Thomas Phillips, A Yorkshire Shoemaker in Philadelphia

From 1860 to the opening of the present century, emigrant Britons played a significant part in the organization and direction of American labor. Since Philadelphia ranked throughout this period as a vital industrial center, as well as an entrepôt for the coal, grain, and manufactured products of the hinterland, it is little wonder that British craftsmen, already conditioned to the factory life of their homeland, settled there and helped transform the city into a workingmen's stronghold. Thousands of them, in fact, during the nineteenth century formed an important element in the local carpet-weaving, hosiery, silk and textile industries, not to mention the heavy industries and the metal trades.¹

Starting with the Civil War there began emerging among the city's mechanics a number of competent and determined labor leaders, some of them American, some British, but all working rather effectively toward common objectives. The native American leaders included such notable figures as Jonathan Fincher, editor of the influential wartime labor paper, Fincher's Trades' Review, and the pioneer chieftain of the Ironmolders' International Union, William Sylvis. Laboring side by side with these men were immigrant British organizers like John Samuel, Jr.,² whose fame rested variously on his leadership in the Glassblowers' Union, the Philadelphia Trades Assembly, the Knights of Labor and several co-operative ventures, Frederick Turner,³ a moving spirit among Philadelphia's goldbeaters and the Knights of Labor, and Thomas Phillips.

¹ Rowland T. Berthoff, British Immigrants in Industrial America (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), 31, 39, 43, 45, 71, 95, 163, 165.
² A well-known exponent of various co-operative schemes in the last forty years of the nineteenth century, Samuel is virtually unknown today. The John Samuel papers are in the Wisconsin State Historical Society, University of Wisconsin, and are hereafter cited as Samuel Papers.
³ There are several brief biographical sketches of Turner. See the Journal of United Labor (July, 1883), hereafter cited as JUL. Also see George McNeill, ed., The Labor Movement: The Problem of To-day (Boston, 1887), 614.
Hardly significant enough for a full-scale biography, a prominent personality only in the context of a small though important movement, Thomas Phillips nevertheless provides us with a welcome case study of a man whose career encompassed labor activity on both sides of the Atlantic. His perspectives were those of a skilled worker in a rapidly changing craft, a pioneer exponent of distributive cooperation, an active organizer in four great labor organizations, and the first president of the International Boot and Shoe Workers' Union. Since the history of labor, especially, must be a history of its lesser as well as its greater leaders, Phillips' life makes it easier for us to view labor as something other than the movement of "an abstract mass" caught in the "grip of an abstract force."  

As was often the case with British immigrants, Phillips' background and training fitted him eminently well for a role in American labor. The son of a farmer, he was born on March 22, 1833, in Whitson near Rotherham, a Yorkshire town famed for its iron forgers. In 1833 British labor had just begun its portentous advance, although there had been earlier stirrings that smoothed the way. That year Robert Owen mobilized a conglomeration of tradesmen, co-operators, and malcontents into the most sizable—and the most formidable—labor union in Yorkshire, the Grand National Consolidated Trades' Union, "a giant Tree the top whereof shall reach to Heaven and afford a shelter to succeeding generations."  

The world in which Phillips was raised time and again heard echoes of Owen's name, and the shadow of the Grand National proved a long one. Tom Phillips' formal education was meager, yet it supplied him with many of his more substantial characteristics. Christened in the Anglican Church, given additional religious and secular training in Methodist, Episcopal, and day schools, he learned the canons of the Christian faith as a boy. Consequently, like so many nineteenth-century British labor leaders, he reflected prevailing Christian mores, cast his thoughts in a Christian mold, and framed his objectives in Christian terms. Once committed to a cause, he readily convinced himself of its righteousness; once a part of the labor movement, he

---


5 G. D. H. Cole and R. Postgate, *The British Common People* (New York, 1939), 240. This remark was made by one of Robert Owen's disciples.
never doubted its virtue or the wisdom of dedicating his energies to it. His labor activity in future years, therefore, displayed attributes of a one-man evangelical mission.

When he was thirteen his schooling ended and, despite paternal objections to servitude, he was bound out by his father to his brother-in-law as an apprentice shoemaker. For the rest of his life he stuck to his last. At the time of his apprenticeship, the several types of craftsmen who practiced at the bench had much in common and they could and did take pride in an ancient, proud profession. Crispins, as shoemakers were called after their patron saint, were distinguished, so their traditions taught them, by their sharp tongues, wit, and intelligence. The shoemaking craft, however, like so many others, had already begun to undergo fundamental changes as its scores of operations—crimping, bottoming, heeling, finishing—were, decade by decade, subdivided and taken over by machinery. Shoe pegs, foot dies, power strippers, power sole molders, and beating-out machines modified generations of custom. Changes of this nature bore in upon Phillips and his associates with frightening speed; it was not unnatural that they gave vent to their reactions in the labor movements of England and America.

As was customary, Phillips labored from twelve to fifteen hours a day at his bench, and, as was equally common, his apprenticeship proved the period of his indoctrination in labor agitation. "My boss," he wrote realistically of his brother-in-law, "was an active Chartist and an ex-Methodist local preacher and with him I attended Chartist and other meetings and became interested in all the reforms of the day." Just how much of the heady Chartist ideology he imbibed is uncertain. The movement late in the forties had, in fact, already lost some of its potency. But within its purview he could certainly have fed upon a variety of ideas, from trade-unionism to co-operation and the Christian Socialism of Maurice, Ludlow, and Kingsley.

In 1849 Phillips and his master withdrew their union cards from the Rotherham shoemakers' union and, tramping into industrial

---

6 An old, but interesting and accurate description of the shoemaking trade, its operations, and the machinery employed can be found in Albert S. Bolles, *Industrial History of the United States from the Earliest Settlements to the Present Time* (Norwich, Conn., 1879), 444-456.

Lancashire, settled in the textile town of Bolton La Moore. There Phillips claims to have enjoyed the distinction of having been the only apprentice in town belonging to a union, a union, moreover, of which his master was secretary. There, too, he formally linked himself with the Chartist Association, “Ernest Jones, the great Chartist leader [making] out my membership card with his own hands in the Temperance Hall in Bolton.” One can hardly doubt that for a time Phillips was swept up in the exciting spirit of the movement. But the spirit shortly waned. Although Jones was capable of arousing great enthusiasm in others, it is clear that neither he nor his organization was able to relieve the young shoemaker of discontent.

Bolton, too, soon lost whatever appeal it may have had for him. Despite the fact that the “hungry forties” were a bitter memory and the flood tide of prosperity had swept back into the cities and towns, Phillips concluded that industrial England offered him insufficient opportunities. In addition, the declining influence of Chartism probably hastened his decision to quit his country. He was, after all, a self-styled “English Radical,” a reformer, an admirer of Cobbett and Paine. Hence, when social disinfectants failed to cleanse the land, when politics spurned the role of the mechanics’ servant, in his judgment, it was time to leave.

Working overtime, earning a sum sufficient to purchase his freedom from his master, he went to live with an Irish family—one of thousands in Lancashire—and prepared to emigrate to the United States. He sold his few books, visited his family for the last time (expressing the hope that he would one day see them in America), and sailed from Liverpool on August 4, 1852. On September 15, several weeks before Pierce’s election as President, Phillips disembarked in New York with eight shillings in his pocket.

