

**Second Public Meeting**  
**The Future of the Philadelphia History Museum at the Atwater Kent**

Free Library of Philadelphia - Parkway Central Branch  
Tuesday, September 10, 2019, from 6PM - 7:30PM

Below is the transcript from the questions and answers session at the September 10<sup>th</sup> Public Meeting. Minor edits were made for clarity.

**Kelly Lee:** I'm moderating the Q&A. If anyone has any questions or comments, we have a live mic over here on this side of the room. We saved the majority of the time for Q&A, so in order to hear from as many people as possible, everyone will have one minute to ask their question or give their comment. Stephanie here will give you a 15 second warning, you will have 15 seconds to wrap it up before we start to address your question. Again, we just want to be sure that we get to as many questions as possible, so please step up to the mic. Now, before we start, I would like to ask Stacy Swigert, Collections Manager, to come to the stage to address any questions about the collection.

**#1:**

Good evening, my name is **Paul Steinke**, Executive Director of the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, and I'm going to pose my first question to the moderator, since Kelly represents the City of Philadelphia. I'd be doing the same thing right now, if I were you. So, there's one artifact that wasn't discussed today.

**Kelly Lee:** The building.

**PS:** First, I'd like to start by saying we are very pleased that the collection is being well cared for, well considered as to its future, conserved and evaluated, that is all excellent, and I think a lot of the concern of the community at first was about that issue, so it's appropriate that that's what you focused on first. You've got an all-star team doing it. The one object that didn't come up is an artifact that tells the story, an important story, about the history of the city of Philadelphia as well, and that is the building. So, what is the current status of the building, and the thinking about its future, since it no longer houses the Philadelphia History Museum? Thank you, Kelly.

**KL:** Thanks, Paul, for that question, and it's a very important question, and we would have been surprised if it didn't come up within the first five questions.

**PS:** Or at least the first question.

**KL:** At least the first question, right. So, the building is critically important to the City of Philadelphia. It was the first Franklin Institute, and that building has always been used for a cultural purpose in the city. Per the deed, the title of the building reverts back to the Atwater Kent Foundation. The city, Drexel, and representatives from the Foundation are having communications now about the building. All parties have acknowledged the importance of this building to the city's history. We will continue to share updates about the building. I'm just putting it out there, I would not be surprised if we have another meeting just on the building itself. I think it's important for the entire community to be able to express their concerns, their hopes, their dreams for that building. It's not up to the City to determine what happens, but I think that all parties involved completely understand the importance of this building.

**PS:** So, no McDonalds

**KL:** No McDonalds - I hope not.

**PS:** Thank you.

**#2:**

Hi, I'm **David Brownlee**, I teach at Penn. First, I want to make a comment, then ask a question, and finally a suggestion, all in a minute. But first of all, again, Drexel must be commended and thanked for this.

**Kelly Lee:** Can we give them a round of applause? (*audience applauds*)

**DB:** And beyond that, Drexel must be thanked specifically for committing its senior personnel and its talent to this project. I think many of us, and I personally, are reassured by the announcement that Derek Gillman will be taking this leadership role. This is hugely significant to this project, a project to be undertaken within the framework of accepted responsibilities and practices for museums. That's the comment. The question is, quite simply, what is the future of the Atwater Kent Museum and its board? It was mentioned as continuing to have a role on various committees, and that's a simple question of what that role is. And the suggestion, picking up on what has been said quite powerfully this evening, is that Drexel as a demonstration of its commitment to public access to these materials, does in the earliest phases of its stewardship, put on public display a highlights exhibition of the collections, as a kind of demonstration of good faith, and to whet our appetite for more things to come. Thank you.

**KL:** David?

**David Rasner:** That is a very good legal question to ask a lawyer, I will tell you that my vision of the Atwater Kent Museum board would be transitory, and would end at the

end of the 5-year period that the city has allocated funding and so forth. But now there's an issue about the Oversight Committee, and we've talked about in our meetings that the Oversight Committee would contain members, some of whom would be Atwater Kent Museum trustees, and some would be the Atwater Kent family members, and others. So right now, I see possibly an ongoing role, and I've not yet formulated an ending date. Right now the Board's focus is on a transition period, to be faithful to the artifacts, and to making sure the process is completed appropriately, and then I think we have to make a decision about whether the board will continue in its role.

