

Landlord-Tenant Relations in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia

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In the late 1790s, Jonathan and Elizabeth Meredith were a wealthy Philadelphia couple who had achieved their financial well-being through twenty years of hard work in their tannery on Third Street, and by making property investments in the city and surrounding area. Between 1794 and 1797 Elizabeth Meredith (1742-1799) regularly corresponded with her oldest son, David, who had started a shipping venture between Philadelphia and France. Her letters to David are full of details of the tannery business, politics in the capital city, the progress on construction of six houses they were building as rental properties close to the President's house near Independence Hall, and troubles with various tenants.¹ The Merediths' aggressive determination to profit from investments is starkly revealed in the following letter, as Elizabeth Meredith provides her son with a detailed account of their ruthless practice as landlords.²

After a work of several years we have at last got Mrs. Bankson out of the house in Front St. He died Last fall a martyr to dissipation, which I believe was brought on him by his wife who is a perfect tyrant. Their time was out in the house in April last, but previous to this though served with a regular notice, she had let the house till July to two members of Congress ready furnished and had gone to Baltimore. Your father took possession legally at the time, and the members of Congress became his tenants. Leases were drawn in which they engaged to give your father possession as soon as the session of Congress was ended. Two days before the arrival of that period, she came up from Baltimore, bringing with her a woman of the name of Young (a name by which we have ever been losers) to whom she had let the house till next autumn. The day arrived and the gentlemen came up requesting your father would come down and take possession. Whereas your father's representative went down. Robert³ was with us at the time, and was expressing his doubts respecting Mrs. B, who had applied again for the house and had been refused. Robert said he would go with him out of curiosity. Down they went, and Lo! to their great dismay Mrs. Young had secreted herself in the house in order to keep possession. The members of Congress made a formal declaration of the delivery and after an encounter of two or three hours (the members and family being gone) and they had set Jerry to smoke unmercifully in the room and every place she occupied. She went to the street door, as she said to breathe, and they shoved her out and locked the door. They then rallied their forces to a considerable number: paraded on the pavement before the door, Mrs. B abusing every individual of the family like a common Billingsgate. Poor Bob and Bill were voluntary prisoners in the castle till evening, when Bob declaring he thought he

had paid for his curiosity, wished to devise some means that they might retire for the night. Jerry, being the most formidable sentinel we could place there, was despatched with his bed for the purpose, and the lads returned exulting in their stratagem. But Lo! the next morning an account was received by your father that two justices and a constable had broke open the house and given them possession! Again we rang the alarm bell and the drum beat to arms but our poor General was disabled, and could not take the field! Two Lawyers were feed, viz, Joseph Thomas and Samson Levy, but nothing could be done to get them out immediately. It was discovered to be a work of time, but it was necessary that we should keep possession. Guard was mounted by our family in succession, this lasted two days longer. At last there was a pleading ordered by the gentlemen of the law, [illegible] One Robinson, a worthless fellow in Southwark who had obtained the office of a justice and had ordered the breaking of the house open, Lewis and Armstrong against, and Thomas and Levy for your father, but it was productive of no other effect than the worshipful squires ordering two warrants to be served on Jonathan Meredith and a black fellow (our coachman) for a forcible Entry into the Premises of Mrs. B. The warrants were Served and they agreeably to the advice of our attorney, to whom Mr. Ingersol was added, were sent to jail and fined ten pounds a piece. Your father then applied to Mr. McKean⁴ who interested himself in the business. The justice and lawyers were summoned and severely reprimanded and the boys released. His advice was also to retain possession. Your father's mind retains its activity and after 6 or 7 days had passed without any alteration, he ordered a parcel of dry hides, tanned leather, and to be taken down and put up a signboard. The smell offended the ladies and they decamped, putting in the house two fellows of very bad character to keep possession. They, in rotation with a negro girl, have kept the house three weeks, they staying above stairs and our people below. But the day before yesterday they all left it but a little boy. Jonathan Meredith took advantage of their absence, locked up the doors, and turned out the boy. One of the fellows returned and again broke open the door by order of the Justice: took the street door off its hinges and the hinges off the cellar door. The Chief justice was again called upon, who issued warrants for the squire and the other ruffians and bound them over to the peace. The other fellow took possession again, but yesterday, using some very threatening language to Jonathan Meredith, Col. Coats granted a warrant against him and bound him over also. Your poor father was obliged to ride up to Col. Coats, when the business was before him, and just before it was concluded rode off. And knowing there was nobody in the house but a little boy, he got a stranger to run down and turn him out. And Jonathan Meredith was again in possession. This happened yesterday, and we are still quiet. How long we shall remain so, time must determine!

The revolution in France has not made more noise over the world, than this transaction has created in our city. It has occupied all our conversation and engrossed all our time. I can see you smile and think your mother might have employed her time to better purposes than writing this narrative! It is done on the old principle, My David - I must tell you everything.⁵

Notes

1. For more information on Elizabeth Meredith and her extensive participation in the family business see Susan Branson, "Women and the Family Economy in the Early Republic: The Case of Elizabeth Meredith," *Journal of the Early Republic* vol.16, no.1 (1996). Ric Caric details the Meredith family's various financial ventures in "Decomposition and Reconstitution: A Theoretical and Historical Study of Philadelphia Artisans, 1785-1820." (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1989), 14.

For information on building in the city see Donna Rilling, "Building Philadelphia: Real Estate Development in the City of Homes, 1790-1837," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1993); Billy G. Smith, *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), 21, 81; Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968); Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (1988); and Thomas M. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development*

in *Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 178.

Details on the speculation in property during the 1790s can also be found in Elizabeth Blackmar's study of New York City in this era. She claims that the assessed value on investments between 1795 and 1815 increased over 700%. *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 39.

2. The Merediths' ruthless attitude toward tenants was not new. Almost twenty years prior to the Front Street house fracas, Jonathan Meredith removed another woman, Mrs. Church, from a farm at Perkiomin Ferry because, as he argued, "there must be a tavern and ferry kept there and her situation with respect to laborers would not permit her even to work the place properly." Jonathan Meredith, March 20 1779.

3. David's business partner, Robert Andrews.

4. Pennsylvania Supreme Court Chief Justice Thomas McKean.

5 This letter is dated July 2, 1796. All of Elizabeth Meredith's correspondence is in the Meredith Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. I have corrected spelling and punctuation.