ONE OF the least mentioned figures in Pennsylvania’s struggle for human rights during the Reconstruction Era is black teacher Octavius Valentine Catto. He was the one leader around whom Philadelphia blacks rallied and the one that the state’s Radical Republicans most consulted. Possessor of a combative and aggressive nature, Catto was linked with every important black movement of the day. His assassination in the election riots of 1871 only served to enhance his popularity and make him a martyr still remembered with pride by black Philadelphians. No less a figure than W.E.B. DuBois was taken by Catto’s youthfulness, militancy, and courage on behalf of black causes. To him, Catto’s death was a tragedy for urban northern blacks.¹

Despite this acclaim, few historians of the Reconstruction Era besides DuBois have even mentioned Catto in their writings. This oversight can be traced to a number of factors. Catto, at the time of his death, was a local figure just emerging on the national scene, thus appearing at first glance to be a rather unimportant black leader. Ignoring men like Catto, historians chose to devote most of their attention to events taking place in the south. This view of Reconstruction history tended to minimize the importance of events taking place in the north. Catto’s rise to power in an urban black community of the north offers another view of blacks previously hidden by the mass of writings on Reconstruction in the south.

Octavius V. Catto was born in Charleston, South Carolina, on 22 February 1839. His father, William T. Catto, was a Presbyterian minister; his mother, Sarah Isabella Cain, was a descendant of one of the most distinguished mulatto families in that city—the DeReefs.

¹ The author is Principal at Lincoln High School in Philadelphia.
Although documentation concerning Catto's birth is unavailable, his family heritage indicates that he was in all likelihood born free. When Octavius was five years old, the Presbyterian Church called his father to Philadelphia and eventually to the ministry of the First African Presbyterian Church.²

Catto's father advocated an articulate black ministry and spoke for Philadelphia blacks who favored higher education. To him "the church has its aim and its end, it is an intelligent intellectual body . . . ever growing, enlightening, civilizing and Christianizing. . . ." The history of the First African Presbyterian Church written by Catto in 1857 remains today an expression of these beliefs and a valuable historical record of the black churches in antebellum Philadelphia.³

William's intellectual curiosity and emphasis on scholarly pursuits provided a model for Octavius to pursue in later life. This, coupled with his father's belief in individual responsibility and a life anchored by deep religious convictions, formed the basic principles by which Octavius would live. Every individual had a responsibility to contribute to the progress of mankind, never to be pushed aside by the will of the masses. As William often told his audiences, "Every man, more or less, has some part to perform in the drama of life . . . as individuals we must go forward and contribute our something toward the press of interest that impels forward; who moves not will be pushed aside; or irresistibly borne forward, uncared for and unhonored. . . ."⁴ Aware that governments might stand in the way of the individual and his advancement, William cautioned that "no man in the great world of life and action can be idle and indifferent to the callings and claims of government."⁵ Individual responsibility as advocated by William included a life based on Christian morality and virtuous behavior. Octavius "must be the salt of the earth; [his] example in life and practice must show to me that [he has] been with Christ and [has] been taught of him; this [he] must evidence by [his] life." Clearly, the values learned at his father's knee by Octavius were the necessity to strive for an education, the responsibility of each

2. The Press (Philadelphia), 14 October 1871; R. E. DeReef and Joseph DeReef, relations of Catto's mother, were free blacks whose wealth ranged from $15,000 to $125,000. See C. W. Birnie, "Education of the Negro in Charleston, South Carolina, Prior to the Civil War," Journal of Negro History 12:17.
4. Ibid., p. 7.
5. Ibid.
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individual to improve mankind, the adoption of a Christian way of life, and a concern for government.

In addition to this home training, Octavius gained the rudiments of his education at the local public schools. He attended the segregated Vaux Primary School held in a church near his home. So primitive were the facilities that school had to be closed on days of funerals since the services took place in the school hall and the burial in the school yard. Later Catto attended the more elaborate but also segregated Lombard Grammar School taught by Quaker James Bird. Emphasis at Lombard was upon systematic drill and repetition as then in use under the Lancastrian system of instruction. In 1853 his family moved to Allentown, New Jersey where, by the influence of ex-Governor William A. Newell, Octavius gained admission to that city's white academy. The next year he returned to Philadelphia ready to attend the newly opened black high school—The Institute for Colored Youth.

Begun by a group of Quakers as a farm school in 1842, the institute moved to the city in 1852 at the urging of a group of black ministers led by William T. Catto. As might be expected, Catto and his supporters prevailed upon the Quakers to change the curriculum from farming and trade preparation to courses in higher mathematics, Greek, and Latin. Haitian-born Charles L. Reason, a professor of mathematics of New York Central College, was hired to be in charge of implementing this new curriculum. Reason never neglected his primary goal of establishing an academic atmosphere at the institute. As soon as the institute opened he ordered that a school library be established. By the end of the school’s second year there were 1300 volumes on hand for the use of students. Lectures were held nightly in the library enabling the institute to become the in-

6. James M. Truman, Jr., Vaux School Committee to the Board of Public Education, 8 May 1862; 9 October 1862; 13 November 1862. Abolition Society Papers (Box 45), Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
Clearly the blacks, led by Catto, had created a high school for their children similar to the newly established Central High School attended by whites only. The Quakers were to maintain control over the financial aspects of the school, the hiring of a faculty, and the admission and dismissal of students, but Reason was given responsibility for what was to be taught and the day-by-day operation of the school. Given his Haitian background, nurtured in the revolutionary fires of an earlier generation and his beliefs in equality, Reason offered black students more than academic training. His stories of Haiti and its free people encouraged black students to seek more forcefully their own goals of freedom and equal rights.10

