

**ABATTOIRS: A PAPER READ
BEFORE THE POLYTECHNIC
BRANCH OF THE AMERICAN
INSTITUTE, JUNE 8, 1866**

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Abattoirs: A Paper Read Before the Polytechnic Branch of the American Institute, June 8, 1866
by Thomas F. DeVoe

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THOMAS F. DEVOE

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ABATTOIRS.

A

PAPER

READ BEFORE THE POLYTECHNIC BRANCH

OF THE

AMERICAN INSTITUTE,

JUNE 8, 1866.

BY THOMAS F. DEVOE,
OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK.

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ABATTOIRS.

The paper which I have the honor to submit before this Association this evening relates to a subject that I am compelled to say possesses little to recommend it—either for its sentiment or as a branch of the fine arts, or of science—in the ordinary sense of the word. Notwithstanding the character it possesses, this very character has been the means of forcing it into existence, as an interesting subject for discussion among all communities, municipalities, associations, learned men, sanitary committees, and others who have devoted to it much attention and consideration.

Some month or two since, a prominent member, with the worthy chairman and secretary of this Association, expressed a desire that I should say something before you in relation to the subject of Abattoirs. I hesitated at the moment, because I hastily came to the conclusion that this subject was unsuitable as it would be uninteresting, and therefore unacceptable to "ears polite"—and more especially as the "cunning" of the business of conducting Abattoirs neither related to art, to science, nor to any branch of mechanics recognized by the American Institute. However, in glancing over the Transactions of this Association of former years, I was there reminded that almost every matter relating to the advancement of scientific knowledge, bearing on the welfare of man, had engaged the attention of this Society. As an old and zealous member of the "Institute," I thought it my duty—with what abilities I possessed—to present such knowledge, or, at least, some of the prominent facts which in long practical experience I had gained, with also the little historical information which had been obtained from our city's records on this subject, extending my researches to the gleanings of something which may suggest the correcting of the many theories advanced by unpractical but learned men. I therefore concluded to act upon the expressed wishes of the gentlemen referred to.

As I have already said, the subject before us does not recommend itself for elegance, but rather as a necessity. To many, no doubt, it presents repulsive features; features even revolting to some persons. Abattoir, a place for slaughtering animals. In my own mind, I am not quite satisfied

with the word *Abattoir*, which, of course, is correct on its native soil; whether its foreign name will refine the character of the subject, by the introduction of affected "foreign airs" to the exclusion of our "native graces," which, worn so long and used and associated with our common vernacular, have been accepted and known to us by the title of slaughter-houses; this question is for you to decide with the poet's sentiments:

"The rose will smell the same,
Grace it with any other name."

The subject then of *Abattoirs*, or, in plain English, slaughter-houses, is one of much importance, as it is found to be absolutely necessary to have suitable places for converting animals into food. Many objections have been made to the present disposition of private slaughter-houses, as to their unhealthiness, &c. The principal questions now presenting themselves are: Is the presence of slaughter-houses in parts of our city, the superinducing cause of disease in their neighborhood? If they are, what is the character of the diseases they produce, and in what manner are they detrimental to health? These questions we demand shall be answered—not upon opinions, theories or the hypothesis of interested persons seeking popularity with the hope of ultimately putting money into their pockets; but they must be answered practically, from the experience of men who have watched the institution of *abattoirs* and the effects of the presence of slaughter-houses upon the health of communities; from men of skill and science who can unite their skill with scientific research, in attaining to certain and well defined results.

Anticipating these questions, I may, perchance be pardoned if I attempt to demonstrate the exalted origin of the slaying of animals, whether for consecration or for the food of man.

THEIR ORIGIN.

Commencing then with the first offerings by the children of Adam. The Bible states that hundreds of animals were killed, and that their flesh was eaten—how soon after the creation of man, animals were sacrificed to support human life does not appear; but this we know that the flesh of flocks and herds has ever been food for man.

Abel, the first-born, was a "keeper of sheep," and in his offerings to the Lord, brought the firstlings of his flock and the fat thereof," which, no doubt, represented the fattest lambs of his flock; but whether they were made fat to be eaten as food, or to be used for sacrifice or burnt offerings, does not appear.

Of the time of Noah we read that "every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things; but the flesh with the life"—living flesh—"shall ye not eat." Then when Abraham entertained the three angels, he "ran unto the Lord and fetched a calf tender and good, and gave it to a young man, and he hastened to dress it. And he took butter and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and sat it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat."

At a later period, St. Paul also says: "Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no questions for conscience sake."

Among the ancients, the first places particularly noticed where animals were slaughtered is found to have been either in or near their most holy places of worship—close by their tabernacles and altars. In religious sacrifices and ceremonies we find that Moses was thus commanded; "and thou shalt cause a bullock to be brought before the Tabernacle of the Congregation, and Aaron and his sons shall put their hands upon the head of the bullock, and thou shalt kill the bullock before the Lord by the door of the Tabernacle of the Congregation. And thou shalt take of the blood of the bullock, and put it upon the horns of the altar with thy finger, and pour all the blood beside the bottom of the altar." "And thou shalt offer every day a bullock for a sin-offering for atonement; and thou shalt cleanse the altar when thou hast made an atonement for it."

