

UNCOVERING QUEER DOMESTICITY: INTUITION AND POSSIBILITY  
AS METHODS OF INTERVENTION INTO THE HISTORIC  
HOUSE MUSEUM AND ARCHIVE

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of queer domesticity, queer possibility and intuition in historic house museums. It develops a methodological framework intended to intervene in archival, research, interpretive and institutional practices at these sites. Using the Elfreth's Alley Museum's podcast *The Alley Cast* as a case study, I examine how utilizing a framework that understands queerness to be just as possible as straightness; that uses intuition to guide research; and queer and trans theory to denaturalize categories of sexuality and gender can uncover queer domestic patterns that unsettle and disrupt the public's hetero- and cisnormative assumptions about the past. I argue that this is a framework that can be adopted by historic house museums in order to engage with queer history when evidence may be lacking or whose historical subjects' gender or sexuality resists easy classification. Finally, I argue that implementing such a framework can only be done successfully if it is engaged as part of a larger institution-wide commitment to creating a socially just and responsive museum that understands the importance of sharing complicated and difficult history with its public and dismantling its own position of power and authority.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Stepping into the darkness of the house is a cool relief from the heat and bright sunshine of the July day. As my eyes adjust, I see the room I am standing in more properly. A replica eighteenth-century mantua gown is on a dress stand next to a table scattered with sewing implements and bolts of cloth. A short hallway opens onto a backdoor and garden. To my left, an entry steps down into a large kitchen designed to look as it would have in the eighteenth century, and in the corner a narrow, winding staircase leads up to the second floor.

The tour guide in the room welcomes our group of tourists to the house, No. 126 Elfreth's Alley. Located in Old City, Philadelphia, Elfreth's Alley is a historic street whose homes have been in continuous residential use for over three hundred years. Our guide explains that the 33 houses on the Alley were built in the mid-1700s, and that the trinity house we will be touring has been preserved and reconstructed to look like it might have for the occupants who lived here in the latter half of that century. The occupants in question were Mary Smith and Sarah Melton, who worked as mantua makers, using this house as their business and shared home. When asked about any male presence within the house, the guide mentions simply that neither were married. And that was that. We moved on to the next room of the house, where another guide continued the tour.

But inside, my curiosity was piqued. Why weren't they married? How common was it to be unmarried at this time? Was it because they couldn't find husbands or

because they didn't want to? Were they sisters? But they didn't have the same last name. Were they lovers or friends or romantic friends? How were they able to support themselves? And if they could do it, why didn't more women do it?

The intuition of both my partner and I were sparked. We both had a sense, even without direct evidence for why, that these women were like us. When we left the museum, she turned to me and asked, "Do you think those women were queer?"

"I don't know," I replied, "But I want to find out."

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Whether as an academic historian, as a museum educator, or a simply as a child trying to figure out if there are other people like them in the world, excavating queer history is an uphill battle. Systemic homophobia and transphobia, silence within the archives, and reluctance to interpret LGBTQIA+ history have all contributed to numerous challenges in finding, interpreting, and presenting histories of queer pasts. In many times and places, it has been a risk to document same-sex desire or experience because of entrenched stigma or criminalization. Many experiences have simply gone unrecorded by narrators who feared discovery. Even when people did document their experiences, those left with these sources upon the narrator's death—quite often family members or close relations—chose to destroy or edit such "incriminating" evidence. The documents that do find their way into the archives have at times been mislabeled or buried by archivists uninterested, ignorant of, or antagonistic toward evidence of queer experiences. The same has often held true for historians working with these sources, at times ignoring them, at others analyzing them through a heteronormative lens that dismisses the very possibility

of queerness because it was unthinkable. And finally, our cultural memory has chosen to forget, ignore and render invisible LGBTQIA+ history, both the isolated experiences and the movements and communities of the twentieth century.

Although scholars of LGBTQIA+ history have made leaps and bounds since the early days of historical scholarship, many of these challenges remain frustratingly persistent. In addition to the barriers that stem from the archive and from a heteronormative society, language also constitutes a major difficulty with which to grapple. How should we label those who never used the modern terms that we use today to signify we are part of the LGBTQIA+ community? If sexuality and gender are socially constructed and historically contingent, then using identities like lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender would assume a conception of gender, sexuality and identity that the historical subjects themselves would not understand.<sup>i</sup> To do so would also flatten and simplify the complexity and nuance of the history of sexuality and gender.

Given the multitude of challenges facing queer historians, embarking on finding and interpreting queer history in public history settings seems a daunting task indeed. A number of historians have warned of the dangers of misapplying identities to historical subjects, urging researchers to be “vigilant about studying evidence within the context of the time in which it was created, rather than simply applying modern categories to behavior in the past.”<sup>ii</sup> Although this is a well-meaning and theoretically sound

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<sup>i</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol I: An Introduction*, (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>ii</sup> Susan Ferentinos, “Where the Magic Happened” in *Reinventing the Historic House Museum: New Approaches and Proven Solutions*, ed. Kenneth C. Turino (Lanham, MD:

consideration, it often comes without providing alternative methods to those historic sites who wish to interpret queer history when evidence might be lacking and whose subjects lived before the advent of modern LGBTQIA+ terminology.<sup>iii</sup>

So how might we discuss this history in a way that is not essentialist, ahistorical, and does not impose modern categories of gender and sexuality onto historical subjects? How might we shift the conversation beyond debates over whether to label historical subjects as LGBTQIA+, and instead toward how to queer our research, archival, and interpretive practices? I argue that in order to responsibly interpret queer history at public history sites, one must adopt a framework that is flexible and attentive to shifting and fluid meanings and definitions, and that takes queerness as a possibility as likely as heterosexuality from the very outset of the research process.<sup>iv</sup> Doing so requires fostering

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Rowman & Littlefield/AASLH, 2019) 190. See also Susan Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); ———. “Ways of Interpreting Queer Pasts,” *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (May 2019): 19–43; Christopher Hommerding, “Queer Public History in Small-Town Wisconsin: The Pendarvis Historic Site and Interpreting the Queer Past,” *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (May 2019); Patrik Steorn, “Curating Queer Heritage: Queer Knowledge and Museum Practice,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 55, no. 3 (2012): 355–65.

<sup>iii</sup> Some current scholarship within the queer history field challenges the social constructionist framework that contends that identity and language are the key factors in the creation of a queer consciousness. Some historians argue instead that queer behavior, desire, and non-normative gender expression are just as important in uncovering queer existence. For such scholarship see Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); and Colin Johnson, *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013). For more works that focus on rural settings see Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); William Benemann, *Men in Eden: William Drummond Stewart and Same-Sex Desire in the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade* (Lincoln: Nebraska Press, 2012); and Gabriel N. Rosenberg, *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2016).

<sup>iv</sup> This conceptual framework is most fully explored in Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton, 1995), in which Katz historicizes the construction of the term heterosexuality in order to denaturalize its position as the dominant and normative form of sexuality. By only analyzing the reasons behind the emergence of homosexual identity and behavior, and the

our intuition and embracing wholeheartedly that uncertainty and ambiguity will shape the narrative at the historic site. Intuition, a tool long used by historians searching in the archives, and utilized by myself when first visiting Elfreth's Alley, was a good starting point. I describe intuition here as a sense of knowing without reason or proof.<sup>v</sup> It helped provoke questions, guided my research process, and illuminated how archives preclude queer possibilities in the way that they organize and index their materials. However, intuition must not just be fostered by a museum's curators, educators, and interpreters, but must also be welcomed and encouraged from the audiences that visit and bring their own understandings of the past.

To explore intuition within the archive, the research process, and interpretive practices requires drawing upon queer and trans theory.<sup>vi</sup> In its theoretical capacity, queer

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solidification of this sexuality as non-normative and marginalized, without doing the reverse for heterosexuality, we reinforce the idea that heterosexuality is natural rather than being constructed.

<sup>v</sup> Just before I was set to submit this thesis, I learned about a recent article that explores the use of intuition in museum education and interpretation from Eli Burke, "Intuition and Vulnerability: A Queer Approach to Museum Education," *Journal of Museum Education*, 45, no. 4 (December 2020). His use of intuition is similar, and he expands my understanding of intuition to a knowing that queer people have of being "outside of the heteronormative before we can even name it, and (2) having that knowing challenged at every turn and the effects this has on our ability to trust our own intuition in future situations." My own exploration of my use of intuition during my research process was not informed by this reading, and so I do not cite it directly within my own analysis. However, Burke's approach to intuition is a useful one that will continue to influence my own understanding of the use of intuition in the future.

<sup>vi</sup> For an incomplete list of works on queer theory and queer history from which I draw my understanding of queer theory see Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015); Lisa Duggan, "The Discipline Problem: Queer Theory Meets Lesbian and Gay History," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 179–191; Eva Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); ———. *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C., 1993); Henry Abelove, "The Queering of Lesbian/Gay History," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 44–57; Jeffrey Escoffier, Regina Kunzel, and Molly McGarry, eds., "The Queer Issue: New Visions of America's Lesbian and Gay Past," Special Issue, *Radical History Review* no. 62 (Spring 1995). For works on queer studies and queer history see Scott Bravmann, *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Christopher

does not describe a category, but rather serves as an analytical tool to investigate how gender and sexuality, both normative and non-normative, are created and negotiated.<sup>vii</sup> Rather than using queer to impart a specific sexual or gender identity, instead it is used to unsettle and denaturalize systems, institutions, and arrangements assumed to be natural. In this capacity, queer signals “a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with one another.”<sup>viii</sup> So too does trans operate not just as a category of identity, but more as a critical analytic. Within this framework, trans acts as a modality that disrupts and destabilizes notions of normative gender identity and practice, and becomes a way to examine methods of movement, travel and slips across boundaries and categories.<sup>ix</sup> Trans modality, thus, becomes a means by which public historians can avoid the fears of essentialism and ahistoricism. Applying trans modality and queer theory to public history interpretive practices can denaturalize categories of all kinds, historicize their construction, and examine the ways in which individuals were

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Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall* (Durham, N.C., 2001); Valerie Traub, “The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies,” *PMLA* 128, no. 1 (2013): 21–39; Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, “Queering History,” *PMLA* 120, no. 5 (2005): 1608–1617; Ari Friedlander, “Desiring History and Historicizing Desire,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016): 1–20; Regina Kunzel, “The Power of Queer History,” *The American Historical Review* 123, no. 5 (December 2018): 1560–1582. For an understanding of trans theory see Genny Beemyn, “A Presence in the Past: A Transgender Historiography,” *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 4 (2013): 113–121; Judith Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008). C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Scott Larson, “‘Indescribable Being’: Theological Performances of Genderlessness in the Society of the Publick Universal Friend, 1776–1819,” *Early American Studies* 12, no. 3 (2014): 576–600.

<sup>vii</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*.

<sup>viii</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C., 1993) in Regina Kunzel, “The Power of Queer History,” *The American Historical Review* 123, no. 5 (December 2018): 1560–1582.

<sup>ix</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*.

defined by and navigated such categories, and how they negotiated, moved across, and rejected the boundaries of these categories.<sup>x</sup>

An attention to queer and trans theories is crucial because it focuses less on attributing specific identities onto historic figures, and more on the ways in which historical subjects navigated and transgressed the gender and sexual norms of the society in which they lived. These analytical methods offer us a way to help visitors interrogate their own assumptions about the past, and how categories of gender and sexuality they assume to be natural or stable were historically constructed and fluid. Such a method encourages visitors who assume straightness on the past to reconsider this notion, and comforts queer visitors whose own intuition is sparked when visiting house museums.

Finally, I argue that a utilizing a framework of intuition and queer possibility cannot be done unless the history site as an entire institution is committed to dismantling the myth that museums are neutral.<sup>xi</sup> Public history sites must be ready to shift themselves away from reproducing the narratives that uphold a white supremacist, colonialist, heteronormative and cisnormative version of the past. To truly engage with the inherent possibility of historical queerness means reframing what we think we know about the past. In practical terms, it means restructuring the entire institution, not just the education or curatorial departments. Queer possibility must be invited into every corner of the institution, from the archive to the volunteer guide force, to the board and

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<sup>x</sup> Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*.

<sup>xi</sup> Museums Are Not Neutral With Movement Co-Founders, *Museums Are Not Neutral*, last revised May 14, 2020, <https://www.museumsarenotneutral.com/learn-more/monument-lab>.

executive team. Historic sites need to implement Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion initiatives, including sensitivity and anti-bias trainings, and share authority with members of the LGBTQIA+ community, seeking out the expertise of stakeholders, historians, and sensitivity readers.

I applied this framework of queer possibility and intuition within the context of my work with the Elfreth's Alley Museum during the summer of 2020.<sup>xii</sup> Chapters 5 and 6 discuss two episodes that I wrote for *The Alley Cast*, the museum's podcast that I helped produced. In applying a queer possibility framework within this context, I found that historic house museums (HHM) are uniquely positioned within the public history sphere to conduct this work effectively. By using queer and trans theory in our research and interpretive practices, we can come to see the disruptions between institutions and systems of the past and the ways that people actually negotiated living within them. House museums offer an environment primed to tip visitors off to these ruptures and breaks because they are spaces where a plurality of lived experiences and perspectives are intrinsic to their very formation. The layering of time and lives that build up at a historic site can illuminate how certain narratives – usually heterosexual ones – get revealed and how others – usually queer ones – get buried. However, I argue that a queer possibility framework allows us to more expansively interpret queer history at HHM. Rather than relegate a discussion of queerness and sexuality to the personal spaces of the

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<sup>xii</sup> This framework shares similarities with the interpretive strategy developed and proposed by Margaret Middleton, "Queer Possibility," *Journal of Museum Education* 45, no. 4 (December 2020): 426-436. Although we have similar ideas, I did not read this article until March 28, 2020, which was a few days before I was due to submit my thesis, so my framework of archival, research, and interpretive intervention was developed without influence from Middleton's work.

bedroom, queer possibility allows us to explore how queerness was intrinsic to the historical subjects' labor and lives, how work and domestic space overlapped, and how these subjects created their own queer domesticity.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **UNDERSTANDING THE METHODS**

To study queer history at a historic house museum, no matter if it is in a major metropolitan center or in small rural community, if its stories occurred before, during or after the Stonewall riots and gay liberation movement, if its subjects were out or not, is to confront many of the same tensions that all other historic house museums face. Tensions exist between academic theory and public history, between straight visitors and queer interpreters, between queer guests and heteronormative institutions and cultural memory; tensions exist over issues of definition, identity, narrative, and evidence.

Undergirding most of these tensions is the struggle to figure out how to interpret queer history responsibly. What does it mean to be responsible, and to whom? Do historians have a greater duty toward respecting the privacy of historical subjects who were not out, or more of a duty toward present-day queer guests who are searching for their history? To what extent must historians respect the silences of the archives that more often than not, have no definitive answers to determining a subject's identity or sexuality? Analysis by historians of house museums have grappled with all these issues and provided their own suggestions and answers to many of these complex questions. For historians like Susan Ferentinos, more robust programming is one of the answers, developing integrated, specialized, and arts programs to address queer history. Others like Lisa Yun Lee and Christopher Hommerding encourage developing intentional models of shared authority in which museums transparently present their visitors with the evidence

(or lack thereof) and invite them to engage with the same methods of historical interpretation that curators use. Historians like Joshua Adair, Lee, and Melinda Marie Jetté advocate “queering the museum” from staff to archives to interpretive labeling. No matter the angle that these historians take, all advocate for engaging with a more complex vision of queer pasts rather than relying on simplistic interpretive models that promote progress narratives or “gay vs. straight” identity games.<sup>xiii</sup>

Historically, constitutive forces of hegemonic museum spaces and a heteronormative and homophobic society have created barriers to interpreting queer history. For most of their existence, historic house museums have helped promote an overwhelmingly straight vision of the past. This straightening of our historical narrative and cultural memory is practiced along multiple vectors, both in refusing to acknowledge the queer sexuality or gender of historical subjects, and in ignoring the work of queer preservationists. Joshua Adair discusses these issues in his article “House Museums or Walk-In Closets? The (Non) Representation of Gay Men in the Museums They Call

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<sup>xiii</sup> Susan Ferentinos, “Ways of Interpreting Queer Pasts,” *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (2019): 19–43; Christopher Hommerding, “Queer Public History in Small-Town Wisconsin: The Pendarvis Historic Site and Interpreting the Queer Past,” *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (May 2019): 70–93; Hilary Iris Lowe, “Dwelling in Possibility: Revisiting Narrative in the Historic House Museum,” *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (May 2019): 44–69; ———. “The Queerest House in Cambridge.” *The Public Historian* 37, no. 2 (2015): 42–60; Lisa Yun Lee, “Peering into the Bedroom: Restorative Justice at the Jane Addams Hull House Museum,” in *Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum*, ed. Janet Marstine, (New York: Routledge, 2011): 174–88; Alison Oram, “Going on an Outing: The Historic House and Queer Public History,” *Rethinking History* 15, no. 2 (June 2011): 189–207; ———. “Sexuality in Heterotopia: Time, Space and Love between Women in the Historic House,” *Women’s History Review* 21, no. 4 (September 2012): 533–51; Joshua G Adair, “House Museums or Walk-In Closets? The (Non) Representation of Gay Men in the Museums They Called Home,” in *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums: A Routledge Reader*, ed. Amy K. Levin, (New York: Routledge, 2010) 265–78; Melinda Marie Jetté, “Through the Queer Looking-Glass: The Future of LGBTQ Public History,” *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (May 2019): 6–18; Patrik Steorn, “Curating Queer Heritage: Queer Knowledge and Museum Practice,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 55, no. 3 (2012): 355–65.

Home." He explores the prevalence of gay men in the field of historic preservation in the twentieth century and the ways in which museums have either covered up or misrepresented these men's homosexuality, all while benefiting from their labor.<sup>xiv</sup> However, Adair points out that the way gay men are represented (or not) as both employees and as subjects of exhibitions is complicated by the very real fear that revealing identity would result in "discrimination, fear of retribution, and increased personal discomfort."<sup>xv</sup> For much of history, silencing queer stories and perspectives has been both a method of oppression by heteronormative institutions and a means of safety for the queer people working within them. These issues are real for queer historians even today, and Adair advocates for more queer individuals to be involved in the decision-making processes and for museums to be sites that push for social justice to combat this fear.<sup>xvi</sup>

Lisa Yun Lee also argues that museums should not be spaces of neutrality, but instead should shift their position from one of normative meaning-making toward becoming sites of resistance. Museums have an ethical imperative to create a more socially just world. It is a charge that is not a matter of choice or preference but one of duty and responsibility. Using the Jane Addams Hull House Museum in Chicago, Illinois as a case study, Lee explores how a museum can and should be a "counter and

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<sup>xiv</sup> Adair, "House Museums or Walk-In Closets?" 265.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid.

'oppositional' space that challenges the dominant narrative."<sup>xvii</sup> Through an alternative labeling project, the JAHHM explored how differing narratives of the past are negotiated. By presenting three labels that each describe the relationship between Jane Addams and Mary Rozet-Smith differently and inviting guests to share which label they most preferred and why on a public message board, the exhibit became a discursive space that directly grappled with the issues of categorizing and theorizing same-sex sexuality that historians face. In doing so, the museum resisted reproducing the same heteronormative narrative around Addams.<sup>xviii</sup>

Christopher Hommerding's article on the history of the Pendarvis Historic Site in Mineral Point, Wisconsin, and the story of Robert Neal and Edgar Hellum, the men who preserved it, reveals how telling the institutional history of a historic house can open opportunities to tell stories of queer history. Moreover, doing so better contextualizes the history that the site portrays. Hommerding's "Queer Public History in Small-Town Wisconsin: The Pendarvis Historic Site and Interpreting the Queer Past," is a compelling examination of some of the issues surrounding queer history, addressing metronormativity and the "difficulties of conveying the nuances of queer history to modern audiences."<sup>xix</sup> Hommerding teases out some of these problems by observing how Pendarvis has traditionally given tours of the site that focus on the influence of the men's business and preservation efforts on the town. In more recent years, however, Pendarvis

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<sup>xvii</sup> Lisa Yun Lee, "Peering into the Bedroom," 176.

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xix</sup> Hommerding, "Pendarvis Historic Site," 73.

has moved toward interpreting the most personal spaces of the men's home (bedrooms and bathrooms) drawing direct attention to the fact that Neal and Hellum's sexuality was crucially linked to their lives' work. For Hommerding, interpretive plans and tour design are a key element to bringing queer history to light.<sup>xx</sup>

The traditional tour design of Pendarvis Historic Site has been problematic for portioning off Neal and Hellum's personal lives and sexuality. Tour guides and interpretative materials have also reinforced such "closeting."<sup>xxi</sup> Allusion, obfuscation and euphemism have not been unique to Pendarvis Historic Site, as Adair points out. Many places like Gibson House or the Sleeper-McCann House have used words like "eccentric" or "bon vivant," to describe the house's occupants(s), "delivered as a kind of aside, the verbal equivalent of a 'wink-wink, nudge-nudge' that is meant to signal either disapproval or a sophisticated acceptance *sotto voce*."<sup>xxii</sup> Words like bachelor and spinster may tip off queer visitors that such subjects might have been queer themselves, but only those who have learned to read terminology against the grain. These techniques have been used by historians trying to find evidence within archives, but without contextualization and intentional discussion from tours or signage, such allusions to queer history may go unnoticed by visitors unfamiliar with these techniques of analysis.<sup>xxiii</sup> To

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<sup>xx</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxi</sup> Hommerding, "Pendarvis Historic Site," 81.

<sup>xxii</sup> Adair, "House Museums or Walk-In Closets," 274.

<sup>xxiii</sup> An incomplete list of historians who discuss reading sources against the grain include Lara Leigh Kelland, *Clio's Foot Soldiers: Twentieth Century U.S. Social Movements and Collective Memory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 101-127; Brian Loftus, "Speaking Silence: The

avoid discussing this history is to prioritize the comfort of straight tour guides and audiences, while sidelining queer ones.

