A View of Philadelphia in 1829

Selections from the Journal of
B. L. C. Wailes of Natchez

During the month of December, 1829, Benjamin L. C. Wailes, a cotton planter from the Natchez region of Mississippi, in company with his wife visited Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington.1 Departing from Natchez on December 1, the Waileses traveled by steamboat to Wheeling and from there overland by stage-coach to Baltimore, arriving in that city on December 23. From Baltimore they went on to Philadelphia, where they spent six days sight-seeing before returning to Mississippi by way of Washington, D. C.

Wailes kept a daily record of his experiences and observations in a small leather-bound pocket notebook,2 and, because he was an enthusiastic amateur who dabbled in horticulture, geology, archaeology and chemistry, his entries describing mechanical devices, industrial plants, museums, horticultural and botanical gardens and other things related to the natural sciences are of particular interest. Unfortunately, Wailes’s literary style, as demonstrated in all his journals, was not equal to his powers of observation. In the travel diary from which these selections have been chosen, the daily record was made with complete disregard for spelling, punctuation, or the most elemental rules of grammar, presumably because the writer expected to incorporate his hasty notes into a published travel account written at leisure at some future date.


2 The journal from which these selections have been taken is contained in the B. L. C. Wailes manuscript collection in the Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi. Additional Wailes documents can be found in the library of Duke University.
In preparing extracts from Wailes's journal for publication, the editor has added punctuation when necessary to make the meaning clear, but grammatical errors and misspellings have been preserved just as the author left them.

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Thursday 24th [December, 1829]. Embarked on board the Philadelphia [steam] B[ oat] at 6 o'clock for Phil. Among the passengers were Mr. Peterson, Danish Consul, & Revd. Mr. Pierpont, Unitarian Clergyman & Celebrated Poet. Rained last night. The fog today extremely thick; became more clear. Entered Elk River, passing the mouth of the Susquehannah in Henderson County; the appearance very poor. Entered the Delaware & Chesapeake Canal & passed through it (distance 16 miles) in 2 1/4 hours. There are four locks & several Bridges made to turn out of the way of the Canal Barge. The weather became clear & extremely mild during our passage & enabled us to have a fine view of its whole extent. At the Summit level there is a fine bridge 70 feet above the water, spanning the whole extent of the Cut, which must be at least 150 feet (of frame, covered & neatly painted). It springs from Rock abutments & has no arch. Near the Summit level there have been large slides or slips of the Bank of the Canal owing to the springs & marshy nature of the ground. These have been overcome by thatching the Banks with Coarse Straw or Grass.

At Delaware City embarked on board the William Pen[n], perhaps the most splendid & best arranged Boat in America. A number of Ships, Briggs & smaller craft were seen plying up & in the Bay, & gave great interest to a most charming scene. Passed the town of New Castle. Fog & dark set in, & I could see no more. At the distance of one mile across the water from our point of embarkation, Fort Delaware, a large mass of Brick with visible ranks of guns, was seen.

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3 Chevalier P. Pedersen.
4 John Pierpont (1785-1866).
5 Construction of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal was begun in 1805. When available funds proved to be insufficient, work on the project was abandoned and not resumed until 1824. The canal was finally placed into operation in 1829 shortly before the visit described by Wailes.
Proceeded through a thick fog, Boat lost & in constant danger of running afloat of Shipping. Passed Chester. Ran foul of a sloop & washed her up. Arrived in Philadelphia at 11 o'clock and put up at Renshaws US Hotel. Bad house & excessively dear [illegible].

Friday 25 Dec. Visited the museum in the Arcade; it is splendidly arranged. The collection of Birds & Shells is very extensive, finely preserved & truly beautiful. The mineral department interesting; Indian antiquities, dresses, arms, &c., very good. Quadrupeds & reptiles somewhat the worse for wear. Some very good specimens—The Skeletons of the Mammoth & Elephant and the stuffed Elephant are great curiosities. There is however no specimen of the teeth (organ grinders) half as large or well preserved as those in my possession. Some very large tusks however are exhibited. Day very pleasant. Thermometer 68° at half past three in the evening.

