William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia, 1872), 215.

THE BATTLE TO END DISCRIMINATION AGAINST NEGROES ON PHILADELPHIA STREETCARS: (PART I) BACKGROUND AND BEGINNING OF THE BATTLE

By Philip S. Foner*

ANTE-BELLUM Philadelphia presented an interesting contradiction so far as black Americans were concerned. The city had always been in the forefront of the antislavery movement and had given birth to the oldest abolitionist society in the country, the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the African Race. As the number of slaves in Pennsylvania declined through the operation of the gradual abolition law, the society suffered from a "decline of energy, and [a] gradual tendency to a state of apathy." But abolitionism continued to grow steadily in Philadelphia and the Garrisonian wing of antislavery was stronger in that city than anywhere outside of New England.[1] Philadelphia was also the leading center of the free produce movement in the North which had as one of its aims the elimination of slavery by boycotting goods made by slave labor.[2]

But Philadelphia was also the most anti-Negro city of the North and the most rigidly segregated metropolis above the Mason-Dixon line. This seeming contradiction is actually not

*The author is Professor of History at Lincoln University/Pennsylvania.

[1] Edward Needles, *An Historical Memoir of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the African Race* (Philadelphia, 1848), 14, 32, 54; Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago, 1967), 206; James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton, N. J., 1964), 233.

There were two separate abolitionist societies in Philadelphia: the "Abolition Society," founded in 1775; and the better known "Anti-Slavery Society," formed in 1834.

[2] Ruth Nuremberger, *The Free Produce Movement* (Durham, N. C., 1942), 119-132; "Free Produce Among the Quakers," *Atlantic Monthly*, XXII (October, 1868), 485-494.

too difficult to explain. Philadelphia in 1860, with its 22,185 Negroes, had a larger black population than any other northern city. The national census of that year revealed that Boston's 2,261 Negroes made up one seventy-seventh of the population, and New York's 12,472, one sixty-third of the population. Negroes comprised one twenty-fourth of the population of Philadelphia.[3] It is a well established fact of American history that the degree of hostility to blacks varied with the size of the Negro community.

In the years before the Civil War it was customary for antislavery writers and speakers to refer to New York City as "the prolongation of the South" where "ten thousand cords of interests are lined with the Southern slaveholder." But Philadelphia outdid even the Empire City in its hostility to antislavery agitation and the demand for equal rights for Negroes.[4] When John Brown's remains were brought to Philadelphia after his execution in Virginia, James Miller McKim, the Philadelphia abolitionist, planned to secure the services of an undertaker and allow Mrs. Brown a day's rest before proceeding on to North Elba where the burial was to take place. The mayor of Philadelphia met them at the railroad station and insisted that Brown's remains be sent out of the city aboard the next train, as he feared that otherwise he would be unable to maintain order in the face of the rising tide of anti-Negro feeling in the city. The mayor threatened to use the police and even the military, if necessary, to get the remains of the great champion of black people out of the city. Brown's remains had to be taken to New York City where no objection was raised to their being turned over to an undertaker for two days.[5]

[3] U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population, 1790-1915* (Washington, D. C., 1918), 60-62. The majority of Philadelphia's Negroes lived in South Philadelphia, Southwark, and Moyamensing. (Ellis Oberholtzer, *Philadelphia: A History of the City and its People, A Record of 225 Years* [Philadelphia, 1912], II, 281-291.) For a seminal study of the place of the Negro in the ante-bellum North, *see* Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago, 1961).

[4] Philip S. Foner, *Business & Slavery: The New York Merchants and the Irrepressible Conflict* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1941), 1. "Colorphobia is more rampant here than in the pro-slavery, negro-hating city of New York," William Wells Brown wrote of Philadelphia in 1854. (William Wells Brown, *The American Fugitive in Europe: Sketches of Places & People Abroad* [New York, 1855], 312.) No publisher in Philadelphia was willing to issue *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. (*See* William Dusenberre, *Civil War Issues in Philadelphia, 1856-1865* [Philadelphia, 1965], 21.)

[5] *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, December 10, 17, 1859. A committee of Negroes had been appointed at a meeting of sympathy for Brown in

Instead of enforcing the law, Philadelphia mayors were repeatedly advising Negroes and their abolitionist friends not to provoke white mobs. In 1839 the mayor warned Lucretia Mott, one of the "noble few [Quakers] who have cleansed their garments from the foul stain of prejudice," not to offend white Philadelphians by walking in the streets with colored people. She replied that she had been in the habit of walking with Negroes as the occasion offered, and, as it was a matter of principle with her to make no distinctions on account of color, she expected to continue to walk with them, and she did. But the *Friend,* a conservative Quaker antislavery journal published in Philadelphia, cautioned abolitionists to heed the mayor's warning, since in the City of Brotherly Love, it was dangerous to mix up with the abolition question, "the warfare against what they are pleased to call prejudices in regard to the colored race."[6] There was solid reason for this advice. Philadelphia was the scene of increasing hostility and violence directed against Negroes before and after 1834 when for the first time the city had "a full-scale race riot." In the course of three nights of rioting, one Negro was killed, many were severely injured, two churches and many private dwellings were attacked and damaged.[7]

As the Negro population of Philadelphia increased with the flow of fugitive slaves, the rights of black people were drastically reduced. In 1813 the mayor, aldermen, and a large body of distinguished citizens of Philadelphia sent a memorial to the legislature complaining that the great number of Negroes in the city were "becoming nuisances." The memorial pleaded for

a Negro church to meet Brown's body at the railroad station, but Mayor Henry hastily gathered a large police force, banned unauthorized persons from entering the station, and ordered the body sent on from Philadelphia. (Philadelphia *North American,* December 3, 5, 1859; *Pennsylvanian,* November 29, December 1, 3, 1859; Philadelphia *Ledger,* December 3, 1859; Philadelphia *Dispatch,* December 4, 1859.)

[6] *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women* (Philadelphia, 1839), 6; *Friend,* August 1, 1840; Carleton Mabee, *Black Freedom: The Non-violent Abolitionists from 1830 Through the Civil War* (New York, 1970), 92, 94. The reference to the "noble few" is by Samuel Douglass, a black Quaker and is quoted in Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1969), 73.

[7] John Runcie, "Hunting the Nigs' in Philadelphia: The Race Riot of August, 1834," *Pennsylvania History,* XXXIX (April, 1972), 189-190. Philadelphia was again the scene of anti-Negro riots in 1838, 1842, and 1849.

legislation to require all blacks to register, to provide for binding out to service convicted Negroes "for the purpose of compensating the persons they may have plundered," and for a special tax on free Negroes to provide for impoverished Negroes. They even proposed "preventive detention," urging that the police be authorized to apprehend any black, whether a vagrant or a man of reputable character, who could not produce a certificate that he had been registered, and that a justice be empowered to commit him to prison for six months. Fortunately, the free Negroes of Philadelphia, led by James Forten, and their abolitionist allies, were barely able to defeat the discriminatory legislation. But in 1838, despite the vigorous protest of 40,000 Negroes, written by the distinguished black Philadelphia abolitionist Robert Purvis, the state legislature adopted a new constitution which included a provision limiting the franchise to adult *white men.*[8] The legislature acted later to deprive Negroes of equality of educational opportunity. For a long time it had simply ignored blacks in establishing public educational facilities, but in 1854 it required school directors to establish separate schools in districts where there were twenty or more colored pupils. Where such separate schools were established, officials were not to be compelled to admit colored children to the white schools. Negro children attended segregated schools or no schools at all, and this applied to the private schools of the Quakers as well as the public schools.[9] "They will give us good advice," wrote Samuel Ringgold Ward, the black abolitionist. "They will aid us in giving us a partial education—but never in a Quaker school, beside their own children. Whatever they do for us savors of pity, and is done at arm's length."[10]

[8] Zilversmit, *First Emancipation*, 207; James Forten, *A Series of Letters by A Man of Color* (Philadelphia, 1813); *Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens, Threatened with Disfranchisement, to the People of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1838); Edward R. Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania: Slavery-Servitude-Freedom, 1639-1861* (Washington, D. C., 1911), 122, 136, 148, 152-153; Charles M. Snyder, *The Jacksonian Heritage: Pennsylvania Politics, 1833-1848* (Harrisburg, 1958), 105. The Pennsylvania legislature considered and rejected proposals to limit the rights of free Negroes in 1805-07, 1813-14, 1819-20, 1831-32, and 1860. Oberholtzer, *Philadelphia*, II, 286-288.

