

# Joseph Willson's Philadelphia

By Julie Winch

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Exploring Philadelphia, coming to know its African-American community, Joseph Willson would soon have realized how diverse a community it was in terms of people's origins. There were men and women whose families had lived in and around the city for two, three, or even four generations. There were those whose parents had arrived in the 1790s or early 1800s from the Upper South as manumission had become easier for a time in Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and even North Carolina. There were those who were themselves migrants. One contingent was from South Carolina. The wave of repression that occurred in that state in the wake of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy of 1822 had prompted some to relocate, while others had come simply because Philadelphia seemed to offer more opportunities for gainful employment. Shortly before the Willsons' own arrival, a number of free families of color had fled Virginia as whites, driven into a frenzy of fear and rage after Nat Turner's rebellion, had turned upon them. The first safe haven they found north of the Mason-Dixon line was Philadelphia.

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There were migrants from Georgia, although few were as rich or as well educated as the Willsons. Among the recent arrivals from North Carolina were Junius C. Morel, the son of a white slaveholder and "his chattel personal" (Morel's own description), who emerged as a powerful and controversial spokesman for the black community, and Frederick Augustus Hinton, a talented and resourceful man from Raleigh, who eventually married into the Willson clan. Some migrants, like Amos Webber, came from Pennsylvania's rural counties. Webber may have learned to read and write before he left Bucks County, but it was in Philadelphia, with its network of African-American schools and literary societies, that he had the chance to further his education, and it was during his lengthy sojourn in the city that he began to compile his "memory books."<sup>12</sup> People of color arrived from neighboring New Jersey, unsure of their future in a state where slavery was taking a very long time indeed to die. Individuals came to Philadelphia from other parts of the North because they had married Philadelphians. That was the case with Amy Matilda Williams, a friend of Joseph Willson's sister, Emily. She

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was the daughter of a prominent New York City minister. In her teens she met and married Philadelphia barber Joseph Cassey. Still others arrived because their work brought them to the city. John Bowers, for instance, was a sailor from Boston. Around 1807 or 1808, his ship sailed up the Delaware to Philadelphia. He liked what he saw and stayed.

Then there were the immigrants. Willson would have met people from the Caribbean. Some, like well-to-do barber Robert Douglass Sr. and Sarah Ann Gordon, matriarch of the affluent Gordon family, were from the British colonies—Douglass from St. Kitts and Gordon from Barbados. A sprinkling of French names—Montier, Duterte, Appo, and Dupuy- resulted from the influx of *gens de couleur* and slaves from Saint Domingue in the 1790s. Whether they spoke French or English, most of the West Indians quickly put down roots in the city, marrying into "local" families.<sup>13</sup>

Few Philadelphians were African-born by the 1830s, but there were some. Willson might have heard the last name "Ganges" applied to a number of people in the community and wondered about it. If he inquired, he would have been told about dozens of Africans set free several decades before from an illegal slaver and named for the vessel that had rescued them.

Some of the migrants kept alive ties with friends and family back home. Sarah Gordon's son lived for a time with her brother on Barbados. Frederick A. Hinton announced his marriage in the Raleigh papers as well as the Philadelphia ones. Amy M. Cassey provided friends in Philadelphia with contacts in New York City. When they attended a women's antislavery convention in New York in 1837, a group of young women of color from Philadelphia stayed with her parents. Friends visited friends. People wrote letters of introduction for one another, easing the transition into a strange city or making a visit safer and more pleasant. Joseph Willson was able to tap into that kind of network of friends when he went to New England to train as a printer. [11]

News was passed back and forth, sometimes over remarkable distances. Junius C. Morel and James Forten had correspondents in the West Indies. Forten's son-in-law looked after the business affairs of a friend in Liberia. Surprisingly large numbers of black Philadelphians traveled overseas. Most did so as sailors. The world they saw was generally that of the great "sailortowns" like Liverpool and Rio de Janeiro, New York and Marseille.

A few saw a very different world. When the independently wealthy Robert Purvis went to Britain to advance the antislavery cause, he ran into Irish patriot Daniel O'Connell in the lobby of the House of Commons! Others went abroad to raise funds for churches and schools. A few went for higher education or the kind of professional training they could not get in the United States. Whether they went as sailors or students, what they found outside the United States often gave them a very different perspective on their identity as Americans and people of color.

