Most Americans associate Christmas with a bundle of images and emotions—perhaps a blanket of snow, or presents under an evergreen tree. For the month between Thanksgiving and Christmas, malls and shopping centers play non-stop Christmas music, DJ’s observe a countdown to Christmas, and families plan holiday get-togethers. Some try, usually unsuccessfully, to ignore the commercialism of the season, while others revel in an orgy of spending, giving, and getting. It seems the only controversies caused by Christmas involve credit card debt and rap versions of traditional Christmas songs.

There was a time, however, when many Americans viewed Christmas with feelings of fear and loathing. In the mid-seventeenth century, the Massachusetts Bay colony passed a law making the celebration of Christmas a criminal offense. What upset the authorities was not the private devotion but the “disorders” that accompanied Christmas celebrations. This concern for excessive, loud, and at times violent Christmas activities became more pronounced in the mid-nineteenth century. In cities like New York and Philadelphia—cities with sharp economic, ethnic, and racial divisions—Christmas was often a time of threatening mob actions, when gangs of young working-class males, often unemployed due to seasonal swings in the economy, dressed up as women or blacks, fortified themselves with liquor, and took to the streets. Often they ranged into wealthier neighborhoods—talking and singing loudly, beating on drums and ringing bells, firing guns and mouthing discontents, and generally “making night hideous.” These mobs reminded the wealthier classes that violence and class conflict seethed under the surface of Jacksonian America.

In the following essay Susan G. Davis discusses the form and meaning of Christmas in nineteenth-century America. She demonstrates that society’s core values are present in its celebrations and leisure moments.
For most of the nineteenth century respectable Philadelphians condemned Christmas as a disgrace. Philadelphia's Christmas was then an essentially public celebration, unfolding in taverns, alleys, and squares, and although it grew out of European festive patterns and rural customs, the festival took its shape and meaning from the city's working class and the changing conditions of urban life. Riot and revelry, disguise and debauch gave police and property owners reason to fear the approach of the holiday.

The history of Christmas in Philadelphia exemplifies the conflict within and between classes over behavior in public; confrontation over the form and enactment of the street festival was sharp and recurring. Middle-class disapproval and hostility were recorded in reportage, editorials, ordinances, and municipal policies, while celebrants' resistance found expression in the streets and the evolving forms of revelry. Press accounts of holiday activities provide a unique year-by-year record, not only of this conflict, but of working peoples' festive behavior. Moreover, the evolution of the street Christmas into an organized, sanctioned New Year's pageant—the Philadelphia Mummers Parade—provides an example of the transformation of urban public culture in the nineteenth century. The history of Christmas and its transformation can be examined along several dimensions: its origins in older customs and urban social life, its enactment in relation to the identities of its creators, and the attempts to suppress it by its opponents. Critical to its history are ethnic and class relations in the city and the special position of urban youth.

This street festival emerged in the early nineteenth century, with urban working-class culture in general, from the convergence of older ways of life with unprecedented conditions. Cultural diversity distinguished Philadelphia's working people: the mingling of Germans, former slaves, Caribbeans, "native" Americans, Catholic and Protestant Irish, and migrants from the countryside was punctuated by their often violent clashes. Working-class heterogeneity found expression in patterns of residence, for the city's poorer districts were ethnic and racial patchworks, and ghettos remained few and small until late in the century. Urban life was shaped by a more decisive segregation, however, as the new working-class suburbs spread out around the concentration of shops, businesses, and middle-class residences in the city center. Social life in the working-class districts grew out of the experience of labor, and although Philadelphians toiled in large workshops and mechanized factories, the lives of the majority were defined by hand labor, seasonal industry, and irregular employment. Working people blended intense labor with bouts of hard play, rejecting the rationalism and piety of their respectable neighbors and middle-class reformers. Their social life and recreation similarly combined the familiar and the new as they found leisure in commercial and customary entertainments. The most vibrant novelty, the musical theater, spoke to an unprecedented male working-class audience, but entertainments could also be found in the tavern, dance hall, groggeries, and street. The edges of town, still rural, provided livelihood and sport, both legal and illegal, complementing the free and easy, open atmosphere of the markets, amusement halls, and fairs. Thus city life in the early decades of the century was marked by the interpenetration of work and leisure, an incomplete spatial segregation of peoples and activities, and a blending of the informal and the emergent commercial.