[9] *Pennsylvania Laws* (May 8, 1854), 623; Ira V. Brown, "Pennsylvania and the Rights of the Negro, 1865-1887," *Pennsylvania History*, XXVIII (January, 1961), 46.

[10] Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 72. Ward, however, came under sharp attack from Frederick Douglass for capitulating to Philadelphia's anti-

The place of Negroes in Philadelphia was as God ordained it should be, said a best-selling book published in the city in 1851. It bore the flaming title, *Negro-Mania,* and its author, John Campbell, was a member of the Social Improvement Society of Philadelphia. The book had been written after eight weeks of discussion in the society on the question, "Can the Colored Races of men be made mentally, politically and socially equal with the white?" It summarized the views of the leading white Philadelphians who had participated. After a lengthy discussion designed to combat the "sickly sentimentalism . . . maudlin philosophy and pseudo philanthropy" of Philadelphians who advocated equal rights for blacks, Campbell asked his fellow Philadelphians if they would "ever agree that blacks shall stand beside us on election day, upon the rostrum, in the ranks of the army, in our places of amusement, in places of public worship, ride in the same coaches, railway cars, or steamships?" His answer, widely approved by white Philadelphia, was specific: "Never! never! never! nor is it natural or just that this kind of equality should exist. God never intended it. . . ."[11]

Little wonder black Americans hated Philadelphia. "There is no more regard shown by the whites for the common and natural rights of the colored people here, than there is at Richmond," wrote John Oliver in 1863.[12] "The city of Philadelphia generally has no sense of justice, where colored peoples rights are concerned, or no disposition to do justice to that despised race," the Reverend B. F. Barrett declared in a fiery sermon delivered at his church at the corner of Broad and Brandywine Streets on September 23, 1866.[13] But it was Frederick Douglass who most frequently and bitterly heaped scorn upon the city "for the insult and degradation offered to the colored citizens

Negro prejudice by lecturing in the Second Presbyterian Church despite the fact that the notice for the meeting announced that "the lower Saloon will be appropriated exclusively for our white fellow citizens." Douglass issued a special supplement to *The North Star,* May 23, 1850, headed "Shameful Abandonment of Principle" in which he denounced his fellow abolitionist's "shameful concession to the spirit of slavery and prejudice. . . ." (Philip S. Foner, *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass* [New York, 1950], II, 121-127.)

[11] John Campbell, *Negro-Mania. Being An Examination of the Falsely Assumed Equality of the Various Races of Man. . . .* (Philadelphia, 1851), 545.

[12] *The Christian Recorder,* October 31, 1863.

[13] *Ibid.,* October 6, 1866.

of Philadelphia."[14] In 1849 he pointed out that Philadelphia had long been "the scene of a series of most foul and cruel mobs, waged against the people of color," and noted that for the colored man and woman it was "one of the most disorderly and insecure cities in the Union." "Shame upon the guilty city!" Douglass cried. "Shame upon its law-makers and law-administrators!"[15] Knowing the city, Douglass predicted that once the Fugitive Slave Bill of 1850 became law, "a vigorous slave-catching business will be driven in Philadelphia."[16] Following a visit to the city at the beginning of 1862, Douglass wrote indignantly:

> There is not perhaps anywhere to be found a city in which prejudice against color is more rampant than in Philadelphia. Hence all the incidents of caste are to be seen there in perfection. It has its white schools and colored schools, its white churches and its colored churches, its white Christianity and the colored Christianity, its white concerts and its colored concerts, its white literary institutions and its colored literary institutions . . . and the line is everywhere tightly drawn between them. Colored persons, no matter how well dressed or how well behaved, ladies or gentlemen, rich or poor, are not even permitted to ride on any of the many railways through that Christian city. Halls are rented with the express understanding that no person of color shall be allowed to enter, either to attend a concert or listen to a lecture. The whole aspect of city usage at this point is mean, contemptible and barbarous. . . .[17]

[14] *The North Star,* May 30, 1850, reprinted in Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass,* II, 125.

[15] *The North Star,* October 19, 1849, reprinted in Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass,* I, 407.

[16] *The North Star,* April 12, 1850, reprinted in Foner, *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass,* II, 119-120. For evidence that Douglass's prediction came true, *see* speech of Robert Purvis at the American Anti-Slavery Society, May 8, 1860, *Liberator,* May 18, 1860.

Writing to Gerrit Smith in July, 1852, Douglass indicated that in planning to travel to Pittsburgh from Rochester to attend the Free Soil Convention, he deliberately sought to avoid Philadelphia. ". . . I should encounter the 'American demon' [racism] that way, more than by way of Cincinnati." (Frederick Douglass to Gerrit Smith, July 20, 1852, Gerrit Smith Papers, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University.)

[17] *Douglass' Monthly,* February, 1862. *See also* speech of John S. Rock to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, January 23, 1862, *Liberator,* February 14, 1862.

It was the street railway situation which aroused the widest indignation among Philadelphia's Negroes. One could choose not to attend a concert or a public lecture and avoid being humiliated. Sarah Forten, daughter of James Forten, Philadelphia's black sail manufacturer and pioneer advocate of Negro equality, advised Negroes to avoid facing discrimination rather than suffer humiliation. Her family, she wrote her friend Angelina Grimké, seldom went to public places unless they were open to all and therefore did not have to suffer the mortification that usually followed.[18] It was possible for blacks to send their children to separate schools, even though they were inferior, and hope they would obtain the rudiments of an education. But how could they get from one place to another in the city, how visit friends and relatives, how even get to work to the servile jobs open to blacks without using the public transportation facilities?

On June 9, 1857, the Philadelphia and Delaware River R. R. Company, operating a steam road, secured from the General Assembly of Pennsylvania, a supplement to its charter, authorizing the construction of a street railway on Fifth and Sixth Streets, to be operated by horses. On January 20, 1858, the first streetcar line in Philadelphia was open to the public. Within the next two years eighteen more street railway companies were in operation, and in January, 1859, Mayor Alexander Henry proudly announced that no "public improvement . . . has ever promised more general benefit to the community."[19]

But black Philadelphians could not share the mayor's joy. The improvements in Philadelphia's transportation system were not for the black citizens. Negroes had been able to travel with some difficulty on the steam road, but the city omnibuses which preceded the streetcars drawn by horse had already set the policy for the companies which took over their routes. In 1854, on his return from Europe, William Wells Brown visited Philadelphia. He and two British friends hailed an omnibus on Chestnut Street. The white men were furnished with seats, but Brown was told that "We don't allow niggers in here." "The omnibuses of

[18] Gilbert Barnes, ed., *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké* Weld and Sarah Grimké (New York, 1934), 273, 379-381.
[19] Frederic W. Speirs, *The Street Railway System of Philadelphia. Its History and Present Condition* (Baltimore, 1897), 11-17.

