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*Friends, Wives, and Strivings:
Networks and Community Values
Among Nineteenth-Century
Philadelphia Afroamerican Elites*

EARLY IN 1863, soon after the Lincoln administration had lifted the ban against black troops in the Union army, the Philadelphia Committee to Recruit Colored Troops issued a broadside, an imposing four-by-eight foot document that summoned black brothers “to arms.”¹ The document—listing as sponsors fifty-five black men, fifty-four Philadelphians, plus Frederick Douglass of Rochester, N.Y.—was a part of a recruitment campaign that succeeded in raising in Pennsylvania almost one-fifth of the 50,000 free-state Afroamericans who served in the Union army during the Civil War. The fifty-four black Philadelphians who lent the weight of their public reputations to this effort to recruit troops were men who had been “successful” in a city that was neither especially brotherly nor loving. Still, the lives they were able to carve out of an inhospitable Philadelphia are instructive about the development of Afroamerican communities in antebellum American cities.

By 1860 there had developed an Afroamerican “elite” in Philadelphia, a caste largely segregated from white counterparts—though in

¹ Committee to Recruit Colored Troops, “Men of Color, to Arms! Now or Never” (Philadelphia, 1863.)

contact with white elites in some critical and significant aspects. Cut off by discrimination and powerlessness from the white elite, the black elite was equally separate from the mass of urban Afroamericans. It constituted a black "upper class," which, molded together by a self-conscious belief that its successes and behaviors could significantly affect the life-chances of *all* Afroamericans, had begun to demand to be addressed as "gentlemen and ladies of colour."² Indeed, the Philadelphia Afro-american elite's strivings for upward mobility, as the example which it hoped the masses might follow, had earned some international attention, albeit in the form of ridicule.³

The fifty-four Philadelphia sponsors of the broadside were, in 1863, spokesmen for the city's black elite, espousing ideals of patriotism and public service as part of their program for full inclusion in American society.⁴ Collectively, their biographies represent the experiences and values that characterized a group of several hundred Afroamericans in Philadelphia who were literate, ambitious and "race conscious" (i.e., convinced—however myopically—that on their success or failure hinged the future opportunities of all their Afroamerican siblings). From their lives we can develop a profile of the characteristics by which a black Philadelphian sought to acquire and maintain his status as a "gentleman of colour."

The recent work of a number of scholars has alerted us to the distinguishing characteristics and ideologies of a nineteenth-century white elite.⁵ As part of identifying such elites among white Americans, scholars have outlined the paths to success and the ingredients of the "good life." The specifics varied with era and locale, but generally a white man in nineteenth-century America could be expected to pass through certain family, economic, educational, marital, occupational,

² Emma Lapsansky, "Since They Got Those Separate Churches Afroamericans and Racism in Jacksonian Philadelphia," *American Quarterly*, 22 (Spring, 1980), 58, [J. Zieger,] "Wealth and Biography of the Wealthy Citizens of Philadelphia Estimated to be Worth \$50,000 and Upwards" (Philadelphia, 1845), 8

³ Lapsansky, 60

⁴ *Ibid.*, Philip S. Foner, *The Voice of Black America, Major Speeches by Blacks in the United States, 1797-1973* (New York, 1972), Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865* (Philadelphia, 1979)

⁵ See, for example, E. Digby Baltzell, *Philadelphia Gentlemen* (Glencoe, Ill., 1958) and Alan M. Zachary, "Social Disorder and the Philadelphia Elite Before Jackson," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XCIX, 3 (July, 1975)

public service and/or geographic corridors to arrive finally at the inner core, where often his daily activities were distant, if not divorced, from his income. Wealth was an important ingredient, but the right combination of other characteristics could mitigate the need for money. By definition, however, a member of the white elite was in a position to wield significant power over the life-chances of the many who were less powerful than he. The white woman's development was the passive accompaniment to the man's. She was to be dependent, self-effacing and, since she would marry into power, to have no need for it herself.⁶ This elite community constituted America's leaders, capable of making sweeping policy decisions that could—as with Pennsylvania's disfranchisement of Afroamericans in the 1830s—underscore the weakness of the underclass. But the relationship between the powerful and the powerless is dynamic, not one-directional. Nor was oppression complete. While black Philadelphians operated under severe circumscription, such restraints did not rob them of the will or ability to exercise preferences which in turn helped to define the parameters of those restraints.⁷

A black leader in the nineteenth century acquired prominence among his peers (and sometimes in the white community as well) by way of a series of passages that often differed from those of his white counterpart. Several patterns of those differences are worth reemphasis here. First, until the Civil War and Reconstruction opened a new avenue, no black person could gain prominence and influence through official public service. Second, throughout the nineteenth century, black leaders always stood in the contradictory status of being both “elite” and “working class;” that is, their upper-class status never exempted them from earning a living by selling their labor. Also, wealth, dependent as it was on so many variables defined and dominated by the white world,

⁶ See, for example, the discussion of white women's roles and the struggle to broaden them, in Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977), 197-206.

