Talk of the Future

This issue marks our last as the editors of *Common-place*. We founded the magazine five years ago in an effort to create a common place for historians, curators, archivists, journalists, and history buffs to share what they know about early America, and to teach each other to ask new questions. In that spirit, we've been proud to publish some exciting new voices, along with unusual contributions from luminaries in the field.

We know that the community of readers and writers that has coalesced around *Common-place* will thrive under the leadership of our successor editor, Edward G. Gray. Gray, a wonderfully creative historian of early American history and culture, is associate professor of history at Florida State University. And he has been a vital part of this publication since its inception, serving as an editorial board member and a column editor. From the very first issue his energy and creativity have made our Reviews section run and read smoothly. Now he'll bring those same talents to bear at the top of the masthead. Our next issue, a special themed number on the early Pacific that will appear in January, will mark Ed's debut (along with guest editor Alan Taylor).

This new editorial leadership at *Common-place* comes with other exciting changes as well. The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, a longtime patron of the publication, has withdrawn from the governance of *Common-place* but will

contribute financially to the journal during this transition year. Florida State University, Ed Gray's home institution, will now join the American Antiquarian Society as a nongoverning partner for the next four years, coincident with Ed's term as editor. FSU will contribute important things to our enterprise, including course release time for the editor, graduate assistantships devoted to the publication, and technical support. The AAS, of course, will maintain its financial support as well.

Thanks to all of you, it's been a joy to see *Common-place* grow and prosper over the last half decade. Now we look forward to joining you as readers in this common place.

This article originally appeared in issue 5.1 (October, 2004).

Walking Moraley's Streets: Philadelphia

Baltimore | Boston | Charleston | Chicago | Havana

| Lima | Los Angeles | Mexico City | New Amsterdam | New Orleans
Paramaribo | Philadelphia | Potosi | Quebec City | Salt Lake City

William Moraley disembarked from the ship *Boneta* in Philadelphia a week before Christmas, 1729. Like Benjamin Franklin who had arrived six years earlier, Moraley landed in the City of Brotherly Love as a poor man. While Franklin was a runaway apprentice, Moraley was a bound servant awaiting purchase. Wearing a dilapidated red coat, coarse checkered shirt, bad shoes, and a dirty wig, Moraley, like the similarly ill attired Franklin, bought bread with his last pennies, then explored the town on foot. After that, the two men's initial hours and days in the city diverged sharply. Franklin gave his leftover bread to a friendless woman and child, attended a Quaker meeting, and sought out a reputable inn for lodging; the following day he applied for work. Moraley sold his clothes to buy rum and contemplated the wonders of Philadelphia. Franklin sought out "young people of the town that were lovers of reading, with whom I spent my evenings very pleasantly and gained money by my industry and frugality." Moraley enjoyed the city's "many Houses of Entertainment" where evening drinkers imbibed the "Product of this fertile Soil."

Fig. 1. William Moraley arrived on the ship Boneta. The ship's arrival was noted and Moraley's indenture was advertised for sale in the Pennsylvania Gazette (Philadelphia), December 9-16, 1729.

Where did William Moraley walk—or more likely wobble, after thirteen weeks on a sailing vessel and several hours in taverns—on the streets of Philadelphia on the first day of his arrival? It is impossible to know for sure, but we can try to retrace his steps on a tour through a bustling city on the rim of the Atlantic world.

While the *Boneta* docked on Market Wharf, Moraley revised George Webb's poem about "one of the most delightful Cities upon Earth." At least forty more ships were docked along the Delaware River. In Philadelphia, the *Boneta* unloaded its cargo of servants and coal, took on a shipment of flour, and in early January set sail for Lisbon. Other vessels were just clearing the port for Barbados, Madeira, Antigua, and the Isle of Man. This sea traffic formed the foundation for Philadelphia's economy. Lord Adam Gordon's observation that "Everybody in Philadelphia deals more or less in trade" was only a slight exaggeration. The urban center was an entrepôt through which European manufactured goods flowed to be sold throughout the Delaware Valley, while the region's abundant grain and livestock products were carried into the city for shipment abroad. Most

residents, directly or indirectly, depended on commerce with people scattered throughout the Atlantic World, from Native Americans in the backcountry, to small farmers and storekeepers in the neighboring countryside, to planters, manufacturers, and merchants operating from the West Indies to Portugal to Britain. Mariners and merchants made money managing the trade, carters and stevedores stowed staples on ships, and coopers created barrels to contain flour bound for the sea. Housing construction likewise formed a vital component of the economy as carpenters and laborers built structures in response to the city's rapid population growth, from a handful of people in 1682, to approximately five thousand inhabitants in 1720, to nearly seven thousand when Moraley arrived.

Fig. 2. Peter Cooper, The South East Prospect of the City of Philadelphia, c. 1720. The original, now in the Library Company of Philadelphia, likely is the oldest surviving painting of a North American city. Cooper distorts a few of the buildings, but the overall impression of a city anchored to maritime commerce is accurate.

