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“SINCE THEY GOT THOSE SEPARATE CHURCHES”: AFRO-AMERICANS AND RACISM IN JACKSONIAN PHILADELPHIA

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IN AUGUST 1834, A MOB OF WHITE PHILADELPHIANS LAUNCHED A massive three-day attack on a nearby black community. This riot, the first in a series of such anti-black incidents in Philadelphia, was finally quelled by some 300 special constables and militia. However, before peace was restored, one black church had been destroyed, another defaced, and scores of black people had been injured, at least one fatally so. The incident, one of many examples of violence in Jacksonian America, attracted attention, both from contemporary reporters and subsequent investigators. While observers often cited general unrest to explain such urban violence, modern historians have had more success in isolating specific community concerns that were potential causes of racial disturbances. They have subjected the riots to close scrutiny. Who were the rioters (by age, occupation, social background, etc.)? How were they organized, how mobilized, how viewed by society, how punished?¹

Historians who have recently examined patterns of riots and rioters in western society over the last four centuries have reached some generalizations valid for Philadelphia's 1830s anti-black riots. First, they have concluded that the terms “riot” and “mob” carry connotations that are too suggestive of lack of direction and purpose—that often so-called “mob” action is actually a violent statement of a quite specific political

¹ See, for example, John Runcie, “‘Hunting the Nigs’ in Philadelphia: The Race Riot of August, 1834,” *Pennsylvania History*, 29 (Apr. 1972); Leonard Richards, “*Gentlemen of Property and Standing*”: *Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970); David Grimsted, “Rioting in its Jacksonian Setting,” *American Historical Review*, 77 (Apr. 1972), 361–97.

objective. Second, these historians have agreed that the rioters often were not simply representing the ideas of a narrow minority but, in fact, felt “legitimate” because they reflected concerns held by a wide section of a community, including not just the “rabble” but rather the “respectable” and even the well-to-do. Third, the riots of the 1830s and 1840s have been represented as the last violent gasp of a western society making a lurching transition from government by unbridled human passion to government of laws administered by “professionals.”²

Using these generalizations as a beginning point, other investigators have sought to isolate more specifically the dynamics of certain types of disturbances in antebellum American cities.³ Usually these investigators have followed the formula set forth by David Grimsted on Jacksonian riots: that they had “obvious roots in both the psychology of . . . [their] participants and their socioeconomic situation.”⁴ In the case of anti-black rioting the analyses have sought to identify the characteristics which separate those individuals who engaged in anti-black mob action from those who did not, and the investigators have generally concluded that certain elements of white society felt “threatened” by free blacks. While the thrust of such investigations is not to be disputed, they usually have paid little attention to the possibility that unique qualities and actions among the riot victims may give us further insight into the dynamics of racial violence.

In his discussion of weavers’ riots in Philadelphia in the 1840s, Bruce Montgomery has suggested that particular qualities shared by rioters and victims alike helped to fan the flames of the attackers’ hatred.⁵ To date, little attention of this sort has been directed toward race riots. Except for briefly noting that middle-class blacks were often targeted for attack, most investigators have described the victims of anti-black riots as the passive instruments upon which whites’ tensions—frequently external or peripheral to the black community—were played out. Such issues as economic competition (for unskilled employment), spatial “turf” controversies (blacks “invading” white neighborhoods, or being displaced by “reclamation”), and concerns over competition for status among up-

² Natalie Zemon Davis, “The Rites of Violence: Religious Riots in Sixteenth-Century France,” *Past and Present*, 59 (May 1973), 62; Grimsted, 373; Pauline Maier, “Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America,” in Stanley Katz, ed., *Colonial America* (New York: Little, Brown, 1971), 432; E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present*, 50 (Feb. 1971), 78, 112; Sam Bass Warner, *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1968), 137.

³ See, for example, David Montgomery, “The Shuttle and the Cross: Weavers and Artisans in the Kensington Riots of 1844,” *Journal of Social History*, 5 (Summer 1972), 411–46.

⁴ Grimsted, 361.

⁵ Montgomery, 439.

wardly (or downwardly) mobile whites are among a few of the dynamics traditionally associated with anti-black violence.⁶ These issues may be considered external or peripheral to the black community in the sense that, had there been no black community or had the black community been self-contained, these issues might still have existed between various groups of whites. The presence of black people and the fact that they touched white society at critical junctures—ranging from economic competition to the sharing of public space—created a peculiar dimension in early nineteenth-century urban social relations.

No one would take issue with the argument that Afro-Americans have often been the instruments of white Americans' interaction with each other: the "pawns" in someone else's games. However, the question to be pursued here is the extent to which their role as instruments was passive. In what ways and to what extent did dynamics *originating within* the black community itself affect the tone and substance of the interaction *between* urban black Americans and urban white Americans? Were some black people or activities objectively "threatening" or did this "threat" exist only in the minds of white observers? Was there a consistent pattern of actions on the part of black people that triggered negative responses in whites, or were attacks purely the gratuitous and random results of whites' frustrations?

We know much about such questions with regard to slavery,⁷ but we have less knowledge with respect to the antebellum, urban, free Negro. Several recent investigators have suggested that the white attackers' choices of targets might yield some insights—that institutions that signaled increasing economic progress and "status" in the black community were especially attractive targets for destruction; but no one has explored how these targets were created or examined their significance to Afro-Americans themselves.

One of the reasons that anti-black riots have been accepted at face value is that they are "typical" of the riots of the period, i.e., the victims are accepted as the social inferiors of the attackers and the attackers were afforded public tolerance because the victims, though they had not committed crimes subject to the discipline of public authorities, had nevertheless committed breaches of a decorum that was understood by most of the community.⁸ Hence the 1830s anti-black riots were unremarkable. Yet, if Afro-Americans may be looked at for a moment as an active and not a

⁶ Grimsted, 378; Richards, 99; Runcie, 209.

⁷ See, for example, John Blassingame, *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972) or Gilbert Osofsky, *Puttin' On Ole Massa* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Random House, 1976).

⁸ Grimsted, 374, 77; Thompson, 78, 112.

passive group, as actors instead of only as acted-against, the issue of racial violence may be viewed from another perspective. Were there elements endemic to the creation or existence of certain institutions within the urban black community that contributed to whites' selection of these institutions as targets for destruction? In approaching this issue, I find it first useful to explore the more general questions of what place Afro-Americans sought in early nineteenth-century American society, the ways in which they sought to achieve their goals, and the extent of their success.

