Presbyterian minister James W. Alexander often shuttled back and forth between his home in Princeton and Philadelphia. His route took him through the thinly populated countryside of eastern Pennsylvania and southern New Jersey, with its small towns surrounded by patches of piney forest and expanses of fertile farmland. The subtle beauty of the landscape paled with each trip and the garrulous preacher welcomed the opportunity to relieve the boredom by exchanging a word with passers-by and local folk. One of his more memorable dialogues took place during the dawn of the Great Depression in the late thirties, when he came across an elderly tailor and a young companion reclining in a field. Evangelists instinctively reacted with hostility to the spectacle of idle workers. It was particularly galling to Alexander, a leading exponent of the new morality with a keen interest in the morals and manners of workingmen. He assumed that the loungers were unemployed because of the recent panic, but was corrected by the salty tailor, who snapped, "Not at all, we are only enjoying the Tailor's Vacation." And he continued, "Pressure is well enough, as I can testify when the last dollar is about to be pressed out of me, but Vacation is capital. It tickles one's fancy with the notion of choice. 'Nothing on compulsion' is my motto."
The journeyman’s retort to the good reverend is more than a humorous anecdote. It represents the gist of working-class traditionalism, an indefatigably autonomous culture whose adherents outraged revivalists and respectable Philadelphians alike. Their behavior inside and outside the workplace recalled an earlier era in which society made no hard and fast distinction between work and play, nor defamed certain amusements as sinful. They were bearers of older ways, whose blend of leisure and work furnished a bountiful market for local vice industries.

Declaring vacations from work was hardly unique to tailors or to traditionalists. Handloom weavers and workers of all trades had their versions of the “tailor’s vacation” and passed holidays in relaxation. They took off from work in celebration of national heroes and patriotic events, on “red letter days,” on their own birthdays, or on any occasion that suited their whim. Nor did traditionalists monopolize all forms of leisure. To whatever extent all wage earners appreciated respite from toil and overwork, one did not have to be a traditionalist to enjoy fishing the sleepy Schuylkill for its prodigious supply of shad or hunting small game in nearby fields and forests. An observer tells us that the “fair” days of early spring raised worker interest in both sports. The warmer months also brought circuses and road shows, balloon launchings, tramping athletes, and other popular attractions that drew crowds of curious and fun-loving workers from home and shop.

Some activities were the exclusive preserve of traditionalists, none more so than drinking and the social rituals surrounding it. Unlike the emerging industrial elite, the evangelical middle and working classes, and, as we shall see, the radical workingmen, traditionalists clung tenaciously to customary notions about the value of spirits. They prized liquor for its own sake and for medicinal purposes; they used it to combat fatigue, warm the body in winter, cool it in summer, and lighten moods in any season. The focal point of social drinking was the neighborhood tavern or a less respectable tippling house. Grog shops and tippling houses, being unlicensed, were concealed in cellars and garrets; pubs and taverns, on the other hand, could not be overlooked. Amusing signs above their doors distinguished them from the sedate houses catering to the middle class and at times
boldly proclaimed their class nature. "The Four Alls," a popular pub in Moyamensing, owed its title to the following apothegm:

1. **King.** I govern all.
2. **General.** I fight for all.
3. **Minister.** I pray for all.
4. **Laborer.** And I pay for all.

Neighboring Southwark housed a good number of these venerable drinking places. One of them sported a placard depicting a dog barking at a full moon and the questions:

Ye foolish dogs! Why bark ye so?
While I'm so high and you're so low?

Pubs and taverns offered an assortment of entertainment, legal and otherwise. Cock-fighting, a popular spectator sport in Colonial Philadelphia but thereafter shunned by men of social standing, prospered in the working-class pubs of Jacksonian Philadelphia and usually played to as many spectators as the facility could handle. William Cook ran one of the larger cockpits. Encircled by an amphitheater with a seating capacity of seventy-five, his pit lured many enthusiasts, who bet on their favorite birds. Working-class gamblers not excited by the gory sport could try their hand in gambling halls. Policy houses, furtively located in the back alleys of poorer neighborhoods, waited fortune seekers looking to turn modest investments of "3 cents to half a dollar" into windfalls. Taverns featured games closely resembling "menagerie" in which participants sat around a circular board divided into pie-shaped units, each of which bore the picture of an animal. Each player placed a coin on his choice and waited for a spinning pinwheel to designate the winner.