⁷ For similar discussions of the power of the “powerless” see Michael Feldberg, “The Crowd in Philadelphia History: A Comparative Perspective,” *Labor History*, 15, (Summer, 1974), David Grimsted, “Rioting in its Jacksonian Setting,” *American Historical Review*, 77 (April, 1972), Herbert C. Gutman, “Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919,” *American Historical Review*, 78 (June, 1973), David Johnson, *Policing the Urban Underground: the Impact of Crime on the Development of the American Police, 1880-1887* (Philadelphia, 1979.)

evidently had less importance for black elites than for whites. Status was conferred more on the basis of personal qualities than on possessions or background. Likewise, "power" in the black community never came from the manipulation of others' wealth. Blacks were not bankers, insurance brokers, railroad moguls. Though they were sometimes landlords, deriving substantial income from rents, they were always workers, continuing to practice whatever skills they possessed. Inherited wealth, which occurred in some cases, did not alter this pattern. For even within the confines of racism and discrimination, these were ambitious and energetic men, and the America of the mid-nineteenth century offered few outlets for the energies of ambitious black men. The energy that these men put into voluntary organizations also suggests that these men worked, in part, because there was nothing else challenging for them to do: job, family and organizational commitments provided psychological as well as material well-being in a precarious world.

For the Philadelphia Afroamerican, then, success and the "good life" involved opportunity for prominence, but little chance for power. While education, property ownership or involvement in church or secular intellectual organizations could provide some access to a public forum, in a setting where most blacks—and many whites—lacked these, still "eliteness" in the black community was a limited phenomenon, a blend of three realities. First, the ambitious black man lived with the requirements and pressures of an inhospitable white society. Second, there was the apparent inertia of enslaved or poverty-stricken Afroamericans. These two distractions left little space for the third concern: for the Afroamerican to maximize his own opportunities for self-fulfilling creativity. Hence, artists such as Robert Douglass or Jesse Glasgow were constantly called upon to balance their need for individual accomplishment against the discrimination of white competitors and the pull of responsibility and guilt toward black brothers and sisters in more desperate circumstances.

Recent quantitative studies have given us clues as to the types of work that were most available to urban Afroamericans.⁸ However, quantitative data alone give only hazy outlines of the quality of a person's life.

⁸ Theodore Hershberg, *Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1981).

The shoemaker John W. Simpson who used his discretionary time and money to retain membership in the intellectual Banneker Institute must have had a life that was qualitatively different from his colleague who spent his evenings at the local tavern. In statistical descriptions such differences often are blurred. Similarly, quantitative evidence alone cannot give much insight into the development of the qualities of mind and spirit that lead a man to want to be a leader rather than a follower. From quantitative evidence alone we learn nothing of what work black men and women wanted; how they chose occupations, given the limits of what was available to them; or what lifestyle offered them the most long-range hope or short-range comfort. Yet these are questions of crucial importance in the development of community dynamics.

From the lives of the Philadelphia members of the Committee to Recruit Colored Troops (the "Committee") we can sketch a profile that touches some of these issues.⁹ If one measure of elite status is the degree of control one can exercise over one's destiny and environment, we can see that most of the committee members led lives over which they had considerable, if not absolute control. At least thirty evidently dwelt in homes they owned, and some owned other pieces of real estate as well: in Philadelphia, in other areas of Pennsylvania, in Washington, D.C., and New Jersey. Such holdings are indicative of connections with and interest in, if not control over, events and people in these places.

In addition to spatial stability, committee members shared other characteristics of being "settled." With but seven exceptions, committee members were fully adult—more than thirty two years of age—and at least half had enough access to health supports (nutrition, re-

⁹ The signers, here re-arranged in alphabetical order: Robert Adger, W.J. Alston, P.J. Armstrong, J. Asher, E.D. Bassett, E. Black, J. Boulden, T.J. Bowers, D.B. Bowser, J.P. Burr, J.P. Campbell, A.S. Cassey, J.W. Cassey, O.V. Catto, W.T. Catto, I.D. Cliff, D. Colley, H. Cropper, E.J. Davis, N.W. Depee, A. Dorsey, T.J. Dorsey, F. Douglass, W. Forten, D. George, J.C. Gibbs, W. Gipson, J.E. Glasgow, J.R. Gordon, A.M. Green, M. Hall, J.P. Johnson, R. Jones, J. McCrummell, H. Minton, J. Needham, J.W. Page, J.W. Price, J.B. Reeves, L.R. Seymour, J.W. Wimpson, S.M. Smith, S. Smith, A.L. Stanford, S. Stewart, J.B. Trusty, D.D. Turner, F. Turner, J. Underdue, L. Weaver, W. Shipper, J.H. Wilson, J.C. White, J.C. White, Jr., J.A. Williams.

The sources from which these and other biographies were collected include the seventh and eighth United States censuses, Wills and inventories on file at the Philadelphia Department of Records, and Housing surveys of the Philadelphia Contributionship and Mutual Assurance Insurance Companies, on file at the Philadelphia Historical Commission.

creation, lack of dangerous environment, for example) to enable them to look forward to an active life that would extend over at least five decades. As an accompaniment to their longevity, all but seven were in stable marriages. Most had wives who were three to ten years younger than they, though several older men married women as much as thirty years younger, and in a few instances the wives were as much as ten years older than their husbands. In one particularly interesting case, a mulatto wife shared the household with a black husband five years younger than she, and she appeared to own the real estate. Mostly, however, older propertied men married younger women; mulatto married mulatto and black married black, except in cases where a black man who was clearly a "good catch" in economic terms, secured a mulatto wife. There is every indication that these marriages, contracted relatively late in life, were a durable part of the public men's mooring.

The women who shared the lives of these men also provide further clues about the durability of the Philadelphia Afroamericans' lifestyle. At least one-fifth of the wives appear to have been literate, and several were teachers themselves. More than half took their own part in the "betterment" of the black community. As church organizers, writers, teachers and performers, they modeled for their own daughters an activist accompaniment to their husbands and fathers. For example, Octavius Catto's fiancée, singer Caroline Lecount, in 1867 successfully challenged a trolley driver who attempted to refuse her passage.¹⁰ Fragmentary evidence from this generation and succeeding ones suggests that these women were expected—and expected themselves—to take leadership and responsibility in their own right, a norm that contrasts sharply with the anticipations of white upper-class women. Whereas in the white community employment for women was the lot of the lower classes, more than half of the wives of committee members combined motherhood, income-producing labor (e.g. as seamstresses, boarding house keepers), public service, and perhaps even lectures or publications.

