Law and Order, 1877: Philadelphia’s Response to the Railroad Riots

In July, 1877, the United States was beset by extensive strikes and urban violence, especially aimed at the nation’s railroads. Philadelphia, the headquarters of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, was crowded with unemployed laborers and “tramps” that summer and, for a few tense days, the city stood in extreme jeopardy. By the end of the month, however, while authorities in other cities totaled lives and dollars lost, Philadelphia, virtually unscathed, had regained her customary calm. Contemporary sources are instructive about the nature of Philadelphia’s danger and the means by which “law and order” were so swiftly and efficiently restored.

The violence of 1877 stemmed from the depression of the mid-1870’s, which led to layoffs and reductions in many industries, especially the railroads. In 1877, when the depression was at its worst, railroad workers were in the vanguard of attempts to forestall such cost-cutting by the corporations. Some, perhaps, had plans to force employers to divert profits from stockholders to hungry workmen and their families. A few, no doubt, countenanced a reorientation of the entire capitalistic system. But most of the agitators, strikers, and rioters of that year probably knew no more reason for their activity than their own dissatisfaction with lower wages or unemployment. Labor unions were scattered, furtive, and pusillanimous, and there is no reason to think that there was much organization behind the strikes which ensued.

The railroad workers first attempted to change company policy in meetings with their employers. Company executives expressed sympathy, but insisted that the corporations, too, were suffering in these hard times. The laborers then turned to work stoppages,
strikes, and, intentionally or not, to riots and destruction of company property, culminating in the last two weeks of July.¹

The first violence occurred on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which announced a ten per cent reduction in wages effective Monday, July 16. At Baltimore, the firemen, later joined by some brakemen and engineers, began deserting their trains. In Martinsburg, West Virginia, an important junction, the trainmen were bolder. There, on July 17, they uncoupled engines, gathered them in the roundhouse and announced to railroad officials that no trains would leave until the wage reduction was cancelled. The strikers made good their promise for two days until 200 federal troops, dispatched by President Hayes at the behest of Governor Henry M. Mathews, arrived to disperse them and start the trains moving again. But by then news of the strike had ignited agitation and disturbances throughout the railroad system of the northeastern and central United States. Eventually, strikes flared from Canada to California.²

Pennsylvania was unquestionably the hardest hit of all the states and Pittsburgh suffered more than any other city in the country. The Pennsylvania Railroad had reduced wages by ten per cent in 1873 and by another ten per cent on June 1, 1877. Meetings with President Thomas A. Scott and other officials produced only kind words. Workers hastily formed a secret Trainmen’s Union in the Pittsburgh area to plan more effective confrontations with management. A strike was planned for June 27 but was called off when dissension arose among the workers. But only a single spark was now required to ignite the trainmen to violent activity and the railroad swiftly provided one. In another cost-cutting attempt, the Pennsylvania announced the introduction, beginning on July 19, of “double-headers”—trains comprising twice the usual number of cars and engines, permitting the dismissal of many conductors and brakemen. A strike broke out that very day in the Pittsburgh vicinity and mobs began to gather in the city itself. Before they

¹ For the background of the depression and consequent labor troubles, see Robert V. Bruce, 1877: Year of Violence (New York, 1939), 9-42, and John R. Commons, et al., History of Labour in the United States (New York, 1918-1935), II, 185-187. For additional information on conditions in Pennsylvania, see Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Railroad Riots in July, 1877 (Harrisburg, 1878), 2-4.

² Commons, II, 187-188; Bruce, 74-92.
dispersed, on July 23, twenty-six people had been killed and millions of dollars worth of railroad property, including the Union Depot, had been reduced to smouldering ruins.\(^3\)

In Philadelphia, accounts of the Baltimore and Martinsburg strikes reached newspaper readers on Tuesday, July 17. Increasingly disturbing information on the Martinsburg situation arrived during the next two days; the front page of the Philadelphia Record of July 19 featured balanced bold-print headlines reading "War in the East," referring to the Russo-Turkish War in the Balkans, and "War in West Virginia." An editorial condemned the officials of West Virginia, especially the governor, for allowing rioters to disgrace the state and the country and called for extirpation of the "miniature rebellion."\(^4\)

Newspapers of July 20 informed readers that the strike was spreading to Ohio and Pennsylvania. Brakemen at Pittsburgh were reported to be stopping all traffic. Pennsylvania Railroad officials in Philadelphia expressed little fear, however; the Pittsburgh brakemen could easily be replaced and there was no prospect of a strike in Philadelphia.\(^5\) But the public nonchalance of the railroad officials was not matched by their actions. President Scott was sleeping at Andalusia, eighteen miles from Philadelphia, on the evening of Thursday, July 19, when one of the company officers from West Philadelphia arrived to request his return to the city because of "trouble on the road." Scott arrived at the Philadelphia depot, located one block west of the present Thirtieth Street Station, shortly before midnight. There, he was briefed on the situation in Pittsburgh as news trickled in by telegraph throughout the night. Scott was primarily concerned with protecting company property in western Pennsylvania. To this end, he telegraphed Governor John F. Hartranft, then traveling in Wyoming, and conferred with General

\(^3\) Commons, II, 188-190; Bruce, 115-183. The P.R.R. Company's annual report for the year ending Dec. 31, 1877, estimated that the total loss would exceed $5,000,000. Commercial and Financial Chronicle, XXVI (Mar. 9, 1878), 240. Of this sum, the company regained $2,772,349 in damage claims from the Allegheny County Commissioners. James Waldo Fawcett, "Quest for Pittsburgh Fire Department History," Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine, XLIX (1966), 51.

