"HUNTING THE NIGS" IN PHILADELPHIA: THE RACE RIOT OF AUGUST 1834

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T HE problem of violence in the decades preceding the Amer-
ican Civil War was one which worried many Americans.
Future President Abraham Lincoln made a speech in 1838 which
suggests that this early some Americans saw internal violence
as a great danger to the American Republic and its political
institutions. Lincoln spoke of "the increasing disregard for law
which pervades the country; the growing disposition to sub-
stitute the wild and furious passions, in lieu of the sober judg-
ment of Courts; and the worse than savage mobs, for the ex-
ecutive ministers of justice."[1] Lincoln was not alone in emphasiz-
ing the issue of law and order at this time. Many of his con-
temporaries did likewise and depicted America in the 1830's as
a society in crisis, just as lawless, decadent, corrupt and violent
as the more familiar America of the 1960s. Hezekiah Niles, for
example, the editor of the widely read newspaper *Niles Weekly
Register*, frequently condemned the violent impulses in Amer-
ican life. "The state of our society is awful," he wrote in Au-
gust, 1835. "Brute force has superseded the law, at many places,
and violence become 'the *order* of the day.' The time predicted
seems rapidly approaching when the mob shall rule."[2] The
conservative, aristocratic, one-time mayor of New York, Philip
Hone, was equally pessimistic. He wrote in his diary on August
11, 1835, "My poor country, what is to be the issue of the
violence of the people and the disregard of law which prevails
in all parts of it?"[3] As far as the Boston *Morning Post* was con-
cerned, America was facing a "crisis of violence."[4]

[1] Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New
Brunswick, 1953), I, 109.
[2] *Niles' Weekly Register*, XLVIII (August 8, 1835), 393.
[3] Philip Hone, *The Diary of Philip Hone* (2 vols.; New York, 1889), I,
152.
[4] David Brion Davis, *Homicide in American Fiction* (Ithaca, New York,
1957), 244.

That the crisis was real there can be no doubt. American society during this period was permeated with a spirit of turbulence and violence which expressed itself in many different ways. To Philip Hone it was a sign of the times that the brutal sport of prize-fighting had spread from England to America where in New York it had "become one of the fashionable abominations of our loafer-ridden city."[5] Congress itself was on occasion little better than a boxing ring. Hone complained bitterly that "Faction, violence, intemperance and ungentlemanly deportment prevail in both Houses of Congress."[6] Political debate too often degenerated into defamation of character and sometimes into actual fighting and brawling.

Less spectacular but more lethal was the institutionalized, premeditated violence of the duel. Duelling at this time was the subject of much criticism and was much less prevalent than it had been some years earlier when Lyman Beecher had denounced it in a sermon as a national sin and proclaimed that, "With the exception of a small section of the Union, the whole land is defiled with blood. . . . We are Murderers, a nation of Murderers."[7] However, the practice persisted, and the duel as fought American fashion with shotguns and bowie knives was not simply a formality for the protection of one's honour. Nor was the practice of carrying and using this kind of weapon confined to the frontier area or to the traditionally violent South. As newspaper editor Joseph Chandler put it, "Let no one lift up his eyes and groan against the South. Bowie knives, dirks and pistols are worn, shown and used in Philadelphia as well, if not as much as they are in Mobile. We scarcely hear of a slight rumpus, but we also learn that knives or pistols were drawn."[8]

If dueling was on the way out during the ante-bellum period, the now familiar weapon of political assassination was being tried for the first time. On January 30, 1835, an insane house painter by the name of Richard Lawrence, who believed among other things that he was heir to the throne of Great Britain, attempted to assassinate President Andrew Jackson. Both of

[5] Hone, *The Diary of Philip Hone*, I, 144-145.
[6] *Ibid.*, 385.
[7] Davis, *Homicide in American Fiction*, 271-272.
[8] *United States Gazette* (Philadelphia), April 17, 1837.

Lawrence's pistols failed to go off. Thirty years later Abraham Lincoln would be less fortunate.

These instances of individual violence were disturbing, but what really alarmed many Americans at this time was the rapid growth in the amount of mass or collective violence. Their Majesties the Mob' were active on many different fronts, lynching thieves and gamblers, disrupting elections, and persecuting Catholics, Negroes, Mormons and Abolitionists. These were years which were filled with labor riots, race riots, and nativist riots. Some of them were mere incidents, others lasted for several days at a time and required military intervention and the imposition of martial law before peace was restored. People died in these riots; convents, churches and private property were burnt and destroyed; martyrs were created.

This was the nature of the pre-civil war 'crisis of violence.' It was a problem which was felt in all parts of the Union, but which was especially acute in rapidly growing urban centers like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. During the summer of 1834 one newspaper editor noted that these "cities are equally disgraced. Boston, perhaps, takes the lead, but the difference in the claims of the three places to the distinguished title of Mob Town, is not so great that we need quarrel about it."[9] Philadelphia was certainly in contention for this unenviable title. The magnitude and persistence of the problem of violence in the City of Brotherly Love led Philadelphia author Charles Godfrey Leland to note in his memoirs that "Whoever shall write a history of Philadelphia from the Thirties to the era of the Fifties will record a popular period of turbulence and outrages so extensive as to now appear almost incredible."[10]

The period to which Leland refers began on a hot sultry August evening during the summer of 1834. There are many earlier instances of collective violence and racial tensions in Philadelphia's history, but this was the first time that the city had suffered a full-scale race riot. It was the first of many comparable incidents. The riot itself can be described fairly briefly.[11]

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[9] *Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia), August 19, 1834.

[10] Charles Godfrey Leland, *Memoirs* (New York, 1893), 216.

[11] Most of Philadelphia's newspapers gave full coverage to the riot. See, for example: *Philadelphia Gazette; United States Gazette; Pennsylvanian;*

It began early on the evening of Tuesday, August 12, when a mob, several hundred strong, attacked a building on South street which housed a carrousel machine known as the "Flying Horses," and which was popular with both the Negroes and the whites living in the neighborhood. The mob soon wrecked the building and its contents and overcame the resistance of those blacks who dared to retaliate. "At one time it is supposed that four or five hundred persons were engaged in the conflict, with clubs, brickbats, paving stones, and the materials of the shed in which the flying horses were kept."[12] After this incident the rioters advanced across South street out of the city and into the adjacent district of Moyamensing. Here, in the squalid streets and narrow alleys which formed the core of the Negro ghetto, they began an orgy of destruction, pillaging and intimidation, which was repeated on the following two evenings.

In the course of these three nights of rioting at least one Negro was killed, many were severely injured, two churches and innumerable private dwellings were attacked and damaged and their contents looted or destroyed. A post-riot citizens' investigation committee conservatively estimated the damage at about $4,000, and in the context of the poverty stricken black community even this was a considerable sum.[13] According to visiting Englishman, Thomas Brothers, many of the rioters described their activities as "hunting the nigs,"[14] and so successful were they in this respect that many Negro families abandoned their homes and sought refuge in the city itself, or across the Delaware River in the neighbouring state of New Jersey.[15] Intermittent rioting occurred on the third evening. By this time Mayor John Swift and Sheriff Benjamin Duncan had taken extensive precautions. A posse of three hundred special constables was sworn in, a troop of mounted militia paraded through the riot area fully armed, and an infantry company of Washington Greys was held in reserve, under arms. Even so, the rioters demolished a Negro church and some houses in

Pennsylvania Inquirer and Daily Courier; Commercial Herald; and Poulson's American Daily Advertiser.
[12] Philadelphia Gazette, August 15, 1834.
[13] Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania, XIV (September 27, 1834), 202-203.
[14] Thomas Brothers, The United States of North America as They Are; Not as They are Generally Described. . . . (London, 1840), 198.
[15] Ibid., 352; United States Gazette, August 15, 1834.

Southwark before the situation was finally brought under control.

The riot is more easily described than explained. Indeed when one begins to analyze the composition and motives of the mob, and the possible origins of this one particular incident the potential complexity of what is involved quickly becomes apparent. Any such analysis must embrace a whole spectrum of possible causes which range from the specific type of precipitating incident which occasioned the outbreak, to the much more general kind of underlying social tensions which greatly increased the violence-potential of the situation.