Some of the subjects and methodology that Hommerding examined at Pendarvis Historic Site are present at the Longfellow House--Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Hilary Iris Lowe illuminates the many queer stories that exist at the Longfellow House and how this institution has moved beyond only interpreting famous residents like George and Martha Washington and Henry Wadsworth and Frances Appleton Longfellow, to include the lives of Samuel Longfellow, a lifelong "bachelor," and preservationists like Alice Longfellow and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana. All three of these individuals are now interpreted through a queer lens, shedding light on the long and varied history of sexuality. The Longfellow House is certainly not the only one with such a history, as Lowe asserts: "nearly all house museums have an unmarried daughter, aunt or widow who allows us to at least destabilize heterosexual marriage as the only option for women in the past."<sup>xxiv</sup> As such, the Longfellow House is a useful framework for how other historic house museums can interpret queer history. Exploring the lives of the people who helped preserve the house, like those at the Longfellow House, Pendarvis, or the gay men that Adair speaks of, can

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Strategies and Structures of Queer Autobiography." *College Literature* 24, no. 1 (1997): 28–44; John D. Wrathall, "Provenance as Text: Reading the Silences around Sexuality in Manuscript Collections," *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 1 (1992): 165–78.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Lowe, "Queerest House in Cambridge," 60.

offer us interesting insights into the ways in which labor and the domestic space are linked and interwoven, rather than distinct spheres.

Susan Ferentinos attends to questions of audience in her writings on implementing queer history into museums, as well as creative strategies for navigating silences in queer history, the lack of evidence, and the difficulty of identity and definition. Ferentinos lays out such methods most recently in her article "Ways of Interpreting Queer Pasts." In many ways a condensed and updated version of her book *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites* written in 2015, Ferentinos discusses the benefits and drawbacks of integrated and specialized programming: one is better suited to drawing new and diverse audiences, in particular queer ones; the other toward educating a wide-ranging public who might otherwise not attend special programs. Arts programming can be a creative solution to get around a lack of sources. Especially if the artists are queer, such poetic license with historical subject matter can draw meaningful connections for a modern audience toward a complex and scantily documented past. Ferentinos also sees museums as positioned to engaged in social justice work through developing programs for queer youth and fostering relationships with community partners.<sup>xxv</sup>

Quite recently, Margaret Middleton has offered an interpretive framework for queer interpretation within art museums that counteracts the typical "three unspoken standards ... [for] when to identify an historical figure as queer," which are: when the content developer thinks that the queer identity is relevant, when the figure describes

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<sup>xxv</sup> Ferentinos, "Ways of Interpreting Queer Pasts."

themselves as such, and when there is documentation for queer behavior.<sup>xxvi</sup> These standards often end up ignoring and sidelining queer interpretation. Middleton offers three alternative methods to explore queer possibility, the first being inferential, which uses current terms to describe a historical figure even if they did not use the word themselves, based on similarities between the historical figure and people who use the word today. The second is descriptive, which uses terms not to impart specific labels, but instead to describe behavior. Middleton, like Lowe and Hommerding, advocates using “queer” because it “encompasses both sexuality and gender identity and is therefore inclusive in its ambiguity.”<sup>xxvii</sup> The final method is imaginative, which “values queer experience as expertise and gaydar as epistemology.”<sup>xxviii</sup> These three methods are useful, not only within an art museum context, but for the historic house museum world, as well. And yet, they can be pushed farther. The use of “queer” can operate not just as a descriptor of behavior but can also be used as a lens to analyze the past, to reveal historical norms and the transgressions of those norms by historical figures. And while Middleton’s interventions into the interpretive method are admirable, queer possibility can begin in the archive and research process and extend to encompass the visitor’s own intuition and imagination.

Many of the efforts of these historic sites and houses have laid important groundwork for interpreting queer history in new and innovative ways. In particular, the

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<sup>xxvi</sup> Margaret Middleton, “Queer Possibility,” *Journal of Museum Education*, 45, no. 4 (Dec 2020).

<sup>xxvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Ibid.

labeling experiment at the JAHHM offers an excellent method to use when implementing a queer possibility framework of interpretation. It both offered multiple ways of interpreting Addams' and Rozet-Smith's relationship and disrupted the simplifying heteronormative narrative of Addams. It also invited visitors into the process of historical interpretation and welcomed differing perspectives and the intuition of queer visitors by asking for feedback near the labels. However, its effectiveness is diminished because it was not a permanent change to the labeling. Furthermore, JAHHM, as well as the Pendarvis Historic Site both run into the same issue of sequestering off the interpretation of queerness into the bedroom and personal spaces of the historic house. Rather than see queerness as inextricably linked to these historical subjects' work, it is made distinct from their choices to pursue such labor. Utilizing a queer possibility framework, on the other hand, would investigate both their lives and labor as queer, and invite visitors to consider the ways in which these subjects navigated and potentially transgressed unspoken norms of living arrangements, homemaking, running businesses and organizations.

Interpreting queer public history has the potential to build community, create alliances and partnerships, and can be a means of advancing social and economic justice.<sup>xxix</sup> However, interpreting queer history is not radical in and of itself, but only when it acknowledges and analyzes "tensions, power and privilege within queer <sup>xxx</sup>[OBJ]. Only by continually examining and challenging the biases, gaps, silences, and inequalities that are built into the foundations of museums, their archives, collecting practices, exhibitions,

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<sup>xxix</sup> Jetté, "Queer Looking-Glass," 8-9.

<sup>xxx</sup> Jetté, "Queer Looking-Glass," 17.

historical interpretation, and museum staff will museums truly be able to practice responsible queer public history. A queer possibility framework must incorporate the entire museum and begins at the level of archival organization and research methodology, not just in interpretive practices.

## CHAPTER 3

### UNDERSTANDING THE CONSTRAINTS

Part of the difficulty of uncovering queer historical subjects and telling their stories respectfully comes from the fact that most of the individuals did not use the same language of identity that people use today and remain uncategorized within archives. Identities, labels, definitions, and categories are historically bound to specific time periods. Many, if not all, of the modern terms we use to signify whether someone is LGBTQIA+ would be inaccurate or ahistorical if applied to subjects who preceded these time periods and did not identify as such. The problem of identity and definition returns again and again for many historic house museums, included but certainly not limited to, the Jane Addams Hull House Museum, The Pendarvis Historic Site, the Longfellow House--Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site, and the Alice Austen House Museum, all of which have historical subjects whose queerness has been debated but who lived before the advent of modern LGBTQIA+ terminology. However, the issue of applying specific identities or categories is complicated by the very history of archival preservation and classification itself. Overwhelmingly, archives have been heteronormative spaces that have erased and ignored, elided and simplified the history of queer experience and existence. The difficulty in labeling a historical subject does not just come from potentially using the incorrect term, but from a system of hegemonic forces that suppress any ability to try.

Nowhere are these issues of normalization and erasure more evident, and its impact more felt, than with the Library of Congress' Subject Headings (LCSH), which are used to categorize the information the Library contains. The LCSH takes its influence from Charles A. Cutter's Rules for a Dictionary Catalog, which advocates using uniform terminology that users are most familiar with, and in doing so creates a universal language that is based on mainstream ideas, concepts, and values. Such a language is one that relies on rendering invisible the minority.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The LCSH history has been, according to its most vocal critics, one of biased, problematic, out-of-date, tautological, deficient, and static controlled vocabularies. In the 1970s the American Library Association's Task Force on Gay Liberation began to petition the LCSH to change problematic classifications, beginning with changing the term "homosexuality" from being classified under "sexual deviance" to "sexual life." They argued that classifying "homosexuality" as deviant was biased, inaccurate, discriminatory and derogatory. Given that the LCSH were purported to be unbiased, neutral, and accurate in their description and classification, "sexual life" was clearly the more accurate heading, and one that would be much more inclusive and welcoming to LGBTQ+ people accessing their own history.<sup>xxxix</sup> Since then, a number of activist archivists and critical cataloguers, including Ellen Greenblatt, Steve Wolf, A. J. Foskett,

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<sup>xxxix</sup> Ellen Greenblatt, "Homosexuality: The Evolution of a Concept in Library of Congress Subject Headings," in *Gay and Lesbian Library Service*, ed. Cal Gough and Ellen Greenblatt (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1990); ———. "The Treatment of LGBTIQ Concepts in Library of Congress Subject Headings," in *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users: Essays on Outreach, Service, Collections and Access*, ed. Ellen Greenblatt (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010) 212–228.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Greenblatt, "Evolution of a Concept."

and Matt Johnson, have advocated for greater changes and additions as the LGBTQIA+ community became more visible and organized, and as language and terminology evolved.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

In "Evolution of a Concept," Greenblatt covers briefly the history of a number of terms pertinent to LGBTQIA+ studies including "homosexuality, homosexual," "lesbian, lesbianism," "gay," "bisexuality, bisexual," "transvestism, transsexualism, transgender," "hermaphroditism, intersexuality, DSDs," and "queer."<sup>xxxiv</sup> She notes the original terms used from both within and outside of the particular identity group, as well as the difference in time between when new terms began to be the preferred term and when the Library of Congress officially updated or adopted that term. Greenblatt also brings up continued problem areas including the use of "gay" as an umbrella term and the use of the terms "sex" and "gender."<sup>xxxv</sup> Her discussion describes the problems related to using "gay" as an umbrella term for gay men and lesbians and argues that this decision has

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<sup>xxxiii</sup> Sarah Brewer, "Out of the Closet and Onto the Shelves and the Oldest Gay Professional Organization in the U.S.," American Library Association Archives, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, June 5, 2018, [https://archives.library.illinois.edu/ala/out-of-the-closet-onto-the-shelves/#:~:text=The%20Task%20Force%20on%20Gay%20Liberation%20originally%20formed%20as%20a,Responsibilities%20Round%20Table%20\(SRRT\).&text=In%201999%20the%20ALA%20Council,Transgender%20Round%20Table%2C%20or%20GLBTRT](https://archives.library.illinois.edu/ala/out-of-the-closet-onto-the-shelves/#:~:text=The%20Task%20Force%20on%20Gay%20Liberation%20originally%20formed%20as%20a,Responsibilities%20Round%20Table%20(SRRT).&text=In%201999%20the%20ALA%20Council,Transgender%20Round%20Table%2C%20or%20GLBTRT); James V. Carmichael, ed. *Daring to Find Our Names: The Search for Lesbian and Gay Library History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998); Greenblatt, "The Treatment of LGBTIQ Concepts;" Alva T. Stone, "The LCSH Century: A Brief History of the Library of Congress Subject Headings, and Introduction to the Centennial Essays," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 29, no. 1-2 (2000) 1-15.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Greenblatt, "Evolution of a Concept."

<sup>xxxv</sup> Ibid.

contributed to the "longstanding issues of lesbian invisibility."<sup>xxxvi</sup> Certainly, this still holds true, since "gay" continues to be used in this context even ten years later. Problems with umbrella terms for LGBTQIA+ subjects in the Subject Headings persist. While "gays" also encompasses "lesbians" it does not include "bisexuals." The term "LGBTQ people" redirects to "sexual minorities," which includes "sexual minority men" and "sexual minority women" but excludes any non-binary headings.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Greenblatt's criticisms of how the LCSH group "sex" and "gender," as well as their treatment of transgender headings also still hold weight. Matt Johnson, Katelyn Angell, and K. R. Roberto have critiqued the Library of Congress specifically for their problematic cataloguing of transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary subject matter.<sup>xxxviii</sup> "Gender minority" and "gender identity" each redirect to "sexual minority" and "sex identity" even though those terms are not synonymous.<sup>xxxix</sup> Although some of the specific critiques of Johnson's 2009 article, "Transgender Subject Access: History and Current Access" and Angell and Roberto's piece on cataloguing in the May 2014 edition

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<sup>xxxvi</sup> Greenblatt, "Evolution of a Concept," 221.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> I used the Library of Congress Subject Headings database search <https://id.loc.gov/search/?q=cs:https://id.loc.gov/authorities/subjects> as well as the Library of Congress Online Catalog Subject Authority Headings <https://authorities.loc.gov/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First> websites in order to check the current status of any terms I discuss here or further below.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Greenblatt, "Evolution of a Concept," ———. "The Treatment of LGBTIQ Concepts;" Katelyn Angell, K. R. Roberto, "Cataloging," *TSQ* 1, no. 1-2 (May 2014): 53–56; Matt Johnson, "Transgender Subject Access: History and Current Practice," *Cataloguing and Classification Quarterly* 48, no. 8 (2010): 661-683.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Library of Congress Subject Headings database.

of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* have now been resolved, such as the necessity to include the term "genderqueer," other critiques like that of using "female impersonator" and "male impersonator" for "drag king" and "drag queen," remain unresolved.<sup>x1</sup> Still other terms that do not so easily fall under the category of "transgender," like "agender," "genderqueer" or "genderfluid," also remain invisible within the LCSH. The persistence of these articles, (and the necessity for me to check each term for potential changes or updates since a specific article's publication), speaks to the continual game of catchup that the LCSH must play. Critical catalogers agree this is a necessary evil, for as Johnson argues, "paramount [is] the belief that in order to avoid misleading or pejorative language, subject descriptors concerning people should reflect the terminology employed by members of the population in question to describe themselves."<sup>xli</sup>

The work of critical catalogers like Greenblatt and Johnson highlights how certain types of users become prioritized over others, even despite any conscious intention of the Library of Congress. If their Subject Headings are designed to create a "universal language," utilizing uniform terminology based on mainstream values and concepts, then these Subject Headings are created by and for a user base that is largely heterosexual and cisgender. It is only by the efforts of critical catalogers that the voices, languages, and concepts of minorities are incorporated at all. This history then, is one that illuminates the

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<sup>x1</sup> Johnson, "Transgender Subject Access."

<sup>xli</sup> Ibid.

necessity for continual change and amendment, and simultaneously, the futility of such projects. On the one hand, the classification and misclassification of queer gender and sexuality has real impact on the communities in question, both directly for those hoping to find and study such subjects, and indirectly, when these classification schemes are disseminated to other institutions and organizations. Furthermore, the way we describe and understand our gender and sexuality is continually evolving. Terms that are accurate or preferred by one group or at one time, may no longer be accurate or preferred by another group or at another time. Thus, the way that queer subject matter is categorized will continually need to be updated. This process of continual change, editing, removal, and addition of terminology illuminates that the Library of Congress's mission to be neutral and unbiased in their language is a futile one. So, if the LCSH and classification schemes can never be unbiased, what is the next step forward?

The efforts of critical catalogers to change and update the LCSH has been one of the most prominent and durable methods of queer intervention within mainstream archives. However, it is not the only one. Patrik Steorn offers a thoughtful treatment of this issue and how such problems contribute to the continual production of heteronormative narratives within museum spaces in his article, "Curating Queer Heritage: Queer Knowledge and Museum Practice." At Sweden's ethnographical museum the Nordic Museum, database searches for the terms "homosexual," "bisexual," "transsexual" or transvestite revealed zero entries in 2008.<sup>xlii</sup> Although examples of queer

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<sup>xlii</sup> Steorn, "Curating Queer Heritage: Queer Knowledge and Museum Practice." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 55, no. 3 (2012): 355–65.

subjects did exist within the Nordic Museum's archives, more complex search methods were required to excavate them. However, the lack of readily identifiable queer subjects within the database meant that these stories never got told. While silence within the archive is problematic for its exclusion of same-sex sexuality and gender variance within the database system, to only correct categorizing issues and add more terminology, is to fail to account for the underlying problem. Archives and databases are inherently normalizing spaces that reinforce historically bounded binaries and categories and elevate the majority over the minority. Tagging any same-sex sexuality as "homosexual" elides the fluidity of sexuality, just as using "transgender "(or -sexual) erases the multiplicity of gender expression, performance and identity. As Steorn argues, "labeling is a form of power."<sup>xliii</sup> Labels can give voice to experience, but they can also be used just as easily to exclude and to simplify.

Emily Drabinski contends that critical catalogers like Greenblatt, Berman, Marshall, Wolf, and Foskett believe that "classification schedules and subject headings promulgated by the Library of Congress are often wrong and should be corrected." She argues, however, that "the problem is not that cataloging happens, but that it happens incorrectly."<sup>xliv</sup> For Drabinski, these methods of correction do not do nearly enough, and in some sense, contribute to the very problem they are trying to correct. Although she acknowledges the meaningful work that these projects have accomplished, and the ways

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<sup>xliii</sup> Steorn, "Curating Queer Heritage," 361.

<sup>xliv</sup> Emily Drabinski, "Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction." *Library Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (2013): 96.

in which they have drawn attention to the politics and bias of categorization, she also notes that these projects fundamentally see the issue as a functional one, rather than a systemic one. Essentially, Drabinski questions whether "classification and subject language can ever be corrected once and for all, outside of the context in which those decisions take on meaning."<sup>xlv</sup>

Taking the example of "homosexuality" being re-categorized from "sexual deviance" to "sexual" life, Drabinski reveals how this choice is not one of merely fixing an inaccuracy, but rather a product of categories of truth and knowledge being produced discursively.<sup>xlvi</sup> From a queer perspective, the mission to create unbiased, neutral, and universalizing classification schemes is fundamentally pointless. No category is neutral because it is always produced within historically contingent contexts. Queer theory and queer analytical methods, however, can offer a framework that, rather than viewing LCSH correction as possible and desirable, instead highlights the ruptures, breaks, and incongruities of a classification scheme. A queer intervention into archives proposes "a way of thinking about boundaries that challenges the assumptions of exclusivity that lie at the foundation of library classification and cataloging practice."<sup>xlvii</sup> Queer theory, therefore, interrogates the ways in which categories assumed to be natural, fixed, stable, or mutually exclusive are, in fact, historically contingent, fixed, unstable, and mutually constitutive.

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<sup>xlv</sup> Drabinski, "Queering the Catalog," 104.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Ibid.

Queer interventions can take place where the work of critical cataloguing ends: where contingency in classification is most apparent. Scholars like Drabinski, as well as Isto Huvila, and Hope Olson offer solutions that:

... Would shift from simply teaching the user to navigate LCC and LCSH to a focus on dialogue with patrons that will help them tell the troubles of those schemes. Users can be invited into the discursive work of both using and resisting standard schemes, developing a capacity for critical reflection about subject language and classification structure.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Such solutions shift the workload away from catalogers and onto the relationships between reference librarians and researchers, and the users themselves.<sup>xlix</sup> Olson's solutions are technically- oriented, suggesting redesigning user interfaces to show related and broader terms connected to a user's search, and user tagging to aid in term description.<sup>1</sup> With the near ubiquity of Google and other search engine interfaces that employ related search suggestions with their results, many archives have adopted similar UI (User Interface) designs. Some archives offer the ability for users to tag their records, such as the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, for example.

In examining the variety of interventions developed by archivists, catalogers, and historians to resist the normalization that takes place within the archive, I return again to the question responsibility. Specifically, how should historic house museums archive and catalog their queer, or potentially queer history? For those that utilize the Library of Congress' Subject Heading scheme, the lessons of critical catalogers both past and

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<sup>xlviii</sup> Drabinski, "Queering the Catalog," 107.

<sup>xlix</sup> Isto Huvila, "Participatory Archive: Towards Decentralised Curation, Radical User Orientation, and Broader Contextualisation of Records Management," *Archival Science* 8, no. 1 (2008): 15– 36.

<sup>1</sup> Hope Olson, "Sameness and Difference: A Cultural Foundation of Classification," *Library Resource and Technical Services* 45, no. 3 (2001): 120-21.

present continue to be useful because they model the necessity of intervening and amending terminology when what exists is not enough. To employ these methods requires editing the museum's archival system to create Subject Headings that account for the queer subjects that exist within the database. It might also require potentially getting directly involved with critical cataloging efforts that push for change in the LCSH.<sup>li</sup>

Many of the methods of queer intervention proposed by Drabinski, Huvila and Olsen are also applicable to historic house museums. For HHM to effectively utilize a framework of queer possibility in their interpretation, their archives must also take this framework into account. To do so, archival systems must be able to account for the ruptures, breaks and incongruities that Drabinski argues are inherent in every categorization scheme, as well as resist the way that these schemes create mutually exclusive categories. Such methods could include ones like Olson proposes, redesigning user interfaces to show related or broader terms to the user's search and inviting user input on tagging descriptions. A subject whose gender or sexuality is difficult to label might therefore be classified under multiple Subject Headings, and have contradictory, even anachronistic index terms that describe their gender or sexuality based on the interpretation of archivists, educators, and museum archival users. A system that also

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<sup>li</sup> More recent critical cataloging efforts include the Library of Congress Subject Heading Suggestion Blog-a-Thon organized by Sandy Berman and RadicalReference, a grassroots initiative, and the Library of Congress' Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO), which allows member institutions to submit addition proposals to the Subject Headings and other classification schemes. Not all of these efforts are LGBTQIA+ focused either. A number of the current SACO projects are for racial and ethnic subject headings. Such projects provide important avenues for intersectional work, as well.

accounts for when these tagged descriptions and indexes were created would also be useful for showcasing the process by which this contested and negotiated category is being produced.

Introducing this level of ambiguity and complicated organization into an archive has the potential to make it even more challenging for users to utilize, but it also creates opportunities for the reference librarian or archivist and the museum user to engage in conversations about how classification and subject description are discursively produced. In fact, fostering the relationship between archivist and user is one of the best ways of archiving queer history responsibly. For researchers who are just beginning their search for queer history, particularly non-experts, and young students, knowing what terms to even search for is a major challenge. Many may not know the historic terms used to describe variant and non-normative gender and sexuality, or else might be shocked or triggered by the words used. A museum archivist can and should be prepared to help explain this challenge in terminology, either in-person or through search guides on their websites. And although it is important to balance the need to be historically accurate and to resist being ahistorical in our descriptions, we must also consider the queer people today who are trying to find their history. Denoting material that is possibly queer with multiple index terms, even and especially when they are contradictory, can begin to account for both responsibility toward historical subjects and toward present-day queer audiences.

