“To Drown the Ills That Discompose the Mind”: Care, Leisure, and Identity Among Philadelphia Artisans and Workers, 1785-1840*

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1. Introduction

In December, 1788, Mathew Carey, a Philadelphia printer and publisher, wrote that he had been forced to bed by a pain in his “heart” so intense that his belief in his premature death “was as strong on my mind as my natural existence.” However, by the time the pain stopped in 1791, Carey realized that his chest pain was psychosomatic and attributed his improved health to the psychological factor of his “greater content” after marriage. In fact, Carey suffered from hypochondria, an ailment in which “personal and social distress is expressed in an idiom of bodily complaints.” Far from indicating heart disease, Carey’s chest pain was a representation of the distress connected with his pioneering magazine enterprise, The American Museum. When Carey launched the Museum as a national magazine in January, 1788, he sought a state of “ease, affluence, happiness . . . , respectability, and public usefulness.” However, when limited capital and slow-paying subscribers forced Carey into a worsening state of poverty and indebtedness, his anxiety, frustration, and humiliation found expression in debilitating chest pain.1

During the 1780’s and 1790’s, most Philadelphia artisans employed their bodies to represent their identification with pre-industrial values of “independence,” “honor,” “respectability,” and “community.” In the Federal Procession of 1788, for instance, hundreds of artisans wore ceremonial white aprons and carried tools to represent their embodied craft skills as the source of their personal independence and value to the community. Most traditional artisans could represent their bodies in terms of “independence” because their anxieties and troubles were limited by the local character of their economic exchanges—they were “independent” of the vicissitudes of a national or world market. This was not the case with Carey, who made himself vulnerable to pressure from a wide variety of sources by distributing the Museum nationally. When his distant customers refused to pay for the Museum, Carey was forced to negotiate new loans, put off the payment of wages to his journeymen, and press his local distributors for remissions. In fact, Carey had so little cash that he had to borrow money to buy food at the market and pay postage on his mail. Facing all these difficulties, Carey could not represent himself in terms of such values as independence and honor. Instead, Carey developed symp-
2. Leisure and the Embodiment of Meaning

To understand how the leisure activities of traditional Philadelphia artisans allowed them to embody meanings such as independence, it is important to comprehend the role of feelings like "care" in artisan self-representation. Terms like "care," "trouble," "pain," "woes," and "ills" were used to describe mental states ranging from compulsive worry to hypochondria and melancholy. From the evidence of drinking songs and other celebrations of leisure,
“cares,” “troubles,” and the like were both pervasive and intensely troubling to those who suffered from them. This was especially the case because “care” often involved the representation of the body (and mind) as subject to division, penetration, dismemberment, and annihilation. However, these same sources also indicate that participation in leisure allowed individuals to displace or remove representations of bodily vulnerability to violence. In this sense, participation in leisure served to counter-act the representations associated with “care,” “trouble,” and other such mental states.

One example of this concern for “care,” “trouble,” and similar states comes in “A Song,” a short celebration of leisure that was written into the tavern account book of Robert and Lydia Moulder.

Will care cure the toothache or cancel a debt
Will duns or the gout be assuaged by a fret
Repining and whining both double our woe
So I’ll laugh and be fat and take things as they go

“Care” can denote a worry, grief, or solicitude that is so intense that it becomes a mental burden. This song assumed that the audience was familiar with care from personal experience and currently might be tempted to fall into an attitude of care. “A Song” argued that all individuals should avoid “care” in relation to problems like toothaches and debt because intense worry and concern was not going to correct a rotten tooth or produce money to pay debts that was not already there. If anything, the intensity of the worry and concern in “care” would have functioned to paralyze individuals and keep them from taking the best course of action to address these kinds of practical problems. “Care” is also associated with behaviors like “fretting”, “repining,” and “whining” that distract people from addressing their difficulties and serve both to exacerbate practical problems and increase the mental trauma associated with those problems. “Repining” is especially harmful because of its connotations of languishing in inactivity and otherwise withdrawing from social intercourse.

As an alternative to “care,” “A Song” recommends leisure as a strategy for dealing with the practical problems of life. To “laugh and be fat” is to engage fully in leisure. It is to eat heartily, enjoy a friendly glass, join in workplace drinking and observe the holidays, all of which is the opposite of being consumed with care. To laugh and be fat is to be happy in the face of practical difficulties. For people to signify their bodies in terms of laughing and being fat was to convey a bodily integrity and self-sufficiency that was invulnerable to the impact of either practical problems or the fears and worries linked to care. To “laugh and be fat” is to assert a strong sense of well-being—a state of satisfaction, fullness, and satiation—despite the difficulties of everyday life.
Leisure is thus a sphere where practical difficulties lose their psychological significance and participation in leisure makes it possible for individuals to deal fruitfully with the inevitable problems, to take things as they go.

Poor economic conditions continually confronted Philadelphia artisans with the kind of difficulties referred to in "A Song." Even masters had a difficult time making enough money to support their families in trades like shoemaking and tailoring. According to Billy Smith, the incomes of master shoemakers and tailors fell below the level required to purchase basic commodities during the 1780's and only recovered to barely meet such expenses during the 1790's. Deriving small profits from their trades, master shoemakers and tailors must have experienced considerable difficulty in paying for basic raw materials, journeymen's wages, and apprentices' food even in normal circumstances. Seasonal downturns, personal illness, illness in the family, and defaulting customers could force master shoemakers and tailors to forego wage payments to journeymen, skimp on food and clothing to their apprentices, and fail to pay debts to suppliers and creditors, who might threaten them with bankruptcy and debtors prison if they could not repay debts.4

