臺大文史哲學報　第六十二期
2005 年 5 月　　頁 23～46
臺　灣　大　學　文　學　院

搜章摘句、翻箱倒篋：以檔案編劇場史

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摘　要

在此論文中，我自問檔案裡找到的史料如何決定身爲史學家的切入觀點。我對於美國早期劇場的著述曾爲人冠以各式各樣的名稱，諸如經濟史、政治史、文化史和敘事史。我以爲，它是這些形式的綜合體，而它的不定性，與其說是我的作爲，毋寧說是***檔案***對我的要求。是我的研究要我輪番成爲早期國家銀行系統的學者，詮釋殖民政治機制的專家，或能夠分析文本、建立表演理論的劇場史學家。

我知道這樣的過程或許忽略了一個問題，即若不採取特定的編史法或著手點，如何從事學術計劃呢？然而，我於此篇論文提出的，是讓檔案裡的斷簡殘篇以新的方式發聲，不但要檔案主導我們的研究內容，也主導我們的***研究方式***，如此一來，定會產生許多叫人驚喜的可能性來。舉例來說，拙作*從*《大革命到湯瑪士・傑佛遜時期的早期美國劇場》一書的出發點，即鎖定十八世紀的波士頓劇場史進行直接的檔案搜尋。當我追溯當時的報紙社論，搜尋關於興建市內第一座劇場的爭議時，意外發現這位提請建造新劇院的人士，同時也和名爲「波士頓互助會組織」的企業有所牽連。因爲我對此組織在早期美國境內如何運作一無所知，便著手對此機構及其成員進行調查。結果發現，此組織本質上等於私人銀行，並且投注了兩百萬美元以上的資金供創辦者自由運用 —這權限使得保守黨當權的市政府大感威脅。因而對地方領導者來說，反對興建劇場的支持者無異於反對此協會。到最後，這半途走岔了路、投入環繞此組織的經

本文 94.2.15 收稿；94.4.20 通過刊登。

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濟史和政治史研究轉而成爲我的著書基礎，徹底轉變了編劇場史的初衷。在我摒棄了預先規劃的「藍圖」，只遵循這些檔案指引我的「路徑」之後，我覓得了最豐碩的研究成果。

關鍵詞：劇場史、檔案研究、清教主義、早期美國劇場、聯合養老保險

Scrap-Scrounging and Dumpster-Diving: Theatre Historiography in the Archive

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Abstract

In his essay, "Cultural Systems and the Nation-State: Paradigms for Writing National Theatre History", Bruce McConachie creates a fascinating case study for theatre historians and historiographers by applying three different historigraphical methods to one set of historical data, and asking the reader to evaluate which approach makes the most convincing interpretation of the material. McConachie's essay helps the scholar understand both the flexibility and the limitations of the data and the methods he applies, and his essay is an invaluable tool both in and out of the classroom.

In my paper, "Scrap-Scrounging and Dumpster-Diving: Theatre Historiography in the Archives," I propose to begin at the "other end," asking how the material I find in the archives determines the approach I take as a writer of history. My work on early American Theatre has been variously described as economic history, political history, cultural history, and narrative history. I consider it a synthesis of all of these forms, and I would argue that its mutability has been shaped *not* by what I bring to the archives, but rather what *they* have demanded of *me*. My research has required that I become, by turns, a scholar of the early national banking system, an adept in interpreting the dynamics of colonial politics, as well as a theatre historian able to analyze text and theorize about performance. While an interdisciplinary approach to scholarship is almost a given in the twenty-first century, I have often been surprised at how much more coherent my historiographical investigations seem when they arise

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organically from the material I am researching.

I realize that such a process may beg the question of how one can begin a research project without a specific historiographical method or point of attack, and of course every scholar must acknowledge both preferences and prejudices. What I suggest in this essay, however, is that by allowing the scraps and treasures in the archives to speak to us in new ways, by allowing them to direct not only what we research, but *how* we do it, many exciting possibilities begin to emerge. For example, I began the research that became my book *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People*, with a fairly straightforward archival search into the history of the eighteenth-century Boston theatre. As I tracked contemporary newspaper articles on the controversy that surrounded the city's first efforts to build a theatre, I was struck by the fact that the same men who seemed to be linked to the proposed new playhouse were also embroiled in a venture described as the "Boston Tontine Association." Moreover, opponents to the theatre aligned themselves against the tontine as well. Having no sense of how a tontine functioned in early national America, I began my investigations into the organization and its membership, and discovered that a tontine can essentially function as a private bank, and that the Boston Tontine Association put over two million dollars in the hands of its founders to use as they pleased - a power that proved an intolerable threat to the city's conservative government. Thus, for the local leaders, opposing the agenda of the theatre's supporters and the tontiners became inextricably linked, as all of the subsequent debates on the playhouse demonstrated. Ultimately, my sideways swerve into the economic and political history that surrounded the Boston Tontine Association became the foundation for my book and fundamentally transformed my approach to theatre historiography and research. While I cannot help but enter the archive with a set of questions, hopes, and expectations, I have found some of my most fruitful research comes when I abandon my preconceived "map," and simply follow the "path" that the archive lay before me.