Curious to explore the city and searching for a master to purchase his indenture, Moraley strolled westward from the wharf on High Street on Saturday, one of the two days each week when the market operated. He joined a crowd of people who sailed from New Jersey to Market Wharf, heading for the marketplace to shop for or sell food, and they immediately passed the area where women sold fish caught by their husbands. Crossing Front Street, Moraley proceeded by the London Coffee House, an impressive edifice where customers conducted all manner of business. Merchants, shopkeepers, and ship captains drank together here while making deals. Wealthier people congregated to sell and bid on land, buildings, and other property. Edward Horne—the merchant who owned both the ship on which Moraley had sailed as well as Moraley's contract—auctioned property there in 1730. At Horne's death six years later, his widow listed their 232-acre "plantation" near the city for public sale at the Coffee House. Not all merchants were as wealthy as Horne was, but many of them earned a great deal of money dealing in commerce and land.

Philadelphians also bartered bound people at the Coffee House. A "likely breeding Negroe Woman, and a Boy about two Years old" numbered among the many black people forcibly imported into the province, often from West Africa via the West Indies, and sold as slaves at auctions at the Coffee House and throughout the city. The demand for labor and the capital accumulation that accompanied the city's early economic growth encouraged the importation of hundreds of slaves in the 1720s. They comprised approximately 15 percent of the population, working as laborers along the wharves, mariners on ships, skilled workers in artisans' shops, and domestics in the homes of the affluent. While

urban bondage usually was physically less grueling than plantation labor in the southern colonies, Philadelphia slaves were often more isolated, swimming in a sea of white faces. Although many absorbed Euro-American culture relatively quickly, urban bondpeople still suffered depression and despair resulting from their difficult circumstances, as evident in the several slave suicides that occurred shortly after Moraley's arrival. Some resisted their bondage. In May 1733, George and Dick fled their Philadelphia owners, taking (according to the *Pennsylvania Gazette*) "two Pair of Pistols, two Muskets and a Cutlass, with a Quantity of Powder and Ball, with an Intent as is believed [by their masters] to do some Mischief." Five months later, six male and female slaves absconded, carrying guns to aid their escape.

Fig. 3. Slaves are offered for sale in the American Weekly Mercury (Philadelphia), June 8-15, 1738.

Moraley was also not free, though his was a different kind of servitude; he characterized himself as a "voluntary slave" whose situation was temporary. Like at least half of European emigrants to North America during the eighteenth century, Moraley signed a contract of indenture. By this agreement, a person toiled as a servant for a master for three or four years in return for the cost of the Atlantic passage, daily maintenance, and, perhaps, freedom dues at the conclusion of their term. Moraley joined 3,400 other bound servants and free passengers who arrived in the port in 1729. An era of peace on the high seas, famine in Ireland, war in present-day Germany, and economic problems in Britain all galvanized Moraley and thousands of others to emigrate to the New World in the late 1720s and the 1730s. Approximately 73,000 Europeans traveled to British North America during the 1730s, nearly twice as many as the average during each of the century's first three decades. With its temperate climate and generally healthy economy, the Delaware River Valley was an attractive destination; at least 17,000 migrants arrived in Philadelphia's port in the 1730s. The condition of immigrants changed as poorer people began to account for a larger proportion of the new arrivals. Nearly one of every three passengers disembarking in Philadelphia during the 1730s was an indentured servant, and an additional five hundred imported slaves joined them at the bottom of the social ladder. A month after Moraley's arrival, Franklin complained about "the great Increase of Vagrants and idle Persons" that had resulted from the "late large Importation of such from several Parts of Europe."

Passing the Coffee House, Moraley walked along the covered market that stretched for two blocks in the middle of High Street. The fruit, herbs, and poultry impressed him, as did "all Kinds of Butchers Meat, as well cut and drest as at London." As they affected so many other aspects of life, seasonal

rhythms determined the availability of foodstuffs. “After the season for fowls,” one traveler noted, “comes the fisheries of the spring,” while “in the beginning and middle of summer it is difficult to procure fresh provisions of any kind.” On Friday night before market day, farmers’ wagons loaded with provisions rumbled down the western end of High Street, while boats stocked with firewood landed from New Jersey. People congregated in the market hall to meet friends and gossip, and a few even may have danced, although the Quakers who controlled the city discouraged such frivolity.

Fig. 4. A map of Philadelphia’s High Street, from Front to Third. Computer generated by Billy G. Smith.