Despite these attractions, traditionalists probably visited pubs for the sake of camaraderie. At the end of the workday homeward-bound artisans went to their favorite taverns to meet friends and discuss the events of the day over drams of malt liquor or spirits. Tavern traffic picked up noticeably on Sunday night, most observers agreed, and in the winter months, when trade slowed.
Traditionalist workers, however, did not adjust their love for liquor to the rhythms of the economy. To the surprise of many observers, they carried on the eighteenth-century tradition of drinking in the shop. Sylvester Graham, the noted Presbyterian minister and temperance advocate who would become a leading dietary reformer, was astonished to find journeymen looking forward to the late afternoon, when “treating time” signalled the occasion to lay down tools and pass around the communal jug. Graham’s testimony is supported by Benjamin T. Sewell, whose memoirs recollected the worker practice of sipping grog from flasks, right in the shop. When flasks ran dry an apprentice was delegated to get them refilled at the local pub, which gave many youngsters a taste for hard liquor, since as reward for his trouble, he “robs the mail . . . takes a drink before he gets back.”

The persistence of such casual work habits in an age of advancing industrialism and evangelical fervor may be attributed to the backgrounds and laboring experiences of traditionalist wage earners. Most Philadelphia workers, it should be recalled, were drawn from the American and European countrysides. These in-migrants and immigrants came from vastly different social and economic settings, but subgroups within each population had more in common that has been thought. Most of the Irish, the city’s leading immigrant group, arrived in Philadelphia directly from rural Eire, and they were the farthest removed from advanced production techniques or even from the discipline of the market economy. Nominally Catholic at the start, or at least more peasant than Catholic, they were imbued with the gloomy pessimism of the peasantry—rich in folk custom and sorely deficient in the attitudes of the productive worker. Survival, not occupational improvement or income accumulation, was uppermost in their minds. Americans of rural birth and most of those reared in the city were as accustomed to hard work as the Irish, but not to the rhythms and exigencies of industrial pursuits. The nonevangelicals among them were either orthodox Protestants or unchurched, but whatever the case, their outlook on work conformed closely to that of the Irish.

The extent to which Irish immigrants and native-born Americans honored older concepts of work and productivity hinged mainly on
their occupational locations in the city. Those who performed casual labor or worked at home under the putting-out system had little incentive to cast off traditional ways. They were the poorest of all wage earners and enjoyed the autonomy and independence that nurtures tradition.

Old-World customs that repeatedly interfered with work thus remained intact among Irish outworkers and unskilled workers. These immigrants deserted workplaces for days at a time to celebrate a wedding, console at a wake, or demonstrate athletic prowess in the Donneybrook Fair, the Irish national games held in August. None of these occasions was complete without liquor, and every Irish community had its pubs and taverns, the nerve centers of local life. Irish and American outworkers, however, did not need the formal excuse of a wake, wedding, or national holiday to avoid work. Cottagers and laborers of both nationalities took off days whenever they saw fit. They often repaired to the country for picnics and celebrated St. Monday with frolicking in the city streets. "All work and no play," said one of them, "makes Jack a dull boy."

Artisans employed in neighborhood shops, though not as independent as outworkers and casual laborers, still had considerable self-determination and, thus, casual work habits. They were rarely sweated or driven by employers, either because markets were slow at this level of production or because masters were former journeymen steeped in preindustrial shop customs. The casual and easy-going manner of such masters caught the attention of many contemporaries. Temperance reformer Thomas Hunt knew a journeyman who was fired on account of "idleness and neglect of business, but not for drinking; for they all [masters] drank themselves." These employers, said another Philadelphian, "expected" journeymen to lose time because of excessive drinking and holidays—official and unofficial—and endured them as long as they showed up "tolerably regularly" and avoided getting "absolutely drunk" as a matter of habit—all of which explains why some workers unconcernedly drank in their small shops.

