

**PHILADELPHIA PERIWIGS, PERFUMES, AND
PURPOSE: BLACK BARBER AND SOCIAL
ACTIVIST JOSEPH CASSEY, 1789–1848**

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Abstract: Joseph Cassey was a free black child refugee from the French West Indies who arrived in Philadelphia circa 1800. He married Amy Williams, the only child of Rev. Peter Williams Jr., a black community leader in New York City. Cassey ascended to the wealthiest ranks of the black community and joined Reverend Williams and sailmaker James Forten to promote social change in Philadelphia and New York City. Hard working by day, an activist by night, barber Cassey amassed considerable wealth and promoted antislavery and education in the black community, while within razor-close proximity to the founders of this country.

Introduction

The late 1700s through the early 1800s was a transformational period for the institution of slavery in the early republic of America. In Philadelphia, the black population transitioned from an enslaved majority to a fast-growing and increasingly visible community of free blacks.¹ Many factors contributed to this transformation, including legal developments such as Pennsylvania's 1780 Gradual Abolition of Slavery Act. The Quaker City soon became a hub of

social activism with the largest population of free blacks in the north. Other factors were more basic, such as the emergence of a highly respected wealthy black elite well connected within the white and black communities. Many black leaders—notably James Forten, Frederick Douglass, Robert Purvis, Rev. Peter Williams, Rev. Richard Allen, Rev. Absalom Jones, Stephen Smith, and William Whipper—tirelessly promoted reform of the social institutions that promoted slavery and oppression, blocked educational pursuits, impeded religious freedom, and limited employment opportunities. Others among the elite, such as Joseph Cassey (1789–1848), contributed less obviously, but still significantly, providing financial and strategic assistance. Cassey’s personal history and its social context provide insight into social activism and organization within the black community.

Cassey joined James Forten, Stephen Smith, William Whipper, and Robert Purvis, who ranked among the wealthiest black Philadelphians in the early republic. Wealth gave them prestige, credibility, power, influence, and the ability to financially support social activist efforts. Originally a free black Frenchman from the island of Martinique, Cassey engaged in a variety of activities that made him the second-wealthiest black in Philadelphia after James Forten and, later, Stephen Smith. He then married into the leading black activist family from New York City, launching him into a lifelong commitment to antislavery, anticolonization, education, religion, and employment.

As a young child in the late 1790s, Joseph Cassey escaped the slave revolts, British military takeovers, and waves of yellow fever that swept the French Antilles in the Caribbean to sail to the United States and make a new start with his French Creole family. In Philadelphia he found opportunity and a lifelong home, building an empire based on hairdressing, money-lending, renting property, and buying and selling real estate in a bustling center of commerce. His extraordinarily keen business sense, his commitment to activism, and his retiring manner enabled him to achieve extraordinary success without fanfare.

In his teens, he was a “proprietor” of a hairdressing shop. In his early twenties, he expanded his business interests as a landlord and rental property owner. By his thirties, he was loaning large sums of money for home mortgages, and buying and selling numerous properties. By his forties, and into his fifties, Cassey accelerated his real estate investment and money-lending activities, totaling nearly one hundred transactions recorded with the city in his lifetime. He retired quite wealthy in the mid-1830s and devoted the rest of his life to the social activism he first undertook at night, after spending his days dressing the hair and shaving some of the most famous figures

in American history. Cassey's significant wealth provided for his large family across several generations, as described in family wills, and sustained religious (notably St. Thomas's Episcopal Church), educational, and activist organizations into the late 1800s. He inspired later generations of Casseys, among others, to support the Civil War and civil rights.

Island Origins

Joseph Cassey's exact island origins were not well documented or widely known. Even after his death in 1848, close friends and colleagues remained ignorant of his birthplace. On May 22, 1885, Cassey's friend and business partner Robert Purvis (1810–1898) responded to an inquiry from Wendell P. Garrison, son of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison.² Purvis wrote that "Joseph Cassey was a native of one of W. India Islands. I will endeavor to learn in a day or two, the place of his nativity, his age, and the time of his death and send it to you."³ At the time that this letter was written, Cassey, his wife Amy, and several of his children had died or moved out of the city. Purvis likely intended to talk to Cassey's son, Alfred Cassey (1829–1903), but whether or not he obtained this information is not known.⁴

Over the decades, Cassey's children were somewhat lackadaisical in reporting their father's birthplace in the US censuses. "France" appeared often, along with "Philadelphia" and "West Indies." Current Cassey family lore places him from either Martinique (French) or St. Martin's (part French and part Dutch), both in the Lesser Antilles, although this was not supported by documentation.⁵ Eventually, in 1920, the family of recently deceased Reverend Peter William Cassey, Cassey's middle son, stated on the US Census that Peter's father was from the French Caribbean island of Martinique.⁶ Family lore proved mostly correct in this case, with the island of Martinique finally identified in documents. Cassey would have been a free black French citizen from Martinique as France had extended citizenship to "*gens de couleur*" (French for "people of color") by 1792 and abolished slavery by 1794.