Keywords: historiography, archival research, Puritanism, early American theatre, Tontine

Scrap-Scrounging and Dumpster-Diving: Theatre Historiography in the Archive

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In his classic work, *The Modern Researcher,* historian Jacques Barzun offers his readers practical hints on how to conduct scholarly investigations, ranging from how to collect and organize data, to how to find sources in the library.[1] Barbara Tuchman's collection of essays, *Practicing History,* offers a number of recommendations to the historian delving into the archives, from cultivating relationships with archivists to smuggling snacks into closed repositories.[2] Yet neither of these scholars probes the underlying question of how to *teach* students to really use an archive -- how to teach them to hunt for the information that will unlock new mysteries, and perhaps more importantly, how to synthesize their findings in the archive with the historiographical methods they learn in the classroom. I face this challenge with my graduate students in every class I teach and in every dissertation I direct. Archival research is, as we know, a highly idiosyncratic and individualized process, and every scholar has his or her own preferred methods of attack. Yet how can we help our students apply the methods that we teach when they are lost in a welter of scraps of paper, diaries, and records that seem to have little practical connection to our lessons on neo-Marxism, New Historicism, sociology, or cultural anthropology? When students ask me how to use an archive, I can, in many ways, only offer a personal response, based on methods and approaches I have developed

1 Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher, fifth edition* (Thomson Learning: US, 1992).

2 Barbara W. Tuchman, *Practicing History: Selected Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 77-78.

over the years. I can offer them educated guesses as to what certain archives may contain, or help them to interpret the data they uncover. Yet ultimately, I send them on their research quests alone, with the hope that their digging in the "Great Hole of History," as Suzan-Lori Parks calls it, will yield buried treasure that our lessons in historiography will have taught them to recognize.

I have a colleague at a university in Pennsylvania who refers to the process of archival research as "dumpster diving"-- partly in jest at adults who spend their lives sifting through the scraps and detritus of centuries, but partly in earnest to describe that one potentially thrilling discovery that awaits the scholar at the bottom of a pile of otherwise seemingly unpromising material. His is a phrase I have often thought back to throughout my own research, since much of what I do in the archive involves sorting data that, on the surface, bears little relation to my area of study: American Theatre history. I remember one afternoon in particular, sitting in the archives of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association (a workingmen's guild from the eighteenth century), with a box of tiny scraps of paper -- two hundred year old receipts for membership dues.[3] I remember thinking, "What can this *possibly* have to do with the history of the eighteenth-century Boston theatre that I am trying to tell?" Yet as I sorted through the tiny scraps -- many only an inch or two wide, and most with only a name and an amount written on them -- I began to see a pattern of names, a pattern of payments, and a pattern of association that helped me to understand how and why this group had functioned, and which gave me the clues I needed to connect their randomly assorted box of membership dues to the creation of Boston's first working-class theatre in the late 1790s.

Yet as much as I enjoy all that is picturesque in the phrase "dumpster-diving," it has a random and haphazard sound, which implies that the researcher will stumble upon an object of value merely by chance. It ignores the larger questions the scholar faces: How does he or she pick the *right* dumpster for investigation; and perhaps more importantly, how does he or she learn to recognize treasures from trash?

In his essay, "Cultural Systems and the Nation-State: Paradigms for Writing National Theatre History," Bruce McConachie offers three different historiographical

3 I am grateful to the Archives of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association in Quincy, Massachusetts for allowing me access to their records.

lenses through which to read the story of a nineteenth-century American playwright and performer, John Howard Payne. Payne, one of the country's first native-born stars, gained fame in America as a juvenile performer, then left the United States in 1812 for a long and successful stint in the British theatre before returning to his homeland in 1832. During his time in England he established a formidable reputation, and his fellow countrymen were eager to claim him as one of their own. Yet, as McConachie notes, Payne's homecoming was not as triumphant as it first appears. His audiences and patrons expected gratitude for their support, and they also expected him to espouse a rhetoric of patriotism and patriarchy that he felt reluctant to do after almost twenty years of independence in the British theatre.[4]

McConachie uses the story of Payne's return to America as a case study for applying three distinct historiographical methods: progressivism, neo-Marxism, and new historicism. For McConachie, the "treasure" in this particular dumpster is a story that will allow him to explore the process of cultural formation in the nation-state, and a tale that provides the raw material for the scholar to shape as he sees fit. Though he crafts three separate interpretations in the article, McConachie carefully notes the seductive traps such narrative histories can offer the scholar -- cautioning the researcher against Hayden White's assertion that all historical writing falls into familiar and basic story-telling frameworks of heroes and villains, triumphs and tragedies. As White asserts, "When we seek to make sense of such problematical topics as human nature, culture, society, and history... our discourse always tends to slip away from our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them."[5] In a recent paper, given at the 2003 conference of the American Society for Theatre Research, McConachie reiterated the caveat that historians must bear in mind: A good history may or may not make a good "story."[6]

While McConachie's study offers a fascinating glimpse into how narrative

4 Bruce McConachie, "Cultural Systems and the Nation-State: Paradigms for Writing National Theatre History," *New England Theatre Journal*, volume 8, 1997, 29-44.

