City of Unbrotherly Love: Violence in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia

"Our whole community was excited to an ungovernable pitch, by a most bloody and terrible riot, which occurred in the district of Kensington. We have never heard of a transaction in our city in which so much savage feeling and brutal ferocity were displayed." So declared one of the pronativist pamphlets circulated after the riots of 1844, in which anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic forces engaged in violence against Irish residents and burned two Catholic churches in the neighborhoods of Southwark and Kensington.[1] Describing an "indiscriminate fight" involving the throwing of brickbats and stones, the writer declared, "We have never heard of a transaction in our city in which so much savage feeling and brutal ferocity were displayed."

Sensational prose and nativist indignation aside, 1844 was not the first time working people of Philadelphia took to the streets in violent protest, attacking individuals and destroying property, nor would it be the last. Violence in fact permeated the antebellum city and was often not indiscriminate but highly discriminating, revealing the fears, anxieties, and challenges of an evolving city and nation. Placing the riots in larger context offers insight into the world of antebellum Philadelphia and the various roles violence played in negotiating the dramatic social, economic, and political changes of the period.

Violence in nineteenth-century Philadelphia had many origins, several of them in the growing pains of a rapidly expanding and industrializing city. Urbanization fed an increasing influx of "strangers" into the city from points abroad as well as the surrounding countryside. By 1856, John Fanning Watson commented on the

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[1] The Full Particulars of the late Riots, With a View of the Burning of the Catholic Churches, St. Michaels & St. Augustine. Philadelphia, 1844.

increasing anonymity of public life in Philadelphia: "I once used to know every face belonging to Philadelphia, and of course, was able to discern all strangers; but now I don't know Philadelphians as such, in any mixed assembly—all seem to me another..." (Watson, 182). Many newcomers took up residence in suburban neighborhoods such as Kensington, Southwark, and Moyamensing (then outside the consolidated city), where tremendous overcrowding and unsanitary conditions created concern and frustration. In these heterogeneous neighborhoods, where one group often lived in close proximity to another, religious differences, economic habits, and social mores came into contact and conflict.

Often the means for expressing these feelings were civil disorder and mob violence. As early as 1828, a mob attacked Irish weavers in Kensington after they displayed a banner outside their workplace. African Americans were a frequent target throughout the 1830s, as were antislavery activists: violent incidents involving African Americans occurred in 1832, 1834, 1835, and 1838, the latter resulting in the burning of the recently erected Pennsylvania Hall. During these attacks, rioters invaded African American homes, looted businesses, and burned churches. In 1842, a violent mob attacked antislavery activists outside the African Presbyterian Church on St. Mary's Street. Violence occurred between as well as within diverse groups.

Violence also functioned as a tactic of political influence and bargaining for those who felt disenfranchised. The Philadelphia neighborhood of Kensington was often the site of such encounters. Four years before the 1844 riots, a mob gathered in Kensington to protest proposed Philadelphia and Trenton rail lines slated to run through the area. In the process, the Philadelphia and Trenton Railroad was torn up along Front Street and a tavern burned. After two years of fighting, the residents successfully blocked the proposed railroad.

Violence was also resorted to by disgruntled laborers during a period of rapid industrialization that began in the 1820s. During this period, the nature of work changed dramatically, often transforming previously skilled occupations into unskilled factory work. Rioting was a way in which artisans countered the mechanization of their trade, voicing their anger against the growth of manufacturing and a surplus of unskilled labor that threatened to drive down wages. In 1843, the year before the nativist riots, weavers again took to the streets in a violent strike for increased wages. Rioters assembled at the Nanny Goat Market, at Washington (now American) Street north of Master, where they were assailed by a sheriff's posse and later (in a development that foreshadowed the coming year's incidents) dispersed by the

militia, led by General Cadwalader. Increased tension between workers was also handled violently during this period. Violence was a tactic of intimidation, a means of driving away competition.

