

Reconstructing Philadelphia: African Americans and Politics in the Post–Civil War North

AS ROBERT E. LEE and the Army of Northern Virginia moved north into central Pennsylvania in June 1863, some panicked Philadelphians began to reconsider what had been previously unthinkable. Since the summer of 1862, when Lincoln had authorized the recruitment of black soldiers, some of Philadelphia's black men had been drilling in anticipation of service in the Union army. Decades of antiblack violence on the city's streets, however, had led many of Philadelphia's political elite to fear the reaction to any effort to recruit black troops. As Lee advanced toward Gettysburg, Philadelphia's black community sprang into action, organizing a black company comprised of many of the most promising young men. Mayor Alexander Henry, who had earlier opposed the enlistment of black men, became convinced that Lee's army posed a greater threat to Philadelphia than did the potential reaction of its own negrophobic citizens.¹

The service of black troops in the Union army, in addition to being of crucial military importance, would prove to be a turning point in black Philadelphia politics. Throughout the antebellum North, free blacks had fought not just to end slavery, but for equal rights as well. Once it became clear that the Civil War was to become a war for emancipation, black Philadelphians joined the war effort with an almost unmatched patriotism, but also with a determination that, to quote one black veteran,

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¹ Harry C. Silcox, "Nineteenth Century Philadelphia Black Militant: Octavius V. Catto (1839–1871)," *Pennsylvania History* 44 (1977): 59; Alexander Henry to Andrew Curtin, June 17, 1863, Alexander Henry Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

"Soldiers in War be Citizens in Peace."² In the coming decade, the service of black men in the Union army, and the loyalty of black civilians to the Union cause, would become the most important focus of black claims to full citizenship. Perhaps just as important, many of the men who marched off in June 1863 to defend their city against Lee's invading army would become leaders in the effort to secure the fruits of their war effort for black Philadelphians.

If African Americans saw the war and emancipation as forces that would transform the position of northern blacks, there were many in the city of Philadelphia who saw things differently. Sidney George Fisher, a cantankerous Philadelphia patrician and staunch Lincoln supporter, wrote in his diary on July 8, 1863, "The abolitionists are trying to make what they can out of the enlistment of Negro soldiers & are likely to cause a reaction & injure their own cause and the real interest of the Negro. . . . The orators claim equality for the Negro race, the right of suffrage, &c. All this is as absurd as it is dangerous."³ The Democratic Party of Philadelphia made opposition to black rights a centerpiece of its political culture. As black activists seeking to reconstruct Philadelphia increasingly allied themselves with state and national Republicans in order to fight for racial equality and full citizenship, Philadelphia Democrats—and even some Republicans—came to see parallels between the Reconstruction of the Confederate states and the efforts of the state and federal governments to interfere in matters they felt to be purely of local concern. This resistance to state and federal interference would shape not only the response to efforts to secure the rights of black Philadelphians, but it would, in turn, contribute to the ambivalence many Philadelphians had toward efforts to secure the rights of southern blacks.

For much of the twentieth century, most American historians viewed the tumultuous years following the Civil War as a time in which corrupt northern politicians exploited the South through their allies—the carpet-baggers and the ignorant freedmen; Radicalism was largely a mask for the interests of northern businessmen. For this school of thought, most associated with the work of historian William Dunning, the year 1877 was significant because it marked the restoration of southern home rule and

² Philip S. Foner, "The Battle to End Discrimination against Negroes on Philadelphia Streetcars: (Part I) Background and Beginning of the Battle," *Pennsylvania History* 40 (1973): 269–71; *Christian Recorder*, Apr. 22, 1865.

³ Sidney George Fisher, *A Philadelphia Perspective: The Diary of Sidney George Fisher, Covering the Years 1834–1871*, ed. Nicholas B. Wainwright (Philadelphia, 1967), 456.

the end of a corrupt era. Though black historians, most prominently W. E. B. Du Bois, countered this view, scholars largely ignored them. By the middle of the century, C. Vann Woodward and others rejected the racism of the Dunning school, but continued to put questions of economics at the center of the withdrawal of the federal troops from the South and the end of Reconstruction. Woodward contended that the end of Reconstruction was brought about by a rejuvenation of Whiggery and the desire of many southern Whigs-turned-Democrats both to be rid of carpetbaggers and to rebuild the southern economy.⁴

In the 1960s, historians, in part inspired by the civil rights movement of that era, began to view the efforts of Radical Reconstruction in a more favorable light. James McPherson, a Woodward student, argued that abolitionists continued to fight for racial egalitarianism and “to rally the conscience of a nation”; ultimately though, “the nation refused to follow their leadership.” John Hope Franklin argued that black leaders in the South had pursued a moderate course and that the white “carpetbaggers” were hardly the corrupt spoilsmen that the Dunning school had depicted. Hans Trefousse suggested that the Radical Republicans had, in fact, been a “vanguard for racial justice.” While these works did not focus specifically on the end of Reconstruction, they argued, at least implicitly, that Reconstruction had failed due to the persistence of northern racism.⁵

If much of Reconstruction historiography has focused on what transpired in the South, historians who have tried to account for the end of Reconstruction have paid particular attention to the flight of Liberal Republican reformers from the ranks of the Republican Party in the North. David Montgomery, using “the labor question” as a “prism with which to study the political spectrum of Reconstruction America,” places class conflict at the center of the ultimate rejection of Radical Reconstruction. Montgomery argues that the Radical vision of postwar America was, at least initially, consistent with the aims of the advocates of labor and that “the most aware and active spokesmen of the working

⁴ See William Archibald Dunning, *Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction* (1898; New York, 1965); W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, intro by David Levering Lewis (1935; New York, 1992); C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (Boston, 1951).

⁵ James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton, NJ, 1964), 431; John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction: After the Civil War* (Chicago, 1961); Hans Louis Trefousse, *The Radical Republicans: Lincoln's Vanguard for Racial Justice* (New York, 1968).

classes found themselves drawn into close-functioning relationships with the Radicals.” This loose coalition failed, however, when labor began to fight for legislation to assure the worker an eight-hour day. Radicals resisted legislation that would benefit any one class of citizens. While Radicals supported equality before the law, they opposed workers’ efforts to move “beyond equality.” Ultimately, according to Montgomery, “class conflict . . . was the submerged shoal on which Radical dreams foundered.”⁶

Much recent work, following Montgomery, has tended to see economic questions as the key to understanding the end of northern support for Reconstruction. Michael Les Benedict has argued that “the Radicals’ flirtation with a policy of land confiscation and redistribution in the South” alienated those who had embraced the doctrines of laissez-faire with an “almost idolatrous faith.” Reformers began to see freedmen as composing a “dangerous class” that threatened liberty. Heather Cox Richardson maintains that northerners, viewing the South through the lens of northern class conflict, increasingly saw the majority of ex-slaves as “the face of ‘communism’ or ‘socialism.’” Northerners turned against African Americans not because of racism (though she acknowledges that most were, in fact, racists) but because “black citizens, it seemed, threatened the core of American society.”⁷

Yet, if persistent northern racism does not provide a sufficient explanation for Reconstruction’s failure, the politics of postwar Philadelphia suggest that any understanding of northern attitudes toward efforts to reconstruct the South needs to be attuned to ongoing struggles over the place of African Americans in the North. Mid-nineteenth-century Philadelphia begs a reconsideration of traditional geographic boundaries. The story of Reconstruction in Philadelphia more closely resembles the narrative commonly associated with the South than it does the account many recent historians have told of the post-Civil War North. In

⁶ David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (New York, 1967), x.

⁷ Michael Les Benedict, “Reform Republicans and the Retreat from Reconstruction,” in *The Facts of Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of John Hope Franklin*, eds. Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss Jr. (Baton Rouge, LA, 1991), 53–78; Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865–1901* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 244–45; see also her more recent *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven, CT, 2007). The most influential recent historian of Reconstruction, Eric Foner, has advanced an explanation along these lines both in his *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York, 1988), and earlier in “Thaddeus Stevens, Confiscation and Reconstruction,” in *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York, 1980), 128–49.