Joseph Cassey's arrival in Philadelphia was likely prompted by several simultaneous events that in combination threw the Caribbean Islands into violent upheaval. The French Revolution (1789–99) weakened French administrative and military power. The English took advantage with a military takeover of the Lesser Antilles by the mid-1790s. In 1793 an accord transferred the island of Martinique from French to British jurisdiction, but with the intention that

the British would rule only until the French monarchy was reinstated. In 1794, the year France abolished slavery, the British took over Martinique, reinstating slavery. The island returned to French rule in 1815.

In 1788 73,416 slaves, 4,851 free blacks, and 10,603 whites—88,870 people in all—lived on Martinique.⁷ Tensions mounted between the three groups. In 1793 and again in 1800, there were unsuccessful slave rebellions. With French citizenship snatched from the *gens de couleur* and personal freedom taken away from the former slaves by the British, it was little wonder that many decided to leave. They joined other refugees from Saint Domingue (the part-French, part-Spanish island of Hispaniola) that produced nearly half of the world's coffee and sugar. In 1791 on St. Domingue, slave rebellions erupted that would last nearly a decade and spread throughout the islands, driving 15,000 French-speaking islanders, of whom two-thirds were whites and one-third free blacks and slaves, to the eastern ports of the United States.

Refugees from the violence fled on the first ship on which they could obtain passage. Ships sailed for France or the US ports of Charleston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. Loaded with whites, blacks, and mulattos, mostly poor, as well as the dreaded yellow fever disease, these arriving ships were hardly a welcome sight to local populations. Philadelphia was hard hit as four waves of yellow fever began in the waterfront areas where the ships unloaded, then spread through the rest of the city during the 1790s. This pestilence killed thousands of residents, only to disappear each year when cold weather arrived, killing the mosquitoes, the unrecognized carrier of the disease.⁸

Joseph Cassey's family sailed into Charleston, South Carolina, sometime in the late 1790s and made their way north to perceived freedom and opportunity.⁹ The information on their migration route was obtained by Richard Wright, who wrote a dissertation on early black Philadelphians, from one of Cassey's children, probably Alfred, or Alfred's family, still living in Philadelphia (243 Delancey Street, formerly 60 Union Street) at the time (see fig. 1).¹⁰

As with so many *gens de couleur*, the male heads of households were often missing, assumed to be dead, having lost their lives in the widespread violence on the islands.¹¹ The Cassey family of four was no different. The family was identified as living in Baltimore, Maryland, in the 1800 US Federal Census, which lists the family of four under "Negro Cassey."¹² At eleven years old, Cassey was living in Baltimore with, likely, his mother and two sisters as no other black male named Cassey was recorded later in the cities of Baltimore or Philadelphia.



FIGURE 1: Photo of “The Cassey House,” 243 Delancey Street, Philadelphia. Owned by the Casseys for eighty-nine years. Photo by J. Black, 2006.

If French-speaking Cassey arrived by ship in Charleston, then lived in Baltimore at the age of eleven before coming to Philadelphia, then his reluctance to discuss his island origins may have simply been due to somewhat vague youthful recollections. Alternatively, he may not have wanted to advertise the circumstances of his family’s escape from Martinique.

The Philadelphia French Community

Philadelphia was the preferred arrival port for blacks over New York, Boston, Baltimore, Charleston, or Norfolk due to the Quaker City’s progress in abolishing slavery (e.g., Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1780) and its sizable free black community. For French islanders of any color, Philadelphia was also preferred as the center for French culture in the states. Hundreds

of refugees came to the city even from continental France during the French Revolution, including future king Louis Philippe, his two brothers, and the statesman Talleyrand.¹³ French slave owners fleeing to Philadelphia found loopholes in the abolition laws, by transporting their slaves out of the city every six months—as George Washington did—or by indenturing their younger slaves until the age of twenty-eight. As the slave revolts spread through the Caribbean islands, including the Lesser Antilles, and the French Revolution continued on the European continent, a French-speaking refugee community emerged in the area south and east of Independence Hall.

Upon arrival in Philadelphia, the Cassey family located among the tenements and shanties of Moyamensing, south of South Street (formerly Cedar Street), containing one of the highest densities of poor, black immigrant population in the city.¹⁴ Teenager Cassey headed off to look for work in the center of the French community, several blocks north. He found employment at a hairdressing establishment at 36 South Fourth Street, the same city block as the most famous French hotel in the city, the Union Hotel.¹⁵ Immediately south of this block were the French Catholic congregations of St. Mary's and St. Joseph's churches. He landed in the very center of the French commercial and cultural district and remained there for his entire career.

Island Child to Urban Entrepreneur

The busy commercial district of Market Street (prior to 1800 known as High Street) was the center of American and French business and culture. French hotels, French businesses, and businesses catering to a French clientele were all within close proximity of the State House (more widely known as "Independence Hall") and the former home of US president George Washington. This business district would have attracted Cassey and, conversely, businesses would have been interested in hiring young Cassey for his fluency in French. It is likely that Cassey found an apprenticeship with hairdresser Charles Cummins directly across the street from the Union Hotel. Opened by Frenchman John Francis in 1793, the hotel was home to two US vice presidents (Adams and Jefferson), plus several congressmen, during their stays in Philadelphia. The word "hotel" is of French derivation. Most hotels in the city at the time were called "inns," so those that held the name of "hotel" typically were owned and operated by Frenchmen.