\(^4\) Philadelphia Record, July 17, 18, 19, 1877 (all newspapers hereinafter cited, unless otherwise indicated, were published in Philadelphia in 1877).

\(^5\) Record, July 20; Public Ledger, July 20.
James W. Latta, state Adjutant General, about the status of military forces available to quell the rioters. He also found time to telegraph Philadelphia Mayor William S. Stokley, who was vacationing at Long Branch, New Jersey, requesting him to return to the city to meet possible railroad trouble there.6

Early Friday evening, the West Philadelphia depot suddenly became very active. Governor Hartranft, or Scott on behalf of the governor, arranged for the dispatch of General Robert M. Brinton and his command, the First Division of the Pennsylvania National Guard, to Pittsburgh to end the riots which local militia had been unable to control. Gradually, the depot became crowded with mustering troops, many arriving without uniforms or arms, accompanied by their families and curious onlookers. Railroad officials struggled manfully to forge order out of the resulting chaos. Of the 1,200 troops who were to leave on a midnight train, only 36 had reported by the appointed hour; 600 troops did leave at about two in the morning, though without any ammunition (they obtained some en route). The depot was the scene of confused military arrivals and departures for the next several days, drawing a large and, the authorities felt, dangerous crowd of onlookers to the very heart of the Pennsylvania Railroad empire.7

In an office at the depot on that noisy Friday night, the recently returned Mayor Stokley sat down with Chief of Police Kennard H. Jones and Scott to discuss the Philadelphia situation. Stokley brought a certain expertise to the discussion. Now in his fifth year as mayor, he had earned a reputation as an upholder of law and order and a protector of property. During his first year in office he had strengthened the police force and had been rewarded by an unusually high number of arrests, 40,368. In June of 1872, he had demonstrated considerable courage in personally leading a posse which stopped and dispersed a threatening mob of striking gas works employees. Stokley then directed the arrest of the strike leaders and city protection for the men hired to replace them. As

6 Scott's testimony, Report, 924–926. Record, July 21, implies that Scott telegraphed Stokley on Thursday night, a virtual impossibility. Times, July 21, says that Stokley was notified at 8 A.M.

Ellis P. Oberholtzer wrote, “Such activity instilled a wholesome dread of him in the minds of rioters and evil-doers of every description.” Indeed, Stokley was re-elected to a third term in February, 1877, primarily because of his successful suppression of riots.  

Now, only five months later, Stokley learned from Scott and Jones that new labor trouble was imminent. Jones even knew of a secret meeting of firemen and brakemen that had been held the night before in a nearby saloon on Lancaster Avenue. What had transpired there was unclear, but Stokley was impressed enough by Scott’s anxiety to dispatch a large force of police to the depot vicinity under Jones’ personal command. This detachment arrived Friday night and was kept out of sight at the Sixteenth District Station House at Lancaster Avenue and Thirty-ninth Street to hide its presence and prevent undue excitement. Plain-clothesmen were doubtless assigned to mingle with the crowds to spot potential trouble.  

On Saturday morning, July 21, the crowd at the West Philadelphia depot had increased in number, while straggling soldiers arrived to board trains for Pittsburgh. Months later, Scott estimated that the onlookers had numbered from 2,000 to 5,000, some of them armed and many of them threatening. He was apparently thinking of Sunday or Monday, however, since local newspapers, while speaking of a “great mob,” say nothing of weapons or bellicosity. On the whole, Saturday seems to have passed as quietly as could be expected under the circumstances, but Mayor Stokley continued to organize for possible trouble. He ordered police lieutenants to keep all their men in the station houses except during meals. Park guards and firemen were also readied for duty. Again, plain-clothesmen were presumably to do the patrolling while uniformed police remained in reserve should an emergency arise. In the station houses, the policemen cleaned muskets and rationed the little ammunition available. Stokley was forced to telegraph the harried General Latta in Pittsburgh for more guns and ammunition, which were promptly sent.