**DB**: But the board is self-governing,

**DR**: The board is self-governing.

**DB**: ...and determines whether it will continue itself.

**DR**: Correct, it would have to be a board vote. I think maybe at the public Museum Board meeting in October, that's an appropriate question to address, as well, so thank you for that.

**DB**: Thank you.

**DR**: Roz?

**Rosalind Remer**: So, the question about a highlights exhibition is a very exciting one. At the first public meeting, a comment or a question that someone asked got me thinking about how we might do such an exhibition that could be open hopefully sooner rather than later. And then I began thinking about the 2026 anniversary, and how we might take advantage of that, and so I've been in some conversations, including with the Constitution Center, where we had the first public meeting, of having a really fabulous, big show of materials from this collection that is in some way crowd curated. So just to give you an idea about this - and I'm just throwing this out as an idea because it's something that I have been toying with and I think would be really fun to produce. Page Talbot and I went to an exhibition some years ago in Minnesota, for Minnesota's 100th anniversary. They went, the historical society, went around the state to fairs and public gatherings of various types and asked people to vote for their top most important historic person, place, thing, product, whatever it would be. You can imagine that Bob Dylan and Prince were at the top of the list, but things like wild rice, and I mean...

So, it occurred to us, and when we went to the exhibition and it was just fabulous, it was so populist and people were just enjoying it, and some of the people who had actually nominated the topics were there to enjoy the show and see the fruits of their labor. We thought about doing something like that, building on the digital portal. So if we're able to get enough artifacts represented digitally, and then open up the voting so

Philadelphians can vote on stories and pieces in the collection that they would really like to see, covering 300 years, we could have a blockbuster exhibition of Philadelphia's history for the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence, and really just have a lot of fun with that. The Constitution Center is very excited about this as a possibility, potentially even a year-long show. And - I shouldn't hold them to this, but they have even talked about making it free admission - not to the rest of their exhibits, but to this one, so that people could enjoy it for a year. So that's one possibility that came out of the first public meeting, that sort of kernel of that idea.

There are other ways to have exhibits sooner than 2026 - that's assuming that the Orphans process and everything allows us to transfer and to get working on curating exhibits - and we can certainly look at those opportunities, whether they be at Drexel or whether they be somewhere else, there may be a space that opens up that it's possible to do an exhibit in. We'll just have to look for those opportunities, so we're pretty excited about it, and I think that there will be a chance for Philadelphians to really celebrate this material when they visit these exhibits around the city.

**#3:**

**[Phillip Price]:** If I may, a question about the public access, public access to me means available on a long-term basis to the public, the way Atwater Kent envisioned it when he set it up in 1938. In fact, he wanted that access to be so available that it was free to the public, I don't know how many years, but certainly when he set it up, that was his idea.

So my suggestion would be, in your thinking, please consider a long-term, permanent exhibit describing the history of Philadelphia, from the time of William Penn to the present, highlighting the richness of that period - the Industrial Revolution, the Suffragette movement, the Underground Railroad, and so forth, here, and all of those items so that at least some of the magnificent collection you're responsible for - or will be responsible for - has a place where people can go, permanently, and visit it, and learn from it, particularly children, as expressed earlier. And I point to the recently-opened exhibit at the Constitution Center, called the Civil War and Reconstruction, which describes the period of the Constitution to the right of African-Americans to vote under the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution.

That entire period is covered very well, interpreted ideas and ability not only to see the objects, but to really understand the history and the context of them, and I would hope your planning board and planning committee can think about doing that. Out of this magnificent collection of 130,000 items, obviously there might be 500 or 1,000 of them that could do just what I'm suggesting, so I hope you'll consider that.

**#4:**

Hi, I'm **Kitty Caparella**, I know Derek, my old head of PAFA. I'm a journalist, retired, and

an artist, as a result of my education there. Anyway, I'm interested about the portal. I believe that we talked after that meeting about the portal, and I wanted to find out how long it would take to photograph the entire collection, and then be able to put it online with explanation of what it is and how it came to be. One of you had mentioned how you could make your own collection, and your own exhibit, and I'm very curious if you could explain a little bit more about that.

