

Walking Moraley's Streets: Philadelphia



SPECIAL ISSUE Early Cities of the Americas

[Baltimore](#) | [Boston](#) | [Charleston](#) | [Chicago](#) | [Havana](#)

| [Lima](#) | [Los Angeles](#) | [Mexico City](#) | [New Amsterdam](#) | [New Orleans](#)
[Paramaribo](#) | [Philadelphia](#) | [Potosi](#) | [Quebec City](#) | [Salt Lake City](#)
[Saint Louis](#) | [Santa Fe](#) | [San Francisco](#) | [Washington, D.C.](#)

William Moraley disembarked from the ship *Boneta* in Philadelphia a week before Christmas, 1729. Like Benjamin Franklin who had arrived six years earlier, Moraley landed in the City of Brotherly Love as a poor man. While Franklin was a runaway apprentice, Moraley was a bound servant awaiting purchase. Wearing a dilapidated red coat, coarse checkered shirt, bad shoes, and a dirty wig, Moraley, like the similarly ill attired Franklin, bought bread with his last pennies, then explored the town on foot. After that, the two men's initial hours and days in the city diverged sharply. Franklin gave his leftover bread to a friendless woman and child, attended a Quaker meeting, and sought out a reputable inn for lodging; the following day he applied for work. Moraley sold his clothes to buy rum and contemplated the wonders of Philadelphia. Franklin sought out "young people of the town that were lovers of reading, with whom I spent my evenings very pleasantly and gained money by my industry and frugality." Moraley enjoyed the city's "many Houses of Entertainment" where

evening drinkers imbibed the "Product of this fertile Soil."

Custom-House, Philadelphia, Entered inwards.
Ship Amity, William Murray, from Jamaica.
Ship Boneta, Thomas Read, from London.
Entered Outwards.
Bdg. Philadelphia Hope, G. Spafford, for West-Indies.
Sloop Surinam, Henry Norwood, for Barbadoes.
Cleared Out.
Sloop Adventure, Robert Rawle, to Surinam.
Ship Samuel and Ann, Thomas Glentworth, to Madera.
Brigt. Clementina, Joseph Arthur, to Antigua.
Brigt. Henrietta, Samuel Farra, to Madera.
Ship Cupid, Stephen Pugh, to Gibraltar.
Ship Three Bachelors, William Spafford, to Barbadoes.
Ship May, Robert Sanders, to Isle of Man.
Buried in the several Burying-Grounds since the 4th Instant.
Church ----- 2. } Baptists ----- 0.
Quakers ----- 1. } } Whites ----- 0.
Presbyterians ----- 0. } } Strangers, } Blacks ----- 0.

A D V E R T I S E M E N T S.
Just Imported in the Ship *Boneta*, Capt. Thomas Read, Master, from London, (lying near the Market Wharf) a Parcel of very likely Servant Men and Boys, of fancy Trades, as well as Husbandmen: To be sold by *Edward Hume* and *William Rawle*, very Reasonable, (as also good *Newcastle Coal*) for Cash, Flower or Bread.

Fig. 1. William Moraley arrived on the ship Boneta. The ship's arrival was noted and Moraley's indenture was advertised for sale in the Pennsylvania Gazette (Philadelphia), December 9-16, 1729.

Where did William Moraley walk—or more likely wobble, after thirteen weeks on a sailing vessel and several hours in taverns—on the streets of Philadelphia on the first day of his arrival? It is impossible to know for sure, but we can try to retrace his steps on a tour through a bustling city on the rim of the Atlantic world.

While the *Boneta* docked on Market Wharf, Moraley revised George Webb's poem about "one of the most delightful Cities upon Earth." At least forty more ships were docked along the Delaware River. In Philadelphia, the *Boneta* unloaded its cargo of servants and coal, took on a shipment of flour, and in early January set sail for Lisbon. Other vessels were just clearing the port for Barbados, Madeira, Antigua, and the Isle of Man. This sea traffic formed the foundation for Philadelphia's economy. Lord Adam Gordon's observation that "Everybody in Philadelphia deals more or less in trade" was only a slight exaggeration. The urban center was an entrepôt through which European manufactured goods flowed to be sold throughout the Delaware Valley, while the region's abundant grain and livestock products were carried into the city for shipment abroad. Most residents, directly or indirectly, depended on commerce with people scattered throughout the Atlantic World, from Native Americans in the backcountry, to small farmers and storekeepers in the neighboring countryside, to planters, manufacturers, and merchants operating from the West Indies to Portugal to Britain. Mariners and merchants made money managing the trade, carters and

stevedores stowed staples on ships, and coopers created barrels to contain flour bound for the sea. Housing construction likewise formed a vital component of the economy as carpenters and laborers built structures in response to the city's rapid population growth, from a handful of people in 1682, to approximately five thousand inhabitants in 1720, to nearly seven thousand when Moraley arrived.

