

**“As the Currency Expands, the Loaf Contracts”**  
**Consumption, Class and the Panic of 1837**

The Panic of 1837: Getting By and Going Under in a Decade of Crisis  
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Even before the collapse of the American financial system during the Panic of 1837, things were getting tough for urban consumers. The wholesale price of wheat had nearly doubled in less than one year by February 1837, and New York's radical Loco Focos announced a public meeting in City Hall Park to address the issue with broadsides screaming: "BREAD, MEAT, RENT, AND FUEL! Their prices must come down!" On the late afternoon of February 13, a crowd of thousands greeted the speakers. Charged by the slogan, "As the currency expands, the loaf contracts," the crowd turned their animosity from the Loco Foco's intended foil, the "monstrous banking system," to a more immediate target, Eli Hart and Company's store on Washington Street. About a thousand angry New Yorkers broke into the store, destroying an estimated five hundred barrels of flour and one thousand bushels of wheat. Shocked editorialists denounced the actions of these "Jackson-jacobins," as the story of the duly named "Flour Riots" spread across the Northeast. "The worst of it is that it will probably get worse before it is better," Philadelphia diarist Sidney George Fisher recorded. "A wild, radical, agrarian spirit is abroad, which is constantly fanned and excited by incendiary presses, & designing demagogues for their own purposes."<sup>1</sup>

Fisher later reported hardships of his own during the Panic. "I wish one could live without eating, for myself I would willingly resign all pleasure I derive from it to escape the suffering it produces," he began his diary entry on 1 May 1837. "Eating, shaving, dressing, heat, cold & one or two other periodical bores make us constantly sensible of our animal nature," Fisher lamented, "brings us back to earth from our high

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<sup>1</sup>Fitzwilliam Byrdsall, *The History of the Loco-Foco, or Equal Rights Party* (New York: Clement & Packard, 1842), 99-106; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1945), 219-220; Nicholas B. Wainwright, *A Philadelphia Perspective. The Diary of Sidney George Fisher Covering the Years 1834-1871* (Philadelphia: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1967), 22.

imaginative flights, and prevent or disturb that calm, pure, intellectual serenity, which sometimes for a few moments & by short glimpses we enjoy, & which is certainly far preferable to any sensual gratification.” Although not especially wealthy himself, Fisher was a well-connected attorney from a prominent Philadelphia family; his anxiety over his need for the basic necessities of life was a far cry from the desperation exhibited by the poorer New Yorkers. Two weeks after his melancholy reflection on the need to consume food, clothing, and shelter, Fisher noted that Philadelphia society might be abuzz about “the times,” but the only practical inconvenience he noted was the inability to get change for less than \$5.00 and the City Council’s decision to issue certificates of loan in the amount of ten cents or upwards.<sup>2</sup>

These contrasting responses to the Panic of 1837 certainly illustrate the deep cleft between the rich and poor in cities of the Early Republic. Fisher’s casual dismissal of “our animal nature” only weeks after frantic New Yorkers broke into a flour warehouse comes across as callous and cruel, especially since his fellow Philadelphians suffered from the same deadly combination of high prices and unemployment. But the actions of the New Yorkers and Fisher’s diary entry both addressed the everyday necessities of food, clothing and shelter even as they reveal the extreme ends of attitudes toward the consumption of them. As it turns out, ideas about “consumption” in the cities of the Early Republic had been in great flux during the decade prior to the Panic of 1837. The acute differences between elite and less affluent consumers became an important part of this discourse. As the extreme price hikes in the winter of 1836-37 hit American

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<sup>2</sup>Wainwright, *A Philadelphia Perspective*, 31.

cities, the hard times drove many to consider radical plans to protect consumers from crippling price of everyday commodities. Rather than exhibit Fisher's indifference or the rage of the New York rioters, these political responses demanded public action in defense of consumers drawn from both traditional and new ideas about the consumption of everyday requirements. They reveal a community very much conflicted over the place of consumers in the urban marketplace and the responsibility of public officials to protect them.

This essay explores three areas of public debate in Philadelphia over the consumption of basic necessities in the decade prior to the Panic, as well as the immediate response to the intolerably high prices of those commodities during the winter of 1836-37. On the surface, this might seem a strange time to examine consumers. After all, the global commodities that signaled the great "consumer revolution" of the late eighteenth century had long been present in Philadelphia's markets by the 1820s and 1830s, and the great department stores and mass markets of the late nineteenth century's completely different "consumer revolution" were still decades away. Some scholars regard the consumption of subsistence goods as unworthy of study; even those willing to include basic necessities in their models find the range of consumer choices in the Early Republic so limited that it has become a kind of flyover period in the history of American consumers. Indeed, this period is correctly depicted as one of high points of the "producerist" rhetoric of the nascent American labor movement. But rather than serving as a brief producerist interlude between two great consumerist moments in history, the 1820s and 1830s saw a number of important developments in the ways in which both elite and less affluent consumers

secured the necessities of life. In fact, several qualitative transformations in consumer choices defy a simplistic producer-consumer dichotomy and reveal a great deal of flux in ideas about consumption, especially as it related to economic status. The solutions offered to protect less affluent consumers at the start of the economic crisis of 1836-37, moreover, suggest that many Philadelphians regarded the markets for basic necessities as the responsibility of public officials. Ultimately, the economic distress triggered by the Panic of 1837 served as an important waypoint for the various debates on consumption that had been blossoming for a decade in Philadelphia. Yet, as the catastrophe washed over the city it also exposed the deep concern that many residents felt about the place of consumers in urban markets and the public responsibility to protect them from avaricious prices.<sup>3</sup>

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Philadelphia's public markets served as the city's cornerstone of consumption during the Early Republic; they also demonstrated the large degree of regulation city officials exerted over the purchase of many basic commodities. Philadelphians constructed their first market house in 1709; a century later the extensive network of city-built structures sprawled over five blocks. The public markets operated on

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<sup>3</sup>On the first American "consumer revolution," see Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), Joyce Appleby, "Consumption in Early Modern Social Thought," in John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 162-177; John E. Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort: Sensibilities & Design in Early Modern Britain and Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Paul G.E. Clemens, "The Consumer Culture of the Middle Atlantic, 1720-1820," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 62 (2005): 577-624. Wendy Woloson is among a handful of scholars to treat antebellum consumption seriously. See her *Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionary, and Consumers in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). The literature on late nineteenth and early twentieth century has exploded in recent years and is too voluminous to do justice here. For a useful overview of the scholarship on this period, see Susan Strasser, "Making Consumption Conspicuous: Transgressive Topics Go Mainstream," *Technology and Culture* 43 (2002): 755-770.