The Philadelphia black community makes a particularly interesting case study. It was not "typical"; but it was atypical in ways that tended to produce a good deal of measurable evidence of the tension between blacks and whites. The most important characteristic of the Philadelphia black community is that it was a visible presence. In 1830 its 15,000 members made it America's largest northern urban black population. Moreover, though this community represented less than 10 percent of the total city population, it reflected a 30 percent increase over the city's black population of 1820. Hence, though the number of blacks in Philadelphia was not large, black and white Philadelphians perceived an ever-increasing number of dark faces in their midst.

The Philadelphia black community was also visible because, compared to other black communities, it was economically well off. This was due partly to the progress of several decades of freedom, partly to Quaker philanthropy, and partly to the in-migration of some exceptionally talented and energetic ex-slaves. An 1838 census concluded that the aggregate wealth of the community was \$977,500, or about \$270 per household. Even by nineteenth-century standards this did not mean the community was wealthy, but the distribution of that wealth is significant for an understanding of both the internal dynamics of the black community and its relationships with the larger community. While a great majority of black households had no real property and only negligible personal property, the wealthiest tenth of the population controlled 70 percent of the community's wealth. Stated another way, the black community might be seen as some 14,000 poor people juxtaposed to upwards of 1,000 economically "substantial" black citizens. Indeed, a survey published in 1845 listed six Afro-Americans among the city's several dozen wealthiest people. Moreover, two of these wealthy Afro-Americans had inherited their money, and could not be dismissed as self-made *nouveau riche*.⁹ For the

⁹ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (Philadelphia, 1899; rpt., New York: Atheneum, 1969); Theodore Hershberg, "Free Blacks in Antebellum Philadelphia," in E. Miller and E. Genovese, *Plantation, Town and County* (Urbana: Univ of Illinois Press, 1974), 421-23; Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, "Present State

black community this economic disparity meant that a noticeable minority stood out, economically and socially, from the majority. For the white community it meant the visibility of Afro-Americans who seemed to differ from upper-class or middle-class whites only in the incidental aspect of color.

The black community of Philadelphia was spatially stable and had been so for many years. In the 1790s Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church had been established at 6th and Lombard Streets. Since then Afro-Americans had increasingly anchored their "turf," setting up a number of institutions—schools, insurance companies, masonic lodges, and several additional churches within a few blocks of Bethel. As early as 1811, a black neighborhood was identifiable at the southern edge of the city, near Bethel Church, and by 1830, this neighborhood, while not devoid of whites, had become more heavily black and was expanding to the west. Though Afro-Americans and their institutions were to be found in all parts of the city and its suburbs, there was, then, an early, clearly defined intellectual, social, and economic focus for the Negro community at the southern edge of the city¹⁰ (see Figure 1).

This stability in the black community was enhanced by increasingly cosmopolitan contacts after 1820. Beginning in 1827 with *Freedom's Journal*, America's first black newspaper, black Philadelphia always had a distribution office for the black newspapers, as well as for Garrison's *Liberator* (usually located in the neighborhood near Bethel).¹¹ In addition to this formal mechanism of communication, informal connections between prominent black Philadelphians and the world outside black Philadelphia were well established and expanding through the 1820s. Francis Johnson, a musician in demand at white "society" parties all over Pennsylvania and New York, was in a position to bring the news and tastes of the outside world home to his fellow black Philadelphians.

and Condition of the Free People of Color of the City of Philadelphia" (Philadelphia, 1838), 6; [J. Zieber] "Wealth and Biography of the Wealthy Citizens of Philadelphia . . . estimated to be Worth \$50,000 and Upwards" (Philadelphia, 1845). Zieber's biographies, admittedly "estimated," are less important for their accuracy about black wealth than for the perception that some blacks *seemed* to be among the city's wealthiest few.

¹⁰ Norman C. Johnston, "Caste and Class of the Urban Form of Historic Philadelphia," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* (Nov. 1966), 334–50.

¹¹ The short-lived *Freedom's Journal*, the sporadic *Colored American*, and the *Liberator* are among the newsheets which listed this neighborhood as their Philadelphia distribution point. As of March 3, 1827, *Freedom's Journal*, the black newspaper published out of New York, 1827–29, listed Francis Webb as its distribution agent in Philadelphia. When this paper failed and was later replaced by the *Colored American*, John Bowers and later Stephen Gloucester, both well-known leaders of the Philadelphia black community, were listed as the Philadelphia agents.

