

Joseph Willson, Sketches of Colored Society in Philadelphia

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Excerpt, Chapter I. Introductory Observations- General Characteristics of Colored Society.

Taking the whole body of the colored population in the city of Philadelphia, they present in a gradual, moderate, and limited ratio, almost every grade of character, wealth, and—I think it not too much to add—of education. They are to be seen in ease, comfort and the enjoyment of all the social blessings of this life; and, in contrast with this, they are to be found in the lowest depths of human degradation, misery, and want. They are also presented in the intermediate stages—sober, honest, industrious and respectable—claiming neither "poverty nor riches,"³ yet maintaining, by their pursuits, their families in comparative ease and comfort, oppressed neither by the cares of the rich, nor assailed by the deprivation and suffering of the indigent. The same in these respects that may be said of any other class of people, may, with the utmost regard to truth, be said of them. [83]

They have their churches, school-houses, institutions of benevolence, and others for the promotion of literature; and if I cannot include scientific pursuits, it is because the avenues leading to and upholding these, have been closed against them.⁴ There are likewise among them, those who are successfully pursuing various branches of the mechanic arts; tradesmen and dealers of various descriptions, artists, clergymen, and other professional gentlemen; and, last of all, though not the least, men of fortune and gentlemen of leisure.

Their churches embrace nearly all the Christian denominations, excepting the papal, and those which may be considered doubtful, as I am not aware that there is any Universalists' society among them.⁵ Whether this arises from a determination to keep on the sure side here, and enjoy the benefit of others' doubts, if realized, hereafter, it has never occurred to me, till now, to inquire! The Methodists are by far the most numerous, and next to these, in numerical order, may be named the Presbyterians, Baptists and Episcopalians.⁶ There is in existence, I believe, a Unitarian society; but their house of worship, for the want of competent support, has, for some time past, been relinquished. [84]

Mutual Relief Societies are numerous.⁷ There are a larger number of these than of any other description, in the colored community. They are generally well sustained, to the great advantage of those who compose them.

There are also one or more others, strictly devoted to objects of outdoors benevolence. The last mentioned are chiefly composed of females.⁸

I pass by here the several literary associations, proposing to make them a distinct subject in another place.

In addition to the public, or common schools supported by the commonwealth—for the continuance, and prosperity of which, much interest and solicitude has of late been manifested—there are also three or four private schools, male and female, conducted by colored teachers. The great facilities afforded by the first mentioned of these, has had the effect greatly to decrease the numbers in the private schools; nevertheless, the latter class still present a favorable condition—particularly the female—from the superior excellence of their government, and attention to the general deportment of the pupils.⁹

In addition to this brief random glance at some of the more prominent features which distinguish colored society at large, the annexed statistical account is added for the convenience of those who desire accuracy on the subject. It is gleaned from a statement "showing the progress and present state of the colored population," compiled by the "Board of Managers of the American Moral Reform Society,"¹⁰ and published in their first annual report, which latter was kindly furnished me, by the chairman of said Board, Mr. John P. Burr.¹¹ Though the statement referred to, bears [a] date as far back as 1837, yet it is presumable that no very remarkable changes, in most instances, have occurred since then; and as there has been no later enumeration in this wise, it is adopted, leaving the reader to form his own judgment in regard to more recent advancements.

For the City and County of Philadelphia, is given as the

Number of Churches	15	
Clergymen	34	
Day-schools	21	
Teachers	6	
Sabbath-schools	17	
S. School Teachers	125	[85]
Literary Societies	3*	
Debating	3	
Mutual Relief or Benevolent Societies	64	
Moral Reform	1	
Temperance	4	
Lyceums	1+	

*There has been some change in the character of one of these.

+Since formed.

In the same tabular view, the number of mechanics for this city, are set down at 78; and real estate owned, and taxes, rents, &c., paid, at

\$850,000. In what manner this eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars is portioned among the population, rising nineteen thousand inhabitants, it is difficult to determine; although it appears to be undoubtedly true, that but a small number are actual freeholders, when compared with the whole body.

Notes

3. Proverbs 30:8: "Remove far from me vanity and lies; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me."

4. The Philadelphia community did have at least one enthusiastic amateur scientist. Robert Bridges Forten (1813-1864), the son of wealthy sailmaker James Forten, was an avid astronomer. He made a nine-foot-long telescope, and ground and set the lenses himself. The telescope was put on display at the Franklin Institute, and Forten used it to give astronomy classes at the school run by his friend, AME cleric Daniel Alexander Payne, who was himself a keen naturalist. Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (Nashville: AME Sunday School Union, 1888; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1968), 51. CA, April 3, 1841.