Again—"Thou shalt offer upon the altar two lambs of the first year, day by day, continually. The one lamb thou shalt offer in the morning, and the other lamb thou shalt offer at even." In the Third Book of Moses, we also find, when he was called upon for burnt offerings: "He shall kill the bullock before the Lord, and the priests, Aaron's sons, shall bring the blood, and sprinkle the blood round about upon the altar, that is the door of the Tabernacle of the Congregation." Then a male sheep or goat, "he shall kill it on the side of the altar, and the priests, Aaron's sons shall sprinkle his blood round about upon the altar." The lamb he shall "kill it before the Tabernacle of the Congregation, and Aaron's sons shall sprinkle the blood thereof round about upon the altar."

It would thus appear that this ancient people made their places of worship, and particularly those of the most sacred character, their daily *Abattoirs*, and whether this was done as a part of their worship or not, the act was the same. It would also appear that the victims were slain by their priests, and sometimes by their inferior ministers, as we find at the Feast of the Passover, each head of a family was at once priest to kill the sacrifice, and the butcher to slay for the food of the household.

GRECIAN CUSTOMS.

Among the ancient Greeks it was also the office of the priests to slay the victims for sacrifice, and of the head of the family or his sons to kill for food. Many instances may be found in Homer: as when Agamemnon kills the lamb, the blood of which was to be the seal of the treaty made with the Trojans, and also, when Nestor sacrifices to Minerva, his own sons kill the victims, cut the flesh in pieces, and broil it.

These sacrifices were continued on by the ancients for generations, and for a more particular description of them I quote the following: "None were to approach the altar until they were first purified, nor must the victim be laid on it, until it had received its lustration with meal and holy water, gathered from their lavatory, styled *chernips*.

Some sprinkling of this water was strewed on the standers by, and then some sacred meal was cast on them. This done, the priest offered up his orisons, and then the sacrifice was conducted to the altar with the head downwards, if it were devoted to the infernal gods; but upwards if it were dedicated to gods celestial. The heart, spleen, liver, and fat were

offered to the deities, the residue of the victim was a feast for the priest and people.

"They were accustomed to try if the sacrifice would prove acceptable to their gods by placing a cake upon the head, between the horns, which were in solemn feasts gilded; if the beast was composed and quiet it was judged to be a fit sacrifice, but if disordered and tumultuous it was rejected."

In the morning they used to sacrifice to their gods, in the evening to their demigods or heroes. The Greeks did not as the Romans, grind the corn they placed on the head of the victim, but laid it on the mass, to demonstrate the ancient mode of feeding before the grinding of corn was instituted. They were accustomed also after the sacrifice and feast to burn the tongue of the beast, and sprinkle wine on it, to signify that after eating and drinking, the tongue should be obliged to keep silence.

Thus we also learn that the first butchers were those that held the highest and most holy office, but at what period the office of killing became a separate trade or profession, it may be difficult, if not almost impossible, to determine; probably at various times in various countries, and in various parts of the same country. It is in the province of civilization to make trades or professions, for, as the wants, either real or imaginary, of men increase, and there is a greater demand for any article, it became profitable for persons to confine themselves to fewer objects, and by this means much time is saved, and business is executed with greater facility. Thus in any district, town or parish, it is better for one man to confine himself to make clothes or shoes, or to build houses, or to kill animals for all the rest, rather than for each person, or each head of a family, to practice all these employments. In this way, as did men in other trades or professions, no doubt, the butcher began his vocation, and so from killing for others, soon took upon himself to slaughter his own animals, and then to sell or trade portions of them to those who were not able to use a whole animal before it spoiled. This, of course, demanded a place to slaughter in, or perhaps no particular building had yet been prepared, but some out-house, shed, tree or open field was made the abattoir. A friend of mine, or rather an old apprentice, who resides in Illinois, in a letter to me a few years ago, says: "Our country is open and cattle hard to drive, so I take a rifle, tackle and block, chopper knives, pritch and spreaders, and three long studs to erect a shears, then shoot and dress the animal on the spot. You will think it queer butchering, but I have got used to it, and get along quite handy." So that he makes the open plain an abattoir.

From the time of the settlement of our country, it was, and has been until within a few years past, a custom of the farmers to have what they have called "the killing time," slaughtering then a bullock or two, with several hogs, and perhaps a few sheep, which had been fattened expressly for the family's provisions to serve the next year. This generally took place late in the fall, or sometimes as late as Christmas; and then the barn-floor was used, with the tackle fastened to the stout girders or beams, and the animals were hoisted and dressed, and thus this became the farmer's abattoir for the occasion. The hogs, however, were dressed near their pens where a rough frame work was erected, and hot water could be easily procured. An open-air abattoir answered for this purpose.