5 Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 1.

6 Bruce McConachie, "Two Cheers for Narrative," unpublished paper presented at to the American Society for Theatre Research, 2003. I am grateful to Professor McConachie for supplying me with a copy of the paper.

paradigms structure the meaning of history, and while I have used his article on "Cultural Systems" as the foundation for many of the lessons I teach in my graduate seminar on historiography, it begins at what I might call the "opposite end" of the historiographical process. In other words, McConachie's "Cultural Systems" shows in many ways, the flexibility of history. In this paper I argue for the flexibility of the *historian*.

In this essay, I use my work on the early national drama to explore the development of a historiographical approach. I begin in the archive -- before a "story" even exists. In some ways, my approach echoes Robert Hume in his *Reconstructing Contexts*, when he argues for the practice of "archaeo-historicism," or what he describes as the "reconstruction of events from primary materials."[7] It also contains elements of the *Annales* school in their drive to re-create the *mentalité* of the cultures they studied. Of course, the hunger to know how a particular people thought or why they behaved as they did, drives every historian, perhaps especially theatre historians, already immersed in the language of dramatic narrative and motivation. Yet, as scholars like Tom Postlewait have noted, such an approach, especially one so tied to the "rules" of evidence, may ultimately limit the historian, reducing his or her role to that of a detective seeking to reconstruct a crime, than a historian trying to *interpret* events.[8] American historian John L. Brooke once observed that, "Interpretation is exaggeration that someone will buy." His statement resonates in my head as I weave my way through the archive, and it serves as the litmus test for the way I gather evidence, interpret, and "exaggerate" my findings into a story. His motto reminds me to constantly check the gap between the story I would *like* to tell because it is entertaining or sensational or even convenient, and the story that I can *reasonably* argue. Finding that balance point between the role of detective gathering factual data and storyteller weaving drama proves a constant challenge. As White notes, "A historical narrative is... a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events... at once a representation that is an

7 Robert D. Hume, *Reconstructing Contexts: The Aims and Principles of Archeo-Historicism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 10. Thomas Postlewait offers a brilliant analysis of Hume's work (both its successes and weaknesses) in his recent essay, "Writing History Today," in the November 2000 issue of *Theatre Survey.*

8 Thomas Postlewait, "Writing History Today," *Theatre Survey* 41:2, 2000, 83-106.

interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative."[9] I struggle with interpretation, but always I turn back to the *archive* to keep me honest.

The archive leads me to my discoveries and also to methods of research, interpretation, and framing which I might otherwise never have considered. Moreover, the archive *demands* that I acquire expertise in a range of fields that will let me tell the story in its fullest and most persuasive way. I should pause to note at this point that I do *not* advocate a positivist perspective which promises "one" truth waiting to be uncovered in the archives or only one "right" way to tell a story. Nor do I follow a progressive (or even neo-progressive) model of historical narrative, with its inevitable march from ignorance towards enlightenment. Too many of our early theatre histories and national histories suffer from these approaches, and scholars have labored assiduously over the last fifty years or more to re-invent and challenge our accepted historical "truths."

Instead, I agree with McConachie and Hume that a *combination* of dynamic narrative paradigms produces the best and most balanced histories. Or, as Christopher Balme commented in a recent article on the development of theatre historiography: "Theatre historiography is no longer able to resist engagement with fundamental and increasingly complex methodological debates...the result has been to open up theatre historiography to other approaches..."[10] In this paper, I argue for an approach to research in which the historian shapes the story from within the archive -- an intrinsic or "organic" application of historiography, rather than an extrinsic one.

I began my research on the early American theatre some years ago with the story of the first Boston theatres founded in the 1790s. Conventional histories of the early American theatre offer a fairly simplistic rendering of our first playhouses. They contend that the American theatre faced strong opposition after the American Revolution -- an opposition attributed to the residual "Puritanism" in our culture. Yet somehow theatres opened in spite of this opposition. Early American dramas

9 White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 51.

10 Christopher Balme, "Cultural Anthropology and Theatre Historiography: Notes on a Methodological Rapprochement," *Theatre Survey*, 35:1, 1994, 33.

enjoyed only very minor success, and the only one worth studying is Royall Tyler's play entitled *The Contrast* (1787), often described as the first "American" play. Our theatre only became "good" or "interesting" in the 1820s, with the advent of the first great American star, Edwin Forrest, a larger-than-life, macho man, whose working class appeal paralleled the national mood of Jacksonian democracy. Thus traditional theatre histories give short shrift to this early national period, dismissing it as uninteresting and largely unknowable, since the actors and theatre managers of the period left relatively perfunctory records that erase any history of struggle and any nuance of interpretation.

