

Chapter 1

THE CITY

PHILADELPHIA in the middle of the eighteenth century had become, by colonial standards, a large and rich city. A careful count of houses in 1749 indicated that it possessed a population of about twelve thousand. This was increasing rapidly. Week by week, often day by day, vessels came up the river bringing immigrants from Europe and passengers from other American settlements. Some of these only passed through the city on their way to the farming regions; but, as in all cases when a city is once established, there was a steady reflux from the country into the town. Individuals, like young Franklin in 1723, came to Philadelphia overland or by river boat or sailing vessel to make their fortunes. Of the men who were prominent in the city in the middle of the eighteenth century, a striking number had come since its opening. They came from the southern colonies, New England, and the West Indies, as well as from England, Scotland, and Ireland. They were a second wave of "first settlers," presumably attracted not so much by the religious freedom of Penn's colony as by its industrial success and opportunities. A somewhat careful estimate made in 1760 gives the city's population as eighteen thousand. It was the largest as well as the most rapidly growing American city. Far from being the "green country town" of Penn's vision, extending along wide streets between its two rivers, "each purchaser having room enough for a house, garden and small orchard," it had already become, under the influence of commerce, a compact, even a congested city. It stretched some two miles in a narrow strip along the Delaware; on the river front, looking out across the harbor, were the oldest dwelling houses, interspersed with warehouses, sail lofts, shipyards, and

taverns. Back of them lay a narrow checkerboard of a dozen or more main streets intersected with numerous and irregularly spaced alleys and courts. All of it, practically, lay east of the present Sixth Street. Built partly of wood, but principally of the fine red brick into which the local clay bakes, Philadelphia was already the "Red City" its great physician and novelist has called it when picturing it as it was half a century later.¹

There were a few fine mansions surrounded by large grounds, the Carpenter house, the Shippen house, the Loxley house, Clark's Hall, and others, but for the most part dwellings were scattered along the streets and alleys or stood contiguously in solid rows. Many merchants and professional men, even of those who were well-to-do, lived in the houses in which they carried on their affairs, some still on the water front, others along the five or six streets parallel with the river, or those extending back toward the open country and the Schuylkill. The edges of the city were frayed out into a region where handsome country places of families that sought open space, like Stenton, alternated with disreputable taverns and shabby houses such as always border main roads running out from a town.

In this city lived an unusually mixed population. Its foundation was of course the body of English families, mostly middle class, some of them Quakers, some Church people, some Dissenters, who, attracted by the offer of religious and civil freedom and reports of excellent and cheap land, had come over with William Penn or in the first twenty years of the colony's existence. Remnants of Swedes and Dutch from the early settlements on the Delaware, a few French and Spanish immigrants, and a steadily flowing stream of Germans and Scotch-Irish percolated among the main body of English settlers.

As a meeting place of North and South and a place where African slaves, acclimated in the West Indies and the far South, were constantly being imported and bought and sold, the city held many Negroes, slave and free. At the funeral of the famous Quaker opponent of slavery and the slave trade, Anthony Benezet, said to have been the largest known in the city's history, one-

¹ See the contemporary map in the Philadelphia Library and Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's *The Red City*, N.Y., 1908.

third of the followers in the procession, walking in the rear, were Negroes.

As a city of proclaimed freedom of religion, it had a population as various in religious profession as in national origin. By the middle of the century there were congregations of the Church of England, Quakers, Presbyterians, Baptists, Moravians, Lutherans, German and Dutch Reformed, and Roman Catholics, besides many people not included in these or any other religious folds. Indeed profession of "the Pennsylvania religion" was said to be a jocular claim made by a person who had no religious connection.

