



# Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities Rutgers University-Camden

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## Humanities Work as Civic Investment: The Emerging Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia

Facing the prospect of deep declines in funding, cultural organizations throughout the region are being challenged to sharpen the case for the value they bring to the communities they serve. A common argument stresses the ways they enrich people's lives through exposure to new ideas and experiences. Some organizations point additionally to the economic returns they generate through increased levels of tourism. Less well developed has been the case for the civic value such organizations could generate, especially if their individual efforts were aggregated.

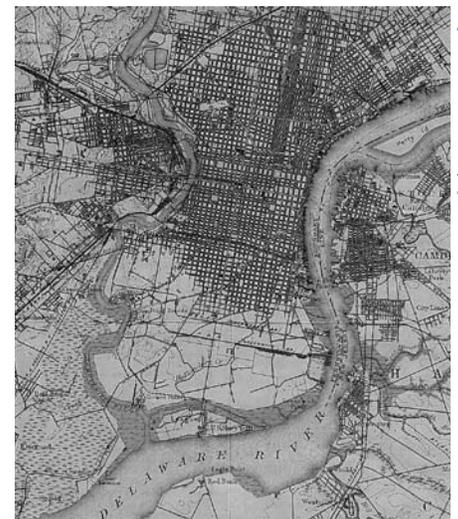
Yet typically initiatives in one quarter do not translate into obvious benefits for whole communities. A fiscal crisis can make the situation even worse by prompting organizations to scramble towards self-protection. However, a strong sense of shared civic identity enhanced through active collaboration can serve as a buffer against competitive self-interest by favoring the

As announced in the last issue, *Cross Ties* is now publishing three times annually, with the summer edition a special theme issue. This summer *Cross Ties* is focusing on the developing Philadelphia encyclopedia project, as an example of the ways a history-based project can connect individuals and institutions to the past in acts of civic engagement.

good of the whole rather than the short-term gains of a few. Philadelphia may serve as a case in point.

Years after then Mayor Edward Rendell made arts and culture a central feature of the city's revitalization, the cultural community did not benefit collectively. Rising visitation to Independence National Historical Park, for instance, failed to extend to nearby cultural institutions. Despite the new Independence Visitors Center, the opening of the National Constitution Center, and significant investments in the Avenue of the Arts along sections of Broad Street, their cumulative effect on Philadelphia's civic life remained limited.

It took another kind of crisis, but that situation changed in the wake of the controversy over the President's House at 6th and Market Streets. The prolonged, contentious, and ultimately successful campaign to commemorate that site and the full range of its occupants, including slaves and indentured servants, at the entrance to the new Liberty Bell Pavilion opened the way to new levels of cooperation within the historical community (see reports in the Summer and Fall 2007 issues of *Cross Ties*). Difficult as it had been, a full range of stakeholders came away from that experience understanding that even the most complex historical stories can be civic assets, if they are built upon good research, strong advocacy to stimulate public interest, and high levels of collaboration.



Philadelphia, 1898

U.S. Geological Survey map, courtesy Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection, University of Texas

### In This Special Issue

Humanities Work as Civic Investment:  
The Emerging Encyclopedia of  
Greater Philadelphia  
1-3

Profiles in Civic Collaboration  
4-5

Famous Last Words:  
Gary B. Nash  
6-7



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Photo by Clem Murray; courtesy: Philadelphia Inquirer

Steven Conn, professor of history at Ohio State University and an associate editor of the Philadelphia encyclopedia, leads discussion during the opening session at the April 2009 workshop at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Planners of a proposed encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia are building on these realizations by grounding their effort in a civic partnership intended to generate returns that will serve participating organizations both individually and collectively. The effort starts with the University of Pennsylvania Press as publisher and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania as the host civic partner. Another two dozen organizations ranging from libraries, museums, and historical societies to policy and advocacy organizations complete the roster of cooperating institutions.

The basis for this partnership formed in workshops funded by the Barra Foundation in April. There, the editors argued that the traditional synthesizing role of a city encyclopedia could be leveraged to new advantage through a broad process of public engagement. Short-term outcomes would include a host of products, including tours, public programs, podcasts, and a new Web site that would serve as a portal to a range of data on the metropolitan area. In the longer term,

the effort at synthesis and interpretation could connect disparate experiences in time and space in ways that would greatly enhance a sense of collective identity and purpose within the region.