**Kelly Lee**: Stacey, could you - and then Roz - talk about the collection evaluation and how taking the photos of the items in the collection is a part of the evaluation?

**Stacy Swigert**: One of the things we are working on, and have been doing for the last year is looking at every piece of paper and every digital record that's inside the museum collection. And what we're working towards is creating a variety of categories, which we've already done. So we're assigning these objects into these umbrella categories of things like household items, electronics, foodways - you name it, there's some sort of category for it - and there's lots and lots of stuff. And what we're doing is hiring some students, and some other staff members, and start taking pictures. Right now, before the website is complete, we're looking at temporary outlets for uploading and using these images so that people can visually see them and interact with them online. We hope to have some access through either a blog, or working on our Instagram, to have tiny stories that our staff members can share that are exciting and new to them, and that tell some really interesting stories. It'll be slow at the beginning, and then as we build the portal, we'll be adding more and more of that.

**Derek Gillman**: I'll just address the question of photographing everything. It's actually quite daunting, but it's a very desirable ambition. It's not *everything* - if you've got, say, a gross of old television vacuum tubes, you don't need to photograph all 144 of them - but, you photograph some.

**David Rasner**: We have a lot of vacuum tubes. (*audience laughs*)

**DG**: But there's really two interesting approaches. Between things that are, there are new ways of looking at the collection, and Stacey just described that. Also, my former institute at the Barnes, has a website, which takes a different approach to accessing objects, through Albert Barnes' formless method, and then there's the more traditional approach of "I just want to know what's in it, and I want to know everything that's in it, and I want to be able to find it easily" - and, if you're setting up a website, sometimes those two are in conflict. So, I think one of the things that we draw on is that Drexel is actually rather good at technology, where Westphal itself has a variety of majors in digital technologies, and we have a great computing school.

But it's the front end which is the right thing to get right. I think, probably, at least at the beginning, we'll try and be all things to all people, and then we'll see how that works, insofar as we'll try and give individual stories which are of interest, while not losing sight

of the fact that this is Philadelphia's historical resource and any one of you might say "I really need to know about that print which was made in 1850, in the center of Philadelphia, of that subject" - and you should be able to access it. So, balance. All museums with rich collections have this issue, and it's a resource issue, essentially. I mean, I imagine it is, because if you had all the resources in the world you set a million people to photographing everything and the only question is how fast can you bring it up, but it's never quite that easy. But, we're going to try very hard to deliver on what we know is the approach of making it accessible, because that's the goal - to make it accessible.

**Rosalind Remer**: I would just address the idea of the website allowing people to curate their own exhibits. I'm very excited about this possibility. I can imagine, as someone who teaches, that having students roam through the website and discover objects and stories that interest them, and then curating them into special online exhibits, would be a really attractive thing, and so we absolutely want to do that. It may not be the very first thing that we're able to do, but it will absolutely be on the website, because - as Derek says - this is Philadelphia's history. We want people to be able to engage with it in as many ways as possible. And I think that both the crowd curation and the individualized curation, are really interesting components of a digital archive in an era of social media. It's just an incredibly important asset for us to include.

**DR**: As Board Chair, the one thing that strikes me is the word "resources." These are resources that the Museum never had, and I believe that, with Drexel, it's an important step in moving it forward. Technology has been a game changer, and Drexel is the right partner to make all this happen, more accessible, educational - I'm very happy in the direction we're headed.

**KL**: I just want to add as well, in my role I have a lot of conversations with people who are running museums and other cultural institutions, and it's this balance now, and especially with younger audiences that consider themselves "phygital", there's a new generation of young people who grew up with tablets, and they don't feel as if they need to be present in a place in order to participate, and they're used to self-curating their lives. And so how do we engage younger audiences in collections, using technology, where they can customize their own exhibits. I just learned that we have "foodways" as part of the collection, which I did not know about, Stacey, until you mentioned that category, but that's a whole other exhibit altogether (*laughter*) - but I think it's very exciting, just to repeat what David said.

**DR**: But also, as Mr. Price said, also having the ability to show these objects as well. I think the combination of technology and demonstration is really important, and with that you need resources to do it.