Journeymen faced even greater problems because their standard of living was lower. Even at the peak of artisan prosperity during the colonial period, fully-employed journeymen shoemakers and tailors could not earn enough money from their labor to afford basic commodities for their families. They counted on income from their wives to bring family earnings up to a subsistence level. The economic downturns, illness, and failure to collect on debts which brought masters close to bankruptcy brought journeymen to a state of privation. Journeymen shoemakers and tailors could reduce their expenses by doubling up with other families or only eating coarse grains, but such strategems created the persistent difficulties of interpersonal disputes and susceptibility to illness. Wages for these and other trades dropped severely during the recession years of the late 1780's and early 1790's, and with few exceptions, only equaled the colonial level after 1800. For journeymen, "cares" and "woes" referred to the waves of personal difficulty precipitated by the onset of winter, cyclical downturns in the economy, a bout of personal illness, sickness in the family, or the failure of masters to pay wages. Any one of these conditions could initiate a crisis in which the journeyman and his family could not pay their small debts, afford food and rent, or procure petty loans from friends or relatives. Journeymen thus could be expected to be routinely pre-occupied with "cares" and "woes."5

The formulations concerning "care" in "A Song" were relatively mild compared to the formulations for "care," "trouble," "woes," and "ills" in other popular songs and poems. Where "A Song" portrayed "care" as an attitude that is taken by individuals, other songs and poems portray "woes" and "ills" as inevitably happening to individuals. In formulating "care" as an externally
imposed condition, such songs and poems signify individuals and their bodies as subject to division, penetration, violence, death, and dismemberment. For instance, the sign of the Union Hotel attributes a malignancy to “woes” and “ills” that is not found in “A Song”:

Whatever may tend to soothe the soul below  
To dry the tear and blunt the shaft of woe,  
To drown the ills that discompose the mind—  
All those who seek at Warwick's shall find

Where “A Song” portrays falling into “care” as a poor response to practical problems, the sign of the Union Hotel assumes that its audience will recognize themselves as already afflicted with “woes” and “ills.” These “shafts of woe” and “ills” are formulated as foreign bodies which exercise a violence and destructiveness on the mind, as shafts of woe that penetrate into the mind from outside and ills that work to break down mental organization or “discompose” the mind. The verse itself signifies individuals as mentally divided between the mind and the malignant states of ills and woes attacking the mind. Perhaps more importantly, the verse takes for granted that individuals passing by the hotel would signify themselves in the same way.

In the sign to the Union Hotel, leisure functions as a psychological counter-force to woes and ills. Where woes are seen as shafts that penetrate into the individual's soul, participating in leisure opposes further penetration and prevents further damage to mental equilibrium. Woes and leisure are thus posed in a relationship of violence with woe representing an exterior condition that forces its way into the mind and leisure representing an exterior condition that acts to oppose woe within the mind, thus functioning to soothe the mind. The same is the case with “ills” which violently work to dissolve the mind’s coherence, whereas sharing a friendly glass “drowns” those ills. Where business slowdowns, illnesses, and the inability to collect debts and wages were external events which precipitated mental states of “care,” “ills,” and “woes” for artisans, leisure activities were a set of external events which functioned to eliminate those mental states. Where practical problems acted violently on artisan mental functioning, leisure acted violently to remove that harm. Conceiving leisure as a counter-violence to “trouble” and “care” is important in other songs as well. For instance, a drinking song reprinted in Robert Waln’s *A Hermit in America on a Visit to Philadelphia* ends with the couplet: “if any care or pain remains, why drown it in the bowl.”

In other songs, terms like “cares,” “woes,” and “ills” were linked to the signification of the body as an object of violation and dismemberment. For example, in “Spanking Jack,” “troubles” are identified with the signification of the body as an object of external violence.
"Spanking Jack"

Spanking Jack was so comely, so pleasant, so jolly
Tho' winds blew great guns still he'd whistle and sing
Jack lov'd his friend, and was true to his Molly,
And if honor gives greatness, was great as a king:
One night, as we droe with two reefers in our mainsail
And the scud came on low'ring upon a lee shore
Jack went aloft for to hand the top g'a'ant sail,
A spray wash'd him off, and we ne'er saw him more
But grieving's a folly,
Come let us be jolly;
If we've troubles at sea, boys, we've pleasures ashore.

Bonny Ben was to each jolly messmate a brother,
He was manly and honest, good natur'd and free;
If ever one tar was more true than another
To his friend and his duty, that sailor was he:
One day with the davit, to heave the cadge anchor
Ben went in a boat on a bold craggy shore,
He overboard tipt, when a shark and a spanker
Soon nipt him in two, and we ne'er saw him more
But grieving's a folly,
Come, let us be jolly;
If we've troubles at sea boys, we've pleasures ashore.

Whiffing Tom, still full of mischief of fun in the middle
Thro' life in all weathers at random would job
He'd dance and he'd sing, and he'd play on the fiddle
And swig, with an air, his allowance of grog;
Long side of a Don, in the Terrible frigate
As yard arm and yard arm we lay off the shore
In and out Whiffing Tom did so caper and jib it
That his head was shot off and we ne'er saw him more
But grieving's a folly
Come let us be jolly
If we've troubles at sea boys, we've pleasures ashore.

But what of it all lads: Shall we be downhearted
Because that mayhap we now take our last sup?
Life's cable must one day or other be parted;
And death, in fast mooring, will bring us all up.
Yet 'tis always the way on't—one scarce finds a brother
Fond as pitch, honest, hearty, and true to the core
But by battle or storm, or some fell thing or other,
He's popp'd off the hooks, and we ne'er see him more
But grieving's a folly
Come let us be jolly
If we've troubles at sea boys, we've pleasures ashore. 8

