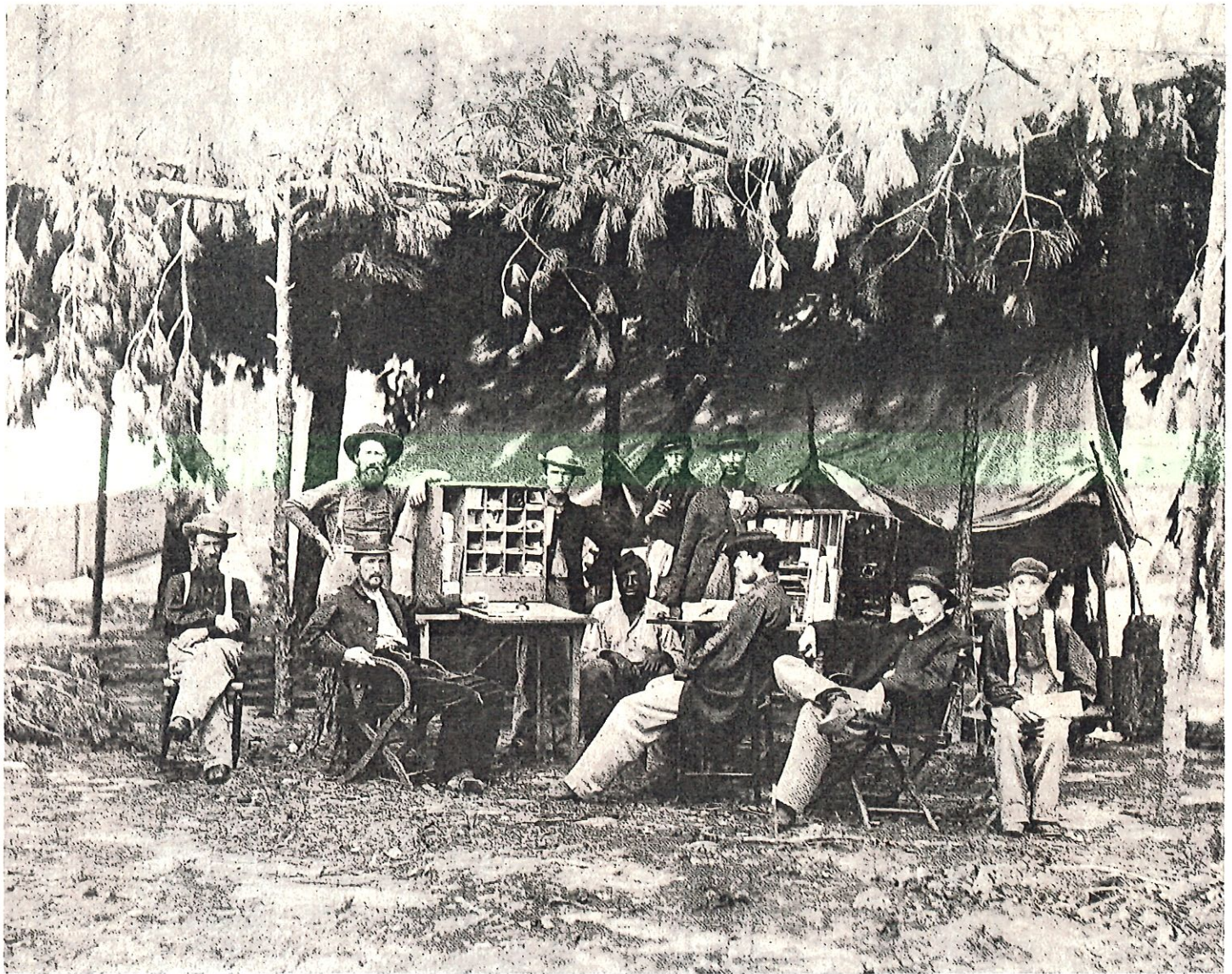


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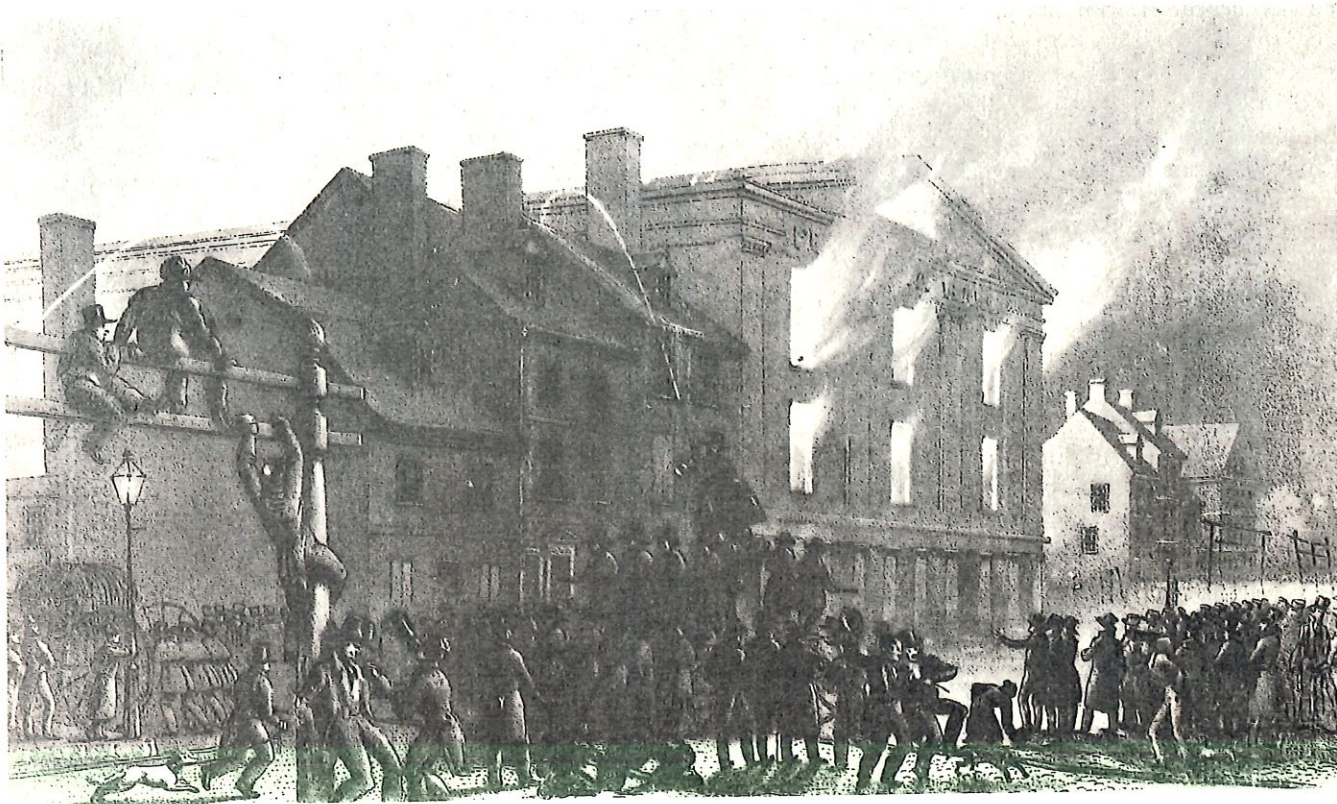
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The Night They Burned Pennsylvania Hall

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ON THE morning of May 14, 1838 a beautiful new building in Philadelphia was dedicated to "Free Discussion, Virtue, Liberty and Independence." On the night of May 17, the building was a smoking ruins, and Philadelphia had learned more about itself—its mob spirit, its timid mayor, its vanishing police force—than it cared to know.

