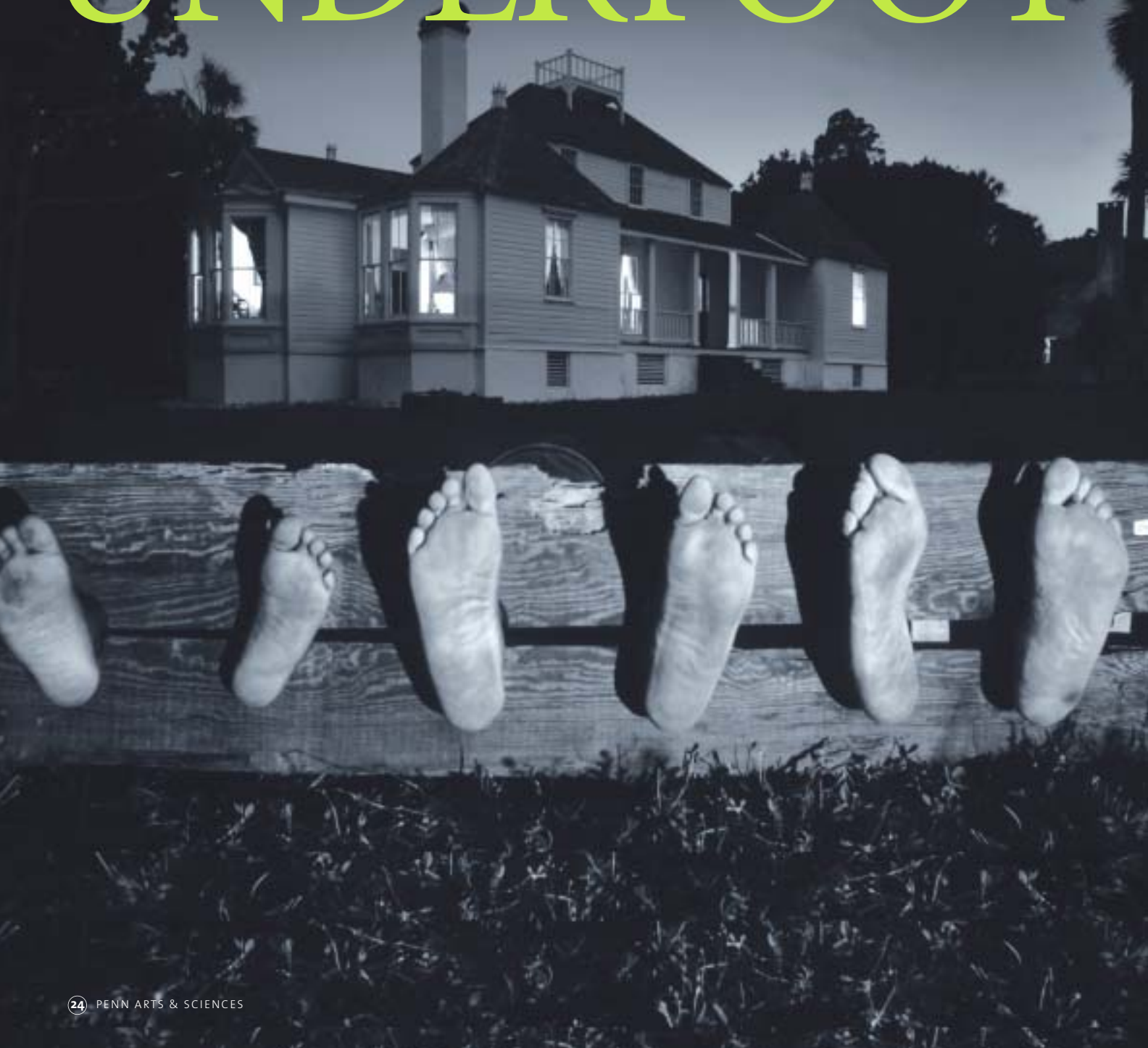


PROFESSOR UNEARTHS THE STORIES IGNORED BY HISTORY

A NATION UNDERFOOT



It only takes a few minutes of conversation with Steven Hahn, the Roy F. and Jeannette P. Nichols Professor of American History, to realize he's *that* professor. The professor every student hopes for. The one who inspires and challenges. The professor who makes you feel that college just might be the life-changing experience you've heard so much about.

In fact, it's so easy to be captivated by Hahn's engaging personality that you might forget a Pulitzer Prize rests among his many accomplishments. But for Hahn, studying history is not about plaudits and prizes. That's what he teaches his students. He tells them that achievement is built on passion and an inner drive to create something great and lasting. His love for history extends from a passion for grassroots politics to a drive to uncover and tell the lost stories that have shaped the United States.

As a college student at the University of Rochester in the early 1970s, he took part in the antiwar protests that broke out on America's campuses during the Vietnam War. His penchant for activism, in fact, suggested work as a political organizer. But after leading an abortive protest against war-related research on the campus — he and other students occupied the university administration building — Hahn wondered about his self-confidence and effectiveness. And after meeting politicized

graduate students from the history department, he began to move in new intellectual directions.

