A French Artist Describes Philadelphia

It was late in October, 1815, when the Little Fanny landed in New York, bringing among her passengers an enthusiastic and indefatigable Frenchman, Jacques Gérard Milbert. As an artist and explorer he had already won his spurs. Professor of drawing at the École des Mines in Paris, he had conducted investigations of a geological nature in the Pyrenees and along the Rhone River on behalf of his government. He had also participated in an expedition to Mauritius under the leadership of Captain Nicolas Baudin.

Between 1815 and 1822, Milbert traveled, largely on foot, up the Hudson River Valley, through New England, into Canada, and south as far as the Natural Bridge in Virginia. His collections of natural curiosities for the Paris Museum filled fifty-eight shipments and numbered nearly 8,000 specimens. They included live birds and mammals for the royal garden, the first skeleton of a bison ever sent to France, reptiles, mollusks, and rocks, as well as plants and seeds of trees and grains which Milbert thought could be propagated at home.

Eager to please the administrators of the Museum and proud of this opportunity to serve his beloved country, Milbert resolved to explore with complete thoroughness. He sent his heavy baggage by public conveyance to large towns which served as focal points for his excursions, and limited his personal luggage to a little satchel weighing about ten pounds. This procedure saved him bother and expense, and gave him more space for the specimens he collected, items far more important to him than luxurious traveling appointments.

Gifted with a keen eye and a philosophic turn of mind, Milbert was interested in everything, particularly the American westward movement. He watched caravans stopping for supper and the night. He noted how the women milked the cows at dawn, the milk paying for shelter and a day’s supply of bread. He spoke with squatters,
many of whom were real nomads who rarely harvested three times on
the same soil. Scarcely had they built a cabin or cleared a little land
than they would abandon it to go in quest of a new home, which, in
turn, they were soon to desert for a third. Eventually, these squatters
settled down and became the nucleus of a new village. Such villages
were rising everywhere, particularly along river banks, and fre-
quently took their names from an early settler who owned a large
tract of land.

Milbert commented on New York's successful efforts in the build-
ing of the Erie Canal—a tremendous project, objected to by many
because of its cost. Its commissioners, Milbert learned, had high
hopes of obtaining financial assistance from Congress since the enter-
prise promised to be important to the nation as a whole. But Con-
gress, "with that discretion and prudent procrastination so charac-
teristic of the body, neither accepted nor rejected the request."

Throughout his travels Milbert was struck by the fact that Amer-
icans had no conception of conserving the nation's forests, a great
source of the country's wealth. People seemed to view trees as
enemies which had to be exterminated at all costs; the environs of a
new city were denuded areas, and firewood in New York was quite
as scarce and costly as in Paris. Milbert pleads for conservation as
eloquently as if he were writing today.

In portraying American manufactures, he gives a brief history of
industry in the United States, pointing out that Americans began
with the production of tools and instruments needed by farmers.
Later they made wearing apparel, nearly all of which was cotton,
flax being reserved for export. Milbert praised American cotton sails,
hats, and boots and shoes which, he declared, were manufactured
with a speed and economy unknown in Europe. American carpets
were of a quality and price comparable to those made in England,
and were found even in rustic houses, for the cold, damp climate of
the United States rendered them indispensable. The fact that window
glass was of but one size impressed the traveler, who noted that all
frames were cut according to this pattern; if a glazier was not avail-
able, the home owner could replace a broken pane himself.

During the years that Milbert spent in America, funds did not
arrive with regularity from the Paris Museum. The administrators,
however, assured him that he would have the support of his govern-
ment upon his return home. Proud of his responsibility, and anxious to complete his task so thoroughly that no corner would be left unexplored, Milbert sold both real estate and objets d'art to obtain the sums he required for his travels and to make his shipments of specimens. Unfortunately, neither the Museum nor the government kept its promises. Shipwrecked on the way home, Milbert was ill for a long time. He never received the promised funds, and he was disappointed again when he attempted to make another voyage to the United States for the Paris Museum. The one bright spot in his later years came in 1830, when, shortly after Louis Philippe ascended the throne, the king conferred upon Milbert the Cross of the Legion of Honor. We have no further information save that he died, a poor man, ten years later.