Not surprisingly, such a narrative presents numerous problems to the contemporary historian. I will offer two examples: first, the use of the term "Puritanism," as a broadly applied label for explaining religious intolerance for the theatre. "Puritanism" as a faith had largely disappeared by the mid-eighteenth century, elbowed aside by successive waves of new, non-Puritan immigrants, rapid economic and geographic expansion, and by the turmoil of the "Great Awakening" -- an evangelical movement that swept the nation in the early 1700s and successfully challenged the basic premises of the Puritan faith. Moreover, the Puritan tradition existed in only one, relatively small portion of the colonies (the northeast). A wide range of other faiths predominated in colonies like Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina. Thus, for the theatre historian investigating *post*-Revolutionary opposition to the theatre, "Puritanism" has little to offer as a viable rationale for ongoing antitheatricalism. A second example lies in the mystery that surrounds the theatres' origins. For instance, the Park Theatre in New York had over 130 founders -- yet only a dozen names linger in the historical record, leaving the identities and motives of the remaining hundred or so unknown. Without these names, how could an historian hope to offer a complete or *complex* story of the playhouse?

Yet despite these mistakes and gaps, scholars of early American history and American literature have imbibed this limited narrative, and often discounting the early national period as a time of limited cultural development, or ignorant prejudice against the "evils" of the theatre. Only in the past few decades have scholars including Tice Miller, Don Wilmeth, Jeffrey Mason, Gary Jay Williams, and Bruce McConachie (to name a few), begun re-thinking our approach to the early American

theatre and paving the way for future theatre historians to reinterpret our nation's earliest dramatic efforts. Yet even their outstanding work makes its way only very slowly to a wider audience. I had dinner with a prominent American historian a few months ago, and when I mentioned I was a scholar of the early American theatre he looked shocked. His comment, "Did they *have* plays after the Revolution?" suggests how far we have to go in terms of bringing our new histories to those who most need them. Without the complicated, archivally based histories we can tell -- without an antidote to the traditional narratives that continue to mire our field, those charged with bringing our national histories to life will continue to churn out myths and misconceptions. To give a contemporary example -- I would suggest that to read and study the early national period without a knowledge of the social, political, and economic context would be like trying to teach Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* without mentioning the McCarthy hearings or the Cold War.

The list of myths, mistakes, and assumptions goes on, but I mention these as examples of the kind of challenges I faced first entering the archive. Did I look for material that supported the traditional story as it had been told for two centuries? If so, what could I possibly hope to add as a scholar? If not, where did I begin to look for a new story and how could I tell it? Where could I cull research methods and historiographical approaches that would create a *complex* new history?

The best research advice I received on the verge of my first foray into the archives came from historian John Brooke, who recommended that I "look for the names," and follow the links and patterns that they created. Those links, he argued, would lead me to my story. On his advice, I sat in the archives at the Massachusetts Historical Society and Harvard University, and compiled a list (that ultimately totaled over 400), using newspaper articles from the 1790s which described the political debate over the early Boston theatre and offered dozens of names of pro-theatre supporters.

Theatrical entertainments had been outlawed in Massachusetts before the Revolution and the law remained on the books in the years after the war. Reading the papers, I found the same group of men mentioned repeatedly presenting petitions for the repeal of anti-theatre law. Those names provided some sense of the "players" in the game and it made the process more personal. But merely knowing

the names would serve little purpose, unless I could connect those men to the "bigger picture" in Boston's post-war society. And so, I progressed from reading only the articles related to the theatre, to reading the entire newspapers (and at this point, I can honestly say that I have read every newspaper published in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia between 1790 and 1800!). Once I started to read the other stories printed in the papers, I saw a pattern emerge. Every time the same group of men proposed repealing the law against the theatre, they also proposed the creation of something known as the Boston Tontine Association. A tontine is a kind of life insurance company in which each participant buys shares, and the person who dies *last* collects the most money. In the interim, however, the shareholders invest their collected funds in whatever ventures strike their fancy. That the founders of the Boston theatre should interest themselves in a life-insurance company seemed interesting, but not necessarily relevant to the creation of the playhouse. However, the *vehement* opposition that the Tontine encountered – an opposition inextricably linked to the theatre – did strike me as highly suspect.

I needed *more* names -- this time, not of supporters of the theatre, but of its arch-enemies. So, I traveled into the bowels of the Massachusetts State House archives to the original voting records from the 1790s. Truly, one of the filthiest archives I have ever entered, with ancient librarians smoking in the hallways (without thought to the terrible danger to the 250 year old brittle documents only ten yards away) -- in this dusty basement I found a treasure trove of names. I found the "roll call" votes taken on both the theatre and the Tontine, as well as records of the debates waged about each. But what to do with these hundreds of names? My theatre history background had provided little experience in unraveling larger political or economic issues. The debates about the Tontine demonstrated the widespread fear that the Tontine's founders would amass unlimited wealth and control in the state, and that they would use that wealth for *private* rather than *public* good (a serious issue in the post-Revolutionary climate). The Tontine's opponents linked that fear of private indulgence to the extravagance and dissipation of play going. The more I studied the data I had gathered from the archives, the more I realized I needed the tools of an economic analyst to understand the forces shaping the new nation. Once again, for me, the archive *led* me to the historiographical

method I needed to decipher and interpret the data. It was certainly tempting to dismiss the reams of account books and petitions of incorporation as tangential to my research -- yet the *archive* had demonstrated a link between my theatre founders and their financial power, and to have ignored the link would have been to confine or reduce the scope of the history I could tell.