Rioting was only one aspect of a larger climate of urban violence during this period. Violence and physical aggression were also components of urban working-class culture in general, particularly for men. Fire companies were, with taverns and workshops, central areas for working-class male sociality and status. Most companies formed along ethnic, political, or other ideological lines; some fire companies identified as Democrats, for instance, or as protemperance. One company, Shiffler Hose, took its name from George Shiffler, the first nativist killed in the riots of 1844. Companies competed to see who could combat fires most efficiently, often racing to respond to alarms. Fighting was part of this competition and brawls were not uncommon. Fire companies were closely linked to the numerous street gangs that emerged in the 1840s. Gangs such as the Killers, Bouncers, Rats, and Skinners defaced property with graffiti and fought, often armed, over territory. Turf and neighborhood loyalties of the gangs overlapped with those of the fire companies, and some forged formal alliances between the two. The Moyamensing Hose Company, for example, formed an alliance with the Killers, the Irish Catholic gang that dominated east Moyamensing throughout the 1840s. In more than one instance the Killers started a fire in Southwark, then ambushed the Shiffler company when it responded to the blaze. Brickbats were traded for firearms by the 1850s.

The predilection towards violence was fueled further by the lack of an organized and effective law enforcement system. Prior to consolidation in 1854, suburban neighborhoods such as Southwark, Kensington, Northern Liberties, and Moyamensing were policed separately by elected constables and part-time watchmen loathe to risk life and limb carrying out what was a voluntary service. The patrol of city streets was reserved for the evening hours only, hence the term "night watchman." Another difficulty was the sheer size and diversity of the city—the various wards and districts all policed separately – making it easy for a perpetrator to cross over into another area to escape punishment. This system made it impossible to effectively deter crime or coordinate policing across the city as a whole.

When violence erupted, a constable would summon the county sheriff who in turn gathered a civilian volunteer posse to quell the disturbance. Organizing the posse was a time-consuming process and volunteers had no formal obligation to respond. The posses were also unarmed. In the event that a posse could not handle

a disturbance, the sheriff called upon the state militia. In contrast to the posse, the volunteer militias were trained and armed, although, again, response delays were usual as the militia commander organized his volunteers.

Additionally, the responses of constables, volunteer posses, and militias were politicized. Organizing volunteers to risk their lives for the protection of Catholic churches or for property belonging to another minority group was often difficult and impeded the ability of a commander to rally an effective response. This difficulty arose in 1844 when Sheriff McMichael summoned his volunteer posse to Southwark for the July riots. Only a handful of the hundreds of volunteers under him responded to his call to protect St. Philip's. Once again General Cadwalader was called in with the militia. In the July riots of 1844, The militia summoned to the scene was heavily armed and was a Germantown unit, not from Southwark. This fact created additional tension between the authorities and the crowd because the militia was not considered a necessary or legitimate authority. The crowd mocked the militia and the confrontation escalated into violence. What had begun as a conflict between nativist Americans and Irish Catholics evolved into a standoff between the state militia and the public. In the aftermath of the riots, the public held the militia partially responsible for the violence, arguing that if the militia had dispersed then so would have the mob.

Professionalizing the police force and consolidating the city and its districts into one municipality had been widely debated issues prior to the riots of 1844. Facing ongoing civil unrest and ineffective policing, the citizens of Philadelphia nevertheless were resistant to reform and districts were accustomed to recruiting their own volunteers to patrol the streets, catch criminals, and disperse mobs. A distrust of organized authorities also prevented the development of a formal law enforcement agency. Opponents of consolidation argued against tax adjustments and the political upheavals that would ensue. However, the riots of 1844 seemed to be one turning point in the debate over these issues. In 1845 the City of Philadelphia and the incorporated districts of Spring Garden, Northern Liberties, and Penn, and the township of Moyamensing were required to establish and maintain police forces of "not less than one able-bodied man for one hundred and fifty taxable inhabitants" for the prevention of riots and the preservation of the public peace. By 1854, the districts were consolidated under one governing body and the police force increasingly professionalized.

By Kathryn Wilson and Jennifer Coval

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