

10-1986

# The City of Philadelphia, 1800

La Salle University Art Museum

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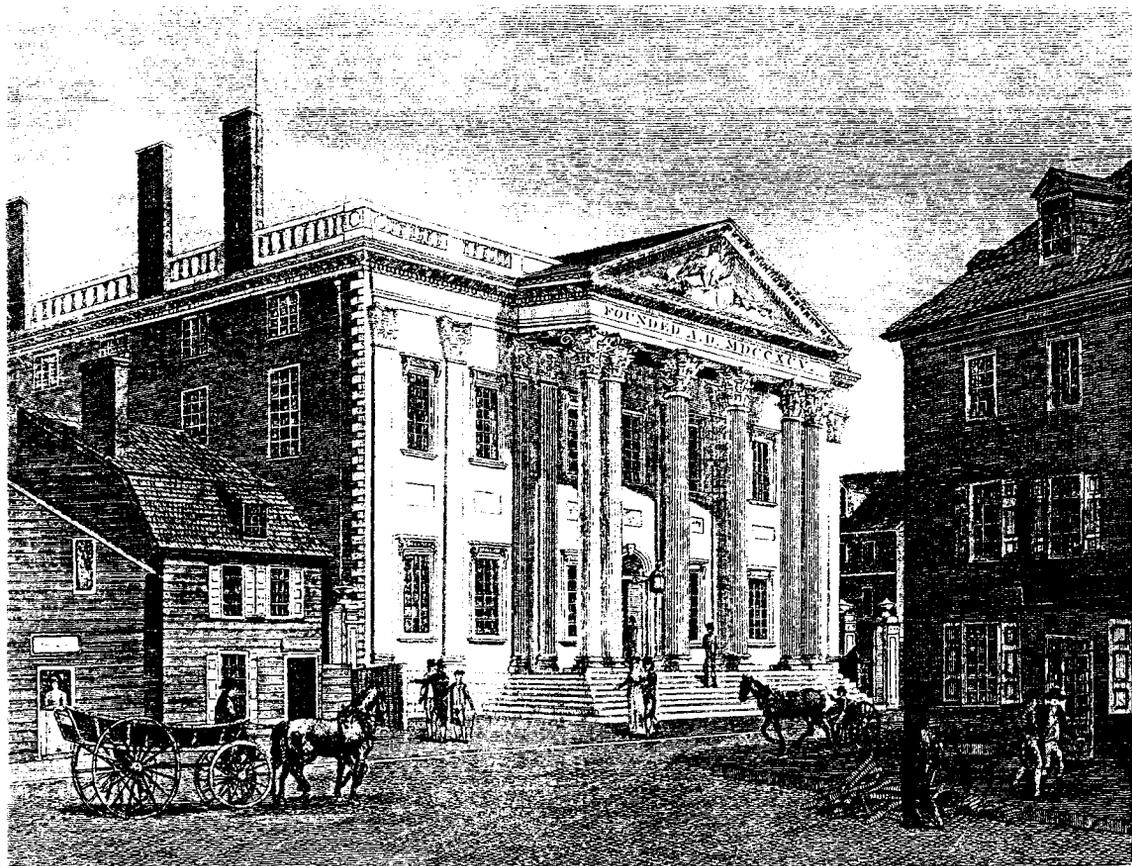
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*Drawn & Engraved & Published by W. Birch & Son*

*Sold by R. Campbell & Co. No. 530 Chestnut Street Philad<sup>a</sup>. 1799.*

*BANK OF THE UNITED STATES, in Third Street PHILADELPHIA.*

"THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA," 1800  
DRAWN & ENGRAVED BY W. BIRCH & SON

Lent by the Independence  
National Historical Park

LA SALLE UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM  
OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 30, 1986

## Introduction

This display of Birch's "City of Philadelphia" is the first of two exhibitions to be held at the La Salle University Art Museum during the academic year in celebration of the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution. These prints, graciously lent by Independence National Historical Park, provide a vivid picture of the area where the Constitutional Convention assembled in 1787.

One of the great advantages of La Salle University is its close proximity to the center of the oldest, most historically rich and well-preserved city in the United States. The specific area illustrated in these prints, in addition to being the "birth place of the nation," offers today an abundance of historical buildings, tree-lined residential streets with elegant townhouses, reasonably priced restaurants, shops, museums, street performances, and special weekend entertainment — much of it free.

Inquire at the front desk for the "Weekend Section" of Friday's Philadelphia Inquirer for listings of special events and easy directions to Center City from La Salle. And do not forget that this is just one part, albeit an important one, of the fourth largest city in the country of which you can take immediate advantage.

What follows next here are some excerpts about The Birch prints from the exhibition catalogue, Philadelphia: Three Centuries of American Art (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1976), reproduced here with permission.

Caroline Wistar  
Curator

William Birch (1755-1834)

From his early years in Warwickshire, William Birch was a keen observer of the English countryside and town life. After serving an apprenticeship under the London goldsmith Thomas Jeffrys, Birch struck out on his own, painting miniatures in enamels. He traveled extensively in England compiling a group of oil landscapes which he engraved and published in 1791 as Delicés de la Grande Bretagne. Finding life in London sluggish following the deaths of his two close friends Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Earl of Mansfield (also a good patron), Birch decided to immigrate to America where he had distant relatives.

