

Labor Leaders in America



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William H. Sylvis and the Search for Citizenship
David Montgomery
In 1828 when William Sylvis was born in the town of Armagh it consisted of some thirty buildings nestled among the mountains of western Pennsylvania only a few miles from the Connemaugh River. His parents had but recently moved there in hopes that the building of the western division of the Pennsylvania Canal along the Connemaugh might provide work for an experienced wagon maker. Nicholas Sylvis's ancestors had come from the German Palatinate to Pennsylvania in the 1730s and through subsequent generations had scraped together a living by hard work at farming or mechanical trades. His wife Maria Mott Sylvis spoke of her family's prominence in New Jersey's revolutionary conflicts of half a century before. Memories of the battles working

people had fought for survival for their nation and for citizenship were their legacy. The rugged terrain through which the canal and its railroad portage were built failed to provide Nicholas Sylvester the steady customers he needed to support his family so he moved east to Mauch Chunk where another canal linked the anthracite fields to Philadelphia bringing the coal that heated most of the city's homes. In 1835 Irish immigrants who unloaded coal from the canal boats began a strike which gathered the support of shoemakers, printers, building workers, blacksmiths and others in such numbers as to culminate in a citywide general strike for higher wages and the ten-hour working day. For more than a year after this strike a General Trades Union assembled delegates from more than fifty unions of artisans, laborers and even factory operatives from mill villages at the nearby falls of the Wisahickon to support each other's strikes and formulate a common program of action. The movement produced remarkable leaders like John Fernald, William English and Thomas Hogan who spoke not just for the weaving, shoemaking, Q, Q, Q

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