

The Southwark Riots

Citation Information: "The Southwark Riots," *Public Ledger*, v. 17, 23 July, 1844.

PUBLIC LEDGER

PHILADELPHIA, TUESDAY, JULY 23, 1844

We have obtained a copy of the following affidavit, which was filed yesterday morning, and completes the evidence elicited by the investigation into the subject before Judge Jones. George S. Roberts, affirmed-I reside 157 John street, Northern Liberties. On Sunday July 7, 1844, being informed that the lower districts of the town were disturbed, curiosity led me down to St. Philip de Neri; arrived about 8 A.M. I approached the place by Third street; large crowds at all the corners of the adjacent streets; those crowds somewhat remote from the building composed of decenter materials, but those near the church composed of the worst class of mankind, the very dregs of the canaille of a large city, a great umber of boys. Great discussion of law, rights, liberty, &c; in relation to the arrests that had been made the night before, with a large display of ignorance, malice, with every species of denunciation and avowal of revenge directed against certain persons who were in the church and holding certain prisoners in custody; whether they were military or civil I do not know and could get no information. "They have had Charley Naylor, one of our greatest and best men, in the church all night without food, drink, or bed, and have refused fifteen thousand dollars good bail for him, and by J—— C—— we'll have him out; we'll make them smell h-l if they don't let him out in half an hour." This was one exclamation which came from a villanous looking knot of men at the corner of Third and Queen streets. Great denunciation of Gen. Cadwalader and threats of assassination, or what was equivalent to my mind. ("Let the d——d cut throat come down here to-night and see whether he'll get away alive." This came from a clique more advanced towards the church on the North side of Queen street. I heard hundreds of denunciation of similar character as this, but not quite as atrocious; they were directed against the military chiefly, but all persons representing civil authority and government; these cries calculated to subvert all law and order and intended by the authors to prompt to violence.

Naylor was raised to a divinity; I remarked to one man who was eulogizing him highly, that "you liberty men have soon chosen yourself a king, we would not think of such a man at our end of the town;" he answered, with a surly huff-this was a great bible man; I went eastward past the church, they were stoning the church; and I passed quickly by; I considered it the duty of those inside to shot any person so engaged, and I did not wish a crown of martyrdom in company with such rascals; I went to Second and Queen streets, where I saw a crowd of similar character as that at Third street, cries and denunciations much the same, but rather more religious discussions; the church stoned violently three different times in the space of half an hour; at every time the stoning commenced a great sensation was evident among the whole, with expressions of satisfaction; I passed east down Queen street, having been informed that a cannon was preparing at the Marine railway; paused ten minutes listening to a squad in discussion; one religious, (hypocritical,) canting rascal among them was justifying

the destruction of the church because arms were found in it; he was descanting largely about the sword of the spirit being the only proper weapon of Christians; I asked him if they were Christians who were collected about Christ in the garden previous to his arrest; he said 'yes;' then what was meant by the command to sell a coat and buy a sword; he said there was no such thing in the book; some person corrected him; he told the person he could not show it; he seemed to think that the sword of the spirit was intended for the use of Catholics only; he was very learned in languages, and a perfect judge of the correctness of King James' version; it was the right version; the mutilation and interpolations of great numbers of councils, representing conflicting sects and schisms, he said were nothing; the law made King James' bible the only lawful bible, and it was their (the Catholics') duty to receive it as such, (and much more stuff.)

The cannon being dragged up Queen street by ten or twelve men and thirty or forty boys, (villainous looking,) the rope led by a man; don't know him, though I looked sharp at him; it was an old rusty cannon on timber wheels, (small wheels used in ship yards;) one man who ran on the sidewalk exclaimed that it was loaded to the length of his arm; all spouted except a few; they ran to the church with it; directed it towards the church; I kept in the wake at the northwest corner of Second and Queen streets, expecting as before that those in charge of the church would shoot them down; I waited fifteen minutes to see if they would fire it; it was not fired; I forgot to say that during the stoning of the church several persons stood unflinchingly on the steps, though at considerable risk, endeavoring to protect it; they were strangers to me; they deserve well of their fellow citizens.

I was present when the seminary was burned; I saw the character and class who were concerned there; this was the same class; men drunk with liquor and devilishness, boys of 16 to 21, of the most insubordinate and lawless character, insane almost with love of devastation, and others looking respectable, but entirely passive.

At 11 o'clock passed up homeward; stopped at the Girard Bank to see the Sheriff, whom I know; he was not there; he was represented by some person whom I did not know; I said I thought the Sheriff should be informed of the danger the military would be under of assassination under the cover of the coming night; the man said that was information for the Major General; I said I did not know him, and wished he would tell him; I am averse to the generality dignitaries unless I know them; the first assumption of superiority on their part generally produces a quarrel; this is the reason why I did not speak personally to the Major General; I went home in a serious and thoughtful mood on account of the assassin-like character of the mob, knowing the mischief I could myself do if actuated by the feelings which appeared to move them.

