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Interview of Cornelia Dayton

Cornelia Dayton 00:00

So, my project as a fellow this year at the MHS is to research the life of John Peters, who lived mostly in Boston for his 55 years. He died in 1801, actually in Charlestown. He had just moved across the bridge to Charlestown from the North End of Boston, but most of the time he lived in Boston, and he is known to us today because he married the poet Phillis Wheatley.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:27

[Intro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is a podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society. It introduces listeners to our community of researchers. We learn about the paths that they took to become a student of the past and the projects that they are working on at the Massachusetts Historical Society. I am Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai, the Director of Research at the MHS. Today, we are sitting down with Cornelia Dayton of the University of Connecticut. She is a recipient of the MHS NEH Long Term Fellowship sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:08

Can you tell us about why you became an historian?

Cornelia Dayton 01:13

Well, I think was probably a bit over-determined in that as a child, I lived in a very old house outside of Philadelphia that was built in stages 1699, 1735, so something about the space and the history of it might have been influential. And then my parents both were interested in history. So I think they encouraged my interest, and they had interesting family histories. One is a kind of mixed English, German family, families that had come to the US starting in

the 1600s or or later on. And then my mother was a Canadian Scot, so there was an interesting story in Canada. So those things I think shaped me, and I remember too that because you asked me to think about books that might have influenced me. And you know, who knows, I don't have a reading list from my childhood, but I remember being kind of obsessed with Elizabeth the First and reading every novel and biography that I could get my hands on and having a little collection of those on my shelf. So, so who knows if that was just part of part of interest in history, but I think the more interesting fork in my intellectual life came around college, where I was sort of deciding between is my fascination history, which I did major in, but I also majored in political science, because I was exactly of that generation that was very influenced by the Watergate hearings, which happened my junior year of high school. So, I was completely obsessed with listening to those hearings, thinking about constitutional process. And in college, I really was deciding between these two paths, would I go into government and policy? I worked in Washington. These were the days when you could actually get paid internships on the [Capitol] Hill two summers. And for other bizarre reasons, I became a bit of an expert on the law of the sea and the 200-mile limit. So, I was really deciding during my college years, do I go that route? And I was very intrigued by the idea of being a constitutional lawyer. So, in those days, I think, you know, young people were like, I want to be Archibald Cox, a constitutional lawyer. And it took me some years to find out you just don't choose constitutional law really. You might evolve into an expert, but it's not something you can sort of start out with. So, I was really deciding about those tracks. Do I go to law school? Do I pursue government and policy, or do I pursue history? And I think history won out, because, as always, with these things, you discover what field, if you're if you're fortunate and have that chance is totally fascinating, and that you can spend weeks reading microfilms, say, which is how we read [micro]fiche newspapers in those days, whereas in the policy field, I would find myself getting somewhat bored after a few weeks or months working on those things. So, I think that told me that it was historical research I wanted to pursue.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:26

What about teachers or professors? Did they have any sway?

Cornelia Dayton 04:31

I think, as when I talk to college students today who end up as history majors, it's usually because they had a great, you know, inspiring history teacher, K through 12. And for me, I was just fortunate in that I I was at a school before college that encouraged independent research, so I did some almost college level research projects.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:54

Was this in the Philadelphia area?

Cornelia Dayton 04:56

Yes and then in college, I mean, you know, it's a strange time the late '70s for women students who were thinking of becoming professionals because there were very few, I think, out of four years at Harvard, I had two women professors, so it was hard to imagine yourself sort of not in the male mold, but because of my interest, I took every course I could with Bernard Bailyn. So certainly intellectually, his work was very exciting. And those were the years when he was introducing his course, *People of North America*. So, he was well known for his courses on the American Revolution that came out of his book Ideological Origins. But he was also very interested in social history and in the migration, those wonderful records of migrants who came to North America, especially Philadelphia, from Britain in [17]74 so who knows if that's the sort of work I do now, tracing lots of ordinary people in my projects, the social history, their social history. So that that may have been influential.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:04

And you would define yourself as a scholar of colonial and early America?