Philadelphia, the retreat from Radical politics was largely a result of the local political conflict surrounding the struggle for black equality. Crucial to the outcome of this political struggle were the ways in which Philadelphians saw, or did not see, connections between what was happening in the South and events transpiring on their own streets.

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The fight for black equality dated to the first years of the early republic. Philadelphia was a center of the struggle for the abolition of slavery, and black Philadelphians had been at the forefront of opposition to the American Colonization Society. Barely a month after the founding of the ACS, a group meeting at Philadelphia's Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church expressed its overwhelming aversion to colonization, arguing that it was a plan to strengthen slavery by removing free blacks from the South. They also contended that colonization undermined their attempts to fight for equality in the North. African American opposition to the ACS proved to be a catalyst for antebellum black politics. According to historian Leonard Sweet, "the commotion over the meaning, methods and motives of the American Colonization Society did more to generate black solidarity and engender a sense of identity among the black community than any other single issue in the first half of the nineteenth century." It was this newly energized black activism that constituted the crucial push leading some white abolitionists, most notably William Lloyd Garrison, to embrace the immediate abolition of slavery in the early 1830s.⁸

Philadelphia remained a nexus of black abolition for some time, but by the 1840s, violent attacks on Philadelphia abolitionists, and blacks in particular, had made some black Philadelphians wary of overt political action. Pennsylvania Hall opened in May 1838 as a meeting place for antislavery groups. Abolitionists from across the country, including William Lloyd Garrison, Angelina and Sarah Grimké, and Maria Chapman, gathered to celebrate the opening, but a few days later, a mob, citing concerns about racial "amalgamation," burned the hall to the ground while the police and fire department looked on. A number of other assaults on black Philadelphians followed, and by the late 1840s,

⁸ Leonard I. Sweet, *Black Images of America, 1784–1870* (New York, 1976), 35–68, quote on 39–40.

some of the most important black churches in Philadelphia refused to allow Frederick Douglass to speak from their pulpits.⁹

If many black Philadelphians withdrew from public abolitionism, it was often to pursue the fight against slavery by more clandestine means. Some black Philadelphians became involved in the vigilance committees that sought to undermine the activity of the fugitive slave law and to protect free blacks from kidnappers. Perhaps most prominently, wealthy black coal merchant William Still became one of the leaders of the loose association known as the Underground Railroad. Though much of Still's work remained secretive, in 1859 he wrote a letter to the conservative—formerly Whig—newspaper, the *North American*. In an August 31 letter, Still, writing as “a colored man, and constant reader of your paper,” humbly criticized the denial of the right to ride on the newly constructed streetcars to black Philadelphians “however unwell or aged, genteel or neatly attired.” He assured his readers that the residents of the poorer black sections of Philadelphia, upon whom he believed many whites had based their impressions of an entire race, were by no means representative of “the great body of colored people residing in Philadelphia.”¹⁰

If Still's letter strikes a modern reader as overly obsequious, it is worth noting two points. First, emphasizing the “respectability” of African Americans was a common antebellum rhetorical strategy. If Still's letter takes this strategy to an extreme, he was hardly an innovator.¹¹ Second, it is clear that Still's argument was aimed at a conservative audience. If he had wanted to address a more radical readership, he probably would have written to one of the other, more radical, Philadelphia newspapers. Still likely figured that a cautious letter would appeal to conservatives who were not otherwise disposed to support his fight for desegregation.

Though the city had elected a Republican mayor and had given a majority of its vote to Lincoln in 1860, it was by no means a friendly place for African Americans. Following an early 1862 visit to the city, Frederick Douglass wrote that “there is not perhaps anywhere to be found a city in which prejudice against color is more rampant than in Philadelphia.”

⁹ Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787–1848* (Philadelphia, 1988), 146–48; Sam Bass Warner, *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth* (Philadelphia, 1968), 132–37.

¹⁰ William Still, *A Brief Narrative of the Struggle for the Rights of the Colored People of Philadelphia in the City Railway Cars; and a Defence of William Still, Relating to His Agency Touching the Passage of the Late Bill* (1867; repr. Philadelphia, 1969), 4–5.

¹¹ On “respectability” as a strategy for black equality, see Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), 202, 204–6.

When the People's Literary Institute scheduled white abolitionist orator George William Curtis, Mayor Henry advised the institute that "the appearance of [Curtis] as a lecturer before the People's Literary Institute on Thursday evening next will be extremely unwise. If I possessed the lawful power I would not permit his presence on that occasion." His previous appearance in the city had been on the occasion of John Brown's death, and a riot had followed. Curtis withdrew from the engagement, still insisting that "the right of free speech is undeniable."¹² Mayor Henry was primarily concerned with the preservation of public order.

Black Philadelphians continued their fight for equality, despite the ambivalence, if not outright hostility, of their elected officials. In 1860, a number of black Philadelphians, including William Still, established the Social, Civil and Statistical Association of the Colored People of Philadelphia. The purpose of the Statistical Association was "to labor earnestly for the right of suffrage . . . and to gather statistics with regard to the condition and wants of the colored people in general." The Statistical Association also offered a lecture series and in general promoted a sense of the cultural sophistication of black Philadelphia.¹³

In 1861, the Statistical Association, on the suggestion of William Still, established a "car committee." The first task of this committee would be to collect the signatures of prominent Philadelphians who were opposed to the segregation of the streetcars. The resulting petition, requesting that the Board of Presidents of the City Railways end segregation of its own free will, was printed in the *Evening Bulletin*. Despite these efforts, little progress was made. When action was taken in the state legislature, it came not from the representatives of Philadelphia, but at the hands of Morrow Lowry, a Radical state senator from the far end of the state. In 1861, Lowry introduced a bill prohibiting segregation in public transportation, but it was bottled up in the Judiciary Committee.¹⁴

From the start, black leaders connected the war with the issue of black civil rights and coupled their call for the enlistment of black troops with demands for equal suffrage. The annual conference of the African

¹² *Douglass' Monthly*, Feb. 1862; Alexander Henry to People's Literary Institute, Dec. 11, 1860, and George William Curtis to Alexander Henry, Dec. 13, 1860, Alexander Henry Papers.

¹³ "Constitution of the Social, Civil and Statistical Association of the Colored People of Philadelphia," American Negro Historical Society Collection, 1790–1905 (hereafter ANHSC), (microfilm ed.) reel 4, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹⁴ Still, *Brief Narrative*, 4–6; Philip S. Foner, "The Battle to End Discrimination against Negroes on Philadelphia Streetcars: (Part II) The Victory," *Pennsylvania History* 40 (1973): 362–63.

Methodist Episcopal Church, meeting in Philadelphia, declared “that the freedom of the enslaved colored people of the South, and the desire to enjoy the right to equal suffrage, by the disfranchised colored people of the North, more than all other emoluments combined, have induced these people to enlist in the military service of the United States.” The admission of black troops to the Union armies would both “advance the cause of human liberty and true Christianity, through those benighted regions of the South” and “necessarily embrace the long neglected interests of the entire colored population.”¹⁵

The enlistment of black soldiers in the Union army also brought new life to the effort to desegregate the Philadelphia streetcars. One of the first black Philadelphians to enlist was the charismatic young school teacher Octavius V. Catto. He would lead a newly formed company. Catto eventually ascended to the rank of major and spent the duration of the war in Philadelphia, helping to organize the troops being raised in the city. Through his military service, Catto established ties with the national Republican Party and with national black political organizations. He attended the October 1864 National Convention of Colored Men, held in Syracuse, and in November of that year he helped to found the Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League. Catto was selected as the first corresponding secretary of the organization and by February had helped to establish auxiliaries in sixteen cities. The Equal Rights League’s express purpose was the advocacy of black suffrage, but it also addressed other issues, including the conditions in black schools and the segregation of streetcars.¹⁶

Black Philadelphians continued their fight for equality, but many white leaders of the city’s Republican Party remained resistant. Though he had contributed his substantial literary talents to the cause of Lincoln’s reelection, Sidney Fisher expressed fear that Lincoln’s success would lead the Republican Party closer to Radicalism. He refused to join the Union League out of conviction that the organization supported black equality. If Mayor Henry had belatedly come around to supporting the enlistment of black troops, he had hardly become a racial egalitarian. When black leaders requested that he prevent the police force from taking a hand in

¹⁵ *Christian Recorder*, May 23, 1863.