The committees set up to investigate the riot by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and by the city authorities both recognized the importance of local or immediate causes, but neither of them was able to ascertain with any certainty just what these causes were.[16] Their failure is surprising since contemporary sources reveal a series of minor incidents which preceded and set the scene for the events of August 12. On the night of August 8 a group of Negroes, who were known to frequent the Flying Horses, attacked members of the Fairmount Engine Company and captured some of their equipment. According to a letter in the *Pennsylvanian*, "A great degree of excitement was naturally generated by so unparalleled an outrage."[17] This was a rash and provocative action. Philadelphia's volunteer fire companies, with their political affiliations and gang connections, had already begun to earn a reputation for lawlessness and violence.[18] Some sort of reaction was almost guaranteed. The next evening one of the sons of Philadelphia's most eminent Negro, James Forten, was attacked on the street "by a gang of fifty or sixty young men in blue jackets and trousers, and low-crowned straw hats." Before the gang dispersed they arranged to reassemble on the following Monday. "We will then," their leader was

[16] Papers of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, "Report of the Committee Appointed to Ascertain the Cause and Particulars of the Late Riot . . . ," 1834 (Record Group 490, Box 42), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. For the City Committee's Report see *Hazard's Register*, XIV (September 27, 1834), 201.

[17] *Pennsylvanian*, August 20, 1834. *Saturday Courier* (Philadelphia), August 16, 1834.

[18] Andrew Neilly, "The Violent Volunteers. A History of the Volunteer Fire Department of Philadelphia, 1736-1871" (Unpublished dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1960), 59, 61, 70.

heard to remark, "attack the niggers."[19] On the Monday evening there was a minor disturbance at the Flying Horses when a group of white youths caused trouble there and were "beaten off by the blacks."[20] On the Tuesday evening the whites returned in force and the confrontation quickly escalated into a full-scale riot.

Who was involved in this riot? What was the composition of the mob which terrorized Philadelphia's black community from August 12 to 15? It is obviously necessary to try and answer these questions before one can talk with any clarity about the deeper causes of the riot. The available records do not provide all the desired information, but they do offer a number of significant insights.

The obvious starting point is with the names of those people who were arrested for rioting at the time of the disturbance. This list of names is not an infallible guide. It makes no allowance for the innocent onlookers who may have been arrested along with the actual rioters, nor does it reveal anything about the considerable number of rioters who evaded arrest through good fortune or the inefficiency and partiality of the police. There are other difficulties. The relevant Prisoners for Trial volume in the Philadelphia archives discloses that 60 people were arrested for rioting between the dates of August 11 and 16, but unfortunately it does not indicate the age, residence or occupation of these prisoners. The most obvious source for this kind of information is the City Directories, but here too certain problems arise. There is no Directory for the year 1834, which means that one must rely on the Directories for the years before and after the riot.[21] In addition, Philadelphia's City Directories during this period were far from comprehensive, their stated purpose being to list the occupations and addresses of people who were heads of households, or "in business."[22] Consequently, whole sections of the community, including many single unskilled workers and journeymen craftsmen, simply do not appear in these volumes. Finally, the Directories are little

    [19] Edward S. Abby, *Journal of a Residence and Tour in the United States of North America* (3 vols.; London, 1835), III, 319-320.
    [20] *United States Gazette*, August 14, 1834.
    [21] Desilver's *Philadelphia Directory and Stranger's Guide* for 1833 and 1835-36.
    [22] *Ibid.*, 1833, I or 1835-36, 21.

help if one is trying to locate a rioter with a name like John Brown. The 1833 Directory listed thirty different people with this name. This is an extreme case, but not an isolated one. Several other rioters also defied identification because of the popularity of their names. Another source of information was the 1835 Enumeration of Taxables; a four volume set of which lists the names and occupations of taxable persons over the age of 21, according to City Wards and County Districts.[23] The city newspapers were also consulted, but disappointingly disclosed only the names and addresses of 18 people arrested during the second night of the riot.[24]

From these different sources it proved possible to identify 39 of the 60 rioters and to draw certain obvious conclusions as to the age and social status of the remaining 21. Particularly interesting was the way in which this data confirmed newspaper and other contemporary descriptions of the mob's composition. These accounts emphasized certain specific things about the rioters, most noticeably their age. According to the *Philadelphia Gazette* the initial attack on the Flying Horses was made by "a party of half grown boys . . . a detachment of boys and very young men."[25] The *Pennsylvanian* described the mob on the second night as consisting of "lads from 17 to 20 years old, with a number of men . . . few persons of more mature years were observed among them."[26] Frequent reference was also made to the low social standing of many of the rioters. The *Saturday Courier* described them as "the rude and turbulent spirits that infest our suburban districts . . . in a word the refuse of the population,"[27] while the *Philadelphia Intelligencer* referred to some of the arrested rioters as "the most brutish and lowest cast of society."[28] The criminal element was also present and active during the riot. Several newspapers mention the presence of recognized thieves, desperadoes and convicts, and according to

[23] Enumeration of Taxables, Slaves, Deaf and Dumb Persons, 1835 (Record Group 1.16), Archives of the City of Philadelphia. Unfortunately the 1835 records for West Southwark are missing.
[24] *Pennsylvania Inquirer and Daily Courier*, August 20, 1834. This same information subsequently appeared in several other Philadelphia newspapers.
[25] *Philadelphia Gazette*, August 15, 1834.
[26] *Pennsylvanian*, August 15, 1834.
[27] *Saturday Courier*, August 16, 1834.
[28] *Philadelphia Intelligencer*, August 15, 1834.

the *Pennsylvania Inquirer* "there was little doubt but that a
large portion of the offenders were actuated solely from motives
of plunder, as the pockets of some of the most active were
found on examination filled with silver spoons and other val-
uables stolen from the blacks."[29] One enterprising rioter even
succeeded in stealing Sheriff Benjamin Duncan's pocket-book.[30]

These secondary accounts provide two other important keys
to the mob's composition. Firstly, a number of the rioters were
Irish immigrants. According to the visiting English abolitionist,
Edward Adby, "It appeared from all I could learn, during two
or three visits I paid to the sufferers, that the Irish laborers
were actively employed in this vile conspiracy."[31] Finally, it is
clearly indicated that not all the rioters belonged to the "lowest
cast of society." Abdy suggests the presence of a number of
tradesmen in the mob, while the *National Gazette* noted that
among the arrested were "two or three . . . of a class of mechanics
of whom better things are expected."[32]

This composite analysis of the mob is confirmed in all its
particulars by the data which I was able to compile on indi-
vidual rioters. The participation of the Irish is reflected in the
arrest of rioters with names like McLaughlin, Lynch, Cavenaugh
and M'Kearnan. The presence of the slightly better class rioter
is confirmed by an occupational break down, which includes two
house painters, a cabinet maker, a carpenter, a blacksmith, a
plasterer, and several weavers. The youth and low status of
many of the rioters is implicit in the failure of so many of them
to show up in either the City Directories or the 1835 Tax
Enumerations. It is more positively proven by the significant
number of apprentices, laborers and paupers among the identified
rioters. Finally, the youthfulness and criminal inclination of the
mob, so frequently commented on by the press, are borne out
by an examination of the Philadelphia arrest records for the
years 1834 and 1835. Of the 39 rioters I was able to trace, no
less than 13 reappear in the relevant Prisoners for Trial volume,
some of them several times, on a variety of charges which

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[29] *Pensylvania Inquirer,* August 15, 1834. It should, of course, be re-
membered that known criminals are more likely to be arrested than other
members of a mob.
[30] *National Gazette* (Philadelphia), August 21, 1834.
[31] Abdy, *Journal,* III, 325.
[32] *National Gazette,* August 21, 1834.