All expressions of traditionalist behavior, however, were not survivals of custom nourished by the "holes and pores" in production. Some facets of traditionalism took shape in the city itself
and were local to the urban milieu. Nothing illustrates this better or offers more insight into the consciousness of traditionalist workers than the history of Philadelphia’s volunteer fire department.

The volunteer fire department of Colonial Philadelphia was perfectly reputable. Founded by the energetic Dr. Franklin, it recruited public-spirited residents of all classes, but relied chiefly on the commercial elite and mechanics who looked upon public service as an obligation of republican citizenship. As befits this social composition, companies closely resembled respectable dinner clubs. They met in rented halls and public houses, and operated on an ad hoc basis, mobilizing bucket brigades of citizens in emergencies. Such outfits left something to be desired as effective firefighters, but most clearly took their mission seriously.

Population growth and the coming of industrialism drastically altered the fire department. The increase and dispersal of population in the second half of the nineteenth century multiplied the demand for firefighting services, and led to a marked proliferation of member companies. Nearly two per year were organized in the second quarter of the century and by the early fifties there were some seventy units in the city and surrounding districts. These were equally divided between hose companies, which carried lengths of leather hose on spindle-like carriages, and engine companies, which manned mobile pumps. Although local law limited the former to twenty-five members and the latter to fifty, personnel mushroomed along with the number of companies, sometimes reaching into the hundreds. Companies used the dues of their large memberships, the contributions of neighborhood businessmen, and public subsidies to construct fire houses, which ended the era of meetings in rented quarters.

The most important change was in the membership. As upper-class Philadelphians turned their attention to entrepreneurship, they withdrew from the companies, leaving them to the newly formed working class, or to some segments of it. One of the most striking aspects of the companies was their relative absence in areas where advanced production prevailed. In Manayunk, for example, the textile elite created the fire department, controlled its apparatus, and screened its members, thus depriving it of an independent and autonomous existence. In areas dominated by outwork and small
The hallmark of these lusty volunteers was competitiveness. The first companies to arrive at a fire controlled the best hose and hydrant connections and earned a reputation for speed and efficiency. This was no small honor and some volunteers showed great ingenuity in jockeying for an edge. Aptly known as "bunkers," they spent the night in the firehouse and took turns at the tower watching for traces of smoke. The more ambitious among them, it was said, even "delighted in a day watch." Fire alarms occasioned races between rivals pulling their gaudy tenders and carriages through narrow streets, and fires became the scene of comical scuffles between engine companies hurrying to hydrants and hose companies battling for their favorite tenders. Getting to a blaze often required repelling combatants who jammed spanners into spokes and cut tow ropes, but fighting off assaults brought great joy. One volunteer attached such importance to winning that he confessed to being able to "work better after a long sun and race with the P—and had beaten her, but if his company was 'waxed' he could'n't [sic] work at all and had to lose a day."  

Such antics and blasé attitudes toward work failed to amuse local entrepreneurs. These businessmen envisioned the volunteers not only as firefighters but also as employees and had nothing good to say about their performance in either capacity. They condemned the worker-firemen's rowdiness and cursed their deserting workshops at the sound of an alarm and wasting precious time loafing in fire houses.

To them, the volunteer system was a nuisance and, as they put it, a "relic" of a "primitive state of society" that distracted workers and interfered with the production process. Those who could afford it purchased their own equipment and many more joined together with merchants, land speculators, and insurance salesmen in a vigorous but fruitless movement to replace the volunteers with paid professionals.
As the critics knew so well, fire companies were not merely feckless agencies of public safety. Rather, they were vital social organizations deeply embedded in traditionalist communities that fulfilled the cultural needs of their members. Fraternal-clubs *cum* athletic-teams, they offered outlets for recreation and centers of camaraderie. They also conferred upon their impoverished followers the status and recognition denied them by the larger society. Membership in a company was a sign of social acceptance, for new recruits were not admitted without the sponsorship of a member and a majority vote of the entire body.

