The Origins of Philadelphia's Self-Depreciation, 1820-1920

In 1820 Stephen Girard, the richest man in the country, was at the peak of his mercantile career. Philadelphians were dominating the Smyrna-to-Canton opium trade. The Chestnut Street Theatre burned. There was a riot in the Walnut Street Prison. The mayor of the city was James N. Barker, veteran of the War of 1812 and a writer of poetry and plays. In 1820 there was a peculiarly malignant, but brief recurrence of yellow fever. That year the Erie Canal was still in the process of being built. Philadelphians, and the world at large following their example, noted that according to the census of 1820 New York passed Philadelphia as the most populous city in the United States. This was a typical example of the crying-before-you're-hurt syndrome; in fact, the population of Philadelphia County did not fall behind New York County's until 1830.1

By 1920 Chicago had also passed Philadelphia in population, but the City of Brotherly Love was basking in its reputation as the "Arsenal of Democracy." Locomotives, Liberty Bonds, ships, shells and uniforms had made the local economic scene look bright. The post-war recession was but a slight cloud sure to blow away. The Republican machine was in control of the body politic, and the city was wearing Lincoln Steffens' phrase, "corrupt and contented," like a badge of honor. The administration of the anti-Vare mayor, J. Hampton Moore, who "stood so straight he leaned backwards," hardly ruffled the political waters. In 1920 Christopher Morley's paean of love for Philadelphia was published.2


With some ups—the Centennial Exposition among them—and many downs—notably the Sesquicentennial and Bicentennial—the city's reputation has descended to the point when it used the mockery of W. C. Fields to advertise itself, and blazoned a slogan, "Philadelphia Isn't As Bad As Philadelphians Say It Is." Other old urban centers are suffering from what Dennis Clark has called the "long tradition of exploitation and disorderly development." Yet, New Yorkers still refer to their financially embattled, crime-ridden home town as "Fun City" and the "Big Apple." Philadelphians, on the other hand, keep spreading those masochistic jokes about Philadelphia.

What was it that turned the ebullient, successful colonial city, the glamorous Federal city, into a self-depreciating town that saw itself perpetually clad in Quaker gray long after the Quakers no longer dominated? What were the urban traumas that were peculiarly Philadelphian? How could a metropolis with multifarious cultural and educational institutions, with a rich mix of different religions, with a healthy press and a broad spectrum of industries come to see itself essentially as Sidney George Fisher did in 1839: "Returned to Philad: as I always do, with the conviction that dull, monotonous & humdrum as it is, it is the most comfortable & desirable place for a residence in this country." On another occasion he characteristically damned his native city once again with hedonistic praise, stating that "however deficient in higher things there is nothing like this city for certain objects of physical enjoyment—cleanliness, good water and good living." Yet, Fisher was somewhat more generous than Nathaniel Burt writing a century and a quarter later. Speaking of self-depreciation, he went on:

In fact, negativeness itself is typical. What Owen Wister called the "instinct of disparagement" that makes Philadelphians run everything down, especially things Philadelphian, is a form of this negative. This has the advantage of modesty; it also is a blight on creative effort, on reform, on any new enthusiasm.

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5 Ibid., 124.
6 Nathaniel Burt, The Perennial Philadelphians (Boston and Toronto, 1963), 17.
Was the city like a prize fighter on the downgrade who loses his will to fight long before his ability to do so? Following the Revolution one blow after another shocked the psyche of Philadelphia. In spite of the efforts of Robert Morris, Tench Coxe, and others, the capital of the United States under the Constitution came to Philadelphia in 1790 on but a temporary basis. In 1800 the government moved to Washington. The year before the state government had moved to Lancaster, a move of more significance than a mere loss of face. It marked a notable and visible "triumph of the western democracy which sought to get the government out of aristocratic Philadelphia and closer to the people of the interior." Although the struggle of *rus* against *urbs* was not unique to Pennsylvania, Philadelphia suffered probably to a greater extent than other American seaboard settlements. It had a long history of political tension with its upcountry neighbors from the colonial days of conflict between frontiersmen seeking armed protection from the Indians and the Philadelphia Quakers' frugal pacifism to the nineteenth-century farmers' distrust of city financiers. The 1838 campaign portrait print of Joseph Ritner in shirt sleeves, hand on a plow and his top hat lying by a stump was typical of the appeal to an agricultural constituency. And at the convention which wrote the Constitution of 1838 Thaddeus Stevens referred to Philadelphia as "a great and growing ulcer on the body politic." 