## CHAPTER 4

### QUEER DOMESTICITY

Interpreting queer relationships in historic house museums seems to strike right at the heart of the central tension that exists within historic house museums. They are places that exist as both private and public, both intimate and on-display. There is an element of voyeurism at play, that can titillate, shock, or comfort. Although straight relationships have long been interpreted and speculated about in HHM, many visitors and historians balk at the “scandalous” idea such attention might be afforded to queer relationships and individuals in the same way.<sup>lii</sup> Even some liberal historians believe that to speculate, theorize or openly consider the possibility of queerness in historical subjects is to forcibly “out” these people when they themselves might not have wanted to be so.<sup>liii</sup>

Problems abound with this line of thinking. First, it assumes a presentist notion that there is a closet to be in or out of, and that the closet is a stable place at all, rather than a historically bounded and fluid space. One can be both in and out at the same time, depending on the context, person, or environment. Second, it assumes also that homosexuality and non-normative sexuality and gender have always been shunned and

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<sup>lii</sup> Alison Oram, “Going on an Outing: The Historic House and Queer Public History,” *Rethinking History* 15, no. 2 (June 2011): 189–207; ———. “Sexuality in Heterotopia: Time, Space and Love between Women in the Historic House,” *Women’s History Review* 21, no. 4 (September 2012): 533–51; Hilary Iris Lowe, “Queerest House in Cambridge,” *The Public Historian* 37, no. 2 (2015): 42–60.

<sup>liii</sup> Margaret Middleton offers a similar critique in “Queer Possibility,” *Journal of Museum Education*, 45, no. 4 (Dec 2020).

shamed in the way that they are now in the twenty-first century or have been in the twentieth. Third, it can contribute to the continued erasure of the existence of historical queerness and hide those experiences from modern queer audiences searching for their history. Finally, it ignores the ways in which audiences themselves utilize queer possibility and intuition when visiting historic house museums.

We need to seriously consider audience when discussing how and when to interpret queer possibility. What may shock a straight audience, might instead comfort a queer one. For many queer visitors, experiences encountering the historical existence of queerness can do a great deal to affirm their existence and reassure them not only that there have always been people transgressing sexual and gender norms but that such transgressions, such queerness, are also historically bounded and have shifted and changed over time.<sup>liv</sup> However, even as staff at a historic house museum considers its relationship with its audience, we should also consider what an audience brings to the museum.

Some historic house museums have begun to utilize queer theory in their interpretive practices, tackling questions of identity by utilizing the label queer in a much more capacious form. Hilary Iris Lowe argues decisively that "we should embrace the use of the word queer as vocabulary that helps us understand and interpret sexuality in the past."<sup>41</sup> Rather than rely only on a historic subject's own vocabulary of identity to

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<sup>liv</sup> Melinda Marie Jetté, "Through the Queer Looking-Glass: The Future of LGBTQ Public History," *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (May 2019): 6–18; Susan Ferentinos, "Ways of Interpreting Queer Pasts," *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (2019): 19–43.

determine their sexuality, public historians have begun to, and should, expand their use of the term queer as a "broad definition ... [for] sexual and gender expressions outside of societal norms."<sup>lv</sup> Such a call to action is deceptively simple, but, of course, is not as straightforward as it initially sounds. As Lowe herself acknowledges, to do so requires becoming comfortable with "imperfect definitions and imperfect evidence."<sup>lvi</sup> However, to rely too heavily on only the evidence within archives is to accept the silences of archives as a perfect representation of the past, rather than an imperfect institution with power and an agenda to preserve, record and interpret select versions of the past. Rather than applying modern identities that can flatten the complexity of historic genders and sexualities, using "queer" offers a way to name, without labeling. Such a technique is one that that can be used to great effect when employing a queer possibility framework. In particular, it definitively acknowledges the intuition of queer visitors who suspect that a historical figure may have been queer.

Lowe also explores other complexities in telling queer history in her study of the Emily Dickinson House where she contends that literary historic houses are uniquely positioned to tackle issues of evidentiary silence, and questions of identity and programmatic opportunities. Additionally, their positions as interpreters of literature and history enable these sites to "question the nature of fiction, and the fiction of biography and history."<sup>lvii</sup> Experiments in interactive wall exhibits like at the Emily Dickinson

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<sup>lv</sup> Lowe, "Queerest House in Cambridge," 47.

<sup>lvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>lvii</sup> Lowe, "Dwelling in Possibility," 54.

House invite guests to explore how the author might have engaged in the literary process and can draw attention to the queer undertones and themes within her work. Such exhibits go some way toward a more reflexive approach to the nature of how historical narrative is built and maintained.<sup>lviii</sup>

Not only are literary historic house museums well-positioned to interrogate the nature of historical narrative and challenge the public's assumptions about how history is written and rewritten, but historic house museums are also unique spaces where queer audiences can push back against heteronormative narratives and assert their own interpretive authority. This blurring of boundaries between the curator and the visitor can happen because "the differences between past and present may be apprehended in the historic house, [where] the dissonance between contrasting forms of interpretation and the spatial qualities of the site can alert the visitor ... to the queerness and the otherness of the past."<sup>lix</sup> Alison Oram, in her analysis of historic homes in the United Kingdom, argues that these sites function as heterotopias, spaces that contain multiple time periods and pasts in the same spatial footprint. The most distinct features of heterotopias that can be found in HHM, Oram argues, "are the way that they enfold layers of time, the multiple meanings attached to space within them, and above all, the manner in which contradictory elements are brought together in this type of site."<sup>lx</sup> As visitors engage with these heterotopic sites, the expectations and assumptions they bring to a historic house

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<sup>lviii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>lix</sup> Oram, "Going on an Outing."

<sup>lx</sup> Oram, "Sexuality in Heterotopia."

museum may at any moment be reinforced, "undercut or challenged, by intimations and direct evidence of an alternative strand of the story."<sup>lxi</sup> Oram's analysis seems to assert that a visitor's preconceptions of history are just as central as the house museum's position as a heterotopia for creating a uniquely engaging and complex space of shared authority for understanding the past.

Oram's case studies for her arguments are Shibden Hall, Sissinghurst Castle Garden, and Plas Newydd Historic House and Gardens, historic homes that despite having queer occupants, have continued to promote national narratives that the heritage industry typically produces: visions of an idealized, orderly, and heteronormative past. Despite this, LGBTQIA+ people visiting house museums "have actively sought similarities with the queer lives of the past, sometimes against the grain of the dominant curatorial narratives offered at the property."<sup>lxii</sup> In doing so, the visitor seizes interpretive responsibilities, analyzing the evidence of the home to come to conclusions about the queerness of the house's subjects, regardless of what labels, tour guides or literature say otherwise. The visitor brings their own intuition, knowledge, and analytical skill to create multiple "possible readings [that] overlap to disrupt heteronormative presumptions ... and reveal elements of queer domesticity."<sup>lxiii</sup> In this way, we can see how introducing queer possibility does not need to be done didactically. Rather, we can include, acknowledge, and highlight those elements within the house that disrupt rather than

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<sup>lxi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>lxii</sup> Oram, "Going on an Outing."

<sup>lxiii</sup> Ibid.

perpetuate a heteronormative vision of the past, while also recognizing, rather than dismissing, the readings an audience will bring to the experience.

A queer possibility framework also extends further than interpretive labels, tours, and literature. By intervening in the archive and research process itself, the possibility of queerness is explored at the foundations of the historic house and conceives of queerness more expansively. Rather than explore historical subjects' queerness within the bedroom and personal spaces, as The Jane Addams Hull House and Pendarvis Historic Site do, a queer possibility framework looks at the ways in which the domestic space as a whole is queered by its inhabitants whose lives and work transgressed certain gender and/or sexuality norms of the time. Indeed, an attention to this "queer domesticity" incorporates labor into the space. For many of these subjects, their work was only made possible by their domestic arrangements and queer partnerships. Reframing research and interpretation around exploring how these subjects' labor was inextricably linked to their queerness and vice versa helps us expand our understanding of queer pasts beyond only the intimate space of the bedroom and out into the means by which these historical figures managed their lives and negotiated the constraints of the society in which they lived.

Another important consideration to make when interpreting queer history, particularly history that is scant on evidence, is *where* in the house museum to interpret it. The traditional space to interpret relationships, queer or otherwise, has been the bedroom. It is a space that signifies family, childbirth, sex, and sexuality and all things intimate. To introduce the potential queerness of historical subjects is to introduce a host of questions,

both spoken and not, the most prominent of which: were these figures sexually or romantically intimate with others of the same gender? In many cases, we can never know for sure, but such a question sidetracks the point of the discussion of queer possibility and reduces the relationship to a question of bedroom activities. The point is not to speculate about specific sexuality or identity, but to consider queerness more capaciously; to use it as a lens to understand the significance that labor and economic circumstances had for enabling household arrangements that were non-normative and transgressive.

## CHAPTER 5

### “THE DRESSMAKERS”

In order to explore queer domesticity and implement a queer possibility framework in my research process and interpretive practices, I interned with Elfreth's Alley, a historic house museum in Philadelphia, PA. The Alley interprets the history of the street and the 33 houses that have been preserved on it for over 300 years. My process began when I first visited the museum and learned about the two eighteenth-century female mantua makers who lived and worked there. I felt an intuitive sense that what these women were doing in their living and working arrangements was queer, and I used those questions that had been sparked in that visit to guide the initial stages of my research. Operating from a position that understands straightness to be just as constructed as queerness, I studied the economic circumstances and household arrangements of women who lived in eighteenth-century Philadelphia to understand how Sarah Melton and Mary Smith fit or did not fit into these patterns. Along the way I learned that a third woman joined Melton's household a few decades after Smith had died. Based on their labor and living arrangements, and bequeathal and inheritance practices, I argued that their household should be understood as a queer one (see Appendix A).<sup>lxiv</sup> Initially, I

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<sup>lxiv</sup> I conducted this research within the context of a graduate level seminar during the spring semester of 2020, with the intention to take this work into my internship with Elfreth's Alley that summer. The research paper that is reproduced in Appendix A also examines another female household in Philadelphia during the same time frame. Similar to the women at Elfreth's Alley, the household contained two Quaker women, Rebecca Jones and Hannah Catherall, who both worked as teachers and lived together. Their relationship was seen by their community as a committed partnership not unlike a marriage between a man and a woman.

planned to use this research and analysis to construct a new tour for Elfreth's Alley, one that specifically prompted questions about eighteenth-century household and family arrangements, explored women's labor, legal, and domestic roles, and encouraged considering these women as potentially queer. I intended to write the tour, experiment with giving it to visitors, solicit feedback, and train other volunteer tour guides on how to incorporate this interpretation into their basic tour.

However, the COVID-19 Pandemic put a halt to this plan. City stay-at-home orders and the closure of the Alley necessitated shifting all museum activities into virtual ones. Working with Elfreth's Alley Associate Director, Ted Maust, and fellow intern Joe Makuc, we decided to take our ideas for in-person tours and turn them into an eight-episode podcast called *The Alley Cast*.<sup>lxv</sup> I used my research to create the first two episodes of the podcast, "The Dressmakers," and "Spinsters, Runaway Wives, and Widows." Given that Episode 1 contains the most direct discussion of the queer history, I focus this chapter's analysis on that episode (see Appendix B for a full transcript of the episode), examining how I utilized intuition, a queer possibility framework, and queer domesticity to provoke new understandings of a story potentially familiar to the Elfreth's Alley audience.

The audience was central in my mind as I began writing. Not only did we have to build an audience, but we also had to keep them engaged. To do so, I started the episode by encouraging the listener to imagine what they would see if they were to walk into

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<sup>lxv</sup> "Podcast," The Elfreth's Alley Museum, <http://www.elfrethsalley.org/thealleycast>.

Sarah Melton, Mary Smith and Elizabeth Carr’s home. This method served a few purposes. As others have argued, podcasts are a visual medium; vividly describing the house helps hook listeners and keep them interested.<sup>lxvi</sup> This was especially important since it would be the only way for visitors to “see” the house for the several months the museum would be closed. This audio description can continue to be used as an interpretive tool that provides more accessibility to those who cannot visit in person as well as those who are blind or visually impaired. The description of the house was drawn from two of only a few sources the Alley has about house #126 and Melton and Smith. A fire insurance survey of the house (and my own familiarity from visits) helped me describe the layout and rooms.<sup>lxvii</sup> Smith’s 1766 last will and testament provided a list of all their furniture and possessions, which were owned in common.<sup>lxviii</sup> However, these sources were not enough to entirely flesh out all the ways in which the house might have been organized. Right from the beginning of this episode, I employed imagination and possibility to fill in the gaps between the sources and teased out where the women might have worked and how they might have used their rooms. By employing such methods from the beginning, I hoped alert the listener to the methods I would be using later in my analysis of Smith, Melton and Carr as queer.

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<sup>lxvi</sup> Hannah Hethmon, *Your Museum Needs a Podcast: A Step-By-Step Guide to Podcasting on a Budget for Museums, History Organizations, and Cultural Nonprofits*, (self-published, 2018) Kindle edition.

<sup>lxvii</sup> Philadelphia Contributionship, “Philadelphia Contributionship Survey #736: A House and Kitchen Belonging to Mary Smith,” 1762, Elfreth’s Alley Association Records Collection.

<sup>lxviii</sup> Will of Mary Smith, 1766, 286, (Book N, 525), Philadelphia Register of Wills, Philadelphia City Archives, City Hall Annex.

Another way I hoped to keep the audience engaged was by posing questions, which is a common tactic when leading in-person dialogic tours. It is a helpful method to help the audience keep track of where the author is leading the narrative. The questions were also modeled off those that I asked throughout my own research process when I traced the history of Melton, Smith and Carr to invite the listener into the process of historical research and interpretation itself. Even before I walk the listeners through the layout of the house, I ask them to consider what their first thoughts are of Philadelphia in the late eighteenth century. In doing so, I intended to illuminate the typical narratives that the public are given about this time period and the ways in which the story I would be presenting might undercut or expand those narratives and the assumptions we have about this part of our nation's past.

I do not introduce the argument that Melton and Smith were queer until halfway through the episode, within the context of their historical social and legal statuses and designations (i.e., single, spinster, married, widow) and the discrepancies that exist within the sources that document them. Within the methodology of queer possibility, I ask why those discrepancies exist and then provide several possible answers, including queer ones. I explore how their household arrangements differed from heterosexual ones at the time, as well as their non-normative bequeathal practices, arguing that "the relationship between Sarah and Mary, and later Sarah and Elizabeth can be considered queer, operating as they did outside of the normative structure of patriarchal household and the

normative arrangements of heterosexual unions.”<sup>lxix</sup> I also discussed how their relative economic security, and ownership of their house were key to their ability to live independent lives with one another.

Although I drew upon Lowe’s encouragement to engage the public with a more expansive use of the term queer, challenges presented themselves in how deeply to discuss queer theory within this episode without boring or alienating listeners. Unlike in-person tours, podcast episodes cannot be adjusted based on the interest level of one’s audience. As a result, I steered too far away from giving a detailed definition and explanation of my use of queer theory. In other ways, the podcast format is a useful one to expand where and how historic house museums discuss queerness. Rather than limit such a discussion to the personal spaces of the home, I was able to develop build this discussion of queerness centered on the labor of these women. By exploring the economic conditions of female mantua makers and the way in which Smith bequeathed the house to Melton who did the same for Carr, I was able to make it more clear to listeners that queerness does not necessarily entail only sexuality but can and should be considered more expansively to include household arrangements and means of economic independence. By sharing the few pieces of evidence that document these women’s lives with the audience and providing the necessary context, I invited the listener to consider how the choice and ability to live the way these women was so non-normative for the time period.

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<sup>lxix</sup> Isabel Steven, “Yoke-Fellows and Life Companions: Exploring the Queer Possibility of Female-Coupled Households in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,” unpublished mss.

## CHAPTER 6

### “THE PUBLIC UNIVERSAL FRIEND IN PHILADELPHIA”

Episode 3, “The Public Universal Friend in Philadelphia,” engages more fully the interpretive methods that historians like Lowe advocate that I hesitated on in “The Dressmakers.”<sup>lxx</sup> Starting at the introduction, I state how the episode will delve into a discussion of gender nonconformity, trans theory, and historiography. Unlike episode 1, where I minimized my discussion of queer theory, I openly employed trans theory to strengthen my exploration of and intervention in the historiography of the Friend (see Appendix C for the full episode transcript). Despite improvements in some areas, the episode suffers in others, namely in my writing and narrative choices. A trans friend and colleague who works as a trans sensitivity reader reached out to me to address the issues of language, names, and pronouns.<sup>lxxi</sup>

In one of the first sentences of the episode, I describe a group of people walking down a street in Philadelphia, before mentioning the Public Universal Friend.

They are an unusual set of men and women, their leader even more so, at least by eighteenth-century standards. This person is dressed in men's ministerial robes over a loose shirt and full skirt. A clerical collar adorns

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<sup>lxx</sup> “Podcast,” The Elfreth’s Alley Museum, <http://www.elfrethsalley.org/thealleycast>.

<sup>lxxi</sup> Content Warning: this chapter contains a discussion of deadnames and “born a woman” narratives that individuals may find triggering. I do not use the actual deadname within this chapter and replace that name with “[deadname]” for the captions of image that I include of the Public Universal Friend. I refer to viewing Appendix C to read the full transcript of episode 3 where I have retained my original use of the deadname and “born a woman” language in order to preserve the integrity of the transcript and because this chapter is a reflective piece that directly engages with the mistakes I made while writing this episode.

the throat, and women's shoes peek out from the robes as they clip along the street. The individual's loose chestnut hair falls in ringlets, covered with a light gray men's beaver hat. Some of the women and a couple of the men have adopted a similar androgynous style of dress, though none as completely as their minister.<sup>lxxii</sup>



Portrait of [Deadname]/the Public Universal Friend by J.L.D. Mathies, 1816. Wilkinson Collection, Courtesy of the Yates County History Center, Penn Yan, NY.

Although I had intended to mark the Friend as distinct from the group of men and women that accompanied the Friend, it is not clear to the audience how the Friend did or

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<sup>lxxii</sup> Isabel Steven. The Public Universal Friend in Philadelphia. *The Alley Cast*. Podcast audio. July 8, 2020. <http://www.elfrethsalley.org/podcast/2020/7/7/episode-3-the-public-universal-friend-in-philadelphia>.

did not fit into this group with regard to gender. Since I mention the Friend after the “set of men and women,” a listener could assume that the Friend was one of either category, and as I state a few moments later, the Friend was neither. While I rely on an audience’s assumed general understanding of normative gender expression in the eighteenth century, it could have been a moment to clearly and deliberately illuminate those norms so that a listener, particularly one with no background in this subject matter, could understand that the Friend was overtly transgressing those norms. If one of intentions of a queer possibility framework is to highlight the disconnect between the public’s understanding of historical categories assumed to be natural and stable and the ways they were actually contingent and constantly being negotiated, then this would have been a prime opportunity to do this.

This episode encounters a few of the challenges that other historians face when writing about trans history: “born a woman (or man)” narratives, deadnaming, and misgendering.<sup>lxxiii</sup> Within this chapter I will discuss how I engaged with each of these concerns, all of which need to be examined within an archival context and from an audience perspective. I began my research on the Public Universal Friend by reading the historiography on the Friend. Each historian has their own method for discussing the Friend, particularly before the transformation, but nearly all rely on the “born a woman” narrative and use the deadname and feminine pronouns (she/her/hers). Some alternate

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<sup>lxxiii</sup> The deadname is the birth or former name of a transgender or non-binary individual that they no longer use. To misgender someone is to use words, particularly pronouns and titles, that do not correctly reflect the gender with which they identify.

using feminine and masculine pronouns to convey the way that the Friend crossed gender or else based on which pronouns contemporaries of the Friend used. Archives do the same in their cataloging and indexing of the Friend. For example, in Figure 1, Yates County Historical Center uses the deadname in tandem with the title Public Universal Friend to caption the painting. In order to find the Friend in the archival and historical record and to formally cite those sources is to be forced to misgender and deadname this historical trans individual. Indeed, the Friend is a prime example that illuminates how archives operate as normalizing spaces that elide, minimize and erase gender variance, nonconformity, and historical subjects' autonomy. These issues then continue to be reproduced in the works written by historians, including myself.

Early in the episode, I describe the illness that prompted the transformation of the Public Universal Friend. I describe the Friend using the deadname, and as being “born a woman.” Another difficulty arises in how to describe this period of pre-transition for the Friend. Again, using this phrase emphasizes a category of identity that the Friend rejected. The writing we have from the Friend is predominantly from post-transformation, which should give historians a clear model for conceptualizing and describing the Friend's gender. Moreover, given that we do not have writing from before the Friend *became* the Public Universal Friend, we cannot know how the Friend experienced gender or felt about identity before this transformation. What we do have are the sources written by contemporaries, many of whom did not accept, understand, or respect the Friend's gender.

The second component of the “born a woman” narrative is a contemporary one. No matter what difficulties exist in writing about trans history, to use a phrase like “born a woman” even in a historical context has a harmful impact on trans people today. Using such a phrase or one similar (i.e., biologically/genetically female [or male]) is one that simplifies a much more complicated experience for transgender people. It is also commonly used to invalidate a transgender person's identity, to center someone's identity around a gender that they are not, and to prioritize biological sex as the most important way to categorize someone. Not only is this language harmful for trans individuals listening to the podcast, but it also imparts the wrong lessons to listeners who are unfamiliar with how to appropriately talk about and to transgender people and trans history. The appropriate phrase I should have used in describing the Public Universal Friend is “assigned female at birth” which acknowledges that someone else decided what that individual’s gender identity and expression would be. Not only is this phrase more respectful toward trans people, but it can highlight the ways that gender, rather than being a naturalized category, is instead constructed.

Primary sources are also clear that the Friend and the Friend’s disciples rejected both the deadname and feminine pronouns, whereas those who opposed the Friend continued to use both. Such evidence within the primary source material offers a clear course on how to responsibly interpret the Friend and how to resist conceptualizing the Friend’s gender from a binary perspective. Historians differ on what pronouns to use for the Friend. Some mix masculine and feminine pronouns, others use masculine when talking about the Friend – taking their directive from some followers who used

he/him/his – and feminine when talking about the Friend pre-transformation. I decided to never use pronouns, except within primary source quotations. I took my cue from historian Scott Larson who resists the structures of grammar and conventions of historical scholarship that enforce gendered pronouns and given names.<sup>lxxiv</sup> Doing so can “unsettle the ease with which gender seems to translate across time and across radically different structures of belief.”<sup>lxxv</sup>

The decision to use only the deadname or gendered pronouns almost exclusively within direct quotations is a good one but requires even more care and intentionality than I initially realized. The first instance I use the Friend's deadname is within the context of the Friend before and during the transformation. In order to understand the significance of the transformation, some explanation and knowledge of who the person was is required. However, the frequency with which I used the Friend's deadname should have been minimized, and in some cases I should have used alternative methods to describe the transformation into the Public Universal Friend, forgoing more elegant writing style choices for a more awkward phrasing that avoids misgendering and deadnaming.