5. Led by such divines as William Ellery Channing and Hosea Ballou, the Universalists diverged from the Congregationalists in the early nineteenth century. They preached that good would ultimately triumph over evil, that Christ's death had brought salvation to all, and that no one would face eternal damnation.

6. In 1838 the community had sixteen churches: one Episcopal, one Lutheran, eight Methodist, two Presbyterian, and four Baptist. Many of the churches were clustered in the South Street corridor. The two oldest were St. Thomas's African Episcopal, on Fifth and Adelphi, and "Mother" Bethel AME, on South Sixth between Lombard and Pine. Both had been founded in the 1790s. Union Baptist and Union Methodist were neighbors, on Little Pine between Sixth and Seventh. Nearby were AME Wesley (on Hurst, between Fifth and Sixth), Wesley Methodist (on Lombard between Fifth and Sixth), and Second African Presbyterian (on St. Mary's Street between Sixth and Seventh). First African Presbyterian was on South Seventh, near Shippen, in Southwark, and two more, Union AME and Zoar Methodist Episcopal, were in the Northern Liberties. First African Baptist was relatively isolated on Pearl and Eleventh. The churches enjoyed varying degrees of autonomy. Only the AME congregations belonged to an African-American parent body. Some African-American churchgoers chose not affiliate with any of the black congregations. They attended predominantly white churches. As Willson notes, there was no black Catholic congregation. However, in 1838 some 3 percent of the black population was Catholic. Charters of Incorporation, Book 2, 180, 245; Book 3, 442; Book 4, 78, 228; Book 6, 171; Book 7, 89, 116; Book 8, 259, PSA. JM 3 (July 1813), 21-22. Pennsylvania Abolition Society, *The Present State and Condition of the Free People of Color in the City of Philadelphia, and Adjoining Districts* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838), 32; William W. Catto, *A Semi-Centenary Discourse Delivered in the First African Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, on the Fourth Sabbath of May, 1857* (Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1857), 105-11; Emma J. Lapsansky, "'Since They Got Those Separate Churches': Afro-Americans and Racism in Jacksonian Philadelphia," AQ 32 (Spring 1980), 54-78.

7. The earliest black benevolent society in Philadelphia of which there is any record

was the all-male Free African Society, established in 1787. It was soon joined by the African Friendly Society of St. Thomas (1795) and the Female Benevolent Society of St. Thomas (1796). Over the years the number of mutual relief societies grew steadily. Most churches had at least two, one for women and another for men. Some, like St. Thomas's, had several, divided not just according to gender but also by age. Various occupations had their own organizations. African-American coachmen, for instance, established a relief society, as did porters. In 1831 the community had forty-four beneficial societies. By 1838 the number had risen to eighty. All the societies were run in essentially the same way. Each week or each month members paid a set amount into a common fund. In the event of misfortune—the loss of employment, an illness that prevented a member from working, a death in the household—the officers of the society would visit the member's family and determine first whether there was a valid claim on the common fund, and second, how much money should be appropriated. By 1841 more than fifty societies had gone to the effort and expense of seeking incorporation—an assertion that their members were "citizens of the Commonwealth." Their charters are preserved in the Pennsylvania State Archives. HR, March 12, 1831. PAS, *Present State and Condition*; "Notes on Beneficial Societies, 1828-1838," PAS Manuscripts, HSP. William Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church in the United States of America, Now Styled the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas* (Philadelphia: King and Baird, 1862), 15-47. JM 3 (July 1813), 22.

8. The women had a Dorcas Society to supply clothing to the needy. Founded in 1830, it had seventy-two members by 1838. Its president was Elizabeth Butler, wife of affluent barber Thomas Butler (see below), and its secretary was Amelia Bogle (note 119). Although not admitted as members, the women also played an important role in promoting the work of the all-male Association for Moral and Mental Improvement (note 13). One goal of that organization was to provide poor black children with clothing and shoes so they could attend school. Willson wisely did not refer to another kind of "out-doors benevolence" sponsored by the women in the community, the collecting of money and clothing for fugitive slaves. "Notes on Beneficial Societies, 1828-1838," PAS MSS, HSP. NASS, May 4, 1843. NECAUL, September 7, 1837. PF July 5, 1838; March 12, 1840; November 5, 1840.