During Octavius' stay at the institute, Jacob C. White, Jr., son of the director of Catto's father's Sunday school, became his closest friend, a relationship which would last for the remainder of their lives.11 Both joined the Banneker Debating Society, a group which met during evening hours in the institute building to discuss scholarly matters and the events of the day. Catto often presented papers at these weekly meetings. Undoubtedly, the Banneker Debating Society provided an oratorical training ground for the young scholar.12

In 1855, to the disappointment of Catto and the other students, Reason resigned his post, and black teacher Ebenezer Don Carlos Bassett succeeded him. A graduate with high honors from the Birmingham Academy and the Connecticut Normal School, Bassett had taught in the public grammar schools of New Haven and taken graduate courses at Yale University. The students found their new

10. Ibid., pp. 1-50; The Liberator, 29 September 1853; The Pennsylvania Freeman, 7 April 1853.

11. The connection between the institute staff members and Haiti cannot be denied. First Principal Reason was born in Haiti, Ebenezer Bassett became the first U.S. ambassador to Haiti in 1869, and Jacob C. White, Jr. was a local agent who provided transportation for blacks wishing to migrate to Haiti. Institute student James H. Smythe was also recommended for the Haitian ambassadorship in the 1880s. See William J. Simmons, Men of Mark (Cleveland, 1887), p. 872; George Laurence, Jr. to Henry J. Lombard, Esq., Pennsylvania Railroad Company, 1861, 1862, and 1898, Jacob C. White Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.


13. MS Banneker Institute Minutes 1855-1859, Gardiner Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, passim. For the list of activities conducted by the institute see, Negro Activities, Gardiner Collection, Box 13G, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
principal capable and prepared to continue the academic courses instituted by Reason.¹⁴

Bassett came to recognize the scholarly Catto as one of his best students. In 1858 Octavius became the fourth graduate of the institute and won high praise from Bassett at the graduation ceremonies for “outstanding scholarly work, great energy, and perseverance in school matters.”¹⁵

Still, Catto was not satisfied with his ability to speak and use the classical languages. After leaving the Institute he went to Washington, D.C. for an additional year of study. Private tutoring in the Latin and Greek languages by Professor Caruthers followed. Feeling himself completely qualified and versed in the language arts, Catto now returned to his old teacher Ebenezer Bassett seeking a position at the Institute. Bassett agreed to support Catto, and the Quaker board of managers made the appointment effective in September 1859.¹⁶

During the next twelve years Catto became one of the most respected blacks in the state. His wide circle of friends and supporters encompassed most of the young blacks in the cities along the east coast. His rapport with white leaders, especially politicians, made him one of the most renowned local blacks of his day. In addition, his teaching career at the institute brought him recognition among blacks and whites, for despite time spent in organizations outside of the classroom, he was always prepared with scholarly lectures.¹⁷ His address to the graduating class on May 10, 1864, entitled “Our Alma Mater,” was so well received that it was printed for distribution. In this pamphlet, Catto advocated a new building for the institute to be located on Bainbridge Street above Ninth. He complimented the Quaker Board, “we may readily perceive the intention of the Board to make this a first class Institution to rank its course of instruction among the best of our Normal Schools. For this noble determination on their part, ... the colored people themselves should be grateful and their friends well pleased.” To Catto’s credit the

¹⁴. Conyers, Cheyney State, pp. 130-160.  
¹⁵. The Pennsylvania Freeman, 7 April 1853.  
¹⁷. The Philadelphia Tribune “Pencil Pushers Points”, 16 November, 8 June, and 30 March 1912. Written by black historian William Carl Bolivar, a graduate of the institute, these columns contain a history from the black point of view of nineteenth-century Philadelphia. Bolivar's obituary appears in the Philadelphia Tribune, 19 December 1914.
new building was completed and opened for classes in 1866.\textsuperscript{18}

Octavius' position at the institute and his growing reputation made him one of the most eligible bachelors in the city. Always preferring to wear well-made expensive clothing, he dressed immaculately. His light brown skin and black hair and moustache and his intellectually based charm made him popular with the opposite sex. Catto's charm and literary style are apparent from a note that accompanied a gift to his girlfriend Cordelia Sanders in 1860.

\begin{quote}
And if, perchance one pleasing ray,
Of true poetic fever beams,
Along my unambitious way
Thyself hath been th' inspiring theme.

Accept it then and believe me
Yours Always and always yours.
\end{quote}

O.V. Catto\textsuperscript{19}

By 1867 Catto had settled on the girl he wished to marry. She was Caroline V. Le Count, a graduate of the Institute for Colored Youth and a teacher in the public schools of the city. Octavius came to center his attentions on Caroline because of their similar interest and background. Both were to be important contributors to black education and the fight for equal rights in the city of brotherly love during their lifetimes.\textsuperscript{20}

Given these circumstances Octavius V. Catto could have married and lived in middle-class respectability, a financially comfortable existence, but he did not choose to do so. Remembering the earlier advice of his father, Catto's energies and talents were increasingly directed toward the progress of blacks in a prejudiced white world. Early in his teaching career he came to realize that it was folly to rely upon schools alone to solve the problems facing blacks. The real issues, as his father had warned years before, were traceable to formal

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19. O. V. Catto to Cordelia Sanders, Philadelphia, 28 May 1860; Wanamaker Store Bills for coat, gloves, and suit, Catto Papers, Gardiner Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