Paris, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Liverpool had stopped to take me up, . . ." he wrote angrily, "but what mattered that? My face was not white, my hair was not straight; and therefore, I must be excluded from a seat in a third-rate American omnibus."[20]

Brown's experience forecast what was to follow on the horse-cars. Of the city's nineteen streetcar and suburban railroad companies, eleven refused to admit Negroes to their cars. The other eight reluctantly allowed them to ride but forced them to stand on the front platform with the driver, even when the cars were half empty, and though it was raining or snowing. In many parts of Philadelphia, Negroes seeking transportation had to walk or hire an expensive carriage.

> "While all colored men, women, and children are refused admittance to the cars or expelled from the very platform at the pleasure of the conductors," wrote an observer after a study of the streetcar situation, "the worst classes of the whites may ride. It is a common thing in the cars to see the rules which forbid smoking violated; to hear men swearing and using improper language in the presence of ladies; to be annoyed by the disgusting behavior of intoxicated persons; to have women of the town take places by respectable ladies. These annoyances are common in the street cars as in the streets; yet the rules which exclude all colored passengers are justified on the pretext that they would protect the comfort of passengers."[21]

At the outbreak of the Civil War, thinking that the nation's struggle for survival might induce a change in policy, a Negro passenger brought an action for damages against a conductor who ejected him from a car. The court rejected the action and upheld the right of companies to exclude Negroes. Judge Hare pointed to the fact that Negroes were excluded "in our theatres, our schools, our lecture-rooms, our churches, and in fine, in all places where men congregate in public or private, for the transaction of business in common, or for enjoyment." It was too much to expect that a race "long civilized" would desire to travel

[20] Brown, *American Fugitive in Europe*, 312-313. For Brown's earlier experience in Philadelphia *see* "My First Visit to Philadelphia," *Liberator*, September 1, 1848. In this piece Brown complained only of the churches in the city.

[21] Philadelphia *Press*, December 22, 1865.

in the company of those "emerging from the shades of barbarism." He concluded: "In the belief then, that the regulation [excluding Negroes] now before us is a wise one, or if not wise, will work its own cure best when least molested, we enter judgment for the defendant." The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society branded the decision "an illustration of the hypocrisy of a people calling themselves democratic and christian," but the companies, now reinforced by the court, continued their practices unchanged.[22] Even black soldiers returning to their camps to fight for the Union were rejected from the horsecars. The Reverend Robert J. Parvin, of Chestnut Hill, described the following incident:

> A few minutes before six o'clock on Monday evening two non-commissioned officers of the United States army, belonging to a regiment now forming at Camp William Penn, stepped on the front platform of a Fifth street car . . . on their way to the Berks-street depot of the North Pennsylvania Railroad. It was the last car by which they could reach the train to convey them out to their camp that night. When these well-dressed and well-behaved colored soldiers stepped on the platform there was no one else on it except the driver. They were almost immediately seen by the conductor, who rushed through the car and ordered the men to "get off." One of the soldiers replied, "We want to reach the train to get out to camp tonight." "I can't help that, you can't ride on this car," was the answer. As the men did not move at once, the conductor put him off. The men, without resistance, but with an indignation they could not express, *were forced from the platform.* . . .
>
> The men were then on the sidewalk, within a short distance of us, but the conductor would not listen to their being allowed to stand on the vacant platform. . . . We reached the Berks-street station just in time to take the train on the North Pennsylvania Railroad, and the two soldiers were left behind. . . .
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> I have seen colored soldiers on the battlefield. I have seen them defending fortifications, which a few hours before, they had taken from the Southern rebels, at the point of a bayonet. I have seen them suffering in their wounds received in our defence, but I never before

[22] Goines vs. McCandless, 4 *Philadelphia Reports*, 255; *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Philadelphia, 1861), 17.

> saw them forcibly driven from the privilege of standing on the platform of a railway car.[23]

Negro regiments were organized and trained at Camp William Penn, a few miles from the city. It was a common sight to see on the road leading to the camp hundreds of Negro men and women walking to visit their husbands and sons to say a last farewell before they left to fight for the Union. "These are the people whom our City Railway Companies exclude from their cars," the Female Anti-Slavery Society declared bitterly. "Our colored population promptly responded to the call for men to drive back the rebel invaders of Pennsylvania; they go willingly in the face of death, and worse than death, to bear their part in the fierce struggle for the Nation's life. Is it *thus* that Philadelphia should requite them?"[24]

But Philadelphia was unmoved. Nor was it influenced by the fact that mothers and wives of wounded black soldiers found it impossible to visit their kinsmen in local hospitals, either because they could not ride on any of the cars in the direction or because they were compelled to stand on the front platform in the most miserable weather. One black woman wrote indignantly in 1864:

> We have in this city three societies of ladies for the relief of the sick and wounded soldiers. . . . These ladies, whenever they desire to visit their brethren at the hospitals, either to minister to their wants or attending them when dying, are constrained to pay for carriage hire, at an expense of six or seven dollars, thus expending money that would be otherwise appropriated to the soldiers were they permitted to ride in the cars. . . . Now, we do think this is a great outrage, not only upon us but upon the men who, regardless of the prej-

[23] The Rev. Robert J. Parvin in Philadelphia *Press*, March 22, 1865. The Union League of Philadelphia had been reluctant even to organize a company of Negro troops for fear of the hostility to the soldiers in the city. When a company was raised and the Negro troops marched through the city in 1863, Mayor Henry was so fearful that they would be attacked by whites that the Negroes marched without arms. (George Lathrop, *History of the Union League of Philadelphia from its Origin and Foundation to the Year 1882* [Philadelphia, 1884], 75-77, 79-81.) *See also* Alexander Henry to George Cadwalder, July 30, 1863, Cadwalder Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP).

[24] *Thirtieth Annual Report of the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society* (Philadelphia, 1864), 23-24.

udice they have always encountered in this land of their birth, have at the call of their country rushed forth to aid in putting down the rebellion, and now they are wounded, many disabled for life, are deprived of seeing those dear to them, because the directors of the city passenger cars refuse to let colored people ride, which, to say the least, is a stigma upon the city of Philadelphia.[25]

Here is what happened to the wives of two wounded soldiers when they attempted to visit them at the hospital. The description is by a white Philadelphian who witnessed the brutal incident which occurred in the summer of 1865:

On Thursday evening last, accompanied by a lady, I took a seat in a Spruce and Pine street car, going west. When the car arrived within a few feet of Eighth street it was hailed by two colored women. The car was stopped, and the women got in. All passed quietly for some time. The conductor received the fare from the women, and no objection was made to their presence until nearing Eleventh street, when the car was stopped and the women ordered to leave. This they declined doing in a mild and peaceable manner, pointing out that they were going to visit their wounded soldier husbands. Several minutes were spent in endeavoring to persuade the women to leave, but to no purpose. The car was then driven at a furious rate as far as Broad street, when it stopped to admit a passenger. The colored women attempted to get out, but were prevented, the conductor informing them that they would be taken to the depot and whitewashed. At Seventeenth street a lady wished to get out. The conductor would not stop for fear of losing his prisoners. At Nineteenth street I pulled the strap. The car stopped and I got out. The colored women rushed to the door to make their escape. One succeeded in reaching the platform, where she was seized by some ruffians. She cried frantically for help; and fear, I suppose, induced the outlaws to release her. The car had started when she sprang from the platform, she barely escaping injury. The other woman did not succeed in making her escape. During the trip the women were incessantly assailed with oaths, threats, and most disgusting language from the driver, conductor and the passengers, including a white woman, whose language was positively loathsome.