Although Baron Cuvier, the great French naturalist, said that Milbert was one of the men to whom natural history owed the most, it is as a social historian that he interests us today. In 1828–1829, Milbert published in Paris his account of his visit to the United States. His observations are lively, frequently farsighted, and they record myriad details of early nineteenth-century America. As an artist he was deeply impressed with the beauty of the American landscape, and a portfolio of more than fifty of his drawings appeared simultaneously with his Picturesque Itinerary.  

Of all the American cities he visited, Milbert liked Philadelphia best. Approaching it by steamboat from Trenton in 1819, he first saw the city as a vast semicircle. His visit was an inclusive one, and his impressions colorful and perceptive.

American Museum of Natural History

Philadelphia, the leading and most symmetrical city in the state, lies 75° 10' long. W. and 39° 58' lat. N. 126 miles from the Atlantic Ocean. Established by William Penn in 1681, the name commemorates both that of the founder and the primitive state of the vast forested region the settlers called Pennsylavania. Although his father

1 J. Milbert, Itinéraire pittoresque du fleuve Hudson et des parties latérales de l'Amérique du Nord, d'après les dessins originaux pris sur les lieux (Paris, 1828–1829). This two-volume work has been translated by the author of this article.
had received a grant of land from Charles II, Penn believed he should deal with the Indians, so he obtained from the Coquannoc [Susquehannock and Delaware tribes] the land between the Delaware and the Schuylkill, where he laid the foundations for the City of Friends. A magnificent basin a mile in width, formed by the Delaware, made it possible for large vessels to come close to the city. The section along the river became the commercial center and here are almost all the establishments pertaining to the Navy, if you except the large dockyard to the south. This section, the most densely populated of all, is, by reason of the occupation of its inhabitants, the low terrain, and the clustering of the houses, the dirtiest and least agreeable. It has another disadvantage in that there is no broad wharf to form a suitable introduction to this magnificent city and provide space for the industrious population engaged in maritime commerce. The Delaware shore is cut into a number of basins projecting inland that serve as docks for commercial vessels. The sides of these basins are covered with all kinds of stalls, counters, and stores, so that a stranger coming from the center of the city can hardly find the magnificent river lapping its walls, while anyone arriving by the Delaware can not believe he is approaching one of the fairest cities in the world.

The most beautiful section, and the most remarkable from the point of view of cleanliness and luxury, is between Walnut and Arch Streets. The straight streets, that cut from north to south and from east to west at right angles, are adorned with sidewalks and various kinds of trees. Trees and grass are also planted on little squares reserved for walks between the houses, which, as they are brick and usually decorated with white marble steps and window frames, are so similar both outside and inside that a stranger can easily mistake one for another. This uniformity would make the city monotonous, were it not for the lively traffic. The population, which numbered 28,522 after the Revolutionary War, passed the 120,000 mark in 1817. It consists of French and Germans, with a few Dutch, but representatives of the United Kingdom constitute the majority. The

2 The grant was actually received by William Penn the Quaker, on Mar. 4, 1681, in payment of a debt which the Crown owed his father.

3 Other government navy yards were located at Boston, Norfolk, Portsmouth and Washington.
latter are descendants of the Puritans, who, fleeing religious persecu-
tions with Penn, came to the New World in search of rest, peace, and
liberty. No sooner had the colony been established than liberty of
conscience was guaranteed to all in the Charter of Privileges promul-
gated by William Penn, October 28, 1701.

"Because no people can be truly happy, though under the greatest
enjoyment of civil liberties, if abridged of the freedom of their con-
sciences, as to their religious profession and worship; and Almighty
God being the only Lord of Conscience, father of lights and spirits,
I do hereby grant and declare that no person or persons, inhabiting
in this province or territories, who shall confess and acknowledge
one almighty God, and profess him or themselves obliged to live
quietly under the Civil Government, shall be in any case molested or
prejudiced in his or their person or estate, because of his or their
conscientious persuasion or practice, nor be compelled to frequent or
maintain any religious worship, place or ministry, contrary to his or
their mind, or to do or suffer any other act or thing, contrary to their
religious persuasion. And that all persons who also confess to believe
in Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, shall be capable (notwith-
standing their other persuasions and practices in point of conscience
and religion) to serve this Government in any capacity, both legis-
latively and executively." The Charter ends with a declaration that
these privileges may not be violated at any time or on any pretext
whatsoever.

