A Story about History: PBS Takes on the War of 1812



The abstract goal of thinking about history is made wonderfully concrete by the documentary’s organizing structure.

Publick Occurrences 2.0 April 2008



April 28, 2008

End-of-the-semester blues

Travel and end-of-the-semester workload issues have kept me off of here a little longer than expected. Regular blogging will resume soon!

April 23, 2008

Another great moment in Pennsylvania political history . . .



. . . from the state that brought you President James Buchanan (who recently lost his one historical distinction, the Worst President Ever crown, to the current illustrious occupant), Lincoln's corrupt & incompetent war secretary Simon Cameron, Boss Matt Quay, Boies Penrose*, Frank "I'm so tough I'm gonna make Attila the Hun look like a f—-t" Rizzo, and the MOVE bombing, just for starters. It's been (almost) all downhill since the state inaugurated competitive presidential politics by swinging to Jefferson in 1796. In 1800, the Federalists in the state senate stopped a state presidential election from even being held.

Actually just looking up some of the guys listed above, I realized how hopeless this was for Obama from the beginning. I do wish Hillary luck with those Rizzoheads in November. She will need them once she finishes completely alienating younger voters (than 50!) and the African-American base.

April 22, 2008

From the teacher of one of the best courses I ever took

Harvard's Theda Skocpol recalls Hillary Clinton's deep connection with ordinary working-class voters circa 1995:

But what is clear in both in my memory and my notes is that there was extensive, hard-nosed discussion about why masses of voters did not support Clinton or trust government or base their choices on economic as opposed to what people saw as peripheral life-style concerns. Hillary Clinton was among the most cold-blooded analysts in attendance. She spoke of ordinary voters as if they were a species apart, and showed interest only in the political usefulness of their choices – usefulness to the Clinton administration, that is.

I vividly remember at the time finding it impressive that Bill Clinton (*not* Hillary Clinton) showed real empathy for the ordinary people whose motives and

supposedly misguided choices were under analysis. Ironically, just as Barber reported, Bill Clinton was the one who combined analysis and empathy, much as Obama himself did in his full San Francisco remarks.

I think this whole angle of "gotcha" politics about snippets of speech transposed from one context to another is ridiculous and pathological for democracy in America – and I cannot fathom why the Clintons or George Stephanopoulos are descending to this dirt, not to mention the guilt-by-association crap. It is particularly despicable of them to criticize Obama for the sort of observation/analysis that was routine in and around the 1990s Clinton White House. And I cannot help but feel there is a psychological edge of pure envy in Bill Clinton's attacks: Obama is empathetic and charismatic as well as smart, just like Bill was back then, in those so much better days!

I doubt Theda Skocpol remembers me – I have not really had any occasion to contact her since leaving grad school – but her "American Political Development" seminar class was quite crucial to me at the point when I was just starting to write my dissertation. Not that it is easy to tell that in terms of how my work has evolved; I was the only student doing anything remotely early American in that class, but it was very bracing and helpful to encounter some other scholars with broad interests in American politics, an article that seemed to be in short supply among the historians I had met up to that point.

Skocpol was also quite a Clinton fan/fellow traveler back in the 90s, so her take on Hillary's late conversion to ersatz lunch bucket politics really means something.

April 18, 2008

Alias Generations X and Jones

Far be it from me to be an ungracious host, but I must demur from commenter Election Watcher's correction of my generational terminology below.

I can't stop people from using "Generation Jones" for the immediate post-Baby Boomers if they like. However, as I wrote in an earlier comment, "Generation X" was indeed coined to describe the born-in-the-60s, grew up in the 70s, began working in the 80s group of which Barack Obama (born 1961) and myself (born 1964) are members. Douglas Coupland, author of the original *Generation X* book, was also born in 1961. Looking a few things up, it also turns out (as I suspected) that the two most prominent purveyors of Seattle grunge rock, so heavily associated with Gen X, are in the same age group: Kurt Cobain was born in 1967, the same year as my younger brother, and Eddie Vedder in 1964, the

same year as yours truly. The key experience in common here is having been too young to directly participate in any of the 60s movements or their fallout. It's prosopography, baby!

