[The Power of Association: Re-examining Philadelphia's Colonial Civic Culture](#)

Common-place talks with Jessica Choppin Roney, author of *Governed by a Spirit of Opposition*, about associational culture and living and researching Philadelphia.

In the introduction you describe the voluntary associations that sprouted in eighteenth-century Philadelphia as a "new civic technology." Why did you select that particular term for them, and what implications does it have to understand these organizations as "technologies?"

I first came across the concept of a "civic technology" in Johann Neem's fine book, *Creating a Nation of Joiners: Democracy and Civil Society in Early National Massachusetts*. The concept resonated powerfully with me as an important intervention in how we think about voluntary associations.

Jessica Choppin Roney

Living in the early twenty-first century as a new generation of technologies make possible popular mobilization at a speed and scale never before dreamed of, it is easy to take for granted or find it self-evident that people organize together. The *things* they use to do so, and especially those instruments that make it possible—the Internet, cellphones, the many and ever-changing platforms of social media—*those* are the technologies. In a similar fashion in the eighteenth century, technological changes related to the rise of print culture facilitated and encouraged collective organizing in new ways and on a new scale. But if we step back and remember that the format of voluntary association itself had to be invented, that it was not self-evident, that it took time and trial-and-error, we can appreciate that the elaboration of successful forms of voluntary association was itself a kind of technological innovation.

The eighteenth-century men of Philadelphia I describe both borrowed and departed from an array of religious, craft, and political organizational strategies as they sought to find an effective way to organize toward a particular end, and to keep their members willing to invest their time, energy, and resources. Many of them failed. We know more about the successes because they left behind a better paper trail, but there in itself is another reason to think of voluntary associations as a technology.

As organizers throughout the Atlantic world sought to mobilize men (and by the end of the eighteenth century, women) outside the parameters of church or state, they borrowed heavily from the strategies of earlier voluntary associations that worked. In Philadelphia, men found it easier and faster to adopt a model that had already been tested, rather than generate their own from scratch. All twenty or so colonial Philadelphia fire companies, for example, copied, often verbatim, the articles of association from the first successful company, the Union Fire Company, founded in 1736. The blue-print, as it were, circulated freely, allowing a diverse range of men over a long time span to adopt and adapt the technology to their own needs. Innovations along the way then became available to still-later groups as they studied the available models and selected those strategies their organizers thought would best meet their objectives and keep the membership energized. The civic technology of voluntary associations, then, was never proprietary. Philadelphians borrowed from England and Scotland, from their churches, from joint-stock companies, and from one another as they created their own innovative strategies tailored to their own needs.

That this technology was indeed *civic* stems from two sources. First, the preponderance of organizations—at least in Philadelphia—that were the most effective at mobilizing and retaining members over long periods of time had at least some explicit desire to contribute to the public good. Second, even where organizations were less focused on explicit civic functions, their members understood their associations still to contribute to a *civil* society—meant both in the sense of one characterized by polite sociability and as a collection of citizens operating outside the scope of church or state.

We often think of voluntary associations as a supplement to government activities in colonial Philadelphia, but you argue that they eventually came to supplant government functions as well. How did that transition take place?

When William Penn founded his city, he paid extravagant attention to the street layout and almost none at all to pesky matters like how those same streets would be kept clean. Who would collect taxes, pave and light the streets, authorize scavengers to clear rubbish, and prevent townspeople who brazenly tried to extend their houses and shops out into the public thoroughfare?

For twenty years Philadelphia had no formal local government at all. When elite Pennsylvanians finally sought and gained a municipal charter for Philadelphia in 1701, they did so less from a concern for self-government than as another way to stick it to Penn in a moment when his star was in descent.

The Philadelphia charter these elites gained in 1701 was most significant as a negative document; it prevented Penn or his heirs from meddling in city-residents' property and carved away the power of their governors. It did not set up an institution that could govern. The municipal corporation—I hesitate even to call it a government—did not have the power to tax, wrote laws that it never published through any medium and thus of which Philadelphians remained blissfully unaware, and could not provide basic needs like fire protection, education, social welfare (poor relief), or even self-defense. It did perform judicial functions, but unfortunately most of those records are lost, so we have an incomplete picture of its work there.

In this context, Philadelphia's earliest civic voluntary associations were at no point "supplementary." Association founders and members saw themselves as explicitly tackling problems that local and/or provincial authorities had failed to address. By 1701, the year the city gained its charter, a voluntary association had already supplanted formal authorities in education, despite Penn's original intention that government would play a role here. By 1740, voluntary associations had taken over fire protection; by 1750 self-defense in wartime; by 1760 Indian diplomacy; by 1770 all public poor relief in the region; and by 1776 all the functions of representative government altogether.

