WHAT IS THE CENTRAL THEME OF PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY?

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At THEIR Harrisburg meeting on November 11, 1944, the members of the Pennsylvania Historical Association accepted the task of sponsoring a comprehensive history of the colony and commonwealth. The assumption of this responsibility was implemented by the appointment of a seven-man committee to begin the planning of the project.

Now that the Association has acted, it behooves all historians of the state to begin to do some really fundamental thinking about the spirit and meaning of the state's past, and to offer their conclusions. Indeed the project will be plowing new ground because little if any writing has been done about the underlying themes that make the state's history meaningful, or the contributions of Pennsylvania to the country as a whole. Fact gathering will be laborious, but not too difficult; already a considerable corpus of material has been accumulated. More, of course, is needed. The real task will be to interpret these data, to generalize on their meaning, and to synthesize the minutiae into a frame, or frames, of reference. A related problem is that of determining the division points or landmarks which end certain eras and which begin others. In fact this latter undertaking is of primary importance because no frame of reference is possible until the landmarks are established and understood.

This essay will attempt to present a few tentative generalizations on Pennsylvania history as an aid towards arriving at a proper frame of reference. First, however, some remarks are in order regarding the problem of chronological landmarks.

The political phase of Pennsylvania history will not give a great deal of trouble because there are certain generally accepted dates and events which serve as signposts. For instance, 1756 denotes the end of Quaker dominion, a very significant turning-point in the history of the colony; 1776 is the termination of the proprietaryship and the beginning of political independence; 1783
represents the gaining of political independence finally and completely. Dunaway in his *History of Pennsylvania* thinks that 1790 is the great dividing line in the state’s history, and so he continues the colonial period up to 1790. The device of treating Pennsylvania’s history in two grand eras, with the dividing point at 1790, has its advantages so far as the political portion of the story is concerned. Whether it is justifiable to consider the colonial period as continuing to and stopping at 1790 is open to question; but that certain important events took place around that year is not open to question. In 1789 the new federal government was established and in 1790 a new state constitution went into force. Both events signalized the return of conservatives to power and the shelving of the radical elements that had been in control since the beginning of the Revolution. Both Pennsylvania and the United States arrived at a stable political regime which has continued, with slight changes, since then. In other words, the political history of Pennsylvania can be divided into two great periods and the division helps to clarify the treatment. But is it justifiable to use 1790 as a division point economically; in fact, in any other respect than politically? To answer this question it is necessary to understand what the colonial period was and what its characteristics were.

It is obvious to anyone who tries to get at the spirit of Pennsylvania history that there is a vast difference between the civilization of the colony (say, about 1740) and of the state (say, about 1940). Whether 1776 or 1790 be accepted as a terminal point for the colonial era—politically—, that era has sundry typical characteristics which make of the province a distinct and unique society, different not only from most of the other provinces, but also from the twentieth century. A few of these well-known attributes that justify the term “colonial civilization” are: (1) *Agriculturalism*. Inasmuch as industry was mostly of the craft variety, the economy of the colony was mainly agricultural. These facts can be explained by the newness of the country, as well as by the English mercantilist policy. The agrarian flavor of the province is evident from the fact that not a bank existed until 1781. Society was simple. (2) *Isolation*, mentally and otherwise. Pennsylvania was far distant from England, and travel

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1 This statement does not exclude other dividing points which might be equally as helpful, or indeed even more helpful.
in the colony itself was difficult because of the lack of good roads. This factor is actually another phase of the agricultural economy. Both agriculturalism and isolation were in part responsible for (3) the derivative culture. Colonial civilization—using civilization in the sense of culture—was dependent upon England. In consideration of the newness of the colony, it would be miraculous if its culture had been original and creative. The first tasks were to create farms, build towns, and make a living. Culture could wait. Franklin maintained in 1743 that it was about time for Americans to become interested in science and the things of the mind; through his efforts some important gains resulted. Nevertheless the absence of cultural originality continued through the so-called colonial period. Even when native talent did appear, as in the case of Benjamin West, it was nurtured in England rather than in Pennsylvania. (4) Diversity, both of peoples and of denominations. This factor grew out of Penn’s desire to found a haven for the distressed peoples of Europe, a refuge for both those seeking religious and those seeking economic security. A typical Pennsylvanian was likely to be part of one of the three sub-civilizations in the province: English-Quaker around Philadelphia; Pennsylvania-German in the interior; and Scots-Irish on the frontier. This varied national make-up provided for varied religions and churches. In other words, the colony became famous for (5) religious liberty. This was of course part of the Quaker heritage. The religious quality of the colony—strict morals and the like—characterized the province as long as the Holy Experiment lasted. Part of the Quaker heritage was (6) pacifism. The non-resistance beliefs of the Friends and the German sects were typical of the colony for many years and presented knotty problems. Allied to pacifism was the Penn policy of equal and peaceful treatment of the Indians.