Moraley purchased a three-penny loaf of bread at John Bryant’s bakery, a structure measuring 23 feet wide along High Street and stretching 72 feet in depth along Latetia Court. Francis Richardson, clockmaker and goldsmith, rented a shop next door, and Moraley, trained as a clockmaker, stopped in to see if Richardson might be interested in purchasing his indenture. As Moraley learned, Peter Stretch was the “eminent” watchmaker who dominated the profession in the city. Arriving in 1702 at the age of thirty-two, Stretch produced dozens of tall-case clocks that provided refinement to the homes of the affluent. Stretch was also prominent politically and religiously, serving for thirty-eight years as a city councilman and participating in Quaker affairs. However, where Stretch succeeded materially and socially, Moraley would fail. Moraley arrived in the city at an inauspicious time for men in his occupation since the number of clockmakers exceeded the local demand for their products. It was a prime reason why he was sold last among the group of servants with whom he arrived. It also proved a critical factor in Moraley’s subsequent struggle with unemployment and poverty once he gained his freedom.

Another ingredient necessary for artisans to realize success was access to capital to enable them to establish their own shop. In the next block of High Street, John Frost, a newly freed servant, began a partnership with Thomas Carter, renting a shop where they could sell the stays and coats they manufactured. Benjamin Franklin, whose printing office was nearby, illustrates the difficulty that many journeymen encountered. He agreed to collaborate with Hugh Meredith, an alcoholic with few printing skills, primarily because Meredith’s father financed the business. Franklin subsequently borrowed from his friends and even bargained for a marriage, if the dowry was sufficient to pay off his debt and establish him as an independent master printer. When the proposed dowry proved inadequate, Franklin declined the marriage. While many merchants like Edward Horne and some artisans like Stretch and Franklin could take advantage of the rapid economic development of the Delaware Valley, others, like Moraley, were unable even to survive financially, much less

prosper.

Continuing along High across Second Street, Moraley paused to read some of the official notices—including new acts of the assembly, announcements of the *assize* (price) of bread, and broadsides of market regulations—posted on the courthouse in the middle of the market. One pressing political issue when Moraley arrived was the amount of paper currency the colony should print, and brochures about the topic were nailed to the courthouse. As in most British colonies, currency was scarce since the balance of trade favored Britain. Pennsylvania emitted £30,000 in 1729, and the funds were used, in part, to enable farmers to borrow against their land and to pay public officials. The amount of money in circulation concerned many Pennsylvanians since it helped shape the economy. Franklin had recently penned an anonymous pamphlet advocating a liberal paper money policy, and Moraley would write about the topic in his autobiography as well.

Criminals sometimes suffered public punishment at the courthouse, often on market days when a great number of people could watch. Six months after Moraley's walk, according to the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Richard Evans "received 39 Lashes at the publick Whipping-post, having been convicted of Bigamy." A few weeks later, "Griffith Jones, and one Glascow an Indian, stood an hour in the Pillory together, and were afterwards whipt round the Town at the Carts Tail, both for Assaults with Intent to ravish" a woman and young girl. Five days after Moraley passed the courthouse, a jury sitting there found two servants, James Mitchel and James Prouse, guilty of stealing seven pounds (equivalent to three months income for a day laborer) from a barber's house in Front Street. The judge sentenced them to death for a crime of such an "enormous Nature." A month later, a large crowd gathered at the prison (at the west end of the market) "to see these unhappy young Men brought forth to suffer." They were placed in a cart, "together with a Coffin for each of them," and carried to "the fatal Tree" for hanging. At the last minute, with the ropes around their necks, the governor spared their lives with a pardon, thereby pleasing not only Mitchel and Prouse but also the "common People, who were unanimous in their loud Acclamations of God bless the Governor for his Mercy."

The butchers' shambles, where animals were slaughtered and sold on Sundays, abutted the courthouse. Moraley strolled along this smelly, fly-infested market, past Strawberry Alley and White Horse Alley. In 1682, William Penn had planned a "greene countrie towne" comprised of immense houses situated on large lots surrounded by orchards, which he expected would expand rapidly westward. However, Philadelphians soon ignored the design, instead carving up the grand blocks with numerous alleys and congregating densely along the Delaware River, the economy's lifeline. William Stapler, tin man, peddled small metal goods in his store along High Street. Next door, shopkeeper John Le sold diverse items imported from London, ranging from diapers and tablecloths to gunpowder and snuff.

Members of the First Presbyterian Church adjacent to Le's shop may have

purchased some of their Bibles from him. The continual arrival of Scots and Scots-Irish immigrants expanded the Presbyterian congregation, which accounted for roughly one of every ten Philadelphians. William Penn's liberal policy of toleration had encouraged settlement by people with various religious beliefs. Anglicans were the most numerous in the city, with Quakers a close second. Baptists, Swedish and Dutch Lutherans, Dutch Calvinists, and a handful of Catholics also worshiped there. African slaves practiced their own beliefs as best as they could. The medley of tongues that Moraley heard near the market matched this diversity of religions. Besides English, Dutch, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Gaelic, Philadelphians spoke a host of African and Native American languages. Indeed, Christ Church, the Anglican house of worship currently under construction, would hold sermons in "Welch" as well as English.