Tuesdays and Fridays from daybreak until the early afternoon, as well as on Saturday evening. Vendors rented covered stalls in order to display their wares, which gave customers both a centralized location to purchase food and other daily necessities as well as the imprimatur of city officials for these goods. Philadelphia's Clerks of the Market collected the stall rents, inspected the food for freshness and consistency, and resolved any disputes between buyers and sellers. As guardians of the public trust, market clerks posted a personal bond and supplemented their modest salaries by keeping half of any confiscated foodstuffs, with the other half going to Philadelphia's almshouse. Although only the renters of stalls were allowed to sell goods within the boundaries of the city market, the "country people" bringing the produce of farms from rural areas in Pennsylvania and New Jersey were allowed to set up on the outskirts of the marketplace.<sup>4</sup>

If public markets constituted the main landscape of consumption in the cities of the Early Republic, butchers served as the aristocracy of that realm. Also known as "victuallers" in the parlance of the day, butchers handled nearly every aspect of meat processing in the early nineteenth century. After purchasing live cattle, pigs, or sheep from local drovers, butchers slaughtered the animals, dressed the carcasses, and transported them to the public market. Butchers then set up shop in their rented market stalls, with a spouse or apprentice usually interacting with the customer, and carved the fresh meat to order. As a skilled worker overseeing nearly every facet of the meat trade, the butcher became one of the model examples of the independent producer

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret B. Tinkcom, "The New Market in Second Street," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 82 (1958): 379-386; William Novak, *The People's Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 97-99; Helen Tangires, *Public Markets and Civic Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 7-8.

central to the rhetoric of the early labor movement. As such, butchers often became involved in municipal politics and served as the centerpiece of market culture in the Early Republic. “Of all the vendors in the public markets,” historian Helen Tangires writes, “none were more organized, politicized, patriotic, and flamboyant than the butchers.” Inside the walls of the City Market, then, butchers created a highly regulated order in which the quality of their meat and service to their customers counterbalanced the cheaper prices that customers might receive from the local farmers outside of the butchers’ stalls.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually a new class of sellers called “shiners” threatened this established order. Shiners served as meat retailers who purchased goods from surrounding areas and brought it to Philadelphia’s public markets, often under the guise of farmers selling the products of their own farms. As they had avoided the initial costs of securing the product on the hoof and preparing it for sale, shiners undercut the prices set by butchers by a substantial margin. Although cloaked in the protection offered to local farmers, critics denounced these “people without capital, living from hand to mouth, who buy cheap and sell quickly, who pay no rent for their stalls, and are at no great expense for their establishment.” Meat purchased from the shiners could be fresh, or simply altered to give the appearance of freshness—without the mark of quality promised by the market stall butchers, consumers simply had to take their chances. Regardless of

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<sup>5</sup>Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 137-140; Roger Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table: Taste, Technology, Transformation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 20-26; Tangires, *Public Markets and Civic Culture*, 61.

its origin, age, or quality, more and more Philadelphians purchased their meat from shiners to the detriment of the highly regulated market for meat favored by butchers.<sup>6</sup>

By July of 1831, the butchers made their move against these unregulated competitors. At a Common Council meeting, Philadelphia butchers presented a petition denouncing the shiners as operating “under the assumed garb of farmers” and undercutting their legitimate business. The petition demanded the passage of a law making it illegal for anyone other than a butcher to sell meat in any amounts less than a quarter and excluding the sale of meat in lesser portions in the market area. To back up their threat, the butchers announced that they would voluntarily withdraw from the public market until city officials considered their appeal. “It is a measure unexpected and important to citizens,” the *Philadelphia Gazette and Advertiser* noted, “and the bowels of the whole community appear to be moved in the manner.” On the morning of 16 July regular patrons were shocked to discover only a single, renegade butcher at work. By noon there was not one ounce of fresh meat for sale in the city, one newspaper reported, aside from three beef tongues, six shins of beef, one piece of pork (about 10 lbs.) and four quarters of small pork (not weighing 10 lbs.). The single butcher, a Mr. Shaffer working Stall #23 between Fourth and Fifth Streets, worked feverishly with hundreds of customers surrounding him. Lest a riot break out over the shortage of meat, Philadelphia’s mayor and several constables arrived to preserve order among the angry consumers. Farmers and shiners did a brisk business in “country meat,” but a

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<sup>6</sup>*Daily Chronicle* (Philadelphia), 26 July 1831.

noticeable shortage of beef, pork, and mutton became immediately evident to Philadelphia's consumers.<sup>7</sup>

For the next week, Philadelphia was abuzz over the butcher's strike. The Common Council agreed to grapple with the issue on 21 July, but in the meantime, various editorialists weighed in on the "strike." One commentator praised the butchers as a "useful class" but warned that if the Common Council were to give in, "the milkmen, the truck men, or any useful and indispensable class might soon lord it over the capital city of Philadelphia" and put consumers in a state of "complete bondage." Other critics wanted to "leave the butchers to their own pursuits," or referred to their actions as "silly and reprehensible." Nearly all of the negative appraisals of the butcher's actions stressed the value of competition in keeping meat affordable. Defenders highlighted the just cause of the butchers' gripe with the shiners. "The butchers are not to be viewed as insurgents, nor as rebels, nor as workmen turning out for an advance of wages," one letter writer insisted, "--but as parties whose liabilities and duties are avoided, as they are no longer properly protected in the performance of them; as parties abstaining from the fulfillment of a contract, because abandoned on the other side." This dispute therefore pitted the interests of producer, in this case the butcher who wanted to extend the city's regulatory arm over the meat trade, and those consumers who valued the lower prices and competition offered by shiners.<sup>8</sup>

The Special Committee appointed by Philadelphia's Common Council reported on the issue at the 21 July meeting. The content of their unanimous report suggests a

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<sup>7</sup>*The Philadelphia Gazette and Advertiser*, 14, 15, 16 July 1831; *Daily Chronicle* (Philadelphia), 16 July 1831.

<sup>8</sup>*Daily Chronicle* (Philadelphia), 16 July 1831; *Philadelphia Gazette and Advertiser*, 18 July 1831; *American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), 18 July 1831, 26 July 1831.

growing awareness of the significance of less affluent consumers. The committee first doubted whether they had the authority to restrict the sale of meat in less than a quarter, but that even if they did, it would be a bad idea because it would help create a monopoly. No farmers deserved to be shut out of Philadelphia's market, the committee continued, and the "general good" must be cared for in this matter. To grant the butchers' opinion would "be to grant a monopoly of articles of the first and daily recurring necessity to a single class of men." More specifically, restrictive legislation would "enable the victuallers to exact most exorbitant prices or at their pleasure totally deprive the community of the most indispensable articles of provisions. The hardships which a combination for such a purpose, so fortified, would inflict upon the poor, need scarcely be alluded to." Wealthy Philadelphians would simply substitute another good in their diet, but cheaper cuts of meat were of vital importance to the middling classes and "almost the only resort of the labouring part of the community." Thus, the committee claimed that they could not pass a law which put these daily necessities at the whim of a single class of men and idea that butchers can completely withhold the supply of meat to the city was even more distressing. The report concluded that the Common Council should try to protect the butchers—after all these sellers paid \$30 a year for their market stalls—but that but that they could not make the laws of the city submit to them. The Council ultimately rejected their request for protection. The one holdout against the strike, Mr. Shaffer, reaped the benefits of his lone wolf campaign. The day after the Common Council report he had five or six thousand pounds of beef to sell in his market stall, and a few days later butchers trickled back to their stalls.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Philadelphia Gazette and Advertiser*, 22, 23, 26 July 1831.

