

What the Artist Saw and What the Editors Ignored: Charles Willson Peale's Wartime Journal and the Perils of Historical Editing





1. Charles Willson Peale, *Self-Portrait*, 1777-78, oil on canvas, 13X12.5 inches. Courtesy of the American Philosophical Society.

Published papers are an invaluable resource for historians and the public alike. But it is sometimes useful and often necessary for historians to return to the archives to consult the original documents because editors can exclude material, and archivists, researchers, and the original owners can jumble the order of things. I was reminded of this necessity three years ago when, as a consulting historian, I accepted a project to help research a new exhibit on the Ten Crucial Days Campaign of the winter of 1776-1777 for the Museum of the American Revolution, which opened in Philadelphia in April 2017. One element of my project seemed easy enough: discuss the civilian lives of a company of Philadelphia militia who participated in the Ten Crucial Days Campaign. We needed to know who they were, where they lived, what they did for work, and why they became revolutionaries. These questions complicated what I originally thought was a simple task.

I believed that the project would be relatively easy because the commander of that company was the artist, soldier, politician, and future museum curator and entrepreneur Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) (fig. 1), whose journals and correspondence made his militia company the best documented Philadelphia company from the winter of 1776-1777. But I was wrong.

The museum intended to build a tableau—a life-sized scene with mannequins—to relate an evocative incident Peale remembered in his autobiography about his company's experience on December 8, 1776:

As soon as they had reached Trent Town, orders came, for them immediately to recross the [Delaware] River with all possible haste. And General Washington's whole army followed that night, and made a grand, but dreadful appearance. All the shores were lighted up with large fires. The Boats continually passing and repassing full of men, Horses, artillery, and camp Equipage. The hollowing [hollering] of hundreds of

men in their difficulties of getting Horses and artillery out of the boats, made it rather the appearance of Hell than any earthly scene. That night he lay with his company by a fire on the shore, the next morning, they were ordered to an Encampment about half a mile from the water.

He now met his brother James, who had a commission in the Maryland line, and had been in the rear guard, through all the retreat of the American Army, from the north River, and had lost all of his cloaths. He was in an Old dirty Blanket Jacket, his beard long, and his face so full of Sores, that he could not clean it, which disfigured him in such a manner that he was not known by his brother at first sight.



2. "He Was Not Known to me on First Sight." The finished tableau representing the meeting of Charles and James Peale on the banks of the Delaware, December 8, 1776. Photos courtesy of the Museum of the American Revolution.

The tableau would include life-sized figures representing the Peale brothers, Charles and James, and others including camp followers and soldiers (fig. 2). The display was intended to illustrate one of the low points of the American cause. It would also illustrate the two very different revolutions of Philadelphia and Maryland: Charles's company represented the increasingly radical egalitarian revolution taking place in Philadelphia, while James and his comrades embodied the more conservative, planter-driven revolution in Maryland. To heighten the effect, the exhibit would also include artifacts associated not only with the Peales themselves, but also with the people associated with them, such as members of Charles's company. I already knew that Charles's militia company was drawn from a ward made up of laborers, tradesmen, and gentlemen. But it would be a coup to find objects associated with them to display along with their stories. So my task was to check Peale's remembrances against other records and then to recreate the scene as closely as possible, by researching the prevailing weather, the condition of the roads they marched on, the time of day, the clothing they wore, and most importantly, the actual people who would have been at the scene. In short, I was supposed to help the museum get the scene "right."

Historical accuracy is, of course, of utmost importance for the people involved in designing exhibits at the Museum of the American Revolution. They want visitors' experiences to be "authentic," for people to come away understanding what Revolutionary America looked and felt like. To that end, one part of my job was confirming historical facts and getting the tableau's details right. For instance, Peale's journal suggests that the incident he remembered took place on December 8, 1776, near present-day Morrisville, Pennsylvania. Weather logs and other journals confirmed that the muddy, nasty conditions were as Peale remembered them. But the museum wanted more detail about the event itself. Who else would have been there, and what would they have worn? These questions were harder to answer and entailed, at the very least, finding out the names of the people in Peale's company.