The second instance I used the Friend's deadname was within two direct quotations. Although direct quotations can be effective and intriguing to listen to, the first consideration should be whether using a direct quotation containing the deadname or gendered pronouns is actually necessary for telling the story. Within the episode, the first

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<sup>lxxiv</sup> Scott Larson, “‘Indescribable Being’: Theological Performances of Genderlessness in the Society of the Publick Universal Friend, 1776–1819.” *Early American Studies* 12, no. 3 (2014): 583.

<sup>lxxv</sup> Ibid.

use of the deadname within a primary source quotation did not actually convey new information or could have been partially cut to avoid using the Friend's deadname. Conversely, the second instance I used a primary source quotation was one that works well in both a historical context and a contemporary one. In this case, it showed how the Friend and the Friend's disciples responded to people's use of the Friend's deadname. They rejected that they knew anyone by that name and corrected the person by addressing the Friend as such: "One individual recounted how a follower, when asked 'where about Jemima Wilkinson's house was [...] replied that she knew no such person; 'the friend' lived a little piece below.'" This quote is not only effective for how it shows the way that the Friend's followers resisted the attempts of others to enforce a normative gender onto the Friend, but also models to a modern audience how to respond when people misgender or deadname a trans individual.

The lessons from this episode of *The Alley Cast* illuminate the necessity of deeply considering to whom we are responsible when interpreting queer history, the ease with which historic house museums can and do reproduce narratives of gender normativity, and how assuming stable categories of gender across time obscures trans history. The level of authority and trust that the public has placed in public history sites and museums means that we have a responsibility to resist the normalizing narratives are produced in archives and the structures of historical scholarship that enforce binary and highly gendered frameworks of analysis and means of interpreting, writing, and talking about queer and trans history. Sometimes that will mean breaking with conventions, like refusing to use the deadname of a subject like the Friend in archival and interpretive

practices. At other times it will mean talking frankly with visitors to explain why researchers must search using the deadname to find information. The experience with this episode also highlights the importance of collaboration and seeking out the expertise of members of the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly transgender individuals. Interpreters that engage in complex discussions of queer and trans history should be working with sensitivity readers in order to be as respectful as possible toward LGBTQIA+ audiences.

And when institutions get things wrong, they must be willing to acknowledge and fix the mistakes they made. Given the extent of the concerns about this episode, Elfreth's Alley decided some type of reparative action needed to be taken. Rather than re-record an episode that had already received over 100 downloads, I published a blog post in which I addressed and explained each of the issues, provided a copy of a new, annotated transcript that highlighted the specific instances where historical analysis was faulty, and an apology to those who might have been harmed by insensitive writing (see Appendix D for the full blog post). We also addressed the concerns in a behind-the-scenes episode and added content warnings at the beginning of the episode and in the episode description to prepare future listeners of what they would be hearing.

## CHAPTER 7

### LEAVING THE BEDROOM

Museums are not neutral; their origins were borne out of colonialism and white supremacy.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Despite this reality, many museums choose instead to embrace the myth that their spaces are objective, apolitical, balanced, and separate from present-day social justice activism. Acknowledging that museums are not neutral is only the first step toward questioning, disrupting, and dismantling the role that museums have in upholding white supremacy. Only then can “museums have the potential to be relevant, socially-engaged spaces ... acting as agents of positive change.”<sup>lxxvii</sup> This movement originated

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<sup>lxxvi</sup> Museums Are Not Neutral With Movement Co-Founders, Museums Are Not Neutral, last revised May 14, 2020, <https://www.museumsarenotneutral.com/learn-more/monument-lab>; La Tanya S. Autry, “Museums Are Not Neutral,” Artstuffmatters (blog),

<https://artstuffmatters.wordpress.com/museums-are-not-neutral/>; La Tanya S. Autry and Mike Murawski, “Museums Are Not Neutral: We Are Stronger Together,” *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2019); La Tanya S. Autry, “Changing the Things I Cannot Accept: Museums Are Not Neutral,” Artstuffmatters (blog), October 15, 2017, <https://artstuffmatters.wordpress.com/2017/10/15/changing-the-things-i-cannot-accept-museums-are-not-neutral/>; La Tanya S. Autry, Mike Murawski, and Kaywin Feldman, “Museums Are Not Neutral,” Interview by Suse Anderson, Museopunks, Episode 27, Podcast audio, June 28, 2018, <https://soundcloud.com/museopunks/s2-ep27-museums-are-not-neutral>; Mike Murawski, “Museums Are Not Neutral,” Art Museum Teaching (blog), August 31, 2017, <https://artmuseumteaching.com/2017/08/31/museums-are-not-neutral/>; Laura Raicovich, “Museum Resolution: Dismantle the Myth of Neutrality,” Walker Art Magazine, Walker Art Center, January 8, 2019, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/soundboard-museum-resolutions-laura-raicovich>; Anabel Roque Rodriguez, “Museums Are Not Neutral,” Anabel Roque Rodriguez (blog), September 13, 2017, <https://www.anabelroque.com/blog/museums-are-not-neutral>, reposted on Art Museum Teaching (blog), <https://artmuseumteaching.com/2017/09/13/museum-are-not-neutral-by-anabel-roque-rodriguez/>; Anabel Roque Rodriguez, “The Myth of Museum Neutrality or Business over Education,” Anabel Roque Rodriguez (blog), July 18, 2018, <https://www.anabelroque.com/blog/museum-neutrality-myth>; Nathan “Mudy” Sentance, “Museums Are Not F\*\*king Neutral: The Myth of Neutrality in Memory Institutions, Your Neutrality Is Not Our Neutral,” Archival Decolonist (blog), January 18, 2018, <https://archivaldecolonist.com/2018/01/18/your-neutral-is-not-our-neutral/>; Jillian Steinhauer, “Museums Have a Duty to be Political,” The Art Newspaper, March 20, 2018, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/comment/museums-have-a-duty-to-be-political>

<sup>lxxvii</sup> Murawski, “Museums Are Not Neutral.”

within the art museum world, led by La Tanya S. Autry and Mike Murawski, but its mission to expose the myth of neutrality and demand equity-based change across the field is one that applies to the public history field and historic house museums as well.

In order to interpret queer history responsibly, particularly with a framework of queer possibility, historic house museums must acknowledge that they are not neutral and embrace a mission that is committed to dismantling their institutional racism, white supremacy and colonialist legacy. If a queer possibility framework begins the work of disrupting hetero- and cisnormative views of the past, then it must be employed with a larger commitment to exposing its own legacy of white supremacy and colonialism, disrupting inaccurate assumptions about the history of race, racism, and America's foundations, and using its position of authority to advocate for socially just change. In other words, to interpret queer history, museums must also be intersectional.<sup>lxxviii</sup>

The importance of intersectionality was made strikingly evident during the protests over the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and so many other Black Americans, and against police brutality and white supremacy that occurred throughout the summer of 2020. These protests sparked a widespread discussion in what the role of museums should be during a moment such as this.<sup>lxxix</sup> Many museums released statements of solidarity and acknowledged their own complacency in upholding

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<sup>lxxviii</sup> Megan Springate, "A Note about Intersectionality," in *LGBTQ America: A Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*, ed. Megan Springate, (Washington, DC: National Park Foundation, 2016).

<sup>lxxix</sup> "Racism, Unrest, and the Role of the Museum Field," American Alliance of Museums, June 9, 2020, <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/06/09/racism-unrest-and-the-role-of-the-museum-field/>.

systems of racism and white supremacy. Some promised to implement plans of action to address their institutional racism, including staff sensitivity and culturally responsive trainings, hiring more BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) staff, creating DEAI (Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion) committees, and more diverse programming.<sup>lxxx</sup>

Elfreth's Alley was no different. We halted current activity to discuss what the Alley's role should be within the current moment and how to proceed in the future. We also reassessed the trajectory of *The Alley Cast's* later episodes to more fully attend to the history of Black residents on the Alley, and the impact that systemic racism has had on the street's development and preservation as a historic landmark.<sup>lxxxi</sup> The protests of the summer also saw a conversation that stressed the importance of listening to and

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<sup>lxxx</sup> Taylor Dafoe, Caroline Goldstein, "The George Floyd Protests Spurred Museums to Promise Change. Here's What They've Actually Done So Far," *Artnet*, August 14, 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/museums-diversity-equity-commitments-1901564>; Alex Greenberger, Tessa Solomon, "Read Statements from Major U.S. Museums about the George Floyd Protests," *Artnews*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/museums-statements-george-floyd-protests-1202689578/>; Alex Greenberger, Tessa Solomon, "Major U.S. Museums Criticized for Responses to Ongoing George Floyd Protests," *Artnews*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/museums-controversy-george-floyd-protests-1202689494/>; Rebecca Ballhaus, Dustin Volz, "Museum Curators Sift Through History of George Floyd Protests in Real Time," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/museum-curators-sift-through-protest-history-in-real-time-11591822497>.

<sup>lxxxi</sup> Joe Makuc. The Racial Politics of Domestic Labor. *The Alley Cast*. Podcast audio. July 15, 2020. <http://www.elfrethsalley.org/podcast/2020/7/7/episode-4-the-racial-politics-of-domestic-labor>; Ted Maust, Isabel Steven, Joe Makuc, An Industrial City. *The Alley Cast*. Podcast audio. July 22, 2020, <http://www.elfrethsalley.org/podcast/2020/7/22/episode-5-an-industrial-neighborhood>; Ted Maust, Isabel Steven, Joe Makuc. "Urban Decay" and the City of Homes. *The Alley Cast*. Podcast audio. August 5, 2020, <http://www.elfrethsalley.org/podcast/2020/8/5/episode-6-urban-decay-and-the-city-of-homes>; Ted Maust, Isabel Steven, Joe Makuc. When Elfreth's Alley Became Historic. *The Alley Cast*. Podcast audio. August 12, 2020, <http://www.elfrethsalley.org/podcast/2020/8/12/episode-7-when-elfreth-s-alley-became-historic>; Enya Xiang, Ted Maust, Isabel Steven. Renewal. *The Alley Cast*. Podcast audio. August 19, 2020. <http://www.elfrethsalley.org/podcast/2020/8/19/episode-8-renewal>.

amplifying black and other POC voices, both historical and in the present. Elfreth's Alley decided to dedicate their social media platforms to amplifying the voices of Black educators, historians, journalists and activists.

We also decided that fully dedicating our marketing and social media presence toward amplifying Black voices meant that a delay in promoting the launch of *The Alley Cast* was necessary. We had planned set to release the first three episodes in June during Pride Month since they contained queer subject matter. In some ways, this was a sound decision. When the entirety of a museum's content and interaction with the public shifts online, marketing strategies that capitalize on trending hashtags and social media threads is necessary, being able to tag a podcast episode as relevant to Pride Month can gain you a larger and more diverse audience. Initially, episode 3, "The Public Universal Friend in Philadelphia" was set to release on Thursday, June 25, right at the end of Pride Month. However, when the George Floyd protests began during the last week of May, Elfreth's Alley's Board of Trustees considered delaying a large fundraiser that was to be the platform for publicizing *The Alley Cast's* launch. Such a delay would then, in turn, delay the release of the podcast until July. Although there was some reluctance at first, ultimately, we decided to delay the release, waiting to use social media to publicize the weekly release of episodes.

I illustrate this moment because it exemplifies some issues at play if museums not only decide to interpret queer history as only specialized programming, but also to interpret it in isolation from other issues of social justice. Such a choice favors surface-level engagement and capitalize on a "safe," widely recognized celebration of LGBTQ+

life, at the cost of grappling with more complicated understandings of the queer past. Furthermore, museums who present Pride-specific programming often fail to consider the larger impact that such choices have.

In our case, to continue producing episodes of *The Alley Cast* so that they could be released during Pride Month would have been a choice to recuse the museum from the national conversation happening over anti-Black racism and police brutality. It would have favored marketing strategies over nuanced engagement and social justice work. In this particular case, it would have left unacknowledged the very history of Pride itself: that the first moment of the modern gay movement was a riot started by Black and brown trans women. To responsibly interpret queer history, it must be intersectional; homophobia, racism, and police brutality have been and continue to be intimately intertwined and that reality must be acknowledged when museums interpret queer history.

The way in which programming and marketing are so closely intertwined also speaks to the practical necessities for institution-wide commitment to creating a socially just museum. This engagement must not just occur within the education or interpretation departments but must happen across the institution from marketing to human resources, from frontline staff to the executive board. One key method to do this is by implementing Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI) initiatives.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> To begin this work,

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<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Nicole Ivy, “Facing Change: A New Report from the American Alliance of Museums Working Group,” American Alliance of Museums, May 1, 2018, <https://www.aam-us.org/2018/05/01/facing-change-a-new-report-from-the-american-alliance-of-museums-working-group-on-deai/>.

no matter the size of the institution, is to confront difficult truths. An unfortunate reality is that many historic house museums have only a small and overworked staff. This makes starting these initiatives difficult and the amount to do can feel overwhelming but is still of the utmost importance. For example, at Elfreth's Alley, where I laid the barest groundwork of DEAI work, the list to accomplish was long. Policies like non-discrimination, Land Acknowledgement and diversity and inclusion statements needed to be drafted; volunteer and board recruitment needed to be assessed and changed accordingly to create more diverse leadership and staffing; training seminars on anti-racism, gender and sexuality sensitivity, and handling complex or difficult historical topics needed to be incorporated into the museum's practices, both at initial volunteer and staff on-boarding, and routinely throughout the year.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Just as archives need to incorporate queer possibility and fluidity into their cataloging practices, so too do they

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<sup>lxxxiii</sup> "Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Resources," American Alliance of Museums, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/resource-library/diversity-equity-accessibility-and-inclusion-resources/>; "Why Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Matter for Nonprofits," National Council of Nonprofits, <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/why-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-matter-nonprofits>; "How to Begin Equity Work in Your Organization with Little or No Money," North Carolina Center for Nonprofits; "Guide to Indigenous Land and Territorial Acknowledgements for Cultural Institutions," Guide to Indigenous Land and Territorial Acknowledgements for Cultural Institutions, <http://landacknowledgements.org/>; Kenneth C. Turino, and Max van Balgooy, eds. *Reinventing the Historic House Museum, New Approaches and Proven Solutions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield/AASLH, 2019); Melinda Marie Jetté, "Through the Queer Looking-Glass: The Future of LGBTQ Public History," *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (May 2019): 6–18; Chris Taylor, "Diversity and Inclusion," *The Inclusive Historian*, June 10, 2019, <https://inclusivehistorian.com/diversity-and-inclusion/>; Kenneth Turino, "Historic House Museums," *The Inclusive Historian's Handbook*, April 12, 2019, <https://inclusivehistorian.com/historic-house-museums/>.

need to implement anti-racist archival descriptions to update outdated and offensive language.<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

Applying a queer possibility framework to historical interpretation within a historic house museum will only be as effective as the institution's commitment to meaningfully unpacking the ways in which museums themselves have been institutions of white supremacy, colonialism, and heteronormativity and how their legacy has perpetuated historical narratives that are overwhelmingly white, European, and straight. For if the framework of queer possibility truly seeks to unsettle and disrupt our comfortable assumptions of the past, then the participation of museums in creating those assumptions will also have to be unsettled and disrupted. This is also why engaging, listening to and valuing queer voices and outside perspectives is so important. Queer people have long been involved in museums but being forced to remain in the closet for fear of discrimination has meant that their perspectives as queer people have gone unheard.<sup>lxxxv</sup> Working with community partners, stakeholders and sensitivity readers will help create a museum that is responsible toward its community and a place that advocates for positive change.

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<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Alexis A. Antracoli, Annalise Berdini, Kelly Bolding, Faith Charlton, Amanda Ferrara, Valencia Johnson, and Katy Rawdon, "Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia: Anti-Racist Description Resources," October 2020. [https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/ardr\\_202010.pdf](https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/ardr_202010.pdf)

<sup>lxxxv</sup> Adair, "House Museums or Walk-In Closets?"

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

In chapter 2, I argued that one of the driving concerns for historic house museums that interpret queer history is how to do it responsibly and what it means to be responsible. Historians have suggested a number of methods, from increasing specialized and integrated programming, to sharing evidentiary and interpretive processes, to queering the museum. I have argued that responsible queer history can be achieved through a framework that takes historical queerness as a baseline possibility, where the burden of proof is lessened by embracing both queer historian and queer visitor intuition, and by using “queer” to describe behavior and positionality rather than identity.

By exploring social, gender, and sexuality norms in the eighteenth century in *The Alley Cast*, I invited audiences to consider how the subjects of episode 1, "The Dressmakers," and episode 3, "The Public Universal Friend in Philadelphia," were transgressing those norms. I described these historical figures as queer because their lives and choices destabilized categories of gender and social organization assumed to be natural. Such an interpretive position relies less on issues of archival silence and questions of individual identity, and instead examines how individuals were both shaped by and impacted the community and society within which they were embedded. This shift in focus and framing is one that I believe to be important for the future of queer interpretation, especially within the historic house museum world. Even if an HHM's inhabitants were not explicitly queer, studying history with an attention to the ways that

societal norms were subverted or transgressed -- in other words, by utilizing queer analytical theory -- can provide much deeper insight into history traditionally interpreted at an HHM.

And yet, issues of individual labels and identities persist. The problems that public historians face in determining what labels or descriptors to use for historical figures were nowhere more relevant than in episode 3 of *The Alley Cast*. When researching the Friend, I confronted the ongoing issue of archives as heteronormative spaces and sites of queer erasure. By using the Friend's deadname as the primary name to describe their collection, archives continue to ignore and erase the Friend's name, identity, and gender nonconformity, influence the historians using the archives, and make it that much more difficult to adequately excavate the queer history of the Public Universal Friend.

These challenges reveal how a queer possibility framework must intervene not just at the interpretive stage, not just during the research process, but within the archives themselves for this is one of the major ways that categories of knowledge are produced and reified. If we are to excavate queer history, we must attend to the structures that work to cover up and elide queer experiences in all their fluidity and complexity. So too must such a framework be implemented throughout the institution in order to dismantle the ways in which museums themselves have perpetuated heteronormative and cisnormative narratives of history, particularly within the domestic spaces of historic houses.

Even though the historic house museums have traditionally used the domestic space to uphold this normativity, these spaces can also reveal the queerness of the past,

the queerness of family structures household arrangements, and labor practices. The women of No. 126 Elfreth's Alley, the men at Pendarvis Historic Site, Jane Addams and Mary Rozet Smith all used their homes as both spaces for labor and for living, and their queer household arrangements and intimate relationships were fundamentally intertwined. In fact, all of these historical figures, each in their own way, contributed to the preservation of these spaces as historic. Their queerness is inherent to this preservation, built into the very foundations of the house.

Though it is often shrouded and obscured, evidence of queerness shines through. Uncovering queer history is often an act of recognition between historian and subject, a conversation across time, the threads of which are created, lost and recovered, destroyed and repaired, and remade over and over again.

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**APPENDIX A**

**“YOKE-FELLOWS AND LIFE COMPANIONS”: EXPLORING QUEER  
POSSIBILITY IN FEMALE-COUPLED HOUSEHOLDS IN EIGHTEENTH-  
CENTURY PHILADELPHIA**

In 1769 Peggy Emlen, a young Philadelphia woman, wrote to her friend Sally Logan and enviously described a trip her aunt was taking with another woman: “I hear Aunt is gone with the Friend and wont be back for two weeks, fine times indeed I think the old friends had, taking their pleasure about the country ... and have the advantage of that fine woman’s conversation and instruction, while we poor girls must spend all spring at home ... what a disappointment that we are not together ...”<sup>lxxxvi</sup> At first glance, this comment looks like the mildly jealous musings of a girl wishing she could be on a trip but is instead stuck at home. In fact, it provides a rich glimpse into the intricate and intimate world of female companionship and life in eighteenth-century Philadelphia. First, it tells us that women had particular and special companions -- the aunt is with *the* Friend, not *a* friend -- and second, it reveals that such relationships were normal, valued, and actively desired by a younger generation. Peggy saw herself and Sally as similar to the aunt and her companion and wished to model their behavior: to take long, solitary trips together enjoying nothing but the other’s company.

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<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Peggy Emlen to Sally Logan, May 3 1769, Wells Morris Collection, Box 1, Historical Society of Pennsylvania in “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Signs* 1 (1973), 11.

It is unclear what the marital status of Peggy's aunt was, but we know that Peggy Emlen grew up to marry, as did Sally Logan.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Although it is often assumed that women were defined by marriage, the work of several historians has illuminated the variety of women's experiences and statuses in eighteenth-century Philadelphia.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Between 1775 and 1800, only a minority of adult women at any one point in time were married and mistresses of their own households.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Besides being wives, a woman's role within a household could be as an adult daughter, boarder, a hired, indentured or enslaved servant, or as a widowed or single head of household. Such diversity of women's roles, and the relatively high numbers of single women living in Philadelphia was due to a confluence of economic, social, and cultural factors. Female self-reliance was not only economically tenable within an urban environment, but somewhat socially tolerated due to the ethnic and religious diversity of Philadelphia. Further, the changing demographic landscape of Philadelphia created a much less coherent or rigid culture of gender norms than might commonly be assumed, enabling women to navigate around

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<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual."

<sup>lxxxviii</sup> On women's status in the eighteenth century see Klein, Joan Larsen, ed. *Daughters, Wives, and Widows: Writings by Men about Women and Marriage in England* (Urbana, 1992); Norton, Mary Beth. *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society*. New York, 1996; Chambers-Schiller, Lee. *Liberty A Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984; Smith, Merrill. *Breaking the Bonds: Marital Discord in Pennsylvania: 1730-1830*. New York: New York University Press, 1991. On women's status specifically within Philadelphia, see Shammass, Carole. "The Female Social Structure of Philadelphia in 1775," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 107, no. 1 (1983): 69–83; Wulf, Karin. *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000; Blecki, Catherine La Courreye, and Karin Wulf, eds. *Milcah Martha Moore's Book: A Commonplace Book from Revolutionary America*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997; Klepp, Susan, and Karin Wulf, eds. *The Diary of Hannah Callender Sansom: Sense and Sensibility in the Age of the American Revolution*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010.

