"We hang our heads in shame when people ask to see our rooms and collections."

— Rev. Andrew Lambing, Historical Society President, 1893

“It remains for the leaders of the community to see and respond to the need for more adequate and permanent support of those day-by-day undramatic labors for history that must be carried on unremittingly, for the most part behind the scenes, and by other than volunteers or mere caretakers.”

— Franklin Holbrook, Historical Society Director, 1938

“Here, we will be capturing the spirit of the city and region, the experiences of all who have worked to build a life for themselves and their families. We will bring the extraordinary story of our past to the generations of the future.”

— John Herbst, Historical Society Executive Director, 1994

“It will be the most important place anywhere for papers about the rise of industrial America — period! It’s a terrific place ... a terrific story.”

— David McCullough, Honorary Chairman, History Center Campaign, 1996
A pierced tin lantern, early 1800s, from the collections of the Historical Society.
Building a History Center in Western Pennsylvania

"We can’t let this NOT happen!"
— David McCullough

On an autumn morning in 1984, anthropologist James Richardson III received a desperate call at his Carnegie Museum of Natural History office. The caller was an executive at the Clairton Works of U.S. Steel (now USX).

The company was closing its Marine Division at Clairton and abandoning its warehouse full of artifacts, architectural drawings and ship models from its long river towboat history. Couldn’t Richardson do something about it, rather than leaving these treasures of steel and river history to the rats and decay?

Richardson replied that he’d come right away to the Monongahela River location southeast of Pittsburgh. He sighed, feeling this was becoming an all-too-frequent effect of the deindustrialization of Pittsburgh — frantic calls from low-level company managers appalled that decades’ worth of documents and photographs and artifacts were being consigned to the rubbish heap in corporate haste not only to close plant facilities, but also, apparently, to obliterate anything that

Clarke M. Thomas, who retired in 1991 as a senior editor at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, was a moderator for the 1985 Committee on Pittsburgh Archaeology and History public conference which proved pivotal to development of a new history museum in Pittsburgh. Thomas wrote numerous P-G editorials in the 1980s urging a wider audience for the region’s history and endorsing the project that became the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center. He is the author of They Came to Pittsburgh (1983), a compilation of Post-Gazette articles about the region’s ethnic communities.
Richardson had been touched that several of the callers said they telephoned because they "didn’t want to see these things leave Pittsburgh." The previous year, because of these very concerns, he had been one of 16 who formed the Committee on Pittsburgh Archaeology and History (CPAH). He was then asked to chair the organization.

That afternoon, when Richardson walked into the Marine Division warehouse, he was overwhelmed by what he found. Everything, from parts of vessels — steering wheels to steam whistles, to china for towboat dining tables, to "exquisite" architectural drawings of early towboats. There was even a model of the Homestead, a vessel that used to race against a Jones and Laughlin steel company towboat.

The Clairton visit was a turning point for Richardson, who realized it wasn’t enough to be a "fireman," snatching precious items from oblivion. What was needed in Pittsburgh was a place where such collections could be stored and, preferably, displayed. One man’s conviction led to a movement launched by CPAH and the Historical Society which would ultimately produce the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center.

There were other pivotal moments:
• When William King was asked to join the Board of Trustees of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and replied, "What’s that?" before eventually taking a leading role in the Center’s development.
• When the search committee’s 2-2-1 tie vote was broken in favor of hiring John Herbst of New Jersey as executive director of the Society. Herbst would be the professional in charge of developing the new facility.
• When board member Thomas Thomson met Torrence M. Hunt Jr., by chance at an East Liberty service station the morning after he and Herbst had feared the project was at a dead end.
• When a successful meeting with Frank Cahouet, Mellon Bank CEO, sent Herbst, Brouerman, King and Hunt away confident that the project would succeed.
• When a hope-and-fear lunch meeting with David McCullough, the famed historical writer, resulted in his accepting a key role.

But when Richardson and other archivists were being overwhelmed by the archival material coming from shuttered plants and alarmed at what was being lost, these events were in the still-distant future.

Richardson and others in the newly formed CPAH weren’t sure of how to proceed. The various alternatives either didn’t have the necessary space or the particular archival material didn’t fit their institutional mission. The Archives of Industrial Society, in Hillman Library at the University of Pittsburgh, and the Historical Society were examples of the first problem; the Carnegie and Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation of the second. All the institutions had the dilemma of too little energy and resources to focus on the problem.

The CPAH board decided to hold a public conference on the subject, complete with outside expert speakers and a local panel. "Salvaging Pittsburgh’s Past: A City History Museum" was held November 16, 1985, at the University Club in Oakland, with grant support from the Pittsburgh Foundation, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, and CPAH itself.