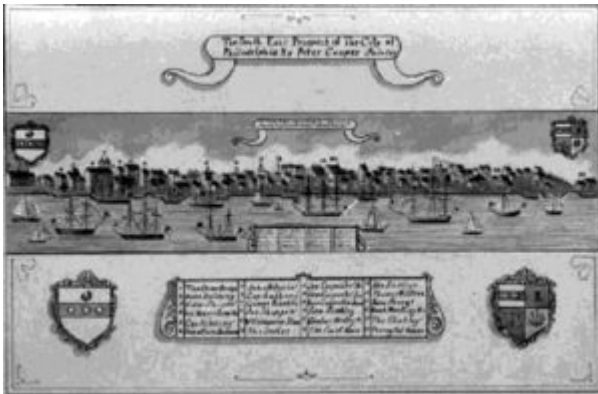


Fig. 2. Peter Cooper, The South East Prospect of the City of Philadelphia, c. 1720. The original, now in the Library Company of Philadelphia, likely is the oldest surviving painting of a North American city. Cooper distorts a few of the buildings, but the overall impression of a city anchored to maritime commerce is accurate.

Curious to explore the city and searching for a master to purchase his indenture, Moraley strolled westward from the wharf on High Street on Saturday, one of the two days each week when the market operated. He joined a crowd of people who sailed from New Jersey to Market Wharf, heading for the marketplace to shop for or sell food, and they immediately passed the area where women sold fish caught by their husbands. Crossing Front Street, Moraley proceeded by the London Coffee House, an impressive edifice where customers conducted all manner of business. Merchants, shopkeepers, and ship captains drank together here while making deals. Wealthier people congregated to sell and bid on land, buildings, and other property. Edward Horne—the merchant who owned both the ship on which Moraley had sailed as well as Moraley's contract—auctioned property there in 1730. At Horne's death six years later, his widow listed their 232-acre "plantation" near the city for public sale at the Coffee House. Not all merchants were as wealthy as Horne was, but many of them earned a great deal of money dealing in commerce and land.

Philadelphians also bartered bound people at the Coffee House. A "likely breeding Negroe Woman, and a Boy about two Years old" numbered among the many black people forcibly imported into the province, often from West Africa via the West Indies, and sold as slaves at auctions at the Coffee House and

throughout the city. The demand for labor and the capital accumulation that accompanied the city's early economic growth encouraged the importation of hundreds of slaves in the 1720s. They comprised approximately 15 percent of the population, working as laborers along the wharves, mariners on ships, skilled workers in artisans' shops, and domestics in the homes of the affluent. While urban bondage usually was physically less grueling than plantation labor in the southern colonies, Philadelphia slaves were often more isolated, swimming in a sea of white faces. Although many absorbed Euro-American culture relatively quickly, urban bondpeople still suffered depression and despair resulting from their difficult circumstances, as evident in the several slave suicides that occurred shortly after Moraley's arrival. Some resisted their bondage. In May 1733, George and Dick fled their Philadelphia owners, taking (according to the *Pennsylvania Gazette*) "two Pair of Pistols, two Muskets and a Cutlass, with a Quantity of Powder and Ball, with an Intent as is believed [by their masters] to do some Mischief." Five months later, six male and female slaves absconded, carrying guns to aid their escape.



Fig. 3. Slaves are offered for sale in the American Weekly Mercury (Philadelphia), June 8-15, 1738.