Philadelphia and Philadelphians were suspect. In the century from 1820 to 1920 only four Philadelphians were elected governor, Robert E. Pattison, Edwin S. Stuart, Samuel W. Pennypacker and Martin G. Brumbaugh, and of these only Stuart was a native Philadelphian. From 1808 to 1883 no Philadelphian won the governorship. In the century from 1820 to 1920 only two Philadelphians served in the United States Senate, George M. Dallas in 1831 and Boies Penrose for the first time in 1897. It was really not until the rise of the Republican political machine with its urban allies state-

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9 Stevens, *Pennsylvania*, 175.
10 Pattison was born in Quantico, Maryland; Pennypacker in Phoenixville; Brumbaugh in Huntingdon County.
wide under Matthew Quay that Philadelphia had significant influence in Harrisburg, in spite of the ability of railroads, utilities, and other businesses to obtain for themselves—not for the city—favorable legislative treatment. The Journals of the state senate and house may not be the most exciting reading, but would not a study of antiurban bias in Pennsylvania explain in part why Philadelphians see themselves through gray-tinted glasses? How much has the hostility, causing urban frustration, sapped the energy and ambition, confounded the imagination, of the city?

Even before the state's capital moved west, Philadelphia for a period became a ghost town. When yellow fever struck in the summer of 1793 pestilence and death rode hand in hand through the streets. The officers of Washington's government quickly moved out of town; all who could left, save for a handful of dedicated physicians, a committee of determined citizens, and a large proportion of the black community. Those who could not leave lived in fear. Was Philadelphia safe? Had such a mortal plague ever hit any other American city? And when the fever returned in 1797 without, it is true, so great a loss of life, all the questions about safety and health recurred. The following year it was a bit worse, and then the fever returned in 1799 and 1802. By the time a comparably minor epidemic occurred in 1820, Philadelphia's reputation for salubrity had been well battered.

The next trauma suffered by the city was the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. It was widely believed that Philadelphia's export trade was the chief victim of New York's outlet to the Great Lakes. However, as long ago as 1849 it was pointed out that the decrease began earlier, that Philadelphia's average yearly exports in the twenty years from 1791 to 1810 amounted to $12,778,170, from 1811 to 1830 $6,873,294, and from 1831 to 1850 $4,377,511. Further it was noted that New York surpassed Philadelphia as a port in 1797, and the later never caught up. "The import and export trade of the City [Philadelphia]," a mid-nineteenth-century economic commentator wrote, "five years before and six after the completion of this work [the Erie Canal], will show that its effect upon her commerce was

11 Morgan, City of Firsts, 277–290.
imperceptible.” It was in the aftermath of this dislocation that some of the largest shipowners suffered severe losses in the China trade which led to the total abandonment of that commerce. Because of the Erie Canal Philadelphia did lose internal markets, some of the southern and most of the midwestern trade which local merchants had dominated before cheap water transportation severely undercut overland shipments. Was this a reason why Philadelphia lost out to New York as a publishing center, why the flourishing firm of Carey & Lea before 1830 “had found Harpers annoying but little more; [but] after 1830 they were a firm to be reckoned with?”

