

C. Dallet Hemphill, *Philadelphia Stories: People and Their Places in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 351 pp.

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In July of 2015, historian C. Dallet Hemphill passed away at the age of 56 after a long struggle with cancer. An accomplished researcher and author, Hemphill published monographs on manners and siblings in early America in 1999 and 2014, respectively. She was also a beloved teacher at Ursinus University, a founder of the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies (now the McNeil Center for Early American Studies), and editor of the Center's house journal, *Early American Studies*. After her passing a former student, Rodney Hessinger, discovered a nearly completed manuscript containing 12 short biographies of revolutionary and antebellum Philadelphians. Together with historian Daniel K. Richter, Hessinger put out a call to Hemphill's students and colleagues to help bring the project to completion. Dozens of volunteers immediately offered to put the finishing touches on chapters matching their scholarly expertise, evidence of Hemphill's influence as a teacher, mentor, and friend.

The result of this collaboration is *Philadelphia Stories: People and Their Places in Early America*. Organized chronologically and thematically, with four parts containing three biographies each, the work skillfully narrates the private as well as public lives of interesting and prominent citizens during an era of upheaval and transformation. At its strongest, Hemphill's individuals illuminate broader cultural and political trends that characterized the period, from the decline of cultural deference in the revolutionary era to the numerous reform movements prior to the Civil War. The sympathetic and (mostly) nonjudgmental way in which Hemphill treats her subjects lends the book an elegance that suggests how scholars can use biographical narrative to elucidate historical change.

With the focus on individual personalities, a number of which intersect over the course of the book, Philadelphia itself serves a largely symbolic function. The city implicitly embodies the growth and democratic promise of the new republic as well as the nation's significant shortcomings. Though the publisher and editors pepper the text with useful maps and images of the city, the "places" of *Philadelphia Stories* generally refer to the social position of Hemphill's subjects and how these were challenged, altered, or accommodated.

While the class position of Hemphill's subjects span the social spectrum, most belonged to the city's elite. Scholars of early Philadelphia will be familiar with the names Benezet, Muhlenberg, Galloway, Livingston, Logan, Peale, and Girard. If most of Hemphill's subjects are far from obscure, she adds personal details that paint a fuller picture of well-

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known urbanites. We learn, for example, that the famed Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet loved tea and gardening, and that as a young man the future Anglican priest William White helped a young woman elope with the painter Benjamin West. We also learn that, despite conforming to a restrictive early republican feminine ideal, Deborah Norris Logan was an intellectual whose “true calling” (141) was historical research and writing.

Not all the personal information Hemphill provides is favorable. Indeed, despite her efforts to humanize her subjects, readers will find it difficult to like some of Hemphill’s characters. For example Stephen Girard, a merchant and banker who became the richest man in the US, was not a pleasant person. After discussing the troubles of his mentally ill wife, Mary, Hemphill charitably states that Girard showed only “moderate warmth” to members of his household while noting that he characterized his housekeeper and mistress Sally Bickham as someone “with whom I amuse myself at very little expense and when I have time” (179). Yet Hemphill argues that Girard’s substantial philanthropic legacy suggests a complex character who, though dedicated primarily to his work, also loved children and animals.

Less ambiguous is the subject of Chapter 4, Grace Growden Galloway, a woman from one of Pennsylvania’s richest and most powerful families. In 1753 Grace married the wealthy lawyer Joseph Galloway; both husband and wife were known to have “imperious” personalities. Galloway, who with Benjamin Franklin largely controlled Pennsylvania politics between 1756 and 1776, supported the Crown during the American Revolution. Fortunately, in Hemphill’s view, Grace kept a diary during the Revolution, which “allows us to watch as she was forced to act on her own” (90) after Joseph fled the city in 1778.

Even as Hemphill shows readers how an elite woman experienced hardship during the Revolution, Growden Galloway’s diary also reveals her to be a pretentious and annoying solipsist. In her characteristically generous reading, Growden Galloway is rendered as a victim of circumstances largely beyond her control—primarily because of her gender. She also deeply resented the Revolution’s assault on the deference she was accustomed to as a member the urban ruling class. After characterizing her as “a fighter” (91) and “a proud and intelligent woman” (93) Hemphill is forced to admit: “The truth is that Grace Growden Galloway was a snob” (96).

It is only in Part IV, the book’s last section, that readers encounter three individuals from outside the Philadelphia elite. And two of these, Sarah Thorne Tyndale and William Darah Kelley, were from the shop-keeping middle class. The Black musician Francis Johnson is the only Philadelphian who can be said to have arisen from truly adverse

conditions—and even he was relatively privileged among the city’s large African American population.

Though largely forgotten today, Johnson was famous in his time, having published 200 pieces of music and likely composing more than 300. He also toured widely, performing with white as well as Black musicians. Despite his notoriety, Johnson regularly experienced the racism pervading antebellum society, in Philadelphia as elsewhere. Not only was the city’s Black bourgeoisie subject to public ridicule in works like Edward Clay’s caricature series “Life in Philadelphia,” but Johnson was also mocked on the national stage in the popular women’s magazine *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (229). Though he died in 1844 at just 52, newspapers reported that Johnson’s funeral was said to have been the largest the city ever witnessed—testimony to the ability of a minority of Black Americans to obtain success and respect despite adversity in the new nation.

The thematic link connecting Johnson, Thorne Tyndale, and Kelley is that they were “aspiring lives” working for inclusion in the antebellum US. Thorne Tyndale exemplified a widespread commitment to reform: the successful entrepreneur became a moral reformer, peace activist, feminist, antislavery advocate, and resident of the North American Phalanx, a commune inspired by Fourierism. Her social circle included luminaries like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Sarah and Bronson Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. After befriending Whitman, Thorne Tyndale recommended he edit out some “objectionable parts” out of a new edition of *Leaves of Grass*, despite describing herself (then in her mid-sixties) as an “ultra radical” (264).

While it would be difficult to match Tyndale’s interests and activism, a case could be made for William Darah Kelley, the last biography in *Philadelphia Stories*. Though of old Scotch-Irish ancestry, the death of Kelley’s father at a young age forced his mother, Hannah, to open a boardinghouse. Apprenticed as a jeweler, Kelley studied law and became active in local, and eventually national, politics. Initially drawn to labor movement activism (in 1834 he participated in Philadelphia’s first general strike over the ten-hour workday), Kelley turned to the Locofoco Democrats before becoming a Republican abolitionist who served in the U.S. Congress until his death in 1890. Kelley’s commitment to social and political justice rubbed off on his daughter, Florence, who would become one of the nation’s leading social reformers during the Progressive Era.

Since Hemphill did not provide a conclusion, readers will have to take from *Philadelphia Stories* what they will. In his introduction, Hessinger suggests that by setting Hemphill’s characters “in the places they unfolded,” readers gain “a better understanding of the city—and America—today” (8). Since the lives examined are far from representative it is unclear exactly what this understanding should be, though Hemphill was clearly

exploring how gender, race, and class relations were negotiated on an individual level in the young nation. Regardless of what readers take away concerning what these stories say about city and nation, *Philadelphia Stories* is an entertaining book and fitting tribute to a beloved teacher and scholar.