render valuable insights into the temperament and character of a significant portion of the mob. The most common offences were disorderly behaviour, riot, disturbing the peace, assault and battery, drunkenness, and larceny. The source is also valuable in that it provides positive proof that a number of rioters were young indentured apprentices. For example, Edward Vaughan was charged on April 15, 1834, "with being a drunken disorderly and disobedient apprentice," while John Kane was charged on February 5 "with absconding and being an unruly apprentice." Kane was in trouble again in March, charged with disorderly behaviour and disturbing the peace, and reappears almost a year after the riot, on August 4, 1835. This time the charge was assault and battery on one Mary O'Neal. Kane apparently had "pulled up her clothes and exposed her person to the public."[33]

There is at least one other way in which the data available on individual rioters greatly facilitates an understanding of just what lay behind this outbreak of violence. It tells us where some of the rioters came from. In this context the local newspapers must be used with caution for the comments of some of them appear to have been partly influenced by the fervor of their political affiliations. At this time the City of Philadelphia was under Whig control, whereas the Democrats were in the ascendency in the First Congressional District, which contained the districts of Southwark and Moyamensing.[34] Both parties were already preparing for the 1834 elections and the August race riot was imaginatively incorporated into the party struggle. Of the many contemporary explanations of the riot, the least plausible was the suggestion in the Whig newspaper, *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser,* that it had been intentionally instigated by the inhabitants and authorities of Southwark and Moyamensing for political ends.[35] The Democratic press reacted to this charge by condemning the inefficiency of the Whig city

[33] Prisoners for Trial Docket, 1834, 1835 (Record Group 38. 38). See also Guardians of the Poor: Daily Occurrence Docket (Record Group 35. 75), and Children [Placed Out] on Trial (Record Group 35. 132). All in the Archives of the City of Philadelphia.

[34] *Pensylvanian,* August 20, 1834.

[35] *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser,* August 16, 1834. The argument offered was that the riot had been stirred up to damage the Whigs by encouraging Mayor Swift and the city police to intervene outside the city boundary, beyond which their authority did not officially extend.

authorities in dealing with the riot, and by emphasizing that
many of the rioters were not resident in the southern districts.
According to the *American Sentinel*, the rioters "were boys and
young men from the upper part of the city and Northern dis-
tricts."[36] As it relates to the early stages of the riot this view
is consistent with what has already been said about the precipitat-
ing incidents which preceded the outbreak and with the little
information available on the residential locations of those people
arrested on the first night of the disturbance. However, it is
quite clear that once the riot had begun, the great majority of
the participants came from homes close to the riot area. Some
came from Cedar Ward and New Market Ward just within the
city boundary, others came from the adjoining district of South-
wark but the greatest concentration of rioters lived in Moyamen-
sing itself, in streets and alleys close to and sometimes actually
within the area where the worst rioting took place.

These were the most obvious characteristics of the mob. The
rioters were mostly young and from the bottom rungs of the
occupational ladder. Some of them were of Irish origin, some
of them had criminal records, a few of them were skilled crafts-
men, most of them lived close to the scene of the trouble. It
is important to emphasize these facts since each one of them
helps to clarify the meaning of this 1834 riot.

The low economic and social status of many of the rioters
provides a key to what appears to have been one of the riot's
major causes. It was precisely this type of person who was
forced to compete for employment with the equally depressed
Negro, and the ensuing rivalries generated tensions and bitter-
ness. In a recent reassessment of the July 1834 race riot in New
York Leonard Richards has minimized the importance of labor
competition between blacks and whites as a cause of that dis-
turbance, and argued that it was primarily a reaction to the
rise of the abolition movement and the supposed threat of racial
amalgamation.[37] These factors were certainly present in the
Philadelphia situation, but to a much lesser degree. There was
no counterpart to James Watson Webb among Philadelphia's

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[36] *American Sentinel* (Philadelphia), August 19, 1834. See also the
Pennsylvanian, August 18, 1834.
[37] Leonard Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing"* (New York,
1970), 114-115.

editors, and during the months preceding the riot the city was not exposed to the same level of hysteria and rumor concerning the possible imminence of amalgamation. This difference between the two riots was recognized by Joseph Chandler when he wrote in his *United States Gazette,* "We have no reason to believe that any of the 'leven' of that feeling which was some time since manifested in New York, operated in these riots. . . ."[38]

The importance of the economic factor in the Philadelphia riot can be illustrated in several ways. By August 1834 the depression, which had closed factories and caused widespread unemployment in the Philadelphia area during the previous winter, was over, but the situation was still not back to normal. During August the *Presbyterian* could still refer to "the peculiar state of the times . . . in which multitudes are thrown loose upon society without employment."[39] This sort of background plus the ever-increasing number of foreign immigrants and Negro freemen in Philadelphia accentuated the competition between blacks and whites for certain types of work. Consequently, it is not really surprising that the report issued by the citizens' committee of investigation saw this issue as the major cause of the riot. It referred to the ill-feeling aroused by unemployment among whites, and by the suspicion that certain employers preferred black to white laborers. "Whoever mixed in the crowds and groups, at the late riots, must so often have heard those complaints, as to convince them, that the feelings from which they sprang stimulated many of the most active among the rioters."[40] The prevalence and bitterness of this issue, as well as its potential as a source of violence, were again in evidence soon after the riot. *Niles Register* noted that "colored persons, when engaged in their usual vocations were repeatedly assailed and maltreated. . . . Parties of white men have *insisted* that no blacks shall be employed in certain departments of labor."[41]

[38] *United States Gazette,* August 14, 1834. The press played a much less significant rôle in the Philadelphia riot than it had done in the July riot in New York. There were no penny dailies in Philadelphia until the publication of the *Public Ledger* in 1836 and the more traditional newspapers did not devote undue attention or level unfair criticism at the city's abolitionists or Negroes in the months before the riot. These newspapers cannot be held guilty of inciting the mob, even indirectly.
[39] *Presbyterian* (Philadelphia), August 21, 1834.
[40] *Hazard's Register,* XIV (September 27, 1834), 201.
[41] *Niles' Weekly Register,* XLVI (August 30, 1834).

This background of unemployment and economic rivalry helps explain not only the overwhelming lower-class composition of the mob, but also the presence among the rioters of the Irish laborers mentioned by Abdy. Irish antagonism to the Negro and his abolitionist allies arose for many complex reasons,[42] but at the heart of the struggle lay the fact that both groups were competitors for the most menial, unskilled and low paid types of employment available. They were involved in a struggle for survival at the lowest level of American society where many of them were confined by their rural backgrounds, lack of training and skills, and by the prejudices of the groups above them. The result was, as Abdy noted of the Boston Irish in 1833, that "nearly all of them, who have resided there any length of time, are more bitter and severe against the blacks than the native whites themselves. It seems as if the disease were more virulent when taken by inoculation than in the natural way."[43] The great wave of Irish immigration into Philadelphia did not come until the 1840s, but Irish migrants were already entering the city at the rate of several thousand a year during the 1830s[44] and making their presence felt in various ways, most noticeably as a factor in local politics or as statistics in the city's prison and almshouse admissions.[45]

The presence of a number of Irishmen among the rioters was possibly the result of more subtle pressures than the economic rivalries described above. It suggests at least one way in which the historian can profitably apply the insights of other disciplines to the interpretation of historical problems. Of the various psychological and sociological theories about the sources of

[42] This subject has been discussed at length by a number of historians. For example: Madeleine H. Rice, *American Catholic Opinion in the Slavery Controversy* (New York, 1944); Florence E. Gibson, *The Attitudes of the New York Irish Toward State and National Affairs, 1848-1892* (New York, 1951); George Potter, *To the Golden Door* (Boston, 1960), 371-386.

[43] Abdy, *Journal*, I, 159.

[44] Jesse Chickering, *Immigration into the United States* (Boston, 1848), 6-8, 38-40. It is also worth noting that the immigration level for the 1830s reached a peak during the 1833-34 period.

