Philadelphia and the End of Slavery

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Following the gradual emancipation of slavery in Pennsylvania in 1780, Philadelphia and its surrounding areas had a lasting impact on the practice in the United States. Being that Pennsylvania was bordered by multiple slave states, it was seen as a viable escape venue for many slaves that wanted to escape their bondage. Philadelphia had a long history in the United States' ongoing slave debate and many abolitionists at the time based themselves out of the Philadelphia area. Over time many anti-slavery societies developed in the area and abolitionists began to surface. These abolitionists ranged from simple everyday people to men like Benjamin Franklin who remains a household name to this day.

Along with abolitionists, the
Underground Railroad became a popular
option for slaves hoping to escape and many
of the stops along the way were in the
Philadelphia area. Fugitive slaves often
escaped to Philadelphia and its suburbs and
hid out from slave catchers that hoped to
return them to the South. These
Underground Railroad stops made
Philadelphia integral in slave escapes and in
their quest to obtain long-term freedom. It
was through major cities in the early United
States that the anti-slavery movement grew
and the quest toward emancipation began.
Initially, Northerners were content with the

North and South being split on the slave issue, but later cities like Philadelphia saw more unrest. In the end, Philadelphia played a vital role in the growing abolitionist movement in the United States. Without a movement like the one in Philadelphia, it was possible that the Civil War could have occurred significantly later and slaves would have been in bondage for decades longer.

Just four years after the United States declared its independence from Britain, Pennsylvania passed a law which called for the slow abolition of slavery within its borders. This act permanently freed all African-Americans that had already been considered free. Essentially, under this law anybody who was not already a slave could no longer be sold as property within the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The goal in enacting this was to not anger current slave owners, but to ensure that Pennsylvania's slave trade did not grow. This law brought a new type of society to Pennsylvania. Philadelphia in particular was one of the most adaptive, as jobs, churches, and even schools were erected for the black population. Despite racial issues arising in the city, and as more African-Americans arrived, Philadelphia lived up to its name as the "City of Brotherly Love." As antislavery societies and anti-slavery rhetoric grew within the city, Philadelphia quickly became one of the safest places for ex-slaves and fugitive slaves to go.²

Despite the praise that Pennsylvania received from many of its citizens, the passage of this law did not please everybody. There were some who did not believe in the gradual abolition of slavery. In

1781, just one year after the law was put into action, there were attempts to repeal it. This would have meant that free African-Americans living within Pennsylvania's borders would once again be subjected to slavery. While the legislature voted against repealing the act, some of the letters and articles that followed show how former slaves coped with the possibility of their return to bondage. One such example of this comes from a former slave named Cato who wrote about how nothing would be worse than granting slaves freedom, letting them live a free life, and then returning them to their bondage. Cato said, "Our lots in slavery were hard enough to bear; but having tasted the sweets of freedom, we should now be miserable indeed." ³ He then questions Christianity by saying, "Surely no Christian gentlemen can be so cruel!"4 One of the main tactics in employing the change in laws at this time was to use freed blacks to reach out to the population. Ex-slaves' words were powerful and valuable in the fight to abolish slavery throughout the state and country.

Philadelphia was a popular destination for fugitive slaves because it was close to where Pennsylvania bordered slave states Delaware and Maryland. Slaves that lived in the northern parts of the South often recognized Philadelphia as part of their journey to freedom. In fact, former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass stated that he would pay attention to how steamboats got to Philadelphia. He would learn their routes so that we would have a better understanding of how to get to the city and where it was from a geographical

standpoint.⁵ Philadelphia quickly had the largest concentration of African-Americans within the state of Pennsylvania.⁶ Its geographical location and growth in abolitionists within its borders made it an important city for the antislavery movement in the United States.

