

**A DOCUMENTARY  
HISTORY OF THE  
EARLY ORGANIZATIONS  
OF PRINTERS**

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**ETHELBERT STEWART**

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# A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF THE EARLY ORGANIZATIONS OF PRINTERS<sup>a</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**HAT a number of disconnected typographical societies existed in various parts of the United States prior to the formation of the unions as now constituted, while not perhaps generally known, will not be new to students of the history of labor organizations. The references to these early organizations are usually hazy, containing no more than a mere statement that they existed at certain dates, with no evidence offered of the truth of even these statements. In this article it is believed the first attempt is made to be specific in the information presented about these early organizations. In this respect at least the article represents pioneer work in its field, not only in the reproduction of documents, but in the resort to minute books of these societies, as a source of information about other kindred societies. Thus the transcription of circular letters from other societies, upon the records of the Columbia Society, or the New York or Philadelphia societies, has furnished documentary proof of the existence of many printers' organizations nowhere else referred to. So far as the documents could tell the story little else has been said. Such explanation as seemed absolutely necessary to an understanding of the documents, as, for instance, the changing industrial conditions which prompted the intense feeling against the professional editor or publisher who was not at the same time a "practical printer" has been given briefly in notes; while the effect of the great employ-yourself movement socialism of 1830 to 1850, so apparent in the radicalism of the documents of that period, is briefly referred to in the text. The addresses "to the trade" or "to the public" have been reproduced in full, and for the most part without comment, the one object always kept in view being to let the workmen of that period tell their own story. Point of view is everything, and as it is very difficult, if not impossible, to state another man's point of view except from your own, the only way to be sure of getting the early printer's point of view is to let his documents present his case. Even then it is hard to realize why some things which seem so trivial today were so serious to men in 1815 or 1830.

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Because of this conviction, that in dealing with the affairs of a generation other than our own the best way to tell the workman's story is to let him tell it himself, no attempt to preserve literary style or unity has been made. In fact, literary quality has been consciously sacrificed to include as many extracts from documents or minute books as possible, to the end that the workman himself should have the floor.

No attempt has been made to present a consecutive sociological study. It has seemed more in consonance with the work of the bureau to present the raw material for an economic study of early printers' organizations, rather than to make such study.

No reference is had to statements in any of the general histories of the organized movements of American workmen, hitherto published as such. Not because such histories were not consulted, or are not valued, but because the restricted purpose of this article was to be confined exclusively to the documents of the early organizations, and all temptations have had to be resisted which would have carried the article beyond a strict conformity to the title—"A Documentary History." There is here no pretense to completeness. Effort was made to locate as many as possible of the old constitutions, price lists, and minute books, and copy or examine them. No thorough canvass was made or attempted. It is doubtful, however, if anything missed would bring up any new problem or condition not touched upon in some of the documents found. The period covered by actual documents is from 1786 to 1853, the price lists extending to 1836. North, south, east, and west are represented not equally, it is true, but sufficiently to make it more than probable that all the problems of the printers in the early days are at least referred to. The original purpose of limiting the article to the period prior to the formation of the National Union in 1852 has been deviated from only to include a few organizations that were outside the sphere of influence of the National Union. Histories of the National Union and its successor, the International, are easily accessible, and intrusions here have been studiously avoided, except when in footnotes it has seemed necessary to follow a subject to its final disposition; as, for instance, the woman compositor question and the uniform wage scale. The Cincinnati wage scale for 1853 was included because it represented a section of the country not distinctively covered by earlier documents.

Copies of constitutions and price lists as far back as 1802 are presented in the appendixes, and are believed to represent every stage of growth from the benefit societies of the first part of the period and the associations of the middle period, or from 1830 to 1840, to the present unions as exemplified by the constitutions of 1850. Special effort was made to ascertain the numerical strength of these early organizations, with gratifying results in many cases.

In a few instances copies of printed constitutions and price lists were found in libraries, particularly the Library of Congress; but by far the greater number were copied from old minute books of the societies, and are not to be found in print except in these appendixes.

Not only are the economic reasons for some of the things done by the unions (as limitation of apprentices) to be found in a study of their



history; but the gradual transformation of sentiments into customs, and the evolution of trade interests into "union principles," goes on so gradually before our eyes in these minute books that we can understand them better.

In the early constitutions and minutes of these organizations will be frequently found stated in terms those "union principles" which have since become a part of the subconscious thought life of the "union man," and no longer printed or stated, because nobody in the union supposes it necessary to state basic principles. Just as no man in introducing his wife specifies that a legal marriage ceremony has been performed, or in talking about his children stops to explain that they were born in honorable wedlock; and the man who asks for an explanation or a verification of these taken-for-granted and socially fundamental assumptions, unless he represents some semi-savage tribe where such status is not indubitable, is simply inviting trouble for himself. So much of this unrevealed ultimate principle exists; so much depends upon an understanding of this submerged or subconscious, and to the trade unionist axiomatic, hence never expressed thought life, that students of organizations coming from a different mental atmosphere often fail to find in unions that which is the reason for their existence—the soul of purpose by which they live.

These "fundamental principles of trade unionism" are often the codified experiences of former generations under industrial conditions that no longer exist, and can not now be understood by a mind not inheriting an intuitive perception of them, except by a study of the early organizations in which they were formulated and of the conditions which suggested them. Of no other institution is it more true than of trade unions that they can only be read in the present by the light of the past.

