Performance Anxiety: Historians Among Us

By Dennis Rizzo

History can be drab and elusive, or it can be colorful and alive. The most interesting history can be a simple statement, in natural and personal tones, of things you’ve discovered. In other words, a simple tale told from person to person. One need only have a good story which, in turn, arises from vibrant and interesting information about people.

Most historians exude an image of long hours spent dutifully looking through every scrap of material known to mankind on a particular facet of history. This may be a requirement in academic circles, but most historians prefer just telling the stories. These can come from social history (newspapers and media), family tradition and letters as well as official records and papers. Michener was a master of bringing the factual history to life using fictional characters – notwithstanding the hue and cry of stolid academics, we enjoyed the stories and actually learned something at the same time.

The early tribes of North America (and elsewhere) knew this. The enslaved Africans knew this. Oral and traditional history brings about an image of ourselves in real and personal terms, narrated in the likes of Turquoise Boy, Anansi, or even (dare I say) Br'er Rabbit. It is real, and interesting.

But the story means nothing unless you tell it.

History need not be in the flashy image, preservative style of television productions to rope the audience into the chronicle. One need not be a polished writer to present information gathered through hours of searching and note-taking. In fact, it is fear by the writer being considered an “amateur” that keeps most history under wraps; yet it is amateurs who have provided some of the best history.

You’ve spent countless hours researching Uncle Seth and Great-Great Aunt Betsy. Your details bring up interesting tidbits of daily life in their time. Your family letters tell stories of the day-to-day lives of common people. Yet, you fear that, without a compelling narrative, your audience will consist mostly of other historians seeking the minutiae of your research. And those historians are trained, professional, and “peer-reviewed”; and they will discover that you do not have initials after your name; and, therefore, your material is suspect and you will be publicly embarrassed and humiliated.

For example, who could better make the following statement than the person experiencing it?

Harriet Tubman sums up the driving force to get to Canada despite having an apparently satisfying life in New Jersey or elsewhere in the free North.

Then I was not happy or contented: every time I saw a white man I was afraid of being carried away. I had two sisters carried away in a chain gang; one of them left two children. We were always uneasy. - Harriet Tubman

The story means nothing unless you tell it.

Publications like this newsletter and countless other local and regional media provide ample forum for your notes on Aunt Betsy. And these are the sources historians (the ones with the initials after their names) rely on to build their more cumbersome tomes.

For sure, your information may be skewed a bit by conventional wisdom. It may be somewhat in error because Aunt Betsy hated Uncle Seth and told tall tales about him in her letters. But that is for the academic historian to decipher.

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Burlington County Historical Society

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Letter from the Executive Director

It has been a busy couple of months at the historical society! I am pleased to report that the society has hired and begun working with John Durel of QM2 consultants on a new long range plan. The process itself is very enlightening, and the ultimate outcome of a working document which will help the society to grow its mission and meet the needs of its community is very exciting! The plan was funded by a grant from the New Jersey Cultural Trust and we hope to complete the process in the fall/winter of 2009.

We started a new series of experiential walking tours that highlight the history of the City of Burlington in February of 2009. The first tour features the dramatic story of Severn Martin, an escaped slave, who was recaptured and ultimately saved by the vigilance of the people of the City of Burlington in 1836. The tours feature a combination of storytelling and street theater. The next 2 thematic tours will feature the stories of Isaac Collins, to be launched in the Summer, and a ghost tour to be launched in the Fall of 2009. Please join us on these adventures! The tours were funded by a grant from the New Jersey Historic Trust and are using the creative services of the South Jersey Tourism Corporation.

I am also pleased to announce that the Society is the recipient of grant monies from the New Jersey Historic Trust for their 2008 grant round. The Trust grant will help fund historic structure reports for the three individual houses and the preparation of a plan that will explore interpretive themes and alternative uses for the structures.

We are continuing our work of strengthening the partnerships within the history community of Burlington County and have a number of special events and activities planned for the upcoming months.

Special thanks to the board, staff, members and volunteers of the historical society for their work in the fulfillment of our mission!