Moraley was also not free, though his was a different kind of servitude; he characterized himself as a "voluntary slave" whose situation was temporary. Like at least half of European emigrants to North America during the eighteenth century, Moraley signed a contract of indenture. By this agreement, a person toiled as a servant for a master for three or four years in return for the cost of the Atlantic passage, daily maintenance, and, perhaps, freedom dues at the conclusion of their term. Moraley joined 3,400 other bound servants and free passengers who arrived in the port in 1729. An era of peace on the high seas, famine in Ireland, war in present-day Germany, and economic problems in Britain all galvanized Moraley and thousands of others to emigrate to the New World in the late 1720s and the 1730s. Approximately 73,000 Europeans traveled to

British North America during the 1730s, nearly twice as many as the average during each of the century's first three decades. With its temperate climate and generally healthy economy, the Delaware River Valley was an attractive destination; at least 17,000 migrants arrived in Philadelphia's port in the 1730s. The condition of immigrants changed as poorer people began to account for a larger proportion of the new arrivals. Nearly one of every three passengers disembarking in Philadelphia during the 1730s was an indentured servant, and an additional five hundred imported slaves joined them at the bottom of the social ladder. A month after Moraley's arrival, Franklin complained about "the great Increase of Vagrants and idle Persons" that had resulted from the "late large Importation of such from several Parts of Europe."

Passing the Coffee House, Moraley walked along the covered market that stretched for two blocks in the middle of High Street. The fruit, herbs, and poultry impressed him, as did "all Kinds of Butchers Meat, as well cut and drest as at London." As they affected so many other aspects of life, seasonal rhythms determined the availability of foodstuffs. "After the season for fowls," one traveler noted, "comes the fisheries of the spring," while "in the beginning and middle of summer it is difficult to procure fresh provisions of any kind." On Friday night before market day, farmers' wagons loaded with provisions rumbled down the western end of High Street, while boats stocked with firewood landed from New Jersey. People congregated in the market hall to meet friends and gossip, and a few even may have danced, although the Quakers who controlled the city discouraged such frivolity.

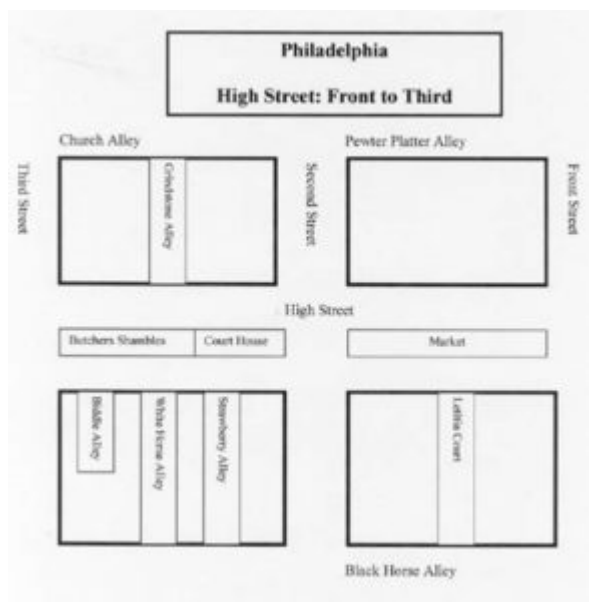


Fig. 4. A map of Philadelphia's High Street, from Front to Third. Computer generated by Billy G. Smith.

Moraley purchased a three-penny loaf of bread at John Bryant's bakery, a structure measuring 23 feet wide along High Street and stretching 72 feet in depth along Latetia Court. Francis Richardson, clockmaker and goldsmith, rented a shop next door, and Moraley, trained as a clockmaker, stopped in to see if Richardson might be interested in purchasing his indenture. As Moraley learned, Peter Stretch was the "eminent" watchmaker who dominated the profession in the city. Arriving in 1702 at the age of thirty-two, Stretch produced dozens of tall-case clocks that provided refinement to the homes of the affluent. Stretch was also prominent politically and religiously, serving for thirty-eight years as a city councilman and participating in Quaker affairs. However, where Stretch succeeded materially and socially, Moraley would fail. Moraley arrived in the city at an inauspicious time for men in his occupation since the number of clockmakers exceeded the local demand for their products. It was a prime reason why he was sold last among the group of servants with whom he arrived. It also proved a critical factor in Moraley's subsequent struggle with unemployment and poverty once he gained his freedom.