Located adjacent to the Union Hotel was the Indian Queen Hotel (see fig. 2) with outbuilding and stables stretching along most of the city block. It was purchased by John Francis in 1804 after he sold the Union Hotel.¹⁶



FIGURE 2: Indian Queen Hotel, 1831. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

With the two French hotels across the street, and the recent growth in Philadelphia's French-speaking immigrant population (at the time, French refugees accounted for 10 percent of Philadelphia's population of about 45,000), Charles Cummins's business would have benefited significantly from having a bilingual employee of French origins. By 1807 Cassey, at the age of eighteen, became sole proprietor of the shop.¹⁷ Charles Cummins does not show up in any later city directories, suggesting that he retired, moved out of the city, or died.

Cassey's shop would have seen heavy foot traffic of the most prominent and influential characters in the city. His city block included a biscuit baker,

coppersmith, jeweler, saddler, tavernkeeper, cabinetmaker, lumber merchant, attorneys, doctor, another hairdresser, toy merchant, boardinghouse, grocer, plater, scrivener and broker, tailors, hatters, and a sexton of the Friends Meeting House, as well as the two large French hotels.¹⁸ The location bode well for developing a successful and profitable enterprise.

The building housing the hairdressing shop was also formerly the home of influential gentlewoman Hannah Dean. Hannah Dean wove in and out of Cassey's activities through the first and second decades of the 1800s. She first appeared at 36 South Fourth Street, his barbershop and later residence, in 1800 and 1801. Hannah was operating a boarding house a couple of blocks away in the late 1790s and early 1800s at 83 North Third Street.¹⁹ Her parents and brother, and later Hannah as the sole surviving heir, owned at least the two properties behind the three-story brick-front house and storefront that housed the hairdressing and perfumery shop on the ground level at 36 South Fourth Street. Cassey and Dean were neighbors at that same address for several years until she sold the two small (12' × 12') trinity properties behind the shop individually to Cassey: the first in 1811 when he was twenty-two years old, and the second adjacent trinity by 1820 when he was thirty-one years old.²⁰ Cassey used these units for family housing and as rental properties. Today, this site is marked with a historical marker for Amy and Joseph Cassey.

It is not clear exactly where Cassey resided between 1801 and 1807, although it would be likely that as a teenager he lived with his family in Moyamensing, a short walk south of the barbershop. By 1807 he was renting the front barber-shop space and likely lived in the residence above it as no other name appeared at that address in the later city directories. Perhaps with thoughts of marriage, Cassey purchased the 12' × 15' three-story building housing the barber shop and residence in 1825, less than a year before his marriage to Amy Williams.

Barber, Wigmaker, and Perfumer

Joseph Cassey prospered as an upscale French hairdresser, perfumer, and wig-maker.²¹ An 1823 engraved advertisement for Cassey's barber shop at 36 South Fourth Street states: "Keeps a general assortment of perfumery, scented soaps, shaving apparatus, ladies work and dressing boxes, fine cutlery, fancy hair, pom-made, "huil antique," combs, &c."²² Selling hair-care products and cologne was part of his strategy to offer his customers a more upscale (and more expensive) experience. Cassey advertised exotic French products and accessories, plus a separate gentleman's dressing room, all signs of a high end establishment (see fig. 3).



FIGURE 3: Joseph Cassey's Advertisement. Shaw's *United States Directory for the use of Travelers and Merchants* (Philadelphia, 1823). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

Money Lending, Rental Properties, and Real Estate

Hairdressing may not seem like a way to wealth, but Cassey's clientele would have been white, male, wealthy, and well connected. At the time, women took care of their hair at home. Considering Cassey's location in the center of the commercial district and the separation of black and white clienteles, only white males would have used the shop. The wealthier black neighborhood of that era was located several blocks south, between (east-west) Spruce and South (formerly Cedar) Streets, and between about (north-south) Fourth and Twelfth Streets.²³ It was among this white elite clientele that Cassey first provided money-lending services, offered rental properties, and dealt in real estate purchases and sales.

If Cassey's money-lending, real estate dealings, and rental activities recorded are divided by decades, his activities in all areas peaked in the 1830s and 1840s prior to his death in 1848. He also conducted business off the city records as documented in his will. These off-the-record clients were likely his friends and associates with whom he had a greater level of trust, negating the need to document the dealings in the city record.