An acquaintance from Bolton, then in the United States, secured him a job in a Brooklyn shoe shop owned by a Welshman, but since this job and a subsequent one in New York City proved unsatisfactory, he moved on to Philadelphia.

By 1850 the City of Brotherly Love had already become a city of “remarkable manufactures,” boasting more than six thousand indus-
trial establishments, including facilities for making iron, brass, chemicals, cotton clothing, locomotives, car wheels, carriages, and, of course, boots and shoes. Phillips, in fact, had every reason to consider his trade an eminent one in Philadelphia. There, as in nearly every other major city, boot and shoe establishments outnumbered many industries both as to shops and operatives. There, too, shoemakers had a distinctive background of craft organization and labor agitation dating back to the formation of the nation's first cordwainers' union in 1792.

A skilled man, never unemployed for long, the young immigrant moved with considerable frequency from shop to shop. Whether these shifts reflected seasonal conditions in the trade or were simply an expression of the normally high mobility of American labor is difficult to say. In one case, however, he confessed that his discharge followed his involvement in a strike and, while his personal role in that particular affair seems to have been slight, his labor activity, according to his own admission, steadily increased. After 1855, the year in which he took out his first citizenship papers, Phillips devoted a great deal of time to organizing shoemakers, cultivating in the meantime an ardent interest in the slavery question, the eight-hour day, and general labor matters.

Phillips' earliest notoriety came from his advocacy of the English Rochdale Plan of distributive co-operation. Curiously enough, though he had once lived within thirty miles of the town of Rochdale and grubby Toad Lane where this famed experiment began, he showed no interest in co-operation as a young Chartist. He turned to it only after he was well established in Philadelphia. It was not a difficult transition. British ideas as well as immigrants were then flowing freely into the American labor movement. Phillips not only took an interest in the "flannel weavers' panacea," as Rochdale co-operation was called, but also received his inspiration directly from the writings of George Jacob Holyoake, high priest of the English movement. In 1858 Holyoake kindled enthusiasm among English workers by his publication of Self-Help: A History of Co-operation in Rochdale, the first portion of what was destined to be-

---

come a famous study. Reprinted in substance by Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune hard on the panic of 1857–1858, news of Self-Help fired the imaginations of Americans seeking a palliative for economic distress. One of them was Phillips.

Basically, Holyoake’s writings, which enjoyed wide currency on both sides of the Atlantic for forty years, dealt with the moral and intellectual goals, as well as with the substantial economic achievements, of the Rochdale Pioneers and their disciples. His pen transformed the story of self-help into something of a drama. He told the tale of thousands of degraded mill operatives, of their elevation from perpetual indebtedness to positions, if not of affluence, at least of decency and competence. Self-Help—the expression itself is marvelously Victorian—illustrated the effectiveness of united working men and women, how when joined in Christian brotherhood they could secure relative freedom from their employers and the evils of the industrial system. The basic plan for accomplishing this was rather simple. Once a nucleus of co-operators subscribed enough capital through the purchase of shares, a distributive store—more familiarly a grocery or general store—was opened. Thereafter, cash operations were conducted, and everyone, members and nonmembers alike, shared in a quarterly distribution of the profits, according to the amount of purchases made. Upon this singularly uncomplicated foundation rested a hierarchy of co-operatives ranging from wholesale stores to manufacturing establishments or workshops, all operating on essentially the same “dividend” principle.

Inspired by Holyoake, Tom Phillips discovered many reasons for regarding co-operation as indispensable. In his judgment, the society about him was unjust and oppressive, antagonistic to what he called “the natural genius of American institutions,” to economic and social democracy. European and American examples of the vast

---

13 For a list of Holyoake’s works on co-operation, see C. W. F. Goss, A Descriptive Bibliography of the Writings of George Jacob Holyoake (London, 1908). Many of Holyoake’s writings are in the Albert Hutzler Collection in the Johns Hopkins University Library. For a sketch of his life, see the Dictionary of National Biography: 2nd Supplement (1910–1911).


15 There are many authoritative explanations of the Rochdale Plan, only the outlines of which are suggested here. See, for instance, George Jacob Holyoake’s The Co-operative Movement Today (London, 1905), 91–93.

accumulation of wealth by the few preyed upon his mind. He fore-
saw, fearfully, the emergence of a landed aristocracy in America more
formidable than England's, and this fear was accentuated by the
rapidity with which western lands were being gobbled up.17 Worse
yet, middlemen, whose economic value Phillips never understood,
were milking the worker of his hard-won gains, and political parties,
allegedly a source of strength for enfranchised labor, failed to prevent
or alleviate this situation.18
Sensible of injustice, desirous of forging a new social order, Phillips
was nevertheless unwilling and unprepared to battle capital. A mod-
erate Victorian, innocent of violating the conventions of his age, this
handsome, full-bearded man was essentially a liberationist, not a
revolutionary. Time and again he emphasized that he was not op-
posed to particular capitalists, but rather to an inequitable capitalist
system.
Although he was later to direct the fortunes of a large trade-
union, his certainty of the success of co-operation prevented him
eyly in his career from fully admitting the efficacy of trade-unionism
and its major weapon, the strike. In his opinion, as long as men clung
to trade societies alone, they were sure only of making too few ad-
vances to justify their efforts. Because of their costliness to both
employers and workingmen, strikes were especially deplorable, and
he once declared that if all the time and money lavished on them had
been pooled for co-operative endeavor, the millennium would long
since have arrived.19 Moreover, strikes failed to fathom the depth of
social injustice, which stemmed not so much from perverse capitalists
as from "the prevailing mode of dividing the profits of productive
industry."20 Hence, he exhorted mechanics "to emancipate them-
selves from slavery in a wrongly constructed society,"21 to substitute
co-operation for strikes, and to confront capital with capital. His
attitude is indicative of the reaction of many workingmen to strikes
in an era when unions had little or no strike funds and in which they
lost the greater number of their head-on conflicts with employers.
Co-operation meant a long-term, peaceful revolution. It provided an

17 Ibid; also see rough manuscript on co-operation, Phillips Papers.
18 Fincher's, Dec. 24, 1864.
19 Ibid., Apr. 30, 1864.
21 Fincher's, Apr. 30, 1864.
alternative to the violent action for which Phillips and other workingmen were neither economically nor psychologically prepared.

Satisfied that the United States presented a fertile field for co-operative revolution, sure that political parties, trade-unions, and joint-stock companies could not effect it, he offered the Rochdale Plan as the most promising method of saving humanity and providing a secure base upon which other forms of co-operation could build. This system, proven and practical, "can be realized by the people arranging the powers of production, distribution, education, and government, for here the people possess the power and the time is not far distant when they will learn to use it."^{23}

If anyone doubted the potentialities of co-operation, he had only to study the progress of the Rochdalers and observe the activities of English reformers:

Let the objector read the history of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in England, and we think he will come to the conclusion that co-operative associations among workingmen are practicable.\textsuperscript{24}

The men who have stood by the people and suffered persecution—the radicals—the men that have the capacity to see the root of the evil and to apply the effectual remedy, these men see that the co-operative movement is producing more practical good than any other mode of reform.\textsuperscript{25}

Therefore, in order to extricate Americans from "the galling tyranny of capital," to banish middlemen and monopolists, Phillips, always assuming that problems in the United States were similar to those in England, declared:

Let us on this side of the Atlantic profit by their [the English radicals'] foresight which their necessities and active battling against all forms of oppression have developed. Let us unite with them in an organized effort to apply the reform axe to the root and strike down the common enemies of both.\textsuperscript{26}

This accomplished, he then caught visions of the millennium:

We claim that by co-operation . . . workingmen can, in time, raise sufficient capital to build workshops, factories or buy farms or to erect the

\textsuperscript{22} Phillips had in mind the joint-stock co-operative enterprises that were prevalent in New England until the late fifties. "Lecture on Co-operation," Phillips Papers.

