

William McMullen, *Nineteenth-Century Political Boss*

NO PERSONALITY FIGURED WITH GREATER NOTORIETY in the turbulent politics of late nineteenth-century Philadelphia than saloon-keeper William McMullen. He was the best known and most durable politician to speak for the city's Irish and its Catholics in his day. As Fourth Ward boss, McMullen controlled the area from the Delaware River to Broad Street and from South Street to Fitzwater, the residential core of the immigrant city. His reputation as a street fighter, a scoundrel, and a lawless thug marked McMullen's youth. Later, these same traits would characterize his election-day behavior. But in the Fourth Ward and among his Irish friends, he was a hero. Year after year the people of Moyamensing voted for McMullen, keeping him in political office from 1856 until his death in 1901.¹

This record of election victories testifies to McMullen's capacity for surviving and adapting to social and political change. Entering politics when Moyamensing was beyond the city limits and beyond its law, he survived the suburb's incorporation into Philadelphia in 1854. Consolidation was accompanied by an expanded police force, threatening a political style based on rowdiness, but McMullen survived that transformation as well. So, too, he outlasted the volunteer fire companies and the office of alderman that comprised his early power base. Though he staked his career on denying blacks the vote,

¹ The most extensive information about William McMullen can be found in Andrew H. Neilly, "The Violent Volunteers: A History of the Volunteer Fire Department of Philadelphia, 1736-1871," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1959, and David R. Johnson, "Crime Patterns in Philadelphia, 1840-70" in Allen F. Davis and Mark Haller, eds. *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class Life, 1790-1940* (Philadelphia, 1972), 89-110. Both works characterize McMullen as a thug and a criminal. Reference to McMullen's character can also be found in Dennis Clark, *The Irish in Philadelphia: Ten Generations of Urban Experience* (Philadelphia, 1973), 119. The most recent study of Philadelphia mentions McMullen's name three times. In each instance, he is called a "Killer" or a thug. Little consideration is given to his political importance in the city for well over forty years. See Russell Weigley, ed., *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History* (New York, 1982), 348, 349, 373.

he continued to hold power after they were enfranchised. Even the changing ethnic composition of his ward did not unseat McMullen. He remained in power until he died, the elder statesman of city council.

William McMullen was born in Moyamensing on September 15, 1824. His father, Archibald McMullen, kept a grocery store at 702 South Seventh Street. Local residents congregated there, allowing the young McMullen to become well known in the neighborhood. Legend has it that his first act of community service occurred before he was a teen, when he held candles at night so that neighborhood carpenters and bricklayers could build a fire house for Moyamensing. Formal education came, as it did for most Moyamensing youth, at the Ringgold Public School. Though William was bright and was admitted by examination to Central High School, he never enjoyed school and stayed at Central but a few months. Apprenticeships in carpentry and in printing were similarly brief. William's father settled the issue by hiring him to work in the grocery store. But McMullen's real education came on the streets, where he quickly developed the reputation as a scrapper. Fearless and forceful in combat, McMullen had the makings of a leader. In Moyamensing, leadership also meant being a "bully"; the threat of force best solved issues in a society which operated for the most part outside of the law.²

The demography of Philadelphia's Irish population in Philadelphia the 1840s and 1850s offers insights into William McMullen's background. There were many more males, a higher proportion of young adults than among Irish populations in other countries, and, as a consequence, relatively few family units. Irish males carried bricks, portered goods, and produced textiles and clothing, while women worked largely as housekeepers and maids. Employment was at best sporadic, too frequently leaving Irish males out of work and in the streets. This was McMullen's environment. He did not marry until he was over thirty, spending an extended youth on the streets with friends.³

² *Catholic Standard* April 1, 1901; *Press* April 1, 1901; Sam Bass Warner, *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth* (Philadelphia, 1968), 154.

³ Lynn H. Lees and John Modell, "The Irish Countryman Urbanized," *Journal of Urban History* 3 (1977): 391-407.

Given McMullen's origins it is not surprising that he was an active participant in the Bible riots of 1844. While the riots were largely in Kensington, far from McMullen's home, he was there to defend his fellow Catholics. Subsequent investigation placed him among the rioters who shot Protestant martyr George Shiffler. For two days after the riot McMullen stood guard in the Catholic churches of Moyamensing to prevent Protestant retaliation for the shooting. For this he earned the life-long loyalty of the Catholic church.⁴

A short stint in the Navy—perhaps occasioned by a desire to escape retribution for his escapades—ended with McMullen returning to the store to avoid military discipline. It was at this point that he became active with his friends in the Moyamensing Hose Company, a decision that shaped his future. He enjoyed the notoriety of being known as one of the "Rowdy Boys of Moyamensing" and his brute strength earned him the epithet "Bull," which appeared regularly in the press over the next twenty years.⁵

The fire companies mixed street violence and politics, leading McMullen to take an active part in the elections of 1844. Like other members of the Moyamensing Hose Company and like most Catholics, McMullen was a Jacksonian Democrat who supported James K. Polk for president. The party selected him to be a window bookman at the polling place. Window bookmen checked to see if the voter resided in the district and distributed the printed ballots on which votes were actually cast. Since disputes about the eligibility of voters were common, brute strength often decided the vote. McMullen's political qualifications rested on his ability to bully his opponents.⁶

When the Mexican War began, the Moyamensing Hose Company enlisted and McMullen, the loyal Democrat, went with them. The men from Moyamensing were assigned to Company D, First Pennsylvania Infantry. Because he was able to control the men, McMullen became orderly sergeant and was ultimately placed in command of the Moyamensing troops. Leading numerous assaults on Mexican

⁴ *Catholic Standard*, April 1, 1901; *Press*, April 1, 1901.

⁵ *Public Ledger*, April 1, 1901.

