

Ellipses, the Black Masses, and Local Elan: A Review of the Sources for a History of the Ante-Bellum Negro in Southeastern Pennsylvania

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Commenting on the black masses in Louisiana nearly a century ago, the black sociologist, W. E. B. DuBois, noted in 1935 that "historians quite unanimously forget and ignore them, and chronicle instead only the lives of Negro 'men of mark'." Unfortunately, DuBois's charges apply with particular force to recent efforts to reconstruct the lives of Negroes in Pennsylvania. Nothing better has appeared in the last half century than superficial generalizations about undifferentiated masses and unrepresentative black elites. Most often, historians, realizing their dereliction as scholars and social critics, bewail the paucity of local sources which treat with the Negro in Pennsylvania. This brief survey of the extant source material, located in the historical societies, colleges, and public archives of Adams, York, Dauphin, Lancaster, Chester, and Delaware counties, permits a realistic picture of Negro life in nineteenth-century, southeastern Pennsylvania.

Official Records of Federal, State, and County Governments

The basic source for any study of the social structure of Negro communities in Pennsylvania during this period are the voluminous United States and Pennsylvania State Census Returns, the federal "Glass Tax" Returns of 1798, and local county tax assessment and commissioners' returns. The first eight United States returns, beginning with the **Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States** through the **Eighth Census of the United States (1860)** are particularly valuable. All eight of these United States censuses provide data by town or by townships for the six counties under review. The first six United States censuses are no more than crude enum-

erations of the names of heads of households, and the members in each household which are broken down by age group and color. The seventh and eighth censuses are more detailed and cover, in several volumes, population, vital statistics, agriculture, social statistics, and manufacturers.

The manuscript population schedules, 1790-1860, located in the various local county historical societies, the Pennsylvania State Archives in Harrisburg, and the National Archives on microfilm, are a copy of the original returns of the census taker and constitute an essential source for any study of family or social structure. The 1850 and 1860 population schedules list inhabitants and real wealth by household and family, and state age, color, state of birth, literacy, occupation, and schooling of each black man, woman, and child.

The Federal Glass tax of 1798, which provides basic information by household, is an excellent compilation with which to measure the accuracy of preceding tax and census records. This glass tax survey, taken to facilitate the assessment on panes of glass in the commonwealth, lists for each household the head's occupation, number of windows, panes of glass, stories of the house, type buildings on the premise, acres owned, adjacent properties, the valuation of the house and land, and, at the end of each county list, names of all slaves and black indentured. The major inadequacy of the lists is that the Chester and Lancaster County lists are incomplete for their southern townships.

The Pennsylvania State Septennial Census, taken every seven years beginning in 1782, was the responsibility of the local county commissioners; consequently most counties never returned their list to the Commonwealth Secretary. The surviving manuscript returns of Franklin and Chester Counties, which are located in the Records Division of the Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, list family heads and their occupations, age, and color by township and are an important source for both a social structure and migration study.

In addition, there are the copious and infrequently used county tax assessment books, which when employed in conjunction with the census material, provide a relatively accurate picture of social change over time. Fortunately, the returns of Chester, Lancaster, York, Adams, and Cumberland Counties for the period 1763-1860 are well-preserved and, except in the case of Cumberland County, stored in the local county historical societies. The tax books, though often uneven in quality, usually enumerate for each household, the occupation of the residents, the number of acres owned, the value per acre, the number of houses and barns, outbuildings, livestock held, and total value of real and personal property. In unusual cases, such as for West Goshen Township (West Chester) in 1835, they contain a list of persons with money at interest and a list of poor and Negro children whose parents were unable to educate them. The county dog tax records, 1800-1860, in the towns of south-

eastern Pennsylvania, for which books are available, list the name, sex, age, color, markings, breed, date of registration for all dogs, and the names and addresses of their owners. Since black men and women owned a dog more often than not, these books, as do the city directories, locate many black residences each year.