Sacred and secular holidays were important expressions of this mixed culture, at once old and new-fashioned. Christmas was the major punctuation of the European traditional year, and Philadelphians kept this emphasis, marking the season with relaxation and drinking, visiting and ceremony. In the first half of the nineteenth century Christmas comprised a week of amusements and celebrations such as horse races, pig chases,
pigeon shoots, ox roasts, and hunting and skating parties. The thriving theatre district counted on heavy attendance at harlequinades and minstrel shows. Militia troops and clubs held balls and concerts, church women gave fairs, fire companies paraded new equipment, set fires, and brawled. Hundreds of pubs, groggeries, and cookshops treated patrons to the specialties of the season with extra liberality.

Such intense socializing was possible, in part, because the holiday fell at a time of sharp contrast between work and leisure. As December’s cold deepened, the creeks and rivers froze, and the workshops, factories, and docks stood still. In this time of hardship and unemployment for working people, the line between seasonal relaxation and distress was a fine one. Desperation often combined with customary license to turn suburban lanes and central streets into scenes of beggary, drunkenness, and riot. From early in the century observers found this face of Christmas both alarming and disgraceful, a threat to public order.

Against this pattern of stepped-up socializing, disorder, and violence, two special activities took place that became the focus of outrage and suppression. “Masking” and “shooting” stood out in the street Christmas, associated with disturbances in the city’s working-class suburbs. “Shooting”—a pan-European custom—celebrated the death of the old year and “fired in” the new, although explosive noisemaking occurred on Christmas Eve as well. “Masking”—assumed a new, often inverted or paradoxical identity through disguise—reflected the varied folk-cultural backgrounds of Philadelphians. Until about 1830, “belsnicking,” a type of masking that involved disguised adults visiting houses to query children about their conduct, was popular in the city, an importation from the German-speaking countryside. Another form of disguised house-visit, masking (sometimes called mumming) became common after the 1820s. Costumed processions from door to door, with or without the performance of a folk play, were familiar to immigrants from the British Isles and the coastal South.

The record of a new kind of masking and shooting began in the 1830s, when descriptions of Christmas Eve processions of young men started to appear in newspapers. Though they were often in costume, these processions were different from rural German and British Isles traditions. Unlike the single, inquisitorial belsnicker, who was known to the families who let him in, these young men roved in bands, stopping at taverns and brawling on street corners. And although they paraded in their own neighborhoods, probably visiting the houses of friends and relatives, they also marched from the suburbs to sport in the city’s crowded thoroughfares.

Observers found new names for these urban maskers: “fantasticals” and “callithumpians” designated their distinct but overlapping themes of disguise. Callithumpians made charivari-like rough music, taking the conventions of marching bands and fife and drum corps and turning them inside out. Dressed in burlesque, they mocked real music with cracked pots, cowbells, kitchen utensils, bent horns, cow horns, fake trumpets, and the whole folk repertoire of homemade and pretend instruments.

The fantasticals flew even further into antisense. In extravagant parody of the militia, they
marched in drill form, bearing mock weapons and pseudo-military names. Appearing in both city and outlying towns, fantasticals drew their identities from real events and from the minstrel stage, mingling “Santa Ana’s Cavalry” with the “Strange Guards.” Accounts of a mock-militia parade held in Easton, in early January, 1834, give the fullest description of fantastical dress and behavior. Led by a “Colonel” mounted on a jackass, one hundred men dressed as soldiers, with huge hats and weapons, wearing paintbrushes, hogs’ ears, and tobacco plugs for epaulettes and strings of bones and fish around their necks, conducted elaborate sham manoeuvres. They were accompanied by a callithumpian band made up of “Indians, hunters, Falstaffs, Jim Crow, and nondescripts,” wearing tent-sized hats and ballooning trousers. The exaggeration and inversion of military ceremony at play in this parody, as well as the theatrical borrowings, served as common devices of city maskers.

Though remarkable, such fantastical and callithumpian processions were not highly framed or specialized performances. On the contrary, noise and disguise, the two enduring and basic motifs of the festival, found endless repetition and myriad forms in the crowd’s “rude revelry” of gun firing, drum beating, bell ringing, and simpler disguises.