Across White Horse Alley on High Street was the Sign of the Conestoga Wagon, where the proprietor kept "good Entertainment for Man and Horses at reasonable rates." Its "large Yard Room for Waggons and Cattle" made it a convenient place "for Killing and Dressing of Hogs" to be sold across the street at the shambles. Farmers often stayed there when bringing their livestock to market. A few paces further, Moraley came to the Sign of the Indian King, a prominent public house run by Owen Owen, a former city sheriff. The inn offered both lodging and alcohol. About one hundred licensed taverns—approximately one for every seventy-five residents—served a very hard-drinking population in the city. The Indian King was a substantial structure. It contained eighteen rooms, fourteen of which had fireplaces, a large brick kitchen, and a two-story stable that would accommodate one hundred horses and fifty tons of hay. The Society of Ancient Britons met there for a feast each year before attending the Welch sermon at Christ Church.

Fig. 5 Stone Prison, Corner View, 1723. This drawing currently is located in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Crossing Third Street, Moraley discovered a large prison he described as a "neat Stone Building, having but little of that look." Because it stood at the busy west end of the market, the block was filled with stores, including an apothecary, an onion seller, a wheelwright, a smith, and the "Crown & Shoe" that specialized in selling bacon and hog's lard. At the next corner, Moraley had to wade through Dock Creek, which meandered in a southeast direction, eventually flowing into the Delaware River at Dock Wharf, where William Penn had originally landed. The area was boggy, and the buildings grew sparse, with the Black Bear Inn being one of the few notable structures in the next block.

Fig. 6. The Old Provincial State House, Philadelphia. From William H. Egle, An Illustrated History of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Gardiner, 1880), 1:71.

Moraley may have decided to walk south a few blocks to see the new state house (later to become Independence Hall) under construction. Nearby, at the western edge of the city, Philadelphians sometimes used the outdoors as “necessaries,” and Moraley may have taken that opportunity. A few months later, according to the newspaper, a “Countryman walking out behind the Town with a Design to ease himself . . . happened to set down in that Place where Hair is dried for the Saddlers,” and he gathered “some out of the Heap to make use of.”

Moraley returned to the ship for the evening. After three weeks, Isaac Pearson, a clockmaker and smith in Burlington, New Jersey, purchased Moraley’s indenture contract for five years. Moraley spent the following three years in Pearson’s household, fixing clocks, sweating at a smith’s forge, herding livestock, working in an iron foundry, and performing other miscellaneous jobs. Disgruntled and eager to live in Philadelphia, Moraley absconded but was quickly caught. Surprisingly, the Quaker City’s mayor mediated the dispute and convinced Pearson to forgive two years’ service. After completing his indenture, Moraley moved to Philadelphia, but could not find steady employment and was reduced to poverty and near starvation. He wandered the streets, slept in barns, and borrowed money and food from friends and acquaintances. He traveled the colonies, from New York to Maryland, cleaning timepieces, working as a tinsmith, and barely keeping beyond the reach of his creditors. Disheartened about his prospect in the “American plantations,” Moraley returned to England in 1734 and lived in Newcastle-on-Tyne until his death in 1762.

Fig. 7. Robert Feke, “Young Benjamin Franklin,” c. 1748.

Meanwhile, of course, Benjamin Franklin achieved fame, fortune, and more: running a printer’s shop, growing rich, inventing practical items, demonstrating that lightening is electricity, pursuing a political career, and becoming the most famous American both at home and abroad. While Franklin came to symbolize—to *invent*—the rags-to-riches American dream, he never abandoned his commitment to Philadelphia, helping found a library, hospital, fire company, and university. Moraley (like nearly all other people) surely was not as talented as Franklin. Yet the opportunities available in the Quaker City and the personal circumstances of each man varied enormously. What if competent printers had dominated the trade in Philadelphia when Franklin arrived, if his

creditors had pursued him for his debts, if his wife's first husband had charged him with bigamy, if disease or a large family had drained his resources, or if the city's economy had stagnated completely at vital times in his career? Had any of these events occurred, Franklin may have found himself at the courthouse whipping post or in the stone prison, or, at best, he may have become another obscure artisan who, like William Moraley, struggled to make ends meet.

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Billy G. Smith, the Michael P. Malone Professor of History at Montana State University, has published a number of books and articles about early Philadelphia, including *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990).

Federalist Chic

The late-breaking beatification of John Adams and his family, soon to be a major monument, forms one of the wonders of the present age. As David McCullough's mammoth biography of Adams continues to ride the bestseller lists, the second president's visage is on display and his merits are being extolled across the land, and in places that Adams could never have imagined: airport gift shops, radio talk shows, the aisles of Target, even holiday gatherings in the suburbs of Kansas City. Adams has not seen this kind of popularity for more than two hundred years, since the XYZ affair was headline news (if there had been headlines) and the song "Adams and Liberty" was leading the hit parade (if there had been a hit parade). Even more remarkable is the fact that the drive to immortalize the Adams family in stone is being co-led by a liberal Irish Catholic Democrat (Ted Kennedy), the type of man that the conservative John Adams administration tried to have thrown in jail or out of the country. Or

both.