Most of the households included two or more children and almost all had some dwellers who were not part of the nuclear family. These

¹⁰ In addition to the seventh and eighth censuses, this material was distilled from James de T. Abajian, *Blacks in Selected Newspapers, censuses and other sources: An Index to Names and Subjects* (G.K. Hall, 1977), 3 vols.

“extras” might be southern—or African-born—boarders, servants, and, sometimes, friends. Often these boarders were young people, fifteen to twenty-five years old, from outside Pennsylvania, who had probably come to Philadelphia to acquire occupational skills, and earn some money and some urban sophistication before starting out on their own. In a comparable strategy, the children of the household head seemed to remain, unmarried, in the family of origin well into adulthood. Typical was the household in which fifty-seven year old Ebenezer Black and his fifty-one year old wife Jane managed two employed sons, ages 17 and 24; three younger daughters, ages 11, 13, and 16, who were attending school; and a sixty-year-old washerwoman. In all families that included children in school, daughters were as likely as sons to be receiving instruction.

Aside from the obvious economic advantages of boarders, the extended family/friend composition of many households seems to have been an important aspect of the socialization/education process for black leaders. As was common in the white community, it appears that black families sometimes sent their children to the homes of relatives or friends for educational, occupational, social and/or ideological “finishing”—or, perhaps simply to ease intergenerational tensions at home. The brother of committee member William Forten sent his daughter to New England to live with an Afroamerican abolitionist leader there, attend non-segregated schools, and be exposed to the ideas of William Lloyd Garrison.¹¹ Forten’s nineteen-year-old brother-in-law, Joseph Purvis, had gained first-hand experience in aiding fugitive slaves while a guest in the Columbia, Pa., home of Stephen Smith, another member of the committee.¹² In 1860, twenty-one year old Octavius Catto was living in the home of fellow committee member Lewis Seymour, despite the fact that Catto’s own father lived nearby. In addition, two other of the younger-than-thirty sponsors of the enlistment campaign were out-of-state boarders in the homes of older committee members.¹³

¹¹ Ray Allen Billington, ed., *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten*, (London, 1953; Reprint, 1961), 19.

¹² William Still, *The Underground Railroad*, (Philadelphia, 1879), 740.

¹³ Abajian I, 346, 374, 501; III, 365; Harry C. Silcox, “Nineteenth-Century Black Militant: Octavius V. Catto, 1839-1871,” *Pennsylvania History*, 44 (Jan., 1977), 56; Seventh Census, 4th Ward, 185; 5th ward, 50, 7th ward, 58, 74, 177, 179.

While such boarding arrangements were certainly not unique to the leadership class (or to black people), the quantity and quality of contacts among elites no doubt offered more selectivity to such placements. Insufficient information prevents a full analysis of the ways homeowners and boarders made contact and of the roles of parent networks in such arrangements. The "Jack and Jill Club of America," a twentieth-century national network of urban black parents dedicated to making "proper" contacts for their children, may be a formalization of this nineteenth-century phenomenon. Certainly the segment of the nineteenth-century Philadelphia black community established in the neighborhood of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church was a uniquely urbane, literate and informed model upon which to organize an environment to socialize potential black leaders.

The neighborhood which these men chose to call home—the seventh ward later made famous by Dubois's classic study¹⁴—was, in the mid-nineteenth century, comparable to the Harlem of the 1920s. In addition to a cacophonous array of races and classes, here were located the most prestigious black schools, clubs, churches, businessmen, and distribution points of the Afroamerican press. In the 1840s, Philadelphia experienced violent anti-black rioting, concentrated in the seventh ward, near Bethel Church, at Sixth and Pine Streets, and the Lebanon Cemetary, located three blocks away at Ninth and Lombard Streets.¹⁵ Yet over the next two decades, a number of black leaders relocated from areas where there had not been rioting to this neighborhood. By 1865, thirty-one members of the committee lived within six blocks of the Lebanon Cemetery. Committee member Jacob C. White, and his son Jacob, Jr., who owned the cemetery, took a wide variety of responsibilities for the maintenance of the black community. Their office repeatedly served as an underground railroad stop as well as a communications center and distribution point for newspapers,

¹⁴ William E. B. Dubois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (Philadelphia, 1899, Reprint, New York, 1968), 26-39

¹⁵ Dubois, 27-30, Seventh Census, 4th Ward, 185, 5th Ward, 50, 217, 282, 283, 365, 421, Seventh Ward, 3, 37, 58, 77, 93, 103, 108, 174, 179, 297, 8th ward, 86, 210, Silcox, 56, Still, 700, Banneker Institute Membership Rolls, 1854-1872, Historical Society of Pennsylvania

broadsides, and other information pertinent to black life.¹⁶

Part of the "push" that led these men to choose this location may have been simmering hostility in other neighborhoods, but the continuing presence of black enclaves in other parts of the city argues against this discrimination as the deciding factor. Of equal importance was the "pull" factor: the lectures, meetings, publications, and like-minded companionship available there. For example, the Banneker Institute, which for two decades held weekly meetings, disciplined members not only to a strict code of attendance and behavior but to some intellectual exercise as well, requiring members to become sufficiently informed on a particular topic such as math or astronomy to lecture to the other members.¹⁷

This Philadelphia black community was apparently one that attracted talented men from other places also. Of the forty-two committee men for whom such biographical information is available, only half were born in Pennsylvania. Of those born elsewhere, sixteen were from the South: five were from other northern states. Most had settled in Philadelphia, some in the Bethel-Lebanon neighborhood, between 1820 and 1860. A few, like Stephen Smith of Columbia, Pa., had relocated to the Bethel neighborhood in the wake of the riots. At least one family, that of William Forten, had been on Lombard Street since the first decade of the century.¹⁸ Despite disfranchisement, kidnapping, white immigrant competition for employment, riots, and discrimination, a solid core of Philadelphia black families had by 1860 created a solid and durable family and community life that valued and advocated education, frugality, and self development.