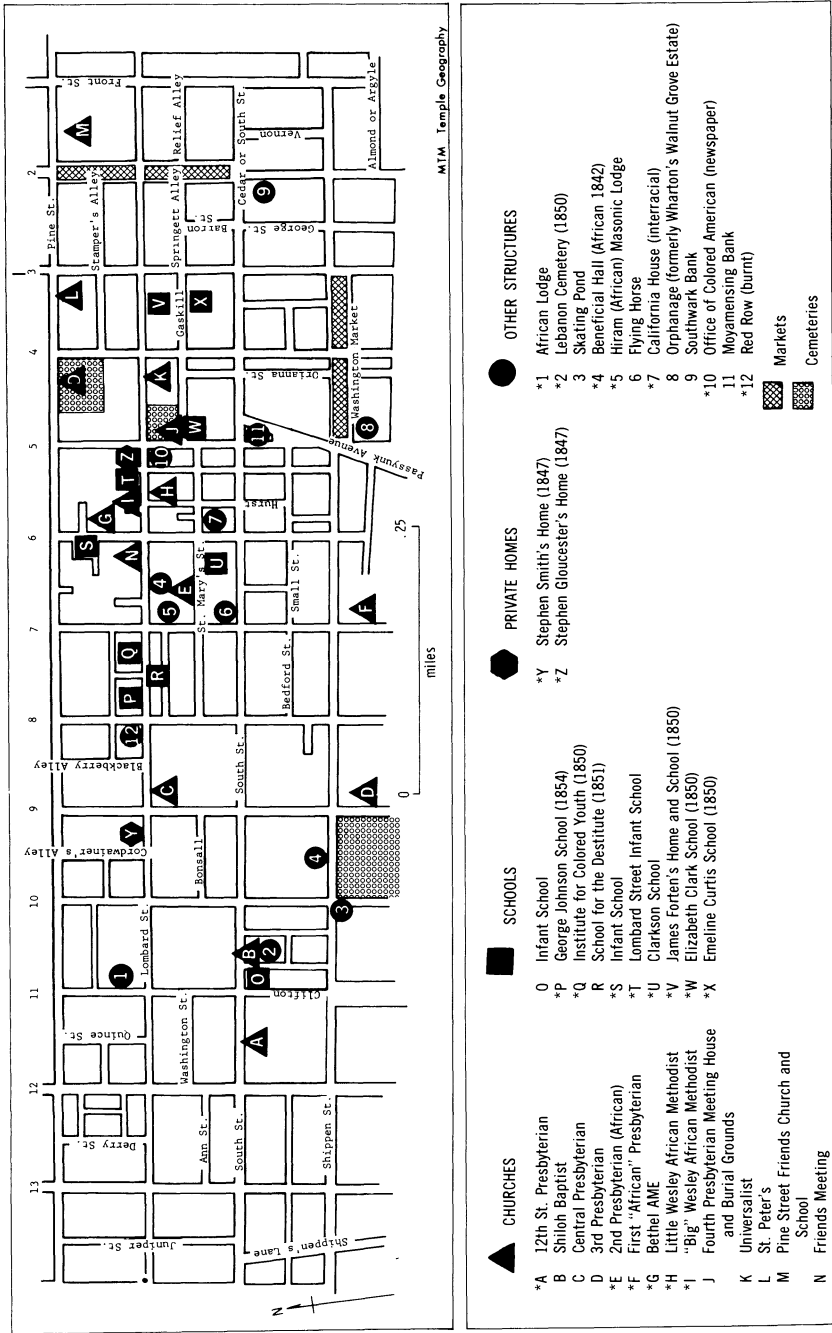


Figure 1. Approximate locations of key institutions in the black neighborhood of Philadelphia, 1800–1860. Asterisks indicate predominantly black membership.

Likewise, noted black caterers like Robert Bogle had some intimacy with such white Philadelphia power figures as Nicholas Biddle.¹²

Black abolitionists, carrying out their organizing activities, traveled widely and met frequently with their wealthy and powerful patrons. Such people returned to the black community bursting with the news of their travels and of the support of their white friends. Typical was this report by John Bowers of a stopover in a Lancaster, Pennsylvania hotel enroute from an abolitionist meeting in Harrisburg:

. . . I finished my breakfast . . . I rose and the [white abolitionist] friends in company (which they certainly were) gave the landlord to understand . . . that if I could not sit there, they would not . . . thus proving to the colored men, and to the world, that they were not abolitionists in word, but in deed, and determined to carry out those principles which they profess.¹³

Such contacts of professional service and social reform with the white upper classes brought black Philadelphians comfortable incomes and information about the lives, values, and tastes of white leaders. These contacts also brought access to powerful allies in times of need. On more than one occasion a black individual's personal, medical, or legal crises were eased by the intervention of a powerful white friend.¹⁴

Many of the characteristics of the Philadelphia black community were apparent in other urban black communities in some measure and combination. In New York, for example, black leaders could draw on the resources of wealthy white abolitionists like the Tappan brothers. What made the Philadelphia community unique was that its size, wealth, stability, and access to resources in the white community were older and more pronounced than in other cities, and that it had a number of wealthy blacks as well as access to wealthy whites. If racial tensions were connected to any of these characteristics, then, these tensions should be evident in Philadelphia. Hence, Philadelphia becomes a laboratory in which to explore the interaction between mechanisms within the antebellum black community and the white communities with which it shared the city. For to the white communities of Philadelphia, black people constituted a presence not easily ignored.

To black people their spokesmen had double status: they were prominent in local black affairs, but they were "national" leaders as well. Numerous enough and informed enough to encompass a range of tastes,

¹² DuBois, 34–36.

¹³ *Colored American*. Feb. 25, 1837.

¹⁴ See, for example, Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), ch. 6.

the black neighborhood at the south of the city had, for example, not one but two masonic lodges and a half-dozen different churches to accommodate the diversity within the black community.¹⁵ All of this added up to a highly visible group of upwardly mobile black people, to be emulated by other blacks, to be carefully and suspiciously watched by groups of whites.

White contemporaries perceived the concerns of Philadelphia blacks in terms of some of their own primary tensions: the pressing problem of economic competition, the emotional issues of "amalgamation" (cross-racial mating) and of blacks' aspirations for upward social mobility, the heightened aggressiveness of blacks in the economic sphere, and the increased belligerence of their social and political style and rhetoric.

On the question of economic competition, the white working-class community was vocal. A commission appointed to investigate the causes of the 1834 riot reported:

Among the causes which originated the late riots, are two. . . . An opinion prevails, especially among white laborers, that certain portions of our community, prefer to employ colored people, whenever they can be had, to the employing of white people; and that, in consequence of this preference, many whites, who are able and willing to work, are left without employment, while colored people are provided with work, and enabled comfortably to maintain their families; and thus many white laborers, anxious for employment, are kept idle and indigent. Whoever mixed in the crowds and groups, at the late riots, must so often have heard those complaints, as to convince them, that . . . they . . . stimulated many of the most active among the rioters. . . .¹⁶

Occupational competition was certainly at the top of the list of working-class whites' concerns, but the question of amalgamation was equally important. Nor was this latter a concern only of the working classes. Among upper-class whites, there was some annoyance over the rumor that wealthy black sailmaker James Forten "was ambitious . . . and strove for a respectable platform for [his family]; and to this end it was said of him that he coveted to wed his daughter to a whiter species at some sacrifice to his fortune."¹⁷ Liberal Quakers themselves, while supporting black "progress," were conservative in their estimate of the appropriate limits of social intercourse with blacks.¹⁸

¹⁵ Emma Jones Lapsansky, "South Street Philadelphia: 'A Haven for Those Low in the World'" (Diss. Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1975), 199–250.

¹⁶ *Register of Pennsylvania*, Dec. 10, 1834.

¹⁷ Abraham Ritter, *Philadelphia and her Merchants* (Philadelphia, 1860), 47–48.

¹⁸ Russell Weigley, "'A Peaceful City': Public Order in Philadelphia from Consolidation Through the Civil War," in Allen Davis and Mark Haller, *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower Class Life, 1790–1940* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1973); Quarles, 48–50.