Philadelphia was, as has been observed, a rich city. It was possible by wholesale or retail trade to change a small business rapidly into a large one. A competence was easy, wealth not too difficult to obtain. There were already several well-established wealthy merchant families. Exportation of products of the back country, grain, flour, ship-bread, flax and flaxseed, bar and pig iron, skins and furs, and importation of necessities and luxuries from the mother country, from other continental colonies and from the West Indies, not to mention occasional privateering, gave abundant opportunity for merchants to increase the extent of their operations and to amass considerable fortunes. In October 1752 there were 117 seagoing vessels, most of them doubtless very small according to modern standards, lying in the harbor at one time. The imports for that year, about two-thirds of them from England, were valued at more than £600,000. Ships were built, sold, and put into service for freight and as packets; tanneries, breweries, and bake-houses of ship-bread are shown on the maps of the river front and the lower reach of Dock Creek.¹

With the rapid increase of population there was also much demand for city lots and adjacent country land, and in the consequent rapid exchanges of ownership, early comers and those in a position to speculate in land profited by the unearned increment. After about 1730 the iron furnaces and forges along the upper Schuylkill became a source of wealth. The ironmasters were interested also in the city. Families in the upper classes were small, notwithstanding Franklin's assertion to the contrary, and

¹ Nicholas Scull's plan and statistics, pub. 1762.

there was much intermarriage among them, so that fortunes were often combined. Professional men, the doctors and lawyers, collected good fees; the former increased their incomes by dispensing their own medicines, the latter by payment for drawing up that multitude of legal documents, examples of which still lie abundantly in the desks of old Philadelphia families and in the cases of historical libraries. Offices under the Proprietors and the city and provincial governments had by this time become lucrative. Contractors profited when there was opportunity. The wealthy were constantly obtaining new recruits. Franklin, who entered the city as a boy and penniless in 1723, had become rich enough to retire from business only nineteen years later; and the personal records of the time offer many other instances of rapid rise to wealth, although seldom from so modest a start.

Below the group which possessed most of this wealth, with of course many variations, was a large class of small merchants and artisans. Those who worked for others received reasonably good and regular wages. Those who worked for themselves often prospered—judging from their contributions to churches, lodges, charities, and a variety of causes in which they were interested, and from their wills. A typical will of a man who describes himself as “carpenter” bequeaths pieces of land in the city, in New Jersey, and in Lancaster County, his tools and some books of his trade, his Negro woman Judith, and his man William Skelton.¹ It is to be remembered, however, that the carpenters of this period were also builders, and men of this calling made up the Carpenters Company and built Carpenter’s Hall of Revolutionary fame.

Between the wealthy who had become established and this middle class there was a wide social distinction. There was little possibility of mechanics or small retail dealers rising to a higher social class. The lines between the upper and the middle and lower classes were more sharply drawn than in later times. The mercantile, professional, landed, and office-holding class were on one side of this line, the common people, the small tradesmen, and artisans on the other. The former class were an aristocracy, though not a landed one. Low-born men, if able, were recog-

¹ Will of Edmund Wooley, Carpenter, dated 1780.

nized but hardly accepted within its circle. Franklin, though he became wealthy, eminent, and influential, was never quite considered, nor did he consider himself, a member of the upper class in Philadelphia. For example, in his *Plain Truth*, written in 1747 to urge defense against the French and the Indians, he says he speaks for the "Middling People, the Farmers, Shopkeepers and Tradesmen of the City and Country," and fulminates against "those great and rich men, merchants and others, who are ever railing at Quakers for doing what their principles seem to require—but take not one step for the Publick Safety." He not infrequently uses a bitter or sarcastic tone toward those he describes as "Men of Wealth and Influence."