[25] Philadelphia *Press*, August 31, 1864.

This Philadelphian added that he wrote the account "to learn if, when respectable white ladies enter a streetcar, they can have some surety that they will not be insulted and their feelings outraged by such disgusting behavior, perpetrated by men who pride themselves on being white men."[26] Evidently the bodily injuries, to say nothing of the humiliation of the Negro women, were not as important as the fact that white women might be forced to witness these disgraceful events.

Mrs. Frances E. W. Harper, the most popular Negro poet of the era, travelled widely during the Civil War as a lecturer. Only in Philadelphia did she come up against the tyranny of the streetcar companies. Attempting during a downpour in March, 1866, to obtain passage in a car, she was sent to the platform to ride with the driver. She replied that she had just ridden in the cars in Southern cities and asked, "Are you more heathenish here than there?" The conductor did not bother to answer but pushed her to the platform, remarking finally that it was "against company rules to let colored persons ride in the cars." Mrs. Harper refused to accept the discriminatory practice, walked several miles in the rain, and the following day, shot off a letter to the Philadelphia *Evening Telegraph,* asking:

> Can it be possible that Philadelphia virtually says to the wives, widows, daughters, mothers and sisters of those men who helped turn the tide of battle in our favor, that they must either stand upon the platform, or plod their way through all weather rather than have the privilege of entering the cars?—a privilege freely accorded to us in other cities. My business calls me from city to city, and from Louisville to Philadelphia: no conductor asks me either to ride on the platform or wend my way through the rain, as I did yesterday.[27]

Robert Smalls, born a slave in Beaufort, South Carolina in 1839, catapulted to national fame in May, 1862, when he led fifteen other slaves in delivering the *Planter,* a Confederate gunboat, to the Union navy outside Charleston harbor. He won commendation from Congress and President Lincoln and served throughout the war as a Union pilot. But none of this cut any

[26] Philadelphia *Sunday Dispatch,* August 27, 1865.
[27] Frances E. W. Harper in Philadelphia *Evening Telegram,* March 20, 1866, and reprinted in *The Christian Recorder,* March 24, 1866.

ice on Philadelphia's streetcars. The *Planter* was at the navy yard in Philadelphia undergoing repairs. When Smalls and a white sailor attempted to board a car to visit the famous vessel, the conductor would not allow the Negro to ride. The sailor pointed out who his companion was, but the conductor stuck to his statement, "Company regulations. We don't allow niggers to ride!" Smalls and his sailor friend had to walk several miles to the navy yard.[28]

Of the scores of humiliating and brutal incidents arising from the policies of the Philadelphia streetcars, perhaps the following is the most shocking. It involved the Reverend William J. Alston, rector of St. Thomas's Colored Episcopal Church. Here is an excerpt from the letter he addressed in July, 1864, "To the Christian Public of Philadelphia":

> Within the past week, my only living child having been at death's door, by our physician we were directed to take him over the Delaware river as often as convenient. On our return to the Philadelphia side, on one occasion, the child became completely prostrated. I held my ear to his mouth three several times to ascertain whether he was still alive. Such a death-like appearance came over him. I felt the necessity of reaching home as soon as possible, and to my satisfaction (for the time being), I saw one of the Lombard and South street cars approaching, which I hailed, was on the act of entering, when the conductor arrested my progress by informing me that I could not enter—*being colored.* I referred him to the condition of my child, but all to no purpose; he ordered the driver to go on, regardless of our humble plea. . . . Had the cars been overloaded, that would have been excuse sufficient; but the fact of the case is, that the only persons on the cars referred to were the conductor and the driver.
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> In the face of these facts, we ask the Christian public of Philadelphia, can you look on in silence, and see respectable colored citizens excluded from the privilege of availing themselves of the *public* facilities for going from one extreme of the city to the other? . . .
>
> Is it humane to exclude respectable colored citizens from your street cars, when so many of our brave and vigorous young men have been and are enlisting, to take part in this heaven-ordained *slavery extermination,*

[28] Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin,* January 14, 1865.

> many of whom have performed commendable service in our army and navy—in the former of which your humble subscriber has two-brawny-armed and battle-tried brothers? Finally, we ask, is it in accordance with Christian civilization to thrust out of your street car the dying child of an humble servant of Christ, in whose congregation there exists an active auxiliary to the Pennsylvania branch of the Women's Sanitary Committee of the United States?
>
> We beg you to remember the words of Him by whom soon you and I are to be judged. . . : "Verily, I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me."[29]

Not a single white clergyman in Philadelphia responded to this plea. To be sure, the theme of many sermons in the churches the Sunday following the publication of the Reverend Alston's appeal did deal with the streetcars, but they concerned the only problem that bothered Philadelphia's white religious community—the operation of cars on Sunday. "The sanctimonious city of Philadelphia has such a high regard for the holy Sabbath," observed a contemporary journal, "that it will not allow the cars to run on that day, and yet on Monday morning it so far forgets the law of doing unto others, etc., that it will not allow a wounded negro soldier to ride in its cars." Of such Christians Frederick Douglass said, in a letter to the students of Lincoln University, "They would have us among the angels in heaven, but do not want to touch elbows with us on earth."[30]

[29] The Reverend J. Alston in Philadelphia *Press*, July 21, 1864.

[30] Speirs, *Street Railway System of Philadelphia*, 22-23; Philadelphia *Sunday Dispatch*, March 13, 1864; New York *Independent*, February 25, 1864; *Free Nation* reprinted in *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, June 3, 1865; *Thirty-Third Annual Report of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Philadelphia, 1867), 27; Frederick Douglass in the *Alumni Magazine*, Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, I (November, 1885), 124. Jewish rabbis in Philadelphia also refrained from speaking out on the issue. Throughout the battle against streetcar segregation, *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* appeared monthly in the city, and carried frequent articles condemning discrimination against Jews in this country and abroad. But only one issue dealt with the streetcars, and that, like the concern shown by Christian ministers, dealt with the operation of cars on Sunday. Since religious Jews did not ride on Saturday, the journal called the prohibition of Sunday cars a special blow at the Jewish community. (*The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, XXIV [1867], 405-419.) *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* was published and edited by Rabbi Isaac Leeser. For a discussion of the Jewish community on the eve of the Civil War, *see* Philip S. Foner, *The Jews in American History, 1654-1865* (New York, 1945), 43-50.

James M. McPherson has characterized the battle against streetcar segregation in Philadelphia as "a microcosm of the Negro's battle for equal rights and human dignity."[31] The opening gun in this long struggle was fired by William Still. The son of slaves, Still rose to prominence in the Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, became an active agent of the Underground Railroad, and a prosperous coal merchant.[32] Still published a letter in the Philadelphia *North American and United States Gazette* on August 31, 1859, under the heading "Colored People and the Cars." This was nineteen months after the first streetcar line opened in Philadelphia. Writing "as a colored man," Still voiced "the sore grievance of genteel colored people in being excluded from the city passenger railroad cars, except they choose to 'stand on the front platform with the driver.'" He observed that "however long the distance they may have to go, or great the hurry—however well or aged, genteel or neatly attired—however hot, cold or stormy the weather —however few in the cars, as the masses of colored people now understand it, they are unceremoniously excluded." Surveying the national scene, Still pointed out that in Philadelphia the proscription against Negroes on the streetcars was more severe than "in any of the leading cities of the Union." Yet this was the City of Brotherly Love, the city of the Quakers, and one of the cities most famous for "great religious and benevolent enterprises, so pre-eminently favorable to elevating the heathen in Africa, while forgetful of those in their very precincts—those who are taxed to support the very highways that they are rejected from."