As economic historian Naomi Lamoreaux has noted, the 1960s witnessed a dramatic transformation in the application of social science methods to the field of American history; in particular, the increased interest in applying tools of economic analysis to data previously regarded as "irrelevant" or "dry."[11] As narrative paradigms shifted from political histories and "Great Man" theories, American historians realized that tax records or land deeds could yield valuable information about those "ordinary" men and women of history who had not left extensive personal records. For example, the tax records of 1790 Massachusetts (the period I study) reveal not only income, but occupation and square footage of property owned – sometimes even details such as the number of *windows* in a house (a luxury in the eighteenth-century), or whose property the house abutted. Such data allows the historian to map entire neighborhoods and to trace the rise and fall, not only of individuals, but of entire sections of a society. Yet as Lamoreaux notes, despite the increased interest in the field over the past forty years, too few historians receive rigorous training in economic history, and so for many it remains an afterthought in their investigations. Yet it became one of the cornerstones of my study, as in each case, I unraveled my history by "following the money." Indeed, the questions Lamoreaux outlines as central to the "new" economic history form the basis for many of my ongoing investigations: How do those individuals who *create* an economic system know what they think they know, and how does what they think they know affect their behavior?[12] For Lamoreaux, the new economic historian probes questions of *mentalité* as much as tax records and market shares.

Both Lamoreaux's work on the development of the early national economy and

11 Naomi R. Lamoreaux, "Economic History and the Cliometric Revolution," in Anthony Mohlo and Gordon Wood, eds., *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 58.

12 Lamoreaux, "Economic History," 76. According to Lamoreaux, the new economic history emphasizes cultural history and the humanities, rather than the social sciences.

fellow Americanist Tamara Thornton's writings on the creation of a post-war economic elite helped to shape my understanding of the development of the post-Revolutionary economy.[13] In the wake of the Revolution, control of the nation's economy lay vulnerable to those men clever and quick enough to seize authority. Without a stable currency or even ideological framework to guide them, citizens found themselves at the mercy of wealthy urban merchants, who offered them cash for their government-issued banknotes. Those merchants bought the notes at less than face-value from the consumer, trading them in to the government for their full price. Hard hit by the privations of the war, the wholesale destruction of cities like New York and Boston (occupied throughout the war years), and by almost ten years of disrupted trade, the nation's working and agrarian population found themselves deeply resentful of those men for whom the war had meant financial *gain*. Perhaps not surprisingly, these men violently opposed any financial schemes that would put *additional* funds into the hands of those they increasingly perceived as their enemies. The Boston Tontine Association raised over two million dollars – funds they proposed to manipulate for private initiatives from new elite neighborhoods to playhouses. Small wonder that *any* of their sponsored activities, from theatres to real estate development – should conjure such an animus in their less wealthy neighbors.

As one of the final pieces of this puzzle, I created a map showing every county in the state of Massachusetts, and tracking (through their recorded votes in the House and Senate) their support or opposition for the theatre and the Tontine. I found the most concentrated support in the urban centers (the ones my men largely controlled), and found the greatest opposition in the western part of the state – the areas most upset by the imposition of new government taxes, and the site of one of the most notorious post-war uprisings: Shays' Rebellion (an anti-tax armed revolt that threatened to erupt into a class war). I left theatre history far behind as I traced my way through the acts passed by the Common Court of Massachusetts, granting the right to various manufacturing monopolies to the Tontiners. I followed the financial fruits of these monopolies through the business archives at Harvard's Baker Business

13 Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life Among the Boston Elite, 1785-1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

library, pouring over seemingly endless records of personal and business accounts. Ultimately, I found that the poor farmers and laborers of the state had every reason to oppose any initiative the Tontiners suggested – their financial records demonstrated just how powerful they had become. But this search failed to explain two things: Why some of the *richest* men in the state (including the Governor) opposed the Theatre and the Tontine, and how the theatre ever opened in spite of such overwhelming opposition.

My first foray into the archive had led me to the complicated economic history of monopolies and private companies. I next turned my attention to the history of early national *banks*. When the Tontine failed to achieve official sanction, its owners cleverly re-organized as the "Union Bank," submitting a proposal with the same list of founders and the same starting capital, but with one significant difference: the promise to loan part of that capital to the state! Though this promise secured them the permission to open their bank, it also stirred the ire of an entirely different and infinitely more dangerous group of men: the owners of the Bank of Massachusetts, an organization which represented some of the wealthiest and most powerful figures in the country.

