

Regional efforts could restore Pa.

By William C. Kashatus

In the epilogue to *Pennsylvania: A History of the Commonwealth*, Penn history professor Michael Zuckerman writes that the story of our state is a "story of decline." It is a painful reality check for a state that was once the envy of the nation.

The colony was in the forefront in the 17th century in championing religion. It led the way in the democratization of government in the 18th century, and it was the keystone of the nation's industrial revolution in the 19th century.

In the last century, though, the state's economy grew more slowly than the national economy. Despite recent efforts at education reform, many school districts lag behind the national average in test scores and academic achievement, especially in our urban areas. No longer is Pennsylvania a preferred destination point for immigrants, or even a place for Americans to plant roots and raise a family. Instead, younger residents earn their college diplomas and leave. Physicians



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flee to escape high malpractice-insurance rates. There seems to be no ray of hope on the horizon, except one: finding the potential to grow through a new form of leadership.

Pennsylvania's dream — like the American Dream itself — was built on individual initiative and leadership. We relied on the Benjamin Franklins to lead us in scientific discovery; the Tom Paines to awaken our passion for revolutionary change; the Lucretia Motts to inspire the reform impulse that spurred the women's rights movement and the abolition of slavery, and the Horace Pippins, Violet Oakleys and Frank Furnesses to provide us with a taste for the aesthetic. As Zuckerman points out, "there are no Pennsylvanians of such eminence anymore, and there have not been for years."

There is, however, a significant potential for collective leadership and initiative. If nothing else, the statewide decline has fostered greater reliance among Pennsylvanians. Whether we are willing to tap into a regional potential remains to be seen.

Ted Hershberg, director of the Center for Greater Philadelphia, has repeatedly noted the advantage of a regional economy linking Philadelphia and its suburbs. He has said the eight-county Philadel-



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phia region, which includes three counties in South Jersey, "is well positioned to compete in the global economy with its vast markets serving 5.5 billion people." If the earned income was pooled from each of those eight counties, the region's economy would be valued at \$140 billion, "which, if we were a country, would rank the region 21st among the world's nations in gross domestic product." The five counties of Southeastern Pennsylvania account for \$110 billion of this amount.

If each of these counties contributed modest amounts toward joint strategic planning, regional marketing, regional tax-base sharing for economic development, and regional support for arts and cultural institutions, Southeastern Pennsylvania would begin to realize its economic potential. But there must also be support from suburban legislators to provide additional state money for Philadelphia's social costs (public education, crime, homelessness) to stem the flight of businesses and middle-class taxpayers.

Southeastern Pennsylvania is not the only region in the state positioned for success. The northeast quadrant can also emerge as a major player in a regional economy that caters to tourism. Recreational opportunities already abound, in the form of ski resorts, the Delaware Wa-

ter Gap, state parks and game lands, as well as professional sports teams in the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre area.

Just as important is the creation of the Steamtown National Historical Site and the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor, both of which offer the potential to create the industrial equivalent of a Colonial Williamsburg in which the region's rich anthracite coal history is interpreted. With regional coordination, these assets can provide jobs and a better quality of life for Northeastern Pennsylvania, as well as attract year-round tourism.

Although Pennsylvania's 20th-century story may be one of decline, the story of the 21st century need not be. If our state legislators are willing to reconsider their narrowly defined notions of the "general welfare" — which are too often limited to their own constituencies — regional cooperation can revitalize Pennsylvania and make us a leader in the nation's economy.

If not, we will have only ourselves to blame for the demise of a once-proud state.

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