⁶ *North American Dispatch*, April 1, 1901.

forts, he became a genuine war hero. He served with his men until after the capture of Mexico City.⁷

War seemed to suit McMullen's personality; peace in an urban setting did not. In October, 1852, McMullen was in trouble with the law. Leading the Moyamensing Hose Company in a fire-related brawl against the Lafayette Hose Company on Fitzwater near Tenth Street, McMullen made himself conspicuous by seizing the Lafayette company's fire engine. By the time the police arrived a number of the Lafayette men lay badly beaten in the streets, with one man shot and not expected to live.⁸

While this seems the behavior of a street thug, McMullen actually was considered a protector by the people of Moyamensing. He offered them security from the gangs and fire companies of other neighborhoods, and he upheld order by meting out violence to those who broke the unwritten laws of his community. The criticism of outsiders only increased the popularity of this visible, outspoken leader. Most of the groups that McMullen opposed were nativist, were rival fire companies, or were Protestant. All were fair targets to the Irishmen of Moyamensing.

Even more upsetting to the residents of Moyamensing were the police themselves. Disillusionment with the force began with its founding in 1850 when John Keyser, a nativist hostile to Catholics and immigrants, was selected marshal in charge. His choice of nativists as officers further alienated the Moyamensing neighborhood. To residents of Moyamensing these policemen were hostile invaders who infringed upon their territory. One of the gangs friendly to McMullen challenged opponents to "Go and get John Keyser and all of his police; / Come up to the Market, and there you will see fun, / To see the Buffers thump Keyser, and make his puppies run."⁹

To McMullen, the police were part of the problem. Even more upsetting were the hypocricies about law and order mouthed by those in power. McMullen found that police often behaved much like the

⁷ *Press*, July 23, 1872.

⁸ *Public Ledger*, July 7, 1845; *United States Gazette*, February 12, 1846; Bruce Laurie, "Fire Companies and Gangs in Southwark: The 1840s," in Davis and Haller *Peoples*, 71-87.

⁹ *Public Ledger*, June 4, 28, August 24, September 17, 1850; Roger Lane, *Roots of Violence in Black Philadelphia, 1860-1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), *passim*.

criminals they were meant to control. Ironically, Marshal Keyser supported him in this view. Keyser repeatedly confronted his men with accusations that they spent too much time in taverns and houses of ill repute. Indeed, the record for the first year of the Keyser administration shows seventy-three officers dismissed for intoxication and disorderly conduct. In retrospect, it is hard to tell villains from heroes, especially in Moyamensing.¹⁰

Struggles against the nativist police force drew McMullen deeper into politics. The winning party had the right to appoint policemen, so a Democratic victory would bring policemen favorable to McMullen. So it was that in 1850 "Bull" McMullen was elected President of the Keystone Club, an association of Democratic Party workers. Never afraid to deal with the lawless and less fortunate members of society, McMullen put together a coalition which would give him political control over the Fourth Ward for the remainder of the century.¹¹

One of the toughest gangs in the area, the "Killers," had been leaderless since the death of Charles Anderson Chester. McMullen and the Moyamensing Boys sided with the Killers during the California House riots of 1849. In return the Killers joined McMullen and Moyamensing. Since the Killers generally were viewed as a positive force in Moyamensing, this built McMullen's image within the neighborhood. In 1847, a pamphlet romanticized the gang and likened them to the Jacobins of revolutionary France, who led a political upheaval of the oppressed by " . . . putting down aristocrats, monopolies, and the DOLLAR'S MISRULE." Under their banner of "Liberty, Equality and Washington," the Killers attacked employers as "cold extortionists," hiring workers "as a gracious favor, while they suck drop by drop the blood and devour the vitals of their labors!" These sentiments echoed those of the poor of Moyamensing and made William McMullen a local hero.¹²

Election day violence in Philadelphia grew out of balloting practices

¹⁰ *Public Ledger*, July 2, November 8, 1851.

¹¹ Warner, *The Private City*, 154.

¹² *The Almighty Dollar; or the Brilliant Exploits of a Killer* (Philadelphia, 1846); *Life and Adventures of Charles Anderson Chester, The Notorious Leader of the Philadelphia "Killers"* (Philadelphia, 1850).

that pre-dated political parties, rabid factionalism, and an ethnically heterogeneous population. As society and politics changed in the first half of the nineteenth century, arrangements for voting did not. Elections remained informal affairs, conducted locally. They depended on shared values and a shared commitment to the community, neither of which any longer existed. Mayhem was sometimes the result. One Moyamensing observer of a pre-Civil War election day left this account:

The Whigs and Democrats would line the curb on either side of the street, to be counted as most numerous, the majority would be entitled to all the officers, to receive the votes, count them and make the returns; These lines on the curb would be made up, not only of legal voters, but grown up lads, and after being counted once, would go to the far end to be counted again, so it would be seen that there could be no reliance on the count. Then a rush would be made for possession of the polls and the best fighters would get possession.¹³

Given these circumstances McMullen was doing little more than following accepted practice. He stood out because he was stronger and more successful than his competitors.

William McMullen added still another dimension to his growing political arsenal when in 1854 he opened a saloon at Eighth and Emeline Streets. Located in the heart of Moyamensing, only two short blocks from the Moyamensing Hose House, the saloon became a gathering place for the Killers and the Hose Company. When the Democrats came to power in the city in 1854, McMullen took a position on the Board of Prison Inspectors for Moyamensing prison. He selected this post over a lieutenancy in the new Democrat-dominated police force, because the position of Prison Inspector allowed McMullen the opportunity to help his Moyamensing neighbors, who suffered the highest arrest rate in the city. For the rest of McMullen's life, he maintained close connections with known criminals, helping many gain parole and other considerations from the legal system.¹⁴

McMullen capitalized on these neighborhood connections in his

¹³ MS "John Harrar Memoirs," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 51-52; Clinton Rogers Woodruff, *Election Methods and Reforms in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1901), 181-185.

