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HISTORYNEWS

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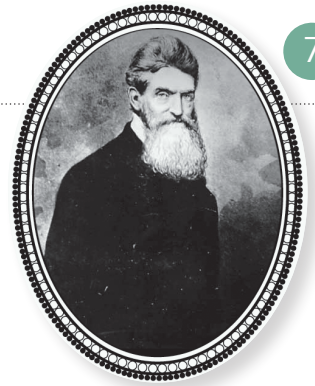
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ON THE COVER
 Curator of Architecture Bruce Lavery reveals one of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia's hidden treasures: Thomas U. Walter's 1855 drawing of the U.S. Capitol Dome, which was

secreted in a bunk house for almost a century.
 Photo courtesy of Jim Carroll.

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Lost in the Museum

Jim Carroll



Curator Bruce Lavery presents Walter's plan to the staff of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia.

Hidden Treasures *and the Stories They Tell*

BY NANCY MOSES

Floor to ceiling, wall to wall, lining the long metal shelves were Atwater Kent radios, obsolete kitchen appliances, patent models of never-built inventions, guns, and butter churns. A life-size mannequin in a faded gray gown sat on a top shelf; her head tipped back, arms akimbo. Advertising signs and wooden hangers from long-bankrupt department stores covered a wall. Thomas Alva Edison's records—cylinders made of wax—stood near the record player with the porcupine quill that once made them sing. Each object had tiny numbers inscribed on it or on a small, attached tag. When visitors toured the storage rooms at the Atwater Kent Museum of Philadelphia, we called these “the precious treasures of Philadelphia’s past.” Alone among ourselves, we called it “the stuff.”

It’s this stuff—the collections—that stuffed the third floor storage vault of the Atwater Kent when I served there as executive director. It also stuffs the storerooms of most every museum, historic house, historical society, archive, and special collections library in the country. America’s 30,000 collecting institutions hold 4.8 billion items, according to the *Heritage Health Index*, a report by Heritage Preservation funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. That’s a whole lot of stuff!¹

Collections are the *raison d’être* of collecting institutions. Yet they can also be the bane of their existence because it costs so much to care for them. Museums own, on the average, ten times the number of objects they have on display. Institutions can often spend more money caring for the stuff nobody sees than they do on public exhibits.

But, when you think about it, with a bit of imagination, storage collections can become a valuable, untapped asset. During the toughest times since the Great Depression, objects stored in basement crypts and climate controlled vaults can help institutions reinvent, reinvigorate, and reconnect with the public, sometimes in deeper and more resonant ways.

• THOMAS USTICK WALTER •

Objects can open doors to fascinating characters: the people who made them, owned them, found them, and donated them to the museum. There are two such personalities behind the beautifully rendered cross-section of the dome of the United States Capitol owned by the Athenaeum of Philadelphia: Thomas Ustick Walter, the architect who created it and then removed it from government files, and Robert B. Ennis, the graduate student who found it in a bunkhouse on a Colorado ranch.

Thomas Ustick Walter was the most influential architect of nineteenth-century America. Born in Philadelphia in 1804, he literally invented himself as an architect and then went on to invent the architectural profession in America.

Walter taught architecture to students, edited architecture books for the building industry, lectured on architecture before the general public, invented the idea for the American Institute of Architects, and served as its second president. The commissions Walter won filled Philadelphia and graced countries as far afield as Venezuela and China. He survived two bankruptcies, fathered thirteen children, and died almost broke.

Walter made his bones on the most important and expensive architectural commission of his era, Founders Hall at Girard College, a private school for orphans whose donor was one of the nation's early philanthropists. A couple of years later, Walter secured the only commission that could top it: the design for two new wings for the U.S. Capitol, to accommodate senators and congressmen from the states that had recently joined the union. Walter decided the Capitol needed a taller, more majestic dome to top off the building and balance the expanded wings. His *Plan for the Dome of the United States Capitol*, dated 1855, was used

to sell Congress on the project. Within a couple of months, construction began and, quite remarkably, continued throughout the Civil War as battles raged just across the Potomac River in nearby Virginia.