Cornelia Dayton 06:09

Yes.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:10

And how did that interest? Why that time period? Was it because you grew up in Philadelphia or was that did you come to that time period later on?

Cornelia Dayton 06:18

No, it's a good question. I'm not quite sure when that congealed, but it was probably in college and taking Bailyn's courses, somehow that it all came together. I remember my mother being disappointed that I didn't choose to study English history or European history. She felt that was more important.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:38

Because you showed interest in it with your interest in Elizabeth.

Cornelia Dayton 06:41

Yes, that's right before, so right. But I think Watergate and maybe Bailyn we put those two two together, perhaps.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:49

And so that is also why a lot of your work has also had a legal dimension in it because you've blended these two.

Cornelia Dayton 06:56

Right and I couldn't have predicted how it worked out because when I left college, I still thought I was going to be, let's say, a historian of constitutional history in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. And I did my graduate research papers on like the debate over the bank, which I now consider very boring, but...

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:18
The First Bank [of the United States]?

Cornelia Dayton 07:19
Yes. So, I gradually, in the first two or three years of graduate school, was fortunate to move, I think, I feel from this sort of high intellectual, constitutional, more abstract political theory approach to how people were thinking, to the social history. How did ordinary people not famous people function going to court, especially, and I was very lucky to have chosen Stan [Stanley Nider] Katz as my PhD advisor, and that's why I went to Princeton. And he he always liked to set his students onto what he felt were promising primary sources that people hadn't plumbed, or, you know, mined yet. And he basically said, go read court records in the archives. So I went to Trenton, which was nearby the State Archives, and then I got a little Woodrow Wilson Foundation grant to start to go to four or five different states along the seaboard and just see what is, what was the state of their what was the condition of their court records. And this is not appellate necessary. This is these are in manuscript right now. Now we're familiar with these, but then not so much so lower court records. And so that, I think and then at the same time, I was influenced by the Women's Studies program at Princeton, and became interested in women's history, which really hadn't studied at all, and by activism. So, all those things came together in my second or third year of graduate school to kind of shape, I think, who the historian I am now as a social historian and not a kind of intellectual historian.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:02

Was it when you were a graduate student that you first came to the Massachusetts Historical Society?

Cornelia Dayton 09:07

You know, I actually think I came as an undergrad.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:10

Oh, wow. So, your fellow you are, so we've just crossed over 1000 fellowships individual awarded, but you are Research Fellow number 94.

Cornelia Dayton 09:19

Yes, right. But, I mean, I think I came because Bailyn thought I should study, well, something related to my father's family that goes back to the 17th century here and in the US settlers, and I've been trying to find out if they were enslavers and found evidence of that. But so, I think I came here then, although that was a Long Island and New Jersey family, the Daytons and not MHS. And he and I just decided I shouldn't pursue a research project on that because, or maybe this is my thesis, I can't remember what we were debating, but because there was no personal, you know, no diaries I could find, or there's a lot of material on this in the Long Island in the East Hampton and South Hampton Historical Societies, but nothing I could really but I think that's probably when I came to MHS as a researcher.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 10:13

Well, that's that's probably easier to just cross the river from Cambridge versus coming up from Princeton.

Cornelia Dayton 10:18

Yes, that's right. That's right. So, for my dissertation, I don't think I used the MHS sources because I was totally studying court records in New Haven County and the superior courts, etc, in Connecticut for over 150-year period. So is, I think I began to use the MHS much more for my second book project, which is still in process, but it's a study of how New Englanders understood and coped with what we might call mental affliction, mental illness, in the period before asylums. And I think I had a one-month MHS fellowship, for sure I did.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 11:00

In 1994.

Cornelia Dayton 11:02

Yes, okay, and gave a seminar paper in the in the seminar series.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 11:07

So, what happens after Princeton? What's your career? How did you end up, and when did you end up at the University of Connecticut?