¹⁴ *Bulletin*, April 1, 1901; *Press* July 24, August 27, 1872.

first run for political office in 1856. He faced a difficult opponent in incumbent alderman Abram Megary, whose experience and wealth made him the favorite. Megary, who could buy the votes necessary for election, let it be known that he would spend all of his wealth, if need be, to defeat McMullen. McMullen was successful, capitalizing on his appeal to the poor—that he was one of them.¹⁵

The position of alderman, which carried substantial judicial authority, made McMullen the most powerful figure in Moyamensing. He ruled paternalistically over his subjects. Meting out justice, he favored his Democratic, Moyamensing Fire Company friends, allowing them considerable leeway in their sometimes violent activities. Observing the violence, contemporary George Foster blamed it on “ruffians and rowdy apprentices . . . tolerated by the authorities in the suburbs because of political influence.” As late as 1871 complaints concerning the ruffians at Eighth and South Street appeared regularly in the newspapers. The police station for Moyamensing was located on the corner; Alderman McMullen’s saloon was about fifteen feet from it. Had McMullen so desired, he could have cleared the corner, but he allowed the situation to continue since the corner gang frequented his tavern and supported him politically.¹⁶ Despite this apparent support of “ruffians,” McMullen won the respect of most people living in Moyamensing. His power and political connections made him the “Squire” of Moyamensing.¹⁷ The title, taken from Ireland, depicted an office holder with wisdom and power in a given territory to rule on the behavior of his subjects.

With the outbreak of Civil War McMullen was swept up in the first burst of patriotic spirit and quickly enlisted for a three months’ tour of duty. Eighty-four members of the Moyamensing Hose Company followed his lead. McMullen was named Captain of the company. Assuming the name Independent Rangers, the company was assigned to serve under General Robert Patterson. They left for Sandy Hook, Maryland, on June 2, 1861. For the three months of their terms of service, the Rangers saw little or no action in battle. They returned in August to a reception and parade in Moyamensing, their

¹⁵ *Public Ledger* April 1, 1901.

¹⁶ *Press*, July 11, 1870; George Foster, *Philadelphia in Slices* (Philadelphia, 1848), *passim*.

¹⁷ *Public Ledger*, April 1, 1901.

responsibilities fulfilled and their patriotic obligations met in what for this group of Democrats was the best manner possible.¹⁸

War's end brought the Democrats back to power in city politics and McMullen returned to business as usual. The Moyamensing Hose Company again restored its dominance on the streets. In 1867, hard feelings between Hope Fire Company and the "Moya," as Moyamensing Hose Company had come to be called, broke into open warfare. Hope accused Moyamensing of bad conduct at a fire. In retaliation two groups from the Moya, about one hundred each, attacked the Hope Fire House at Sixth and Fitzwater Streets. William McMullen headed one group and Moyamensing Councilman William P. H. Barnes the other. Bricks were thrown and fifty shots fired at Hope. Two policemen were injured, but the Moyas were driven away. A committee of Councils considered the impeachment of McMullen and Barnes for their part in the affair. The case was dismissed by the City Solicitor who ruled that the committee had no power to act in the matter.¹⁹

This was only one of a number of fire company riots that led the City Council majority to decide that public order could best be promoted by eliminating the volunteer fire company system. McMullen argued against the proposal for a paid fire department, maintaining that the new system would "be far worse than the police force against us. . . . Our party cannot afford it." In spite of McMullen's fears Council President William S. Stokley recommended legislation ending the volunteer system. Even after Democratic Mayor Daniel Fox signed the bill into law on December 30, 1870, McMullen was unwilling to concede defeat. When the Moyas met in April, 1871, McMullen announced that he was arranging the annual parade and would serve as Marshal. The company marched in a show of force, two hundred and fifty strong, through the streets of Moyamensing, wearing new red shirts and black pants.²⁰

Although the volunteer fire companies had been outlawed, the

¹⁸ *Public Ledger* April 1, 1901; Neilly, "The Violent Volunteers," 107-109; William Frayne Amann, *Personnel of the Civil War* (New York, 1961), 19, 218.

¹⁹ *Public Ledger*, July 26, August 7, 10, September 13, 1867.

²⁰ *Press*, March 16, 1871; *Inquirer*, April 4, 1871; Neilly, "The Violent Volunteers," 193-196; William McMullen to Samuel J. Randall, January 11, 1870, Randall Papers, Rare Book Room, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania. [hereafter VPL].

Moyamensing Hose Company was still responding to neighborhood fires in 1872. To uphold the new law, the Mayor ordered the arrest of volunteers answering fire bells. Despite this order, the Moya continued to respond to fires. They were met one day at the corner of Eighth and Fitzwater Streets by a squad of policemen and the lieutenant from the local station house. Angry words were exchanged and a crowd loyal to the Moyamensing Hose Company gathered around the police. Just when violence seemed imminent McMullen, who had not been with the company, arrived on the scene. Pushing his way to the center of the crowd he demanded an explanation of the lieutenant. When the situation was explained, McMullen calmed the angry crowd, turned to the lieutenant, and reportedly exclaimed, "That's all right, old man. You have your orders and we don't want to fight the police. Besides, there ain't enough of you to stand the show. Take your pets into the saloon over here and give'em something to drink at my expense. They look nervous." The policemen went to the bar and McMullen led the Moyas back to the fire house. McMullen's less violent tactics reflected the new era of centralized police authority and a strong-Mayor form of government. Street fighters like McMullen knew that they could be outnumbered very quickly by the police and that they would eventually be held accountable for illegal actions. The Squire, as he was now called, had changed while still keeping control of his district.²¹

The saloon business also changed to reflect the fact of increasingly centralized government control. Prior to the Civil War most saloon-keepers, especially those in poor sections like Moyamensing, could buy cheap liquor from illegal Kensington stills and avoid paying taxes. The whiskey might not be good, but it was within the reach of working class customers. Representing those customers politically, Democrats opposed prohibition and other tight controls over the consumption of alcohol. The new Republican party, on the other hand, favored limitations on the sale and use of alcohol. In the period following the war, the Republicans in Washington, in an effort to pay the war debt, turned their attention to stopping the illegal whiskey trade. The national government sent revenue agents to Philadelphia.

²¹ *Inquirer*, April 1, 1901.