Still conceded that the proscription might be based upon the

[31] James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War* (New York, 1965), 255-256. But the issue does not seem to have been important enough to merit even a mention in William Dusinberre's study, *Civil War Issues in Philadelphia, 1856-1865*, published in 1965 nor in Edwin Stanley Bradley's book, *The Triumph of Militant Republicanism: A Study of Pennsylvania and Presidential Politics, 1860-1872*, published in 1964. Both books were published by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

[32] For the details of William Still's life, *see* James P. Boyd, "William Still: His Life and Work to this Time," in *Still's Underground Railroad* (Revised Edition, Hartford, 1886), i-lxiv, and Lara Gara, "William Still and the Underground Railroad," *Pennsylvania History*, XXVIII (January, 1961), 33-39; Joseph A. Boromé, "The Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XCII (July, 1968), 320-351. Still became nationally famous as the author of *The Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia, 1872).

"erroneous impression" that the colored people of Philadelphia were made up only of those who lived in poverty and squalor in the city's slums. Not so, he argued. This "degraded class" was by no means a "fair sample of the twenty thousand colored people of Philadelphia." He pointed to the parts of the city "where the decent portions of colored people reside," the eighteen or twenty colored churches with their Sabbath schools, the twenty or so day schools, the dozens of beneficial societies for the support of sick and disabled members, the comfortable, even luxurious homes and valuable businesses owned by "industrious sober and decent" colored people—all proof that the Philadelphia Negro was "by no means so sadly degraded and miserably poor as the public have generally been led to believe." Yet all this was beside the point. For even if Stephen Smith, one of Philadelphia's Negroes who had amassed considerable wealth in the lumber and coal business, should enter a car, he, too, would be forced to stand on the front platform. Indeed, should Elizabeth Greenfield, the internationally famous "Black Swan," wish to enjoy a ride to Fairmount Park, she, too, "must stand on the 'front platform by the driver.'" "The fact that her extraordinary acquirement as a vocalist have won for her the very highest distinction both in this country and Europe, does actually weigh nothing when entering a City passenger Railroad car—the front platform is the place for all the Creator chose to make with a dark skin." Still closed his communication with the expression of hope that "ere long, decent colored men and women will find the same privilege in the City Passenger Railroad cars of Philadelphia that are extended to colored men and women in other cities."

Still's letter was widely reprinted in the antislavery press,[33] but in Philadelphia it aroused no interest. Philadelphians did not even bother to defend their prejudices by pointing out that Still was not quite accurate in his comparison between their city and other metropolitan centers on the question of streetcar segregation. As proof of his assertion that the Quaker city was the worst in the nation in this respect, Still cited the fact that in New Orleans Negroes—slaves as well as free—rode without

[33] Alberta S. Norwood, "Negro Welfare Work in Philadelphia, Especially as Illustrated by the Career of William Still, 1775-1930" (M.A. Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1931), 4.

discrimination in all the city cars and omnibuses. Actually, while streetcar segregation in New Orleans was not required by law, it was practiced as company policy from the time the cars were placed in service in the 1820s. Several lines excluded Negroes altogether, but others operated special cars for blacks, identified by large stars painted on the front, rear, and both sides. Still also claimed that Negro women could ride freely in the city omnibuses of Cincinnati while colored men did face some discrimination. In actual fact, complete segregation existed on streetcars in Cincinnati until after the Civil War.[34]

Since Philadelphia, to paraphrase Lincoln Steffens, was Jim Crow and content, Still's letter did not disturb the citizens' equanimity. Only one Philadelphian took the trouble to comment on Still's letter. A citizen who described himself as belonging to the class which had the "right to use freely the passenger railway cars in our city," sent a communication to the *North American and United States Review.* He commended Still for having stood up for the rights of people, adding: "If a similar intelligent and firm support of all their rights were characteristic of the colored race, it can hardly be doubted that their condition in our community and in our country would be vastly improved."[35] It is doubtful, however, that the entire black population of Philadelphia viewed Still's communication in the same light. His effort to convince the bigots that prejudice against colored people was due to their mistaken conception that the Negro who lived in the city's slums was representative of the black population seemed to quite a few blacks as advancing the elitist proposition that it was legitimate to Jimcrow poor Negroes. In later years Still was accused of seeking to open the streetcars without discrimination to the wealthy, so-called respectable blacks, a charge he heatedly denied.[36]

Be that as it may, Still's letter opened the cars neither to the wealthy Stephen Smiths nor the colored residents of the slums.

[34] Roger A. Fischer, "Racial Segregation in Ante Bellum New Orleans," *American Historical Review,* LXXIV (February, 1969), 932; McPherson, *Struggle for Equality,* 233 *n.*

[35] Philadelphia *North American and United States Gazette,* September 14, 1859.

[36] *A Brief Narrative of the Struggle for the Rights of the Colored People of Philadelphia on the City Railway Cars and a Defence of William Still Relating to His Agency Touching the Passage of the Late Bill, Etc.* (Philadelphia, 1867), 1-2.

Meanwhile, the outrages daily committed on Negroes seeking public transportation multiplied. In 1861 the next move was made to end these practices. This time it came from the Social, Cultural and Statistical Association of the Colored People of Pennsylvania. Organized in September, 1860, as a body "embracing the public interests of the colored citizens of Philadelphia," the association announced its plans to call meetings and engage in other activities "to diffuse a knowledge of the condition & wants of the colored people, and to remove prejudice in any directions where their civil rights are discriminated thereby."[37] Late in 1861 William Still, the association's corresponding secretary, proposed to the executive committee that a petition be circulated among white Philadelphians requesting the Board of Presidents of the City Railways to end segregation on their lines. A car committee was appointed, and the work of collecting signatures to a petition got underway. For four months the committee, made up of Still, Isaiah C. Wears, Samuel S. Smith, and the Reverend J. C. Gibbs of the First Presbyterian Colored Church, visited various groups in Philadelphia, including the prestigious Merchants' Exchange, with their petition. They requested the privilege of gaining the floor to present arguments in favor of the appeal and solicit signatures. By June, 1862, 369 prominent white Philadelphians had signed the following petition:

> The colored citizens of Philadelphia suffer very serious inconvenience and hardship daily, by being excluded from riding in the city passenger cars. In New York city, and in all the principal Northern cities, they ride; even in New Orleans (although subject to some proscription,) they ride in the cars; why, then, should they be excluded in Philadelphia, a city standing so preeminently high for its benevolence, liberality, love of freedom and Christianity, as the City of Brotherly Love?
>
> Colored people pay more taxes here than is paid by the same class in any other Northern city. The members of the "Social and Statistical Association," although numbering less than fifty members, pay annually about five thousand dollars into the Tax Collector's Office.

[37] Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Social, Cultural, and Statistical Association of the Colored People of Pennsylvania, *Ms.*, HSP.

