Introduction: The Conception of a Conference

From May 30 to June 1, 2013, the David Library of the American Revolution, the McNeil Center for Early American Studies, the Museum of the American Revolution, and the American Philosophical Society held a major conference, "The American Revolution Reborn," at Benjamin Franklin Hall in Philadelphia. The conference attracted over 300 attendees and a veritable avalanche of social media coverage and discussion.

The success of the conference was beyond what we as organizers ever imagined. HISTORY came to the conference and produced ten short videos for its Website. The University of Pennsylvania Press and the McNeil Center will publish an anthology of the essays. And, as you are about to read, *Common-place* is hosting an online symposium on the conference, which includes the essays written by our commentators and new video from HISTORY. Before you get to these essays and videos, however, we would like to take a moment to tell you about the conference's origins and its innovative design, something that we believe is

distilled in the format in which we have decided to present these essays on *Common-place*.

Left to our own devices, neither one of us would ever have thought of helping to put together these essays or of organizing the conference from which they arise. All we ever meant to do was honor our friendship with Frank Fox.

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Frank came into our lives relatively late in his. He'd been a musician and then, improbably, a publisher of textbooks. Hardly anyone gets rich blowing a horn, and he certainly didn't. But he had a good career selling books. And after he was done with that journey, he decided to embark on a new one. He would write books of his own. History books.

Frank began with his own family's past. But his genealogical pursuits soon led him to ask larger questions, questions about Pennsylvania's past and the country's founding. Soon, he was writing a brilliantly quirky book, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, on Northampton County, Pennsylvania, in the years of the American Revolution. Then he set his sights on a more formidable target: the financing of the fighting in revolutionary Pennsylvania more largely. He became so immersed in his projects that he moved from Boston to Philadelphia so he could be closer to the relevant archives and to the community of the McNeil Center.

As Frank plunged into the past, he became more involved in the profession, attending conferences and McNeil Center seminars, even writing pieces for scholarly journals. He was enthralled. And we grew ever more enthralled with him. We prized his comradeship. We thrilled to keep him company as he found a true calling in this third act of his life. But as time wore on, he became more and more aware that the scholarly world was paying less and less attention to the event that fired his passion and consumed his interest, the American Revolution. Convinced that he could not, himself, reverse this drift, he turned to us and offered a challenge: a start-up gift to organize a conference that would re-energize the study of the Revolution. We couldn't say no to him.

So we set about to create a conference that would renew a field that seemed to have grown stale and, at bottom, tired of itself. For decades, the interpretation of the Revolution had been losing its verve and, worse, its center. Even among the diminishing number who continued to want to work in the era of Independence, many were taking up topics ever further from the political rebellion itself. As we began thinking about the conference, we were clear only that we meant to take up Frank's challenge to revivify the study of the Revolution.

As good academics, we began by assembling an advisory committee. At that point,

one of us was just finishing his Ph.D., the other just turning emeritus. So we sought others from the rest of the career range, to maximize our access to fresh ideas across the scholarly generations. We asked six to join us: Kathleen DuVal, Woody Holton, Benjamin Irvin, Brendan McConville, Andrew O'Shaughnessy, and Rosemarie Zagarri. When we brought them together for the first time, we were relieved to find that they shared not only our conviction that the study of the Revolution had been too long in thrall to concepts and controversies now half a century old but also our hope that together we could design a conference that might create a new paradigm for the field.

We spent the better part of our first meeting with our advisory committee crystallizing four themes upon which to organize the conference. We wanted themes that could at once draw on emergent work in the existing scholarship and spur new approaches. We settled on violence, civil war, power, and religion. Then we put out a call for proposals and waited for those proposals to arrive. When they did, we were surprised to discover that we had remarkably few proposals on religion and several stronger ones that saw the Revolution and its legacies in an international context. We all agreed to abandon the sessions we'd envisioned on religion and to add sessions on global perspectives, though we all continue to believe—and the conversations at the conference supported our belief—that religion and the Revolution is a subject ripe for future study.