On May 31, 1865, a month-and-a-half after the death of President Lincoln, Walter resigned his post and prepared to return home. During his years in Washington, he had completed not only the expansion and dome of the Capitol but also an ambitious schedule of fourteen other government assignments. Unfortunately, the government was unwilling to pay him for anything over and above the original assignment for the Capitol wings. So Walter packed up his *Plan for the Dome of the United States Capitol* and the diaries, correspondence, and other records that documented his entire career—including hundreds of federal government documents.

The story of Walter and his Capitol dome now fast-forwards to 1970 when Robert B. Ennis, a young graduate student in architectural history, decided to write his Ph.D. dissertation on Thomas U. Walter. He had no hope of completing the work without Walter's papers or designs for the Capitol; they had disappeared.

One day by chance Ennis happened upon a list of Walter's descendants on the desk of the Architect of the Capitol in Washington, D.C. In writing to each one, he learned that Walter's great-granddaughter owned the lion's share of his papers and had shunned all requests to share them.

Ennis was despondent. Then, on a gloomy February night, the telephone rang. It was Isabelle Becker inviting him out to see her great-grandfather's things. Ennis quickly flew to Denver, picked up a car, and drove to a 1,000-acre ranch in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The bunkhouse of the ranch had been turned into Isabelle Becker's home and it was filled with Walter's drawings, and his professional and personal papers, including the *Plan for the Dome of the United States Capitol*. It was a graduate student's dream come true.

Isabella Becker eventually allowed Ennis to exhibit Walter's work at The Athenaeum of Philadelphia. The show not only revealed the work of this remarkable architect but also set a new path for the organization, which, for the first time in its history, raised funds for acquisition. Today the Athenaeum owns Walter's portrait, the portraits of his two wives, some 30,000 of his documents, 150 photographs of the Capitol, and 550 original drawings, including the *Plan for the Dome of the United States Capitol*, all in all, the most comprehensive collection from any architect before the twentieth century. It is the Philadelphia region's principal repository for the records of architectural achievement prior to 1945 and a special collections library of national standing.

• FRANKLIN BENJAMIN GOWEN •

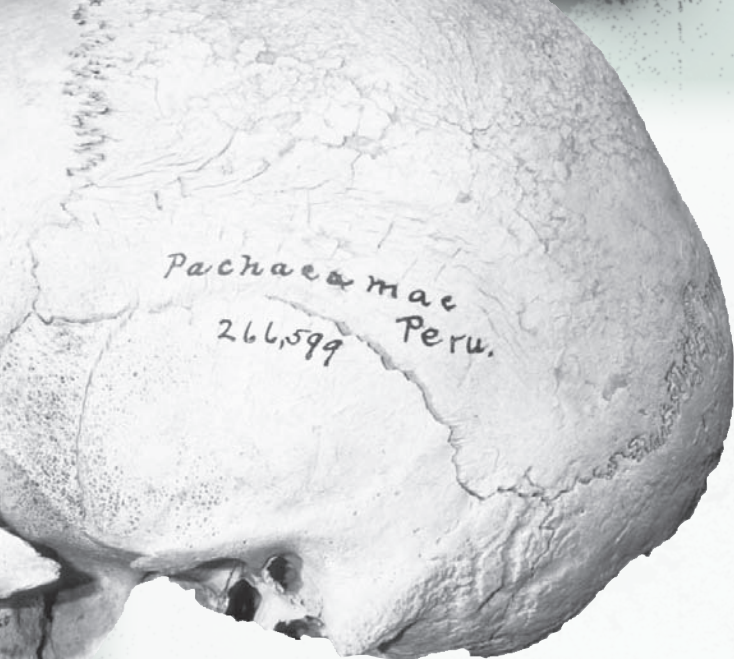
No one could mistake Walter's Capitol Dome for anything else, but that's not always the case. Some objects that look like one thing have a whole different meaning. Take, for example, the majestic silver and gold gilt bowl which is part of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania collection at the Atwater Kent Museum of Philadelphia. At first glance, it appears to be the kind of commemorative item you'd find at most every historical society, the sort of trophy Victorian gentlemen gave in tribute to one of their own. What makes this one so different, so shocking and provocative, is the event it commemorates: Franklin Benjamin Gowen's destruction of one of America's first industrial labor unions.

