

Public Meeting Q&A Notes
The future of the Philadelphia History Museum at the Atwater Kent
National Constitution Center
Wednesday, February 27, 2019 from 6:00-7:30 p.m.

Q1: I would like to hear more about the organizational structure that will ensure the staffing is adequate and professional. How will integrity be maintained? Is it going to be part of these other collections? Is it going to be free floating?

A1: We are treating this collection as separate from our other collections, it will have its own identity. We're imaging something like the Atwater Kent collection at Drexel University. We haven't worked out all the details. We do know that we're going to need additional staffing to support this collection. We will be bringing in a full time registrar who will work with our curator of the Drexel collections. We will draw heavily on our full-time student coops as well as graduate students. There's no question that as we grow the program we're going to need to grow staffing as well. I also anticipate that we will work with an outside vendor to develop a digital component. Drexel has fabulous IT and digital ability but this is going to be a very big robust digital portal that is interactive and not only as a place just to find information. We know that's going to require staffing too. The good news is that President Fry is committed to raising funds to support all these activities including the staffing.

Q2: Do you have any guess or rough estimate on how many items might be de-accessioned?

A2: My guess is that the number will not be terribly big because there has been some culling already but the standards for items remaining in the collection will require a bar that makes sense for the future. At this point we're in a fairly early stage. The collection storage area, which is enormous, is already filled to the gills and the whole of this collection will continue to grow. After all, 2018 isn't the end of Philadelphia's history. I'd say the answer is a balance between being good stewards of the current collection and making good decisions with the current collection while still making room for the future.

Q2: Will duplicates be candidates for de-accession?

A2: Duplicates are one of the areas that we will probably be looking at and also how these objects will be used in the future. We're looking at a broad range of uses. No longer are we looking just at what might be hung on a museum wall. An item could well be used in a historic house museum; for example, in a way it wouldn't be used in a more traditional sense.

Q2: My hope is that not too many items will be deaccessioned.

Q3: My question is about a digital portal and whether it would be similar to the library of congress, where they are putting all of their items online so that they are available not only in Philadelphia, in the United States, but all over the world. I see that as part of the educational community worldwide. An item that we may have in a certain country, someone in that country could give us more information about it. So it could be an interactive idea to do that. I take it that you are considering that.

A3: Absolutely. It really would be a two way street, we want people to interact with what they find online as well as to find what's there. 10 years ago for the Benjamin Franklin Church Centenary we developed a website database of all objects related to Franklin's life that we used as we curated the big exhibition that travelled around the country and to France. Some maybe 300-400 items, so not big by comparison but beautiful photography of each item, provenance, interpretation, information about it. We have some experience producing this kind of thing but what I see doing a 2.0 version of this is to make it more interactive. To make spaces in the digital space for people to curate their own exhibits, to do projects. Certainly the images that we'd have would be open source. We'd want people to use them, we want as much interaction as possible. We want to learn from people things like "this looks like something my grandmother had," and "this reminded me of..." There will be information we can get just from people who may use the database. We want it to be a tool and not just a finding aid. Although a finding aid for a collection this size will be a fantastic thing.

A3: Furthermore, before everything gets digitized, we'd like to think that the inventory will be available to be searched online which is a pass-through before we begin the expensive and time consuming process of actually getting images up.

Q4: I was a volunteer at the PHM. I'd just like to say a few words about what we lost and it may be unfair to put it on Drexel. It was a place where people weren't intimidated, so people who wouldn't normally come to a museum felt comfortable there. It was a place where swarms of school children came and touched stuff. They learned that museums were places for them. I don't know if it's fair or not to Drexel but keep that in mind that we lost a treasure when the museum closed.

A4: What I really love about that point is that we have been imagining how our loan program would work, we've been thinking about how we can bring history to where people are. So if it's local branch libraries, other places where people congregate, maybe we're bringing the history to them in a way that is also not intimidating and I think the spirit of that point is so important.

Q5: I want to thank Drexel for making this extraordinary public-spirited effort. Thanks to Paige and Ros for the expertise that they've brought to this. The prospect of the city's collections probably catalogued, preserved, and made accessibly is a plan that's very attractive. But I don't think it's enough. I think that the strategic plan for the city's collections in which it waits for the possibility for someone else to come up with an idea for a museum while we keep it in storage and available isn't enough. The strategic planning for the future of this collection must certainly ensure its preservation, ensure its cataloguing

and digital access, but I think that the strategic plan for this city's history has to include something that resembles a museum to represent our history to the people of the world who's history we fundamentally changed not just in the 18th century but in the 19th and 20th century. We have a responsibility to our civilization to not just preserve this material but to put it out in the most potent way possible.