Since these traditions of tolerance have been preserved, every
religion is afforded the same protection in Philadelphia. Of the 89
churches in the city, four, including the cathedral, are Catholic, and
19 or 20 are Presbyterian. One is Moravian, there are churches be-
longing to the Lutherans, Baptists and Methodists; eleven, known as
African churches, are for Negroes, and the Jews have two syna-
gogues. . . .

One result of this spirit of tolerance is that each church is built and
supported by voluntary contributions, without intervention from the
federal budget, and various congregations, such as the Bible and
Mission Society, are annexed to these churches. It is a very common
sight to see funeral corteges of different sects meet in Philadelphia
streets. Although Quakers do not wear mourning, which they con-
sider an ostentatious, vain custom, they lend color to these cere-
monies, for, contrary to the custom in most European countries, the
women walk in the procession, with their heads covered by a silk
hood, and the men, garbed in huge hats and exceedingly plain gar-
ments, wear dazzlingly white linen. One day I saw a gray hearse, the
Quakers’ favorite color, bearing the coffin beneath a catafalque and
followed by more than a hundred identical carriages. Drawn by two
horses, the hearse came to the cemetery, the coffin was placed beside
the grave, the mourners surrounded it, and then one of the men
stepped forward to speak on a text from the Gospel. After the body
was lowered into the grave, everyone withdrew quietly, the women
weeping and giving every indication of grief, the men remaining
impassive.

Members of other sects, especially Presbyterians, do not share the
Quaker ideas about mourning. They wear it for their grandparents,
for in-laws, friends, while a girl wears it for her fiancé. The result of
this custom, which has been adopted nearly everywhere in the Union,
is that a stranger, on seeing so many lugubrious garments, may well
believe death has carried away half the population. At the funeral of
a wealthy man the corners of the pall are borne by relatives and
special friends; those in the procession wear a white scarf and gloves
provided by the family. Fastened on the shoulder by a broad rosette,
the scarf, which comes almost down to the ground, may be worn
from right to left or from left to right.

Etiquette prescribes that you pay a last call on the deceased, who
is shaved, bathed, clad in white linen, and lying on a bed of shavings
in a drapery-lined coffin adorned with fringe. The face is covered with
a veil, which is raised when each caller arrives. After the funeral, the
visitor is taken to a room where refreshments, consisting of Madeira,
tea and cakes, are served. The coffin is closed by means of screws
instead of nails, which would make a noise painful to members of the
family. Some of them bear metal plates giving the name of the
deceased and the date of his death.

Primary education of orphans and poor children is supported by
voluntary contributions. More advanced students, and those inter-
ested in art, find every tool they require in the libraries of various
learned societies, especially that of the city. Established and enlarged
by individual gifts, it contains no less than 24,000 volumes. One is a
book printed by Franklin, whose white marble statue is over the
main entrance. Some rather curious ones are to be found in the libraries of the Athenaeum, established in 1815, the [American] Philosophical Society, and the university; this is located in the building the State of Pennsylvania erected as a gift for Washington, who refused it. A fairly exact idea of the flourishing state of sciences and letters may be obtained by counting the number of buildings used for educational purposes. Without including the large number of public schools for elementary studies, or the various university faculties, Philadelphia has 16 libraries, with more than 65,000 books, and about 24 learned societies or scientific and literary foundations devoted to the various branches of natural history, medicine, agriculture, the fine arts, literature, and even music.

Founded in 1805, the Academy of Fine Arts has a rather good collection of plaster casts of classical statues in the Louvre. I was also pleased to see other casts of works by Cartellier, Chaudet and [Baron François Frédéric] Lemot, as well as [Antonio] Canova’s Perseus. The gallery has a large number of genre and historical paintings, some of which are quite well done.

These buildings are large and severe, but Philadelphia’s real monuments are its banks, where artists have made use of every marvel of architecture. All of them have remarkable details, notably the [Second] United States Bank, which is a copy of the Parthenon in native marble, but none can compare with the Bank of Pennsylvania, built [in 1798] according to the plans of a European architect, Mr. [Benjamin Henry] Latrobe, who imitated the temple of the Muses on Ilissus near Athens. Although Americans are not enthusiastic about artistic objects, they are full of admiration for the Pennsylvania bank.

