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THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF TERENCE V. POWDERLY

William John Shepherd

Abstract: Terence Vincent Powderly (1849–1924) was a national celebrity who personified the American labor movement in the late nineteenth century during his tenure (1879–93) as head of the Knights of Labor, the era's largest organization of American workers. Unions were especially important in his native Pennsylvania and his reform efforts found a sympathetic political audience. He was also a dedicated public servant with three terms (1878–84) as a progressive mayor of Scranton and a reform-minded federal bureaucrat (1897–1924) in Washington, DC. In addition, he supported Irish nationalism, serving as a member of the secret pro-independence Clan Na Gael society and the Irish Land League political organization that favored the rights of tenant farmers. He was often photographed, or had photographs given to him, and late in life became an avid photographer with thousands of photographs preserved in his personal papers housed at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC.

Keywords: Labor history, immigration, civil service, photography, Gilded Age

*T*erence Vincent Powderly was a national celebrity who eloquently personified the American labor movement in the late nineteenth century during his tenure (1879–93) as head of the

Knights of Labor, the era's largest organization of American workers. Unions were especially important in his native Pennsylvania and his reform efforts found a sympathetic political audience. He was also a dedicated public servant with three terms (1878–84) as a progressive mayor of Scranton and a reform-minded federal bureaucrat (1897–1924) in Washington, DC. In addition, he supported Irish nationalism, serving as a member of the secret pro-independence Clan Na Gael society and the Irish Land League political organization that favored the rights of tenant farmers. He was often photographed, or had photographs given to him, and late in life became an avid photographer with thousands of photographs preserved in his personal papers housed at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC.¹

Powderly was born January 22, 1849, in the industrial community of Carbondale, Pennsylvania, to Terence and Madge Powderly, immigrants from County Meath, Ireland. His father had said, "Let us leave this damn country and go to America where a man may own himself and a gun too, if he wants to."² With eleven siblings, young Terence had scant opportunity for schooling, "I did not have the advantage of an education, I could read some, write but little."³ He was employed at age thirteen by the Delaware and Hudson Railroad and later apprenticed as a machinist to master mechanic James Dickson, who had in turn apprenticed under George Stephenson, the Englishman who invented the first railway line for the steam locomotive (see fig. 1).⁴

The 1869 strike and mine fire in Avondale, Pennsylvania, that killed 110 coal miners greatly influenced Powderly's life and induced him to join the International Union of Machinists and Blacksmiths in 1871, becoming local president in 1873.⁵ Powderly's union activities and the Depression of 1873 left him unemployed and blacklisted as a union agitator. He traveled North America searching for work and was often separated from his wife, Hannah Dever, whom he had married in 1872 and who barely survived delivering their only known child, a daughter who died a few days after birth on December 19, 1875.⁶ Powderly joined the local Scranton Knights of Labor in 1876, organized them into an assembly, and became their leader. Thereafter, he assumed national leadership in 1879. The Knights came into national prominence during his tenure, peaking in influence in 1886 with nearly 700,000 predominantly Catholic members, including many women. He became widely popular as crowds cheered him when he traveled, wrote songs and poetry in his honor, and named children after him. Unfortunately,