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It was during the Civil War that Catto first began to attract public attention. In June of 1863 General Robert E. Lee’s army moved northward toward an eventual showdown with the Union army at Gettysburg. The Philadelphia newspapers were filled daily with the events of the northward movement. Governor Andrew Curtin and Mayor Alexander Henry issued proclamations calling for new recruits to bolster the state militia. Ignored by most Philadelphians, the call to arms caused great excitement in the black community. Meetings were held in the black churches of the city, fifers and drummers paraded in the streets, and orations of patriotism occurred throughout the day. Headquarters were opened at the Institute for Colored Youth at 715-717 Lombard Street for the expressed purpose of recruiting a black company. The students at the institute were in the center of the recruiting activity. Catto was among the first to volunteer and immediately was selected to lead the newly formed company. The institute students followed Catto almost in mass—Lombard L. Nickens, William T. Jones, Martin M. and Joseph White, Joseph B. Adger, Andrew Glasgow, Henry Boyer, Jr., Joseph G. Anderson, Jr., and Jacob R. Ballard leaving school to go off to fight Lee’s Army.21

The newly organized company, with Catto leading the way, marched to the West Philadelphia train station where a large number of blacks had gathered to say their farewells. Upon reaching Harrisburg they were fully mustered in and issued equipment, but Major General Darius N. Couch, of the Department of the Army in the Susquehanna area, refused to allow them to be inducted. His excuse was that Congress provided for the enlistment of blacks for not less than three years. Since this company was an emergency militia unit enlisted for limited services of a few months, they could not serve. Considering the dire state of the nation Couch’s view indicates his prejudice.

Reading of Couch's decision in the June 18, 1863 North American and U.S. Gazette, Secretary of the Army Edwin M. Stanton telegraphed Couch "You are authorized to receive into the service any volunteer troops that may be offered, without regard to color." But it came too late. The damage was done since the Catto-led black company had returned to Philadelphia.22

The black community and various segments of the white community became indignant when told of the treatment of the black troops. Scarcely a week elapsed after Catto's return from Harrisburg before he attended a mass meeting at Franklin Hall to protest Couch's actions. Speeches by blacks and whites decried the treatment of Catto's recruits. Major George Sterns, one of the few whites in favor of enlisting the black regiment sent to Harrisburg; William D. Kelley, the Republican congressman; Ebenezer D. Bassett, the principal of the institute; and black David E. Gipson spoke out for the necessity of enlisting black troops. The rally produced resolutions in which Philadelphia blacks offered to throw "aside unpleasant memories of the past", look to the future, and ask only the same guarantees and fair play received by whites. They also reiterated their "willingness and readiness to defend the union."23

This meeting led to rumors in Philadelphia that a proscribed list of blacks, Catto included, was being singled out for hostile treatment by white groups. For this reason blacks deemed it wise to move "cautiously" on the streets and to go home early at night.24

George Stearns turned to the Union League and appealed to patriotic Philadelphians to help. Finally a group of seventy-five Philadelphians organized themselves as the Supervisory Committee.

22. The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies Series 1, 27, pt. 3:203. This statement stands in marked contrast to earlier rejections of black efforts to join the service. In 1853 "Colored gentlemen" asked Thomas Firth, Inspector General of the Pennsylvania Militia if they could join the army. His reply was "My opinion is it would produce a devil of a riot and some of the lawyery might indict me for 'inciting a riot.' But joking aside—My own mind is made-up. If the Adgt. Genl. [General George Cadwalader] desires this done he has got to find another Inspector in my place—for I hope to go to ______. . . . if I ever put on My uniform to inspect any set of Niggers. . . . I don't believe the almighty ever intended a Nigger to be put on a par with the whites and I won't be a party to such matters. . . ." See Thomas Firth to General Cadwalader, Philadelphia, 13 April 1853, Cadwalader Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.


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for Recruiting Colored Regiments. Cooperating with Stearns, this committee raised eleven regiments of U.S. troops for Pennsylvania as well as establishing the Free Military School at 1210 Chestnut Street for white officer candidates who were to become leaders of black regiments. Camp William Penn, the training ground of black soldiers located in Chelten Hills, also became part of the committee's responsibility. Events now occurred with such rapidity that by the end of 1863 Philadelphia blacks were wearing the uniform of the Union Army.

Octavius V. Catto became active in the first division of the Pennsylvania National Guard. Commander General Louis Wagner, recognizing his abilities, approved his appointment as a major and inspector for the fifth brigade. Undoubtedly Catto gained increased military status because of his continued close association with members of the Republican party and his membership in the newly-formed Equal Rights League. Wagner found Catto to be a "conscientious and faithful officer . . . [who] labored effectively in the organization of this command . . . [an] honored and respected soldier of the Commonwealth." Army records and what is known of Catto's life during the war years indicate that he never saw action but remained in the Philadelphia area where he continued his service as a teacher at the institute.