Visitors then did not come to meet Philadelphia’s authors, simply because the most popular ones of the day were the Britshers Scott and Dickens and the New Yorkers Irving and Cooper. What was the city’s internationally most famous tourist attraction after 1829? It was not the Liberty Bell, still only the State House bell—with a small “b.” It was not Independence Hall; the State House had been renamed that as recently as Lafayette’s visit in 1824. It was not even the handsome promenade, the colonnaded buildings of the Water Works and the river view at Fairmount. The visitors whose books created an image came to the City of Brotherly Love to seek out Cherry Hill, the Eastern State Penitentiary, to marvel at the neo-medievalism of its impressive construction and to observe its supposedly effective system of solitary confinement. Tocqueville and his companion Beaumont came to the United States expressly to study American penal institutions. To be sure, his major work, *Democracy in America*, had nothing to do with such places. Yet, in his diary and in his joint report with Beaumont, Tocqueville described an inspection of the grim prison and recorded his opinions of it. It is revelatory of the tone of the city that in the privacy of his diary Tocqueville commented on Philadelphians’ lack of humor and imagination, and went on: “But we must not speak ill of them, for they continue to treat us admirably. Philadelphia, beyond all others, is infatuated to the last degree with the penitentiary system. . . .”

What was it in the dark psyche of the people, or at least of the civic leaders, which brought them to look upon themselves as benefactors and philanthropists for sentencing criminals to absolute solitude.

Charles Dickens, who in 1842 also visited the penitentiary and reported in ripe Dickensian style the loneliness of the inmates, described in muted trumpet tones the culmination of a series of financial blows which disheartened the city and ruined many of its citizens. He was staying at the United States Hotel on Chestnut Street.

Looking out of my chamber window, before going to bed, I saw, on the opposite side of the way, a handsome building of white marble, which had a mournful ghost-like aspect, dreary to behold. I attributed this to the sombre influence of the night, and on rising in the morning looked out again, expecting to see its steps and portico thronged with groups of people passing in and out. The door was still tight shut, however; the same cold cheerless air prevailed. . . . It was the Tomb of many fortunes; the Great Catacomb of investment; the memorable United States Bank. 17

The city's slide from its peak as the financial center of the nation to the sad state in which Dickens found it began with Andrew Jackson's populist attack on bankers, a version of the old battle of country versus city, what Sidney George Fisher called "the violent and unconstitutional measure of hostility against the Bank of U. S. of removing the public deposits, thus breaking the pledged faith of the nation, and obtaining complete control of the public money, to be used for the purpose of gaining partisans and strengthening the power of his party." 18

The charter of Biddle's bank had not been renewed, but in 1836 a state charter had been obtained. In March 1837 businesses began to suffer from chronic inflation, overexpansion and speculation. A number of Philadelphia merchants failed. The conservative economist Condy Raguet was quoted as believing that things would continue as bad or get worse for at least a year. The panic was country-wide. On May 10, 1837, banks in New York suspended specie payments; the following day so did the Philadelphia banks. It is not really necessary here to trace the financial history of the

18 Wainwright, A Philadelphia Perspective, 2.
city or nation; that has been adequately, if often polemically, recorded. But when the Bank of the United States closed its doors in February 1841, other local banks followed in its wake. As Job S. Tyson noted just over a decade later, by the "simple process of annihilation" capital assets in Philadelphia plummeted from fifty-one million dollars to eleven million. What study has been made of the men, the businesses, the plans, the optimism that foundered when the Bank of the United States failed? How can such a trauma on a city be measured?

Until the suspension of specie payments the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania had been able easily to borrow money in Europe, establishing its credit with the stocks it owned. It had paid interest on old loans with new capital borrowing. On August 1, 1842, Pennsylvania defaulted on its interest payments. In lieu of the amount owed, 5 percent notes were given five times from August 1842 to August 1844, after which regular interest payment was resumed. Philadelphia lost face, for Philadelphia banks had acted as brokers on a large scale in selling bonds and stocks of local banks, canals, railroads and other businesses to foreign investors, particularly in England. When Henry Fisher went to London in 1843 to negotiate a loan for the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad, he considered it a triumph to get one at 5 percent, although money was so abundant that it was being offered to safe borrowers at 1½ percent. "We are all aware of the cloud," Tyson wrote in 1852 to the British Consul General in Philadelphia, "which, to the eyes of many Englishmen, is still suspended over the venerable House of Pennsylvania, conjured up by the idle story of an intended repudiation of the public debt." There was no further default by Pennsylvania; a decade later Englishmen bought Confederate bonds.