<sup>lxxxix</sup> Carole Shammass, "The Female Social Structure," 3.

their prescribed roles in various ways. Finally, the active female literary scene, growing educational opportunities, and the influence of Quakerism all supported a growing cultural tolerance for singleness.<sup>xc</sup>

Even amidst the varied statuses of women, only a small number of women in Philadelphia lived together. These cohabitating women have traditionally been analyzed alongside single women, and although they certainly should be understood within the social, economic, and legal context of singlehood, these women and their household arrangements also need to be conceptualized as a distinct mode of coupled existence. I argue that female-partnered households should be considered queer because they operated outside the heteronormative household structure of patriarchal authority and gendered divisions of labor; prioritized female relationships; and preserved female self-reliance. Furthermore, they did not exist in isolation, but participated in a much larger and long-lived web of queer female existence that valued and modeled female singleness, friendship, and economic independence. Informed by the larger urban economic world of Philadelphia, Quaker religion, social diversity, and the female literary culture, these women were able to conceptualize pursuing intimate female relationships, establish female-coupled households, and exist as models of female partnership to other women.<sup>xcii</sup>

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<sup>xc</sup> Karin Wulf. *Not All Wives*; Lee Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty A Better Husband*, 10-28; Lyons, Clare. *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

<sup>xcii</sup> On the female literary culture see Crane, Elaine F. "The World of Elizabeth Drinker." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 107, no. 1 (1983): 3-28; Klepp, Susan, and Karin Wulf, eds. *The Diary of Hannah Callender Sansom*; Blecki, Wulf, eds. *Milcah Martha Moore's Book*; Moore, Lisa. *Sister Arts: The Erotics of Lesbian Landscapes*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011; Ousterhout, Anne. *The Most Learned Woman in America: A Life of Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University State Press, 2003; Wulf, *Not All Wives*.

Rather than assuming any of these women were heterosexual until proven otherwise -- given that heterosexuality is just as constructed as homosexuality -- I operate from a position of queer possibility.<sup>xcii</sup> Taking into consideration the sexual culture and conceptions of sexuality in eighteenth-century Philadelphia, I consider homoerotic and queer behavior to be just as possible and as likely as heteroerotic behavior.<sup>xciii</sup> My point is to explore the many reasons why women would couple with other women, particularly within the context of a Philadelphia that was in the midst of the “transformation of the colonial constructions and regulation of sexuality into the nineteenth-century gender system.”<sup>xciv</sup> And so while I invite the consideration of queer potentiality, ultimately, my use of queer to describe female-coupled households is not to impart a sexual or gender identity on specific women. Instead, I use it in its theoretical application, which unsettles and denaturalizes systems, institutions, and arrangements assumed to be natural.<sup>xcv</sup> In

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<sup>xcii</sup> This conceptual framework is most fully explored in Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton, 1995), in which Katz historicizes the construction of the term heterosexuality in order to denaturalize its position as the dominant and normative form of sexuality. By only analyzing the reasons behind the emergence of homosexual identity and behavior, and the solidification of this sexuality as non-normative and marginalized, without doing the reverse for heterosexuality, we reinforce the idea that heterosexuality is natural rather than being constructed.

<sup>xciii</sup> On the history of sexuality in eighteenth-century Philadelphia see Clare Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*; John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Godbeer, Richard. *Sexual Revolution in Early America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002; Kann, Mark. *Taming Passion for the Public Good: Policing Sex in the Early Republic*. New York: New York University, 2013; Foster, Thomas, ed. *Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America*. New York: New York University Press, 2007.

<sup>xciv</sup> Clare Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 3.

<sup>xcv</sup> On the usage and application of queer theory see Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015); Lisa Duggan, “The Discipline Problem: Queer Theory Meets Lesbian and Gay History,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 179–191; Henry Abelove, “The Queering of Lesbian/Gay History,” *ibid.*, 44–57; Jeffrey Escoffier, Regina Kunzel, and Molly McGarry, eds., *The Queer Issue: New Visions of America’s Lesbian and Gay Past*, Special Issue, *Radical History Review*, no. 62 (Spring 1995); Martha M. Umphrey, “The Trouble with Harry Thaw,” 9–23. For works on queer studies and queer history see Scott Bravmann, *Queer Fictions of the Past: History*,

this capacity, queer signals “a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with one another.”<sup>xcvi</sup> The heterosexual marital union was considered the foundational unit to society’s proper order and functioning, through which men’s authority and dominion over women and other subordinates was naturalized.<sup>xcvii</sup> If this is the case, where did female-coupled households exist within such a society? What do they tell us about the possibilities of existence for women during this time? Why were they not only allowed, but respected, and how did other women view such arrangements?

In order to explore the material realities and imaginative possibilities for female partnership in eighteenth-century Philadelphia, I examine the lives of five women -- two Quaker schoolteachers and three mantua makers -- and the social and literary networks in which they were embedded. Employing a trans-Atlantic framework and a speculative queer analytical lens, I intend to expose the ways the two Quakers, Rebecca Jones and

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*Culture, and Difference* (New York, 1997); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago, 2007); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, N.C., 2010); Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall* (Durham, N.C., 2001); Valerie Traub, “The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies,” *PMLA* 128, no. 1 (2013): 21–39; Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, “Queering History,” *PMLA* 120, no. 5 (2005): 1608–1617; Ari Friedlander, “Desiring History and Historicizing Desire,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016): 1–20.

<sup>xcvi</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C., 1993) in Regina Kunzel, “The Power of Queer History,” *The American Historical Review*, Volume 123, Issue 5, December 2018, Pages 1560–1582.

<sup>xcvii</sup> I take my framework of analysis for household structure from Wulf, *Not All Wives*, whose analysis more fully engages with the historiography of early modern households. For an incomplete list of that historiography see Julie Hardwick, *The Practice of Patriarchy: Gender and the Politics of Household Autonomy in Early Modern France* (University Park, PA, 1998); Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (New York, 1989); Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*; Carole Shammas, “Anglo-American Household Government in Comparative Perspective,” *WMQ* 52 (January 1995: 104-144; Daniel Scott Smith, “The Meanings of Family and Household: Change and Continuity in the Mirror of the American Census,” *Population and Development Review* 18 (1992): 421-56.

Hannah Catherall, were connected to a larger Anglo-American queer female world through a lesbian genre literary tradition and the social networks that overlapped it.<sup>xcviii</sup> I use Jones' own writing, her commonplace book, and the literature she and Catherall assigned to their students to excavate how they thought about their world and their place within it. I also use letters and diaries from their circle of friends and public records to reconstruct their economic circumstances and social life.

Alongside Jones and Catherall, I reconstruct the lives of Mary Smith, Sarah Melton, and Elizabeth Carr, three lower middle class mantua makers who made choices to live outside of the heteronormative sphere of marriage and child-rearing, and to provide economic security to their partners after death. I situate their individual choices within the larger social, economic, and cultural world of Philadelphia using public records like probate wills and inventories, death records, City Directories, and Constable Returns. Where the historical record is silent, I use more speculative methods to analyze their decisions and relationships. These five women, and their female networks, sit at the nexus of a number of complex and evolving systems, institutions, and ideas that both limited and enabled their choices to live with other women. While they themselves might not have considered themselves queer, lesbian, or homosexual, their lives, choices, and

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<sup>xcviii</sup> For other examples of trans-Atlantic frameworks in queer history as well as the larger history of female queer existence at this time see Faderman, Lillian. *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women From the Renaissance to the Present*. New York: William Morrow Press, 1981; Moore, Lisa. *Sister Arts: The Erotics of Lesbian Landscapes*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011; Donoghue, Emma. *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993; Vicinus, Martha. *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

words modeled the possibility for intimate female partnerships to future generations, and thus existed as part of a larger, multi-generational tradition of queer female existence.

In late eighteenth-century Philadelphia, the household was the smallest unit of social organization, and as such was supposed to reflect the hierarchical patriarchal society. The ideal household was headed by a man, with his wife, children and any servants or enslaved people subordinate to him. In reality, 20-30% of households were headed by women at any one point in time.<sup>xcix</sup> Nearly two-thirds of those households' heads were widows, raising families after their husbands had died, or living with adult children.<sup>c</sup> The remaining third were single women, either living by themselves, with family members, or with other single women. The situation of widowed and single women has been well documented by historians, but by examining the lives of female-coupled households in comparison to other types of female-headed households, we can see certain unique features of the former regarding economic security, longevity, and independence.

Although marriage was the most reliable form of economic stability for women, those who lived together fared better than widows or single women did. Most widows lived in poverty, but single women living by themselves fared even worse economically. Certainly, this makes sense, as many widows had the opportunity to inherit some sort of

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<sup>xcix</sup> Karin Wulf, *Not All Wives*, 13-15.

<sup>c</sup> Carole Shammas, "The Female Social Structure." For examinations of the social and economic history of eighteenth-century Philadelphia see Smith, Billy. *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990 and Klepp, Susan. *Philadelphia in Transition: A Demographic History of the City and Its Occupational Groups, 1720-1830*. A Garland Series. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989.

money or assets from their husbands, whereas single women had no such luxury. On the other hand, coupled women did better because they could pool resources together to support themselves, and usually did not have children or dependents to take care of, to say nothing of the emotional support they may have brought each other. Living together thus was a more economically secure choice, especially since women made half the wages men did in the same occupation and had a narrower set of opportunities for employment.<sup>ci</sup>

Within the context of economic patterns and opportunities for female-led households, three mantua makers who lived at No. 24 Elfreth's Alley in East Mulberry Ward for over fifty years were a remarkable example of stability and longevity for female independence.<sup>cii</sup> For these women, financial decisions and affective ties were closely linked. They did not just live and work together but provided for their companions after death. In 1762, Mary Smith and Sarah Melton purchased a two-story house, kitchen, and ground lot for 280£ from Jeremiah Elfreth.<sup>ciii</sup> Elfreth's Alley was situated in a less affluent neighborhood where many other lower middle-class merchants and artisans lived. The Ward also housed a higher portion of female-headed households than the wealthier Chestnut Ward to the south; 70% of these households were too poor to pay taxes compared to the 59% of Chestnut Ward.<sup>civ</sup> Smith and Melton's ability to purchase a

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<sup>ci</sup> Smith, *The Lower Sort*.

<sup>cii</sup> Another set of such women are Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake who lived in Vermont in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Both tailors, they lived together openly in their small village, tolerated, historian Rachel Hope Cleves argues, because of moral character and important contributions to their community. Cleves, Rachel Hope. *Charity and Sylvia: Portrait of a Same-Sex Marriage in Early America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>ciii</sup> Deed Book I, 1, 429, Philadelphia City Archives.

<sup>civ</sup> Carole Shammas, "The Female Social Structure of Philadelphia in 1775," 69-83.

house outright and their profession as mantua makers put the two squarely in the lower middling class. It is unclear where they obtained the funds to purchase the building and ground, but it seems most likely that they inherited money from kin, or if widowed, from a deceased husband.

The two women quickly set up home and shop, operating their business from the first-floor parlor. Of the occupations available to women like Smith, Melton, and later Elizabeth Carr -- who would come to live with Melton after Smith's death -- mantua making was one of the better paying occupations because it required a high degree of craftsmanship and technical skill. Whereas seamstresses completed less intricate work, mantua makers knew how to fit and sew elaborate garments and were skilled in embroidery, tambour, and needlework techniques like "Irish stitch," Queen stitch," and "ten stitch."<sup>cv</sup> Mantua makers made a variety of other garments as well, including cloaks, body-linings, caps, cloaks, and coats. Despite the skill, time, and materials required for this work, mantua makers were not paid particularly well. Quaker elite Elizabeth Drinker, reflecting upon Polly Sharpless' quick work in making a gown, mode cloak, and petticoat, commented, "poor girls, they earn their money."<sup>cvi</sup> Even with low wages, mantua making still paid better than other female occupations, which were limited to working as tavernkeepers, shopkeepers, hucksters, glovers, stays makers, milliners, teachers, domestic laborers, or housing boarders; wealthier women could generate

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<sup>cv</sup> Elfresth's Alley Association, "Urban Craftswomen: Mantuamakers Active in Philadelphia, 1785-1800," Elfresth's Alley Association Records Collection, unpublished ms., 1-25.

<sup>cvi</sup> Elaine Crane, ed., *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press 1991), 1475.

passive income through rental properties, which may have been left to them by deceased family.<sup>cvi</sup>

The relative security of mantua making accounts for why most of the longest-lasting female households in Philadelphia were engaged in this occupation. Between 1785 and 1801 seventy-nine mantua makers lived in Philadelphia, most of whom resided in the more densely populated areas of the city, particularly East Mulberry Ward and Northern Liberties. Besides the women at No. 24, Mary Harman and her partner lived together on Vine Street from 1791-1819. Others did not manage such longevity. Jane Rogers and Hannah Robbins lived together for three years near North Front Street from 1801-1804, before disappearing from the City Directories; and Susannah Bliss and Jane Harrison appeared in the Directories throughout the years as mantua makers, boarders, nurses, teachers, and layers out of the dead.<sup>cvi</sup>

Although heterosexual marriage may have been the most economically secure and advantageous choice, it was not necessarily the best choice in protecting a woman's autonomy. Single women, regardless of prior marital condition, had the ability to own property and do business in her own name.<sup>cix</sup> However, for a woman to live on her own was marked by insecurity. For the most part, female-headed households were shorter lived than their coupled counterparts. These women tended to move often and change occupations, chasing an often elusive economic security. Female cohabitation on the

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<sup>cvi</sup> Wulf, *Not All Wives*, 18.

<sup>cvi</sup> *The Philadelphia Directory*, 1785, 1791, 1793-1795, 1797-1810, 1813-1814 and "Urban Craftswomen," 10-12.

<sup>cix</sup> The legal term for a single woman was *feme sole*.

other hand was, if not a guaranteed path, then at least a viable one for women to pursue to maintain autonomy and economic freedom outside the bounds of a male authority figure.

Such was the case for life at No. 24, whose occupants led a relatively secure life. Smith, Melton, and Carr catered to a variety of clientele based on the differing qualities of fabrics that were listed in Melton's probate inventory in 1794. The inventory included a camblet gown and cloak (silk and wool mixture) which were each valued at fifteen shillings, whereas two other gowns of unknown material were valued at two pounds, five shillings each, and a "lute-string" (silk) cloak that was valued at one pound, fifteen shillings.<sup>cx</sup> Smith was able to purchase fire insurance from the Philadelphia Contributionship two months after buying the house, which proved useful when fires swept through the neighborhood and street a few years later.<sup>cx<sup>i</sup></sup> Their possessions included several pieces of walnut furniture, china dishes and a small set of silver teaspoons and tongs, twelve rush bottom chairs, and two mirrors, which were valued at 33£ in Smith's probate inventory, evidencing a fairly comfortable home.<sup>cx<sup>ii</sup></sup>

The Fire Insurance Inventory taken in 1762 noted that Melton and Smith owned all their possessions in common, which may have been an indication for how they ran their household. Rather than a traditionally hierarchical arrangement, their union was an egalitarian one in which both women shared tasks, responsibilities, and possessions.

Although labor was not entirely segregated along gender lines, men conducted the bulk of

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<sup>cx</sup> Will of Sarah Melton, 1974, 104, (Book X, 152), Philadelphia Register of Wills, Philadelphia City Archives, City Hall Annex.

<sup>cx<sup>i</sup></sup> Philadelphia Contributionship, "Philadelphia Contributionship Survey #736: A House and Kitchen Belonging to Mary Smith," 1762, Elfreth's Alley Association Records Collection.

<sup>cx<sup>ii</sup></sup> Will of Mary Smith, 1766, 286, (Book N, 525), Philadelphia Register of Wills, Philadelphia City Archives, City Hall Annex.

occupational labor, business affairs, and the more public-facing duties, whereas women kept house, took care of children, and managed any servants or enslaved staff. Constable Returns for 1775 did not list a maid working at the house, which means that they were both cooking, cleaning, and caring for their home alongside their mantua making work.<sup>cxiii</sup> However, within the legal and civic realm, Smith appeared to be a “de facto” household head. She was named as the owner of the house, although both women probably contributed funds. The deed mentions both of them as purchasers, and pooling funds to reach the required 280£ seems much more feasible than Smith having such a sum of money by herself, especially given her class.<sup>cxiv</sup> Positioning Smith as household head ultimately may have been more of a bookkeeping necessity rather than a method of household structure.

Beyond their living and working relationship, it is unclear what the nature of Smith and Melton’s relationship was. Smith named Melton as her sister-in-law in her will; however, Smith called herself a spinster, as did Melton in her own will in 1794. Public records varying list both Smith and Melton as widows, spinsters, and mantua makers as their occupation, which makes it difficult to ascertain what their marriage statuses actually were. Listing female household heads within City Directories and Constable Returns as widows without reference to their occupation was common at the time, despite the fact that the majority of them would have had to work to sustain

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<sup>cxiii</sup> Constable Returns, 1775, Philadelphia City Archives.

<sup>cxiv</sup> Deed Book I, 1, 429, Philadelphia City Archives.

themselves.<sup>cxv</sup> There were times when an occupation was included, or conversely, the marital status was unrecorded, but the predominance of widowhood being listed as the occupational role indicated how a woman's status was conceptualized according to her relationship to a male figure. Thus, given that the majority of female-headed households were led by widows, the men making public records may have been operating under this assumption when they listed Smith and Melton as widows on these records.

If we attribute more weight to the documents written or dictated by themselves, then they were both single. If this was the case, having different last names while still being sister-in-laws makes little sense. Perhaps these women were concerned about public scrutiny and took steps to mitigate any potential scandal or charges of cohabitation by describing themselves as relations. Such charges were not unknown. In 1792 Ann Hannah was brought before the Prisoners for Trial Docket on a charge of cohabitation with Margaret Marshall and released the same day.<sup>cxvi</sup> No other information explained why this particular woman was brought forward on this charge, one which was typically leveled at heterosexual couples living together without marrying.<sup>cxvii</sup> That Marshall is the one who brought the charge forward is equally curious, though no clear answer exists for why. What is clear was that cohabitation by women could be considered punishable by law, and Smith and Melton may have been aware of this fact. At any rate, even if they

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<sup>cxv</sup> This analysis comes from my own survey of the Philadelphia City Directories between 1785-1814 and the Constable Returns of 1775, and is corroborated by Klepp, *Philadelphia in Transition*, and Wulf, *Not All Wives*.

<sup>cxvi</sup> Prisoners for Trial Docket, 1790-1799, Philadelphia City Archives.

<sup>cxvii</sup> Clare Lyons, "Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture," in *Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America*, ed. Thomas A. Foster (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 185.

were sisters-in-law, being related by marriage does not preclude the possibility of a romantic or erotic relationship. Historian Mark Kann argues that outside the bounds of patriarchal households, “unpoliced women ... were also positioned to establish nonmarital sex lives.”<sup>cxviii</sup> Although Kann centers his discussion on heterosexual behavior, pointing out the dangers of “disrepute, unwanted pregnancy, and poverty when their male partners deserted them,” it was just as likely for Smith and Melton to have established a nonnormative sex life with one another within the confines of their own home.<sup>cxix</sup>

Whatever the specific nature of their relationship, the two were close enough that when Smith died in 1766, she named Melton sole executrix and inheritor of home, business, and property.<sup>cxx</sup> By bequeathing all property to Melton, Smith enabled Melton to continue living at No. 24 until the end of her life in 1794, twenty-eight years later. The transfer of property was one of the most effective strategies for maintaining female independence; when we compare the length of time of female couples stayed together, those who owned their homes stayed together longer. Moreover, such a practice, in effect, disrupted the normative and traditional patriarchal household that was such a foundational unit for social organization. Household structures were propagated through inheritance practices, which were “intimately bound up in the institution of marriage;” real estate passed to sons, whereas personal property or money was gifted to

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<sup>cxviii</sup> Kann, *Taming Passions*, 112.

<sup>cxix</sup> Kann, *Taming Passions*, 112.

<sup>cxx</sup> Will of Mary Smith, 1766, 286, (Book N, 525), Philadelphia Register of Wills, Philadelphia City Archives, City Hall Annex.

daughters.<sup>cxxi</sup> However, in this case, and others like it, women transferred property not to a male heir or a family member, but instead to a female companion who then became the legal head of household. For Smith to leave the house to her female companion was thus at odds with normative arrangements and modeled a queer household arrangement to Melton who would perpetuate it herself.

Owning the house was one of the key successes to the longevity of Melton's independence. Although she had to pay taxes, she did not have to worry about paying rent, unlike many of her fellow single women and mantua makers in the neighborhood who rented their homes.<sup>cxxii</sup> This was particularly helpful since Melton could only do half the work that she and Smith would have accomplished together. To supplement her smaller income, she often took in a boarder who lived on the backlot of the property.<sup>cxxiii</sup> However, by 1790 another woman had come to live and work at No. 24. Elizabeth Swobes Carr (b. 1744) married Alexander Carr in 1778, but by the time of the first Federal Census in 1790, had separated from him.<sup>cxxiv</sup> He was living alone in Chester County, when Elizabeth had moved in with Melton.<sup>cxxv</sup>

Divorce was not unheard of in late eighteenth-century Philadelphia. Although difficult to obtain, divorce was legal, though most couples resorted to self-divorce, as it was an accepted practice. It is unclear why Carr and her husband separated, but they did not do it legally, since she was still officially married when Melton bequeathed her the

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<sup>cxxi</sup> Wulf, *Not All Wives*, 115.

<sup>cxxii</sup> However, a majority of the women in the neighborhood made so little that they were not required to pay taxes.

<sup>cxxiii</sup> *The Philadelphia Directory*, 1785, 1791-1794.

<sup>cxxiv</sup> "Pennsylvania Marriages, 1709-1940." Database. *FamilySearch*.