In “Spanking Jack,” the practical difficulties of the sea make it necessary
for individuals to acknowledge the fundamental vulnerabilities of their bod-
ies. Even though “Spanking Jack,” “Bonnie Ben,” and “Whiffing Tom” were
paragons of manly virtue, they were subject to instant and horrible deaths at
the hands of nature. The horrible nature of the sailors’ deaths raised the ques-
tion of whether the vulnerability to death and dismemberment is the only
valid representation of the human condition: “But what of it all lads? Shall we
be downhearted/ Because that mayhap we now take our last sup?” The answer,
however, is that leisure justifies other representations of the human body and
human condition. The refrain to “Spanking Jack” poses a simple equality be-
tween “troubles at sea” and “pleasures ashore.” If troubles at sea involve the
loss of friends and mates, new ones could be gathered through participation in
leisure. If troubles have a connotation of the vulnerability of one’s body to
penetration, dismemberment, and death, pleasures serve to reconstruct the
body’s integrity. This would also be the case with artisan purchasers of “Spanking
Jack” who might have identified their own “troubles” as involving the signifi-
cation of their bodies as subject to invasion or dismemberment and identified
leisure as an activity through which they could reconstruct a bodily integrity.
It is this kind of bodily integrity that is also conveyed by the injunction to
“laugh and be fat” in “A Song.” Drinking, games, celebrations, and tavern
socializing would all make it possible to recreate a sense of the potential of
one’s body, to associate the body with either the masculine exploits of seaman-
ship or the masculine art of practicing a trade.

Participation in leisure served as an antidote to “cares” and “troubles
because the organization of leisure activities as “processes of recognition” al-
lowed artisans to re-establish an identification with values like independence
and honor. Artisan leisure activities can be considered as “processes of recogni-
tion” because they revolved around the acclaim or acknowledgement of indi-
viduals by various kinds of groups. From the most informal streetcorner gath-
erings to the operations of formal organizations like fire and militia compa-
nies, artisan leisure provided all participants with opportunities to display their
skill, knowledge, courage and other attributes and subjected participants to
the evaluation of a group. Work breaks, street encounters, tavern discussions,
games, and holiday celebrations were organized as situations of performance
in which individuals (and groups) displayed their ability, knowledge, or discipline before a collective body. Through their performances, artisans sought collective acknowledgement of their individual distinctness while groups affirmed their collective solidarity as they judged individual performances.9

These sequences of performances and judgments involved a symbolic process which reversed the process of falling into “cares” and “troubles.” Where “care” involved the signification of the body as subject to the violence of imagined external threats, leisure activities provided a process for re-establishing an identification with positive values and meanings. Because pre-industrial leisure activities were largely competitive, participants were introduced to people and things which they experienced as symbolizing the threats associated with their cares. The consequent defeat or overthrow of these people or things was also experienced as the overthrow of the threats associated with care, thus freeing individuals from the signification of themselves as afflicted or troubled. Further, the applause, shouts, huzzahs, and other forms of collective approval that followed upon the overthrow of opposition provided participants with an external communication associating them with values of “independence,” “honor,” and “distinction.” With their own independence, etc. being “mirrored” to them in this way, participants in cultural activities could once again signify themselves, their minds, and their bodies in terms of these values. In other words, values of independence, honor, and the like were embodied once again as the meanings of artisan existence.

One particularly good example of how artisan leisure worked as a social and symbolic process is an inventing contest that took place between Jacob Perkins and a naval officer at the shop of Perkins and Sellers on Mulberry Court. Jacob Perkins was a machinist and inventor who built small fire engines in partnership with Coleman Sellers between 1813 and 1817. Commodore Murray was a frequent visitor to the workshop of Perkins and Sellers who “would be and fancied himself an inventor.” Seeking to prove himself the equal of inventive mechanics like Perkins, Murray came to the shop one day to display a ship’s pump of his design. However, being unschooled in basic mechanics, Murray did not realize that he had spent months re-inventing the beer pump. For Perkins, Murray’s ignorance created an opportunity to display his own inventive skill. At first, Perkins acted like he was interested in Murray’s invention, working the pump a few times and complimenting Murray, repeating “it works well, Commodore; it is a capital thing.” Then, Perkins launched into a story of how his own extemporaneous invention of a pump had saved a heavily-laden schooner from sinking in a storm. Going into detail about how he fashioned the pump in less than an hour, Perkins “became more and more excited” and finished by boasting to Murray that he could make a better pump than Murray’s in less than half an hour and would be willing to bet an oyster dinner for twelve on his success.10
Murray had been seeking recognition as an inventor from a group of artisans by putting on an exhibition of his pump, but Perkins' boast turned Murray's exhibition into a competition that pitted half an hour of Perkins' efforts against several months of Murray's. Artisans mounted and attended a wide variety of exhibitions where individuals sought acclaim by displaying their talents and learning before an audience. These included recitals, public debates, displays of inventions, novelty exhibits, and theatrical performances. Likewise, artisans could initiate competitions by boasting of their knowledge, skill, courage, or ability to eat and drink. They also started competitive trials by insulting potential rivals and launching into performances. Among the fire and militia companies, occasions like fires or training days precipitated competitions among the companies and provided situations in which members could spark further contests through their boasts, challenges, and insults. Philadelphia artisans also initiated the pursuit of recognition by taking their turn in the pre-arranged sequences of tavern games, pitch-penny, card games, and bowling. Participation in leisure activities that involved seeking recognition began with the first work break at eleven a.m. and did not end until artisans left the taverns in the evening.1

Sources portray informal artisan leisure activities as occurring within "companies" which collectively judged their members. In the case of Perkins and Murray, a company of a dozen men gathered to watch their exchange, including the craftsmen in the shop, two or three regular visitors, and two boatmen from out of state. When Perkins challenged Murray to an inventing competition, he was using Murray's easily recognized ignorance as an opportunity to display his own abilities for the potential approval of the company. Perkins was also engaging himself in an onerous set of obligations that he would need to fulfill in order to receive recognition from the gathered company. By committing himself to a half-hour time limit, he was creating a severe test of his abilities to instantly invent machines and obligating himself to have the success or failure of his efforts judged according to the criteria of that test. This was a test that Perkins could have easily failed, which would have exposed him to embarrassment and ridicule. Such defeat would have been especially painful because he would have been defeated by a fool like Murray.2