Almost simultaneous with the diminishing of Philadelphia's export trade and the collapse of its banking hegemony was the tremendous growth of the coal business. The Lehigh Coal and Navigation Com-

19 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Jackson (Boston, 1945), and Bray Hammond, Banks and Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War (Princeton, 1957).
20 Tyson, Letters, 15.
22 Wainwright, A Philadelphia Perspective, 136-137.
23 Tyson, Letters, 8.
pany had landed coal from Mauch Chunk at its city wharf on the Delaware as early as 1820, and in 1825 canal boats of the Schuylkill Navigation Company brought down coal from Port Carbon above Reading. In 1820 365 tons of coal reached Philadelphia, in 1852 four and a half million tons. Canal companies were booming. But in this era of cross-currents, even as canals reached the peak of their profitability, they were being made obsolescent by the economic challenge of railroads. In the early 1830s railroad lines were extended from Philadelphia to Norristown, to Columbia on the Susquehanna, and south to Baltimore. By the end of the decade the Philadelphia and Reading reached the coal country. At the very time that Dickens looked out on a gloomy aspect of the city, profits and jobs in coal mining and transportation, railroads, and the metal and textile industries were on a long-term upswing. From the depression of 1837 the city's economy rose in 1843–1844.

These were, nonetheless, parlous times. All the problems of urbanization came home to roost. Economic, racial, religious and political riots, the violence of street gangs and fire companies kept the working class and poor neighborhoods of the city in turmoil. The causes were general and probably inevitable as they were spelled out by Sam Bass Warner, Jr.: "industrialization, immigration, mixed patterns of settlement, changing styles of leadership, weakness of municipal institutions, and shifting orientations of politics." Yet, there is an unanswered question. Why was immigration into Philadelphia less than in Boston and New York, and even from 1830 to the ante-bellum years less than in booming New Orleans. The figures of immigration in 1854 were New York 327,976, New Orleans 51,169, Boston 27,483, Philadelphia 15,032 and San Francisco 14,487.

24 Scharf and Westcott, History, III, 2271–2272; Wolf, Philadelphia, 149, 162.
25 Tyson, Letters, 22.
26 Scharf and Westcott, History, III, 2176–2186; Wolf, Philadelphia, 158.
There was propaganda and fire in the anti-Catholic, anti-Irish prejudice in Boston, but still the Irish poured in. The deep-rooted German community in Philadelphia, which never seems to have been subjected to xenophobic attacks, attracted some newcomers, but nothing like the numbers who made their way west. What was true of the mid-nineteenth-century was true later. Eastern European Jews, Poles, and Italians came in considerable numbers to Philadelphia, but in far greater numbers elsewhere. Did the violence of 1833-1849, the strikes, the bank failures, the large black population, and in later years the peculiar urban psychology of Philadelphia discourage them? Would an urban psychoanalysis be historically rewarding and, if the metaphor holds, might it be the first step toward a cure of the city’s inferiority complex.

The 1850s showed many of the same cross-currents that had upset Philadelphia during the earlier decades. The struggle in 1846-1847 to promote the Pennsylvania Railroad, the extension of the line from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh, Philadelphia’s challenge to the Erie Canal and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, was vividly chronicled by its chief advocate, Thomas P. Cope. The project needed political and financial support. As always there were nay-sayers, among them Philadelphia’s leading lawyer. “Horace Binney is opposed to the Penna. R. Road,” Cope wrote in his diary. “I never knew him to contribute towards any public improvement. He is wealthy, but proverbially selfish.” The Pennsylvania Railroad was completed to Pittsburgh in 1854.

It may have been the coming opening of the West that aroused a number of Philadelphians more enterprising than Binney to take a look at New York’s commercial superiority and wonder if it could not be challenged. In an attempt to secure British capital for a steamship line Job R. Tyson stated the case for the city in the strongest terms. Philadelphia handled more coal than any other city; the iron manufactures of the state were greater than any other; the census of 1850 showed that Pennsylvania’s production of textiles was higher than that of Massachusetts or New York. Living cond-

31 Ibid., 502.
tions were superior; New York had only 37,730 houses whereas Philadelphia boasted 61,202. It was Philadelphians who were underpinning New York's success. Tyson claimed that one-sixth of all ships sailing from New York to Canton were owned by Philadelphians and that one-third of its entire foreign commerce was "supported by the custom, or supplied by the capital of Philadelphia."