Catto's military experience made him an ardent and confirmed Republican. He saw the principles of republicanism as the hope for American blacks. The formation of a State Equal Rights League was welcomed by Catto since it was begun by Republicans with the expressed purpose of helping blacks to gain the right to vote. In October 1864 he met with black leaders from all over the country at the National Convention of Colored Men in Syracuse, New York. At the opening session convention President Frederick Douglass declared: "We are here to promote the freedom, progress, elevation, and perfect enfranchisement of the entire people of the United States." To Douglass the cause of acquiring equal rights de-

26. The Press (Philadelphia), 14 October 1871. Louis Wagner had been the Commander of Camp William Penn, the training area for black troops during the Civil War. It was located in suburban Philadelphia 1863-1865.
27. Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men, Held in the City of Syracuse, New York, October 4, 5, 6, and 7, 1864, with the Bill of Wrongs and Rights and the address to the American People (Philadelphia, Historic Publications, 1969), p. 11. Catto's activities in Philadelphia on behalf of the Rights League were numerous. For one such meeting see The Christian Recorder, 1 September 1866.
manded national organization. Organization of a National Equal Rights League supported by state leagues followed, with Douglass as President.

In November of 1864 Pennsylvania's blacks met in Philadelphia to found the Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League. Catto was elected to the position of corresponding secretary, Jacob C. White, Jr., recording secretary, and William Nesbitt of Altoona president. The league's objectives consisted of encouraging "morality, education, temperance, frugality, industry, and prompt [ing] everything that pertains to a well ordered and dignified life and to obtain by appeals to the mind and conscience of the American people or by legal process a recognition of the rights of the colored people. . . ." Leaders Nesbitt and Catto urged the systematic arrangement of auxiliary leagues in every city and town of the state. By the time of the first state-wide convention in Harrisburg in February 1865, the Pennsylvania Equal Rights League had organizations in sixteen of the larger cities. The Philadelphia delegation of twenty-four men, headed by Catto and Joseph Bustill, constituted the largest bloc of voters.

After electing Reverend John Peck of Pittsburgh president, the league proceeded to the business of discussing the specific demands of the state's black population. What occurred next displayed Catto's ability to crystallize the thinking of blacks into specific demands. It all began on the second day of the convention when James J. Wright of Wilkes-Barre, presented what he hoped would be the convention's stand on education.

Inasmuch as the School Law of Pennsylvania provides that where there are twenty children of African descent, a separate school shall be established for them; and as we know by experimental knowledge, that colored children make greater advancement under the charge of colored teachers than they do under white teachers, therefore we consider it to be our incumbent duty, as lovers of the advancement of our race, to see to it, that our schools are under the charge of colored teachers.29  

John Quincy Allen, the first black teacher in Philadelphia’s public schools and at the time a teacher at the Institute for Colored Youth, took the floor and spoke against passage of the resolution. Allen argued for an amendment that “no discrimination on account of color ought to be made in the appointment of teachers for colored schools,” since this convention by its very declaration was for equal rights for all men. Reverend William J. Alston, of the Sanitary Commission at Philadelphia’s St. Thomas Presbyterian Church, disagreed with Allen, noting that the abilities of black teachers to teach black students “had been made evident to him by the experience of twelve years, and instanced [in] the difference in appearance between the schools under white and those under colored teachers.”

Wright, loath to accept Allen’s amendment, advocated passage of his original resolution. He told Allen “there [is] no use of our making provision about literary qualifications, for white teachers sufficiently qualified could not be induced to take charge of colored schools.” He was “surprised to hear gentlemen of intelligence discussing this amendment favorably.” Alfred Green thought it disgraceful for colored men, particularly those of the Philadelphia delegation, to argue against Wright’s resolution, since they knew better than anyone the poor treatment “which colored persons had received at the hands of that city’s Board of Controllers.” Green believed that any black Philadelphian at the convention who voted for Allen’s amendment would “be ashamed to meet their constituents. . . .”

Allen’s amendment was voted down by the convention. Catto then asked to address the convention. He agreed with the black-teachers-in-black-schools argument but disagreed with the phraseology, since such a resolution might be quoted as a statement based on preference for certain teachers merely on account of color. Catto “did not wish to turn his back on the fact that the colored man was the best teacher for colored children [since] he had long been of the belief that no white man could so well instruct colored children as could a colored teacher.” He credited the latter’s success to a clear recognition by all blacks that black teachers “had the welfare of the race more at heart, knowing that they rose or fell together. . . .” Catto’s amendment read: “In the appointment of teachers for these schools, colored
persons, their literary qualifications being sufficient, should receive the preference, not by reason of their complexion, but because they are better qualified by conventional circumstances outside of the school-house." With this addendum Wright's motion passed unanimously and served as a plank in the platform of the State Equal Rights League.

This educational platform became the credo for Catto's fellow teachers at the Institute for Colored Youth. Partly motivated by their own need for employment and partly by their feeling that they were fitted best to educate black children, institute members advocated Catto's stand for the next thirty years. Complaints in the black newspaper *The Christian Recorder* also advanced Catto's position and illustrated his ability to speak for his people in racial matters.

It constrains us more than ever to adhere to our motto of "Colored teachers for colored schools," and further that those white teachers take no real interest in their work nor of the scholars but teach and tolerate them only in order to enable them to draw the money they receive at the end of each month.

Now, if white people of this country are so bitterly opposed to sending their children to school with the colored, why is it that they are so anxious to teach us? . . . It must be the dollars and cents they are after and not the moral interest of our children. . . . We are tired of white overseers, we got enough of them during the days of slavery.

