

THE PENN MUSEUM

SPHINX

Celebrating a Centennial in Philadelphia

BY JENNIFER HOUSER WEGNER



The Museum courtyard, ca. 1915. INSET, The sphinx shares the front page of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* with the opening game of the World Series, October 7, 1913.

We have had raised at Memphis a colossal sphinx of Rameses II about 11 feet long, 11 ton weight.

The head has been much weathered, the body and inscribed base are perfect, of red granite...

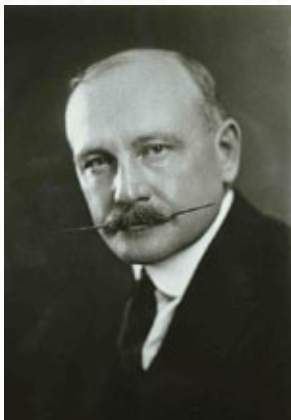
Would such a piece as this be acceptable for your Museum?

With these lines, the renowned archaeologist, William Matthew Flinders Petrie (or Flinders Petrie, as he is commonly known) wrote to Penn Museum director, Dr. George Byron Gordon, in November 1912, offering him the red granite sphinx of Ramses II, which today resides in the first floor gallery, known as the Egypt (Sphinx) Gallery. A letter in the Museum Archives preserves Dr. Gordon's response, which seems curiously subdued. Gordon wrote, *I thank you for mentioning the colossal sphinx of Ramses II which you raised at Memphis during the summer. If you will kindly send me a photograph of this stone, I will let you know at once whether we will accept your offer of it.*

The beautifully carved sphinx is a highlight of our Egyptian collection and an unofficial mascot of the Penn Museum. Originally created in the Middle Kingdom (1800–1630 BCE), the statue was altered during the reign of Ramses II (1279–1213 BCE). Sculptors recarved the face (which is now eroded away) to reflect the visage of the king and added his royal titulary to the base. Ramses II had it placed before the Ptah Temple at Memphis, an important religious center, which throughout much of pharaonic history served as Egypt's capital. How did this colossal royal monument make its way to the Penn Museum? The story has never been fully told, but the recent occasion of the centennial of the sphinx's arrival in Philadelphia is a good time to share this tale. Fascinating records from the Museum Archives have formed the basis of a forthcoming book on the history of this beloved artifact written by the author and Joe Wegner, Associate Curators in the Egyptian Section.

THE KEY PLAYERS

The men responsible for bringing the sphinx to Philadelphia were William Matthew Flinders Petrie, George Byron Gordon, and Eckley Brinton Coxe Jr. From the 1880s,



William Matthew Flinders Petrie (1853–1942). George Byron Gordon (1870–1927).

Petrie had worked as one of the primary field excavators of the British research organization, the Egypt Exploration Fund. Division of finds from many of Petrie's excavations came to Philadelphia and formed the core of the Egyptian collection. Extensive correspondence between the Museum and Petrie reflects his important role as an advisor to the Museum in the building of its collection.

Petrie resigned from the Egypt Exploration Fund in 1905. In 1906, he formed a separate organization: the British School of Archaeology in Egypt. Petrie's relationship with the Penn Museum continued to be close. He advised the Museum on its field activities for several decades. The Museum's ongoing support for Petrie's work led to the offer of the sphinx to the Museum in 1912.

The second key figure was Penn Museum Curator of American Prehistoric Archaeology, George Byron Gordon. In 1910, Gordon officially became Director of the Museum, a position he held until his death in 1927. Gordon was involved in reshaping the direction of the Museum; he had a particular interest in securing large-scale statuary for display. He also pressed to initiate the Museum's own excavations in Egypt.

The final member of this group was Mr. Eckley Brinton Coxe, Jr., a man with money, passion, and a keen interest in the archaeology of Egypt. In 1906, Coxe, a Penn alumnus, established the Eckley Coxe Junior Expedition to Nubia, the first

direct Museum excavation in the Nile Valley. Becoming Chairman of the Board of Managers in 1910, paralleling Gordon's own appointment as Director, Coxe personally funded half of the day-to-day costs of running the Museum. He also paid for many additions to the original 1899 building.

At the time when Petrie wrote the letter quoted above, he had been working in the area of the Ptah temple at Memphis for several years. In 1912, Petrie and his team discovered not one, but two colossal sphinxes at Memphis—our red granite statue as well as an 80-ton alabaster sphinx. Letters in our Archives mention the possibility of also bringing the larger sphinx to the Penn Museum, but the logistical problems were too great and Petrie wished for it to remain in situ. Today it is a highlight of the Memphis Open Air Museum.