—Lisa Fox-Pfeiffer

Hours and Admission
The Burlington County Historical Society is open Tuesday-Saturday, 1 PM-5 PM.
Please check our website for closings and special events.
Use of the research library is $3.
Tours of the gallery and three historic houses is $5

Volunteer Corner
The Burlington County Historical Society is looking for a few good men and women. Do you want to help us with special events? Are you good with computers? Have an idea for a newsletter article? Do you like being around fun people? If so, we want to hear from you!

Did You Know?
You can purchase high quality reprints or scans of photos from the collections of the Burlington County Historical Society. Contact us for prices!
Spotlight on Smithville

On May 31, 2009, the Burlington County Historical Society held its annual meeting at Historic Smithville Park in Eastamptton Township. For the third year in a row, BCHS took its annual meeting on the road, hoping to expose our membership, and potential members, to some of the wonderful and diverse historic sites Burlington County has to offer. Having just received a Grand Jury Award from the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, Smithville was an ideal locale for this year’s meeting. Featuring nature, fitness, and a floating trail on Smith Lake, architectural ruins and rehabs, and the fascinating story of an eccentric and his well-oiled machine of a factory town, Smithville offers a point of interest for all comers. On this particular day, the sun shone brightly and winds carried the scent of honey-suckle through the air as Joe Laufer, County Historian and president of the H.B. Smith Conservancy, guided our group of 40 intrepid guests on a tour of some of the new features, including a sample of their 15 historic sign locations, and provided them with a glimpse of exciting things yet to come. While the majority of guests had been familiar with Smithville, many commented that on this excursion, they felt like they were seeing it for the first time. For more information on Historic Smithville Park, visit www.co.burlington.nj.us/parks.

The Ingenious Agnes Gilkerson Smith, Lady of Smithville

By Jeannie Francis

What do we really know about Agnes Gilkerson Smith? Despite slander and bad press, Agnes was a remarkable woman for the short time she was upon this earth. This youthful woman from New England had more foresight than most young women of her era. Ms. Gilkerson was beautiful, full of ambition, energetic, and enchanted by the world around her. I believe it was these attributes that totally fascinated Mr. H.B. Smith and made him fall in love with her.

The young Agnes worked in a small factory in Lowell, Massachusetts. However, she dreamed of being more than a humble factory worker. H.B. Smith offered her an opportunity to further herself, first as an office worker in his factory in New England, then later to help him with his vision of Smithville in the woodlands of New Jersey. During their time together, H.B. Smith supported Agnes and all her inventive ideas. She aspired to be a doctor, to care for her town’s people, a writer, an editor, and an inventor.

Agnes carefully tended all of the ills of her town’s people; she brought many a new life into the world, cared for the ailing and tended the dying. All the while, she used the tinctures and cure-alls she learned while in medical school in Philadelphia. Mrs. Smith accomplished all these in her short lifetime, before she passed away at the young age of 43.

In turn Agnes helped H.B. rise to the top of his entrepreneur talents, which lead to the development of many inventions, such as the Star bicycle, the hand pump rail car, a factory-run working town, a glorious mansion. Both of them created wonderful opportunities for their town’s people in education, enlightening them in the arts and humanities. Mrs. Agnes G. Smith injected her many innovative ideas which would make Smithville the amazing town it became in South Jersey history.

Did Elton Smith succeed in sniffing out his step-mother’s legacy? For a while, yes. In spite of this, after all these years, she has surfaced again. There is so much to relive about this delightful woman and her many accomplishments in Burlington

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From the Archive

On May 31, 2009, we hosted our Annual Meeting and Program at the newly restored Historic Smithville Park. Smithville, in Eastampton Township, is a remarkable example of a 19th century company town still containing the well preserved owner's mansion of namesake H. B. Smith and the stabilized ruins and mill races of his factories. Some of the original worker houses remain as well. Here on the lovely Rancocas Creek the famous high wheeled Starr Bicycle was produced and also many other iron products including stoves. After Smith's death a unique manner of transporting employees to work each day, the Bicycle Railway ran for a brief period on these grounds. Featured here are some exceptional items from the Burlington County Historical Society manuscript and photograph collections.

