

EARLY BLACK HISTORY IN *PENNSYLVANIA*
HISTORY: FROM HAGIOGRAPHY TO
CRITICAL HISTORY

Leslie Patrick
Bucknell University

W

hen contacted to present at the PHA 76th Annual Meeting plenary, I elected to examine early Black history in *Pennsylvania History*. Colonial through Early National history of Pennsylvania is the period of my attention, and I was glad of the opportunity since African-American historiography does not receive the attention that it deserves. The opportunity could not be resisted, moreover, for I was curious to discover how the journal fared on the question of early American black history. Given that the journal began in 1934, I wondered when black history appeared in the journal and about the nature of the articles that were published. This examination is not exhaustive and it does not include book reviews. Rather, it reflects my interest in African-American historiography and social history. I have, arbitrarily perhaps, broken down the historiography into three eras in the journal's history: early (1935–1950s), middle (1960s–1970s), and late (1980s–present). The articles largely parallel the perspectives on

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY: A JOURNAL OF MID-ATLANTIC STUDIES, VOL. 75, NO. 3, 2008.
Copyright © 2008 The Pennsylvania Historical Association

black American history and the changes that occurred in the wider historical scholarship.

I was especially curious to find the first article in *Pennsylvania History* that discussed black people in Pennsylvania. Perhaps because of my own bias it did not come as a surprise to me that this article, published in 1935, included black people, but in a footnote only. The article, "Crime and Its Punishment in Provincial Pennsylvania," did not problematize its finding that "for a black assaulting a white, the penalty was death."¹ By 1940 black people entered the text of an article when William Miller's article was published. "The Effects of the American Revolution on Indentured Servitude" mentioned black people in two substantive respects: their numerical superiority to white indentured servants and the impact of the 1780 Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery.² Six years later another article appeared, this one especially important because it would set the stage for what became the guiding theme of African-American history in the Commonwealth. In this pathbreaking article, written by Oliver Heckman, one learns:

William Penn in the articles of "The Free Society of Traders" (1682) provided for the freedom of negroes (sic) after fourteen years of servitude. In general, the relatively few Friends who held slaves treated them kindly and regarded their enslavement as a great misfortune."³

Twelve years after *Pennsylvania History's* inception, this was the most extensive discussion of black people in the journal. In terms of this historiography, it is important to note that Heckman's analysis was framed in terms of Quakers' benevolence toward black people, an outlook that would dominate the scholarship until the 1960s. It should be noted that this perspective was not unique to Heckman; monographs on black history in Pennsylvania, one published in 1911 and continues to be important to the field, also adopted this outlook. However, W. E. B. DuBois, whose 1899 study, *The Philadelphia Negro*, went a greater distance in revealing Friends' ambivalence toward black presence and inaction on slavery's abolition.⁴ L. H. Butterfield's 1950 article, "The Reputation of Benjamin Rush" did not reflect DuBois's research; rather it continued the dominant attitude toward African Americans.⁵ In this article Butterfield includes one sentence mentioning Rush's humanitarian concern to improve the condition of black people by virtue of his involvement with the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully held in Bondage.

However, none of these earliest *Pennsylvania History* authors cited the major monographs or the *Journal of Negro History*, the latter of which had been in publication since 1916. That year, its first volume included an article written by an author whose pseudonym was Othello and entitled "What the Negro was Thinking During the Eighteenth Century: Essay on Negro Slavery."⁶ As the title of this article suggests, black perspectives counted considerably in the *Journal of Negro History*, perhaps the only historical scholarly publication in which this was true. Meanwhile, during the first half of the twentieth century, black people appeared in *Pennsylvania History* as a mere appendage to the "larger" concerns with Pennsylvania's white population. This period is marked as well by little attention to the documentary record generated by black people.

The next phase of this inquiry into the scholarship, primarily the 1960s and 1970s, reflected to varying degrees the larger social issues that black Americans confronted during these tumultuous times. One influential monograph that sent the scholarship travelling in this new direction was Leon F. Litwack's *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790–1860*. Litwack's critical examination of the North dealt a serious blow to previous claims that the region was generously disposed to black presence and the arrival of the enslaved who sought freedom. Historians of this era (some of whom were published in *Pennsylvania History*) generally wrote with the concern and passion that gave rise to recognizing the contradiction of enslaved black presence in a "free" white America. Some, though certainly not all, historians asserted that black history was forged in struggle and was not merely "the outstanding contributions of special black people to the life and times of America," at a point when America was reeling from having been forced by black Americans and much of the world to give up white privilege in exchange for extending citizenship rights to which they had been denied them for so long.⁷ This period, therefore, marks the beginning of a trend toward examining the documentary evidence rather than simply declaring the magnitude of Pennsylvania's benevolence toward the black populace. It also reveals a new outlook, one which included, again to varying degrees, black perspectives.