The fight between butchers and shiners hardly settled disputes between sellers and consumers, nor did it end the regulation of public markets in Philadelphia. It did, however, highlight a growing concern among Philadelphians that combinations of producers could raise prices, which city officials argued was against the public interest. The invocation of less affluent consumers in the case against the butchers, moreover, suggests that class entered this debate over consumption in 1831. Although they styled themselves as the vanguard of the producing classes—a position that even their most conservative critics recognized—butchers could not easily rectify the protection of their trade with growing concerns over the ability of poor consumers to purchase the necessities of life. The case against the butchers in Philadelphia preceded a similar erosion of producer rights in New York City during the 1830s and 1840s. Municipal authorities there attempted to break the power of butchers by offering market stalls to the highest bidder and threatening to replace the centralized public market with small dispersed ones. By 1843 New York's city government allowed private stores to sell meat, which undermined that city's public markets as retailing centers. Two years later, Philadelphia's market clerks opened stalls in public markets to shiners. Public markets remained, in the words of William Novak, "a strong testament to the power of the visions of a well-regulated society and a public economy," well into the late nineteenth century. This scuffle between butchers and shiners in 1831 suggests, however, that the interests of consumers had crept into the debate over how those markets could best support the "public interest."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Tangires, *Public Markets and Civic Culture*, 71-94; Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table*, 25-26; Tinkcom, "The New Market on Second Street," 395; Novak, *The People's Welfare*, 104.

In meat markets, public officials undermined the power of the “producerist” view. In the development of an entirely new commodity in Philadelphia’s markets, expanding the range of consumers required a number of public interventions. More specifically, the rise of coal as a heating fuel in the decade prior to the Panic of 1837 signaled the significance of class in the consumption debate and the need for institutions to bridge the gap between wealthy and less affluent consumers of heating fuel. If the public judgments on butchers led consumers to doubt the primacy of producers in Philadelphia’s markets, the adoption of coal provided an example of how the gap between affluent and poor consumers required creative solutions that pushed the strict boundaries of “public” and “private” institutions.

Severe shortages of firewood in the period following the War of 1812 encouraged many entrepreneurial Philadelphians to promote the use of anthracite, or “hard,” coal as a substitute heating fuel. Coal merchants like Wilkes-Barre’s Jacob Cist hoped to sell anthracite in large batches to wealthy customers seeking to avoid Philadelphia’s inevitable shortages of firewood. Cist placed several articles in local newspapers boosting anthracite’s heating qualities, as well as its abundance in close proximity. Anthracite was difficult to ignite, so in addition to the written testimonials fuel merchants used public demonstrations of anthracite coal to broaden its potential consumers. In 1819, one dealer advertised Lehigh Coal for sale at 38 cents per bushel and encouraged potential customers to stop by his shop on No. 172 Arch Street to both order the coal and to see it burning. Jesse Fell of Wilkes-Barre, one of the first promoters of anthracite, recognized the significance of exhibitions to anthracite’s flame. “On its being put into operation,” he remembered in 1826, “my neighbours flocked to

see the novelty; but many would not believe the fact until convinced by ocular demonstration.” Canal and coal mining companies sponsored many such demonstrations—often aimed at as much at culling stock subscriptions as gaining actual customers—in Philadelphia’s well-heeled hotels. Once convinced of anthracite’s comfort and utility, a consumer’s conversion to the new fuel required constant supervision and periodic investments in technology. The ability of wealthy consumers to “lay in” a supply of coal guarded them against rising winter prices and fuel shortages, such as the one that struck Philadelphia in the winter of 1831-32.<sup>11</sup>

Philadelphia’s households of means had the luxury of testing certain fuels, perhaps installing a fireplace grate in one room, buying a coal stove for another, while retaining a traditional fireplace in yet another. But the vast majority of Philadelphia’s working poor could not repeat this pattern of fuel consumption. Comfort was not the main concern, as keeping warm during the winter was more an issue of survival for them. Whereas wealthy Philadelphians might measure their weekly consumption of heating fuel in dollars, Matthew Carey estimated that the average seamstress in Philadelphia budgeted only about fifteen cents a week in 1833. Moreover, less affluent consumers often lacked the cash and storage space to “lay up” their fuel, so they tended to purchase it in small amounts by the half-bushel or even less. These

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<sup>11</sup> *American Daily Advertiser*, 10 February 1819; “History of the Introduction of Anthracite Coal into Philadelphia. By Erskine Hazard, Esq., Communicated to the Society, Feb. 5, 1827; and a Letter from Jesse Fell, Esq. of Wilkesbarre, on the Discovery and First Use of Anthracite in the Valley of Wyoming,” *Memoirs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania* 2 (1827): 163; Frederick Binder, “Anthracite Enters the American Home,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 82 (1958): 94. For more on the early campaign to promote anthracite, see H. Benjamin Powell, *Philadelphia’s First Fuel Crisis: Jacob Cist and the Developing Market for Pennsylvania Anthracite* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978).

economic realities made the transition to using anthracite coal far less attractive for many wage laborers and their families.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, Philadelphia's poor consumers entered the discussion of heating fuel transitions very early in the process. One of the first prominent individuals to promote anthracite as a cheap source of heat for the poor was Cadwalader Evans, the president of the Schuylkill Navigation Company, in 1817. In a public address to drum up stock sales, Evans stated that his firm could ship coal down the Schuylkill River to the city at a cost of thirty cents a bushel—by his estimation this was the equivalent of reducing the cost of oak to three dollars a cord. He immediately brought poor consumers into the equation by exclaiming: “What a relief this would be to the indigent!” “Remember, fellow citizens, how much you subscribed and paid last winter to supply the poor with wood,” Evans claimed, “All the country too near the Schuylkill which is bare of timber, and all the towns on that river, and on all the tide waters of the Delaware will reap the benefit of this reduction in the price of fuel.” Evans and other anthracite boosters pushed their product on all ranks of Philadelphians, of course, but at a very early point they also suggested that coal would serve as the “workingman's fuel” because of its efficiency and abundance.<sup>13</sup>

Philanthropic organizations took notice of anthracite's cheap heat and tried to encourage its use among their clients. In 1831, Philadelphia's Fuel Savings Society, a charity designed to allow the poor to subscribe to wood in the summer and then draw on that account in the winter, appointed a committee to explore the distribution of coal

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<sup>12</sup>Mathew Carey, *An Appeal to the Wealthy of the Land, Ladies as Well as Gentlemen, on the Character, Conduct, Situation, and Prospects of Those Whose Sole Dependence for Subsistence is on the Labour of their Hands* (Philadelphia: L. Johnson, 1833), 15.