Theodore Hershberg and Henry Williams have suggested that for Afroamericans, mixed ancestry and southern origins were often predictive of success in Philadelphia. However, the pattern that emerges from examination of this committee and the closely-related Banneker Institute is more akin to the pattern found by Thomas C. Cox in To-

¹⁶ William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark*. (Cleveland, 1887), 160, Dubois, 200, [Joseph Willson], *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1841), 97-115. Harry C. Silcox, "Philadelphia Negro Educator Jacob C. White, Jr.," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 97 (Jan. 1973), 80-91.

¹⁷ Banneker Institute. Minute Book, 1856.

¹⁸ Philadelphia City Directories, 1810 and 1860.

peka, Kansas: an individual's origins were one of many variables that affected elite status, and origins alone were of less importance than socialization to a common set of values and goals.¹⁹ Of the forty-two included above, half of the sponsors were black; eleven of these were from Pennsylvania. Eight blacks came from the slave South (including Delaware), and two were from other northern states. Of the twenty-one mulattoes, two had moved to Philadelphia from other northern states. Of the remainder, ten were from Pennsylvania; nine were from the South. All of the committee members remained in Philadelphia over a period of at least eighteen years; many were part of families that had been active in Philadelphia public life prior to 1840. A few, including ministers like Jesse Boulden and Jabez (James Pitt) Campbell, followed a calling to the leadership of other urban black communities. Still, though all had relatives, friends and/or property elsewhere, at least thirty-six of these men spent the rest of their lives in Philadelphia. Apparently, for these men, black or mulatto, Philadelphia was the city of choice.²⁰

Within limitations, some discretion was possible in work as well as location. Self-employment of some sort seems to have been most desirable: in addition to allowing the ambitious person to maximize his income, such work offered the greatest possible insulation against the perils of white hostility. The food trades—ranging from the high-status caterer to the lowly street vendor—were among the most dependable sources of work. Equally secure seems to have been the family that could purchase and rent real estate. Those men with arts or artisan skills often had difficulty finding work in their trades, but teaching was highly valued, both for the service it provided in the struggle for equality and for the personal satisfaction inherent in the work. And since politics and law were closed, the two avenues opened for the person who wanted to air his ideas and opinions were “teaching and preaching.” Indeed, no less than twenty-three of the committee members made their living by public proselytizing, as teachers, ministers,

¹⁹ Theodore Hershberg and Henry Williams, “Mulattoes and Blacks Intra-Group Color Differences and Social Stratification in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia,” in Hershberg, 392-434, Thomas C. Cox, *Blacks in Topeka Kansas, 1865-1915* (Baton Rouge 1982), 85, Lapsansky, 60

²⁰ This summary is compiled from the following sources: Seventh and Eighth Censuses, City Directories, Abajian, Simmons, Wills and administrations

and/or performers. Several others exercised their desire for influence by participation in the governing boards of black churches.²¹

Clearly, for these men, Philadelphia and public service were concomitant commitments. Color differences notwithstanding, they dedicated themselves to the maintenance of an Afroamerican community. Robert Adger, bookdealer, whose catalog of his Afro-american collection is an invaluable tool for the intellectual historian, was a black man. So was Augustus Dorsey, whose wealth included real estate in New Jersey as well as Pennsylvania and who bequeathed a substantial sum to Afroamerican charities. So, too, Ebenezer Black, a Banneker Institute member whose household was described earlier. James Gordon, whose will stipulated that his wife's legacy was to be invested in United States bonds, was mulatto, as was Virginia-born dentist James McCrummell, whose wife was apparently literate and sophisticated enough to handle, unassisted, the administration of his estate. All these men were active members of the Banneker Institute, a group that bound together these Afroamericans of unlike color and background in a brotherhood that transcended skin tones. They shared the hope that through examples of unimpeachable patriotism and citizenship in their own lives, they could erase prejudice from American life. Education and the exercising of the mind were seen as "the highest endeavor," even though they might not lead to employment commensurate with the preparation.²² At the time when white elite society was becoming exclusive and closed, Philadelphia Afroamericans continued to welcome to their midst any newcomer, regardless of color, who shared the fervent commitment to education, and whose exemplary life might strengthen their case.

The income of these leaders was sufficient to allow for some luxuries, and data on discretionary expenditures, while fragmentary, give additional clues as to choices of the nineteenth-century self-styled Afroamerican "leader." Wills and inventories indicate the presence of clocks, pianos, carpets, and books among the possessions of these

²¹ Abajian, Willson.

²² Wendy Ball and Tony Martin, *Rare Afro-Americana: A Reconstruction of the Adger Library* (Boston, 1981), 1-17; Seventh Census, 5th Ward, 421; 7th Ward, 37; 9th Ward, 108, 12th Ward 105; Banneker Institute. Membership Rolls, 1856-72.

men.²³ Such items are consistent with black elites' oft-published concern for self-discipline and self-development. A clock implies some conformity to the discipline of externally dictated routines, a transition that was in process in many parts of American society.²⁴ Likewise, mastery of pianos and books requires conscious, consistent, and disciplined choices about the use of leisure time. Indeed, the making and probating of a will was itself a luxury, one reserved for those who were at ease with the mechanics of white bureaucracies and who were self-conscious about future orientation and the maintenance of consistent control over their domain, even from the grave.