<sup>cxxv</sup> *First Census of the United States*, Pennsylvania, 1790.

house in 1794. It may have been Alexander who left the marriage, since husbands ended marriages more frequently than did wives, due to their greater power in the marriage and society at-large. However, it may also have been Elizabeth who left, since women also left marriages frequently, taking advantage of the fact that the economic and cultural landscape of Philadelphia made it viable. Or else the two of them may have dissolved their marriage together for any number of personal reasons, the most common of which were physical abuse, economic disagreement, and sexual misbehavior. They may also have come from an ethnic or religious background in which self-divorce was commonly accepted. Carr was a common surname in both Scotland and Ireland, both of which had strong common-law traditions that supported self-marriage, self-divorce, and re-marriage.<sup>cxxvi</sup>

Whatever the initial reason for separation, Carr came and stayed at No. 24. As Smith had done, so too did Melton decide to leave her home, business, and property to her “friend Elizabeth Carr” upon her death.<sup>cxxvii</sup> In fact, Melton took particular care to exclude Elizabeth’s husband in the will, ensuring that he would get no part, either assets or debts, of what Elizabeth inherited. Ultimately, Elizabeth could not fully separate herself from her marriage to Alexander. Although Melton had been able to legally inherit the house because she was single, Elizabeth was married and therefore could not. Even if she was separated from her husband, she still retained her feme covert status, which stipulated that as a married woman she and her husband were legally one. In other words,

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<sup>cxxvi</sup> Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*; Smith, *Breaking the Bonds*.

<sup>cxxvii</sup> Will of Sarah Melton, 1974, 104, (Book X, 152), Philadelphia Register of Wills, Philadelphia City Archives, City Hall Annex.

only her husband could own or inherit property legally. Thus, Melton designated that Elizabeth could “have the uses Income and possession of all my Dwelling house and Lot of Ground [...] for and During all the Term of her natural Life.”<sup>cxxviii</sup> Upon Elizabeth’s death, the house would revert to Melton’s friends Justinian, Robert and Martha Fox, who were named as Executors.<sup>cxxix</sup>

Carr continued to live out the remainder of her years at No. 24, also taking on boarders at times, like bricklayer Benjamin Lodor, who boarded there off and on during the last decade of the century.<sup>cxxx</sup> Carr died in 1814 at the age of 70, ending half a century of female-coupled independence. The key components to this economic independence were secure work, the initial ability to purchase a home, cohabitation, and Smith’s choice in her will. By leaving Melton all property and possessions, Smith acknowledged the importance of their relationship, and her desire to provide for Melton after her death. Such a choice became a model for Melton to follow, one which provided for a close female companion, and preserved female-coupled, queer households.

One street north from where Smith, Melton, and Carr lived, another couple made their home. In the house where she grew up on Drinker Alley (now known as Quarry Street), Rebecca Jones ran a school for Quaker children with her partner Hannah Catherall for over twenty years. Born July 8, 1739 and abandoned by her father William Jones when she was an infant, Jones was raised by her mother Mary, who supported her

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<sup>cxxviii</sup> Will of Sarah Melton, 1974, 104, (Book X, 152), Philadelphia Register of Wills, Philadelphia City Archives, City Hall Annex.

<sup>cxxix</sup> Will of Sarah Melton, 1974, 104, (Book X, 152), Philadelphia Register of Wills, Philadelphia City Archives, City Hall Annex.

<sup>cxxx</sup> *The Philadelphia Directory*, 1794, 1798-1800.

family by running a school.<sup>cxxxix</sup> In many ways, this same-sex intergenerational household could be considered queer. Mary headed her household for twenty years, aided by Rebecca in running the school, and apparently without help from Rebecca's older brother. When Mary died in 1761, she passed the home and school to Rebecca, rather than her son.<sup>cxxxix</sup> Such a decision ran counter to prevailing custom, which dictated that sons inherited property rather than daughters. Furthermore, her mother's capability in sustaining the family despite her father's abandonment probably influenced Rebecca's own outlook on marriage, single life, and the ability to economically support herself. Even if Mary was forced into singlehood by her husband's actions, she modeled an endurance and tenacity to Rebecca who would never marry, taking only women as her partners throughout her life.

Jones saw other models of female independence and partnership in her youth as well. Against the wishes of her mother who had raised her Anglican, she increasingly began to attend Quaker Meetings. Often feeling out of place, Jones's involvement in Meetings was hesitant at first. However, she was drawn to Catherine Peyton, a female minister visiting from England with her companion Mary Peasley. Concerned about her "many and deep transgressions," Jones wrote a letter to Peyton asking for advice and spiritual guidance, to which Peyton responded kindly. Peyton's reply was so important to Jones that she copied it out fully into the account of her conviction -- an account of

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<sup>cxxxix</sup> Ruth E. Chambers, "A Short Account of Rebecca Jones," *The Westonian* (1907).

<sup>cxxxix</sup> Rebecca Jones letterbook, Box 12, Allinson Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

religious conversion -- decades later.<sup>cxxxiii</sup> When Peyton and Peasley returned to England in 1756, Jones grew despondent and “indifferent toward attending meeting,” grieving the loss of her friend and spiritual guide.<sup>cxxxiv</sup> Her affection for the two appeared not to have diminished over time, as her commonplace book contained a letter written to Peyton describing the death of Peasley shortly after the latter’s marriage.<sup>cxxxv</sup>

Toward the end of her life, Mary came to accept Rebecca’s choice to join the Society of Friends. Throughout 1761, Mary’s health was failing, and Rebecca had to care for her in the evening while shouldering most of the school responsibilities during the day. She was reluctant to do so permanently after her mother’s death, hoping to find “some other way than keeping school for a livelihood.”<sup>cxxxvi</sup> While writing her convincement years later, she reflected upon the different options that were available to her. It is striking that Jones at no point considered marriage as an option during what would have been a highly stressful and economically unstable period of her life. A husband would have provided her with economic stability and would have relieved her of the task of continuing to run the school. Perhaps there were no suitable men, or she did not have any offers, but if that were the case, it is interesting that she did not mention it here. Or maybe her father’s early abandonment of her mother made her uneasy to marry herself. Within this personal context and the larger culture of female singleness in Philadelphia, it seems likely that Jones did not see marriage as an attractive or desirable

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<sup>cxxxiii</sup> Jones letterbook.

<sup>cxxxiv</sup> Jones letterbook.

<sup>cxxxv</sup> Jones letterbook.

<sup>cxxxvi</sup> Jones letterbook.

option, despite its economic advantages. Furthermore, the choices that she continued to make throughout her life reflect this attitude. She continually valued her female relationships highest, from Catherine Peyton in her youth, to Bernice Chattin, her companion at the end of her life.

Despite Jones's initial reluctance, she continued operating the school after her mother died in September of 1761. It was the easiest option since she knew how to do it, had little time to find another livelihood, and because Hannah Catherall, a young woman from a prominent Quaker family, joined Jones in the business. Catherall's involvement was especially helpful to Jones as she had grown too weak from caring for her mother and the school to continue laboring on her own.<sup>cxxxvii</sup> Working together, the two were not only able to maintain the school, but also to increase the number of students and earn a "sufficiency to live comfortably."<sup>cxxxviii</sup> Five students were transferred from another Quaker school run by Rebecca Birchall, who died in 1763. Having run the school since the 1750s, Birchall had taught Quaker elites like Elizabeth Drinker and Hannah Callender; Drinker, in turn, sent her own children to be educated by Jones and Catherall.<sup>cxxxix</sup> Many of their students remained enrolled for many years, and although similar to other Quaker schools, was impressive for the time. If we assume that their school was typical of the twelve schools within the Quaker school system, which the Quaker Overseers of the Public School surveyed in 1765, then over half the students were enrolled for three years, and one third were enrolled for four or more years. The stability

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<sup>cxxxvii</sup> Jones letterbook.

<sup>cxxxviii</sup> Jones letterbook.

<sup>cxxxix</sup> Crane ed., *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*.

of enrollment would have provided economic security and peace of mind to Jones and Catherall. Their students did not just come from an elite Quaker background, but from a variety of economic and religious circumstances. According to the Overseers, 56% of students were Quaker, 27% were Anglican, and 17% were from other religions including Catholicism. Many working-class families numbered among Jones and Catherall's students, the parents of whom worked hard to keep their children in class and out of service, despite economic hardship.<sup>cxl</sup>

Jones and Catherall had other means of economic security besides running a school. In 1775 fellow spinster Deborah Morris died and left her house to the pair, which they appeared to have rented out, earning 60£ annually.<sup>cxli</sup> Like the mantua-makers of Elfreth's Alley, the bequeathal of property from one single woman to another provided greater ease for living autonomously. That Morris chose to leave her house to a pair of single women rather than a family member is striking, especially considering how large her extended family was.<sup>cxlii</sup> Although we do not have an explicit explanation for why she chose Jones and Catherall, it seems evident that the three were friends, and perhaps Morris wanted to provide for fellow single women to help them maintain their lifestyle.

Jones and Catherall's relationship was not just a working one, but characterized by affection, support, and mutual dependence. Jones described Catherall as having an "affectionate disposition," offering encouragement whenever Jones was depressed, and

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<sup>cxl</sup> All information on Jones and Catherall's school comes from "List of the Scholars now in the several Schools at Philada at the Expense of the Overseers of the Public School," William Penn Charter School Archives, Box 1, 7, 14, Quaker Collection, Haverford College, from Wulf, *Not All Wives*, 48-49, 112.

<sup>cxli</sup> Crane ed., *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker* 1182.

<sup>cxlii</sup> Blecki, Wulf eds., *Milcah Martha Moore's Book*, 18.

caring for her whenever she was feeling weak or ill.<sup>cxliii</sup> The couple's friends and community not only recognized and esteemed this affection, but treated the two as a union, not unlike a married couple. Elizabeth Drinker, Rachel Wilson and her daughter, and Anna Rawle, all frequently mentioned them as a pair in their diaries.<sup>cxliv</sup> Correspondence and invitations to visit were often addressed to them jointly, and when a letter was addressed to the one, love and greetings were extended to the other. Edward Catherall, Catherall's nephew, called Jones 'aunt' and fostered a relationship with her that resembled that of an in-law.<sup>cxlv</sup> Perhaps the most explicit reference to Jones and Catherall being viewed as a couple like that of partners in a marriage was from George Dillwyn to Henry Drinker. He wrote of Catherall that "she & her valuable Yoke Fellow would now & then ... make such excursions," referencing a rare vacation the two women were taking.<sup>cxlvi</sup> The term yoke-fellow, which originally described when two work animals like oxen are fitted together in a frame that harnesses them to a wagon, was a common reference to marriage in the eighteenth century.<sup>cxlvii</sup> In particular, it described a relationship where the couple was teamed together in life to share their workload equally and in common. Though typically used to describe a union between a man and woman,

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<sup>cxliii</sup> Jones letterbook.

<sup>cxliv</sup> Crane ed., *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*; Wulf, *Not All Wives*.

<sup>cxlv</sup> Rebecca Jones to Edward Catherall, July 25, 1782, Allinson Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College. Edward Catherall was not the only nephew to consider his aunt's female companion as family. The poet William Cullen Bryant spoke with great love for his aunt Charity and his "aunt" Sylvia. Hope Cleves, *Charity and Sylvia*.

<sup>cxlvi</sup> George Dillwyn to Henry Drinker, Burlington, April 19, 1781, Vaux Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

<sup>cxlvii</sup> The term can be found scattered amidst newspapers throughout the eighteenth century and continued to be used well into the nineteenth century.

Dillwyn seemed to think the term was fitting for the two women about whom he was writing.

The yoke-fellow metaphor fit Jones and Catherall well. The two shared all their tasks equally, like Smith and Melton, and Melton and Carr, and unlike the typical heterosexual household. Whereas the husband would have handled public-facing business matters and taken the lead in education if he ran a school, and his wife would have kept house and raised their children, Jones and Catherall split the work of teaching and housekeeping. Elizabeth Drinker noted in her diary sending her children to “RJ and HC’s school,” “Hannah Catherall’s school,” or “Becky Jones’ school” at various times.<sup>cxlviii</sup> Clearly, the two both were present in educating their pupils, and Drinker implied the presence of the other while representing the one. To the extent that there was a “de facto” household held, Jones, who seemed to be the one who handled financial matters, filled that role.<sup>cxlix</sup> Dillwyn’s use of yoke-fellows was also true to its biblical roots, which described companions who shared the same spiritual goals and values and worked together to accomplish them. Jones and Catherall actively participated in Meeting life, serving on a number of committees together, in addition to their own particular roles.

Although Jones and Catherall’s union did not fit the mold of typical household arrangements, in its lack of a male presence, division of labor, or household authority figure, their community did not appear to comment upon its unusualness, or the two women’s uninterest in marriage. Remarks about the relationship were overwhelmingly

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<sup>cxlviii</sup> Crane ed., *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*.

<sup>cxlix</sup> Henry Drinker noted lending Becky Jones £650 for sundry items in 1797. Henry Drinker Papers, Allinson Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

positive. This is due to a number of reasons. First, Jones and Catherall contributed significantly to their community, through educating Quaker boys and girls, and by participating in Meeting life. Second, Quaker ideas about women's roles often differed from the society at-large. Women participated in public, religious and even political matters, albeit in a limited fashion, and were esteemed for doing so.<sup>cl</sup> Inspired by Peyton and Peasley, Jones had become a minister in 1758 at the age of nineteen, joining the ranks of Philadelphia ministers like Sarah Morris, Elizabeth Smith, and Elizabeth Norris. Catherall was a clerk for the Philadelphia Women's Yearly Meeting from 1778 to 1794. Third, Quakerism promoted a more egalitarian form of marriage, first encouraged by George Fox and his wife, Margaret Fell, that mimicked the "helpmeet" relationship between Adam and Eve before the biblical Fall. Although clearly not heterosexual, in many ways Jones and Catherall's relationship was closer to the ideal egalitarian union than were heterosexual ones, which proved elusive to men and women who had been raised within a patriarchal and hierarchical society. Finally, and most likely because of these other reasons, the number of single Quaker women was much higher than the average in Philadelphia.<sup>cli</sup>

In fact, a number of prominent Quaker women moved in or close to Jones and Catherall's circle, who acted as models of the single life and proponents of female

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<sup>cl</sup> On the Quaker family and female religious activity see Frost, William. *The Quaker Family in Colonial America: A Portrait of the Society of Friends*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973; Levy, Barry. *Quakers and the American Family: British Settlement in the Delaware Valley*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988; Mack, Phyllis. *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. Moyer, Paul. *The Public Universal Friend: Jemima Wilkinson and Religious Enthusiasm in Revolutionary America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015; Blecki, Wulf eds., *Milcah Martha Moore's Book*.

<sup>cli</sup> Blecki, Wulf eds., *Milcah Martha Moore's Book*, 11 n. 20.

companionship both in practice and through their writing. The three most well-known literary figures within this world were Hannah Griffitts, Susannah Wright, and Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson, who wrote heavily on marriage, the admirable qualities of singleness, and female friendship. Both Griffitts and Wright remained single throughout their lives, and Graeme Fergusson only lived with her husband for four years. Wright, born a generation earlier in 1697, not only acted as a mentor and friend to Griffitts, but served as an example of singlehood to young women growing up in the mid-eighteenth century, Jones and Catherall included. Indeed, she was able to live independently because she was left a life interest in the estate at Hempfield in Lancaster by Samuel Blunston, a magistrate for whom she acted as secretary during his life. The letters between Griffitts and Wright evidence an intimate relationship that lasted for many years and were circulated in the manuscript culture alongside their poetry. Griffitts (b. 1727-1827) supported her single life by relying on a network of female kin and friends, and by living with her cousins. In her youth, she cared for her single aunt Elizabeth Norris, her single sister Mary, and in turn was cared for by her nieces as she grew older, who aided her with supplies and financial dependence. Graeme Fergusson (1737-1801) was perhaps the most cosmopolitan of the three women, whose network extended across the Atlantic. Although she married in 1772 to Henry Fergusson, she never saw him again after 1779.<sup>clii</sup> She had a number of intimate friendships and spent the last decades of her life living at Graeme Park with her childhood friend Elizabeth Stedman. The two had difficulty

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<sup>clii</sup> Fergusson fled the colonies back to England during the American Revolution and never returned once the war ended.

managing the Park's farm and were unable to make a decent living off it, suffering a marked decline in their economic status as the years wore on.<sup>cliii</sup> Although unclear if Jones and Catherall personally knew these women, they certainly knew *of* them. Not only did they have mutual acquaintances, the two participated actively in the eighteenth-century manuscript culture that circulated the writings of these women.<sup>cliv</sup>

Manuscript circulation was the predominant method by which Jones, Catherall and many other women encountered the work of Griffitts, Graeme Fergusson, and Wright. Much of their writing was never published publicly. Instead, they and authors like them sent poetry to friends who would copy it into their commonplace books, send copies to their acquaintances, read them out loud to groups of friends, and give to students to copy for assignments. Different versions were often circulated as well, as the author continued to edit her work. Many of these poems were shared because they were initially requested by friends, as in the case of Graeme Fergusson who compiled collections of poems as gifts at the behest of her close friend Annis Boudinet Stockton. Women's writings, poetry, journal entries and letters, might be edited intentionally into a cohesive volume that conveyed certain themes and whose entries spoke to one another, such as in Milcah Martha Moore's commonplace book. This project was both a creative endeavor and ended up being a record that contained the only extant copies of many of Griffitts and Wright's poetry, and Fergusson's journal entries and letters back to Philadelphia during a trip to England. These poems would have seen a variety of types of

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<sup>cliii</sup> Ousterhout, *The Most Learned Woman in Philadelphia*, 330-332.

<sup>cliv</sup> Blecki, Wulf eds., *Milcah Martha Moore's Book*, xii-xviii.

audiences: individual, public, social, or educational.<sup>clv</sup> It was a highly mobile, personal, and fluid literary world within which these women wrote, and one in which Jones and Catherall participated actively, both copying poetry into their own commonplace books and assigning their students to copy out poems as well.

Through education, Jones and Catherall disseminated models of female singleness and friendship to a younger generation, alongside models of religious virtue, and commentaries on marriage and courtship. In particular, one poem that students like Sarah Sandwith Drinker and Catherine Haines copied was the memorial “To Cath[erine] P[ayton] on the Death of her Companion and Fellow Labourer M[ary] N[eal].” Most likely assigned by Jones, whose relationship with the two women had been a formative influence on her spiritual and social life, this poem reflected upon the friendship between the two women. Although the author praised Neale’s virtue and piety, she acknowledged Peyton was the “best who can tell, how she deserved a Tear,” because they were “Life companion[s] in the Way,” “kindred spirits,” “sisters,” and “partners in joy in Travail and Distress.”<sup>clvi</sup> Their relationship was a “Union” joined by “the same Cause and same Engagements” of ministerial work. The author lauded this relationship and offered solace to Peyton through a reunion in Heaven where the two would “separate no more.”<sup>clvii</sup> Without doing so explicitly, the poem’s author described Peyton and Neale as yoke-fellows, bound in labor and love. Jones and Catherall assigned their students poems to

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<sup>clv</sup> Blecki, Wulf eds., *Milcah Martha Moore’s Book*, 22-37.

<sup>clvi</sup> J. Gough, “To CP on the Death of her Companion...,” May 6, 1757, Deborah Haines Copybook, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>clvii</sup> J. Gough, “To CP on the Death of her Companion...,” May 6, 1757, Deborah Haines Copybook, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

copy not just for penmanship practice, but because their content was respectable and worthy of copying. Their pupils may have seen the similarities between the two companions in verse and their own teachers and implicitly understood that female companionship like this was not only possible, but also esteemed and even attractive to pursue.

Among other texts like memorials and sermons from Quaker ministers, Jones and Catherall also assigned a number of poems that described the trials of marriage and modeled the virtues of single life. Students copied Susannah Wright's popular verse "Anne Boylens Letter to King Henry the 8th," which emphasized the tyrannical rule of Henry both as a king and as a husband, and the injustice faced by Anne under the power of her husband.<sup>clviii</sup> The memorial poem, "To the Memory of Respected Friend Sarah Morris" written by Griffitts, also showed up in the copybooks of Drinker and Haines. Griffitts praised Morris, a well-known minister and single woman, describing the "powerful Language of her Tongue ... noble Faith & generous Charity" of her ministry.<sup>clix</sup>

Indeed, Griffitts was perhaps the most outspoken proponent of the single life, choosing her pen name Fidelia to reflect her commitment to singlehood. Griffitts used classical allusions throughout her poems, including addressing a fictional reader named Sophronia in her most staunch defenses of the unmarried life. Although it does not appear to have a specific association, Sophronia was known to be a reference to an unmarried

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<sup>clviii</sup> Susanna Wright, "Anna Boylens Letter to King Henry the 8th," 1720, from *Milcah Martha Moore's Book*, 121-124.

<sup>clix</sup> Hannah Griffitts, "To the Memory of Respected Friend Sarah Morris who died at Philada. Octobr. 24th. 1775," found in Sarah Sandwith Drinker and Catherine Haines' copybooks, and from *Milcah Martha Moore's Book*, 253-255.

woman.<sup>clx</sup> Sophronia also appeared as a character in an almanac essay that discussed the four types of spinsters, wherein Sophronia “remains unmarried” because she was “taught to love Greek, and hate men from her very infancy.”<sup>clxi</sup> Griffitts used Sophronia in her poem “The Maid’s Husband,” published in *Hazard’s Register* and “To Sophronia,” an unpublished poem recorded in Milcah Martha Moore’s commonplace book.<sup>clxii</sup> In “To Sophronia,” Griffitts explained that the reason she would not marry was “to keep my dear Liberty, long as I can.” Further, she did not wish to bind her whole life to men: “The Men, (as a Friend) I prefer, I esteem, / And love them as well as I ought / But to fix all my Happiness, solely in Him / Was never my wish or my Thought.”<sup>clxiii</sup> Within a society that identified women as relational beings first (wife, mother, daughter) and individuals second, Griffitts’ lines were biting in their satire. One would think that to love men as she ought would be to be happily subordinate herself in relationship to them, and yet she envisioned a life wherein she could “enjoy ... sweet Freedom.”<sup>clxiv</sup> To Griffitts, a life of freedom existed outside of the subordinate position to a husband she was expected to fill. She ended the poem by encouraging other women to “go marry--as soon as you please,” at first implying that single life was not for everyone, but was right for her.<sup>clxv</sup> Yet, the caesura in that final line implied a more ambiguous imperative. Perhaps in reading this

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<sup>clx</sup> Blecki, Wulf eds., *Milcah Martha Moore’s Book*; Wulf, *Not All Wives*.