Thus, I began to see a group emerging, *not* as I had thought, at the top of the social structure, but somewhere in between the working classes and the vestiges of the pre-Revolutionary wealthy regime. Finally, I understood why the Tontiners placed so much importance on the theatre. As "new men" in the post-war society, they struggled to make a place for themselves, financially, politically, and socially. When they could not penetrate or insinuate themselves into the centers of power and authority they aspired to (the Bank of Massachusetts, and some of the elite social clubs its members sponsored), they decided instead to establish their own alternate sites of power and authority. I would never have imagined that a struggle over banks and life insurance companies could have anything to do with the theatre, and indeed, at times I wondered if I had forged the connection in my own mind, based on wishful thinking and creative interpretation of the archival data. Yet one miraculous day a colleague studying early American newspaper editors asked me if I had seen a short-lived, obscure Boston paper called *The Argus*. I said I had not yet read it, and he replied, "Well, you might want to look at it -- the editor talks about the theatre and

the Tontine." I flew to the archive, and there, in a scathing editorial from 1793 was my smoking gun -- an outraged editor demanding, "Why do our Tontine Gentry want a theatre?" This was, quite literally, the first time that I had ever read anything from the period that confirmed the *explicit* connection between the Tontine and the playhouse and which demonstrated that it had been recognized at the time. Had I found that article on the very first day of my research, who can say how my history might have turned out? I believe that the archive ultimately led me to create a much more complicated method and approach than I might otherwise have taken, and so, in many ways, equipped me to *recognize* the final "proof" when I found it.

The convoluted economic history of the Boston Tontine Association led me to the work of sociologist Edward Shils, and of political historian Ronald Formisano.[14] Shils theorizes that cultures organize themselves in patterns of "center" and "periphery," in other words, that groups in central positions of power assume control of the signs, symbols, and rituals that represent their authority. The groups on the periphery do one of two things: struggle to gain access to the same symbols and rituals guarded by the center, *or* re-imagine their *own* rituals and try to reconfigure the society around *them*. Within the last fifteen years, an increasing number of American historians have used this interpretive framework to explain the ritual celebrations of the Revolution and the power struggles that often surrounded them. Ann Fairfax Withington has studied the connection between ancient British carnival celebrations and the Boston Tea Party, while Simon Newman and David Waldstreicher have investigated the ceremonies of "Liberty Trees," symbolic executions, etc.[15]

Formisano argues that in the wake of the Revolution, a hodge-podge of factions struggled for what he terms possession of the "Revolutionary Center" – in other

14 Edward Shils, *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) and Ronald Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790-1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

15 Ann Fairfax Withington, *Toward a More Perfect Union: Virtue and the Formation of American Republics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Simon Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

words, they debated who had the greatest claims to legitimacy and power based on their involvement in the war effort. Those who could successfully lay claim to the ideals and goals of the Revolution would be in the best position to control the political development of the new nation. This approach which combines sociology with cultural anthropology and political analysis helped explain the dynamic of the post-war struggle in Boston's economy and government, and ultimately, in Boston's theatre.

In the winter of 1792, despite repeated refusals on the part of the government to repeal the state's anti-theatrical laws (or to officially recognize the Tontine), a group of my "new men" converted one of their empty properties into a makeshift theatre, securing professional actors, and advertising their entertainments in the local newspapers. In so doing, they threw down the gauntlet to their opponents.

Then, on a winter night in December of 1792, the government took up the challenge. Governor John Hancock, furious that his orders to close the theatre had gone ignored, sent the Sheriff to close the playhouse. The outraged spectators *rioted*, and in the process, tore down the governor's coat of arms from one of the theatre boxes, and trampled them. Every account of the incident, whether in the newspaper or in private letters or in the court records, mentioned the destruction of the governor's coat of arms. None of the accounts mentioned a *political* or *economic* motive, yet it held a deep significance for every witness or chronicler of the theatre's history as a "turning point" in the battle between Boston's pro- and anti-theatre forces. Indeed, after the governor's one unsuccessful effort to close the playhouse, he never tried again, even though the law remained on the books for the next four years.

The coat of arms incident inspired me to don yet another historiographical guise to understand how such a seemingly trivial event could convey so much to its audience. Cultural historian Robert Darnton has suggested that the common man thinks not in "logical propositions," but with "things," in other words, he argues, men will negotiate the power struggles of their world with "anything that their culture makes available to them, such as stories or ceremonies."[16] He also suggests that

16 Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Random House, 1985), 4.

historians begin their research at the place in the story where they *don't* get the joke, contending, "When we cannot get a parable, a joke, a ritual, or a poem, we know it means something."[17] As his most vivid example, Darnton offers the story of the "Great Cat Massacre," a seemingly inexplicable mass killing of cats by a group of teenage apprentices in mid-eighteenth century France. As Darnton notes, the massacre stood out to all those involved as the comic highlight of their lives – a tale they continued to enjoy some twenty years after the fact. To the modern reader, it seems merely a grotesque and inexplicable episode. Yet by picking at the layers of the historical record, by tracing everything from the centuries-old European tradition of killing cats for sport, to the socio-economic status of young male apprentices in eighteenth-century Parisian households, Darnton offers an interpretation of the events that synthesizes the archival evidence into a story that recaptures not only the how, but (plausibly) the *why* of the event. Thus he transforms an unappealing anecdote into a complex history of French labor conflict.