Costumes were spare and dramatic, varying within a narrow range of imagery. Occasionally a lone beardsnaker—half-demon, half-man—turned out. But in contrast to older, rural themes of semi-human disguise, Philadelphians commonly impersonated kinds of people, in conventionalized but differing interpretations of racial and national types. “Red Indians,” “Chinamen,” “Dutchmen” (standing both for German-speaking farmers and later, German immigrants), and rural New Englanders—“Brother Jonathans”—all appeared. But the most familiar disguises treated very familiar people: women and blacks. Wearing women’s clothing was an easy transformation and popular, although arrests for transvestism brought stiff fines. Dressing as a woman could be as simple as filching a sister’s dress or as elaborate as an impersonation of Jenny Lind or “Mrs. Langtry.”

Blackface was a popular theme in the street Christmas from the 1830s. Here, as with the stereotyped images mentioned above, there was an intimate connection to performances in city theatres and their most successful form, the Negro minstrel show. “Jim Crow” began to march in parades and processions almost immediately after his debut in 1832. Like transvestism, blacking-up was quick and cheap, but could sustain elaboration into a stage character or a marching minstrel troupe. Female clothing often combined with blackface to make an “Aunt Sally,” a double inversion of race and sex.

Though masks and disguises varied, the real identities of the holiday revelers stood clear: the Christmas and New Year’s crowds were always described as young and male. Year after year the newspapers railed against the “drunken men and boys in the streets,” the “half-grown boys,” “the young rioters,” “the inebriated young men,” the “groups of hobbledehoys,” and “black sheep” who made night hideous with Galathumpian doings.” Similarly, those arrested for masking and shooting and worse were uniformly young and male. The facts of youth and maleness illuminate the specific meanings of the festival for participants and observers, for the noisy, often violent crowds were not anomalous or extraordinary. Revelry crystallized the city’s year-round youth problem. In a period of rapidly increasing industrialization, and before universal public education, the breakdown of the apprenticeship system and the decline of craft skills meant that young men were a severely underemployed group. Youthful criminals caused anxiety in all parts of the city, but the notorious gangs were only the most visible aspect of male street life. Most boys and young men diverted themselves less violently than the “Killers” and “Stingers”; still, their ever-present “destructionism,” petty gambling, and hanging out annoyed gentle citizens, reminding them that the city seemed to corrupt youth.

In the street Christmas, rowdy youth culture reached its apotheosis; concern over riotous holiday nights was constant from the 1830s on. The editor of the Chronicle complained that on Christmas Eve, 1833, “riot, noise, and uproar prevailed, uncontrolled and uninterrupted in
many of our central and most orderly streets. Gangs of boys howled as if possessed by the demon of disorder.” In 1844 the Ledger’s New Year’s editorial deplored the “riotous spirit raging” in the streets and declared that “our city has almost daily been the theatre of disorders which practically nullify civil government.” The mid-1840s were especially uproarious, but tumult and commotion seemed ominous for decades.

Anxieties over youth and holiday crowds came together in outrage over the volunteer fire companies, who contributed heavily to the ceremonial and rowdy aspects of Christmas week and set the tone of the wild night. Key institutions of working-class peer culture, these all-male fraternities reflected ethnic and ideological splits among workers, as well as local rivalries over gang territory and fire-fighting prerogatives. The volunteers’ love of parades, costumes, and machinery was surpassed only by their enthusiasm for fighting; by the 1840s firemen ranked as leading incendiaries and rioters in a city well known for violent upheavals. During Christmas week, firemen filled the theatre of the streets with their horse races, promenade dances, fantastical troupes, and less benign celebrations.

Many firemen and other “rowdies” lived in the new suburbs, where on holiday nights they created masquerades and uproars. In 1845 the Public Ledger remarked of Southwark’s brawls, “the people who live in this region are demons.” But as fantasticals and callithumpians, young men sought their largest audiences in the main business and theatre district, Chestnut between Fourth and Broad, where playgoers and promenaders thronged to view shop-window illuminations. The sense of threat, then, turned in part on the influx of carousers into the city’s respectable heart; many of those arrested downtown for masking began their sport in Spring Garden, the Liberties, Passyunk, or Moyamensing.

Observers understood from suburban residence and demeanor the revellers’ membership in the growing, heavily foreign-born, and poor stratum of the working class. There is, however, little information about the nativity of the crowds, and as noted above, masking customs would have been familiar to many of the city’s natives and immigrants. Just as they came from all areas of the city, so the maskers likely sprang from different national backgrounds. Neither were the crowds all white, despite the mocking convention of blackface, for blacks made fantastical parades and played music in the streets as well. One of the first clear descriptions of a Christmas procession reports the attack on a black fife and drum corps by a white gang. Given the size of the city’s black population, its concentration near the center, and the steady influx of blacks from the coastal South where slaves developed distinct mumming traditions, it is likely that Afro Americans contributed much to the shape of Christmas revelry.