¹⁶ Silcox, “Nineteenth Century Philadelphia Black Militant,” 61–62; on the Equal Rights League, see also Hugh Davis, “The Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League and the Northern Black Struggle for Legal Equality, 1864–1877,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 126 (2002): 611–34.

the ejection of black passengers from the streetcars, he refused, stating frankly that he did not wish “the ladies of his family to ride with colored people.” George Fahnestock, a wealthy Philadelphia Republican, applauded the enlistment of black troops for the reason that “we have been pouring out the best blood of the nation” in this Civil War “while the black man has hardly the privilege of digging ditches.”¹⁷

The tactics of the Statistical Association and the Equal Rights League differed in some respects, though perhaps not as much as some have suggested. The Statistical Association tended to take a more cautious course, especially in the early 1860s, pursuing what might be called a type of moral suasion within the city. By presenting a more accurate picture of black Philadelphians, and in many cases emphasizing the refinement of the black elite, its members intended to undermine the rationale for inequality. After the enlistment of black troops, this approach especially involved the publication of letters from wounded black soldiers who had been denied access to the streetcars. The Equal Rights League, on the other hand, sought to attack inequality more directly through political channels. It tended to lobby legislators and to build alliances with Radicals outside of the city, both in Harrisburg and in Washington. By 1866, however, the Statistical Association was raising money for congressional Radicals, and members were expressing frustration with their negotiations with Philadelphia streetcar owners. By that time, both Catto and his friend and fellow black Philadelphian and political activist Jacob C. White were members of both organizations. On certain issues, such as the fight for the desegregation of the streetcars, the two organizations worked in concert.¹⁸

Thanks in large part to the efforts of black Philadelphians, a few rail lines abandoned the policy of segregation in early 1865. This change was short-lived, however, as, according to one streetcar line, “the admission of colored people caused such pecuniary loss that they were compelled to refuse them thereafter.” Though the Republicans controlled both houses of the state legislature, as well as the mayor’s office, they proved reluctant to act on the streetcar issue. Senator Lowry, in Harrisburg, continued to

¹⁷ Fisher, *Philadelphia Perspective*, 471–72, 487–88; Foner, “Part II: The Victory,” 357; George W. Fahnestock diary, Mar. 26, 1863, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹⁸ Foner, “Part I: Background and Beginning of the Battle,” 282; Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Statistical Association, Apr. 3 and Dec. 7, 1866, ANHSC, reel 4; Minutes of the Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League, June 20, 1865, ANHSC, reel 1; Davis, “Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League,” 614–15.

champion the rights of black Philadelphians to ride on the streetcars. "The efforts of Mr. Lowry will be upon record," noted the *Christian Recorder*, "and will never be forgotten by the people of color in this country, nor by their friends." The Lowry bill did pass the senate by a slim margin, but it was defeated in the house by Philadelphia Republicans who claimed that voting for the bill would cost them their seats in the next election. In October 1865, Morton McMichael, editor of the conservative Republican newspaper the *North American*, was elected mayor of Philadelphia. He proved to be a weak and rather colorless mayor. Throughout 1866, neither the Republican nor Democratic parties of Philadelphia made any move to address the segregation of the streetcars.¹⁹

In March 1866, William D. Forten, Octavius Catto, and John C. Bowers traveled to Harrisburg to press the Equal Rights League's case on the streetcar issue. According to Forten, he had received promises of support from a number of state legislators. They also continued to raise money to aid Congressman William Kelley in his effort to fight for universal manhood suffrage on the floor of the United States House of Representatives. Kelley, speaking at the dedication of the new Liberty Hall on Lombard Street, trumpeted his support for "enfranchising *all* citizens," which would "thus settle the question of suffrage upon the basis of justice and equality." Nevertheless, frustration mounted. At a December 7 meeting of the Statistical Association, black abolitionist Steven Smith expressed his "entire lack of confidence" in the white people of Philadelphia.²⁰

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As Philadelphians marked the start of 1867, the *Public Ledger*, an independent daily with the widest circulation in the city, applauded the efforts of Mayor McMichael to restrain the "rowdyism on the streets,"

¹⁹J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609–1884* (Philadelphia, 1884), 821; *Christian Recorder*, Jan. 28, 1865; Dorothy Gondos Beers, "The Centennial City, 1865–1876," in *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, ed. Russell F. Weigley (New York, 1982), 440; Foner, "Part II: The Victory," 366.

²⁰Minutes of the Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League, Mar. 24 and Apr. 1, 1866, ANHSC, reel 1; *Christian Recorder*, Nov. 17, 1866; Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Statistical Association, Dec. 7, 1866, ANHSC, reel 4. Though especially concerned with advancing the suffrage of black men, Kelley was also an early advocate of extending the vote to women. See Ira V. Brown, "William D. Kelley and Radical Reconstruction," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 85 (1961): 329.

and it celebrated the general “healthfulness” of the city. The notable local events of the past year were enumerated in some detail, and the paper expressed its wishes for the city’s continued prosperity. The paper then turned its attention to events beyond the city’s borders. “Our *nation* too, has its hopes. It trusts that this year is to see North and South heartily reconciled and fully one again, politically and socially.”²¹

Similarly, black Philadelphians took the celebration of the New Year as an opportunity to reflect on their own continuing struggles for full citizenship and equality. Black veterans from across the country met in Philadelphia on January 5 to celebrate their loyalty to the Union cause and to call for the enfranchisement of African American men. The *Christian Recorder*, a paper published in Philadelphia by the African Methodist Episcopal Church, touted various achievements of the Radical Republicans in Congress, especially the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. There were, it noted, two black men sitting in the Massachusetts legislature. This accomplishment, it insisted, was but the beginning. “On! On! The wheel of progression goes, until we have colored Governors, Senators and Presidents. Let us never be backward in the well doing of any good and useful thing, and the Lord will bless us.”²²

If the struggles of 1866 had not yet produced tangible results for black Philadelphians, there was good reason to expect that the next year would bear more fruit. In February, the Pennsylvania legislature ratified the Fourteenth Amendment, and the Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League continued its close contact with its allies in the state house. On February 5, Senator Lowry reintroduced legislation which had been written, at least in part, by the Equal Rights League’s car committee. The bill made it illegal for a Pennsylvania railroad corporation to make any distinction (some companies had already tried running separate white and black cars) based on race or color. On February 19, John C. Bowers reported to the executive board of the Equal Rights League that “prospects for its passage through the House are cheering . . . the [car] committee are sanguine that the governor will sign it without hesitancy.” Octavius Catto added, somewhat optimistically, that the “Philadelphia public” had endorsed the actions of the committee.²³

²¹ *Public Ledger*, Jan. 1, 1867.

²² *Christian Recorder*, Jan. 5 and 12, 1867.

²³ Foner, “Part II: The Victory,” 369; Still, *Brief Narrative*, 21; Minutes of the Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League, Feb. 19, 1867, ANHSC, reel 1.

On March 22, despite some last-minute parliamentary subterfuge by Democratic legislators, the house and senate passed the Lowry bill on a nearly party-line vote. “Gov. Geary! has signed the Bill to force us to ride with negroes or be compelled to walk,” wrote Philadelphia diarist William Armstrong, though he insisted that Geary had done so despite the wishes of a vast majority of Philadelphians. “The passage of this car bill,” announced the *Christian Recorder*, “is a triumph of *right*.” The *Recorder* felt it necessary, however, to challenge reports that African Americans had had an inappropriate influence on the bill’s success. “Whatever force corrupt influences may have in engineering bills through a state Legislature, no one is so stupid as to suppose that our people had the resources to bring them to bear.”²⁴ Obviously, there was some anxiety among white Philadelphians as to the influence black members of their community seemed to have exerted over the legislation. This anxiety over black political participation would prove crucial in undermining support for Reconstruction, both in the North and South.

