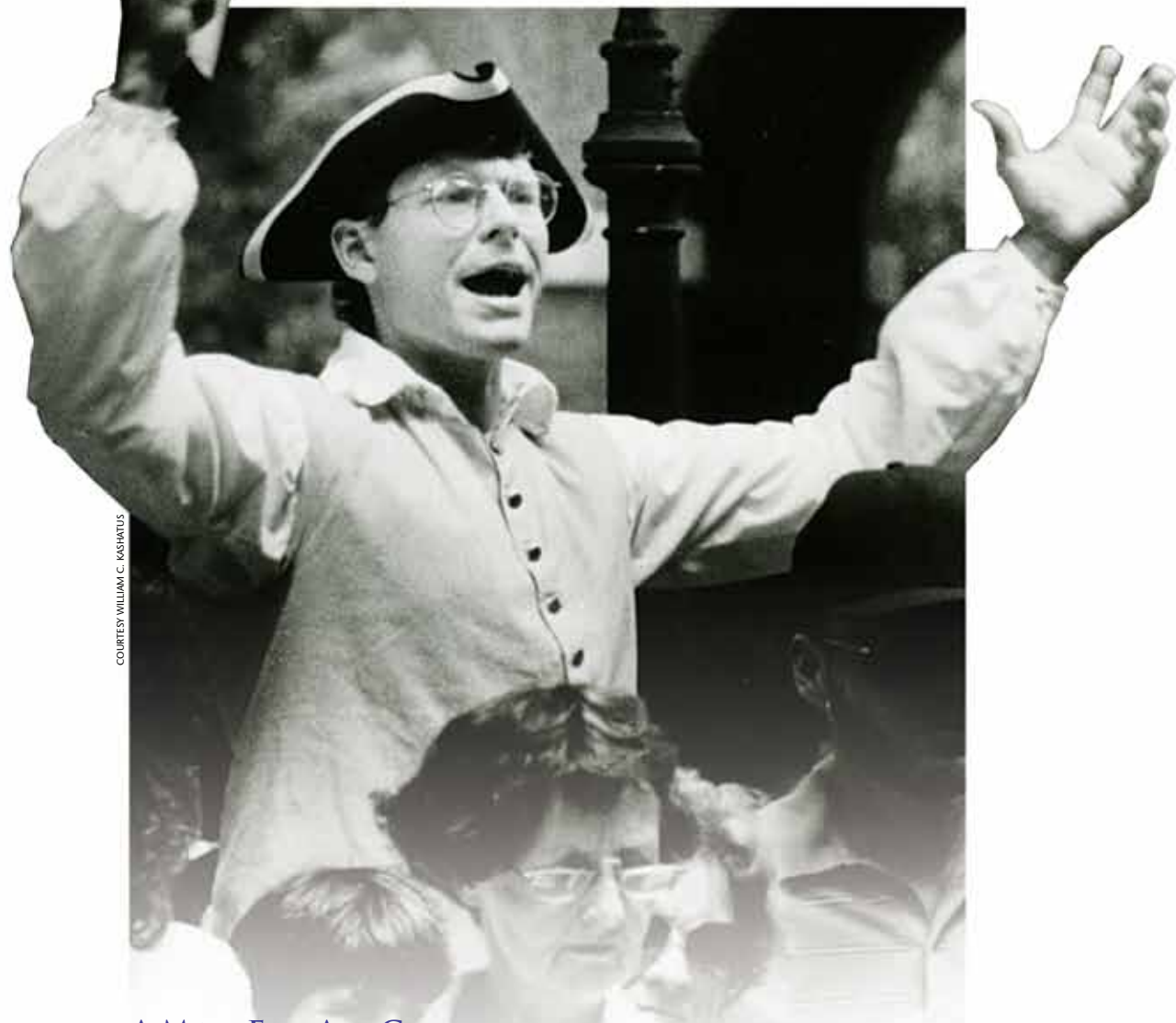


WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

BRINGING HISTORY TO LIFE

Ted R. Walke



COURTESY WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

A MAN FOR ALL CENTURIES

"Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa hath expelled her. O, receive the fugitive and prepare it for all mankind!" exclaims William C. (Bill) Kashatus with fists stabbing the air. In this instance, Bill is passionately portraying Thomas Paine (1737-1809), the bellicose British radical who advocated the American Revolution. Much of Bill's passion comes from his many roles as an educator, performer, author, lecturer, and, of course, historian. For his audiences, readers, and students, he is history—living history. The gleam in his eye, the hand and arm gestures, the projection of voice, and the carefully researched dialect smack of intense ownership, transformation, and authenticity—he is who he portrays. Whether he is appearing as William Penn during the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) Charter Day at The State Museum of Pennsylvania, or a presentation of one of his other eleven historical figures to an audience of elementary or secondary students, or to an audience of older Americans, he engages and draws his audience into another time in history with a delicate balance of charged emotion and factual accuracy. It's this verve and accessibility that carries over to his writings and teachings about American history.