In addition to featuring the lessons of the President's House controversy, the workshops considered landmark projects currently underway in the region. These include a documentary film project, *America's First City: Philadelphia*, being produced by businessman and former Philadelphia mayoral candidate Sam Katz; an ambitious architectural survey of the city advanced by the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia; The Civil War History Consortium, which is promoting and connecting regional commemoration of the Civil War; and a reinvigorated National History Day brought back to life in Philadelphia by a new partnership. Profiles of these and other initiatives follow this essay.

Some of the efforts discussed at the April workshops are neighborhood based, notably

Historic Germantown, a newly formed partnership of fourteen organizations intended not just to provide greater efficiencies through shared purchasing, promotion, and the like, but also to magnify their collective story (see Spring 2009 issue of *Cross Ties*). Additionally, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania described its PhilaPlace initiative, to be launched in September as a Web-based resource intended to connect multi-ethnic stories to places across time in specific Philadelphia neighborhoods. Its effort to incorporate local knowledge into a larger interpretive framework offers a model for mining local knowledge across the city and, in the process, generating new levels of interest in area heritage.

Other presentations illustrated how Geographic Information Systems technology is making it possible to visualize the region in new ways. Temple University's Metropolitan Philadelphia Indicators Project and the Reinvestment Fund's policy map chart contemporary social and economic

trends in Greater Philadelphia. Additional projects signify the potential for tracking historical trends, notably the Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network, a joint effort of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collection Libraries, and PhillyHistory.Org, a project supported by the city's Department of Records. Both sites allow visitors to search historical maps to locate specific places and to track processes of change over time.

One challenge for the proposed encyclopedia is to link contemporary with historic mapping. If this can be done effectively, users will be able to place themselves and their local ancestors within the process of urban change, tracing paths of geographic mobility over generations, for example, or the changing demographics of specific neighborhoods. As yet another way of placing individuals in history, the editors propose to feature stories shared by members of the public on-line and at neighborhood workshops within the context of larger trends, in a series of integrative and analytical essays.

Consider the multiple ways an encyclopedia project might address the story of immigration to Philadelphia. Its broad outlines through the early twentieth century are well established, but it has become fragmented when the focus turns to newer immigrants, who arrived following the liberalized national policy enacted in 1965. Yet as a panel during the April workshop made clear, a good deal of research on the subject is emerging from area universities. Just as important has been the ethnographic research generated by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania for a series of exhibits on new immigration. Both sources of information extend the temporal and conceptual reach of earlier work, and advanced Web capacity offers opportunities to both visualize trends and bring to the fore seldom heard voices addressing continuing themes of settlement choices, challenges to community building, and, ultimately, group identity. The process of discovery and understanding generated by an encyclopedia project can advance in tandem with academic



Photo by Clem Murray; courtesy Philadelphia Inquirer

Kim Sajet, president and chief executive officer of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, makes a point during a session at the Philadelphia encyclopedia workshop at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. To her left is Eric Halpern, Director of the University of Pennsylvania Press.

publications and more broadly public venues such as PhilaPlace and its successor Web sites. An associated benefit of such integrated thinking for a number of topics could be a more fully shared view of regional identity.

Thus the potential civic returns begin to emerge, made possible by further investments in collaboration, ongoing public involvement, and critical thinking. As area cultural institutions both contribute to the stories told and benefit from new knowledge generated, the greater Philadelphia cultural community gains collectively. Done effectively, the encyclopedia project promises to realize a long-desired but elusive goal of making the region's story greater than the sum of its parts.

The building blocks for cultural vitality and civic identity are not formed overnight, but the foundations exist in the Philadelphia area. Even as the city has coalesced around the commemoration of the story of slavery at the nation's premier site of liberty at the President's House, its cultural community can transcend its fragmentation and present a comprehensive vision of the area. The proposed encyclopedia promises to accelerate that process, even as it builds upon what has already been accomplished.