One agent particularly troublesome to McMullen and his saloon-keeper friends was James J. Brooks, who they thought pursued his job with too much enthusiasm. And he could not be bought. A group of men, while standing outside Devitt's saloon (just five houses away from Alderman McMullen's office) were hired to assault Brooks and scare him off. The leader, Hugh Marrow, was a Moyamensing thug friendly with McMullen and a member of the Moyamensing Hose Company. After having trailed Brooks for a week, Marrow and his partner James Dougherty caught up with him on September 6, 1869. Marrow and Dougherty shot Brooks in a saloon on Front Street. Escaping from the scene, they quickly reached Eighth and Bainbridge Streets. Friends arranged to hide them in a third floor front bedroom within a block of Eighth and Bainbridge, and then they were secretly transported by wagon to the West Philadelphia train station and sent on by escort to New York City. But Marrow and Dougherty were picked up in New York and returned to Philadelphia to stand trial. Although both were sentenced to twelve years in jail, parole was arranged for them by McMullen after they had spent less than two years in jail. Whether McMullen hired Marrow and Dougherty is not clear, although Marrow later claimed that he did. McMullen had undoubtedly arranged the escape.²²

This sequence of events can be found in Marrow's confessions to James Brooks. These statements tell a good deal about criminal behavior and about the Moyamensing neighborhood. There was honor among thieves and scoundrels. McMullen and other local politicians were part of saloon politics, and they were interested in the Brooks matter. Few were concerned that two criminals were harbored in the neighborhood. Further, the street gangs, especially the one at Eighth and South Streets, protected men like Marrow and Dougherty. It would be difficult for a stranger—a detective or some other authority—to gain access to McMullen's turf unnoticed. The police did as little as possible to provoke McMullen's ire, since they brought many of their cases before him for trial. Not to cooperate with the Squire could mean trouble for a policeman. Clearly, Moyamensing was McMullen's territory.²³

²² James J. Brooks, *Whiskey Drips* (Philadelphia, 1870), 330-341.

²³ *Press*, September 2, 1871; *Public Ledger*, April 1, 1901.

The saloon business, like the activities of the Hose Company, was scrutinized with more care after the war. Reform was in the air, with Republicans advocating centralization, bureaucratic organization, and increased order in society. They no longer accepted the once dominant belief that states and local communities could operate independently of centralized control. McMullen opposed this movement as he struggled to keep his power base in the community.

With the claim that they were going to clean up Philadelphia's political system, the city's Republicans under Col. William B. Mann enacted a new local election law. Philadelphia's "Registry Act" took effect with the election of October, 1870. Under the act, which was intended to put a stop to multiple voting and other electoral abuses, voters were to register before elections. A house-to-house canvas would verify their eligibility before election day. If a canvasser questioned an individual's eligibility, two adults could vouch for his residence, but the canvasser made the final decision.²⁴

The voter registration law provided for the appointment of canvassers by majority vote of the Aldermen. This meant that Republicans would select the canvassers, and the Republican organization would control registration. McMullen fought the law the way he knew best. He accused the Republicans of appointing to his district canvassers who could not read or write. This may have been true; Mann and the "Republican ring" had adopted McMullen-like tactics themselves. McMullen warned the Republicans that if these men appeared in Moyamensing they might not return safely. A compromise was reached. Three canvassers were to be sent to each district—two chosen by the majority party and one by the minority. This meant that the Democrats had to cover twice the area if they were going to gain equal registration with the Republicans.²⁵

Even more annoying to McMullen and the Democrats was the belief that Mann had pushed the act through to ensure Republicans the votes of newly enfranchised blacks. Black suffrage was now guaranteed for the first time under the fifteenth amendment (1870) to

²⁴ Alexander McClure, *Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1905), 236-238.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 237; *Press*, August 31, September 13, 1870, June 20, 1871. For a description of the connections between Mann and Stokley see Frank B. Evans, *Pennsylvania Politics 1872-1877: A Study in Political Leadership* (Harrisburg, 1966), 16-17.

the United States Constitution. And blacks, more often than not, were Republicans. Although some Democrats made tentative overtures for the black vote, most simply wished to keep blacks away from the polls, disenfranchised in practice as they had been in Pennsylvania law from 1838 to 1870. If the city's black population were to vote heavily Republican, the balance of local political power would decisively tip to the Republicans.²⁶

By 1870 the Fourth Ward had a substantial black population and McMullen knew that he would be hurt by the new black vote. His Moyamensing constituents had long been hostile to the black community. McMullen had sensed the threat to his political dominance represented by blacks when the Quakers had placed the Institute for Colored Youth in his ward in 1866. When the black high school moved from Lombard Street into Moyamensing, a number of the blacks who taught at and attended the Institute moved with it onto South Street above Eighth. Their leader was Institute teacher Octavius V. Catto, who was also President of the Fourth Ward black political club.²⁷

Given the circumstance that blacks were to vote for the first time since 1838, October 14, 1870 came with less political fanfare than one might expect. There was a small riot at Sixth and Lombard Streets, when whites, many of them from the Fourth Ward, tried to keep blacks from voting. This was common practice for McMullen's men. Their corner, Eighth and South Streets, was one block from the Seventh and South Streets boundary separating the Fourth, Fifth, and Seventh Wards. Federal troops intervened and the disorder was put down.²⁸

The Fourth Ward recorded a heavy black vote. As they did throughout the city that day, blacks went to the polls early with ballots filled out beforehand. With the "advantage of the Registry Act," they voted rapidly. After nine o'clock in the morning, scarcely a black voted in

²⁶ *Press*, October 9, 1871; James Erroll Miller, "The Negro in Pennsylvania Politics with Special Reference to Philadelphia Since 1932," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1945, 82.

²⁷ *Press*, April 23, 1870; *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 16, 23, 1912. The South Street section of the city is best described by Emma Jones Lapsansky, "A Haven for Those Low in the World," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1975.