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9 Record, July 21; Report, 932. Inquirer, July 21, reports that some extra police had been stationed at the Sixteenth District Station House on Thursday night as well.
The mayor also directed two police tugs to patrol the Schuylkill River in the vicinity of the depot.\textsuperscript{10}

Sunday, July 22, saw even larger crowds milling around near the depot as curiosity seekers, and perhaps troublemakers, spent their day of leisure at the focal point of excitement in the city. Now the crowd was afforded glimpses of soldiers returning from Pittsburgh, a sight chilling to some and exciting to others, for a number of these men were wounded. Scott and some officers and directors of the railroad spent the entire day at the depot receiving telegraph news of death and destruction in Pittsburgh, where the rioting was at its worst.\textsuperscript{11}

Mayor Stokley, who had set up his headquarters in the General Agent’s office at the depot, was shaken by the news from Pittsburgh and the effect it might have on the crowds menacing the building. In an attempt to reduce the danger, he issued a proclamation which both reasoned with and threatened his constituents. Invoking the pride Philadelphians had felt during the “Centennial year,” Stokley asked that the city be spared the “horrible scenes enacted in our sister cities.” For those who persisted in “outbreak and violence,” however, there would be “condign punishment.” But the keystone of the mayor’s proclamation was his plan for preventing violence. This, Stokley hoped to achieve by banning public gatherings altogether. “Let all the people resume and continue their lawful occupations,” he urged, “and avoid assembling or congregating together for discussion or otherwise at the present time.” The words were polite enough, seemingly a mere request, but Stokley intended to enforce them as law if the need arose.\textsuperscript{12}

The immediate problem, however, was the throng already assembled in West Philadelphia. In the afternoon, Stokley and Chief of Police Jones rode by carriage through the streets near the depot, directing police efforts to disperse the crowds. Yet when they re-

\textsuperscript{10} Report, 932–933; Record, July 23; Public Ledger, July 23.

\textsuperscript{11} Inquirer, July 23; Times, July 23.

\textsuperscript{12} Inquirer, July 23. The ostensible authority for the mayor’s abrogation of the right of assembly was an act of the Pennsylvania legislature dated May 3, 1850. Section 22 of this law authorized the police to disperse groups of people “unlawfully, riotously and tumultuously assembled together, to the number of twelve or more.” However, it did not authorize the dispersal or banning of peaceful assemblies. Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Passed at the Session of 1850 (Harrisburg, 1850), 670–672.
turned to the station, it was still surrounded by what seemed like thousands of people. At about 6 P.M., the mayor, reasoning that the surrounding crowds would become even more dangerous as night fell, ordered the police to press the throng back to Lancaster Avenue and hold them there. A detail of patrolmen accomplished this potentially hazardous task with surprisingly little difficulty. Police now checked the identity and intentions of anyone wishing to approach or enter the depot. A large portion of the crowd drifted north along the tracks to Callowhill Street (near the corner of today’s Thirty-first and Baring Streets) and milled about a nearby roundhouse.  

Until Sunday evening, there had been a great deal of confusion among railroad workers in Philadelphia, but no strike. Quiet conferences among brakemen and firemen that day, however, resulted in a decision to halt work. They left their posts in an orderly fashion and requested officers of the company to halt all freight traffic. Scott, who generally would have had no qualms about introducing replacements, prudently agreed. Other strikers, along with a small group of onlookers, took possession of the roundhouse at Callowhill Street at about the same time, but abandoned it again when they saw that the company needed no persuasion to cease operations. Engineers, many of them willing to work, accepted the threats of the strikers and went home.

Scott and Stokley were willing to countenance the stoppage of freight traffic for a time, but feared a crowd of about 500 persons who had again approached the depot along the tracks from the north. The police—there were now some 600 officers in the immediate vicinity—again essayed to push the crowd back to Lancaster Avenue. This time the maneuver resulted in violence. The crowd moved docilely at first but halted, for some reason, about a block’s distance from the station, still obstructing the tracks. Police Captain George W. Curry’s request that the tracks be cleared peacefully was met by laughter and catcalls and the patrolmen advanced slowly, prodding and striking members of the crowd with their nightsticks. Driven back as far as a hill to the west of the tracks, the mob

13 *Inquirer*, July 23; *Times*, July 23.
14 *Record*, July 23.
began to hurl stones and other missiles. The police, caught in a bad
position, charged the hill and, after a short, sharp struggle, punctu-
ated with a few pistol shots from the mob, gained the upper hand.
The crowd broke and ran pursued by the police for about a block
before the engagement ended. Many in the crowd were injured,
some of them severely; the police also suffered some injuries, though
none were hit by gunfire. By 10 P.M., they had cleared the tracks
and cordoned off the area from the depot to Callowhill Street.
Apart from a small disturbance at Mantua Station, a short distance
to the northwest, the area was calm for the remainder of the night.  
Scott and Stokley had weathered the strike’s first violence in
Philadelphia, but both were profoundly apprehensive about the
next few days. Scott seems almost to have succumbed to hysteria
in a telegram he dispatched to Governor Hartranft urging him to
request federal troops for Philadelphia if he had not already done so.
“You must not delay a moment about this,” Scott wrote in a
dazzling burst of hyperbole, “for the destruction of life and property
in Philada. and the eastern road of this State greatly exceed what
has occurred in western part of the State last night and today, and
which greatly exceeds any thing that has ever occurred in this
country. . . .” Stokley was calmer, but he too realized that more
manpower, ideally federal troops, would be necessary if he wished
to enforce the language of his proclamation. Just before midnight,
both men received welcome news from Washington. Secretary of
War George McCrary had approved Governor Hartranft’s request
for federal troops and a contingent under General Winfield S.
Hancock would arrive as soon as possible.  
Monday morning, July 23, began peacefully at the West Phila-
delphia depot and Scott felt secure enough to order normal freight
runs to proceed as usual. However, the resultant activity at the
Callowhill Street roundhouse immediately drew a menacing crowd
and Scott retracted the order. The crowd, in the morning at least,
was thinner than Sunday’s and appeared to be more curious than