Eagle gates to the mansion, with bandstand at left.
Photo by N.R. Ewan, c. 1900. PC 56-31

Exhibitor pass for E.F. Burns of the Mt. Holly and Smithville Bicycle Railroad Co. for admittance to the World's Columbian Exposition, better known as the Chicago World's Fair, 1893. MSS 249

H.B. Smith's exhibitor pass for the United States International Exhibition, 1876. MSS 249
Alternative is true as well – your stories might have that tidbit needed to complete the puzzle of an event or circumstance.

The vertical files at the County Library are full of anecdotes and events that, someday, will find their way into “academic” publications. Some of the most important resources for historians of Black America, for example, are the simply stated interviews and printed personal narratives of individuals, in bondage and free.  

Collecting and recording oral histories from aging members is one of the most important roles of local historical groups and societies. Without these recollections, history reverts to something with the consistency of Salt Cod. With them, historians can flesh out even the most banal events with real people and real life. Preparing them as locally subscribed booklets is as American as, well, Maple Sugar Candy.

So – get out there and tell us your story. NOW. Before it is lost to posterity and we have to dig it up all over again.

Dennis Rizzo is the author of the recently published Parallel Communities: The Underground Railroad in South Jersey
2 Excellent source is “Documenting the American South” website of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, www.docsouth.unc.edu
[Note: Apple Pie came over from England. Maple sugar is indigenous to North America.]
We advocate the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment. To effect such repeal we demand that the Congress immediately propose a Constitutional Amendment to truly represent [sic] the conventions in the states called to act solely on that proposal; we urge the enactment of such measures by the several states as will actually promote temperance, effectively prevent the return of the saloon, and bring the liquor traffic into the open under complete supervision and control by the states.

Pending repeal, we favor immediate modification of the Volstead Act; to legalize the manufacture and sale of beer and other beverages of such alcoholic content as is permissible under the Constitution and to provide therefrom a proper and needed revenue.

Thus, as Franklin D. Roosevelt campaigned for the highest office in the nation, as the country was in the midst of deep economic depression, the Democratic Party made its position on the Volstead Act (prohibition) known. The time had come for repeal, and not too much time elapsed before Roosevelt and his party got their wish. December 5, 2008 marked the 75th anniversary of the 21st amendment, which officially ended the era of prohibition. In the months leading to Repeal, The New Jersey Mirror of Mt. Holly closely followed both the national proceedings and state-wide initiatives to legalize the sale of alcohol which would undoubtedly affect the highly agricultural Burlington County. This coverage included frequent editorials by paper editor Charles H. Folwell in his regular “The Editor Discusses Men and Current Happenings” column, revealing not only economic, political and legal implications of Prohibition, but also its consequences to civil liberties. Below are excerpts from Folwell’s column taken from the editions leading up the moment when Repeal became law.

June 7, 1933
New Jersey Convention Votes Repeal

By a vote of 202 to 2 on Thursday, the delegates to the State Convention, chosen at the recent primary elections, declared for the repeal of the 18th Amendment. Actually they ratified the Congressional Repeal resolution, thus placing New Jersey in line with the four other States which already had pursued a similar course. Several other States have elected delegates instructed to vote for repeal or have since held conventions at which that course was taken, but the battle against Prohibition is still far from won by the wets. The affirmative votes of thirty-six States will be essential to the ratification of the Congressional Repeal resolution, not all of which are surely in sight yet.

July 10, 1933
Big Stick Invoked to Hasten Repeal

There is no bluff, at least, in the way the Administration down at Washington and its various agencies, not forgetting Postmaster General Farley, are going after those states which have yet to vote on the question of Repeal. The Administration wants the 18th Amendment wiped out and wants it done this year. Of that there can be no doubt.

August 9, 1933
Looking to Repeal

These are unhappy days for the bitter-end Prohibitionists. With twenty states already having ratified the Congressional Repeal resolution and the utmost confidence among the wets that the Eighteenth Amendment will cease to be operative by November, the federal government is reported to have nodded its assent to the manufacture of whiskey in large quantities. This obviously is in anticipation of repeal at an early date.

And when liquor comes back and beer is stronger than 3.2 I’m wondering whether public sentiment will countenance a saloon on every corner, in a manner of speaking, as now is the case in some towns.

And finally, December 6, 1933, on the front page.

It’s here!