Though largely unknown today, in the 1870s Franklin B. Gowen, president of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, was as powerful a robber baron as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Cornelius Vanderbilt. This was the era when coal was king and Gowen's railroad monopolized the shipping of anthracite, the fuel of choice for industry and homes. When a subsidiary of the Philadelphia and Reading purchased, with the help of British investors, some 70,000 acres of prime coal fields, it became the largest corporation in the world.

But Gowen, as brilliant as he was ruthless, was still not satisfied. Now that he controlled the rail lines and coalfields,

Pike from
John
Brown's
Raid.

Courtesy of the Civil War Museum of Philadelphia



Skull of a prehistoric Peruvian child.

Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History

he wanted to control the workforce. After many struggles, the miners had formed the Workingmen's Benevolent Association to fight against the appalling conditions under which they were working and their families were living. Gowen was determined to wipe it out. In 1873 Franklin Gowen secretly hired a spy from the Pinkerton National Detective Agency to infiltrate the union. Two years later the Workmen's Benevolent Association struck for fair wages. The strike led to sabotage, then to the murder of ten mine bosses.

This was the opportunity that Gowen had been waiting for. A master of media manipulation, he took advantage of the murders to accuse the Association of harboring a seditious band of terrorists known as the Molly Maguires. (In Ireland, the Molly Maguires were a secret society of Catholic patriots who fought to rid the nation of its hated English Protestant landlords.) By 1870 Pennsylvania's coal towns were filled with Irish immigrants—including some Mollies, at least according to Gowen. The murders stunned the nation. America was already suffering the aftermath of a bloody Civil War and reeling from streams of immigrants who flooded the nation. Now they learned that Irish miners were tyrannizing and murdering in the once-peaceful hills of Pennsylvania.

In 1876, in a courtroom packed with sightseers and reporters, the accused miners were brought to trial for murder. By the end of 1877, ten miners died at the end of the hangman's noose. Before it ended, forty-one people were convicted of felonies and twenty miners put to death, including some who appeared innocent. Though labor strife continued, the Workmen's Benevolent Association was crushed forever.

Many hailed Franklin B. Gowen as a national hero, but not for long. He had borrowed millions to purchase coal fields and finance their development, gambling on an unlimited demand for anthracite. He had not counted on a nationwide depression that would dramatically cut coal consumption. In 1880 his company went bankrupt. Gowen lost, then regained, the presidency of his company, and readied himself to travel abroad to meet his British shareholders.

The great silver and gold gilt bowl at the Atwater Kent Museum of Philadelphia comes from this moment in time. In 1882, a delegation of mine owners gave the bowl to Gowen. Big enough to bathe a toddler in, the over-the-top Victorian creation was the largest bowl that jewelers Bailey, Banks, and Biddle had ever sold. Covered with coal iconography—a chunk of coal, names and portraits of coal barons, the picks, spades, and shovels of the trade—the inscription around its rim tells all: "Presented to Franklin B. Gowen, as a Token of our Grateful Remembrance of his Services in Suppressing Lawless Violence and Re-Establishing Security for Life and Property in the Anthracite Coal Regions of Pennsylvania."