One of the best ways for people to get the word of abolitionists to the public was through anti-slavery societies. One of the earliest and most famous anti-slavery society to form in Philadelphia was the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society. It was founded in 1775, but did most of its work following Pennsylvania's gradual abolition law. The society was located on Walnut Street, which provided easy access for both its white and black members. Its overall goal was to better the African race.⁷ This society worked tirelessly at emancipating slaves and growing the nation through its anti-slavery rhetoric. Many of their platforms stood on ideas like slavery being anti-Christian and slavery being harmful to the prosperity of the United States. The society called for the speedy abolition of slavery and they believed that this could be achieved peaceably and rather quickly. In other words, the society believed that slavery could be abolished nationwide if the United States government took a similar approach to the state of Pennsylvania. While they waited for the movement to grow, they put some of their efforts into improving conditions for free African-Americans living in Philadelphia.8 This made them a society for not only slaves, but a society for the improvement of race relations in the United States. Of course, this did not come easily as

even free African-Americans were treated poorly throughout Philadelphia and the rest of the country.

The Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society was an extensive organization with a hierarchy of power and annual membership fees. Its Constitution laid out the chain of command as well as the steps that people needed to take if they wished to join. Some of the rules required to join included being twenty-one years old and being approved by the Board of Managers. Once they accepted somebody into the society, the person would be required to pay the annual fee of two dollars. Similar to the Constitution of the United States, the society's Constitution required a two-thirds vote by the members of the society to amend the document.⁹ This society essentially led Philadelphia through its role in the slave debate; its prominence was overwhelming throughout the city. The goal, to "never cease our endeavors, until slavery shall become entirely extinct, and our institutions, effectually purged from the gross impurities which they have acquired under its influence" brought people together in joining and played a part in Philadelphia's importance during this critical time. ¹⁰

Another major anti-slavery society at this time was the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS). It was also founded in 1775, and although the PAS was a statewide organization, it was prominent and grew throughout the city of Philadelphia. It quickly expanded to become the world's leading anti-slavery organization during this time. Its main focus was obviously on abolishing the practice of slavery and emancipating every slave in the United

States, however it also had some other important aspects. In Pennsylvania, the organization took on smaller tasks like education for the black community and legally assisting African-Americans who were endangered by their opposition to slavery. While the institutions that developed were segregated, they were a start that very few other cities offered. Following Pennsylvania passing the gradual emancipation law in 1780, this became the PAS's main goal for the rest of the country. They often approached these types of movements through legal action instead of mass organization. They are noted multiple times having petitioned congress, federal courts, and state government. As the abolitionist movement grew, antislavery societies began to appear more often and the PAS became less popular. Regardless, this society was huge in starting the fight toward abolition and the ultimate eradication of the institution.11

Following in the footsteps of societies like the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, the American Anti-Slavery Society was formed. This society was not simply an organization for the city of Philadelphia or the state of Pennsylvania, but a society designed for growing the abolitionist movement in the entire country. The other, smaller and local societies essentially morphed into this bigger, unified society in 1833. While the smaller societies in Philadelphia did not go away, the fact that the American Anti-Slavery Society was housed within Philadelphia's borders made the organization more appealing to those

serious about advocating for the abolition of slavery. The American Anti-Slavery Society was formed in Philadelphia on December 4, 1833 and quickly became the largest of such societies in the United States. Its entire goal revolved around the complete emancipation of all slaves in the United States. Some of the other ideas that the society was founded on included elevating the character and condition in which African-Americans lived as well as improving race relations throughout the United States. ¹³

The anti-slavery movement in Philadelphia brought notable abolitionists, one abolitionist of note during this time was Philadelphia native Benjamin Franklin. Despite having one time been a slave owner himself, Franklin became an advocate for the emancipation of slaves as he grew older. In fact, Franklin was even elected at one point to be the president of the Philadelphia Abolition Society. 14 His change from slave owner to abolitionist was one that many cannot pinpoint, but as the United States moved past the revolution, it became clear that Franklin was willing to transfer his energy into the slave debate. Franklin frequently addressed public groups in the form of letters and speeches to speak out about his views on slavery. In 1789, Franklin gave an address on the atrocities of slavery where he mentioned how slaves did not have the ability to make choices and that everything they did was governed by fear. 15

The interesting things about Franklin as an abolitionist, was that he did not come out publicly as an abolitionist until around the time slavery was abolished in