Eckley Brinton Coxe, Jr. (1872–1916). This painting by Adolphe Borie shows him with the statuette of Merer (UPM object #E10751) discovered in Buhen in 1909.

time, the sphinx was finally loaded aboard a freighter: the *Schildturm*, a 5,100-ton steam freighter operated by a German shipping line. Due to concerns about possible losses at sea from storms or other unforeseen misfortunes, the sphinx was insured on its ocean voyage at a cost of £1,000 or about \$1,700. Curiously, the insurance documents describe the sphinx merely as “un pierre antique”—an ancient stone!

The transatlantic journey was uneventful and the ship arrived in Philadelphia on October 7, 1913. It docked at Pier 47 in South Philadelphia, which belonged to the Hamburg-America Line, an affiliate of the Hansa Shipping Company that owned the *Schildturm*. Reporters from the city's newspapers descended on Pier 47 for a glimpse of what was then the second largest Egyptian object ever to arrive in America (the largest being the Central Park obelisk in New York City). Stories appeared in all the

THE JOURNEY FROM MEMPHIS

It took a full year of travel before our sphinx arrived in Philadelphia. Workers first moved it from Memphis to the nearby town of Bedrashain on the west side of the Nile. From Bedrashain it traveled by train to Cairo, then on to Suez by rail. A shipping company based in Cairo, J. W. Congdon and Company, bore the responsibility for preparing the sphinx for its transatlantic journey. Complaints about the massive size of the statue fill the letters from Congdon and Co., stating that photos *do not give an adequate view of its real size*. Additionally, it was quite difficult to find a ship willing to transport the immense sphinx to the United States. After sitting at the docks at Suez for some

WHAT IS A SPHINX?

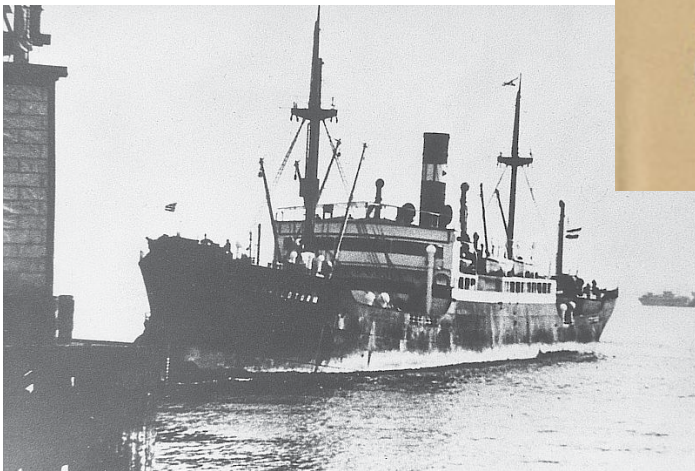
An iconic image of ancient Egypt, the sphinx is a hybrid creature. The archetypal Egyptian sphinx usually had the body of a lion and the head of a man—usually the king, although examples of female (queen) sphinxes exist. A combination of human and leonine elements endowed the sphinx with the intelligence of a human being and the awesome physical prowess of a lion. Sphinxes appear early in the Egyptian artistic canon and remain an important royal and divine symbol for the Pharaonic Period. The Egyptian sphinx was quite distinct from the sphinx found in Greek mythology. The Egyptian sphinx was a protective, positive entity, while the Greek sphinx was a fearsome and dangerous creature.



This drawing of an intaglio depicts Oedipus and the sphinx. Courtesy of British Museum 2010,5006.1143.

daily newspapers and suggest quite a bit of excitement in anticipation of the disembarking of the sphinx. However, no machinery was suited to unloading cargo as heavy as the sphinx. Hamburg-America operated many passenger ships and the pier in question was better suited for passengers and light cargo.

The *Schildturm* had no choice but to travel north to another pier. The largest crane then in operation on the Delaware waterfront was a 100-ton heavy cargo crane located at the huge freight terminal operated by the Philadelphia and Reading Railway Company (PRR) at Allegheny Avenue in Port Richmond. Designed for lifting train engines into and out of ships, the massive crane at Export Pier G was perfect for the job. The freight terminal connected directly to the Philadelphia and Reading Line's train tracks, on which the sphinx could travel to West Philadelphia some 10 miles away. Newspaper reports of



October 8 tell us that the *Schildturm* had moved north to Port Richmond and by that same evening, the giant crane had made short work of unloading the sphinx. In just 15 minutes, the crane hoisted the sphinx out of the freighter and set it upon a flatbed rail car for the final leg of its journey to the Museum.