Reformers concerned with promoting public morality toward black people were joined in their disapproval of racial intermixing by others more interested in protecting the purity of immorality. The publisher of a guide to the city's brothels questioned the limit of decorum in racial taboos:

. . . There is a brothel occupied by a swarm of yellow girls, who promenaded up and down Chestnut Street . . . and strange to say, they meet with more custom [*sic*] than their fairer skinned rivals. . . . There is no accounting for taste, however, and we have no objection to a white man hugging a negro wench to his bosom, providing his stomach is strong enough. . . .¹⁹

Statements ranging from curiosity to annoyance at the possibilities of "race mixing" were frequent among Philadelphia whites, and one riot, that of 1849, focused on the destruction of a prosperous little tavern, in the neighborhood near Bethel Church, which was owned by a mulatto man and his wife.²⁰ However, since numerous less prominent but no less interracial bars, gambling houses, and brothels in the neighborhood were left untouched, it is worth speculating that it was, perhaps, intermarriage for the purpose of upward mobility that was abhorred by the riotous whites, and not necessarily amalgamation *per se*. In any case, "race mixing" in the nineteenth-century city, and its meanings for different groups of whites and blacks, is a subject that bears further inquiry. Job competition and amalgamation were but portions of a larger issue, that of blacks' rising aspirations and designs for upward mobility that threatened to jostle the established social order. Even before the significant anti-black riots of the 1830s, a white Philadelphia historian expressed the widespread resentment against blacks' new values and aspirations:

In the olden time, dressy blacks and dandy coloured beaux and belles, as we now see them issuing from their proper churches, were quite unknown. Their aspirings and little vanities have been growing since they got those separate churches. Once they submitted to the appellation of servants, blacks, or negroes, but now they require to be called coloured people, and among themselves, their common call of salutation is—gentlemen and ladies.²¹

Ironically, "those separate churches," symbolizing black arrogance to many whites, were the result of whites' own unchristian attitudes toward their black brothers. In the 1790s, Philadelphia blacks had rebelled against

¹⁹ [Anonymous] "A Guide to the Stranger or Pocket Companion for the Fancy, Containing a List of the Gay Houses and Ladies of Pleasure in the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection" (Philadelphia, [ca., 1849]), 17.

²⁰ Lapsansky, 222.

²¹ John Fanning Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1830), 479.

segregated seating in racially mixed churches, and withdrew to their own institutions.

With the exception of their masonic lodges (the leadership of which was frequently drawn from the leaders of the church), the black community had developed no other major public arena by 1830. Whereas in the white community church leadership was frequently drawn from among people who were leaders in other spheres, in the black community the separate church had become and remained *the* arena for developing leadership skills.

Furthermore, to fill a vacuum, the churches had expanded their jurisdiction to include political and social, as well as religious concerns. The absence of alternative networks through which leadership might emerge (political, professional, or commercial) meant that this church leadership and its values became synonymous with the values of the entire black community. The church, then, served as both the training ground and the operating base for religious leaders such as Bethel's pastor, Richard Allen, who in turn were seen by many whites and blacks as the black community's secular leaders as well. For white rioters to attack the black church was to strike at the seat of the black community's organizational strength, while simultaneously aiming at one of the symbols of black arrogance.

While this issue of symbols was not as immediate as job competition, it was no less important, and many aspects of the tangible issues cannot be fully understood without also comprehending the importance of such symbols. For example, recent analysis has shown that many anti-black rioters were not in direct economic competition with black workers, that the occupations for which they were trained were ones in which blacks did not participate.²² Clearly, something more was at work here than simply a matter of white workers being replaced at their jobs by black workers.

Some insight into the hidden agenda in the labor controversy may be drawn from the newspaper passage quoted earlier that describes white frustration that "colored people are . . . enabled comfortably to maintain their families." At issue was not so much specific jobs as the fact that whites were jobless while blacks lived comfortably—that, in fact, sometimes blacks' comfort was had from the income of poorer whites. Thus, it is not surprising that one of the targets of the 1834 rioters, in the early stages of the riot when choice of targets appears to have been most selective, was the son of wealthy black Philadelphian James Forten, owner of a country estate and a carriage—and several rental properties occupied by less well-off whites.²³

²² Runcie, 201.

²³ Lapsansky, 228; Runcie, 191.

Available evidence of the Philadelphia riots does not provide conclusive proof that the more well-to-do blacks and their property were preferred targets. Nevertheless, certain patterns that emerged lend weight to the argument that this was so. For example, in the 1834 riot many victims were robbed of their valuables—silver, watches, etc.²⁴—items which the poor would have been less likely to possess (or to convince authorities that they possessed). An additional indication that the better-off blacks made more appealing targets is to be found in the fact that of the more than three dozen houses destroyed in the second night of this rioting, many were “substantial brick ones,” from which fine furniture was thrown into the streets and destroyed, while many more easily destroyed frame houses, owned by blacks in the same streets, were left untouched.²⁵

These choices of targets suggest resentment of the “have nots” specifically against the “haves.” So too does the casualty of the third night of this rioting. A group of whites, claiming to have been fired upon from a house *near* the black masonic lodge, destroyed the lodge building, citing it as a place where blacks would gather, rather than attacking the *house* from which the alleged shots originated.²⁶ Similar insight may be drawn from the descriptions of the kinds of people who were assaulted in the 1834 riot. Contemporaries expressed some outrage that the mob attacked “old, confiding and unoffending” blacks.²⁷ Yet this outrage is more comprehensible if one substitutes the words “middle-aged, respectable, and hardworking” for the description of these victims, one of whom was reportedly a one-time servant of George Washington. It then begins to appear that individuals, groups, and property which represented economic and social “success” and “respectability” were prime targets for rioters’ resentments.

It seems also significant that some of the attackers had actually crossed the city, passing other concentrations of Afro-Americans, in order to reach the south end where the greatest concentration, not just of black people, but also of their organizations, was to be found. Equally informative were the continuing complaints that blacks could find work when whites could not, and the repeated reports of blacks being assaulted *at their work*.²⁸

The visibility of affluent Negroes, and the resentment of them by struggling whites, was apparent not only in the printed sources of the day, but

²⁴ Runcie, 212; *Register of Pennsylvania*, Aug. 23, 1834.

²⁵ J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1884), I: 638.

²⁶ Scharf and Westcott, I: 637–38.

²⁷ Runcie, 213.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 197; *Register of Pennsylvania*, Aug. 23, 1834.



Figure 2. Caption reads "How you find yourself dis hot weader Miss Chloe?" "Pretty well I tank you Mr. Cesar only I aspire too much!" From the "Life in Philadelphia" series by Edward Clay. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

also in stage and iconographic caricature in which the Philadelphia Negro was portrayed as the prototype of the "uppity nigger." In the late 1820s, a caricaturist, Edward Clay, introduced a series of cartoons entitled "Life in Philadelphia," many of which poked fun at the activities and aspirations of upwardly mobile blacks in the city (see Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5). Clay, a professional man himself, ignored the doings of the lower-class and working-class blacks, who by far outnumbered the tiny elite which he chose to ridicule. Instead, he concentrated on the attempts of the black upper classes to set themselves apart from the masses, and on their conspicuous consumption of the material goods and social values associated with upper-class whites. He ridiculed their strivings by pointing to their adoption of values of family heritage, their cultivation of music, romance languages, and the arts, and to their tendency to adopt the latest style in dress and furnishings. These caricatures, capturing as they did the essence of black "society" in Philadelphia, were immensely popular both in Philadelphia and in England where they were copied and augmented by other cartoonists over the next several decades.²⁹

²⁹ The accompanying cartoons, produced as broadsides by Edward Clay and later caricaturists, were part of a series, "Life in Philadelphia," which was produced in Philadelphia and in London. Evidently there was an audience in both places that could appreciate the Philadelphia black community as the prototype of black aspirations. The broadsides were published by William Simpson and by C. S. Hart in Philadelphia, and by Tregear and several other publishing houses in London.