In no sense was the Philadelphia community an isolated and insular one. Although many people lived their whole lives within a few blocks of the place where they had been born, others traveled across town, across the state, or across the ocean. Philadelphia became home to thousands of African-American migrants, but black migrants from Philadelphia also headed out for other communities. Joseph Willson was a case in point. Born in Augusta, Georgia, he lived briefly in Huntsville, Alabama. Then he came to Philadelphia. From there he went to Boston for a year or two. He returned to Philadelphia, made his home there for some years, left for Cleveland, and then relocated to Indianapolis.

Whatever factors had drawn individual black migrants to Philadelphia, they shared one major concern with the long-established residents. How could they make a living? What job opportunities could the city offer men and women of color? For many the only work to be had was of the most menial and arduous kind.

Very few African-American women in Philadelphia knew what it was like to supervise servants, or to enjoy the rather more modest luxury of keeping house for their families while their husbands fulfilled single-handedly the role of breadwinner. Generally, black women worked in the homes of whites. Some "lived in," while others lived with their families and trudged to work every day to clean and cook for upper- and middle-class white women. Still others took in laundry. Being a laundress or a washerwoman was low-paid and certainly without prestige, but it was work they could do at home while they cared for their children. [12]

Most of the female wage-earners in the black community were in domestic service of one kind or another. There were some, though, who were streetvendors, selling a wide range of delicacies, from pepper-pot soup to ginger-cakes and candies. Others were seamstresses and milliners.

The work was often poorly paid, and it took a toll on one's eyesight, but again it could be done at home. Some women, especially widows, kept boarding-houses. At least bustling about and tending to the needs of their boarders meant boardinghouse keepers were working for themselves, and caring for their children could be combined with their paid work.

A few black women became teachers, opening their own schools or working in schools run by the Abolition Society or other charitable groups. However, the standing an African-American teacher enjoyed in her own community was seldom translated into respect from whites. Sarah Mapps Douglass, a genteel young woman whom Willson had no hesitation in including in his "higher classes," recalled a traumatic encounter in New York, where she taught for a time. She had been raised a Quaker by her mother and had accompanied her to Friends' Meeting in Philadelphia since childhood. In New York she located a meeting and began attending. Most of the white Friends completely ignored her. "I had been attending one month, when a Friend accosted me thus—'Does thee go out a house cleaning?'—I looked at her with astonishment—my eyes filled with tears, & I answered 'no.' 'What does thee do then?' 'I teach a school'—'oh, then thee's better off'—Judge what were my feelings! a stranger, in a strange land! . . . I wept during the whole of that meeting, & for many succeeding sabbaths."<sup>14</sup>

The range of jobs available to black men was appreciably greater than that available to black women, but it was narrowing rapidly by the time the Willsons came to Philadelphia. The vast majority worked as unskilled laborers, who cleaned the city's streets, dug ditches, hauled away trash, and in short did whatever they could to eke out a living. Low-paid and physically very demanding, laboring also gave a man little job security. He was hired by the day or by the week. In addition, black laborers found themselves competing with each new wave of white immigrants. One black [13] commentator, himself in comfortable circumstances, was appalled at the unwillingness to give African-American men a chance to earn a few cents by performing even the humblest tasks. "During the late snow storm, thousands of persons were employed in cleaning the gutters, levelling [sic] the drifts, &c. Among the whole number, there was not a man of color to be [15] seen, while hundreds of them were going about the streets with shovels in their hands, looking for work and finding none."<sup>15</sup>

Slightly higher up the occupational ladder than the unskilled laborers were the porters. Porters moved anything that needed moving, from furni-

ture and household goods to merchandise for store-owners and luggage for the hundreds of travelers who arrived in the city each day by coach or by river.<sup>16</sup> A refinement on that, toiling on the docks as a stevedore or long-shoreman, moved one into the semiskilled category. Loading a vessel to maximize space and to ensure that cargoes did not shift in transit required more than a strong back. Draymen and coachmen enjoyed a certain measure of independence. The coachman might work for a white family, but occasionally he owned his own vehicle.<sup>17</sup> Draymen with their horses and carts provided an essential service, moving goods of all kinds about the city. Sweep-masters were also independent entrepreneurs, going from house to house with their gangs of young chimney-sweeps.<sup>18</sup> Crossing-sweeps and whitewashers, male and female, also did better for themselves than unskilled laborers.