\textsuperscript{23} Fincher's, Apr. 30, 1864.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., July 4, 1864.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., Apr. 30, 1864.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
most costly machinery and secure the benefits of every labor saving invention and turn them into a blessing . . . instead of as now to a large extent a curse from the fact that a few are able to monopolize these and reap the benefits which under a co-operative system would be divided among the many.  

It would be easy to misinterpret Phillips' pronouncements as merely an attempt to convert workers into capitalists. Such an assumption has too often been applied without discrimination to labor leadership. The Rochdale Plan, insofar as he was concerned, though this was certainly equally true of many other co-operators as well, implied the moral renovation of society. There burned within him the same fierce moral conviction, the same awareness of his Christian duty that sent British and American clergymen into the slums and dark streets of industrial cities, that motivated Gladstone, for example, to found a private Magdalenian establishment, and drove scores of able men in both countries into the ranks of the Christian Socialists. Co-operators and co-operative ideas brought into the United States often arrived replete with evangelical emotionalism and a zeal which defined the connection between the secular reformism of Holyoake and the religious fervor of his disciples.

Thus to Phillips, striving for a "Co-operative Republic," cooperation was the movement of the future that would reorient industrial affairs in accord with what to him were equitable principles.  

Self-help was the "bright star to which all enlightened humanity looked," "the friend of all mankind," "the reform containing the seeds of all other reforms."

... by equitable distribution of wealth the foundation would be laid which would bring forth this fruit [moral regeneration of society] and the first efforts of the co-operator is [sic] designed to bring this about. The co-operative arrangements are by their nature calculated to supply the world with the most perfect system of economics that the most advanced political and social reformers have ever been able to conceive of.

That such a steady fellow as he believed this large utopian order to be possible is an indication of how deeply rooted the nineteenth-century faith in man's capacity was.

27 Ibid., July 4, 1864.
29 From the manuscript of a paper Phillips wrote in 1876, ibid.
Excited, hopeful, entertaining not a scintilla of doubt as to the ultimate triumph of co-operation, Phillips kept the discussion of the subject on a high level, divorcing it from petty monetary concerns, suffusing it with the aura of his idealism. Emphasizing education, scorning demagoguery, he sought to attract men of intellect, good moral fiber, and sound judgment into the fold. There was no place in his scheme for zealots, hotheaded youths, or revolutionary rabble. Upon occasion he did upbraid capitalism, to be sure, but on the whole as a co-operator he conducted his operations with an almost gentlemanly balance. And it was perfectly feasible for him to do so. For unlike trade-unions, co-operatives were not viewed with hostility by many employers. They detected in them no latent threat to the prevailing order. On the contrary, they frequently felt that what appeared to be business ventures by workingmen would have a healthy, sobering effect by teaching mechanics how hard the knocks of business life were. Some employers, in fact, were so convinced of the usefulness of self-help that they actively encouraged co-operative enterprises. Small wonder Phillips could afford optimism.

An idealist, Tom Phillips was also a man of practical sagacity. The new order would not come overnight. From his observations of English experience, he realized that the initial phases of co-operation must of necessity be humble and that the struggle for survival would be prolonged. Counseling co-operators in patience, stressing the virtues of gradualness, he informed them that they had to "drill themselves" before competing with capital. His primary objective was the establishment of distributive retail stores "in every neighborhood in town and country throughout the land." Since he based his

30 Fincher's, July 1, 1865.
31 See comments in the Merchants' Magazine and Commercial Review, LVIII (1868), 249; LXII (1870), 121; also U.S. Senate, Committee on Education and Labor. Testimony as to Relations between Capital and Labor. 48th Congress, II (1883), 1104-1105.
32 "Lecture on Co-operation," Phillips Papers; Fincher's, July 1, 1865.
33 Ibid., Jan. 23, 1864.
34 Ibid., July 1, 1865. See also for details the Constitution and By-laws of the Union Co-operative Association No. 1 of Philadelphia, and Constitution and By-laws of the Philadelphia Co-operative and General Manufacturing Company Associated, Phillips Papers; also Sovereigns of Industry. Pioneer Council No. 1 of Philadelphia. Minute Books of the Executive Council, US Mss 4A, in Wisconsin State Historical Society, hereafter cited as US Mss 4A. Rochdalers turned to co-operative wholesale arrangements in 1856. After several failures these ventures were made to work satisfactorily by 1863-1864.
entire program on precedents set by the Rochdalers, he arranged for shareholders in the stores to receive interest on their capital and dividends based on the amount of their purchases. Nonshareholders, in the latest Rochdale fashion, were permitted to let their dividends accrue until they were credited with enough money to buy shares. Whenever possible, retail stores were to be buttressed by central wholesale stores, already by the mid-sixties a proven success in England. Here retailers could buy their stocks in anticipation of a quarterly dividend such as they gave their own customers. Then, once both retail and wholesale outlets functioned effectively, the co-operators could do as the Pioneers had done—namely, launch co-operative workshops and manufacturing enterprises along the same lines.

Taking their cues from the Pioneers, Phillips and a small band of Englishmen turned from preaching co-operation to the practice of it. They formed on December 16, 1862, the Union Co-operative Association No. 1 of Philadelphia (U.C.A.). With a capital collection of only $133.70, these twenty-two men, led by the Yorkshire shoemaker, started their revolution in a grocery store. Their motto was “Co-operation, a means of harmonizing conflicting interests and securing exact justice to every child of Earth.” The venture was in most respects a conscious imitation of the original Rochdale organization. At the outset of their own enterprise, in fact, the Rochdalers numbered only twenty-eight men and could boast resources of but £28. Similarly, in Philadelphia as in Rochdale, spirits were high. Writing for Fincher’s, one member of the new organization declared:

One of the brightest spots on earth to my vision is the little dingy, one story co-operative shop, 917 Federal Street, Philadelphia. Its very reticence throughout the day and all but three nights of the week is pleasing to me because it speaks of economy. . . . The fact that the members are mostly of English birth argues that they have a fair amount of stability among them. Additional proof of this is found in the fact that they spent over a year studying this system and perfecting their constitution before they launched into buying or selling. . . . They adhere to the rigid [good] old Rochdale style.

35 Fincher’s, Aug. 13, 1864.
36 U.C.A. letterheads; also manuscript of an undated article by Phillips in Phillips Papers; Fincher’s, July 4, 1863.
37 Ibid., Dec. 3, 1864. The writer who signed himself “Quaestor” was not Phillips.
Then, paying tribute to the English influences in the U.C.A., the writer proudly cited "the first shilling pamphlet" members received from Holyoake.