Pennsylvania. The earliest signs of Franklin's personal interest in the antislavery movement came in the late 1750s, but Franklin was careful to keep his abolitionist-agenda quiet. In 1729, Franklin was approached by a writer who wished to publish an antislavery manuscript. 16 At this point, Franklin was very wary on the slave debate and did not yet speak of it publicly. Franklin believed slavery to be a very complex issue and at the time it was highly contested; Franklin did not yet want to risk his reputation on a topic like slavery. ¹⁷ In this instance, Franklin did agree to publish the manuscript, but did not list his publishing company as the printer of the document.¹⁸ In the 1770s, Franklin decided to participate in both sides of the slave issue. In letters during this time, Franklin told antislavery advocates that he was with them, however, publicly he often supported the practice. Following the Revolution, Franklin became more open about his views on slavery. He felt that prior to the Revolution, the main focus should have been on developing and creating the basics of the country, but once that was complete he was ready to discuss other issues. By the time Franklin joined the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in 1787, he was prepared to make bold steps toward ending the practice. 19 It was at this time that he began regularly publishing and speaking out about the practice. As the society was growing, Franklin was noted saying, "I myself printed...[works] against keeping negroes in slavery."20 He claimed that he had been publishing works of these abolitionists since as early as 1729.²¹ Some may find this rather ironic, since Franklin did not publicly denounce the practice, however many of the publications that he sent to print were very valuable and contributed to the antislavery rhetoric in Philadelphia at his time.

As the slave debate waged on throughout the 1800s, the north and south struggled to find even ground on the issue. One of the biggest laws agreed upon in regards to slavery in the United States was the "Fugitive Slave Act of 1850." This act effectively required any slave caught escaping to the North be returned to their owner. This meant that whether or not a person supported the slave trade, they were required by law to bring slave back to their owners. Failure to comply with this law could have resulted in penalties, like fines. From this point, the effectiveness of the slave conversation in the city of Philadelphia began to disappear.²² While legal action slowed for quite some time, the relevance of slave societies like the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society were only just beginning. Likewise, the illegal maneuvers by local people to break laws like the Fugitive Slave Act quickly became more popular and spread out not only in Philadelphia, but the entire northern region of the United States.

The Fugitive Slave Act was opposed throughout the northern states, as many felt that it did not match with the principles written about in the Declaration of Independence. They questioned the ideals of the United States, especially the idea "that all men were created equal; that they were endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life,

liberty and the pursuit of happiness."²³ The expectation brought on by the United States government to literally capture and send another human being into bondage, led to the formation of the Underground Railroad. The beginning of the actual, formal Underground Railroad began following a shooting in 1804 in Columbia, PA. During this shooting a fugitive slave was shot as he attempted to escape. It was here, that many mark the beginning of outraged free people (both white and black) coming together to help hide these escaped slaves.²⁴

Philadelphia became an important stop on the Underground Railroad due to its proximately to southern slave states. While early on, following the initiation of the law, the Underground Railroad remained quiet in the public realm, however, as tensions began to boil over and the Civil War was on the horizon, citizens began to congregate to amend and allow the non-compliance of this law. In one of these meetings, much was resolved, most importantly, the law was denounced in Philadelphia and primarily ignored.²⁵ While this successful change in the law, was important, many slaves saw successful escape to the north prior to it being recognized by the city of Philadelphia. In fact, prior to 1860, almost 1,940 runaway slaves entered Philadelphia. Despite many of these slaves staying in Philadelphia, many others continued north on a trek that ultimately brought them to Canada, where they would be safest.²⁶

Some escaped slaves did not hope to end their venture in Canada, but were content to stay around the Philadelphia area and work. One such man, with the pseudonym Henry Franklin was uninterested in going to Canada and instead worked carting coal between locations. In doing so, he would often help move slaves on their quest to freedom. He would do this by covering them with straw and carting them along with the coal from stop to stop. Henry Franklin worked for many years and moved between jobs in not only an attempt to live a comfortable free life, but to help fugitive slaves escape in any way he could.²⁷