Figure 3. Mr. Mortimer, who is posing in front of black Puritan ancestors, sings "quite con a moor, as de Italians say!!"



Conspicuous consumption and other elements of the lifestyle of the class of Philadelphia Afro-Americans represented was a topic of general discussion for both blacks and whites of the day. Whites' comments indeed suggested the reactions expected of a class "threatened" from below: annoyance at the audacity of the lower classes in stepping out of their "places." Typical was this comment from the same historian quoted earlier on the subject of "dressy blacks and dandy coloured beaux":

As a whole, they show an overwhelming fondness for display and vainglory in processions . . . and in the pomp and pageantry of Masonic . . . societies. . . . With the kindest feelings for their race, judicious men wish them wiser conduct. . . .³⁰

Typical also is this satire of black social life, published in the Pennsylvania Gazette:

A joke of no ordinary magnitude was enacted last night, by getting up a Coloured Fancy Ball, at the Assembly-Room. . . . Carriages arrived, with ladies and gentlemen of colour, dressed in "character" in the most grotesque style. . . .

³⁰ Watson, 479.



Figure 4. A black “gentleman” leaves his card for Miss Dinah, who is “bery pettishly engaged in washing de dishes.”

It is worthy of remark, that many of the coaches containing these sable divinities were attended by white coachmen and *white footmen*. It is indeed high time that some serious attention was paid to the conduct and pursuits of the class of persons alluded to, and it may be well to inquire if matters progress at this rate how long it will be before masters and servants change places.³¹

Settled securely in the city by 1830, what were the concerns of black leaders? How did they interpret the dynamics of the racist attacks? What did they see as the most effective response to the rising frequency and virulence of such attacks after 1830? Did they passively accept this as the reality of their world? Did they seek simply to escape? Did they launch or consider counterattacks? And, ultimately, how effective were their strategies in reducing the hostility against them; in protecting them from its ravages; and in helping them to progress toward the place they sought in society?

Commentary by contemporary Afro-Americans on the subject of lifestyles sheds some light on goals and values as seen from within the black

³¹ *Freedom's Journal*, Mar. 14, 1828. (Rpt. from *Pennsylvania Gazette*.)

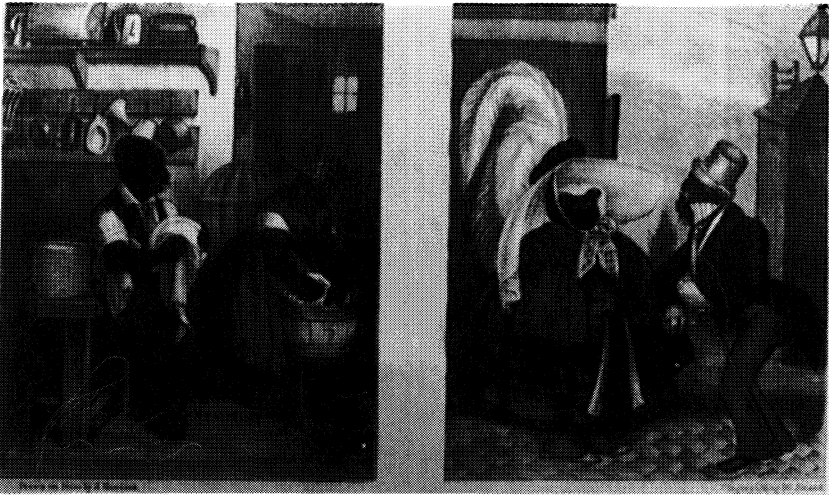


Figure 5. Captioned "At Home" and "Abroad," this "Sketch of Character" ridicules black lifestyles.

community. Concerned with acceptability to the larger white society, black leaders admonished their constituents to make life choices that would convince whites of their suitability for responsible citizenship. To this end, one of the early Philadelphia meetings of the national Convention of Free People of Color—a group established in the early 1830s to address the problems of free blacks and, in later years, the problems of enslaved brothers as well—adopted a resolution advocating that the designation "African" be dropped from the titles of black organizations. Instead, the fact that black people were colored *Americans* should be stressed.³² To this end also, they gravitated toward values which they felt would establish them as "respectable" in wider American society. An 1837 statement of goals written by a Philadelphia black leader bears the unmistakable mark of liberal Quaker influence:

. . . We shall advocate the cause of peace, believing that whatever tends to the destruction of human life is at variance with the precepts of the Gospel. . . . We shall endeavor to promote education with sound morality, not that we shall become "learned and mighty," but "great and good." . . . We shall advocate temperance in all things, and total abstinence from all alcoholic liquors. We shall advocate a system of economy, not only because luxury is injurious to

³² Quarles, 54.

individuals, but because its practice exercises an influence on society, which in its very nature is sinful.³³

Frugality, temperance, religion, and education, they argued, would be the keys that would result in the respectability that would open the doors of American society to black people.

Among this list of goals of the elites in the black community, perhaps the most important was education. But why? In a society where few people were formally educated, and in which the highly educated Negro was frequently frustrated by lack of opportunities to exercise his talents, how would education help them become "great and good?" For the leaders of this community the purpose of education seemed to be two-fold. For one thing, it would keep black youths off the streets, where their presence and idleness would reinforce whites' perception that Negroes were aimless, undisciplined, and untrainable. Hence the statement by one black leader that education inspired ambition, "the cornerstone of all human greatness . . . without which we become nothing—nay, we become awful nuisances to society."³⁴

Equally important, educational institutions would provide the medium for socializing black youth and ex-slaves into the temperate, "orderly" lifestyle that leaders felt was so essential to their acceptance in the larger society:

. . . the age in which we live is fastidious in its taste. It demands eloquence, figure, rhetoric, and pathos; plain, honest, common sense is no longer attracting. . . . the means of ameliorating our condition . . . is by a strict attention to education. We find that those men who have ever been instrumental in raising a community into respectability, have devoted their best and happiest years to this important object, have lived laborious days and restless nights; made a sacrifice of ease, health, and social joys and terminated their useful career in poverty, with the only consoling hope that they had done justice to their fellow men, and should in their last hours of triumphant prospect lie down on the bed of fame and live to future ages. . . .³⁵

As an accompaniment to practical education, black elites enjoyed a wide range of curricular "extras," designed to add an "eloquence" to their lives that was frequently publicized by white and black alike. Ed-

³³ William Whipper, "Minutes and Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the American Moral Reform Society," in Dorothy Porter, ed., *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837* (Boston: Beacon, 1971), 207.