These, then, were the revellers; young men from the city’s poorer districts, ethnically and racially diverse, invading the respectable and propertied downtown. Fantasticals and callithumpians, highly visible because of their costumes and antics, became the focus of uneasiness and the objects of attempts to suppress the wearing of disguise. Maskers’ own customs also led to notoriety and outrage. For instance, a favored callithumpian sport was collecting free drinks in neighborhood taverns. But if treats were ungenerous or refused, rough musicians were likely to retaliate. Crossing neighborhood boundaries probably provoked more fights than did stingy proprietors, and tavern owners seem to have preferred the noise of maskers to interference by authorities. In 1854 watchmen who tried to stop a callithumpian performance at William Myers’s tavern found themselves mobbed by the band, the clientele, and the owner.

A New Year’s Eve murder in 1857 illustrates the involvement of gangs and the night’s use for the expression of ethnic antipathy. Witnesses to the stabbing death of Andrew Beiche, a young German, described his attack by a group of fantasticals. Calling themselves the “Ruggers” and sporting blackened faces, white robes, and plumes, the fantasticals followed Beiche’s sere-nading party, beating them with wooden swords, fence stakes, and brickbats. References at the inquest to the Ruggers’ code words, headquarters, and activities make it clear that they
were one of the city's numerous gangs. Maskers and undisguised gangs fought each other, or joined up to attack "outsiders" and immigrants. White assaults on blacks, mobbings of black churches, battles between white and black gangs, and attacks on the watch were venerable holiday traditions.

Nighttime violence could be still more capricious: shootings and knifings erupted from disputes between maskers, and accidents were common, as when firing out the old year resulted in chance shootings of bystanders. The holidays seemed to offer endless possibilities for crime, violence, arson, riot, and misadventure.

The street Christmas held different and antagonistic meanings for those who created it and those who opposed it, meanings and interpretations located in the social identities of the maskers, in their violent, disorderly behavior. For the boys and young men, "making night hideous" was a condensed statement made to and about three groups of people: themselves, their social superiors, and those they saw as outsiders or inferiors. For the young of the working class, the custom of masquerading forged and perpetuated group identity in particular neighborhoods or for particular gangs. Dressing up together, carousing and collecting free drinks, and finding and thrashing common enemies all created sensations of solidarity. At the same time, those denied power, recognition, and adult status because of their class and in particular because of their weak position in the city's economy could for once take over the respectable central district. In streets lined with the shops and residences of businessmen, the world turned upside down as maskers forced the most decried features of their peer culture on the entire city. The young men created a giant exemplary display of noise, intertemperance, and riot, and they seem to have delighted in the outrage they caused.

Disguise expressed the point of view of working-class youth: in the patterned and selective transformation of identity, they discussed local social relations, outlining and emphasizing differences between kinds of people. The street Christmas shared this central motif—the delineation of the traits of inferiors—with much of nineteenth-century popular culture. But the racial and ethnic stereotypes that preoccupied maskers did not spring from an abstract repertoire; they reflected immediate conflicts and complexities in local and national life. Germans, whether rural or urban newcomers, were an important group in Philadelphia and the objects of joking and hostility in daily life, on stage, and in broadsheets. Chinese people were only a little removed, presented as subhuman idiots in newspapers and on the minstrel stage from San Francisco to Philadelphia. News of Indian removals and wars circulated constantly; Indian plays and later Wild West shows served as staple Christmas entertainments. The rural hick or "Brother Jonathan" strode the stage for most of the century, and Philadelphians witnessed his idiosyncrasies in comic publications, the press, and at first hand.

But the group closest to home was the Negro, whose inferiority was delineated, celebrated, and reproduced in print and in the popular theatre. Young white men who dressed as blacks did not merely borrow imagery from commercial culture, they created a kind of localized commentary on central tensions in Philadelphia neighborhoods. From the early nineteenth century blacks competed with working-class whites for jobs and resources, achieving before the Civil War a position of relative strength in a few unskilled occupations and all-black guilds. Blacks were barely tolerable to whites when they acted like slaves, but after the eighteenth century they had been permitted to hold festive dances in Potter's Field. But as the black population in the central city and Southwark grew in the 1830s and 1840s, black attempts at full social and political participation drew mockery, abuse, and violence from the majority of their white neighbors.