My effort to understand the significance of the Boston theatre riot, and especially the destruction of Hancock's coat of arms (an outstanding example of Darnton's "thinking with things") led me on a similar journey into the cultural history of Hancock's status within the community, his personal history with the theatre's founders; the post-war understanding of privilege (including coats of arms); the wartime legacy of symbolic demonstration, from the hanging of figures in effigy to the planting of liberty trees. These investigations helped me frame a cultural context in which the destruction of Hancock's arms made sense as a pivotal moment in the history of the early American theatre, and it became, in my interpretation, the point at which the *audience* assumed control of the playhouse, declaring their independence from both their leaders in the government, and (although the theatre's founders did not realize this for some years to come) the very men who sought to oversee the cultural formation of the new nation. The trampling of Hancock's arms reconstructed the audience's relationship with the theatre, casting them as an imagined community in the playhouse – one willing to seize the authority as they saw fit.

17 Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, 5.

Up to this point, I have worn – or perhaps more accurately, "borrowed" – many hats, from economic to cultural to political historian. I have two more to try on: labor history and new historicism. The first I have worn with enthusiasm and the latter I continue to find an awkward fit.

One of the most blatant mistakes in the "standard" histories of American theatre attributes the post-war schism in the playhouse to political squabbling between the Federalist and the Republican parties.[18] While political debates did indeed contribute to dissension in the playhouse, that explanation overlooks more fundamental *class* differences as the basis of the rupture. In part, as American historian Daniel Rogers has noted, scholars under the thrall of American "exceptionalism" have elided class differences in the early national period -- preferring to attribute conflict to the more "romantic" (and certainly more intellectually appealing) problem of the young nation struggling to resolve its idealistic vision of a perfect Republic.[19]

Yet as labor historians Sean Wilentz, Billy Smith, and Gary Kornblith have noted, class lay at the foundation of both the major political *and* cultural conflicts of the late eighteenth-century. Wilentz, Smith, and Kornblith all argue that the American working class consciousness developed several decades earlier than many twentieth-century historians had believed, and they have offered persuasive arguments for re-thinking our understanding of early national labor relations.[20] The theatre proved no exception to the showdown between the elite and working classes.

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18 I suggest that two recent essays on the early national theatre mistakenly attribute the ongoing disputes in the Boston playhouse to party politics, rather than to class conflict, overlooking the evidence that *neither* Boston theatre boasted audiences loyal to one particular party. See Steve Wilmer, "Partisan Theatre in the Early Years of the United States," *Theatre Survey*, 40:2 (1999): 1-26; and Ginger Strand, "The Theatre and the Republic: Defining Party on Boston's Early Stages," in Jeffrey H. Mason and J. Ellen Gainor, eds., *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

19 Daniel T. Rogers, "Exceptionalism," in *Imagined Histories*, 21-40.

20 Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 26 (1984): 1-24; Billy Smith, *The Lower Sort: Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Gary J. Kornblith, "Artisan Federalism: New England Mechanics and the Political Economy of the 1790s," in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Launching the Extended Republic: The Federalist Era* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

Whether it was the wife of the richest man in the country barring the town's smaller merchants and working class population from attending her city-wide costume ball, to the effort of a small group of working class Bostonians to form their own miniature version of the Tontine association, class negotiations lay at the root of almost every transaction that surrounded the playhouse. Poorer citizens complained that they could not afford the good seats that wealthy patrons appropriated, and wondered why, in a "democracy" citizens should still separate on the basis of class. Boston working-men sought the backing of the Tontiners for their own fledgling financial ventures, and when they failed to receive it, withdrew their support from the Tontiners' elite playhouse and built their own. In Philadelphia, a *hairdresser*, frustrated with British plays that only showed the shenanigans of the upper classes, wrote his own plays in protest -- plays that vaunted the virtues of the American working man. Yet these working men left little record of themselves, and reconstructing their lives, connections, and motives proved the most challenging and rewarding part of my research.

In my efforts to recover the history of Boston's working class theatre, I began with a record of the deed for the Haymarket Theatre found in the Massachusetts Historical Society – a deed which listed some eighty names, as well as occupations from housewright to bricklayer to milliner. Armed with my list, I searched for these men in the state tax records, the records of the Common Court, lists of wills, etc. I compiled lists of bricklayers, hairdressers, and carpenters, looking at their income and the neighborhoods in which they clustered. I also found them in a network of charitable organizations which paralleled those of their elite counterparts. The wealthiest men in Boston belonged to an exclusive fraternity of former army officers. Their *less* wealthy fellow citizens created their own military companies, with separate qualifications for membership and their own private rituals. Tired of standing on the periphery of Boston society, they created a new center, including the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association (the workingmen's guild I mentioned at the beginning of this paper), and a playhouse for celebrating their newfound class unity. Alas for them, they lacked sufficient financial resources to sustain their new venture (tax records show an average income for a successful bricklayer or housewright might hover around $200 per year, while the income for

the Boston Tontine members averaged at $15,000-$17,000). Their playhouse failed within three years, however, as letters and records in the Boston Public Library Archives attest, its brief history persuaded the supporters of the early national drama that the theatre should strive to create a "democracy of glee," – rather than a class-based cultural weapon. Theatre manager, playwright, and historian William Dunlap – a witness to the ongoing turmoil within the playhouse went so far as to describe the theatre as a "powerful engine" for the transformation of the new nation.[21]