For years it was thought that the U.C.A. was the first Rochdale store in the United States. Such was the claim of the historian of American co-operation, Edward Bemis. Bemis, to whom later students are indebted for much valuable information, probably gave too much credence to Phillips' statements about his organization.\textsuperscript{38} The U.C.A. was not the first such store and Phillips, at one time, was aware of it. During a heated newspaper debate with the leader of the Lawrence, Massachusetts, Co-operative Association, which also pretended to have been the first Rochdale store in this country, Phillips declared: "We do not claim to be the first organization in this country . . . on the Rochdale Plan for we know that such an organization was formed in Philadelphia in 1860 and one in Cincinnati in 1861."\textsuperscript{39}

Precisely where the first English-model co-operative was begun is still a mystery. Pending the discovery of new materials it will remain so. Many stores and several co-operative-minded labor organizations boasted of having first translated Rochdale ideas in the United States. Of the co-operative which Phillips mentioned in Philadelphia in 1860 nothing seems to be known, and there were actually two stores in Cincinnati started in the late fifties.\textsuperscript{40} Confusing matters further, an English friend of Phillips', Samuel Leavitt, who won a reputation of his own in the American labor movement, insisted that he had disseminated Rochdale principles in this country as early as 1850,\textsuperscript{41} and he cited as proof the fact that Holyoake during one of his American tours had honored him with a visit and publicly acknowledged his good work. The variety of conflicting assertions can only lead to the conclusion that news of the "flannel weavers' panacea" reached workingmen in the United States several years prior to the Civil War and had rather greater currency among them than we have previ-

\textsuperscript{38} See Edward Bemis, \textit{A History of Co-operation in the United States} (Baltimore, Md., 1888), 141-142; also statements of a more accurate type by John R. Commons, \textit{et al.}, \textit{A History of Labour in the United States} (New York, 1918), II, 39-41.
\textsuperscript{39} Autobiography, Phillips Papers; also Fincher's, Apr. 25, July 1, Aug. 5 and 12, 1865.
\textsuperscript{40} The New York Tribune, Oct. 12, 1858.
\textsuperscript{41} For Leavitt's claims see JUL, January, 1883, and the Workingman's Advocate, Jan. 15, 1876.
ously thought. The main point is clear, however. Phillips' co-operative was the first of that type to attract widespread attention and to leave adequate records behind it. The Philadelphia shoemaker broadcast word of English-model co-operation as none of his predecessors appears to have done, serving both as an effective propagandist and an ebullient, practical pioneer.

The founders of the U.C.A. made haste slowly. They devoted the fifteen-month period following the creation of their organization to studies of English co-operative methods. They corresponded extensively with the secretary of the Rochdale Society, receiving important documents from him. Meantime, they hoarded their capital. Consequently, when their store opened for business in March, 1864, they were well equipped in view of their resources. "We are few and poor," said their leader Phillips of the members of the U.C.A., "but we know of no such word as fail."

For two and a half years the store fared well. Morale among the co-operators was high. Not trusting to chance, they continually schooled themselves in English techniques. Speakers like John Sheddon, the Pennsylvanian who later succeeded William Earle as leader of the Sovereigns of Industry, and John Samuel, Jr., himself a stockholder in the U.C.A., lectured on such topics as "Co-operation in England and America" and gave the group the benefit of their experience and reading. In December, 1864, the members formed a separate organization, the Self-Help Aid Association, designed to raise funds for the expansion of the U.C.A. Samuel Leavitt also encouraged several merchants to lend money to the co-operators, though he confessed this proved a mistake insofar as it gave the merchants too much control over the destiny of the co-operative.

By 1866, however, there were four stores in Philadelphia, and prospects, especially after Phillips declared a six per cent dividend in April, were good.

42 Fincher's, Aug. 13, 1864; also July 4, 1864, and Apr. 25, 1865.
43 Ibid., July 4, 1864.
44 For the cause of high morale, see Balance Sheets, 10th Quarterly Report of the U.C.A., Phillips Papers; also Fincher's, Apr. 1, 1865.
45 A miscellaneous scrap of paper lists Samuel's $10 share, Phillips Papers.
46 Notebook, ibid.
47 Fincher's, Apr. 15, 1865.
48 The Workingman's Advocate, June 5, 1875.
49 Fincher's, Apr. 21, 1866.
“But,” said Phillips, “trade and membership did not keep pace with expansion,” which, incidentally, he had opposed as rash. “Profits ceased, Branch One closed, being in a neighborhood which cared not for co-operation. The summer soldiers and sunshine co-operators began to withdraw their stock and throw a wet blanket over the concern.” In November it was all over. “It was a great disappointment. Our hearts were set on success but it was our fate to fail.”

Although the U.C.A. was unsuccessful, Phillips’ practical leadership and propaganda, coupled with the writings of his associates on *Fincher’s*, elicited widespread attention. By May, 1865, he was designated as the paper’s chief authority on co-operation, and it was his job to answer questions about self-help raised by subscribers. After *Fincher’s*, failed, he maintained his position as an oracle for its successors, the *National Trades’ Review* and *Welcome Workman*. In this capacity there is ample evidence that he reached many workingmen. One of *Fincher’s* Massachusetts subscribers, for example, credited “Worker” (Phillips’ pen name) with the most lucid explanation of self-help that he had ever encountered, and he wondered why, after such an illuminating commentary, workers were so blind to their own interests. Readers who had been apprised of the U.C.A. requested still further facts about English co-operation. Hiram Lord, an English co-operator who was then touring the United States, inspected the U.C.A. and was impressed by its performance. Similarly, in Philadelphia, the Kensington Mutual Co-operative Association, directly inspired by Phillips, structured itself along the lines of the U.C.A.

His influence was by no means restricted to the columns of *Fincher’s*. Enthusiastic workers wrote to Phillips personally for guidance and help. Having interested thirty men in a co-operative venture, a member of the Government Printing Office sought advice, instructions, and documents from him, which were promptly forwarded. From the bituminous coal regions in Pennsylvania’s Alle-

---

50 The withdrawal slips remain in the Phillips Papers; see, too, Bemis, 142.
51 Autobiography, Phillips Papers; *Fincher’s*, May 6, 1865, Apr. 14 and Aug. 18, 1866.
52 Autobiography, Phillips Papers.
54 Ibid., May 6 and Dec. 23, 1865.
55 *The National Trades’ Review*, Jan. 20, 1866.
56 W. B. Burger to Phillips, Mar. 21, 1866, Phillips Papers.
gheny County, where co-operation enjoyed considerable success among the Welsh, Scottish, and English miners, Andrew Carney wrote to Phillips: "We are about to start a co-operative store in this neighborhood and are at present without anything in the shape of a book or papers containing any information on the subject. I proposed writing to you as chief manager of the co-operative stores in Philadelphia . . . to see if you'll send copies of your constitution and by-laws." Not long afterward, Carney thanked Phillips for his competent assistance.\(^{57}\)

Other letters were in the same vein. The master mechanic of the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago Railroad's Fort Wayne shop informed Phillips that the four hundred men in his charge were anxiously awaiting co-operative instructions from him, adding in a postscript, "Co-operation is all that's talked of among our shop men."\(^{58}\) Occasionally, more than one request would come from the same general area or town. From one group in Mineral Ridge, Pennsylvania, came a plea for him to sell co-operators there copies of his constitution so that they might increase their membership and efficiency. From another group in the same town came a letter informing Phillips that it had adopted "nearly all" his Rochdale plans.\(^ {59}\)

Blending propaganda with practical co-operative work, Phillips and his colleagues on Fincher's were mainly responsible for inspiring and counseling at least forty-five co-operatives scattered through ten states in the period from October, 1863, to July, 1866. There seems every likelihood that this is a conservative figure.\(^{60}\)

From 1866 through the middle seventies Phillips continued to ply his trade and to plan new co-operatives. Failure of the U.C.A. did not by any means discourage him. Hoping to spur labor on to greater exertions in its own behalf, he submitted articles on self-help to Fincher's Welcome Workman\(^{61}\) and persisted in chipping away at the more formidable barriers that still lay between co-operators and their Elysian fields.