As a port city, Philadelphia had a long history of offering employment to black mariners. Going to sea was tough and dangerous, but it had its positive aspects. Sailors were paid not on the basis of their race but according to the level of their skill.<sup>19</sup> And there were the intangible benefits that offset the hardships and risks of life at sea. One saw something of the wider world. John Bowers sailed to China in 1809. In Canton, as close as foreigners were allowed to get to the mainland, he made an interesting discovery. All non-Chinese, white and black, were regarded as "barbarians" by a culture that had a profoundly different understanding of "race." With travel came a degree of pride. Junius C. Morel, an ex-sailor, boasted: "In the course of a not uneventful life, it has been my case to have visited the four corners of the Globe, and . . . to have been brought into contact . . . with Christians, Mahomedans and Pagans."<sup>20</sup> [16]

If black seafaring had declined from its heyday long before Willson arrived in Philadelphia—in 1810, 22.4 percent of mariners shipping out of the port on overseas voyages were men of color—it was still significant. [18] The figure was 17 percent in 1830 and, despite downturns as the economy fluctuated, it was still 17 percent in 1853, when Willson began preparing to leave Philadelphia for a new life in the Midwest.<sup>21</sup>

Many black Philadelphians went to sea at some point in their working lives, and many found work in one or another of the maritime trades. Unquestionably the most spectacular success story was that of James Forten, who rose from apprentice to proprietor of one of the largest sail-lofts in the city. At the height of his prosperity, he presided over an integrated (and harmonious) workforce of forty men. Others labored in shipyards, rigging lofts, and mast shops. Still others did the vital work of caulking, making sure

seams were watertight before a vessel sailed.

The basic problem with this kind of work, and many of the other better-paying jobs, was that they were skilled. The necessary level of skill was acquired by serving a lengthy apprenticeship. As Joseph Willson discovered when he tried to train as a printer, a young black man seeking to apprentice himself to a white craftsman would have to look long and hard before he found one willing to share the "mysteries" of his craft with him. James Forten, who fully appreciated the advantages he enjoyed and spoke in glowing terms of the white man who had given him his start in business, made a personal commitment to take on apprentices regardless of race. He called on other black men in the skilled trades to make the same commitment. It was essential that they do so because no one else would. "If a man of color has children, it is almost impossible for him to get a trade for them, as the journeymen and apprentices generally refuse to work with them, even if the master is willing, which is seldom the case."<sup>22</sup>

Some black Philadelphians were fortunate in that they had skills, either mastered in slavery or handed down by their parents. Dressmakers like Hetty Burr, wife of community leader John P. Burr and very much a presence in her own right, shared their skills with their daughters. Fathers trained their sons. When he left the sea, John Bowers became a clothes-dealer. His sons, John C. and Thomas, became tailors. Several men who featured in *Sketches of the Higher Classes* were boot- and shoemakers. Charles Brister was a skilled worker in a sugar refinery. The multitalented Paris Salter was a successful builder, combining the skills of a bricklayer, plasterer, slater, and stonemason. Ex-slave James Gibbons built homes and the furniture to fill them. His son, George Washington Gibbons, graduated from making furniture to coffins, and from coffin-making to undertaking. Of course, whether one could find employment even with a good trade was another matter. Surveys conducted by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and the Society of Friends revealed that hundreds of black citizens possessed skills they had no opportunity to use.<sup>23</sup> [20]

One sector of employment that African-American men had dominated for decades in Philadelphia was barbering. Many in Willson's "higher classes" were barbers. The designation "barber" embraced everyone from the prosperous hairdresser, wig-maker, and perfumer Joseph Cassey, to John P. Burr, who never earned enough to become a homeowner, to Alexander Hutchinson, a young journeyman who worked in someone else's shop,

but Willson included all three in his "higher classes" not because of their wealth or their lack of it, but because of their devotion to the welfare of their community.