In turning to our city, and glancing back more than two hundred years, we find among the records an order dated 1656, in relation to slaughtering animals, which reads thus: "From this time forth, neither in this city, nor on the plains belonging to this province, shall any cattle, hogs, goats or sheep be permitted to be slaughtered, not even by the owner himself, unless the owner first, on the same day he intends to slaughter, shall have given in such creature as his own, to the magistrate of the respective place to which he belongs, and from him obtained a slaughter certificate," for which he was obliged to pay a fee or excise, according to the size or value of the animal, to a public officer called "Slaughter Farmer." At the same time sworn butchers were ordered and confirmed, "Who shall each be bound to serve in butchering and cutting up, and to provide, have and possess their own ropes, hand-barrows, troughs, and other articles requisite for slaughtering, and receive" certain fees which are particularly stated. The oath taken by the sworn butchers, under Governor Nicholls' administration, somewhat differed from those previously taken, and thus read: "We doe swere, in the presence of the Almighty God, that we, as sworne butchers of this city, shall kill noe cattle, hoggs, etz., without a ticket of consent from the Collectors of the Mayor and Aldermen, except it be for the Right. Hon. Governor Richard Nicholls. So help us, God Almighty."

Previous to the year 1676, cattle were slaughtered in the city below Wall street, and on the Brooklyn shore, and perhaps those in the city were not kept as orderly as they should have been, and perhaps they annoyed the inhabitants around them, for they were all commanded outside of the City Wall, or above the present Wall street; this, however, gave the "Slaughter Farmer" so much trouble to examine each animal, especially when it took place on the same day, and the wrangles which no doubt occurred about their value, that the authorities caused a public slaughter-house "to be built for the use of the Cytie over the water, without the Gate at the Smith's Fly, near the Half-Moone."

This "Half-Moone," represented a small half-circle battery, situated at the east end of the wall of the city, on the shore of the East river, and the site of the first public slaughter-house, or Abattoir, would now be on the east side of Pearl street, between Wall and Pine streets. This fact, however, is further shown by a survey made in 1686 of the north side of Wall street, which reads: "Have laid out ye northeast side of Wall street, beginning at ye westermost corner of ye Butcher's Pen," or yard belonging to this public establishment. We also find this building distinctly marked down on the Rev. John Miller's plan of New York, printed in 1695.

A sworn butcher named Asher Levy, and Gerrit Jansen Roos, a carpenter, erected this public slaughter-house, and became the "Slaughter-Farmers," and they set forth "That all persons should have liberty to kill and hang therein meat, there paying for the same as formerly"—that is so much per head, according to the value of the animals.

In the month of June, 1696, this public institution, or rather the slaughtering part of it, was thus ordered to be removed: "No butcher or other person whatsoever doe slaughter any cattle of any kind after ye seventh

day of July next." Capt. Ebenezer Willson had previously obtained the privilege of building two public slaughter-houses close together near the present Peck-alip, on the shore of the East river, and a lease of the same was granted him for thirty years; but before his lease expired we find them under the control and possession of the "widow Cortlandt and Johannes Beeckman, who appear to have owned the land and purchased the lease of Capt. Willson or his heirs, and before the thirty years had expired the property in this neighborhood had become very much enhanced in value by the rapid growth of the city along the sloping grounds of the East river shore, and more particularly on Queen (now Pearl) street, which was then known as the "Fly," the fashionable locality representing the Fifth avenue in the "olden time."

In 1720 we find that the progress of building fine residences in this then attractive neighborhood had been stayed by the existence of these slaughter-houses, and it became necessary to petition for their removal. One of these petitions stated that "in order that more convenient and ornamental buildings may be erected there, and in that neighborhood, which is now retarded by occasion of the said slaughter-houses," &c. Although the lease had not expired, yet the lessors, who owned the property, were quite willing that it should be removed from their lands, which now had become much more valuable for improved residences; and, no doubt, when John Kelly had offered his three water-lots, of seventy-four feet wide, which he describes in a petition to the Councils as a "convenient place for the situation of a slaughter-house for cattle," he had made a satisfactory arrangement with the former lessees, and thus secured the privilege, as shown in the following report:

"We are also humbly of opinion, that the place proposed by the petitioner, John Kelly, for the erecting of public slaughter-houses and penn, upon the East river of this city, a little to the westward of the now dwelling house of Mr. John Dean in the said East ward, is a convenient place for that use and service, being the freehold of the said John Kelly, and that he ought to have a grant for the term of twenty-one years." They also stipulated that he should have them all built or regulated "on or before the first day of October next, (1720) and to inclose a sufficient quantity of ground for a public penn or pin-fold, sufficient to hold and secure all neat cattle that shall be brought there; and also to keep all in good and sufficient repair, plight and condition, well and sufficiently scoured and cleansed." The authorities also promise "that no other slaughter-house, from thence forward, shall be built and erected on the East river during the said term."

The location of these newly-created public slaughter-houses, was just below Dean's dock, (near the present intersection of Roosevelt and Water streets,) where all the cattle were landed which came across the East river from Long Island.

KOLEK POND.

In the month of November, 1722, "It is ordained, that all cattle for slaughter that hereafter shall be landed, or brought into this city, on the south side of Fresh-Water, (Kolek Pond,) shall be killed at the public slaughter-houses."