3 Other provincial executives pitied the Governor of Pennsylvania who had the job of trying to wring money and men for frontier defense out of an unwilling assembly. The energetic Governor William Shirley of Massachusetts wrote, on October 21, 1754, to Robert Hunter, newly arrived Governor of Pennsylvania, as follows: “I have no leaf in my book for managing a Quaker Assembly. If I had, it should be at your Service. Your predecessor, Mr. Hamilton, to whom I would beg the favour of you to make my Complaints, will give you a better insight into the Light within them, than I can pretend to do.” Correspondence of William Shirley. Edited by Charles Henry Lincoln. (Two volumes, New York, 1912) II, 95.
Granted that these are some of the outstanding features of Pennsylvania as a colony, how many of them stopped in or around either 1776 or 1790? Let us see, one by one. (1) The agricultural aspect of Pennsylvania continued in almost unabated form at least until the 1840's. By the next decade the industrial forces began to be powerful, but agricultural control of the state was not finally ended until 1860. (2) With some slow improvement—such as the Cumberland Road—transportation remained difficult and isolation continued until after the 1820's. Then came canals, the telegraph, and railroads to reduce the longstanding provincialism. But note that the Pennsylvania Railroad did not span the state until 1858. (3) Political independence did not by any means end the cultural colonialism—neither in Pennsylvania nor in any other state. Hence the question asked by Sidney Smith: “Who in the four corners of the globe reads an American book? . . . or looks at an American painting or statue?” After the War of 1812 Americans began to produce, particularly in literature, but the dependence upon foreigners for inspiration in many cultural fields continued for years. (4) Diversification in religion and in population has not ended to this day. Indeed, with the coming of Central and South European immigrants, these diversities have increased. Whereas, in colonial times, there were three distinct sub-civilizations, now there are many little Italys, little Polands, little Slovakias, and the like. Only the German enclave of colonial times has remained a distinct entity. (5) Religious liberty, we trust, is with us even today. Certainly it did not cease with the passing of the Quaker control in 1756. (6) Pacifism as an official doctrine ended before the coming of independence. A different Indian policy was evident as early as the Walking Purchase of 1737, and good relations with the Indians were definitely over when the Penn's Creek Massacre occurred in 1755.

"By the fastest combinations of existing modes of transportation, Pittsburgh was receiving its Baltimore and Philadelphia news three days after the events, its New Orleans news twelve days after. The Great Western was yet the speediest harbinger of European advices; a sailing from Liverpool on July 25, for instance, brought Continental news to Pittsburgh readers on August 14. . . . For the President's message to Congress, December, 1846, Pittsburgh newspapers arranged for the National Road Stage Company (connecting with the Baltimore & Ohio at Cumberland) to rush the text pell-mell. The speech, delivered on December 8th, was printed in full in the papers of the 11th." E. Douglas Branch, "The Coming of the Telegraph to Western Pennsylvania," in Pennsylvania History, V (Jan. 1938), 23.
Thus it is clear that, while 1776 and 1790 are important politically, they are meaningless in any other particular. Some of the "typical" Pennsylvania characteristics had ceased before the Revolution; others continued well into the next century or are present even today.

Of all the factors that made colonial society what it was, the first one in the above list—the predominance of agriculture and the lack of industrialization—is without question the key. Colonial civilization was basically a farmers' civilization (as was true in all thirteen colonies). This agrarian aspect of Pennsylvania was not changed either in 1776 or in 1790. Industrialization received a boost from Jefferson's embargo, the War of 1812, and the tariff of 1816.