Saturday 26 Dec. Hired a horse & gig for 2$ for half a day. Rode out to Landreths Nursery and passed through his hot house [which contained] a number of dwarf Orange & Lemon trees in fruit, a few Camelia, Japonicas in Bloom, a number of young evergreens consisting of the Balm of Gilead, Juniper, Hemlock, Box Arbor Vitae, &c., &c. in hedges & nurseries. The day bad & the rain prevented our going over the grounds. In sight was a splendid looking building which I was told was the Marine Asylum. Returned by Pennsylvania Hospital & stopped to see Wests Painting of Christ healing in the Temple.

Rode by Washington Square laid out in gravel walks & planted in trees. Cedars & Pines interspersed among the larger deciduous trees. Rained. Walked through it to the Academy of Fine Arts. This day

7 The United States Hotel on Chestnut Street owned by Benjamin Renshaw was opened in 1828.
8 Peak's Museum, located in the Arcade on Chestnut Street between Sixth and Seventh, was taken over by the Philadelphia Museum Company, founded in 1821, and operated under the management of Charles Willson Peale's sons, Franklin and Titian R., until 1838.
9 Wailes had discovered the skeleton of a mammoth near Natchez and had preserved two molars weighing more than eight pounds each.
10 The word "evening" as used by Wailes was the common southern expression for afternoon.
11 D. and C. Landreth's nurseries and gardens were located on Federal Street near the United States Arsenal at Gray's Ferry.
12 The Marine Hospital was situated above Gray's Ferry.
13 The famous painting by Benjamin West presented to the Pennsylvania Hospital in 1811.
14 The Academy of Fine Arts, on Chestnut Street between Tenth and Eleventh, originally organized by the artist Charles Willson Peale, began to hold public exhibitions in 1811.
to dark & far Advanced to be seen to advantage. A few paintings only interested us. A most ingenious & elegant specimen of wood carving in three pieces (in what may be termed *Alto Relevo*) of the roof of a tree & elegantly framed like pictures attracted our attention. The[y] consist of flowers, birds, insects, &c. The wood is about the colour of Box. It is said 300 guineas have been offered for them in addition to the first cost, which I did not learn.

There is a handsome group of plaster of the Graces in the center of the Salon. The antique gallery contains a parcel of *manuscript damaged* tapestry. But few things in it very attractive. [Illegible] Venus is a charming, chaste production & from its modest drapery contrasting most agreeably with the defaced, mutilated & nude figures around it.

Called at Earls gallery as we returned. It contained some sweet pictures, but the light was too dull to *illegible* them much.

**Sunday 27 Dec.** Rained nearly the whole day. . . .

**Monday 28 Dec.** Day fair. Went to market in company with my wife. The greatest profusion of meats & vegetables of the Season of the finest kind. The beef is unrivalled in the world. The quantity of edibles exhibited is surprising.

Visited US Mint. The establishment is carried on in a very *mean* house. A new building, it is said, is now building for its reception. Witnessed the process of Coining. Bars of Silver, Copper or Gold are passed through three rollers of Iron & reduced nearly to the thickness of the Coin to be made from it. The bands or strips of metal are then drawn by a machine endwise through an apparatus which leaves them of a perfectly uniform thickness. The end of one of those strips is then passed under a bit (or gouge, or punch) driven by a powerful screw, which requires about a quarter of a revolution to bring it down & to clip out the size of the coin (which falls in a box below). In this manner the slip of metal is pushed onward until it is perforated with holes throughout its whole extent, & is then *illegible* and to be recast & rolled.

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15 The gallery of James Earle was on Chestnut Street between Fifth and Sixth.