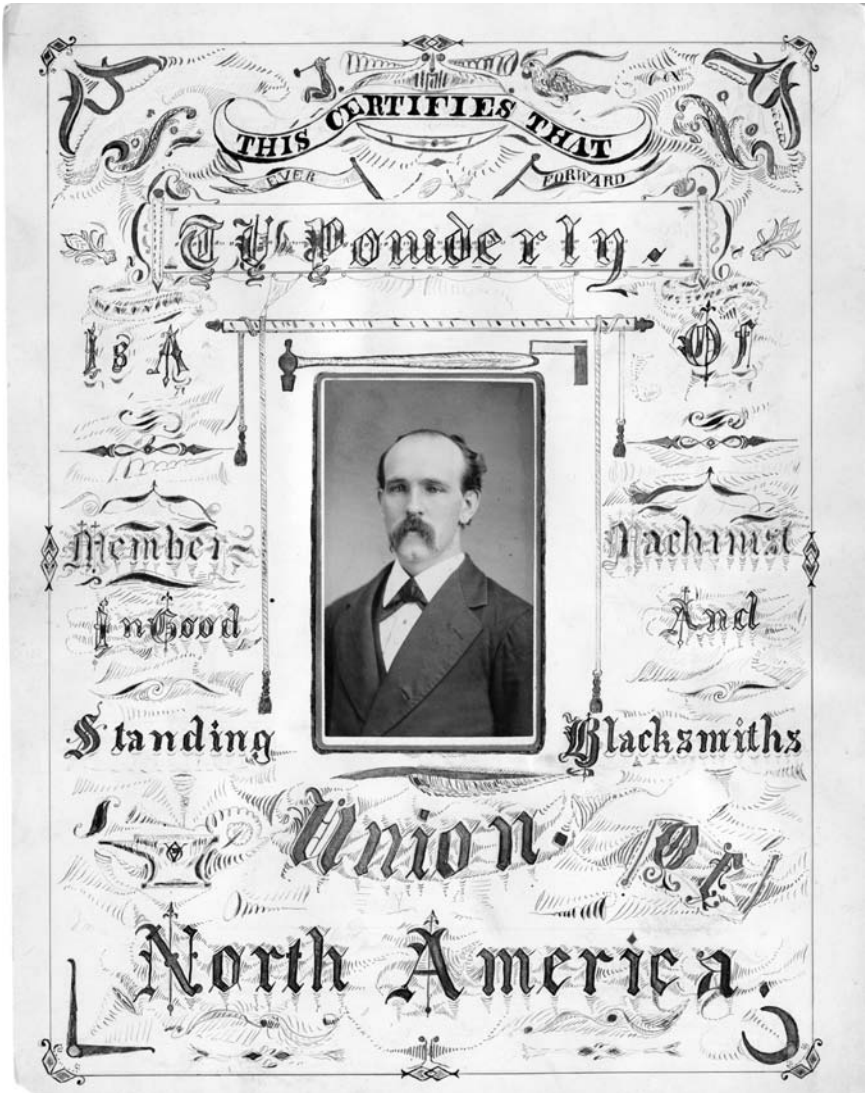


FIGURE 1: T. V. Powderly Certificate of Membership in Machinist and Blacksmith's Union of North America, ca. 1873. Photographer unknown.

he was increasingly vilified by various interests as his idealistic rhetoric was often belied by his instinctive desire to avoid conflict (see fig. 2).⁷

The Knights of Labor declined after the watershed year of 1886. First, the abortive Southwest Railroad Strike in March involving more than 200,000



FIGURE 2: Women delegates to the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor, Richmond, Virginia, October, 1886, with Elizabeth Rogers of Chicago and two-week-old daughter (her tenth). Photographer unknown.

workers against railroads owned by ruthless industrialist Jay Gould weakened Powderly because he had called off the strike. Second, the Knights were linked to the Haymarket Riot in Chicago in May that killed several and prompted a controversial trial followed by the executions of four men who may have been innocent. Finally, the founding of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in December 1886 by Samuel Gompers lured workers away so that Knights membership dropped to 120,000 by 1889. Thereafter, the Knights were beset with a divisive power struggle resulting in Powderly's removal in 1893 (see fig. 3).⁸

Even as the Knights declined there was some lasting success. Powderly had been born a Roman Catholic but had public differences with the institutional Church, resenting the attitude of many Church leaders who opposed labor



FIGURE 3: Knights of Labor headquarters, Philadelphia, July 15, 1892. Mary O'Reilly, James H. Mager(?), Mary Stephen, unknown, Tom O'Reilly, unknown, John O'Keefe, Ira C. Traphagen, unknown, Phoebe George. Photographer unknown.

