



University of Pennsylvania  
**ScholarlyCommons**

---

Unique at Penn

The Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare  
Books and Manuscripts

---

2-5-2019

## **“If a Woman Had Been Mayor”**

Zachary Schrag

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/uniqueatpenn>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

Schrag, Zachary, “If a Woman Had Been Mayor” (2019). *Unique at Penn*. 41.  
<https://repository.upenn.edu/uniqueatpenn/41>

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. <https://repository.upenn.edu/uniqueatpenn/41>  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

## **“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

Unique  
at penn

Nothing can more effectually contribute to the Cultivation & Improvement of a Country, the Wisdom, Riches, & Strength, Virtue and Piety, the Welfare & Happiness of a People, than a proper Education of Youth, by forming their Manners, imbuing

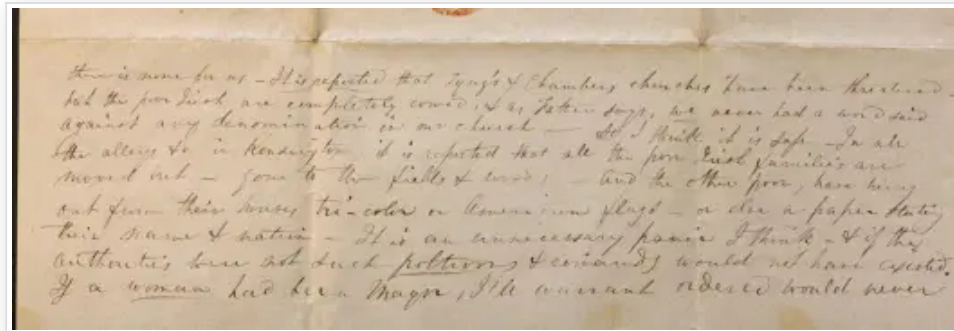
05  
Tuesday  
FEB 2019

## “If a Woman Had Been Mayor”

POSTED BY ADMINUATPA IN POSTS

≈ LEAVE A COMMENT

[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,

### ♣ WELCOME

Welcome to Unique at Penn, part of the family of University of Pennsylvania Libraries blogs. Every week this space will feature descriptions and contextualization of items from the collections of the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. The site focuses on those materials held by Penn which are in some sense “unique” - drawn from both our special and circulating collections, whether a one-of-a-kind medieval manuscript or a twentieth-century popular novel with generations of student notes penciled inside. See the About page for more on the blog and to contact the editor.

### ♣ RECENT POSTS

- Blue Skies to Red Seas
- “If a Woman Had Been Mayor”
- A Woodblock on Pilgrimage: From Flanders to Philadelphia
- Etta Winograd: Artist of the Figurative and the Fantastical
- A Collection of Korekushon

### ♣ ARCHIVES

- August 2019
- February 2019

Follow

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.

- August 2018

---

- December 2017

---

- November 2017

---

- July 2017

---

- October 2016

---

- July 2016

---

- June 2016

---

- May 2016

---

- March 2016

---

- December 2015

---

- November 2015

---

- October 2015

---

- September 2015

---

- August 2015

---

- June 2015

---

- March 2015

---

- February 2015

---

- January 2015

---

- October 2014

---

- September 2014

---

- July 2014

---

- June 2014

---

- May 2014

---

- April 2014

---

- February 2014

---

- January 2014

---

- December 2013

---

- November 2013

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.

SHARE THIS:

Twitter

Facebook

#### RELATED

[An Independence Day Selection](#)  
In "Posts"

[Lincolniana and the Electoral College](#)  
In "Posts"

[A Rocket Cat? Early Modern Explosives Treatises at Penn](#)  
In "Posts"

- October 2013
- September 2013
- August 2013
- July 2013
- June 2013
- May 2013
- April 2013
- March 2013
- February 2013
- January 2013
- December 2012
- October 2012
- September 2012
- August 2012
- July 2012
- June 2012
- May 2012

#### ✚ AUTHORS

[adminuatpa](#)

[Alexander Devine](#)

[Dianne Mitchell](#)

[Lynne Farrington](#)

[Jacqueline Burek](#)

[John F. Anderies](#)

[Regan Kladstrup](#)

[Marissa Nicosia](#)

[Mitch Fraas](#)

[← Previous post](#)

[Next post →](#)

## LEAVE A REPLY

---

---

**Michael P. Williams**

---

**Molly Des Jardin**

---

**Richard Griscom**

---

**Nancy Shawcross**

---

**Pushkar Sohoni**

---

**Simran Thadani**

---

### ♣ LINKS

- [Penn's Apps on Tap](#)

---

- [Penn's Rare Books Cataloging Blog](#)

---

- [Penn Libraries Catalog \(New Franklin\)](#)

---

- [Penn's Rare Book and Manuscript Library](#)

---

- [DigitalPenn](#)

---

- [Penn in Hand](#)

---

- [Schoenberg Database of Manuscripts](#)

---

### ♣ LATEST FROM PENNRARE

- [Move Forward](#) May 25, 2020

---

- [Lydia Sigourney's Rags and Ribbons](#) May 20, 2020

---

- [Musical Bridge](#) May 18, 2020

---

### ♣ SUBSCRIBE TO UNIQUE AT PENN



*The conclusions and views presented on posts within "Unique at Penn" reflect those of their writers and do not represent the official position of the University of Pennsylvania or the University of Pennsylvania Libraries.*

Blog at WordPress.com.