That brings me back to Obama and the Weathermen. The story of his association will former Weatherman Bill Ayers is a little less flimsy than I originally assumed – there was apparently a state senate campaign event at Ayers's home – but the terms of it are interesting generationally. In the recent debate,

Obama replied that Ayers was a neighbor and acquaintance. "The notion that . . . me knowing somebody who engaged in detestable acts 40 years ago, when I was 8 years old, somehow reflects on me and my values doesn't make much sense," he said.

Who did or said what to whom back in the day was just not relevant. My reaction exactly to any number of academic situations I have run into regarding old radical antipathies and controversies.

Let me close by saying that I really hope I don't have to wait longer than January before my generation gets its first president.

April 17, 2008

What's Sauce for the Gander Is Marinating the Goose [corrected]

Do Hillary and the Hillaryites really not see that they are being set up? A Generation X-er like myself, Barack Obama was a still a kid during the late 60s/early 70s period when the Black Panthers, Weather Underground, and other revolutionary radical groups stalked the Earth, gaining far more publicity than adherents and inserting themselves into they not how many future pointless political debates. Yet somehow Obama becomes a a card-carrying Maoist because he sat on a Chicago community board with former Weatherman Bill Ayers, many years later when Ayers was a respected academic. So when ABC and its former Clintonista anchor George Stephanopoulos smuggle a "spider-web chart" type question about Ayers from Sean Hannity on to a national TV debate, Hillary agrees that yes this is a serious issue, working to keep the campaign in the Baby Boomer Reflux mode that she thinks helps her.

Where does she think this sort of campaigning will go from here if she does

happen to win the nomination? Having thoroughly alienated the black voters who make up the Democrats' surest base and have turned off millions of young Obama supporters, does she not realize that she will have put the GOP in position to attack her on the same grounds she now attacks Obama, only with months of new reinforcement for the image of the Democrats as ROTC-bombing Maoist radicals? Does not she not remember that there is actually more substantive material to base such attacks on in her case *because she was actually there* in the supposed bad old days? While Obama was still in elementary school, she was an adult, living in places like New Haven and Berkeley and involved with various forms of radical politics, such as working at a law firm that defended various Panthers? Clinton's no radical either, but she was a lot closer than Obama's board seat.

It is not surprising that Obama was a little less sharp than usual in the ABC debate. As I can attest from any number of department meetings and academic gatherings, it ain't easy being inside someone else's psychodrama. He had a quite deft comment, gesture actually, about the debate today.

Media wagons circled against analytical thought or real debate

I have had a number of thoughts about this past ridiculous week of campaigning, but frankly have not been able to get any of them all the way written out for just being so angry about it. Here we have Iraq spiraling and the world economy disintegrating before our eyes, among other major developments that are posing serious threats to our way of life and the stability of the world. Yet our presidential campaign has become yet another opportunity for various millionaire urbanites in New York and Washington to pretend they are just folks for the benefit of the rubes out in flyover land. Possibly because they themselves really are so very ignorant, and proudly so, of anything that does not appear in their products (and much that does), the mainstream media's devotion to the pose of belligerent, self-satisified regular joe is truly boundless. Then they turn around and project that same abstraction on the rest of the country, and convince each other they are really talking to and about the Average American. As though they would talk to a such person in they unlikely event they encountered them at a social event.

The question would not be whether Bill Kristol or Maureen Dowd or Charlie Gibson or the Monster of the Middle Way herself are really "in touch" with the perspective of church-going small town working people but rather whether they have *any* connection to or personal knowledge of it whatsoever. Through his Kansas roots and generally less wealthy background, Barack Obama has a little bit more, though probably only a little bit. His now-infamous "bitter" comment arose from something few of his national media critics or opponents would ever bother with, an attempt to actually understand the perspective of other people in other socioeconomic strata in a specific way, even when it does not necessarily lead to a preferred conclusion and involves admitting that even Average Americans can have negative feelings that depart from MSM stereotypes.

The best analysis of I have seen of what substance of any this recent tiff has was by Sam Stein in the Huffington Post. It is quite even handed despite the source.

To me the overreaction of the entire media and most of the political structure to the "bitter" comment shows that Obama must have been on to something. The only thing that cannot be allowed is any sort of genuine alternative to the current conventionalities about culture and economics. Obama opines that there might be one – a sentiment perfectly cognizant with Christian practice as many of us understand it, and with the longstanding missionary practice of providing food and other economic assistance to groups they were trying to convert.