The beautiful Chestnut Street Theatre, the only one in Philadelphia at the time of my visit, burned, but it has been replaced by an even more magnificent structure. I am told that, since my return,
three other theaters have been erected, all fully comparable to the one I mentioned. In all of them the painted sets are satisfactory but the actors very mediocre.

The City Hall [Independence Hall], measuring 400 feet in length, contains the various courts of justice. A wooden staircase, 18th century in style, leads to the main floor, which is divided into several rooms used for meetings of the council of judges of the Supreme Court and the city administration. Here in the central room Congress proclaimed American independence. For a time the building was turned into a museum of natural history, whose greatest treasure was the mammoth discovered in New York State, but after the collection was transported to a new building, the Arcade in Chestnut Street, City Hall was restored to its original purpose. Privately owned, like most of the fine collections in the United States, the museum belongs to the family of Mr. [Charles Willson] Peale, a zealous artist, who devoted most of his life and all his wealth to its creation. He painted in France nearly all the famous men of his day, savants, artists, soldiers, whose portraits, together with those of important personages of other countries, constitute one of the museum's leading attractions. . . .

After visiting buildings devoted to administration, commerce and the arts, there remained those that sadden, even though I have only words of praise for their organization: the hospitals and prisons.

The Pennsylvania Hospital, one of the best institutions of its kind, was built by volunteer subscriptions. Completed in 1755, it consists of a ground floor, where mental patients are housed, and two floors surmounted by a huge ventilator. In the center of a flower bed of medicinal plants stands a bronze statue of William Penn dressed as a Quaker. A nearby pavilion has a painting of Christ healing the sick, done by a Pennsylvania artist, Benjamin West, who gave it to the hospital.

Philadelphia has three prisons: the state prison, debtors' prison, and the penitentiary. Although all are clean and well run, the Walnut Street penitentiary is the best example of the system of moral improvement that Europe is apparently ready to try at last.

As soon as a convict arrives, he has a haircut, takes a bath, and is given clean clothes. Twice a week he changes and bathes. Men im-

9 It was Rembrandt Peale, not his father Charles Willson Peale, who went to France (1808 and 1809) to paint portraits of outstanding Frenchmen for Peale's Museum.
prisoned for mutiny have nothing but bread, but workers receive soup, cornmeal mush, and meat twice a week, while no spirits are allowed. This system, which is based on much too kind treatment, has not produced good results; the building, almost in the center of the city, is cramped and has numerous other disadvantages, but the new penitentiary will be one of the finest in the world. On an isolated plateau on the banks of the Schuylkill, it is being constructed of native granite in a panopticon divided into eight spokes, so that a single guard, placed in the center, can see everything. This arrangement, repeated on the second floor, enables one guard to watch the courts when the prisoners are taking walks. It also ensures a constant change of air, which finds an opening no matter how the wind is blowing. The section of the building enclosed between the seven spokes contains 36 cells 12 feet long by 8 feet wide and 10 feet high. The walls separating them are 18 inches thick and the foundations 3 feet deep, with a masonry floor in each cell to discourage any attempt at excavation. Casement windows are placed in the ceiling to receive light and air, but prisoners can not look out or talk to their neighbors. Silence, prescribed for everything, including meals, is intended to make the prisoners forget their former habits in an atmosphere of calm and meditation. The solitary confinement is so complete that a prisoner can communicate with his guard only about some urgent matter, although the latter can see him, as a conical aperture \( \frac{1}{2} \) in diameter opens on the corridor. Each cell has a wooden door, left open at certain intervals, with an iron grate to air the room. In winter a heater is placed at the end of each corridor, with a fire pump that provides the necessary water for the latrine in each cell. The surrounding walls form a perfect square, with towers at the four corners; these walls, which are three feet thick by 15 to 20 feet in height, are constantly patrolled.