> Therefore, the undersigned respectfully petition that the various Boards of the City Passenger cars rescind the rules indiscriminately excluding colored persons from the inside of the cars.[38]

It obviously mattered little to the signers that, like Still's letter of 1859, the petition contained some inaccuracies. As noted previously, New Orleans segregated Negroes on its streetcars, and in New York City Negroes were subject to occasional discrimination on some of the streetcar lines and were required to ride in a Jim Crow car on the Sixth Avenue line.[39] In mid-June Still, on behalf of the car committee, placed the petition in the hands of the board of presidents of the city passenger cars. He conceded that there were fears that "filthy and degraded" Negroes might obtain entrance to the inside of streetcars if the petition were granted but went on to assure the presidents that "*We make no advocacy for the filthy.*" This time, however, perhaps because of the criticism of his 1859 letter, Still acknowledged that it might be possible that "filthy and degraded" Negroes were "rendered so by being compelled to live and rear their children in localities of degradation." Still might have been more effective had he pointed out, as did A. L. Standard, acting editor of *The Christian Recorder,* official organ of the AME Church published in Philadelphia, that the companies had no objection to seating in their cars the recent immigrants from Ireland and other parts of Europe who also were forced to live unsanitary lives in Philadelphia's slums.

Still left the companies' presidents "with sanguine feelings and desires that it may not be long before the prayer will be answered to the satisfaction and honor of all concerned." *The Christian Recorder* also exuded confidence and predicted that the "effort nobly made—we mean wisely and prudently made—in behalf of the colored people of Philadelphia" would bring instant results. "We cannot but believe that such an effort will

[38] Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin,* June 11, 1862; *The Christian Recorder,* June 14, 1862. Among the signers were Bishop Alonzo Potter, Horace Binney, Morton McMichael, Gibson Peacock, John Lawlor, Daniel Dougherty, the Reverend Phillips Brooks, and about forty-two other Methodist and Episcopal Church ministers. The original petition with all of the signatures is in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

[39] New York *Tribune,* August 4-7, 1863.

be crowned with success, for it has touched the sympathies of our white friends."[40]

Unfortunately, it failed to "touch the sympathies" of the presidents of the streetcar lines. They were "touched" by the spectre of declining passenger traffic if their white customers took it into their minds to avoid streetcars which required them to sit next to Negroes. Still had gently raised the point to the presidents that "the companies would actually be gainers, instead of losers." But the companies' inspectors had informed the presidents that passengers had been saying that many of the prominent Philadelphians who had signed the petition travelled about in their own carriages and hence could afford to be quite benevolent about the rights of Negroes on streetcars. So it was, that despite the publicity the petition received, and even the endorsement it gained from the Philadelphia *Press*, "our rights," as Still recalled sadly, "were still denied us."[41]

Throughout the rest of 1862 and nearly all of 1863, the protest movement against streetcar segregation remained dormant even while black volunteers in the Union army were being kicked off the horsecars by white roughnecks coming to the aid of conductors. In fact, John Oliver, a militant black Philadelphian, publicly accused the leaders of the Negro community of being averse to further agitation on the ground "that it will make the case worse and injure our cause—that the white people will become still more prejudiced against us, and therefore it is best to wait until they see fit to treat us better."[42] Whatever criticism might be made of William Still for the manner in which he pleaded the case against segregation on the cars, he was certainly not one of those guilty of what Oliver called "abominable sycophancy." On the contrary, though he saw some wisdom in avoiding incessant agitation on the issue, the "car inhumanity" so angered Still that he refused to remain silent. In December, 1863, he sent a letter to the Philadelphia *Press* relating his humiliating experiences on one of the city cars when, despite his vigorous objections, he was forced to ride on the platform in the dark while it was snowing, until he decided it

[40] *The Christian Recorder*, June 14, 1862.
[41] *Ibid.*; Philadelphia *Press*, June 14-16, 1862; *A Brief Narrative of the Struggle for the Rights of Colored People*, 7.
[42] John Oliver in *The Christian Recorder*, October 31, 1863.

was safer to get off the car and walk. A year before, an old Negro minister was killed while riding on the platform during a dark, cold, and rainy night. Still walked home in the blizzard, "feeling satisfied that nowhere in Christendom could be found a better illustration of Judge Taney's decision in the Dred Scott case, in which he declared that 'black men have no rights which white men are bound to respect,' than are demonstrated by the 'rules' of the passenger cars of the City of Brotherly Love."[43]

Still's letter was more widely reprinted than his earlier communication and even appeared in the London *Times*. Moncure D. Conway reported from London to the Boston *Commonwealth* that Still's letter describing his experiences on the streetcar had done more harm to the Union cause in England "than a military defeat in Virginia."[44]

During the winter of 1864 the car committee of the Statistical Association continued its efforts through public appeals, visits, and interviews for the abolition of discrimination on Philadelphia's transportation system. At the same time a group of younger and more militant black Philadelphians, including Octavius V. Catto and John Oliver, determined to involve the black people themselves in the campaign. On March 3, 1864, at their instigation a mass meeting of Negroes in Philadelphia was held to consider the whole issue of streetcar exclusion. The resolutions, unanimously adopted by the meeting, noted that petitions and appeals to the presidents of the various companies had produced only evidence that these pleas had not even been considered by the corporations. They called for mounting a mass campaign by the Negroes of Philadelphia to persuade the legislature to "provide by law the right of all respectable colored persons the free use of every city passenger railway car, and by law, provide against the ejection or exclusion from equal enjoyment of all railroad privileges in the City and County of Philadelphia." The plan to seek legislative redress was acknowledged to have been influenced by the action of Senator Charles Sumner in the United States Senate in denouncing the Washington streetcar companies for excluding or segregating passengers on account of race and instructing, in a resolution,

[43] Philadelphia *Press*, December 12, 1863.
[44] *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, January 2, 1864; *A Brief Narrative of the Struggle for the Rights of Colored People*, 8-10.

the Senate District of Columbia Committee to frame a law barring streetcar discrimination in the district. Apart from *The Christian Recorder,* only the Philadelphia *Press* carried any notice of the Negro mass meeting, a situation which caused the organ of the AME Church to comment bitterly that if only the newspapers of Philadelphia "would come out bold, and speaking against it," streetcar segregation would soon be a thing of the past.[45]

The battle against segregation now continued on three fronts: petitions to the presidents of the car companies; action in the courts; and lobbying in the state legislature. The car committee of the statistical association was once again the driving force in the petition movement. In 1864 the committee had high hopes of success in persuading the presidents of the car companies to change their policy. For one thing, the publication of letters from wounded black soldiers who had been ejected from the horsecars and those of relatives who wished to visit them in nearby hospitals had been too much for even some of Philadelphia's newspapers, and a number which had formerly been silent now began to carry news of the struggle against segregation. For another, New York City and San Francisco both abolished segregation on their street railroads in 1864, and these developments were publicized in Philadelphia. The fact that New York City, less than a year after the bloody draft riots during which wild mobs hanged, burned, and butchered Negroes, had seen fit to end streetcar segregation was pointed to by the friends of equality in Philadelphia as an indication of how far behind their city was in upholding the principles of freedom. The *Press* and the *North American and United States Gazette* reprinted the New York *Tribune's* sharp editorial denouncing the forcible ejection from an Eighth Avenue car of the widow of a Negro sergeant who had been recently killed in battle. "It is quite time to settle the question whether the wives and children of the men who are laying down their lives for their country . . . are to be treated like dogs," the *Tribune* editorialized, and the foes of streetcar segregation in Philadelphia agreed that

[45] Philadelphia *Press,* March 4, 1864; *The Christian Recorder,* March 5, 1864. For Sumner's actions in the Senate on the streetcar segregation in Washington, *see* James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War* (New York, 1965), 261-262.

nowhere was there a more pressing need to "settle the question" than in their city.[46]

A good deal of publicity was also given to the decision of Judge C. C. Pratt in the Twelfth District Court of California which abolished segregation on San Francisco's streetcars. The case involved a Negro woman who had been forcibly ejected from a horsecar and who applied to the court for redress. The company answered to the court that its rules prohibited a Negro or mulatto person from riding in their cars. The plaintiff moved to strike out this rule.