Q6: Yes, absolutely, at some point we must have Philadelphia History Museum but in the interim we will not have that and that's very sad. What is the future of the existing Atwater Kent building? A very fine piece of architecture will stand empty. What idea, vision do you have for its future use?

A6: The Atwater Kent Foundation is involved in the discussion about the future of the building. One of the things that the city hopes—and we've heard this often—is that building is very important to the city of Philadelphia. It's always been a cultural institution, being the former Franklin Institute. We hope that in the future it will always be used for a public cultural purpose. Right now we are having discussions about the building; our prior focus was on the collection. Those conversations are underway but at this point we do not have specific plans about the building.

Q7: 30 years ago I was a chairman of the museum. It was a kinder gentler period than looking at what we're facing now with some of the problems that we have today. We also didn't have Internet. Things weren't quite as tough in those days, the nature of museums and exhibits have as a whole changed. I want to first commend David Rasner and Jeffrey. This has been a very tough time for museums nationally, the whole concept has evolved at a different scale and we just don't have the same access to funds as we once had. We didn't have the Lenfest Foundation for which we're also grateful. We didn't have Drexel having such a large presence in the city. It is an appropriate place to have stewardship of the collection. What I did want to highlight is the opportunity for the children of our city to touch, to see, experience up close the nature of some of the artifacts that we have at the Atwater Kent. I took to my daughter's school some years ago an 18th century map of the country as they know it then. They wondered and marveled at it, wondered who touched it at the time. My grandchildren yesterday came to the Constitution Center (inaudible) and they want to see these things, they want to be a part of it. The environment was wonderful at the Atwater Kent. David did a wonderful job, taking responsibility.

Q8: Back in the 1960s the Chicago History Museum was having financial problems. They needed to raise a large amount of money in a short time. What they did was catalogue the collection and for \$50 you got to adopt an artifact in the collection. They raised multimillions of dollars. That could be a way that the Atwater Kent could raise some funds. Also, since we have a number of people here, how about we

create a group called Friends of the Philadelphia History Museum who would volunteer to do what you guys need to get done.

Q9: My family has been in Philadelphia for as long as they have been in America. I say thank you John Fry and Drexel for stepping up when nobody else would. That's number one here. From what I have heard tonight I am so happy that the collection will remain in tact and that it will be well stewarded. But a bell is not a bell if you can't ring it. I care a great deal that children, adults, people of all ages may have access to the actual objects. The thing I haven't heard a lot about tonight is about how we're going to connect the dots between this beautifully preserved collection and how people get to see it. It is very hard to promote these collections, we can see it online, but will we be fragmented Philadelphia's story?

A9: I have something to share about 2026 and the idea that we will be celebrating a very important milestone in our country's history and the idea that Philadelphia could lead the way by every single organization, every library branch, every you name it, places where we can tell parts of the story in such a way that we can create a kind of map of Philadelphia's history. You can imagine it on bus shelters, in maps on your phone, a sort of treasure hunt of Philadelphia's history. An opportunity to wander around that whole year, look at amazing artifacts in unexpected places. The great thing about the Lenfest Center at Drexel is that we have all these relationships with different organizations all over town. Our student's and faculty have relationships with them. We can work with them to find the right piece of history to display, we can offer technical assistance in interpretation as well as security, vitrines, the kind of things that you would need to be able to display something if you're not an organization that's normally in display business. We're really looking forward to that outreach. Will a story be diffuse? Probably, but I'm hoping through programs we can do together we will find ways to knit those things together. Each year we could send out new artifacts with new stories to tell. There's lots of great thought and ideas that could come out of it.

Q10: I'm the executive director of the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations so I work with Brian and Kelly. I want to thank you guys for going on this process for trying to save what you can. But first and foremost I'm a Philadelphian, and it's important to recognize the loss, how sad some of the people are in this room for losing such an important institution. Moving forward, the most important thing for me is my dream of 2026, I think we need to preserve our Philadelphia civil rights history. I've always hoped that with this collection we could tell the story of Philadelphia's civil rights movements and all the fights and struggles that we've had through the collections and things that we don't have yet. In order to get to that place, a place of having a Philadelphia Museum again, is that we make sure that there is a diverse group of people who are de-accessioning the objects and also who are curating and telling the story of Philadelphia through our beautifully diverse eyes. There are a lot of people that aren't in the room tonight and this needs to be a museum for all of us.