COURTESY WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

It's Bill's authorship that *Pennsylvania Heritage* readers know. Since his inaugural appearance in the Fall 1987 edition with a feature article entitled "The Molly Maguires: Fighting for Justice" to his recent feature, "Laughing with Philadelphia Stogie Larry Fine" in the Fall 2008 edition, Bill has delivered a rich mix of the Keystone State's ethnic, political, educational, religious, and sports history. To date, he has written forty-four articles, with many more scheduled for future editions. What may not be known to our readers is Bill's total investment and immersion in American history.

Bill possesses impressive academic credentials. He is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Earlham College, and earned an MA in history at Brown University and a PhD in history education at the University of Pennsylvania. He has taught at Penn's Graduate School of Education and in the history department of West Chester University of Pennsylvania. He's been a middle and



COURTESY WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

Coaching varsity soccer at Episcopal Academy.

high school teacher, sports coach, and history interpreter. In 1993, Bill was hired as director of religious studies and community service at the William Penn Charter School, Philadelphia, the oldest Quaker school in the world, founded in 1689 by William Penn. In 1998, he left independent education to become director of educational and public programs at the Chester County Historical Society in West Chester. During his five-year tenure at the historical society, he expanded and improved the quality of educational programming by instituting a series of living history programs and an innovative research partnership program. Bill currently teaches American Studies at Luzerne County Community College. Better known to our readers is that he is a prolific writer; Bill is the author of more than a dozen books and a regular contributor to many history journals (see "Bookshelf" in this edition).

Bill and I met at PHMC's Publications and Sales Division offices this past October for this interview. I quickly realized Bill's visit for the interview was a reunion—a homecoming for him and the *Pennsylvania Heritage* staff. Not only was it a logical choice to interview Bill for our thirty-fifth anniversary edition, it was a great way to hold a mirror up for our readers—and to meet a man who has spent much of his life presenting American history, a man for all centuries.

INSPIRATIONS AND INFLUENCES

Who inspired you the most and in what ways?

My parents are clearly the biggest influences in my life. My mother, who could have been a wonderful schoolteacher and writer, gave up that opportunity to raise my sister and me. I get my sensitivity, writing ability, and imagination from her. My father wasn't a historian, he's a physician. But he set a strong example for me through his many roles in medicine—oncologist, medical school professor, and administrator. Both my parents were really hard workers in the sense that there was no idleness in our house. That kind of work ethic registered with me at a very young age.



COURTESY WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

The author credits his parents, Balbina Malkiewicz Kashatus and William C. Kashatus Jr., as his greatest influences

Sometimes there's a fallacy about creative products: that there's got to be a level of divine inspiration. It's interesting to hear you talk about work ethic and commitment.

If I know I'm going to write about something, then I just go ahead and do it. It has to be calculated, because the inspiration comes from the work. You actually used the term that has been both part of my success and probably part of my downfall in Quaker education, and that word is commitment. One thing that I was taught at a very young age is that you have to be committed to your work. You also want to be in a workplace with people who feel the same way. If they aren't committed, you either make them accountable or find a new line of work. That's what happened to me in Quaker education. Commitment and accountability are extremely important to me, and those qualities can be seen in my writing in terms of the endnotes that I use in my books. It also applies to my living history where I feel I have to be accountable to the historical figure I'm portraying. Commitment is a matter of personal integrity for me.

Is there one or a series of experiences that helped you choose the field of history?

I was raised in Philadelphia and surrounded by history. The type of history that really piqued my curiosity at a very early age was the colonial and revolutionary periods, because it was all around me. The schools I went to were Quaker schools with roots back to the 1680s. I was totally immersed in history as a child.

That certainly says a great deal about the value of preservation. Taking all that into account, at what point did you realize you wanted to be a writer?