Providing more detail relating to the summary of transactions in Table 1, Cassey's first recorded transactions were two house purchases and one ground rent purchase.²⁴ He did not appear to need to borrow money for these transactions. One of the houses bought, and its accompanying ground rent, was at 36 South Fourth Street, the site of his barbershop. The original site contained one larger house and shop bordering the street, with two smaller trinities behind it. It was one of the trinities behind the larger house that Cassey first purchased (in 1811) from Hannah Dean while he was only in his twenties. It may be that Cassey housed his island family in this trinity

TABLE 1. Joseph Cassey's Business Transactions Summary By Decades

Transaction			
Decade	Type of Transaction	Number	Dollar Amount ^a
1810s	Real estate purchase	2	\$900–\$1,450
	Mortgage borrowed or loaned	0	\$0
	Ground rent purchase	1	\$68
1820s	Real estate purchase	5	\$900–\$4,650
	Real estate sale	1	\$6,550
	Mortgage loaned	6	\$?–\$4,000
	Mortgage borrowed	2	\$300–?
1830s	Real estate purchase	16	\$1–\$7,500
	Real estate sale	8	\$1–\$12,000
	Mortgage loaned	13	\$5,000–\$13,679.82
	Ground rent purchase	1	\$104
1840s	Rents	2	\$1 each
	Real estate purchase	13	\$1,350–\$5,500
	Real estate sale	21	\$1–\$10,000
	Mortgage loaned	7	\$2,000–\$10,000

^aNot all dollar amounts are recorded.

as they disappear from Moyamensing in the census records after 1810. By this time, Cassey was the sole proprietor of the barbershop, likely renting the front property and living above the shop. A note on the ground rent purchase documents suggested that Hannah Dean was then living in one of the trinities in the 1810s.

In the 1820s Cassey took out two mortgage loans for himself, his only personal mortgages recorded. He purchased five properties, sold one, and loaned six other people mortgage money. This was the decade when he completed the purchase of the three homes at the same address as his shop: the two trinities and the three-story main house with barbershop. This was also the decade when he married and unexpectedly sold the combined property. While he remained there until 1836 or 1837 in his shop and home, he was renting the property from Allyn Bacon and Abraham Hart who owned a music store a few doors away. Over the years, Cassey made large loans to Abraham Hart (even ones as high as \$4,000 and \$10,000), ensuring that Hart owed him a considerable debt. This was a good insurance policy on Cassey's part, allowing him to remain in the house and shop without concern of loss of lease.

In the 1830s Cassey's focus shifted more to real estate purchases and sales, his mortgage loans and real estate purchases being the highest of any decade. Unfortunately, the immigrant and racial tensions of the 1830s and 1840s were also peaking. Whites were not supporting black businesses as they had in the past. Cassey was vulnerable, his shop being located in an all-white area. It was also probable that he was having some heart health issues. Reports at the time of his death in 1848 were inconclusive but suggested possible congestive heart failure.²⁵ He was physically slowing down in the 1840s, resulting in more real estate sales than purchases and fewer mortgage loans made. This change in portfolio balance, possibly made to accommodate health and age concerns, was also a reaction to the greater difficulties of dealing with whites in the business environment.

A surprisingly large amount of cash flowed through Cassey's shop for many decades. Even two hundred years later, after significant cash devaluation, a single entrepreneurial barber might be hard-pressed to come up with this level of cash flow. More than one hundred real estate and mortgage transactions were recorded with the city, while many transactions with close associates were off the record. With these financial dealings involving individual sums as high as \$14,000, it is striking how much cash Cassey accessed and managed on a daily basis. His ledger, and one assumes that he would have

had one, would be quite revealing. The actual figures would disclose how he went from having nothing to becoming one of the wealthiest black residents in Philadelphia.

Personal Character

We extract some indications of Cassey's true character from the company that he kept. His closest friend was successful businessman and primary black community leader James Forten (1766–1842), a man widely respected in the white and black communities for his integrity and character.²⁶ Martin Delaney stated of Cassey after his death in 1848,

His name and paper were good in any house in the city, and there was no banker of moderate capital, of more benefit to the business community than was Joseph Cassey. He also left a young and promising family of five sons, one daughter, a most excellent widow, and a fortune of seventy-five thousand dollars, clear of all encumbrances.²⁷

David and Elizabeth Hicks Bustill, Philadelphia African Americans and Quakers, named a son after Cassey when Cassey was only thirty-three years old, Joseph Cassey Bustill (1822–1895), who became a conductor of the Underground Railroad in Ohio. Cassey achieved considerable stature within his community and family throughout his lifetime.

Tragedy and Fortune in Family Life

Cassey married and started his first family sometime in the 1810s when he was in his twenties. Not much is known about his first wife and children except that some tragedy overtook both wife and young daughter early in the marriage. The city death notices relating to St. Mary's Catholic Church on South Fourth Street, a church and cemetery just a couple of blocks south of his home and barbershop, indicated that "Joseph Cassey's daughter," without a name listed, died at thirteen months of age in 1814.²⁸ For Joseph Cassey to attend a Catholic church would have been consistent with a West French Indies origin, although, as with most of the white churches of that era, there would have been segregation of blacks to the rear pews in the church.

It might have been unusual, at the time, for a black man to bury his daughter in a mainly white church's cemetery in the center of the city. But the French Island community was very strong and, apparently, community trumped race in the burial decision. The presence of numerous French names, and names from the island of St. Domingue, on tombstones at St. Mary's Church today suggest a strong presence of church members with French and French Island origins. No records of his first wife's nor his daughter's name has been found although it is believed that he lost his first wife in the 1810s since she was not discussed among his friends by the 1820s. Cassey was at that time described as a "widower."