Catto's role in reconciling the opposing elements at the Equal Rights Convention, while still proposing a platform which had the support of the black community, demonstrates his leadership qualities among his people. However, his position on black teachers for black schools made him a greater threat to whites who were coming more and more to the view that the institute was the center for black malcontents. Rumors of teachings about Haiti, the enlistment of blacks for military service, and the news that Catto had become a moving force in the Equal Rights League all tended to arouse whites against schools with an all-black teaching staff. As Catto was demonstrating at the institute, black teachers in black schools meant a loss of control over black students by whites and increased opportunities

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34. Ibid., p. 21.
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for the development of militant black leadership. What Catto did next attracted these growing antagonisms directly to him personally.37

Continuing his interest in the Equal Rights League during the Reconstruction era, Catto used the weight of that organization to fight for the desegregation of Philadelphia street cars in 1866. While some blacks tried to force the local street car companies to change their policies, Catto took another approach.38 Appointed to lead a three-man committee from the Equal Rights League, he went to Harrisburg to solicit the support of legislators in ruling against the segregation of street cars throughout the state. There he solicited the support of national representatives Thaddeus Stevens and William D. Kelley, and state representative Morrow B. Lowry to influence state legislators to support black claims. Also helpful in publicizing events surrounding the controversy was Colonel John W. Forney, owner of the Philadelphia Press.39 Catto's tactics won the day, for despite local foot dragging by city officials, the state legislature, under pressure from Radical Republicans, passed on 22 March 1867 a bill that desegregated the street cars of the state.

Just three days after passage of the law, Catto's fiancée, Caroline V. LeCount, was refused entry to a street car at Ninth and Lombard streets. Adding insult to the injustice the conductor shouted that "We don't allow niggers to ride." How influential Catto was in what transpired next is uncertain but Caroline went to a local magistrate who would not act since he had not received official notification of the

37. In 1866 the Age raised the issue of Haiti-like rule in Philadelphia if blacks received the vote. See, Philadelphia Age, 4, 29 September, and 2, 3, 4 October 1866. White reaction to the institute was generally negative. Simon Gratz, a member of the Board of Education, noted that "They [blacks] send their children to what is known as 'The Colored High School' which is about the same grade as one of our grammar schools. The number of colored people who have high aspirations in this direction is comparatively small. . . ." Catto's abilities indicate that Gratz underestimated the curriculum at the institute. Simon Gratz Scrapbook 1880-1892; Philadelphia Times, July 7, 1881. Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.


39. Philadelphia Tribune, 7 December 1912. The Press was a Republican paper and generally gave the blacks of the city greater coverage than any of the other white daily papers. Catto lauded John W. Forney at a serenade on May 26, 1867 on the occasion of the Grand Reunion Festival. See The Christian Recorder, 4 May 1867.
passage of the law and would not rely on newspaper reports. Not to be discouraged, Caroline went to the Pennsylvania secretary of state who was then in the city, obtained a copy of the bill, and returned to the magistrate. The conductor was arrested and fined $100. With this, the rights of blacks to ride street cars in Philadelphia was assured. 40

The street car victory served to increase the respect and admiration of local blacks toward Catto, but it was his athletic ability that broadened his popular appeal to include blacks from the various urban centers of the north. Despite medium size and a tendency to be stout, Catto was an agile baseball player. While still a student at the institute, Catto had learned the English game of cricket in games played against Lombard School. In 1865 Catto, like many Union soldiers, began to play the American version of the same game—baseball. 41

The first black baseball team to leap into prominence was the Monitor Club of Jamaica, Long Island (1865). Then came the Bachelors of Albany, New York (1865), followed by the Excelsiors of Philadelphia (1866). Other teams forming at the same time were the Mutual and Alert Clubs of Washington, D.C., the Blue Sky Club of Camden, New Jersey, the Monrovia Club of Harrisburg, and the Unique Club of Chicago. 42

Philadelphia became the center of interest for black baseball in the late 1860s, when a second local team was formed. The Pythians, as they came to be called, were captained by Catto who was also the team's star player. During these early years there was keen competition between the two Philadelphia teams for players, prompting some black families and friends to feud over which team to support. 43

More than just a game, baseball provided the Philadelphia black community with a social event which, in some cases, lasted over an entire week. There were picnics, dances, and lunches showered upon the players. Black women planned nightly entertainment and dinners that caused great excitement within the community. This was particularly true in September 1867 when the first black team to visit

43. Ibid. For a complete description of the Pythian Baseball Club activities read: MS Pythian Baseball Club Papers, Gardiner Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
the city, the Bachelors from Albany, came to play a series against Catto’s Pythians. A field was equipped with stands at 11th and Wharton streets and the beginnings of a black baseball dynasty had begun.  

Later the same month the Mutual and Alert baseball clubs of Washington visited Philadelphia. The Mutual team listed among its players two young prominent blacks of the day: Major Charles R. Douglass, son of Frederick Douglass, and Hugh M. Brown, later principal of the Cheyney Training School. By the end of the 1867 season, Catto’s Pythians had compiled a record of nine wins and one loss, that to the Bachelors.  

That winter, meetings of the Pythian Club were held in a second floor room at Liberty Hall, Seventh and Lombard streets, to determine means for strengthening the team. Catto and Jacob C. White, Jr. formulated plans to improve the team. Hard practice during the spring and a few new players seemed the best approach. That spring Catto enticed two outstanding players to join the Pythians. The first, John Cannon, was “considered by whites a baseball wonder” even in those early days of the sport. Of equal ability was George Brown of West Chester, “a pitcher, the best amateur of his day....” The result of the training by Catto and the addition of these two players was an undefeated season in 1867. All of this served to increase Catto’s popularity with lower-class blacks who were spectators and participants in baseball.  