There were three incidents that led me to become a writer, and they occurred when I was a student at Earlham College in the late 1970s. As a freshman, I had a humanities teacher by the name of Bob Southard who really taught me how to write. We had to read a two-hundred-page book and also write an expository essay each week. I remember failing my first four essays for the class and thinking, "My God, I am going to flunk out of college." I asked him for help. He recommended I write my paper earlier and have him review it before handing it in. I did it, but I continued to fail the papers until the ninth paper, when I started getting Ds. I paid attention to his comments and eventually got B- on the last three papers and received a B for the course. That experience could have destroyed me. Instead, I saw it as a challenge.

Fast forward to my junior year. I wrote a term paper on the Quakers' response to the Civil War and based it on research from the Earlham archives. My professor, Randall Shrock, was impressed with the research. He had never had a student who went to such lengths to do original research like that. But he gave the paper a B since it was more of a narrative chronology



PHOTO BY B&H PHOTOGRAPHIC/COURTESY WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

Photographed working on an article for *Pennsylvania Heritage*, Kashatus balances family, teaching, researching, writing, and living history presentations.

than the kind of thematic analysis that was assigned. Well, I figured if the research was so original, why not submit it for publication? So I did. The essay appeared in the *Indiana Military History Journal* the following year. Though Randall insisted it was still a B essay, he was so proud of me and often used that essay as an example of original research by a student.

Finally, in my senior year, I was reading a lot of James Michener, the historical novelist. I was also becoming interested in the Underground Railroad at that time since Earlham, located in Richmond, Indiana, was near a major Underground Railroad station. I asked my professor, Lillie Johnson, if I could write a paper about it, but in the style of a Michener novel. Lillie loved the paper, gave it an A, and said it was very "Micheneresque." She also suggested that I send Michener a copy, and I sent it through his publisher. Weeks later, I received a letter from Michener, and the first line read, "You can write." He wrote, "You can also organize your material in a challenging way." I have that letter framed, and it's on my wall at home.

Whenever I have doubts about myself as a writer, I look at that letter. There's no question that Earlham was a real turning point for me. I knew then that I had the ability to be a writer and had my first publication by the time I was twenty years old.

AUTHORSHIP: TELLING A STORY

We've identified you as "head of the class" with your contributions to the magazine. With that said, what have been your favorite subjects and feature articles?

Early on, the ones I really enjoyed writing were about Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell. I'm sure it was because I was working as a historical interpreter at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia. As time went on, there were subjects that were more personal to me, like the article on [U.S. Representative] Dan Flood. I knew Flood could be a risk for *Pennsylvania Heritage* because he used some colorful language. I got a lot of feedback on that article, and it was positive.

More recently, I wrote a piece on George Washington's slaves when he was in Philadelphia serving as president of the United States. I wanted to tell the story in an engaging fashion without preaching and being moralistic about Washington or his slaves. *Pennsylvania Heritage* was the perfect vehicle to do that. That piece was widely circulated and probably my favorite.

Why do you think people enjoy biographies so much?

There's something that resonates with people about other people and their successes. Some of the early pieces I wrote were always on people who I could relate to and, generally, people like to find out what inspired other people to become successes. People might be looking and questioning their lives, or it could be a matter of personal pride. This person is a Pennsylvanian and came from my neck of the woods. What experiences did they have that I might have had or didn't have? Biographies from the time I was in elementary school were really something that excited me. In fact, I still have a lot of my elementary school papers hanging around the attic, and I remember writing on Robert E. Lee, Abraham Lincoln, William Penn, Lucretia Mott, and Katherine Drexel. I turned some of those into *Pennsylvania Heritage* articles.

From your perspective as an educator, what kind of role do you see *Pennsylvania Heritage* playing with regard to an educational mission?

There are two things. The first thing is as people get older and their school days are