Illustration © John McCoy

Though long popular with historians for the wonderfully honest, acerbic, and introspective sources they left behind in their letters and diaries, the Adamses are tough to feature as twenty-first-century icons, especially when one considers the elder John's post-independence career. David McCullough claimed in a *New York Times* profile that "so much of what [Adams] wrote dealt with the ideas and ideals that are the basis of our whole way of life; of our society as Americans." That Adams played a powerful role in bringing about independence is true—our lack of maple leaves on the flag and freeways named after the queen owe as much to Adams as to anybody. But the political content of the new republic that the Revolution created, and of the popular aspirations that were unleashed, pretty well eluded Adams. While his fellow Americans thrilled to the democratic, egalitarian message of Paine's *Common Sense*, Adams sat down to write a rebuttal. After the Revolution, Adams spent most of his time on what would come to be seen as the wrong side of history, railing *against* the "ideas and ideals" that became the basis of American life and politics. And with one huge exception, his breaking with hardline Federalists to avoid a war with France, he did not exactly cover himself with glory as a leader either.

As vice president, Adams was a laughingstock who was invited to two or three Cabinet meetings (tops) in eight years, and became best known for his wordy and poorly received arguments for extending various aspects of Europe's more hierarchical political culture to the United States. Taking an increasingly dark view of popular morals and capacities as he got older, Adams proposed and defended ideas that mercifully did not become part of the American political tradition: royal titles and life tenures for senators and chief executives, the open maintenance of an aristocracy. (He was also a vociferous, and unlike Jefferson, sincere and committed, opponent of political parties and campaigning, developments that *did* become part of our political tradition.) Adams was even willing to consider the idea of calling the chief executive a king. And while he usually seemed willing to leave his aristocracy "natural," elective, and relatively meritocratic, the last of his "Discourses on Davila" (the newspaper essay series that precipitated the break with Thomas Jefferson), opined that "hereditary succession was attended with fewer evils than frequent elections."

While not the "avowed monarchist" of Jeffersonian propaganda, Adams did call the English constitution "the most stupendous fabric of human invention" (an often-parodied turn of phrase in its day) and hewed to older political ideas that most of his fellow Americans were abandoning or repudiating. Believing

that a proper republican constitution should balance different orders of society—the monarch, the aristocracy, and the people—rather than just institutions of government, Adams worried that American constitutions did not have enough of the good stuff, being too heavily skewed toward democracy. He believed it was far better to err in the other direction: the people were "as unjust, tyrannical, brutal, barbarous, and cruel, as any king or senate," and more prone to "intemperance and excess." Democracy without aristocratic power to keep it in check would lead to "profligacy, vice, and corruption," while the reverse would be merely unjust, without public order and morals being threatened. As president, the long-time advocate of strong executive power acted with characteristic perversity by refusing to use any in managing his own administration. Adams retained the Washington Cabinet for years despite the fact that they held him in relatively open contempt and consistently flouted or subverted his orders. Yet at the same time, the Adams administration seized some executive powers that were stronger than any before or since. One of the few areas where Adams and his Cabinet agreed was in the promulgation of what remains—if only barely—the nation's only peacetime sedition law, one that was openly intended to suppress and silence a nascent opposition party. The Sedition Act was coupled with the nation's first crackdown on politically suspicious immigrants—people from such deeply alien places as England, Ireland, and Scotland—in a case where the dangers they posed to American liberty were much more theoretical than they are in the case of today's Osamists. Adams sometimes seemed to shy away from the Alien and Sedition Acts, but he signed them, and was not sorry to see his detractors suffer. (His wife and memorial-mate Abigail was positively eager for it.) Whatever his other virtues, John Adams stands out rather boldly in our history as the only president not dealing with armed rebellion who got to have his critics in the press arrested, jailed, or driven into hiding. Many others, from Washington to Nixon to Clinton, would have enjoyed similar privileges, but forbore seeking them.

As little sense as it seems to make, the origins of the Adams craze are not mysterious. It is a by-product of the celebrity culture that is coming to dominate American history publishing as thoroughly as it does most other aspects of our society. Celebrity historian David McCullough cast his gaze on Adams, and "His Rotundity" suddenly became both a national hero and corporate profit center. With his PBS-ready voice and grandpa-with-gravitas demeanor (sort of a cross between John Houseman and Matlock), McCullough is exactly what television producers and popular audiences want their historians to look and sound like. People love him, especially college-educated people who feel like they should have paid more attention in that freshman survey class now that they are older and more serious. (This means the McCullough fan base is especially well represented in the media and politics.) Ted Kennedy rushed up to get the national treasure's autograph after a congressional hearing, quipping that he could "grovel with the best of them." McCullough matches his genially distinguished persona with exactly consonant subjects and writing style: great men and events that most people have heard of, described in lively, human, but stately prose that tastes full-bodied but goes down smooth. After his bestselling paean to Harry Truman and heavy exposure on television

and the distinguished lecture circuit, McCullough could probably have inspired a monument to the Millard Fillmore family if he had chosen differently. As it was, McCullough turned his sights to the second president, deciding that Adams was "unfairly maligned"—this despite the many usually admiring biographies and exegeses that scholars have produced over the years.

