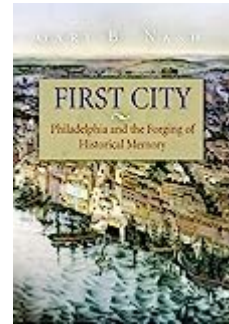


Gary B. Nash. *First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. 383 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3630-9.



Reviewed by Christopher Klemek (Department of History, University of Pennsylvania)

Published on H-Urban (March, 2002)

Philadelphia Social History Project(s)

Philadelphia Social History Project(s)

Philadelphia is a treasure trove for historians, as researchers in colonial, nineteenth-century, or even, in my case, modern urban America have long known. In part, this is because Philadelphia has been at (or very near) the center of many successive developments: commerce and politics in the eighteenth century, abolition and industry in the nineteenth, urban renewal and disinvestment in the twentieth. Sam Bass Warner, Jr. attempted to extrapolate this phenomenon into a “framework for urban history” as early as 1967 with his provocatively titled paper, “If All the World Were Philadelphia.”[1] But beyond its changing yet perennial significance, the prime reason for Philadelphia’s ubiquity in historical studies may perhaps be linked to the habits of Philadelphia collectors. The city is endowed with a spectacular set of archival institutions, many of which date to the periods they chronicle: the Library Company of Philadelphia (1731), the American Philosophical Society (1743), the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (1805), the Athenaeum of Philadelphia (1814), the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (1824), and the Franklin Institute (also 1824), to name a few. The

antiquarian treasures of these storehouses appear as illustrations in countless books, usually accompanied with captions of their initials (LCP, APS, HSP). Gary Nash’s *First City* is packed with similar images, but rather than leaving the historian’s implicit relationship at the level of such abbreviations, or buried in acknowledgments, Nash turns his primary attention to these very important organizations, analyzing their objects and collections and relating them to the production of history. In short, Nash renders explicit the construction of memory in historical institutions. This may be an unusual method to compose a narrative, but it is certainly the way we as historians, beholden to what has been preserved, necessarily approach material.

First City also stands as a case study of one community with an incomparably rich history (in the sense of the past), and the history (as in writings and commemorations) it has produced. With regard to the overarching narrative of Philadelphia’s past, Nash synthesizes the broad body of secondary literature—some of the most important volumes of which have been contributed by the author himself.[2] The first two chapters are devoted

to Pennsylvania's early colonization and the growth of Philadelphia as a commercial seaport. The next two chapters chronicle Philadelphia's role in the American revolution and as the new national capital. The two chapters considering the antebellum period, which are so packed as to become convoluted, trace industrialization as well as the reactions to it. In the two penultimate chapters, Nash takes up the Civil War and the decades following it as important periods of commemoration.

Despite its broad narrative content, *First City* is unlikely to replace Russell Weigley's *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History* (New York: Norton, 1982) as the standard one-volume overview. This is partly due to the absence of any twentieth-century material in Nash's book. But even those wanting an overview of Philadelphia's eighteenth- or nineteenth-century history will find the exposition in *First City* complicated by its self-consciousness of sources and its sub-plots about subsequent collectors, which—though interesting—give the sensation of lurching to and fro chronologically. In his defense, comprehensiveness is not Nash's aim. Instead, he seeks to draw attention to "particular elements of social and cultural history...within a framework of economic and political history," (p. 9). And he proposes to do so by attending to the materials various groups left behind, and the manner by which they got saved. Which is to say, the self-conscious to-ing and fro-ing is inherent in the project. At times, the work resembles the exhibition catalogue it began its life as—an object-driven organization, interspersed with narrative. John Fanning Watson, founder of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP), believed "in the almost mystical power of ancient objects owned by heroic figures to connect people to the past" (p. 247). Nash, for his part, contends that, "word and image, like pie and ice cream, are meant to be savored together," and constructs his book accordingly (p. 13). Indeed, one of the work's greatest strengths is the manner by which Nash savors the stuff of history—pamphlets, paintings, photographs, furniture, and other material culture—that are amply illustrated in over 130 black and white images. One example is this tour-de-force passage, in which the author offers a cross section of colonial society, not to mention historical sub-disciplines, through a single object:

