Obituaries

CARL BRIDENBAUGH

As the new century opens, the American Antiquarian Society remembers a staunch member and champion who as an American historian was one of the towering figures of the mid-twentieth century. Carl Bridenbaugh died just eight years ago on January 6, 1992, at the age of 88. Bridenbaugh may not have been universally loved, especially after a controversial presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1962, but his shaping influence on the practice of American history was widely acknowledged and admired. Besides his many more particular contributions, he was the leading advocate in the 1940s and 1950s for a reinvigorated study of the colonial and Revolutionary periods, which he called 'the neglected first half of American history.'

A Philadelphian by birth (August 10, 1903), and abiding sentiment, he nevertheless went to college at Dartmouth, returning after his graduation in 1925 to study briefly at the University of Pennsylvania while holding teaching appointments in two successive private secondary schools. In 1927 he began graduate study in earnest at Harvard, where, under the senior Arthur Schlesinger, he laid the chief cornerstone of scholarly career by writing the dissertation that would become *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625–1642*. When he received the Ph.D. in 1936, he was already on the history faculty at M.I.T. In 1938, the year in which *Cities in the Wilderness* was published by Alfred Knopf, he moved to Brown University as an associate professor. As it turned out, this would

be the first of two widely separated six-year appointments at Brown. His career, like those of most of his generation of academicians, was interrupted by the Second World War, though during much of his naval service he headed the academic component of an officer training program at Fort Schuyler, New York. It was also during his wartime service that he lost his wife, Jessica, whom he had married while he was a Harvard graduate student and young M.I.T. instructor and who had collaborated with him on his second book, *Rebels and Gentlemen: Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin* (1942). Before his release from active duty as a lieutenant commander, he married again, this time to Roberta Haines Herriott, who contributed to all of his subsequent scholarship and shared the authorship of his last really major work, *No Peace Beyond the Line* (1971). Her husband's only immediate survivor, she died March 3, 1996.

When Bridenbaugh was elected to the AAS in October 1945, an honor that he promptly acknowledged with pleasure and obvious pride in a letter to Clarence Brigham, he had just resumed his post-war career by becoming the first director of the Institute for Early American History and Culture. He was at once asked to address the Society's next semiannual meeting, resulting in 'The New England Town: A Way of Life,' subsequently published in the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* and much later, in 1981, in a volume of his essays, *Early Americans*. This first contribution to AAS, according to this writer's memory, also furnished one of Bridenbaugh's stock classsroom lectures.

Besides its obvious importance in establishing the Institute and its programs, Bridenbaugh's five-year pioneering term in Williamsburg was marked by significant advances in his own scholarship. *Peter Harrison: First American Architect*, *Seat of Empire: The Political Role of Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg*, his edited version of Dr. Alexander Hamilton's Itinerarium entitled *Gentleman's Progress*, and *The Colonial Craftsman* were all products of this brief era, as were the bulk of the research on *Myths and Realities: Societies of the Colonial South* (1952), and the beginnings

of his work on his great companion volume to *Cities in the Wilderness*, which would appear in 1955 as *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743–1776*. In February 1952, Bridenbaugh communicated his progress to Clifford K. Shipton, the AAS librarian: 'My second volume on Cities, which is now 14 large boxes of notes with more to come from this summer's trip, will be my next big job and will take me several years to write—and rewrite—but at least when it is done I will have the satisfaction of having written pretty completely the story of one large phase of American life, which is more than has been done for any other to date, so far as I know.' He was never one to underestimate the importance of his own work.

Bridenbaugh corresponded with some frequency with 'Ted' Shipton, whose compact biographies of eighteenth-century Harvard graduates he often recommended to his students not only as sources but as models of graceful writing. In 1950, not long before leaving Williamsburg to assume the Margaret Byrnes Professorship of United States History at Berkeley, he had responded to a slightly (but only slightly) different sort of biography. 'After reading what you had to say about James Truslow Adams,' he had written to Shipton, 'I have firmly resolved to outlive you lest you pen an obituary about little Carl.' He had just read an obituary of Adams in the 1949 *Proceedings*. It reflected on Adams's rise and abrupt fall from favor, 'a reminder,' Shipton observed, 'that history itself is a transitory and human thing.' It also contained, among other more complimentary passages, some blunt criticism of Adams's scholarship. Bridenbaugh in fact did outlive his friend by eighteen years, which may have saved him from being held up by Shipton as another object lesson in shift of historical fashion.

When Bridenbaugh moved from Williamsburg to Berkeley in the summer of 1950, he explained to Shipton with characteristic bluntness that had taken the job, made vacant by the death of Dixon Wecter, because 'California ranks with Harvard and Chicago as one of the three American universities.' During his

twelve years there, he finished *Cities in Revolt*, making extensive use of the AAS newspaper collection and other materials in the library whenever he could make his way east, and researched and wrote *Mitre and Sceptre: Transatlantic Faiths, Ideas, Personalities, and Politics, 1689–1775*, his extensive study of the controversy over an Anglican episcopate in America and its role in bringing on the American Revolution, to which he attributed greater weight than most historians before or since. It was published in 1962 shortly after he made his second move to Brown, this time as University Professor.