[45] See, for example, the 1834 elections in the first congressional district of Philadelphia, where the Whigs mounted a campaign designed to win the Irish vote from the Democrats. Frequent references to the connection between immigrants and crime appear in *Niles' Weekly Register* during this period (e.g., XLVII, October 18 and November 1, 1834). For Philadelphia Almshouse admissions in 1834 see *Hazard's Register*, XV (March 7, 1835), 157.

human aggression, the ones which are most widely accepted and which are most useful in the present context are the so-called frustration-aggression hypothesis and the allied notion of relative deprivation. Beneath this technical and somewhat disabling jargon lies the presumption that violence is less an innate characteristic of human behaviour than a response activated by frustration. The frustration itself results usually from the failure of the individual or group to fulfill certain expectations, to attain certain goals, and the greater the gap between expectation and actual achievement the greater the sense of deprivation and the more violent the response is likely to be.[46] The experience of the large Irish immigrant group in Philadelphia and other major urban centers affords an excellent example of these hypotheses in action. The expectations of the Irish who poured into America in the decades before the Civil War were unrealistically high. According to Thomas Grattan, who was for several years the British Consul in Boston and who was himself an Irishman, many of the immigrants looked upon America "as a sort of half-way stage to Heaven." This immigrant version of the American Dream emphasized the existence of political and social equality, religious toleration, and equal opportunity, not to mention the ready availability of high wages, wealth, success and status. "Infants suck in as it were, with their mother's milk, this passionate admiration of the New World."[47] Such illusions were quickly shattered by the overcrowding, filthy condition and disease which characterized many of the immigrant ships, and by the life of poverty and squalor which awaited many of the newcomers in the slums of the great east coast cities. Frequently they were cheated, exploited and persecuted by the native population who disliked the way they filled the almshouses, hospitals and prisons, forced them to accept the most menial employment and often looked upon them as inferior to even the Negro. According to Gratton, "The recoil (was) in proportion to the exuberance. . . . By a rapid transition, on finding himself slighted and despised, (the Irishman) assumes

[46] Ted Robert Gurr, "Psychological Factors in Civil Strife," *World Politics*, XX (January 1968), 247-249, Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, eds., *Violence in America* (New York, 1969), 605, Shalom Endleman, ed., *Violence in the Streets* (London, 1969), 19-101.
[47] Thomas C. Gratton, *Civilized America* (2 vols.; London 1859), II, 3-4.

the offensive, becomes violent, throws himself into the arms of faction; drinks, swears, joins in riots."[48] About the accuracy of this last remark there is no question. Irishmen were the victims of some of the worst riots of the ante-bellum period, especially in Philadelphia, but they in turn did more than their share of fighting and rioting. Irish participation in the August 1834 race riot was simply one example of the kind of violent behaviour which also found expression in gang warfare, in brawls between rival fire companies, in election, abolition and labor riots. To try and explain this kind of Irish behaviour purely in terms of the frustration-aggression hypothesis would be to fall into the trap of distorting complex events to comply with preconceived theories. However, used carefully in the limited context of the August 1834 riot, and with full awareness of the many other causal factors involved, certain behaviorist theories do add an understanding of the incident. Philadelphia's Negroes were the most obvious "aggression objects" on which the Irish could vent their frustrations and blame their failure to make the American Dream come true.

The potential usefulness of this sort of approach to the August riot transcends the experience of Philadelphia's immigrant community. The Irish were not the only Philadelphians whose achievements failed to live up to their expectations during the 1830s, a fact which may help to explain the presence in the mob of a small group whose occupations did not involve them in any significant level of competition with the city's black population. Among the rioters were a cabinetmaker, a carpenter, a blacksmith, a plasterer, a mariner, two housepainters and several weavers. This fact substantiates those accounts of the riot which mention the participation of a number of tradesmen and mechanics, but it does not alter the conclusion that this mob, unlike the one which had terrorized New York's Negroes during the previous July, was dominated by the poor, the young, the unskilled and the semi-skilled.[49] There were no professional or commercial men among those arrested, and the small group of tradesmen and skilled laborers who took part in the riot were mostly employed in jobs which fell at the lower end of the

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[48] *Ibid.*, 8. See also Edith Abbott, *Historical Aspects of the Immigration Problem* (Chicago, 1926), 27-28, 126, 130-134, 296-297, 440-441.
[49] Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing,"* 151-152.

occupational scale and which earned them little more than an unskilled laborer.[50] However, this group did enjoy one advantage. A breakdown of the black occupational structure as shown in the 1835 Enumeration of Taxables for Moyamensing, where most of the rioters came from, reveals that it included no cabinetmakers, no painters, no weavers, no blacksmiths, no plasterers, a small number of seamen, and an even smaller number of house-carpenters.[51] If one examines the pattern of Negro employment for the entire Philadelphia area, rather than just for the poor Moyamensing district, the picture is slightly different. Data compiled by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in 1838 reveals that blacks were operating in small numbers in all the trades represented by the rioters. There were for example fifteen cabinet-makers, five weavers, eleven plasterers, six painters, twenty-three blacksmiths, and as many as forty-one cabinet makers in the black community at that time.[52] Making allowances for the continuing deterioration in the socio-economic position of Philadelphia's free Negro community, these figures were probably slightly higher in 1834. On the basis of this information it appears that while the slightly better class of rioter, especially the few who came from outside the Moyamensing district, may have been alienated by some small scale black intrusion into their trades, the majority had nothing to fear from Negro competition and were activated by different motives, and were using the blacks as scape-goats for different frustrations. At best, one can only make tentative suggestions, based on the findings of other historians, as to what these frustrations and grievances were. Certainly there is no shortage of possibilities.

Like many other Americans, the group in question suffered from the instability and fluctuations of the American economy during the 1830s and in particular from the rising prices, falling wages, and unemployment resulting from the 1833-1834 depression. In addition some of them may have belonged to the

[50] Stuart Blumin, "Mobility and Change in Ante-Bellum Philadelphia," in Stephan Thernstrom and Richard Sennett, ed., *Nineteenth Century Cities* (New Haven and London, 1969), 168-169.
[51] Enumeration of Taxables.
[52] Papers of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, Census Facts Collected by Bacon and Gardner, 1838. (Record Group 490. AMS 133, Vols. I-IV), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

artisan group which increasingly felt its economic security
threatened and its social status devalued by the erosion of the
old craft system and the emergence of what John Commons has
referred to as "merchant capitalism."[53] The expectations of this
same group were further frustrated by pressures which not only
lowered them to a level little different from that of the unskilled
worker, but also forced some of them to seek new homes in
the least affluent and attractive neighborhoods of the city.[54]
Not all members of the artisan group suffered in this way. Some
of them took advantage of the situation and moved up the
social scale as retailers or factory owners and it may be, as
Stuart Blumin has suggested, that the spectacular success of
the few maintained the viability of the American Dream for
the many.[55] However, one may question whether this was an
attitude widely shared by those who were forced to live in the
squalor and poverty of Philadelphia's poorest and most racially
integrated neighborhoods. It is more likely that as with the
Irish immigrants the pervasiveness of this ideology of success
simply increased their sense of deprivation. Tension and frustra-
tions of this type bred an aggressiveness which is everywhere
obvious in the labor history of Philadelphia during the mid 1830s.
Skilled and unskilled workers were involved in a spate of union
and strike activity. Violence was not uncommon.[56] Against this
sort of background it took very little provocation, and required
nothing so rational as direct labor competition to stir up a
race riot.