The Radical Republican journal the *Press* applauded the law which “put an end to the unjust distinction which has too long been maintained, and afford[ed] a much needed convenience to a large number of worthy citizens.” Tellingly, however, it used the passage of the Lowry bill to criticize the refusal of the state legislature to allow Philadelphia to run streetcars on Sunday. This issue, in fact, had received much more coverage in the local press than had the fight over desegregation. Republican Mayor Morton McMichael, in his annual message, decried the “legislative interference” in “the supervision of our thoroughfares.” The city’s “functions are usurped or disregarded,” he insisted, and “measures affecting the city and the city only are adopted without our sanction.” Senator Lowry stood out as a chief opponent of allowing the cars to run on Sunday.²⁵

The Philadelphia Democratic Party sought both to exploit this split in the Republican ranks and to shine a light on that party’s “friendly” attitude toward African Americans. During the debate over the bill in the senate, Philadelphian W. H. McCandless had stated bluntly, “I do not desire to ride with them.” The *Democratic Age* denounced the supposed inconsistency of the Republican Party’s position on the streetcars and suggested that the Republican legislators both supported streetcar inte-

²⁴ Entry of Mar. 23, 1867, William G. Armstrong diary, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; *Christian Recorder*, Mar. 23, 1867.

²⁵ *Press*, Mar. 24 and 29, 1867; *Public Ledger*, Mar. 29, 1867.

gration and opposed the running of cars on Sunday because they were wealthy enough to ride in their own carriages and did not need the public cars. If Republicans were sometimes hesitant to play up their support for the rights of African Americans, Democrats were not quite so shy. "The unity of the Radical Party," insisted the *Age*, "depends upon the agitation of the negro question." Without it, the paper argued, the party would fall apart.²⁶

The Radicals who had spearheaded the Lowry bill in the Pennsylvania legislature made it clear that they welcomed the contributions of Philadelphia's black political activists. They singled out the efforts of William Forten, David Bowser, and Octavius Catto in a letter that was read before a mass meeting held at Liberty Hall in celebration of the passage of the bill. "Gentlemen," it began, "the undersigned feel it due to you to make this statement, setting forth the services you have rendered your race . . . the bill is essentially your own, having been drawn by your chairman, Mr. Forten." The Liberty Hall meeting celebrated the alliance between Radical state legislators and black Philadelphians, and many participants took advantage of the opportunity to denounce the more cautious efforts of those who had tried to cultivate the support of conservative Republicans. William Still was a particular target of scorn. "There will be a funeral at the coal yard now!" shouted one celebrant.²⁷

Black Philadelphians immediately set to work testing the new legislation. On March 25, three days after the passage of the Lowry bill, a conductor of the Tenth and Eleventh Street Railway was arrested on the complaint of "a mulatto woman named Caroline R. Lacount" (who happened to be Octavius Catto's fiancée). She claimed to have been ejected from the car on account of her race. The conductor was ultimately convicted and fined one hundred dollars. Black women, invariably characterized as light skinned and respectable, had long been a crucial element in the fight to end streetcar segregation despite criticism from some black men.²⁸

²⁶ Ira V. Brown, "Pennsylvania and the Rights of the Negro, 1865–1887," *Pennsylvania History* 28 (1961): 49; *Age*, Mar. 27 and 30, 1867.

²⁷ *Press*, Mar. 28, 1867; Still, *Brief Narrative*, 2.

²⁸ *Press*, Mar. 27, 1867; Silcox, "Nineteenth Century Philadelphia Black Militant," 64–65. My understanding of the importance of women in challenging the segregation of Philadelphia's streetcars has been informed by Judith Giesberg, "Civil War, Civil Rights: Philadelphia Women's Street Car Battle, 1861–1867" (paper presented at Underground Railroad and Black History Conference, Temple University, Feb. 2006).

The Radical press picked up on this strategy and printed a “scene in a passenger car” on March 25. According to the *Press*’s correspondent, he witnessed a scene in which “a car pretty well filled with a promiscuous body of white people stopped at a street intersection. An elderly, well-dressed, colored woman entered.” There was no seat vacant, so a middle-aged white “gentleman” rose and offered her his seat. “Thank you sir,” she replied, “I do not wish to impose.” “Not at all, madame,” he insisted. In the meantime, two “vulgar” and “boorish” young men uttered some comments about “niggers riding in the cars.” One approached the gentleman who had given up his seat and asked him if he was “fond of niggers.” “I am not aware,” responded the gentleman, “that this respectable, well-dressed and well behaved colored woman, who is old enough perhaps to be your grandmother, is a nigger.” “Well she’s a nigger anyhow, and niggers oughtn’t to be allowed to ride in the cars.” “Oh shut up,” interposed a rough looking working man, “you’re more of a nigger than she is.”²⁹

The scene captures what Radical Republicans, both black and white, hoped would be the larger narrative of the desegregation of the streetcars. There is clearly a contrast between the “respectable, well-dressed and well behaved” black woman and the “vulgar” and “boorish” young ruffians. The white gentleman, of course, gives up his seat and is willing to defend the woman against insult; he links racial tolerance with manly respect for women. If the primary defender of racial tolerance is the white gentleman, the day is finally won when his—and the “respectable” woman’s—argument wins over the “rough looking working man.” It is he who makes explicit the challenge to a race-based hierarchy represented in the contrast between the black woman and the two white men.

Not all Philadelphia Republicans were as supportive of black equality as were the editors of the *Press*. Sidney George Fisher remained opposed to the rights of black Philadelphians, though he saw black suffrage as just punishment for the disloyalty of the South. “This is poetical justice, and though I hate negro suffrage and all . . . as much as anyone,” he wrote in his diary, “I cannot help a feeling of satisfaction at beholding it.” Philadelphia Democrats seem to have recognized that many Republicans who supported efforts to defend blacks in the South would not support similar efforts in their own city. Philadelphia Democrats had tried to frame the elections of 1866 as a contest over black rights, even insisting that “Every man who votes for Geary or for a Radical Candidate for

²⁹ *Press*, Mar. 25, 1867.

Congress, votes as surely for Negro Suffrage and Negro Equality, as if they were printed on his ballot" (figure 1). In the wake of the desegregation of the streetcars, they attacked the pro-black sympathies of Radicals with a renewed vigor. "If the Republican Party in this state is in favor of Negro suffrage," argued the *Democratic Age*, "let them fly that flag openly. So far they have not done so. Ours is a white man's flag, and white men will uphold and protect it." Philadelphia Democrats sought to link the efforts of Radicals in Congress to reconstruct the South with the efforts of Radicals in the state legislature (and their black allies) to impose racial equality on the city of Philadelphia. They celebrated the defeat of the Republican Party in Connecticut in spring elections as a rejection of "Connecticut Reconstruction." As the editors of the *Age* explained, "they would not bow down to the mandates of a minority faction, which having desolated the southern portion of the nation, threatened to invade and subjugate the North."³⁰