Toward the end of the day, a panel moderator caused some consternation among CPAH officials by precipitously asking the audience ("in order to move things along") for a straw vote on its choice among the alternative solutions offered. The audience favored the creation of a history center with archives, something on a much grander scale beyond the hopes of most of the CPAH board. The idea created trepidation that reaching for the impossible "best" would defeat the goal of an attainable "good."

Out of the session, however, came a call for a "white paper" on the subject, something duly written by CPAH’s steering committee. After explaining that the concept of a museum dedicated to the study and exhibition of Pittsburgh history is not entirely new, the authors of the February 1986 paper specifically state: "This document proposes the creation of a Pittsburgh Museum of Industrial Society. In its ultimate form we envision this museum as a major multi-site, historical, and museum complex encompassing exhibit halls, preserved industrial sites, archives, and curatorial and research facilities."

The CPAH document said that while the proposed museum "must be national in prominence, its focus should be regional.” And it urged that such a Pittsburgh museum “must not only be grand in purpose, but also broad in scope.” It outlined three purposes for the proposed museum:
• To preserve and interpret the artifactual and documentary record of Pittsburgh and its region, with structures as large as part of an abandoned steel mill or as small as correspondence from a Slovak immigrant to a brother back in Europe. The concentration would be on late 19th and early 20th century urban-industrial society materials.
• Second, to provide creative exhibits and entertaining displays to attract a regional and national audience.
• Third, to complement the acquisition policies of existing historical institutions and foundations.

The CPAH report did not specify any institution to carry forward its ideas. The closest it came was to note that the Historical Society "may have the most broadly defined historical scope of the area’s organizations with strong collections in the colonial frontier and antebellum (pre-1860) eras and in special topics such as glassware.”

Any specific recommendation identifying the Historical Society may have met with skepticism in some quarters, for the very reasons listed as its strengths. Here was a 100-year-old organization that even its friends called "sleepy." (For decades, the
Society's focus was on the 18th century French and Indian War and the beginnings of white settlement in this trans-Allegheny Mountain region.

Perhaps the first signs of organizational change in the Historical Society had come during the short tenure (1972-1977) of Joseph Smith. A retired Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel Co. executive of Irish-Catholic heritage, Smith guided the Society’s attention toward the 19th century, with its great Industrial Age in Pittsburgh and its immigrant era. “Because of his health,” recalls board member Thomson, “Joe knew his time was short, but he got a lot done.”

For some time after Smith’s death in 1977, the Society went back into a quiescent mode. At one point, when no individual would accept its board presidency, five trustees took turns. Nevertheless, within the Society, elements for change smoldered, ready to ignite when CPAH spotlighted the danger of losing key parts of Pittsburgh’s heritage.

In 1978, William King, a Gulf Oil Corp. executive, was asked by advertising executive and HSWP President David Ketchum to join the Historical Society board. He replied, “What’s that, Dave?”

Opposite page: Historical Society
Executive Director John Herbst
Below: At a November 1989 press conference, Historical Society President William King announced the site of the History Center. Other speakers were, from left, State Rep. William Robinson; HSWP Executive Director John Herbst; Dr. Brent Glass, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission; Dr. John Bauman, Chairman, CPAH; and Lewis Bormann, Office of the Mayor. Also attending (front row) were Bart Roselli, former Assistant Director for Museum Programs, and Chief Curator Ellen Rosenthal, who supervised studies of the facility from 1989 to 1992 as History Center Planning Coordinator.
Members of the History Center
Campaign Team and Historical
Society staff and families gather.
Pictured from left, back row, is
D. Bruce Hayes, Georgeann
Foerster, Gerald Voros, Ann
Cahouet, HSWP President
Stephen W. Graffam, Rosalee
McCullough, Honorary
Campaign Chairman David
McCullough, Campaign Director
Audrey Brouman, Bill Keyes,
Carolyn King, Carolyn
Schumacher, Betty Arenth,
Karen Herbst, Nina Margiotta,
and Mike Hill.
Front row: the Hon. Tom
Foerster, Sandra McLaughlin,
HSWP Executive Director John
Herbst, Campaign Chairman
Frank V. Cahouet, and HSWP
Board Chairman William C. King.

King learned that the Society had only a $70,000 annual budget,
six evening programs a year, a learned quarterly magazine, and a
research library. Because of his regard for Ketchum, King agreed,
though his work as a worldwide project coordinator for Gulf took
him out of town so much that when he would attend board
meetings, board member Bob Alberts would chaff, "Look who's
here again!"