Q11: What's happening is similar to the crisis that we had some years ago when we almost had the loss of the Barnes. I think this is that moment of crisis that leaves us to reexamine and look at completely different pathways. It needs to be joined by the city of Philadelphia in a formal way. These artifacts are from Philadelphia. Drexel is a worthy steward, but Philadelphia is the owner of these artifacts and has to play a direct role. It's the city's responsibility. That's important to say particularly where we are now, where we look out the window and we see the very beginning of the history of the country, not just Philadelphia. We need to think of this as a place-maker, and there are underutilized resources. All of the museums in this area have available space that is underutilized. Part of this plan should include a consortium of all the public spaces right in this square mile because that's the logical place where these things can be seen, where the millions of tourists of Philadelphia every year can experience it, where all the people of this City could do the same thing.

Q12: Unfortunately this proposal is completely the wrong thing. I published the op-ed in the Inquirer as I wanted to express the view that Philadelphia deserves a real history museum. Many people responded online, many responded directly to me. While I haven't checked the online things regularly, the last time I checked 100% of everyone endorsed the idea of a real history museum. I don't want schoolchildren to have to wander to the Philadelphia Airport to see William Penn's Wampum belt. I don't want to go to the King of Prussia mall to see George Washington's desk. I don't want to open my computer file to see these artifacts, I want all Philadelphians to be really able to see them. If Drexel thinks they can raise money in the future, if the city has money for 5 years of subsidy to Drexel, let us put that to a real museum. Right now, start a real siting of the potential places and opportunities to keep this collection in one piece, not scattered throughout the city. Philadelphia is the most historic city in the US, not just because of the constitution and independence hall but also because of everything else that happened here. It is a disgrace that we do not have the ability to create an excellent history museum.

Q13: I have tried to preserve and save from destruction a number of small museums and collections. I want to remind people about the museum's brilliant idea of selling the collection. They raised a lot of money that way but of course it raised an international scandal. My point is: what will we do to prevent this from ever happening again? Have you considered repatriation of cultural artifacts?

A13: Repatriation of cultural artifacts is definitely something that we're going to need to take on and understand but we haven't gotten to that level of discussion yet. If this plan is approved and goes forward, committees are definitely going to take a close look at that. Drexel has very strict de-accession policies. We have no interest in really selling anything and the deaccessioning that we've been talking about is entirely about collection shaping, it's not about raising money. Drexel's deaccession policies would not allow this to happen. Any monies raised for the purpose of this collection would be segregated so the university would not be able to use the money associated with the sale of objects for any other purpose than to support the collection. As a collecting institution it's not what we do. We all remember the horror stories of those deaccessioning moments. It's something we feel we have

sufficient safeguards against given our professional affiliations, our standards, our de-accession policies. I feel very sure that wouldn't happen.

A13: I'd like to remind everyone what was stated in the presentation that any items that are de-accessioned will go to other cultural institutions in Philadelphia for free.

Q14: Despite the very thoughtful presentation this evening I've come to the microphone with a few reservations. One of them is the shameful spectacle of the City of Philadelphia starving its history museum to reach this point. A second shame is the handing over of a public treasure, which according to you is of immense significance, to a private institution, however well intentioned that institution will be. My third concern is that this conversation has been all about the collection. I beg to differ. I think the collection is not a museum; a museum is a conversation not a collection. I came with one particular suggestion for the kind of history museum that this town needs and deserves and that is a museum of Philadelphia activism. We have one of the greatest histories of civic activism in the country, perhaps the world. I think that it's time for us, instead of retreating, to move forward and advance a program that will engage the citizens of this in celebrating the activism of their fellow citizens and the agency of those citizens ought to be exemplified.

Q15: You mentioned in your presentation that one of Drexel's goals would be creating an active, robust loan program. But the PHM already had a loan program so I'm wondering what the plans are for maintaining those active loans during this transitional period.

A15: All loans that are active will remain active and will be honored. The main difference is that the loan program we're imagining is a little bit more interactive which is to say that currently just as with most museums loan programs, the idea is that you're asked for something, you lend it, it's a long to term loan, you do condition checking and so on. In our case we'd actually be reaching out to organizations that we feel would be a great fit for telling part of Philadelphia's story and working with them on interpretation, on best ways to display, and programs that would support the display. This we be, when we call it a robust loan program, it's shorthand for not just your average museum loan program but one were we really will be engaging in outreach to get items into places where people are. Absolutely, any outstanding loans that are out there, all the conditions of those loans remain in place.

Q16: I'm the executive director of the Delaware County Museum Research Library and we're facing very similar circumstances as the Atwater Kent. Being in that situation I would to thank and applaud the board and Drexel and Paige for your dedication and expertise for taking this on. My comment is directed towards this passionate group of community members. I'd like to remind you of the importance of feeling that passion before a museum gets to the point of a museum having to close. I think the passion here is wonderful, but I want remind you that this is the last thing that the Atwater Kent museum wanted to do, it's the last thing the City of Philadelphia wanted to do. But I ask all of you,

how many of you have given in the past? How many of you have attended numerous openings? It's too late to complain now and say that it's going away. Where were you for fundraising and attendance over the last decade or two? I just wanted to remind you that this is on all of us. This is not just the City, it's not Drexel, it's not the board, it's us as well.