On one level, barbering was servile. White customers felt comfortable being shaved by a black barber. The proprieties were preserved. The black man was in deferential attendance on the white man. African-American men who were careful to show they "knew their place" could do well as barbers. Servile though barbering might be in some respects, it could be very lucrative. Joseph Cassey combined shaving customers with "note shaving." As a result of his money-lending activities, which were financed by the capital he derived from his barbershop, he grew very wealthy and eventually retired to live the life of a gentleman. Frederick A. Hinton prospered, becoming the proprietor of the elegant "Gentleman's Dressing Room." Other affluent barbers in Willson's "higher classes" included Robert Douglass Sr. and his son James, Thomas Butler, and James McCrummill. Some, like McCrummill, Jacob C. White, and young Peter Cassey, doubled as dentists and bleeders. For every well-to-do African-American barber, though, there were dozens making barely enough money to live on. Competition was also becoming tougher. By the time Joseph Willson arrived in Philadelphia, the near monopoly black barbers had once enjoyed was being eroded.

There were opportunities for African-American men and women who wanted to become retailers. Not much capital was needed, although still far [21] more was needed than most black Philadelphians could hope to amass. There were black grocers, cake-bakers, and confectioners. Some of the individuals Willson included in his "higher classes" were secondhand clothing dealers. Philadelphia had a thriving market in used clothing. The personal servants of the well-to-do expected to be given their employers' castoffs. Having little opportunity to wear such finery themselves, they sold the garments to dealers and pocketed the proceeds (often an important supplement to their wages). The dealers then sold the various items to people eager to buy last season's fashions if the price was right. Of course, one had to take care not to handle stolen goods unwittingly.<sup>24</sup> However, men like Harrison R. Sylva and John Bowers prospered in the clothing trade. In every respect—wealth, status, aspirations—they were in a very different class from the wretchedly poor rag-pickers, who roamed the alleys looking for scraps of cloth to sell to paper-makers.

One sector of the economy that African-American men in Philadel-

phia succeeded in keeping peculiarly their own throughout the antebellum era was catering. Most of those who prepared and sold food ran fairly modest operations—an oyster-cellar or a small eatery of some sort—but a handful of people, such as Peter Augustine, Robert Bogle, James Prosser, Thomas J. Dorsey, and the Mintons, had establishments that could offer lavish entertainments to affluent white customers able to pay for their services. Bogle's catering skills were legendary. They were the subject of a lengthy poem by Nicholas Biddle, who had probably attended some of Bogle's dinners, and of a shorter satirical piece by another white Philadelphian. Both dwelt on the same theme. No entertainment was complete unless Robert Bogle had had the overseeing of it.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of an African-American professional class, Philadelphia had no black lawyers before the Civil War. As for physicians, there were none who were university-trained, but there were black women and men who practiced medicine in one form or another. Ex-slave James J. G. Bias was a highly regarded bleeder and practitioner of the popular science of phrenology, the theory that different parts of the brain governed different mental faculties, and that the shape of the skull determined an individual's character and abilities. He even authored a treatise on the subject. Medicine might be an individual's secondary rather than their primary occupation. For instance, Charles Nash was a bleeder and a skilled cabinetmaker. John Purdy could draw blood, but he could also make shoes.<sup>26</sup> Then there were the African-American women who were seamstresses and laundresses but also acted as midwives. At a time and in a place where many people, irrespective of race, lacked the means to hire a licensed physician, such individuals provided basic medical care. Their fees were lower, and their services often earned them the respect of their patients—a respect that transcended race. [23]

With sixteen black churches by 1838, Philadelphia had a cadre of African-American ministers. Willson singled out the minister of his own church, William Douglass, as a man who coupled learning with piety, although he acknowledged there were others equally deserving of praise. The pulpit brought men of real talent to Philadelphia. Even so, few earned the kinds of salaries that enabled them to dispense with a second job. They taught school, made shoes, and turned their hand to anything that would enable them to support their families.