After Murray accepted the bet, he and the rest of the company watched as Perkins built the pump he had described out of handy materials like an old boot. Perkins had his pump working within 24 minutes and it was so obviously superior that Murray declined a trial. In fact, Perkins' pump was a new kind of pump, becoming known as a "box pump," and was used on river barges for years. Having seen Perkins win the bet, Murray met his own obligation, telling Perkins to name the time and guest list for the oyster supper. Murray also gave Perkins the kind of flattering praise he had hoped to receive for himself, remarking "that the United States can have any number of my
safety pumps on all their vessels, but they cannot find a Jacob Perkins for every man of war.” For Perkins, who no doubt was already glowing in the assembled group’s admiration of his inventiveness and dexterity as a craftsman, this testimonial was the highest kind of praise. He still remembered it fifteen years later.\textsuperscript{13}

Perkins’ story of saving the storm-tossed schooner is the key to understanding how the contest with Murray affected Perkins’ signification of his body. In his story, Perkins’ efforts to invent the pump are told as part of a struggle against a raging sea that threatened to destroy the cargo, sink the vessel, and end Perkins’ own life. In his telling of the story, Perkins initially signifies his body as something that is subject to violent forces and then represents himself as able to use his craft skill and inventiveness to overcome such forces, and thus end his exposure to natural perils. Perkins’ representation of himself as exposed to a violent nature makes his exposure palpable in a manner analogous to the chest pain which gave exposure an immediacy as the meaning of his body to Carey. Representations of death and disease were made concrete in Carey's chest pains because they were conveyed as an objective condition of Carey's body. Carey's hypochondria signified bodily exposure by representing it as “real.”\textsuperscript{14} In Perkins' case, the representation of his body in terms of exposure was concrete because it was experienced as an objective condition arising from a stormy sea and leaky vessel. The difference between Perkins' story and Carey's chest pain was the amount of symbolic play in their representation of bodily exposure. Where Carey was representing his exposure to violent forces as “real” in his chest pain, Perkins was aware of the fictive character of his exposure to the sea, and thus was able to manipulate his narrative in his effort to challenge Murray.

However, by telling the story of saving the schooner as a preface to his challenge, Perkins was bringing connotations of his exposure to death into his upcoming contest with Murray. The chance that Perkins might not create a superior pump meant that he might suffer humiliation and embarrassment before the group. By telling the story of the schooner, Perkins was indicating that the possibility of defeat had the further connotation of vulnerability to external threat. Like Carey's hypochondria, the connotations of vulnerability were concretely real for Perkins in that he viewed them as part of the contest. The contest was thus a reprise of the fictional situation of the sinking schooner.\textsuperscript{15}

Carey’s hypochondria made his exposure palpable in a way that paralyzed him. On the other hand, the connotations of bodily vulnerability and exposure in Perkins’ challenge could be counteracted. When Perkins completed the pump and Murray acknowledged defeat, Perkins had overcome the possibility of embarrassment and humiliation and thus eliminated the connotations of exposure to violent forces from his situation. If Perkins felt a threat
that was as violent as a stormy sea, his own actions represented an even stronger violence against that threat, eliminating his exposure to danger and death. Perkins thereby paved the way for representing himself as respectable, honorable, manly, and socially useful. Instead of experiencing embarrassment and humiliation before the company, he had triumphed and received approving nods and smiles, if not cheers and applause. Perkins had vindicated his character as one of the city's leading mechanics and this vindication was reflected back to him in the gestures of the company. To this was added Commodore Murray's warm testimonial concerning Perkins' character as a man of rare qualities. All in all, Perkins was able to re-establish pre-industrial values as meanings of his body.

Street encounters, tavern contests, fire fighting, and holiday frolics can also be viewed as processes of recognition. When artisans made boasts, took positions, played practical jokes, arrived at fires, or called for a song, they were initiating cultural processes in which individual artisans performed before a company of men, seeking recognition of their identification with pre-industrial values. Artisans who entered into these activities burdened with "cares" and "troubles," artisans identified the threats they felt with the figures of competitors, performers, or spectators. Their victories over their rivals permitted artisans to overcome such psychological threats, obtain recognition, and finally experience themselves as independent, honest, manly, and free. In other words, they could restore their identification with pre-industrial values by signifying personal autonomy as the meaning of their body.

In cockfighting, the viewing of exhibitions, and some games, artisans engaged in this kind of cultural process without directly participating in competition. Rather, they projected the threats they felt into the social field of the contest or exhibition before them and overcame those threats as a result of their spectating. In 1808, an extensive account of a cock-fight was published in *The Tickler* by a writer who wished to reveal its savagery:

... In this condition he was led to the field of battle and because nature had not furnished him with weapons fatally keen, he was now supplied with artificial ones. I took notice of two men in striped jackets, who I after understood stiled themselves pitters. Their business was to encourage these little combatants to destroy each other ... . The engagement began, and these little creatures exerted much agility, and mighty valorous they were in their way. Oft were the bloody weapons extracted by these doughty seconds, and as oft did they urge them to the fight ... . After many severe onsets one of these poor creatures had an eye struck out by his antagonist's spur, which went with such violence as to pierce quite through the head. The barbarous com-
pany, instead of commiserating, announced their joy with a loud cheer, which was echoed throughout the whole circle. The weapon was again extracted, but this did not suffice. The combat must again be renewed. After a few more faint struggles . . . they fell to the ground, gasping in agonies, with heads reclined on the grass. After a few seconds, one of them raised his head, and made a motion with his bill, upon which a second tremendous roar proclaimed him victor . . .

But aside from the cruelty of the diversion, what ruin has it brought on families? How many poor mechanics have their wives and children starving at home for want of bread, while they are rioting and reveling at a cock-match! How many of the higher rank have forfeited their estates, and entailed poverty to their posterity, in order that they might pay what they call “debts of honour!”