Cornelia Dayton 11:13

Well, so the first I was two years at the College of William and Mary, where I was a postdoc at what is now the Omohundro Institute. So that was very fortunate as a two-year space to revise the book, to add to the research, to think about it as a book, and to do some teaching. And then I was 10 years at the University of California Irvine, just a wonderful place to be as an assistant and associate professor, and then I was lured east by the University of Connecticut. And you know, it was wonderful to be near my sources, to be mentoring graduate students who could come to the MHS and all the other archives all around New

England. I had aging parents who were in Maine, so I felt it was important to be near them. And there was a wonderful collection of early Americanists, as we put it at UConn. So, I wouldn't be the only one, as I was at Irvine.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:11
What are some of the biggest challenges you've had as an historian?

Cornelia Dayton 12:14
Well, just thinking recently as I think the challenges, one of the challenges that has faced me is what we might say, researching subalterns, so people who are not elites, but especially who are people of color, indigenous or of African descent, women who are not elites and wealthy. And this, of course, is an issue for so many of us researching. And even when you do find traces of their lives and records, there usually records generated by white people, by the dominant society. And so, it's very difficult to there are very few firsthand accounts, I'd say. And so, the challenge is how to get some sort of grasp on their perspectives, on their societies, their lives, their obstacles. So that's a big one.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 13:12
And that ties in with the project you're working on here at the MHS. That's a good segue. Tell us about that.

Cornelia Dayton 13:22
Right. Exactly. So, my project as a fellow this year at the MHS is to research the life of John Peters, who lived mostly in Boston for his 55 years. He died in 1801, actually in Charlestown. He had just moved across the bridge to Charlestown from the North End of Boston, but most of the time he lived in Boston, and he is known to us today because he married the poet Phillis Wheatley. And I some years ago, came across in legal papers a set of probate

appeals that John Peters was a party too. And I realized at the time that this John Peters was the husband of Phillis Wheatley, and that we knew, if you looked up the biographies of Phillis Wheatley, we knew very little about him. He didn't know his backstory. He had been negatively described, shall we say, by white descendants of Phillis Wheatley's enslavers, the Wheatleys in the 19th century sort of demeaned or dismissed as a negligent husband, as someone who didn't apply himself, but we didn't know much, and many the few details in those short reminiscences of him were wrong. So [Henry Louis] 'Skip' Gates, Honorée Jeffers and others who've thought about this and their marriage have said, we have to start over again. And I just found myself in a position of actually doing some of the nitty gritty historical research, and so I've carried that on my initial discoveries of these legal cases he was John Peters was involved in turned into an article in the *New England Quarterly* in 2021 and I didn't think I would be pursuing it more, but some of my interlocutors encouraged me to write a biography. So that's another challenge when you ask about challenges is I've never written a biography, and I'm sort of taking it on as a as a challenge to sort of think about biography as a genre, and how one would go about writing the story of a subaltern man who who isn't famous. And you know, there are a variety of ways of going about it, especially through legal records, because he was somewhat of a frequent litigator. So, beyond this cluster of cases, I found we find him usually as the plaintiff suing someone for a small amount of debt. It's not much, and many, many, many people who lived in that society did get involved in this sort of suit, but it gives us, every time it happens, we it gives us a glimpse into the economic transactions that this person was involved in.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 16:13

So, a lot of historians, after their first or second books, turn to biography, which you are doing, and you're it is indeed a very different type of writing. Well, how have you found this?

I mean, you say it's challenging, and in what way is it challenging or different from writing an academic book or something that does not focus solely on a single individual?