Baseball had provided Catto with a vehicle for gaining contacts with blacks from other sections of the country. Games with black teams from Chicago, Brooklyn, Albany, and Washington had permitted social intercourse and discussions of the major issues of the day. Communication between the various black communities of the north had been enhanced and Catto’s leadership among young blacks was becoming more evident.  

In 1868 a group of white teams met in Harrisburg to form the Pennsylvania Convention of Baseball Clubs. As might be expected, Catto’s undefeated Pythian club attempted to join the league and integrate baseball. Although they were supported by representatives Hayhurst and Ellis of the Philadelphia Athletics, the majority of white teams opposed the black team’s membership. Again, even in

46. Ibid.
his leisure time, Catto became a central figure in efforts to remove discriminatory barriers facing blacks. His aggressive nature and strivings for equality had again exceeded the role that whites expected of blacks. In this case he offended the lower classes of white society that enjoyed baseball. They intended to keep their teams and league white and they did.47

Catto's dealings with the Quaker Board of Managers at the Institute for Colored Youth reflected a similar discontent on his part with the status quo. He had always demanded fair and equal treatment from the board. As a new, underpaid teacher in 1862, Catto threatened to leave the institute for a higher paying position at a Brooklyn public school. He submitted a "Declaration on the Subject of Leaving the Institute," which was answered by an increase of one hundred dollars per year in salary. Catto's reply at the time was simply that "I . . . [am] satisfied and . . . [will] continue with the institute."48

When Ebenezer D. Bassett left the principalship in 1869 to become ambassador to Haiti, Catto wrote Alfred Cope, Chairman of the Board of Managers, and requested the position. In his favor Catto could cite service to the school, an unqualified position as a leader among Philadelphia blacks, and efforts on behalf of civil rights. Catto wanted the position and Cope knew it. In a polite reply Cope carefully avoided any commitment to the black leader. He wrote on April 4, 1869:

My Esteemed Friend O.V. Catto, . . . we all have a high appreciation of thy services to the Institute and shall be glad to do whatever we can to promote thy welfare . . . [but] to necessity we must yield and no one could complain of us for that.49

A month later Catto learned of the board's appointment of Fanny Jackson (Coppin), an Oberlin graduate and head of the institute's female department, to the position he had sought. Catto considered resigning from the school. He applied for the principalship of the

48. O. V. Catto to H. H. Pierson, Philadelphia, 10 October 1862, and private paper preserved in the Catto Papers entitled "Declaration on the Subject of leaving the Institute," Gardiner Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
49. Alfred Cope to O. V. Catto, Philadelphia, 4 April 1869, Catto Papers, Gardiner Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
OCTAVIUS CATTO

Brooklyn Colored School on 11 May 1869. Whether rejection of his application followed is not clear, but the board saw fit to reduce his teaching load and make him head of the boys’ department. These concessions convinced Catto to continue as a teacher at the institute.

The reason for the board’s rejection of Catto is not spelled out clearly in the rather bland and self-patronizing minutes of the institute. Still, when viewed in historical perspective, there were some characteristics of a man like Catto that rankled the sensitivities of Quakers and made his candidacy for the leadership of their institute repugnant to them.

Catto always believed in his right to act independently and to forcefully push for improvement of the conditions of blacks in the world outside the classroom. This was not an approach which endeared him to Quakers with their ideas of loyalty to the group and a non-militant, peaceful pursuit of desired goals. In what appeared to some whites as arrogance, Catto always contended that the black man was equal to the white man in all respects and that blacks could and would eventually be leaders in the nation. There were times when the institute was drawn into civil rights campaigns and war recruiting activities. This did not fit the non-violent nature of Quakerism. Catto, of course, was the leader in these efforts. To the Quaker, the fight of the black man for political and social equality was a matter which should be kept outside the school. The classroom was for learning subject matter and not for proselytizing black hopes and dreams.

Catto’s charismatic leadership and his ability to sway groups at public forums made him a threat to the managers. The Quakers wanted to continue to make the major decisions affecting the institute. Clearly, if Catto became the principal, he could use his influence with the black community to undermine that power. It was Catto’s position with Philadelphia blacks that had forced the board to grant him raises in salary so that he would not leave the institute. How embarrassing it would have been for the Quakers to lose the services of a black leader and educator like Catto. Despite their need to

50. O. V. Catto to William Buckley, Philadelphia, 11 May 1869, Catto Papers, Gardiner Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Levi Coppin, Unwritten History (Philadelphia, 1919), p. 352. Coppin states that Catto would “not teach under a woman.” This explanation does not consider the relationship of Catto to the managers.

51. Conyers, Cheyney State, pp. 163-164.
keep him at the institute the managers could not risk his promotion.

The appointment of Fanny Jackson (Coppin) was much safer. She was a well educated and respected black who owed the managers a favor. They had given her numerous loans to relieve her indebtedness, for which she was always appreciative. How comforting for the managers to have someone that relied upon them for help as their educational leader. The fact that Jackson was a woman also presented much less of a threat to their control of the school. Ironically, once she became principal, Jackson became an aggressive and outspoken leader. On numerous occasions she disobeyed her superiors and did what she thought was best for the students. Despite these later disagreements, the implication remains that in O.V. Catto the managers saw a greater threat to their control of the school and for that reason he was passed over for the principalship.