Cockfighting allowed artisans and others to play out the process of concretizing and overcoming threats as spectators. What the handlers, owners, supporters, and spectators immediately saw and experienced was a panorama of death and dismemberment drawn out before them in the blood-spurting, eye-piercing, wing-mangling struggle between the cocks. As “Humanitas” emphasizes, the fight to the death was mandated by the rules and if a bird should “decline engaging” or “endeavor to avoid his destiny by flight . . . his neck must be twisted, as the reward for his prowess.”

In viewing the cockfight, artisan owners and bettors could project the threats they associated with “care” onto the field of battle and view those threats from the somewhat detached position of a spectator. This identification with the roosters was enhanced because the spectators bet on the match. If their cock won, the roar of his supporters did not merely signify the approval of victory or the winning of bets, but also a retrieval of the supporter’s individuality, a demonstration of the supporter’s own valor, skill, and virtue, and the representation of the security and fullness of their own bodily integrity in opposition to the agonized death suffered by the opposing cock. “Humanitas” quotes a typical “cocker” as saying “I glory in a good cock.” Receiving money from bets was a confirmation of both the spectator’s triumph in the face of death and his freedom from the connotations of vulnerability connected with “care.”

In some ways, sports like cockfighting, bear-baiting, and bull-baiting were models for pre-industrial artisan culture. The kind of spectatorship involved in cockfighting was undoubtedly important in many day to day cultural activities. Though pre-industrial culture was organized around competitive performance, most of the time artisans passed in work breaks, tavern so-
cializing, and dinner parties was taken up by observing and passing judgment on the boasts, social and political positions, jokes, stories, and singing of others. Like the spectating at a cockfight, everyday spectating in pre-industrial culture involved viewing the contests between friends and acquaintances as representations of annihilating struggle. Projecting their own feelings of being threatened into the contests of their friends, spectators in workshop, street-corner, and tavern companies identified with the overcoming of threats when they cheered the victor and further separated themselves from that sense of threat by heaping abuse and ridicule on the vanquished.

3. Early Experiences of Cultural Failure

The first step in the decline of pre-industrial culture among Philadelphia artisans was an overwhelming of pre-industrial symbolic mechanisms. The initial speculative enterprises of the 1780's and 1790's created enormous economic problems for those involved, magnifying their feelings of "care" and "trouble" and intensifying connotations of bodily exposure to threats of invasion, death, and dismemberment. When such artisans participated in leisure activity, they found it extremely difficult to displace the full sense of being threatened onto others and thus to re-establish "independence" and "honor" as the meanings of their bodies. Mathew Carey was a good example of a master who launched a speculative enterprise (The American Museum) and experienced many difficulties in keeping the enterprise afloat. He ultimately came to signify his own body as subject to tremendous pain. Although Carey was a faithful participant in leisure (visiting with friends, going to the theater, meeting in taverns with voluntary groups), his hypochondriacal chest pain indicated that the connotations of his body as subject to threats of death and disease had become so intense that he was compelled to represent them as "real" in his body. Instead of experiencing himself as "independent," "respectable," and "social useful," Carey experienced specters of death and disease as actual sensations in his chest. Thus Carey's participation in the cultural practices of pre-industrial leisure failed to reestablish his identity with pre-industrial values.

John Fitch is another example of how speculative artisan enterprise created pressures for cultural transformation. Like Mathew Carey, Fitch was an artisan who gave up traditional craft goals of achieving a modest "competence" and developed ambitions to acquire wealth and perform public service on a large scale. A prosperous silversmith in Trenton before the Revolution, Fitch lost his property to the British and spent much of the war as an Indian and British prisoner. While imprisoned in Detroit and Montreal, Fitch's ambitions took a speculative cast. When he returned to Bucks County, Fitch came up with the idea of using steam to power boats on water. Fitch's aim was to construct a steam-powered vessel on the western waters of the Ohio and
Mississippi. If successful, Fitch thought that he would make a fortune for himself and perform the public service of enriching "America at least 3 times as much as all that country N. W. of the Ohio . . . ." To Fitch this kind of contribution was comparable to Peter the Great's service in introducing "the arts in Muscovia" or Louis XVI in aiding the American Revolution. Instead of following more traditional artisans in thinking about "honor," "respectability," and "character" in terms of his reputation among small circles of his relatives, friends, and creditors, Fitch thought of these kinds of values in Homeric terms of undying fame. He asked himself rhetorically: "When future ages shall revere the great Lewis the 16, for promoting the happiness and interest of Mankind, will there be no sons of Columbia to eclipse the Mighty Monarch, and introduce one of the first powers of Nature into our Empire?"

However, Fitch's work on the steamboat brought him frustration and controversy instead of fame. At the beginning of 1786, Fitch moved to Philadelphia, formed a company of local investors to fund the construction of a steamboat, and recruited Henry Voight to work with him. Fitch's and Voight's initial experiments with steam-powered paddles and screws proved unworkable and they almost gave up the project after the embarrassing failure of one public trial. Even after Fitch came up with a workable plan to use cranks and oars and developed a number of technical innovations in cranking, he and Voight were still forced to engage in a tedious trial-and-error process to make their parts compatible.

The practical difficulties of steamboat building created severe financial problems for Fitch. Fitch and Voight often had to rebuild the whole steam works when they changed or adjusted a piece of equipment and were forced to return many times to his reluctant company of investors for money. However, money was not regularly forthcoming because the members of the company were not among the wealthiest men in Philadelphia. As a result, Fitch experienced cash shortages, was continually pressed for payment by his journeymen and landlords, and found himself so poor that he was forced to dress in clothes that had tears and holes in them. Some of Fitch's creditors were so frustrated by his failure to pay his debts that they resorted to the judicial system. "I have been continually tied with duns from our workmen and embarrassed with Constables, for debts; and continually so bare and mean an appearance, that every decent man must and ought to despise me from my appearance."