³⁴ William Whipper, "An Address . . . Before the Colored Reading Society of Philadelphia, for Mental Improvement," in Porter, 107.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

ward Clay and his followers satirized this “society,” but an anonymous writer—probably a black Philadelphian named Joseph Willson—produced a more serious document on upper-class black social life. Willson in 1841 published a book describing the lifestyles of what he termed “the higher classes of colored society,” mentioning “parlors . . . carpeted and furnished with sofas, sideboards, cardtables, mirrors, . . . and in many instances, . . . a piano forte,” where, in prearranged formal visits, black women trained in “painting, instrumental music, singing . . . and . . . ornamental needlework” visited with each other. Their men—home from concerts, lectures, or meetings of literacy, debating, and library association gatherings at their meeting halls—sometimes joined their women, bringing news of the lectures and debates they had heard or engaged in. The topics of these meetings ranged from treatises on ancient Rome to studies of medicine, but the most frequent subjects related to the plight of blacks in America. Jacob White, destined to become a public school administrator in the years after the Civil War, was one young member of this social circle whose debating skills, at one point, were turned to a defense—before a black audience—of slavery as beneficial because it brought Africans in touch with civilization!³⁶

Rivaling the commitment to education was the Philadelphia black leaders’ concern for frugality and temperance—a concern which sometimes led to a delicate balancing act against the desire for “eloquence . . . and rhetoric.” An article in the black newspaper *Freedom’s Journal* denounced the *Pennsylvania Gazette’s* satire of a black “fancy ball” in Philadelphia, and cautioned Afro-Americans about the damaging image of such balls:

The obloquy and contempt which have heretofore been heaped upon us, as a body, for our much and continual dancing, will, we hope, cause many who are persons of reflection, to think some upon the propriety of spending so many valuable hours in this amusement. While we are no advocates of dancing, we do not consider it criminal to indulge in it, occasionally, once or twice a year.³⁷

The writer went on to distinguish the “we [who] don’t believe in balls” from the “few who do” and expressed the concern that these latter “should not be cause to ridicule a whole society.”³⁸

³⁶ Joseph Willson, *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1841), 57, 97–116; Harry Silcox, “Philadelphia Negro Educator: Jacob C. White, Jr.,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 97 (Jan. 1973), 75–98; Broad­sides of Banneker Institute, Leon Gardiner Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

³⁷ *Freedom’s Journal*, Mar. 14, 1828.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Black newspapers frequently carried articles exhorting their readers to live disciplined, frugal lives, and set before them numerous biographies—from Toussaint L'Overture to Paul Cuffe—of black leaders who had contributed to the progress of the race by so doing.³⁹ In their statements black leaders expressed this commitment to sober consumption but in actuality they seemed to live well, making up in “style” and “culture” what they denied themselves in frivolity. Abolitionists who visited black Philadelphians’ homes commented—some with disapproval—on the sumptuousness they found there.⁴⁰ And Joseph Willson described the homes of Philadelphia’s black elite as “present[ing] an air of neatness and [having] the evidences of comfort . . . quite astonishing when compared with their limited advantages for securing them. . . .” But Willson goes on to make the point that people do not seem to be living beyond their means: “. . . unlike fashionable people of other communities, they live mostly within their incomes . . . and hence . . . they manage to maintain even appearances.”⁴¹

Such “even appearances” in the lives of black elites must have been particularly annoying to whites in less stable positions: the displaced skilled laborers who participated in the riots. Though it was not black competition, but rather new technology and new work routines that actually caused skilled whites’ job displacement, “upper-class” blacks were an acceptable target for frustration, whereas upper-class whites were not.

Bruce Laurie, in this study of antebellum Philadelphia working-class whites’ lifestyles and values, has suggested that among certain segments of society (the same segments that would have been involved in the riots) there was a strong resistance to temperance and punctuality—what Laurie terms the “new morality” or “new respectability”—that was necessary for the coming regimentation of the industrial work day.⁴² Such an interpretation adds the potential for yet another dimension to anti-black violence, for the recipe of frugality, temperance, religion, and education—seasoned with “eloquence”—advocated by black leaders must have given added spice to the taste of anti-black hatred in the mouths of white rioters.

³⁹ See, for example, *Colored American*, Feb. 25, 1838 and Aug. 17, 1840.

⁴⁰ Jane and William Pease, *They Who Would be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830–1861* (New York: Atheneum, 1972), 111.

⁴¹ Willson, 94. Also, the diary of James Forten’s granddaughter, Charlotte L. Forten, contains ample information of the “proper” education of an upper-class black Philadelphia girl. The diary has been republished: Ray Allen Billington, ed., *A Free Negro in the Slave Era* (New York: Collier, 1961). See also Silcox, “Jacob White.”

⁴² Bruce Laurie, “‘Nothing on Compulsion’: Life Styles of Philadelphia Artisans, 1820–1850,” *Labor History* (Summer 1974), 350–52; for another discussion of this resistance to workday discipline see Montgomery, 411.

Hence, the virulent attack on the black temperance parade, which triggered the race riot of 1842, emerges as something more than simple racial violence. If blackness was injury, black temperance added insult to it. Before the riot was over, a black meeting hall, erected by and named for Stephen Smith, a wealthy black merchant, was destroyed. Nor was this destruction the result of random violence, for the local authorities, pinpointing the hall as a potential target, had set up a guard around the building. Nevertheless, it and a neighboring black church were destroyed by the crowd, and a third building, a brick structure erected as a temperance, meeting hall by the black community, was ordered destroyed by municipal authorities lest its presence incite more unrest.⁴³

Few participants in anti-black riots were ever prosecuted, and this fact was not lost on black leaders. An article in the *Colored American* newspaper spelled out one Afro-American's perception that the black upper classes presented a target partly because the white upper classes were unavailable:

Abolition is a mere pretext for these outbreaks. The same class of vagabonds who mob abolitionists, would as readily mob . . . the aristocracy could they do it with the same impunity.⁴⁴

Though these leaders understood that they were the scapegoats of American society, still they continued to pursue the only strategy they could conceive: to convince that society of the Afro-American's respectability. They were proud of their restraint and their independence. They were quick to take offense to any disparagement of their character, and they responded with lengthy protestations of their temperance and industry. One such refutation, published in a white newspaper in 1832, pointed to the large number of colored benevolent societies and the fact that none of the societies' members had ever been convicted in the court as evidences of the respectable nature of the black community.⁴⁵

These groups, pleased with their capacity to care for blacks both inside and outside their membership, noted how few black people were in the almshouses and then went on to point out that "in Philadelphia, far from burdening the whites with the support of . . . [black] paupers, . . . [black people's] taxes, over and above the support of their own poor, furnish funds for the support of *white* paupers."⁴⁶

A significant segment of the black elite was, then, concerned with whites' perception of the Negro. This group was committed to education

⁴³ Scharf and Westcott, 660; Quarles, 99.