organizations due to their secretive and ritualistic activities. He did, however, maintain close relations with several bishops and gained surprising support at a crucial period from Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore. Working together, they brought about reconciliation in 1888 between the labor movement and the Roman Catholic Church, including recognition by the Vatican. This rapprochement removed major obstacles to full Catholic participation in the American labor movement with a resultant swelling of union ranks with native-born and immigrant Catholics (see fig. 4).⁹

While engaged in the labor movement, Powderly was also a player in local Pennsylvania politics. In the 1876 presidential election he supported the largely agrarian Greenback ticket and, following the massive railroad strikes of 1877, activists organized a Labor Party that allied with the Greenbacks to make Powderly mayor of Scranton. During his three terms (1878–84) he progressively transformed the city into a modern municipality with an agenda



FIGURE 4: "Italian Laborers." Delaware Water Gap, Pennsylvania, May 27, 1913. Image by T. V. Powderly.

that included the establishment of a board of health, a sewage system, food inspection, and paved roads (see fig. 5).¹⁰

After 1894, stung by his rejection by the labor movement and now viewed as a troublemaker, Powderly was unable to find employment. Therefore, he studied law and was admitted to the Pennsylvania bar in 1894, eventually arguing cases before the supreme courts of Pennsylvania and the United States. He also returned to politics and (now disenchanted with third parties) joined the Central Republican Club of Scranton. He later stated, "I am a Republican because I am a Protectionist and believe my own country—being the best—should come first."¹¹

During the contentious presidential election of 1896 he avidly campaigned throughout Pennsylvania for the successful Republican ticket of William McKinley of Ohio and Garrett Hobart of New Jersey.¹² In 1897 the newly inaugurated president appointed Powderly as Commissioner-General of Immigration, a significant office under the US Treasury Department. After a lengthy Senate confirmation battle in which the opposition of old labor nemesis Samuel Gompers had to be overcome a triumphant Powderly assumed office in March 1898. As Commissioner-General of Immigration, Powderly investigated corruption at Ellis Island and fired nearly a dozen people. Unfortunately, his benefactor, William McKinley, was assassinated



FIGURE 5: T. V. Powderly. Scranton, Pennsylvania. "Taken Nov. 1909 while at home to vote and on way back." Image by T. V. Powderly.

in September 1901 and succeeded by New York's Theodore Roosevelt who terminated Powderly from office on July 2, 1902 (see fig. 6). This was the result of the slanderous efforts of those Powderly had fired who in turn convinced Roosevelt that Powderly was himself corrupt and had actively conspired with Roosevelt's political enemy Thomas Platt. Powderly, however, waged a vigorous campaign to exonerate himself.¹³ Following an investigation, Roosevelt reinstated Powderly in 1906 as a Special Immigration Inspector of the Department of Commerce and Labor charged to study the causes of emigration. After touring several European countries Powderly wrote a report advocating that American agents select prospective immigrants before they left their homes, travel with them on the ships bringing them over, and evenly distribute the arriving immigrants throughout America (see figs. 7 and 8).¹⁴

Powderly next served (1907–21) as chief of the Immigration Bureau's Division of Information, which until 1913—a period that included the presidency of Republican William Howard Taft—was part of the Department of Commerce and Labor. With the advent of the Democratic administration of Woodrow Wilson in 1913, the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization reorganized and was placed in the new Department of Labor. For the next



FIGURE 6: Ellis Island, New York, September 3, 1913. Image by T. V. Powderly.



FIGURE 7: Powderly the world traveler: "Self and Satchel on Lawn," DC, September 17, 1911. Photographer unknown.