As much as we worried over the content of the conference, we worried every bit as much about its form. None of us relished the prospect of another meeting in which one perfectly fine historian after another read one perfectly fine paper after another, leaving scant time for comments and questions from the audience. To galvanize new thinking about the Revolution, we had to have more than just fresh perspectives. We had to have an audience engaged enough to notice them, an audience that was not drifting off as one recitation blurred into another, an audience that actually participated in the production of those fresh perspectives.

It took months to figure out that new format for an academic meeting. Rather than have presenters read or pre-circulate the extended essays that we would later edit for book publication, we would ask them to prepare before the conference a ten-page version of their work that would convey its argument and offer a fair flavor of its evidence. This condensed version would be posted on the conference Website, to be read ahead of time by those attending. All the papers together would require just 140 pages of reading. Presenters could then assume that the audience had done its homework and that they were free to do something other than summarize their longer papers at the conference itself. We could then ask presenters to do whatever they did at the conference in no more than eight minutes. With three or four presentations in each paper session, there would be half an hour of presentations and a full hour for responses from the audience. No one would fall asleep.

Of course, you were not at the conference, and you are not now about to read those conference papers. No matter.

What you are about to read is what followed those paper panels. We decided that each theme should have a commentary session in which leading scholars would respond to the previous session, speak about the theme, or do whatever they thought most urgent to do. This, we hoped, would encourage the type of conversation that might spur even more scholarship. Indeed, these sessions proved dynamic and engaging, as we think you will soon see for yourselves. In preparing them for this special issue of *Common-place*, we have tried to recapture the spirit of passionate and even unruly exchange which characterized the conference.

The transformative terms of the paper sessions enabled us to reconceive the terms of the commentary sessions too. Just as the new format liberated our paper-presenters to presume on and depart from the papers they had posted on the Website, so it freed our commentators from the obligations of commentary on the papers they had nominally been assigned. Since those papers had already had an hour of audience response, we could invite the commentators—who also had just eight minutes each, so as to leave the preponderance of their sessions for audience response as well—to bypass the papers if they pleased and to offer their own largest thoughts on the theme at hand.

We felt free to allow our commentators such liberties because we'd chosen them for their flair for thinking large thoughts. We encouraged them to take such liberties because, in most cases, we'd chosen them because they hadn't thought their large thoughts about the Revolution before. They were historians of the era who had never written consequentially about the Revolution itself. Or historians of other periods and places. Or historians of the Revolution who were not American. Or scholars who were not historians. In short, we'd sought voices that hadn't been heard before, even by the speakers themselves. We wanted analyses that our commentators might be formulating for the first time, because no one had ever asked them what they thought before.

You will see at once that we have not rounded up the usual suspects. Our contributors come from Australia, China, and the U.K., from departments of art history and English as well as history. Very few of them are specialists in the American Revolution. The rest—even the ones among them who are historians based in the United States—are variously historians of England, of American religion, of international labor, and of the environment. You are about to find out what they said and what the audience thought.

We think you will find that they have dazzling and distinctive things to say, things that they have rarely if ever said in public before. They are not at the pinnacles of their professions for nothing. If they do not concur in pointing toward a new paradigm—the fondest of our fantasies when we first conceived the conference—they do diverge in tantalizing ways.

We have also tried to convey the tone and feel of the conference in the way we present these essays to you. We wanted our meeting to be as much about conversation as it was about formal presentations. Digital technology now

allows us to give the world a taste of the discussion that coursed through the conference and to engage with it remotely. Thanks to HISTORY, we have video of all the Friday and Saturday sessions. Thanks to Peter Kotowski, a graduate student at Loyola University Chicago, we have identified some of the most probing questions from the audience at the conference and included them as videos in each essay. We invite readers to read the essay, watch the video, and continue the discussion that began in Philadelphia in the open comment sections that follow each video.

We hope you see in this symposium what we do: a beginning of the renewal of the study of the American Revolution. We thank Frank Fox for his vision.

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