Soon after this personally difficult period, and perhaps frustrated with his treatment by the church regarding his wife and daughter's anonymous death records, Cassey left St. Mary's Church and crossed Fifth Street to join St. Thomas' African Episcopal Church. Led by Reverend Absalom Jones, St. Thomas' was founded in 1792, the first church dedicated to serving the black community in Philadelphia. Here Cassey became very active in the leadership of the church as a long-time treasurer and vestryman. He personally and financially supported the church for the remainder of his life.²⁹

This church was also the religious refuge of the most influential, elite, black social activists in Philadelphia. The move to St. Thomas would have been a calculated action consistent with Joseph Cassey's character and ambition. It was symbolic of an emotional and intellectual transition for Cassey, from relying on the opportunities and support within the French community, where his life and family were invisible to society, to immersing himself within the support system of the very active and visible African American community. In all likelihood, sailmaker James Forten, having considerable influence over Cassey during this time, invited him to join St. Thomas while Cassey grieved for his wife and daughter. Forten was apparently the only later contemporary of Cassey's to have known him during these difficult years when he lost his family, the only friend known to have called Cassey a "widower."

Cassey's sense of loss due to the deaths of his wife and daughter may have been assuaged by a renewed focus on wealth creation and interactions with some very influential friends. Increasingly active with James Forten in church and social activist activities, Cassey also met Reverend Peter Williams (1780–1840), leader of the black community in New York City. In 1818 Cassey served as an officer of the Pennsylvania Augustine Society. This networked him with some of the strongest proponents for Haitian resettlement, including Williams. In 1824, while Williams served as chairman

of the New York City chapter for the Haytien Emigration Society, a group recruiting free people of color to emigrate to Haiti, Cassey served as treasurer for the Haytien Emigration Society of Philadelphia.

During his interactions with Peter Williams, Cassey would have heard of, or even met face to face, Peter's only child, Amy Matilda Williams, who was perhaps as young as nine years old at their first meeting. Amy was later to become Cassey's second wife. It would not be too difficult to imagine that Amy's father, Rev. Peter Williams Jr., met often with Cassey during Williams's visits to Philadelphia and recognized in Cassey a promising suitor for his only child and cherished daughter: a future husband who would provide well for her. Here again, one might suspect that the consummate businessman, Cassey, now nearly forty years old, held off starting a second family until he had developed a diverse portfolio of businesses and generated sufficient wealth to support a family in comfort and luxury. The marriage was widely announced in newspapers in Philadelphia, New York, Washington DC, and Baltimore (see fig. 4).

Cassey's second marriage, on September 12, 1826, in New York City, was an inspired union, mutually beneficial to both Amy and Cassey.³⁰ Only seventeen years old and her spouse twenty years her senior, Amy Matilda Williams (1809–August 15, 1856), had already established herself as a very attractive potential asset for any aspiring businessman and suitor.³¹ Amy came from an elite, influential family of church leaders in New York City and was already interested in improving the lot of black Americans. Her relatives were associated with the first black Protestant Episcopal Church in New York City and the first African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Together, Amy and Joseph had eight children, two of whom died in infancy. Many of these children left their own legacy of activism, religious pursuits, or wealth. These children included Joseph Williams

In New York, on the 12th inst. by the Rev. Mr. Lisle, Mr. *Joseph Cassey*, of this city to *Matilda*, daughter of the Rev. Peter Williams, Rector of St. Philip's Church of that city.

FIGURE 4: Newspaper clipping announcing Cassey's wedding to Amy Matilda Williams. *The Album and Ladies' Weekly Gazette* (1826–1827); September 27, 1826, 1, 17, American Philosophical Society Online, 7.

(June 17, 1827–?), Alfred Smith (July 26, 1829–September 3, 1903), Reverend Peter William (October 13, 1831–1917),³² Sarah Louisa (December 9, 1833–October 18, 1844), Henry Garrison (October 19, 1840–?), and, the youngest, Francis L. (Lloyd?) (1844–?). Children Mary Caroline (February 29, 1836–March 1837) and William Henry (February 12, 1838–26 July 26, 1840) died young.³³

Amy Williams's influential family included her father, Rev. Peter Williams Jr. (1780–1840), the son of Mary "Molly" Durham (1748–1821) and Peter Williams Sr., known as "The Tobacconist" (1750–1823).³⁴ Peter Williams Sr. was the well-known sexton from the John Street Methodist Church. Peter Sr. also served as the church's funeral director. He raised the funds and laid the cornerstone for the first church building in New York City for people of color, the Zion Church, for which he was one of the original trustees.³⁵ The Reverend Peter Williams Jr. was only the second African American, after Absalom Jones in Philadelphia, to be ordained (1820) in the Episcopal Church.³⁶ He was involved with Trinity Church and the founding of St. Philip's Church in downtown New York City.