Christmas impersonations, like minstrel shows, mocked urban blacks' attempts to "act white"; that is, to participate equally in city life. But the homemade masquerades were unique in that they were not performed for commercial consumption, but as part of an informal means of creating familiar between st neighbor: masking race desp- face foun- tity, imp- was taken plete. Jo moving l boundar behavior tures. Su adocticall of "alien' example boundan Christmas all the ac count or The p more dif so little s omen expresa- tions. Th etique of of home absolute version formatic voiced a women' ir in ance, te seemed Mocel the fant Philadel- sans or sive con- strain climer men, all class ne
creating group unity. In derogatory repetition of familiar images, popular ideas moved easily between stage and street and were enacted by neighbors for neighbors. On the other hand, masking made an ambiguous statement about race despite its violent mocking tone, for blackface found use as a way to play with racial identity, important in a city where black inferiority was taken for granted yet segregation was incomplete. John Szwed has described processes of moving back and forth across racial and cultural boundaries, involving the use of gesture, specific behaviors, voice, dialect, and other linguistic features. Such play, often the preserve of youth, paradoxically accomplishes learning and absorption of “alien” culture. Theatricals are only heightened examples of this play with socially constructed boundaries between kinds of people. Part of Christmas’s delight was the liberty to “act black,” all the more enjoyable because maskers could count on a safe return to their real identities.

The popularity of transvestism at Christmas is more difficult to explain, if only because we know so little about the lives of Philadelphia’s working women. But the festival, like carnivals elsewhere, expressed vivid male/female, home/street oppositions. The heavily male tavern life and fighting mystique of peer culture opposed a respectable world of home, marriage, and family, so that in an era of absolute male supremacy in public life, sexual inversion made a strikingly complete identity transformation. Perhaps sexual boundary-crossing voiced anxiety about the definition of sex roles, for women’s new activities as industrial workers and their involvement in evangelical religion, temperance, trade unions, abolitionism, and feminism all seemed worthy of derision and violence from men.

Mockery and parody could also aim upward: the fantastical takeoffs of militia drills appeared in Philadelphia at the same time that the city’s artisans organized against the unequal and oppressive compulsory militia system. This antiauthority strain continued in later impersonations of policemen, dog-catchers, and even mounted policemen, all municipal innovations resented in working-class neighborhoods.

Inferiority, then, was the street Christmas’s subject, and masking, inequality’s spare but complete enactment. Revelry took for its text acceptance of the fundamental divisions on which the republic of equals rested and asserted the right of the white male to take what was his—jobs, education, a limited measure of political power—by force, if necessary. This margin of privilege was reconstructed daily in laws, informal practices, and by riot, so that it is not surprising to find masquerades shaded into violence against blacks and immigrants, and rioters disguised as blacks and women at times other than Christmas. Playful and serious assertions of power, maskings, and mobbings marked proximate points along a continuum of antagonistic expression.

The racial and ethnic antagonisms within the working class served middle-class interests, fragmenting the potential for class-wide labor and political organization. Not one of the public complaints against masking objected to the strands of mocking supremacism it contained, but as the century progressed fear of the festival’s form and tone increased. Arrests, stiff fines for masking and shooting, denunciations in the press, and attempts to keep crowds from forming expressed the mingled annoyance and anxiety with which middle-class Philadelphians viewed “the Christmas disgrace.”

Gentle citizens felt rankled by more than noise. The “young black sheep of the community” were the group the authorities could least control, and imprecations hurled by the press—“rag-tag,” “loafers,” “vagrants”—reveal recognition of and uneasiness about youths’ unemployment and the distress of winter. Precisely because of the year-round boisterousness of working-class youth, the street Christmas made the worst fears of the respectable seem about to come true. When the street Christmas was called a threat to property, authorities proved especially sensitive to complaints from downtown storekeepers. So the watch made forays into the suburbs to quell masking and shooting, but from early on concentrated their efforts on Eighth and Chestnut Streets.

