

John H. McFadden and His Age: Cotton and Culture in Philadelphia

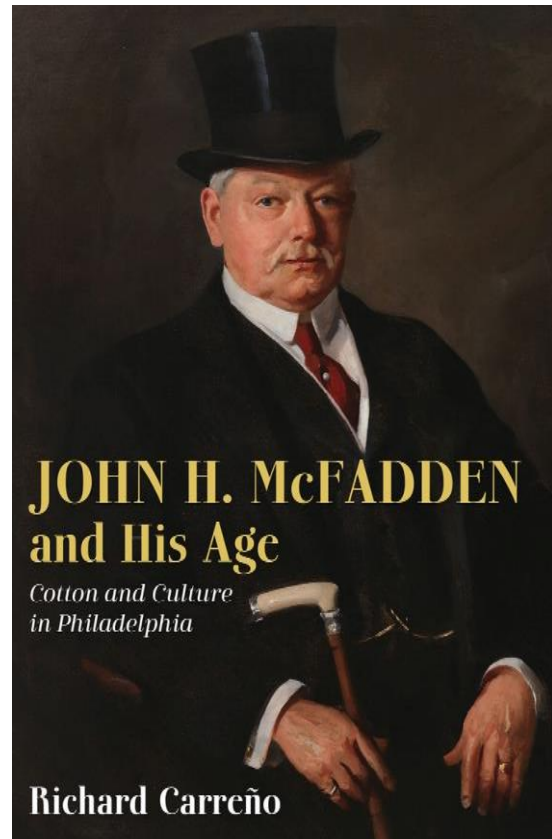
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Preface: Beau Ideal

In a city where Benjamin Franklin's legacy permeates the institutional landscape, it is easy to believe that the Philadelphia Museum of Art is another of Philadelphia's ancient and legendary cultural institutions. Many of them indeed date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, founded in 1805, and the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, begun in 1814. And Franklin was in fact associated with two public institutions: the Library Company (1731) and the American Philosophical Society (1743). In contrast, the Philadelphia Museum is a mere youngblood, less than a century from its opening in 1928 as the Pennsylvania Museum of Art.

That is, if we are considering it as it is today: the majestic Greek Revival colossus atop Fairmount Hill. But the museum's roots run much deeper, to the late nineteenth century, in its first incarnation in 1877 as the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art. By this measure, it is actually older than the iconic Metropolitan Museum of Art (1880) in New York.

John H. McFadden and His Age The Pennsylvania Museum of Art was born in a time of tumultuous municipal transition, which tore and remade the fabric of virtually all of Philadelphia's institutions, from political to cultural, from commercial to societal. In a period of no more than thirty years beginning in the late 19th century, Philadelphia reconsidered how money



changed hands, who lived where, and how immigrant Americans would shape the city's demographic landscape. The new museum, remarkably, also contributed to sounding the death knell of "Proper Philadelphia," as E. Digby Baltzell famously memorialized the city's WASP elite.

Unlike Philadelphia's other venerable cultural institutions, the Philadelphia Museum was not the product of a single visionary, nor of a coterie of affluent connoisseurs. The museum's founding was contentious, public, messy, and expensive. One Philadelphian, among the many who figured in the museum's creation, stands out prominently in shaping its transformation. John H. McFadden, having made his fortune as a cotton merchant in England, stepped forward to become Philadelphia's singular cultural impresario.

McFadden's renown as Philadelphia's—indeed, America's— grandest cotton king has been largely forgotten. If he is known for anything nowadays, it is as the collector and donor of the John Howard McFadden Memorial Collection of British art to the Philadelphia Museum. Scant biographical resources, and no recent writing about the man's life, meant that McFadden's multitude of remarkable roles—as philanthropist, rare book collector, sponsor of exploration, real estate developer, and museum administrator— had fallen into the shadows of history.

This has been the case with many of Philadelphia's great art collectors: no "big" books have been written about such giants as P.A.B. Widener, William L. Elkins, and, most egregiously, John G. Johnson. The exception is Dr. Albert C. Barnes, the founder of the legendary Barnes Foundation.

Very little was known about McFadden: how he formed his massive wealth as a cotton trader in Liverpool; his role as an art connoisseur and collector, or as importantly, how he became Philadelphia's unofficial arts czar, overseeing—often ruling— the city's major cultural institutions.

Stipulations attached to the donation of his art trove—at the time the largest collection of British art in America—were instrumental in driving the Philadelphia Museum to reinvent itself, taking the form it has today, the world-class cultural capstone of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

McFadden's is the donation that keeps on giving. The McFadden bequest states that the collection can never be disassembled—and despite a dreary, anachronistic gallery setting, its renditions of “Olde England”—its paean to British order, beauty, and dignity—will remain on view forever.

McFadden did not singlehandedly invent Philadelphia's great museum. John D. McIlhenny, Eli Kirk Price II, and Fiske Kimball also harnessed the mounting synergy of funds, influence, civic motivation, and artwork that finally led to the creation of the neo-Classical masterpiece in brick and mortar. But like no other early twentieth-century Philadelphian, John H. McFadden laid the museum's foundation. Even its cornerstone.

—Richard Carreño
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