²⁸ *Press*, October 11, 12, 13, 1871.

the Fourth Ward. This tactic caught the Democrats by surprise and helped keep violence to a minimum. In one incident recorded just before nine o'clock, Alderman McMullen attempted to remove a black man, Thomas Hall, from the voting line. But intimidation failed as Hall turned on McMullen and knocked him to the ground. Hall quickly left the scene and turned himself in at the Eighth and South Street police station. Later McMullen, perhaps as a means of covering his loss of stature in the community, told Hall, "Give me your hand, because I respect you as the first black man not to show fear in my presence." According to black historian William Carl Bolivar, Hall never lost his composure and shook McMullen's hand remarking that he "was there to contend for a principle; even at the expense of his life." But McMullen had a propensity for revenge, and this outward show did not mean that the incident was forgotten.²⁹

The new black vote was not McMullen's only problem. Reformers were now attacking the position of Alderman. Aldermen were politicians; they sometimes acted as if their popular support put them above the law. Aldermen received fees, generally unreported, for their services, and for handling cases; they protected people in their own communities, sometimes forcing prosecutors to bring defendants before the bar of justice in other sections of the city. The system of aldermanic courts made for delay and favoritism. The Republicans argued for a new magistrate system at every opportunity. It must have seemed to McMullen that the world had turned against him. His beloved Moyamensing Hose Company was no longer lawful; his position as alderman was threatened; the Republicans had made great strides toward capturing the city by using the Registry Act; liquor-law enforcement was hurting his business; and educated blacks were moving into Moyamensing and voting. All threatened his political power and his status. Sensing that something had to be done, McMullen prepared for one more violent effort to bring back the "old way" of doing things. The scene was now set for one of the most violent election days in Philadelphia's history.³⁰

It was clear that the election of October 10, 1871, would settle

²⁹ *Press*, October 12, 1870; *Philadelphia Tribune* July 27, 1912.

³⁰ *Public Ledger*, June 17, September 10, 16, 1869; September 14, 17, 1870; *Press*, March 27, 1872.

the issue of party dominance in Philadelphia for the next decade. In a heated race incumbent Mayor Daniel Fox ran against Republican William S. Stokley, the councilman who had led the campaign against volunteer fire companies. Signs of impending trouble were present long before election day. A pattern of violence marked the weeks prior to the election, and canvassers from both parties were attacked. On the Sunday night before the election, a meeting of black and white Republicans at Union Hall, on Seventh below Lombard Street, was attacked and broken up by rock throwers. The next night a more serious incident occurred. Jacob Gordon, a Moyamensing black, left his house to buy shoes at Eighth and Bainbridge Streets. Leaving the store at eight o'clock Gordon was accosted by Edward McNulty, who took out a gun and for no apparent reason shot Gordon twice. Gordon died from the wounds two days later.³¹

The morning newspapers on October 10, 1871, carried no news of these incidents, devoting most of the space instead to the Chicago fire. Over half of that city had burned, a tragedy beyond belief for most readers. This news added to the tensions of the day.³² So too did the rumors of violence in the Fourth Ward which started in the early morning hours. The actual fighting began at Sixth and Lombard Streets when whites attempted to keep blacks from voting. A similar incident had occurred in 1870, but now Mayor Fox decided to take matters into his own hands. Rather than call out federal troops, Fox went to the scene of the riot and asked voters to remain peaceful. The crowd gave him three cheers, but when he left the riot broke out again.

Leading the assault were Democratic policemen who tried to keep blacks from voting. A Republican victory meant that these political appointees would lose their jobs. They resented the Republicans' use of the black vote. A brick-throwing white mob eventually chased blacks west on Lombard Street. Such incidents continued throughout the morning, with whites and blacks participating in a general *mélée*. Black Levi Bolden was shot during these morning riots, and died of the wound three weeks later. Pennsylvania Hospital treated hundreds

³¹ *Press*, October 14, 1871, November 25, 27, 28, 29, December 1, 1871. Reports of the Jacob Gordon trial were printed daily.

³² *Press*, October 10, 1871; *Public Ledger*, October 10, 1871; *Inquirer*, October 10, 1871.

of people for injuries and wounds throughout the day, but Democratic Mayor Fox did not call in Federal troops.³³

McMullen was in the Fifth Ward in the morning and returned to the Fourth Ward at mid-day, stationing himself at the polling place at Eighth and Bainbridge Streets. There was continuous fighting between blacks and whites. About two o'clock in the afternoon Isaac Chase, a black man who lived directly behind Republican leader Catto, went to vote. Two men, later identified as "Reddy" Dever and Frank Kelly, harassed Chase and followed him up an alley behind South Street at Eighth Street toward his home. Dever caught Chase and split his skull open with an ax, killing him. McMullen and Sergeant John Duffy, from the Eighth and South Station, rushed down the block and cleared the whites from the alley. Incensed blacks lined the roof tops and windows and hurled objects at the police. For the next two hours tensions ran high, and the fight continued. About four o'clock, Octavius V. Catto was returning home from a visit with his friend Jacob C. White, Jr. Stopping at Eighth and Lombard Streets, Catto could see the Chase riot still in progress. To avoid trouble, Catto walked up to Ninth Street and east on South Street toward his home at number 814. Whether Frank Kelly saw him coming or just happened to be walking up South Street is unclear, but Kelly walked toward Catto. They passed at 822 South Street and exchanged words; five steps later Kelly turned and fired at Catto. The second shot struck Catto in the heart, killing him immediately. Kelly ran around the corner and into a saloon at Ninth and Bainbridge Streets. A policeman helped Kelly escape out the back door, and he was not seen again publicly in Philadelphia until 1877. McMullen spent night after night out, putting the "blowers back in their wholes [*sic.*]"—his way of saying that he was discouraging braggarts and loudmouths from fanning the flames of continued violence.³⁴

³³ Sergeant John Duffy was accused of killing Levi Bolden. In a trial held in February of 1872 Duffy was found innocent of the charges when Bolden's death was ruled accidental because he had Bright's Disease. This, the court held, would have "been fatal at sometime" and "the accident to his leg" merely brought about death sooner. *Press*, February 20, 21, 1872.