The sponsors of the recruitment committee, literate, "public men," often had lecture and/or publication experience. In addition to their own publications, almost all had been cited in the Afroamerican press of the day. The New York *Anglo-African's* report on the doings of John Wesley Simpson, or the San Francisco *Pacific Appeal's* discussion of Daniel Colley are two of many national accounts of the activities of Philadelphia black leaders.²⁵ By the eve of the Civil War, the Philadelphia black community had developed to the point where its members could provide themselves with intellectual stimulation, leisure time to reflect, and amenable work spaces in which to produce a continuous flow of publications. Nor were their intellectual energies parochial. The interests of these men ranged from history and anthropology to astronomy and mathematics and they spread their enthusiasm for such pursuits across many aspects of their lives. More than two thirds of the Committee were active in one of the five most exclusive of the twenty black churches in Philadelphia, and all held membership in at least one of some two dozen interlocking literary or beneficial organizations. Most had served as founder and/or officer in at least one such organization. Clearly, men such as Jacob C. White, Jr., who was a founder and/or officer in not less than fourteen different organizations, expected to take leadership in their community.²⁶ Moreover, they expected that *others* would desire their leadership. Many of the committee members

²³ Admin. Bk. Y, No. 1268, 281 (Bowers, 1885); Will Bk. 140, No. 1042, 481 (Page, 1888); Will Bk. 70, No. 95, 401 (Gordon, 1871).

²⁴ Bruce Laurie, "Nothing on Compulsion: Lifestyles of Philadelphia Artisans, 1820-1850," *Labor History*, XV (Summer, 1974), 350-352.

²⁵ Abajian, I, 441; III, 350.

²⁶ Silcox, (1973), 80-91.

had friends and/or siblings in other urban areas with whom they corresponded regularly and perhaps met at national conventions or visited on occasion. At least five of these committee members had traveled abroad.²⁷ A number of their out-of-town contacts were making names for themselves in the organizational life of their own communities, and by the end of the nineteenth century, the biological and ideological children of Philadelphia black leaders would be prominent members of the newer black elite groups in developing cities such as Detroit, San Francisco, Topeka, Cleveland, and a few cities of the Northwest.²⁸

These characteristics, especially as a cluster, were among those that set this group apart from the majority of black Philadelphians in 1860. In that year, there were somewhat more than 22,000 Afroamericans in Philadelphia, most of whom were not literate, not published, not documented in any newspaper, not members of a literary or beneficial society. They owned no real estate, and they drifted, unanchored, among several black enclaves, in various parts of the city, or crowded themselves into alleys and small streets behind the homes they served. They were not self-employed and owned little or no personal property—they watched no clocks, played no pianos, read no books. Their lives were not cushioned with carpets. Perhaps as many as half were without mates. Disease and/or malnutrition would bring, for many, an early death.²⁹ Lacking literacy and other resources, they probably were not in contact with friends or relatives, many of whom were still enslaved in the South. Some probably lived and died without ever travelling outside Philadelphia. Far from being “public,” most were almost invisible. The sponsors of the enlistment appeal, then, represented a group that was not only different from the typical southern, rural Afroamerican, but different from urban peers as well. These differ-

²⁷ Abajian, III, 351, I, 441; Jeremiah Asher, *An Autobiography, With Details of a Visit to England, and Some Account of the History of the Meeting Street Baptist Church, Providence, R.I. and of the Shiloh Baptist Church, Philadelphia, Pa.* (Philadelphia, 1862); Banneker Institute, Membership Rolls, 1854-65.

²⁸ Abajian, *ibid.*

²⁹ Theodore Hershberg, “A Tale of Three Cities: Blacks and Immigrants in Philadelphia, 1850-1880, 1930 and 1970,” in Hershberg, 462-491; Philadelphia Society of Friends, Manuscript Census of the Colored Population of Philadelphia, 1856; Seventh Census; Dubois, 25-163; “Register of Trades of the Colored People in the City of Philadelphia and Districts,” (Philadelphia, 1838), 2-7; Benjamin C. Bacon, *Statistics of the Colored People of Philadelphia*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1859), 13-15.

ences, and the accompanying self-conscious ideology, were to become the mark of black leadership in late nineteenth-century American cities.

Connections between members of the Committee served functions similar to such connections among the white elite. Network exchanges—sometimes extending between cities—included loans, events to honor each others' achievements, the writing of each others' biographies, and the protection of each others' family and property, especially in case of death. In 1865, when committee member Morris Hall died, colleague Lewis Seymour assisted in the execution of his will. When Octavius Catto was killed in 1871, his father, who had worked with the son on the committee, requested that two other members of the committee help with the disposition of the younger Catto's estate. William Bolivar, who was not a member of the committee but was connected to the group through the Banneker Institute, served as executor to the wills of several committee members. When Bolivar died, several of the committee members, who had worked with Bolivar in 1897 in establishing the Negro Historical Society, preserved and housed his extensive Afroamerican history library.³⁰

After-death concerns included more than just property. Providing for wives, family, community, and the launching of offspring were equally important responsibilities, and here again black elites' lives are comparable to those of white counterparts. Robert Adger left a house to his wife and another to his daughter. Thomas Dorsey left friend James Steele in control of his legacy to his three children, in case of his wife's death. Morris Hall divided his estate between his wife, children, niece, and Bethel Church. Augustus Dorsey included in his will his wife, children, sister, Association for Colored Orphans, and Stephen Smith's Home for the Aged.³¹

Confectioner James Gordon left some real estate, a considerable amount of household furnishings, and a lengthy list of instructions for colleague James Alston, who was to assist Gordon's daughter, Cornelia, whom Gordon had appointed executor. Gordon had first assigned this role to his son, then later changed his will. Probably Cornelia's

³⁰ Will Bk. 56 No. 554, 275 (Hall, 1865); Admin. Bk. 0, No. 680, 36 (Catto, 1871); Will Bk. 140, No. 1042, 481 (John W. Page, 1888); Ball and Martin, 20-21.