FIGURE 8: Scene in market, Trieste, Austria (now Italy), ca. 1906–1907. Image by T. V. Powderly.

eight years, Powderly reported to Commissioner-General Anthony Camenetti (1854–1923), a former lawyer and congressman from California who was very critical of Asian immigration (see fig. 9).¹⁵

Powderly also worked with Camenetti's boss, William B. Wilson (1870–1934), the Scottish-born first secretary of labor who had been a member of the Knights of Labor and a founding member of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Wilson was a Pennsylvania congressman (1907–13) who had sponsored an investigation of mine safety conditions and helped organize the Federal Bureau of Mines in 1910. He also promoted the eight-hour workday for public employees and the creation of the Department of Labor that he headed (1913–21).¹⁶ Powderly's final position (1921–24) was commissioner of Conciliation of the US Labor Department under James J. Davis (1873–1947), a Welsh-born steelworker (see fig. 10).¹⁷

During these years Powderly maintained ties to labor leaders such as Mary "Mother" Harris Jones (1837–1930), the Irish-born "Miner's Angel" who was

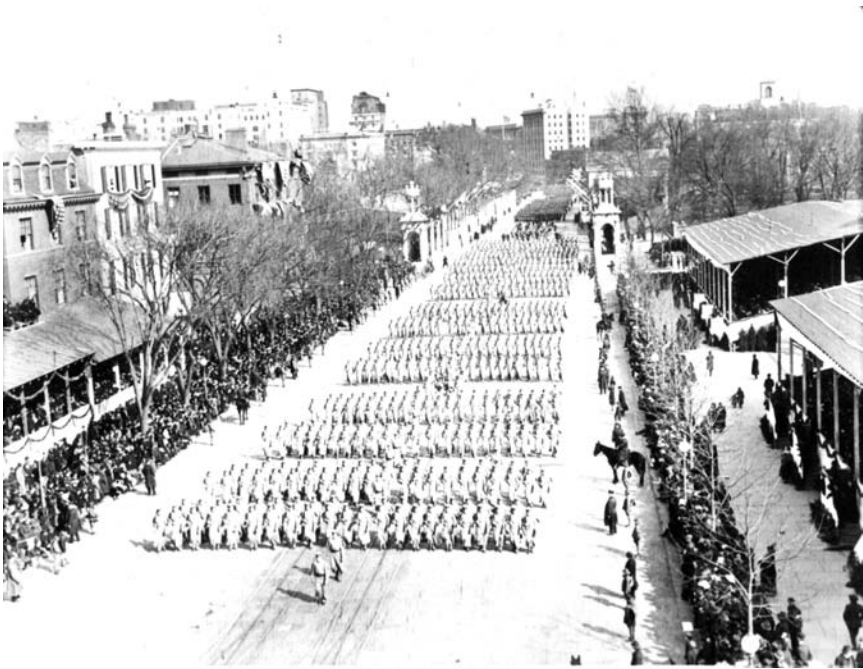


FIGURE 9: First inauguration of Woodrow Wilson, parade, DC—March 4, 1913. Image by T. V. Powderly.