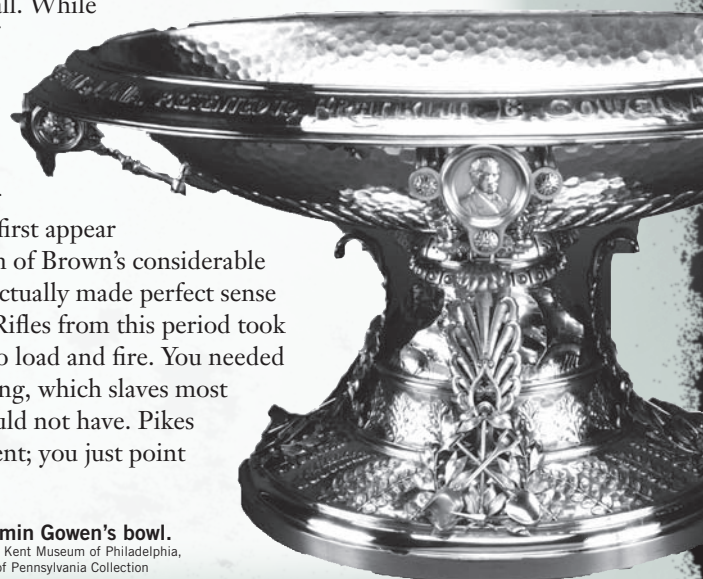
Franklin Benjamin Gowen received his glorious trophy not at the peak of success but at the precipice of failure. In 1884, after a number of valiant attempts to borrow money and pay off creditors, he stepped down as president of the Philadelphia and Reading. A year later he was found in a Washington, D.C., hotel room, shot to death by his own hand.

• JOHN BROWN •

Gowen's is a cautionary tale of hubris: triumph and ultimately defeat. A very different story is embedded in another museum's holdings, a never-used weapon from the battle that sparked the Civil War. Out of the bowels of the Civil War Library and Museum—which has since been re-branded as the Civil War Museum of Philadelphia—a volunteer curator showed me a pike, a seven-foot-long wooden rod tipped with a wicked ten-inch steel blade. At that time this town-house museum overflowed with relics, documents, paintings, photographs, and books donated by the Union officers who fought the war and their descendants, including this weapon which once belonged to the great abolitionist John Brown.

Brown's biography reads like a chapter from the Old Testament, and well it should. From childhood, he believed he was on a mission from God to free the slaves. By 1859 Brown had fashioned a secret plan to steal into Harpers Ferry, Virginia, with a small band of guerrilla fighters, capture its vast federal arsenal, and use the armaments to spark a massive slave rebellion.

Along on his secret mission, Brown brought a cache of some 900 pikes to arm the former slaves he believed would answer his call. While his notion of pitting slaves bearing pikes against soldiers bearing guns may at first appear as a symptom of Brown's considerable delusion, it actually made perfect sense at the time. Rifles from this period took seven steps to load and fire. You needed special training, which slaves most certainly would not have. Pikes are self-evident; you just point and stick.



Franklin Benjamin Gowen's bowl.

Courtesy of the Atwater Kent Museum of Philadelphia, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania Collection

Beyond its narrative value, John Brown's pike is also useful as an illustration of provenance, a topic important to museum professionals but unfamiliar to most other people. Along its wooden shaft are a series of numbers, letters, and words that trace its lineage from its foundry in Connecticut to Brown's secret farmhouse headquarters on the outskirts of Harper's Ferry, to a doctor, then a soldier, then his son, and eventually to the Civil War Library and Museum. Given the proliferation of fakes in the lucrative market for Civil War memorabilia, the marks on this pike prove its authenticity.

John Brown's war for slave liberation lasted only thirty-six hours and cost seventeen lives, including two slaves and two of Brown's own sons. Not a single slave came to Harpers Ferry on his or her own volition. Brown was quickly brought to trial and convicted of treason. As he walked to the gallows Brown passed a note to one of his attendants. It read, in part, "I John Brown am now quite *certain* that the crimes of this *guilt[y]* land: will never be purged *away* [:] but with Blood." These last words proved prophetic. Within eighteen months of Brown's hanging, seven southern states had seceded, and war had begun at Fort Sumter.

• A PREHISTORIC SKULL •

John Brown's pike is iconic, but even the mundane can become magical if you know the story behind it. There is a great story behind a skull stored on the fourth floor of another institution, the National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian Institution—one of the 35,000 human remains collected over the years. To the untrained eye it looks like a skull, one with the accession number 266599 written on its crown. To Dr. Donald Ortner, it is the key to unlocking a lost society. Ortner is one of the world's preeminent paleopathologists, an authority on disease in prehistoric man. By examining the skull closely, Ortner was able to determine that this skull belonged to a prehistoric Peruvian teenager who died of scurvy.