Q17: I live in South Philadelphia and I'm very angry. People have spoken about the children. I first visited the Atwater Kent museum in about 1950 when I was 8 years old. I came with a class in my elementary school. I remember the visit very clearly. It was that visit that kindled an interest in Philadelphia history in me which has continued for over 60 years. In response to the previous remark, I have been a paying member of the museum for over 35 years and I have been there dozens of times each year to see what's going on and to support the program. Despite its unparalleled collection, the museum has never lived up to its potential because it has been chronically underfunded by successive city administrations. Mayors previous to Kenney have starved the museum of dollars. This has made it impossible to provide the kind of publicity and programming essential to breaking into audiences that a proper marketing program would attract. It took the administration of Kenney to actually shutter the place. This is a disgrace for the city as whole and for Mayor Kenney in particular. It is perfectly clear that a real PHM should be reopened and properly funded by the City.

Q18: I'm a museum professional, I've worked in museum development an museum education and teaching museum studies for over 15 years. I've also worked as manager of school and youth programs at Atwater Kent for 3 years. I'd like to highlight a brief anecdote that hopefully will illustrate the potential of this collection and what it can do in physical space, digital space, and frankly what humans can do to help this collection. When I make an exhibit, I'm bringing together communities and those communities may not have wanted to be in conversation historically. In fact, they may have been in violent opposition. I was teaching numerous classes at Atwater Kent, one particular class was racially integrated. There were children who were friends with each other: this one girl was white and her best friend was African American. We looked at the Octavius Cato banner. I said he was killed by a person of Irish descent. The one girl said, I'm Irish, my family is Irish American and her best friend was African American. They looked at each other like "Oh my gosh." I said, you know, sometimes groups that don't have much start to fight with each other. Let's go into the other room and see the nativist banner and talk about what's happening to the Irish and let's talk about the Bible riots and Protestants versus Catholics. I even said to them, can we talk about my German-American Lutheran relatives and a fear of speaking German around WWI, WWII. And also my visiting German relatives and what they will and won't say about they were during WWII in the German and Nazi army or in Russian prisons. The ability to have those complex conversations in physical spaces that are about my country, my history, and all of our communities in an exhibit that was about the Philadelphia streets, that was about parades, protests, as well as sewers, and cobblestones, and melting pots. That's our collective story. I thank you for the work you've done, but I look for ways were we can do our best jobs to do that hard work together because it doesn't happen in segregated neighborhoods or class segregated neighborhoods and all the other ways that we are separate. There is something about public space that does that.

Q19: I'm a student at Drexel University. I saw the digital media and I'm really fascinated by the idea of high quality photography being taken of the artifacts themselves. Have you considered taking high-resolution 3D modeled images of objects? This is one of my favorite things, recreation of props and historical events. Have you considered giving detailed descriptions like information about things like dimensions and materials used? Would that be included in this project?

A19: We get as much information as we can get on any object we want to be able to capture. If we have the capacity of funds to 3D model then we'd like to consider.

Q20: Picking up on some comments people made on PHM being historically underfunded. Can you give us some numbers about its budget and how that roughly relates to other institutions? The other thing I want to know is, what happens to the building? Ms. Lee you said that you that it will be used for some constructive cultural purpose. But who actually has control of it? Is it the City? Will it revert back to Atwater Kent family? Who will make the final decision on the actual physical space?

A20: There are no specific plans for the building right now. We mentioned that it might revert back to the Atwater Kent foundation under the 1930 agreement. Right now they are working with the city, the sessions are fairly new to decide what will happen to the building. Kelly emphasized the cultural importance of the building and it's designated historic by the historical commission of the national register. Everybody wants to protect the building. We will do what is sensible with the building.

A20: The city annual fund for museums is roughly \$300,000 a year. It's hard for us to compare to other institutions. Generally speaking, all of our departments are underfunded by the city. I'm amazed at the ability for our institutions and workers in their ability to do incredibly great things without very much. I don't want anyone to leave here tonight thinking that the city does not value this museum. This was not an easy decision for us to come just like it wasn't an easy decision for the board to come to. None of us wanted to reach this point. We believe the importance of Philadelphia's history and we want to maintain it. We're trying to find the best path forward to maintain and tell the stories of the collection, tell the stories of our ancestors and bridge the gaps between communities. We're not anything without being able to tell our stories. I appreciate everyone's passion and concerns. We share those concerns.