Executive offices were open to all and fellow firemen bestowed no greater honor than electing one of their number to a directorship. Directors loosely supervised the actual firefighting or at least tried to bring a semblance of order to the chronic chaos and confusion. This office seems to have been the “summit of the hopes” of the typical volunteer, and with good reason. Directors were fully outfitted with “a trumpet in one hand, a spanner in the other, and a lantern affixed to a leathern belt around his waist” and reveled in the paraphernalia of rank.  

This was exclusively a man’s world. Women were barred from fire companies and, as far as one can tell, rarely frequented the pubs and tippling houses that dotted traditionalist neighborhoods. Many values governed the behavior of firemen at all times. The more daring and assertive the volunteer, the more respect he commanded from his comrades and from youths, who took to “running with” or escorting companies to and from fires. Firemen and “runners” venerated the company “tough” and followed him with “awe and reverence.” The ethic of manliness implied in such behavior is unmistakable in the following swaggering song written by a Philadelphia fireman:

We are the Ancient Rams,
Who never fear our foes,
And at the corner of Second and Wharton we stand,
And run with the Wecca hose.

Then arouse ye gallant Rams,
And by the Wecca stand,
And show our friends and foes,
That we’re a sporting band.
Traditionalist: "The Boys of Pleasure"

Our foes are called the Scroungers,
A name we never fear,
For when they see us ancient boys they soon will disappear.

On the first of September,
Upon a Wednesday night,
They stood at Wharton and Rye Streets,
To show the Rams the fight.

They stood a single minute,
Then found it was no go,
They ran away from us ancient boys,
With steps not very slow,

We fear no equal party,
To meet us on the ground,
For we're the Ancient Rams,
No braver can be found.

Then come ye boys of pleasure,
Wherever you may be,
Come join the sporting Rams,
The boys of fun and glee.32

-------------------

A decade later this ethic would touch off brutal clashes between warring white traditionalists. In the 1830s, however, intercompany rivalries were still relatively benign. Skirmishes rarely pitted native-born American against immigrant, because most companies were integrated along national lines, and infrequently claimed lives. In probing the meaning of these scuffles one historian draws a distinction between expressive and instrumental violence. Expressive violence, he argues, seldom has a specific purpose and is less controlled and goal-oriented than instrumental violence, which is purposive and limited.33 Most firemen's struggles in the 1820s and early 1830s were expressive if not necessarily bloody. More often than not they stemmed from the volunteers' love of fight and desire to avenge insults and threats to manliness. Others were unquestionably instrumental, if not always controlled or limited, and they consisted of two distinct but overlapping types: territorial riots and job riots. Instrumental riots would become the principal mode in
the forties, but they were already evident in the early thirties. Such brawls usually arrayed white traditionalists against Blacks.

Interracial violence flared up sporadically during the first third of the nineteenth century, but the first major race riot in Philadelphia took place in the hot summer of 1834. The setting was a carnival near Seventh and South Streets that included a kind of merry-go-round known as “flying horses.” It attracted a rough clientele of street-wise whites and Blacks, who shoved and quarreled in the competition for seats. Patience was thin on both sides of the evening of August 12, when a shouting match developed into a fight in which the Blacks bested their foes or humiliated them enough to provoke severe retaliation. Later that night a crowd of vengeful whites armed with brick bats and paving stones, assembled in a field opposite Pennsylvania hospital, and went on a rampage through the Afro-American community. The mob first trashed a tavern owned by the proprietor of the “flying horses” and then turned on Black residents and their property. Club-wielding whites mercilessly beat their adversaries in the street and fought their way into homes. They pilfered at will and systematically destroyed furniture, sometimes ceremoniously smashing furnishings in the streets. The area was littered with the splintered remains of dresses and bedsteads and broken bits of pottery and china by the time the police arrived, at 11 p.m. In hopes of preventing further incidents, they arrested eighteen alleged ring leaders, but the tactic failed to quell white rage.