There was much poverty in the city. The overseers of the poor were always busy; and we hear of widespread suffering and of special collections being made when there was an unusually hard winter. There was much disorder. The restless elements were recruited principally from redemptioners who had left their service and seamen deserting their ships, dissatisfied apprentices, and the usual flotsam and jetsam of a port town in those days of drunkenness and neglect. The authorities had constant trouble with misdeeds in obscure taverns and during fair time. The presentment of a grand jury in 1744 calls the attention of the mayor and magistrates to the fact that there are more than one hundred taverns in the city, and that many of these are mere "tippling houses," tending to vice and debauchery and the increase of poverty. "They impoverish the neighborhoods they live in and for want of better customers are under temptation to entertain apprentices, servants and even negroes." One of these neighborhoods is "so vitiated that it has obtained among the common People the shocking name of 'Hell Town.'" The jury proceeds to present, as keeping disorderly houses, six women and three men. Yet eight years later, in 1752, there were still in the city 120 taverns with licenses, and 118 houses that sold rum by the quart.¹

Taverns were of course by no means all disorderly houses: quite the contrary. The Indian King on Market Street near Third, where Franklin's Junto held its meetings, the Crooked

¹ *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XXII, 497-99.

Billet on the wharf above Chestnut, the Conestoga Wagon, where German farmers put up, the Pewter Platter at the corner of Front Street and an alley that took its name from the tavern, Mullen's, where the Freemasons met, the Beef-steak Club dined, and the Governor entertained his guests, Mrs. Roberts' Coffee House, the London Tavern of a later date, and many others were respectable and indeed famous.

Crimes and misdemeanors were numerous and punishments were harsh. In 1729 Charles Callaghan was convicted of intent to ravish a child of ten years and was whipped around the town at the cart's tail and then given thirty-five lashes, and the next year two culprits were for a similar offense placed for an hour in the pillory, then whipped. The same year a man received twenty-one lashes for stealing a saddle. At one Quarter Sessions Court, in 1733, thirteen men and women were convicted of stealing and were sentenced to be whipped. In 1750 and 1751 there was a regular epidemic of house-breaking, horse-stealing and counterfeiting, and there were many hangings. In 1761 there was a scandal when several young men, sons of the best families, slipped away from their homes, slept in the daytime in a certain tavern at Fourth and Chestnut streets, and sallied forth at night to break doorknobs, slash dresses and petticoats with razors, and otherwise insult women on the street, and do other serious mischief. When their identity was discovered they were taken before the mayor, who lectured them, then dismissed them on bail after their relatives and friends had given bonds for their good behavior and made restitution for the losses they had inflicted.

Slaves were regularly sent to the Court House at Second and Market streets by their owners to be whipped for their misdemeanors. Not only petty offenses but serious crimes occurred among them: in 1738 three Negroes were hung for a multiple poisoning. In 1743 a Negro, brought to the whipping post to be whipped, took out his knife and cut his throat, dying before the crowd.¹ But too dark a picture must not be drawn; such occurrences were, as in all the annals of crime, exceptional.

An early local poet wrote, doubtless with only the usual poetic license:

¹ John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia*. Ed. 1856, I, 309-10.

Hail Pennsylvania! Hail, thou happy land
Where plenty scatters with a lavish hand,

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Where free from clouds we breathe aethereal air,
And Sol keeps holiday throughout the year.
Thy sons are witty and thy daughters fair.¹

Our interest, moreover, in this history lies with the upper, not the lower or the criminal classes. It was among them that the College was to arise and flourish. In the hands of the upper class lay the government of the city and the province, in so far as it was not controlled by the distant Proprietor or his representative the Governor, or by the still more shadowy and occasional interference of the British Crown and Parliament. William Penn's grant of rights of self-government to the colony, and his charter given to the city gave the privileges and the actual work of government largely to the inhabitants. Among these it was the well-to-do merchants and professional men who made up the membership of the Provincial Council, the Assembly, the City Council and the magistracy. They were a little oligarchy of leading men. Government and social influence alike were in the hands of a caste of mercantile and professional patricians. The same names constantly meet us in the various offices, and again in the social clubs and the philanthropic organizations for which Philadelphia was already becoming famous. Local society and government were not the less an aristocracy because there was no royal court, no dominant church, and no semi-feudal body of land holders.