Not unlike the era and the movement for civil rights, articles published during this period began mildly. In 1960 Negley Teeters included one paragraph about the House of Refuge and the fact that a few black children were admitted to that institution, unlike most Houses of Refuge elsewhere in the new nation that did not accept them at all.⁸ These few sentences in Teeters'

article initiated an interrogation that in time would grow more intense and produce more knowledge about groups of neglected black people.

Stanley I. Kutler's article reflected the larger historical context of civil rights, one in which black people challenged a "second-class" status. The 1963 article's date and title tell the story of black freedom struggles that were being replayed on the twentieth century stage. "Pennsylvania Courts, the Abolition Act [of 1780], and Negro Rights" concluded that

[t]he judiciary's denial of political and social rights probably reflect the dominant attitude of the state's white population. Altogether, from the time of the passage of the abolition act down to the Civil War, the Negro achieved a rather mixed record of success in the state courts. Conforming to the legislature's aim, the courts worked for the gradual abolition of slavery, but not for political and social equality.⁹

John Myers' 1964 article, "The Early Antislavery Agency System in Pennsylvania, 1833-37," continues to travel down the critical road asking why after such an "illustrious" past in working toward slavery's abolition did the Commonwealth contribute so little to the organized antislavery movement of the early 1830's?" Unlike the grandiose claims made by his predecessors, Myers found "[t]he contributions of Pennsylvanians to the abolition crusade of the nineteenth century *were initially modest*."¹⁰

It was Darold Wax, however, in 1965, who finally and definitively broke ranks with representations of Pennsylvania's past as one comprised entirely of Quakers who were benevolent toward black people:

When Pennsylvania has been brought into discussions of the early American slave trade, it has been to note the existence there of a determined and increasingly vocal opposition movement...But even the Quakers participated in the Negro slave trade, as buyers and sellers of human flesh.¹¹

As best can be discerned, this was the first appearance in *Pennsylvania History* of a perspective that allowed for a critical examination of the Quakers and their purported benevolence toward black people. In 1967 Wax continued this critical examination of what happened to black people in the story of Pennsylvania's colonial past, when *Pennsylvania History* published another of

his articles, "The Demand for Slave Labor in Colonial Pennsylvania." Again, unlike his predecessors, Wax raised issues that accounted why they were not desirable in the labor force, asserting: "Negro slaves were...alien to the white man's culture, in every respect, slaves were unwilling intruders relegated to an existence on the fringe of white society."¹²

Finally we get a glimpse of black perspectives as well as the assertion that black presence was not quite so welcomed in colonial Pennsylvania. This tradition of critical scholarship continued when in 1973 Philip S. Foner asserted that despite its historical reputation for and representation as benevolent: "...Philadelphia was also the most anti-Negro city of the North and the most rigidly segregated metropolis above the Mason-Dixon line."¹³

Foner also appears to have been the first historian published in *Pennsylvania History* to explicitly include black agency and perspectives critical of Pennsylvania's disposition. He discussed James Forten and Robert Purvis, who objected to restrictions imposed on the black populace and their access to the franchise. Citing Frederick Douglass' observations about a later period, Foner also included the hitherto unheard claim: "Little wonder black Americans hated Philadelphia."¹⁴ It should be noted, though, that the emphasis at this point remained on Philadelphia's black elite.

Familiar figures in Pennsylvania's past also became the subjects of critical scrutiny in the 1970s. For instance, William E. Juhnke's article, "Benjamin Franklin's View of the Negro and Slavery" provided insight into Benjamin Franklin's paradoxical relationship to the enslaved.

Although he printed abolitionist literature, Franklin participated in the slave trade. He sold Negro slaves for other owners and bought them from time to time as an investment. He planned to resell them through advertisements in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*.¹⁵

The next "trend" of note began during the 1980s, when historians began to unearth documents disclosing evidence about daily life among black people in Philadelphia. And to a lesser extent, they began constructing alternative narratives that, even more explicitly than their immediate predecessors, challenged the older view of Pennsylvania as a haven for those born low in the world. Moreover, their attention was directed beyond Philadelphia's black élite. These historians concerned themselves with the bases for understanding the ideas and practices that laid the foundation for a critical perspective on Pennsylvania's black past.