Judge Pratt approached the subject as one of great public interest and comparatively new to the judicial record. He remarked that "this absence of precedent excited but little wonder when it is remembered in how light esteem negro or mulatto persons have been holden for near two hundred years by the whites, in whose control have been placed and exercised the law-making and law-construing powers of the land." He spoke of the injustice of the Dred Scott decision, and said,

> It has been already quite too long tolerated by the dominant race to see with indifference the negro or mulatto treated as a brute, insulted, wronged, enslaved, made to wear a yoke, to tremble before white men, to serve him as a tool, to hold property and life at his will, to surrender to him his intellect and conscience, and to seal his lips and belie his thought through dread of the white man's power.

Was not the government ordained to defend the weak against the strong, the Judge asked; to exalt right above might, and to assure the rights of each and all, however lowly or exalted, and to make them, as far as possible, inviolate? What was asked by the defendant in this case was nothing less than to make the court an instrument of power to trample upon rights; and, in support of this position, nothing was offered, "except the invocation of prejudices which have no holier origin than in brutal propensities, and a willingness to assist in perpetuating a relic of barbarism."

[46] Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin*, Philadelphia *North American*, June 23, 1864, quoting New York *Tribune*, June 21, 1864. By the end of June, 1864, both the Eighth Avenue and Sixth Avenue roads had ended exclusion of Negroes, and all of New York City's public transportation was integrated. (New York *Tribune*, June 30, 1864.)

Conceding that railroad companies had a right to manage their own affairs, Judge Pratt insisted that they had no right to manage the affairs of the general public, which was exactly what they attempted to do by the exclusion of colored people. Where, he asked, did the companies find the right to make such distinctions between one and another on the ground of color? Only if legislation authorized the exclusion of colored people would the companies have the right to adopt rules authorizing the exclusion of passengers because of their color, and until such authorization was given, the color of a man's skin was an illegal reason for expelling him from a car. When the company obtained a railroad franchise, it also took on the responsibility of carrying in its cars

> all persons, whether of high or low degree in social life, the rich and the poor, the popular and unpopular, the Caucasian and the African, and all other civilized people, without distinction based upon classes, race or color. The law, in giving the right of exclusive carriage, enjoined the duty of transporting all who are physically fit, and willing to pay; and that duty cannot be avoided or successfully evaded to the injury of classes, or individuals of a class, on account of prejudice arising from color or race, although performing its whole duty may tend to lessen the business or profits of defendant. With the *benefit* came the *burden*, and while the *one* is enjoyed the *other* must be borne.

The Philadelphia *Press* published the full text of Judge Pratt's opinion and, in an accompanying editorial praising the San Francisco jurist, predicted that it would be influential in ending "the pro-slavery rule which still disgraces the government of the city railroads." It urged the black community not to despair but keep up their protests. "If the colored people of this city are in earnest, and would maintain their self-respect, they must not cease to urge their civil rights. Not only justice but law is upon their side in this dispute, and their cause will be warmly sustained by all who despise prejudice, and the petty, inconsistent tyranny of these anti-republican rules."[47]

[47] Philadelphia *Press*, October 5, 1864, quoting San Francisco *Bulletin*, October 3, 1864; *Liberator*, November 18, 1864; *The Christian Recorder*, November 19, 1864.

It was, therefore, with considerable confidence that the car committee made its second appearance before the presidents of the companies on December 7, 1864. The committee pointed to the fact that since their last petition to the board of presidents, New York had removed "every vestige of proscription" from all the city passenger cars. They asked if it were possible that there "was more prejudice and less humanity in Philadelphia than in New York?" The number of signatures to their petition, they insisted, gave the answer to this question and had convinced the committee that "should the oppressive and proscriptive rules be changed to-day, the great majority of the citizens of Philadelphia would acquiesce in the change." A change had occurred in public opinion since their last meeting with the presidents, a change the committee attributed to the growing sense of shame over the fact that relatives of wounded black soldiers could not visit their kinsmen and the awareness that due to the regulations of the city railways, "not one mother, wife or sister could be admitted even to see a United States soldier, a relative, although the presence and succor of said mother, wife or sister might save a life." The committee left, expressing the hope that their efforts this time would "meet with a more favorable response than before," and that before many weeks or months had passed, concrete action would be taken to remove the cause of complaint of the Philadelphia Negro community.[48]

This time the walls of prejudice were slightly cracked. The stockholders of the West Philadelphia and Darby Road unanimously voted "that no discrimination ought to be made in the use of the public cars, to the exclusion of any person, except such as intended to secure good behaviour and general comfort" and requested the board of directors to adopt such regulations as would permit colored persons to ride in the cars. The directors then opened the cars to all passengers without regard to color. The Fifth and Sixth Streets line followed with the announcement that their cars would be "open to all decent and well-behaved persons without regard to complexion." But the other companies refused to budge. The Girard College and Ridge Avenue Road made what they termed "a concession" by

[48] Philadelphia *Press*, December 8, 1864.

agreeing to run special cars every half hour for colored people only, and the Union line, just beginning its operations, went a bit further by putting on separate cars to run regularly but to be labelled, "For Colored Only." The Negro community rejected these so-called concessions.[49]

The same meager results emerged from a meeting between the board of presidents and committees appointed by the Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery. Not even the threat that the groups would urge a boycott of the cars, unless colored people were admitted as equals, moved the executives. One president was willing to run special cars at half-hour intervals; another to put on every fifth car and mark it "Colored," but the others, in the words of the abolitionist committee, "were cold and indifferent." A visit to several leading stockholders produced the response, "Get the community right, and then we will not object."[50]

Some abolitionists, including members of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, then voted to boycott the cars.[51] Others busied themselves helping to promote public protest meetings. The first developed from a suggestion made by Still to J. Miller McKim. Still proposed calling a mass meeting at the Concert Hall to be sponsored by many of the eminent Philadelphians who had signed the car committee petition.[52] McKim, an ardent foe of the car companies' Jim Crow policy, quickly agreed and rounded up the sixty-three sponsors. Among them were Henry C. Carey, the nationally-famous economist; Phillips Brooks, the young Episcopal minister soon to become famous as pastor of Trinity Church in Boston; Thomas de Witt Talmage, another famous preacher; Jay Cooke, head of the international banking firm; James Mott and J. Miller McKim, veteran anti-slavery crusaders; clergymen of every religious persuasion in the city; and a large assortment of Philadelphia lawyers. Their

[49] *A Brief Narrative of the Struggle for the Rights of Colored People,* 11; Philadelphia *Sunday Dispatch,* January 25, 1865; *Thirty-First Annual Report of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Philadelphia, 1865), 18-19.

[50] *A Brief Narrative of the Struggle for the Rights of Colored People,* 14-15.

[51] *Thirtieth Annual Report of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Philadelphia, 1864), 23-24.

[52] William Still to J. Miller McKim, November 10, 1871, J. Miller McKim Papers, New York Public Library; William Cohen, "James Miller McKim: Pennsylvania Abolitionist" (Ph.D. Thesis, New York University, 1968), 305.

names appeared under the notice of the call of a meeting "To take into consideration the question of the Colored People and the Street Cars," and they invited citizens of Philadelphia "who are opposed to the exclusion of respectable persons from the Passenger Railroad Cars, on the ground of complexion, to unite with them . . . to consider the subject, and take such action as may be deemed advisable."