Although stripped of their leaders, the whites reconstituted their forces near the hospital the following evening. Roving bands again invaded the ghetto and went about their work with “renewed . . . fury.” One group assaulted “The Diving Bell,” an interracial tavern and lodging house; another sacked the First African Presbyterian Church; and still another marauded through the adjacent streets and alleys. At least twenty Black homes were pillaged, and scores of their occupants savagely abused. In one ugly episode a mob broke into a home, took a corpse from a coffin, and hurled it into the street; in another a dead or sleeping infant was snatched from bed and thrown on the floor, and the terrorized mother was “barbarously treated.”

Once again the authorities arrived as the violence subsided. They made twenty arrests and then took precautionary measures. The
mayor mustered a posse of 300, ordered the First City Calvary Troop fully equipped, and put the Washington Greys under arms. The next evening he marched the posse to the mob’s staging ground near the hospital, only to find that it had already wrought havoc—this time across the city line into Southwark. It had stolen to the southern end of the district and destroyed a Black church by sawing through its support beams and pulling it down with guy ropes. By the time a contingent of the posse reached the scene, the building was reduced to a pile of smoking rubble, and the mob was terrorizing and looting neighborhood Blacks. The only bright spot in this nightmarish evening occurred when the mayor got word of a confrontation brewing at a house in which sixty Blacks sought refuge from a menacing mob. He stationed his men between the mob and the edifice, and calmed tempers while his assistants slipped inside and allowed the frightened Blacks to escape out the back.

Minor street fights between whites and Blacks broke out in other districts over the next few nights, but the worst of the rioting ended on Thursday evening. Miraculously, only two Blacks lost their lives, or only two deaths were reported, although two churches and upward of thirty black homes were destroyed.

These incidents command our attention for a number of reasons. First, the participants were not the “gentlemen of property and standing” who were known to lead or participate in anti-Black and antiabolitionist rioting. On the contrary, respectable Philadelphians were cast in the role of curiosity-seekers, and observers characterized the rioters as a mixture of men and “apprentices and half-grown boys” and “very young men” of the “lowest social classes.” It is impossible to confirm their age composition, but some evidence supports those who perceived the assailants as lower class: the most common occupations of the apprehended were “laborer” and “weaver.” Second, the raids were planned and carried out with community support. On each night rioters congregated in a vacant lot on the city line adjacent to the southern districts and plotted the evening’s events. Smaller bands were probably ordered to specific streets or commanded to assault certain buildings. The destroyers of Wharton Street Church, for example, had gathered in the early part of the evening with the deliberate intention of tearing down the building. “No one was to be seen [when the posse arrived] except the
neighbors, who stated that the destruction had been affected with much deliberation, and . . . those engaged in it, after effecting their purpose, walked coolly away." Rioters also used code words, such as "Gunner," "Punch," and "Big Gun," probably to coordinate activities or warn of the authorities. Or such terms might refer to firemen. The southern districts, after all, were firemen centers and the location of the riots, coupled with the remarkable efficiency of the participants, suggests a pre-existing organization base.

Third, objects of mob wrath were selected with some discrimination and betray the underlying cause of the riots. Whites who could not bring themselves to beat Blacks or destroy their homes expressed sympathy with the mob by placing lighted candles in their windows. Their homes escaped destruction. Other whites did not escape; namely those who consorted with Blacks, cohabited with Black men or women, or operated businesses catering to Afro-Americans. Attacks on them as well as on the Blacks themselves, underscored the bald racism of the mob. Such assaults may be likened to the territorial riots, in that the violence was partly contrived to intimidate both Blacks and white sympathizers into leaving the area. But there was another dimension to the rioting that indicates that it was rooted in job competition between white and Black workers.