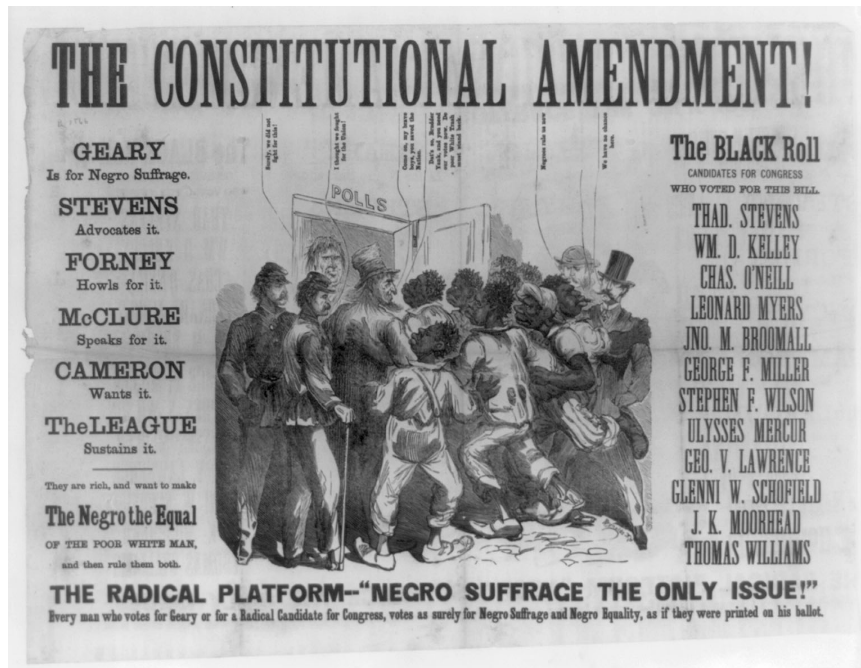


Figure 1. "The Constitutional Amendment! Geary Is for Negro Suffrage . . .," political cartoon, 1866. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

³⁰ Fisher, *Philadelphia Perspective*, 526; "The Constitutional Amendment! Geary Is for Negro Suffrage . . .," political cartoon, 1866; *Age*, Mar. 8 and Apr. 3, 1867.



Figure 2. "The Two Platforms," 1866. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

While black Philadelphians shifted their emphasis from desegregation to suffrage, Democrats sought to exploit differences within the Republican coalition. Radicals continued to trumpet the rights of black Philadelphians, but the more conservative editors of the *North American* sought to defend the Reconstruction of the southern states. Yet, they downplayed "local issues," and made no mention of legislation concerning blacks in Philadelphia. As the October elections drew near, the Democratic press sought both to emphasize the inconsistency in the Republican ranks and to portray the efforts of local Republicans as an effort to "reconstruct" Philadelphia. "They have declared that the negroes shall vote in the southern states . . . Proceeding upon this assumed power, they now declare their intention to force negro suffrage upon this state." While Philadelphia Democrats had a long tradition of tarring their opponents as the friends of African Americans (whether or not such an allegation was justified), the use of federal power to enforce black equality in the South, and the specter of the same in the North, gave their racial appeals new resonance.³¹

³¹ Minutes of the Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League, Aug. 15, 1867, ANHSC, reel 1; *North American*, Oct. 1 and 7, 1867; *Age*, Oct. 4 and 5, 1867. On Philadelphia Democrats' tradi-

The Democratic Party carried the day, winning election of its entire local ticket, headed by Peter Lyle, its candidate for sheriff. "We have been defeated," admitted the *North American*. Philadelphia Democrats celebrated their first significant electoral victory since the start of the Civil War. Amid the usual allegations of fraud at the polls, Republicans attributed the defeat to honest—and healthy—disagreements within the party and insisted that "the next election, learned through the results of this, will bring our strength together again." Sidney Fisher was more specific and assigned blame for his party's loss to "Negro suffrage and Sunday liquor laws . . . The gross corruption and mismanagement of our city government had nothing to do with the result in this city." Fisher, disgusted with the radical politics of his own Republican Party, had, in fact, refused to vote at all.³²

Fisher was not alone in his assessment of the election results. "*The opposition to Negro Suffrage in the South*, as well as the North, has been the principle cause of our triumph everywhere," insisted ex-president James Buchanan. "Abandon this, & we are gone." The *National Anti-Slavery Standard* worried that the election would lead to the decline of Republican support for black equality. "The milk-and-water Republicans" immediately sought to form a new party, it noted. "The essential characteristic of the proposed new party is the omission of the negro." A piece of postelection satire celebrated "The Great Negro Party—Born, 1856—Died, Oct. 8, 1867" (figure 3).³³

Nevertheless, Radicals in the Pennsylvania legislature did not back off in their advocacy of black equality. In January 1868, John Hickman, a state legislator from Chester County (just southwest of Philadelphia), introduced a resolution to strike from the state constitution the word "white" while also adding a literacy requirement. When it finally came to a vote, however, a majority of Republicans joined the Democrats in defeating it by a tally of sixty-eight to fourteen. William Kelley scolded

tional racial politics, see Eric Ledell Smith's discussion of the partisan political context of the disfranchisement of black Pennsylvanians in "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1837–1838," *Pennsylvania History* 65 (1998): 279–99.

³² Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 834; *North American*, Oct., 10, 1867; Fisher, *Philadelphia Perspective*, 533.

³³ James Buchanan to Augustus Schell, Nov. 9, 1867, in *The Works of James Buchanan, Comprising His Speeches, State Papers, and Private Correspondence*, ed. John Bassett Moore (New York, 1960); *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Oct. 19, 1867; "The Salt River Gazette—Extra. Wednesday, Oct 9. 1867," political cartoon, 1866, Library Company of Philadelphia.

his fellow Pennsylvania Republicans for denying “the humanity and the immortality of the great mass of mankind, for the majority of the human race are of those shades of complexion and that character of blood to which, while asserting the equal rights of man, they deny equality before the law.”³⁴



Figure 3. “The Salt River Gazette—Extra. Wednesday, Oct 9. 1867.” Library Company of Philadelphia.

³⁴ Brown, “Pennsylvania and the Rights of the Negro,” 51–52; *Congressional Globe*, 40th Cong., 2nd sess., Mar. 18, 1868, 1971.

The Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League remained active. Its "Address to the Colored People of the South," published in 1868, warned the freedmen of the South against "our old insidious foe, Colonization." In the years following the end of the Civil War, various organizations, both in the North and in the South, continued to advocate and promote the colonization of African Americans. Some southern freedmen, in the face of rising racial violence, saw emigration to the west coast of Africa as their best option. The Equal Rights League insisted that attempts to induce freedmen to leave the United States were intended to undermine the efforts of Radical Republicans to support racial equality.³⁵ Clearly, the members of the Equal Rights League saw that their own fight for equality in Pennsylvania was inextricably bound to national political struggles over the place of African Americans in postwar society.

The *Christian Recorder* also drew parallels between conflict in the South and the suffrage struggles of black Philadelphians. It termed recent riots in Georgia "an expression of the old rebel and pro-slavery malignity, encouraged by the forbearance of the North and by the open sympathies of the Democratic party." Such violence, argued the *Recorder*, only served to aid the cause of black suffrage. "In the blindness of their passion, they fail to see how every such murderous deed reacts upon the North, repels quiet thinking people from the idea of trusting power into such hands." The actions of these individuals led those who would otherwise have been opposed to black suffrage to instead support "the elevation of the loyal of whatever complexion." Black Philadelphians continued to emphasize loyalty as a prime argument for black suffrage.³⁶

In the October 1868 elections, Philadelphia Democrats sought to repeat their successes of the previous year. This time the prize at the top of the ticket was the mayor's office. Mayor McMichael declined to run for a second term, and in his place Republicans nominated Hector Tyndale. Democrats ran veteran politician Daniel Fox. Once again, their campaign leaned heavily on their opposition to black equality. The Democratic Age warned that, if given the chance, Republicans would do in Philadelphia what they were doing in the South. "Continue the Radicals in authority and what security is there that Negro suffrage and equality will not be

³⁵ "Address to the Colored People of the South," Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League records, ANHSC, reel 1; on the colonization movement in the postwar South, see Claude A. Clegg III, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 249–70.

