

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **Pioneer in African American History Retires After 41-Year Career**

**Phil Lapsansky leaves behind a proud and important legacy of scholarship dedicated to promoting the African American experience in the national consciousness**

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania – June 6, 2012 – The Library Company of Philadelphia (LCP) is commemorating the long and illustrious career of Curator of African American History Phil Lapsansky, who retires this month. In his 40-year career, Mr. Lapsansky changed the way that African American history is studied not only at LCP but in the overall scholarly community.

In 1969, when scholars were just beginning to focus on understudied groups in history, LCP Librarian Edwin Wolf mounted the pioneering exhibition *Negro History: 1553-1903*. Wolf wrote in the preface to the exhibition catalog that “Everybody is *talking* about Negro history, so we decided to *do* something about it.”

He hired Phil Lapsansky in 1971 to prepare a comprehensive bibliography of the considerable, but unorganized, African American materials in the collection and make them accessible to scholars. With the aid of grants from the Ford Foundation and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, Mr. Lapsansky organized the diverse collection. In the preface to the resulting bibliography Wolf noted that the success of the project was due in large measure to Phil’s “quiet diligence.”

Phil had spent his 20s engaged in the struggle for civil rights. He spent two years in Mississippi in 1964 and 1965, working in support of voting rights for African Americans and writing articles and press releases. His interest in African American history was sparked by his experience with the segregated South and its violence. He came to Philadelphia intent on continuing his education in the then-new field of Negro History and the job opportunity at the Library Company in 1971 seemed a perfect setting.

Under Phil’s care the collections grew to include more than 13,000 titles and 1,200 images. These substantial holdings of books, graphics, and other materials document slavery and abolitionism in the New World; the printed works of black individuals, and the exploration and colonization of Africa, among other topics.

The Library Company’s efforts to focus attention on its African Americana collections contributed to a turning point in how people explored this history. Previously, African American literature and art were considered inconsequential to understanding our nation’s history. Through years of dedicated scholarship and mentorship, Mr. Lapsansky brought to light a wide array of previously overlooked historical sources and helped change the minds of many.

Thanks in great measure to Mr. Lapsansky’s tireless acquiring, writing about, and exhibiting these collections, the Library Company established a Program in African American History (PAAH) in 2007 with funding from the Albert M. Greenfield Foundation. In just five years PAAH has supported sixteen research fellows; acquired, cataloged, and conserved hundreds of rare books; held two major scholarly conferences; mounted two exhibitions; presented many lectures and other public programs; and conducted several seminars for school teachers.

Over the years Mr. Lapsansky has shared his deep knowledge of the Library Company’s collections with hundreds, even thousands, of readers, many of whom acknowledge their indebtedness to him in the

books they publish. One of those readers recently said of Mr. Lapsansky: “without his help it is difficult to imagine either my own or any of the recent books on 19th-century Philadelphia getting written.”

#### The Library Company of Philadelphia

The Library Company of Philadelphia is an independent research library specializing in American history and culture from the 17th through the 19th centuries. Founded in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin, the Library Company is America's oldest cultural institution and served as the Library of Congress from the Revolutionary War to 1800. The Library Company was the largest public library in America until the Civil War and includes the extensive personal libraries of such prominent early American bibliophiles such as James Logan. Open to the public free of charge, the Library Company houses an extensive collection of rare books, manuscripts, broadsides, ephemera, prints, photographs, and works of art, and the second largest holding of early American imprints. Particular strengths of the collection include economic history, women's history, African American history, history of medicine, history of philanthropy, and visual culture. To find out more, please visit [www.librarycompany.org](http://www.librarycompany.org).

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