As luck would have it, Tuesday, October 7, 1913 was not just the day the sphinx arrived in Philadelphia. It was also the opening day of the 1913 World Series between the Philadelphia Athletics and the New York Giants. Nevertheless, the story of the sphinx's arrival managed

to grab a front page spot in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, below a wry cartoon showing the World Series, and overshadowing the more pressing issues of the day such as women's suffrage.



The sphinx was transported on the freighter D/S *Schildturm* (ca. 1915). Maritime Insurance was purchased for the sphinx for its voyage from Suez to Philadelphia.

Such was the level of baseball fever in the city that it is mentioned in several letters that after the sphinx was unloaded in Port Richmond on October 8, it sat for another week on its flatbed rail car before workers could be gathered to unload it for its final delivery to the Museum. If we are to judge from the photos of the 1913 World Series—with people spilling out of Shibe Park and onto nearby rooftops—most of the available workmen were watching baseball and not interested in moving a giant sphinx!

Once workers were corralled, the sphinx travelled on a railcar through the city to the railroad terminal at 23rd and Arch Streets. The sphinx sat for ten days in the 23rd Street freight yard until

finally, on October 18, preparations were complete for its journey to the Museum. Because the rail lines did not pass directly in front of the Museum, it was necessary to load the sphinx onto a big, horse-drawn wagon. Here the newspaper accounts vary somewhat regarding the number of horses and men involved. One story suggested there were as many as 40 horses. However, most of the reports agree on 9 horses and 50 workmen, as well as a parade of University of Pennsylvania students who helped haul the sphinx to the Museum. The short journey took the sphinx up Market Street in an impressive procession.

When I am three next
month, it can't be
me



The sphinx is placed on the Museum's second floor just inside the main entrance, ca. 1918.

THE SPHINX ARRIVES

Resting curbside on Spruce Street in its burlap covering, many a passerby saw the Penn Museum's new sphinx for the first time. The sphinx spent nearly two days on the street before riggers slowly hoisted it over the Museum's garden wall. The University stationed special guards to prevent treasure seekers from breaking off a piece of the sphinx as a memento. It took the rest of the day to set up the wooden tracks and the 50-foot hoist needed to maneuver the statue up and over the 10-foot high courtyard wall. It was actually not until October 20 that the sphinx finally came to rest in front of the Museum. Finally, its 6,000-mile journey from Egypt to the Penn Museum was complete!

On November 10, 1913, with the sphinx comfortably positioned in the Museum's front courtyard, Director Gordon sent the final accounting to Mr. Coxe. The shipping company, Congdon and Co., charged \$391.00 for the rail costs in Egypt and its voyage to Philadelphia from Suez on the *Schildturm*. A total of \$403.02 covered the towing of the freighter to Port Richmond, the sphinx's unloading using the large Philadelphia and Reading crane, and its transport from Port Richmond to the Museum. The grand total amounted to \$794.02. Some of the newspapers at the time remarked on the high cost involved in the effort. The total was certainly a large sum in 1913,

but even converted to today's dollars the total bill was relatively modest. What is surprising is that it cost more to unload the sphinx and transport it 12 miles through Philadelphia than it did to bring it by sea across the Mediterranean and Atlantic.

The sphinx resided in the garden in front of the museum for three years. This location was never intended to be permanent, but was necessary since construction of the Rotunda was still in progress. During its time in the Museum's garden, the sphinx experienced the cold and sometimes snowy winters of Pennsylvania. In December 1914, there was a sizeable early winter snowstorm and a series of photos taken of the sphinx at this time show the statue from the sunny land of the Nile incongruously blanketed with snow. A writer for the *Philadelphia Evening Ledger* (December 18, 1914) put the sphinx's discomfort to verse claiming the sphinx was feeling bitterly cold and might even crack in two:

... The Sphinx was cold as the frozen North, and he made his two-ton figure shake:

"Beware", at last he sputtered forth, "or my granite frame will freeze and break:

Once I was young and bra'e and bold.

But now, egad, I'm getting old;

And I wanna get out of the bitter cold

And go back home to bake.