#### BEGINNINGS, 1786 TO 1830.

Whatever of associated effort there was among printers prior to 1795 was temporary, having a single purpose, and when this was accomplished the compact was dissolved. It was the custom in all trades to call a "general meeting" of the trade whenever a matter of importance to all presented itself. Such calls were signed by one or two men of recognized influence in the trade. These meetings, usually held in private homes, were organized by the election of officers, a statement was made of the purpose in calling the trade together, and after discussion resolutions were adopted embodying the views of those present upon the question presented. When the meeting had decided what the attitude of the trade was to be, all those present, if willing to do so, signed an agreement to stand by each other during the difficulty. Committees were appointed, and frequent meetings were held during the trouble, especially if it proved to be a strike and of some duration, thus creating the impression that a permanent association of journeymen had been formed. It is certain that some of the strikes in colonial times were undertaken with no more of an organization than this, and while,

there is nothing inherently improbable about the existence of permanent unions in colonial times, since they had been in existence in England and Europe for many generations before, yet we should be cautious about concluding from such a statement as "The journeymen bakers of New York went on strike in 1741," that therefore there was an organization, other than a temporary understanding, among them.

The first, probably, of such understandings among journeymen printers was in New York city in 1776, when a demand for an increase of wages was made by them and refused by their employers, with the result that a strike was called, which, proving successful, the association ceased. Again, in Philadelphia in 1786 an attempt by the employers to reduce wages to \$5.83 $\frac{1}{2}$  a week was made the occasion for calling the trade together. The statement issued by the printers at this meeting has fortunately been preserved, and was as follows:

"At a meeting of journeymen printers of Philadelphia held at the house of Henry Myers on Wednesday evening, the 31st ultimo, the following resolutions were unanimously entered into and ordered transcribed for publication. In consequence of an attempt having been made by some of our employers to reduce our wages to 35 shillings per week:

*"Resolved*, That we, the subscribers, will not engage to work for any printing establishment in this city or county under the sum of \$6 per week.

*"Resolved*, That we will support such of our brethren as shall be thrown out of employment on account of their refusing to work for less than \$6 per week.

"PHILADELPHIA, June 7, 1786."

This document is signed by twenty-six printers, probably comprising a majority of the competent men in the city at that time. There are indications that this struggle lasted for some time, but none whatever that the organization of printers had any purpose beyond the immediate one of resisting that reduction of wages, or any existence after this single purpose was accomplished. The document is important, however, as showing that the sentiment of supporting each other in time of a strike, out of which the union strike-benefit fund grew, existed among printers long before unions as such were formed.

In 1795 an organization was formed in New York city known as "The Typographical Society," comprising in its membership most of those working at the trade at that time. It was the first known society devoting its energies to trade conditions and wage scales that existed for any appreciable length of time.<sup>5</sup> So far as known it was the

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<sup>5</sup>The "Company of Printers of Philadelphia," organized in 1794, was an association of employers and job printers, not of journeymen, as is so often stated. While it is not the purpose of this article to go into the question of employers' associations, yet this one of 1794 is so frequently referred to as a labor organization, its constitution being listed in a very recent bibliography of trade union publications as such, that

first society not called into existence by an immediate exigency of the trade, and ceasing to exist when that exigency was removed. The

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it seems advisable to settle the matter definitely by reproducing the document, a copy of which is preserved in the library of congress. It will be noted that article 14 provides that the company shall "regulate the prices at which its members shall execute printing work, determine the terms of employing journeymen, fix penalties for the violation of their regulations," etc., and is signed by nine individuals and firms, among them some who were of more than local importance as printers and publishers. (See Bishop's History of American Manufacturers, Vol. 1.) The term "printer" was applied only to employers in the earlier times, and, later, to both employers and journeymen.

Aside from the historical value of the document itself and the importance of eliminating it from the literature of trade unionism, it is submitted as one of the few constitutions extant of a form of association known as "companies," which formed a link between the merchant guilds of the late middle ages and the employers' associations of today. The document follows:

#### CONSTITUTION OF THE COMPANY OF PRINTERS OF PHILADELPHIA, 1794.

Assured that the interests of every profession depend, in a high degree, on the union and co-operation of its members; impressed with the necessity of associating for the purpose of securing those advantages which are at present attached to the printing business, as well as for the purpose of extending them; and persuaded that such association will conduce to insure the harmony and good fellowship of those by whom it is composed; we, the subscribers, printers of the city of Philadelphia, do hereby constitute ourselves a society, under the name of the Company of Philadelphia Printers.

##### ARTICLE I.

The company shall be formed of such printers of the city and liberties, as are present at the adoption of this constitution; of such as shall join the company within one month subsequent to said adoption, and of such as shall be hereafter elected in conformity to the third article.

##### ARTICLE II.

Every person previously to his being considered a member, shall subscribe the constitution, and by such subscription solemnly engage to comply with the articles thereof, as well as such regulations as may be made under the same.

##### ARTICLE III.

A printer may become a candidate for admission into this company, either on application by letter or on the nomination of a member; in either case his name shall be submitted to the company, at one regular meeting, and be balloted for at the next regular meeting; should, however, an unanimous voice be expressed for proceeding to an immediate election, all delay shall thereby be suspended. If the votes of two-thirds of the members present be in his favor, he shall be elected a member.

##### ARTICLE IV.

A member on admission shall pay the sum of \$2 and the sum of \$1 annually afterward during his membership.

##### ARTICLE V.

There shall be four regular meetings in every year, viz., on the