

Our Radical Heritage at Restoration 1827

(Summer Service 06.07)

by Frank Gerould

Good morning. My name is Frank Gerould. I have been a member of this congregation since 1990, which qualifies me as one of the old heads. This morning we are going to do a little history of our radical forbears in Universalism in early 19th century Philadelphia.

In April, I went on my annual pilgrimage to the Socialist Scholars Conference, now called the Left Forum, at Cooper Union in NYC with some of my socialist comrades, and found this book **William Heighton: Pioneer Labor Leader of Jacksonian Philadelphia** by Philip Foner in the bookstalls in the basement there. Foner was the dean of American labor history, who taught at Lincoln University and Rutgers-Camden until his death in 1994. The appendix has selections of William Heighton's writings and speeches, including, remarkably, an address delivered to the Universalist Church in Callowhill Street on Wednesday evening, November 21, 1827. Heighton was a labor journalist and organizer of the first central labor body in American History, and a Universalist.

According to Bruce Laurie in **Working People of Philadelphia 1800-1850**, there were four Universalist congregations in Philadelphia in 1830: our congregation on Lombard Street, one in Northern Liberties, one in Kensington, and a fourth not identified. So this address happened at the Northern Liberties branch of the Universalists.

To begin, Sandy Fulton will talk about the early history of Universalism, then Paul Mack will read some excerpts from Heighton's address to the "Mechanics and Working Classes" at the Universalist Church. When you are listening to Paul, notice the level of language delivered to a 19th century audience from an artisan laborer with little formal education. The complete address is 20 pages, and must have taken two hours to deliver. Then I will talk about William Heighton and the social movement of the times. Then comments and questions as time permits.

William Heighton: Pioneer Labor Leader of Jacksonian Philadelphia

By Frank Gerould

From 1818 to 1820, depression visited upon America. In 1820, 20,000 in a population of 100,000 were unemployed in Philadelphia. In addition, even those who managed to stay employed took severe wage cuts. Most of the few Philadelphia unions died in the mid-1820s. Shoes, clothing, furniture, carriages, bricks, rope, cigars, brushes, barrels, candy, and hats were produced in large but not mechanized factories. In Manayunk, the textile industry became fully established with water-powered spinning and weaving machines. In Kensington and Moyanmensing textile factories also emerged, although much of the work continued to be performed by outworkers.

Even when the economy improved, workingmen felt an increasing sense of injustice—long hours, overbearing employers, and constant fear of unemployment. For a growing

number of workers, living conditions were declining at an alarming rate. Forced to live in crowded dwellings, in tenements and basement hovels, they were without the benefits of fresh air, sunlight or rudimentary sanitary facilities. The stagnant pools of sewage in the streets provided a natural home for the scourge of cholera, which swept the city leaving hundreds dead who could not escape to the countryside.

So this is what moved William Heighton to advocate for the cause of labor in Jacksonian Philadelphia. He noted there were “but few indeed who produce wealth that ever enjoy it; while those who produce nothing, enjoy it with all its attendant blessings and comforts.” William Heighton was a 28-year old cordwainer in 1827 (a leatherworker who made things of cordovan, esp. shoes) who played an important role in the creation and shaping of the early American labor movement. Heighton was born in Northamptonshire, England in 1800, and came to America as a young man. He went to work in the shoemakers’ trade in Southwark in present day South Philadelphia. He had little formal education, but had some biblical training and was familiar with a number of economic works of the time. Like many artisans and mechanics, Heighton was influenced by the ideas of the classical British economist David Ricardo. Ricardo argued that only labor adds value to natural resources, and the price of every product is determined by the work put into it. This is called the labor theory of value- a theory that prevailed among classical economists thought the mid 19th century- most notably Marx. Ricardo, like Adam Smith, also believed in laissez-faire, free trade and free markets.

The labor theory of value had enormous influence in working class circles during the Jacksonian era, and some economic thinkers known as the Ricardian Socialists. They opposed the unequal distribution of wealth under capitalism, which resulted in the accumulation of large amounts of capital in the hands of the few. They were the intellectual precursors to Marxian socialism and social democracy which would come later in the 19th century. Other influences on Heighton were John Gray’s **A Lecture on Human Happiness**, which Heighton reprinted in his labor newspaper, the *Mechanics’ Free Press*, and Robert Owen, the British industrialist and utopian socialist. Owen is considered the father of the cooperative movement, who pioneered reforms of the factory system in Europe. He proposed intentional cooperative communities with public kitchens, universal childcare and education for youth, and humane workplaces. He spoke before joint Houses of Congress in 1824, and in Philadelphia at the Franklin Institute in June 1827. He founded an experimental community in New Harmony, Indiana in 1825, which failed after two years.

Much to Heighton’s credit, he thought the solution to poverty was through a workingmen’s movement in their own community, especially through the intelligent use of the vote (rather than retreating to some remote frontier). In the address Paul read, Heighton advocates nominating their own candidates who will serve the interests of working people. He led the creation of a powerful central association of Philadelphia journeymen’s societies to collect and administer strike funds, direct strikes, and organize new unions. The Mechanics Union of Trade Associations was officially established in January, 1828. The preamble, written by Heighton, read like the Declaration of Independence:

“We, the Journeymen Mechanics of the City and County of Philadelphia, conscious that our condition in society is lower than justice demands it should be, and feeling our inability, individually, to ward off from ourselves and families those numerous evils which result from an unequal and very excessive accumulation of wealth and power into the hands of a few, are desirous of forming an Association, which shall avert as much as possible those evils which poverty and increasing toil have already inflicted, and which threaten ultimately to overwhelm and destroy us.”