\(^{57}\) A. Carney to Phillips, Apr. 9 and June 17, 1866, \textit{ibid.}

\(^{58}\) R. H. Harrison to Phillips, May 6, 1866, \textit{ibid.}

\(^{59}\) C. Bowman to Phillips, June 28, 1866, \textit{ibid.}


\(^{61}\) Autobiography, Phillips Papers.
One considerable handicap they faced in several states was the law of association. Enacted without overt malice toward labor, such laws nevertheless posed a barrier to associative enterprise by poor men. Generally, the statutes required the accumulation of capital resources well beyond the capacity of working people. Sometimes, too, they crippled those who raised the requisite sums with additional fees and taxes due before the state would permit co-operation. Just such a law had been passed in Pennsylvania in April, 1868. Prospective co-operators were expected to amass $20,000 in capital upon which they paid a tax. They were further required to employ the services of notaries, to pay special registration fees, and to pay for the recording of the charter of association.

Since Phillips was familiar with British laws of association, he detected the reactionary character of the Pennsylvania statute. The irony of the situation did not escape him. If the creation of co-operatives was facilitated in a monarchy, why was not the same true—and even more so—in a republic? Great Britain by its first modern law of association, 15 Victoria 31 (1852), simply required that no fewer than seven persons must agree to associate, making no exactions about subscriptions of capital, taxes, fees, or other charges. Charters were freely granted to men and women almost without cost. Theoretically, this allowed the poorest groups in England to start a co-operative virtually without a penny. Though Phillips denounced the Pennsylvania law as oppressive and obsolete, it remained on the books until 1887. By that time, enough people were aroused by the provisions of such enactments to sweep them aside not only in Pennsylvania, but elsewhere.

While writing and speaking against the associative law, Phillips was immersing himself more deeply than ever in the labor movement. In 1869 at Tillot's factory in Philadelphia he became acquainted with a circular advertising the programs of the Knights of St. Crispin, a

---


64 Notebook, Phillips Papers.

65 Ibid., portion of a lecture on co-operation.

66 See clipping from the Union, Sept. 9, 1881, Box 5, Samuel Papers; also "State of Michigan, File No. 178, House of Representatives, No. 528, March 7, 1881: A Bill to Amend Compiled Laws of 1871 relating to Co-operative Association," Box 1, ibid.
powerful shoemakers' organization founded two years earlier by Newell Daniels in Milwaukee. By 1870 its 50,000 members made it the largest labor organization in the country. Shortly after learning of the order, Phillips took up a new job at Shirley's factory, and since he had by that time joined the Crispins he founded among the hands there a Philadelphia Lodge in Jefferson Hall. Devoting himself to lodge recruiting activities he was often kept busy until the small hours of the morning. He sometimes enlisted, according to his estimates, as many as one hundred and twenty-five men a night. When the lodge counted 1,100 stalwarts, a number of them pressed him to form a separate branch. To encourage him in this action, they offered him the position of Sir Knight, which he readily accepted when the new lodge opened. Moreover, he soon carried a union election by a two-thirds vote which gained for him the rank of Grand Sir Knight and the additional title of "Crispin Orator" for his articulate campaigning.67

Superficially an impressive order, the Crispins drew their strength from shoemakers all over the nation who were dismayed by the swift technological changes in the shoe industry during the late sixties. In particular, opposition centered on the introduction into shoe factories of the McKay pegging machine, something of a juggernaut in the eyes of skilled craftsmen, and on the practice of allowing a large number of apprentices into the craft.68 But the organization appealed to Phillips primarily because it looked beyond trade-unionism to the development of a co-operative system.69 As a member of the union, therefore, he was able to serve his favorite cause. When a rash of strikes erupted in the shoe industry, principally as a result of the order's efforts to limit "green hands," Phillips was commissioned by the union to write articles explaining its programs and principles in the Boston labor paper, American Workman. He was quick to seize his opportunity. In place of strikes he advocated that Crispins should establish productive co-operatives where they would be their own bosses. In 1871 he had still another chance to press home his ideas when, along with four other Philadelphia shoemakers, he attended

69 Ibid.; also see J. C. Simonds, The Story of Labor (Chicago, 1887), 640.
the Crispins' convention in Boston where he was able to exercise his influence and prestige on the Committee on Co-operation. The order was soon operating between thirty and forty co-operatives, and there is little doubt that Phillips contributed materially to their formation.70

Meantime, in Philadelphia, the main lodge which had been started with inadequate financial support proved unable to maintain a co-operative workshop that Phillips had instituted for unemployed Crispins, and it began to fail. As it did, the shoemakers unwisely indulged in factional skirmishes with one another. One group of partisans wanted to restrict the organization’s membership and, to carry out its aims, tried to capture control of the co-operative shop. Such a move was typical of many Crispins, for among the older men seclusion was a fetish. More tolerant members, like Phillips, were bound to block a group of this kind; their goals in the main lay beyond the narrower confines of craft.

Leading an opposition move in hopes of opening the co-operative to all Crispins, Phillips temporarily routed the reactionaries and plunged into the task of co-operative manufacturing along the latest Rochdale lines. This was quite a feat to perform in the teeth of an almost disastrous situation. Profits from the new venture, the Knights of St. Crispin Shoe Manufacturing Association No. 1 of Philadelphia, were divided among “interest on capital, labor, and custom.”71 Procuring a charter from the Commonwealth in August, 1871, Phillips was forced to impose stiff demands on the membership because of the obvious difficulties a small organization faced in raising $20,000. Despite initial obstacles, however, the co-operative fared well for a few years. Unfortunately, the reactionary Crispins were able to rally their forces and before long were bringing considerable pressure to bear on their struggling brethren. According to Phillips, they effectively prevented the mass of shoemakers from joining the organization. After four years of strife, its resources sapped, its program sabotaged, its membership list atrophied, the co-operative collapsed.72 As was so often the case, labor had nourished the seeds of

70 Autobiography, Phillips Papers; see, too, his “Address to the Crispins,” a lecture on co-operation, ibid.
71 Autobiography, ibid.
72 A legal paper in the Phillips Papers indicates that the venture was signed over to Phillips and two associates by the membership just before it failed. Autobiography, ibid.; The Workingman’s Advocate, Apr. 13, 1872.
its own failure, for at no time had the enterprise been attacked by employers.

Phillips remained undaunted. Even as the shoemakers' co-operative fought for existence, he recognized the urgent necessity for more training among his fellows. Consequently, in 1871 he started still another co-operative, this time composed of what he called "choice spirits." To win support for this experiment, a circular publicizing his ideas was printed. More than 20,000 copies were widely circulated, even receiving notice in England from the famed Manchester Co-operator. Meetings of prospective members were held over a two-year period in Philadelphia, and reports of the organization's plans appeared from time to time in local newspapers. But the support it mustered was too fragile a bark to launch upon the confused waters of co-operation, and the attempt was written off. Undismayed as ever, Phillips retained his perspective. He had witnessed many failures in co-operation, but he had also seen considerable progress.