How Ortner was able to place the skull in time and place and disease category is a story in itself. The diagnosis of scurvy came from the hundreds of perforations on either side of the skull along the tops of both of the eye sockets, and the sides where the ears used to be, so tiny they look as if they were drilled by needles the size of cat whiskers. This is a sure sign of scurvy. The rest of the skull's story came from the accession records. Ales Hrdlicka, the head of the Smithsonian's division of Physical Anthropology, discovered it in the Peruvian desert of Pachacamac. After shipping it back to the Smithsonian and painting the accession number on its crown, Hrdlicka placed the skull in a storage drawer. There it lay until staff rediscovered it during a computerized inventory of the Smithsonian's collections.

This skull eventually led Ortner on a remarkable scientific quest that continues to this day. All over the world, paleopathologists like Ortner are digging deep in museum

collections and unearthing new science in old specimens. A long-deceased Peruvian teenager is contributing to cutting-edge discoveries.

• HIDDEN TREASURES •

These objects, Thomas U. Walter's cross-section of the dome of the United States Capitol, Franklin Benjamin Gowen's majestic but troubling trophy bowl, John Brown's pike, even the skull of a prehistoric Peruvian teenager with scurvy, are memorable not necessarily for their aesthetic or monetary value but for their narrative value, the stories they tell. Objects like these, ignored for decades, can morph into exhibits (onsite and online), books, blogs, radio, television, educational programs, and public experiences. And, the best news of all is that the curators, registrars, and volunteers who work with the collections know where the best stories are buried. I have stood in awe as curators have spun fascinating tales about objects as mundane as a wooden water pipe, a leg bone of a giraffe, and an obsolete gynecological device.

In my mind's eye I imagine an entire exhibit that would tell the story of an institution from the items it owns. The exhibit, which would feature once-hidden treasures, would illustrate the accession decisions that stand the test of time and those that don't. It would show how a collection is itself an artifact of a myriad of decisions often over a myriad of years. It would explain how a collection is also a microcosm of the tastes and values of the world outside its doors. This kind of exhibit can be staged at any collecting institution and at each one it would be unique, because each one has a story all its own.

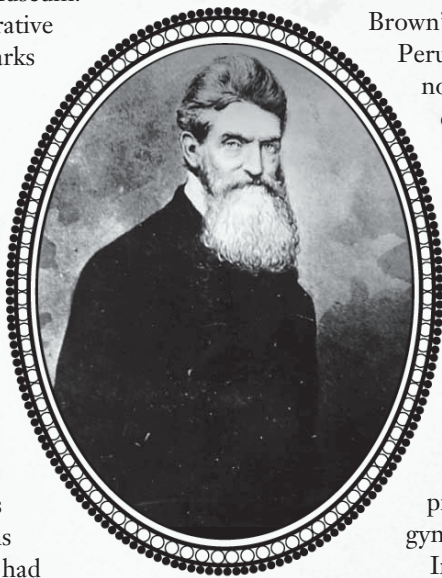
Most visitors don't realize that collecting institutions are like giant icebergs with only the tiniest tip exposed—the items displayed in the galleries—the rest under the water line, frozen below. Most don't understand why collections are so large, what it takes to care for objects, and why it's important they be saved.

Especially now when grants are so tough to come by, government subsidies have dried up, and donor dollars are down, it's time museums shared the hidden treasures long lost in the museum: the artifacts and relics, work of minor and major artists, the heirlooms, souvenirs, mementos, specimens, and many, many types of documents.

People don't value the things they can't see. ●

Nancy Moses is a planning consultant to cultural and other nonprofit organizations. Her book, *Lost in the Museum: Hidden Treasures and the Stories They Tell* (AltaMira Press) won a 2008 Gold Medal from *ForeWord Magazine*. She can be reached at nancy@nancymoses.com.

¹ Heritage Preservation, Inc., *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America's Collections* (Washington, DC: Heritage Preservation, Inc., 2005).



Portrait of John Brown, from the Bowman Gallery, Ottawa, Illinois.