Another important key to the 1834 riot lies in the fact estab-
lished by my initial analysis of the mob, that the great majority
of the rioters lived close to the scene of the crime, in the dis-
trict of Moyamensing and Southwark. Philadelphia in common
with other major American cities was experiencing all the dis-
ruptive side effects of rapid and large-scale immigration, in-
dustrialization and urbanization.[57] The worst conditions, the

[53] Blumin, "Mobility and Change in Anti-Bellum Philadelphia," 200-203;
Sam Bass Warner, The Private City (Philadelphia, 1968), 65-78; William
A. Sullivan, The Industrial Worker in Pennsylvania, 1800-1840 (Harris-
burg, 1955), 1, 17, 50.
[54] Blumin, "Mobility and Change in Ante-Bellum Philadelphia," 186-189.
[55] Ibid., 203.
[56] Sullivan, Industrial Worker, 99, 118-119, 130-151, Warner, Private
City, 72-78.
[57] See, for example, Warner, Private City, 125, 152-157; and James F.
Richardson, History of the New York Police (New York, 1970), 25.

greatest hardship and the most acute kind of social disorganiza-
tion were concentrated in the districts which lay immediately
below the city's southern boundary. In 1829, following a tour
of inspection and a number of visits in the area, Matthew Carey
lamented, "I deeply regret to state that there are numerous
cases of as intense suffering in Southwark, as can be found in
any part of the world."[58] The annual reports of the Union
Benevolent Association for the 1830s confirm Carey's pessimism.
Describing the situation in Moyamensing, the 1838 report noted
that "The heart sickens, and the feelings revolt at the scenes
of degradation and misery which constantly meet our view."[59]
The reasons for this poverty and overcrowding are clear enough.
The area was a refuge and a last resort for many of the victims
of Philadelphia's social and residential fluidity. "High rents
drive them from the city . . . they are naturally or necessarily
led to choose their residence here."[60] For similar reasons the
same area was heavily populated by "The immense number of
emigrants weekly arriving on our shores—bringing with them
ignorance, poverty and vicious habits."[61] The courts and alleys
of Moyamensing and of the adjacent Cedar and New Market
Wards also housed Philadelphia's heaviest concentration of free
Negroes.[62] Significantly the overcrowding was most acute in
the immediate riot area. Moyamensing's population grew from
four thousand to fourteen and a half thousand between the
years 1820 and 1840, and the great majority of these people
were packed into the small triangular area formed by Cedar
Street, 8th Street and the Passyunk Road.[63] What one finds here
is a situation fraught with potential danger. Different ethnic
and racial groups lacking any common values or culture were
forced by poverty and prejudice to live in close proximity in

[58] Mathew Carey, *Essays on the Public Charities of Philadelphia* (Phila-
delphia, 1829), vi.
[59] *The Seventh Annual Report of the Union Benevolent Association*
(Philadelphia, 1838), 15.
[60] *The Sixth Annual Report of the Union Benevolent Association* (Phila-
delphia, 1837), 6.
[61] *The Fifth Annual Report of the Union Benevolent Association* (Phila-
delphia, 1836), 4.
[62] *Fifth and Sixth Censuses of the United States, 1830 and 1840,* micro-
filmed manuscript schedules, City and County of Philadelphia. See also,
W. E. B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (New York, 1967), 302-303.
[63] William S. Hastings, "Philadelphia Microcosm," *Pennsylvania Magazine
of History and Biography,* XCI (April, 1967), 168-169.

a communal ghetto, crowded together in squalid, unsanitary
tenements, hovels and cellars. It was no coincidence that when
Philadelphia was hit by the 1932 cholera epidemic the highest
mortality rate was in Moyamensing. In two of the riot streets,
Small and St. Mary, the situation was so bad that the streets
had to be temporarily closed and the residents moved to make-
shift accommodation on the nearby common. One eyewitness
account referred to the exodus of "men women and children,
black and white, barefooted, lame and blind, half-naked and
dirty . . . ,"[64] illustrating both the degraded condition of these
people and the fact that there was no effective separation be-
tween blacks and whites in this neighborhood. They shared the
same streets, sometimes the same houses. "In many places" they
"were found herding together, apparently sunk in the depths
of vice."[65]

When one examines the main riot area in this sort of way
it is clear that the overall picture is one of extreme social dis-
organization of a type which some psychologists have found to
be an important prerequisite for destructive and violent be-
haviour.[66] The August 1834 race riot, was, in part at least, one
result of this situation. It was no coincidence that the same
area was the scene of subsequent race, election, and nativist
riots and was notorious also for its criminals and its gangs.[67]

The gang problem in Philadelphia deserves closed considera-
tion. It helps clarify what was probably the most obvious char-
acteristic of the August 1834 mob; the youth of many of its
members. The heyday of the gangs came during the 1840s and
1850s with the depredations of such notorious organizations as
the Killers, the Blood Tubs, the Rats and the Bouncers, espe-
cially in the Moyamensing and Southwark districts.[68] However,

[64] J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia
1609-1884* (3 vols.; Philadelphia, 1884) I, 633; John Fanning Watson,
Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in the Olden Time (3 vols.;
Philadelphia, 1898), III, 393.
[65] *The Seventh Annual Report of the Union Benevolent Association* (Phila-
delphia, 1838), 15.
[66] See, for example, John Paul Scott, "The Anatomy of Violence," in
Endleman, ed., *Violence in the Streets*, 63-70.
[67] For example, the race riots of July 1835, August 1842 and October
1849, the election riot of October 1849, and the nativist riot of July 1844,
were all centered in the Southwark-Moyamensing area.
[68] Howard O. Sprogle, *The Philadelphia Police* (Philadelphia, 1887),
89-90; Ellis P. Oberholtzer, *Philadelphia: A History of the City* (4 vols.;
Philadelphia, 1912), II, 303-304.

the problem of juvenile street corner gangs was attracting considerable attention in the Philadelphia press as early as the mid 1830s. There is no shortage of complaints about the language and behaviour of these "disgraceful assemblages of vulgar, swearing riotous boys."[69] On September 29, 1834, only a few weeks after the riot, the *Pennsylvania Inquirer* complained that "for the last two or three nights, gangs of unruly boys and men have been permitted to march through the district (of Southwark) at all hours of the night, disturbing the peace by the most 'uproarious noises.' "[70] One year later the *United States Gazette* noted that "The mayor has given strict and positive orders to the police and watchmen, to arrest and bring before him, all lads who may be found collected together about the corners of streets or in the vicinity of Engine houses, with the very laudable intention of preventing the so frequent occurrence of rioting and crime, and of punishing all idlers and vagabonds, who will persist in annoying the citizens and disturbing the public peace."[71]

The problem of this type of juvenile delinquency can be explained in various ways. It may be, as certain historians have suggested, that Americans joined gangs at this time in the same way that they joined clubs and organizations, hoping to find there some sort of personal identity, an antidote to the loneliness and impersonality of big city life, and a substitute for the informal community life which had been partly destroyed by rapid urbanization, immigration and residential mobility.[72] It was probably also important that in the poorer working class districts there were large numbers of young men living beyond the control of family discipline in unsavoury workingmens' boarding-houses and without adequate recreational facilities.[73] A contemporary fictional account of one of

[69] *United States Gazette*, September 26, 1835.
[70] *Pennsylvania Inquirer*, September 29, 1834.
[71] *United States Gazette*, September 26, 1835. For other references to the same problem, see *Pennsylvanian*, August 27, 1833, January 3, 1834, *United States Gazette*, November 14, 1834, April 6 and 22, 1836, *Public Ledger*, May 10, 1836.
[72] Charles W. Ferguson, *Fifty Million Brothers* (New York, Toronto, 1937), 3, 9-10; Warner, *Private City*, 61-62.
[73] Louis Arky, "The Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations and the Formation of the Philadelphia Workingmens' Movement," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXXVI (April 1952), 165.

the worst gangs in the Moyamensing area refers suggestively
to "the beardless apprentice boys who after a hard days' work
were turned loose upon the street at night, by their masters or
bosses."[74] In effect what one is describing here are further
instances of the social disorganization discussed above. Gang
violence was one possible response to the doubts and frustra-
tions produced by this kind of crisis in the social order. It was
little wonder that Philip Hone, referring to the comparable situa-
tion in New York, could talk in October 1834 of "a set of dis-
orderly young men, who stand ready for any kind of mischief,
whether it be to attack theatres, desecrate churches, assault
Whigs, or murder negroes."[75]

