

# PRIESTLEY RECOLLECTIONS OF A 1983 PHMC INTERN

In January 1983, I had an incredible opportunity to complete my education at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown by working as a full-time intern with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC). Mr. Michael Ripton, Director of the Bureau of Historic Sites, had agreed to my internship and assigned me to work in an office on the fifth floor of the William Penn Memorial Museum. On the first day of my internship, I was assigned to the project that would commemorate the 250th anniversary of Joseph Priestley's birth in 1733.

Marianne Bez, the administrator at Pottsgrove Manor, had been assigned to coordinate the Priestley project. Frank Demma, at Daniel Boone Homestead, served as the exhibit designer for the project. Tom Lehman, at the Priestley House, played an important role in the development and installation of the exhibit and other components of the project. Michael Ripton provided project oversight and leadership.

As an intern working full-time on the project I was assigned many tasks. These included conducting research on Priestley, searching for artifacts at regional and national museums and private collections, acquiring loans for the 250th anniversary exhibition, and coordinating an exhibit of modern equipment and products that were based on Priestley's experiments. A few of my most interesting recollections included travelling to the Library of Congress to do research, making several trips to New York City to procure loans for the exhibit, and finding original paintings of Mary and Joseph Priestley in a private collection that were also loaned for the exhibit.

The 250th Anniversary of Joseph Priestley's birth was celebrated in many ways in Northumberland and the region. A commemorative exhibit was installed at the Joseph Priestley House. Priestley's laboratory was refurbished based upon project research. The United States Postal Service unveiled a new Joseph Priestley postage stamp and held the first day cancellation ceremony at the Priestley House. A symposium that honored Priestley was also held that year at Bucknell University sponsored by the American Chemical Society.

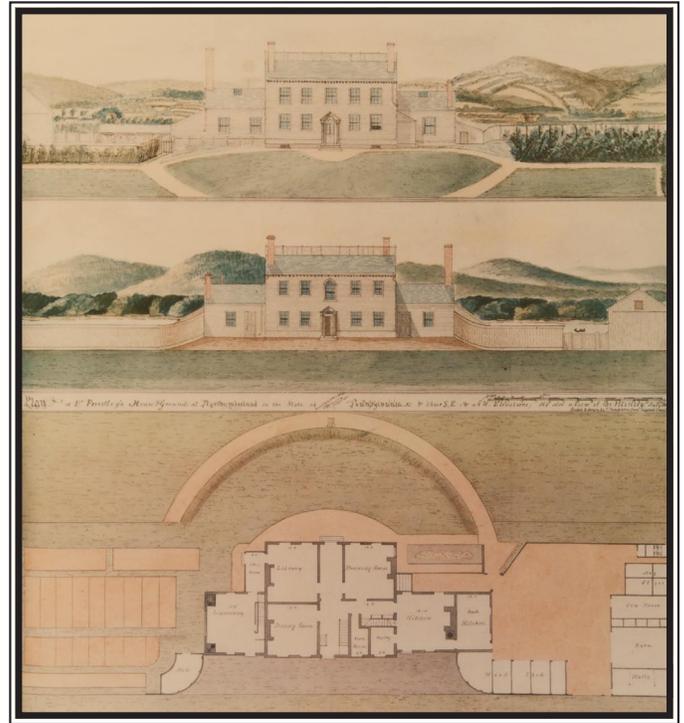
With the opening of the exhibit and completion of the other components, I was assigned other duties at the Bureau of Historic Sites. However, I was encouraged to continue research on Priestley. In the early summer of 1983, Michael Ripton and Marianne Bez began discussing the possibility of going to England to continue the Priestley research. When I was offered the opportunity to go along, I jumped at the chance. The trip was scheduled for early August.

During the week-long trip we spent part of the time in London and the rest of the time in the Bath and Calne region. The London component of the trip included conducting research at the Royal Society of London. This proved to be the most exciting part of the journey. While reviewing files with Marianne Bez, I came across a drawing/map of the Joseph Priestley home in Northumberland. The Sambourne drawing showed the house, barn, and outbuildings. It also showed an X in one of the rooms on the first floor and stated that this was where Joseph died. This drawing was later used by the PHMC to conduct archaeological investigations of the property and further develop the historic site.

While in London we also visited the Victoria and Albert Museum where we viewed an exhibit that included information on Priestley and his scientific experiments. Several days were spent in the Bath and Calne region where we visited and toured Bowood Estate, the home of the Earl of Shelburne. Priestley worked for Lord Shelburne from 1773-1780, and it was in his laboratory at Bowood that he discovered oxygen. He also made many of his other scientific discoveries in this laboratory.

Upon returning from this exciting adventure I completed my internship with the PHMC and left to continue my educational pursuits in the Masters program in Historical Administration at Eastern Illinois University. From there I went on to a career working in museums and historical societies in Pennsylvania and Kansas.

On one of my trips across Pennsylvania in the late 1990s, I had the opportunity to visit the Joseph Priestley House. I was amazed to see how much the site had changed. The fact that these changes were the result of the discovery of the Sambourne drawing brought a smile to my face and a recollection of my earlier time at the PHMC working on the Joseph Priestley project.



*Editor's note: Michael Knecht is the site administrator at Old Economy Village, an historic complex at Ambridge, Pa. The document that he found at the Royal Society of London was based on architectural drawings and measurements made by Thomas Sambourne, who in 1800 was a deputy surveyor for Luzerne County. Tiny writing at the bottom of the plan indicates that the drawing is a 19th-century copy that was rendered by a London architect, Thomas Chatfield Clarke of 127 Leadenhall Street, or possibly someone in Clarke's firm.*