Black workmen in this period did not constitute the usual underclass of casually employed day laborers and a vast army of the unemployed. Instead, they included a small group of artisans and many unskilled, but employed, laborers toiling at construction sites and on the docks as hod carriers and stevedores. The artisans, however, were skilled workers in name only. Unable to practice their trades because of the pervasive racism and absence of a substantial group of Black masters, they were forced into unskilled jobs. The ironic result of this was both that Blacks came to monopolize several categories of unskilled work and that some Black workers, as the looting and destruction of the whites showed, earned good incomes and accumulated some worldly possessions. (Indeed, this was one of the few, and perhaps only, race riots in the city in which white mobs destroyed and looted the personal property of Blacks!) At the same time the influx of unskilled rural-born whites and Irish immigrants exacerbated competition for jobs at the bottom of the occupational ladder. Thirsting for such work, the white newcomers could not gain
access to employment without dislodging the Blacks and intimidating their employers.

Evidence abounds that whites attacked Blacks (and some employers) in order to muscle their way into jobs on the waterfront and elsewhere. Mobs sacked the homes of a white shoemaker and chimney sweep believed to have hired Black labor, and at the end of the August riot, it was reported, "colored persons, when engaged in their usual occupations, were repeatedly assailed and maltreated, usually on the Schuylkill front of the city. Parties of white men have insisted that no blacks shall be employed in certain departments of labor." An investigation of the riot conducted by local patricians drew the same conclusion. Singling out job competition between the races, the report reads:

An opinion prevails, especially among white laborers, that certain portions of our community prefer to employ colored people, whenever they can be had, to the employing of white people, and that, in consequence of this preference, many whites, who are able and willing to work, are left without employment, while colored people are provided with work, and enabled comfortably to maintain their families, and thus many white laborers, anxious for employment, are kept idle and indigent. Whoever mixed in the crowds and groups, at the late riots, must so often have heard those complaints, so as to convince them, that the feelings from which they sprung, stimulated many of the most active among the rioters.

Whether they participated in riots against Blacks or merely sympathized with the rioters, traditionalist workers shared a common style of life and social perspective. The tavern, street corner, and fire company were to them what the church, Sunday school, and temperance society were to revivalists. Where revivalists internalized the Protestant work ethic with all that it implies, traditionalists honored casual work practices and, by extension, cared less for social mobility and self-improvement than for survival and group solidarity.

Traditionalists identified three enemies or threats to their well being: Blacks and especially Black dockers who dominated unskilled work, civil authorities who hindered their efforts to intimidate the
Blacks, and moral reformers and evangelicals who would undermine their neighborhood institutions and leisure-time activities. They waged concurrent struggles against all three groups, but in different arenas and with different weapons. When confronting Blacks, they resorted to direct action and collective violence, which in turn drew them into conflict with the civil authorities. Their continual defiance of the police showed that they were anything but deferential or obsequious in the face of authority. Indeed, no group of workers was as inclined to use violence to solve problems or as disrespectful of state power. Yet traditionalists used violence selectively. There is no evidence at all of their employing collective force against moral reformers or evangelicals in this period. Rather than fight these groups in the streets, they did battle with both in the realm of politics. Here they found a worthy ally in the emerging Democratic party, whose ideology of cultural pluralism and freedom from state intervention protected traditional culture from the meliorative policies of Whigs and evangelicals.

Traditionalists thus evinced a peculiar form of class consciousness. Theirs was an “us-them, we-they” mentality that imparted intense feelings over race, on the one hand, and an abiding hatred of upper-class reformers, on the other. They did not, as yet, transfer their suspicions about moral reformers to employers, but were not averse to contesting for their rights at the workplace under certain circumstances. Nor were they inherently conservative or resistant to radicalism. They would follow the lead of radical activists whose program promised to deliver both material security and insulation from the designs of moralists.