It is not until the 1840's that one begins to feel a new spirit when he hears about coal, iron, woolen industries, and protective tariffs. The Democratic party, composed to a large extent of farmers, in the 1840's began to lose elections to the Whigs with their industrial views. The Whigs were succeeded by the Republicans who carried the state in 1860 mainly because of a promise to industry that a high tariff would be forthcoming. That year, then, is a, perhaps the, great dividing line in the commonwealth's history. Up to that time Pennsylvania, in a sense, was still colonial; that is to say, agricultural. But in one generation a change had occurred; the farm outlook and ruralness that had characterized the state since its founding began to take a back seat, and has continued to do so up to the present. Economically speaking, there have been two great periods in the history of the commonwealth: (1) the agricultural and (2) the industrial. The line of demarcation is somewhere around 1860.

Although the census figures for 1860 are incomplete and do

4 Cf. Frederick Shriver Klein, Lancaster County 1841-1941 (Lancaster, Pa.), 1941, p. 2: "In Lancaster County, general farming had been prevalent since the days of the first settlers, and the county was as self-sufficient as it was possible for any section of the United States to be. . . . The Eighteen Forties marked the beginning of changes in agricultural methods, which for a century in Pennsylvania had been universally the methods of the frontier." Steel plows, cultivators, rakes, and harrows began to displace the old-style farm tools. See also Chapter II, called "The Busy Age 1851-61," in which the coming of iron and other manufacturing enterprises changed the old agricultural domination.

not give full statistics on the value of manufactured products in each state, there is nevertheless an appropriate correlation between the period in which the Republican party, with its industrial program, was coming into power in Pennsylvania and the period in which manufacturing was surpassing agriculture. Inasmuch as by the census of 1870, manufacturing was far ahead of agriculture in value of product ($711,894,344 to $183,946,027), it would appear that manufacturing first overtook agriculture somewhere around 1860, or even in 1850.

The era after the Civil War, with its high tariffs, big business, and labor problems, is as different in character from the previous era as could be. The central theme of Pennsylvania history is the way in which a commonwealth of yeoman farmers became a commonwealth of industrialists, city-dwellers, and labor unions.

This industrialization made of the old Pennsylvania a memory. Many of the other thirteen states went through a similar evolution; some did not. The causes for the differing experiences are varied; but the reason for the industrialization of Pennsylvania is clear, namely, its tremendous natural wealth. Some of it, like timber, was above ground; but most of it was under ground. The mineral resources of the state became the efficient cause of Pennsylvania's history during the second period. They explain the change from agriculturalism to industrialism, just as, per contra, in South Carolina, the lack of mineral wealth has meant the retention of agriculturalism. The key to Pennsylvania's history, then, in the modern period, is exploitation of its natural resources.

Perhaps no other state has been as much the fortunate child of luck as has Pennsylvania. Unknown to the Privy Councillors as they framed the charter, they were bestowing upon Penn an area which included more of the basic requisites for wealth and industry than that of any other colony. The recent tourist pamphlet which described Pennsylvania as having everything was not guilty of hyperbole. By luck Penn's father's debt had not

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*The figures for the entire country are as follows: In 1850 the value of manufactured products was $1,055,511,000 and of agricultural products, $994,000,000. But in 1860—perhaps because of the panic of 1857—manufactured products were worth $1,885,862,000 and agricultural products were worth $1,910,000,000. In all subsequent censuses manufactures have been far in the lead.
been paid; by luck Penn persuaded the King to pay it in a way that cost the King nothing; by luck the land between Maryland and New York was almost completely unoccupied. Penn got it, but never knew that it contained, under ground, practically everything that a modern industrial empire needs. Charles II’s requirement that the proprietor pay a fifth of any gold to be found seems ludicrous to us in the light of the untold wealth of a different kind that was later discovered. In his advertisements for prospective settlers, Penn always stressed the good earth. Before the Penns were deprived of their province, iron ore was in use in a small way; but when the radical revolutionary government paid the Penn heirs, the payment was for real estate. The underground riches were as yet undreamed of.