Other county records are valuable for capturing the community life of a people that left behind few written documents. The two most important sources for reconstructing the life of such people are the county almshouse and prison records. These records — available for Chester, Delaware, Philadelphia, York, Adams, Franklin, Cumberland, Dauphin, and Berks Counties from 1800-1860 — are located variously in the Prothonotary's basement vaults, the almshouses, the warden's offices of county prisons, the private homes of concerned county officials, local county historical societies, and sometimes the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. The almshouse records include: the minutes of the directors; registers of the county poor homes which list name, age, sex, residence, name and address of nearest kin, occupation, nativity, religious affiliation, marital status, education, and habits of county inmates; the valuable outdoor allowance book; the death registers; record books of children bound out; tramp allowance books; and most importantly, crates of correspondence and observation between poor keepers of all the southeastern Pennsylvania counties concerning all aspects of their inmates' lives. These records are so detailed that they should enable the historian to correct serious underenumerations of blacks in both the tax and census records. No less valuable, the county prison records often told more about the white population's fears, frustrations, and tensions than about conditions in the black community. In the dreary basements and damp attics of the Pennsylvania county prison system lay untold piles of board of inspection minutes, prison records of inmates committed, showing date, name, color, occupation, and sex of the committed, convict description blotters, lists of descriptions of clothing and wealth of prisoners, letter books, and pamphlets on public hangings.

Quarter Sessions Court (Criminal court) records, when used carefully, yield important information on black community life. The original indictment papers for serious crimes show, among other things, the name of the defendant, nature of the charge, date of arraignment, name of the attorney, and, in some instances, the sentence of the court. The transcripts of testimony taken in these criminal cases contain: names of judges, defendants, jurors, and witnesses; nature of the charge; prisoners' pleas and sentences of the juries; Commonwealth evidence; names of witnesses and their testimony; and direct and cross examinations of defendants' and witnesses' testimony. Summaries of these felony trials and their sentences, along with the record of proceedings in the courts of Oyer and Terminer and Quarter Sessions, may be found in the Quarter Sessions' Dockets. When used together with the Sheriffs execu-

tion and commitment dockets, the Justices of Peaces' vagrancy and Coroners' Inquest records located in the Prothonotary's office, these records portray the precariousness of daily existence of black men and women in southeastern Pennsylvania cities.

Because of their sheer bulk, most historians have neglected the county mortgage, deed, will, and estate probate records of nineteenth century Pennsylvania. The will, deed, and mortgage books — over 1600 volumes for York County alone — reveal invaluable information on the financial and social arrangements between the wealthier Negroes and the white population of a town. While these records are more important for a study of the black middle class, the intestate estate inventories, filed when persons died without a will, record the value and enumerate the goods and valuables of all deceased Negroes.

The official records of the state are essential to a study of Negro life in Pennsylvania. The records of the Department of Justice (Record Group 15 in the Division of Public Records, Pennsylvania State Archives) are especially important, for they hold the various information of the Eastern and Western State Penitentiaries. The two penitentiary reports are divided into three groups: 1) Minutes of the Board, 1821-1891; 2) Records of the Board of Inspection, 1821-1960; and 3) prison population records, 1829-1960. Especially in the prison population records, which include the admission and discharge books, commitments' notations, convict affidavits and registers, alphabetical lists of prisoners, statistical books, and colorful scrapbooks, one can begin to understand why a vast segment of the Commonwealth's Negroes were unable to attach themselves to a black community or live a life free of hunger and frustration.

The records of the State Supreme Court and the Office of the Commissioner of Land hold important information on migration patterns of Negroes. The Supreme Court of the Commonwealth, which sat at Philadelphia during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, heard many pleas and reviewed many writs of Habeas Corpus involving indigent blacks re-enslaved or illegally bound out as indentured servants. After 1820 that body received and reviewed all kidnapping cases in the state. Closer to the Civil War, the Land Office holdings, which house the records of the different divisions of the State's elaborate canal and public works system, indicate that there was a large black population which flowed with the demands of the casual labor market.

Finally, one should examine the official legislative records of the state. **The Journals of the Senate, 1818-1872, the Journals of the General Assembly, 1818-1860, and the Daily Legislative Record** record testimony and reports dealing with runaway slaves, Negro crime, aid to colonization schemes, taxation of disfranchised blacks, the influx of fugitives and manumitted Negroes from the South, and acts to prevent the kidnapping of Negro citizens in the state. In addi-

tion, the historian should also peruse the **Statutes at Large** and the debates in the **Journals and proceedings of the Constitutional Convention, 1837-38**, the convention which disfranchised the Commonwealth's black citizens.

Published Primary Source Material

No study of the ante-bellum Negro could be complete without recourse to the many files of antislavery, abolitionist, and Negro-sponsored newspapers. These sources are the most fertile for determining the reactions of the most prestigious Negroes to social issues and changes. William Lloyd Garrison's **Liberator**, which had Negro correspondents in Columbia, Carlisle, and West Chester, contains a wealth of Pennsylvania material as does the **Colonization Herald** (1835-1865). Especially valuable is the **Pennsylvania Free Man** (1836-54), published in Philadelphia and involving Benjamin Lundy, J. Miller McKim, John Greenleaf Whittier, C. C. Burleigh, and others. Of unequal value are Fredrick Douglass's **North Star**, the **African Repository**, the **Emancipator**, the **Provincial Freeman**, the **Anti-Slavery Examiner**, and the **Anti-Slavery Bugle**. The Free Library of Philadelphia, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and the Library Company of Philadelphia contain good collections of most of these newspapers.