As the labor movement expanded, new vehicles for co-operative ideas arose. Late in August, 1874, the Workingman's Advocate announced without fanfare the organization of the Sovereigns of Industry. The growth of the movement was astonishingly swift. Within a year it claimed to have enrolled 100,000 followers. The Sovereigns, of course, as students of labor have long realized, was an outgrowth of the Patrons of Husbandry, and under the leadership of William Earle, it caught the attention of co-operators, largely because a statement in its preamble committed the members to co-operation. As outlined there, one of the order's main objectives was to "try to establish a better system of economical exchange and to promote on a basis of equity and liberty, mutual fellowship and co-operative action among the producers and consumers of wealth." Although the organization's chieftains hoped ultimately to set up productive co-operatives, their immediate intent was to create and foster the rise of distributive stores.

Since English co-operative ideas enjoyed wide acceptance among the Sovereigns, Phillips' co-workers, aware of his long advocacy of

---

73 Ibid., Aug. 22 and 29, 1874 (a single issue).
74 Newton, "Co-operative Distribution," 331-333; Bemis, 37-51; Simonds, 651; E. M. Chamberlain, The Sovereigns of Industry (Boston, 1875).
75 Particularly the ideas imported and refurbished by H. J. Burton and John Orvis. See the Sovereigns' Bulletin, January and August, 1875; also "Sovereigns of Industry Trade Statistics," Box 1, Samuel Papers.
the Rochdale Plan, secured for him without his prior knowledge a special deputy's commission from the order in March, 1874. With the commission came organizational powers which he was delighted to exercise freely. Throwing himself into the spirit of the movement he pushed its programs vigorously. In only a few months he started five councils in Philadelphia, one of which, he cheerfully reported to his superiors, was composed exclusively of ladies. Agitation, of course, roused the usual local enmities. According to Phillips, one local newspaper suggested that he be hanged, while another intimated that he ought to be deposited in the Delaware. Dire though the threats may have been—and they were certainly not as serious as he intimated they were—opposition was the spice of his life; it strengthened his sense of mission and helped him dramatize his own situation.

Opposition or not, the order progressed favorably in Philadelphia. On June 29, 1874, Pioneer Council Number One of the Pennsylvania Sovereigns was formed. Much to Phillips' satisfaction, its meeting hall from time to time became a forum for the discussion of British co-operative schemes. As a charter member of the council, he extolled the virtues of Rochdale, urging his comrades to put the plan into operation. Shouldering his responsibilities, he delivered a series of lectures to the rank and file on co-operative affairs, and it was mainly through his efforts that several small co-operatives were soon launched in Philadelphia.

On the whole, Phillips profited by his attachment to the Sovereigns of Industry. Perhaps it galled him to hear the leadership of the order claim foremost place in the introduction of Rochdale ideas to America, but if it did he never gave free rein to his sentiments. Only the secrecy of the order elicited adverse comment from him. Underground activities always disturbed him, for he knew that while unions might be so organized, sub rosa co-operatives could not. Either they flourished in the light of day or they could not flourish at all. On this score, he felt impelled to write the secretary of the Sovereigns, declaring in substance that "if we are to have a Co-operative Republic," the order must be prepared to work openly in full view of

76 Autobiography, Phillips Papers.
77 Ibid.
the public. While he took the trouble to register this formal complaint, however, the issue was not pressed by either side.

Meantime, there were men in the Pioneer Council whose opinions regarding co-operation closely paralleled those of Phillips. John Sheddon, the Pennsylvanian who became president of the Sovereigns in 1878, was one. His remarks in the council's minutes contain words of praise for British co-operative ideas and methods. There is no doubt that he believed that the Rochdale system was the one the organization ought to put into practice. The council's members, in fact, represented a strange mixture of beliefs. Side by side with Phillips and Sheddon, advocates of the latest Rochdale techniques, sat Albert Brisbane, the veteran Fourierist, whose activities traced back to the exciting days of Brook Farm. Brisbane probably joined the order in part out of curiosity about its programs and in part because of his friendship for the Sovereigns' chief lecturer, John Orvis. However, he proved anything but a pillar to the organization, defaulting on his dues and retaining his membership only because "of his great services to Mankind," which, as Phillips and his colleagues must have realized, was a small price to pay for the use of the old man's name.

We cannot determine to what extent Rochdale ideas were put into operation by the Sovereigns of Industry in Philadelphia. Nationally, it was the acceptance of the very program which Phillips championed that accounted for the brief but nevertheless considerable success of the organization. Thus, in 1877, President Earle announced that a "very large portion" of the Sovereigns' trade "has been secured on the Rochdale Plan." Ten of the organization's leading stores were Rochdale models, while of twenty-six stores that answered a questionnaire from John Samuel in New England, nineteen were operated on the same principles. By 1880, unfortunately, the Sovereigns ran out of steam and, after considerable difficulties had checked the

---

80 Phillips to J. Butterfield, Oct. 10, 1874, ibid.
81 For information on Sheddon, see the Sovereigns' Bulletin, May, 1877; US Mss 4A, Sovereigns of Industry Minutes, Philadelphia Council, Jan. 31, 1877.
82 Ibid., Mar. 14, 1877.
83 See Newton, "Co-operative Distribution," 332; the Sovereigns' Bulletin, January and May, 1876.
84 Ibid., May, 1877.
85 Cited in Newton, "Co-operative Distribution," 332.
86 "Sovereigns of Industry Trade Statistics," Box 1, Feb. 28, 1878, Samuel Papers.
order's progress, the Executive Council met in solemn conclave to bury the order. The disappointment of Phillips and other co-operators must have been great, but the Philadelphian was fortunate in having several remaining irons in the fire.

During the years when he was involved in his own co-operative ventures and with the Crispins and Sovereigns as well, Phillips had also taken an interest in the Knights of Labor. Founded as a secret society in 1869 by a band of Philadelphia tailors and garment workers, the most important of whom was Uriah Stephens, the organization grew slowly through the seventies. Then, in 1879, control of the order passed to a former machinist of Irish descent, Terence Powderly. At the insistence of the Catholic Church he brought the movement into the open. This action, coupled with a few subsequent victories, caused the Knights to mushroom into what was easily the world's largest and certainly one of its most complex labor organizations. Once transformed into a national body, once stripped of its cloak of secrecy, the Knights became the great white hope of the co-operators. In fact, the order's platform pledged it to the "establishment of co-operative institutions, productive and distributive," and this pledge was reiterated by Powderly and his lieutenants. Under the circumstances, experienced co-operators like John Samuel and Tom Phillips joined the movement.