16 The Philadelphia Mint, which began operations in 1792, was the first maintained by the United States Government. Originally located on Seventh Street above Filbert, it was later moved into a new building at the northwest corner of Juniper and Chestnut streets that had been designed by William Strickland and completed in 1833.
Each piece of Coin is then taken to scales & its weight tested separately. The Coin is then removed to the apparatus for stamping the impression. This is a very powerful, ingenious, simple (tho very perfect) piece of machinery. It consists (like the cutting machine) of a very powerful upright screw, to the top of which is affixed a heavy & strong lever worked with great apparent ease by one man at each end, & by which the Screw is made to make about one fourth of a revolution & returning instantly to its former position. At the lower end of the screw is affixed the die which gives the impression on the upper side, & immediately under it is the die containing the impression for the reverse of the Coin, around which a pair of nippers (which gives the milling or impression on the edges), & which by placing as a rivet in the manner of sheers admits the introduction of the coin before & its ejection after it receives the impression. Near the lower end of the Screw Stands a tube sufficiently large to admit a considerable number of the Coins, one on top of the other, which may be termed the hopper, at the bottom of which is an apparatus sufficiently large to admit the passage of the coin, one at the time. The lower end in the file (or hopper) is struck out with great accuracy by a thin piece of iron made to strike edgewise at each movement of the lever, and is conveyed by a channel formed for the purpose & is conveyed directly on & under the dye. The screw is brought down & the nippers close with a force that makes the impression. The leaver is instantly brought back, the nippers open, the Stamped Coin is struck out of its place & conveyed into a Box by a spout (or conductor) as the Screw rises, and another unstamped Coin takes its place, & the Screw comes down again.

During this process the whole manual labour required (with the exception of replenishing the hopper occasionally) is the pushing [of] the leaver backwards & forwards. I presume 60 pieces may be stamped per minute, the cutting is done equally fast. A great quantity of N Carolina & Virginia gold is required. But it is said [the coined metal] is immediately shipped to Europe bearing a handsome premium. I must have seen 100 pounds of gold in bars & hoops ready to be manufactured into half eagles. I learn that the precious metals are deposited by individuals. They are then refined & assayed & the true value ascertained, & the full weight is given in coin. The number of hands employed is said to be about 20, & the establishment costs
the government about 40,000 dollars annually, the expense of the Establishment itself not being defrayed out of the coining. Mr. Eckfeldt, one of the Superintendents (the Second in grade) is an artist & has been in the mint from its first establishment. [He] made the first dye used in it.\textsuperscript{17}

In the afternoon visited Mr. Childs lithographic Establishment.\textsuperscript{18} Saw the press at work on a portrait of Henry Clay, very handsomely executed on stone from a Painting by Jo. Wood.\textsuperscript{19} A roller, over which the stone passes, conveys it by means of a crank under the edge of a scraper of wood, which presses the paper to the drawing on the Stone. The drawing is made of a peculiar kind of crayon. The Stone being moistened by means of a sponge, a roller containing ink (about the consistency of common printing ink but differently composed) is passed repeatedly over the Stone (held by lands at each end) & pressing it with considerable force—the ink adhering only to the traces of the drawing & to no other part of the Stone. The impressions were very perfect, & the print has a softer mellower appearance than the copper plate engraving.

\textit{Tuesday 29 Dec.} Went by market; found everything good as usual. Hired a horse & gig for 2 dollars & drove to the Water Works.\textsuperscript{20} Passed by the Schuylkill Permanent Bridge.\textsuperscript{21} It has 3 arches, is 550 over the water & 1300 feet in its whole Length. It was completed in 1805. Above is another bridge of one arch; this dammed the Schuylkill.\textsuperscript{22}

The Buildings \textit{of the waterworks} enclose pastures sodded & planted in pines, Cedars, Balm of Gilead, &c., & are extremely handsome & neat. The water is forced up a very high bank under the ground, but how & in what manner, I could not ascertain.\textsuperscript{23} All is hid