15 Inquirer, July 23; Record, July 23.
16 “Papers of Governor John Frederick Hartranft relative to the Railroad Strike of July,
1877,” Pennsylvania Archives, Fourth Series, IX, 622–623; Bruce, 195; Record, July 23. For
the background of Hayes’ decision to send troops, see Bruce, 209–218. Scott must have
forgotten about his telegram eight months later when he averred, under oath, that there
had not been “any trouble at any time” during the Philadelphia disturbances. Report, 932–933.
desirous of molesting railroad property. Passenger traffic, until now, had continued substantially unhindered. Morning trains had left for Pittsburgh and New York with well-filled coaches. But late on Monday morning, part of the mob, apparently with the aid of strikers, positioned an oil train so as to block the passenger tracks and then disconnected the engine. Police were required to protect engineers, most of whom had returned to their jobs, while they coupled another engine to the cars and hauled them to a distant spur. Several police charges during the morning bloodied a few heads and cleared the Callowhill Street tracks. Despite this, the crowd continued to mill about in dangerous proximity to the roundhouse and the depot.\textsuperscript{17}

Suddenly, at about 11 A.M., the mob at Callowhill Street was electrified by the sight of billowing black smoke to the south. Someone had set fire to an oil train on the West Chester siding, just south of the South Street Bridge, and a large crowd soon gathered to watch the result. In fact, damage was not very extensive but only because of quick work on the part of railroad employees. They brought an engine to the scene and coupled it to the head of the train while city firemen risked their lives in uncoupling the burning cars. Only five cars were left on fire when the rest of the train was drawn to safety. An explosion from one car, however, propelled burning oil fifty feet in the air and injured several firemen, one of them severely. Hundreds of police were on hand to protect the firemen from the crowd but the onlookers seemed little disposed to interfere. The fire was allowed to burn itself out.

Meanwhile at the depot, Scott and other railroad officials feared that the fire might be only a decoy to draw police away from the station so that rioters could storm it. Stokley, who apparently had remained at the depot all night, now made an unusual and risky move. He ordered all the policemen in the city, some 1,200 men, and 80 Fairmount Park Guards to join him at the terminal. With this force on hand, it was possible to prevent anyone, except those on official business, from approaching the building.\textsuperscript{18}

Downtown Philadelphia, on this day of unrest, was unusually quiet. Business was almost at a standstill, since no one could hope

\textsuperscript{17} Record, July 24; Times, July 24; Telegraph, July 23; Bruce, 196.

\textsuperscript{18} Record, July 24; Times, July 24; Telegraph, July 23.
to ship or receive any supplies by rail and customers preferred to remain at home and read their newspapers. Prices rose slightly in stores in anticipation of shortages. The Philadelphia Stock Exchange was closed all day for the official reason that the inevitable wave of selling would give comfort to the rioters. More likely, the brokers felt that the actions of the rioters might cause discomfort to their clients. As an editor pointed out, the rioters were not likely to be the sort who would consult or who could understand the financial sections of the local newspapers.\(^{19}\)

If Scott’s and Stokley’s spirits sank during the oil train fire, they were soon buoyed by the arrival, shortly after noon, of about 200 fully armed federal troops. With General Hancock and the remainder of his force on a later train, Major Charles Heywood, temporarily in command, sent 100 marines up the tracks to the Callowhill Street Bridge. They met no resistance from the awed spectators. Hancock soon arrived and conferred with Scott who took him on an inspection of the area in his carriage. The general, perhaps impressed by further displays of Scott’s powers of exaggeration, thought the situation serious enough to warrant ordering all federal troops \textit{en route} from the north and east to stop in Philadelphia before reporting to their previously assigned destinations. This was certainly reassuring to Scott. He used his new position of strength to face down a delegation of strikers who met with him later in the afternoon to demand restoration of old wage scales. Not only would the wages remain at the present level, he told them, but the railroad had enough able men ready to fill all the strikers’ places. It was unnecessary to add that, in this instance, federal troops as well as city policemen stood ready to protect the replacements.\(^{20}\)

Shaken by the oil train fire and apprehensive about the use of all the city’s policemen in West Philadelphia, Mayor Stokley took decisive action Monday afternoon. He invited 200 “representative” citizens to assemble in his office to discuss measures for protecting the city. There is no record of who most of these citizens were, or

\(^{19}\) Record, July 24. Inquirer, July 24, reports that it was Stokley’s idea that stock sales might encourage the rioters.