Under the influence of such esteemed and proactive community leaders in New York City, Amy was an early and active proponent of antislavery efforts. Her personal album resides in the collection at the Library Company of Philadelphia and contains original drawings and writings by such antislavery advocates as Frederick Douglass, Lucy Stone, William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Sarah Mapps Douglass, and Robert Purvis, as well as members of James Forten's family, among others.³⁷

As the Cassey household always employed at least one servant, Amy was free to devote considerable attention to antislavery and civil rights efforts including being active in the interracial Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society.³⁸ It wasn't until his marriage to Amy, and under the strong influence of his wife and her father, that Cassey immersed himself into social activism efforts.

When Joseph Cassey died in 1848, Amy remarried two years later to Charles Lenox Remond, a caterer and noted orator on antislavery and abolition, who had visited Philadelphia on numerous occasions. She moved to Salem, Massachusetts, where Remond lived, and continued her work in abolition and civil rights.³⁹ The days and hours leading to her death due to illness on August 15, 1856, were captured in the diary of young Charlotte Forten, James Forten's granddaughter, who was attending school in Salem and staying with the Remonds.⁴⁰

Social Activist and Black Community Network

Through his community and business activities, Joseph Cassey met and befriended notables Robert Purvis, James Forten, William Lloyd Garrison, Stephen Smith, William Whipper, Charles Lenox Remond, Frederick Douglass, and Lucretia Mott, naming his children after many of these respected individuals. Sailmaker James Forten was the primary black community leader in Philadelphia during Cassey's lifetime. At retirement, Cassey moved his home and family to 113 Lombard Street, within a few doors of Forten's family at 92 Lombard Street, after he closed his barbershop around 1836 or 1837. The Cassey and Forten families were very close for at least three generations as captured in the diary of James Forten's granddaughter, Charlotte Forten.⁴¹

Robert Purvis (1810–1898), prominent community leader and commonly considered to be the chairman of the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia in his later years, became Cassey's business partner in numerous real estate deals including sharing a farm in Bucks County once visited by Lucretia Mott. Stephen Smith and William Whipper ran a successful lumber mill at Columbia in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. They also began the Underground Railroad in the Philadelphia area and were known to have a special boxcar with a false wall to transport runaway slaves via the railroad. Cassey's son, Joseph W. Cassey Jr., became their accountant and later ran his own lumber mill in Penyan, New York. Stephen Smith was the co-executor of Cassey's will. Orators Frederick Douglass and Charles Lenox Remond passed through Philadelphia on speaking tours for the abolition cause and frequently visited with the Casseys. As stated above, Charles Lenox Remond later became Amy Williams Cassey's second husband. Cassey's activities with the church and activist organizations would have connected him with all of the influential blacks in the city of Philadelphia and many from New York City, Baltimore, and Boston.⁴²

Cassey's wealth created opportunities for him to contribute to important events of the day. He was pulled into the community spotlight initially by James Forten in the 1810s, and to a much greater extent when he married Amy Williams in the 1820s. He retired from main-stage activities when Forten and Rev. Peter Williams retired from community service in the late 1830s. Cassey was neither generally known for taking primary roles in activist organizations nor for producing passionate orations to civic-minded audiences, but his ready support of the more senior Forten's front-stage activist efforts was life-long. When Forten took a primary leadership role, Cassey stepped up consistently into the number two spot.

Social Activism

The 1820s through 1840s were the highest public profile years for Cassey in community service, when he focused on antislavery, black education, religious improvement, and intellectual pursuits. He initially supported emigration to Haiti, influenced by his future father-in-law, but later joined Forten in his anticolonization campaign. The appendix summarizes Cassey's numerous activities. He frequently appeared as an officer, delegate, agent, founder, and not just a member of various organizations. He took a very active role in these activities, but usually not in the very top position.

Sunset on Success

Joseph Cassey was talented and insightful enough to be unusually successful at building wealth in an era of obstacles for most blacks. They had neither the liberties nor basic rights: they were informally prevented from voting before the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1838 took away that right.⁴³ At the point when Cassey withdrew from his primary business of hairdressing, sometime around 1837, the business climate had turned acrimonious and violence against blacks was manifested in several race riots between 1834 and 1842. Tensions grew as the local white labor force had difficulty adjusting to the recent influx of cheap Irish labor and the improving status of the growing population of free blacks. Blacks comprised nearly 10 percent of the total population by 1830.⁴⁴ They directly competed with Irish immigrants who were not above using violent means to eliminate their competition. Some said Cassey had to retire due to health issues, although it is more likely he was disgusted with the deteriorating civic climate in the city.⁴⁵ James Forten was also retreating from civic duties under increasingly poor health, old age, and severe disappointment in how little progress blacks had made toward improving their conditions. The Reverend Peter Williams Jr. had been asked in 1834 to withdraw from his leadership roles by the bishop, as St. Philip's Church had been attacked by a mob, the attack attributed to his antislavery activities.