<sup>13</sup>*Address of the President and Managers of the Schuylkill Navigation Company, to the Stockholders and to the Publick in General* (Philadelphia: The United States' Gazette, 1817), 7.

along with firewood. Although wood had the advantage of familiarity and immediate value, they argued, the adoption of coal would be of great benefit “to the *laboring classes* of our citizens, *in particular*” by saving families approximately six dollars per year in terms of fuel. They estimated that a poor family in Philadelphia consumed about 2.5 cords of wood in the winter season, which cost around \$15.00 in 1831. The equivalent heating value of anthracite coal—about two tons—would cost around \$9.00 in 1831. But it is important to remember that a conversion from wood to anthracite fuel also required an initial investment in either an anthracite grate or stove, which the FSS did not include in their report. One visitor to a modest household in January of 1831 noted the absence of a fireplace or stove and reported that the family warmed itself by burning charcoal in a floor “furnace” and letting the smoke go out of the open window. The Union Benevolent Association, another benevolent organization founded in that same year, also became involved in fuel philanthropy. More specifically, the UBA examined whether its visitors to poor families should suggest that they purchase a “proper stove or grate for anthracite.” The UBA also tinkered with the idea of converting coal dust—a waste product in increasing abundance during the 1830s—into a cheap fuel for distribution to the poor.<sup>14</sup>

Philanthropic societies—private institutions serving a public cause—underwrote the cost of purchasing stoves for Philadelphia’s working poor. In 1831 the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company advertised a \$1.50 anthracite cooking stove under the heading “Economy and solid comfort for the poor.” That same year, the Fuel Savings

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<sup>14</sup>*A History of the Fuel Savings Society of the City and Liberties of Philadelphia from its Organization to 1871* (Philadelphia: Collins, 1875), 7-8; *Philadelphia Gazette and Advertiser*, 19 January 1831; *First Annual Report of the Executive Board of the Union Benevolent Association* (Philadelphia: J. Harding, 1832), 3; Minutes of the Executive Board, 28 October 1833, Union Benevolent Association Records, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Society resolved to purchase one hundred stoves from Steinhaur & Kisterbock and sell them to depositors at \$5.50 each. The Union Benevolent Society went even further to promote the use of anthracite stoves. They distributed between 350 and 400 stoves that combined cooking, heating, and baking to poor families for winter seasons. The stoves were stamped “UBA” on the side, lest anyone try to resell them, but nonetheless the loan made a substantial impact upon anthracite consumption among Philadelphia’s working poor. Overall, these programs developed into as a substantial subsidy for new fuel technology, as cheap coal stoves sold for about \$15 to \$20 dollars during the 1830s, with most models averaging about \$30. The aims of philanthropy and the needs of consumers thus merged together to encourage technological change in Philadelphia’s poorer households.<sup>15</sup>

So where the wealthy consumer approached the problem of heating fuel transition as an individual choice to use a more economical and abundant fuel, poor Philadelphians often required subsidies from philanthropic institutions to convert from wood to coal fuel. The reasons for promoting coal consumption among poor might have included a philanthropic desire to shield more vulnerable residents from firewood shortages so endemic to the Early Republic. Other evidence suggests, however, that carriers and sellers of coal had an economic interest in widening the scope of coal consumption and that the urban poor had a role in this process. The Pennsylvania Senate’s investigation into the coal trade in 1834 revealed some interesting trends. Most notably, the increased consumption of anthracite coal in Philadelphia had slowed

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<sup>15</sup>*Niles’ Register*, 16 July 1831; *A History of the Fuel Savings Society*, 9; *Union Benevolent Association, 1831-1881: Fifty Years of Work Among the Poor of Philadelphia. Historical Sketch of the First Half-Century of the Union Benevolent Association* (Philadelphia: Chandler Printing House, 1881), 25; Brewer, *From Fireplace to Cookstove*, 79.

by the late 1820s and 1830s, and coal companies began to see inventory surpluses of up to 20-25%. Charles Wurts, the president of the Union Benevolent Association for sixteen years, offers an insight into the response of coal promoters to these trends. In 1832 Charles worked closely with a manufacturer to develop the UBA's loaner stove and pushed for the working poor to burn anthracite coal. Perhaps this act was done out of sheer munificence. In 1831, however, Charles received a letter from his brother, Maurice, who lived in New York City and was an investor and former manager of New York's major anthracite outlet, the Delaware and Hudson Canal. Maurice not only related the "great variety of cheap contrivances" that had been recently introduced in New York to burn anthracite; he also mentioned the value of selling coal by the half-bushel (coal was commonly sold by the ton at the yard) to the working poor. "The introduction of it among this class of inhabitants," Maurice wrote in 1831, "much extends its use beyond computations." For coal interests, then, warming the homes of the less fortunate could broaden their customer base. But at the same time, fuel philanthropists and coal interests dovetailed in allowing poor consumers to participate in heating fuel markets by offering a subsidy on both the price of coal and the cost of adopting anthracite technology.<sup>16</sup>

A final way in which debates over consumption crept into Philadelphia's public sphere was through the writings of political economists. Although it is always difficult to establish a consensus opinion among intellectuals, most historians view the Early Republic as, in the words of historian of consumerism Kathleen Donohue, "profoundly producerist" in orientation. Some mainstream political economists focused on the

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<sup>16</sup>S. J. Packer, *Report of the Committee of the Senate of Pennsylvania upon the Subject of the Coal Trade* (Harrisburg: Henry Welsh, 1834), 43; Maurice Wurts to Charles Wurts, 12 February 1831, Wurts Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

adoption of the population theories of Thomas Malthus or Jean Baptiste Say's ideas about production creating its own demand to the American situation. No other European thinker had more of an impact than David Ricardo, whose ideas concerning rent and the labor theory of value intrigued American political economists. Influential figures like Francis Wayland and Henry Carey took exception with the grim Ricardian view of classes pitted against one another for increasingly limited resources. But most political economists who studied the situation of their less affluent countrymen still stressed frugality and restraint, lest American workers become idle consumers and lose their productive capacity. Historian of consumption Daniel Horowitz argues that those on the conservative end of this discussion "felt that premodern habits interfered with the inculcation of discipline in work and consumption so necessary in turning ordinary people into workers and savers in a period of intense industrialization." Even those who feigned sympathy for American workers stressed their need to increase production and limit their consumption of goods. In many ways, then, "producerism" dominated the intellectual climate of the Early Republic.<sup>17</sup>

