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Shift at Historical Society Raises Concerns

By **ROBIN POGREBIN AND GLENN COLLINS**

For the New-York Historical Society, the promise of a long-awaited chapter of financial stability and higher visibility now seems just around the corner -- or in the basement, to be precise.

A year ago Richard Gilder and Lewis E. Lehrman, two wealthy businessmen, joined the society's board, lent the institution their renowned collection of historical documents and created a \$1 million vault in the basement of the society's building on Central Park West to house the archive at their own expense.

Already the benefits are evident. The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History has moved its operations to the society, including a reading room for scholars and students. Board members are giving more money. And the society can draw on the collection and its staff for exhibitions, as it has for a forthcoming Alexander Hamilton show, the first to be presented by the society's new president, Louise Mirrer, whom Mr. Gilder helped recruit.

But the collection is not yet the society's to keep. For the moment it is only on deposit. The archive had other suitors, including the Morgan Library, where the documents resided for more than a decade and whose director said he would welcome their return. Mr. Gilder said that the New York Public Library, too, lobbied hard to get the collection. The library declined comment.

At the same time Mr. Gilder and Mr. Lehrman, both conservative Republicans, are leading the society's shift toward a broader view of its mandate, emphasizing American rather than local history. Mr. Gilder, a money manager, acknowledged that the men chose the society in part because they feared the collection would be overshadowed at a large institution like the public library.

All this suggests to some historians and society staff members that Mr. Gilder and Mr. Lehrman are dangling the prize of their collection on the condition that the society go along with their interests, and that they have chosen the society because its history of financial weakness has left it malleable.

"I am troubled by the direction apparently being charted by the historical society," said Mike Wallace, a professor of history at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1999, adding that he had "high regard" for Dr. Mirrer and respect for Mr. Gilder's "passion for history."

Still, Mr. Wallace added, "the many hundreds of people who rallied successfully to keep the N.-Y.H.S. alive over the past decade did not do so to have it wind up as a subsidiary of the Gilder Lehrman Institute, which would then jettison its city emphasis."

In an interview Mr. Gilder acknowledged that he and Mr. Lehrman were evaluating the society on the

basis, among other things, of whether it fulfilled their desire to make its focus more national.

"Having invested \$1 million in the vault, it's the society's to lose," Mr. Gilder said of the collection, which includes signed copies of the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment, which bans slavery. "We really want to end up giving it to them. It makes a lot of sense. It could have a special identity."

Influence of Big Donors

Museums have long had complicated relations with big donors who take a strong interest in the stories told in their halls. But across the country, questions about the extent of wealthy trustees' influence on content have grown as charitable contributions have declined.

The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, for example, came under criticism from historians in May 2001 when it accepted a \$38 million gift from a businesswoman, Catherine B. Reynolds, who insisted that she have a say in picking those who would select the 100 prominent Americans to be honored by the exhibition she was financing. Ms. Reynolds ultimately withdrew most of the gift.

At the historical society the rising influence of Mr. Gilder and Mr. Lehrman, and the presence of their collection in the basement, has raised questions among insiders and outsiders about whether the institute might ultimately eclipse the society.

"There is the potential for conflict of interest," said Terry L. Davis, the president and chief executive of the American Association for State and Local History, based in Nashville. "The important thing is that the board really knows what it's doing and doesn't let the money coming in rule the mission of this institution."

Board members and Dr. Mirrer, a medievalist who was formerly executive vice chancellor for academic affairs at the City University of New York, say they are conscious of that danger but discount it.

"I would hope that over time the collection, if not owned by this institution, would be seen as an integral part of our holding," Dr. Mirrer said. "We have a treasure here. Everyone is going to work closely together. It's not going to be an adversarial relationship."

The documentary filmmaker Ric Burns was recently recruited to the society's board by Mr. Gilder. "Any institution in the world would be grateful," Mr. Burns said, for the involvement of Mr. Gilder and Mr. Lehrman.

Richard W. Edelman, the society's treasurer, credited Mr. Gilder and Mr. Lehrman with increasing the level of giving among fellow board members. In 2000 trustees were expected to give or raise \$2,000 a year, he said. Now that figure is up to \$25,000.

"The board has been completely transformed," added Mr. Edelman, president and chief executive of the Edelman public relations company. "These guys have serious wealth and a serious interest in history. At least it gives us the aspiration to be one of the bigger institutions in the city."

Certainly Mr. Gilder and Mr. Lehrman have pushed the society to think big. The \$5 million Hamilton exhibition, scheduled to open on Sept. 10, is the largest in the society's history and is intended to be the first in a series of buzz-generating blockbusters.

"We'd like to have people lined up outside, waiting to come in," said Nancy Newcomb, the chairwoman.

Mr. Lehrman, who was the Republican candidate for governor of New York in 1982, said there was "no truth whatsoever" to the notion that he and Mr. Gilder would seek to dominate the historical society. Still, he added: "Dick and I are reformers. We are not interested in insulating the status quo from new ideas."

Mr. Gilder said he and Mr. Lehrman were no more powerful than other trustees of the society, merely more experienced.

"We can't impose our ideas on them by fiat," he said. "What we're doing that maybe hasn't been done before is to maybe broaden the scope. Americans are ready for this now. We are financial people, and we have a nose for what the market wants."

In its 10 years of existence, the Gilder Lehrman Institute has created history-centered public schools and academic research centers, sponsored lectures by historians, organized seminars and enrichment programs and produced publications and traveling exhibitions. It has a renowned slavery archive at Yale University and is a co-sponsor of two of the largest awards for American history books, the Lincoln Prize (\$50,000) and the Frederick Douglass Prize (\$25,000).

"We are not interested in upholding any self-appointed establishment -- on the left or on the right," Mr. Lehrman said. "The scholars we have sponsored, well, the vast majority are more on the liberal side than on the conservative side."

Exhibition Canceled

Still, several exhibitions at the historical society have been started or overhauled at least partly at the urging of Mr. Gilder and Mr. Lehrman. At least one has been canceled since their arrival -- an exhibition on the Times Square centennial, one of the steps that prompted objections by Mr. Wallace and other historians that the society's new national focus could leave New York history underrepresented.

Dr. Mirrer said she canceled the show to focus on "the needs and space and fund-raising of this institution on our own bicentennial." She noted that the society has had a national component since its founding in 1804.

"I see this as an institution that tells the story of American history, as it has been influenced and affected by the history of New York," Dr. Mirrer said. "I would hate for anyone to think that New York and New Yorkers would be irrelevant to whatever we do in this institution."

A coming exhibition about slavery, however, has been recast to reflect Mr. Lehrman's viewpoint, as expressed in an interview in the society's journal. "This was an institution supported throughout the world, but Americans took the initiative in destroying it," Mr. Lehrman said in that interview, adding that he deplored the view that "American history consists of one failure after another to deal with the issue of slavery."

Originally the show was intended as a modest \$50,000 undertaking, called "From Bondage to Freedom," that focused on the realities of slavery in New York. The society has now expanded it into a \$2 million would-be blockbuster with national scope.

"Of course we will emphasize the misery and awfulness of it," said Mr. Gilder, adding that New York

would still figure in the show. "But what's really interesting is the economic impact it had on the United States. The profits from the slave trade -- did they finance the textile industry, the banking industry, shipping? We want to explore this."

Asked if the exhibition would incorporate his view of slavery, Mr. Leh

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