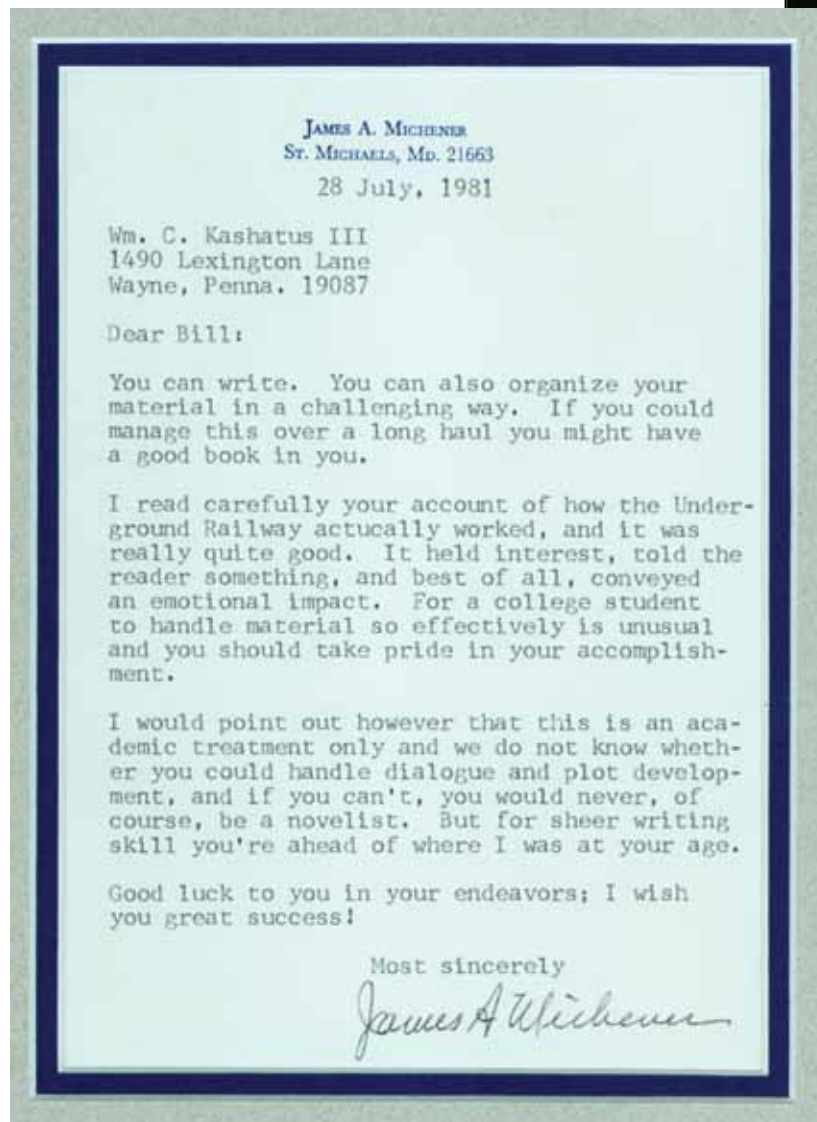
Kashatus—portraying Pennsylvania's founder William Penn—enjoys bringing history to life for audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

far behind them, self-education is very important. People yearn to improve themselves over time, but many people don't like to read books, so they'll read magazines. If your penchant is history and culture, then you're going to look to *Pennsylvania Heritage*.

The second thing is people relate best with what's in their own backyard, and *Pennsylvania Heritage* has really done that for Pennsylvanians. And, by association, Pennsylvania history correlates well with major events that occurred in our national history. That's the advantage that *Pennsylvania Heritage* has over a lot of other historical magazines. In those two ways—the individual's quest for self-improvement and Pennsylvania's role in the nation's history—the magazine fulfills an educational mission. Take this magazine, ground yourself in knowledge, and go see the sites.

I want you to think in terms of your work and the works that you enjoy reading. What makes a good story about history? What elements are critical, and which ones can be poison?

Every good book usually deals with cultural conflict and resolution; conflict resolution is what people want to read about. Aside from that, you've got to know how to tell a story, it's got to be engaging. That's what I loved about James Michener's books, especially works like *Chesapeake*, *Poland*, and *Texas*. Not only did those books deal with cultural conflict and resolution, but he was such a spellbinding storyteller as well. I think too much extraneous detail, without really keeping in mind what's important about the story, is the poison. You have to pull what's important about the subject and analyze it. History is interpretation, and I think a lot of people don't understand that. They just think history is nothing but facts, dates, events, and descriptions.



COURTESY WILLIAM C. KASHATUS



THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER



PHOTO BY DON GILES/PHMC



PHOTO BY DON GILES/PHMC



PHOTO BY DON GILES/PHMC

His insight and introspection enables Kashatus to write about a number of diverse subjects, including sensitive issues and controversial individuals, in magazine articles, newspaper columns, and books.

Does the accessibility of a *Pennsylvania Heritage* article or the visual nature of a Ken Burns documentary open the door for people to actually pick up a book?