At its height, the Mechanics Union of Trade Associations had 18 member unions in 1830, representing 2000 dues paying members. It founded six new trade societies and beneficial societies. Trades included tobacconists, ladies cordainers, printers and compositors, blacksmiths and whitesmiths (a worker in whitemetals, esp. tinsmith), leather workers, saddlers and harness makers. The finance committee of the MUTA collected ten cents monthly dues from the membership to build a strike fund, which was a new development in the labor market of Philadelphia. Workers could now endure a strike with strike benefits.

Another venture for Heighton was a workingmen’s library and newspaper, which he mentions in his address. In September 1827, the Mechanics Library Company was opened in North Alley. It became a clearinghouse of ideas, forum for discussions, and a meetinghouse for all regardless of trade. A regular feature was a Wednesday evening debate designed to encourage the growth of the workingmen’s movement. Membership was \$1.00. Over 100 volumes and many periodicals could be read in its single room during the long hours the library was open.

The Library also edited and published the *Mechanics’ Free Press*, the first newspaper in America for workers and edited entirely by workingmen. The four-page, five-column weekly carried on the masthead “A Journal of Practical and Useful Knowledge” edited and published by a committee of the Mechanics Library Company of Philadelphia. It lasted from 1828 to 1835, and had average weekly circulation of 1500-2000, when the major Philadelphia paper claimed on 4000. I would like to read the old issues. Philip Foner reports that the paper reprinted some articles from the abolitionist press, and treatises like Gray’s **Lecture on Human Happiness**, poetry from its working class readers, as well as issues on educational and labor reforms.

The paper also championed the Philadelphia Workingmen’s Party to run its own candidates for public office. The program for the party became a platform for labor parties throughout the US during the Jacksonian era: a call for a free, tax supported school system to replace the hated “pauper schools”; the abolition of imprisonment for debt; abolition of all licensed monopolies (meaning banks especially); abolition of the prevailing compulsory militia system; no regulation of religion; and direct election of officer by a vote of the people. The platform also addressed economic issues, protested unsanitary and overcrowded housing, the right to form trade unions, and proposed a ten-hour work day. It even demanded “sufficient hydrant water pressure for the accommodation of the poor.” Public education for the children of the poor as well as the

rich was a key demand. At this time, Pennsylvania provided schools for the poor if a family could not afford tuition. In practice, these schools were woefully under funded, and there was a stigma attached to attending them. The Philadelphia workingmen demanded education for their children not as “a grace and bounty for charity, but as a matter of right and duty.”

The Workingmen’s Party ran 39 candidates for state and national office in 1828, receiving less than 10% of Jackson’s Democratic Party vote, which is the story of third parties in America. In 1829 the Party ran candidates dually endorsed with the Democratic Party in Philadelphia, and became power brokers in many city districts. Sixteen Workingmen candidates were elected. Of course, this led to the eventual absorption of the Workingmen’s Party and its issues into the Democratic Party. 1831 was the last campaign for the first labor party in the world.

Foner reports that Heighton left Philadelphia in 1830 after the collapse of the Philadelphia Workingmen’s Party. I think he burned out. He achieved a secure (if neglected) place in the history of the American labor movement. He initiated the Mechanics Union of Trade Associations. He founded the first labor paper, the *Mechanics Free Press*, and the first labor party, the Philadelphia Workingmen’s Party. He wrote and distributed many popular pamphlets advancing the cause of social and economic equality.

In June 1833, the Pennsylvania legislature abolished imprisonment for debt, and in 1834 it passed laws establishing comprehensive free public schools and taxes to support them. Labor won a victory.

Let me finish with some tidbits I found about Universalism in Philadelphia in Bruce Laurie’s **Working People of Philadelphia 1800-1850**. The minister of our congregation from 1818 to 1825 was a prominent freethinker named Abner Kneeland. He was friend and champion of Robert Owen, the British utopian socialist, and also Frances Wright, a famous feminist and abolitionist from Scotland. He introduced Owen at his Franklin Institute engagement in 1827, and shared the stage with Frances Wright on many occasions in Philadelphia. Among her controversial activities was founding an interracial community called the Nashoba Commune in a suburb of Memphis in 1825, and conducting 30 freed slaves to Haiti in 1830. Abner Kneeland was automatically disfellowshipped by the New England Universalist General Convention in 1830 when he renounced Christianity.

Bruce Laurie recounts in a chapter called “*Radicals: Thomas Paine’s Progeny*”, that Universalism and Free Thought were the most important rationalist currents, products of the liberal humanism of the Enlightenment. Taken together, there were about 2000 Universalists and Free Thinkers (or as they preferred, Free Enquirers) on the rolls of the churches and societies in 1830 in Philadelphia, about 4/5 of which were Universalists. He also tells this story about the cholera epidemic of 1832 that took a heavy toll in Philadelphia’s poorest neighborhoods. Thousands crowded into churches in search of solace and reassurance. Leading Protestant clergy called a meeting to consider remedial action, attracting 250 clergy of various sects. A resolution was passed with only two

dissenters calling for a day of fasting and prayer “as means of averting the scourge and inducing the Lord to be gracious.” The lone dissenters, Zelotes Fuller and Abel Thomas, two Universalist ministers, argued large prayer meetings risked spreading the epidemic, and fasting would reduce one’s resistance. They were denounced as infidels.

So we are the progeny of Thomas Paine and infidels. Amen.