The 1834 riot was especially brutal. It took approximately 300 constables and special militia to subdue a three-day riot, but only after black churches had been destroyed and defaced, numerous people had been injured, and one person had died. As with future riots, prosperous free blacks and their institutions were targeted. Forten received death threats and his son was set upon,

FIGURE 5: Joseph Cassey's signature, 1828, from one of Cassey's property deeds, Philadelphia Archives Deed Book GWR, 12, Butler.

meeting halls were torched, and middle-class homes were damaged. Cassey's hairdressing shop would have been a likely target as he was well on his way to becoming one of the wealthiest black residents in the city.⁴⁶

In the end, more than thirty-seven homes were destroyed, and several churches and meeting halls were damaged. The mayor and firemen of the city were kept active subduing the riots and minimizing property damage. The mayor showed up at many of the riots to personally dissuade the attackers.⁴⁷ A historical marker today marks the location of a riot that took place yards from Forten's doorstep. By the end of the riots in the early 1840s, two pivotal black community leaders in the city of Philadelphia, Forten and Cassey, as well as the primary leader of the New York City black community, Reverend Williams, together withdrew from business and activist roles, retreating into retirement and the security of their churches. All three died in the 1840s. With them passed away an older generation of black leaders, born in the late eighteenth century. Their successors would be more vocal and belligerent, much like the whites who took over national political leadership from Clay, Webster, and Calhoun a few years later (see fig. 5).

APPENDIX

Joseph Cassey's Social Activist Record

1818: Cassey served as an officer of the Pennsylvania Augustine Society. This networked him with some of the strongest proponents for Haitian resettlement, including his future father-in-law, Rev. Peter Williams Jr. (1780–1840), leader of the black community in New York City.

1820: Involved life-long in St. Thomas's Church on South Fifth Street, he was a member and treasurer beginning in 1820, with Forten pledging \$1,000 personally to guarantee Cassey's performance. He was active as an officer in the Sons of St. Thomas benevolent society, and in the nondenominational Benezet Philanthropic Society.

1824: Cassey served as treasurer for the Haytien Emigration Society of Philadelphia (while Reverend Williams was president of the New York City branch), a group recruiting free people of color to immigrate to Haiti.

1830: He was recruited to be a delegate from Philadelphia to the national Negro Convention of the American Society of Free Persons of Colour founded by Rev. Richard Allen.

1831: Introduced to William Lloyd Garrison by James Forten, Cassey became the first agent in Philadelphia for *The Liberator*, the early abolitionist newspaper published in Boston by Garrison, which Cassey actively funded and distributed.

Also in 1831, Cassey was a delegate to the first national convention of colored men where a proposition was put forth to establish a College for Colored Youth. Cassey raised funds for this school to be established in New Haven, Connecticut, home of Yale University. This met with much resistance from the local townspeople, to the extent that they would “resist the establishment of the proposed College . . . by every lawful means.”

1831: Cassey served as agent for the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* newspaper.

1833: Cassey was appointed vice president of the New England Anti-Slavery Society.

Also in 1833, Forten recruited Cassey to help raise funds for Garrison’s trip to Europe to speak on anticolonization.

1833: Cassey served as chair of the public meeting of people of color at the Wesleyan Church in Philadelphia.

1834: Cassey was a founding manager of the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society, an auxiliary to the American Anti-Slavery Society.

1834–1836: Cassey was on the board of the American Anti-Slavery Society, providing financial support to this organization.

1835–1841: Cassey served as treasurer of the American Moral Reform Society.

1833–1834: The ill-fated “Canterbury Affair” saw Cassey and colleagues supporting the transition of a school for local white children in Canterbury, Connecticut, to a “High School for Young Colored Ladies and Misses,” as advertised in the *Liberator* abolitionist newspaper. The local townspeople rose up against the school teacher and threw her in jail, closing down the school permanently. Laws were enacted preventing students of color from outside the area to be educated within Canterbury.

1839: Cassey joined with friends and colleagues, sailmaker James Forten, and lumber merchant Stephen Smith, to establish a ten-year scholarship for poor but deserving black students at the Oneida Institute in upstate New York which had a race-blind admissions policy.

1841: Cassey and second wife, Amy Williams Cassey, were founding members of the Gilbert Lyceum for scientific and literary interests, the first of its kind established by African Americans and which included both genders. The Lyceum organized lectures on “Physiology, Anatomy, Chemistry & Natural Philosophy.”

NOTES

1. For an analysis of both the southern and the northern positions on the topic of slavery in the early Republic, look at Richard S. Newman, “Prelude to the Gag Rule: Southern Reaction to Antislavery Petitions in the First Federal Congress,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 16 (1996): 571–99.