Another ingredient necessary for artisans to realize success was access to capital to enable them to establish their own shop. In the next block of High Street, John Frost, a newly freed servant, began a partnership with Thomas Carter, renting a shop where they could sell the stays and coats they manufactured. Benjamin Franklin, whose printing office was nearby, illustrates the difficulty that many journeymen encountered. He agreed to collaborate with Hugh Meredith, an alcoholic with few printing skills, primarily because Meredith's father financed the business. Franklin subsequently borrowed from his friends and even bargained for a marriage, if the dowry was sufficient to pay off his debt and establish him as an independent master printer. When the proposed dowry proved inadequate, Franklin declined the marriage. While many merchants like Edward Horne and some artisans like Stretch and Franklin could take advantage of the rapid economic development of the Delaware Valley, others, like Moraley, were unable even to survive financially, much less prosper.

Continuing along High across Second Street, Moraley paused to read some of the official notices—including new acts of the assembly, announcements of the *assize* (price) of bread, and broadsides of market regulations—posted on the courthouse in the middle of the market. One pressing political issue when Moraley arrived was the amount of paper currency the colony should print, and brochures about the topic were nailed to the courthouse. As in most British colonies, currency was scarce since the balance of trade favored Britain. Pennsylvania emitted £30,000 in 1729, and the funds were used, in part, to enable farmers to borrow against their land and to pay public officials. The amount of money in circulation concerned many Pennsylvanians since it helped shape the economy. Franklin had recently penned an anonymous pamphlet advocating a liberal paper money policy, and Moraley would write about the topic in his autobiography as well.

Criminals sometimes suffered public punishment at the courthouse, often on

market days when a great number of people could watch. Six months after Moraley's walk, according to the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Richard Evans "received 39 Lashes at the publick Whipping-post, having been convicted of Bigamy." A few weeks later, "Griffith Jones, and one Glasgow an Indian, stood an hour in the Pillory together, and were afterwards whipt round the Town at the Carts Tail, both for Assaults with Intent to ravish" a woman and young girl. Five days after Moraley passed the courthouse, a jury sitting there found two servants, James Mitchel and James Prouse, guilty of stealing seven pounds (equivalent to three months income for a day laborer) from a barber's house in Front Street. The judge sentenced them to death for a crime of such an "enormous Nature." A month later, a large crowd gathered at the prison (at the west end of the market) "to see these unhappy young Men brought forth to suffer." They were placed in a cart, "together with a Coffin for each of them," and carried to "the fatal Tree" for hanging. At the last minute, with the ropes around their necks, the governor spared their lives with a pardon, thereby pleasing not only Mitchel and Prouse but also the "common People, who were unanimous in their loud Acclamations of God bless the Governor for his Mercy."

The butchers' shambles, where animals were slaughtered and sold on Sundays, abutted the courthouse. Moraley strolled along this smelly, fly-infested market, past Strawberry Alley and White Horse Alley. In 1682, William Penn had planned a "greene countrie towne" comprised of immense houses situated on large lots surrounded by orchards, which he expected would expand rapidly westward. However, Philadelphians soon ignored the design, instead carving up the grand blocks with numerous alleys and congregating densely along the Delaware River, the economy's lifeline. William Stapler, tin man, peddled small metal goods in his store along High Street. Next door, shopkeeper John Le sold diverse items imported from London, ranging from diapers and tablecloths to gunpowder and snuff.

Members of the First Presbyterian Church adjacent to Le's shop may have purchased some of their Bibles from him. The continual arrival of Scots and Scots-Irish immigrants expanded the Presbyterian congregation, which accounted for roughly one of every ten Philadelphians. William Penn's liberal policy of toleration had encouraged settlement by people with various religious beliefs. Anglicans were the most numerous in the city, with Quakers a close second. Baptists, Swedish and Dutch Lutherans, Dutch Calvinists, and a handful of Catholics also worshiped there. African slaves practiced their own beliefs as best as they could. The medley of tongues that Moraley heard near the market matched this diversity of religions. Besides English, Dutch, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Gaelic, Philadelphians spoke a host of African and Native American languages. Indeed, Christ Church, the Anglican house of worship currently under construction, would hold sermons in "Welch" as well as English.