Kurt Kocher combined archival research with an alternative view of Philadelphia for black people when in 1984 *Pennsylvania History* published his article critical of the efforts at promoting the colonization of black people in Africa. This article exposed the complicity of certain white Philadelphians in an "enigma" which "...centers primarily on whether it was an attempt to 'civilize' Africa and rid the nation of slavery, or was an attempt by white America to achieve a racially pure nation."¹⁶

It was also during the 1980s that historians turned their attention to records describing "ordinary" people who had been almost entirely excluded from the American narrative: almshouse and jail inmates, fugitive slaves, and the dead. Black people appeared frequently in these accounts, such as that which is found in the "richly detailed" records of institutions that housed people who occupied "the lower strata of the occupational social strata."¹⁷ The editors of this article, Billy G. Smith Cynthia Shelton, endeavored to include poorer women, including black women, because "information about them often is difficult to find in other sources."¹⁸ At the end of the decade Gary B. Nash published *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840*, which inverted previous patterns where monographs usually preceded journal articles published in *Pennsylvania History*. *Forging Freedom* clearly was the beneficiary of earlier approaches, including Nash's own previous work, which had laid the foundation for such a rich account of Philadelphia's African-American communities.¹⁹

During the mid-1980s we still were not free from the older patronizing perspective, however. In 1986, *Pennsylvania History* published "Friends and Nature in America: Toward an Eighteenth-Century Quaker Ecology," which essentially returned to the view of the black populace as an undifferentiated mass waiting to be "saved" by Quaker intervention.²⁰ In fact, it is not quite clear why black people were included at all, except for the endurance of the alleged Quaker humanitarianism toward black people.

Yet another field in Pennsylvania history opened when in 1987 Billy Smith and Richard Wojtowicz published in the "Notes & Documents" section of the journal their compilation of advertisements for fugitive slaves, indentured servants, and apprentices that appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* between 1795 and 1796. Smith and Wojtowicz also cited other studies that had been conducted both in the South and New England. These authors also appear to be among the first published in *Pennsylvania History* to cite the *Journal of Negro History*, which by this point had long been documenting the fate of black people, fugitive or otherwise.

In the 1980s *Pennsylvania History* began to publish a small number of articles that challenged the dominant paradigm by using archival records to promote a critical analysis of the social conditions encountered by Philadelphia's "lower sorts." Articles based on heretofore untapped documentary records also began to appear in the late 1980s, moving beyond benevolence and the black elite. The importance of the difference between black and white birth-rates, for example, is evident in Susan E. Klepp's explanation, which appears to be the first among this group:

Blacks experienced somewhat different conditions than whites. Since few of the white-dominated churches permitted blacks to be buried in their cemeteries, most of them were interred in the segregated portion of the Stranger's Ground...Most black Philadelphians were recent arrivals in the city; their numbers had nearly doubled between 1783 and 1790, then almost tripled during the next decade, due largely to immigration. Since migration tends to be age-specific, with those between 18 and 30 most likely to move, a larger proportion of the city's blacks consisted of people in the child-bearing age groups than was true for the total population. This favored high fertility.²¹

Klepp's careful examination of the bills of mortality aided considerably in beginning to build a structure that placed the Philadelphia black family and gender relations, or lack thereof, in historical perspective. Christopher M. Osborne's article, "Invisible Hands: Slaves, Bound Laborers, and the Development of Western Pennsylvania, 1780–1820" appeared in *Pennsylvania History* in 2005.²² Admittedly there is a considerable chronological gap between Klepp and Osborne. But like Klepp, Osborne took the demographic data as a point of departure, but he did so for the western part of the state and used it to critically analyze the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of black life in that region. Also of importance is the fact that Osborne deliberately seeks to understand circumstances beyond Philadelphia and its immediate environs. He argues: "Slavery, then, was much more than a curiosity, aberration, or status symbol in early western Pennsylvania; it was an important cog in the region's rapid transformation from struggling back-country to burgeoning industrial and commercial power."²³

Latecomer, Leslie Patrick-Stamp, added to this investigation of the documents that had received so little attention when in 1993 she examined

the Walnut Street Prison Sentence Dockets for 1795, following the lead established in Billy G. Smith and G. S. Rowe's "Prisoners for Trial Docket for Philadelphia County, 1795."²⁴ While neither article focused exclusively on the black populace, each included them and discussed their circumstances such that they ended up "entangled with the white man's law."²⁵

Articles published since the 1990s and up to this point have mined to the archival records to reconstruct aspects of the African-American past in Pennsylvania that were largely neglected or they have revised older interpretations of events. Dee E. Andrews' 1997 article is an example of this most recent scholarship, which has produced a much more complex portrait than earlier examinations.