It does, and the entrée is personal relevance. Burns has been extremely successful in doing that through his many features, because that's where you can make a relationship. When that human element is introduced and we can relate with those feelings, then people say, "Ah, now I can go ahead and find out more about it on my own." Both magazines and documentaries are teasers for people to go and read more about history.

Going back to the prior question about what makes a good history book and, in particular, my work and from a writer's perspective, it also involves critical thinking. At this stage in my career, I really don't see myself much as a history teacher, I see myself as someone who teaches writing. To become a good writer, you have to learn how to think critically first, and you have to read critically. One of the things that I try to do when I write and teach my students to do when they write research papers is to open up by putting the reader in a specific time period, in a specific place, and letting them be a fly on the wall. Then the rest of the essay becomes why the individual took certain actions, why the event unfolded the way it did, and why it is important. You could bottle and sell it. The other part of it is placing the subject in the national context.

For example, one of the things I'm trying to finish up for *Pennsylvania Heritage* is a piece on George McClellan, and it's problematic for several reasons, but most of all because I really don't like McClellan. He intrigues me, because I don't like him. The opening narrative on McClellan goes back to November 1861, when Lincoln, Seward, and Lincoln's secretary, John Hay, are waiting for McClellan in the parlor of his Washington, D.C., headquarters. They've been informed that McClellan is out at a wedding, but he'll be back shortly. An hour passes, and Lincoln and his party are waiting in the parlor. McClellan arrives. He walks right by the parlor and everybody sees him, and he goes upstairs. The servant tells him that the president, the secretary of state, and Hay are

waiting for him, and McClellan just goes to bed! Lincoln, after another hour, leaves, and on his way out, John Hay expresses the complete arrogance of the general, a person who he's just appointed as not only head of the Army of the Potomac, but general in chief. Lincoln simply responded, "If McClellan will give me a victory, I'll hold his horse for him." That exemplifies George McClellan and the arrogance that comes out time and time again. That may be a negative way of opening on McClellan, but it's also one that describes him, and why he was removed from command.

When you're revealing moments in a person's life, not everything's pretty. In the context of that story, you're providing the experience and letting readers draw conclusions, resulting in greater reader engagement.

Absolutely. And part of my tremendous admiration for Abraham Lincoln, understanding that he was a very shrewd politician, comes from that and the dislike of McClellan for it—and I really struggled. Should I make this Little Napoleon versus Honest Abe or just Little Napoleon, the rise and fall of McClellan? I decided on the latter, but the implication of Lincoln's greatness runs throughout the piece.

Your stated passion is writing; essentially it's telling a story. Your topics have ranged from sports to historical figures and events. What are the similarities and differences with these subjects and their audiences?

I'm at the stage where I'm pretty played out on baseball. I've written ten baseball books, and I'm becoming known as a "baseball writer." Many don't understand that I'm writing about American history; baseball just happens to be the vehicle. On one hand, they're different topics, but if you look at baseball—there is a symbiotic relationship between it and American history. You see it most strongly in terms of civil rights, but you also have labor problems. You also have the democratic nature of baseball that allows each individual, regardless of their ability, to step up to the plate and get their turn at bat. But, as I said, I think after ten baseball

books, I really want to move on. I hope to do a biography of William Penn. I want to do a book about Abraham Lincoln and his sons. I want to get back to the Underground Railroad.

Do you ever choose the topic by anticipating what people will like before you write versus selecting a topic for the sake of personal preference?

Usually, I write about what I want to write about. There have been some topics that have been suggested to me and some interviews with people that I went ahead and did, but I really didn't feel that it was my best work. I've gotten to a stage where I've had success, and publishers who want to have more of a trade market are coming to me and asking will you do this book? I seriously question whether I'm going to invest three or four years of my life in a recommended topic when I don't feel strongly enough about it as I do some other topics. It's a difficult decision to make.

Normally how long does it take you to write a book? I know that sounds very mechanical, but I think for our readers, because you are so prolific and have many other interests, the natural question people have is about time.

For better and worse, I've always been a loner. My relief, my outlet, as well as my passion, is my writing. Actually, if we do it in priority order, it's my family first, and whatever doesn't go to them goes to my writing, and then what doesn't go to my writing, goes to my job. So, when you ask how long does it take me to write a book, it's a difficult question to answer. I know it takes me longer these days. I allow things to percolate longer.