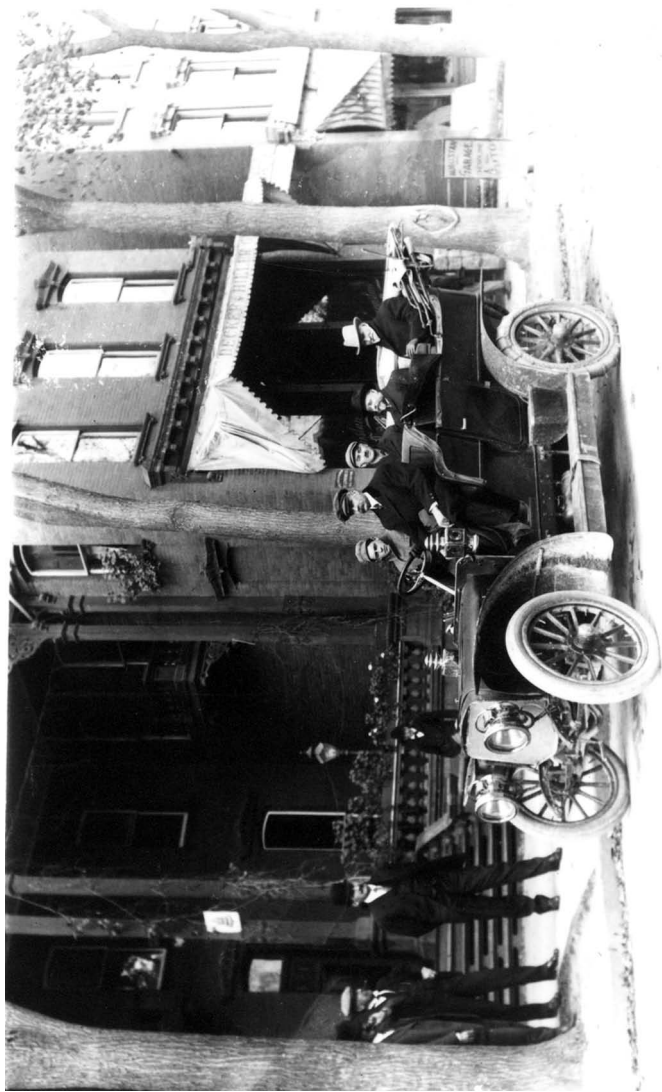


FIGURE 10: Auto with William B. Wilson, John W. Stewart, C. W. Larmon, and Professor Milton Whitney, Albany, New York, October 12–14, 1909. Image by T. V. Powderly.

an iconic American labor activist for nearly sixty years. Affiliated with both the Knights and the UMWA, she was often photographed with Powderly and was his frequent houseguest (he also paid many of her bills). Another labor associate was the Illinois-born coal miner John B. White (1870–1934), UMWA president during the Colorado Coal Strike (1913–14) that included the infamous Ludlow Massacre. White was noted for his work on a ban on the employment of children under sixteen, old-age pensions, and workmen's compensation (see fig. 11).

While the photographs taken by others and given to Powderly related to his career as a labor leader and labor-related events and people, his own photographic work was focused on his later life in Washington and national and international travels as part of the fact-finding work as part of his federal employment. Overall, they are a rich archival resource documenting one man's turbulent journey through a tumultuous period in American history. Several thousand of these images (ca. 1902–21) survive, being transferred from unstable and highly volatile nitrate images to safety film in the 1970s, enhanced by the preservation of his meticulous notes identifying persons and subjects as well as camera types, shutter speeds, and f-stops on many of the negative jackets. According to one expert, "Powderly was a photographer of uncommon skill and professionalism. He seemed to be instinctively aware of what a good documentary photo was before the word 'documentary' became fashionable."¹⁸ Many sites and scenes caught his eye, ranging from shoppers gathering at Woodward and Lothrop ("Woodie's") and children playing outside the US Labor Department to a blacksmith on Fourteenth and G streets and an African American carpet salesman displaying his wares. Powderly was present at and photographed three presidential inaugurations, that of Republican William Howard Taft in 1909, and Democrat Woodrow Wilson in 1913 and again in 1917. He also recorded the Confederate Soldiers Reunion Parade in Washington on June 8, 1917, and military draft registration on June 5, 1917 (see figs. 12–14).

Powderly was apparently a great fan of the Washington Monument, with nearly four dozen images of perhaps the nation's most beloved shrine (see fig. 15). Ironically, Powderly did not photograph anything specific to the current home of his papers, the Catholic University of America, though he did record the nearby Soldier's Home, established in 1851, with two of the buildings used as the summer White House for several American presidents, most notably Abraham Lincoln, who lived at the Anderson Cottage. Finally, there was Powderly's beloved Petworth residence, his Washington



FIGURE 11: Powderly, with “Mother” Mary Harris Jones and John P. White, UMWA president, 1916. Photographer unknown.

home until his death, which was probably his favorite place to photograph. Having moved to the District in 1897, Powderly had obtained a three-story Queen Anne-style house in the Petworth area, a residential neighborhood in Northwest Washington bounded by Georgia Avenue to the west, North Capitol Street to the east, Rock Creek Church Road to the south, and



FIGURE 12: Blacksmith (with “hand forge”), 14th and G streets in DC, October 1913. Image by T. V. Powderly.