**#5:**

**(This person did not introduce herself)** This transformation of the museum is very dramatic, and I'm curious if you could tell us about some of the models that you you're looking to, either as good examples, or cautionary tales, or is this something that's truly innovative and none of this has ever been done before.

**Rosalind Remer:** The only thing that I am aware of is the Smithsonian had a program for sending artifacts, generally those pieces that were in deep storage, to other museums around the country. This was a program that I think was started in the 1990s, does that sound right?

**Stacy Swigert:** SITES?

**RR:** The SITES Program, yeah. It's a little bit like that, I suppose, but I don't actually know of any other museum that is doing this now - there may well be, but I don't know of it.

**(From the Audience):** The Library of Congress.

**RR:** Library of Congress.

**Derek Gillman:** So those are two really interesting ones, because we can balance them again with the UK, where there's a parallel, and it's all central government. What happened in the UK back in the '80s was that there was an awareness that the national museums were clustered in London, and there was a great reaction from the provinces that they weren't being served. So there was an imperative [for] almost all the national museums to put loan exhibitions out, and that's actually where the Tate St Ives came from, and the Tate Liverpool - and actually creating new institutions, which went out. But, we were searching, and searching mentally, for models which were library-like models for museums, and there aren't that many. And it does tend to be, we think, these centralized government organizations which have a moral obligation to serve their whole populations. But left to their own devices, individually, museums don't do it that much. They'll be responsive rather than proactive, so we actually think that this is a really interesting new model.

**#6:**

Hi, my name is **Rick Getlin**, and for the purposes of transparency, I am a former member of the board of trustees at the Philadelphia History Museum, and I've been at both sessions, and during these sessions, I've had three questions, and perhaps because of a unique perspective, I might even be able to supply an answer to my own questions, but I think others might have them.

The first question is "Hey, this all sounds great, but can Drexel really be trusted to fulfill this mission?" The second question that comes is "Will Drexel, on a continuing basis,

provide the resources - the financial, the human, the physical resources that are necessary to do this?" And, third, "Will they continue to involve in a democratic process, to have the input that we've all been talking about?"

Perhaps, since I know I'm limited on time here, from my unique perspective - I'm also a board member on another nonprofit that a few years ago decided to partner with Drexel University. I met with John Fry and a number of his senior advisors. They made a lot of promises, and those promises were financial promises, there were physical resource promises, and there were human resource promises. So I can tell you, to answer that question, and to quote Kelly, the answer is "Yes, Yes, and Yes."

Our organization is enjoying unbelievable success that has far surpassed any expectation we had, when we first partnered with Drexel three and a half years ago. We have built our own building on their campus, we have enlarged our staff, and we have programming that has surpassed anything that we ever dreamt. So I'll tell you that the questions that I had were questions that are being answered by seeing some of the people that are here tonight, and thank you all, and I can't tell you how confident I feel. Because I had a concern - as a former trustee at the Atwater Kent, I gave my own time, and my money, to sustain that collection. And I feel now that it's in the best hands possible. I thank you for that time.

**David Rasner**: Thank you.

**(From the audience)**: Can you say what institution you represent?

**RG**: Yes, I'm going to be the next president of that institution, currently I'm on their board, it's the Hillel, the center for Jewish life, on Drexel's campus. John Fry personally went out and helped us to raise 6 million dollars to build a building, and he brought in the largest contributors for us. We now have a nationally and internationally acclaimed architectural masterpiece on campus, we have a terrific staff, and we're serving about 600 students on an annualized basis and growing.

**Rosalind Remer**: Thank you, and I guess that I would just say that - and Derek could speak to this too - John Fry is a collections hound. He loves collections. He loves history, loves art, and he's really passionate about this, and has pledged to engage in significant fundraising around the support of these collections. He and I and Derek have had conversations with individuals and foundations - in a preliminary way - about this and have received very, very positive signals that the innovative nature of our plan, and the importance of the collection will receive support from the community in this new, distributed model.