³⁴ *Press*, October 12, 13, 14, 1871. The transcript of the Catto trial was printed in the *Press*, April 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, May, 1, 2, 1877. The transcript of the Isaac Chase trial with Frank Kelly as defendant is in the *Press*, June 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 1877, and with

Stokley and the Republicans won the election, but that did not end the violence. Yet another killing occurred on October 11, 1871, when George Dougherty was shot at Seventh and Lombard Streets. Dougherty had worked at the polls on election day, and his death was generally thought to be connected with this work. Witnesses testified that four black men fired upon Dougherty from Union Hall. The case was quickly ruled death by unknown persons.³⁵ The prompt closing of the Dougherty case while action was still pending on the Gordon, Bolden, Chase, and Catto cases did not go unnoticed by the Democratic newspaper *The Age*. A two-column story on Dougherty's death carried the headlines: "Inquest on a Murdered Democrat: A White Democrat Election Officer Killed the Day After the Election Near the Scene of His Duties. The Inquest Fails to Indicate Who Were His Murderers." The story claimed that the Republicans did not conduct a thorough investigation and were happy to have the case listed as "murderers unknown." *The Age* indicated that this was the justice white Philadelphians could expect from the "black" Republicans who had won the 1871 election.³⁶

Of all the deaths, that of Octavius V. Catto was sensationalized most by the press. His funeral was one of the largest held in the city at that time. Republicans organized indignation meetings. Catto's character and reputation among whites who knew him made his death an ideal issue for the Republican party. Making Catto the city's first black martyr, the Republicans assumed the mantle of decency and non-violence.

For McMullen and the Moyamensing Democrats, Stokley's victory meant total defeat. They had lost the election, lost the battle for popular opinion, been classified as killers, and lost control of the streets. Intimidation and street violence did not help their campaign. An editorial in the *Bulletin* made this clear " . . . we shall look to [Stokley's] officers to destroy the power of the Fourth Ward crowd of bullies."³⁷ McMullen was certainly behind much of what happened

Reddy Dever as defendant *Press*, May 22, 24, 1879; William McMullen to Samuel J. Randall, December 10, 1871, Randall Papers, VPL.

³⁵ *Press*, October 24, 1871.

³⁶ *The Age*, October 24, 1871.

³⁷ *North American*, October 22, 1871; *Press*, February 16, 1874, February 19, April 24, 1877.

in the Fourth Ward. He controlled the neighborhood where the killings took place. Kelly and Dever were from the Moyamensing Fire Company, a fact verified by the number 27—Moyamensing was the twenty-seventh company chartered to fight fires in Philadelphia—tattooed on the backs of their hands. As Prison Inspector and Alderman, McMullen had looked after men like Kelly and Dever to see that they were not sent to jail for their political violence. Clearly, McMullen was the key to the riot.³⁸

But McMullen showed himself able to adapt to change. By 1872, volunteer fire companies were extinct. Aldermen came under increasing attack and, in 1874, they were eliminated and replaced by paid magistrates. The streets no longer were to be political battlegrounds, even in a section like Moyamensing. The only power base left to McMullen was his saloon, and he made the most of it. He moved to Ninth and Bainbridge Streets, the very place used by Kelly to escape after having killed Catto. McMullen renamed his saloon after his long-time friend Samuel J. Randall, a Democratic United States Congressman whose service as Speaker of the House of Representatives made him the city's most powerful Democrat. The saloon, like the alliance with Randall, was an important political powerbase for McMullen. The money McMullen kept in the saloon safe and his location near the local police station made him a person to go to when in trouble. Politics and saloon-keeping went hand in hand; city licensing regulations and liquor taxes kept the saloon-keeper alert to government action. McMullen was no exception. Faced with the loss of his alderman's position, McMullen was able to build on his political friendships and alliances to mount a bid for a city council seat. He resigned his Alderman's office prior to its abolition and ran for Common Council in October 1873. Winning the election easily, he assumed his post in Council on January 1, 1874. His service in this branch lasted four years; he then successfully ran for Select Council in 1877.³⁹

During the 1874 mayoralty election Stokley and the Republicans used the riots of 1871 and the killing of Catto against the Democrats.

³⁸ *Press*, June 20, 1877.

³⁹ *Inquirer*, April 1, 1901. Perry R. Duis, *The Saloon: Public Drinking in Chicago and Boston, 1880-1920* (Chicago, 1982), 114-142.

This was especially the case with black voters who were so incensed that when William Still, one of their leaders, publicly supported reform Democrat Alexander K. McClure for mayor, they attempted to burn down his coal yard. William S. Stokley was re-elected.⁴⁰

In 1877, the Catto riot, as it was now known, again became the major issue in the election campaign. Much to the consternation of the Democrats, a Republican committee that included black politician William Forten, son of James Forten, went to Chicago where a man fitting Frank Kelly's description had been arrested. Frank Kelly was indeed brought back to Philadelphia to stand trial. The newspapers reprinted the brutal and bloody accounts of that fatal election day. Stokley and the Republicans again could use a law and order issue as part of their election campaign. The trial was held after the election; its outcome was unimportant to the election. Much more important were the private deals that took place between William McMullen and William S. Stokley.⁴¹

McMullen was loyal to the Democrats, especially when it came to support for Congressman Randall. But, like many other people in his district, he was annoyed with the direction the party took in selecting candidates for mayor. McMullen stayed loyal in 1874 even though he was unhappy with the choice of reformer and former Republican McClure as candidate for mayor. The naming of another liberal Democrat, Joseph L. Caven, as candidate for mayor in 1877 was more than McMullen could stand. Caven's position as president of Common Council placed McMullen under his leadership. McMullen did not like the man or his politics. Mayor Stokley arranged a private deal, and McMullen secretly threw his support to the Republican mayor. Not long after, McMullen openly supported Stokley in his ward. He printed Democratic ballots for Fourth Ward voters with Stokley's name listed for mayor. McMullen's effort gave Stokley the victory and another term as mayor.⁴²

As for the Kelly trial, Benjamin L. Temple, chairman of the City Democratic Committee, acted as defense attorney, and local Republican boss and District Attorney William B. Mann prosecuted for the

⁴⁰ *Press*, January 20, February 4, 1874.

⁴¹ Editorial, "Philadelphia Then and Now 1871-1877," *Press*, February 3, 1877.