In 1985, the man who recruited King announced he would
not serve another year as president. And Ketchum asked King to
take the post. King was retiring from Gulf after Chevron's take-
over of the giant oil firm and presumably would have fewer
responsibilities. Yet King said "no."

He explains, "The main reason was that I couldn't see it as
being an organization of any consequence." The CPAH white
paper the following year indicated to him the Society should take
the lead, but "not the Society as then constituted."

Still, King felt he had to do something: "As a lifelong Pitts-
burgher, I decided it would be a disaster if nothing were done."

He considered what was needed, and decided the first step
was a personal one: to take the Society's presidency after all. "I
realized it would take a totally new tack. We would need a new
director — ambitious, skillful, and not a caretaker type."
The trustees agreed with King’s analysis and formed a search committee composed of King, who took the chair, by then as the board’s president-elect, plus James O’Hara Denny III, Van Beck Hall, Jane Smith and Thomas Thomson.

Advertisements in professional periodicals brought 40 applicants. Later, on a tip, the name of John Herbst of New Jersey was added as one of 10 finalists to be interviewed by search committee members over one weekend.

Herbst was young, 33, and had worked for various types of historical organizations. He was a man with vigor and ability. He had already developed a labor history museum at a site which he had worked to have designated as a national landmark in Haledon, his hometown outside of Paterson.

The search committee split three ways, 2-2-1. Finally, on the third vote, one member switched to Herbst, giving him the majority required. He was hired April 10, 1986. Says King today: “We specifically picked someone with the drive and skill to expand the Society activity to get visibility to raise funds for a center.”

At the end of the search process, Bill King had showed Herbst a copy of the CPAH white paper. When asked his opinion of the proposal, Herbst asked why the Historical Society wasn’t taking the lead — it was a natural fit in institutional type and mission. Herbst hit the ground running. No sooner had he arrived on May 17, 1986, than he was visited by a CPAH delegation composed of Richardson and anthropologists Verna Cowin and Ronald Carlisle. Armed with the CPAH paper, the three asked Herbst if he would like to submit to the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission a grant proposal for studying the feasibility of an industrial history museum in Pittsburgh.

When he readily agreed, Richardson, Carlisle, and another CPAH board member, Frank Kurtik, worked with Herbst to develop the proposal, which was submitted on May 30, 1986. On August 20, the Society, CPAH and PHMC held a press conference at the Allegheny County Courthouse to announce the state grant of $12,000. The Pittsburgh Foundation also contributed a $6,000 grant.

Meanwhile, Herbst had wasted no time in moving the concept forward with the Society’s board. Although he raised $70,000 to upgrade the headquarters building on Bigelow Boulevard, Herbst argued that the facility was inadequate for housing collections over the long haul and for programming that would appeal to a broader audience. He proposed a two-track effort. One was to lay out a five-year plan for expansion of Society activities. The other was to plan for a history center. Herbst directed a planning effort with staff, CPAH members, and museum consultants that produced a report pegging the cost of a proper history center at $40 million.

“That just blew everybody’s mind,” King recalls. “Here we were, an organization with a $200,000 annual budget and a $2.5 million endowment, hearing that kind of talk.”

Then, a long-range planning committee of the board was established. It came up with three alternative plans: 1) modest expansion; 2) major expansion of the scope of activities, such as two exhibitions in the $150,000 range; and 3) maximum expansion.

What, then, will be the visitor’s experience when the Senator John Heinz Regional History Center opens in April?

by Clarke Thomas

VISITORS ENTER FROM the Smallman Street doors into the “Great Hall,” with its 1949 trolley and the massive fire bell, cast after the devastating downtown fire of 1845. From there, you ascend to the principal exhibition gallery on the second floor. In “Points in Time: Building a life in Western Pennsylvania, 1750 - Today,” you follow a chronological path through 250 years of history, from Native American life at the time of arrival of the first white settlers, through industrialization and into the present.

Three furnished partial replicas of homes anchor the permanent exhibit: a 1790 settler’s log house from Cecil Township in Washington County; a 1910 steelworker’s home from the industrial mill town of Homestead; and a 1950s house from the blue-collar suburb of West Mifflin. According to Museum Director Bill Keyes, visitors may explore the interiors of these replicas of actual structures and imagine life there.

In addition, interpretive parts in the main exhibition include:

• The Hill District between the world wars, including its Jewish, Lebanese, Syrian, Central European, Italian and African American communities.