³⁶ *Christian Recorder*, Oct. 3, 1868.

forced upon the North as it has been upon the South by 'a small rectangular piece of steel.'"³⁷

Philadelphia Radicals continued to advocate for black equality, but the more conservative *North American* backed off somewhat. Its extensive lists of reasons "Why" the voters of Philadelphia should vote for the Republican Party referred mostly to economic issues, particularly the protective tariff. The list included no mention of issues relating to black equality or even to Reconstruction. The *North American* did cite the wartime "disloyalty" of Democratic "copperheads," but protection was the overwhelming theme of its partisan advocacy.³⁸

The Democrats focused on what appeared to be the Republican weakness—refusing to fight an election on the grounds of economic issues. "The Radicals in our state legislature passed the law which forced negroes into the cars against the will of the majority of the people," insisted an editorial in the *Age*. The Democrats of Philadelphia, on the other hand, stood with the people and with the constitution. "The people will decide whether negroes shall vote and hold office in Pennsylvania, in defiance of the Constitution of the state." On the morning of the election, the paper explained that the election hinged on one question: "Do you believe there is a difference between the negro and the white man?"³⁹

Once again, the Democratic Party of Philadelphia won convincing victories at the polls. Fox defeated Tyndale by a margin of two thousand votes. Democrats elected seven men to the state house versus the Republicans' eleven (as compared to three versus fifteen just two years before). The *North American* suggested that the result was largely determined by fraud. According to an early twentieth-century historian of Philadelphia, Democratic sheriff Peter Lyle had sworn in "a large posse of bartenders, brothel keepers, and proprietors of rat and dog pits" to police the polls and allowed voters imported from Baltimore to swell the Democratic vote.⁴⁰ Considering the roughly 50 percent increase in turnout over the previous mayoral election, there is no doubt some truth to allegations of fraud. On the other hand, despite the Democratic gains of 1867, much of the city remained in Republican hands. Even if

³⁷ *Age*, Oct. 3, 1868.

³⁸ *North American*, Oct. 3 and 6, 1868.

³⁹ *Age*, Oct. 5 and 13, 1868.

⁴⁰ *North American*, Oct. 15, 1868; Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer, *Philadelphia: A History of the City and Its People: A Record of 225 Years* (Philadelphia, 1912), 2:399.

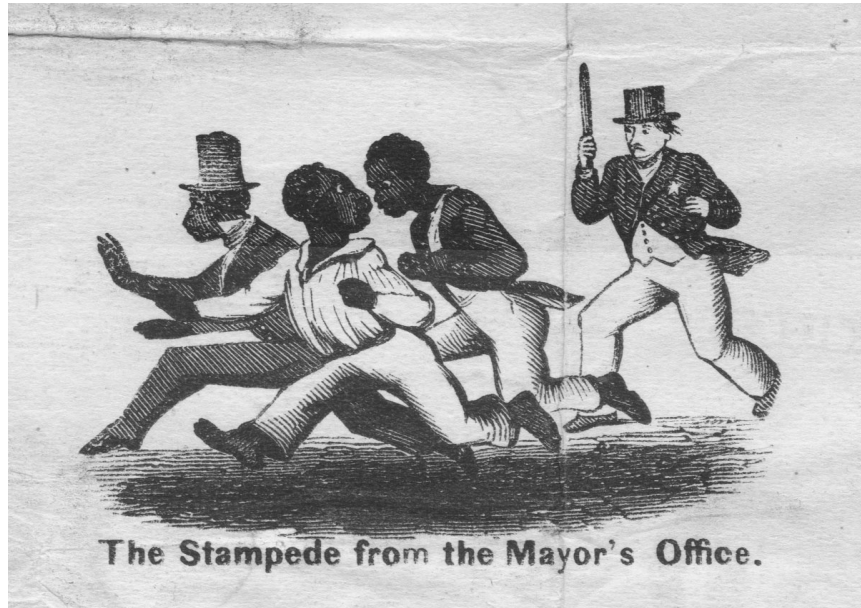


Figure 4. Detail from the “Salt River Express. Wednesday, October 14, 1868.” Library Company of Philadelphia.

Republicans had not yet perfected the techniques that would establish their dominance over the city in the next decade, it is hard to imagine that their own vote was not inflated somewhat.

Alexander McClure, Republican politician and future leader of the Liberal faction of the Philadelphia party, suggested that Tyndale lost because he was “not entirely orthodox in faith,” and he noted that the results of the election “gave little promise of future Republican mastery in the city that was claimed to be the great loyal city of the nation.” There is no question that the results of the election cannot be attributed to a single cause. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Philadelphia’s Democratic Party had been victorious for two years in a row, running primarily on its opposition to black equality. A postelection cartoon titled “The Stampede from the Mayor’s Office” depicted three black men being chased by a white police officer (figure 4).⁴¹

⁴¹ Alexander Kelly McClure, *Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1905), 233; “Salt River Express. Wednesday, October 14, 1868,” political cartoon, 1868, Library Company of Philadelphia.

If some Philadelphia Republicans had begun to de-emphasize the party's support for African American rights, black Philadelphians continued to press for the right to vote. Following the overwhelming defeat of the suffrage bill in the Pennsylvania legislature, they increasingly focused on lobbying Radical Republicans in Congress. Jacob C. White petitioned Philadelphia Radical congressman William D. Kelley to support a proposed amendment to the constitution that would guarantee black men the right to vote. "I am happy to inform you," replied Kelley on December 7, 1868, "that I introduced just such an amendment this morning." Kelley would later claim responsibility for helping to guide the amendment through the Judiciary Committee.⁴²

Early in 1869, Congress submitted the suffrage amendment to the states for ratification. Democratic leaders in Pennsylvania, once again framing themselves as the defenders of popular opinion, argued that the matter should not be decided by the state legislature but should be submitted to a popular referendum. Instead, in March, the Republicans in both houses voted to ratify the Fifteenth Amendment in a strictly party-line vote. Philadelphia Democrats denounced Republicans for going back on their insistence in the 1868 election that "the question of suffrage in all the loyal states properly belongs to the people of those states." Democrats played on the divisions within the Republican Party on the question of black equality, refusing to allow conservative Republicans to dodge the issue. "They want to invest the Radical majority in Congress with the power to make Chinese and negro voters in Pennsylvania at pleasure," trumpeted the *Age*. The conservative *North American* offered a weak defense of black suffrage, suggesting that Democrats opposed the enfranchising of black voters out of fear that they would all vote for the Republican Party.⁴³

In response to the party's waning fortunes, especially in Philadelphia, Republicans in the state legislature passed a registry law on April 19, 1869. This law, which applied only to the city of Philadelphia, placed the city's entire voting administration in the hands of the Republican Party. The Board of Canvassers, under the direction of Republican district attorney William B. Mann, had the final say on who was eligible to vote. The law's purpose was to combat the fraud that had supposedly led the

⁴² William D. Kelley to Jacob C. White Jr., Dec. 7, 1868, ANHSC, reel 1; Brown, "William D. Kelley," 329.

⁴³ Brown, "Pennsylvania and the Rights of the Negro," 52; *Age*, Oct. 6, 1869; *North American*, Oct. 5 and 6, 1869.

Democrats to victory in the last two local elections. In reality, it allowed the Republican Party of Philadelphia to establish control over the city. "It was this registry law," wrote reformer Alexander McClure, that led to "the debauchery of the ballot."⁴⁴

There is little doubt that the act helped stop the decline of the Republican Party in the state's largest city. Republican governor John White Geary won reelection based on a solid victory in Philadelphia (95 percent of his margin of victory came from the city). Philadelphia Democrats had run, once again, on their opposition to black equality. "The next movement of Geary and his friends," insisted the *Age*, "will be to force [the negro] into the legislature, the jury box, upon the bench and into hotels and all places of amusement." They attributed their failure to "the neglect of duty and apathy of our friends." Others, however, insisted that Republican victory, and the surprisingly low turnout, was a result of the suppression of the Democratic vote under the registry law.⁴⁵

By the middle of 1870, the efforts of Republican leaders of Philadelphia to counter the party's decline in the city had produced their own problems. After taking beatings at the hands of the Democratic Party for two years over the issue of black equality, Republicans had once again seized control of Philadelphia. In 1865, James McManes, a Republican political organizer, had become a trustee of the city's Gas Trust. From this post, he established himself as perhaps the most powerful and influential man in Philadelphia, controlling thousands of patronage jobs, not to mention lucrative government contracts. By 1870, many considered him the "King" of Philadelphia, and using the registry law, he and a few others dominated the city's politics, establishing a machine to rival William M. Tweed's in New York.⁴⁶

The success of Philadelphia's Republican machine was not without its critics. In the summer of 1870, a group of Independent Republicans decided to support its own candidates for the fall elections. According to Alexander McClure, who became a leader of this group, the reasons for the disillusionment with the regular Republican Party were several. "The reconstruction policy of the government as administered under Grant became especially offensive to many of the most thoughtful Republicans."

