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INTRODUCTION

Markers of the Hidden City

I



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HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

In June 1916 the 442 members of the Poor Richard Club, publishers and advertising men, hosted a trade convention of the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World. The Poor Richard Club occupied a “little home,” as members called it, next door to the nation’s oldest amateur artist group, the Sketch Club, on Camac Street, a slender alley of cobblestones and roomy nineteenth-century row houses turned into clubhouses. A century later, with the alley draped in gingko trees, a law firm occupies the Poor Richard Club (its members moved to a much larger building around the corner in 1925). Yet several other nineteenth-century clubs—including the Sketch Club, the Plastic Club, and a literary society called the Franklin Inn Club—remain on Camac, “little Bohemia,” as it was known in 1916, hidden inside the commercial heart of present-day Philadelphia.

Advertising men are natural civic boosters. With their out-of-town guests in mind, the members of the Poor Richard Club published a guide, the *Poor Richard’s Dictionary of Philadelphia* (1916), assembled by the artist Frank Taylor, a magazine illustrator. One of Taylor’s employers, *Harper’s Magazine*, had just published a needling article, “Who Is a Philadelphian?” by the playwright Harrison Rhodes. Philadelphia, Rhodes proffered, was “*a terra incognita*”:

It makes no effort to attract the stranger. It advertises no historic attractions, it sets no Broadway ablaze, it beats no tom-toms.

Particularly optimistic about his city, Taylor was sensitive to claims like this and to accusations, mostly by New Yorkers, that it was “slow” (the previous year he had produced a lithograph series he called “Ever-changing Philadelphia”). “As in many other cases the facts spoil the joke” about Philadelphia’s slowness, he wrote in the introduction to the guide, which begins with a 166-item list of Philadelphia’s pioneering “firsts.”

Taylor, whose watercolor sketches and lithographs make up our best record of Philadelphia streets in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, wanted his city to be seen for what it was: a rich, quilted tableau of people and buildings, at human scale, both “busy” and “homey.” Luc Sante, in *The Other Paris* (2015), writes that before the telephone, radio, and television, city streets were public living rooms legible to their observers: “The relative intimacy of a city, any city, of a hundred or more years ago is as hard to overstate as it is to convey.” Taylor’s scenes—which depict people gathered in streets, beneath store awnings, and in the glow of electric lights—recall this same sentiment.





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Plate I.1

Metropolitan Opera House,
North Broad Street, 2009 (HCF)



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Like Paris, Philadelphia had a population in 1966 (about 1.95 million) that was slightly higher than it was a half century earlier in 1916 (about 1.75 million), but spread across a much greater area. The new neighborhoods in the farthest reaches of the city were built at lower density. In the concentrated traditional city that persisted until World War I, most people lived in the same neighborhood where they worked, ate, and shopped. Sante avers that this was true for rich Parisians as well as poor and that, in fact, people of all economic classes were joined in place. “The rich were right over there, in the next street,” he writes—as true of Philadelphia in that period as Paris.

In Philadelphia in 1916, an abundant portion of both rich and poor people were involved in making things, Taylor was proud to declare in *Poor Richard’s Dictionary of Philadelphia*. They worked in the city’s 8,379 plants, factories, workshops, and mills, and their output was stunning. Taylor cheekily illustrated all this activity under the heading “Philadelphia’s Time-Table,” as if, in this exceptional place, time was measured in productivity in accordance with the theories of Scientific Management (invented by another Taylor of Philadelphia, Frederick, and just then gaining wide acceptance). “When Philadelphia gets into its working togs,” Frank Taylor wrote, “it strikes a gait like this”:

Every second, 15 cigars.
Every second, 10 loaves of bread.
Every second, 10 pairs of stockings.
Every second, 15 bushels of wheat loaded.
Every second, a new saw.
Every second, 1½ yards of carpet.
Every second, 50 daily papers printed.
Every two seconds, a new hat.
Every three seconds, a pair of lace curtains.
Every twenty minutes, a new house erected.
Every hour, a new trolley car built.
Every two-and-a-half hours, a new locomotive constructed.

About a half century later, in the early 1960s—a good decade into the suburbanization that would dilute the intimacy of Philadelphia and the deindustrialization that would drain it of purpose, rhythm, and wealth—the writer and composer Nathaniel Burt produced a study of Philadelphia’s legacy upper class, *The Perennial Philadelphians* (1963). The nominal subject of Burt’s book was the city’s unusually insular and long-lived hereditary aristocracy, which until the end of the long nineteenth century, around 1916, embodied the civic ambition of Philadelphia. Now, several decades later, Burt discovered that by a ratio of ten to one, the members of this atrophied group lived outside the city, subject to the same process of white flight that emptied out many other postwar American cities. Philadelphia’s





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wealthy remained “conspicuous” because of their outsized influence in business and society but, at the same time, were eerily “absent” from the bristling life of the city.

In the course of recounting the achievements of these illustrious families—the Biddles, Cadwaladers, Ingersolls, Whartons, and the like—over the course of two centuries, Burt explained better than perhaps any writer before or since the essential qualities that made the city of Philadelphia characteristically itself. Compared with the forward-looking American cities of the time, he noted, Philadelphia was decidedly too inward, too drowsy, and too parochial. Yet those very qualities had, in their abundance, given the place an elusive character that was “not quite like everything or anything else”:

It was neither exciting like Manhattan, quaint like Boston, nor picturesque and glamorous like the South and West. It was not even conspicuously awful like the Midwest. It was, in fact, like some forbidden Oriental city . . . surrounded by its own impenetrable wall.

This made Philadelphia, according to Burt, the “Hidden City.” More than fifty years later, his words still ring true to us, although for somewhat different reasons. For Philadelphia seems to possess an exceptionally large number of places that have disappeared elsewhere—workshops and small factories, sporting clubs and societies, synagogues and theaters and railroad lines—like endangered species that have managed to stay alive in some remote forest or swamp.