Howard Gillette is professor of history at Rutgers University – Camden, director of MARCH, and coeditor of the proposed encyclopedia of Philadelphia with Charlene Mires of Villanova University and Randall Miller of St. Joseph's University. ✕

## PROFILES IN CIVIC COLLABORATION

**History Making Productions** plans a twenty-five-part film series documenting the city's history from 1575 to 2010, currently titled *America's First Great City: Philadelphia*. Working with a \$400,000 start-up grant from the Barra Foundation and additional donations from other foundations and individuals, the project has established a compact among some thirty-five Philadelphia-area heritage, cultural, and arts institutions, many of them with archival resources. Partners receive support for digitizing visual materials that may be used in the film. These will also be collected in a single repository open to public use. Producer Sam Katz and filmmaker Mark Moskowitz have made available the first of eight planned "webisodes;" it features President Abraham Lincoln's funeral procession through the city in 1865 and can be accessed at the film website at [www.HistoryofPhilly.com](http://www.HistoryofPhilly.com). A pilot episode treating the city's history from 1864 to 1876 will be completed this summer and screened throughout the city for feedback during the fall. In addition to showing the documentary on public television, Katz hopes to introduce episodes into area schools and place pertinent episodes on partner websites.



Construction of Broad Street Railroad Station, 1890.

Courtesy: History Making Productions



Courtesy: Historical Society of Pennsylvania

**PhilaPlace**, scheduled to launch in early September, is an interactive Web site that connects stories to places across time in Philadelphia's neighborhoods. It will feature interpretive text, audio and video clips, photographs, primary documents, pod cast tours, and lessons for K-12 teachers. Initially the site will focus on Old Southwark and the Greater Northern Liberties, communities that built the city's reputation as the "workshop of the world." Visitors, however, will be able to submit stories about any neighborhood through text, photographs, audio, and video. Much more than a Web site, this initiative reaches out to the greater Philadelphia community through participatory workshops for the public and teachers, trolley tours, and printed neighborhood guides. Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities among other sources, PhilaPlace is a collaborative project undertaken by The Historical Society of Pennsylvania in partnership with the City of Philadelphia Department of Records, the University of Pennsylvania School of Design, and other institutions and community organizations. The PhilaPlace Web site is at [www.PhilaPlace.org](http://www.PhilaPlace.org).

The **Civil War History Consortium** (CWHC) is a group of more than sixty-five Philadelphia-area organizations formed to develop and coordinate plans to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Civil War from 2011 through 2015. All participants, whether they hold relevant collections, are a historic site, or work to attract visitors to the region, have an

interest in public programming related to the Civil War era. Collectively, they seek to preserve, link, and promote the stories, collections, and sites that reveal the Philadelphia region's crucial role in the United States' struggle for liberty and unity during the Civil War era by developing meaningful heritage and educational experiences and stimulating community and economic development. To accomplish this, CWHC aims to marshal the resources of southeastern Pennsylvania to: 1.) facilitate communication among local, regional, and state entities, consortium members, and collaborators; 2.) create structures for linking sites and develop a sustainable infrastructure for presenting nineteenth-century history; 3.) build and share local collections; 4.) create interactive Web resources; 5.) support K-12 education; and 6.) coordinate quality programming. CWHC is also part of a larger initiative, Civil War Pennsylvania 150, which is overseeing multiple collaborative projects statewide, including a comprehensive Web site at [www.pacivilwar150.org](http://www.pacivilwar150.org). The Consortium's Web site is at <http://www.civilwarconsortium.org>.

**PhillyHistory.Org** is a Web-based database of some twenty-five thousand photographs in the collections of the Philadelphia City Archives. Users can search for images based on geographic location, subject matter, or date. In addition, an interactive map locates where all photographs were taken near an address, intersection, or neighborhood, helping users place historical settings in current context. Developed by Avencia, a Philadelphia software development firm, the historical assets framework developed for this site has been modified for application to collections of photographs, maps, audio, and visual materials maintained by other cities, organizations, and universities.

Established thirty years ago, **National History Day** (NHD) engages more than seven hundred thousand middle and high

school students from the United States and American schools in Europe in developing history-themed projects based on original research. Similar to the Westinghouse Science Fair in that the national competition builds upon a series of local and statewide History Days, NHD thus expands students' skills in historical inquiry and critical thinking within the context of state and local education benchmarks and standardized testing requirements. Spearheaded by the National Archives Mid-Atlantic Region, NHD in Philadelphia formed in 2004 on the basis of collaboration among more than forty institutions, which provide financial and in-kind support, furnish volunteer judges, and conduct workshops to introduce students and teachers

to the city's extraordinary historical assets. The cost for the Philadelphia program in 2009 is more than \$180,000. A hallmark of NHD in Philadelphia is that it enables student participation without regard for economic or social barriers

by providing qualifying participants with scholarships to attend both the state and national History Day competitions. Its Web site can be viewed at <http://www.ushistory.org/nhdphilly>.