Phillips learned of the existence of the Knights of Labor the year it was launched, but in 1869 he was distinctly uninterested in it. In view of his many commitments at the time this is understandable. It was not long before one of the founders of the Knights, however, "that grand old Irishman James S. Wright," persuaded Phillips to look into the organization. At Wright's behest, he rather casually dropped into an assembly meeting in Philadelphia one evening and ended up by becoming the first shoemaker to join the order. Despite this he remained unwilling to devote much energy to assembly affairs and at first played a purely passive role. But the local leaders were not content to see him waste his talents. Both James Wright and the principal leader of the Knights of Labor, Uriah Stephens, prevailed upon him once more, and he was encouraged to undertake the mobilization of shoemakers for the order. Thereafter, he served

88 Ibid.
enthusiastically. Inevitably, because of his background and broad familiarity with labor problems, he was installed as an official of Local Assembly 64, the first assembly of shoemakers in Philadelphia. In a short time this local burgeoned and became the largest single local in the Knights of Labor, and the man who was its Master Workman, Harry Skeffington, was to have an important influence on Phillips' life nearly two decades later.

While helping to lead the shoemakers in Local 64, Phillips also entered District Assembly One as a member of the Committee of Progress, a group whose chief function was to manufacture the order's propaganda. In his own words, his task was "to act before the public . . . and push the work of labor's emancipation." Searching for channels and outlets for its ideas, the committee discovered in William Swain, a member of the Philadelphia newspaper family and the proprietor of the Public Record, a faithful angel. Swain turned over to Phillips and his associates the use of a column in his daily, his only stipulation being that whoever wrote the column must tell the truth, a caveat that presented no problem to the committee. Uriah Stephens, the Grand Master Workman of the Knights, promptly selected Phillips to produce the necessary 1,770 words a day at an annual salary of $1,000, a figure which must have seemed fabulously large. In the course of the next fourteen months, the Yorkshireman published more than four hundred articles for the order. Thus, he wrote,

I stand on record as the first man ever employed by the Order of the Knights of Labor to publicly champion its cause and explain its principles and objects. From the time these articles began to appear abuse of labor began to be less bitter, sentiment grew on the side of the worker and the way opened for a great growth of labor organizations which had it been conducted on the lines first laid down, would have resulted in vast benefits to labor.

He certainly derived more encouragement from the effectiveness of his writings than the facts would allow. Nevertheless, since he was for the most part honest with himself, there seems every reason to

91 Ibid.
conclude that he rendered a very marked service to the Knights of Labor.

Propaganda and the writing that it required only curtailed his co-operative energies; they did not stop him. In fact, it is clear that he continued to think of the Knights primarily as a co-operative vehicle. Among the members of District One he initiated efforts to create Rochdale stores. At least one hopeful project was started, and he soon found that once again his experience made him the logical choice as president of the enterprise. As usual, however, a couple of years of promise yielded to a stagnation of business and the prospect of ultimate failure. In this case, the waning co-operative was signed over by Phillips to the English-born goldbeater, later secretary of the Knights, Frederick Turner, and, curiously enough, Turner made a success of the business during the years that he served the Knights.

In two respects, Tom Phillips' career reached a climax in the late 1880's. First, a series of political adventures in which he had been engaged with some success terminated in failure, and secondly, he abandoned twenty-five years of co-operative agitation for pure trade-unionism.

He began dabbling in politics for the first time since his Chartist days in America's centennial year, 1876. Like his friend the Welshman John M. Davis, editor of the National Labor Tribune, Phillips thought that the disintegration of the major political parties was fast approaching. Believing that labor needed men who were more sympathetic toward its varied aspirations, he took to the hustings in an attempt to rally the electorate around the venerable Peter Cooper, candidate of the Greenback Party. But while Cooper polled several thousand votes in the anthracite regions of eastern Pennsylvania, his friends, Phillips among them, seem to have counted for nothing in Philadelphia. There, Cooper captured less than a dozen votes. The following year, a Greenback-Labor fusion was effected at Pittsburgh under the aegis of the local trade-unions, giving birth to the United Labor Party. The candidates who emerged from the hassles of the convention to run for state offices were James Wright of the Knights

92 Ibid.
93 John M. Davis to Phillips, Feb. 23, 1876, ibid. Not only an editor, Davis also figured prominently in mine unionism and in the Knights of Labor. The National Labor Tribune was a Pittsburgh publication.
of Labor and John Davis, the labor editor. Phillips knew both men well and campaigned actively for them, enjoying the satisfaction of noting when the votes were counted that the United Labor Party had won more than 50,000 votes, nearly ten per cent of the total ballots cast in the state. In two subsequent Presidential contests, Phillips acted as an elector and generally managed to keep in touch with matters political. Then, in 1887, his opportunity arrived. Without his solicitation—or so he tells us in time-honored fashion—the combined greenback, labor, and single-tax forces chose him as their mayorality candidate in Philadelphia. There is no doubt that he was greatly elated by this signal honor from his labor associates and from the workingmen for whom he had labored so long and earnestly. Political campaigning, like labor agitation, came easily to him, and he reveled in the excitement of the pre-election battles. Throughout the fight he had a good press, an indication of the fact that his chances were not terribly promising and that he was, as a person, widely respected. Rather sadly, however, he seems to have taken seriously what was pretty obviously a forlorn hope; when the shouting subsided in the failure of the campaign, he surrendered his political ambitions in deep disappointment.

He could hardly have turned from the political battlefield to the workbench with a sigh of relief, however, for his fellow craftsmen were in the midst of fresh tumults. Trouble among the shoemakers had been brewing for years, and in 1887–1888 these disturbances came to the fore. The details need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that much of the difficulty revolved around conflicting personalities and aspirations within the labor movement itself; only occasionally were these troubles aggravated by employers. The Philadelphia shoemakers, for one thing, had begun to feel their organizational strength. They were the first craftsmen in the Knights of Labor to claim one hundred per cent unionization of the men working in the city’s shoe industries. Some credit for this unusual success belongs to Phillips and several other agitators, but most of the honor falls to

95 Autobiography, Phillips Papers.
96 Galster, 46–80, for background on these troubles.
97 Ibid., 53.
Harry Skeffington. Young, tough-minded, and ambitious, deficient in imagination and idealism, but very much the bread-and-butter professional, Skeffington contributed mightily to the Philadelphia Assembly, as well as to locals in New York City, Brooklyn, and the shoe towns of Massachusetts. Craft-minded and conscious of his own power, Skeffington soon began locking horns with Terence Powderly. Powderly, in fact, is reported to have said that there was not enough room in the Knights of Labor for the two of them. In 1887, as friction grew, the young Skeffington bared plans for a national trade assembly of shoemakers within the framework of the Knights of Labor.

Theoretically, the Knights were prepared to incorporate such a body within their ranks. Practically speaking, however, both Powderly and the General Executive Board feared that such an assembly smacked too much of pure trade-unionism, and they vetoed the project. Since Skeffington represented the Philadelphia men, he had little choice but to acquiesce or to secede from the order, and he had no intention of taking the former course. Fortunately for him, he was able to muster substantial elements within the Knights of Labor willing to battle the leadership. Similarly, he was wise enough to fan into a rebellion the already smoldering embers of revolt among the shoemakers. In Philadelphia, for instance, tempers had risen during a lockout in 1887 when Local Assembly 70 of the Knights failed to support the actions of a group of defiant benchmen. Although the locked-out men were Knights of Labor members, the parent organization felt that they had not lived up to their contract with employers and even urged other Knights to move in and take the jobs held by these men. The workers affected naturally considered this an inexcusable breach of faith. Meantime, internecine warfare exploded in New England, and the Knights jostled among themselves even in the face of renewed assaults by the factory owners. Thus, discontent among the Crispins of the Knights of Labor was widespread and serious.