⁴⁴ *Colored American*, June 2, 1838.

⁴⁵ *Register of Pennsylvania*, June 9, 1832.

⁴⁶ *Register of Pennsylvania*, Mar. 12, 1831.

and frugal, temperate living, with the intent of “rendering harmless, false and exaggerated accounts of our degraded condition by living consistent, orderly and moral lives.”⁴⁷

A small minority of Philadelphia blacks, however, grew frustrated with shaping its rhetoric and its policies to suit the tastes of a white public. Some resorted to direct confrontations with local authorities—a fact which was noted as one of the “causes” of the 1834 riots:

The other cause . . . [of rioting] is the conduct of certain portions of the colored people, when any of their members are arrested as fugitives from justice. It has too often happened, that . . . the colored people have not relied on the wisdom and justice of the judiciary, . . . or on the active and untiring exertions of benevolent citizens, . . . but they have . . . forcibly attempted the rescue of prisoners. . . .⁴⁸

While some took to physical force, others confined their anger to a growing belligerence in their public statements. Though forced to recognize that white allies might desert their cause if the black community exhibited too much radical spirit, these dissenters had come to understand that the elite’s stride toward “respectability” had been, at best, minimally effective in bringing about significant change in the lives of most black people. As the national black organizations inched away from total commitment to pacifism and lost some of their zeal for temperance as a pressing issue for Afro-Americans, a few Philadelphia leaders reluctantly followed, with blistering statements against white slaveholders, and even some mild protest of the hypocrisy of some abolitionists.⁴⁹ A few blacks as well as whites criticized the bold ones who indulged in such “measures denunciatory” of the white community, claiming such measures were ineffectual and self-defeating.⁵⁰ Yet some black leaders, disgruntled at the slowness of progress, became increasingly verbal about their exasperation as mid-century approached. Scattered among the exhortations to black Americans to improve themselves there began to creep a note of admonition toward the white world as well. Typical was this statement, made by one black leader:

On the one hand we see arrayed against us unblushing impiety, unholy pride, grovelling sinful prejudice, and a short-sighted worldly policy . . . *the unholy alliance must capitulate*. . . .⁵¹

⁴⁷ *Register of Pennsylvania*, May 7, 1831.

⁴⁸ *Register of Pennsylvania*, Dec. 10, 1834.

⁴⁹ See Quarles, chs. 3 and 10.

⁵⁰ Willson, 77–78.

⁵¹ William Watkins, “Address Before the Moral Reform Society in Philadelphia . . . 1836,” in Porter, 166.

If one response of Afro-Americans to increased racism was the redoubling of efforts to prove themselves respectable, and another was the increase in the belligerent tone of rhetoric, yet a third expression of disillusionment, frustration, and fear was to flee Philadelphia altogether—a response that contemporary observers felt to be part of the design of the rioters:

It is notorious indeed, a fact not to be concealed or disputed, that the “object” of the most active among the rioters, was a destruction of the property, and injury to the persons, of the colored people, with intent, as it would seem to induce or compel them to remove from this district. . . .⁵²

It was possible, of course, that one individual might do all three: step up efforts to be “respectable,” increase the amount of anger expressed in public statements, and leave the city. Those who left went to places as close as New Jersey and as far away as West Africa. But one of the more interesting developments in the black community through the 1830s and 1840s was the number of people who chose the first two alternatives, but rejected—in fact, reversed—the third; that is, the number of vocal and militant abolitionists who moved from outside the black neighborhood or outside of Philadelphia into the area that was experiencing the riots.

While we cannot discount the external pressure (from the city’s white communities) to “ghettoize” the black community, it is worth noticing that by 1850, a number of black leaders with substantial economic power had left other neighborhoods—neighborhoods untouched by riots—and bought residences in the area in which resided black churches, newspapers, etc. Since in 1850, all the neighborhoods of the city still had some black residents, including some black homeowners, it would seem unlikely that those black owners who moved from other neighborhoods into the riot area did so solely because of force—or at least unlikely that they were driven out of the old neighborhood simply because they were black.⁵³

By 1850, leading families of Cassey, Ayres, Forten, and Parrot were joined in the neighborhood near Bethel by the Gloucester, Bustill, Stephen Smith, Florin, and White families, each with taxable property

⁵² *Register of Pennsylvania*, Dec. 10, 1834; Hershberg, 421; DuBois, 29, 48.

⁵³ Philadelphia Social History Project, Computer Map of Black and Mulatto Residence, 1850, in Theodore Hershberg, “Mulattoes and Blacks: Intra-Group Color Differences and Social Stratification in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia,” paper presented at Annual Meeting of Organization of American Historians, April 1974. Though it is possible that black people who became abolitionists were made unwelcome in their old neighborhoods, the lack of evidence on the subject suggests that this was not widespread.

worth from \$500 to \$12,000.⁵⁴ These families were typically composed of two working parents—e.g., a tailor or baker father and a teacher or seamstress mother—who had one or more children in the local black schools. Seven of the thirteen black schools were located in this neighborhood, and none of the other schools were grouped so closely together.⁵⁵ These people's names appeared frequently as organizers of local meetings, signers of petitions, or representatives on boards of black organizations.