As a result of his difficulties, Fitch experienced neither the reverence due him as the man who "made the Greatest improvement on inland navigation that was ever made since the first invention of Paddles or Oars," nor the respect given to a prosperous craftsman. To the contrary, Fitch saw his efforts as painful and degrading. In reflecting on his frustrations in getting a patent for the steamboat from Congress, Fitch wrote that:
When I received information of that (his failure to receive an exclusive patent for the steamboat) and reflecting how I had ruined myself to serve my country, and how many sleepless, restless nights I had suffered to bring about one of the greatest events...and had placed myself on the base dependence of my friends, it effected me beyond measure, could I have been dependent on my township only for my sustenance I could have supported it much better, or could I have recalled my life for four years, I would gladly have offered my neck to the common executioner.23

With this disappointment, Fitch finds the whole history of anxiety and care connected to the steamboat to be such a burden that he imagines himself as better off if he had been executed before beginning the project. Where drinking songs portrayed leisure as violently overcoming "care," Fitch represented his own violent death as a strategy for "supporting" his awareness of the emotional traumas and enduring economic dependency of steamboat building. Fitch casually participated in pre-industrial leisure, treating his journey-men to brandy, getting "mildly glad" in liquor with passersby at the steamboat dock, founding a society of deists, and boarding at a tavern. However, participation in leisure did not allow him to overcome his steamboat-related cares. Either he could not concretize the violent threats implied by his anxieties and cares or he could not experience himself as overcoming them through cultural performance. Instead of overcoming care by exulting in the humiliation and defeat of others in the manner of Perkins, Fitch proposed to make his burden of care bearable by offering up his own death. Overcoming his sense of anxiety, humiliation, and degradation through violence toward himself is a recurring theme in Fitch's petitions and letters. In discussing his financial dependence on his friends, Fitch compares amputation favorably to asking his friends for money:

All the hardships that I have ever experienced were nothing to the distress of feeling in raising money from my best friends. Could money have been extracted from my limbs, amputation would have taken place, provided the disjointed part could have been readily joined, rather than to make the demands which I have.24

By 1792, Fitch could no longer mobilize support for the steamboat project from his friends and investors and consequently could not keep the steamboat project afloat. The death blow had come with the refusal of the commissioner of patents to give Fitch priority in the steamboat over his competitor Rumsey. By the beginning of 1792, Fitch was reduced to "writing his journal and auto-
biography, wearying his patrons with applications and remonstrances, and railing at the ignorance, prejudice, and folly of the world." Writing his Autobiography and Steamboat History were especially ominous because Fitch had decided to commit suicide and wanted to preserve his accomplishments for posterity, hoping to gain the future acclaim that his contemporaries denied him.

Fitch did not commit suicide for six more years, but the will that he drew up in July, 1792, represents a new departure in Fitch's self-representation. The focal point of the document is "The Song of the Brown Jug."

"The Song of the Brown Jug"

With my jug in one hand and my pipe in the other
I'll drink to my neighbor and friend
All my cares in a whiff of Tobacco I'll Smother
My life I know Shortly must End
While Ceres most kindly refills my Brown Jug With Brown Ale
I will make myself mellow
In my old vicar Chair I'll set myself snug
Like and jolly and true-hearted Fellow

I'll ne'er trouble myself with the Cares of my Nation
I've enough of My own for to mind
All we see in this World is but grief and vexation
To Death I am Shortly Resigned
So we'll Laugh Drink and Smoke and leave Nothing to Care
And Drop like a Pair [Pear] Ripe and Mellow
When Cold in my Coffin I'll leave them to Say
He's gone what a True-hearted Fellow

In "The Song of the Brown Jug," the acceptance of death is a condition under which Fitch overcomes his "cares" and reestablishes the bodily integrity of setting himself snug "like a true-hearted Fellow." When Fitch states that "my life I know Shortly must End" and "to Death I am Shortly Resigned," he indicates that he is aware of imminent death when he takes up his jug and pipe. His awareness of death serves a positive role in combating care. As with other drinking songs, "care" refers to practical problems and the attitude of worry and concern that acts violently on the mind. For Fitch, however, care is so painful and pervasive that he experiences the world as nothing but "grief and vexation." He no longer views leisure as overwhelming "care" and re-establishing a sense of the body as integrated and coherent.
of bodily integrity. Only with the certainty of death could Fitch “Laugh, Drink, and Smoke and leave Nothing to Care.” Only after his death could he be fully recognized as a “True-hearted fellow.”

Fitch’s representation of his death as a condition for overcoming care involves a fundamental change in the signification of his body. Where other pre-industrial artisans entered the leisure process burdened by “cares” that included sickness and death, Fitch presents himself as identifying with death as he entered into drinking, smoking, and laughing with his friends. Instead of signifying his body as threatened with death, Fitch signified it as practically dead since his perception that death is imminent guides his current actions. This identification of himself with death occurred outside the context of the processes of recognition typical of pre-industrial culture. Unable to overcome care and signify his body as independent or true-hearted in his dockside drinking and tavern socializing, Fitch had to go outside the resources of pre-industrial culture to identify himself as “dead,” his “death” being a preliminary means to overcome care. The process by which Fitch’s thoughts turned from the representation of death as a threatening specter toward embracing his death as the necessary condition for overcoming care is obscure. Nevertheless, in identifying with his death, Fitch was engaged in a mode of self-identification foreign to pre-industrial culture. In a fundamental way, he had moved outside pre-industrial culture to a morbid romanticism found frequently in the nineteenth century but rarely before.