3. The small but densely populated High Street Ward, Philadelphia, delineated (in blue) by Market Street in the south, Arch Street in the North, Front Street to the east, and Second Street to the west; the boundaries of the ward did not change during the period. "A plan of the city of Philadelphia, the capital of Pennsylvania, from an actual survey" (London, 1776). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

This was a much more difficult proposition. The task that I originally thought would be "easy enough" was actually, I discovered, a complicated research problem. What I needed to find was a muster roll—a list of company members—from the winter of 1776-77. But this proved elusive. Many Philadelphia militia muster rolls were published by the state of Pennsylvania in the nineteenth century, but the one I needed wasn't there. Because I could not find the muster roll I needed, I would have to reconstruct one using other sources. A first step was taking stock of what I actually knew. Charles Willson Peale's company was from the physically small but population-dense High Street Ward in Philadelphia (fig. 3).

The white male population of the area consisted largely of tradesmen and laborers. Many of the inhabitants of the ward were of the "lower sort," the type of people chronicled in Steven Rosswurm's *Arms, Country and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and the "Lower Sort" during the American Revolution* and Billy Smith's *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800*. So I knew where they lived, and, because of the already substantive research done, I had a broad idea of what their daily lives were like, and their relationship with the Revolution. Unfortunately, I did not know their names.

Working in my favor, though, was the fact that the inhabitants of the High Street Ward were relatively well documented. Tax lists and other militia muster rolls abounded. By looking at them in tandem, it was possible to build a dossier on nearly every white male in the ward at that time. Although dated a year before the one I needed, the muster roll from 1775 is remarkable as one of the few from Philadelphia City to survive from that period. In that year, a majority of white tradesman and property owners joined the company from the ward. But the extant 1777 muster roll showed that in the intervening time, enthusiasm for the Revolution appeared to have waned: very few members of the company of 1775 served their tours of duty in the years after 1777. Several were noted as loyalists. Though eventually crucial to this project and incredibly interesting, this research trail was not an effective method of deducing members of the company in the winter of 1776-77. As is often the case in conducting research for a project, the material I needed simply was not there.

Which brought me back to Charles Willson Peale himself. I knew he had kept a detailed journal of the winter campaign of '76-77. The published versions did not contain a muster roll but that fact did not preclude the possibility that his original might. Peale's journal from the winter of 1776-1777 had been printed three times over two centuries. Each publication reflected the editorial choices of their periods of publication. It was first published in the February 1856 issue of the art magazine *The Crayon* by Peale's son Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860). Rembrandt titled it "The Artist-Soldier" and presented it as "nothing worthy of the great historic pen, yet [it has] interesting episodes of soldier life without the embellishments of romance." Rembrandt's editorial choices possibly reflected the tendency in antiquarian publishing of the period to highlight the everyday experiences of the Revolution instead of recounting grand narratives. Further, Charles Willson Peale's account suggested to another generation of American artists that they could be both artists and play a role in building their republic. The editorial interventions were relatively typical: there was an attempt made at correcting spelling and grammar, while addenda, accounts, and some portions of daily events were excised.

In 1914, Peale's great-grandson Horace Wells Sellers (1857-1933) published the journal again. Sellers's editing was fairly typical of that period as well: corrected for grammar and spelling, with a little bit of hagiography, and no attempt to unpack any of the contradictions between Peale's journals and his later autobiography that Sellers included. Sellers was a prominent Philadelphia

engineer and architect who, along with his father Coleman Sellers, began gathering Peale family material that had been loaned or donated elsewhere. Sellers reused Rembrandt Peale's title, "Artist-Soldier," but his narrative suggests slightly different purposes than Rembrandt's. Above all, Sellers wanted to reestablish Peale's role as a founder and artist.

When the journal was published again in 1983, the editor, Lillian B. Miller (1923-1997), also wanted to reestablish Peale's reputation as a great American painter and a major figure in the cultural world of the early republic. Like the others, Miller's volume reflected contemporary editorial practices. She attempted to include everything that could be of value to the public and academics alike—especially to academics of the early 1980s. Among other changes, Miller elided some material out of concern for length, and "in deference to printing costs." But the material that Miller left out—CWP's "running account of provisions supplied to his company and individual transactions between him and his men"—was the very material I wanted to examine.

Together, the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia and the Huntington Library own Peale's Revolutionary War-era journals. (The Huntington has Peale's winter of '76-77 journal except for a few pages, while the American Philosophical Society Library has several pages of the original and a photostatic copy of the rest.) It soon became clear that the unpublished contents were as valuable as I had hoped they might be: they included some of Peale's financial and militia accounts, the accounts of his company, clothing issues, and most importantly, a list of company members by last name (fig. 4). While this list was not a detailed muster roll, taken together with the other muster rolls and tax lists, the list of company members was sufficient to recover the names of many members of Peale's company. Finally, the museum could flesh out the figures of Peale's company.