He arrived in Philadelphia in 1794, armed with a letter of introduction from Benjamin West to William Bingham, who hired him as a drawing instructor for his daughters. Birch built himself a furnace and re-established his career as a miniaturist and enamelist. His most noted work in enamel was a miniature after Gilbert Stuart's "Lansdowne" portrait of Washington.

During 1797 and 1798, Birch prepared a novel publishing undertaking that was to become his most famous legacy, a book of views entitled The City of Philadelphia, published in 1800. While traveling throughout the mid-Atlantic region to procure subscriptions for this volume, Birch began to formulate his next publishing venture, a group of views of American country seats. These illustrated a civilized rural landscape, in contrast to the wilder nature that Joshua Shaw was to depict in an even grander publication some years later. In both productions Birch was aided by his son Thomas, better known as a marine painter.

An Englishman recently arrived in Philadelphia, Birch wished to pay tribute to his new home in the manner he knew best, pictorially. While the city had been recorded throughout the eighteenth century, there was no complete document of Philadelphia's buildings, activities, commerce, and stature. William Birch determined to produce an album of these aspects of the city, and, possibly unwittingly, created the first such urban record in America...

In collecting sketches, Birch was assisted by his son Thomas and by Samuel Seymour, a young artist whom Birch was instructing... Existing drawings reveal Birch's method of working. A small rough sketch was made at the site, indicating bare outlines of perspective, buildings, and notes on detail, and it was then squared off for enlarging... The small sketches formed the basis for watercolor drawings, slightly larger and much more finished in detail; these in turn were enlarged to the size of the copperplates, about 11 x 13 inches.

Although a portraitist, Birch rarely individualized the faces of the Philadelphians who populated his street scenes of what was the largest metropolis in America. Birch's original title, as used in his manuscript subscription book (Historical Society of Pennsylvania) was "Philadelphia Disected: Or, the Metropolis of America." He wanted to include as many aspects of the city as possible. Places of worship, amusement, and commerce; moments of historical significance and every-day life; visitors and natives, artisans and merchants — all played a role in Birch's urban theater...

The whole volume was introduced by a handsome title page, the work of the calligraphic engraver William Barker, who also engraved the plan of the city, which was copied from that of T. Stephens in a 1796 Philadelphia directory. To advertise the publication, Birch and Samuel Seymour jointly engraved a larger version of the frontispiece, published in 1801. As was customary, choice of coloring and binding was left to the purchaser.

An uncolored set in boards cost an economical \$28; the more opulent leather-bound volume with hand-colored plates could be bought for \$44.50...Birch's work was well received and his subscription book is studded with both the best Philadelphia names and those of leading American political and cultural figures...

A second edition of 1804 and a third edition of 1809... as well as a final salvo in 1820, kept the Philadelphia views in print...Demand for the City of Philadelphia continued well into the 1820's, and Birch issued a final edition in 1827-28...Restrikes appeared intermittently throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some by Robert DeSilver in 1841, others by John McAllister, Jr., and possibly also by his son. Countless reproductions in varying techniques have appeared and continue to appear to this day, attesting to the ageless popularity of Birch's Philadelphia views.

## Check-list

THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA,  
IN THE STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA,  
NORTH AMERICA; AS IT APPEARED  
IN THE YEAR 1800

Drawn and engraved by W. Birch & Son  
Published by W. Birch, Springland Cot,  
Near Neshaminy Bridge on the Bristol  
Road, Pennsylvania. Dec. 31st 1800

Etching and engraving with watercolor  
16½ x 37½ ins.

Lent by National Independence Historical Park

1. The City of Philadelphia...
2. The City & Port of Philadelphia, on the River Delaware from Kensington. 1800
3. Subscription list to Birch's The City of Philadelphia.
4. Plan of the City of Philadelphia, engraved by W. Barker.

5. Introduction and Table of Contents,  
The City of Philadelphia, c. 1800.
6. Arch Street, with the Second Presbyterian  
Church, Philadelphia, 1799.
7. Bank of the United States in Third  
Street Philadelphia, 1799.
8. South East Corner of Third, and Market  
Streets Philadelphia, 1799.
9. Goal, in Walnut Street Philadelphia, 1799.
10. High Street Market Philadelphia, 1799.
11. High Street, From the Country Market-place  
Philadelphia: with the procession in  
commemoration of the Death of General  
George Washington, December 26th, 1799.
12. High Street, from Ninth Street Philadelphia, 1799.
13. The House intended for the President of the  
United States in Ninth Street Philadelphia.
14. An Unfinished House, in Chestnut Street  
Philadelphia, 1800.
15. Old Lutheran Church, in Fifth Street  
Philadelphia, 1800.

16. New Market, in South Second Street Philadelphia, 1799.
17. Library and Surgeons Hall, in Fifth Street Philadelphia, 1799.
18. Congress Hall and New Theatre, in Chestnut Street Philadelphia, 1800.
19. State-House, with a View of Chestnut Street Philadelphia, 1798.
20. New Lutheran Church, in Fourth Street Philadelphia, 1799.
21. View in Third Street, from Spruce Street Philadelphia.
22. Preparation for war to defend Commerce. The Swedish Church Southwark with the building of the Frigate Philadelphia, 1800.
23. High Street, with the First Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, 1799.
24. Back of the State House Philadelphia, 1799.
25. Second Street North from Market S.W. Christ Church Philadelphia, 1799.
26. The Water Works, in Centre Square Philadelphia.

This exhibition is supported by a grant from  
Manufacturers Hanover Financial Services, Inc.