9. When the Pennsylvania Abolition Society surveyed Philadelphia's black community in 1838 its officers counted ten schools being operated by African-Am teachers, eight by women and two by men. Several might have closed by the Willson was writing, but at least two more had opened, one run by Amelia Bogle (note 119) and another by Daniel Alexander Payne. Some African-American parents expressed dissatisfaction with the treatment their children received in the segregated public schools and preferred, if they could afford it, to send them to a private school. JM 3 (July 1813), 2-3, 18-19. PAS, *Present State and Condition*, 29. *Minutes of Proceedings at the Council of the Philadelphia Association for the Moral and Mental Improvement of the People of Color June 5th-9th, 1837* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1837), 9-10. CA, April 3, 1841; Harry C. Silcox, "Delay and Neglect: Negro Education in Antebellum Philadelphia, 1800-1860," *PMHB* 97 (Oct. 1973), 444-64.

10. For the full report, see *Minutes and Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the American Moral Reform Society, Held at Philadelphia from the 14th to the 19th of August, 1837* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1837), in Dorothy Porter, ed., *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 212-13. In fact, the AMRS was following in the footsteps of the national conventions, which had called for the compiling of statistics on the various free black communities in the North, the

Midwest, and the Upper South. See *Minutes and Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention, for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour in these United States, Held by Adjournments in the City of Philadelphia from the 3rd to the 13th of June Inclusive, 1833* (New York: By Order of the Convention, 1833), 23-24, 25; *Minutes of the Fourth Annual Convention, for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour, in the United States, Held by Adjournments in the Asbury Church, New York, from the 2^d to the 13th of June Inclusive, 1834* (New York: By Order of the Convention, 1834). 25; *Minutes of the Fifth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Color in the United States. Held by Adjournments, in the Welsey Church, Philadelphia, from the First to the Fifth of June, Inclusive, 1835* (Philadelphia: William P. Gibbons, 1835), 5.

11. Reputed to be the son of Aaron Burr and his Haitian-born governess, New Jersey native John P. Burr (b. 1792) was one of the most active individuals in the Philadelphia community. In business as a hairdresser by 1818, he did moderately well but never achieved the status of a homeowner. However, that seemed in no way to diminish his standing. His activities ranged from promoting emigration to Haiti to serving as agent for the *Liberator*, protesting disfranchisement, sheltering fugitive slaves, and aiding those charged with treason in the infamous Christiana Riot of 1851. A stalwart of the American Moral Reform Society, he helped publish its journal, the *National Reformer*. He was involved in the national convention movement of the early 1830s and in the organization of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. Burr was also an officer of two community institutions, the Mechanics' Enterprise Hall and the Moral Reform Retreat, a refuge for black alcoholics. His commitment to the antislavery struggle was shared by his wife, Hetty, his daughter, J. Matilda, and his sons, John E. and David. CA, June 3, 1837; August 5, 1837; March 22, 1838; September 8, 1838; September 15, 1838; September 22, 1838; February 2, 1839; November 2, 1839; June 13, 1840; July 25, 1840; August 24, 1841; July 3, 1841. FDP, November 13, 1851. Lib, February 6, 1836; July 2, 1836. NECAUL, October 29, 1836. PF August 10, 1837; September 6, 1838; April 16, 1840; February 1, 1844; August 14, 1845. NR, September 1838; October 1838; January 1839; February 1839; March 1839; April 1839; September 1839; November 1839. NS, November 10, 1848; September 7, 1849. VF, January 15, 1852. Haytien Emigration Society of Philadelphia, *Information for the Free People of Colour, Who Are Inclined to Emigrate to Hayti* (Philadelphia: J. H. Cunningham, 1825). Robert Purvis, *Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens, Threatened with Disfranchisement, To the People of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838), 2. AMRS Convention . . . 1837, in Porter, ed., *Early Negro Writing*, 224. Pennsylvania Abolition Society, *Register of the Trades of the Coloured People in the City of Philadelphia and Districts* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838). PAS census (1838); Friends' census (1847). U.S. census, Philadelphia (1830), Dock Ward, 132; (1840), Dock Ward, 52; (1850), Moyamensing, Ward 2, 243; (1860), Philadelphia, Ward 7, 259. Philadelphia directories, 1818-22, 1825, 1828-48. C. Peter Ripley et al., *Black Abolitionist Papers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), vol. 3, 196n.