One abolitionist who opened his doors to escaped slaves was Robert Purvis. Purvis was originally from South Carolina, but moved to Philadelphia in 1820. Following the move Purvis attended the Clarkson School, which was sponsored by the PAS. This is where Purvis grew to support the abolitionist movement and one of the biggest reasons that he devoted his life to the abolition of slavery and freeing escaped slaves through the Underground Railroad. Purvis lived at the cross of Ninth and Lombard streets in Philadelphia where his house had a secret door to hide runaway slaves. In 1837, Purvis developed a program for the purpose of assisting "colored persons in distress." ²⁸ While this program sent over 40 fugitives further north and worked on over three cases each week, the group collapsed in 1842 following an antiabolition riot. This society was later picked up by William Still, who worked at rebuilding the program to assist about 100 fugitives per year during the 1850s. Still was a former slave who hoped to help others escape to freedom. Still took the goal of Purvis's society a little further as he worked with the slaves that he housed to find their

families and loved ones.²⁹ While it is unclear exactly how successful he was in doing this, his efforts and successes in simply housing fugitive slaves shows the importance of abolitionists living in Philadelphia during this time.

Many place the relevance of antislavery rhetoric in Philadelphia from not only its proximity to slave states, but also its successes in establishing the first pro-Black organizations like anti-slavery societies and black churches. The African-American population grew dramatically between 1830 and 1860 not only because of the Underground Railroad, but because of the abolitionist societies formed in Philadelphia. By 1860 Philadelphia alone housed between 30 and 40 percent of Pennsylvania's African-American population. While this made up only a measly four percent of the state's population, this was a bigger free black population than any city in the United States at this time.³⁰ This population became not only a major player in the ongoing quest to bring slaves to freedom, but was important because it even began an early Civil Rights movement. Philadelphia's role at this time predominantly was focused on the freedom of slaves, but this did not prevent free blacks from beginning to start a movement for equal rights. In fact, Philadelphia housed the American Society of Free Persons of Coulour for four days in September of 1830. Here, African-Americans met to discuss ways in which they could "devise and pursue all legal means for the speedy elevation of ourselves and brethren to the scale and standing of men."31 Many of these early Civil Rights

movements were overshadowed by the slavery issue. Societies like the ones previously discussed were able to form and grow exponentially because of the Underground Railroad. As more slaves began to flee to Philadelphia, the city was able to grow both culturally and structurally. The Underground Railroad helped bring fugitive slaves to the city which continued to grow anti-slavery rhetoric in Philadelphia and further expanded the call to end slavery on a national scale. Philadelphia's ability to grow in this way, was a massive success for the anti-slavery movement. The rhetoric and the ideas being spread from the city of Philadelphia further spread the message that slavery needed to be abolished and led the country closer to the Civil War.

Philadelphia certainly played a huge role in the emancipation of slaves, but the surrounding suburbs often proved to be a better place to hide fugitive slaves. Due to their smaller population and smaller impact on the rest of the country, suburbs became an important place for escaped slaves to stop on their journey to freedom. One of the most notable Philadelphia suburbs to house slaves in the 1800s was Bucks County. While Bucks County was not among the most popular suburbs for fugitive slaves to run, it quickly became one of the most successful.³² Its small population and lack of standing out as an Underground Railroad "premier stop" made it valuable for high profile escapes and slaves wishing to find work.

Slave catchers rarely came to Bucks County in search of their slaves, but if they did, they would knock on doors in hoping to

regain their "property." It is for this reason, that many of the slaves who did not stay in the Bucks County area to work continued further north to Quakertown or the truly free land of Canada. Another reason for the limited success of slave catchers in Bucks County, was that the county was small enough to keep the secrets of where slaves were kept. Information rarely made its way into the wrong hands. When asked by slave catchers for information on the whereabouts of fugitive slaves, Bucks County residents often kept quiet and acted like there never were and never would be fugitive slaves hidden in the county. Simply put, the strategy in this area was simply to deny the Underground Railroad's existence. 33