Fitch stepped outside pre-industrial culture with extreme reluctance. In “The Song of the Brown Jug,” Fitch’s pre-identification with his death serves as a kind of cultural supplement that makes it possible for him to “re-establish” a positive signification of his body through participation in artisan leisure. Certain of his upcoming death, Fitch can portray himself as toasting his neighbors and friends, re-establishing the integrity of his body when he sets himself “snug” in his old vicar’s chair, and acting like a “true-hearted fellow.” Fitch even represents himself as participating in pre-industrial culture after his death. In his will, Fitch leaves money to pay for anyone who is willing to lead a company of men to visit his grave on the date of his death, sing “The Song of the Brown Jug,” and drink a toast. Fitch pictured himself as a vicarious participant in pre-industrial leisure after his death, taking his turn to treat the company and being present for drinks, song, jokes, and laughter. In Fitch’s mind, accepting his death solidified his participation in pre-industrial culture beyond the grave.

4. Mania a Potu

If John Fitch’s business difficulties created such a burden of care that the effort to signify his body as integrated and secure forced him outside the mechanisms of pre-industrial culture, he was a fairly isolated case during the 1780’s
and 1790's. Other artisans and merchants pioneered nationwide distribution of their products, erected manufactories, integrated new technologies, and speculated in local markets. The typefounding firm of Binney and Ronaldson dominated the national market for types; shoemakers like John Bedford produced shoes by the thousand for the West Indian market; master carpenters were beginning to build houses on the assumption that people would buy them; and some spinners were beginning to build manufactories. The speculative operations of Carey, Bedford, and many carpenters had severe financial troubles, but these only affected themselves, their sub-contractors, and their journeymen because the trades of printing, shoemaking, and house carpentry were not organized on a speculative basis. The largest group of workers affected by technological innovations was the immigrant hand spinners whose wages were reduced because of the competition of machine-spun cloth from New England. Thus, it is doubtful that the great majority of artisans felt such cares and troubles as pioneers like John Fitch. It is doubtful that a large number of artisans were pushed outside the bounds of pre-industrial culture.  

By the 1820's however, the "speculative" enterprises of the 1780's and 1790's had become the norm in large sections of the economy. Entrepreneurs like J. J. Borie and Joseph Ripka invested large amounts of capital to build factories in Manayunk for producing coarse yarn and simple cloth patterns, primarily for foreign markets. The competition from power looms led to a continuous downward pressure on wages among hand-loom weavers during the 1820's and 1830's, dropping their wages to the level of street sweepers. Skilled mule spinners thrived in the 1820's because of the large market for specialized yarn, but found themselves displaced by technical innovations in the early 1830's. For the immigrant population of male spinners and weavers, the re-organization of production to serve international markets, the introduction of machinery, and the greater division of labor created an environment that dramatically increased their economic difficulties and consequently their sense of "care," "trouble," "ills," and the like. Carpenters faced little inter-regional competition or technical innovation, but the speculative character of housebuilding resulting in a large number of masters being employed as subcontractors to other masters. These sub-contractors then exercised downward pressure on journeymen's wages. Downward pressure on wages, underemployment, factorization, and loss of control over the work environment affected shoemaking, ropemaking, glassmaking, tailoring, and other trades as well.  

Unfortunately, there is no direct testimony in diaries, autobiographies, or memoirs concerning the impact of these economic developments on how artisans signified their bodies. However, indirect evidence of the inability of male artisans and workers to signify their bodies using pre-industrial values can be seen in the growing incidence of mania a potu during the 1820's and
1830’s. *Mania a potu* or *delirium tremens* is a mental and physical disorder associated with heavy drinking or drug use. In *mania a potu*, symptoms of stomach distress, headache, and an attitude of watchfulness began when an extremely heavy drinker suddenly abstained from alcohol. In many cases victims of *mania a potu* stopped drinking because their stomachs could no longer tolerate alcohol. Sometimes, heavy drinkers fell into *mania a potu* when they ran out of money to buy alcohol or stopped drinking at the end of a long spree. Within one or two days, these symptoms developed into hallucinations of collapsing walls, assaults by friends and relatives, attacks by animals or devils, or arrest for particularly disgusting crimes like robbing graves. Those who suffered from *mania a potu* also became preoccupied with imaginary business and spent hours drawing up accounts, counting buildings, and picking up money. The hallucinations themselves were not life-threatening, but resulted in an intensive wariness and self-protective activity that wore down the physical system and could be fatal, especially in those who were already ill from long periods of heavy drinking. The treatment for *mania a potu* in the nineteenth century was to give the patient a sleep-inducing agent like alcohol or opium. As one nineteenth century physician noted, patients rarely recovered unless they could be induced to sleep. They almost always recovered after a full sleep.30

Although physicians like Benjamin Rush had treated *mania a potu* for some time, the number of cases increased during the 1820’s and 1830’s to the point where *mania a potu* was perceived as a public health problem. In 1825, it was enough of an issue that a public-spirited lawyer like William Davidson argued in his diary that opening the Atheneum on Sundays would give young men an alternative to taverns and thus prevent the disease. Statistics for *mania a potu* are scarce, but a rough estimate of the incidence of the disease can be gathered from a report on the distribution of deaths in the Philadelphia Hospital.31

Deaths from *mania a potu* at Philadelphia Hospital

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1832</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1834</td>
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<td>1840</td>
<td>42</td>
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What makes these statistics significant is that the cure rates for *mania a potu* at the Philadelphia Hospital was 95% when treated with alcohol and 90% when treated with opium. Philadelphia Hospital treated *mania a potu* with opium until 1837. Thus, the facility would have treated something on the order of 6,750 cases of *mania a potu* in 1832 if they had a 90% cure rate, an average of more than 129 new cases per week. Of course, Philadelphia Hospital was one of at least five major hospitals in the city during the 1820’s and 1830’s. The case load of *mania a potu* for the city as a whole must have been much higher. Seventy-seven percent of those who died from *mania a potu* at Philadelphia Hospital were men and medical dissertations indicate that artisans and other members of the lower orders suffered at least proportionately from the disease.¹³