Hahn came to recognize that being politically active in the present required an understanding of the past. He discovered that history was about more than major figures and big public events. It could also be the story of ordinary people generating change within their own communities. And because he wanted to stay politically involved, he turned to the study of history.

Along with its activist students, Rochester's history department was guided by the faculty's passion for scholarship that was socially and politically meaningful. Their energy inspired Hahn. One of his early mentors, Professor Herbert Gutman, read aloud in the classroom from his then yet-to-be-published book *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. Gutman's excitement and the level of seriousness he brought to the subject made Hahn feel that "history was the most important thing you could do." He still has his undergraduate course notes.

While Gutman inspired delight in history, he also stressed the importance of good scholarship — history that looks at a variety of primary sources and original perspectives, that unsettles the accepted wisdom, spawns new questions and uncovers new interpretations. The lesson stayed with Hahn, who believes that socially and politically valuable history, with all its controversies,

can't just be "good" history; it has to be history that surpasses established standards.

These lessons brought Hahn to Yale for graduate school, where his interests centered on the study of humble white southerners who did not own slaves and who eventually supported the radical Populist Party (the subject of his doctoral dissertation and first book). But in a graduate research seminar, he also examined the African-American transition from slavery to freedom, and while sifting through reels of microfilm from the National Archives, he came upon a set of labor reports from Mississippi. There, he found an account of former slaves leaving work on Saturdays and walking as many as 25 miles to attend a political meeting. The episode occurred very soon after black men had won the elective franchise in 1867, and it seemed to confound the prevailing view in the historical literature that portrayed African-Americans as politically inert or easily manipulated. Thinking that there might be a great deal more to learn about African-American grassroots politics, both before and after emancipation, Hahn determined to uncover the stories as soon as he could.

After publishing his first book, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, he began to piece together the history of black political activism in the rural South. But finding information about a group ignored by history — and not literate in ways easily

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accessible to us — meant turning to census tracts, organizational records, petitions and newspapers. Any one of these sources might offer a small detail or glimpse, but together they told the tale of a political movement. Hahn discovered that slaves had a surprising awareness of local and national politics and that they would later have a deeper understanding of the Civil War and Reconstruction than many of their white counterparts.

Unearthing a lost political movement required years of research and, like many middle-class kids, Hahn had to explain and defend his proposed vocation to a skeptical family. From his parents' vantage point, becoming a college professor didn't make good sense. But Hahn's devotion to the lives of the people he studied kept him at it, and he had the benefit of support from his peers. "When I was in college," he notes, "going after the big bucks was generally frowned upon while pursuing something socially meaningful was admired."

Rural slaves and freedpeople in the South may appear marginal to the great currents of history, but to Hahn, African-American history is central to U.S. — indeed to world — history. It deserves the widest possible interest and attention, he says, and we have much to gain from the range of new perspectives and interpretations that will necessarily develop.

In 2004, the Pulitzer Prize board seemed to agree. The more Hahn uncovered, the harder he strove to construct a powerful narrative describing black political worlds that many historians had ignored. The result was *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the*

Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration, a politically edgy book written for both a scholarly and non-academic audience. In addition to a Pulitzer, the book earned the Bancroft Prize in American History and the Merle Curti Prize in Social History from the Organization of American Historians.

Hahn now writes for *The New Republic* and is at work on a history of the United States from 1840 to 1900, which will be published as part of the multi-volume Penguin History of the United States. In the fall, he delivered the Nathan I. Huggins Lectures in African-American History at Harvard. (Soon to be published.)

Through his scholarship, Hahn tries to give a voice to people and movements overlooked by historians. "For a long time," he explains, "the history of the South was written by white Southerners, many of whom were apologists for what had happened under slavery and segregation. But there were also extremely important African-American scholars whose groundbreaking work the mainstream press refused to publish."

In one of his Huggins lectures, Hahn explored why historians have shown so little interest in Marcus Garvey and especially in his organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Started by Garvey in 1916, the UNIA mobilized people of African descent across the Atlantic world toward the goal of an independent African nation. While the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the American Civil Rights Movement have attracted enormous attention, the story of Garvey and his followers has not, despite the millions who

were drawn to the UNIA and its message. Hahn suggests that Garvey's project, like the forgotten activism of former slaves and freedpeople, does not fit well into a dominant liberal integrationist outlook. Historians with such a perspective, he observes, "tend to see politics coming to slaves and black people more generally from outside of their own communities. Historians tend to privilege and lend legitimacy to African-American struggles for inclusion and assimilation, but they regard African-American interest in separatism and nationalism as the products of failure and defeat, as somehow lacking in integrity."

Hahn carries years of teaching experience and has won several distinguished teaching awards. He knows that students hunger for transformative experiences, and he strives to be the kind of professor who provides them. Greg Downs, G'06, is a former graduate student of Hahn's and is currently an assistant professor of history at the City College of New York. He remembers Hahn as a teacher who "genuinely listens to your ideas" and "asks tough but helpful questions." Downs adds, "There are many wonderful historians, but there are only a few people who seem to really redefine the field, and [Steve Hahn] is accomplishing that right now. By the time he's done, a lot of the things we say about the nation's history will be different. He's forcing us to rethink what politics is and how it works in the United States." ■

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