Pennsylvania Hall on Sixth between Mulberry and Sassafras Streets* had been built by a group of prominent Philadelphians with abolitionist leanings who felt Philadelphia had long needed a gathering place for the discussion of worthy causes. In the fall of 1837 they formed a company to raise funds for a suitable building "wherein the principles of Liberty and Equality and Civil Rights can be freely discussed and the evils of Slavery fearlessly portrayed." By Christmas time, the new building was advertised in an extra edition of the *National Enquirer*, and the managers were beginning to send out invitations to the dedication ceremonies.

But not all Philadelphians regarded the new building with equal enthusiasm. Among merchants who dealt with the South, as well as newly immigrant white laborers who feared the competition of free

blacks, the abolitionists were cordially disliked. The fact that in Philadelphia, as in no other city, prominent black men and women were part of the new Anti-Slavery Society, and mixed socially with white members, was regarded by the ignorant as a fearful scandal. The new hall, it was whispered, would be one more place for this mixing to take place, leading to miscegenation, or "amalgamation" of the races.

The whispers were evidently heard beyond Philadelphia, for the managers were perplexed to have one prominent man after another decline their invitation to attend the opening ceremonies. John Quincy Adams had a previous engagement, Francis James was indisposed, and even Pennsylvania's own Thaddeus Stevens was unable to be present. In the end a relatively obscure Philadelphia lawyer, David Paul Brown, Esq. was asked to give the keynote address.

On the morning of the dedication a few of the invited guests arrived early to look around. The hall had been built, it was rumored, at a cost of \$40,000 and it was clear that no expense had been spared. The first floor contained a small auditorium, committee rooms, offices and stores; the second floor housed a large hall with galleries. The whole was lit with modern gas, and there were ventilators in the ceiling to permit a flow of fresh air. A blue and white decorating scheme had been faithfully executed with chairs

* Mulberry Street was south of Race Street and is now non-existent. Sassafras Street is now Arch Street. The Pennsylvania building was between what is now Arch and Race Streets.

lined in blue silk plush, and sofas upholstered in blue damask, and the tables hung in blue silk.

The opening ceremonies began at 10 a.m. and though the hall was packed, the affair was decorous. The managers welcomed the group, read long letters from the many missing guests of honor, and then introduced the speaker. David Paul Brown spoke long and earnestly, if a bit dully, on freedom of speech in general and freedom to speak out against slavery in particular. The meeting adjourned for a late lunch, and in the afternoon the Hall was taken over by the Philadelphia Lyceum for a lecture on the benefits of physical education for children.

All reforms being linked in these early days of moral uplift, it seemed proper that the evening sessions should be devoted to a lecture on Temperance by the New England abolitionist, Arnold Buffum. Outside on the streets were many who might have benefited from Buffum's lecture, but on the whole the affair was still as peaceful as a ladies' tea party.

One of the small offices in the first floor of Pennsylvania Hall was to house the editorial headquarters of an abolitionist newspaper, *The Pennsylvania Freeman*. Its editor was a gaunt young New England journalist, politician and poet by the name of John Greenleaf Whittier. Whittier had written a long ode on the occasion of the dedication of the new hall, and on the second morning of the dedication ceremonies it was read to the assembled group. Just as the hope was being expressed that the new hall might be a place

Where wealth and rank and worldly pomp and might

Yield to the presence of the Truth and Right
a brickbat came hurtling through a window. The rest of the day, however, passed quietly enough with a talk on "Indian Wrongs" in the morning, a second meeting of the Lyceum in the afternoon, and a debate on the merits of African Colonization in the evening. Downstairs, in the small lecture hall, a group of ladies had meanwhile assembled to hold the first annual meeting of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American women, but they seemed to be performing their true womanly function, and keeping well out of sight.