"Such a piece as a coffeepot (Figure 27) crafted by Joseph Richardson, Jr., one of the city's premier silversmiths before the Revolution, provides an example of how such an artifact can have multiple meanings. It can be viewed most directly as a handsome example of high-style eighteenth century craftsmanship, as an intrinsically valuable work of decorative art. Through a sec-

ond lens, the coffeepot can be seen as a crucial piece of evidence in tracing the new meaning of gentility in the eighteenth century. Amid rising consumerism, in both England and its colonies, genteel people developed a new sense of refinement, acted out in elegant manners, witty conversation, and graceful movements on occasions that depended on the importation of new beverages from exotic ports of call—in this case coffee beans from South America. Through a third lens, the Richardson coffeepot can be considered, although not actually seen, with regard to the organization of rhythms of work of the artisan who crafted the object. Behind the coffeepot lay several work processes involving African cultivation of the coffee beans, the sailors who shipped them to Philadelphia, and the small silversmith workshop production that linked together the labor of apprentices, journeymen, and master craftsmen. Finally, behind the coffeepot, absent from the view of the lovely pot itself, resided the role of the crafts worker in the political and social life of a port town such as Philadelphia" (p. 66-68).

Furthermore, the artifacts serve double duty—as evidence about their periods of origin, but also as evidence about the interests and concerns of the collectors who preserved them. This "double-vision" gives the reader a vicarious sense of sitting in archival institutions at various moments, leafing through primary documents and conjuring events they related. Some of those antiquarian moments, as with Ben Franklin's Library Company collecting materials in the 1760s, occurred contemporaneously with the historic events they chronicled. Mostly, however, we are confronted with mid-nineteenth-century Philadelphians' attempts to come to terms with its present via its past. The nineteenth-century leadership of Philadelphia's collecting institutions were legatees of merchant wealth, ambivalent (at best) about industrialization. Their personal aversions left the tumultuous antebellum period as simultaneously the most thinly documented. What's more, Nash argues:

"In the forty years preceding the Civil War, a battle for public memory occurred in Philadelphia. The contest was initiated from the top among a small group of cultural leaders who imagined that remembering the past through civic pageants, monuments, publicly displayed paintings, and published biographies and memoirs relating to the heroes of the the colonial and revolutionary generations might provide a restorative to their fast-growing, industrializing, uproarious and splintering city," (p. 205).

Buried in this tale is the fascinating biography of pa-

trician banker John Fanning Watson. In the 1820s, Watson conducted an “oral history project” to document the nation’s founding, published history, started the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, founded the field of historic house preservation, and above all sought the glorification of colonial leaders like William Penn. Watson is contrasted vividly with sensational-provocateur George Lippard, the bestselling U.S. author prior to Harriet Beecher Stowe. Both men took popular history as a battleground for the soul of industrializing America. For Watson, the dynamic times might be subdued with nostalgia for an imagined past of order and deference. Lippard sought revolutionary reform of industrial inequalities through the celebration of radical antecedents (like Thomas Paine) and the heroism of commoners. One delightful aspect of Nash’s survey is the reminder that our contemporary historical debates have origins long before the 1960s.

My guess is that *First City* could prove useful for graduate or even undergraduate seminars, as a kind of primer in the (not particularly) New Social History. Nash pays special attention to “women, racial and religious minorities, and laboring people” while discussing the challenges of accessing their histories. He discusses explicitly some of fundamental lessons for the historian’s craft, including the use of objects versus documents, the different kinds of documents and their often unexpected utility, including the technique of reading against the prejudices of earlier archival gatekeepers. (Nash reminds that “much old wine has been decanted into new bottles” p. 71.) Experienced historians will find little new in this survey of their trade, though Philadelphia’s feast of source material may entice even those already acquainted with the city’s collections. Since the work can be profitably perused according to the period of interest, it will be a useful introduction for anyone considering research in the region.

