
★ PREFACE ★

October 10, 1871

THE YOUNG WHITE MAN had the number 27 tattooed on his hand and a bandage around his head when he began shooting at a colored man named John Fawcett. He missed. Fawcett, a hod carrier from the Philadelphia neighborhood of Frankford, ran up South Street to escape. Joined by a crowd, the bandaged man chased him.

Fawcett saw a cellar door in front of a store in the middle of the block. Before he could dive in, a white boy stuck out a foot and tripped him. Fawcett scrambled to his feet, and the bandaged man fired again.

That same afternoon, about a mile away, another Negro, a school-teacher with the Roman-sounding name of Octavius Valentine Catto, left a pawnshop on Third Street and began walking home. People on the street knew who he was—an orator who shared stages with Frederick Douglass, a second baseman on the city's best black baseball team, a teacher at a black school of national renown, and an activist who had fought in the state capital and on the streets for equal rights. He was thirty-two.

It was election day 1871, and the busy South Street area—the institutional and emotional heart of the black community—had been rocked by violence since the night before. Was it all the Squire's doing? White policemen and Democrats who answered to him were attacking black voters, and scores had gone to the hospital. Catto had sent his pupils home early. Rather than going directly to his boardinghouse, he chose a safer

route—up Lombard to Ninth Street, near his fiancée’s home, and then down to South Street. He lived at 814.

Catto walked with an assured, athletic gait, as if his right to the pavement were guaranteed. Which it was—but only lately. Memories of slavery haunted every colored home. Generations of men and women had risked their lives to claim the simplest of rights—to learn in a schoolhouse, serve in the army, ride the railways, cast a ballot. Now those rights were being tested. Catto turned onto South Street at the moment when, in W.E.B. Du Bois’s words, Americans of color “were first tasting freedom.”

As Catto walked east, the bandaged man was looking for more Negroes to hurt, more Negroes who would not be able to vote that day. He passed Catto nonchalantly, but once he was five steps beyond, the bandaged man turned and crouched. A young girl at 822 South shouted to Catto, “Look out for that man!”

The bandaged man was pulling out his gun.

“A Hundred O. V. Catts”

SAY THE WORDS *civil rights movement* and the conversation veers to Selma and Birmingham and what people remember reading or seeing on small black-and-white televisions—sit-ins on buses and at lunch counters, Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Governor George Wallace and Sheriff Bull Connor. It was all so very long ago, the 1950s and 1960s.

There are few memories before that.

It is difficult to point to a moment when a movement began or ended or emerged as distinct from another. But the civil rights movement in the mid-twentieth century was the second or third organized effort by African Americans to be treated as the equals of white persons.

This book is about the first civil rights movement, about its heroes, villains, and battles. Not the Civil War battles at Antietam or Bull Run but the street wars—pogroms, as the historian Roger Lane says—of whites against blacks in Washington, New York, Cincinnati, and Philadelphia. The heroes from the 1800s have not had highways named after them, or commendations from a thankful nation. So the stories of Henry Highland Garnet, Caroline Le Count, and Octavius Valentine Catto are a new way for us to see an old century and an older problem. The nineteenth century had its charismatic racial villains as well—this time, another “Bull,” William “Bull” McMullen, also known as the Squire.

This is a book about the North, about “free” blacks whose freedom was in name only. For the most part, they could not vote, testify, or participate in their community’s July 4 celebration. Black people in the mid-nineteenth-century North were threatened not with whippings by slaveholders but with insults, brickbats, torches, and gunfire. They lived in a time when mob violence was so common that the word *mobbed* was a verb. African Americans were routinely assailed in the public square, in the courts and the legislatures, even in the privacy of their churches, schools, and homes. Their assailants? Everyone—from the resentful Irish poor to some of the nation’s most powerful men.

Octavius Catto, his father, and his friends and allies fought a street battle for equal rights in Northern cities before, during, and after the Civil War. The men and women of Catto’s generation presaged the better-known civil rights era, sitting down as Rosa Parks did, challenging baseball’s color line as Jackie Robinson did, marching for the right to vote as Martin Luther King Jr. did. But they did all these things a century before. Think about that for a moment—Caroline Le Count did almost the same thing as Rosa Parks did, but her streetcar in 1867 was powered by a horse.

So while ending slavery and bringing fugitive slaves to freedom through the Underground Railroad captured the hearts and minds of abolitionists, black and white alike, we write, instead, about the peril and prejudice felt in New York and Boston and Detroit among African Americans. They had libraries, Odd Fellow lodges, choral societies, and ladies clubs but never the freedom to walk down the street safe from white boys attacking them, or, at the very least, spitting out the word *Nigger*.

And speaking of that vile word: It will appear often in these pages. At the risk of offending readers, we chose to include this and other racist words in an effort to depict accurately the talk of those days. For similar reasons we chose to use *Negro* and *colored*, the latter being a term many nineteenth-century African Americans accepted and preferred.

The man at the center of our story, O. V. Catto—who electrified a biracial audience in 1864 when he said, “There must come a change”—was a charmer of ladies, a hard-hitting second baseman, a talented teacher, and a Renaissance man of equal rights whom one historian likens to Dr. King and another to George Steinbrenner.

Catto spent too much money on clothes, ate too well at banquets, and reveled in late-summer parties at the New Jersey shore. He wrote poetry and fell in love—and now we are getting ahead of the story.

Catto, with a group of other African Americans who called themselves a "band of brothers," challenged one injustice after another. His story—their story—begins in lesser-known corners of our history, in Charleston, South Carolina, where people of color owned slaves and where teaching blacks to read was a crime punished by whipping, and ends in Philadelphia, where police used billy clubs on Negro voters and where business leaders condoned arson to break up an abolitionist convention within sight of Independence Hall.

This first civil rights movement did not begin or end with Catto. No, he stood on the shoulders of older heroes—Richard Allen, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Lucretia Mott. Catto's generation, in turn, left footsteps for twentieth-century men and women to follow.

As the Catto family descendant Leonard Smith says today, "There were a hundred O. V. Cattos." Their stories need telling.

We begin with the earliest Cattos, and their story starts in Charleston.