With the affirmative vote of the Repeal convention in Utah, at half past five last evening, the 26th state voted for the 21st Amendment to the federal Constitution, thus repealing the 18th Amendment and returning the United States to its pre-war wet basis.

Followed by a page 2 editorial:

Has the Lesson Been Learned?

Legalized Liquor is back after 15 years banishment. It was welcomed with cordiality by many, a goodly percentage of whom cannot by any stretch of the imagination be termed “drinking people.” More than half the population of the United States showed ever-growing resentment at attempted control of their personal habits and appetites, by a minority. With many it was not the freedom to make, and drink liquor, under reasonable governmental regulation, that was demanded, but an end to the hypocrisy, racketeering and poison rum with which the country was becoming saturated under so-called Prohibition.

And with that, friends, drink up, and celebrate 75 years of being able to do so freely!
December 14, 2008: BCHS hosted our 8th Annual Gingerbread House Contest. This always popular event saw a number of edible creations, not just houses, including Big Ben and London Bridge, a camp for gummy bears, a Nativity, and a New Jersey seascape, complete with lighthouse. Congratulations to all the winners!

February 28, 2009: The end of February marked the biggest event of our Winter season—the launch of our first experiential walking tour! In partnership with South Jersey Tourism, we debuted a tour of Burlington City, following the remarkable story of escaped slave Severn Martin. Making stops at Burlington Quaker Meeting, Wheately’s Pharmacy, and the Underground Railroad Café and Cultural Center, participants in the tour stepped back in time and learned how the city rallied around Severn and saved him from a return to slavery. Keep an eye on our website for future tours, including the next installment: Isaac Collins and Freedom of the Press. These tours were made possible by a grant from the New Jersey Historic Trust.

March 14, 2009: We hosted the second installment of Heart to Heart with History, a symposium of county historical societies and other like-minded organizations. Approximately fifty people from 19 organizations attended. This year’s symposium focused on technology and how small organizations can use digital media to increase awareness of who they are and what they do. Hopefully, you’ll be seeing a lot more from these organizations in the very near future.

April 17, 2009: In the BCHS Corson Poley Center, the Camp Olden Civil War Round Table hosted folk singer Charlie Zahm and fiddler Tad Marks. The event was a fundraiser for Civil War education and programs... and was a huge success.

Are you on Facebook? If so, track down the Burlington County Historical Society and become a fan. Keep track of upcoming events and peek into items in our collection!

Upcoming with BCHS...

June 14, 2009, 10 AM-4 PM: Look for our table at Earth Fair ’09, taking place at Historic Smithville Park in Eastampton.

June 27, 2009, 10 AM-4 PM: Find our table at the 26th Annual Whitesbog Blueberry Festival! Bring your family and play one of our games. You may win a prize!

More events are in the works, including a kids’ movie night on the lawn of the BCHS campus! Check our website, www.burlingtoncountyhistoricalsociety.org, for updates!

Upcoming around the county...

The following programs will take place at Kirby’s Mill, 275 Church Rd., Medford. www.medford-history-nj.org

Sun., July 12, 12 PM-4 PM: Country Day – Displays & demonstrations of old machinery, farm equipment, historic craft demonstrations, Civil War encampment and much more.

Sun., August 2, 11 AM-4 PM: Art Show & Sale – Display and sale of art by local artists, both amateur & professional.

Sat., September 19, 8 AM-2 PM: Flea Market

Sat., October 10, 9am-4pm: Annual Apple Festival – Over 95 crafters, food, demonstrations, music, children’s activity & apples!

The Ingenious Agnes

County. Please feel free to call her Mrs. H.B. Smith, the Lady of the Mansion at Smithville.

Is your interest in the life of Agnes G. Smith now piqued? Jeannie Francis, a master gardener, will be giving a talk on Agnes Smith for the Burlington County Historical Society in the near future. Check our website for updates.

Education Corner

Not to leave out pre-Colonial History, we have also been successfully going on the road with a hands on program on the lifestyle of the Lenape inhabitants of this area.

If any of these offering spark your interest please contact me Jeff Macechak at 609-386-4773 Ext. 2 or via e-mail at burlcohistoryeducation@verizon.net