• The fall of the steel industry. Keyes said this was an especially tricky one to design. “We’re talking about quite recent history, with a wide variety of opinions as to why this deindustrialization happened.
Historical Society President Stephen W. Graffam, right, and David McCullough, Honorary Campaign Chairman, speak with heart transplant pioneer Thomas Starzl, M.D., Ph.D. Graffam, senior partner in the Pittsburgh law firm of Grogan, Graffam, McGinley and Lucchino, led the Board of Trustees through the dramatic growth of the institution and the realization of the History Center's Capital Campaign. McCullough made his honorary position a very active assignment.

The board agreed to the second proposal, "provided the funds could be raised," King says. "It put immense pressure on our executive director to nickel-and-dime our way to excellence."

A couple of important board members, he continues, "thought we were out of our minds" on the History Center idea and resigned. "That was a blow, because they were good friends." But by now, King had determined to go ahead. "In my career, I had put together a lot of big projects, some in the $75 million range — that would now be $500 million. Some went smoothly, some with difficulty, and all eventually succeeded. Sure, Gulf was behind me, but there was a lot of competition for project money. The point is that big projects and big money didn't scare me."

King said he first thought an incremental expansion would be best, then he later concluded that "we needed a quantum jump, not some small effort. The Convention Center was a lesson in the dangers of compromise. Go small and you struggle with it all your life. We needed something that would attract attendance,
generate revenues and preserve our very wonderful Pittsburgh history.”

Selling it to the board was something else.

Meanwhile, Herbst had been working on the Society’s frail finances and poor visibility in the city.

When approached by the Society’s search committee, he had seen unrealized potential; he saw a lot of Paterson’s gritty integrity as an industrial city in Pittsburgh, but Pittsburgh also had the qualities of the “City Beautiful.” He had visited the city for an American Folklife Society meeting in 1980, and had felt at home right away. He confesses now that he did not realize what a low profile the Society had in the community, however. Initially impressed by the Society’s $2.5 million endowment, he quickly came to realize, once on the job, how inadequate it was in relation to the position that the Society wanted to carve out for itself. He also came to understand what a “mountain to Mohammed” gesture had been made by Robert Wilburn, who was then the president of the Carnegie Institute. Soon after Herbst started, Wilburn came to see him, rather than waiting for the newcomer to call.

“He was supportive, assuring us that the Carnegie had enough on its plate, encouraging us, and helping us with the planning effort,” says Herbst. “I now know that he could have put the kibosh on the whole Center idea, but he backed it, both publicly and privately. And because people turned to Bob for his reactions, it made all the difference.”

Both to get visibility and to show the Society’s potential, Herbst started work on important social history exhibitions — as major as the limited space at the Bigelow building would allow. After eight months, he and his slightly expanded staff mounted an exhibit about the history of the Homewood-Brushton neighborhood in the city’s East End. The attendance overwhelmed the building’s capacity, and those who came not only had historic roots but were also from the present-day African American community in the neighborhood. Later came another blockbuster — “Homestead: the Story of a Steel Town.” Herbst says that in retrospect this exhibit was a turning point in demonstrating public interest in the directions the Society was taking.

By the time the Society began work on another exhibition — a traveling presentation called “Ohio River Odyssey,” composed of artifacts and art depicting the history of “La Belle Riviere” — the lengthening string of successes had provided visibility at a local, state and national level. The overflow crowds also demonstrated the inadequacies of the Bigelow Boulevard location. Success made the need for a new site more pressing. It also made clear that future success, on a larger scale, required vision and action by the Board of Trustees.

Trustees faced a real dilemma, Herbst could see. The potential difficulties would be many if the Society undertook a course of broad expansion, yet many trustees also realized that doing nothing would lead to extinction. Without new direction and new facilities, the Society could not hope to attract the larger, younger, and more diverse audiences and membership required to ensure survival for the decades to come.

Herbst says now: “They were looking to me to provide the answer: ‘What do we want to be? For a professional, it was wonderful — to be in a position to define this institutional role.’”

By that time, Herbst had decided to change the project’s name and emphasis from the industrial history museum originally described in the CPAH white paper to a regional history center. This would allow for programs and collecting artifacts about every topic in the regional experience, and the interpretation of history made after deindustrialization — which was proceeding apace in Pittsburgh while the board engaged in an organized pondering of the Society’s future.

This led to talks with several philanthropic foundations which, Herbst relates, were not encouraging. Foundation representatives thought a history center was a good idea in principle, but they stressed that such a major project would need a lead patron or funder and — a central necessity — some kind of public funding. The foundations’ pessimism was contagious. “I had a chat with Tom Thomson,” Herbst recalls. “I had to confess that we were at a dead end.”

The next day, by chance, Thomson ran into another board member, Torrence M. Hunt, Jr., at an East Liberty service station. Standing there beside the pumps, Thomson and Hunt agreed to jump-start the effort with a fund to which other trustees and friends of the Society could also donate.