From this group and this neighborhood came a disproportionately large number of the public statements of the black community in the years 1834–1850 when anti-black rioting was at its peak in Philadelphia. The concerns they voiced for action within the black community were handed down to the next generation of leaders, many of whom were their biological as well as their spiritual children, for Bustills, Fortens, Whites, Stills, and many other black leaders through the Civil War and late nineteenth century were second, if not third, generation organizers in the black community.⁵⁶

The strategy of respectability, adopted in the 1830s by the majority of the influential black leaders, was the strategy carried on by the younger group of leaders that drew together in the Bethel neighborhood in the wake of the riots. The full import of the fact that the white community seemed to grow more hostile in proportion to the success of these goals seems to have been lost on these leaders. Yet each of the five major riots against the black community between 1834 and 1849 resulted not only in generalized mayhem, but also in the destruction of at least one of these symbols of group "success": churches, meeting halls, outstanding black leaders' property. In 1834 it was a masonic hall and a church; several substantial brick houses in 1835; in 1838—in addition to Pennsylvania Hall itself—rioters burned the Quaker Shelter for Colored Orphans and another black church; the temperance parade in 1842 occasioned the destruction of two meeting halls and yet another church; and in 1849 an interracial tavern went up in smoke. An examination of other inhabitants who shared the neighborhood adds further weight to the argument that the rioters chose their targets with some purpose, for all along small streets that rippled the area, rioters bypassed seats of gambling and prostitution—some of them interracial—to reach homes and meeting places of "unoffending" blacks.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Lapsansky, 222, 240–41; Philadelphia Society of Friends, Manuscript Census of the Colored Population of Philadelphia, 1847.

⁵⁵ Benjamin Bacon, "Statistics of the Colored People of Philadelphia," (Philadelphia, 1856).

⁵⁶ Hershberg, "Mulattoes and Blacks," map; E. Lapsansky, *Before the Model City* (Philadelphia: Historical Commission of Philadelphia, 1969), 43.

⁵⁷ Lapsansky, 239, 240; Warner, 79–160.

The differences of style and opinion between the respectable and the unrespectable within the black community are of use in gaining insight into the relationship of the total black community to the equally varied white community. Some progress has recently been made in describing objective characteristics that differentiated various levels of material progress among antebellum urban blacks.⁵⁸ Sometimes these intrablack dynamics had a dramatic effect on black-white relations. One example of what might be called a "domino" effect of intrablack tensions may be seen in the riot that occurred in the summer of 1835. A group of blacks, reflecting the widespread acceptance of the black community's adoption of "Americanization" values, ridiculed the manners and clothing of a West Indian servant, teasing him for his "African" ways and unstylish clothing. The servant, much upset, petitioned his master for better clothing. When the master refused, the servant beat him. A race riot ensued, which, like the one before it, was aimed at the property of comfortable black people.⁵⁹ Presenting the image of colored Americans as separate in style and dress from Africans was a highly emotional issue within some segments of the black community—important enough to inspire public ridicule and destroy at least one servant's social restraint.

Out of an examination of the black community, then, the anti-black riots of the 1830s and 1840s are given another dimension—a dimension born not only out of the peculiarities of Philadelphia's white communities but also out of the unique qualities of the black community. While the white mobs were expressing their frustration at their own social immobility, black people, for their part, were concerned with publicly exhibiting the proof of their progress toward the "respectable" life. This set of dynamics proved mutually antagonistic. Within this setting, Philadelphia's black leaders continued to focus on three goals: economic security, physical safety, and social status. With respect to the first goal, they achieved some measure of success by 1830, accentuated by the fact that a few Afro-Americans achieved some economic power, and that in times of crisis both black and white wealth could be called in for support. After 1830, when changes in the geographic integration of the city, heightened competition for work, and the rise of trade guilds that excluded blacks eroded the gains made in the early years of the century, Philadelphia's black leaders still had no choice but to continue agitation for economic opportunities.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Hershberg, "Mulattoes and Blacks . . ." 6.

⁵⁹ *Register of Pennsylvania*, Aug. 1, 1835; Scharf and Westcott, 1: 642.

⁶⁰ Hershberg, "Free Blacks . . ." 427. Though Runcie argues, plausibly, that *specific* labor competition between blacks and whites was at a minimum, Hershberg's interpretation that *general* competition for jobs was acutely felt after 1830 seems to fit well with available evidence.

On the second goal, physical security, the tactic adopted by the black community was even less successful. Since the upper-class whites whom black leaders saw as their national allies were themselves hated by working-class whites, black leaders' choices of allies had the effect of reinforcing their position of being attractive targets for anti-upper-class, as well as anti-black, attack.

It is interesting that no major black leader conceived of a cross-racial political union among the working classes. Until well into the 1840s, black leaders steered clear of political organization completely, and their huddling together helped in forming the ghetto that made it unnecessary to attack anymore; now they could simply be isolated.

If the effectiveness of the first two strategies was limited, in the third, the pursuit of status, blacks found their goals even more thwarted. For here black leaders found that they were alone. While working people hated the idea of upward mobility in an economic way, while elites supported it only as long as it stayed within certain limits—as long as it avoided measures “denunciatory” of themselves, or attempts at intermarriage. The 1838 decision of the state legislature to rescind black suffrage suggests that the rioters were indeed “legitimized” by the approval of the larger white community, as it is “respectable” citizens and not criminals who are most likely to exercise this kind of political power. The 1830s and 1840s were a critical time for Afro-Americans in a northern city. All-black organizations, only a generation or so old, found themselves working out policies and goals under the tremendous pressure of generally tumultuous urban situations in which they were under physical and psychological attack. It was too soon in the development of Afro-American organizational life for the group to move toward recognizing that its own sets of values differed from those of the major society it sought to enter. It was too soon to have accumulated the experience that might later tell them that inclusion in American society required fundamental change—not just within the black community, but in the entire political and class structure of American society.

Black leaders, then, adjusted their tactics and goals to the realities of their city as it moved into the Civil War. They gave up physical competition for city space and retreated to the safety of their own neighborhood, with its supportive institutions and services. Likewise, they gave up their commitment to some of the causes of white liberals, such as temperance. A few expatriated, foregoing hope of acceptance in America at all. Most, however, continued their use of their “separate churches” and lodges to cultivate and promote their leaders and their pursuits of respectability and acceptability. And on the issue of “amalgamation” they were silent. Continued resentment against the abolitionists and against blacks as the

“cause” of the disruption of Civil War far outweighed the gains possible through the old strategies of preparing for full inclusion in American society by living “respectably.” And though riots and rioters gradually disappeared from American cities as legitimate extralegal tools of public discipline,⁶¹ rioting against blacks remained acceptable. But the black churches and masonic lodges remained under the leadership of the children of leaders steeped in the values of frugality, temperance, respectability, and “Americanization.” As they moved into the twentieth century, such leaders found themselves more and more out of touch with a constituency that could no longer see the use of such values.

A generalized racism in the context of the riot atmosphere of the mid-nineteenth century might well have been sufficient to engender both the riots and the rioters without any “provocation” from within the black community. Nevertheless, an examination of inner dynamics may help to keep us aware that interracial tensions are a complex phenomenon.*

⁶¹ Grimsted, 392; Maier, 452.

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