The terms of the reinterpretation that McCullough offers are very revealing of the narrowness of his intellectual compass. Chiefly, McCullough seems to have been concerned with the charge (lodged by Adams himself) that he was an obnoxious man. Not so, says the biographer: Adams was "full of life, high-spirited, affectionate, loyal to friends, a kind and a dedicated father and husband." Abigail liked him and so should we. A contributor to the pompously reductionist PBS program and tie-in book series on political leadership, *Character Above All*, McCullough seems to ask only one real question about his subjects: was he a good, likable, morally virtuous person? This is dressed up with some rhetoric about the importance of the subject's political career. Yet in practice any defects in the public career are explained away by the good intentions and sterling qualities of the private man. Or they are left vague, or left out.

McCullough leaves Adams's views so vague, in fact, that our present Congress seems to think he was Jefferson. The Adams memorial legislation that had Ted Kennedy groveling actually mentions the honorees' "abiding belief in the perfectibility of the Nation's democracy" as one of the justifications for memorializing the Adams family. The breathtaking counterfactuality of this argument is compounded by the fact that the new monument will also include not only Sedition Act John, but also his son John Quincy Adams, the president whose commitment to perfecting democracy was so strong that he told Congress not to be "palsied by the will of [their] constituents," and their descendant Henry Adams, author of *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*.

McCullough and Kennedy fail to realize that there was a reason for earlier generations of leaders not turning the Adamses into monuments of democracy: earlier generations of leaders actually *understood* the Adamses. Our own willful failure to do so suggests that there may be more at work here than historical ignorance and star power.

Especially among our political, business, and media elites, genuine feeling for democracy seems to have ebbed very low, while comfort levels with autocracy, inequality, and concentrated power seem to be rather high. Corporate CEOs, essentially princes wielding absolute power in their realms, have emerged as cultural heroes, while each successive president (Jimmy Carter excepted) has gotten a little bit better at playing the role of elective monarch. During the 2000 election crisis, it seemed that media commentators and citizens who were genuinely alarmed at the possibility of the people's will not being done were drowned out by throngs who just wanted a decision made, to see an "endgame," as the appropriately dynastic buzzword had it.

Upon close inspection, the current vogue for the Founders is politically right-handed, heavily favoring the conservatives of the founding era, figures such as Adams, Hamilton, and Washington who stood against or above the rise of democratic politics and the further expansion of individual rights. "Founders chic," as Newsweek called the phenomenon last summer, is really "Federalist chic." Since then, even long before September 11, the political restraints one might have expected to limit a court-ordered president rejected by a majority of voters nationwide have simply not existed. (Approval ratings based on a few hundred phone calls seem to be given more democratic weight than millions of votes.) Likewise there has been only a little more outcry, and no serious congressional resistance, as President Bush and his retainers have seized police powers not seen since World War II and claimed sweeping wartime exemptions from public scrutiny and criticism of their actions all without the need of, say, a major, declared war involving millions of Americans against genocidal modern states. That such world-war-like authority has been so easily taken speaks depressing volumes about the health of our political system. So John Adams may be a man for our times after all. The democratic tradition that swamped him and his son is not what it used to be.

Further Reading:

For additional, late-breaking comments on this and other historical-political topics, see "Publick Occurrences Extra."

The Adams craze was only part of a larger boom in celebratory ruminations on the Founders, dubbed "Founder chic" by *Newsweek*. (For a time this fall, it even threatened to extend to Adams's archenemy Alexander Hamilton.) The boom gained prominent coverage in national publications during 2000 and 2001, and was slowed only a little by September 11 and the Joseph Ellis scandal. At least two forceful critiques of the trend have appeared: Sean Wilentz's *New Republic* review of McCullough's *Adams*, "America Made Easy"; and Andrew Burstein's article, "The Politics of Memory: Taking the measure of the ever more popular demand for historical greatness," *Washington Post Book World*, 14 October 2001.

David McCullough's conviction that John Adams has somehow been neglected by historians is one the strangest aspects of the craze. In fact, there are numerous admiring, well-written Adams books by historians, and they all do a more thorough and even-handed job than McCullough of analyzing Adams's political ideas and career, without stinting on the love. For just a selection, see John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (New York, 1996); Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York, 1993); Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill, 1976). Middlebrow pop culture has not left Adams behind either. While depicted as priggish and difficult, he is clearly the hero of the popular musical *1776*. Those readers old enough to remember the Bicentennial may also recall the PBS miniseries of that time, *The Adams Chronicles*, the tie-in book for which is still pretty widely available in used book stores.

Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of the journalistic accounts of "Founder chic" is the degree to which it has been mistaken for a dominant trend in historical scholarship (as opposed to historical publishing), the essence of a new "new political history." While there is now a fairly substantial group of early American historians working in political history again, the thrust of this work is quite different, as I hope will be demonstrated by the forthcoming volume I am co-editing with David Waldstreicher and Andrew Robertson, *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (University of North Carolina Press). No one ever said that pundits had to be objective!

This article originally appeared in issue 2.2 (January, 2002).

Lampi's Election Notes

The 1824 Presidential Election is one of the most well remembered, primarily because it is the only election ever forced into the House of Representatives because no candidate succeeded in getting a majority of electoral votes (different from the 1800 Presidential Election in which two candidates got a majority, thus forcing the passing of the 12th Amendment).

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“The challenging, yet glorious, differences among visitors’ expectations when they come to Independence Hall constitute a unique opportunity for learning.”

Hearing Slavery: Recovering the role of sound in African American slave culture

In these two almost random cases, the sounds created by African Americans induced in white observers a sense of cultural dissonance, prompting feelings of confusion, disgust, and even horror.

Publick Occurrences 2.0 January 2008

January 31, 2008

Goody Bags Bad

The eloquently nasty James Wolcott made a sharp comment on the historical contribution to what he called "the Charlie Rose post-[State of the Union] all-star cud-chew" Monday night. Actually I would have generalized Wolcott's point to most of the people I have seen on supposedly serious TV talk shows labeled as a "presidential historian." Panelist Doris Kearns Goodwin, Wolcott wrote, has

become a major irritant with her . . . goody bag of presidential anecdotes that she dispenses to humanize everybody on the same glorious continuum, as if the crimes and calamities of Vietnam and Iraq were crucibles of character-building for our chief executives, the crowded backdrops to personal tragedy and greatness. (So many faraway nobodies have to die so that History can come alive.)

This is not a new irritant at all, of course, as Goodwin and a number of her pop history colleagues have been handing out these sugary snacks regularly ever since the great Founder Chic eruption of 2001. It would be nice if the middlebrow media and popular political history would work on their addiction to this kind of thing, but somehow I doubt we will be seeing Charlie Rose in intellectual rehab anytime soon.

January 30, 2008

"Less Jobs, More Wars"

That's the message some Republican commentators are expecting the GOP to have to run with in the fall if John McCain wins the nomination, as seems increasingly likely. Watch this video of Joe Scarborough and Pat Buchanan chortling blackly about McCain's Florida win:

There would be a platform that John Adams could have run on, or, to be fair, James Madison or Martin Van Buren, too. But they would not have enjoyed it like the self-loathing Adams.

If only those Massachusetts farmers had some credit card offers with great introductory rates . . .

From John Quiggin in Australia (via Crooked Timber and Matthew Yglesias) comes the interesting suggestion that the relatively easy credit in the United States, especially as regards the comparatively lenient terms on which people can get credit, may help explain the general lack of political traction that increasing income inequality seems to get here. (Just ask John Edwards, again.)

Quiggin wrote, in a late 2005 post:

1. Wage inequality in the US has grown greatly since 1970. Income inequality has also grown, but not as much since low-wage households have increased hours worked.
2. (Annual) ***Consumption inequality has not changed much since 1970****. In my judgement, this reflects increased use of credit markets to smooth out short term fluctuations in income, which offsets increased long-run inequality. . .*
4. Bankruptcy laws act as a kind of income insurance, and generous (to debtors) ***bankruptcy laws are a substitute for redistributive taxation****.*

I bolded what seemed the key points to me. In a new post today (1-30-08), Quiggin laments the current U.S. mortgage foreclosure crisis, but makes a similar point about the relatively lenient (compared to other countries) terms of U.S. mortgages: "Most [U.S.] mortgages are non-recourse, meaning that the lender can take the house but cannot recover the debt from the borrowers income or other assets. That means that once the value of the house falls below the amount owing (equity becomes negative) the borrower can walk away from the house and the debt." The parochial, debt-fueled American inside me blanches at the idea that it is common in other places for lenders to have rights over your money *after* they have taken your house. That would definitely damp down the old housing bubbles.

Of course, credit was not always so easy in the U.S., and the notable association of rural political unrest and rebellion in U.S. history with harsh credit contractions (and threatened property loss to creditors or taxing

authorities) makes Quibbin's suggestion fairly convincing. The most obvious example would be that central Massachusetts favorite, Shays' Rebellion. It makes you wonder whether the credit-card companies really understood what they were playing with when they pushed through the bankruptcy "reform" legislation a while back. I am guessing not.

January 29, 2008

Florida's Unsettling Influence

I don't live in Florida any more — *Common-Place* editor Ed Gray is in a better position than me to comment — but it was unsettling to read our fellow early American historian (turned super-blogger) Josh Marshall's opinion that the Sunshine State might decide the Republican nomination later today. Politics in Florida always puzzled me. I will never forget the guys standing outside a lecture hall handing out anti-tax literature — in a state with no income tax!