³¹ Will Bk. 190, No. 1690, 290 (Robert Adger, 1896); Will Bk. 83, No. 189, 1491 (Thomas Dorsey, 1875); Will Bk. 56, No. 554, 275 (Morris Hall, 1865); Will Bk. 86, No. 986, 128 (Augustus Dorsey, 1875.)

schoolteacher mother, who had separate property of her own, had prepared her daughter for such responsibilities. Son Alfred, on the other hand, nine years younger than his sister, was, in his father's opinion, in need of guidance. Gordon requested that Alfred, who was then living with his aunt, continue to do so. The son was also to continue to study "at the Institute [for Colored Youth]" and then "select some . . . pursuit, teaching or other."³²

Selecting some pursuit was, for the Afroamerican, not to be taken lightly. Afroamerican elites were naturally anxious that their children make choices such that the family's lifestyle and status would not decline. This required constant re-evaluation in the light of changing economic and social realities. In an article on the stages of modernization in Philadelphia, Theodore Hershberg uses statistics to illustrate the differing situations faced by blacks and white immigrants at different times in the progress of the pre-industrial, industrial, and post-industrial city.³³ While this analysis does give us some understanding of the pressures facing antebellum blacks, the numbers do not tell us how black leaders comprehended and interpreted these pressures, what they wanted, or how effectively they perceived, evaluated, and exercised the choices open to them. Antebellum Philadelphia was undergoing the transition to a manufacturing center. Immigrants, particularly from Ireland and Germany, were flocking to the new factory jobs, but such work was not available to Afroamericans. While statistics can tell us about employment limitations, they do not inform us about employment aspirations of urban Afroamericans. Lacking, as they do, a clear narrative of what happened *within*—rather than simply *to*—the nineteenth-century Afroamerican community, statisticians manipulate the numbers, attempting prematurely to analyze *how* and *why* change happened. Had all work been equally available, would blacks have chosen, as did many white immigrant groups, to concentrate in work areas that were "culturally compatible?"³⁴

By 1860, the black elite had spent more than a generation training itself, at no small economic and psychological expense, in philosophy, history, oratory, science, literature, and leadership skills. A few men,

³² Will Bk. 70, No. 95, 401.

³³ Hershberg, "A Tale", 470-75.

³⁴ Caroline Golab, *Immigrant Destinations*, (Philadelphia, 1977), 43-65.

such as Thomas Bowers and David Bustill Bowser, had even succeeded in carving successful careers in areas as exotic as the arts. For such men, manual labor was not a goal for themselves or their sons, though they would apply pressure to open up all work to themselves and their brothers. Far more attractive was what seemed the promise of political opportunity, a chance for public performance at the federal or state level. Hence, almost all of the committee members became involved in the Equal Rights League. The avowed and, no doubt, primary purpose of the league was to secure the vote for all Afroamericans, but perhaps equally important, the league provided, at long last, a truly public forum in which to employ hard-won leadership skills.

Traditional economic opportunities were becoming ever more circumscribed for Afroamericans as technology and heavily-capitalized industries replaced cottage industries and the small merchant. A few individuals like committee members William Whipper and Stephen Smith raised—alone or with friends—the capital for such an undertaking as a coal or lumber yard, but none made the breakthrough into the newest growth industries: railroads, banking, insurance, inner-city transportation. How much of this failure was due to discrimination and how much to cultural choice is open to question, but for whatever causes, the sons and daughters of black leaders headed for independent professions.

In charting a course through political, economic and social channels, urban Afroamericans always risked running afoul of the vengeance of the white community with which it shared close quarters. But it also risked entanglements with opponents within the black communities as well. In advocating blacks' participation in the union army, pro-enlistment Afroamericans were challenged by some of their peers who saw the Civil War as a white man's war to perpetuate slavery.³⁵ Hence, the Committee's broadside was couched in rhetoric which tells something of the sponsors' hopes, guilt, and sense of responsibility. "This is our golden moment!" the broadside proclaimed. "Now our relations to the white race are changed." The appeal then challenged what must have been a very real guilt on the part of free Afroamericans: "Are free men less brave than slaves?" The Committee challenged their black brothers by comparing Afroamericans with other sub-groups: "if we

³⁵ James McPherson, *Ordeal By Fire* (New York, 1982), 349-351.

are not lower in the scale of humanity than Englishmen, Irishmen, white Americans and other races, we can show it now." Urban Afro-american, enjoying relative freedom, felt the need to prove themselves in order to, as the broadside put it, "deserve well of our country."