**The Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia**, which promotes historic preservation in the region, has launched the first ever comprehensive survey of Philadelphia's built environment. Overlaying scanned copies of historical atlases on contemporary maps, researchers are identifying historically important buildings, including those no longer extant,

in every part of the city. Associated thematic treatments of such topics as rowhouses and industrial structures provide context, enabling the identification of links among structures. The information will be used to guide preservation planning for the city. The Alliance's Web site is at <http://www.preservationalliance.com/>.



The **Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network** is a user-friendly way to view more than five thousand maps and prints on line. Hosted by the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, this Web site employs the nearly universal Google Maps technology to enable users to overlay and switch between current and historic maps. In addition to materials held by the Athenaeum, the Free Library of Philadelphia, the University of Pennsylvania, the Philadelphia Historical Commission, and the Historical Society of Frankford, the site provides access to historical and contemporary aerial photos as well as historical topographical maps from the United States Geological Survey. Also, PhilaGeoHistory data has been linked directly to images of the built environment in the region on the Philadelphia Architects and Buildings (PAB) Web site, so that each image in PAB can be located on a number of historic maps. These two resources will allow viewers to track changes in land use, the built environment, and the geographic context of individual sites over time. The Athenaeum's Regional Digital Imaging Center continues to scan and post geographical material to the site and expects to add at least one thousand additional images within the next year. The PhilaGeoHistory network can be accessed at [www.philageohistory.org](http://www.philageohistory.org) PAB's site is at <http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/index.cfm>.

**The Metropolitan Philadelphia Indicators Project (MPIP)**, a program of Temple University's Geography and Urban Studies Department, maintains updated information on a series of social indicators for more than three hundred and fifty communities in the Philadelphia metropolitan area, spanning nine counties in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The indicators range from basic demographics and socioeconomic characteristics of the population to data about such aspects of community life as education, arts and culture, and the environment. Each year, MPIP publishes *Where We Stand*, a report that assesses change in the region in a dozen dimensions. Community members, civic activists, researchers, and planners may obtain information about prevailing conditions in their own or other communities by logging onto the project Web site at [www.temple.edu/mpip](http://www.temple.edu/mpip). There, users can create maps, graphs, tables, and reports drawing upon all of the project's data. They can choose to look at the entire region or any part of it. Temple faculty researchers associated with MPIP have used the project's information resources to support the work of civic partners ranging from Public Citizens for Children and Youth, to Select Greater Philadelphia, the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, and Ten Thousand Friends of Pennsylvania.

**Policymap.com** is a national data warehouse and mapping tool developed by Philadelphia's Reinvestment Fund, a community investment group that works across the Mid-Atlantic Region. For a fee, the site provides on-line access to data, tables, charts, reports, and maps in a user-friendly Web platform. It combines publicly available data with other proprietary data, such as demographic and employment projections and home sales. Subscribers can upload their own data as well as view where other subscribers have made investments. Although geared to investor decision-making, the system can also provide guidance to civic and government organizations about social and economic trends that could affect policy decisions. ✕



Savoy-Weeks Richards of Christopher Columbus Charter School, Philadelphia, discussed her History Day project, "B.F. Skinner - The Man Who Changed Our Views on Behavior," with History Day judges Michael Sentman of the Philadelphia City Archives and Marla Shoemaker of Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Courtesy: Philadelphia Department of Records for National History Day Philadelphia

Courtesy: Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network

## FAMOUS LAST WORDS GARY B. NASH

### Isn't It Time for an Encyclopedia of Philadelphia?

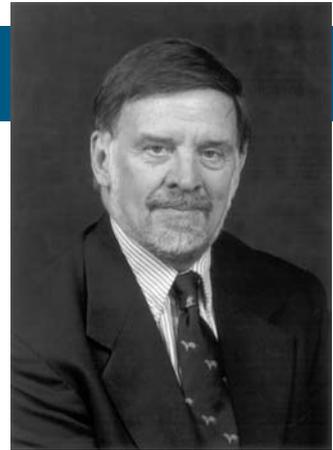
*The following is a slightly edited excerpt from a talk Gary Nash gave on October 23, 2007, at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania as part of a conference presenting a twenty-five-year retrospective on the publication, Philadelphia: A 300-Year History.*