4. Examples of Peale's winter of 1776-1777 journal with the names of company members and accounts. Peale-Sellers Family Collection, 1686-1963: Series 7: Volumes. Courtesy of American Philosophical Society

The portions of Peale's journal that were consistently excluded from publication turned out to be extremely important to understanding the world of Peale's company. I could plug the names into the database I had already constructed to get a detailed, almost personal, view of his men. Using tax lists, property lists, newspapers, muster rolls, and post-war city directories, I could plot where they lived, identify their neighbors, determine their economic status, and envision what they wore. For instance, I discovered that future mayors of the city of Philadelphia like John Barker fought alongside lowly, nearly anonymous wage laborers like Thomas Dixon and freed slaves such as Polydon Redman. As I was getting to know these people, so, too, could the museum's countless visitors.

Visitors could also get to know these people and to understand the revolution in Philadelphia through the work of the historical costumers and the museum designer, who were guided by the work of researchers like me. Historical costumers could translate the information I gathered into figures for the tableau by clothing them with garments appropriate to their class. They could draw from Peale's record of clothing issued to the company that included knit caps, stockings, mittens, shoes, and other odds and ends. Thanks to the unpublished material in Peale's journal, the museum had the information to populate its exhibit and to add significant depth. Hopefully visitors would be able to see some relatively complex ideas distilled into the tableau and the displays. Ultimately, the details of life—what people wore, what they ate, what they saw and smelled—are what we often crave when we learn about history. My adventures with Peale taught me that historians would do well to remember that it is often ephemera that can put historical experiences front and center for the public.

My adventures into Peale's original journals also provided a useful lesson in the relative reliability of published papers. No matter how seemingly objective or meticulously transcribed, published papers are creatures of the editorial decisions that are necessary for putting them together. The manner in which they were edited makes them historical texts themselves. In the case of Peale's journal, that several pages of material were excised for publication suggests to us that academia has only slowly come around to the use of material evidence as a source. Today's editors still often drop account books and addenda from their published (and even online) versions. They still cannot include everything because space, money, and academic taste continue to dictate what is included and what is not. As the history profession's many preferences continue to change, so, too, will historical editing. Historical editors can never fully anticipate the needs of future historians, but hopefully with a growing respect for the full documentary record, including material that might, to some, be considered unimportant, editors will begin to add accounts, images, and other addenda and make them searchable, as the editors of the George Washington papers have done.

But future researchers must not be lulled into accepting that even these more deluxe versions of published papers are complete. Even with well-funded projects, it is important to remember that all is not accessible or searchable, misleading us about the extant historical record, and important contextual material such as addenda are still excised when they are published in another form. Further, with limited funds and the limited ability of software to read eighteenth- and nineteenth-century script, it will continue to be cost-prohibitive to bring about new fully searchable published editions, especially of documents written by hand, thus distorting the historical record even more.

Even fully searchable editions will be hampered by odd or archaic spellings that transcription software has yet to adapt to. Instead, it will continue to be easiest to use software to make already published papers searchable, thus perpetuating the editorial choices of the past and making easily discoverable only a small portion of the historical records we should be consulting. Indeed, much of the readily accessible, searchable, early republican primary sources fall into this category because they can be found within the pages of historical society journals and books published before the public domain cut-off of 1923. Presumably, a sizable portion of this material shares the same inaccuracies or exclusions of the printed Peale journals. To get a full reckoning of the past, then, scholars will still need to make a trip to the archives, as much to see what the edited volumes left out as to confirm the accuracy of what they kept in.

Further Reading

Rembrandt Peale, "Artist-Soldier," *The Crayon* 3:2 (February 1856): 37-40.

Horace Wells Sellers, "Charles Willson Peale, Artist-Soldier," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 38:3 (1914): 257-286.

Lillian B. Miller, ed., *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family, Volume 1, Charles Willson Peale: Artist in Revolutionary America, 1735-1791* (New Haven, 1983).

Sidney Hart, ed., *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family, Volume 5, The Autobiography of Charles Willson Peale* (New Haven, 2000).

Billy G. Smith, *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca, 1990).

Steven Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and "Lower Sort" During the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (New Brunswick, 1987).

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