Those who have convinced themselves that Hillary's mastery of policy somehow makes her more progressive are kidding themselves. Her whole rationale at this point is that you have to be a Republican to beat the Republicans, something that has never been true but only seemed like it was after she and her husband screwed up their first administration so badly and lost control of Congress. It is however a point that the Republicans and many other enemies of good, responsive government, want to make sure that the media and the voter accepts completely.

April 14, 2008

What I Did While I Wasn't Blogging: The Noble Cunningham memorial

Apologies for the blackout over the past few days. We were hosting an out-of-town guest who was in for a conference and it seemed a bit obnoxious to have my laptop out all the time, and impossible to have it out while driving back and forth to Kansas City, at least under my present technical limitations. I look forward to the day when in-dash voice blogging software comes standard with every sensible compact car.

The occasion for the visit, or one of them, was a long-overdue memorial event for my late colleague Noble Cunningham, one of the greatest political historians of the Early American Republic and one of the most prominent ever employed by my present institution, the University of Missouri. General readers are most likely to know Noble for what is generally considered the best short scholarly biography of Jefferson, the Pulitzer-nominated *In Pursuit of Reason*. (Ignore the trolls on Amazon, but also don't expect heavy coverage of many topics that have dominated discussions of Jefferson in the last 20 years. Noble's Jefferson was a politician, an administrator, and an enthusiast of the Enlightenment, which of course he was.) I may post the remarks I made here when I have time to clean them up a little, but for now I will confine myself to posting a link to an only somewhat inaccurate local newspaper report of the event. The credit for organizing the whole thing should really go to my student

Steven C. Smith, with special thanks to my friend Andy (Andrew W.) Robertson of CUNY for being the special out-of-state guest speaker.

Finally, in tribute to Noble's love for Jefferson, I will throw in a slightly cheeseball portrait of the present writer that the university publicity people took a while back, posing me with the campus Jefferson statue – doesn't everyone have them? Near the same spot is now also found a tree and plaque dedicated to Noble Cunningham. I had kind of been suppressing this little bit of personal Jefferson kitsch, but anything for you, Noble.

April 10, 2008

Hamilton and the Golden Shield

Is this America's first "Golden Shield" memo? Jefferson thought so. Are the S of M and I being grossly unfair? In fairness, it was George Washington that Hamilton used as his "aegis."

The Fellowship of the Golden Shield

TPM drew my attention to an ABC news story [Sources: Top Bush Advisors Approved 'Enhanced Interrogation'] that reveals some new depths to the Bush administration's unique mix of malevolence, incompetence, and bureaucratic tomfoolery. I can certainly agree that if the government discovers some real evidence of some real and imminent threat, rare as they tend to be, certain bounds may have to be temporarily overstepped. There may be a need to get a little tough or vicious occasionally in some desperate situation. That's a risk people in positions of leadership and officer on the front lines of wars have to take, and there have been few cases in history where necessary desperate action in a truly good cause was seriously questioned later. (I think that's true.) It is unnecessary acts and questionable causes that get people in trouble later.

The CheneyCorp version of being tough, on the other hand, involves adopting vicious tactics on principle and permanently moving the boundaries away from historic democratic ideals. Yet for tough guys the administration is not very good at actual toughness, except in domestic and bureaucratic politics. What kind of tough guys write get-out-of-jail free cards for themselves in advance – The Golden Shield they called it – and then hold regular meetings where they decide just how many cans of whup-ass are going to be used on a particular

suspect, what degree of the business was to be given, when a good thrashing was in order, and how many simulated drownings a week should be allowed. There seems to have been no talk about what actual information they would be expecting to get out of those interrogations, nor about any concrete plots that were foiled. It was the worst of both worlds: they were not catching or scaring off any terrorists, but they were making the United States look nasty and foolish and hypocritical, and getting it down on paper!

It seems more likely that everyone in those meetings except Dick Cheney understood that what was happening was likely to be deemed illegal some day, and was unlikely to work, so the CIA's main focus was establishing their defenses for later on. Even the agents who had their Golden Shields still asked for and got a paper trail leading all the way to the top. You know things are off the rails when John Ashcroft had to be the man providing the reality checks. "According to a top official, Ashcroft asked aloud after one meeting: 'Why are we talking about this in the White House? History will not judge this kindly.' " No, not kindly, but perhaps with a little black humor.