The little path beside the new penitentiary leads to Fairmount and the apparatus that conveys the waters of the Schuylkill to Philadelphia. A high point in the vicinity provides a view of the immense reservoir and the dike, which, by cutting diagonally across the river, keeps the tidewater at a certain height. A canal on the right bank has locks that permit navigation from the lower to the upper course of

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10 Eastern State Penitentiary, also known as Cherry Hill, was opened in 1829.
the river. The magnificent trees and luxurious homes, including Mr. [Henry] Pratt's, on its shores present an enchanting picture. Two wooden bridges, the second serving as a prolongation of the city's main street, enliven the landscape. The hydraulic apparatus, which can raise ten million gallons of water in 24 hours, consists of 8 wheels 15 feet in diameter, with power supplied by a seven-foot falls; the nearly horizontal pumps are set in motion by means of a machine with pins fitted to the wheels. The first reservoir, containing three to four million gallons of water, is 316 feet long by 139 feet in width and 12 feet in depth. Two pipes 20 inches in diameter connect it to the old one, with its 14 million gallons. The water is piped to houses and fire hydrants that flush the streets, carrying dirt to the Delaware. In summer the city is sprinkled twice a day by men using a leather hose apparatus, resembling a fire pump hose, that fits onto the hydrants. This method makes it possible to raise water to every floor, even attics, of houses, for the kitchen, for baths, which almost all of them have, and for fire.

This magnificent model city has a number of other improvements intended to ensure cleanliness and salubriosity. As it would require too much detail to list them all, I shall merely mention the fine construction and great number of sewers. These dark, subterranean structures, almost unknown to the inhabitants of the cities they cleanse, were one of the finest ornaments of ancient cities but are all too infrequent in modern ones, especially Paris, in view of the concentrated population in this capital. Their number, extent, and arrangement are much better related to the size of the city, and probable growth of the population, in Philadelphia.

Another, and closely associated, public utility is control of rainwater. Our largest cities leave much to be desired on this point. It is true that several years ago Paris got rid of the long, threatening pipes that used to dump broad columns of water in the street during a storm, but this is only the first step, and Paris still has much to learn from Philadelphia. Here every householder is forced to construct gutters along his whole façade, either in the cornices or on the slope of the roof; carried under the sidewalks to brooks, they safe-

11 Lemon Hill, formerly the home of Robert Morris.
12 Upper Ferry Bridge at Fairmount, opened in 1813, and Market Street Bridge, opened in 1805.
guard pedestrians from overflowing sewers, help keep the streets clean, and protect basements and pavement from damage. . . .

In Philadelphia, as in all large American cities, prostitution is kept within definite limits by police control. Each district has clearly marked houses for streetwalkers, who are forced to dress decently and are severely punished for any attempt at soliciting. This wise repression of one of the vices inseparable from a great city is necessary in a country where custom grants a great deal of liberty to young ladies, even of the finest families. Thanks to this precaution, they are never subject to disagreeable experiences when they go out alone to pay calls or to shop. It would be a serious error for a stranger, unfamiliar with the customs of the country, to address one.

Since we are on the subject of public decency, let us not forget to mention that no nuisances are ever committed on American streets and buildings, although they are not plastered with threatening signs and violated orders, such as we see everywhere in France. No more severe penalties menace the delinquents, nor are special police entailed for this matter; lavatories are placed in a large number of inconspicuous spots, and habit does the rest.

Philadelphia has an advantage over all other coastal cities in that, as its straight streets intersect at right angles, policing is very easy. Watchmen, placed at equal distances from one another, are alerted when the rounds are to begin at night. They cry the weather, the hour, and, should there be any infraction of the peace, they shake noisy rattles. At this signal, rapidly passed down the lines, the area is surrounded by neighboring watchmen and the brawlers are arrested and taken to jail. In circumstances beyond police control citizens are required to assist, as there are no paid troops.

If the guard on the City Hall tower spots a fire, he rings a bell to show its location. (One ring for north, two for south, three for east, and four for west; for points in between, such as northeast, he rings the number of the two adjoining points of the compass, leaving a certain interval between.) The signal calls forth a response from other bells in the city, whereupon the watchmen cry "fire" and ring all the doorbells. At the same time, members of the fire department, clad in overalls and wearing leather hats protected by iron bands, run to the pumps, which are always kept in good condition. Harnessing themselves, an immense crowd of citizens drag these pumps to the scene of the disaster, where constables stand guard over the nearby areas,
as well as over whatever personal effects have been saved. Although these police officers have no weapons other than sticks bearing the city coat of arms, they form a barrier no one would dare cross. Conditions must be very serious to warrant intervention from the militia, and such cases are extremely rare in this peaceful city; however, on the occasion of my first trip to Philadelphia, I witnessed a riot caused by the ascension of a balloon, which was torn to pieces by an angry crowd.13