Mineral wealth is the greatness of Pennsylvania in the modern era. To prove this assertion, one need only observe what the commonwealth would have been had all the claims of other colonies and states been made good. Suppose Maryland had secured all the Baltimores argued for; suppose Virginia had made permanent its temporary control over the southwestern part of the state; and suppose Connecticut had won its lien on the northern corridor. Pennsylvania would now be a truncated pygmy, one of the least of the states in the Union, sans Philadelphia with its port, sans most of the trans-Allegheny west with its soft coal, oil, and steel industry, sans the anthracite region. Maryland, Virginia, and Connecticut would have been the industrial giants. But the Penn luck held, even though by the time all the claims were settled the Penn family had lost the province.

And so, with the coming of the Industrial Revolution to the United States, Pennsylvania had the wherewithal to become rich and great. Hard coal fed the industries of the eastern section;  

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8 See the "Genealogical Map of the Counties," compiled and prepared in the Bureau of Land Records of the Department of Internal Affairs, second edition, 1936. The map has been issued in later editions.

9 In 1839 an anthracite furnace for iron ore was constructed at Pottsville. The first successful one was established in Lehigh County in 1840. Soon others sprang up in the eastern part of the state, especially in Luzerne and Columbia Counties, which were Democratic strongholds. See Henry R. Mueller, *The Whig Party in Pennsylvania*, Volume CI of Studies in History, Economics and Public Law, edited by the faculty of political science of Columbia University (N. Y., 1922), p. 100.
iron ore, soft coal, and limestone made the great iron and steel industry of Pittsburgh; oil in the northwest provided wealth in another line. In the case of oil, the Penn luck can be felt by anyone who travels across the New York boundary into Bradford. There is hardly a well in New York, but over the line they dot the Pennsylvania landscape. When, in 1788-89, the boundary was run at the forty-second degree of latitude between the two states, the agreement neatly sliced off from New York both oil and coal.¹⁰

Needless to say, industrialization has affected every phase of the state's life. One of the most obvious is in politics. The Republican party became the annex of great industrial interests who financed the bosses in return for favorable legislation and other advantages. More recently, unionized labor (another product of industrialization) has become a powerful force in the Democratic party. When industry grew dominant, the legislature became even more notorious for corruption, if that could be, than before.¹¹ To outsiders, the great dynasty of bosses was for many

²⁸The state's leadership in some industrial fields has been slipping. Its primacy in the production of lumber passed long ago. Hegemony in oil travelled westward, although a thriving oil business still exists. Richer iron ore, located off Lake Superior, closed up most of the ore mines, but steel production has continued to be large. But even in the case of steel, Pennsylvania has been losing out. The 56% which in 1901 represented that portion of the finished steel of the nation which was produced in Pennsylvania had decreased by 1937 to 30%. In 1935 West Virginia dug more bituminous coal than did Pennsylvania. These facts have led to a relative decline in population as reflected in the loss of Representatives in the lower house of Congress after the censuses of 1930 and 1940. Hence the campaign which was organized in the later 1930's to keep industry in the state by promises of reduced taxes; and more recently the cries of anguish at Senator Patrick McCarran's suggestion of freezing war industries in the northeastern states.

¹²This is a serious charge and requires documentation. In 1867 Thaddeus Stevens, who was no saint himself, said: "It cannot be denied—and therefore need not be concealed—that for the last ten or fifteen years the Legislature of Pennsylvania has had a most unenviable reputation; corruption and fraud have been freely charged, and I fear too often proved, to have controlled their actions. No matter how honest when chosen, the atmosphere of Harrisburg seems to have pierced many of them with a demoralizing taint; a seat in the Legislature becomes an object of ambition, not for the per diem, but for the chance of levying contributions from rich corporations, and other large jobs. Corruption finally became so respectable as to seduce candidates for office boldly to bid for them, and to pay the cost for the delivery of the ballot. The very office of Senator is known to have been once bought with gold, and to have been trafficked for an offer on several occasions in exchange for the precious metal. Indeed, it has become proverbial that the longest purse is sure to win." Quoted by the Richmond Enquirer, Jan. 11, 1867. This was probably directed against Simon Cameron who had just defeated Stevens in the Legislature for the Senatorial toga.
years the symbol of Pennsylvania, somewhat after the fashion in
which Quakerism was the badge of the colony in its early days. The
tie-up of the dominant Republican party with industry after
1860 made the commonwealth in effect a one-party state until
1935.