The second half of the article, including this quite, I have pasted below the jump:

(more…)

Letter to the Editor (and the Blogger)

This was posted in the comments below, but since it is about the blog more generally, I am promoting it to a post so that other readers will be more likely to see it and join in or respond. Let me just also say that the whole point of comment threads on blogs, or one of them, is the opportunity to immediately rebut something you disagree with in the same place it was published. So, if like this reader, you are displeased with what you read here on *PO2*, why wait for a formal letter to the editor? Let me have it right away.

Sir:

Recently, upon receiving a regular e-mail regarding the publication of Common Place I clicked over to the website and perused a number of the offerings. For the first time, I noticed "Lampi's Election Notes" and "Publick Occurrences." Being a moderate fan of all kinds of blogs, I skimmed both of these offerings (incidentally, there appears to be a linking problem: clicking on the larger, "script" link to "Lampi's Election Notes," leads one to Pasley's blog).

I was intrigued to see Pasley's blog described as one of "historical punditry."

Naturally, if one clicks through a few links, we encounter the standard legal boilerplate disclaimer on “not reflecting opinions” etc. etc. What I find most curious about this is that the blog is essentially presented as one historian’s interpretation of current events through the eyes of the academic. This, of course, is inaccurate. Dr. Pasley’s blog is politically-driven opinion. For example we are told that Cheney is the most evil v-p ever, a statement that cannot, virtually by definition, be anything other than emotional opinion. We are also treated to the story of a German citizen oppressed in prisons (it is not clear to me from Pasley’s entry if the prisons were only in Pakistan or elsewhere as well); a story it seems which is based entirely on the account of the gentleman in question and presented on an American network which does not have, shall we say, an exemplary record in providing genuine, documentary proof to its allegations against the current administration.

My concern here is that Dr. Pasley, and by default Common-Place seems to be following in an unfortunate academic trend. That is, to present political opinion, from an academic perspective thus labelling it as somehow more academic than opinion offered by non-academics. Furthermore, by offering it on a website which is devoted, for the most part, to more traditional academic subjects, the blog tends to enhance the perspective of some in our society that all academics think the same (left-wing) way and that academe is just a cover for political activism.

I am not here suggesting ending the blog (any kind of censorship tends to sicken me) nor even offer an alternative (”fair and balanced” is a measure for weighing produce not presenting opinion). But, given Common-Place’s commendable decision to run such blogs, I would suggest it would be appropriate to run a disclaimer at the top of the blog page (i.e. where it would be seen on the first click) noting that the blog is partisan political opinion by an academic thus removing the implicit non-statement being currently made that it is more objective and academic in nature.

cc: posted to Pasley blog

Sincerely,
John A. Grigg
Assistant Professor of History
University of Nebraska – Omaha
ASH 287F
jgrigg@mail.unomaha.edu
402.554.2302

“Many people fail at adulthood and constantly reach backwards for the freedom and passion of adolescence. But those who achieve adulthood are the ones who create civilization,” Orson Scott Card

This article originally appeared in issue 8.3 (April, 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*.

Reflection



David Shields reflects on the legacy of Nat Fuller in the wake of the attack on the Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston.