Some $80,000 eventually was raised. With the money, the Society commissioned a Pennsylvania Economy League economic impact study and retained the New York City firm of Ehrenkrantz and Eckstut to study possible sites. As the studies were concluding, foundations began to warm to the project and to invest “risk money.” A particularly helpful early grant of $195,000 came from the R. K. Mellon Foundation to support various planning activities. The Scaife Family Foundation then provided a matching grant.

In the Ehrenkrantz and Eckstut survey, more than a dozen potential sites were reduced to four: the old Lawrence Paint Co. building near Station Square on the South Side; the Greyhound Bus Terminal, downtown; and the Adelman Lumber Co. and Armstrong Cork Co. buildings, both in the Strip District. As William King explains, the bus terminal was rejected because of an overhead railroad trestle. Repairs on the Armstrong building would be too expensive and its surroundings in a light industrial area were discouraging. Adelman Lumber occupied a seven-story, turn-of-the-century warehouse formerly the home of Chautauqua Lake Ice Co.

The Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation was particularly interested in pushing the adjacent Lawrence Paint property. PHLF Executive Director Arthur Ziegler felt it would make for a synergy of high-attendance attractions near the Point, coupled not only with Station Square, but also with a new Carnegie Science Center across the water on the North Side. But the Lawrence building was in bad repair and on a site squeezed
A 1989 rendering by C. F. Peterson of exhibit space at the History Center.
between Carson Street and railroad tracks; plus, it was priced more than $1 million higher than the Chautauqua Ice building.

The ice company site eventually was chosen because it was near Downtown and only one block from the David Lawrence Convention Center, and had a huge parking lot nearby. Constructed to hold ice from Lake Chautauqua, it was built like a fortress. With two adjoining buildings and space for a third, it offered 160,000 square feet, more than 10 times the square footage in the old Oakland building — ample space for exhibits and archives. To boot, The Buncher Co., a real estate firm with properties in the vicinity, was willing to help with the financing, including two gifts of $50,000 to make possible a Society purchase option on the building.

Later, King and the trustees were particularly gratified when historian David McCullough joined the team. With Herbst, he visited the Chautauqua building and climbed to the roof, beholding the glitter of the Golden Triangle’s skyline and the glimmer of the Allegheny River and its bridges. McCullough, who had risen to fame as an author of books about history and as the de facto voice of history on public television, grew up in Pittsburgh, but the massiveness of the building and its location greatly impressed him. On the roof that day with Herbst, he enthusiastically declared, “This is it!”

The selection process had created some strained feelings within the historical community. So did some early announcements of the Society’s intentions. Some felt the Society was giving the impression that there was a big archival “hole” in Pittsburgh, thus overlooking or dismissing the efforts and historical collections already existing. Promoters of other historic sites felt like mere tour-guide satellites for the forthcoming History Center.

Some fence-mending had to be done, and it was. In 1989, Herbst instituted a Local History Resource Service staffed by a full-time museum professional who provides technical assistance and training to local historical organizations in a six-county area. (Six years later, more than 125 groups and agencies are affiliated with HSWP through this program.) Eventually, the historical community for the most part swung behind the Center’s development.

There were many tough moments along the way, and one of them was a feasibility study by Pittsburgh-based Ketchum Inc. Instead of the rosy optimism customary in such studies, it ladeled out bad news: the Society was too little known; it had no major corporate leaders on its board; its plan was far too expensive for Pittsburgh’s pocketbook; there was no government funding component; this was not the time for a campaign.

This bombshell might have derailed the History Center Express, had not the Society’s leadership decided to plug the very holes — the need for increased visibility, public funding, etc. — the Ketchum report had identified, turning the study into a positive factor. Herbst said, “We just had to press ahead; every day we were losing more of our heritage as people literally put it out in the garbage can.”

The next step forward was to hire Audrey Brouerman as a fundraising consultant. Due to her experience with such organiza-


tions as the Bedford Music Festival and the Pittsburgh Opera, she was well-positioned to get right to work, and as the months went by, Brouerman became a full-time member of the team. “I didn’t agree with Ketchum’s dark picture,” says Brouerman. “This was not the usual fundraising kind of project. It was very special. Our big advantage was that there was such a great need for this kind of history center. We felt we could break the usual rules — the kind that the Ketchum report relied upon.”

Once the building had been identified, the hard work of finding some serious money commenced. Board member Torrence (Tod) Hunt was willing to chair the campaign committee. Suddenly something clicked! Tod Hunt was the scion of a prominent Pittsburgh family which had helped found Alcoa and was making his own name in food-marketing, real estate and hotel businesses. Despite his relative youth and his not being a top corporate CEO, the board wanted to put Hunt to work on raising the money for the leadership phase of the campaign. Hunt agreed. He and his steering committee set to work.