Although poverty was pervasive in black Philadelphia, there were men and women of considerable wealth, and Joseph Willson came to know

most of them. Grocer Littleton Hubert had accumulated \$3,800 in real estate and \$2,000 in personal property by 1847, when the Quakers conducted a survey of the African-American population. In 1838 barber and hairdresser Robert Douglass Sr. was worth \$8,000. Sailmaker James Forten was worth almost \$100,000 by the early 1830s. The astute barber turned moneylender Joseph Cassey left an estate estimated at \$75,000. If not quite in the same league as Forten and Cassey, Jacob C. White did very well as a barber, bleeder, store-owner, and eventually the proprietor of an African-American cemetery. Then there were the people who had inherited their wealth. Joseph Willson was one such fortunate heir. Another was Robert Purvis. Purvis received a legacy of over \$100,000 from his British-born father, a successful South Carolina cotton factor, and increased it by his own skill as a real estate speculator and entrepreneur.

Wealth was very unevenly distributed in the black community, as it was in the larger white community. Theodore Hershberg has calculated that during the 1830s and 1840s the poorest 50 percent of the African-American population possessed only 5 percent of the total black-owned wealth in the city. The top 10 percent owned almost 70 percent, and the top 1 percent owned a staggering 30 percent.<sup>27</sup> The distribution may in fact have been more uneven, since some of the richest people in the community, including James Forten, his son, Robert B. Forten, Robert Purvis (who was married to one of Forten's daughters), and William Douglass, declined to disclose the full details of their wealth. The compilers of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society census of 1838 could learn nothing from Purvis and the Fortens about their property holdings. When the Friends took their own survey in 1847, Joseph Cassey told them he had \$2,000 in personal property, but said nothing about his real estate, although the deed books for Philadelphia and Bucks Counties indicate he held title to a number of valuable properties. As for the Rev. William Douglass, he apparently sent the census-taker away with a flea in his ear. The man took a guess at the minister's wealth, noting: "[R]efused any information whatever. This was obtained without his knowledge." [24]

Indisputably, despite the success of a Robert Purvis, a James Forten, or a Joseph Willson, poverty was endemic in Philadelphia's African-American community. Poverty restricted choices, especially when it came to housing. In a pamphlet they published in 1849, the officers of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society quoted at length from a former coroner, who had had ample opportunity to inspect the hovels of Moyamensing, where so many blacks and whites lived and died in squalor. "Many are found dead in cold and ex-

posed rooms and garrets, board shanties five and six feet high, and as many feet square, erected and rented for lodging purposes, mostly without any comforts, save the bare floor, with the cold penetrating between the boards, and through the holes and crevices on all sides; some in cold, wet and damp cellars, with naked walls, and in many instances without floors; and others found lying dead in back yards, in alleys, and other exposed situations."<sup>28</sup>

This was a far cry indeed from the comfortable parlors of the African-American elite, or even the modest but scrupulously clean dwellings of the "middling sort," and that was something the compilers of the report wanted to emphasize. Despite all the barriers thrown in the way of black economic advancement, their investigation showed "a population, to a considerable degree, sober, industrious, and independent. . . . The degradation and wretchedness which mark the infected district in Moyamensing, are foreign to the real character of our colored population, to whom it would be doing a gross injustice, not to point out clearly the broad line of separation."<sup>29</sup> That was precisely the point Joseph Willson was trying to make in his book.<sup>30</sup> [25]

By 1833, when the Willsons decided to make their home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 was more than half a century old. True, freedom had come slowly under the provisions of the act, but freedom, whether inherited, purchased, granted under the law, or seized through flight, was the prevailing condition of black people in Joseph Willson's Philadelphia. But what did "freedom" mean? What it meant depended on whom one asked.

Philadelphia might have the reputation as a haven of liberty and equality, but the image was far removed from the reality, at least by the 1830s. True, people of color did not need a license to live in the city, as they did in some southern cities, but that "solution" to the perceived problem of a growing African-American presence in the state of Pennsylvania as a whole, and in Philadelphia in particular, had been debated on more than one occasion.<sup>31</sup>

During the two decades he lived in Philadelphia, Joseph Willson saw a steady erosion of African-American freedom. The arguments used to bolster each restriction were illogical in that some ran directly counter to others. Black people were lazy, preferring to steal or beg rather than work. Black people were competing too successfully in the job market and taking work away from whites. Black people preferred to live in squalor, threatening the health and well-being of their white neighbors. Black people were doing rather too well, acquiring property and thinking themselves as good as white people.