In many aspects, Chester and Lancaster Counties proved to be the best examples of thriving stops on the Underground Railroad. The close proximity of these counties to the events taking place in Philadelphia, made them excellent stops on the Underground Railroad because they were more protected and less searched. These counties were primarily Quaker, making it important because at the time, Quakers were one of the biggest advocates against slavery. Northern areas of these counties were far enough from the borders that they could house slaves until they could be transported further North. Unlike Bucks County, Chester and Lancaster Counties often proved to be primarily temporary destinations for fugitive slaves as slaves quickly turned over to the north and more slaves would enter. In terms of the routes used in these areas, they ultimately split into three separate northern routes. Fugitive

slaves would be strategically sent at different times on these routes to avoid traveling in large numbers. Slave catchers often followed their suspects through Columbia, PA (at the time located in Chester), and because of the strategic methods put into play in this area were seldom able to capture their slaves.³⁴ This was one of the factors that led to further tension between the slave-owning South and the free North. The North's failure to comply with the Fugitive Slave Act in addition to Philadelphia and its surrounding counties' ability to allow fugitives to seek refuge in this area, were incredibly valuable as the United States geared up for the Civil War.35

In the late 1850s, as the Union was falling apart and the prospect of Civil War was becoming a reality, Philadelphia continued to play its part in the broken country. Philadelphia began to see struggles politically as they weighed whether they preferred Republicans (who they felt would tear the Union apart) or Democrats (who they felt would continue the practice of slavery). Until this time surprisingly, Philadelphia political figures did not speak out for or against the practice of slavery. This was mainly because people were so split on the issue and it was such a spirited issue for different people. Much of what happened in terms of political issues were handled at the federal level. More often than not Philadelphia's leading political figures would not comment or act on things like the increased use of the Underground Railroad in their city. Rather, they would often turn a blind eye to the issue. ³⁶

As the city and the country further approached secession and the Civil War, the city became more split. Despite its large African-American population, antiabolitionist sentiment began to increase. This was mainly the result of the fear that came with civil war being on the horizon. In fact, a certain sect of the Democratic Party was advocating for the state of Pennsylvania to secede if and when the slave states did. Despite some resistance prior to the fall of Fort Sumter, the majority of Philadelphians got on board with the United States' government.³⁷ By supporting the U.S. government, Philadelphia showed that it was ready to fight. While this would appear to perhaps have been an obvious endorsement by the people of Philadelphia because of its long history of anti-slavery rhetoric, it took until the fall of Fort Sumter for Philadelphians to officially support the U.S. government in the coming war.

The oncoming war in the United States at this time, brought fear to many people and rightfully so. The coming slaughter of United States citizens at the hands of their own brethren is one that should have instilled fear in anybody. The United States at this time was very split and very different, and Philadelphia played a major part in this division and much later its ultimate reunification. Philadelphia represented one of the biggest cities in the country at this time, and its involvement in such a movement played an extensive part in what was about to come. Pennsylvania began a movement by enacting a law gradually abolishing slavery, and

Philadelphia acted on and expanded this law.

Antislavery and abolitionist societies developed in the city of Philadelphia to bring awareness and help fight the horrors of slavery in the United States. Such societies played a major part in growing the abolitionist movement throughout the United States, it is through these societies that a movement was built and support was grown. Through these societies abolitionists were created. One of the most famous names at this time was Benjamin Franklin, whose open stance as an abolitionist began late in life, but who spent a lot of his life working behind the scenes toward a movement. Later, Philadelphia and its surrounding counties became major hubs in the Underground Railroad. Through this system, slaves were able to come through Philadelphia and gain their freedom. This did not come without controversy, but Philadelphians were ready to break the law to do what they felt was right for their fellow man. As the Civil War became imminent, Philadelphia, despite seeing a slight schism, held its ground and supported the United States' government in their upcoming challenges. The part played by Philadelphia from these points cannot be understated.

All of these events took place within the city and some of its surrounding counties. The large Quaker population in Pennsylvania played a large part in this. It is through this population, that many slaves were freed, and it is through their ideology of peace and harmony that much of the antislavery sentiment in Philadelphia grew.

It later continued as more African-Americans entered the city and worked to grow these practices. No one person created this movement, but it was one of big numbers and passionate Philadelphians.