The deepest threat loomed for moral and symbolic order, as defined by center city residents.
Christmas focused uneasiness through the lens of concern over youth, but at the same time that outrage over rowdiness swelled, the middle class was attaching its own new meanings to the festival. By the 1840s Christmas was becoming the apotheosis of middle-class ideals of childhood and family. Though still a holy day for the pious, affluent people now sought the day's meaning in the cozy, innocent delights of gift-giving, stocking-filling, and a family dinner celebrated at the altar of the hearth. The new icon of the holiday press—jolly, doting Santa Claus—barely resembled his country cousin, the whip-cracking belsnickle. This is not to argue that working-class families enjoyed no domestic Christmas; however, the elaboration and commercialization of this domestic holiday were accomplished largely by popular magazines, especially women's magazines, speaking to a newly prosperous and growing urban middle class.

The street Christmas collided with this celebration of private sentiment, throwing the disparity between middle-class expectations for behavior in public and anxieties about working-class youth into sharp relief. Hopes that the lower orders would raise themselves through temperance, piety, and self-denial (hopes held by some among the working class as well) found contradiction in the defiant rudeness of the festival. Most ironically, the exposition of irrationality unfolded on the holiest night of the pious year, openly, freely, and in public. Despite its critics' denunciations, it annually grew more disreputable.

In the 1860s, with the exception of the war years, the crowds of revelers swelled and their music grew rougher. Chestnut Street from Eighth to Independence Hall was "completely blockaded," and the firing of guns and blowing of trumpets incessant. Now the street Christmas reached a turning point: in the past masking and shooting had been tolerated when they could not be prevented, but the consolidation of the city's watches into a central police force in 1854 meant that all neighborhoods now experienced a more consistent presence of authority. Disorder could be met, at least in theory, in a concerted and forceful way. Thus, as the Christmas disgrace reached a new peak, the city government could begin a campaign to establish control over the holiday streets. Christmas Eve now saw the theatre district lined with hundreds of armed, uniformed men stationed in front of the shops. Proclamations forbidding masking, guns, and horns were issued from year to year, and "reasonable restraints" resulted in hundreds of arrests annually, mostly for drunkenness. These attempts at suppression continued into the 1870s, but none worked. Instead of withering away, processions of fantasticals and callithumpians became more numerous, and the themes of noise-making and disguise persisted with resilience. In years when the city issued bans on "the horn nuisance," crowds of boys turned out ringing bells. When the little tin horns sold by hawkers were prohibited, men and boys blew brass trumpets, fog horns, rams horns—anything not made of tin.

Pressure from above did shift the locations, forms, and interpretations of the festival. Massed police kept celebrants out of the business district and closer to home in the suburbs, until masqueraders, long active in all parts of town and even in Camden, began to be thought of as "belonging" to the southern wards. But the most important and symbolic effect of organized crowd control was to shift the theatre of disorder from holy Christmas Eve to secular New Year's Eve and eventually to New Year's Day. New Year's had always been a nonreligious if less well-loved holiday, and seemed less susceptible to defilement than the night of Christ's birth.

At the same time, attitudes toward a more restricted range of festive activities softened. In 1880, describing a scene on Chestnut Street, the Inquirer commented that although fantasticals created pandemonium with their mock weapons and voices, "... it is the prerogative of New Year's that as long as the people do not violently break the peace, they can be as noisy and jolly as they will." Why was condescending tolerance possible after decades of complaint, contempt, and suppression? It was the growing tendency of
the maskers to organize themselves into clubs and to give coordinated performances that proved decisive in forcing the city's acceptance of modified mummery. While early fantasticals and callithumpians had gathered spontaneously among age cohorts, by the mid-1880s Philadelphia maskers participated in New Year's social clubs. A few "Socials" were active year after year under the same names, prefiguring the famous twentieth-century string bands and comic clubs. Socials with money to spend paraded in "fancy dress," yet themes of racial and sexual parody persisted. These more elaborate marches earned approval from commentators who distinguished between the "tasteful" and the "crude," and between mock musicians and troupes with hired brass bands.

The beginnings of the organized clubs and the stepped-up efforts at crowd control coincided with the city's victory in 1871 in its long battle to bring the volunteer fire departments under municipal authority. There is some evidence that the social functions of the fire companies flowed into the activities of the New Year's clubs, a shift from one heavily invested all-male institution to another. The socials retained the volunteers' names and ties to firemen in other cities, and behaved much as the hose and engine crews had done, parading, giving dances, and brawling. Women participated in auxiliaries, sewing banners and costumes. The cycle of ceremony and social exchange remained dense and busy.