Working-class radicals active in Philadelphia's intellectual and political community warmly embraced this producerist rhetoric, but refused to accept Ricardian ideas about the necessity of scarcity and subsistence wages. The leading voice of Philadelphia's radical movement in the Early Republic was an English cordwainer turned essayist named William Heighon. Heighon's 1827 address became the fulcrum

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<sup>17</sup>Kathleen Donohue, *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism & the Idea of the Consumer* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 2; Paul K. Conklin, *Prophets of Prosperity: America's First Political Economists* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 17-40; Jeffrey Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 77-79; Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes Toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1985), 11.

of Philadelphia's Mechanic's Union of Trade Associations and its political cousin, the Working Men's Party. Although effectively limited to skilled workers, the MUTA and Working Men's Party pushed forward a critique of the market economy on behalf of all Philadelphia's "productive classes." They highlighted the need for access to education for all citizens, fiercely attacked the concentration of wealth in society, and called for a reform of the political system. Heighton expressed particular bile for legislators, claiming that, "They are *consumers* only, producing nothing, and as such dependent on our exertions for all the wealth they possess or enjoy." Ostentatious purchases, the meaning-laden activity that many scholars of consumption cite as evidence of a "consumerist" mindset, came under withering attack. Heighton's newspaper, the *Mechanic's Free Press*, ran an editorial in 1830 encouraging its readers to abandon the "rank weeds of fashion" and live by republican simplicity. Workers should wear only a "decent and economical garb" and avoid "apeing their political enemies" and "mistress of Bablyon" by donning "a national costume which shall not vary with every breeze which blows."<sup>18</sup>

Although working-class radicals championed the cause of producers at every turn, they also recognized the role of consumption in economic life. Heighton's inspiration, the Scottish philosopher John Gray began his *Lecture on Human Happiness*

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<sup>18</sup>[William Heighton], *An Address to the Members of Trade Societies and to the Working Classes Generally: Being an Exposition of the Relative Situation, Condition, and Future Prospects of Working People in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Young, 1827), 33; *Mechanic's Free Press* (Philadelphia), 31 July 1830; L Leonard Bernstein, "The Working People of Philadelphia from Colonial Times to the General Strike of 1835," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 74 (1950): 322-339; Louis Arky, "The Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations and the Formation of the Philadelphia Workingmen's Movement," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 76 (1952): 142-176; Edward Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians: The Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1967), 12-27; Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 75-83; Ronald Schultz, *The Republic of Labor. Philadelphia Artisans and the Politics of Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 224-232.

by dividing the “natural wants” of man into two categories: the “food, clothing, and habitation” that constitute basic animal needs and the intellectual pursuits of humanity. Gray obviously favored the latter, but in complaining about the scarcity of basic necessities he argued that the market allocates goods “without the least regard either to the satisfaction of our wants, or to the extent of our powers of production.” Heighton implicitly included consumption in his critique of Philadelphia’s economy when he complained that workers were forced to accept “a scanty portion of the coarsest and the meanest of their own productions.” Legislators might be villains for their inability to produce, but the worse enemy for working-class consumers, in the eyes of an editorialist in the *Mechanic’s Free Press*, were the “dealers” and “huxters” whose “superabundant number being as injurious to the prosperity of the nation as in the deficiency in the number of products.” By purchasing goods for resale, these middlemen made “a living off the articles produced by others, while on their way to the consumer,” which acted as a “heavy tax on both production and consumption.” Although *consumers* seemed anathema to Philadelphia’s working-class radicals, *consumption* formed a vital part of their argument.<sup>19</sup>

Stephen Simpson was another famous critic of Malthusian principles active in the radical intellectual community. Although the scion of a prominent Philadelphia banking family and former bank cashier, Simpson heaped scorn on the American financial system as a young writer for William Duane’s *Aurora*. Later in life he embraced Whiggish principles, but Simpson became notable in Philadelphia’s working-class political circles as the congressional candidate for the Working Men’s Party in 1830. The

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<sup>19</sup>John Gray, *A Lecture on Human Happiness* (Philadelphia: D&S Neall, 1825), 9, 44; Heighton, *An Address to the Members of Trade Societies*, 3; *Mechanic’s Free Press* (Philadelphia), 8 May 1830.

next year, he published the *Working-Man's Manual*, in which he assessed the economy from the perspective of the working classes. Although some scholars question Simpson's authenticity as a spokesman for Philadelphia's downtrodden, *The Working-Man's Manual* presents a radical worldview in crystal-clear prose. Access to education, the labor theory of value, and a breakdown of wealth into primary (food, clothing, shelter) and secondary (luxury, science, literature, fine arts) categories are all similar themes to other working-class treatises of the period. "Capitalists live and grow rich by the labour of others," Simpson concluded. "The laboring man lives by his own industry, enriches others by his own industry, but very seldom grows rich himself."<sup>20</sup>

Amidst this producerist narrative, however, Simpson also reserved space for reflections on consumption. He reprimanded both the "avaricious miser" and the "miserly beggar" as the two "moral extremes" of frugality. "The poorest and most indolent countries," Simpson concluded, "are generally the most economical." As for consumption, he argued that "the end of all production is consumption" but that the latter should be "regulated on principles of justice, prudence, the public health, the public virtue, and the public vigor." In regard to the basic needs of life, or those primary categories of wealth, Simpson found production important, but stressed equally the need, indeed the right, for all citizens to consume:

The working man has a right to consume, for he produces wealth, and in him it is a productive consumption; and if he only consumes what is conducive to vigour and health, he is a double benefactor to society, for he thus leaves a portion of labour unimpaired, undestroyed, which may go to

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<sup>20</sup> Stephen Simpson, *The Working-Man's Manual: A New Theory of Political Economy on the Principle of Production the Source of Wealth* (Philadelphia: Thomas L. Bonsal, 1831), 26, 51-52, 70; Edward Pessen, "The Ideology of Steven Stephen Simpson, Upperclass Champion of the Early Philadelphia Workingmen's Movement," *Pennsylvania History* 22 (1955): 328-340; Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 211-213.

the subsistence of others. The working men of all classes, are the productive consumers of wealth.