Black people were ignorant and vicious in their habits. They needed whites [26] to exercise strict control over them for their own good. However, these same people would do splendidly if they were colonized in Liberia or some other suitably remote spot far away from the presence of white people. . . . The arguments ran on and on, unanswerable by African Americans because none of their detractors really cared to listen to their answers.

The sense of being marginalized and of losing rights they had once enjoyed was all the more galling because black Philadelphians could not see what they had done to deserve such treatment. Again and again, in petitions and pamphlets, in speeches and letters to officials, in statements in the press, African-American leaders pointed out the basic integrity and worthiness of themselves and those on whose behalf they spoke. There was black crime. They acknowledged that and pledged to bring lawbreakers to justice, but they noted that proportionately more crimes were committed by whites, and their criminal offenses tended to be much more serious.<sup>32</sup> There were black men and women in the almshouse, but they insisted the African-American community tried to take care of its own poor through a network of mutual benefit societies and charities. Were African Americans unpatriotic? How could that be when they and their fathers had rallied to the general defense when the city was threatened by the British during the War of 1812? Were they uncaring? Had their parents and grandparents not nursed the sick during the great yellow fever epidemic of 1793 with a commendable disregard for their own safety? Why had the majority community, with the exception of a few selfless friends, apparently turned its back on them? In the words of one group of Philadelphians, who petitioned the state legislature in 1832: "We claim no exemption from the frailties and imperfections of our common nature. We feel that we are men of like passions and feelings with others of a different color. . . . But we think that in the aggregate, we will not suffer by a comparison with our white neighbors?"<sup>33</sup>

At least as far as legislative action was concerned, an especially heavy blow fell in 1838, when the state constitution of 1790 was revised so that blacks lost the right to vote. As a substantial property owner and a member of the African-American upper class, Joseph Willson was directly affected by that. [27] He had just reached the age of majority, and he was about to lose a precious right. There were some, of course, who maintained that he and others like him—men of color over twenty-one who paid taxes on a certain amount of property and had established residency in a given county—had never been "freemen" under the terms of the state's 1790 constitution. Their argument

was that "freeman" was not synonymous with "free man," and that no man of color could qualify as a voter. To be a "freeman" one had to be white. Lawyers, politicians, white abolitionists, and African-American citizens wrangled for decades over that question.<sup>34</sup> It was resolved once and for all by the Reform Convention of 1837-38, which rewrote the constitution in such a way that far more white men were permitted to vote, but black men, regardless of wealth and status, were disfranchised.

Actually, most black Pennsylvanians who could meet the property qualification to be "freemen" had never been able to exercise the right they believed they had, either for fear of violence or because election officials refused to accept their votes, but some had gone to the polls and cast their ballots, although apparently not in Philadelphia County. Now there was no doubt about their access to the ballot box. The framers of the new constitution had spoken, and the white voters quickly ratified the results of their deliberations. In the words of the members of Philadelphia's "higher classes" who drew up the *Appeal of Forty Thousand* (the supposed number of eligible black voters under the old constitution), African Americans had lost "their check on oppression, their wherewith to buy friends." John Joseph Gurney, a British Quaker, reported hearing a story that may have been apocryphal, but certainly summed up public sentiment. "I was told that a white boy was observed seizing the marbles of a coloured boy in one of the streets, with the words, '*You have no rights now.*'"<sup>35</sup>

### **Pages 31-33 of the Introduction:**

Some black migrants, including the Willsons, had been drawn to Philadelphia by the promise of educational opportunities. A network of schools—public, charitable, and private—existed in the city for African-American children. The public schools were woefully inadequate, but they were free. However, plenty of parents were obliged to keep their children away because they could not clothe them properly (a problem African-American women in the "higher classes" tried to address through their charitable societies) or because they needed to send them out to work. Charity schools generally requested that parents pay what they could afford, although tuition was free to the poorest pupils. As for private schools, including the Pennsylvania Abolition Society's Clarkson School, which the Willsons attended, they were beyond the means of most families. Despite their limitations, Philadelphia's African-American schools must have looked appealing to people like the Willsons, who had moved to the city from a state where the education of black children, free and slave, was illegal.<sup>46</sup>

