Violence: The Riots of 1844

City of Unbrotherly Love: Violence in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia (The Historical Society of 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. 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 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....

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