The hope of increasing Philadelphia's transatlantic steamship connections did not die. The Cope Line ran regularly between Philadelphia and Liverpool, but the difficulty of introducing another line—and, incidentally, underlining the inherent do-nothingness of local investors—was forcefully expressed in the prospectus of the never-to-be-realized Philadelphia Ocean Steamship Company in 1859.

They recognize in this community a profound sense of want and a generally admitted desire for Ocean Steamship communication with some foreign port; and while they are fully aware that neither this want nor desire have been evolved by the present condition of trade or from any recent combination of circumstances, but, on the contrary, that both have existed and obtained expression frequently during the last twenty years, they are persuaded that the same commercial apathy which defeated former efforts still threatens a like enterprise at the present time.

In the glow of the post-Centennial era Scharf and Westcott believed that, with the Pennsylvania Railroad tapping the agricultural products of the West and the American and Red Star Line regularly sailing for Liverpool and Antwerp respectively, "the basis of a commerce is already laid of which the older merchants never dreamed."

It is extraordinary that the alternation of praise and blame was so great and so constant. In 1852, as pressure was increasing for the consolidation of the separate townships and boroughs of Philadelphia County into a city-county whole, a guidebook with an upbeat flavor described the city in lyrical terms quite in harmony with the exuberant designs of George J. Henkels, a contemporary local cabinetmaker.

33 Ibid., 50, 54.
35 Scharf and Westcott, *History*, III, 2223.
At present, Philadelphia extends from Southwark to Richmond, a distance of nearly five miles: and from the Delaware to the Schuylkill. Innumerable steamboats, sailboats, &c. travel along her shores—merchantmen and packets bring her the wealth of the most distant climes. Still her progress is onward.

The enterprise of her citizens was never more displayed than at present. Railroads and canals pour into her lap the treasures alike of our own mountains and the great valley of the glorious West. The city is extending with wondrous strides; year by year streets are being laid out, and houses, extending away for squares, arise, as by the hand of magic, on ground that lately "waved in golden harvest." Spring Garden and Penn [Township], twelve years ago, were rural districts. Now look at them! We remember rambling five years since, through fields immediately north of Poplar Street, where are now beautiful streets, adorned with tasty, and, in many instances, magnificent houses. In the "west end," the change is no less extraordinary. Who does not remember the "duck ponds" and "commons out Broad Street?" They are gone, and houses unrivalled, in any city, for architectural taste and elegance, now line Vine, Race, Arch, Chestnut, Walnut, Locust, Spruce, and the intermediate streets.36

What a shame that somewhat idyllic picture was flawed in reality. With a bland disregard for beauty and the orderly development of the city, the railroad companies had criss-crossed Centre Square with grade-level tracks running from Washington Avenue to Callowhill Street and from the Market Street bridge to the Delaware River. From the northwest the Reading cut along the edge of the park to 33rd and Poplar, from there diagonally to 21st and Callowhill, and then almost straight east to the river. The Norristown Railroad merged with the Philadelphia and Germantown near 15th and Somerset, cut across to 9th and Diamond and ran south along 9th to Callowhill.37 Riots in 1840–1841 prevented the Philadelphia and Trenton from continuing along Front Street beyond its terminal at Montgomery Avenue, but to the north it served the easternmost fringe of the city.38

Whereas once mills clung to the edge of creeks from which they derived waterpower or, as in Manayunk, purchased channeled river water, in the age of coal-generated steam factories moved along railroad tracks or by navigable waters. The avenue of fine houses

which by the time of the Centennial made Broad Street north of Spring Garden fashionable for Sunday promenades was cut off from the center of town by a solid band of heavy industry. This spread westward from Broad Street between Callowhill and Spring Garden where the three-block-long Baldwin Locomotive Works dominated the scene for some four-score years. The Norris Locomotive Works was at 17th and Spring Garden. W. Sellers & Co., the leading manufacturer of machine tools, built its plant between 16th and 17th and Pennsylvania Avenue and Buttonwood Street, and William B. Bement & Son, another machine tool manufacturer, was directly to the west between 20th and 21st. The Pennsylvania Soap Works in 1854 moved to Callowhill Street near the park. William Wood & Co., in cotton and woolen goods, had its factory in the block bounded by 21st and 22nd and Hamilton and Spring Garden. The Callowhill Street railroad tracks were the magnet.