Wednesday, the third day was almost as uneventful. Word, however, had leaked out by this time that William Lloyd Garrison, the fire-eating abolitionist from Boston, was present and the crowd outside the hall had grown. The presence of Negroes in the hall seemed particularly to arouse the ire of the mob, and Negro women, coming and going to the Women's Convention, were jeered at. The managers must have drawn a huge sigh of relief when 3 p.m. came, and the Dedication ceremonies were brought officially to a close. Almost absent-mindedly they agreed to a request that the hall be used that night by several members of the women's group. Only later, and much too late, did they learn that it was the intention of the ladies to speak to a "mixed" audience.

In the 1830's, ladies—nice ladies—did not speak to groups containing members of the opposite sex. The

Quakers let their women speak in Meeting for Worship, but in their business meetings they still met separately. Other groups were far more opposed; universally it was regarded as not quite womanly and not quite nice. So when a few impassioned lady abolitionists had begun last year speaking to mixed groups in New England, a shock wave had been felt up and down the East coast.

The first lady orators were the Grimke sisters. Born of wealthy, aristocratic slaveholding parents in South Carolina, Angelina and Sarah had freed their slaves, moved to Philadelphia, become Quakers, and in 1837 begun lecturing to mixed audiences in Massachusetts. Now they were here in Philadelphia for the dedication ceremonies as well as for a wedding. On Tuesday, Angelina had married Theodore Weld, a noted abolitionist and Presbyterian minister. Since it was a mixed marriage between a Quaker and a non-Quaker, John Greenleaf Whittier couldn't attend, but he sat outside the room in which his friends were wed.

On the evening of May 16, petite, pretty Angelina, a radiant new bride, stepped to the podium of the main auditorium in Pennsylvania Hall to face a huge audience. Alternately the crowds hissed and cheered as she made vain efforts to be heard. Maria Chapman was the next to attempt to speak, followed by Abby Kelley, a beautiful blue-eyed Quaker of Irish ancestry. It was Abby's maiden speech. All three were drowned out by the shouts and the shattering of glass as bricks were thrown against the windows. At one moment the doors burst open and a crowd surged in, deluged the hall, and then surged out again like a receding wave. Lucretia Mott rose to the rostrum to protest the attitudes of those who thought it improper for women to make public addresses. Let us hope, she said, that "such false notions of delicacy and propriety will not long obtain in this enlightened country."

Perhaps in defense of his lady allies, William Lloyd Garrison now rose to make a speech. Never a man to trim his sails to the wind, Garrison spoke as he put it in good Anglo-Saxon English, giving his opinion not only of the slaveholders, but also of the moderates and temporizers, in fact, of all who did not agree exactly with him. Castigated in the process were a good many Philadelphians. The noise inside and outside the hall was deafening, and the tinkle of broken glass a regular occurrence. Dispersing finally, the abolitionists were jeered and taunted by members of the mob, but still no real outbreak of violence had occurred.

Garrison's speech, however, was evidently the last straw to the proslavery fashion. In the course of the night, posters were hastily printed and distributed throughout the city urging all citizens who had a proper regard for the rights of property and the preservation of the Constitution to gather at Pennsylvania Hall and interfere, forcefully if they must, with the meetings being held there.

Alarmed, a committee of the Board of Managers

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THE NIGHT THEY BURNED PENNSYLVANIA HALL

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headed by Daniel Neall went to see the mayor, Colonel John Swift. Colonel Swift was not at the police station, nor could he be found at city hall. When finally tracked down he said he wanted to consult the Attorney General to find out whether or not the county was liable for damages in the event of violence.

"Liable!" Daniel Neall exclaimed. "But we are asking thee to protect our property."

"There are two sides to every question," the mayor responded tartly. "It is public opinion that makes mobs, and ninety-nine out of a hundred of those with whom I converse are against you."