⁴² *Public Ledger*, April 1, 1901; *Inquirer*, February 8, 1877.

state. This trial illustrated Philadelphia politics at its worst. Justice was less an issue than was the effort of the Democrats to clear their name so that the riot issue would no longer be a political liability. The Republicans, on the other hand, wanted the label to remain. The trial began April 23, 1877, with blacks and Republicans testifying to Kelly's guilt in the killing of Catto. Eye witnesses placed Kelly, who had a bandaged head at the time, at the scene, and they pinpointed the sequence of events leading to the killing. Democratic witnesses swore that Kelly was not at the scene and that many men were wearing bandages over their heads on election day. An additional problem for Mann and the Republicans was that the event had taken place six years before. Many witnesses could not be found; others who had not given evidence during the inquest of 1871 came forward in 1877. All testimony was questionable, for time had dulled memories.

One issue clouding Kelly's guilt was that Catto had a gun in his possession when he was killed. Witnesses testified that Catto had purchased a gun that day. John Duffy, then sergeant at the Eighth and South Street police station, testified that he had heard three or four shots fired. As McMullen made it clear that Kelly was not at the scene and Duffy's testimony alluded to Catto's having been killed in a shoot-out in which he was an active participant, Kelly now had a chance for acquittal. Mann offered witnesses to refute the testimonies of McMullen and Duffy. All swore that Catto had no bullets for his gun.

Councilman William McMullen was a crucial witness to election day events. He testified that Kelly had not killed Catto, and he identified three other men who had had bandages on their heads that day. These men were not available to the court, but McMullen had made his point.⁴³ Surprisingly, reports appeared in the newspaper that Frank Kelly was not a bad sort. "He has little of the personality of the typical murderer," wrote one journalist. He was described as a man with pleasant and affable manners, a light-hearted temperament, and as a man easily led by his friends. In what might have been a confession on the return trip from Chicago, Kelly refused a drink

⁴³ *Press*, April 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, May 1, 2, 1877.

offered by his guard, Officer Albert Bickley. He noted that "drinking has been the cause of all my trouble. I wouldn't be in the trouble I am arrested for if it had not been for rum." All of this contributed to the portrait of a nice, young man who fell victim to friends and rum. While little direct evidence raised doubt about Kelly's guilt, the jury reached a "not guilty" verdict. To blacks and some Republicans the verdict reflected American racism.⁴⁴

A second trial for Kelly took up the accusation that he had killed Isaac Chase. McMullen presented the most crucial evidence at the trial. Henry Nicholls, a black resident on the street where Chase was killed, testified that he saw Kelly kill Chase. Nicholls could insist upon his position, because he had climbed over the roofs and was directly above Kelly when Chase was hacked to death. McMullen challenged this testimony, stating that when he was in the alley he saw no one on the roof and that Kelly was never in the alley. In fact McMullen had, within the last few days, identified the roofs in question and voiced his opinion no person could have jumped between them because the distance was too great. Nicholls was recalled to reassert his testimony, but the damage was done and Frank Kelly again went free. "Reddy" Dever returned to the city and was put on trial for Chase's murder. But the same court room scenario set Dever free. The end of these trials prompted McMullen to write Randall, "All things are quiet here. I have had a hard week getting Dever acquitted."⁴⁵

McMullen's support of Stokley in the 1877 election did not sit well with his fellow Democrats. George McGowan, newly elected chairman of the Democratic party, openly criticised McMullen, pointing out that: "In the Fourth Ward Caven . . . [was] openly traded away in return for votes for Adams for Common Council . . . The vote announced for Stokley makes up a clear case of fraud, intimidation and counting out." McMullen had a different view of the

⁴⁴ *Press*, March 14, 1877.

⁴⁵ For the Chase trial, *Press*, June 19, 20, 21, 22, 26, 1877. William Armstrong Ms. Diary, October 14, 1871; Bennie Faires Ms. Diary, October 10, 1871, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; William McMullen to Samuel J. Randall, January 2, 1875, Randall Papers, VPL.

situation, and wrote Randall that "the only thing is that damn secret ballot. I am afraid we do not know where to hit to get even."⁴⁶

Besides dealing with Stokley, McMullen had a very friendly secretive relationship with black Republican politician Gilbert Ball. Keeper of a saloon in the Seventh Ward just three blocks from McMullen's Samuel J. Randall Democratic Club, Ball operated the Matthew Quay Republican Club for black voters. It would appear on the surface that political differences and the poor record of McMullen supporters in race relations would have assured that McMullen and Ball would be bitter enemies. Yet there was never a street fight or a political incident on election day between supporters of the two politicians. Both operated the same way, controlling votes in poor sections of the city through favors, patronage, and outright cash payments to voters. Because McMullen often supported Republicans, he often got the cash to buy votes from the same Republican party that financed Ball. McMullen and Ball traded support for their particular favorites, with Ball supporting Randall as long as McMullen supported Stokley or other Republicans. Followers of both men knew little of such arrangements, yet these deals among the leadership explain the peaceful co-existence of Republican blacks and Democratic white Irish voters in the South Street area on election days after 1871.⁴⁷

McMullen defended his position by blaming the Democratic leadership for his actions. "Our record in the Fourth Ward is as clear as any ward when there is a Democrat in the field. When Stokley ran against Caven and there was no Democratic candidate we preferred a solid Republican; but we voted solid for a solid Democrat."⁴⁸

Stokley's close ties with McMullen raised questions about some of the Republican administration's actions. Mayor Stokley came under criticism from reform groups for not enforcing Sunday liquor laws in the Fourth Ward. To mute this criticism, Stokley ordered a raid in the Alaska District—Philadelphia's most notorious section for crime and vice, in the center of McMullen's ward—on October 21, 1879.

⁴⁶ *Times*, February 22, 1877; William McMullen to Samuel J. Randall, May 27, 1879, Randall Papers, VPL.

⁴⁷ Lane, *Roots of Violence. Inquirer*, December 15, 1890.

⁴⁸ *Times*, December 7, 1879.