The Dan Flood book took me twenty years. It started in 1987, when Flood had just been out of office for seven years and continued through to 1994, when Flood died, and then started back up in 2003. I spent the last five years researching and writing, and it was a different book than anything else I'd ever done. In this case, I was making appointments with people like Melvin Laird, Gerald Ford, and Bill Scranton, where I had to operate on their time. So, intensely, the book took me all of five years. On average though, it takes about three or four years to research and write a book.

Do you think the percolation at this point provides more reward back to you for the process, or is the end product your reward?

When I first started writing, the reward came with the end product—that is, when I got the book from the publisher and held it in my hands. I don't look at it that way anymore. I look for short-term rewards in writing and get them when I finish a good day of writing. It could be four pages, but it's rewarding if I've really nailed what I wanted to say.

Do you ever think that comes back to what you initially stated as the influence of a good work ethic?

Absolutely. The interesting thing about my writing is how it's changed over the years. When I started, I was more like a sculptor. I'd just throw my thoughts on a subject onto the word processor. It would just be a very rough draft. Slowly, I'd sculpt and refine it. I don't do that anymore. The way I write now is I'll sit at the word processor and really think about what I want to say. I don't really change a whole heck of a lot of what I write from the first time I put it down.

You mentioned research. What proportion of your full work constitutes research?

Seventy-five percent of my time is spent on the research. The writing is the joy and real fun. I look at writing as a game with words, and that's what I tell my students.

What is your normal work schedule? I hate to use the word "work," but you know what I mean as far as scheduling around family and teaching?

I have three sons, and the youngest, who is seven years old, is autistic. He's a great little guy, but he demands a lot of my time. My middle son is a very good athlete, and I coach him in soccer and baseball. It's the way we connect. My oldest boy is sixteen and pretty independent. He's actually a very good writer. If he asks for advice, I'll gladly give it. If not, I've learned to trust his judgment. I take my responsibility as a father and husband very seriously, so my weekends belong to my family. As a result, the workweek is divided between teaching and writing. My best writing time is in the early morning before noon.



COURTESY WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

Kashatus deftly manages his many commitments to enjoy time with his wife Jacqueline and their three sons.

Needless to say, it's a busy schedule. What has been your favorite book you've written?

I'd have to say *One-Armed Wonder: Pete Gray, Wartime Baseball and the*

American Dream. Gray was the only one-armed player to play major league baseball, and because he played during World War II, when many of the stars were away at war, his career has been attributed to the lack of quality players in the majors at that time. I know that that bothered Pete. Deep down, I think he still questioned whether he was really respected for who he was as an athlete as opposed to just being like a circus freak or a draw. I hope my book laid that issue to rest, at least for him. I believe that Gray's career reflected the resilience of the human spirit and personal courage. I don't want to come across like a saint, but you'd like to think that what you do in your life makes a difference. I'm hoping that *September Swoon* will make a similar difference for Richie Allen. I hope it gets the baseball writers and veteran players to finally elect him to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

EDUCATION: WHAT WE LEARN FROM HISTORY

How does an understanding of history help to prepare us for the present and future?

One thing that I learned very early about history is that it teaches us judgment, and gives us the wisdom to look critically at our future as well as our present. If you could go back into the past and see where we as a people erred, as well as where we have succeeded, you'd want to replicate the successes and avoid the mistakes. Obviously, we have not learned much from our history if you consider our current political and international circumstances. Having said that, let's take a case where we *have* learned from history. If we go back and look for the first large civil rights movement in our country's history, we would have to point to the Underground Railroad. It was our first large-scale movement of civil disobedience. I think the resurgence of interest in the Underground Railroad is because we, as a nation, are eager to find a point of commonality between different races. We want to find an event where black and white Americans have acted together for a noble cause, such as freeing enslaved human beings. I think that's the best kind of history lesson we could have.



To the subject of history education, do you think there's a direct correlation for people in their daily lives, their occupations? Is there an aspect of history that it's more looked at as a primer for other things?

Yes, I think history is a valuable vehicle to teach critical reading, writing, and thinking. Those are skills really for life and transcend any discipline or field. I do think schools and colleges are trying more to do that. Some of them do it through technology, and I applaud that.

And relevance?

I've done that by getting the students to realize that their families came to this country. If they don't understand the historical, social, political, and economic circumstances, then how are they going to begin to understand what their families valued? How are they going to begin to understand the sacrifices their ancestors made to put them in their seat in my classroom today? How are they going to begin to understand how that value system impacts their choices and decisions for the future? I think you appeal to them in that sense; then they begin to understand the relevance.