As we move forward in the twenty-first century, it bears remembering that for half of the quarter-century since *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*<sup>1</sup> appeared we have witnessed fiery battles over what history is, what it should be, who owns it, and who is entitled even to speak historically. Here in Philadelphia controversy has swirled around the exhibits to be installed in the new Liberty Bell Pavilion and then in the hue and cry over an interpretation of the President's House. What all of these heated debates shared was an argument about how the world's most powerful democracy should portray its past and whether we want our children to learn about the sordid and corrupt as well as the heroic and praiseworthy. Here, as elsewhere, such controversies show that history is hot, that the public cares about history, and that more of the people in the streets than could have been imagined, especially those whose history has been forgotten or demeaned, insist that their stories be told.

Let's be candid. We have a quarter century of scholarship that pleases some and offends others. Much of the new scholarship sensitive to race, religion, gender, and class has displeased many people, including some academic historians, who miss what they remember as a more coherent and worshipful rendition of the past. In my view, such purported coherency depended heavily on excluding large segments of the population, making it a coherency for the included and a dismissal of the excluded. And it ought to be recognized that the explosion of the social history of the many, following our motto of *e pluribus unum*, one from the many, has

increased history's popularity. Why not, when people for the first time find in accounts of the past figures like themselves – alike in color or class, religion or region, sex or social situation?

History, we are finding out, when it is complex, ambiguous, paradoxical, myth-shattering, and even shocking, can be thought-provoking, useful, and a prod toward civic engagement. Narratives of triumph and glory will always have a market, but human empathy with less than oversized figures, as much in history as in literature, has created a market as well. Moreover, only an inclusive history – filled with shadows as well as sunshine, balancing the profane against the prophetic, interweaving order and disorder – can overcome the defeatist notion that the past was inevitably determined. This is particularly fitting in an open and generally optimistic society that prizes the autonomy of the individual. In a democracy we should be proud to be honest enough to interweave the heroic and tragic chapters of history, to braid together the destinies of the great and the inconspicuous, to write history from the bottom up and the inside out as well as from the top down. Here in Philadelphia, we have seen this happen as the President's House controversy has morphed into the public's fascination with the archaeological excavations at Sixth and Market Streets, where buried history rises to the surface. Tourist and resident Philadelphian, blue collar and white collar, young and old, black and white – people who have never laid eyes on each other – have been having conversations about forgotten stories and buried history. The National Park Service, traditionally wary of creating emotional or intellectual “dissonance” for visitors, has come to see that “an intellectually unsettled visitor” is a sign of a citizen in a mature democracy. Park Service rangers will tell you that talking about the gritty as well as the glorious, raising questions rather than providing final answers, earns them compliments instead of curses.



Courtesy Gary B. Nash

In this light, isn't it time to launch an encyclopedia of Philadelphia? Here are four reasons why. Number one, Philadelphia is ready for it. The wave of gentrification and Center City's renaissance have transformed downtown Philadelphia and the adjacent neighborhoods. Philadelphia's new skyline and the business revival associated with it have driven the city forward. History-driven tourism and the magnetic Avenue of the Arts have also contributed to this vibrant reinvention of William Penn's green country town. Philadelphia now has a history-hungry population, swelled not only by culturally sophisticated in-town and suburban come-to-town professionals but by ordinary people eager to know of their part in the city's history. I am not talking about a jargon-clotted multiplicity of miniature academic treatises but an engaging book that would draw the kind of praise bestowed on the *Encyclopedia of New York City*.<sup>2</sup> As the *New York Times* book reviewer wrote: “No one with even a passing interest in New York will be able to live without it.” And from the *New Yorker*: “The *Encyclopedia of New York City* is very much like strolling the streets of the city itself; both provide visual surprises and pleasures, chance encounters, overheard conversations, and unexpected enlightenment. It is unexcelled companionship.”