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2. Margaret Hope Bacon, *But One Race: The Life of Robert Purvis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
3. Robert Purvis to William Lloyd Garrison Jr. (1885), "My Dear Mr. Garrison," The Gilder Lehrman Collection at the New-York Historical Society, New York.
4. Alfred Cassey was the sole offspring to remain in Philadelphia with wife Abby A. (died 1912) and daughter Matilda Inez (1851–1916) at 243 Delancey Street (known as the Cassey House), formerly 63 Union Street, within two blocks of his father's final residence at 113 Lombard Street (now an open churchyard).
5. Dianna Ruth Cassey-Warner, conversation with author, March 7, 2008.
6. *US Federal Census 1920, St. Augustine, Florida*. Interestingly, the Reverend Peter William Cassey died in 1917, yet the family still listed him as head of the family in 1920. A member of the family listed Peter's father's (Joseph Cassey) origin as Martinique. This is the only documentation known of Cassey's origins.
7. Paul Finkelman and J. C. Miller, eds., *Macmillan Encyclopedia of World Slavery*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1998), 1:160.
8. See Billy G. Smith, *Ship of Death: The Voyage that Changed the Atlantic World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), and P. Sean Taylor, "We Live in the Midst of Death: Yellow Fever, Moral Economy, and Public Health in Philadelphia, 1793–1805" (PhD diss., Northern Illinois University, 2005).
9. Joseph was fluent in French and had a life-long French accent. He taught French to his children. He would have to have lived in a French-speaking community most of his early childhood years to develop this fluency. As he was born in 1789, the family would have left the islands in the late 1790s, allowing Joseph to build his French-language skills.
10. Richard R. Wright Jr., "The Negro in Pennsylvania: A Study in Economic History," *History* 250 (1907): 52.
11. Gary B. Nash, "Reverberations of Haiti in the American North: Black Saint Domingans in Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania History* 65 (1998): 44–73.
12. *U.S. Federal Census 1800, Baltimore* (Baltimore, 1800).
13. Nash, "Reverberations of Haiti."
14. *U.S. Federal Census 1810, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1810); *A Statistical Inquiry into the Condition of People of Colour, or the City and Districts of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Kite & Walton, 1849).
15. A Philadelphia city block is 400–425 feet long, per William Penn's plans in 1681.
16. R. B. Ludy, *Historic Hotels of the World: Past and Present* (Philadelphia: David McKay Company, 1927).
17. James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1808* (Philadelphia, 1809).
18. Cornelius William Stafford, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1801* (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1801).
19. Ibid.
20. A "trinity" is a traditional Philadelphia small home from the 1700s or early 1800s. It consists of three stories above ground, one below, and each story contains only one room, often in the 12' × 12' range (or smaller) for a total house size of 576 square feet. Early allusions for the word "trinity" houses were to "faith, hope, and charity," evolving into "the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, with

the Devil in the basement" (kitchen). These homes were heated with fireplaces on each floor or Franklin stoves.

21. Joseph Willson, *The Elite of Our People: Joseph Willson's Sketches of Black Upper-Class Life in Antebellum Philadelphia* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 167.
22. J. Shaw, *United States Directory for the Use of Travelers and Merchants* (Philadelphia, 1823).
23. *The 1838 African American Census* (Philadelphia, 1838).
24. Ground rents represent a separation of above ground and ground ownership for a property in Philadelphia. These were abolished later by the city as they complicated ownership. You could own your house but lose it at a sheriff's sale if you neglected to pay an annual ground rent to whoever owned the ground rent. Owners of properties tried to buy the ground rents for their properties and unite the two deeds permanently.
25. Death Records, Philadelphia City Archives.
26. Julie Winch, "A Person of Good Character and Considerable Property: James Forten and the Issue of Race in Philadelphia's Antebellum Business Community," *Business History Review* 75 (2001): 261.
27. Martin Robison Delaney, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852), Project Gutenberg EBook.
28. Death Records, 261, Philadelphia City Archives.
29. The records of St. Thomas Church are maintained in excellent shape by archivist Mary Sewall-Smith at the church's present home at Sixty-Ninth Street and Overbrook Avenue (near City Line Avenue).
30. *The Album and Ladies' Weekly Gazette* (1826–27), September 27, 1826, 1, 17; APS [American Philosophical Society] Online, 7.
31. Charlotte Forten Grimké, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787–1848* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Willson, *The Elite of Our People*, 167.
32. Cassey Family newspaper clippings excerpts, Howard University Archives, Washington, DC.
33. Cassey 1700s Family Bible, Howard University Archives, Washington, DC.
34. J. B. Wakeley, *Lost Chapters Recovered from the Early History of American Methodism* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1858). These dates are derived from a tombstone description found in Wakeley's book. The Cassey family Bible from the 1700s (Howard University Archives) states slightly different dates, e.g., 1824. Both sources have been found to have errors in dates.
35. *Ibid.*, 443–44.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Phillip Lapsansky, *The Library Company of Philadelphia: 1998 Annual Report* (Philadelphia: Library Company of Philadelphia, 1999).
38. Willson. *The Elite of Our People*, 167.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Grimké, *Journals*.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Wright, *The Negro in Pennsylvania*.

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43. Eric Ledell Smith, "The End of Black Voting Rights and the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1837–1838," *Pennsylvania History* 56 (1998): 279–99.
44. Emma J. Lapsansky, "'Since They Got Those Separate Churches': Afro-Americans and Racism in Jacksonian Philadelphia," *American Quarterly* (32) 1980: 54–74.
45. Delaney, *Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*.
46. Lapsansky, "Since They Got Those Separate Churches."
47. Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).