To portray historical personages, including William Penn (above), Kashatus painstakingly researches his subjects to ensure accuracy in his lively interpretations.

FROM WILLIAM KASHATUS TO WILLIAM PENN: RE-CREATING HISTORY

You've received critical acclaim for your interpretive roles as history-maker and storyteller. Where did you cut your teeth, and how do you channel such personalities with authenticity?

Cutting my teeth was the easy part. So much of it, as I said earlier, comes from my parents, and I often thought that my father would be a wonderful actor if he wasn't so committed to medicine. He was a real ham and could imitate any person once he saw them enough. When I went into teaching, I taught middle school at the Riverdale Country School in the Bronx, New York. I just couldn't teach what the curriculum called for, I mean, seventh graders writing research papers and testing. I didn't see the imaginative part of history and wanted them to see history as something that was fun and personally relevant to them. The way I thought I could deliver that was by dressing up and having them have their own experience.

What I did the day before the test was dress up as someone from the past and have a dialogue. We would review the material for the test, and they loved it! I found that it was such a great experience for them, and they remembered a lot more from those performances than from anything we did in class. From there, it just became natural, because it's just not middle-schoolers that enjoy that kind of entertainment—people from all ages do. For me, living history is just stepping out of myself to be somebody who entertains and teaches.

Out of the historical figures you bring to life, how varied are they?

Probably the ones that are the most varied are William Penn, since he is a state personality, a scholar, and a gentleman; then a century later, I do Thomas Paine, who is exactly the opposite. He is a gruff kind of writer who really doesn't care about what people think. When he comes in, he really cajoles people and immediately gets on their bad side. Penn is much more reflective and less reactionary, someone who gives an awful lot of thought to what he says before he says it. So, those two are probably polar opposites.

Do you have a favorite?

Just as writing, you write what you know. In acting, you act whom you know. I never met the man, because he died long before I was born, but my great-grandfather, Peter Kashatus, is the person that I enjoy the most. He's funny, he's genuinely a good human being and still believes in certain values like the American Dream and that this country is the greatest.



PHOTO BY JOEL ZARSKA

Was there any single performance that has touched you?

That performance happened in 1998. The William Penn Charter School hired me back to meet the junior class at Ellis Island. I was hiding out behind a newspaper on the same ferry the kids were on, and they were seated in the entrance hall at Ellis Island. If you've ever been there, you know there are the Stairs of Separation, ascended by immigrants. After further examination, immigrants would descend the same stairs that led them to New York City, the train stations, or, if they were rejected, back to their native country. Well, I walked up this staircase with my great-grandfather's trunk on my shoulder, the one he used when he came through Ellis Island. I walk up and have this real emotional moment. I'm crying and cannot stop shedding tears, because I realize at that point this is what my great-grandfather saw. I got to the top of the stairs and everybody, all the kids that were sitting there, 160 of them, they all knew who I was and gave me a standing ovation. The combination of that and being in a place that I knew that my great-grandfather was just completely blew me away. I certainly felt more in tune with my character than in any other performance. It was just an amazing feeling.



PHOTO BY DON GILES/PHMC

Ted R. Walke (left), is chief of PHMC's Publications and Sales Division. As a relative newcomer to the division since 2006, he gratefully acknowledges the expertise and combined creative force of Michael J. O'Malley III, Kimberly L. Stone, Fred J. Lauver, and Louis M. Waddell, who bring each edition of Pennsylvania Heritage to fruition with thoughtful care for the readership.

One of the favorite figures Kashatus portrays is his great-grandfather, immigrant Peter Kashatus.

Aside from family and knowing they are your greatest contribution, what else would you consider a great contribution?

Probably helping people understand that they have a connection to history, making history personally relevant to them so they see it as something that can be a roadmap for their future and help them understand the present. History teaches you wisdom and judgment.

You're coming up on twenty-two years writing for *Pennsylvania Heritage*; why do you continue to write for the magazine?

I've been really fortunate to have Michael [J. O'Malley III] as an editor. He allows me to take creative risks. He's helped me in terms of my writing style tremendously. The magazine has grown tremendously, and I enjoy it. If you're given that kind of latitude, then you want to write well for it.

It sounds like it's been and will continue to be a perfect match. On behalf of the readership, I thank you for this interview.

Thank you very much. It was a lot of fun.