Of course, this need to balance production and consumption did not include luxury goods, which produces commodities “inimical to all the ends of civilization and industry.” One of the leading voices of the “producerist” movement in Philadelphia maintained that working-class families also had a right to consumption, even if it was framed in the oxymoronic “productive consumption” idiom. Although his congressional campaign of 1830 attracted few voters and the Working Men’s Party movement subsided soon afterwards, Simpson remained active in Philadelphia’s intellectual community for years.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of a “productive consumption” outlived the Working Men’s movement and expanded beyond Philadelphia’s publishing circles to appear in Theodore Sedgwick’s 1836 work *Public and Private Economy*. A New England elite who had gravitated towards the Working Men’s Party, Sedgwick wrote this piece in 1836 with the decidedly non-Malthusian intent of revealing political economy as a “beautiful science.” “How can it be otherwise,” he asked, “when it teaches us so to manage our public affairs as to diffuse happiness by spreading plenty among the whole people.” *Public and Private Economy* emphasizes the need of working-class Americans to consume wisely and avoid becoming the “fashionable, expensive, poor” who spend their hard-earned wages on “gew-gews and short-lived finery, which disgrace their houses and persons” or “expensive eating and drinking, that now so often either enfeeble or destroy their working faculties.” As such he had the ambitious goal of contributing to the ongoing debate on political economy and also providing a primer for plain and simple living for

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<sup>21</sup>Simpson, *The Working-Man’s Manual*, 128, 217-218, 221; Schultz, *The Republic of Labor*, 232-233.

the working classes. Sedgwick's project of making political economy accessible to his readers comes across as patronizing to modern readers; Marvin Meyers labeled his work a "puritanical Jacksonian's home companion." But even as he employed a high moral tone, Sedgwick recognized the need for a balance between production and consumption. "Upon the whole, it is plain," he wrote, "that the prosperity of a people will depend greatly upon the way in which they consume what they work for and earn." The logic of discerning between "productive" and "non-productive" consumption seems curious, and yet this reconciliation between the two functions of economic life became an important theme among many political economists in the period before the Panic of 1837.<sup>22</sup>

Although a broad based movement organized around the Working Men's Party fell apart in the early 1830s, by mid-decade a series of strikes demonstrated the power of Philadelphia's working-class organizations beyond the intellectual project of reconciling production with consumption. Although the General Trades Union (GTU) that sponsored cross-trade actions like the General Strike of 1835 counted mostly skilled workers among its 10,000 members, it was the unskilled coal heavers' disruption of the supply of coal to consumers that triggered Philadelphia's first major actions in support of the ten-hour day. By the early 1830s, the coal wharves on the Schuylkill hummed with activity. On a single day in 1835, thirty-five barges landed at Philadelphia laden with 1,651 tons of coal. A small army of coal heavers unloaded this cargo, hauled it to coal yards, and then delivered it to customers. But in May of 1835, the Schuylkill

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<sup>22</sup>Theodore Sedgwick, *Public and Private Economy*. vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836), 29, 113, 131, 174; Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 126.

coal wharves fell silent as, in the words of Philadelphia's *American Daily Advertiser*, "The coal-heavers have determined that ten hours work per day is as much as comports with their comfort and dignity, and have therefore decreed that none shall work longer." About 300 men banded together to hold up 75 barges from landing and discharging their cargo on the Schuylkill, led by a sword-waving man who "have threatened every man with death who dares life a piece of coal." In June of 1835, boatmen on the Schuylkill coal barges struck to demand higher wages. These strikes ended peacefully and the ten-hour day became common among coal heavers, but a year later they struck again for a twenty-five cent increase and enlisted Philadelphia's GTU in their cause. This time around, Philadelphia officials threw the coal-heavers in jail, set bail at \$2,500, and ultimately broke their walkout. But in the meantime, these unskilled workers demonstrated how their control over an essential commodity could easily disrupt Philadelphia's economy.<sup>23</sup>

The General Strike of 1835 seemed to give working-class radicalism, at least as espoused by the GTU, a wide-ranging influence in Philadelphia. This power, however, was illusory. Just as Philadelphia's trade union movement demonstrated its ability to disrupt the flow of essential commodities to Philadelphians of all classes, a sharp spike in prices in the winter of 1836-37 triggered an entirely new crisis. Prices of bread, meat, and fuel all inched to unprecedented levels, as depicted in Figure 1. Part of the GTU's critique of the market economy had been the high price of basic necessities—by early 1837 the cost of living shot even higher. In February of 1837, for example, wholesale

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<sup>23</sup> *American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), 6, 29 May, 29 June 1835; William Sullivan, *The Industrial Worker in Pennsylvania, 1800-1840* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1955), 152-155; Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians*, 44-45; Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia*, 90-91, 99.

prices in general were 36.8 percent higher than they had been in 1834. When coupled with a slow in the growth of real wages that had begun in the mid-1830s, this inflation quickly cut into the budgets of nearly all Philadelphians. The price of a bushel of wheat made a particularly dramatic leap, from \$1.32 in January of 1836 to \$2.25 a year later—a jump of over 70 percent. A barrel of flour’s price nearly doubled from \$6.62 to \$11.13 over that same time period. Philadelphia may not have seen flour riots, but its residents did suffer immensely from the sharp uptick of prices in the 1836-37 winter season.<sup>24</sup>

The moralism inherent in fuel philanthropy offered one solution to the high price of bread, as some consumers sought to redirect the flow of grain in order to stem prices. Concerned citizens in Reading, Pennsylvania appointed a committee to investigate the high cost of “provisions and other commodities” and that they have concluded that there are two causes—first, the problem of excessive speculation on the material from millers and second the use of grain in the distillation of whiskey. “The spirit of speculation which extends its cormorant grasp to every thing which promises liberal profit has laid hold of this leading necessary of life,” they reported, “and have sounded the alarm of scarcity, now profits by the panic it has produced.” While the granaries are near bursting and farmers withhold their grain in the hope of even higher prices, “the distiller is busily engaged not only in destroying the sustenance of his fellow man, but in *converting* it into a product destitute of nourishment and destructive to their health, fortune, and morals.” The Reading committee sought no legal remedy for this, but that they ask farmers to stop selling grain to distilleries and for tavern keepers and grocers

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<sup>24</sup>Anne Bezanson, Robert D. Gray, and Miriam Hussey, *Wholesale Prices in Philadelphia, 1784-1861, Volume One* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1936), 205; Robert A. Margo, *Wages and Labor Markets in the United States, 1820-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 143-148; Arthur Harrison Cole, *Wholesale Commodity Prices in the United States, 1700-1861, Statistical Supplement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 257, 261.

to stop selling whiskey “until at least the public, and especially the poor shall be able to buy their bread at reasonable prices.” At a town meeting in Philadelphia, the General Ward Committee also highlighted speculation as the culprit in the high price of bread and singled out exporters sitting on reserves of flour. *Poulson’s Daily Advertiser* joined the call against distilleries called for the three million bushels of grain destined for whiskey be somehow reallocated to breadmaking.<sup>25</sup>