Cornelia Dayton 16:37

Well, I haven't written it yet. I will find out, but I've been reading a lot of biographies, long and short ones, but and particularly looking for what I call unconventionally structured biographies. So, they might not have long they might have short chapters, say, or chapters of different lengths, or their table of contents might be quite unusual. So, I'm particularly interested in those, because I think of this as a short book that doesn't go on and on and so, you know, but I think the best example that really influences me is Alfred Young's book on George Robert Twelves Hewes the shoemaker. So, it's and I think of it as it's sort of novella like length. It's 90 pages, and it's published in his it was first published as a 90-page article, but it's published in his book The Shoemake [and the Tea Party: Memory and the American] so there's several pieces of his, but this is the sort of anchor piece. And you know, readers, students, just love how he writes about this rather obscure shoemaker Boston who becomes a soldier in the American Revolution and then later in life, lives a long life, mostly impoverished, leaves Boston as so many people do, and moves consistently in steps westward to New York, and then the reason Al Young could write a biography, and I don't have this for my subject, John Peters, is late in life what was it the 25th or, you know, in one of the anniversaries of the American Revolution, there's a big interest in veterans and getting them to tell their stories. So, Hughes told his story, and it was published as a sort of memoir, as told to biography, and he went on tour and gave lectures. So, Al Young just does a wonderful job with using those texts and other records where he can confirm what Hugh said about himself his family, to write in a very, we would say, accessible or way, about this non-famous person.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 18:56

Why should people learn about Mr. Peters?

Cornelia Dayton 19:00

Well, I think the main reason, and I find this when I talk with people who aren't historians about my project is to get to get a sense of what it was like to sort of navigate Boston, to navigate Massachusetts society as a person of African descent, just in the period when in Massachusetts, slavery is ending in a kind of messy and very interesting way, and there are aspects of it that surprise non historians. For instance, John Peters frequent use of the laws and on the law courts. He is in the first year for instance, he's married to Phillis Wheatley. He is an itinerant traitor, and he's in partnership with a maybe he's 25 or probably about 25 he's in partnership with a 21 year old white man, Josiah Biles, and they go through travel on horseback through some interior Massachusetts towns selling, stopping at taverns, spending two weeks living in a tavern owned by a white tavern keeper, selling sugar, nails and something else I forget. You know, so dry goods that might be hard for people right during the war to get access to, and because of some depositions of litigation that follows, we have a kind of snapshot of patrons of the tavern dropping by and asking both Peters and his partner Biles, you know, why are you working with this other guy? Why are you working they might say to Biles with this black man, and he says something like, well, because he's good, or he's smart or and it's clear to me that Peters is actually the sort of dominant member of the more savvy legally member of the partnership. But so so we get some glimpses of how do white New Englanders react to people of color taking opportunities and advantage of the particular economic situation, and how do, even though we don't have his exact accounts, like a diary or letters written by him, I'm trying to imagine how he is thinking about the situations he faces in life.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 21:18

So, what do we know about him? When does he marry Phyllis Wheatley or anything like that?

Cornelia Dayton 21:25

Right, so we do have a back story on John Peters now, because the papers that I first came across describe where John and Phillis went when they left Boston. Biographers have known that for three years, from 1780 to 1783 they left Boston, and they haven't known what town they went to and why, and so these papers give quite a story about that. And the story is that John Peters had been raised as a child, probably born there too, although it's possible he was born in Africa and trafficked. But I sort of, I'm leaning away from that, but it's possible. But he because he's baptized at something like age four in the Middleton church. So, Middleton is a small interior town just to the west of Danvers and Salem. So, it's in Essex County. It's 26 miles from Boston, something like that. So, it turns out he is enslaved there, and his three brothers are. He's enslaved by the Wilkins family, a farm, somewhat prominent farm family, and the story that comes out in the depositions, one which is by one of his brothers, is that he when he became teenager of some sort, and sort of grown into fuller height and strength. He challenged his enslavers when they tried to discipline him. So, by physically responding, they decided that he had to be sold. Now we don't know where he was sold, but the next moment he appears in the historical record, he is in Boston as having obtained his freedom, as his brother puts it. And it's March of 1776, and the British have just evacuated Boston. So that, in a way, is where some of my questions begin is we know from other sources that he actually own two horses in this period, and that it's somewhat unusual for a young black man at this period to own horses, that horses are still identified, if not, as farm animals, as gentlemen, something a gentleman would own, and both for riding and for sort of status. So, this fascinates me that John Peters, throughout his adult life, seems to have owned horses. And as you know, I've done a sort of deep dive while here at the MHS into what, what did horse keeping entail in this period, and how did you manage horses in an urban