The Concert Hall was full on Friday evening, January 13, 1865. The reporter for the *Press* was "agreeably surprised at the audience," since many of the "most respectable ladies and gentlemen that our city can boast were present." He was surprised, too, by the seating arrangement. Contrary to the usual practice in Philadelphia of assigning Negroes to a separate place in the balcony, if they were allowed to enter a hall, there were "quite a number of genteel colored persons" seated in the midst of the vast audience. On the platform were representatives of the clergy, the legal and medical professions, the mercantile interests, and several members of Congress, and here, too, black and white sat together.[53] Five white and two black Philadelphians addressed the audience, and one of the scheduled white speakers declined, saying "that colored people could speak for themselves." They did. Robert Purvis, the veteran abolitionist, spoke at length and insisted that the meeting demand that Negroes be given the right to ride the cars not as a favor but as a right. "We ask no favors, but in the name of the living God—we ask, 'Give us justice!' " he cried to thunderous applause. The Reverend Alston told the moving story of his inability to take his sick child home on the cars and remarked that though born and reared in the South, he had never before "met with a spirit so satanical as this car question in Philadelphia." The black minister did not confine himself to the car question but also condemned the exclusion of Negroes from the workshops of Philadelphia, pointing out that this was primarily responsible for widespread poverty in the Negro community and especially caused the black youth of the city "to hang their heads and hearts in despair."[54] None of the white speakers

[53] Philadelphia *Press*, January 10, 1865; *See also National Anti-Slavery Standard*, January 26, 1865.

[54] Purvis was described as "a man of wealth and refinement, and he consequently feels very keenly the proscription he has been compelled to

touched on this issue, but they did condemn "the higher circles of society" in Philadelphia for "moral cowardice" in having for so long accepted the existing pattern of discrimination against Negroes.

J. Miller McKim moved the audience with the story of how Robert Smalls was forbidden to ride to the Navy Yard to see his famous vessel, the *Planter*. The Reverend W. H. Furness told how he had resolved never again to use the streetcars after he had seen the mother and sister of a Negro soldier forced to stand on the front platform. And he called upon those present to boycott the cars until "they were managed with equal justice."

The meeting closed with the unanimous adoption of a series of resolutions. These expressed "shame and sorrow" over the fact that "decent women of color" had been forced to walk long distances or accept a standing position on the front platform of the cars, "exposed to the clemency of the weather," while visiting at the military hospitals their relatives who had been "wounded in the defence of the country." They also pointed out that "the two main causes" of the nation's struggle for its life were "the enslavement of the black man at the South, and contempt for him manifested at the North"; held it to be "fitting and just that both these great evils should disappear together," and specifically protested "against the assumption that an unchristian prejudice or a fastidious taste may longer be allowed to take precedence of justice and humanity in determining the rights of any class of our citizens to the use of our public conveniences and institutions." The resolutions also asserted that the rights of colored people in the cars should be without qualification or limitation; condemned the recently-instituted practice of running special cars at long intervals "bearing aloft the degrading label of caste," and described this as "a simple substitution of one act of injustice for another, and as much in violation of their rights as is their total exclusion." The heart of the resolutions was the statement of firm opposition to "the expulsion of respectable persons from our Passenger Railroad

submit to upon account of his race." Purvis also recounted his experience during a passage to Europe when he moved freely among Southerners who, because of his light skin, did not know he was a Negro. He became good friends with a Virginia slaveholder of wealth, sharing walks on the deck with him, until he broke the news that he was a Negro. (Philadelphia *Press*, January 14, 1865; Philadelphia *Sunday Dispatch*, January 15, 1865.)

cars on the ground of complexion," and the request that the directors of the street railway companies withdraw the discriminatory rule in the name of "justice and humanity."[55]

Quite a few of the participants at the meeting were convinced that "the character and high social standing" of the men involved in the protest all but guaranteed that the streetcar issue was settled. Phillips Brooks assured his father that the meeting would bring a quick end "of our special Philadelphia iniquity of excluding negroes from the cars." But the *Sunday Dispatch,* while agreeing it was high time "the iniquity" was ended, was not so optimistic. "The prejudice against colored passengers in the City railway cars is probably stronger than in any other city in the Union," it reminded the participants in the meeting. "Whether the present movement will result in the dissipation of prejudice and the removal of restrictions remains to be seen." It feared that the voices of Philadelphians who believed "that 'niggers should be kept in their proper place,' " would carry more weight than those of the advocates of removing restrictions on the rights of Negroes to travel.[56]

It turned out that the *Dispatch* knew Philadelphia better than did the young Episcopal minister. A committee, headed by McKim and James Mott, had been appointed at the public meeting to negotiate with those street railway companies which still practiced discrimination. The group immediately requested that the presidents rescind the regulation excluding colored persons from the cars. The companies replied that they could not admit Negroes in opposition to the wishes of their passengers and proposed that the issue be settled by a "poll" in the cars. The committee protested vehemently against this "new method of settling our social questions," but the company presidents were adamant.[57]

While the news of the forthcoming balloting was making the rounds of the city, an incident occurred which demonstrated

[55] Philadelphia *Press,* January 14, 1865; Philadelphia *Sunday Dispatch,* January 15, 1865; *The Christian Recorder,* January 21, 1865.

[56] Alexander V. G. Allen, *Life and Letters of Phillips Brooks* (New York, 1900), I, 527; Philadelphia *Sunday Dispatch,* January 25, 1865; *National Anti-Slavery Standard,* January 21, 1865.

[57] *Report of the Committee Appointed for the Purpose of Securing to Colored in Philadelphia the Right to the Use of the Street Cars* (Philadelphia, 1867), 1-2; *Why Colored People Are Excluded from the Street Cars?* (Philadelphia, 1866), 3-4.

how low the foes of equality were willing to sink to guarantee a vote against opening the cars to Negroes. On a car of the Fifth and Sixth Street Railway, one of the two lines which had abolished the regulation excluding Negroes from inside the cars, two blacks entered and sat down. A white man accompanying them paid their fare. Their clothes were covered with filth and emitted a foul odor. Several passengers objected, and the men were arrested. Brought before a magistrate, they told their story. They had been working cleaning cesspools when they were approached by Alderman William McMullin and offered a sum of money to go to an address on Fifth and Brown Streets and bring back a box. They were instructed to ride inside the car going and coming, and to stay close to a white man who would accompany them. When they entered the car, they realized that the odor from their clothes was causing resentment among the passengers, and they tried to go forward and stand on the platform. But the white person with them refused to permit them to leave. Before they could get away, they were arrested.

The magistrate, noting that they had violated no law, discharged the two blacks. But black Philadelphians were furious that their enemies, in the attempt to sway the forthcoming vote on the streetcars, had stooped to using innocent, hard-working Negroes as instruments in their diabolical plot. *The Christian Recorder* demanded Alderman McMullin be relieved of his office immediately, an appeal which fell on deaf ears. The *Recorder* saw some consolation for black Philadelphians in the "dastardly incident." Perhaps now even those in the city who had had doubts would finally begin to understand something of "the malignant and disgraceful prejudice existing against the colored people."[58]

[58] Philadelphia *Press*, January 19-20, 1865; *The Christian Recorder*, January 21, 1865. The *Evening Bulletin* on January 18, 1865, concluded, after an investigation, that on the lines that allowed Negroes to ride inside the cars, "some of the vulgarest of the negrophobists have hired the dirtiest negroes they could find, to ride up and down all day in order to stir up feeling, and prevent a reformation of the abuse."