\(^{20}\) Record, July 24; Inquirer, July 24.
exactly what happened at this meeting, but a participant has provided some fragmentary information. A. K. McClure, reform mayoralty candidate in the 1874 election and founder of the Philadelphia Times, was somewhat surprised to be invited to the Monday meeting since he and the mayor were on unfriendly terms. He was even more surprised to be chosen, apparently with Stokley's approval, as one of the six members of a Committee of Safety which would cooperate with the mayor in maintaining peace in the city. The other members were John Welsh, leading merchant and president of the Board of Trade, who, in fact, had helped the mayor choose the committee, Morton McMichael, editor of the North American and former police magistrate, sheriff, and Republican mayor (1866–1868), Daniel M. Fox, former Democratic mayor (1869–1871), Peter McCall, former Democratic mayor (1844–1845), and State Senator Thomas Cochran, banker, member of the Board of Trade, and Director of the North Pennsylvania Railroad (not part of Scott's company).21

The committee met in the mayor's office soon after the 200 "representative" citizens had dispersed. Stokley told the group, according to McClure, that while most of the city might appear calm, it was only because he had instructed police "to prevent any gatherings whatever in any part of the city." In actuality, he said, the police were hard pressed to prevent the city from being "plunged into anarchy" and it was essential that the force be doubled without delay. Stokley admitted that he had no legal authority for such a move, but he vowed that "any means necessary to preserve the public peace would be employed by him regardless of their lawfulness if approved by the Committee of Safety."22

Endorsing these sentiments, the committee at once and unanimously authorized doubling the police force by adding 1,200 men,

21 McClure, II, 455–457; Record, July 25. Some doubt is cast upon the credibility of McClure's account in view of his contention that the mob "held possession" of the depot for two days, which it manifestly did not, and of his omission of McCall's name from the committee. There appears to be no prejudice influencing these errors, however, and McClure's recollection of the general tenor of the mayor's remarks is probably trustworthy.

22 McClure, II, 457. One might suspect here that McClure put reprehensible phrases in the mayor's mouth to defame an old enemy, but McClure strongly approved of the mayor's actions. McClure, II, 455. Inquirer, July 25, says that the original group was "over a hundred," rather than 200, citizens.
chiefly from the ranks of the local Grand Army of the Republic. These men were soon recruited and by Tuesday had assumed the normal stations of the regular police, who were still concentrated in West Philadelphia. Because the city had no means for paying this force, the committee and members of the Grand Army of the Republic sought help from the business community. They arranged for a loan of $518.40 from each of thirty-five local financial institutions, a total of $18,144, which the city paid back in October.

Meanwhile, the federal troops assured West Philadelphia of a relatively quiet Monday night by the zeal with which they guarded the area around the depot. Civilians walking the streets near the terminal were repeatedly stopped and examined at rifle point. Neighboring "gin mills" and "lager beer shops" were cleared and closed. Even small gatherings of men were quickly dispersed with the free use of nightsticks. Soldiers and police on the bridges across the Schuylkill River prevented anyone from crossing into West Philadelphia unless he could show good cause. Mayor Stokley and officials of the railroad were on hand at the depot to welcome additional federal troops. Arrivals included 300 artillerymen from Newport, Rhode Island, some sailors assigned to monitors at the Navy Yard, and four batteries of artillery from Boston. By late Tuesday, authorities could boast of a formidable force indeed: 1,300 armed regular policemen, 1,200 special police, 2,000 volunteer policemen, 800 federal troops with artillery, a 300-man remnant of the city's First Division, a boat with two heavy guns on the Delaware and, in reserve, 2,000 men in various nearby veterans' groups.

With this kind of protection, it is not surprising that the city was calm on Tuesday morning, July 24. In fact, though some still feared that this was only a calm before the storm, the Philadelphia riots were substantially over. McClure exaggerated little when he

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23 McClure, II, 458, speaks of 1,000 additional policemen, but the newspapers agree on the figure of 1,200. Record, July 24, and Inquirer, July 25, contain details of the recruitment of these men. Record, July 25, and Inquirer, July 25, state that it was the meeting of the "representative" citizens which originally approved this action, subject to ratification by the committee.


25 Record, July 24, 25. One must allow for the fact that these are official figures which may have been inflated to discourage further rioting.
claimed that within twenty-four hours of the investiture of the mayor with "dictatorial powers, he had the city so completely under control that an outbreak was simply an impossibility." The area around the depot was untroubled during the stay of the federal troops. Their tactic of marching around the railroad property with rifles at the ready and artillery in tow was no doubt thoroughly intimidating. Freight traffic began to roll again early Tuesday afternoon. Not even further news of the extent of the rioting in Pittsburgh or of new disturbances at Harrisburg and Reading caused any sympathetic vibrations in Philadelphia. General Hancock, in fact, was confident enough of his position on Tuesday to shift some of the federal artillery to Reading where the rioting was extremely serious. When Governor Hartranft arrived in Philadelphia on Wednesday afternoon, it was not to oversee operations there but to supervise the recruitment and transportation of troops to other more troubled areas of the state.26