Across White Horse Alley on High Street was the Sign of the Conestoga Wagon, where the proprietor kept "good Entertainment for Man and Horses at reasonable rates." Its "large Yard Room for Waggons and Cattle" made it a convenient place "for Killing and Dressing of Hogs" to be sold across the street at the

shambles. Farmers often stayed there when bringing their livestock to market. A few paces further, Moraley came to the Sign of the Indian King, a prominent public house run by Owen Owen, a former city sheriff. The inn offered both lodging and alcohol. About one hundred licensed taverns—approximately one for every seventy-five residents—served a very hard-drinking population in the city. The Indian King was a substantial structure. It contained eighteen rooms, fourteen of which had fireplaces, a large brick kitchen, and a two-story stable that would accommodate one hundred horses and fifty tons of hay. The Society of Ancient Britons met there for a feast each year before attending the Welch sermon at Christ Church.



Fig. 5 Stone Prison, Corner View, 1723. This drawing currently is located in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Crossing Third Street, Moraley discovered a large prison he described as a “neat Stone Building, having but little of that look.” Because it stood at the busy west end of the market, the block was filled with stores, including an apothecary, an onion seller, a wheelwright, a smith, and the “Crown & Shoe” that specialized in selling bacon and hog’s lard. At the next corner, Moraley had to wade through Dock Creek, which meandered in a southeast direction, eventually flowing into the Delaware River at Dock Wharf, where William Penn had originally landed. The area was boggy, and the buildings grew sparse, with the Black Bear Inn being one of the few notable structures in the next block.



Fig. 6. The Old Provincial State House, Philadelphia. From William H. Egle, *An Illustrated History of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Gardiner, 1880), 1:71.

Moraley may have decided to walk south a few blocks to see the new state house (later to become Independence Hall) under construction. Nearby, at the western edge of the city, Philadelphians sometimes used the outdoors as “necessaries,” and Moraley may have taken that opportunity. A few months later, according to the newspaper, a “Countryman walking out behind the Town with a Design to ease himself . . . happened to set down in that Place where Hair is dried for the Saddlers,” and he gathered “some out of the Heap to make use of.”

Moraley returned to the ship for the evening. After three weeks, Isaac Pearson, a clockmaker and smith in Burlington, New Jersey, purchased Moraley’s indenture contract for five years. Moraley spent the following three years in Pearson’s household, fixing clocks, sweating at a smith’s forge, herding livestock, working in an iron foundry, and performing other miscellaneous jobs. Disgruntled and eager to live in Philadelphia, Moraley absconded but was quickly caught. Surprisingly, the Quaker City’s mayor mediated the dispute and convinced Pearson to forgive two years’ service. After completing his indenture, Moraley moved to Philadelphia, but could not find steady employment and was reduced to poverty and near starvation. He wandered the streets, slept in barns, and borrowed money and food from friends and acquaintances. He traveled the colonies, from New York to Maryland, cleaning timepieces, working as a tinsmith, and barely keeping beyond the reach of his creditors. Disheartened about his prospect in the “American plantations,” Moraley returned to England in 1734 and lived in Newcastle-on-Tyne until his death in 1762.



Fig. 7. Robert Feke, "Young Benjamin Franklin," c. 1748.

Meanwhile, of course, Benjamin Franklin achieved fame, fortune, and more: running a printer's shop, growing rich, inventing practical items, demonstrating that lightening is electricity, pursuing a political career, and becoming the most famous American both at home and abroad. While Franklin came to symbolize—to *invent*—the rags-to-riches American dream, he never abandoned his commitment to Philadelphia, helping found a library, hospital, fire company, and university. Moraley (like nearly all other people) surely was not as talented as Franklin. Yet the opportunities available in the Quaker City and the personal circumstances of each man varied enormously. What if competent printers had dominated the trade in Philadelphia when Franklin arrived, if his creditors had pursued him for his debts, if his wife's first husband had charged him with bigamy, if disease or a large family had drained his resources, or if the city's economy had stagnated completely at vital times in his career? Had any of these events occurred, Franklin may have found himself at the courthouse whipping post or in the stone prison, or, at best, he may have become another obscure artisan who, like William Moraley, struggled to make ends meet.

This article originally appeared in issue 3.4 (July, 2003).

Billy G. Smith, the Michael P. Malone Professor of History at Montana State University, has published a number of books and articles about early Philadelphia, including *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990).