Among the most remarkable establishments in Philadelphia are the markets; the one on High Street is nearly half a mile long, with great quantities of poultry, game and butcher's meat. Enormous pieces of salted and smoked beef are prepared by farmers, nearly all of whom have smokehouses for this purpose. Fresh-water fish from the Schuylkill and the Delaware are no less abundant, and their variety, glitter, and bright colors give an excellent idea of the ichthyological wealth in these two rivers. The catfish, whose flat head and sharp barbs doubtless explain its name, is very common in these waters, where it is one of the finest fish caught. When the head is removed and the body fried, it is a dish Americans prize.

In addition to fresh-water fish, there are species from the Jersey coasts that are kept on ice during hot weather. Every country inhabitant has near his house an icebox in which he keeps meat he brings home from market. The beauty and variety of fruits in the Philadelphia market are no less remarkable, considering the latitude. Besides locally grown grapes, cherries, various kinds of peaches, apples, pears, numerous types of melons and watermelons, there are imported tropical fruits. It is a common sight to see piles of pineapples from the island of Cuba, long clusters of bananas and enormous coconuts from the West Indies. The reader will be interested to know that, in return for these products of the equatorial regions, residents of various ports in the United States ship ice to the West Indies and all the ports along the southern coasts; whole vessels are laden with this singular cargo.

13 On Sept. 8, 1819, M. Michel was to have attempted a balloon ascension and parachute leap from Vauxhall Garden, a fashionable amusement place in the city. A large crowd had encircled the Garden to watch the inflating of the balloon. Becoming impatient at the seeming delay, the crowd got out of hand and attacked the Garden. The balloon was ripped open, and within fifteen minutes Vauxhall Garden was a shambles. Joseph Jackson, Encyclopedia of Philadelphia (Harrisburg, 1933), IV, 1155-1156.
The first City Hall stands in the marketplace. It was built in 1709, as is stated in the inscription on the weathervane of a lantern that served as belfry. Shaped like a rectangle, 60 feet long by 30 feet wide, with three arcades on each side, it has a wooden staircase leading to several medium-size rooms. This monument, whose small size is in striking contrast to the sumptuousness of modern edifices, is being carefully preserved.\textsuperscript{14}

The market, which is open twice a week, gives the city a very lively appearance, for, in addition to foodstuffs, industrial products are sold by their manufacturers. Philadelphia has a large number of factories producing hardware and cotton fabrics; there are 20 distilleries, 15 breweries, 6 tanneries, 15 ropewalks, 3 glass factories, 60 printing presses, 2 very high towers for the manufacture of shot (this is made by dropping a rain of melted lead into water from a very great height), and 14 marble works where native marble is cut and polished for furniture and funeral monuments.

As I am afraid of becoming involved in too great detail, I have not undertaken to acquaint my reader with all the remarka.\ldots e edifices or establishments in Philadelphia. I can not, however, forbear to speak of the new customhouse, well situated for prompt handling of commercial transactions, and one of the finest civil monuments in the city. I shall just mention the Navy Yard, where I saw a superb warship and frigate, with 44 cannon, ready to be launched.\ldots

The dike to be constructed at Cape Henlopen, at the entrance to the Delaware, will be of very great importance to Philadelphia. This great project, measuring not less than a mile six hundred meters, will tower above the highest water level, to protect shipping from ice. The breaking up of ice is at times very perilous in the Delaware, which, at present, offers no protection to vessels. An artificial harbor is essential if Philadelphia is to retain its commercial resources.

The reader would not have an adequate idea of the advantages Philadelphia may secure from its admirable position between the two rivers unless I added some information concerning the Schuylkill, which bounds the city to the west. Over 150 miles in length, this river is navigable for sloops from its mouth to the Fairmount dam, where a lateral canal, running along the right bank, takes them into the upper bed beyond the falls, about seven miles from Philadelphia.

\textsuperscript{14} Familiarly known as the Court House, this building was located in the middle of Market St., just west of Second. It was torn down in 1837.