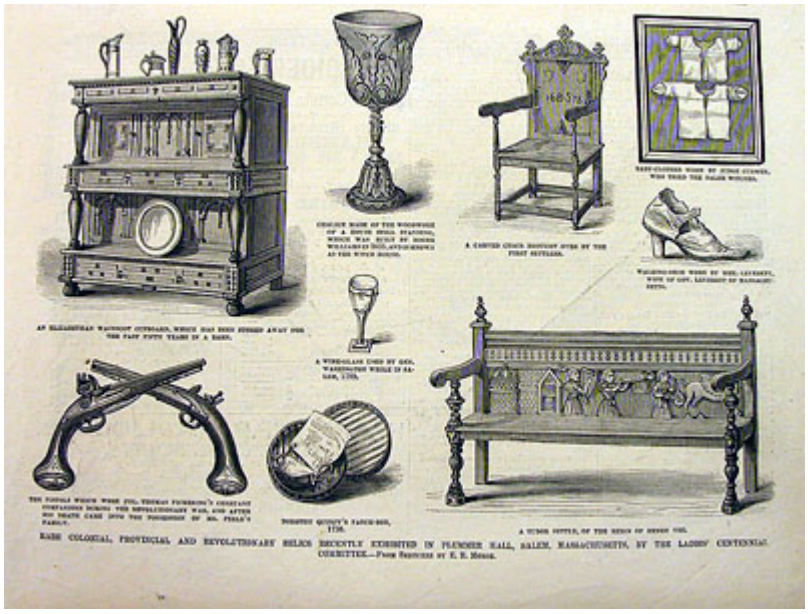
Tiptoeing through the Tombstones



“In effect, the cemetery becomes a history laboratory where students can chart and graph gravestone styles and inscriptions according to the specific increments in time in which they first appear, reach the height of popularity, and finally fade out.”

The Old Curiosity Shop and the New

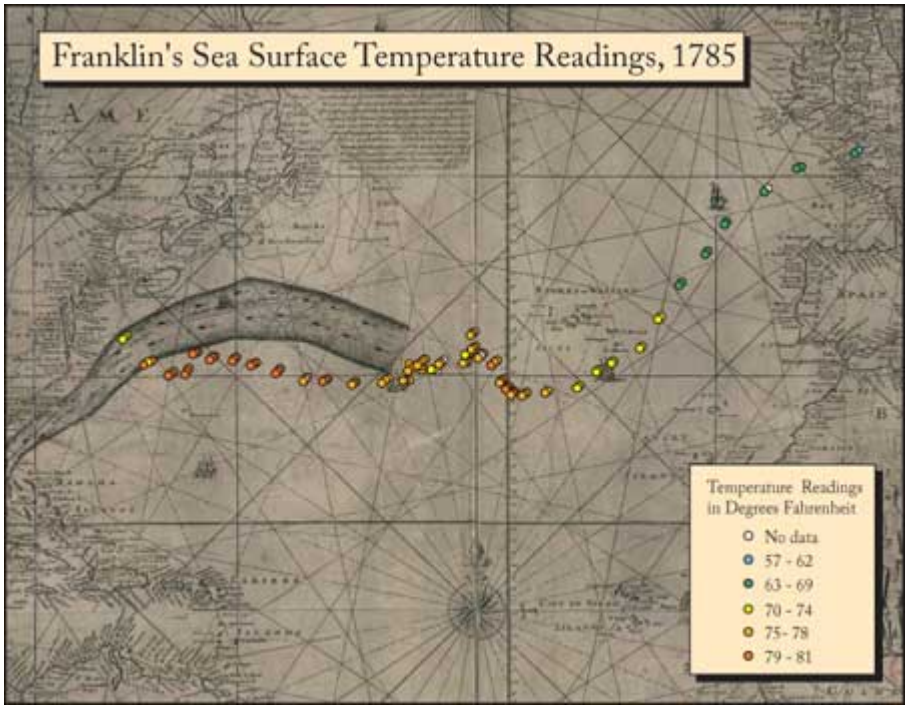
Antique Store: A Note on the Vanishing Curio in New York City



Presented as part of the special issue: “A Cabinet of Curiosities”

“How do we then account for the transition from curios to antiques? Why was the change in nomenclature and character so rapid?”

Overboard



What version of the past was this? Was I really getting a taste of what life would have been like for someone like Franklin during his many months at sea?

Exhibiting Excellence



As with any decent varsity athletic program, an imperative of participation coexists alongside one of competition. At its best, History Day is genuinely inclusive.

The Prideful Mission and the Little Town: Los Angeles



Presented as part of the special issue “Early Cities of the Americas.”

“This was the great idea that, out of the wreckage of Spanish imperialism to which the Catholic Church had attached itself, came from the variously sanctified and base mixings of the Americas: the stunning idea that people were not one thing or the other, nor even some cross between two civilizations, but some new mestizaje, some new way of being altogether.”

Was Slavery Really Not A Major Issue in American Politics Before the Missouri Crisis?



But researchers doing only word searches will miss not only context, but also what might lurk just beneath the headlines.

To “Do Now” or Not



Well-meaning educators are often unwittingly sabotaging their lessons before they have a chance to get them off of the ground.