Even though the idea that the sphinx might break in half may be exaggerated, Museum officials were indeed worried about the long-term effects of weather on this valuable statue. After the snowfall of December 1914, Coxe wrote to Gordon addressing his concerns about keeping the sphinx outside. In the autumn of 1916, Gordon made the final decision to move the sphinx from the courtyard to just inside the Museum's main entrance. Although a short journey, there were some worries about this move. One concern was whether the building's floor could support the massive weight of the sphinx. Gordon consulted with the building's original architects, who confirmed that the sphinx could stand in front of the stairway leading down into the Museum's recently completed auditorium (now Harrison Auditorium). In a letter to the company who moved the sphinx, Gordon was neverthe-

less concerned stating, *We will relieve you from further responsibility in case the weight should prove too heavy for the strength of the floor.*

Fortunately, the architect's calculations were correct. The sphinx did not crash through the floor of the Museum's main entrance. Only one known photograph currently exists in the Museum Archives showing the sphinx inside, regally welcoming visitors through the Museum's entrance.

The movement of the sphinx indoors corresponds with an unfortunate event in the Museum's history. In the summer of 1916, Eckley Coxe passed away unexpectedly at the age of 44. Gordon wrote to Coxe's mother Elizabeth in November of that year informing her of the successful move of the sphinx indoors. In the same letter, he states that this location represented only a temporary location and he writes of the idea to honor Coxe with a grand

MORE PENN MUSEUM SPHINXES

While the granite sphinx from Memphis is the largest and most impressive sphinx in the Penn Museum, it is not the only sphinx in our Egyptian collection. The Penn Museum houses a number of other sphinxes in a variety of materials from a tiny electrum sphinx that was an element of jewelry to mass-produced terracotta sphinxes and sphinx statuettes, which were clearly not carved by a master-sculptor. Sphinx imagery decorates the bases of Egyptian scarab amulets and Meroitic ebony boxes from Nubia.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT, Terracotta sphinxes were made from molds in Memphis (UPM object #29-71-886). This humble limestone sphinx is from Memphis. The piece was clearly not carved by a master sculptor. (UPM object #29-75-422) Photo by Steve Minicola, University Communications. This assortment of Penn Museum scarabs includes sphinx iconography. From top left (Museum object numbers): E11506; 86-35-219; E12859; E13042; E13812; 55-35-2; E11675; 48-10-13; E12832; E15281E; E13057; E13771; E12824; E11049; E13070; and E11047.

“Egyptian Hall” to house the materials from excavations Mr. Coxe had sponsored in Egypt.

EXCAVATIONS IN MEMPHIS

The year after the sphinx came to Philadelphia, the Penn Museum began its own excavations at the site of Memphis. The Museum hired archaeologist Clarence Fisher in 1914 and he undertook several successful seasons of field-work that were sponsored by Coxe. During the course of his excavations, Fisher discovered the ceremonial palace of the pharaoh Merenptah (the son of Ramses II) who reigned from 1213 to 1204 BCE. This discovery resulted in a tremendous amount of architectural material that is now partially displayed in the Egypt (Sphinx) Gallery. Although the sphinx came from the temple of Ptah, and not from the Merenptah palace, all of these elements belong to royal buildings built by Ramses II and his successor Merenptah in honor of the god Ptah, the patron deity of Memphis.

Now, 100 years later, the Museum is considering moving the Merenptah Palace elements upstairs to what was originally intended to be their location—the third floor gallery, known as the Egypt (Mummies) Gallery. If



The sphinx, one of the Museum's most iconic artifacts, looms large over cultural events frequently held in the Museum.

this happens, the sphinx will remain downstairs. Since the sphinx's entry point into the gallery where it resides in the Museum is now bricked over and, with additional buildings added in this area in the 1970s, it would be very difficult to move the sphinx out of the Museum again. So, the sphinx will remain, as it has for almost a century now, greeting every visitor and presiding over every event that takes place in our Egypt (Sphinx) Gallery. ●

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HOW BIG IS THE SPHINX?

The sphinx was never accurately weighed. And estimates of its weight have increased over the years. Petrie's letter mentions an 11-ton sphinx. However, this may be in British tons (2,400 pounds/ton), rather than American tons (2,000 pounds/ton). We now estimate a weight closer to 15 tons based on the volume of red granite. The Penn Museum sphinx is the largest ancient sphinx in the western hemisphere. Worldwide, its size places it after the Great Sphinx at Giza, the 80-ton alabaster sphinx at Memphis, the pair of St. Petersburg sphinxes, the sphinxes in Alexandria, and the Tanis sphinx now in the Louvre. The largest sphinx in the world, however, is the modern sphinx that fronts the Luxor Casino in Las Vegas, which stands quite a few feet taller than the Great Sphinx.

Students from Lea Elementary and Middle School measure the sphinx as part of an exercise to calculate its weight, in a lesson led by Penn Museum docent Benjamin Ashcom (see next page).