⁴⁴ Erwin Stanley Bradley, *The Triumph of Militant Republicanism: A Study of Pennsylvania and Presidential Politics, 1860-1872* (Philadelphia, 1964), 364; McClure, *Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania*, 239.

⁴⁵ Bradley, *Triumph of Militant Republicanism*, 354-56; *Age*, Oct. 11 and 16, 1869.

⁴⁶ Beers, "Centennial City," 438-39.

Others were alienated by the “severe factional mastery in Grant’s administration.” Above all, however, McClure cited the corrupt party management of Philadelphia under the registry law as his own reason for rejecting the party. The Liberal Republicans were concerned about corruption in the Reconstruction South, but they were more concerned about the political situation at home. McClure also argued that the Republican Party’s support for the Fifteenth Amendment diminished its appeal. “There is no reason to doubt that the advent of colored suffrage was the chief, if not the sole, obstacle to Republican success in the state in the contest of 1870.” Democrats sought to depict the newly enfranchised black voters as the tools of corrupt Republican politicians. In a curious inversion of the Democratic depiction of Reconstruction in the South, they alleged that black men were surreptitiously being shipped north from Baltimore in order to “vote the radical ticket” and to “kill any colored man that voted for a democrat.”⁴⁷

This was the atmosphere in which black Philadelphians were to cast their first votes since 1838. Democrats declined to run candidates for most offices, hoping for a majority from the combined Democratic and Liberal Republican vote. Radicals, recognizing that the defection of Liberals posed a threat, even with the advantage of the registry law, hoped that the new black voters would take the Liberals’ place. At a meeting held in April 1870 to celebrate the success of the Fifteenth Amendment, Octavius Catto declared that “the black man knows on which side of the line to vote.” The *Radical Press* printed an address issued by the State Equal Rights League calling upon all black men to support the Republican Party and to reject “any Democratic, Independent or Conservative candidate for office. They are all one and the same.”⁴⁸

Both the *Press* and the conservative *North American* mentioned the Republican Party’s economic issues above all else. The *Press*, however, trumpeted the enfranchisement of black men and offered assurances of their suitability as citizens. It also warned that “The partisan police force of Mayor Fox will no doubt interfere in every possible manner with the election tomorrow.” The *North American*, on the other hand, while supporting the regular Republican ticket, entirely avoided the issue of black voting, offering the vague statement, “municipal independence is of as

⁴⁷ Bradley, *Triumph of Militant Republicanism*, 359, 367–69; McClure, *Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania*, 237–39, 293, 441; *Sun* (Baltimore), Oct. 10, 1870.

⁴⁸ Brown, “Pennsylvania and the Rights of the Negro,” 53; *Public Ledger*, Apr. 27, 1870; *Press*, Oct. 6, 1870.

much consequence as state independence, though of late our cities have become the footballs of state legislatures.”⁴⁹

On the morning of the election, the *Press* predicted that there would be violence at the polls. Nevertheless, the Radical editors of the *Press* observed, “it is the right and duty of every colored man to get in his vote today.” They continued, “To die at the polls in defense of civil freedom is not a less grand or acceptable sacrifice than death on the field.” By noon, it seemed as if the words of the *Press* might have been prophetic. Recognizing the potentially explosive situation on their hands, the election authorities in one ward decided that white and black voters would vote separately, first white, then black. A rumor spread that the black voters, who had formed a line to wait their turn, would not be allowed to vote at all. According to the *Press*, Mayor Fox’s police force took the lead in keeping black voters from the polls, and “it became evident that a superior authority was needed,” both to prevent violence and to ensure the right of black men to vote. Under the terms of the Force Act, which had been intended to curb the terrorist activity of the Ku Klux Klan in the South, General E. M. Gregory, U.S. marshal for eastern Pennsylvania, sent a company of marines to Philadelphia under Colonel Forney. William Armstrong had a different take: “Voted Dem Ticket—No Niggers visible at our division. . . . Forney’s drunken son took possession of the polls at 5th and Lombard with a company of marines. US Marshalls also controlled the election—illegal nigger repeaters were arrested after voting 3 times. Many other similar outrages were perpetrated.”⁵⁰

The election results were mixed. Incumbent Republican congressman for the Second District Charles O’Neill lost to the Liberal Republican candidate, John V. Creeley. Colonel Robert Dechert scored an unexpected victory against a Republican incumbent to give the Democrats a one-seat majority in the state senate. For the most part, however, the regular Republicans held onto their seats. Alexander McClure predictably attributed this success to the registry law and to “the negroes” who “were aroused on the subject.” Mayor Fox telegraphed the governor, denouncing the decision to send federal troops to police the city. “I am amply able to maintain the peace of the city,” he insisted. The Democratic press questioned the constitutionality of the presence of federal troops on the streets

⁴⁹ *Press*, Oct. 10, 1870; *North American*, Oct. 10, 1870.

⁵⁰ *Press*, Oct. 12, 1870; Brown, “Pennsylvania and the Rights of the Negro,” 53; Silcox, “Nineteenth Century Philadelphia Black Militant,” 72; Entry for Oct. 11, 1870, William G. Armstrong diary.

of Philadelphia.⁵¹

Throughout the North, the Democratic press cited the events in Philadelphia as proof that the tyranny of the federal government over the South was leading inexorably toward a similar tyranny in the North. It was predicted, ominously, that New York would be the next city in which federal troops would be used to secure Republican victory. *Pomeroy's Democrat* printed a satirical letter of President Grant's cousin, "Terence McGrant," insisting that the president was being pressured into sending troops to New York, though he did not want to do so, because "he sent throops to North Carolina, and they helped the Democrats get the most terrible majority ever known." Less comically, the *Macon Weekly Telegraph* predicted a backlash against the Republican Party now that northerners were suffering that which had been intended only for the South.⁵²

That backlash came quite soon to Pennsylvania. In his New Year's message, erstwhile Radical Republican governor John White Geary called for the end of the use of troops to patrol polling places throughout the South. He linked this practice with events in Philadelphia. As early as January 1870, Geary had privately expressed his frustration with having to carry the burden of the "sins of both state and national Governments, the questions relating to reconstruction, the 15th Amendment with the whole question of Negro Suffrage." Events in Philadelphia gave him an opportunity to escape from these troublesome issues. "At the last October election, troops were stationed in Philadelphia for the avowed purpose of enforcing the election laws." This was done, he insisted, "without the consent or even the knowledge of the civil authorities of either the city or state, and without any expressed desire on the part of the citizens." He went on to call the use of federal troops to police the election in Philadelphia "*a measure which meets my unqualified disapproval.*"⁵³

Both the *Press* and the *North American* printed the governor's message, but they did not comment on the section concerning the use of troops in Philadelphia. The *Age* displayed no such reticence. "It is cer-

⁵¹ Bradley, *Triumph of Militant Republicanism*, 359; Brown, "Pennsylvania and the Rights of the Negro," 53; McClure, *Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania*, 284-86; *Press*, Oct. 13, 1870; *Age*, Jan. 5, 1871.

⁵² *New Hampshire Patriot*, Oct. 19, 1870; *Sun*, Oct. 21, 1870; *Pomeroy's Democrat* (New York), Oct. 26, 1870; *Macon (GA) Weekly Telegraph*, Oct. 25, 1870.