FIGURE 13: Confederate veterans parading in DC with American flag, June 8, 1917. 251658240. Image by T. V. Powderly.

Kennedy Street to the north. Powderly’s address, oddly enough, changed several times (from 502 Newark Street to 502 Quincy Street to 3700 Fifth Street) over the next two decades though he and the house never moved!



FIGURE 14: Draft registration, DC (0286-13), June 5, 1917. Image by T. V. Powderly.



FIGURE 15: Washington Monument, April 16, 1912. Image by T. V. Powderly.

Today it is the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker House at 503 Rock Creek Church Road NW.¹⁹ The neighborhood had been the site of the Tayloe family estates, becoming part of the city in the 1880s when two real-estate investment partnerships purchased the estates for development. The neighborhood grew with the expansion of the streetcar line up Georgia Avenue (then known as Seventh Street Extended or Brightwood Avenue) from Florida Avenue to the district line at Silver Spring, Maryland. He had lobbied diligently for this as president of the Petworth Citizen's Association (see fig. 16).²⁰

Powderly was also active in 1904 in leading the Citizen's Association in supporting the Policemen's Association's efforts to secure pay increases via congressional action. There were also complaints (eerily familiar in the twenty-first century) that the new streetcar service did not run frequently enough or provide enough seats.²¹ Powderly also used his position as a platform to advocate for home rule. In a July 4, 1908, speech at the Soldier's Home he also advocated the rights of Washington residents, including women, to vote, basing his theory on the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution stating that nothing could alter the fact that they were citizens of the United States (see fig. 17).²²



FIGURE 16: Powderly house at Petworth, Washington, DC, 1903. Photographer unknown.



FIGURE 17: "Suffragists on Picket Duty before the White House," January 11, 1917. TVP (0285-11). Image by T. V. Powderly.

In 1900 the Petworth household included Terence, his first wife Hannah, four of Mrs. Powderly's relatives, and Terence's faithful secretary Emma Fickenscher, later to be his second wife.²³ It was here that his first wife, Hannah, died at the relatively young age of forty-seven on October 13, 1901.²⁴ There were always many visitors in addition to the semi-permanent houseguests. In 1910, in addition to Terence and Emma, three of his relatives and one of hers lived there.²⁵ Ten years later, in 1920, there were four boarders.²⁶ After 1920 Powderly was in declining health, so much so that a concerned Mother Jones wrote, "Don't be dwelling on when we are going to take our final rest" and "don't be so despondent."²⁷ He died aged seventy-five at Petworth after a long illness on June 24, 1924. He was buried two days later in nearby Rock Creek Cemetery.²⁸ He had married his second wife, long-time secretary Emma Fickenscher, in 1919 and she survived him for many years, dying at age eighty-four on February 23, 1940 (see fig. 18).²⁹

Earlier American labor historians dismissed Powderly and the Knights as relics of the utopian traditions of the antebellum years that were unsuited



FIGURE 18: Powderly and Emma Fickenscher (later Powderly) in the lawn of their house in Petworth, DC, n.d. (circa 1908). Photographer unknown.

to the economic realities of the Gilded Age.³⁰ More recent studies presented the Knights as an authentic working-class organization with a convincing critique of industrial capitalism, making the case that Powderly was a worthy if flawed hero who articulated a progressive vision of laborers in the face of that era's inhumanity of the industrial capitalist system. In 2000 Powderly received due recognition as an inductee into the US Department of Labor's Hall of Fame in Washington, DC, joining rival Samuel Gompers, good friend "Mother" Jones, and fellow Pennsylvanian labor leader Philip Murray.³¹

NOTES

All images in this article are from the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC.