Masking gradually became a very different kind of activity. In the eighties, participation shifted toward family involvement, often across generations, and families identified with particular clubs. In club life, maskers adapted and modified the older forms of revelry, following the general tendency toward more organized urban recreations. As a result, revelry shifted away from the domain of rowdy youth. Though working-class youth and gangs still prompted anxiety, the noisy strains of youth culture receded from the festival's core. Mummery now tended to become—and could become—more "creditable." Costumes became flashy and elaborate; "furs, feathers, bul-

lion and embroidery" appeared in the crowds. Formally making a masquerade more of a performance and less a wild revel provided one way of being in control of being out of control. With increasing elaboration, structure, and consciousness of form the wild night was becoming a parade, and the disgrace could be recast into an appropriate and rational part of the city's self-image.

Most important, the clubs gave the city authorities a flexible means of control over maskers' performances. In 1884 the mayor issued permits, making the leader of each troupe responsible for the actions of all its members. By requiring maskers to carry permits and present them like licenses, the city assured that mummery took place not in the face of authority but under its sponsorship. This authority maskers accepted to a degree, by desisting from impersonating local politicians and policemen, and by further organizing and differentiating themselves from the crowd. When merchants offered prizes for the best troupes and costumes, the shift in public meaning was assured—the disgrace transformed into an entertaining custom. All that remained was to shift the theatre of disorders from the night to the day.

Still, the transformation of the wild night into an official tradition did not take place in one year or even over one decade. In 1883-1884 several large clubs and fife and drum corps applied for the first permits. Yet of 190 applications more than 140 were filed by individuals and unnamed persons, and many of these, the Inquirer remarked, were boys. Requests were "respectfully submitted" for "a few friends [to] have a sociable time," for "six private citizens to masquerade [sic]," and "for blakin up as colored men to serenade a few friends."

Though tortuous callithumpian notes still prevailed over brass bands, large associations did the main streets decked out in spangles and satins, their clowns in blackface at the rear. But as the Inquirer commented, the majority of masquerades took place on a "cheap and shabby scale"; that is, they were homemade and neighborhood oriented.

As a result of pressures and counter pressures, the rude street festival had been changed and contained, yet it expanded into a formal parade.
In 1900 the Mummers Parade, as observers now called it, received the city’s official sanction and sponsorship. Although arbiters of culture occasionally offered suggestions for making the parade more “artistic,” the clubs retained control of their performances’ content and good relations prevailed between Mummers and officials until the 1960s. Except for regulations prohibiting the impersonation of local politicians, content was self-regulated, or rather, Mummers and official notions of parade-worthy topics did not diverge significantly.

In the parade, a selective and distilled statement of working-class culture and point of view found institutionalized, public expression. One segment of the city’s working class, a mostly white, self-organizing portion, wrested for itself and was allowed to gain an important medium of communication. Enmeshed in a complex binding of kin, neighborhood, and ethnic ties, the new parade linked working-class recreation and social life to commerce, advertising, and more recently, to tourism. But in the process of transformation, the possibility of the wild night as a means to explore alternate interpretations and orderings of society—a possibility that flickered and threatened in the nineteenth century—was foreclosed. Thus it is no surprise to find that while the parade has remained a stoutly working-class activity, black participation in the festival withered away after 1900. Official sanction alone did not diffuse revelry’s rowdy threat and redirect its social commentary. The ideology celebrated in the street Christmas—Jacksonian masculinity, white supremacy—saturated the challenge to order implied in the explosion of youth culture. Along with other new features of popular culture, the street Christmas delineated inferiors, foreigners, and social “others,” and this aspect of revelry, never challenged by authorities, persists most vibrantly today. It was not inevitable that the Mummers Parade become a joyful elaboration of the primacy of racial and sexual divisions and loyalties over other social values and larger class interests, but this was the result of the process of organization, incorporation, and control. Decisively changed was the social definition of what might be enacted in public.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. How would you characterize the relationships between the various racial and ethnic groups which comprised Philadelphia’s working class in the first half of the nineteenth century? How might we consider the processions of “fantasticals” and “callithumpians” as an expression of these relationships?

2. What were “masking” and “shooting,” and why did the working classes want to make a “mockery” and “parody” of middle-class respectability and governmental authority? If Christmas revelry was a way for the white male working classes to assert their “rights” and create a “sensation of solidarity,” why was the middle class so upset at these activities?

3. What were some of the activities of the volunteer fire companies which particularly offended middle-class reformers? How were the fire companies eventually brought under control?