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Barbara Franco
Executive Director
Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
State Museum Building
300 North Street
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Director Franco:

It has come to our attention that a recommendation has been made to the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission to close the Joseph Priestley House in Northumberland, Pennsylvania.

We, the undersigned, Nobel Laureates in Chemistry and ACS Priestley Medalists, urge you to keep the Priestley House open and operating. Joseph Priestley is a cornerstone of the chemical profession, and through his settling in Pennsylvania, an emblem of the enrichment of America by its immigrants. The American Chemical Society (ACS) named its most prestigious award after him – the Priestley Medal. His house in Northumberland was designated a National Historic Chemical Landmark by the ACS in 1994, and as you know the house is also a National Historic Landmark.

There were many parts to Joseph Priestley: scientist, theologian, educator and political theorist. Above all, Priestley was a natural philosopher who recognized no boundaries to knowledge. If Priestley's fame rested only on the discovery of oxygen – the most elemental of the elements – it would be enormous. But Priestley also invented soda water and wrote extensively on optics and electricity (it was his history of electricity that popularized the image of Benjamin Franklin flying a kite during an electrical storm). His most productive years as a scientific researcher spanned a decade during the 1760s and 1770s, but he never forswore the laboratory, continuing his experiments during the last decade of his life in Northumberland, where he isolated carbon monoxide.

Priestley chose Northumberland because he wanted "more leisure" to pursue his scientific experiments and to write about theology and politics. In Northumberland Priestley, a founder of the Unitarian Church, wrote some of his most important theological works, including the last four volumes of the *General History of the Christian*

Church, Notes on all the Books of Scriptures, Index to the Bible, and many others. Rural Pennsylvania offered him what he wanted most: "I only wish to be quiet, and pursue my studies without interruption, with the few advantages that I can expect in this country."

In the 18th century, Priestley enjoyed fame in some quarters and notoriety in others for his support of the American and French Revolutions and nonconformist and dissenting religious opinions. Politics always interested him, and though he tried to stay neutral in the emerging political battles of the 1790s in his new home, inevitably he could not remain above the fray. He corresponded at length with Adams and Jefferson; friends with both at first, his liberal political views led him eventually to become a Jeffersonian.

Priestley stands as a giant in the history of science; his home in Northumberland demonstrates that stature as well as reflecting his importance in early American History. As Edgar Fahs Smith – an historian of chemistry and professor at the University of Pennsylvania – suggested in 1920, the Joseph Priestley House has become "a Mecca for all who would look back to the beginnings of chemical research" in America.

We urge you to keep this valuable scientific historical landmark open and operating and not let it fall into a state of abandonment and disrepair.

Sincerely yours,



Roald Hoffmann, Nobel '81, Priestley '90

Cosigners:

Allen Bard, Priestley '02
Carl Djerassi, Priestley '92
Darleane C. Hoffman, Priestley '00
Dudley R. Hershbach, Nobel '86
Gabor A. Somorjai, Priestley '08
George A. Olah, Nobel '94, Priestley '05
George M. Whitesides, Priestley '07
Harry B. Gray, Priestley '91
Herbert A. Hauptman, Nobel '85
John D. Roberts, Priestley '87
Martin Chalfie, Nobel '08
Paul Berg, Nobel '80
Robert F. Curl, Jr., Nobel '96
Roger Kornberg, Nobel '06
Ronald Breslow, Priestley '99
Sidney Altman, Nobel '89
Walter Kohn, Nobel '98