1. Terence Vincent Powderly's material legacy is preserved in his papers housed at the Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, DC. They document his impact on American labor and immigration history consisting largely of his official correspondence as leader of the Knights of Labor (1879–93), his tenure as mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania (1878–84), and his service as a federal official for the Immigration and Labor departments (1897–1924). Additionally, there are his personal correspondence, photographs, memorabilia, legal files, and financial records. An online collection guide (or finding aid) can be accessed at <http://archives.lib.cua.edu/findingaid/powderly.cfm>. The Powderly Photograph Prints digital collection is at <http://www.aladino.wrlc.org/gsdll/collect/powderly/powderly.shtml>. Those wishing to research original Powderly materials at Catholic University are encouraged to call 202-319-5065, send an email to archives@mail.lib.cua.edu, or access the archives visitor's page at <http://archives.lib.cua.edu/visit.cfm>.
2. Terence V. Powderly, *The Path I Trod: The Autobiography of Terence V. Powderly* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 5.
3. Powderly, letter to "Eddie," January 9, 1898, box 155, folder 6, Powderly Papers (hereafter TVP), Catholic University.
4. Richard Oestreicher, "Terence Powderly, the Knights of Labor, and Artisanal Republicanism," in *Labor Leaders in America*, ed. Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 32.
5. Vincent J. Falzone, *Terence V. Powderly: Middle Class Reformer* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1978), 10; Craig Phelan, *Grand Master Workman: Terence Powderly and the Knights of Labor* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 16.
6. T. V. Powderly diary, 1875, box 178, TVP.
7. Sandra Yocum Mize, "Terence V. Powderly, 1849–1924," in *Encyclopedia of American Catholic History*, ed. Thomas J. Shelley (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 1163–64.
8. Falzone, *Terence V. Powderly*, 169–71; Phelan, *Grand Master Workman*, 254–57.
9. Henry Vincent Brown, *The Catholic Church and the Knights of Labor* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1949).
10. Falzone, *Terence V. Powderly*, 32–61.

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11. T. V. Powderly, letter to Warren Harding, February 7, 1921, TVP.
12. Powderly, *Path I Trod*, ix; Falzone, *Terence V. Powderly*, 174; Phelan, *Grand Master Workman*, 258–59.
13. Falzone, *Terence V. Powderly*, 184–89; Oestreicher, “Terence Powderly,” 56.
14. Falzone, *Terence V. Powderly*, 191; Powderly, *Path I Trod*, ix–x; Phelan, *Grand Master Workman*, 260.
15. Biographical Dictionary of the US Congress website, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000069> (accessed February 28, 2012); Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony_Caminetti (accessed February 28, 2012).
16. US Department of Labor website, <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/wilson.htm> (accessed February 28, 2012).
17. Falzone, *Terence V. Powderly*, 192; Phelan, *Grand Master Workman*, 260.
18. “The Photographs of Terence Vincent Powderly,” information pamphlet, CUA Archives, 1985.
19. Dorothy Day Catholic Worker at <http://dccatholicworker.wordpress.com/>.
20. Falzone, *Terence V. Powderly*, 190.
21. *Washington Post*, December 7, 1904, 8.
22. *Ibid.*, July 6, 1908, 2.
23. Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Washington, DC.
24. *Washington Post*, October 15, 1901, 7.
25. Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Washington, DC.
26. Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington, DC.
27. M. H. Jones to T. V. Powderly, May 3, 1923, Mother Jones Collection, TVP.
28. *Washington Post*, June 25, 1924, 13.
29. *Ibid.*, February 26, 1940, 20.
30. Phelan, *Terence V. Powderly*, 3–4.
31. *Catholic Standard*, February 10, 2000, 24, and March 2, 2000, 20.