January 26, 2008

Welcome to the new "Publick Occurrences"

I have been writing a (very) sporadic political column on *Common-Place* since 2001, but I realized a while back that I would prefer to do "Publick Occurrences" as a blog instead of a column, since frankly not *every* single thought that passes through my head is worth developing into a whole essay. Probably more to the point, many observations I could have made over past few years would have long passed their sell-by date by the time they reached *Common-Place* through the usual editorial process. So now John McCoy and Ed Gray have been so kind as to set up this space where the world can once more have the horror of direct, largely unedited access to my thoughts on politics, history, and other (sometimes loosely) related matters. I hope to be posting *at least* once a week, especially on Sunday evening/Monday morning. Comments are enabled, but they will be moderated, at least for the time being.

While I can't promise that this new "Publick Occurrences" blog will stick completely to the American history/current American politics intersection that was the focus of the columns, but since that perspective informs just about everything I do and say — ask my poor family who get world events and whatever we happen to be watching on television tiresomely contextualized every night —

I doubt this space will stray too far. I will try to keep my teaching separate. Students who get this site accidentally through a search engine should check the links on my main home page for the course they are taking.

Finally, I certainly hope it would go without saying that the opinions expressed here are mine alone and not those of *Common-Place*, the American Antiquarian Society, or the University of Missouri, my actual employer.

This article originally appeared in issue 8.2 (January, 2008).

Jeffrey L. Pasley is associate professor of history at the University of Missouri and the author of *"The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (2001), along with numerous articles and book chapters, most recently the entry on Philip Freneau in Greil Marcus's forthcoming New Literary History of America. He is currently completing a book on the presidential election of 1796 for the University Press of Kansas and also writes the blog Publick Occurrences 2.0 for some Website called *Common-place*.

The Online Writings of Jeffrey L. Pasley – UPDATED

This page presents some of the same links that appear on my original home page, along with some new ones, in a more compact format. These are all scholarly or quasi-scholarly pieces, either never published in print or published in much shorter versions or just plain are not very easily accessible. The order is reverse chronological, or newest first.

- "The Role of the Press and Media in Presidential Elections" – expanded & updated encyclopedia article, 2003/2010
- "Thomas Paine and the U.S. Election of 1796: In which it is discovered that George Washington was more popular than Jesus" – conference paper, Oct. 2008
- "Popular Constitutionalism in Philadelphia: How Freedom of the Press Was Won" (2008)
- Articles on Conspiracy Theory in Early American History, written for Peter Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia* (2003): "Indians, North American," "Illuminati," "Lewis, Meriwether," "Abolitionists," "Jackson, Andrew," "Monk, Maria," "Morse, Jedidiah," "Alien and Sedition Acts"
- "You Can't Pin A Good Slayer Down: The Politics, If Any, of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*" (2003)
- "Showing the Scars: Presidential Illness and the Press over the Centuries" (2001)
- "Conspiracy Theory and American Exceptionalism from the Revolution to Roswell" (2000)
- "Matthew Livingston Davis's Notes From The Political Underground: The

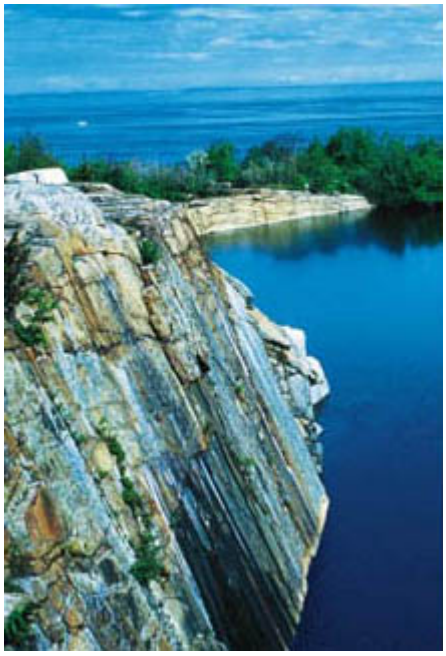
Conflict of Political Values in the Early American Republic" (1996/2000)

… more to come

This article originally appeared in issue 8.4 (July, 2008).

Jeffrey L. Pasley is associate professor of history at the University of Missouri and the author of *"The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (2001), along with numerous articles and book chapters, most recently the entry on Philip Freneau in Greil Marcus's forthcoming New Literary History of America. He is currently completing a book on the presidential election of 1796 for the University Press of Kansas and also writes the blog Publick Occurrences 2.0 for some Website called *Common-place*.

Venturing Out



"In about their eighth year, children develop a sense of time and an ability to abstract that connect stories with pasts. They begin, that is, to think historically."

A Hard Act is Good to Follow

As our capacity to incorporate sound, video, and other media into our site grows, so grows our ability to present the American past, and representations of the American past, in ever-more innovative ways.