Second, such an encyclopedia can be readily done – and done handsomely. The book is already half-written simply because so much Philadelphia history has been produced in recent decades. Imbedded in this work is

the essence of a great many of the thousand or two thousand entries that would comprise such an encyclopedia. For the other half, we have a veritable factory of history workers primed to take their places on an assembly line of writing encyclopedia entries. The three major centers of doctoral dissertation research and writing – the McNeil Center for Early American Studies, the Library Company of Philadelphia’s Program in Early American Economy and Society, and the Hagley Library’s Center for the History of Business, Technology, and Society – assemble each fall a small horde of worker bees with keen minds, nimble pens, and a desire to break into the profession by publishing in a prestigious project. And then there are those not breaking in but being busted out – the talented journalists of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and other local papers who are the casualties of down-sizing.

Third, several models for an urban encyclopedia lay before us. More than twenty years ago, David Van Tassel launched the first modern urban encyclopedia in Cleveland.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on a yearning for Cleveland pride as the city was trying to recover from the rust-belt syndrome, he found support from twenty-seven foundations, thirty-nine local companies, and sixteen individual community-minded people. But even more sophisticated models are now available. *The Encyclopedia of Chicago*,<sup>4</sup> published in 2004, with an electronic version made available a year later, is a triumph of conceptualization and design. Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the MacArthur Foundation, the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, Bank One, Boeing Corporation, BP Foundation, and the

Sara Lee Foundation, the book provides a working architecture that is easily replicable.

Fourth, a distinguished publisher – the University of Pennsylvania Press, is willing and ready. And why not? *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, wonderfully edited by Ken Jackson, was published fourteen years ago by Yale and has sold more than eighty thousand copies to date – one of Yale University Press’s top-five best sellers in its century-long history. The University of Chicago Press sold some forty-five thousand copies of the Chicago volume in just three years. It would be the responsibility of Penn Press to do the designing, copy editing, and indexing of the volume, while anticipating the joyous sound of the cash register ringing.

Creating such a work could have an indirect added value of incalculable benefit. In a city that has had its share of ethnic, racial, and political tensions, the process of organizing, designing, writing, and publishing the volume could have an annealing effect on the city’s diverse peoples and neighborhoods. I foresee a parallel to the unexpected way in which the President’s House excavation at Sixth and Market, and the hammering out of exhibits that will arise there, pulled together parts of the city that were known better for fisticuffs than clasping hands. The idea of interpreting the President’s House started with bad feelings but then became an exercise in civic engagement. Creating an encyclopedia can learn from that experience. Following a model employed in Chicago, the organizers of an encyclopedia of Philadelphia could – indeed should – invite librarians, museum curators, business leaders, politicians, professionals, community activists, churches, voluntary associations, urban

planners, architects, and of course historians to discuss what they would like to have included in such a work. Some people would call this outreach, old patrician institutions reaching out to the people; but I call it “in-gathering” – bringing people together in a project of this sort. If you wish, call me a cock-eyed optimist to think that the creation of the encyclopedia of Philadelphia could do its mite to honor Penn’s hope for a peaceable kingdom on the shores of the Delaware, for it would reach every part of the city and give every group and institution the satisfaction that they and their predecessors are imbedded in the book. And isn’t that just what the Historical Society of Pennsylvania is now doing with its innovative PhilaPlace project – a collaboration with the city’s Department of Records, the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, and The University of Pennsylvania’s School of Design that is ransacking the collective memory of Philadelphia neighborhoods? Joan Saverino, the Historical Society’s assistant director for education, says, “We want people to understand that they are part of history, part of the larger historical story.” That’s what Studs Terkel has said of *The Encyclopedia of Chicago*, that it belongs to all the people of the brawny city of broad shoulders.

Here in Philadelphia, almost all the stars are aligned. It’s time to move forward.

Gary B. Nash is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of California Los Angeles. Among the premier historians of early American, he has focused much of his work on Philadelphia. He is serving as a consulting editor to the encyclopedia project. ❖

<sup>1</sup> Barra Foundation, *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> David D. Van Tassel and John J. Grabowski, *The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); 2nd ed. 1996; now available on line at <http://ech.case.edu/>.

<sup>4</sup> James R. Grossman, Ann Durkin Keating, and Janice L. Reiff, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); on line at <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/>



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