It is still surprising that in the quarter century from 1850, culminating in the civic triumph of the Centennial, so much of a drumbeating nature appeared. It is apparent that, even if life for the lower classes ranged from miserable to bearable, a large number of Philadelphia industries were booming. The statistician Lorin Blodget updated the 1870 census by estimating dollar production for 1875 in a table and for 1876 in a most informative category-by-category survey. It was up, up and away. The textile industry, broken down by Blodget into cotton, mixed cotton and woollen, and woollen goods, was the largest, employing the greatest number of workers. Next came the iron manufactures which showed a $41,463,729 output in 1870 and was estimated to have risen to $53,902,847 in 1875. The value of refined sugar remained the same, although the production in pounds increased. The building industry really boomed, going from $10,669,343 in 1870 to an estimated $18,000,000 six years later. The Centennial helped, but as Philadelphia expanded geographically north and west, houses were being built at an amazing rate. Between 1863 and 1876 no one-story dwellings were constructed.

and none made of wood; 25,368 two-story houses went up, 24,415 three-story and 585 four-story ones, exclusive of factories and public buildings. Who has studied the career of William M. Singerley, heir to a Germantown Passenger Railway fortune, publisher of the *Philadelphia Record*, and the developer of an area of homes in North Philadelphia said by a contemporary to have been “probably the most extensive ever inaugurated in Philadelphia by one person at any one time”?43

One of the elements that unquestionably caused a social conflict in the city, weighing heavily on its ego image, was the clustering of the descendants of old families in banking, insurance, and the legal and medical professions. By withdrawing or—more likely—unwilling to compete by risking capital, they turned over the struggle for markets in new fields to others. Blodget noted: “The cotton, wool, and textile fabric industries generally are in a great degree transplanted from English, Scotch, and Irish sources, not coming as capitalists, but as workmen, and developing into establishments of gigantic proportions, and almost invariable success.”44 A glance at, not a detailed analysis of, the men listed in the 1875 puffery of Pennsylvania manufacturers would seem to indicate that the founders of a high proportion, if not most, of the city’s major industries were not Philadelphia-born. A few names must stand here for many. Matthias Baldwin (locomotives) was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey; William B. Bement (machine tools) in Bradford, New Hampshire; Joseph Allen (furniture) in Birmingham, England; George H. Burgin (glass) in Bridgeton, New Jersey; James Bromley (carpets) in Dewsbury, Yorkshire; Godfrey Keebler (crackers) in Wurtemberg; Henry Disston (saws) in Tewkesbury; and William L. Elkins (petroleum) in West Virginia. 45 Of the seventy-four members of the first Common Council after the consolidation twenty-five at least were not Philadelphia-born.46

46 *Daguerreotype Sketches of the Members of the First Common Council, after Consolidation* (Philadelphia, 1855). The birthplace of a number of the men is not mentioned, so there may be even more nonnative Philadelphians.
I agree with Warner that the period 1830–1860 (extended to 1880 in Philadelphia) was the era in which "the basic American relationships between the public and private functions were set, and the communitarian limits of a city of private moneymakers were reached, and passed." The new promoters who succeeded the new industrialists were too busy making money to worry about the city that was being transformed by their gas, electric, and transit companies. The politicians were satisfied with crumbs from the capitalists' table. It is significant that although political graft became a by-word, it was not the city officials who ended up with fortunes, not even the contractors who enjoyed the city business. Where are the wealthy descendants of James McManes of the Gas Trust, or the contractors David Martin, James P. ("Sunny Jim") McNichol, and the Vares?