It was that same year that Bridenbaugh caused a mighty stir in the profession with his now legendary A.H.A. presidential address, 'The Great Mutation.' He argued that young scholars with urban rather than rural backgrounds, sometimes relying on quantitative rather than traditional research techniques enriched by experience and a common literary heritage, had diluted and distorted the practice of preindustrial history. While the address provided inspiration for a few who recognized in it a plea for the engagement of the historian's full humanity in imagining the past, it enraged those who saw it primarily as an expression of ethnic and class bias as well as a curt dismissal of the emerging methodologies. It is unfortunate for his subsequent reputation that it is mainly by an unfavorable interpretation of this address, rather than by his very much larger body of work, that he is apt to be remembered by the generation of historians that followed his and especially by those for whom that generation served as mentors.

Bridenbaugh next undertook what he thought would be the capstone of his career, a multivolume social history he called 'The Beginnings of the American People.' Building further upon contacts and sources in Britain that had served him well in *Mitre and Spectre*, he produced the first of a projected four volumes, *Vexed and Troubled Englishmen*, in 1968. After his retirement from Brown in 1969, he and Roberta pushed on to the second volume, *No Peace Beyond the Line: The English in the Caribbean, 1624–1690*, which appeared in 1971. That was as far as this bold and massive

project got. The series never moved to the American mainland. Instead, working from his restored Benefit Street home and in the John Carter Brown Library, meanwhile lunching frequently at the Providence Art Club and rooting in a dignified sort of way for the Brown hockey team at Meehan Auditorium, Bridenbaugh turned to projects of less ambitious scope. Most of them, however, contained materials that would likely have made their way into the 'Beginnings' series had it run its projected course. *Fat Mutton and Liberty of Conscience* (1974) was a slim but acute study of seventeenth-century Rhode Island, *The Spirit of '76* (1975) reiterated his often-taught conviction that the colonial experience had produced an American nationalism before its culminating expression in the Revolution, and *Jamestown, 1544–1699* (1980) was a lively account of the first mainland English colony aimed deliberately at the general reader. His last published book was the 1981 collection *Early Americans*, after which his own deteriorating eyesight and Roberta's failing health forced a move to simpler living quarters in an apartment on Angell Street and finally an end to an extraordinary career of scholarship.

Bridenbaugh's methods as a scholar were thorough but not rigidly systematic. In his own work and in that of his students, he emphasized a diligent quest for sources, an essentially common sense approach to their use and interpretation, an insistence of taking the past on its own terms, a breadth of historical vision, and good writing. He was impatient in lapses in any of those areas on the part of his students, and openly critical of the highly sophisticated methods of the 'new' social history of the 1960s and '70s (though he once sheepishly confessed that part of his research for *Fat Mutton* involved counting sheep). He did appreciate the contributions of the historical archaeologist, as he made abundantly plain in *Jamestown*, but as for the writing of history, he believed, as he expressed in the preface to *Fat Mutton*, that 'wide learning is what historians need today more than anything else.'

His own breadth of 'learning,' combined with an equally broad historical vision, made for considerable versatility. He wrote—and

conversed—with equal authority and grace about architecture, craftsmen, religion, seaports, taverns, sugar plantations, newspapers, and politicians. His selections of seventeenth-century materials may not have placed the Native Americans quite as close to center stage as fashion now dictates, but he appreciated their humanity and their importance and in the early portions of *Jamestown* approached what subsequent early Americanists might call 'contact' history. Doubtless neither he nor the later practitioners of a self-conscious women's history would have found much cause for mutual admiration had he been active a decade longer, but both sexes (he would have not called them 'genders') were very much a part of his own historical consciousness. He once chided the present writer for not having paid sufficient attention in his early work to the 'womenfolk.'

His relations with his students were on the formal side. While he was usually cordial and even charming, some found that he could be abrupt and dismissive, an attribute that also found expression in a somewhat prickly relationship with some of his colleagues. His conversation was seasoned with a well-honed stock of amusing anecdotes and occasional sports metaphors. His lectures were factual and interpretive, based heavily on his own extensive research, and his style businesslike rather than spontaneous or dramatic, demanding the respectful attention of every undergraduate lest he or she be sent from the classroom.

In short, Bridenbaugh represents almost in ideal and in its most energetic form the type of twentieth-century humanistic teacher-scholar whose era of dominance, but perhaps not lasting influence, was finally brought to a close by the student rebellions and the 'great mutation' not only in history but in other disciplines as well. Historical distance now provides the clarity to see that in an era, and a generation, worthy of twenty-first century celebration.

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