Many of the subjects that have recently concerned historians regarding the beginning of the end of northern slavery—the economic bases for slavery's decline, the role of free black associations and churches, the persistence of racism—are not always illuminated by its contents. Nevertheless, the PAS correspondence opens to view the complex geographical, procedural, and cultural matrix that sustained and impeded the first antislavery movement and some of the reasons for its successes and failures.²⁶

Clearly the study of African-American history in the Commonwealth has made progress, moving from hagiography to critical history; all of which is reflected in *Pennsylvania History*. While the trajectory has not been entirely free of its hagiographic past, the direction has been moving toward a more complex picture of Pennsylvania's black inhabitants.

NOTES

1. Lawrence H. Gipson, "Crime and Its Punishment in Provincial Pennsylvania" *PH* 2, #1 (Jan., 1935): 9, n. 27.
2. William Miller, "The Effects of the American Revolution on Indentured Servitude" *PH* 7, #3 (July 1940): 131, 133, 136 (refers to the 1785 Act).
3. Oliver S. Heckman, "Pennsylvania Quakers in Southern Reconstruction," *PH* 13, #4 (1946): 248.
4. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Negro in Pennsylvania: A Social Study* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967, repr. 1899) and Edward Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania: Slavery-Servitude-Freedom, 1639-1861* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969, repr. 1911).
5. L. H. Butterfield, "The Reputation of Benjamin Rush" *PH* 17, #1 (1950): 20.

6. Othello, "What The Negro Was Thinking During the Eighteenth Century: Essay on Negro Slavery" *Journal of Negro History* 1, #1 (Jan., 1916): 4. The article's first footnote credits Abbé Grégoire with having documented that this individual was "a Negro." Ibid.
7. Vincent Harding, from "Beyond chaos: black history and the search for the New Land," originally published in *Amistad* 1 (1970) in John Tosh, ed., *Historians on History* (New York: Longman, 2000), 155.
8. Negley K. Teeters, "The Early Days of the Philadelphia House of Refuge" *PH* 27, #4 (April, 1960): 177.
9. Stanley I. Kutler, "Pennsylvania Courts, the Abolition Act, and Negro Rights" *PH* 30, #1 (January 1963): 27.
10. John L. Myers, "The Early Antislavery Agency System in Pennsylvania, 1833-1837" *PH* 31, #1 (1964): 62. Italics added.
11. Darold D. Wax, "Negro Imports into Pennsylvania, 1720-1766" *PH* 32, #3 (1965): 254.
12. Wax, "The Demand for Slave Labor in Colonial Pennsylvania" *PH* 34, #4 (1965): 343.
13. Philip S. Foner, "The Battle to End Discrimination Against Negroes on Philadelphia Streetcars (Part I), *PH* 40, #3 (1973): 261.
14. Foner, "The Battle...(Part I)," 265.
15. William E. Juhnke, "Benjamin Franklin's View of the Negro and Slavery" *PH* 41, #4 (1974): 377.
16. Kurt Lee Kocher, "A Duty to America and Africa: A History of the Independent African Colonization Movement in Pennsylvania" *PH* 51, #2 (1984): 118.
17. Billy G. Smith and Cynthia Shelton, "The Daily Occurrence Docket of the Philadelphia Almshouse, 1800" *PH* 52, #2 (April 1985): 86.
18. Billy G. Smith and Cynthia Shelton, "The Daily Occurrence Docket of the Philadelphia Almshouse: Selected Entries, 1800-1804" *PH* 52, #3 (July 1985): 183.
19. Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1988). Nash's *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge MA: Harvard, 1979) continues by far to be the most progressive and insightful examination of African-American history during the bridge between the colonial and "Revolutionary" periods.
20. Donald Brooks Kelley, "Friends and Nature in America: Toward an Eighteenth-Century Quaker Ecology" *PH* 53, #4 (1986), 257-72.
21. Susan E. Klepp, "The Demographic Characteristics of Philadelphia, 1788-1801: Zachariah Poulson's Bills of Mortality" *PH* 53, #3 (1986): 204.
22. Christopher M. Osborne, "Invisible Hands: Slaves, Bound Laborers, and the Development of Western Pennsylvania, 1780-1820" *PH* 72, #1 (Winter, 2005): 77-79.
23. Osborne, 29.
24. G. S. Rowe and Billy G. Smith, "The Prisoners for Trial Docket, 1795" *PH* 53, #4 (1986): 289-319; Leslie Patrick-Stamp "The Prison Sentence Docket for 1795: Inmates at the Nation's First State Penitentiary" *PH* 60, #3 (1993): 353-382.
25. Leroy DuPuy, "The Walnut Street Prison: Pennsylvania's First Penitentiary" *PH* 8, #2 (1951): 136.
26. Dee E. Andrews, "Reconsidering the First Emancipation: Evidence from the Pennsylvania Abolition Society Correspondence, 1785-1810" *PH* 64, #5 (1997): 231.