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White critics liked to point to the prevalence of ignorance and "vice" [32] (a term that encompassed everything from unemployment to criminal activities) among people of color in the city, and certainly there were those in the community who preferred street life to the schoolroom, but education clearly mattered to the vast majority of black Philadelphians. Many parents made financial sacrifices to send their children to school. Children who worked during the week often attended Sabbath schools. Classes for adults offered in the evenings by the various African-American churches or by white charitable groups had no shortage of pupils. People would turn up ready to study after a long day's work. Willson emphasized again and again in *Sketches of the Higher Classes* the yearning for education on the part of all sectors of the community. He observed, though, that it was love of knowledge for its own sake that drove them on. They understood the harsh realities of their situation. "The educated man of color, in the United States, is by no means . . . the *happiest* man. He finds himself in possession of abilities and acquirements that fit him for most of the useful and honorable stations in life ... but ... can he ever with reason anticipate their . . . being . . . appreciated and rewarded?" One could master reading and writing, but what then? So often the various branches of higher education were off-limits to people of color. Willson could and did name talented and highly educated men and women in the community. That there were not more, he attributed to prejudice.

The machinery of the watch will not fulfill its intent, unless the impulse of the spring be applied; and, though things inanimate are not to be compared with the human soul, yet, neither can a man be expected to rise to eminence in a given department, where ... there is not only an absence of all encouragement . . . but from the exercise of the legitimate functions of which . . . he would be absolutely excluded! He may indeed reach the base of the hill of science; but when there . . . what does he behold? Brethren ready to extend the hand of greeting and congratulation, when he bath made the ascent? No; not so with the man of color: need I say what reception he would be most likely to meet with?

Inevitably, the knowledge that learning was unlikely to bring anything but personal satisfaction led some to abandon the struggle. Philadelphia had many attractions, and plenty of African-American residents found grog-shops and gambling dens every bit as appealing as their white neighbors did. The community did indeed have a vibrant street culture. However, many black Philadelphians—and not just the affluent and well educated—shunned that culture. They pooled their often meager resources and push- [33]

ed ahead, forming libraries, literary societies, and debating groups. Belonging to a literary society might say less about one's level of education than about one's aspirations. Men with the inclination to do so could seek enlightenment and entertainment at a host of societies, from the venerable Philadelphia Library Company of Colored Persons to the newly established Demosthenian Institute. Women were more limited in their choices, but by the mid-1830s they had three literary societies. Only one organization, the Gilbert Lyceum, broke with tradition by admitting men and women.

It was important that the African-American community organize its own lectures and debates, since black citizens could never be sure when they would be excluded from supposedly "public" events. Joseph Willson was proud of the intellectual endeavors of the people of color in his adopted home. He challenged whites who harbored notions of black intellectual inferiority to set aside their prejudices for an evening or two and attend meetings of African-American literary and debating societies, listen to young black women play the piano or recite poetry they had written, look at the paintings they had produced, take part in the well-informed discussions and the refined conversation that graced the drawingrooms of the black "better sort."<sup>47</sup> Then they might begin to appreciate those men and women they had shunned for so long as idle, useless, and quite unworthy of their notice, let alone their friendship.

### **End Notes:**

#### **Pages 9-27**

12. On Webber's adjustment to life in Philadelphia, see Nick Salvatore's *We All Got History: Memory Books of Amos Webber* (New York: Random House, 1996), chaps. 1-3.

13. Some Caribbean immigrants still valued their distinctive identity enough to organize their own mutual benefit society. The Friendly West Indian Society was incorporated in 1816. Most of its thirty-three charter members had decidedly "English" names (John Brown, Richard Bennett, and so on), but the names of a few members, such as David Bastien and John Jematrice, suggest French West Indian origins. Charters of Incorporation, Book 2, 234; PSA.

14. Testimony of Sarah Mapps Douglass, quoted in Sarah M. Grimke, "Letter on the Subject of Prejudice against Colour amongst the Society of Friends in the United States," 1839; BPL.

15. *Lib*, February 12, 1831. "A Colored Philadelphian," was in fact sailmaker James Forten. This was a pen name he often used.

16. In 1830 nineteen African-American porters banded together to form their own mutual benefit society, the African Porters' Benevolent Society. Charters of Incorporation, Book 4, 419; PSA.