In spite of these undercurrents, the record of the Institute for Colored Youth Board of Managers in promoting black advanced education during this period cannot be disparaged. A plaque on the present Cheyney State Library building expresses these sentiments:

> This tablet is set up to express the lasting gratitude of Alumni, students and teachers for the pioneer service rendered by the Society of Friends to the cause of the education of the American Negro, first in the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia then in the Cheyney Training School for Teachers in Cheyney. From 1837 to 1920 Friends built up and supported a private school for the professional training of Negro teachers. They maintained the highest standards, visioning ever the highest humanity. It was a venture of faith in dark days of our national life requiring foresight, Christian courage, patience, self-sacrifice and the giving of their material substance. In 1920 this Institution became the fourteenth state normal school in this Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.  

52. Fanny Jackson Coppin introduced the study of German without the consent of the managers for which she was reprimanded. Later she fought for industrial education as a new curriculum at the institute even though the managers would not endorse the project. See Conyers, Cheyney State, pp. 174, 182-190.

53. The plaque is currently located to the left of the main entrance to the library at Cheyney College in Pennsylvania.
Still, the board’s relationship with Catto in 1869 illustrates the dilemma which its policies and attitudes forced upon black educational leaders. Rather than encouraging black independence and prompting black efforts to change the views of a prejudiced society, they continued to demand black compliance with their views. While Quakers did provide educational opportunities for blacks, they did not support nineteenth-century activities by blacks in political and social matters.

Although disappointed with his treatment at the hands of the Quaker managers, Catto never let these feelings interfere with his relentless campaign aimed at equal treatment for blacks. In the summer of 1869, at the request of Republican leaders, Catto went south to speak in the state of Virginia on behalf of the Fourteenth Amendment. The next year he was granted a leave of absence to go to Washington, D.C., to organize the black schools of that city to accommodate the freedman. Clearly, Catto was now beginning to emerge as a national black figure. His intimate friend, William H.A. Wormley, encouraged him to stay in Washington as director of these schools but Catto could not obtain a release from his teaching duties at the institute.\textsuperscript{54}

The passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 set off celebrations among the blacks of Philadelphia on 26 April. Church services began the festivities early in the day. Bunting and decorations were seen everywhere in the city’s black districts. Scores of halls had parties scheduled to mark the occasion. One celebration at Horticulture Hall featured music and speeches by abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Robert Purvis, while another ceremony at the Union League focused upon the presentation of a banner commemorating the event to Octavius V. Catto and other black leaders. Catto pledged to his Republican friends that “the black man knows which side of the line to vote.” Despite the merriment and excitement of the day there was a foreboding shadow cast upon the event when some shots were fired into a crowd of marchers on their way home.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{54} The Press (Philadelphia), 14 October 1871; Conyers, Cheyney State, p. 165. The friendship of Wormley is expressed in a letter to Catto. See, William H. V. Wormley to Catto, Washington, 17 September 1860, Catto Papers; and O. V. Catto to Jacob C. White, Jr., Washington D.C., 2 October 1871, White Papers, Gardiner Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Threatening letters to Catto after the incident indicated the extent to which his enemies would go to keep him from organizing the black vote. Reassured by a friend to pay little attention to "their authors or contents," Catto continued his efforts to organize blacks for voting.  

In the fall of 1870 Catto's name again came before the public's eye. He was the central character in a racial dispute at the Franklin Institute. Guest lecturer B. Howard Rand, M.D. refused to lecture at the institute because Catto had recently been admitted as a member. While many city whites supported Rand and agreed that Catto should be ousted, the institute did not. The lecture was cancelled and Catto retained his membership. Still, the event only sharpened white Philadelphia's growing concern over the young militant's behavior.  

Even more alarming to most whites were the elections that were taking place at the time of the institute dispute. For the first time blacks, enfranchised by the Fifteenth Amendment, appeared in large numbers at the polls to vote. To avoid trouble Democrats and Republicans agreed that blacks would vote after whites. However, when blacks were formed into separate polling lines, rumors spread concerning possible violence. Under the provisions of the 1870 Force Act General E. M. Gregory, United States Marshal for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, sent a company of marines to keep order. No violence ensued, but Mayor Daniel M. Fox, a Democrat, protested the action and Governor John W. Geary expressed doubt before the General Assembly that the action was necessary.  

In the summer of 1871 Catto returned to Washington to aid in the administration of the freedman schools. His travels to the capital increased his interest in politics. Praise came from his Republican friends that "he was prominent in politics being looked up to and confided in by his people as a man of earnest convictions and judgments beyond his years." To a Philadelphian "he was the pride of his race in this city, . . . being the ablest and best educated among the colored men of this city."  

Catto returned to Philadelphia in the early part of October 1871 to continue his teaching at the Institute for Colored Youth. On  

57. The Press (Philadelphia), 14 October 1871.  
58. Brown, Negro, pp. 52-55.  
election day 10 October a fight between black and white voters two blocks away from the institute spread throughout the black sixteenth ward and into the vicinity of Sixth and Lombard streets. Mass violence erupted throughout these black sections and local police, rather than federal troops, were called to intervene. They did little to stop the racial rioting that continued throughout the day.  

At the institute the students had been dismissed at the first signs of disorder so that they might arrive at home before the situation became more serious. Catto used his free time in the school to write up some military reports and then told a fellow teacher that he would go to vote. Warned of the dangers, Catto replied that he had not a chance to vote earlier and that he intended to exercise his right as a citizen. He left the school building unarmed. After a confrontation with some whites a block away from the school, Catto headed for the mayor's office to seek help. On Chestnut Street he was again accosted by some white ruffians, who pointed a pistol at him, threatening his life if he went to vote. Catto went to a near-by store and purchased a pistol. When a friend reminded him that he had no cartridges, he replied that he had some at home.