Their goal was $3 million. They raised $8 million. “We with the old families would open the door,” Hunt says, “and John Herbst would rush in and take the place by storm.”

Hunt remembers going to talk with Alfred W. Wishart, Jr., executive director and president of the Pittsburgh Foundation and the Heinz philanthropies. “He asked hard questions,” Hunt recalls. “He advised us that unless we got government money on the table, we’d never be able to make it. We asked if there was a chance of money from his foundation if we got government money first. He said, ‘Is the Pope Catholic?’

Pittsburgh attorney Stephen Graffam, now Society president, took on the task of approaching the Allegheny County commissioners. With the enthusiastic support of Commission Chairman Tom Foerster, the county came through with a $3 million grant. Herbst remarks, “For a long time, I felt Tom Foerster was the only person in the community, besides our board leaders, who had caught the vision of the Center and was willing to be of immense practical help.”

Foerster further aided the project by including the History Center in Strategy 21, the highly successful Pittsburgh method of involving the city, the county and the universities in shaping a joint capital project “wants” list in the Pennsylvania legislature.

However, the funding push in Harrisburg required more than just being included in the Strategy 21 list. Hunt recalls talking with Josh Whetzol, who is widely acknowledged to have fathered the Carnegie Science Center. Whetzol said that in order to obtain state money, he had practically lived in Harrisburg for months on end. (Of the $35 million cost of the Science Center, $15 million came from the state.)

So Herbst, King and others started on a similar quest. Of great help was a state representative, Tom Murphy. “His office gave us a place to hang our coats,” King said. That support from Murphy has continued since he became Pittsburgh’s mayor in 1993. Eventually, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania under the Robert Casey administration gave $7 million in grants for the Center.

Many members of Pittsburgh’s leading families pitched in to gain broader support for the Center. One of them was the late
James O’Hara Denny III, the descendant of both Pittsburgh’s first mayor, Ebenezer Denny, and General James O’Hara, early pioneer landowner and industrialist. Herbst describes Denny as being “a traditionalist and conservative who could have had every reason to oppose any change that seemed critical of the way the Society had been run. Here we were attracting new constituencies, new members not of his social circle, and a huge project. But I think Jim spoke for many when he once told me, ‘This place is just too damned sleepy.’ The hold-over trustees like Jim Denny were magnificent.”

Denny was the one who had the idea that historian David McCullough should be enlisted. He invited McCullough, who lived in Massachusetts, to have lunch at the Pittsburgh Golf Club with Herbst and himself. After Herbst explained the changes being introduced to professionalize the Historical Society, Denny asked McCullough to join the board, promising there would be “no work.” McCullough respectfully declined, but after leaving the Golf Club, he thought it over and changed his mind, to Herbst’s and Denny’s delight. And later, when he was approached about serving as honorary chairman of the campaign, he also agreed.

Asked recently why he took the post in the midst of a busy life, McCullough quipped, “I ask that myself sometimes. There are a lot of other things I could be doing.” Then, turning serious, he added, “Although I haven’t lived here since I was 17, I’ve come back several times a year to visit. I’ve seen the city change dramatically, more than ever reinforcing the feeling I had as a youngster that it was unique.”

McCullough continues, “If I were to pick one city in the country as a window or lens through which to look at our past, it would be Pittsburgh.”

McCullough then gives a tight overview of the region’s history, stretching from some of the earliest archaeological finds near Avella in Washington County (now on the property of the Historical Society’s Meadowcroft Museum of Rural Life) through the Forks of the Ohio as a pivot in the French and Indian War (“It affected the course of history worldwide; we would be speaking French here otherwise.”), through Pittsburgh on the Ohio River as the gateway to the West, through the Industrial Era, and through the immigrant period (“I remember as a boy hearing five or six languages on a streetcar.”) to the postwar Renaissance. Pittsburgh has been protoan in its development, McCullough says, not only in pioneering new methods in industry and finance, but also in the arts, music, education and medicine (“The first general hospital in the world was here.”).

In many ways, says McCullough, “Pittsburgh is an example of why cities are important.” For that reason, when the History Center project was laid out for him, he felt, “We can’t let this NOT happen.”

As it turned out, the prestige McCullough brought to the campaign became even greater when, two years later, he was awarded the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for his best-selling biography, *Truman*. Herbst says that ultimately, it is impossible to calculate the enormous impact on the History Center campaign of David McCullough’s unstinting support and advocacy.