17. Like porters, coachmen had their own mutual benefit organization, the Coachmen's Benevolent Society. It is perhaps an indication of their dominance of the occupation—at

least as late as 1828, when the society was formed—that they did not feel it necessary to identify themselves as "African Coachmen" or "Colored Coachmen." All thirty of the founding members were men of color. Charters of Incorporation, Book 4, 263; PSA.

18. On the sweep-masters of another urban center, New York City, and their role as entrepreneurs, see Paul A. Gilje and Howard B. Rock, "'Sweep 0! Sweep 0!': African-American Chimney-Sweeps and Citizenship in the New Nation," *WMQ* 51 (July 1994), 507-38.
19. W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 76, 161, 213. However, as Bolster notes, few African-American sailors became mates, and fewer still masters.
20. *CA*, May 3, 1838.
21. Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 236.
22. *Lib*, February 12, 1831.
23. See, for instance, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society's *Register of the Trades of the Colored People in the City of Philadelphia and Districts* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838).
24. On the African-American clothiers of Boston and their brushes with the law, see Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 66-68.
25. Nicholas Biddle, *An Ode to Bogle* (Philadelphia: Privately printed for Ferdinand J. Dreer, 1865); R. H. Small, *Philadelphia; or, Glances at Lawyers, Physicians, First-Circle, Wistar Parties, &c, &c.* (Philadelphia: R. H. Small, 1826), 81-82. See also Henry W Minton, *The Early History of the Negro in Business in Philadelphia, Read Before the American Negro Historical Society, March 1913* (Nashville, Tenn.: AMESS Union, 1913), 11-12.
26. *PAS, Register of Trades*.
27. Theodore Hershberg, "Free Blacks in Antebellum Philadelphia: A Study of Ex-Slaves, Freeborn, and Socio-Economic Decline," in Joe William Trotter Jr. and Eric Ledell Smith, eds., *African Americans in Pennsylvania: Shifting Historical Perspectives* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 127.
28. *A Statistical Inquiry into the Condition of the People of Colour in the City and Districts of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Kite and Walton, 1849), 34.
29. *Ibid.*, 39.
30. Frank J. Webb would make the same point in his 1857 novel, *The Garies and Their Friends* (London: G. Routledge & Co., 1857; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969). While his main theme was the pernicious nature of racial violence, Webb, who had grown up in a middle-class black family in Philadelphia, tried to describe for his white readers the home life of the African-American elite and that of the "middling sort."
31. Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 17-20, 132-34.
32. On efforts by those in the African-American "higher classes" to combat black crime, while at the same time pointing to the extent of white criminal activities, see *Poulson*, March 1822.
33. James Forten, Robert Purvis, and William Whipper, *To the Honourable the Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1832), 6-8.
34. Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite*, 134-37.
35. Robert Purvis, *Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens, Threatened with Disfranchisement, To the People of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838), 4. John Joseph Gurney, *A Visit to North America, Described in Familiar Letters to Amelia Opie* (Norwich,

England: Joseph Fletcher, 1841), 102.

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46. On the education of African Americans in Philadelphia, see Harry C. Silcox, "Delay and Neglect: Negro Education in Antebellum Philadelphia, 1800-1860," *PMHB* 97 (October 1973), 444-64; William C. Kashatus III, "The Inner Light and Popular Enlightenment: Philadelphia Quakers and Charity Schooling, 1790-1820," *PMHB* 118 (January 1994), 98-99; Lapsansky, "'Since They Got Those Separate Churches,'" 59, 69; and Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 203-5, 208-9.

47. On the social and intellectual life of the "higher classes of colored society" in Philadelphia, see Emma J. Lapsansky, "'Discipline to the Mind': Philadelphia's Banneker Institute, 1854-72," *PMHB* 117 (January 1993), 83-102; Julie Winch, "'You Have Talents—Only Cultivate Them': Philadelphia's Black Female Literary Societies and the Abolitionist Crusade," in Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 101-16; Salvatore, *We All Got History*, 51-73; Donald Yacovone, ed., *A Voice of Thunder: The Civil War Letters of George E. Stephens* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 7-9. On the various musical societies and concerts organized by African Americans in Philadelphia, see Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 99-110, 113-16.