One other group involved in the riot has not yet been men-
tioned. It is impossible to identify this group with any precision
since the role they played did not often expose them to the
danger of arrest. Their participation in the riot was indirect,
but that does not detract from its importance. A number of de-
tailed studies of Twentieth Century race riots have emphasized
the degree to which mobs are usually made up of different com-
ponent parts. In particular they distinguish between the active
nucleus of leaders, frequently young unattached males with
gang connections, and the larger mass of non-active, but often
curious and sympathetic onlookers, usually older and of higher
social standing.[76] The main importance of this latter group is
that it plays the part of an audience and by offering encourage-
ment and tacit approval effectively spurs on the active rioters
to greater efforts. There is ample evidence that this kind of
combination functioned during the Philadelphia race riot of
1834, particularly during the second and third nights. An eye-
witness account of the events of the second night which ap-
peared in the *Commercial Herald* is especially revealing in
this respect.[77] Out of a force estimated at between four and

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[74] Author unknown, *Life and Adventures of Charles Anderson Chester,
the Notorious Leader of the Philadelphia 'Killers'* (Philadelphia, 1850), 27.
[75] Hone, *Diary*, I, 113.
[76] See, for example, William Westley, "The Escalation of Violence Through
Legitimation," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social
Science*, 364 (March 1966), 121. Allen Grimshaw, ed., *Racial Violence in
the United States* (Chicago, 1969), 104, includes this important point in
a summary of the findings of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations,
set up after the Chicago riot of 1919.
[77] *Commercial Herald*, August 15, 1834.

five hundred it appears that the active rioters were comparatively
few in number. "They at no time amounted to 100" whereas the
great majority of those present "were mere idle spectators."
Idle or not these onlookers provide a classic instance of the
important role of the supportive audience in a riot situation.
Few as the genuine rioters were, they "felt more than common
confidence in themselves; they had been all night long followed
by a large body of spectators, not participants in the spoils and
plunder . . . but who had so far countenanced their operations,
and in one or two instances coincided with their conduct by
clapping, that in the event of an attack by the city police, they
confidently counted on their assistance." Eventually the rioters
grew so reckless that many of the onlookers were alienated and
might have intervened if the Mayor and City Police had not
done so. However, by this time the damage had been done
and it remained only for the *Commercial Intelligencer* to antic-
ipate future generations of social scientists in stating that "Our
citizens at large, would do well to stay away from the scenes
of disorder . . . well disposed citizens only tend to increase the
crowd and give the rioters confidence."[78]

On the strength of this analysis of the mob there is a strong
temptation to assume automatically that one is dealing with
little more than an unorganized disorderly rabble whose violent
behaviour was spontaneous, directionless, even irrational. While
such an interpretation may not be without validity in this par-
ticular context, recent studies of mob violence indicate that it
must be approached with caution and carefully evaluated. The
work of scholars such as George Rudé and Charles Tilly, for
example, has indicated that early Nineteenth Century city mobs
in Europe frequently used violence in a rational, controlled way
as a useful weapon in the attainment of specific goals.[79] Accord-
ing to Rudé these mobs "rioted for precise objects and rarely
engaged in indiscriminate attacks on either properties or per-
sons."[80] Recently, Leonard Richards has applied these insights
to the American anti-abolition mobs of the 1830s and argued
that they too demonstrate an impressive ability to organize and

[78] *Commercial Intelligencer,* August 16, 1834.
[79] George Rudé, *The Crowd in History* (New York, 1964); and Charles
Tilly, *The Vendée* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964).
[80] Rudé, *The Crowd,* 254.

co-ordinate their activities, in the pursuit of clearly specified
ends.[81] How much of this pertains to the Philadelphia mob of
August 1834?

The answer depends almost totally upon how the available
information is interpreted and how selectively it is used. Con-
sequently, if one were sufficiently determined, the riot in ques-
tion could be portrayed as a masterpiece of ingenious planning
and devious organization, dedicated to the realization of several
totally rational goals. According to this version of events the
riot, as many contemporaries believed, was "clearly the result
of a preconcerted organized plan."[82] The masterminds of the
incident were people "whose range in society would secure con-
cealment, while it gave facilities to the conspiracy."[83] It was
supposedly these same people who were responsible for gather-
ing the rioters together and formally marching them across the
city into the Moyamensing area. Possibly these plotters were
members of the Colonization Society. Colonizationist responsi-
bility for the riot was certainly emphasized in the report drawn
up by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society's investigation com-
mittee after the event.[84] Colonizationists or not, the instigators
of the riot were powerful people. When several members of
the local police force, which attempted to cope with the first
night's rioting, performed their duties over-zealously, they were
threatened by some of the men of Moyamensing, who hold high
and honorable office, with being marked for revenge at the
next constable's election."[85] In a similar vein, it is possible to
discern pernicious, behind the scenes, influence at work in the
aftermath of the riot. Despite public professions of regret at the
plight of the mob's victims and demands that the guilty be
brought to justice, only ten of the sixty rioters arrested ever ap-
peared in court and not one of them was fined, jailed, or
punished in any way for his involvement in the riot.[86]

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[81] Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing,"* 5, 82-85, 111-112,
129. Some of these features of mob behaviour were noted by contemporaries.
One New York police chief was of the opinion that "the concerted actions
of a mob have rarely anything spontaneous about them. In most cases the
so-called upr'ising' has much premeditation in its composition." George
Walling, *Recollections of a New York Chief of Police* (New York, 1887), 46.
    [82] Abdy, *Journal,* III, 316.
    [83] *Ibid.*
    [84] See footnote 16.
    [85] *Pennsylvania Inquirer,* August 18, 1834.
    [86] The 10 rioters in question appeared at the September sessions of the
Mayor's Court when the Grand Jury returned a verdict of "True Bill," in-

More compelling and less open to alternative interpretation is the degree of organization and co-ordination which functioned among the rioters themselves. They confined their activities to the area south of the city line which was outside the jurisdiction of the city police. On the second night of the riot the attack on Negro property was delayed until about eleven o'clock, by which time "the peace officers, worn out, by the toils of the affray on Tuesday, and not anticipating a second riot, had generally retired."[87] Equally effective was the method used to distinguish black from white property. As in the New York riot of the previous July, white residents identified themselves by placing candles in their windows. "The constant cry of the rioters being for 'light' and 'white faces.'"[88] Some of the rioters, probably the small minority of skilled artisans, were disguised in black masks and shabby coats.[89] As a further precaution the mob appears to have used certain words and whistles as distress and warning signals.[90] Other accounts suggest a division of responsibilities between recognized leaders, an advance guard which reconnoitered the district in search of suitable dwellings to attack, and the general body of rioters.[91] Finally, it could be argued, that as with Rudé's European mobs, the Philadelphia rioters did not use violence in a totally haphazard way. Their major target was property rather than persons, and there is some proof that certain types of property were preferred: Negro churches, the homes of "negroes of property and substance," racially integrated establishments like the 'Flying Horses' and Cox's 'Diving Bell' which was white owned, but described as "the veriest brothel in the country."[92]

dicating that there was sufficient proof of their guilt to justify trying them. However the Mayor's Court records contain no evidence that the rioters were tried then or later and none of their names appear in the relevant volumes of the Prison Sentence Docket or the Convicts' Docket. See Mayor's Court: Docket, 1834 (Record Group 130. 1), Sentence Docket, 1834 (Record Group 38.36), and Convicts' Docket, 1834 (Record Group 38.35), Archives of the City of Philadelphia.

[87] *Pennsylvanian*, August 15, 1834.

[88] *Commercial Herald*, August 15, 1834.

[89] Abdy, *Journal*, III, 325.

[90] *Pennsylvanian*, August 15, 1834, "The signal words of the mob were 'Gunner,' 'Punch,' and 'Big Gun.'" According to the *United States Gazette*, August 28, 1834, when one of the rioters was arrested, he cried "'ahoy,' a watch word with the mob, who endeavoured to rescue him. . . ." *The Commercial Herald*, August 15, 1834, described the mob's signal as "a few shrill whistles and a 'howl.'"

[91] *Commercial Herald*, August 15, 1834.

[92] *Ibid*.