<sup>clxi</sup> “The reasons why ...,” *Father Abraham’s Almanack ... for 1772* (Philadelphia, 1771) in Wulf, *Not All Wives*.

<sup>clxii</sup> Blecki, Wulf eds. *Milcah Martha Moore’s Book*, 173, n. 47.

<sup>clxiii</sup> Hannah Griffitts “To Sophronia. In answer to some Lines she directed to be wrote on my Fan,” 1769, in *Milcah Martha Moore’s Book*, 173-174.

<sup>clxiv</sup> “To Sophronia...”

<sup>clxv</sup> “To Sophronia...”

poem, the reader might think twice about wishing to marry. “As soon as you please,” may, in fact, be never.

Philadelphia’s literary culture was but one node in a larger cross-Atlantic web of overlapping artistic traditions and social networks that connected women with others who experienced same-sex intimacy, circulating a literature that expressed such experiences in a lesbian genre literary tradition. This web contained port cities like Philadelphia and intellectual communities like Litchfield, Connecticut, and stretched across the Atlantic to Great Britain. Women like Anna Seward, Mary Wollstonecraft, and the Bluestockings, themselves integrated into their own European lesbian and queer networks, influenced the writings of Wright, Griffitts, and Fergusson.<sup>clxvi</sup> In turn, Wright, Griffitts, and Fergusson took elements of the tradition and shaped it according to their own religious and social sensibilities to produce a unique type of poetry that they disseminated into their own Quaker network, which included Jones, Catherall, and their students.

The use of lesbian here is not to describe an identity or type of person, but rather an “art-making practice, a form of relationship or community, and sometimes as a kind of art object,” in which “the female body [is] imagined by a woman as an object of desire,” and female relationships - including erotic - are central and celebrated.<sup>clxvii</sup> The manuscript culture of Philadelphia contained elements of the lesbian genre tradition such as “the creation of works of art as gifts or forms of exchange that create and/or intensify

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<sup>clxvi</sup> Graeme Fergusson’s poetry contained similar themes to that of the Blue Stockings and Mary Wollstonecraft, particularly on friendship being preferable to love. See Ousterhout, *The Most Learned Woman in America*, 320.

<sup>clxvii</sup> Moore, *Sister Arts*, 3.

women's intimate relationships; the unapologetic use of craft, popular, ephemeral, and decorative forms by the same artist who might also be working in a recognized high-art tradition; and an unmarked mobility between audience--intimate and public, amateur and professional, literary and visual."<sup>clxviii</sup> And Jones and Catherall, as active participants in the manuscript culture, extended its reach to a younger generation of students dutifully fulfilling their copying assignments.

Jones was not connected to a trans-Atlantic network through manuscript culture alone, but through her own travels abroad as well. In 1784, Jones decided to embark on a four-year trip to Europe to preach to her fellow Quakers on the other side of the Atlantic. Catherall was supportive and encouraged Jones to pursue this long-held desire, while she elected to stay home in Philadelphia in order to continue running the school.<sup>clxix</sup> Letters between the two do not remain, so we are left only to guess at how their relationship might have changed over the four years. Jones returned in 1788 and continued teaching with Catherall for a time until the two separated. An account written in 1907 of Jones' life argues that the separation was because they could no longer keep the school running due to Catherall's failing health.<sup>clxx</sup>

Over the next few years Jones boarded with several different acquaintances before renting a house in Brooks Court where she turned her parlor into a shop that sold books and women's clothing. She began a relationship with a new companion, Bernice Chattin,

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<sup>clxviii</sup> Moore, *Sister Arts*, 3.

<sup>clxix</sup> Jones Letterbook, Chambers, "A Short Account of Rebecca Jones."

<sup>clxx</sup> Chambers, "A Short Account of Rebecca Jones."

who rented a house next door. Chattin married James Allinson in 1806 but returned to live with Jones after her husband's death in 1811. They moved into a house across from the Quaker North Meeting House where they lived until Jones' death in 1818.<sup>clxxi</sup> The relationship seems to have had a similar character to that of Jones and Catherall. Acquaintances writing to Jones offered love and greetings to Chattin, and the two were invited to social engagements as a pair, although Jones' ability to visit with friends diminished as she grew older.<sup>clxxii</sup> Ultimately, Jones' life was characterized by her multiple and intimate female relationships, her remarkable ability to maintain an independent life to foster those relationships, and her choice to model that life to her students through the work she assigned and her relationship with Catherall.

When we consider the number of women who not only valued intimate female relationships but found ways to live with and provide for their companions, we are forced to disrupt many commonly held assumptions about familial and household norms. If society was supposed to be male-dominated and hierarchical, why were female-coupled households not maligned? Why, instead, were they praised and valued by their community at-large? A partial answer to these questions may rest in the rarity of female-coupled households. The numbers, while not negligible, indicated that such households were a small minority of the population. Indeed, the low numbers may have reflected the difficulty in gaining and maintaining economic independence from a man. Thus, one way

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<sup>clxxi</sup> Chambers, "A Short Account of Rebecca Jones."

<sup>clxxii</sup> Jones letterbook.

to make sense of why these female-coupled households is to recognize that they did not threaten the overwhelmingly male order.

A second way to understand the relatively esteemed position these female-coupled households maintained is to focus on the stature of their occupants. Jones and Catherall taught a generation of children, and they preached and participated in Quaker meetings. Melton, Smith, and Carr had socially respectable positions as mantua makers. If they were unusual for their decision not to marry, they may have made up for it by what they gave back to their community. Even so, these women walked a tightrope of gendered assumptions about a woman's role in the public sphere, her position within a patriarchal society, and the arrangement of her household.

Even if few and far between, by considering the lives of Catherall and Jones, Smith, Melton, and Carr as examples of queer existence, the realities of eighteenth-century Philadelphia's economic and social world come into sharper focus. Rather than merely attending to the idealized vision of social organization, we can begin to uncover a fuller image of household arrangements and how individuals, couples, and households navigated, grappled with, or abandoned normative forms of living. Moreover, we see how forms of queer experience ran both concurrent with and operated against prevailing norms. The lives of these five women illuminate how female-coupled households were both embedded within the larger normative society and connected, even if tenuously, to a queer female network. Jones, Catherall, Smith, Melton, and Carr managed to do so by navigating the economic, social, and religious opportunities available to them as women, by providing financial and affective support to one another, and by engaging with their

larger community. In doing so, they enacted a form of queer existence that, though distinct to their time and place, did not disappear when they died, but continued on, through their writing, through the generation they taught, and through the companions that survived them.

## APPENDIX B

### *THE ALLEY CAST, "THE DRESSMAKERS"*

Isabel Steven:

The year is 1762. You are walking down a narrow, cobblestoned street lined with small two-story houses. As you step off the street and into the front parlor of No. 24, Elfreth's Alley, home to two mantua makers, you see a small, but well-appointed room. It is furnished with large oval walnut tables, a tea table, tea stand and rush bottom chairs. This parlor serves as the shop room for the dressmakers. Here, the two women, Mary Smith and Sarah Melton, greet their clients, measure and fit them, and conduct business. Curtains hang in the windows and a large mirror and small framed painting adorn the walls. A china tea set with silver spoons and tongs is carefully tucked away waiting to be used for company like yourself. One doorway leads to the kitchen filled with simple but serviceable materials: a dough trough sits upon one of the two work tables; brass and tin pots, pans, and kettles, gridirons, and fireplace tools are clustered around the hearth; pewter and earthenware dishes are stowed on shelves; tubs and buckets for laundry, an ironing board, and irons are clustered in a corner and along the wall; necessary implements for Sarah and Mary's sewing work. Another door opens to the back, where they may have had a small herb or vegetable garden. As you head up the narrow winding staircase from the corner of the parlor, you step into the larger of the two upper floor rooms. This was the bedroom Mary and Sarah shared: you see two beds with feather

mattresses, a washstand and walnut chamber table, and dressers for clothing. In the smaller of the two rooms, you see a workshop filled with cloths of linen, calico, wool, silk, camblet, satin and taffeta in colors of greens and browns, blues and purples, all in various stages of being crafted into gowns -- otherwise known as mantuas in the eighteenth century. Furs, ribbons, fringe, and lace can be spotted here and there, in baskets or pinned onto necklines and sleeves, ready to be more permanently attached. Two women sit close to the windows to use the natural light streaming in in order to see their work, sewing quickly but with an eased skill that comes from many years of practice. The house is small, but comfortable, and these dressmakers work tirelessly to keep it so.

Ted Maust:

Welcome to *The Alley Cast*, a new podcast from the Elfreth's Alley Museum in Philadelphia. We tell the stories of people who lived or worked on this street which has been home to everyday Philadelphians for three centuries. And while we start in this neighborhood, we will explore connections that will take us across the city and around the globe.

Think about the last article of clothing you purchased? How expensive was it to buy? What is it made of? Who made it and where? Today on *The Alley Cast*, Isabel Steven will be telling the story of three women who lived on Elfreth's Alley in the eighteenth century who worked as dressmakers. She'll tell us how these women made their living sewing clothes and invite us to imagine what their working and personal relationships might have been like. Episode 1: "The Dressmakers."

Isabel Steven:

When you imagine Philadelphia in the 1700s, what do you think about? The Founding Fathers and their fight for freedom from the British Empire, and the Declaration of Independence signed in Constitution Hall? Perhaps you think about Abigail Adams writing to her husband John, urging him to: “Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could.” Maybe you think of something else entirely, but ask yourself, whatever you think of, where do men fit into your image of eighteenth-century Philadelphia, and where do women fit? How do you expect women to live, to work, and to love?

For over fifty years No. 24 Elfreth’s Alley - now numbered as 126 - was home to two female couples who worked as mantua makers. Though single working women like these ones were not entirely unknown, Mary Smith, Sarah Melton, and Elizabeth Carr were somewhat remarkable for how long they were able to live independently as single women, for their choices to remain single, and to protect their lifestyle for their companion. In July of 1762 Mary Smith and Sarah Melton purchased the two-story house, kitchen, and lot of property for 280£ from Jeremiah Elfreth. The two dressmakers quickly set up home and shop, using their front parlor for receiving and fitting clientele, using the smaller second floor chamber as their workshop. The two lived together for four years until Mary’s death in 1766. She left the home to Sarah who continued the business for another 28 years, joined by a new companion toward the end of her life. By 1790 Elizabeth Carr, self-divorced from her husband, came to live with Sarah and join

the mantua making business. Perhaps inspired by her former partner, when Sarah made her will, she also left the house and business to the woman who survived her. Although unable to legally inherit No. 24, Elizabeth lived out the remainder of her life there, until her death in 1814.

Elfreth's Alley was situated in the less affluent Mulberry Ward where many other lower middle-class merchants and artisans lived, including a number of other mantua makers. On the Alley alone, seven other dressmakers or seamstresses lived in the same fifty years that Sarah, Mary and Elizabeth did. In fact, part of the reason the Ward was less wealthy compared to ones like Chestnut Ward to the south was because of the higher numbers of female-headed households.. Female-headed households were not uncommon, despite a patriarchal society that upheld male authority at every level of social organization, and naturalized it through marriage and the household structure. 20-30% of households were headed by women at any one point in time in the eighteenth-century. Nearly two-thirds of those households were widows, raising families after their husbands had died, or living with adult children. Within that remaining third were single women, either living by themselves, with family, or with other single women. Although possible, for single women like Mary, Sarah, and Elizabeth, cohabitating was not only difficult within an economic context, but nonnormative within a social one.

Unless she came from wealth, living on one's own as a woman was marked by economic insecurity. Occupational choices were limited, and wages were low - women made half that of men for the same job. Women worked as tavern and shopkeepers, hucking wares on the street, making garments like gowns, gloves, hats, and stays, as

laundresses and performing domestic labor. Most women took any position wherever they could, moving from job to job, chasing an ever elusive economic stability. However, of these jobs, mantua making was one of the most secure. In fact, the relative security of mantua making accounts for why most of the longest-lasting female households in Philadelphia were engaged in this occupation. It paid more than most other occupations, and could be relied on to produce a relatively steady stream of customers, particularly from upper class women, who could afford to purchase more than one or two gowns. Women of any class often sewed their own clothing, mostly underclothes like chemises and petticoats, the mantua was an opportunity for a woman to show off her class, wealth, and sophistication. As the outer gown, the mantua was an elaborately constructed garment made of costly fabric dyed in rich colors, and heavily adorned. As such it required a highly skilled craftswoman to be created.

Mantua makers differed from seamstresses who completed less intricate work -- the name comes from their work of sewing straight seams with simple stitches. Dressmakers like Sarah, Mary and Elizabeth knew how to drape, fit, cut, and piece fabric to create elegant garments. They used skilled stitch techniques like "Irish stitch," Queen stitch," and "ten stitch" to piece the dress together and embroidery, tambour, and quilting to decorate it. They also knew how to work with difficult fabrics like satin, silk and taffeta, and adorn dresses with fur, lace, ribbons and fringe. Of course, Sarah, Mary, and Elizabeth did not work exclusively with upper class clients, but rather with a variety of women. Sarah's probate inventory taken after her death included a camblet gown and cloak which were each valued at fifteen shillings, whereas two other gowns of unknown

material were valued at two pounds, five shillings each, and a high quality “lute-string” (otherwise known as silk) cloak was valued at one pound, fifteen shillings. The differing qualities and prices of fabrics indicated that the women had clients from different social and economic standings.

However, despite the relatively high wages, mantua making was not a profitable venture. Mary, Sarah, and Elizabeth would have had to maintain a large clientele, serving women both within their shop room and making house calls to wealthier individuals; and they would have had to work as fast as physically possible without sacrificing the quality of their work to maintain economic stability. Elizabeth Drinker, a socially prominent Quaker and wife to one of the richest merchants in Philadelphia, reflected in her diary on Polly Sharpless, the mantua maker she had employed, who completed in short time a gown, mode cloak, and petticoat: “poor girls, they earn their money.” The fact that Sarah and Mary had purchased their house, however, was a great help because they did not have to pay rent, which was one of the largest household expenses. It is unclear where they obtained the funds to make such a purchase outright, since they wouldn’t have been able to afford it through what their dressmaking paid. It seems most likely that they inherited money from kin, or if they widowed, from a deceased husband.

Beyond their living and working relationship, it is unclear what the nature of Mary and Sarah’s affectionate relationship was or what their statuses as women were. Mary named Sarah as her sister-in-law in her will; however, Mary called herself a spinster, as did Sarah in her own will in 1794. Public records varying list their occupations as widows, spinsters, and mantua makers, which makes it difficult to

ascertain what their marriage statuses actually were. Listing female household heads within City Directories and Constable Returns as widows without reference to their occupation was common at the time, despite the fact that the majority of these women would have had to work to sustain themselves. There were times when an occupation was included, or conversely, the marital status was unrecorded, but the predominance of widowhood being listed as the occupational role indicated how a woman's status was conceptualized according to her relationship to a male figure. Given that the majority of female-headed households were led by widows, the men making public records may have been operating under this assumption when they listed Mary and Sarah as widows on these records, even if neither of them actually were ever married.

And if we give greater credence to Sarah and Mary's wills, documents written or dictated by themselves, then they were both single. If this was the case, having different last names while still being sisters-in-law makes little sense. So why would two single women choose to call themselves sisters-in-law if they weren't? Perhaps these women, living in a non-normative household were concerned about public scrutiny and took steps to mitigate any potential scandal or charges of cohabitation by describing themselves as relations, rather than as two unrelated single women living together outside of the authority of a male figure. Such charges of cohabitation were not unknown. In 1792 Ann Hannah was brought before the Prisoners for Trial Docket on a charge of cohabitation with Margaret Marshall and released the same day. No other information explained why this particular woman was brought forward on this charge, one which was typically leveled at heterosexual couples living together without marrying. That Margaret

is the one who brought forward the charge is equally curious, though no clear answer exists for why. What is clear was that cohabitation by women could be considered punishable by law, and Mary and Sarah may have been aware of this fact. At any rate, even if they were sisters-in-law, being related by marriage does not preclude the possibility of a deep emotional, romantic or even erotic relationship. Even if we may never know the specific nature of their emotional relationship, in a certain sense, the relationship between Sarah and Mary, and later Sarah and Elizabeth can be considered queer, operating as they did outside of the normative structure of patriarchal household and the normative arrangements of heterosexual unions.

Sarah, Mary and Elizabeth lived counter to these prevailing norms of household arrangements in how they ran their home and business, as well. Rather than a traditionally hierarchical arrangement, the unions between these women were egalitarian ones in which both women shared tasks, responsibilities, and possessions. In heterosexual unions, labor tended to be segregated along gender lines, though not completely; men conducted the bulk of occupational labor, business affairs, and the more public-facing duties, whereas women kept house, took care of children, and managed any servants or enslaved staff. The women were not able to afford a maid or other servant staff, which means that they were both cooking, cleaning, doing laundry and caring for their home alongside their dressmaking. The women would have had to work tirelessly to find the time and strength to manage it all, but manage it they did. Sarah and Mary also managed their possessions and property differently than a heterosexual household, in which the husband owned everything under the law of coverture that upheld the legal

fiction that husband and wife were one person. At No. 24, however, all possessions were owned in common, although within the legal and civic realm, Mary appeared to be a “de facto” household head. She was named as the owner of the house, although both women contributed funds. Positioning Mary as household head ultimately may have been more of a bookkeeping necessity rather than a method of structuring the household day-to-day.

Whatever the specific nature of their relationship and their household operation, it was deep enough that when Mary died in 1766, she named Sarah sole executrix and inheritor of the home, business, and property. By bequeathing all property to her, Mary enabled Sarah to continue living at No. 24 until the end of her life in 1794. The transfer of property was one of the most effective strategies for maintaining her economic independence. What’s more, such a practice was disruptive to the normative, heterosexual and patriarchal household that was so foundational for social organization. Household structures were propagated through inheritance practices, which were “intimately bound up in the institution of marriage;” real estate passed to sons, whereas personal property or money was gifted to daughters. Instead, Mary transferred her property, not to a male heir or a family member, but instead to a female companion who then became the legal head of household. For Mary to leave the house to her female companion became a way to preserve their queer relationship and household even after her death; and Sarah perpetuated this practice of queer preservation in her own will twenty-eight years later.

Through this bequeathal, Sarah was able to maintain her independence. Owning her home meant that although she had to pay taxes, she did not have to worry about

paying rent, unlike many of her fellow single women and mantua makers in the neighborhood. This was particularly helpful since Sarah could only do half the work that she and Mary would have accomplished together. To supplement her smaller income, she often took on a boarder who lived on the backlot of the property. However, by 1790 another woman had come to live and work at No. 24 permanently. Elizabeth Swobes Carr (b. 1744) was married to Alexander Carr in 1778, but by the time of the first Federal Census in 1790, had separated from him. He was living alone in Chester County, whereas Elizabeth had moved in with Sarah.

Whatever the initial reason for separation, Elizabeth came and stayed at No. 24. And perhaps Sarah and Elizabeth had a similar relationship to the one Sarah shared with Mary, potentially romantic or erotic, but certainly affectionate. And like Sarah and Mary, the two women had the opportunity to pursue such a relationship, living as they did in their own home, and away from the authority of a male figure. The similarity of these two relationships is revealed in Sarah's choice within her will. As Mary had done, so too did Sarah decide to leave her home, business, and property to her "friend Elizabeth Carr" upon her death. Sarah took particular care to exclude Elizabeth's husband in the will, ensuring that he would get no part, either assets or debts, of what Elizabeth inherited: "So nevertheless that her present husband Alexander Carr shall not have any right or Interest whatever therein neither shall the Same be liable for his Debts..." Ultimately however, Elizabeth could not fully separate herself from her marriage to Alexander. Although Sarah had been able to legally inherit the house because she was single, Elizabeth was married and therefore could not. Even if she was separated from her husband, she still

retained her feme covert status, part of the law of coverture. In other words, only her husband could own or inherit property legally. Instead, Sarah designated that Elizabeth could “have the uses Income and possession of all my Dwelling house and Lot of Ground ... for and During all the Term of her natural Life.” Upon Elizabeth’s death, the house would revert to Sarah's friends Justinian, Robert and Martha Fox, who were named as executors.

Elizabeth continued to live out the remainder of her years at No. 24, also taking on boarders at times, like bricklayer Benjamin Lodor, who boarded there off and on during the last decade of the century. Elizabeth died in 1814 at the age of 70, ending half a century of female-coupled independence. The house went to the Foxes who then sold it. For Sarah, Mary, and Elizabeth, the key components to this economic independence were secure work, cohabitation with a female companion, the initial ability to purchase a home, and the bequeathal of that property. By leaving Sarah everything, Mary acknowledged the importance of their relationship, and her desire to provide for her companion Sarah after her death. Such a choice became a model for Sarah to follow, one which provided for a close female companion, and preserved female-coupled, queer households.

Ted Maust:

History is a group effort! Today’s episode was researched, written, and narrated by Isabel Steven, but utilized many other people’s work: you can check out the episode page at [elfrethsalley.org/podcast](http://elfrethsalley.org/podcast) for a complete list of sources. Our theme music is the song “Open Flames” by Blue Dot Sessions from the album Aeronaut, used under

Creative Commons license. Thank you for listening! If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts! Be sure to join us next week for Episode 2: “Spinsters, Runaway Wives, and Widows.” Thank you for supporting the Elfreth’s Alley Museum by listening to this podcast! If you are able to make a financial gift, you can do so at [elfrethsalley.org/donate](https://elfrethsalley.org/donate). Thank you and take care!

## APPENDIX C

### ***THE ALLEY CAST, “THE PUBLIC UNIVERSAL FRIEND IN PHILADELPHIA”***

Isabel Steven:

A crisp evening falls over Philadelphia in October 1782. A group of seven individuals walk down the city's brick and cobblestoned streets. They are an unusual set of men and women, their leader even more so, at least by 18th-century standards. This person is dressed in men's ministerial robes over a loose shirt and full skirt. A clerical collar adorns the throat, and women's shoes peek out from the robes as they clip along the street. The individual's loose chestnut hair falls in ringlets, covered with a light gray men's beaver hat. Some of the women and a couple of the men have adopted a similar androgynous style of dress, though none as completely as their minister. The group comes down Front Street, turning right onto Elfreth's Alley, nearing their final destination. Their leader raps on one of the doors down the street, which is opened by an older woman, who greets the group and welcomes them inside. They enter, grateful to finally find a hospitable host at the end of their journey from Rhode Island. The parlor is small but cozy, warmed by a fire crackling in the fireplace. The minister stretches, eager for a good night's rest before tomorrow's work of preaching and proselytizing to the people of the city. The Public Universal Friend has arrived in Philadelphia.