I do not mean to suggest a clear teleology here or that the abdication of responsibility for fire protection etc. by local authorities led in a clear, unbroken line to the supplanting of the Pennsylvania Assembly by the extra-governmental Military Association in the summer of 1776. The story is considerably more complicated than that. A long history of ordinary Philadelphia men taking up responsibility for local governance, however, helps explain how Philadelphia radicals were able to act so decisively in the wake of Lexington and Concord—and why they met with so little resistance even from moderates and conservatives who deplored independence. They all—radicals forming the Military Association and conservatives resisting them—conformed to a long history allowing and even respecting extralegal organizations usurping governmental authority. None of the actors at the time initially understood how

off-script the Military Association would be able to go as relations with Britain deteriorated, that it would eventually declare the sitting government void and hold elections for a constitutional convention that produced a new government altogether. Philadelphians, who had long supplanted government functions through their voluntary association, in 1776 supplanted the government itself.

Governed by a Spirit of Opposition focuses heavily on voluntary associations with a civic function, but you've also conducted extensive research on social organizations in Philadelphia—you mention several in the book, in particular the Dancing Assembly. Can you expand on their role in the development of Philadelphia and its civic culture?

In Philadelphia, civic and social organizations evolved in tandem and often mutually reinforced one another. The city had a vibrant assortment of formal associations dedicated to convivial purposes: the Freemasons; hunting and fishing clubs; the Jockey Club, which organized horse races; the Dancing Assembly, which hosted balls each winter; and ethnic societies celebrating respectively Welsh, Scottish, German, Irish, and English identity.

These associations placed all or much of their focus on sociability, linking their evolution in two important ways to organizations which focused more explicitly on civic aims. First, sociability played a role—and often a central one—in all associations, whether they were "social" or "civic" in their primary objectives. Fire companies held their monthly meetings in taverns and only discussed business after members had eaten supper together (and consumed copious quantities of alcohol). The celebrated Junto of Benjamin Franklin and his associates held their philosophical debates over successive pints of wine. Even the seemingly straight-laced Quaker managers of the Pennsylvania Hospital incorporated alcohol occasionally into their meetings.

Second, Philadelphia organizations across a wide spectrum ascribed to the ideal and pursuit of "improvement." Some groups worked to improve the conditions of their city—think of the fire companies protecting lives and property or the Defense Association building a fort against marauding privateers. Some groups worked to improve their neighbors, that is to say *others*, rather than themselves—think of the Contributors to the Relief of the Poor, whose members believed they could root out urban poverty if only they could reform the morals and habits of the impoverished.

And many groups offered their members an avenue toward *self*-improvement. The Junto would provide its members with the equivalent of a college education; the Library Company offered self-improving literature to its subscribers; and in much the same vein, the Dancing Assembly offered a space to engage in polite conversation and perform highly structured and specific dances. Dancing and conversation were in themselves forms of self-improvement and required much the same kind of dedication, education, and practice-at-home as did the education touted by the Library Company.

Many organizations *improved* on more than one register. The American Philosophical Society, for example, explored inventions and ideas that would improve American agriculture, manufacturing, and commerce, at the same time that members pushed and improved their own intellectual capacities. Meanwhile the St. Andrew's Society of Philadelphia provided charity to destitute Scots in the city, improving conditions for others, and at the same time its members indulged themselves in quarterly feasts during which they consolidated their own ethnic identity, and honed their polite conversation and sociability.

In the face-to-face social and economic community in which these men operated, of course, among the most important forms of self-improvement—and this was a key component to every single organization—was networking. Philadelphia's formal associations of all types facilitated the creation of social and information networks that were crucial to political mobilization, business transactions, family formation, and friendship. Convivially oriented organizations often aligned with or contributed to social clusters within the city because they tended to be expensive and exclusive, but the same could be said of many civically oriented organizations as well—for example the Pennsylvania Hospital, College of Philadelphia, and Friendly Association. In my book I chose to focus more on what Daniel Defoe would have called projecting societies, but these organizations were in fact linked in their structure, aims, and membership with Philadelphia's formal convivial clubs.

What role did women play in these government-oriented associations?

In the colonial period women hover at the edges of our vision of voluntary associations. They were there, but they are hard to find. Philadelphia's formal organizations were founded by and for men. They were so heavily inflected as masculine that not one group bothered to specify that membership be restricted to men; and indeed it seems never to have occurred to them, or to women in the city, that their wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters might join too. So, with the sole exception of the Library Company, which had a scant handful of female subscribers in the colonial period, no formal voluntary association, civic or convivial, had formal members who were women.

