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## **“If a Woman Had Been Mayor”**

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## **“If a Woman Had Been Mayor”**

### **Abstract**

Essay on the 1844 anti-Catholic riots in Philadelphia through the lens of the Robert Montgomery Bird papers.

### **Keywords**

Philadelphia history

### **Disciplines**

Library and Information Science | United States History

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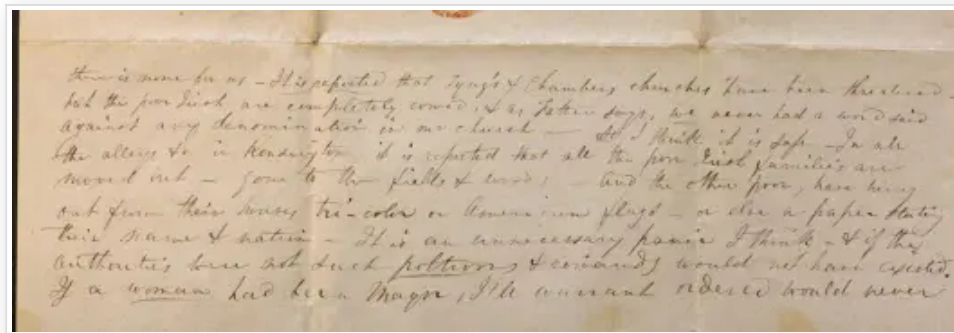
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## “If a Woman Had Been Mayor”

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[Ed. Note: Today's post is by [Prof. Zachary M. Schrag](#) from George Mason University. We are very grateful to Prof. Schrag for visiting the Penn Libraries for his research and volunteering to write about what he found.]



— Robert Montgomery Bird Family Correspondence (UPenn Ms. Coll. 1074, Box 1, folder 11)

From May 6 through 8, 1844, Protestant nativists battled Irish Catholic immigrants in the streets of Kensington—then an independent district north of the city of Philadelphia proper—and burned the Catholic churches of St. Michael and St. Augustine. Among the witnesses to the latter was 37-year-old Caroline Augusta Mayer, who on May 10 described the events to her sister, Mary E. Bird,

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then in Newcastle, Delaware. Caroline's letter, written in haste and now preserved in the Robert Montgomery Bird Family Papers. [UPenn MS Coll. 1074](#), describes the violence from the unusual perspective of an opinionated Philadelphia gentlewoman.

In May 1844, Caroline was living with her parents, Philip and Lucy Rodman Mayer, whose home on Race Street was about half a mile west of St. Augustine's. On the evening of May 8, the Mayers were in the parlor when a scream from the garret sent them running upstairs. It was "Poor Mary" (probably Mary Shails, the Irish-born domestic listed with the family in the 1850 census), "strong in hysterics" at the sight of the church in flames. "The cross on the cupola stood out distinct in the flames to the last," Caroline wrote, "& when at length it fell in, the flames were directly extinguished. It looked most striking, grand & sublime."

That evening, Pennsylvania Militia troops deployed to protect the city's surviving Catholic churches, including the elegant St. John the Evangelist, just north of fashionable Chestnut Street. On May 9, Philadelphians turned out to gawk. "The ladies not choosing to be chased out of their Chesnut Street—as why should they be? were out in flocks," Caroline reported, "particularly the upper part. We all took occasion to pass by 13th & Chesnut in the course of the afternoon, thinking we might not soon see a fortified church again." She took her 5-year-old nephew—Mary Bird's son, Frederic Mayer Bird—who "was perfectly delighted to see the soldiers & cannon," which she held him up to see. "But do not let his Dear Father think there is the slightest danger of his getting among the fighters."

Caroline's sister, Mary Bird, initially blamed the immigrants for the violence. "What a dreadful, wicked set of people they are to make such horrid riots," she wrote to Frederic. But Caroline had a different view. "The Americans are ten times worse than the Irish, except the Protestant Irish," she asserted, "and as for the poor Catholics, if people persecute them much longer, and all the saintly people smile & say, 'Ah, 'tis sad, but their doctrines are so very wicked,' I shall be tempted to turn Catholic myself. They at least are sincere, & not such detestable hypocrites." Quite a statement from the daughter of a Lutheran minister.

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Caroline also had sharp words for Philadelphia's Mayor John Scott, who had failed to save St. Augustine's. "Mother says, she would think rather more of [him], if he were less of an old granny, & had had the moral & physical courage to order a cannon to be fired on Monday afternoon ... It is an unnecessary panic I think, & if the authorities were not such poltroons & cowards would not have existed. If a woman had been Mayor, I'll warrant ordered [sic] would never have been infringed."

This was unfair. Whatever one might think of Scott's manhood, his jurisdiction did not extend to Kensington, the scene of Monday's fighting. Sheriff Morton McMichael did have county-wide jurisdiction but no forces to go with it, as he explained to his friend Robert Montgomery Bird, Mary's husband. In a May 17 letter, now in the Robert Montgomery Bird papers. [UPenn MS Coll. 108](#), the sheriff pitied himself: "In the late riots I did all that I could do to suppress them, but I have been so hampered by the tardiness and inaction of others, upon whom I depended, but could not control, that my personal efforts were to a great degree unavailing." Philadelphia's riots were too big a problem for any individual to control, and would not be resolved until Philadelphia absorbed Kensington and its other suburbs in 1854.

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