A basic source on local Negro community developments are the local town and village newspapers of southeastern Pennsylvania. While the West Chester **Jeffersonian** and **American Republican**, the Lancaster **Inland Weekly and Campaign Banner**, the York **Democratic Press, Recorder, and Gazette**, and the **Columbia Spy and York County Reporter** were generally hostile to the Negro community and reported with glee acts of violence committed against black men, the York **Pennsylvania Republican**, the Lancaster **American, Journal, Beobachter, Anti-Masonic Herald**, and **Bethania Palladium**, the Gettysburg **Compiler**, and West Chester **Village Record** were generally more favorable and reported Negro achievements and fraternal activities.

Published and typewritten transcripts of church records constitute the major documentary and statistical evidence on the religious lives of the Negro communities. Though it is notorious that Negro church records are poorly preserved, the dedicated historian should be able, with the courteous aid of Negro church members, to begin constructing the history and membership of the congregations of the Small Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (York), the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church of York, the Faith Presbyterian Church of York, the Fawn Grove (York County) African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Mt. Zion Methodist Episcopal Church of Columbia, the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church of Lancaster, and the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church of West Chester. Other church records one should use in a study of Negro religious life include the records of such

elite white churches as St. James Episcopal Church of Lancaster and the famous First Presbyterian Church of York. The birth, death, and baptismal records of early Negro communicants and the church histories of these elite white churches are well-preserved in bound typescript copies at the York and Lancaster County Historical Societies. Those Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Reformed church records not found in these societies may be found respectively in Philadelphia, Gettysburg, and Lancaster.

Geneological collections provide fresh insights into the intimate relationships which developed between the white elite and members of the black community. Scattered throughout the geneological collections of the Spanglers, Slagles, Bulls, Billmeyers, Smalls, Smysers of York, the Yeates, Shippens, Atlees, and Sloughs of Lancaster, and the Painters and Hickmans of West Chester are valuable and vital family records of the Negro elite. Further, since the continuity of a town's white elite insured the security of the black community, these collections are invaluable aids for determining the fate of a town's Negro population.

Travellers' and commentators' accounts of the Northern ante-bellum Negro population are valuable sources of information on the social and economic conditions of Pennsylvania Negroes. Edward S. Adby's *Journal of a Residence and Tour in the United States of North America, from April, 1833 to October, 1834* (3 vols., London, 1835); the West Chester Negro, John Tillman's *Biographical Sketch of the Life and Travels of John W. Tillman* (West Chester, 1893), the Quakerees, Mary Haines', *Clovercraft Chronicles* (West Chester, 1893); Ellwood Griest's extremely important, *John and Mary, Fugitive Slaves in South East Pennsylvania* (Lancaster, 1873); the last section of W. C. Carter's and A. J. Glossbrenner's *History of York County . . . 1729-1834* (Harrisburg, 1835); John F. Denny's, *An Inquiry into the Political Grade of the Free Colored Population . . .* (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, 1834); and John Fox's *Opinion . . . Against the Exercise of Negro Suffrage in Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1838) deal variously with Quaker treatment of Negroes in Pennsylvania, the numbers and expectations of fugitives entering the keystone state from the South, and the destitution of vast numbers of Negroes in ante-bellum Pennsylvania cities.

Manuscripts

Most of the manuscript material on the Pennsylvania Negro may be found in three general locations: 1) the local county historical societies; 2) the major libraries and historical societies of Philadelphia and its adjacent suburbs, and 3) the Pennsylvania State Archives in Harrisburg. Although I don't review in this survey the collections of the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore, the Haverford College Library, the Vail Memorial Manuscript Room at Lincoln Memorial College, the Pennsylvania State Archives, and the

Library of Congress, they should be used in any study of the Pennsylvania Negro.