That said, women informally played a vital role in Philadelphia's associational world. Women participated in civic organizations through their male kin—usually their husbands—contributing in much the same way that men did: with their time, effort, and labor. Wives and widows of fire company members sent their family's fire equipment to fires and probably assisted in carrying and guarding goods out of burning houses; wives and daughters borrowed, read, and discussed books from the Library Company; and the money that built a hospital, raised two forts, provided firewood for the poor, and formed a prize for local horse races came from women *and* men.

This is a crucial point to understand. No married man acted alone when he participated in an organization or gave money to it. He acted as part of a family economy. Every hour that he spent outside of his home or his business

was an hour that his wife and other female kin expanded their efforts to make up his absence, caring for the shop, serving the customers, fulfilling the chores of the house. Israel Pemberton, leader of the Friendly Association for Regaining and Preserving Peace with Indians, understood this fact explicitly. He recognized that only through the extra work of his wife, Mary, was he able to devote so much time to a cause in which they both believed passionately. Whether Deborah Franklin believed as deeply in her husband's firefighting through the Union Fire Company as Mary Pemberton did in her husband's pursuits, we do not know—but Deborah did dutifully send Benjamin's fire equipment to fires throughout his long diplomatic mission to England from the mid-1750s until her death in 1774. Mary Pemberton and Deborah Franklin were never listed as members of their husbands' organizations, but they contributed to them nevertheless, and their husbands could not have done what they did without their wives' participation—enthusiastic or otherwise.

If formal voluntary associations were a civic technology, a form that had to be experimented with and developed over time, women's formal participation did not register as a possibility, let alone a salutary idea, in the colonial period. Only at the end of the eighteenth century did changing notions of women's capacity for reason, education, and moral action converge with now more solidly established forms of organizational structure to carve out space for women, first in organizations with men and then in organizations of their own.

The research for this book required you to spend extensive time in Philadelphia. How did your residence in the city—and doing research at the current incarnations of some of the associations you study—shape your thinking?

It was a delight to spend so much time in Philadelphia working on this book, and then to end up living here permanently around the time the book came out. The first thing I would say about living here that influenced the book is how much I walk when I live in Philadelphia. Penn really did create a walking city. The year I spent here on fellowship I lived at 2nd and Spruce, and most days I walked to the McNeil Center for Early American Studies, where I had my fellowship, at 34th and Walnut. Tracing out daily that long walk from where "my guys" were living in the eighteenth century, past the Center Square they rejected, and all the way across the Schuylkill River into what for them would have been countryside, helped to make real for me something about what it may have been like over generations of occupation to live in and shape this space. It was that year living in Old City/Society Hill that the physical space of the city came to play a much more important role in my understanding of how the political and civic culture of the city depended on and was shaped by the spatial realities of the city and its environs.

Closely related, I got to spend that fellowship year (thanks to the facilitation of Patrick and Laura Spero!) living in the Man Full of Trouble Tavern, a colonial-era tavern that was saved from demolition in the late 1950s and opened for a time as a museum. The ground-floor interior of the tavern has been restored to fit its description in an early nineteenth-century probate, so

I was living in a space that echoed the spaces in which the activities I wrote about occurred. Sitting in that space, sipping rum punch from the recipe of the Colony in Schuylkill, a Philadelphia convivial society, made by my husband who was eager in this respect to further my historical exploration, was an unparalleled privilege and pleasure—and certainly it influenced my historical imagination.

The city I have occupied since I first started doing research here over a decade ago, right up to the moment I write these words, has always been for me a city shaped by associations and dense networks not unlike the ones I study. Some of them are literally the same organizations. I did research at the archives of the Library Company of Philadelphia (where I am also a proud subscriber), the American Philosophical Society, the Pennsylvania Hospital, the University of Pennsylvania, St. Andrew's Society, and the City Archives of Philadelphia.

The current scholarly community in Philadelphia forms another dense network that influences and improves my scholarship in the direct way you would imagine—over the years I got to present and receive feedback on much of my dissertation and then book manuscript—but also through the example of what it means to be part of a voluntary, collective enterprise. I inhabit a dense associational world where people contribute their time, energy, and, yes, their money. The tightly overlapping networks that center around the McNeil Center, Library Company, Program in Economy and Early American Society, and American Philosophical Society today serve both convivial and civic purposes—they involve food and drink, and they provide discursive spaces to interrogate history, literature, art, and material culture. They foster self-improvement through direct intervention (seminars, conferences), but also by modeling scholarly service and community. I am deeply indebted to and influenced by the examples of service of so many Philadelphia-area scholars who make the academic community of Philadelphia the thriving place it is.

Jessica Choppin Roney is an assistant professor of history at Temple University in Philadelphia. She is currently working on a project examining settler societies of the 1780s and '90s, expanding upon her interest in the interaction between voluntary organization and governance, this time outside an urban northeastern context.