Catto now proceeded down Ninth Street onto South Street where a white man with a bandage on his head came up from behind and called out to him. Catto moved away from the man, later identified as Frank Kelly, cognizant of the gun held in his hand. Whether Catto pulled his gun or not is unclear, but Kelly fired three shots into Catto killing him instantly. Kelly ran from the scene while numerous citizens stood staring at the bleeding body lying in the street.  

The body was moved to a near-by police station where, in a heart rending scene, Caroline LeCount identified her fiancee's body. Two other blacks met death and many whites and blacks were wounded before the melee subsided.

At a mass meeting on Friday, 21 October 1871, black and white citizens passed resolutions deploring the bloodshed and censuring city officials for not having maintained order. Investigations of the riot showed more police abuses than mob violence. A Lieutenant Haggerty actually had encouraged his men to keep blacks from voting, and for this Judge of Elections Joseph Allison placed him under $10,000 bail.  

Slain black Levi Bolden had been shot in the

61. Public Ledger (Philadelphia), 13 October 1871.
back, and a warrant was issued for a policeman following Dr. Elisha Shapleigh’s post mortem. All of this led Robert Purvis to comment that “in the death of Mr. Catto liberty has been strengthened.” Unfortunately for blacks, Purvis had spoken too quickly, for further court hearings produced no convictions.

In a full military funeral, led by Major Catto’s Fifth Brigade, the cortege left the city armory at Broad and Race streets in an hour-long procession down Broad Street. A contingent of grief-stricken students from the institute joined the funeral march. Thousands of whites and blacks lined the route of march to honor the fallen leader. Newspaper reports the next day judged the funeral to be the most elaborate ever held for a black person in America.

At the institute the pupils spent the next two weeks in solemn meditation in remembrance of their former teacher, but the Quaker managers avoided taking a position which would uphold justice. In a special meeting the managers appointed a committee of two to obtain legal counsel and attend the coroner’s inquest into Catto’s death. Three days later they reported that the proper authorities were at work on the case and that the committee’s services were not necessary. However, the eventual report by the coroner amounted to nothing more than a whitewash, and although the managers had declared that they had learned “not only to highly estimate his [Catto’s] service as an instructor which his faithfulness made more valuable every year ... [and] that a life which promised to be one of much more than ordinary usefulness, had been lost and this loss would be especially felt by the school,” there is no evidence of further committee activity.

Even more disturbing was the rapid retreat of most blacks from politics. The Republican-sponsored Equal Rights League moved its headquarters from Philadelphia to Reading in 1872. Isaiah C. Wears assumed the leadership of local black Republicans but lacked the charismatic leadership qualities of Catto. Important issues such as school desegregation and increased political activities were virtually

64. Ibid.
left untouched by black politicians like Wears. Catto’s death brought to an end black militant behavior in nineteenth-century Philadelphia. 68

Using the assassination of Octavius V. Catto as a barometer of racial attitudes among northern whites, the outlook for urban northern blacks was bleak. Assessing the situation, a white contemporary spokesman cited racial reasons. “Catto did not die because the murderer was his natural enemy. He died because a poor demented wretch was taught that the black man had no right the white man should respect.” 69 Obviously, the feeling of prejudice against blacks was as strong in the north as in the south during the Reconstruction period. The northern urban dweller never really wanted equality for blacks, even one as reputable as Catto. Ironically, it was the quality of his intelligence, upright character, and charismatic leadership that increased the fears among whites. How uncomfortable, even dangerous, for urban whites to have such a man in their midst. Black minister J. Walker Jackson made this point clear when he asked, “Could it have been because of his erudition and eloquence that his life was taken?” Apparently those present agreed, shouting, “That’s it!” and “That’s Right!” 70

Clearly, Catto did not fit the white stereotype of what a black man should be. To most Philadelphia whites his entrance into Republican politics only served to increase racial tensions within the community. As an outspoken supporter of the Republican party, he laid himself open to the scorn and animosity of local Democrats. It was precisely this political involvement which motivated those who killed Catto. Never before had the black community of Philadelphia produced a leader who saw so clearly the necessity for blacks to increase their participation in government and politics. In actuality, Catto’s death served as a warning for Philadelphia blacks to stay out of politics.

Catto’s fanatical insistence on equality for all men further exacerbated the situation. His success in integrating the local militia units, the Franklin Institute, and the local street cars had made him a symbol of black militancy in the city. In the end, Catto died because he chose to act on an equal basis with whites even to the point of exercising his political rights at a time when most whites considered

68. Isaiah C. Wears Papers, Gardiner Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
70. Ibid.
him to be inferior and entitled to no rights. This widespread anti-black prejudice did not even allow the trial of Catto’s known assassin Frank Kelly, proof that a white man in Philadelphia could not be convicted of killing a black man anymore than a white man in the south could be held for a similar crime.

Clearly, the racial atmosphere in Philadelphia did not permit the growth of local black leadership. In all likelihood a similar atmosphere existed throughout the North. Any wonder that black leadership for the next thirty years, until the emergence of W.E.B. DuBois, would come from the black schools of the South. Could the mentality of submission, as symbolized by Booker T. Washington, have had its beginnings in the violence and suppression of the urban North and not in the rural South? Catto’s life and death give credence to just such a hypothesis.

71. Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery* (Chicago, 1961), *passim*. Litwack shows the antebellum North to have the same racial prejudices as the South. Undoubtedly these attitudes continued and grew more intense during the reconstruction period.