environment? So later on in his life, John Peters lives in the tightly packed North End Ward One near the Charlestown ferry, then the bridge, and he couldn't have kept horses where he lived. He owned his own house. It was quite small, 202 square feet, one story, and he owned only the land under the house. So, to me, that suggests he has to be boarding his one or two horses somewhere nearby or I was just reading something this morning. You know, some Bostonians sent their animals to Noddle's Island or one of the Harbor Islands for the winter, say. So, I was just thinking, did John Peters do that? So, I've been trying to use sources to find out what, what do we know about livery stables in Boston? What did it cost to keep a horse? What did you sort of have to know about horses, the illnesses and injuries that horses were subject to? So that's, that's one of the themes I've been exploring at the MHS, and the other is something that fascinates other historians too, but is the siege itself and the aftermath. So, if John Peters was in Boston, which we don't know, but during the occupation, the second occupation by the British '74, '75 and then this what we call the siege, when the fledgling American army was gathering outside Boston and trying to prevent goods from coming into the British et cetera. What was that like? And the reason it's still sort of a mystery is that Boston town government stops operating, so we don't have the selectmen minutes anymore. We don't have the usual sources, because those were interrupted. So, I've been using my time at the MHS to read people's if they have an account book or a diary, and some of these are young soldiers who happened to be stationed in Boston during that period, trying to just get a sense of the everyday life, and of course, to see if John Peters shows up. But the other issue here is, in those years, he was using aliases, his brothers always used the surname Francis, and they say that he was called John Francis as a child. But then by the time he shows up in Boston he's chosen the name John Peters, but the court records show he used yet another name, Peter Frizzle. And so, I have to be aware that it's possible he's going to show up under another name, because by the time he marries Phillis Wheatley, which I hadn't answered that question for you, which is, in November 1778, in Boston, he's settling consistently on the name John Peters. And one question about

him is, why did he choose that name and I won't go into that today, but this is, again, is one of the challenges of studying subalterns, in that they often use aliases historians say.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:04
Why is that?

Cornelia Dayton 27:06
As a way to kind of navigate right? If they're sort of in trouble in one part of their life, they might want to sort of remake themselves if they move it's not clear. But I think this is, you know, has a different valence for people of African descent, because they're pushing back, you know, often against the names that were forced on them by their enslavers or the white community around them. And so, they often change their names to some extent.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:35
This is quite fascinating, because here at the MHS, we have a collection of letters written by Phillis Wheatley. We have her writing desk, and there are solid objects that are connected to her. You're looking for someone who's not as represented. And seems like you found some creative ways to try to locate him in the historical record.

Cornelia Dayton 27:58
Well, I hope so. I mean, one of my goals for this fellowship was to read through as many account books, diaries, letter collections by Bostonians in the years Peters lived in Boston, you know? And of course, yes, I'm hoping to find he was the customer of William Dawes or whatever. But, but more important is sort of, I do find people of color, like Prince Hall and others. I haven't found Peters yet, but you get a sense of the daily, again, economic patterns, like who walked into so and so store, what are through the seven people and what did they buy? And that, you know, that makes me think about, well, where did Peters, who, in the last