There are many evidences that by the middle of the century this wealthy class chose their own occupations and forms of pleasure as well as controlling politics and business. The list of subscribers to the Assembly balls, then as now a highly selective list of gentlemen, contained in 1749 the names of sixty-five men, each of whom contributed £3 currency, approximately \$10, to the expenses for the year. The ladies who made up the list of invited guests in 1757 numbered eighty-eight, mostly the wives of the men named, and the "Peggies," "Betties," "Patties,"

¹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Nov. 21, 1728.

“Sallies,” and “Mollies” who were their daughters. The well-to-do Quakers, of whom there were many, were of course not included in this list.¹

There was little of authoritative interference with social pleasures. The Proprietors and the successive governors they appointed were no longer Quakers, and the “Friendly” impress upon manners was largely restricted to the members of the Society. There were already, as has been mentioned, regularly organized dancing assemblies. There was a “Concert Room” in Lodge Alley where these dancing assemblies took place. Several teachers gave dancing lessons, and from 1730 onward instruction was offered in performing on various musical instruments. Before the middle of the century there were organs in Christ Church and St. Peter’s, in the Roman Catholic church in Willing’s Alley, and in the newly built Moravian church. The musical interests of the Moravians, emanating from Bethlehem, were already recognizable in Philadelphia. In 1744, a visitor from Maryland not only regaled himself before breakfast by playing on his fiddle and his flute, but was invited to an evening concert given by some ladies and gentlemen. Although the great development of interest in music in Philadelphia did not come till a decade after the middle of the century and will attract our attention later, this was already evidently a city of culture and refinement.

Theatrical plays had to make their way against considerable opposition, and the middle of the century saw the question of the theatre still in doubt. In January 1749 a troupe of players had secured for the season the use of a warehouse on the river front belonging to the wealthy merchant William Plumsted who, though he had been brought up as a Quaker, had recently become a churchman and was not averse to the theatre. The Recorder and the Mayor called the attention of the City Council to this threat to the thrift and industry of persons who might attend the plays. The actors were thereupon called before the magistrates and, though not forbidden to give their performance, were bound over to good behavior. Six months later they were still playing, though nothing more demoralizing than *The Tragedy of Cato*. This troupe migrated to New York and then

¹ Watson, *op. cit.*, I, 284–85.

to Virginia, but four years later another company was allowed by Governor Hamilton, in the face of much religious protest, to give a series of twenty-four performances in the same old Water Street warehouse, its owner, Mr. Plumsted, being now mayor. There is a modern sound in the newspaper notice of April 25, 1754: "The Company of Comedians from London opened the New Theatre in Water Street, when 'The Fair Penitent' and 'Miss in her Teens' were performed before a numerous and polished audience, with unusual applause." But it was evident that city opinion was much divided. It was not until 1766 that a permanent theatre was established; even then it was built outside the city limits, as was Shakespeare's Globe on Bankside.¹

The higher intellectual interests of the city asserted themselves more and more as the century progressed. Lists of the books that were in private households, of those bequeathed, advertised and sold in the shops, and those purchased for subscription libraries are a constant source of surprise. Scarcely less striking is the number of books published in the city; though the narrowness of the provincial market necessarily affected their literary quality. Among these there were relatively few works on theology, such as appeared in New England, or even manuals of devotion, though Whitefield's *Journal* was promptly published and widely read. Yet much of the best of existing literature was available and apparently not unappreciated.

There was much solid intellectual interest. It was in 1743 that Franklin put out his plan for a general society of learned men extending through the colonies—the body that ultimately became the American Philosophical Society. He was able to name as members of a Philadelphia branch nine men each already eminent in some field of learning, and to claim that Philadelphia was not only geographically but by its intellectual activity and its possession of a learned library the natural center for such a society. His reference to the library was no doubt to the collection of James Logan, the scholarly Quaker who, while carrying on his work as a merchant and occupying in succession almost every office under the Proprietors, the province, and in the city, had collected an astonishing body of books. This he had housed

¹ A. H. Quinn, *A History of the American Drama*, N.Y., 1923, pp. 8-16.