The historical societies of York, Adams, Lancaster, and Chester Counties hold extensive collections of manuscripts, journals, and diaries. The foremost collection on the history of the Pennsylvania Negro, outside of the holdings of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, is held by the Chester County Historical Society in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Here may be found the 40,000 piece Gilbert Cope Historical and Genealogical Collection and the 100,000 piece Albert Cook Myers Colonial Collection. The voluminous Cope Collection includes minutes of Quaker meetings and the Negro visitation committees, two large file boxes dealing with slavery and kidnapping in southeastern Pennsylvania, constable returns, coroners' inquests into "suspicious deaths," records of servants and apprentices, manuscript histories of the county, the West Chester prison records, 1804-1838, and boxes of miscellaneous correspondence, and scrapbooks, some dealing with Negro affairs. It is no exaggeration to say that Gilbert Cope has, with the kind aid of the present Chester County Historical Society Librarian, Miss Dorothy Lapp, preserved every scrap of legal paper ever dealing with the Negro in Chester County. The Myers Collection pertains to the earlier colonial period in Pennsylvania's history when slaveholding patterns were being established. Other items which contain information on the Negro in the Chester County Historical Society are the voluminous correspondence and genealogical collection of the Painter family of West Chester, the some 500 account books of businesses employing and selling to Negroes in the County, the large files of indexed newspaper clippings arranged chronologically and topically, the Oberholtzer Papers, the Passmore Williamson Scrapbook, the John Evans Diaries, the Caleb Cope Diary, the Sharpless Family Papers, the John Sugar Diary, the Bayard Taylor Journal, the Wherry Collection Papers, the Lewis Collection Papers, and the Darlington Collection Papers.

Though the holdings of the York, Adams, and Lancaster County societies are not so extensive as Chester County's, they are no less important. Among the most valuable for Negro community development are: the slavery papers, antislavery files, Brough Family Papers, Gettys Family files, and the Henry Stewart Papers at the Adams County Historical Society in Gettysburg; the Reuss Collection and scrapbooks, Miscellaneous Collection, Wisler Collection, Stevens Manuscripts, Buchanan Manuscripts, the papers of the Lancaster County Historical Society and the Evans Collection at the Lancaster County Historical Society; and the Negro Collection, Union Club Books, genealogical and family folders, vital statistics files, the Lewis Miller Watercolor portfolio of early York, the Ellis Lewis and Smyser Family Papers, 1790-1910, the business ledgers, including the James McConkey general store, canal boat and quarrying book, 1842-53, and the Quaker and church files of the Historical Society of York County.

The Negro holdings of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia are the most extensive in the United States. The papers of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, begun in 1774 under the leadership of Benjamin Franklin, are the society's most significant collection. The catalogue title at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania is somewhat misleading as the collection, which comprises more than 50,000 items, encompasses a broader aspect of Negro affairs than the title indicates. Hardly a thread of Pennsylvania Negro life is untouched in this collection. The papers are a fundamental source for any study of Pennsylvania slavery, manumission practices, fugitive slaves and the "underground railroad." Education and the many schools founded by and for Negroes, mutual aid and self-improvement societies, and general community life may be gleaned from the collection's files.

Other collections at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania represent the Negro. William Still, author of **The Underground Railroad**, is represented in a series of journals and letters at the society. Hundreds of Quaker journals, account books, diaries, and personal correspondence reveal the involvement of Quakers in local Negro life. The American Negro History Society Papers (1790-1901) view the Negro community from the different perspective of Negro artists, scientists, and inventors. When these collections are exhausted and the subject heading of slavery, anti-slavery, abolitionism, and Negro have been searched, other material for Negro history must be mined from the general collections. The most important to consult are the Association, Club, and Society Records, the Rhoda Barber Journal, the Elias Boudinet Papers, the George Bryan Papers, the Shippen Family Papers, the Delaware County Poor House Records, the Gilpin Letter books, the bail books in the voluminous Dreer Collection, the Elihu Embree Papers, the Pemberton Papers, the Robert McPherson Papers, and the northern and interior county papers.

The manuscript collections of the American Philosophical Society provide useful information on black involvement in the antislavery movement in the papers of Robert Hare, Philadelphia chemist, J. Peter Lesley, geologist, and other active participants in the movement. The Library Company of Philadelphia has similar collections. The McCallister papers, the Granville Sharp, Dillwyn, Emlen, and Belknap letters all concern themselves with Pennsylvania slavery. Samuel George Morton, nineteenth-century anthropologist and craniologist, left behind notes and correspondence concerning the Negro which cast light on race attitudes in southeastern Pennsylvania.

It is obvious, then, that much primary research material dealing with the Negro exists and has existed in useful form for a period of time within southeastern Pennsylvania institutions. The challenge presented is to use it properly.