Who cared about Philadelphia or Philadelphia's reputation? There were plenty of volumes of boosterism from the Centennial to the turn of the century. The finest of these esthetically, Edward Strahan's *A Century After*, published in anticipation of the Centennial, has fallen into undeserved limbo. It is not only typographically excellent, but pictures slums as well as park scenes, oyster sellers as well as churches. The text is flowery in the extreme. More typical of Chamber of Commerce kind of propaganda were those that appeared later, most of them "mug books," lauding prominent citizens as well as the city. They saw Philadelphia through rose-colored glasses: "Philadelphia, the greatest manufacturing center of the United States, in the past decade has maintained a steady growth

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48 Edward Strahan, *A Century After: Picturesque Glimpses of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1875). As a sample: "There is no other city where the varieties of wild landscape so closely surround and so boldly invade a civilization given over to material industries. Besides the broad Delaware, the exquisite Schuylkill, a stream far more beautiful than the Arno, bathes one side of the city, and into this Indian sheet of water slides the wild Wissahickon, coming down pure from its 'savage gorges and cold springs' as primitive as a stream of the wilderness, yet easily accessible to the most sedentary citizens" (p. 7).

in population, increase of wealth, extension of industrial pursuits, enlarged its railroad facilities and extended its commerce.”

But a cynical American public did not believe what was obviously self-serving information. It was hard to believe it when there was a local cross-current of doubt. A mid-nineteenth-century writer had urged Philadelphians to “enlarge your market—then go out West and solicit business—then circulate Philadelphia newspapers, brag and bluster a little.” The author of a promotional volume for the Columbian Exposition whispered what soon was shouted: “The City of the Revolution, and the great American city of this Continent, Philadelphia, is blamed for being too conservative, for not being more noisy, more boisterous and bustling in her outward demeanor, a fault of which she may be inclined to admit herself guilty.”

Who began those stories which became part of American folklore? Was it the frustrated descendants of colonial Pennsylvania families who saw strangers molding the city of their ancestors? Elizabeth Robins Pennell, wife of the artist Joseph Pennell, stated the case as she saw it.

Philadelphians have grown accustomed to the laugh. We have heard it since we were in our cradles. We are used to have other Americans come to our town and,—in the face of our factory chimneys smoking along the Schuylkill and our ship-building yards in full swing on the Delaware, and our locomotives pouring out over the world by I do not know how many thousands from the works in Broad Street, and our mills going at full pressure in the “Little England” of Kensington, in Frankford and Germantown,—in the face of our busy schools and hospitals and academies,—in the face of our stores and banks and charities,—that is, in the face of our industry, our learning, and our philanthropy that have given tips to the whole country,—see only our sleep-laden eyes and hear only our sluggish snores. We know the foolish stories they tell. We have heard many more times than we can count of the Bostonian who retires to Philadelphia for complete rest, and the New Yorker who when he has the day off comes to spend a week in Philadelphia, and the Philadelphian who goes to New York to eat the snails he cannot catch in his own back-yard. We have heard until we have it by heart that Philadelphia is a cemetery, and the road to it, the Road to Yesterday.

50 Philadelphia and Popular Philadelphians, 5.
51 Baker, A Review, 55.
52 Vickers, Philadelphia, 225.
The amazing fact of Mrs. Pennell’s book is that it is a road to yesterday. Except for memories and her circle of friends, things for her on the eve of World War I were changed for the worse. One chapter is so violently racist that it might have been written by a latterday neo-Nazi. It was this which characterized the era when social bars were erected. These were exclusive times; ancestry became more important than posterity. The books about Philadelphia which were popular treated of past glories: colonial architecture and the history of the Revolution. One of the more prolific writers of the day echoed the mood.

There is something of disdain in the mood of the Philadelphian meeting one who does not know and love his city even as he himself knows and loves it,—just as the Englishman in silence scorns a scoffer. The true Philadelphian understands the strength of his attachment for his own little earthly coign; he knows that out of his city have come men great and valuable in the service of the nation and of mankind, in every branch of human doing. The city has had its statesmen, soldiers, jurists, scientists and its literary men—poets, philosophers and novelists.

The key is the use of the past tense. And so Frank Brookhouser, the popular gossip columnist, just over twenty years ago titled the prologue to his Candid and Colorful Portrait, “I Spent a Week in Philly One Sunday.” Cannot this be exorcized?

54 Ibid., 460-474.