Mayor Stokley issued a confident proclamation on Tuesday expressing pride in the fact that "while anarchy and bloodshed have afflicted many of our sister cities, Philadelphia . . . has put herself squarely upon the side of law and order. . . ." Still, he was forced to spend most of the next few days in insuring that his idea of law and order was maintained in sections of the city not under military command. Much of his activity was prophylactic, such as dispatching police to sites rumored to be the targets of violence. More serious were incidents involving dispersal of crowds in accord with the mayor's previously proclaimed desire to prevent violence by preventing assembly. Police had been instructed to tear down all notices of meetings of any kind, but various workingmen's groups continued to assemble. On Tuesday night, about 200 men gathered at Kelly's Hall, at Eighth and Christian Streets. Police had closed the hall in anticipation of the meeting, so the men began to conduct their business in the street. A speaker was soon interrupted by a charge of policemen who, with generous application of clubs, completely dispersed the crowd in ten minutes' time, injuring a large number of laborers in the process.27

26 McClure, II, 459; Record, July 25, 27; Inquirer, July 26.
27 Record, July 25; Inquirer, July 25.
Again, on Wednesday evening, July 25, a large group of workers attempted to meet at Beech and Laurel Streets under the auspices of the Workingmen's Party of the United States. Before they could hear their first speaker, a police lieutenant arrived to warn them that the mayor had ordered that no meeting be held in the city and that 100 patrolmen were near at hand to enforce that order. When the crowd did not disperse voluntarily, the police charged with clubs at the ready. The crowd then began to break up, though a few men, grumbling about freedom of speech, required blows to convince them that their meeting was adjourned. Tentative plans to hold the meeting elsewhere were foiled by incarceration of the speakers on dubious charges. Police arrested Workingmen's Party leader Joseph Steiner, for example, on a charge of inciting to riot when he persisted in his attempts to address the peaceful assembly. Steiner spent the rest of the night at the station house and was arraigned the next afternoon on $5,000 bail. Another group of workingmen sought to hold a meeting on Wednesday night at Frankford Road and York Street to express sympathy with the strikers. Police prevented the organizers from attending and quickly dispersed workers who gathered at the intended place, arresting six who "interfered" with their action.28

At least one newspaper also ran afoul of Mayor Stokley's desire for calm. Police confiscated all the copies they could find of the Labor Standard, a New York weekly which trumpeted itself as the organ of the Workingmen's Party of the United States. The paper may have become a target of mayor and police because of its open support of violent strikers. Its front page of July 28 headlined the news, "WAR!!! Plundered Labor in Arms." Of more immediate concern to the authorities, however, was the paper's call for workers' meetings in Philadelphia at specific dates and times.29

The mayor's stern policies brought a futile protest from citizens whose rights had been infringed. A committee of workingmen gained a hurried conference with Stokley, but, by their own account, got a haughty and unyielding reception. The workers, citing denial of their rights of assembly and confiscation of the Labor Standard,

28 Inquirer, July 26; Record, July 27.
asked the mayor by what right he interfered with peaceable meetings of citizens. Stokley responded that he acted by his own right. Warned that he would be held responsible, the mayor declared that he was satisfied with such an arrangement. The workers protested that his conduct was a violation of the Constitution. Stokley remarked that "he could not consider such things now."30

Workers continued to attempt meetings, however, and with tragic results. On Thursday night, July 26, police cordoned off a planned meeting place at Fourth and Berks Streets only to have the men gather two blocks away near Second Street. When officers moved to disperse the assembly, they were pelted with stones. After several warnings they achieved their end only by a charge which included the firing of about fifty shots in the air. Someone apparently aimed low, however, because when the area emptied police found the body of William McBride, eighteen, with a bullet wound in the back of his head. He died minutes later, the sole fatality of the Philadelphia riots.31

McClure provides a scandalous anecdote about this death which, if true, demonstrates the depth of involvement of the mayor in these questionable police activities. Though he has confused his dates, McClure reports a meeting of the Committee of Safety, apparently on July 26, during which a police officer told the mayor that he expected a disturbance in his "uptown" district that night. The officer, who from newspaper accounts was probably Lieutenant James Ferguson or Captain William R. Heins, knew the identity of the "leader of the whole movement" in his area, a man "tireless in his efforts to precipitate revolution." The mayor "quietly remarked" that the officer should have a large force ready that night and that "if any riotous action was forced upon him, he should see that the right person or persons were killed." The next morning, July 27, the officer again appeared before the Committee of Safety. He reported that a riot had started in his section the night before, but had been cut short by the death of the ringleader. The mayor

30 Labor Standard, August 4. The mayor's sentiments during this encounter are documented only by this highly partisan source and may be inaccurate. However, in view of some other words and actions of Stokley, cited above, they have the ring of authenticity.