Such debate about strategy had begun long before the Civil War, and Philadelphia's Afroamerican men and women had long sought the opportunity to test out their ideas by participation in national life. Caricaturists of the Jacksonian era had repeatedly satirized the ambitious Philadelphia black person as reaching for politics, literature, philosophy, and "high style" that exceeded his grasp.³⁶ Literary clubs, such as the Banneker Institute, meeting in the comfortable homes of black members, frequently debated political and philosophical and strategy questions, as did schools and church study groups, and Philadelphia's lead in these discussions was quickly followed by similar groups in such places as New York, Cincinnati, Baltimore and Washington, D.C., and soon by Cleveland, Detroit, San Francisco and Topeka.³⁷ Through the end of the nineteenth century, as "integrationist" vs. "segregationist" debates riddled the black communities, the black press in all these places publicized the political and social activities and opinions of Philadelphia's leading black families.

Four brief biographies illustrate the breadth of ambition and commitment, the variety and the depth of public recognition in the lives of Philadelphia's black leaders. John W. Page was a native Pennsylvanian, a black man who by 1860 had acquired a fair amount of real estate and an Ohio-born mulatto wife named Isabella. Page, then thirty-one years old, and Isabella, who was ten years younger, lived in a comfortable three-story brick house on an ample lot on Addison Street, about five blocks from the Lebanon Cemetery. They shared their home with three boarders from Virginia: a teenage mulatto girl, a young black man, and an elderly black woman. By 1863, restaurant-owner Page had published a number of his opinions and was a well-known figure and a member of the Committee. The following year he was named delegate to the Pennsylvania Equal Rights League Convention, and a member of the executive board of the National Convention of Colored People.

³⁶ Lapsansky, 65.

³⁷ See, for example, Cox, Abajian and Dorothy Porter, ed., *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837* (Boston, 1971).

Apparently Page's reputation spread far in both political and social circles, for in his will Page bequeathed the "punch bowl given me by the New York and Newport Ugly Fishing Club" to the Philadelphia annex of that organization. This will, witnessed by committee member James Needham, listed the Addison Street House, the 4th Street Restaurant, and several other pieces of property in Philadelphia and New Jersey. These were left to Isabella and their son, George. Page's personal effects, appraised by William C. Bolivar, included a clock, pictures, plated ware, a dining room fitted with table, six chairs, stove, and carpet, and an equally well-appointed parlour. These furnishings, valued at \$57 comprised only a small portion of the estate, in which the personal property alone totaled nearly \$4,000.³⁸

When Thomas J. Bowers died in 1885, the weekly newspaper in Cleveland noted his death. In addition to a far-reaching reputation, Bowers left nearly \$10,000 in real estate, Pennsylvania Railroad stock, household furnishings and cash in the Farmers and Mechanics Bank. Bowers, identified by census-takers as mulatto, began life in Philadelphia in the 1830s, the son of a tailor who insisted that his children study music. First taught by his brother, Bowers's musical experience widened as he became organist for St. Thomas African Episcopal Church and studied and performed with internationally-known "Black Swan," Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield. By 1850, Bowers was married to Lucretia, a native of New York, and they had one child, Adelia. Following his father's lead, Bowers became an outspoken participant in the Afroamerican community. During the 1850s, Frederick Douglass's paper cited him for rejecting the idea of colonizing Afroamericans in Africa. Bowers and other members of his family had also been associated with the Banneker Institute and had been an organizer, at the national scale, of the black opposition to the fugitive slave laws of the 1850s. After serving as state representative to the Equal Rights Convention, Bowers continued this involvement with the public life of the black community. He was a member of the board of managers of the Lebanon Cemetery, and, at the time of his death, he, his wife, several sisters, and a nephew occupied several houses near the cemetery. The Bowers home was apparently quite commodiously appointed, with many yards of carpet, an organ, a piano, more than two dozen parlour

³⁸ Seventh Census 7th ward, 297; Will Bk. 140, No. 1042 (1888); Abajian, II, 140.

and dining room chairs, mirrors, sofas, pictures, and silverware. The family was evidently well-equipped to hold musical events in their homes. Bowers's commitment to music and to the black community is evident in this statement, quoted in the biography written by one of Bowers' contemporaries: "What induced me. . .to appear in public was. . .to show the world that colored men and women could sing classical music."³⁹

Jeremiah Asher was not a native Philadelphian. Born in Connecticut, he and his wife Abigail had spent time in Rhode Island, where their first son was born, before settling here. By the 1860s, this mulatto family—including three sons, Jeremiah's father, and a black servant from Kentucky—was living one block from the Lebanon Cemetery. The children were in school, and Asher, an occasional lecturer for the Banneker Institute, was serving as pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church and writing his autobiography. Asher, following his own advice, joined the army as a chaplain, and by 1865, had gained a reputation that led the San Francisco *Elevator* to notice his death, though he left a humble estate of less than \$400 to a wife who could not sign her name.⁴⁰

Years of travel and life in an intellectual community may have left Abigail Asher untouched, but not so Mary Campbell, wife of A.M.E. missionary Jabez P. Campbell (sometimes known as James Pitt Campbell). Campbell, three years younger than Asher, had, like Asher, travelled through several northern states before settling down with a wife and daughter in the Philadelphia of the 1850s. The Campbells settled their daughter in school, and took into their home a young mulatto barber, Joseph Shinn. While Mary taught Sunday School and Jabez edited the *Christian Recorder* at the nearby Bethel Church, Jabez contributed his spare time and money to black schools. Mary's work as an officer on the board of Stephen Smith Home for the Aged earned her recognition in the San Francisco *Appeal*.⁴¹ Such powerful examples of industry could not have been lost on young Shinn.

Bowers, Page, Asher and Campbell: mulatto and black, literate and

³⁹ Abajian, I, 213; Simmons, 202-204; *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, April 20, 1852; *Cleveland Gazette*, Oct. 24, 1885, 5; Reading, Pa. Keystone Hall. "Black Swan's Grand Concert, assisted by the African Mario" (Programme, Sept. 22, 1856.); Banneker Institute. Membership Rolls, 1856-65; Admin Bk. Y, No. 1268, 28 (1885).