An idea that came out of the brainstorming sessions after Audrey Brounman joined the team was to hold “History Makers” dinners, annual events recognizing individuals who have made a profound impact on Western Pennsylvania history. The dinners have raised both funds and the Society’s visibility. By a stroke of luck, among the corporate leaders attending the first dinner in 1992 was Frank Cahouet, CEO of Mellon Bank. Because the next step was to secure a major corporate executive to head the fundraising campaign, Cahouet was approached. When he accepted, Herbst, Brounman, Hunt and King were propelled by sheer joy as they left the Mellon building Downtown. Such high-level leadership is critical to getting things done in Pittsburgh.

In retrospect, Cahouet says, his only hesitation was because of time — “I’m involved in a lot of community activities; I can’t start one of these projects without finishing it.” But the Mellon executive said that he was fascinated by the potential — a true “people’s museum,” which would tell the story of the working man and woman on the shop floor as well as of the business geniuses who made things happen in Pittsburgh. It would be a museum showing the role that Western Pennsylvania played in opening up the West — “something done by the captains of industry but also done by people who came from many parts of the world to work in the mills and foundries.”

Cahouet said he also remains quite aware of the huge obligation corporate America has to its communities. “It’s through foundations, individuals — the private sector working with the public sector — that you get these big projects.”

Although Cahouet is a native Bostonian, he has Pennsylvania connections: his mother came from Oliphant near Scranton, and he has a degree from the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business in Philadelphia. Mindful of worries that Pittsburgh natives no longer dominate this city’s corporate leadership, Cahouet states unequivocally, “I’m a Pittsburgher; I’ve been here eight years, and you simply have to adopt the city in which you are living.”

For all these reasons, therefore, Cahouet accepted the challenge to chair the Center’s capital campaign. In interview after interview, Society leaders praise the highly active role Cahouet took, quite beyond that of a figurehead. William King remarks, “Having Cahouet come on board was a stroke of marvelous good fortune. He has been hands-on, enthusiastic, not perfunctory.”

Audrey Brounman recalls, “He didn’t just sign letters. I remember one meeting we had at 6 a.m. in his office to get his ideas to keep things rolling.”

An all-important boost to the campaign came when Cahouet formed a 32-member “campaign cabinet” of top Pittsburgh corporate executives. This move plugged a couple of holes identified by the Ketchum report: community visibility and the lack of big names on the Society’s board. Rather than tackling the difficult task of persuading executives already heavily board-involved to join yet another board, the Cahouet plan utilized their abilities directly for the campaign. Particularly active in the
campaign were such chief executives as Wesley von Schack of Duquesne Light Co., Charles Corry of USX, and Paul O'Neill of Alcoa.

Within a very weeks of joining the campaign, David McCullough found he had already abandoned the "no work" notion that Jim Denny had presented to him. McCullough spoke at a meeting of civic leaders called by Cahouet and found an immediate and favorable reaction as he outlined the project's potential. McCullough says that although he was the only native Pittsburgher present, "These people from elsewhere seemed to appreciate immediately the unprecedented character of the Pittsburgh story."

The campaign team quickly learned that McCullough clearly intended to be a part of the process. "Where I have been helpful, I believe, is in being able to step back and view the entire scene, just as a painter does." Word soon came back to Pittsburgh that in his speeches around the country, McCullough was talking up the History Center. Those opportunities increased after he received the Pulitzer Prize.

McCullough says he has found a ferment similar to Pitts-
Spacious quarters at the History Center allow historical interpretation not possible at the Society's old building in the Oakland district. A 1940s trolley used in Pittsburgh's mass transit system is among the most dramatic artifacts.

As for the Center's history, Spilker noted that museums are no longer just for the “effete and elite,” and he cites attendance figures in many cities which exceed those of professional sports. At least 76 percent of the museums in the United States have been built since 1950, he notes.

Both Cahouet and McCullough were involved in yet another major turn of events for the Center. The decision was made to approach Mrs. Teresa Heinz to name the Center for her late husband, Sen. John Heinz, who had been killed in a tragic air accident in April 1991.

“We hoped Mrs. Heinz would agree with us,” explains Herbst, “that this would be a fitting tribute to a man of wealth who could have done anything he wanted and chose public service. He was a hero to people across the board — the elderly, blue-collar workers. And his name would be on a history center where everyone’s story would be told — the Heinzes, the Mellons and people from every walk of life.”

Their letter to Mrs. Heinz elicited the answer they had hoped
for. In agreeing to allow her husband’s name to grace the Center, she now recalls: “I appreciated how well Frank Cahouet and David McCullough understood John’s relationship with this region. Their request wasn’t about putting someone’s name on a building. It was about celebrating the spirit of Pittsburgh and its people through John Heinz. That meant a great deal to me.