31 Record, July 27; Bruce, 232-233. Inquirer, July 27, reports that the police suggested that the youth might have been shot accidently by one of the crowd.
thanked the policeman. No inquiry was ever made as to who had killed the man and the newspapers simply reported that one person was found dead, without suggesting that he had led the riot. In view of McBride's youth, one must wonder if the police succeeded in obeying the mayor's suggestion that the "right person" be killed.32

Philadelphia, in July, 1877, knew little of Stokley's specific means of keeping the city peaceful. His orders banning public assembly were widely promulgated, of course, and almost universally admired. The Paris Commune was fresh in the memory of many Philadelphians and most newspaper editors, at least, felt that any means were legitimate if they tended to prevent such an outbreak in Philadelphia.33 The Inquirer commended Stokley for preventing assembly which tended to provoke "trouble." Assembling to express sympathy with peaceable aims might be permissible, but not to express sympathy with strikers. Mayor Stokley and his advisors would have to decide where to draw the line. The Times felt that all crowds were bad whether "distinctly riotous or not" and that it was "foolish to speak of this as an interference with personal liberty."34

Similarly, prominent Philadelphians' opinions of Mayor Stokley were eulogistic. The editor of the Record was typical in saluting the mayor's energy and ability; the mayor "would make an excellent military general," he said with unconscious discernment. McClure thought the relative calm in Philadelphia entirely due to Stokley's courage and sponsored a subscription gift of $10,000 in gratitude for his "exceptionally great service."35

32 McClure, II, 458-459. Again, one might suspect McClure of slandering Stokley in this anecdote if he evidenced the slightest disapproval of the mayor's actions. Quite to the contrary, McClure seems to admire the mayor's coolness and decisiveness. If he is accusing the mayor of complicity in manslaughter, he is also accusing himself.  
33 Philadelphia newspapers made frequent, strident references to the Paris Commune. Record, July 21, mentions the "prevalence in this country of the spirit of French Communism"; Record, July 23, speaks of the success of "grape and canister" in quelling the Paris riots and hints that the same means might prove efficacious in the United States; Inquirer, July 23, declared that the strikers "have practically raised the standard of the Commune in free America." The recent threat of the Molly Maguires, no doubt, also prejudiced Philadelphians against strikers and "rioters" of any description,  
34 Inquirer, July 28; Times, July 28.  
35 Record, July 25; McClure, II, 455, 460. The state legislative investigating committee lauded Stokley in its official report, attributing the "salvation" of Philadelphia to the mayor and his police force. Report, 23. Governor Hartranft added his praise in his annual message of Jan. 2, 1878; Pennsylvania Archives, Fourth Series, IX, 592.
There was one demurral in this otherwise unanimous chorus. The editor of the *Record* apparently felt by July 27 that Philadelphia was safe enough to permit some criticism of the mayor's policies. He opposed Stokley's orders to disperse labor meetings before those attending had committed any acts of violence. If New York City allowed "the ridiculous Communists" to gather in Tompkins Square, the editor continued, Philadelphia could have a like policy for workers. The mayor had handled himself well in the riots, but that did not make him "king of the city." The editorial voice of the *Record* felt that denying the right of peaceable assembly would cause more trouble than the meetings would and that there were things more important than absolute control. In the tense but unscathed Philadelphia of the end of July, such counsel was unappreciated and probably uncomprehended.

A more vehement criticism of the mayor's tactics failed to reach wide readership. It was a worker's letter addressed to the *Labor Standard*. By July 29, the worker wrote, Philadelphia was calm, but at the cost of its citizens' constitutional rights. He had attempted to attend the weekly meeting of the Workingmen's Party, but police were at the door invoking the mayor's orders to prohibit the gathering. When the party members shifted the meeting to another address, the police merely followed them and forebade assembling there as well. "We—the free men of the great Republic," the correspondent lamented, "who habitually boasted of the freedom of our land are here at once brought to the condition of the European."

In view of the foregoing history of Philadelphia's experiences during the railroad riots, it is possible to draw some conclusions about how the city managed to avoid the violence and destruction witnessed by Pittsburgh and other urban communities. (1) Most obviously, Philadelphia was struck by unrest after other cities and had a few days' warning. This permitted both Scott and city officials to prepare for, or at least think about, riot prevention in Philadelphia. (2) Mayor Stokley, of course, had mobilized an awesome force to impose calm on Philadelphia. Pittsburgh's mayor, William McCarthy, by contrast, had recruited only twenty-nine additional

36 *Record*, July 27, 28.
38 That editors were thinking about what was proper or improper civic and state action in riots before trouble struck Philadelphia is shown in *Record*, July 19.
policemen to quell the disorders. Even under normal circumstances, Philadelphia had relatively a much larger police force than Pittsburgh. Considering the two cities’ populations, 847,170 and 156,389, in the census of 1880, it is obvious that Philadelphia with 1,300 police had better protection against potential riot than Pittsburgh, which had a force of only 120.39 (3) The riots of 1877 were generally directed against railroad property and it is virtually certain that the Pennsylvania’s public image was more positive in Philadelphia than elsewhere. Pittsburghers, especially, saw the railroad as a monster monopoly which discriminated against local shippers and prevented competing lines from obtaining charters to enter their city. The state legislature’s investigating committee felt that in Pittsburgh “sympathy with the strikers pervaded the whole community” and that the strikers were aware of and capitalized upon this sentiment.40 Philadelphians, on the other hand, viewed the railroad as one of the economic cornerstones of their city. (4) Indeed, Mayor Stokley and the city had strong financial reasons for wanting the riots and strikes extirpated. The city was the largest stockholder of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company; it held at least 59,000 shares of stock in 1877, a block of securities which two years later would sell for almost $3,000,000. Mayor Stokley regularly served as chairman of the annual meeting of stockholders because he was the senior official of the largest shareholder.41 (5) Philadelphia newspapers were unanimous in their unqualified support of the mayor and their condemnation of the strikers until the danger had

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39 Report, 6; Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census (Washington, 1883), 424; Sixth Annual Message of William S. Stokley, Mayor of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1878), viii; Christine Altenburger, “The Pittsburgh Bureau of Police: Some Historical Highlights,” Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine, XLIX (1966), 27. Most of Pittsburgh’s patrolmen were assigned to night duty, and when the riots broke out on the morning of July 19 there were only nine on duty. Altenburger, 28; Report, 5.