⁴⁰ Seventh census, 7th Ward, 93; Still, 612; Abajian, I, 73; Admin. Bk. S, No. 189, 444.

⁴¹ Simmons, 1030-1034; Seventh census, 5th ward, 217; Abajian I, 373.

illiterate, native and transplant, wealthy and impoverished, all were part of this network of "certain people," self-appointed models for the white community, champions of a black cause undergirded by the ideals of capitalist competition, self-discipline, temperance, frugality, education, moderation, stable family life, intellectual autonomy, race-pride and noblesse oblige.

* * * *

Nineteenth-century urban heterogeneity placed black Philadelphians house-to-house with their white contemporaries, many of whom were openly and effectively hostile to Afroamericans' achievements. Blacks and whites lived here in a nervous symbiosis of competition and dependency, unlike that of the slave South. This different relationship to white society set the stage for a wide gulf between the city-wise, bureaucracy-astute Afroamerican and the urban neophyte who faced the ever-hardening segregation of the post-reconstruction years. We cannot know how many of the Philadelphia black recruits were persuaded by the rhetoric and example of the black "leaders" who comprised the Committee. What we do know is that those blacks who strove for "success" in the post bellum years did so against even greater odds than had their predecessors.

By 1860 the elite group of "certain people" had already hammered out a niche for themselves in the relative fluidity of the antebellum, industrializing city. They had a head start, in terms of self-expectations as well as economic advantage, that for many was never lost, even as real estate became ever more expensive and post-Reconstruction improvements in public transportation made segregation ever more the norm.⁴²

The men of the Committee were able to enhance longevity with long-lived marriages, geographic stability, enduring friendships, public recognition, economic comfort, and continuing involvement in the world around them. Such supports buffered the chafing of a life stressed by occupational immobility, disfranchisement, persecution, and the weight of social responsibility added to the ordinary bumps and

⁴² Stephen Birmingham, *Certain People*. (Boston, 1977), 55-80; Theodore Hershberg *et al.*, "The 'Journey-to-Work': An Empirical Investigation of Work, Residence and Transportation, Philadelphia, 1850 and 1880," in Hershberg, 128-173.

bruises of daily existence. Moreover, many must have taken satisfaction in seeing the legacy of commitment embraced by their children.

Unlike many other groups who found that the second generation often lacked the sense of urgency that was born out of immediate experience with hardship, black leaders had less difficulty demonstrating to their children—and their protégés—the desperate need for continued commitment. A sense of urgency and ambition coupled with a determination to “better the race” remained strong. William Whipper’s grandson became president of the Negro Actors’ Guild. David Bustill Bowser’s great nephew, Paul Robeson, stood firmly on a family tradition of intellectual independence when he struggled for the dignity of black performers, while holding staunchly to an unpopular political position. William Forten’s daughter went south to teach ex-slaves before marrying, late in life, the race-militant mulatto Reverend Francis Grimke. As the first woman to earn a music degree from the University of Pennsylvania, Ida Bowser, descendent of Thomas Bowser, won cheers of her compatriots. Adgers, Whites, Casseys, Gibbs, Cattos, Bowers, Glasgows, Mintons and others had the continuity of at least three generations of active involvement in the “race-conscious” public life in Philadelphia.

As individuals and through their families, these nineteenth-century black leaders left a mark on the communities they served. As a group, they set a precedent that later would lead commentators to refer to a “talented tenth.” In city after city, a black elite emerged, defined at first simply by stable employment, circumspect moral behavior, and participation in local black community affairs. After the Civil War, as each community matured and participation in national affairs became the valued aspiration, inclusion in the inner circle became increasingly restricted by some combination of parentage, occupation, income, neighborhood, number, and kind of possessions, associational behavior and/or uses of leisure time.

Philadelphia’s black leadership, well-established since the 1830s, had reached this second stage before the Civil War, and, by the end of the nineteenth century, was leading the way toward the ossification

⁴³ Discussion and contemporary statements of these ideologies can be found in Porter, Birmingham, 268-295, Cox, 82-118, Dubois, 19-45, Foner and Walker, 143, Silcox, “Nineteenth-Century Black Militant,” 61-66, Lapsansky, 69

described by D. Franklin Frazier in his *Black Bourgeoisie*.⁴⁴ The black community was not untouched by the trend toward tribalistic exclusivity that swept the United States in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. As white Americans huddled under the proliferating umbrellas of the Sons of the American Revolution, the American Historical Association, the American Folklore Society, and a host of other separatist organizations, committee-member Ebenezer D. Bassett and his compatriots were busy establishing the exclusivist Negro Historical Society, Olde Philadelphia Club, Highland Beach, and other institutions that often served to screen new talent out of the "talented tenth."

Under the weight of time and human frailty, self-appreciation sometimes acquired a patina of snobbery; ambition shaded in self-importance; intellectual curiosity could drift into intellectual display. Nevertheless, Frazier exaggerated when he described the group as *only* frivolous and irresponsible. Even as the elites grew culturally more and more out of touch with the masses of Afroamericans, these families and their descendants continued to see themselves as public models, continued to feel genuinely, if sometimes misinformedly, responsible to the community, and they have continued to divert some of their resources to less-well-off brothers. Moreover, the commitment to public service has remained a vibrant value for many of the present day descendants of these nineteenth-century leaders.

Temple University

EMMA JONES LAPSANSKY

⁴⁴ E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*. (New York, 1957.)