10 years of his life called himself a physician and was a physician, in other words, a practitioner. And so where did he get his medicines? And one of the fascinating things about him is that he, he occupied and called himself a number of vocational titles. And he, I think, is was trying in his adult life to avoid being a laborer, which is the occupational tag associated or given, most commonly, to men of African descent in this period, and and to being a servant. And I think he aspires to being genteel and being a gentleman. And this goes very well with who Phillis Wheatley Peters was too. She had refined manner. She had a great deal of learning and and so I think both of them are kind of setting themselves apart in some ways. But so he calls himself after their marriage. Of course, he's a yeoman farmer in the three three years he lived in Middleton, which I haven't gone into, but he owns he has the title to 110-acre farm from his enslavers have deeded it to him in exchange for his taking care of the widow for the rest of her life. So, I think that he and Phillis think they're going to live in Middleton for the rest of their lives and bring their children up there. And she had serious asthma. So, people believed at this time period that if you were in the country and not in Boston or Salem, the air the country air, was good for your health. So, they don't know that that relationship is going to fall apart and that they'll end up being evicted from that farmhouse because he can't live up to his promise to support the widow because she refuses to let him do so. Their relationship falls apart, and that's what leads to all this litigation. So, there are these Middleton years, which we know quite a lot about and then the couple moves back to Boston, and tragically, the poet Phillis Wheatley Peters dies at the end of the year 1784, in her young 30s. And then John Peters lives another almost 20 years to 1801 and just doesn't remarry and lives in Boston and he calls himself in the Boston tax records, a lawyer, gentleman, physician. He often lists a number of occupational texts, and you can see the sort of aspirations here. And I think of him as someone who picks up skills readily throughout his life, and he's been in court a lot. He can't, as a black man, get a legal apprenticeship, which you to get admitted to the bar, you had to serve for three years as a law clerk and in a white lawyer's office, and all the white lawyers in each county were

gatekeepers for who served as apprentices. So, he couldn't have done that. He couldn't have afforded the 100 pounds that you had to pay. So, we know that. On the other hand, I pretty much found out that he was practicing law. He's just he's not just making this up. He was representing clients before justices of the peace courts which are informal enough or low enough on the totem pole that there was not yet a law in Massachusetts saying you couldn't you no, you couldn't do that, even though you were not admitted to practice or represent before the county courts or the superior court. So, I think that's what he's doing and the powers that be in Boston, James Sullivan, who Phillis Wheatley had written a poem to when he lost a child early in his life, is Attorney General, and he charges Peters with barratry, which means vexatious litigation in 1792. The charges are dropped, but I think probably there was a bargain where Sullivan and Francis Dana insisted that Peter stop representing clients because it was unseemly, because we'd have no trace of him doing so after that so but it is fascinating that he is a lawyer and he's a physician, and those are things that I'm trying to explore, even though I don't have a lot of direct evidence. What would that mean? That's my question.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 33:10
Biographers, either, I suppose, like or dislike their the people they're studying. Do you have a sense of where you fall on that for Mr. Peters?

Cornelia Dayton 33:16
I don't in that I think I admire him.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 33:23
He's entrepreneurial.

Cornelia Dayton 33:24

Yes, exactly right, although, as some of my interlocutors have cautioned me, and this has been very helpful. You know, we may admire his entrepreneurship and his skill set, which I think is really varied and interesting as so many people trying to support themselves in this time period were but he may have been skirting with precarity throughout much of his life. And I'm trying to kind of understand how to how to balance those two things. You know, on the one hand, he owns two horses in '76. He when he dies, we have his probate inventory. He owned a sulky, two sleighs, a sorrel Mare, a silver mounted whip, silver knee buckles, and a few other items of household, and 14 books. We don't know which books they were. He's literate. He signs his name. His estate goes into probate and yet, and yet, of course, his estate is insolvent in the end. I mean, as so many peoples were at this time. They had more debts than they had, you know, value of their estate. So, it's hard, it's a bit hard to figure out the balance between precarity and the attainment of some markers like home ownership of you know, a middling class status.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 34:50

[Outro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Cornelia Dayton, professor of history at the University of Connecticut and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Podington Bear. Please see our show notes for details. Thank you for listening, and please rate, review and subscribe to both the MHS produced shows wherever you listen to podcasts