98 See the Union Boot and Shoe Worker, May, 1900, hereafter cited as UBSW. George McNeill ran a series of articles on the history of the shoemakers' union and he had much to say about Skeffington. Also see Galster, 49, 57, 63.
99 Ibid., 63.
100 UBSW, April and May, 1900, McNeill's articles.
101 Ibid., April, 1900, McNeill's article; also Galster, 59-69.
102 UBSW, April, 1900.
As for Phillips, he was already disenchanted with the Knights of Labor chieftains. During his mayoralty contest, Powderly had seemingly gone out of his way to earn Phillips' enmity, for he sent him a long letter throwing cold water on the shoemaker's political ambitions.\footnote{Autobiography, Phillips Papers.} Moreover, Phillips was outraged by what he regarded as the Knights' disgraceful surrender during the lockout of 1887.\footnote{Ibid.} Defeated, he felt that the Crispins had been unable to marshal their strength effectively because "the enemy [Powderly] in the guise of a friend came in directing [the Knights] in the Spirit of the Dark Ages and murdered the grandest concept of organized labor ever put into shape on this continent."\footnote{Ibid.} Harsh as these words were, they were penned by a devoted labor leader who saw benchmen in Philadelphia so decisively routed by employers that they lost all immediate capacity for concerted action.\footnote{Galster, 65.}

It was in this frame of mind that Phillips threw in his lot with Harry Skeffington and the Crispins seeking to found an autonomous national union outside the bailiwick of the Knights of Labor. And there was ample work for him to do. Because of his recognized abilities as a veteran agitator and orator, Phillips, at Skeffington's personal request,\footnote{Boston Globe, Feb. 26, 1889, clipping in Phillips Papers.} went into New England among the many British shoemakers there to help lay the groundwork for the new national organization. On the scene he was joined by another old war horse, Newell Daniels, founder of the Knights of St. Crispin, whom Skeffington was also able to enlist. In a short time, organizational work was well under way and was proceeding at an encouragingly rapid pace. By June, 1889, forty-seven locals had been persuaded to detach themselves from the Knights and to pledge their assistance to a new union.\footnote{UBSW, April and May, 1900. For side lights on skirmishes between Skeffington and Powderly in the summer of 1889, see Skeffington to Phillips, Aug. 26 and Sept. [?], 1889, Phillips Papers.} That same month rebellious shoemakers from all over the eastern half of the nation met in convention at Boston and created the Boot and Shoe Workers' International Union, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor.\footnote{The first locals broke with the Knights on Feb. 19, 1889, at Dover, N.H. By Apr. 17, 1889, the seceding unions had joined the A. F. of L. UBSW, April, 1900, McNeill's article.} This was the so-called
“Skeffington Union,” after the man who had done more than any other to weld it together. But Skeffington contented himself with the position of secretary-treasurer. It was Thomas Phillips who was elected the Union’s first general president.

There were several obvious reasons why Skeffington, who probably could have won the presidency for himself, was willing to see Phillips elected. As Crispins everywhere knew, Phillips brought to the office the prestige and dignity that went with a lifelong struggle in behalf of workingmen. His past associations in the more prominent labor organizations, furthermore, secured valuable contacts for the new union. His ability as an organizer was also calculated to be of great usefulness to an organization hungry for members. Perhaps even more important from a practical point of view, Phillips helped bring into the union with him a substantial contingent of the powerful Philadelphia benchmen. Finally, it appears that Skeffington expected the older Philadelphian to be no more than a cipher in the front office of the union.

As the leader of thousands of shoemakers, Phillips must have congratulated himself on having reached the pinnacle of his career. If so, his delusion was soon banished, and he was reminded that the honor of being president entailed only new sacrifices, additional hard work, and fresh divisions of opinion. The general president, in fact, was anything but the cipher Skeffington appears to have hoped for. Still enthusiastically devoted to labor, Phillips gave himself up tirelessly to warding off the attacks of Powderly, cementing the International’s alliance with Gompers, and building up the strength of the union. From his home in Clementon, New Jersey, not many miles from Philadelphia, he wrote and spoke vigorously for the International. Requests from Skeffington, whose headquarters remained in New England, were promptly honored despite the fact that the younger man’s letters were sometimes either patronizing or peremptory in tone.

In the spring of 1890 a rift developed between the two leaders which resulted in Phillips’ decision to retire from his active work in the labor movement. Because the union faced considerable opposition in some New England shoe towns, Skeffington, doubtless with justice, insisted that Phillips embark on a large scale organizing tour of the critical area. Unfortunately, it was extremely difficult for Phillips

110 Skeffington to Phillips, Feb. 21, 1890, Phillips Papers.
to do this on the spur of the moment; he was hard pressed financially and had but recently started what he described as the best job he had ever had. A prolonged agitational tour meant surrendering his job and increasing his domestic financial problems. The choice between union and family was not an unusual one for labor leaders to face, but it was a distressing one. Nevertheless, Phillips quit his job and went off to New England. The trouble-shooting junket proved an extended one, lasting fifty-eight days. During this time he tried to settle strikes or lockouts, as well as to enlist new members. The campaign was largely successful, and Phillips undoubtedly helped materially to save the union from serious difficulties in the first year of its existence.

However, while the New England trip was understood to have been a matter of union expense, only a small portion of the sum Phillips spent was forthcoming from Treasurer Skeffington. Phillips, in fact, had been so embarrassed from a lack of cash that at one point in his journey he had had to borrow money from his son-in-law to tide him over. In dismay, but in good humor, he pointed out the nature of his situation to Skeffington. But Skeffington's answers were invariably delayed, giving rise to some misgivings, and when they did arrive they were not distinguished by their candor. Finally, Skeffington wrote that the union did not have sufficient money to pay the balance of Phillips' expenses. But the veteran leader was no fool; he realized that he had been badly used. He proceeded, therefore, to draft a long and careful indictment of Skeffington's conduct, showing how the latter had made extensive and oftentimes unessential trips on union monies, while the union's president was reduced to borrowing from a relative to meet expenses. Originally, it was his intention to carry his quarrel with Skeffington into the union's convention and there seek redress of his grievance. Tired and disgusted, however, he did not, and the upshot of the affair was his decision to retire. For while he was still not past middle life, years of ceaseless and exhausting labor had marked him. The International which he had helped to found and lead continued intact until 1895 when it merged with two other shoemakers' craft unions to form the Boot and Shoe Workers' Union. The International Union, of which he was president, was the only organization with which Phillips was directly associated.

111 Phillips to John Mulryan, May 11, 1890, ibid.
112 Ibid.
that survived him, testifying to the struggle of labor to establish its house upon a rock.

There is virtually no information about Phillips after 1891. Insofar as the written record is concerned he becomes a phantom. Presumably, he lived out his remaining years employed in the shoe factories of Philadelphia and then in semiretirement at his Clementon, New Jersey, home. In 1909 he forwarded to the noted labor historian John Andrews and to the Wisconsin State Historical Society the remnants of his personal papers. Thereafter we know nothing about him until on February 29, 1916, at the age of 82, he died at Laurel Springs, New Jersey.¹¹³ Had he died in 1890, laboring men throughout the country would have offered testimonials to his years of service. By 1916, he was completely forgotten. His death was not even mentioned by the trade-union journals.

Yet who among those that toiled would not have agreed with what Phillips wrote of his own career—"good seed was sown."¹¹⁴