in a building at Sixth and Walnut streets and made available to all properly introduced persons. But Franklin might well have referred to the new subscription library that he had founded ten years before, in conjunction with some of his old friends of the Junto and some new subscribers of a more wealthy class, and which, under an influential board of directors, was rapidly becoming an accepted Philadelphia institution. Of this, the "First Library in America," Logan's collection ultimately became an important part.¹

The middle years of the century were the period of a popular and growing interest in what were then called "philosophical experiments." One of the oldest possessions of the Philadelphia Library is an air pump in the use of which its members were instructed in 1739. A Dr. Greenwood gave a course of "experimental lectures" at the State House in 1740. Dr. Spence gave two courses which attracted much attention in 1744; Ebenezer Kinnersley and a Mr. Baron both gave courses in 1751. In 1753 a series of twenty experiments were performed "to show that electricity and lightning are one and the same thing." Scientific letters between Franklin and his friends enrich or encumber, according to the reader's interests, all collections of Franklin's correspondence during this period. Other men, like his friend Kinnersley, who did not, unfortunately, keep their correspondence so carefully, were fascinated with the same group of interests. A public subscription was taken up in 1742 to encourage John Bartram to make a collection of materials of natural history in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York.

It was fifty years later that Gilbert Stuart, speaking of Philadelphia at the time he lived there, called it the "Athens of America," but already in 1752 a young Englishman contrasting Philadelphia and New York had called them Athens and Sparta. It is certainly true that many such literary, scientific, musical, and dramatic societies as were found in Boston and New York only at the close of the century already existed in Philadelphia in 1750 or soon after.²

It is notable, however, that this community of such varied

¹ Austin K. Gray, *The First American Library*, Phila., 1936.

² Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England*, N.Y., 1936.

intellectual interests and relatively abundant financial resources had as yet made no provision for higher education. There was little of such ecclesiastical demand for an education for the ministry as had led to the foundation of the New England colleges. The Episcopalians imported their clergy; the Presbyterians prepared theirs by private instruction among themselves; the Quakers and the lesser denominations, such as the Mennonites and at least some of the Baptists, were opposed to a separate and educated ministry. The higher education of laymen was not so widespread as it had been. The generation of early settlers who had brought their education with them from Europe was running out; the new arrivals were not generally so well educated, and neither were those who had been born in the province. The frontier and the regions settled by Germans were almost absolutely illiterate. Sons of the rich, especially those who were ambitious for professional success, were sometimes sent home to Europe to be educated. William Allen, perhaps the wealthiest, and one of the most influential citizens of Philadelphia and later Chief Justice of the province, had been sent to England by his father, a successful Philadelphia merchant, for a legal education; and he in turn sent three of his sons there for professional training and experience of the world, an experience that unfortunately, when the time of division came, made them Tories. William Plumsted, William Shippen, Thomas Cadwalader, and others likewise went abroad, but those who did were on the whole few. Most young people obtained their education as best they could, or as their parents could provide it for them, from local sources.

Teaching of various sorts was by no means lacking. The William Penn Charter School, still existing today and of high repute, which received the special support and encouragement of the founder of the province, had been chartered in 1711, and in the middle of the century was giving some elementary classical training to twenty or thirty boys in a building with a spacious yard on Fourth Street below Chestnut, and a plainer English education to possibly as many more in another location.¹ There

¹ James Mulhern, *A History of Secondary Education in Pennsylvania*, Phila., 1933, Chapter II.

was a school in connection with Christ Church and another kept by the Swedish minister. The Moravians, always interested in education, in 1748 opened a school for boys and girls of their communion near their church on Race Street.

The greater number of boys and girls of the upper and middle classes, however, received their education, such as it was, from individual schoolmasters who, in their own homes, gave lessons in the elementary branches and even in Latin, modern languages, and more or less advanced mathematics. The newspapers bristle with their advertisements.