Finally there is the question of the "specific goals" which the riot was designed to achieve, and here too there are several possibilities on which this type of interpretation might draw. In the first place it could be argued that the riot was designed to provide an answer to Philadelphia's racial problem. At the heart of the problem was the rapidly increasing number of negroes in the city, who according to the dominant view were filling its jails and poor-houses, fostering vice and intemperance, and threatening the jobs of the white population.[93] The riot sought a simple solution to this complex problem. According to the citizens investigation committee "it is notorious . . . that the most active among the rioters" . . . "sought to intimidate the "colored people, with intent as it would seem, to induce or compel them to remove from this district."[94] The attacks on negro churches were equally goal-oriented and suggest a similar simplistic rationality. The committee report was at pains to emphasize that there was no religious prejudice involved in these attacks. They were designed to put an end to "the disorderly and noisy manner in which some of the colored congregations indulge, to the annoyance and disturbance of the neighborhood in which such meeting houses are located."[95]

This is one possible interpretation of the August riot, but while parts of it are not without interest and merit, the overall impression is that of a rather strained attempt to force the facts to comply with a preconceived model of mob violence. There is good reason to believe that the rioters in question were less rational and organized than this model might lead one to expect. Certainly, the interpretation of the riot described above is open to criticism on various counts. For example when examined more closely, the theory that the mob was organized and marched into the riot area on the instigation of people of power and responsibility, is somewhat less than convincing. In

[93] For a general treatment of the Negro in Philadelphia, see Du Bois, *Philadelphia Negro*, and Edward R. Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania* (Washington, 1911). Both Du Bois and Turner emphasize the rapid increase in the size of Philadelphia's Negro population, and the high level of Negro crime, especially during the 1830s, as root causes of the city's recurring racial antagonisms. The available census returns and prison records confirm their conclusions and suggest that these factors contributed to already deep-rooted antipathies between the two races.

[94] *Hazard's Register*, XIV (September 27, 1834), 201.
[95] *Ibid.*

the first place, most of the rioteres lived locally, and secondly
neither of the committees which investigated the incident found
any real proof that it was the result of a preconcerted plot. The
local abolitionists did their best to implicate the Colonization
Society in the raising of the mob, but despite comparisons with
the more incriminating July riot in New York, the best they
could do was to blame the Philadelphia riot on a combination
of local causes and racial prejudice stirred up by colonization
propaganda. "It strengthens the unchristian prejudice against
our free coloured brethren and makes them regarded as strangers
and aliens in the land of their birth. The advocates of this
doctrine to promote its success too often vilify the character of
the free people of colour and we believe it susceptible of proof
that to this spirit is owing the disgraceful riots."⁹⁶ At other
times, in other places, the Colonization society was deeply in-
volved in mob violence,⁹⁷ but in Philadelphia in August 1834, no
prominent colonizationists took part in the riot, no rioters
shouted colonization slogans as they destroyed Negro property,
and there is no proof that the society was responsible for or-
ganizing the mob. As the abolitionists indicated, the real im-
portance of the Colonization Society in this situation was that
it fostered dislike of the free Negro, fear of the possibility of
amalgamation, and generally contributed to an already power-
ful fund of racial prejudice, which was anything but rational and
controlled. In the last resort it was probably the prevalence of
this same prejudice which explains why influential people were
anxious to limit the intervention of the police, and reluctant to
punish the guilty after the event. One need not assume that they
behaved in this way because of any personal involvement in the
organization and planning of the riot. It is much more likely
that such people realized they were dealing with what would
now be described as a "majority" type of riot, that they shared
the sympathies of the crowd which had cheered the rioters on,
and consequently lacked the incentive to ensure that the guilty
were punished.

Also open to criticism is the belief that the mob was an effec-

⁹⁶ Papers of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of
Slavery, "Address of the Society to the Citizens of Philadelphia," 1834
(Record Group 490, Box 42), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
⁹⁷ See, for example, Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing,"* 30.

tively co-ordinated unit using violence in a controlled disciplined
way against clearly defined targets for specific and rational rea-
sons. Undeniably there was some sort of organization among the
rioters, although the decision to remain outside the city bound-
aries, the timing of the riot, and the use of warning signals were
probably the products of common sense and the self-preservation
instinct; improvised experients rather than a carefully conceived
plan. Effective as it may have been, the co-ordination which
operated within the mob was possibly as spontaneous as its
destruction of property and attacks on Negroes. This last point
is important. It effectively differentiates the Philadelphia mob
from the mobs described by Rudé which "rarely engaged in
indiscriminate attacks on either property or persons." It is per-
fectly true, as I have already suggested, that the Philadelphia
rioters directed most of their energies at Negro property and
did not indulge in any wholesale slaughter of the blacks. It is
also true that in the early stages of the riot certain types of
property were singled out for attention. However, as the riot
progressed and the mob warmed to its task, any semblance of
control soon disappeared and the ensuing violence was un-
restrained and ferocious as well as spontaneous. According to
the *Philadelphia Inquirer* the destruction of property on the
second night of the riot "exceeds belief—No less than thirty-seven
houses, some of them substantial brick tenements, were more
or less destroyed, and many of them rendered entirely uninhabit-
able."[98] Only the distribution of large quantities of free liquor
saved Cox's Diving Bell from destruction—a further indication
of the mood and mentality of the rioters.[99] The treatment of
the contents of these houses was equally frenzied and complete.
"The furniture of the houses was broken into the smallest frag-
ments; nothing escaped; the bedding was carried into the streets,
ripped up with knives, and the contents scattered far and wide.
The bedsteads, chairs and tables were hacked to chips.[100] The
Negroes themselves fared little better. Property may initially
have been the primary target of the mob, but "nig hunting" was
obviously high on the rioters' agenda and those blacks who failed
to escape were harshly treated. The words of one eye-witness,

[98] *Philadelphia Inquirer,* August 15, 1834.
[99] *Commercial Herald,* August 15, 1834.
[100] *Pennsylvanian,* August 15, 1834.

"the mob exhibited more than fiendish brutality, beating and mutilating some of the old, confiding and unoffending blacks, with a savageness surpassing anything we could have believed men capable of."[101] By the end of the riot one Negro was dead and many had been badly hurt, as indeed had several of the police who had intervened on the first night of the trouble.[102]

Confronted with this kind of reality, one is tempted to wonder whether the currently unfashionable views of Gustave Le Bon on mob behaviour, with their emphasis on the emotional, irrational and unrestrained brutality of individuals protected by the anonymity of a crowd, may not after all have something to offer the student of mob violence in ante-bellum America.[103] Used carefully and making allowances for Le Bon's aristocratic bias, they do seem relevant to an understanding of the rioting which terrorized Philadelphia's Negro community in August 1834. Certainly the lower classes of society and the criminal elements, which Le Bon felt to be synonymous with the term "mob," played a dominant role on this occasion. Also there is something fundamentally irrational, brutal, even primitive about the behavior of this mob, and even more so about the kind of mentality which sought to eliminate the annoyance of noise in Negro churches by destroying the churches, and which believed that Philadelphia's racial problems could be solved by literally forcing the sizable Negro population to move elsewhere.[104]

In the last resort it is the very wealth of possible explanations which threatens to render this riot incomprehensible. There is a definite temptation to over-apply the historical imagination and to see in this incident much more than probably existed. It

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[101] *Commercial Herald,* August 15, 1834.

[102] *Philadelphia Gazette,* August 14, 1834.

[103] Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London, 1896). For the current rejection of Le Bon's ideas, see Rudé, 9-15, 198-199, 247, 252-257 and Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing,"* 82-85. Rudé, however, does concede that Le Bon's ideas, while overstated are "not lacking in shrewd and imaginative insight." Rudé, *The Crowd,* 257.