While the new playhouses of the early Republic transformed the urban landscape in very visible ways, their impact on the ideological landscape remains harder to trace. The theatres' supporters had claimed that the drama would "polish the manners and habits of society," yet accounts of theatre riots in which audiences threw rotting fruit and broken glass at orchestras who refused to play their favorite tunes, hardly suggest an environment conducive to the fostering of correct social etiquette.[22] The theatres' founders claimed that moral dramas would instruct playgoers on how to be good citizens, yet the most popular plays of the day offered little in the way of guidance and instruction. How then, can a theatre historian in the early American archive trace the impact of play texts on the cultural formation of the new nation in a way that moves beyond the traditional histories of exceptionalism and progressivism? Perhaps of all the historiographical methods I have pursued, I find myself least comfortable in applying New Historicist methods to my research. While connecting the interpretive problems in a text to broader cultural/historical concerns outside the theatre offers seductive storytelling possibilities, too often I have found that those connections remain tenuous at best and misleading at worst.[23] For example, I mentioned Royall Tyler's 1787 play, *The Contrast* widely hailed as the "first" American play. More print has been devoted to analysis of *The Contrast*

21 William Dunlap, *History of the American Theatre* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1963), vol. I, 133.

22 Heather S. Nathans, *Early American Theatre From the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 60.

23 For an intriguing discussion of both the promise and pitfalls of new historicism, see Brook Thomas, ed., *New Historicism and Other Old Fashioned Topics* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1991).

in journals ranging from *Theatre Survey* to *The Journal of American Drama and Theater* to *Early American Literature* than probably the rest of the early national canon combined. Yet the play received only *four* public performances in *seven* years after the opening of the Philadelphia theatre (and not many more in any other early urban center). Given the capacities of the early national playhouse, that suggests a total audience of no more than three thousand people seeing the play in Philadelphia in the period between the end of the Revolution and the election of Thomas Jefferson. Even Royall Tyler's brother, who assumed the manager's post at the Boston theatre in 1794, did not stage his sibling's dramatic works! How then, can a theatre historian, faced with endless paeans of praise to this fledgling dramatic effort reconcile the interpretation (or perhaps wishful thinking) of scholars with the complete *dearth* of evidence in the archive? The story of the "first" American play has achieved legendary status because we need myths and we need "firsts" in our histories. As we struggle to answer the question, "where did we come from," it is comforting to have one simple answer. These myths ultimately overshadow both archival evidence and complexity of interpretation, and it is up to the contemporary historian to dispel them.

John Brooke's essay, "Reason and Passion in the Public Sphere: Habermas and the Cultural Historians" may offer a solution to those investigators wary of falling into the sometimes too reductive approach of New Historicism. Brooke suggests focusing on the "problem of the public" and how "literature, associations, newspapers, material symbols, parades or festivals – comprising aspects of the public sphere and civil society – forged links between experience and polity."[24] For the historian of the early national theatre, the "problem of the public" remains acute. While half the audience clamored for popular British comedies, another portion demanded republican tragedies or songs in support of the French Revolution. Thus I would suggest that no *one* text holds the interpretive key to unlocking the cultural work of the early American dramatic narrative, but rather that the conversation *among* the works offers one way into re-imagining the *mentalité* of the eighteenth-century American audience. Again, for me, the archives pointed the way to this

24 John L. Brooke, "Reason and Passion in the Public Sphere: Habermas and the Cultural Historians," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 24:1 (1998), 44-45.

more complex conversation in the form of a collection of promptbooks from Philadelphia's Chestnut Street Theatre, housed at the Library Company of Philadelphia. The manager of the theatre, Thomas Wignell, had not only excised those sentiments he thought would be offensive to Americans in British scripts, he and his stage managers had scribbled commentary on the probable response of audience, orchestra, and performers. Where I had found myself reluctant to trust the *text* in framing my interpretation, I turned eagerly to the marginalia that decorated it as a kind of layered commentary on the social, political, and cultural significance of the work. Wignell's comments sensitized me to nuances in the text that I would not otherwise have paid attention to.

I have seldom had the privilege, the pleasure, or the *leisure* to reflect back on my work in the archive and to think about *how* I framed and found it, rather than *what* I found. As I have tried to suggest in this essay, I find my greatest success as a scholar and researcher when I allow the archive to lead the way. I have tried to teach my students that the puzzles in the archive are their greatest friend -- that they should mistrust any history too pat and neat. That I *want* them to find the evidence that doesn't seem to fit, since it is in that very complexity that they will find the richest stories. For myself, I have learned to accept the initial discomfort, the sense of disorientation I experience when confronting a set of historical data with absolutely *no idea* of how to interpret it. And so I continue to dive joyously into dumpster after dumpster, content to get muddy and dirty in the process, and always on the lookout for treasure.