

The Philadelphia Riots of 1844: Reporting Ethnic Conflict

Primary Reading

"The Kensington Massacre," *The Republic, A Magazine for the Defence of Civil and Religious Liberty*, No. 1 August 1845

The Meeting of Monday, May 6th: [9]

In conformity to the resolution adopted at the meeting of the preceding Friday evening, citizens favorable to the American Republican cause, assembled in Mass Meeting, on Monday afternoon, May 6th, at 4 o'clock, on an unoccupied lot, at the corner of Second and Master Streets. This lot is about 100 feet wide and 150 feet in length, and is bounded on the west by the Public School House, which fronts on Master Street. The staging for the officers and speakers was erected about the centre of the west side of the lot, against the school house fence. The whole extent of the lot was covered with persons who had assembled to participate in the proceedings. The meeting was organized in the usual way, and several gentlemen were called upon to address the assembled multitude. Mr. S. R. Kramer and General Smith successively took the stand; neither of them, however, occupying over ten minutes' time. Their addresses were remarkably mild in their character, and contained nothing against which the most scrupulous could have reasonably objected. While these gentlemen were speaking, several Irish carters came driving their carts into the lot, and forced their way through the crowd, nearly up to the speakers' stand, greatly annoying the people, and even exposing them to danger. Each of these carts contained something more than an ordinary wheelbarrow load of yellow dirt which was brought there at that particular time, in that remarkably singular manner, and in such small quantities, for no good reason which has yet been assigned. Five or six of these diminutive loads were successfully brought in, and emptied in the midst of the crowd, as near to the staging as the drivers could conveniently force their carts. These loads of dirt still lie upon the spot where they were then thrown. They were not needed there at that particular time; neither has any use been made of them since. Neither of them was brought in until the meeting had assembled, nor was one sent there after the assembly had dismissed! And when it is understood, that at the very time when these carters were committing this inexcusable outrage upon the meeting, there was assembled in the market house, running parallel with Second street, on the north side of Master street, and a few yards west of the school house, a number of Irishmen opposed to the meeting, armed with firearms and other offensive weapons, none can for an instant doubt that these carters were sent there for the purpose of provoking an attack upon themselves, and of thus furnishing a plausible excuse for an assault in return upon the meeting, on the part of their friends in the market house and the surrounding buildings. There was evidently in all this a cunningly devised plan for the perpetration of a premeditated outrage, for the consummation of which the most fiendish preparation had been made.

But that Divine Providence which often takes the wicked in his own craftiness, and guards the innocent from harm, interposed most miraculously to avert the calamity which then pended over the American Republican cause. Had the carters to whom allusion has been made, been assailed with violence by the assembled people, a fearful and dreadful slaughter, far more extensive than that which really occurred, would doubtless have ensued. For in this spot, the citizens were almost entirely unprotected. They were surrounded by their enemies, as they fled in the only

direction which could have promised security, toward the market house, they would have been met by the assassins who there remained concealed, awaiting a signal for the commencement of their work of death. Then, too, it would have been exceedingly difficult to have made it appear that the Native Americans were not the aggressors, and that their assailants were not only acting upon the defensive, of for the protection of their worthy friends, the carters. At the moment when the conduct of the carters was growing insufferable, and a slight demonstration of a disposition at interference was being manifested, Mr. Lewis C Levin was called to the stand. This circumstance restored tranquility for the space of a minute. But the moment that gentleman commenced his remarks,-before a solitary sentiment had been concluded by him, and before the subject of the carts had again drawn off the people's attention, the clouds suddenly discharged a torrent of rain upon the assembled multitude. For a second there was a pause, which was followed by a simultaneous rush for shelter in the market house.

So suddenly and entirely unexpected was this movement, that those of the Irish who were unquestionably awaiting some provocation for an attack upon the meeting, were confused and undetermined in regard to the nature of their further proceedings. The most of them, as the crowd rushed into the market, retreated to a row of buildings, consisting of a hose house and the dwellings of themselves and friends, situated in Cadwalader street, and facing the market house, at the distance perhaps of some 200 feet. Others, however, but their number was few, remained to contest the right of the citizens to the use of the market. This market house had previously been employed as a sort of rendezvous for the mob during the railroad and weavers' riots, which had previously disgraced that neighborhood, and they seemed to consider themselves solely entitled to its use. An attempt was here made to reorganize the meeting, but the few Irishmen who had now mingled with the native citizens, were determined that the organization should not take place. They produced the utmost noise and confusion, whenever any effort was made to speak, on the part of Mr. Levin, who had again arisen to continue his address; and so constant and violent was the uproar that it was impossible for that gentleman to be heard even by those who occupied places nearest to him. Among the most noisy of those who were now interrupting the proceedings of the meeting, was an athletic Irishman near the speaker, who brandished his naked arms above the heads of those around him, and swore terrible vengeance upon every one who should dare to come into contact with his clenched fists. So exceedingly violent was this man's conduct that some person at length attempted to eject him from the market house. A scuffle ensued between the two. The Irish rioter drew his antagonist to the outer side of the market, on that side which fronted the dwellings and the hose house of which mention has been made, when a stone was thrown from a party in the vicinity of the hose house, with tremendous violence, toward the market, which struck with great force against one of the stalls. This was instantly followed with the discharge of a musket from the same direction.

A scene of confusion and strife now took place which beggars all description. The first impulse of those in the market was to rush upon the party near the hose house who first assailed them, which they did driving them off in a great affright in every direction. But no sooner were they thus drawn out from the shelter of the market, upon the open space in front, and their open assailants dispersed, than a destructive fire was opened upon them with fowling pieces, rifles, and muskets, from roofs, windows, loopholes, yards and alleys of the houses in front, which was kept up without intermission, until the ground was vacated by the American Republican party. During this firing the utmost consternation prevailed, and men were shot down while endeavoring to escape from the scene of danger, without knowing from whence their injuries were received, so cautiously were their enemies concealed.

One young man, about nineteen years of age, was engaged throughout the afternoon, in supporting the American flag, which hung over the speaker's stand. This laudible employment rendered him an especial mark for the aim of the enemies of the cause he was maintaining. Two or three times had the flag fallen to the ground, and as often did George Schiffler, with the assistance of several others, again raise it, and cause its stripes and stars to float above their heads. But his efforts were unavailing; for a bullet at length pierced his heart, and he fell as senseless as the flag he supported, to the ground. He was carried to the store of an apothecary near by, where, in a few minutes, he ceased to exist on earth; and before the sun had gone down, the lifeless body of the noble patriotic boy was laid at the feet of a widowed and distracted mother. The flag which he had supported was torn, and leveled with the dust. The triumph however, was of short duration. For at half past six o'clock, a party of those who had been driven off amounting to about twenty in all, returned to the field of action, armed with rifles and muskets. This small party took a station immediately in front of the buildings occupied by the Irish assailants on the open space where their friends had been shot, and opened a brisk fire upon their enemies, over whom in a very short time, they obtained a complete victory. Soon after the fire was returned upon them, the Irish began to give way in evident alarm, the hose house was fired, and none of them dared to expose themselves sufficiently to attempt to extinguish the flames, which spread with astonishing rapidity until, within a very brief space of time, every house almost from which a gun was fired, was enveloped in the devouring element. The murderous creatures who occupied them, precipitately fled from the rear of their burning buildings, and were about falling into the hands of their conquerors, when the sound of the military was heard approaching, who, in a few moments, took possession of the entire ground, and arrested all further hostile proceedings.