The high incidence of *mania a potu* is evidence that drinking and associated forms of leisure no longer allowed artisans to signify their bodies in terms of pre-industrial values. The cultural failure of leisure can be seen in the situation of individuals immediately before they developed symptoms of *mania a potu*. The heavy-drinking worker was in an either-or position, either drink or quickly fall into hallucinations of caving walls, attacking animals and demons, or arrest for horrible crimes. To have this readiness for *mania a potu*, a man must have already formed a disposition toward hallucinations in which he represented the fictional agencies of walls, animals, demons, and enemies as having a higher priority than the practical world in which he existed. The drinking songs discussed above portrayed artisans and others as feeling burdened by “cares” and “ills” in which they represented themselves as “susceptible” to attack, death, and dismemberment, while Carey’s chest pain represented him as under siege from internal degeneracy and the approach of death. However, to be disposed toward hallucination implied a much more urgent sense of vulnerability than either the drinking songs or Carey, a sense of vulnerability so powerful that it impelled men to represent attacks as actually occurring on the body.

A disposition toward *mania a potu* implies the cultural failure of an individual’s previous leisure activity. Drinking songs portrayed artisans as displacing their sense of vulnerability through convivial drinking, as drowning the cares that “discompose the mind” in the give and take of pre-industrial leisure. If anything, those artisans who were disposed toward *mania a potu* had an accelerated pattern of participation in drinking and other forms of leisure. They would most likely have spent much time drinking in taverns, oyster cellars, and grog shops and perhaps participated to a greater degree than others in the various kinds of tavern games, gambling, and other contests of knowledge, skill, and nerve. Likewise, many would have been in the crowds for election day, Fourth of July celebrations, and other prominent events even if they were not members of political parties, militia companies, or other vol-
unteer groups. Unlike earlier artisans however, those who developed *mania a potu* had not been able to remove the representations of threats to their bodily integrity that made “care” and “woes” so burdensome. Even though such artisans participated in the give-and-take of activities organized as processes of recognition, they must not have been able to displace representations of threat onto others, experience themselves as overcoming various threats through participation in pre-industrial leisure, or identify themselves with values of independence, honor, and respectability. Instead the sense of “care” among thousands of artisans was so acute that they were on the verge of hallucination. Because participation in pre-industrial leisure had failed to make it possible for them to identify their bodies with the ideals of pre-industrial culture, large numbers of artisans were drifting toward a limited form of psychosis. Drinking was serving only as a defensive measure preventing the emergence of symptoms.

5. Conclusion

Labor historians have long agreed on the persistence of pre-industrial culture through the 1850’s and beyond. Nevertheless, the increasing incidence of *mania a potu* represents a striking change in the representation of the body among artisans and workers who were still participating in pre-industrial culture. Before industrial expansion, participation in pre-industrial cultural practices made it possible for working people to overcome the sense of threat linked to “cares” and “troubles” and represent their bodies in terms of pre-industrial values. By the 1820’s and 1830’s however, an increasing number of artisans and workers not only failed to displace their “cares” and “troubles” through participation in traditional culture, but found themselves representing their bodies in terms of the frightening hallucinations associated with *mania a potu*. According to James Washington, a Philadelphia medical student, the worst cases of *mania a potu* were those of men who had been “driven to intemperance, in order to free their minds from corrosive care and anxiety.” However, in the industrializing conditions of the 1820’s, neither heavy drinking nor *mania a potu* could relieve these men of their cares for long. Washington observed that those who recovered from the disease once again were “harassed by their reflections” concerning their “misfortune[s], either in business or family matters.”

*Mania a potu* may only be the most spectacular example of the failure of pre-industrial culture during the early years of industrialization. This possibility is suggested by the trend toward higher levels of drinking during the 1820’s and 1830’s. W. J. Rorabaugh argued in *The Alcoholic Republic* that alcohol consumption increased dramatically among urban workers, farm laborers, and professionals during this period. This was certainly the case among Philadelphia’s volunteer fire companies. For instance, the Delaware Fire Com-
pany, which had a substantial artisan membership, spent $23.50 for whiskey in 1829 at twenty to thirty cents a gallon. Likewise, fire companies were plagued by drunkenness at meetings, fires, and parades. Perhaps working people accelerated their drinking because they could no longer represent themselves as "independent" and "respectable" and were consuming larger amounts of alcohol for the anesthetizing effect. A contributor to The Pennsylvanian stated that journeymen would "crowd around the bar, or the gaming table" after work and by "drinking to excess . . . thus drive away the horrors of mind occasioned by excessive toil." Though not suffering from mania a potu, those artisans who drank just to drive away the "horrors of mind" were victims of a symbolic and psychological dislocation that was every bit as profound as the economic dislocations of early industrialization.35
Notes

*Research was supported by a Faculty Research Grant from Morehead State University. Susan Klepp graciously brought the materials on mania apotu to my attention. Comments by Michael Batinski, Elizabeth Perkins Gary Cross and Michael Zuckerman were very helpful.


11. For violin recitals by a draftsman from the


23. For Fitch’s sleepless nights and low-spiritedness, see Westcott, *Life of John Fitch*, 190, 202, 205.


27. For unpublished poetry of the late 1820’s and early 1830’s that portrays death as the sole basis for truth, love, and happiness, see the poetry albums of George and Ann Sellers, Paschall Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; for examples of published poetry containing the same themes, see “The Dying Mother” and “My Mother’s Grave,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, Jan. 10, 1829.


30. For a good summary of the hallucinations involved in *mania a potu*, see John H. Griffin, “A Dissertation on *Mania a Potu*,” Philadelphia.


35. Rorabaugh likewise attributes the increase in drinking to the “anxieties” stimulated by social and economic changes of the 1820’s and 1830’s. See W. J. Rorabaugh, The Alcoholic Republic, 127-137. For Philadelphia fire companies, see the “Minute Book” of the Delaware Fire Company, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Feb. 5, 1830; for “the horrors of mind,” see The Pennsylvanian, April 1, 1836.