Learning next that the City Solicitor had given express orders that no one was to be arrested in connection with the agitation, the managers went to see the Sheriff, who agreed to offer them some protection, but said he could only spare them three men. Further alarmed, they hurried back to their hall and asked Lucretia Mott to request of the women's convention that the Negro members not come that night, since their presence seemed to draw the ire of the mob. Lucretia delivered the message, but she said she did not agree with it, and that she hoped the women would not be put off by the appearance of danger.

It was, however, more than appearance. By night-fall the mob had grown to 17,000 and even the reluctant mayor at last saw something must be done. His solution was to ask the managers to turn the keys of the hall over to him. He then mildly addressed the shouting, shoving throng telling them that he had arranged that there be no meeting that night.

"Our city has long had the enviable position of a peaceful city, a city of order," he said. "We never call out the military here . . . I would, fellow citizens look upon you as my police, and I trust you will keep order. I now bid you farewell for the night."

The crowd gave three hearty cheers for the mayor (who promptly disappeared) and then got down to the business of the evening, bursting open the doors of the hall, ransacking the offices, piling combustibles on the speakers desk, turning on the gas, and applying the torch. By 9 p.m. flames were shooting skyward. Fire companies, rushing to the scene, were not allowed by the mob to do more than protect surrounding buildings. The Temple of Emancipation was offered up, in Whittier's words "a smoking sacrifice to the demon Slavery."

The fire seemed to whet the mob's appetite for violence. Once the hall was well on its way to destruction, the multitude grew restless and began to look for fresh prey. Someone suggested the Motts, and the crowd started up Ninth Street, headed for the house where James and Lucretia Mott and their friends sat wondering what would happen next. Just as the mob

turned the corner, however, a friend of the Motts daringly rushed to the head of the straggling column and shouting, "On to the Mott's!" led the crowd in the opposite direction. Eventually, the excitement declined and the crowd dispersed, only to form again the next day. Now its mood ugly, it burned down Bethel Church, a Negro house of worship, and destroyed The Shelter for Colored Orphans, a Quaker philanthropy.

A final target was the *Public Ledger*, not because that newspaper had advocated abolition, but because it had dared to speak forth for freedom of speech and fair play. The *Ledger*, however, was forewarned, and had armed all its employees. When this news reached the mob, their enthusiasm for burning down newspaper establishments rapidly cooled.

As a matter of fact, they learned later, they had failed to close down even the *Pennsylvania Freeman*. The night before, when the mob was preparing to break into Pennsylvania Hall, Whittier had rushed to the home of his friend John Parrish, donned a wig and a long white overcoat, and joining the crowd which invaded his sanctum, rescued the galleys for the next issue. On the morning of May 18, therefore, the *Freeman* came out as usual, with a short report on the events of the night before.

Nor was this the only surprise on the morning after the fire. Nothing daunted, nine of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society held an open meeting on the street in front of the hall, while Lucretia Mott and her ladies went serenely on with their Convention, meeting in a nearby schoolroom, and making plans for next year's gathering in Philadelphia.

The courage of the abolitionists helped swing public opinion to their side, and the burning of Pennsylvania Hall became a national scandal. Incensed, the governor of Pennsylvania offered a reward for the capture of any who participated in the action, while Philadelphia's City Council appointed a committee of inquiry to look into the actions of the mayor and the police. Mr. Swift tried to counter the damage to his reputation by also offering a reward for the capture of the culprits, but he so worded his proposition that he actually meant only the one man who set the torch. He narrowly missed impeachment and was not returned to office.

The burning of Pennsylvania Hall came to be regarded as one of the turning points in the struggle against slavery. Formerly it had been believed by polite society that the opposition to abolition came mainly from respectable and law-abiding citizens. Now they had to face the fact that there was a close connection between slavery and violence.

Most of all, however, the event reminded Philadelphians that freedom of speech, born here in the cradle of liberty, had to be extended to all, and that if you were willing to see the reformers throttled you ended up with the mob at your own doorstep. It is a lesson that needs to be continually relearned.