40 Report, 45; Joseph S. Clark, “The Railroad Struggle for Pittsburgh,” Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XLVIII (1924), 22–33. Some Philadelphians recognized this attitude as one of the reasons for the unique vehemence of the Pittsburgh rioters. Record, July 27.

41 The railroad was the purchaser of the city shares in 1879. H. W. Schotter, The Growth and Development of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company (Philadelphia, 1927), 184. On Stokley, see Commercial and Financial Chronicle, XXVI (Mar. 16, 1878), 265. The state, too, had a strong financial interest in the railroad at this time. Hartranft’s annual message of 1878 reveals that the state held P.R.R. bonds worth more than $4,600,000. Pennsylvania Archives, Fourth Series, IX, 578.
passed. At least two Pittsburgh papers might be accused of having encouraged rioters. (6) Stokley saw to it that members of the political opposition, especially the powerful McClure, had positions of responsibility during the latter part of the Philadelphia unrest. This bipartisan leadership helped the city by presenting a unanimous front to strikers and potential rioters. For the mayor, of course, it had the added advantage of associating past and future political opponents with his more questionable tactics. (7) Stokley, the state and federal governments, and the railroad cooperated closely during all phases of the antiriot operations. (8) Scott, of course, arranged for the transportation of troops. He also furnished supplies for the soldiers to some extent and fed city police free of charge. Scott, Stokley, and Hartranft kept in extremely close contact after the governor's return from the West (where, incidently, he had been touring in Scott's private railroad coach.) All three, of course, were Republicans, as was the national administration, so there were no divisions on that score. Pittsburgh's Mayor McCarthy, on the other hand, refused to cooperate with railroad officials or troop commanders and in general had nothing to do with efforts to end the disturbances in his city. (8) Probably the most important factor, as is evident in the foregoing account, was the skill, energy, daring and recklessness of Philadelphia's Mayor Stokley in suppressing the disturbance. Stokley had dealt with riotous situations before and in general was prepared for any contingency during the city's danger. If the mayor overreacted to some extent and built a protective force larger than he needed, he at least avoided the mistakes of the Pittsburgh authorities who did not marshal enough police and soldiers until it was too late. Stokley had the confident man's daring to take risky actions when necessary, as when he summoned every regular policeman in the city to help protect a single site. On the debit side,

42 See the editorials of the Pittsburgh Leader, July 20, 21, 22, 23, quoted in Report, 798-803, and excerpts from the Pittsburgh Sunday Globe, July 22, quoted in Report, 806-807.
44 Record, July 24; Journal of the Common Council, II, Appendix II. One wonders if Scott would have been quite so cooperative if, for example, the nation's canal system had been struck.
45 Bruce, 73.
46 Report, 5-6, 43-44.
though, many of Stokley’s actions smacked of oppression. The mayor and his supporters were fully willing to sacrifice constitutional rights in order to ensure the law and order they craved. The very phrase “law and order” is unsuitable in this context for the mayor readily admitted his willingness to enact measures contributing to order, regardless of their illegality. To the quick dispatch of police and troops to trouble spots and other such meritorious actions, then, one must add as factors in Philadelphia’s success, bans on peaceable assembly, apparent unconstitutional arrest, and excessive bail in order to prevent citizens from speaking, the confiscation of an undesirable newspaper and perhaps even mayoral approval of a police “execution.”

Philadelphia, in short, quickly ended its labor problems with a combination of a strong mayor willing to use unconstitutional measures, close city, state, and federal cooperation, private financing of a huge increase in the police force and the total resources of the relatively popular Pennsylvania Railroad. Such a combination, given a few days’ warning, proved fully equal to the task of keeping Philadelphia peaceful while other cities were partially destroyed.

Rutgers University
Camden College of Arts and Sciences

47 Indeed, Stokley’s policy of arresting those who attempted to hold peaceful meetings resulted in the release or acquittal of every defendant. Arrest records for the year 1877 show no convictions for offenses connected with the disturbances. “Fifth Annual Report of the Chief of Police for the City of Philadelphia,” in Sixth Annual Message, 459–566; also see New York Times, November 27. The court records are not extant, but presumably the cases were dismissed or the defendants acquitted in the absence of proof that anyone had been, in the words of the law of 1850, “riotously and tumultuously assembled together.” The more riotous crowd of July 21–23 did fit that description, but virtually no one was arrested at that time because police did not want to lose the services of officers while they conducted culprits to custody. Inquirer, July 23.