Ted Maust:

In the previous episode, we talked about the experiences of spinsters, divorced wives, and widows who lived on Elfreth's Alley. This week we begin with one of those

widows who housed a nonbinary Quaker minister titled the Public Universal Friend and the Friend's group of followers. Along the way we will talk about Quakerism, gender norms and gender variance in Philadelphia, explore how the Public Universal Friend's gender ambiguity and religious ideas unsettled societal norms and learn how the Friend navigated a city whose inhabitants who felt threatened by this queer gender expression.

This week on *The Alley Cast*: “The Public Universal Friend in Philadelphia.”

Isabel Steven:

The story of the Public Universal Friend is one that invites us to seriously consider what we know about gender in the 18th century; that rather than being just a rigid binary, gender could be unstable, mutable, and contested. The Friend invites us to consider how gender was made and performed, challenged and unmade, blended and transcended, and how theological and religious space could become a site for crossing gender. By studying the Friend, we gain unique insights into how political events like the American Revolution and religious movements like Quakerism influenced the changing social structure of an infant nation and in turn, how individuals and communities were both affected by these changing political, religious, and social structures, and how they navigated, challenged, and traversed the borders created by such structures.

The story of the Public Universal Friend has also been one of debate, argument, and uncertainty that began the moment this person first transformed from a Rhode Island woman named Jemima Wilkinson into a genderless spirit named the Public Universal Friend, who was believed to be resurrected from death to become a religious prophet. Before we go any further, it is important that I explain where I stand in discussing the

Friend's gender. Historians beginning in the 19th century up until today have had different ways of conceptualizing, categorizing, and defining the Friend and the gender of the Friend. I am no different, but I want to be transparent about my positionality. Some have discussed the Friend from a religious viewpoint, or through the lens of women's history. Many of these historians have downplayed how or why the Friend crossed and transcended gender. More recently, however, some historians have sought to understand the Friend's gender and religious transformation using transgender theory. And it is this last method of analysis that I most strongly draw on, although I have used other historians' research to round out my understanding of this story. To this end, while I agree with other historians that we cannot for certain label the Public Universal Friend as transgender, which is a modern term, I do consider the Friend to be a part of trans history, an earlier chapter of how individuals challenged gender constructs that precedes the modern transgender identities we understand today, and it is through this lens that I present the Friend's story to you today. Furthermore, as we will explore in greater depth, the Friend did not use gendered pronouns, rarely used gendered terms and did so reluctantly. As such, I do not use any gendered pronouns to talk about the Friend, but rather use only the names that the Friend used, like The Public Universal Friend, the Friend, the Comforter, or the P.U.F., an abbreviation of the Public Universal Friend. Unfortunately, many primary sources use gendered pronouns, terms and the Friend's given name Jemima Wilkinson. The only time I will use this name will be to explain the origin of the Friend's story, and any use of gendered pronouns will be contained within primary source quotations.

The Public Universal Friend's story begins in Cumberland, Rhode Island in 1752. Born Jemima Wilkinson, The Friend's life was relatively unremarkable up until the near-fatal illness that prompted the transformation from Jemima Wilkinson into The Public Universal Friend. In October of 1776 the person who would become the Friend had taken ill with a sickness called "Columbus fever," which may have been typhus. For five days the fever worsened until the Wilkinson family began to prepare for death. On October 11, by the Friend's own account, the person named Jemima Wilkinson died, and the body that got up out of bed that day instead was one reanimated by God with a divine spirit that was neither male nor female. While gripped by the fever, the person that would become the Public Universal Friend received a vision of two angels who proclaimed that "the Spirit of Life from God, has descended to the earth, to warn a lost and guilty perishing dying world to flee from the wrath which is to come," and to "assume the Body which God has prepared, for the Spirit to dwell in." This near-death experience and the transcendence from gender it birthed was the catalyst for the Friend to begin a religious mission to preach a message of repentance and the necessity of salvation in preparation for the Apocalypse.

The Friend's genderlessness was intimately intertwined with religion; precipitated by a spiritual near-death experience, practiced through a religious context, and affirmed through a religious community of belief. The Friend also expressed this nonbinary gender identity through dress and hairstyle, voice, and linguistic practices to emphasize the theological essence of the Friend as a divine spirit. The Comforter wore a mix of male, female, and clerical clothing, such as a ministerial robe and collar, skirts, men's hats, and

through wearing hair loose and without a cap. Women at this time period wore their hair up and usually covered with a linen or cotton cap, whereas the Friend only wore a man's hat and removed it indoors like a man would. Furthermore, the Friend's particular style of parting the hair in the middle and letting it fall loose to the shoulders was intended to evoke Christ's supposed hairstyle. Doing so associated the Friend with Christ, marking a comparison between the Friend as a divine spirit in a human body and Christ with his own blended nature as both fully human and fully divine. Although many people read the Friend's sartorial choices as masculine, an article in *The Freeman's Journal* described the Friend's clothing as "being neither man nor woman." Such debate flourished, in part because dress at this time was important in reading an individual's age, class, status, occupation, religious affiliation, and of course, gender. Furthermore, debate over the ambiguity of Friend's voice abounded; varying accounts disagree over whether the Friend's voice was low-pitched or high-pitched, and people described the Friend's voice as being anything from "clear and harmonious," to "kind of a croak, unearthly and sepulchral." What is clear from these differing descriptions is that rather than being a clear indication of what the Friend actually sounded like, they more obviously revealed the narrator's own ideas about what they thought the Friend *should* sound like based on preconceived ideas about how vocal quality was supposed to convey a specific gender and how gender was supposed to dictate vocal quality. The Friend's gender ambiguity threw all of these notions into disarray.

The Public Universal Friend also conveyed genderlessness through the rejection of gendered terms and pronouns. When asked directly whether the P.U.F. was a man or a

woman, the Friend simply replied, "I am that I am." Such an answer served the dual purpose of acknowledging an indescribable gender identity and associating this indescribable being with the divine, as this was a phrase uttered by God in the Old Testament. The Comforter's friends and disciples also respected such linguistic practices, in effect creating a new community of language unique from the larger society that relied so heavily on gendered terminology. One individual recounted how a follower, when asked "where about Jemima Wilkinson's house was [...] replied that she knew no such person; 'the friend' lived a little piece below." For the P.U.F. and followers, to refer to Jemima Wilkinson and not to the Friend was to reject the Comforter's resurrection and transformation, and to deny the theological claim that The Friend was a spirit of divinity. The evidence of this divinity was the transcendence of body and gender that the Friend had undergone. However, just as this gender ambiguity could be associated with spiritual purity, so too could it be associated with sin, religious fraud, and sexual immorality. Such was the case with some of the Friend's neighbors in Rhode Island and many Philadelphians when the Friend visited the city throughout the 1780s.

The Comforter's emergence as a prophet and minister is not an entirely unique event given the larger religious landscape of the late 18th-century that emerged from the First Great Awakening. Evangelical revivals stressed spiritual strength and direct, personal relationships with God over adherence to doctrine and clerical authority. The combined emphasis on political equality promoted by the American Revolution and spiritual equality by the Awakening led many evangelicals to seriously challenge the traditional sources of religious authority and to form their own sects and movements. The

Friend grew up within this milieu as a part of the Religious Society of Friends, commonly known as Quakers. Many aspects of both the Friend's theology and call to ministerial service align with other Quaker ministers. Quaker worship (or "meetings") largely consisted of the practice of "waiting" in silence for the Inward Light of holy inspiration to speak through individuals. Though the church often had leaders and popular speakers, they were not given hierarchical titles like other Protestant denominations, believing the choice and ability to serve as minister was because of God's will. From the origins of Quakerism, women have also had equal standing to speak in meetings, leading to a great number of female ministers.

However, it is here that the Friend's trajectory diverges from other ministers. It is clear from the P.U.F.'s transformation that the Friend was not another female minister who felt God's call to preach. Rather, when the Friend attempted to stand up and speak in a meeting, the other Quakers, also called friends, rejected the P.U.F.'s vision of gender and bodily transcendence: "after she had utter'd a few words a friend stood up & desired her to sit down, but she not submitting, the same request was repeated by another friend ... until no less than 5 friends required her to desist." Ultimately, the Public Universal Friend was expelled from the Religious Society of Friends, because of the Comforter's unique and dissenting theological message. However, the Friend was undeterred and continued preaching throughout Rhode Island, gaining converts from Quakers, and other religious sects like the New Lights and the Free Quakers. By 1783, the disciples of the Public Universal Friend officially wrote a manifest for their own sect called the Society of Universal Friends, clearly modeled off the Religious Society of Friends.

It was during this time that The Public Universal Friend first visited Philadelphia. After spending several years preaching throughout Rhode Island and New England, The Friend and a few followers decided to travel to Philadelphia in 1782 to spread the Friend's message farther. The P.U.F. most likely assumed that the large population of Quakers would be fruitful grounds for attracting new converts. Quakerism had been central to the history of the city beginning with its founding by Quaker William Penn. The Religious Society of Friends had only just been founded around 1650 in Lancashire, England when William Penn, then a 22-year-old supervising his family's estate in Ireland, began attending Quaker meetings in 1667. Penn was arrested and then cast out by his father. He took refuge in the homes of his fellow Quakers and became a sort of ambassador for the faith, writing treatises on religious tolerance and travelling throughout Europe seeking converts. Persecutions within Britain continued, and many Quakers began looking for a new home. The British colonies in North America offered an escape for religious minorities in Great Britain throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In 1675, Penn acted as a mediator between two Quakers who were in dispute over ownership of lands awarded them in New Jersey and over the next six years petitioned Charles I for a colony of his own. Finally granted the land that became Pennsylvania, William Penn articulated his desire that the colony be a "holy experiment." While Penn recruited settlers for his colony broadly, and attracted many religious minorities, among them the Mennonites, the city of Philadelphia was dominated for the first few generations by Quaker leaders, and Quaker ideals formed the basis for innovations in law within the

colony and later the state. With the beginning of the French and Indian War in 1754, Quaker politicians in the colony were forced to weigh their belief in pacifism with their duties to the crown. By the time of the American Revolution, most Quakers had left government service, but had shifted to creating philanthropic structures such as poor relief, public education, and public health services. Though they no longer held political power, Quakers in Pennsylvania and Philadelphia still held social and cultural capital.

It was into this environment that the Friend entered when the group arrived in Philadelphia. Rather than being warmly received, the Society of Universal Friends had a hard time finding lodgings. According to an article from *The Freeman's Journal*, they had difficulty because of the Friend's mixed gendered clothing and the female disciples' somewhat ambiguous "dresses [that] were singular or uncommon." Elizabeth Drinker, a prominent Quaker involved in much of the elite social life of Philadelphia, had much to say about the Friend's visit: "Some days past Jemima Wilkinson left this Town a woman lately from New-England who has occasioned much talk in this City--she, and those that accompany'd her (who were call'd her Deciples) resided some short time in Elfriths-Ally, where crouds went to hear her preach and afterwards in the Methodast meeting-house--her Dress and Behaviour remarkable."

As Drinker noted, the group eventually found lodgings at Elfreth's Alley with an unnamed widow. Although we do not know any more about this woman, it seems likely that she was sympathetic to the Friend's message, and perhaps a Quaker herself.

In 1785 there were several Quakers who lived on Elfreth's Alley including William Atkinson, Daniel Trotter, John Webb, and Rebecca Jones. If all these individuals

were living on the street in 1782, they must have had some kind of reaction to the Friend's presence, although if it was interest, intrigue or hostility, we do not know. We do know, however, that the Friend quickly sparked strong and diverse reactions from Philadelphians. The evening after the Friend's first night with the widow at Elfreth's Alley, "an unruly company assembled ... and a dreadful scene of outrage ensued." The mob began throwing stones and bricks at the house, trying to oust the Comforter and the disciples from the Alley, which was "contrary to the laws of hospitality." The Friend was forced to leave, eventually finding refuge at the home of Christopher Marshall, a Quaker and retired merchant. He and his sons continued to provide their homes for the Society of Universal Friends when they returned to the city for longer stays in 1784 and 1790.

Undeterred by the violence of the riot, a couple of days afterward the Friend preached in the Arch Street Meeting House, which was a five minute walk away from the Alley. Perhaps the widow who had sheltered the Comforter attended the meeting, or perhaps she was scared off from doing so by the rage of the mob that attacked her home and threatened her guests. If she did, she would have seen a large crowd assembled to listen to the Public Universal Friend speak. Despite the large crowds, the P.U.F. only gained one follower from the first visit. Subsequent trips garnered more converts, however. In particular, many followers came from Philadelphia's Free Quakers, an offshoot of the Religious Society of Friends who had been expelled during the American Revolution. The Friends were committed to pacifism and therefore did not take sides during the war. The Free Quakers, sometimes known as "Fighting Quakers," abandoned that tenant, however, and supported the revolutionary government.

Ultimately, the Public Universal Friend's theological message was not as profound as the method by which it was delivered. Like everything about the Friend, opinions on the profundity of the Comforter's message were divided. Those who sought a more mystical religious experience found the Friend's preaching to be inspired and moving, whereas those who came for reasoned theological arguments were disappointed. The Friend's message was one that emphasized transcendence over death, and envisioned a world beyond death, beyond gender, and beyond bodily concerns. And the Friend's physical appearance supported this message through a genderless identity. All who attended the Friend's sermons, regardless of what they thought of the actual speech, were struck by the gender ambiguity of the P.U.F.'s appearance, voice, and presence. And many felt threatened by this nonbinary gender expression. Detractors accused the Friend of blasphemy, believing the Comforter claimed to be the second coming of Christ. What the Society of Universal Friends actually thought has been a matter of debate, but there is not a clear consensus that the P.U.F. openly claimed to be Jesus. Accusations of religious blasphemy and fraud, scandal and even murder dogged the Friend and the Society whenever they were in Philadelphia, though little in the way of evidence could ever be found to substantiate such claims.

But why were so many people intimidated by the Public Universal Friend's gender ambiguity? Well, just as the Great Awakening challenged traditional sources of religious authority, so too did the Atlantic revolutions throw into question many categories and hierarchies of power assumed to be natural. Traditional systems that organized hierarchy through status, class and lineage were being eroded, as people

renegotiated the political system from one that relied on an authoritative monarch and politically passive subjects to a republic that relied on politically active citizens. And so as certain hierarchies lost power, so too did categories like gender and race become much more strongly and rigidly defined in order to assert new hierarchies.

And yet, even as a masculine and feminine gender binary was being more strongly defined, the Friend was not the only one who crossed gender boundaries, although the Friend was one of the most famous and well-documented. We find other individuals in Philadelphia within arrest and prison records who were accused of cross-dressing. Accounts of cross-dressing prostitutes and female husbands like Mary/Charles Hamilton were circulated in newspapers and periodicals and in popular literature. And for as many examples as we have of people who crossed the gender binary, there are probably just as many individuals who passed, who were never accused of gender transgressions or whose lives went unrecorded.

Ultimately, much of the negative reaction to the Public Universal Friend derived from the way the Friend conceptualized, performed and articulated a nonbinary gender as central to the theological statement the P.U.F. was making. Within a religious and theological space, the Comforter challenged 18th-century constructs of gender and openly crossed the borders of categories and hierarchies of power that were supposed to be absolute. Life and death, maleness and femaleness, divinity and humanity. Next week, we will move away from religious articulations of gender and learn how the hierarchical categories of gender and race compounded to inform the experiences of Black women who labored as domestic workers in the first half of the 19th century.

Next week on *The Alley Cast*: “The Racial Politics of Domestic Labor”

Ted Maust:

History is a group effort!

Today’s episode was researched, written, and narrated by Isabel Steven, with research assistance by Ted Maust and Joe Makuc. We also drew on the work of scholars like Paul Moyer and Scott Larson; you can check out the episode page at [elfrethsalley.org/podcast](http://elfrethsalley.org/podcast) for a complete list of sources. Our theme music is the song “Open Flames” by Blue Dot Sessions from the album *Aeronaut*, used under Creative Commons license. Thank you for listening! If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts! Be sure to join us next week for Episode 4. Thank you for supporting the Elfreth’s Alley Museum by listening to this podcast! If you are able to make a financial gift, you can do so at [elfrethsalley.org/donate](http://elfrethsalley.org/donate). Thank you and take care!

## APPENDIX D

### “A COMMENTARY ON EPISODE 3 OF *THE ALLEY CAST*”

In the process of creating *The Alley Cast*, our team has learned a lot and sometimes recognized mistakes we made earlier in the process. This post from Isabel Steven is intended to be a companion piece and commentary on episode three of *The Alley Cast*, "The Public Universal Friend in Philadelphia."

History is never static, and the process of learning and changing how I understand and write about the past is one that will never be complete. Since the release of "The Public Universal Friend in Philadelphia," I have continued to read, think, and most importantly, talk with others. In particular, I had the good fortune to have a friend and colleague reach out to me in order share their thoughts and critiques of the episode, providing their expertise as a sensitivity reader to explain where I got things wrong, where I could improve, and where I could have been more intentional with you, the audience. My colleague has elected to remain anonymous, but I wish to thank them profusely for providing their expertise, educating me, and reminding me that my work as a historian can always be improved.

The episode, of course, has already been released, but I wish to provide a synopsis of the critiques my colleague provided and an annotated version of the transcript with specific notes that can stand as a record for where this episode could have been improved, and perhaps provide greater clarity on some of the issues historians working on trans history face. None of these notes are intended to be excuses for mistakes I made, but rather to show

greater insight into my process of research and writing and ways I should have written the script and would have if I could.

In one of the first sentences of the episode, I describe a group of men and women walking down a street in Philadelphia, before mentioning the Friend. Although I had intended to mark the Friend as distinct from the group of *men* and *women*, my colleague pointed out that it is not clear how the Friend did or did not fit into this group with regard to gender. Someone could read this as the PUF being either a man or a woman, and as we learn, the Friend was neither. This moment should have been a moment to clearly construct some of the gender norms of the 18th century so that an audience, particularly one with no background in this subject matter, could understand that the Friend was overtly transgressing those norms.

Early in the episode, I describe the illness that prompted the transformation of the Public Universal Friend. I describe the Friend by their deadname, Jemima Wilkinson, and that the Friend was born a woman. Rather than merely describing this aspect of the story, I should have taken the time to deliberately discuss the use of the "born a woman" phrase from both a historical perspective and a contemporary one. When researching trans historical figures and writing about them pre-transition, certain difficulties arise. First, much of the historical record misgenders or deadnames these figures. The Public Universal Friend is no different. Contemporaries, historians and archivists have all used the Friend's deadname to refer to the Friend. Research, then, must take into account using this name in order to find source material. Another difficulty arises in how to describe this period of pre-transition for the PUF. The writing we have from the Friend is predominantly from post-

transformation, and so while we can and should use the Friend's own words to describe and understand the Friend's gender, it also means we do not have writing from before the Friend became the Public Universal Friend. The truth is, we do not know how the Person experienced their gender or felt about their identity before this transformation.

The second component of this issue is a contemporary one. Whatever difficulties there are in writing about trans history, to use a phrase like "born a woman" in a historical context has harmful connotations because of the harmful impact it has on trans people today. Using such a phrase or one similar (i.e. biologically/genetically female [or male]) is one that grossly simplifies a much more complicated experience for transgender people. It is also commonly used to invalidate a transgender person's identity, and to center someone's identity around a gender that they are not. It can also imply that biological sex is a more valid way to categorize someone, when in fact, biological sex is not the appropriate phrase to use, if indeed it is necessary at all, is to say assigned female at birth in order to recognize that someone else made a decision on what gender that person is.

How I wrote about the Public Universal Friend pre-transition and how I tried to mark the significance of The Friend's transformation was not perfect. I should have been clearer about both the challenges of the historical record, the inadequacies of language to describe historical experiences of transness, and acknowledged how the narrative phrase "born a woman" is harmful toward transgender people.

As I touched on in the previous point, the use of the Public Universal Friend's deadname presents challenges and requires care when using it. In the case of using the Friend's deadname, we do have the Friend's own writing and the Friend's disciples', which

both reject that name. Such directives should provide historians with a clear model for how to discuss the Friend and which name to use and which to not. The two cases I use the Friend's deadname are first, when discussing the Friend's transformation, and second, within direct quotations. I mention in the introduction of the episode where I use the name, but I should have been more intentional in my explanation as to why, and in acknowledging the harm that deadnaming does to transgender individuals.

The first instance I use the Friend's deadname is within the context of the Friend before and during the transformation. In order to understand the significance of the transformation, some explanation and knowledge of who the person was is required. However, the amount of times I used the Friend's deadname could have been minimized, and in some cases I should have used alternative methods to describe the transformation into the Public Universal Friend.

The second instance I used the Friend's deadname is within direct quotations. The use of primary source material when it contains offensive or outdated language is a challenging one, and I am certainly not the only one to face it. The main consideration in this case (and many others I would hazard) is whether or not using a direct quotation with such language is actually necessary or useful for telling the story. In the annotated transcript, I highlight the two instances that the Friend's deadname is used within direct quotations. The first example is one that I realize is not actually that helpful in conveying new information and could easily have been partially cut to avoid using the Friend's deadname. The second instance is one that my colleague and I discussed, and which they believed to be an example of a quotation with a deadname effectively conveys information;

in this case, how the Friend and the Friend's disciples responded to people's use of the Friend's deadname. For more specific and in-depth explanations of these two instances, please see the commentary I provided on the transcript linked above.

The final aspect of this issue that I should have done a better job on was being clear that when people talk about the Public Universal Friend that we should be using that name and not the Friend's deadname, and that gendered pronouns (he/him, she/her) should not be used. It may be difficult to find the right language to discuss trans history, but that should never be an excuse not to. To anyone who listened to this episode and was hurt by my use of the "born a woman" narrative and the use of the Friend's deadname, I apologize. I should have been more diligent in considering how such language would affect listeners and the harmful connotations and impact that hearing such language would have. I hope that this blogpost and the annotated transcript can go some way toward making amends for any hurt caused.