With some familiarity in the area myself, I couldn’t help but notice some technical mistakes: For instance, Nash announces that Nathan Levy was the first Jew living in Philadelphia, but Jonas Aaron, Isaac Miranda, and a man called Jacob Philadelphia probably all came to the city before 1710, when Levy was still a child in New York. Nash also states that print-maker William Russell Birch arrived in Philadelphia in 1794, but then includes an engraving dated from 1793.[3] Worst of all, Charles Willson Peale’s unmistakable self-portrait, “The Artist in his Museum,” is misdated by forty-three years—asserting it is a colonial rather than a Jacksonian-era painting! Whether these mistakes are that of the author or the publisher is unclear, although sloppy proofing work is also visible in

the mispagination of running footers in the end note references.

The unabated popular enthusiasm for history as accessible through its physical relics—from antiques to costumed reenactments—seems to confirm Nash’s multimedia approach. The concluding chapter (nine) of *First City* seems directed primarily at the current inheritors of the institutions it chronicles. Thus, in addition to memorializing the now defunct HSP exhibition on Philadelphia history Nash curated (which filled me with exhilaration when I stumbled into it as a prospective graduate student), the book stands as a rebuke to the recent directors of that institution, who undertook the controversial deaccessioning of its objects, in order to get out of the museum business and focus on scholarly research. There is much bitterness in his tone when, for example, Nash notes that guns and a pike carried by John Brown and his sons at Harper’s Ferry “have never been shown in Philadelphia and are now stored in a warehouse, along with the Historical Society’s entire artifact collection,” (p. 197). Nash, fresh from the battles over national history standards, warns that such institutions risk their own demise if they fail to change from “offering a passive venue for the already educated to being an active center of learning for a public of diverse educational and cultural backgrounds.”[4]

Nash’s book—not unlike the collectors and historical promoters he profiles—embodies a vision of unifying beneath a big tent the various schools of history, together with non-academic audiences and the cultural institutions that sustain both. *First City* will probably not satisfy any of them—nor, for that matter, did his predecessors. That, however, is probably less a failure on the part of its author than an affirmation of his goal.

Notes

[1]. Warner’s “framework for the history of urban environments: Philadelphia 1774, 1860, 1930,” was delivered to the Washington University Institute for Urban and Regional Studies Colloquium on February 6, 1967, and later developed at book length in *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968).

[2]. Among Philadelphia’s many historiographical suitors, Nash may well take the prize; many of his score of books deal with the region, including *Quakers and Politics: Pennsylvania, 1681-1726* (1968), *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness and the Origins of the American Revolution* (1979), *Forging Freedom:*

The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840 (1988), and *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation and Its Aftermath in Pennsylvania, 1690-1840*, (1991).

[3]. Emily Cooperman concurs that no work predates 1794 in her dissertation, "William Russell Birch and the Beginnings of the American Picturesqu" (University of Pennsylvania, 1999). As for Jews in Philadelphia, Nathan Levy was certainly an institution-builder and probably the most established of his day, but, as Edwin Wolf makes clear, he was by not the first Jew Philadelphians would encounter in their city; see *The History of the Jews of Philadelphia: From Colonial Times to the Age of Jackson*

(1975).

[4]. p. 323. Nash is quoting from Willard L. Boyd "Museums as Centers of Controversy," *Daedalus* 128 (1999): 199. Nash discusses the exhibit he curated, "Finding Philadelphia: Visions and Revisions," which was displayed at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania from 1989 until 1999, in "Behind the Velvet Curtain: Academic History, Historical Societies, and the Presentation of the Past," *Pennsylvania Magazine for History and Biography* 114 (1991): 3-36. For Nash's take on the politicization of history, see *History on Trial: National Identity, Culture Wars, and the Teaching of the Past* (1997).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Christopher Klemek. Review of Nash, Gary B., *First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6063>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.