Police squads raided every saloon. They arrested hundreds of people on the street and in the saloons, and booked every saloon-keeper. How could McMullen have made deals and supported men like Stokley when they perpetrated such acts in Moyamensing?⁴⁹

The plain political reality was that the raid benefitted both men. By cleaning out the worst section of town, Stokley was able to claim that he supported law and order. McMullen, who arranged the release of most of those arrested and saw to it they were not prosecuted, now had hundreds of people who owed him favors. As for the Alaska District, it returned to its previous conditions within a week, the only inconvenience having been a few days spent in jail by a portion of the population used to such treatment.⁵⁰

The lack of success by Democratic candidates for Mayor frustrated their leaders. The election of 1871 had given Republicans an issue, one they exploited for a decade. The Kelly-Dever acquittals of 1877 helped quiet Republican charges of violence against Democrats. But to secure a mayoral victory, Samuel Randall forced Democratic party unity behind reform candidate Samuel G. King in the election of 1881. King's liberal attitudes on the race question and his attempts to reform the political patronage system alienated conservative Democrats like McMullen. This caused Democrats to become more conservative in their choices of local political candidates, making them a minority party until well into the next century.⁵¹

McMullen kept the support of the ward, because as a member of the Select Council he always spoke for his ward and was willing to deal with the Republicans. The Squire continually proposed street lights, pavements, and other municipal improvements for the ward. Republicans usually supported these proposals, because civic improvements meant patronage jobs for Republicans and for McMullen. The ease with which opponents could deal with McMullen made him a reliable friend to Republicans. He fought high fares on public transportation and in private cabs. His interest in the fire department led

⁴⁹ *Press*, October 22, 1879; *Bulletin*, November 25, 1879; for a list of the saloon-keepers arrested and McMullen's efforts to get them out see *The Report of a Committee of One* (Philadelphia, 1880), 29.

⁵⁰ *Press*, February 8, 1881.

⁵¹ Harry C. Silcox, "Politics from the Bottom-Up: The Life of William McMullen, 1824-1901," unpublished manuscript. See especially the chapter "Democratic Reform: Mayor Samuel G. King, 1881-1884."

him to become an active member of the Council Fire Committee. Finally, he made deals with Republicans whenever politically expedient. In short McMullen was a good politician who had an extraordinary sense of how to develop a coalition and get things done. A practical man, he could be trusted when dealing with friends or foes.⁵²

In the 1890s, McMullen could be found in his saloon at Ninth and Bainbridge Street still telling stories about politics in the old days. In Select Council he could be counted on to support Republican legislation and also to be the one to call for adjournment. McMullen had always been an adventurous type. He vacationed yearly on the Chesapeake Bay or in Atlantic City, usually spending his time on large sailing craft. In June, 1895, at age seventy-three McMullen displayed extraordinary stamina and condition for a man his age as he rescued a black youth from the Atlantic Ocean. The boy had accidentally fallen off a ship about four miles off the Jersey coast. McMullen, always a good swimmer and never showing fear, jumped into the water and kept the boy afloat until help arrived. All admitted that the boy would have drowned without McMullen's help.⁵³

This heroic act fills out the picture of race relations between blacks and Irishmen like McMullen. He disliked educated, elitist and class conscious individuals, black or white. To McMullen, a young black boy drowning needed help and McMullen would give it; to McMullen an elitist black activist like Catto needed to be taught his place, and McMullen could do that. Distrust for the elite characterized McMullen's feelings from the days when he ran with the Killers. His deals with Gil Ball showed he could war with blacks as equals. But he was more comfortable among saloon-keepers, because they spoke the same language.⁵⁴

A stroke in 1898 restricted McMullen's activities, confining him to his saloon with an occasional visit to Council. He was fond of telling those in attendance that "he had seen the advent of the steamboat, railroads, telegraph, telephone, electric lights, civil service, ballot reform and other improvements, also that he had helped develop the new Philadelphia." McMullen's advice to all was that

⁵² *Journal of Common Council* 1875, 1876, 1877; *Journal of Select Council* 1879, 1880, 1881, 1885, 1887; *Times* December 27, 1879, January 2, 1880.

⁵³ *Inquirer*, June 24, 1895; *Press*, December 2, 1879.

⁵⁴ *Press*, December 2, 1879.

“success in life is to be square to your friends, help the poor, and when you get your enemy down don’t be anxious to crush him. Some charity in your bosom is a good thing in politics.”⁵⁵

McMullen was married twice. His second wife died in 1899; McMullen suffered a second stroke the same year. Cared for by his daughters, he recovered to return downstairs to his beloved saloon, but his zest for life was gone. In the latter part of March, 1901, he returned from Select Council not feeling well. In bed, he suffered yet another stroke and remained unconscious for days. McMullen died March 31, 1901.⁵⁶

McMullen was remembered in the obituary notices not as a villain, a tough, or a criminal, but as a kindly old man who was a generous and charitable neighbor. In his will McMullen showed a net worth of \$27,173. A large sum for someone from Moyamensing, it did not put McMullen in a class with the wealthy of Philadelphia. He left money in his will to St. Paul’s Catholic Church and arranged that his family and friends were rewarded for their loyalty. One resident noted: “They’ll be many a poor soul who will miss that good hearted old man. He was a friend of the orphan and the widow and no unfortunate was ever turned away from his door empty handed.”⁵⁷

McMullen’s life illustrates the transition of urban politics from the streets of the city to the halls of a legislative body. This transition spanned fifty years and affected most urban institutions. The fire company and political gangs that controlled politics prior to the Civil War gave way eventually to the powerful ward leader whose political base might be a saloon named after a well known political leader. Street violence that endangered outsiders was halted, but physical fights continued within party ranks. Political deals behind closed doors were commonplace in this ward system; in the end, such deals helped to quell violence in the streets.

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⁵⁵ *Inquirer*, April 1, 1901.

⁵⁶ *Public Ledger*, April 1, 1901.

⁵⁷ *Public Ledger*, April 1, 1901; Will, William McMullen, Registrar of Wills, Philadelphia.