Mr. Charles Fortesque offers to teach at his home in the alley commonly called Mr. Taylors, the Latin Tongue, English in a Grammatical Manner, Navigation, Surveying, Mensuration, Dialling, Geography, Use of the Globes, the Gentleman's Astronomy, Chronology, Arithmetic, Merchants Accounting, etc. The above to be taught at Night School as well as Day.¹

Young ladies were offered instruction in French, dancing, and fine sewing. Some eighteen individual teachers advertise thus in the decade between 1740 and 1750. Some of them, such as Theophilus Grew, Thomas Godfrey, Alexander Bullen, and Stephen Vidal were well known and long established as schoolmasters and presumably had a good clientele. Anthony Benezet, after teaching boys in the Penn Charter School for ten or twelve years, established in 1755 what became a fashionable school for girls. So many of these teachers lived along Second Street, from Thomas Godfrey, right above Christ Church, down to Andrew Lamb, below Chestnut, and in Strawberry Alley just adjacent, that children "creeping like snail" or more cheerfully, as modern children do, must have filled those streets at opening and closing time.

Outside the city proper but well within its general radius a number of Presbyterian and Episcopal ministers made a regular practice of taking boys into their homes to study, and some of these ministers' dwellings, such as Francis Alison's at New London, Samuel Blair's at Faggs' Manor, Hugh Mills's at Germantown, and John Andrews' at York, became veritable academies.

¹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Nov. 24, 1743.

There were neighborhood schools, such as that at Old St. David's, Radnor, where James Adams later taught. The well-trained and well-stored minds that constantly surprise the student of our early history by their emergence in unexpected places may be largely accounted for by the influence of an apostolic succession of individual learned and devoted teachers.

If the inadequacy of means of education in Philadelphia was marked at the top, it was still more evident at the bottom. Although boys and girls whose parents were able to pay for private teaching were obtaining the rudiments of an education, the great body of the poor here, as elsewhere, were growing up in absolute ignorance. A deep concern for this is a striking characteristic of the time in all English-speaking countries. It meets us at many points, especially among religious-minded people. One instance of it is the plan of a group of pious men in Philadelphia in 1740 to collect funds for the establishment of a free school for boys and girls. To this proposal we must return later.

At the same time the fertile mind of Franklin was turning to the need for higher schooling in Pennsylvania. It was a college or high-grade academy such as the great English endowed schools that he had in mind. He remarks in his *Proposals*, "It has long been regretted as a misfortune to the youth of this province that we have no academy in which they might receive the accomplishments of a regular education." Long afterward he wrote in his *Autobiography* concerning his life in Philadelphia at this time: "There were two things that I regretted, there being no provision for defense or for a complete education of youth: no militia nor any college." A plan to meet the second of these needs he formulated in 1743 and proposed to put before the public, but he was deterred by inability to secure the services of the man he had picked to take charge of it. This was the Reverend Richard Peters, a highly educated and able young clergyman, for a while attached to Christ Church but at this time successful in obtaining an appointment in the service of the Proprietary which he was not willing to relinquish for the sake of accepting Franklin's offer. Nor were the times favorable to new projects, for war was threatening, so Franklin let his scheme, as he says, "lie for a while dormant." Others had similar ideas in mind. Thomas Penn, the

Proprietor, had thought of some such plan, for he complained when a later plan was proposed that it was not at all in accordance with the one he had in mind. Presbyterians were already discussing the need that finally led to the foundation of Princeton.

Among these recognitions of the need for more formal education in Philadelphia it is the plan of the little group of men who in 1740 did actually establish a trust for the free education of boys and girls, and Franklin's postponed plans of 1743 that are of special interest for us. The trust for a charity school became our first educational responsibility; the building erected under that trust became the first home of the College; the belief in higher education, the energy, and the practical wisdom of Franklin made an institution arise where there had been merely an aspiration. It was to take the fifteen years from 1740 to 1755 for these germs to develop into the full stature of the College of Philadelphia.