At about 7 o'clock in the evening passed down Third street to the neighborhood of Queen; the cannon firing; at Second and South the mob was retreating north; I passed to near the line at Third street; the crowd dense at that point; I did not get near enough to see the soldiers; dark; but heard one of them say "Why in the name of God don't you stand back; why do you press upon us thus?" the speaker was evidently irritated; the crowd between me and the military was evidently of a bad character; those around me and further north not so bad,

though their language was more conducive of sedition than peace; I immediately passed back up Third street, cautioning all to do the same; great numbers of person placed themselves under the cover of corners of alleys and small streets, and numbers passed off entirely; the reasoning I made use of to the crowd in the street and to crowds of women sitting in their own doors, was, that the mob showed a disposition to press the military, and that the soldiers, if attacked, would fire in defence, and death might be carried the whole length of the street; the women generally moved back into their houses; I came to South street and sat on a step for half an hour, watching the flashes of the artillery against the sky; I counted altogether nineteen discharges of artillery; between which I occasionally heard the report of small arms; at half past 11 went home.

Monday, July 8.-Went down to the lower district to see the state of matters; viewed the effects of the firing where it took effect; went to the Hall; the dead had been removed; their blood was about the room. The persons viewing the range of the artillery generally are an excellent kind of people, attracted by curiosity; those about the hall, with few exceptions, are the worst looking of mankind and full of vengeance and fury. It was there rumored that the Governor was in; he, Gen. Cadwalader, the Sheriff, the Military, and people of the city, who they said, had interfered, were cursed in every form that language would admit of; the Governor, they said had run off frightened at what he had done; they wanted to see the Governor, they said they had a letter for him; this came from a squad at the south corner of the area before the Hall. I was informed that several cannon were below at the market; went down, at a grog-hole, southeast corner was a tall flag staff and a flag labelled "Native American Head Quarters;" two or three hundred people inside and out, the most infernal in looks, words and actions, that I had ever yet seen. I asked several about the cannon, they would or could not tell about them; in truth, I believe they had none, and the tales about six or eight pieces mounted, were all lies which they passed from one to another, to enable them to keep their cowardly courage up; I believe (but I may be mistaken.) that the military got all their cannon; I went into the bar room pretending to admire certain mean, vulgar pictures, daubed with red paint; the room was filled with men drunk, uttering curses, blasphemy and vulgarity in every imaginable form of words; there was a back room filled with the same kind of materials which appeared a sanctum of mischief; did not enter it; in the bar room I saw and was recognized by ———, the only man whom I knew in all these transactions; he saw me, was talking at the time, not loud; numbers were speaking to him in vulgar and boisterous style, he appeared to be a centre of attraction; so many speaking at once, and he talking lower than they, I could not hear what he said. One said to him "by God we'll have our rights now;" he is a bad man in every sense of the word, he is well-known up town;—with the exception of one young man who sat on the fire plug and in reply to my questions said that he and a few others of their company would do their duty in case of fire, whether the majority would or not, with the exception of him they did not deserve to live.

Every few minutes a call for muster was made, "who will be one of five hundred to go and attack the bloody murderers?" I tried to reason with one of the men who made this sort of proclamation by telling him that this course would cause more murder; that they would be slaughtered by the hundreds; the weapons of the military were so much superior to theirs; that they would commit themselves against the law and have to leave their families in want,

&c. I appealed to one who was calm and quiet, and who was listening, to induce his colleague to desist and not talk so much; he made a reply too insulting and disgusting for the public eye or ear. I will know him again; he belongs to the oyster trade, I think; a large, stout man; if I can see him I'll run him into the dock and follow him with the testimony. I would have justified the Governor, or any other supervisor of the public weal (who saw what I saw, heard what I heard, of that mob there collected) in putting the whole lot to death, the young fireman excepted.

I returned to the Hall, where Deputy Attorney Rush was addressing a large concourse in a most admirable style of language and reasoning, above intellectual calibre of the great mass; he was repeatedly interrupted; he was followed by some of their own demagogues in inferior style but with more effect; their orations being the common slang and cant of ward meetings; in this meeting were a large number of worthy and deserving citizens; in the small squads in the streets I met with but two men and one woman who were opposed to riot and sedition, and my observation teaches me that among the worst men who have urged it on by countenance and word are a numerous class of Bible-canting scoundrels, themselves the offspring of a base hireling ministry. The approaching elections for magistrates have added fuel to the fire, and will forever baffle measures to bring the offenders to justice. Much might be said upon this matter, but it is probably out of place. I returned home at 3 o'clock P. M. I know nothing more.

GEORGE S. ROBERTS

Affirmed to in open Court, July 22, 1844

JOSEPH ENEU, Deputy Clerk