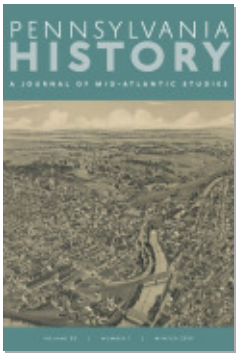
Pennsylvania Hall: A "Legal Lynching" in the Shadow of the Liberty Bell by Beverly C. Tomek (review)



Christopher H. Bouton

Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies, Volume 83, Number 1, Winter 2016, pp. 103-105 (Review)

Published by Penn State University Press

BOOK REVIEWS

Beverly C. Tomek. *Pennsylvania Hall: A "Legal Lynching" in the Shadow of the Liberty Bell*. Critical Historical Encounters Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Pp. 206. Illustrations, notes, index. Paperback, $14.95.

On the evening of May 17, 1838, an angry mob of Philadelphians rallied to the corner of Sixth and Haines streets, between Arch and Race. Surrounded by a crowd of some 10,000–15,000 people, a small group of rioters burst into the newly opened Pennsylvania Hall. They piled the furniture high in the Grand Saloon, a meeting room that comprised the entire second floor and lit it on fire. Within a few hours, Pennsylvania Hall, meant to house free and open discussion, lay in a smoldering pile of ruins some three days after it had opened. Fears of amalgamation, hatred of radical abolitionists, racial tensions between whites and blacks, and a desire to preserve good relations with Southern merchants all stimulated the mob's anger. In its brief life, the building hosted the Philadelphia Antislavery Society, the Philadelphia Lyceum, and an unofficial meeting of the Antislavery Convention of American Women. The history of the hall, beginning with its construction, Beverly C. Tomek argues, "is the story of American antislavery in microcosm" (xiii).

Tomek's opening chapters detail the early history of Pennsylvania abolitionism. Beginning with the region's Quakers and the formation of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, Tomek traces the evolution of the region's gradualist tradition that culminated the state's gradual emancipation act of 1780. These early chapters serve as a good introduction to readers unfamiliar with Pennsylvania's particular brand of antislavery or the early history

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY: A JOURNAL OF MID-ATLANTIC STUDIES, VOL. 83, NO. 1, 2016.

of American abolitionism. The arrival of immediatism and its most vocal proponent, William Lloyd Garrison, caused problems for Pennsylvania's abolitionists. His demands for black equality and equal rights were "a recipe for disaster" as he migrated to Baltimore, though that statement might easily apply to Garrison's time in Philadelphia as well (27). While in Philadelphia for the dedication of Pennsylvania Hall, Garrison could not help but "rededicate" the hall after Philadelphia abolitionist David Paul Brown's opening address proved too conciliatory to colonizationists and other non-Garrisonian immediatists.

The debate among the abolitionists over Pennsylvania Hall, Tomek argues, highlighted the different strains of American abolitionism and presaged the divisions that would later splinter the movement. The opening of this new "Temple of Liberty" had brought together leading abolitionists including Garrison, Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, Robert Purvis, James and Lucretia Mott, John Greenleaf Whittier, Benjamin Lundy, and a host of others. In revisiting the historiographical debate over means and ends in American abolitionism, Tomek highlights the vast differences that divided abolitionists. Political abolitionists like Whittier wanted to end bondage through constitutional means. Garrison sought a program of moral suasion that would rid the nation of the sin of slavery and promote racial and gender equality. More conservative elements led by the Tappan brothers wanted the focus to remain on reforming, not remaking American society. These fundamental disagreements, on display at Pennsylvania Hall in 1838, sparked the division of the movement in 1840. Tomek's sympathies seem to lie with the Pennsylvania abolitionists rather than Garrison's more confrontational activism. As she points out, Garrison managed to return home to Boston safely, while the managers of Pennsylvania Hall struggled for years to receive compensation for the hall's destruction.

Variety characterized the opponents of the hall as well. Philadelphians in the 1830s were still grappling with how to integrate African Americans in a post-emancipation society. While slavery never drove Pennsylvania's economy, Tomek stresses that it did have a deep impact on the state's social order. Pennsylvania's blacks stood on the bottom of the social ladder, competing with the Irish and other immigrants for contract labor. The opening of a new building that promoted abolitionism, false rumors of an amalgamation wedding—referring to Theodore

Dwight Weld's marriage to Angelina Grimke—and dangerous ideas about racial equality all served to foment opposition to the hall's existence. In the immediate aftermath of the building's opening, placards appeared warning of a convention gathering in the city that demanded the immediate abolition of slavery. All citizens who respected the rights of property and the survival of the Constitution were urged to gather at Pennsylvania Hall and demand the end to such meetings. The intersection of conflicting ideas within abolitionism and those of its opponents, Tomek argues, created the conditions necessary to prompt the destruction of the hall.

Tomek stresses that the story of Pennsylvania Hall had two lasting contributions to American history. First, the mob's actions helped awaken the Northern public against slavery. As abolitionists sought to defend themselves from accusations of inciting the riot, they portrayed the hall as a martyr to the cause of free speech. Garrison described its destruction as a legal lynching. Destroying a building designed to host free and open discussion seemed antithetical to the principles enshrined in the Constitution. The hall's destruction served to highlight the radicalism, not of the abolitionists, but of pro-slavery advocates, willing to do whatever was necessary to protect their interest in human bondage. Tomek also argues that the hall's history exposes similarities between the post-emancipation North and post-emancipation South. This temporal comparison notes that both regions confronted the reality of the meaning of black freedom. This is an intriguing, if underdeveloped idea. The vast differences between legal and gradual emancipation in the North and emancipation in the South that came as the result of a bloody war and where slavery served to undergird an entire social, political, and cultural system warrants more attention than what Tomek affords.

Tomek's microhistory of Pennsylvania Hall both serves as a history of early American abolitionism and successfully demonstrates how abolitionism, pro-slavery, and struggles over the role African Americans would play in a free society converged on the evening of May 17, 1838, and ended with Pennsylvania Hall devoured by the flames.

CHRISTOPHER H. BOUTON
University of Delaware