“John loved this place. He loved our farm like no place else; he loved Pittsburghers, and he was extremely proud of our history.”

The announcement was made personally by Teresa Heinz, on June 15, 1994 at the Center, for which ground breaking ceremonies had been held on March 9. That designation clearly raised the Center’s stature in the community and with corporations and foundations. By 1994, over $22 million was raised.

Even with all the success, the project was not yet out of the woods. For one thing, the money from the state did not arrive as planned. In fact, it didn’t appear until the spring of 1995, which turned out to be a contributing factor in an eventual one-year postponement of the scheduled opening.

The Society knew that more money was needed up front. Any pay-as-you-go hopes faltered when it was discovered that in the remodeling of such a building, a point arrives where commitments have to be made and paid for before money from long-term pledges comes in. Consequently, the cash-flow situation became tight, and in the fall of 1994, there were two successive layoffs of personnel. “This was one of the grimmest moments of all for me,” says Herbst.

At that point, the Society turned once again to Cahouet. Obstacles are to be expected, says Cahouet. “Nothing goes in a straight line. As in business, if there were no problems, you wouldn’t need executives.

“One of the great things in working with this team is that there was a lot of pride. They are real professionals, so they knew when to ask for help, not waiting until it was forced on them. And, quite as important, they weren’t like some people who ask for help but then are reluctant when they get it and don’t embrace it.”

The result was that in mid-1995 Mellon Bank extended a $14 million line of credit to enable the project to be finished before the Society had commitments for the total cost. Moreover, Cahouet said that because Mellon itself has been involved in many construction projects, it was able to lend two bank executives, John Brandstetter and Kenneth Popko, to assist in the construction and financial aspects of the project.

Society administrators are aware that more than just the project’s fiscal dimension was being watched. For example, the late Roy Lubove, a distinguished professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh and an author of two books on Pittsburgh’s history, saw the Center as an example of cultural programming new in the 1990s. The skeptical Lubove, author of several respected analyses of Pittsburgh, wrote in a draft of his upcoming Twentieth Century Pittsburgh: The Post-Steel Era:

“The History Center exemplified the emergence in the 1980s and early ’90s of a new political economy of culture. Culture was legitimized as an economic asset rather than a liability with limited appeal. According to Tom Foerster, chairman of the Allegheny County Commissioners, the History Center would be ‘a great selling tool for companies who want to locate here, and a great tool for tourism.’”

Because of the Center’s favored role as a corporate amenity and a tourist draw — it’s close to Downtown, the Convention Center and new developments in The Strip and along the Allegheny River — the Pitt professor worried that the need to meet these goals would require “a Faustian bargain” of “corporate-style marketing methods and exhibition techniques which would not overtax the intellect or attention span of a heterogeneous audience. At all costs, any hint of elitism or intellectual strain has to be avoided in favor of interactivism and outreach.”

Lubove concluded, “Perhaps all this is the price to be paid for the more solid purposes of a Regional History Center: archival and research facilities, academic scholarship and conferences, the quiet display of artifacts from the past. At least one can hope.”

Herbst says he shares some of the late Pitt professor’s concerns, but not all of them. “Well, I would say it’s true that we want to avoid any hint of elitism, ‘at all cost’ even. Our programs must challenge our visitors intellectually; they must provoke and inspire to be exciting. This type of approach makes the community get involved, which helps us in our role as a major repository of artifacts and archival material.”

The Faustian bargain that Lubove worried about is a legitimate concern, says Herbst, “but how else would the History Center have been built without government, corporate and foundation contributions?” He has not felt pressure from sponsoring corporations or organizations to affect content or programming, because, he feels, “we have a highly cultured and sophisticated corporate community, which respects our work.” He adds that “corporate-style methods” represent a growing awareness in the museum business that cultural activities compete against many other recreational activities for leisure-time dollars. “Competing for peoples’ free time requires a professional marketing effort,” he says. “That’s the way it is. And we intend to do our best to attract an audience for history.”

As of March 1996, Cahouet’s fundraising campaign had yielded commitments of over $30 million with final efforts in progress to raise the remaining $8 million.

McCullough, the historian, seems to think the Society will appeal to professional historians and the general public alike. Two floors of the building, for instance, are devoted to a substantial research library and an archives — not exactly natural competitors to mass entertainment events like a music concert or a Pirates game. “Scholars will come from all over the world,” McCullough enthuses. “It will be the most important place anywhere for papers about the rise of industrial America — period!”

Everybody, he insists, will be impressed. “It’s a terrific place... a terrific story.”