**Derek Gillman**: I'm just going to add on, I see professor Lilly Milroy getting up to be the second questioner, and I wonder whether Lilly is thinking - if she is, I hope she'll ask the question - about the origin's of Drexel's collections. I think that one of the things that



John Fry has done is gone back to the founding of Drexel, which Anthony Drexel was passionate about collections back in the 1890s, and John is interested in recovering that side of Drexel, which certainly for a number of decades in Drexel's history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was not at the forefront. But, boy, is it back now.

**#7:**

Yeah, my question is: is there still going to be a friends' group for Atwater Kent? That has never been talked about. The Atwater Kent Museum had a friends' group, and there was no mention of what is going to happen with that. Also the second question is that I am glad to hear that you are thinking about putting on a display on the campus at Drexel, but would it be best if they could possibly earmark one gallery mainly for when they put on events for the Atwater Kent collection? One suggestion, I am with what used to be the Penn's Landing Trolley, which is now Electric City, and they do a lot of events up there, which the trolleys that used to go run in the middle of Delaware Avenue are now in Scranton and they are doing very well, because they do a lot of events, and so when you have a collection on display, it would probably be wise to do some special events with it, which may help things.

**#8:**

I was going to remind you of the Newark museum, and John Cotton Dana (sp?) who was sending objects from the Newark Museum's collections to local schools and libraries in the nineteen-teens. And, in fact the Philadelphia Museum [of Art] had for a time a branch museum at 69<sup>th</sup> Street, which was mainly an educational center, but we're working on very strong precedents. So on the one hand, we're doing something really exciting and unique, and on the other, building on a long tradition, which we're reviving. I should explain, my name is **Lilly Milroy**, I teach at Drexel, and so I've been watching this with great interest. And, yes, it's the fact that when Anthony Drexel built the main building in the early 1890s, a major part of that building on the first floor was the museum that was designed for public access by the citizens of Philadelphia to study exemplary works of art and design. So, this is right in with the revival of Drexel's founding philosophy. No question.

**Derek Gillman**: I should say that in addition to Lilly, Mike, other colleagues from the Drexel collections, Lilly is a wonderful resource at Drexel as chair of Art and Art History and as a professor of art history, and the author of a phenomenal and very heavy tome that you should not drop on your foot, of the development of Philadelphia. So we have fantastic resources in the city, but we also have fantastic resources here on our doorstep in Drexel.

**#9:**

My name is **Frank Hobert**. I live in South Philadelphia, and I am still very angry. (*one*

*audience member claps*) I feel obligated to say this on behalf of a lot of Philadelphians. I think the panel here and the discussion and plan all sounds great, but this is my collection. I own this collection, as of today, and it took Jim Kenney, the Kenney administration, for the City of Philadelphia to stop taking care of this collection that the city has taken care of for 80 years, and it's Jim Kenney and the Kenney administration who are unloading it and taking it away from us, and I think that's a bad thing. Thank you.

**Kelly Lee:** Any other questions or comments?

**#10:**

Yes hello, My name is **Neil Benson**, and it's not a question, it's a statement. In my over 40 years as a journalist in Philadelphia, I discovered that Philadelphians are extraordinarily passionate about Philadelphia, but they are very slow to reveal this. *(audience laughs)* They will never compliment Philadelphia, but boy is the civic pride in Philadelphia extremely strong. So I would like to modify the "yes, yes, yes" to everybody in this room, to everyone at the Constitution Center, to everybody working on this, out of sight - thank you, thank you, thank you!

**Kelly Lee:** I can't think of a better end to this question and answer session. I want to thank you all again for attending. Your time, I know, is very valuable, so the fact that you've come here - and many of you came back for this second public meeting to hear the next steps - we really appreciate it. Know again, by the end of next week, the questions that were raised, and responses that were given, will be posted on the website for people who were not able to attend tonight. Also, the revised plan that you've heard so much about, we will also put that on a website. As David mentioned, we did not want to do that before this second public meeting, because we wanted to be open to any other ideas and considerations that we did not hear prior to this meeting. So again, go to the website, please stay involved, please stay informed. We will have a meeting, probably about the building I'm sure in the near future, and also the exciting work that the collection evaluation committee will be doing, using the photos of the collection, and trying to keep people engaged even while this process is going on, we think that's very important. So again, thank you for coming.