⁵³ *North American*, Jan. 5, 1871; John White Geary to Rev. Edward R. Geary, Jan. 7, 1870, John White Geary Collection, Pennsylvania State Archives.

tainly an encouraging sign of the times that our radical governor wakes up, though rather tardily, to the military outrage perpetrated in this state, upon the election day this October last." It returned to an old theme, noting that "it was a part of the general conspiracy to obtrude the military power into elections, and to extend, gradually to the North, the system of military coercion that was introduced in the Southern states."⁵⁴ This section of Geary's speech was widely reproduced in papers throughout the nation and provoked predictions of the demise of Radical Republicanism. "When such pronounced and influential Radicals join in the condemnation of this Congressional usurpation," insisted Georgia's *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, "we are encouraged to hope for its speedy repeal."⁵⁵

All factions prepared for an October election in which the Democrat-controlled police would be the only force securing the Philadelphia polls. On October 6, an item in the *Age* declared that "negro repeaters are the hope of the 'Ring' in the 5th, 7th and 8th wards." Another report noted "the colonizers and repeaters who have congregated in the vicinity of Tenth and Lombard Streets, are being watched" and warned that "any attempt to cast an illegal vote, in the First Precinct of the Seventh Ward, will be visited with condign punishment." Later that week, the paper stated ominously that "negro repeaters will receive a warm welcome at the polls tomorrow."⁵⁶

Philadelphia's Republicans sought to rally black voters to the cause. "Colored citizens!" announced the *Press*, "Do not be intimidated by your Democratic enemies An organized system of violence may be expected tomorrow." In response to the criticism of Liberal Republicans, the party also sought to assume the mantle of reform. The proposed reforms would "banish vice and crime from our city," but they would especially "put an end to the frauds upon the ballot box by the Fourth Ward Democracy," which Republicans compared to Boss Tweed's Tammany Hall.⁵⁷

On election day, violence erupted between black and white voters—unsurprisingly, in the very areas where the *Age* had predicted it would. Octavius Catto left the Institute for Colored Youth, which closed at the first sign of disturbance, in order to go to the polls. White ruffians threatened him a number of times. Finally, as he was walking down Ninth

⁵⁴ *Press*, Jan. 5, 1871; *North American*, Jan. 5, 1871; *Age*, Jan. 5, 1871.

⁵⁵ *New Hampshire Patriot*, Jan. 11, 1871; *Weekly Patriot* (Harrisburg), Jan. 11, 1871; *Eastern Argus* (Portland, ME), Jan. 26, 1871; *Columbus (GA) Ledger-Enquirer*, Jan. 8, 1871.

⁵⁶ *Age*, Oct. 6 and 9, 1871.

⁵⁷ *Press*, Oct. 9 and 10, 1871.

Street toward South Street, a white man came up behind him and called out his name. Catto, who had with him an unloaded gun, moved away from the man later identified as Frank Kelly, an associate of Democratic politician William McMullen. Kelly shot him three times, killing him instantly, and then fled the scene. Two other black men were also killed in election day violence.⁵⁸

Republican newspapers blamed the day's violence on Mayor Fox. The *Press* lamented the death of Catto, who "believed in his race, and in the great principles of that party which has always championed it. And for this cause he died." The *North American* observed "how base and dastardly the police had really become, let the record of yesterday's riot bear witness." The *Democratic Age*, on the other hand, blamed the violence on "colored radical roughs" and praised the conduct of Mayor Fox and the police force. "Radical negroes," it claimed, "beat their own race from the polls, at the late election, who desired to vote the Democratic ticket, and that was the cause of the disturbance. The blood shed is on their heads." Even the *Age*, though, had complimentary words for Catto, "a man of culture and prominence among our colored citizens," though it suggested that he had probably instigated the conflict that cost him his life.⁵⁹

At a mass meeting on October 21, black and white citizens protested the events of the past election and called for an inquiry into the police force's actions. The investigation resulted in no convictions. The death of one man was ruled "accidental," owing to the fact that he had a chronic kidney disorder, which eventually would have killed him anyway. "It was common in those days," noted Alexander McClure, "for Republican speakers to accuse the South of hindering negro suffrage by violence, and at times by murder." But in Philadelphia, "the Republican citadel of the state, three murders were committed . . . solely because they attempted to exercise their rights as citizens and electors, and not a single criminal was brought to punishment."⁶⁰

McClure would become a leader of the Pennsylvania Liberal Republicans, who sought to prevent the reelection of President Grant in 1872. Historians have long recognized the importance of these reformers to the decline of Radicalism and have agreed that the revolt of the Liberal

⁵⁸ Silcox, "Nineteenth Century Philadelphia Black Militant," 72–73; Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish became White* (New York, 1995), 171.

⁵⁹ *Press*, Oct. 11, 1871; *North American*, Oct. 11, 1871; *Age*, Oct. 11, 1871.

⁶⁰ Silcox, "Nineteenth Century Philadelphia Black Militant," 73; Ignatiev, *How the Irish became White*, 171; McClure, *Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania*, 287–89.

Republican movement, in the words of historian Michael Les Benedict, “would sap the [Republican] party of much of its intellectual vigor and its crusading spirit.” They have, of course, disagreed over the causes of this defection. In Philadelphia, the Liberals fused their critique of corruption and federal control in the former Confederate states with a critique of the same in their own city and state. They called for an end to Reconstruction, both North and South. Not only did they criticize the use of federal force to police elections—a force that had been a necessary guarantee of the right of black men to vote—but their denunciations of corruption implicitly leaned on the association of black voters with allegedly fraudulent Republican electoral practices. The quest to defeat Grant was, of course, unsuccessful, but in the long run, Liberals helped to undermine Radical Republicanism in Pennsylvania. Many of the conservatives who remained regular Republicans had never been supportive of black equality, except as a means of undermining the power of disloyal former Confederates in the South. By the late 1870s, even staunch Radicals, such as William D. Kelley, drifted away from the fight for black equality, and in 1877, the once-Radical *Press* declared that the nation was “weary of sectional agitations and sectional issues.”⁶¹

The riots of 1871 marked the retreat of the Philadelphia Republican Party from aggressive local defense of black equality as well. Black Philadelphians remained an important part of the Republican electoral coalition, but the violence at the polls led to a general retreat from most other political activity. According to one late nineteenth-century history of Philadelphia, “the shooting of Catto awakened a bitterness of feeling in his race which was not allayed for years afterward.” In 1872, the Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League moved its headquarters from Philadelphia to Reading. Isaiah Wears assumed leadership of the city’s black Republicans, but he exhibited none of Catto’s charisma and steered a cautious course. It would not be until 1887 that the state legislature would pass a law to fine schools that continued to exclude black students. In the Republican city of Philadelphia, blacks were expected to vote, but they were largely denied political office. There would be no black police officers in Philadelphia until the 1880s. If Philadelphia did continue to

⁶¹ Benedict, “Reform Republicans and the Retreat from Reconstruction,” 54–55; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Apr. 22 and May 7, 1872; Brown, “William D. Kelley,” 329; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 577; *Press*, Mar. 28, 1877.

make progress in its support of black equality, it lagged behind much of the North.⁶²

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The narrative is familiar: black resistance—local white intransigence—federal intervention—cries of corruption—redemption and retreat. If the events of Reconstruction Philadelphia do parallel those that occurred in the South, it is important, however, not to take this comparison too far. The Republican Party of Philadelphia ceased to pursue black equality aggressively, but it did defend the rights that had already been won. Black Philadelphians were not deprived of the right to vote—if only because they tended to support the Republican Party. Nevertheless, the promise of the achievements of black Philadelphians and their Radical Republican allies settled into a long, slow, gradual compromise with white resistance to equal rights.

The retreat from the Radical defense of black equality in Philadelphia occurred not primarily because of Radical support for economic redistribution in the South, as Montgomery and Richardson would suggest, or because the freedmen of the South were increasingly perceived as economic radicals. White Philadelphians were primarily interested in the actions of their own black neighbors, who insisted that it was not only the South that was in need of reconstruction. Philadelphia Democrats picked up on these links in order to undermine the already lukewarm support of many conservative Republicans for black equality and to appeal to Liberal Republicans concerned with corruption, both in the South and in Philadelphia. This conflict, and the reaction of the Philadelphia Republican Party, would continue to shape city politics and the role of black Philadelphians within it for years to come.

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⁶² Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 837; Brown, "Pennsylvania and the Rights of the Negro," 53–57; Silcox, "Nineteenth Century Philadelphia Black Militant," 74–75; McClure, *Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania*, 289.