\textsuperscript{17} Adam Eckfeldt.
\textsuperscript{18} The firm of Pendleton, Kearny & Childs, founded in 1829, was among the first publishing houses in the United States to use the lithographing process.
\textsuperscript{19} Joseph Wood (1778–1852).
\textsuperscript{20} Philadelphia was among the first of the cities of the world to operate a waterworks. The Fairmount waterworks visited by Wailes was the second built in the city and had been completed in 1815.
\textsuperscript{21} The Permanent Bridge was a covered wooden bridge at Market Street. It was destroyed by fire in 1875.
\textsuperscript{22} Lewis Wernwag’s bridge, completed in 1813, was constructed in the form of a single arch with a span ninety-six feet longer than any other similar bridge of the period. This structure, called the Upper Ferry Bridge, was burned in 1838.
\textsuperscript{23} Steam pumps filled the reservoirs with water from the river.
but the Water wheel. Two flights of steps leads to the top of the Bluff where are three large reservoirs of water enclosed in a neat railing. The sides of the ponds are lined with stone, & some handsome Ceadars are planted around it. This position is said to be 50 feet higher than the level of the City, & water is conveyed under ground in pipes for the supply.

The Scenery around the water works, & especially from the Basins, is extremely fine. You have in view the greater part of the City, the two Schuylkill bridges, a large extent of beautiful Country beyond the Schuylkill spotted with buildings & embellished with gardens, pleasure grounds & spotted over with beautiful evergreens. You see also this Pagoda, the Shot tower & a part of the Penitentiary. But the most enchanting prospect is towards the grand pleasure grove & green house of a Mr. Prat[e], a gentleman of fortune, and to this we next proceeded by a circuitous rout, passing in view of the fish ponds, bowers, rustic retreats, summer houses, fountains, grotto, &c., &c. The grotto is dug in a bank [and] is of a circular form, the side built up of rock and arched over head, and a number of Shells [?]. A dog of natural size carved out of marble sits just within the entrance, the guardian of the place. A narrow aperture lined with a hedge of arbor vitae leads to it. Next is a round fish pond with a small fountain playing in the pond. An Oval & several oblong fish ponds of larger size follow, & between the two last is an artificial cascade. Several summer houses in rustic style are made by nailing bark on the outside & thatching the roof. There is also a rustic seat built in the branches of a tree, & to which a flight of steps ascend. In one of the summer houses is a Spring with seats around it. The houses are all embellished with marble busts of Venus, Appollo, Diana and a Bacanti. One sits on an Island on the fish pond. All the ponds filled with handsome coloured fish.

The grounds are planted with a great variety of shrubbery & evergreens of various kinds of the pine & fir, and the hot house is said to be the largest in the US. It is filled to overflowing with the choicest Exotics: the Chaddock Orange of different kinds & the Lemon loaded

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24 The Pagoda and Labyrinth Garden was an amusement garden designed by William Strickland and opened in 1827.
25 An abandoned shot tower erected in 1808 by Paul Beck.
26 The Eastern State Penitentiary was completed in 1829.
27 Lemon Hill, at that time owned by Henry Pratt, was originally the estate of the Revolutionary War financier, Robert Morris. It was laid out by the horticulturist, John McAran.
with fruit. There are two coffee trees with their berries. Some few shrubs were in flower & others seeded, & I was politely furnished with a few seed of 2 varieties of flowers (Myrtle & an accacia). In front of the hot house, one at each end, is a Lion of marble, well executed, & a dog in front. On the roof is a range of marble busts.

We proceeded next by the Pagoda, the Penitentiary & the House of Refuge to Kensington to the small monument erected to mark the spot on which stood the celebrated Elm, under which Penn's treaty with the Indians was made. Visited some large vessels on the stocks nearby & returned.

*Wednesday 30.* Embarked at 7 oclock on board the William Pen[n]. Passed through the Canal & arrived at Baltimore a little past nine. Nothing material occurred. . . .

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28 The House of Refuge, founded in 1826, was a reformatory for juvenile delinquents.