Consumers upset with the use of grain in spirituous liquors also appealed to state officials. In the single legislative session of 1836-37, two petitions from Philadelphia and three from nearby Bucks County asked for a statewide prohibition on distilling grain into alcohol for one year. Even if this call was a rear guard action by temperance advocates to undermine alcohol consumption, legislators took the economic aspects of the appeal seriously enough to refer it to both the Committee on Vice and Immorality and the Committee on Agriculture. The Senate Committee on Agriculture reported on the petitions on 31 January 1837. Although sympathetic to the idea of temperance, the committee cited the large capital investment made by distillers, who after all were running a lawful business, and wished to avoid the “utter ruin” of those “who have to depend upon it exclusively for their livelihood.”<sup>26</sup>

In addition to calls for new voluntary and state action, complaints about the high price of bread also reflected the butcher’s appeal for traditional regulation; in this case the call went out for public officials to renew the bread assize. This longstanding practice of regulating the weight of bread and tying it to the price of grain had only been

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<sup>25</sup> *Poulson’s Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), 10 January, 1 February 1837; *The Pennsylvanian* (Philadelphia), 17 January 1837.

<sup>26</sup> *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Volume One* (Harrisburg: Samuel D. Patterson, 1837), 142, 170, 185, 571, 685; *Journal of the Senate of Pennsylvania, Volume One* (Harrisburg: Emanuel Guver, 1837), 279-280.

sporadically enforced in Philadelphia; in other large cities like New York, the bread assize had been abandoned by the 1820s. A law passed in 1797 requiring Philadelphia bakers to sell bread by weight, instead of by the individual loaf, had similarly slipped into disuse by 1837. In response to the spike in prices, however, Philadelphia's public officials sampled seven loaves of bread from local bakers in December of 1836 and found that they ranged in weight from 15 to 10 ½ ounces. A "respectable mechanic" who purchased the standard five cent loaf, an alderman concluded, would not know whether he was being cheated or not. In response to complaints about "light loaves" in Philadelphia's bread markets, clerks of Philadelphia's public markets took out an advertisement in *The Pennsylvanian* to announce that they would start enforcing the 1797 law in February of 1837 and weighing individual loaves in public markets. But the clerks demonstrated an ambivalence toward this decision, as they maintained that consumers held an advantage when bakers sold their bread by tally, meaning that they deliver an amount to houses without waiting for payment—if the price changed daily as a result of the price of flour's change and the bread had to be weighed, this would complicate the process of buying bread. Thus, they argued that the tally eliminates the cost of weighing and settling accounts immediately and instead of lowering the cost of bread, weighing would increase it, as "consumers of bread will have to provide funds necessary to pay all the salaries of the bookkeepers and clerks, the expense of stationary, and the wages of the additional number of men who will be required to deliver bread." They also offered advice for consumers on how to remedy inequities in loaves. "If one baker gives too small loaves, go to another," the clerks argued, "just as you go to one who makes good bread in preference to one who makes bad bread." The

degree to which clerks followed up on their promise is uncertain, as the *Pennsylvanian* reported that uniform loaves had not caught on for Philadelphia's bakers. "Their loaves are not only made much less than they ought to be at the present price of flour," the editors complained, "but are in many instances made of damaged flour." The assorted efforts to remedy the high cost of bread demonstrates a change in the expectations of consumers at the same time that the targets of these campaigns reveals an underlying belief that public authorities had a responsibility to redress high prices.<sup>27</sup>

Working-class radicalism helped inspire one of the most drastic remedies for high prices, which emerged from the town meeting held in Philadelphia in January of 1837. The General Ward Committee reported on the source of high prices in the basic necessities of life and, not unexpectedly, blamed speculators. They asked that petitions be sent to the state to allow for the passage of a law "for the erection of one or more public granaries and coal yards, to be owned by and kept up by the State, with such regulations as shall at all times afford the farmer and the miner a fair cash price for wood, coal, and grain; and provide each citizen who may demand it, a sufficient quantity for his own consumption at cost." The Englishman Thomas Brothers attended the meeting and sympathized with the idea that "bankers" had "used every endeavor to make the people believe there was a scarcity," when it was clear that there was not. But Brothers later remembered his skepticism for public granaries and coal yards. "One of the crack-skulled orators had been informed of the happy conditions of China, which he attributed to her public granaries," Brothers wrote in 1840, "and he thought, if he thought

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<sup>27</sup> On the expiration of the bread assize in the United States, see Howard Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York City in the Age of Jefferson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 183-197; Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 35; David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Free Workers and the Free Market During the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 74-75; *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), 23 January 1837.

of anything besides humbugging the gaping creatures by whom he was surrounded, that such a system might be established in his republic.” One of Philadelphia’s representatives in the legislature introduced the plan for “public granaries and coal yards” on February 14 and three days later two petitions from Philadelphia County were submitted in support of the plan. The Committee on Agriculture rejected the idea, which prompted the same delegate to resubmit the proposal in March. But by this time, the legislature was in no mood to authorize such wide-ranging authority over the consumption of commodities and instead focused their energy on redressing the state’s difficult currency issues, the upcoming constitutional convention, and the impending gubernatorial election.<sup>28</sup>

On the other end of the Panic, the idea that public authorities should strictly regulate markets was becoming less and less popular. Philadelphia planned to tear down many of its older public markets as early as 1835; and a rage for private market houses hit the city by the 1840s and 1850s. New York City abdicated control over its meat markets in 1843 and continued a pattern of deregulation for the next three decades. Historians have rightly questioned the usefulness of the concept of describing “laissez faire” in nineteenth-century markets, as the footprint of local, state, and even federal policies remained visible on the American economy through the Gilded Age. In terms of consumers, however, the period following the Panic of 1837 does indicate a trend toward less regulation. Consumers, as always, could view these developments as a series of trade-offs. Access to cheaper necessities of life increased to include a wider

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<sup>28</sup> *The Pennsylvanian* (Philadelphia), 17 January 1837; Thomas Brothers, *The United States of North America as They Are; Not As They Are Generally Described. Being a Cure For Radicalism* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longman, 1840), 67; *Pennsylvania House Journal, 1836-37, Volume One*, 508, 542, 554, 643, 670; Charles McCool Snyder, *The Jacksonian Heritage: Pennsylvania Politics, 1833-1848* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1958), 109-119.

range of consumers during the 1830s, but at the same time public authorities seemed less capable of supervising consumption in urban markets.<sup>29</sup>