[104] Possibly one should not underestimate the effectiveness of the rioters' methods. Philadelphia's Negro population did not, of course, simply disappear, but many Negroes fled from the riot area and it appears that not all of them returned after the riot. During the decade of the 1840s the white population increased by 63 percent while the number of Negroes declined slightly. Contemporaries felt that Philadelphia's frequent race riots, beginning in 1834 were partly to blame for this decline. Society of Friends, *Statistical Inquiry Into The Condition of the People of Colour of the City and Districts of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1849), 7.

could, for example, be argued that as early as the 1830s the propensity to violence was deeply buried in the American psyche, that the Philadelphia riot was one minor product of a revolutionary past which had firmly established, even given constitutional recognition to the tradition that violent means were permissible if the end was good enough. It could also be argued that urban rioting in the east was a by-product of the custom of lynching which flourished in the more primitive frontier areas of America. Certainly someone as astute as Philip Hone believed there to be an important connection between the two. In August 1835 he expressed the fear that the system of lynch law, the practice of people taking the law into their own hands, so widely used in the South and West, "has kindled a flame which may in time endanger the safety of our institutions throughout the Union."[105] By this time occasional lynchings were occurring as far east as Massachusetts, and for Hone the riots of the period simply represented a similar contempt for law and order on a larger scale. This by no means exhausts the list of possible explanations. From the conservative point of view the Philadelphia riot was just one more instance of the inevitable connection between democracy and anarchy, a product of re-publican government, universal suffrage and the ascendancy of Andrew Jackson. For Alexis de Tocqueville it was doubtless further vindication of his belief in the "Tyranny of the Majority." From a Philadelphia perspective there is a temptation to see this attack on the city's Negro community as an expression of support for the Colonization Society and of solidarity with the South.

Mention of this last point illustrates the danger of this kind of theorizing when it is divorced from the factual realities of a given situation. While it is possible that Philadelphia's well known pro-Southern sympathies may have conditioned the atti-tudes of many of its inhabitants on certain issues, the data available on the mob makes it clear that the rioters were not the kind of people who were tied by marriage to aristocratic

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[105] Hone, *Diary*, I, 144-145. These views were shared by others. William Leggett, writing in the Evening Post of September 3, 1835, noted that Judge Lynch "has lately extended most fearfully the prescriptive boundaries of his authority. All places are now within the limits of his jurisdiction." Theodore Sedgewick ed., *A Collection of the Political Writings of William Leggett* (New York, 1840), 51.

southern families, or dependent on mercantile ties with the south for their livelihood. There is simply no proof that sympathy for the south or the Colonization Society were factors of any importance in the deliberations of this mob. Just what their motives were is less clear. One suspects that many of the rioters would have found their behaviour difficult to explain, and given the fragmentary nature of the available source material and the dangers inherent in any attempt to ascribe precise motives to whole groups of men, this is a difficulty which the historian shares. In this type of situation, and dealing with this kind of mob, the simplest answer may well be the safest and the most accurate.

In the riot area large and constantly increasing numbers of blacks and whites lived in close and uneasy proximity. There was much poverty and hardship, many tensions and frustrations. Racial prejudice was deeply ingrained and frequently exacerbated by the criminal activities and general behaviour of a minority of the Negro population. This point is worth emphasizing. There are clear indications that the riot was in part the result of a breakdown in the firmly established accommodative pattern between the races, which required that the Negro accept his subordinate status without question. As one newspaper put it, "The law of this state has not, it is true, affixed many disabilities to the black man, but public opinion and universal custom require that his place in society should be inferior to that of the least favoured white man."[106] In various ways a minority of Philadelphia's blacks was refusing to play the racial game. On the one hand there was the small black élite, which despite all the difficulties of their situation had succeeded in the trades and in the professions and become "men of fortune and gentlemen of leisure."[107] Members of this group were among the mob's victims. More important was the behavior of a minority at the other end of the black social scale. One hostile critic commented on the frequency with which he had witnessed "instances of loathsome disease, exhibitions of nudity or something near to it, intemperance, profanity, vice and wretchedness, in all the most disgusting forms" among the Negroes of Southwark

[106] *Saturday Courier,* September 20, 1834.
[107] *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia by a Southerner* (Philadelphia, 1841).

and Moyamensing.[108] As an advocate of colonization the writer
may have exaggerated what he found, but the description has
a familiar ring. It suggests all the difficulties of a largely rural
population, many of them ex-slaves, adjusting to the different
life-style of the urban ghetto. A more serious affront to the racial
attitudes and expectations of the white majority was described
in an article in the Saturday Courier, which noted that "It has
long been a subject of general complaint that the blacks in
certain neighborhoods are so rude and uncivil to those white
persons who may happen to pass by, that these neighbourhoods
are generally shunned on that account."[109] In addition, this
article joined the post-riot investigation committee in condemn-
ing those Negroes who had attempted to disrupt the course of
justice by rescuing fugitive slaves and convicted criminals from
the police. This sort of behaviour was not typical of Philadel-
phia's Negroes, but as the Saturday Courier astutely pointed out,
the indiscretions of this black minority "have excited a strong
feeling against their whole people . . . and have made them the
subject of an indignation, which unhappily does not discriminate
between the innocent and the guilty."[110]

Finally, there was the weather during the riot period, which
must have frayed men's nerves and shortened their tempers even
further. On August 14, Poulson's Daily noted that "at no period
for the last 40 years have we experienced a succession of so
many oppressively hot days as we have had for the last two
weeks."[111] The first day of the riot was described by one Phila-
delphian as "the hottest and most oppressive day we have had
this summer."[112] The situation was explosive and a number of
trivial incidents quickly and predictably escalated it into a full
scale riot which Philadelphia's police force, weak, undermanned,
underpaid, lacking any training in riot control techniques and

[108] Poulsons American Daily Advertisers, August 20, 1834.
[109] Saturday Courier, September 20, 1834.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Poulsons American Daily Advertiser, August 14, 1834.
[112] Norris Papers, Poor Wills Almanac, 1834 (which also contains a
number of written entries, comprising "ye Olde Diary of J. P. Norris"),
(Record Group, 454, Norris miscellany), Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
The importance of hot weather in fostering riotous behaviour was formally
recognized by the 1919 Chicago Commission on Race Relations. See Arthur
Waskow, From Race Riot to Sit-In, 1919 and the 1960s (New York, 1966),
98.

hopelessly divided in its responsibilities, was initially unable to handle.[113]

The 1834 Philadelphia race riot was the product of a complex combination of immediate causes and more subtle but equally dangerous underlying social tensions and grievances. The people who participated in it were not without purpose but this is not to say that they were using violence in a rational controlled way for the attainment of specific goals and objectives. Some of the rioters may have sought revenge for what they saw as the misbehavior of a black minority, others may have hoped that confronted in this way many Negroes would move elsewhere and their own lives become easier and more secure as a consequence. However, even this degree of rationality was not typical of the mob as a whole and one suspects that many of the rioters acted for very different kinds of reason, most of them fundamentally irrational. For some there was possibly a sense of identity to be gained by rioting with others against a common enemy, while for others violence was one way of releasing the tensions and frustrations which were part of their drab lives. For the majority, however, the riot offered more obvious and immediate attractions. Something of this mentality is revealed in a few tantalizing extracts which have survived from the examination of the rioters carried out before the Mayor after their arrest.[114] One of the prisoners was alleged to have shouted " 'come on my boys, by Jesus we will soon knock hell out of them.' " According to a witness, another of the ringleaders refused to retire " 'till he had some fun—he came for that, and that he would have before he went home.' " An aggressive emotional negrophobia was just as important as economic rivalries or status anxieties to the mob which terrorized Philadelphia's Negro community in August 1834. No account of this riot should overlook the simple incontrovertible fact that "hunting the nigs" offered a welcome opportunity for certain people to loot, plunder, get drunk, destroy property, assault

[113] The inadequacy of law enforcement in Philadelphia was the subject of much comment and discussion in the city's newspapers. The overhaul of the police system in the early 1830s failed to eliminate many of its weaknesses. See, for example: *Hazard's Register*, VI (July 3, 1830), 6-8; *ibid.*, XII (November 2, 1833), 281-285; *Pennsylvanian*, June 4, 1834; *United States Gazette*, August 15, 1834; and the *Public Ledger*, August 11, 1836.
[114] *United States Gazette*, August 28, 1834.

innocent victims and generally enjoy themselves at the Negroes' expense.[115]

[115] This is not, of course, meant to suggest that the riot was begun simply to provide a cover for criminal behavior. However, when the opportunity arose, Moyamensing's sizable criminal element made the most of it, and so became a factor of importance in the perpetuation of the 1834 riot.