In the end, Philadelphia played a major role in the end of slavery in the United States. Without the city's citizens push toward emancipating slaves in the United States, the oncoming Civil War could have been pushed back many years. By growing a community that pushed for the end of slavery, Philadelphia was able to help put an end to this horrible practice. The commitment of antislavery societies, abolitionists, and Underground Railroad supporters this movement could have taken a lot longer to accomplish. Philadelphia was able to become the heart of the antislavery movement as its location gave it the prime opportunity to do so. This movement could have taken much longer without the part Philadelphia played. Its role should not be forgotten but should be remembered as a bigger piece of history and the emancipation of all slaves within the United States' border.

Notes:

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- ³ Cato, "Having Tasted the Sweets of Freedom," *Freeman's Journal*, September 21, 1781.
- ⁴ Cato, "Having Tasted the Sweets of Freedom," *Freeman's Journal*, September 21, 1781.
- ⁵ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, ed. David W. Blight (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin, 2003), 75. ⁶ Newman and Mueller, *Antislavery and Abolition*, 165-166.
- ⁷ Ibid, 177-178.
- ⁸ Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society, *Constitution of the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society: Instituted fourth month 30th, 1834* (Philadelphia, PA: T. Town, 1834), 2-4, accessed November 1, 2016, http://vv4kg5gr5v.search.serialssolutions.com/
- ⁹ Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society, *Constitution of the Philadelphia*, 8. ¹⁰ Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society, *Constitution of the Philadelphia*, 12.
- ¹¹ Richard Newman, "Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS)," in *Abolition and Antislavery*, ed. Peter Hinks and John McKivigan (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 248-250
- ¹² Newman, "Pennsylvania Abolition," in *Abolition and Antislavery*, 249.

- ¹³ The Constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society (New York, NY: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838).
- ¹⁴ David Waldsteicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2004), 229.
- ¹⁵ Memorandum by Benjamin Franklin, "An address to the public, from the Pennsylvania Society for promoting the abolition of slavery, and the relief of free negroes, unlawfully held in bondage," November 9, 1789, accessed October 6, 2016, https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.1470100 0/.
- ¹⁶ Newman and Mueller, *Antislavery and Abolition*, 56.
- ¹⁷ David Waldsteicher, *Runaway America*, 198-200.
- ¹⁸ Newman and Mueller, *Antislavery and Abolition*, 56.
- ¹⁹ David Waldsteicher, *Runaway America*, 198-200.
- ²⁰ Newman and Mueller, *Antislavery and Abolition*, 121.
- ²¹ Ibid 121.
- ²² Lawrence Goldstone, *Dark Bargain: Slavery, Profits, and the Struggle for the Constitution* (New York, NY: Walker & Company, 2005), 175.
- ²³ Robert Clemens Smedley, M.D., *History* of the Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania (New York, NY: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 25.
- ²⁴ Ibid 26
- ²⁵ "Fugitive Slave Law in Philadelphia," *The Sun* (New York, NY), 1850, accessed November 1, 2016,
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- ²⁶ Nilgun Anadolu Okur, "Underground Railroad in Philadelphia, 1830-

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²⁷ Edward H. Magill, When Men Were Sold: The underground railroad in Bucks County, Pa.: an address delivered before the Bucks County Historical Society (n.p., 1898), 11, accessed November 1, 2016,

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- ²⁸ Okur, "Underground Railroad," 548.
- ²⁹ Okur, "Underground Railroad," 548.
- ³⁰ Ibid 554.
- ³¹ Richard Allen, "Address to the Free People of Coulour of These United States," speech, 1830, in *Minutes of the Proceedings* of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864, ed. Howard Holman Bell (New York, NY: Arno, 1969).
- ³² Edward H. Magill, When Men Were Sold: The underground railroad in Bucks County, Pa.: an address delivered before the Bucks County Historical Society (n.p., 1898), 5, accessed November 1, 2016, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100554 543.
- ³³ Magill, When Men Were, 10.
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 Ibid 36-38.
- ³⁷ Ibid 96.