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The Panic of 1837 put a damper on many things; Martin Van Buren's political future, the nation's financial system, and the nascent radical trade union movement all saw their demise during the Panic and subsequent depression. In the decades following 1837, the role of public institutions in regulating everyday life seemed less and less important, but public authorities never fully abdicated their role over consumption. Nevertheless, the degree of regulation found in Philadelphia's public markets or bread assize laws waned in the 1840s and 1850s. The failure of state-funded grain and coal depots, moreover, added to the budding idea that Pennsylvania's legislature should pull back its active involvement in growing their state's economy. In the post-Panic years, municipal and state authorities exerted less influence over the day to day operation of Philadelphia's economy at a number of levels. The 1844 referendum on selling Pennsylvania's ambitious State Works program of internal improvements, for example, mirrored the less dramatic decision by Philadelphia authorities to allow shiners into public markethouses. In this regard, the Panic of 1837 served to hasten an already weakened position of public policymakers. As the range of goods increased in urban markets and as less affluent consumers were drawn into the market for new commodities like anthracite coal, the public oversight over the distribution of basic necessities waned. The dramatic price hikes of 1836-37 reignited some cries for state authorities to insure fair prices for these goods, but despite the extreme circumstances these pleas went unfulfilled.

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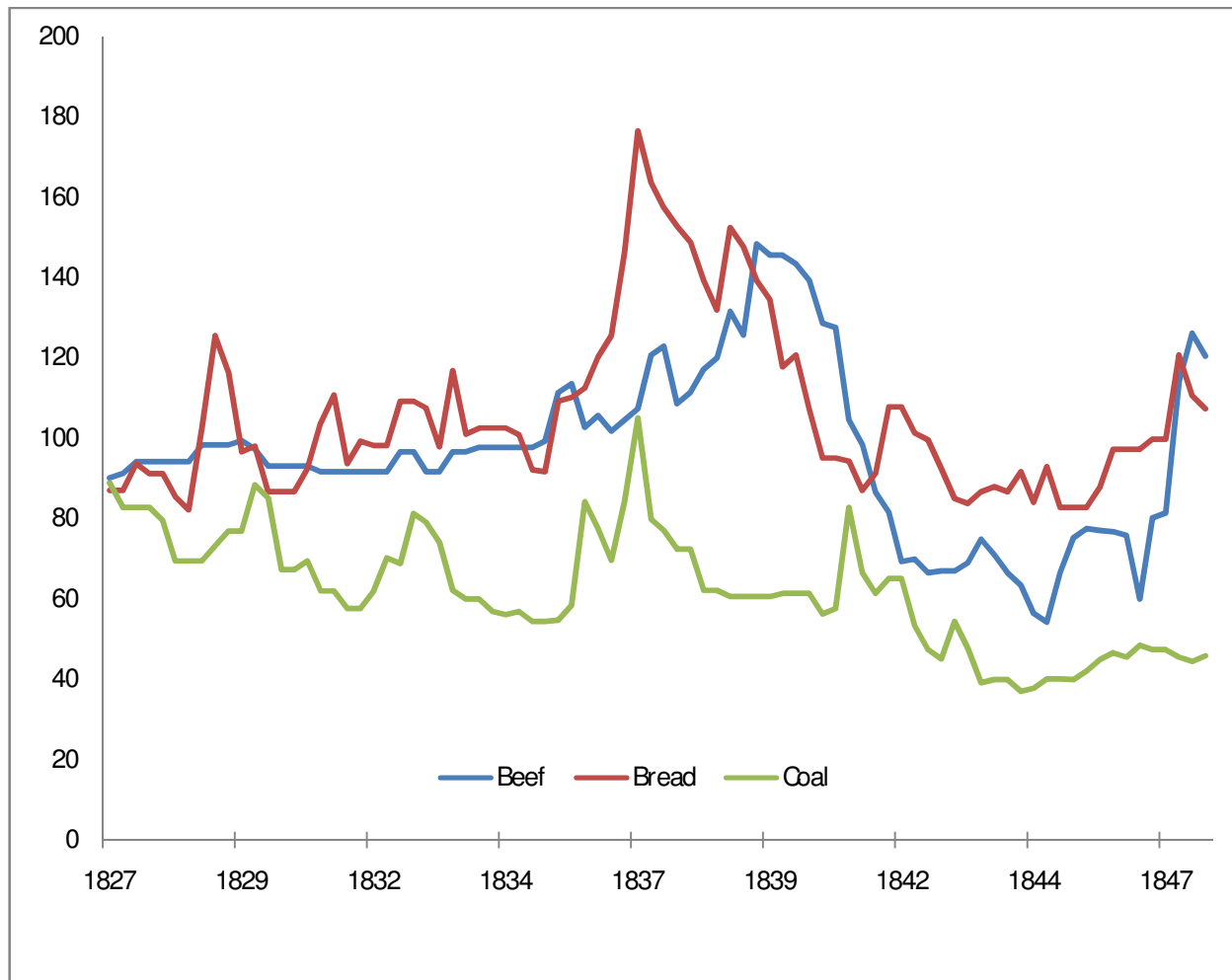
<sup>29</sup>Tangires, *Public Markets and Civic Culture*, 83.

If the decade leading up to the Panic of 1837 undermined the role of public authorities in debates over consumption and the immediate response to the crisis demonstrates the lingering tension over the appropriate role of public authorities in protecting consumers, these trends also reveal the significance of the Early Republic in the longer history of American consumption. Susan Strasser, in an excellent review of this literature, criticized the tendency of historians to fall back on easily understood dichotomies when examining economic life. “To study [consumption’s] history, we have to drop the practice of framing our work with the binary opposites of public/private, production/consumption, work/leisure, and business/home,” she argues, “and abandon those with the male/female dyad in such a way as to constitute separate spheres, to use the nineteenth-century phrase.” The events in the decade leading up to the Panic of 1837 detailed in this essay question the supremacy of producerist doctrine in Philadelphia’s intellectual and everyday economic life. But this does not simply provide a corrective in the perception of the period—the pendulum shouldn’t swing away from the producer and toward the consumer. Nor should the change in consumer markets readjust a zero-sum game between “public” and “private” oversight. Instead Philadelphia’s story of the Panic of 1837 suggests that these easy dichotomies do not explain the complexity of debates over consumption in the Early Republic. By focusing on the consumption of everyday necessities such as meat, bread, and fuel, moreover, we can understand how both elite and less affluent Philadelphians participated in consumer markets and, perhaps more significantly, how their distinct presence shaped the development of those markets over time.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Strasser, “Making Consumption Conspicuous,” 761.

Figure One: Wholesale Price Index of Three Basic Commodities in Philadelphia  
1827-1847



Source: Anne Bezanson, Robert D. Gray, and Miriam Hussey, *Wholesale Prices in Philadelphia, 1784-1861* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1936), 9, 16, 37.