Secondly, the coming of industry produced disorder and vio-

lence. This fact will not be doubted by anyone who recalls the
innumerable strikes and other labor troubles that became common
after the Civil War—in fact still are. But for the thirty or more
years previous to the Civil War there was an era of unsettled
conditions with more than the usual amount of disorder and vio-
lence. Historians who have dealt with the period from about
1830 to 1860 have sensed the fact, but have been somewhat at a
loss to explain it.

Turbulence in Pennsylvania during that period was frequent;
in fact, the state was a microcosm of the national macrocosm.
Outbreaks occurred against the Masons as early as 1829 in New
Berlin; bitter objections were made by Germans and farmers
against the free school law; civil strife almost broke out in the
Buckshot War; deadly riots between Native Americans and
Catholics took place in Philadelphia; bloody fights between Irish
and German laborers on the canals were not uncommon; and
slavery caused many troubles, of which the Christiana affair was

For further information on legislative corruption at Harrisburg, see Will-
liam A. Russ, Jr., “The Origin of the Ban on Special Legislation in the

Thus Jeannette P. and Roy F. Nichols in The Republic of the United
States: A History (two volumes; N. Y., 1942) entitle chapter XXI of
volume I, “Panic, Disorder, and Recovery.” One section of the chapter is
called “Disorder and Violence” and it includes the Caroline affair, the
Aroostook War, anti-Catholic riots, Nativism, opposition to the Mormons,
the murder of Lovejoy and other Abolition troubles, the “gag rule,” elec-
tion troubles in New Jersey, and the Buckshot War in Pennsylvania. Most
of these occurred in the 1830’s; but the next two decades saw more instances
of disorder. Thus the sectional dispute over slavery brought on such
events as Bloody Kansas, the attack on Sumner, and the John Brown Raid.
Actually, the Civil War was a culmination of all the violence of the pre-
vious thirty years.

Part of the folklore of Selinsgrove is the story of the way in which
Lafayette Lodge No. 194 was menaced by unfriendly persons and finally
had to change its meeting place, which was reached by a secret passage
way. The Tyler sat with Governor Snyder’s sword over his knees; he also
had handy a brace of pistols which Governor Snyder took from Mrs.
Carson when she tried to force him to sign a pardon for her paramour,
Smith. See Frederic A. Godcharles, Freemasonry in Northumberland &
but one. These are only the outstanding instances; a multitude of others, known only to local historians, can be found in their works.

There is a simple explanation for most if not all of the civil disturbance. The key to what was happening during this generation of instability is that new issues were coming before the people of Pennsylvania—and of the United States as well—and they did not know how to meet them or how to adjust to them. The issues were those inherent in a revolution from a society which was fundamentally agricultural to one which was fundamentally industrial. In a word, a cyclical change was taking place. Agriculturalism, which was being crowded out by a new industrial power, fought to retain its old domination. Business men and industrialists, needing better banks and banknotes, protection for their products from foreign competition, Federal aid to get transportation facilities, and legislation favorable to industry, organized against the older economic order which either knew not, or else did not like, United States banks, tariffs, interference in state rights, and all the rest of the paraphernalia of the burgeoning new industrial regime.

And so, Germans and farmers, disliking oaths and secrecy, supported Anti-Masonry—14—even though the Anti-Masonic leaders were soon joining the Whigs with their industrial program. Germans and farmers also vehemently criticized free public education because such a new-fangled thing was not needed in an agricultural economy. The numerous riots against Irish Catholics—15 were caused not only because Protestants disliked Romanism; but also because the Irish worked in industry, took jobs from older Americans, lived in cities, and did not like farming. The frequent conflicts

14 The reason why Anti-Masonry appealed to country people is not hard to see. It represented one of the fundamental tenets of the older farmers' America, namely, the inherent equality of all citizens before the law, before officials, and in making a living. Thaddeus Stevens, in his Anti-Masonic diatribes, charged that Masonry was creating a secret aristocracy of privilege because most public officials were Masons who then favored brother Masons as against non-members. He was opposed to the emergence of ranks and orders in a democracy. His ideas and those of most Anti-Masons were not essentially different from the accusations which had been made against the Society of the Cincinnati in a previous generation. See quotations from some of Stevens's Anti-Masonic speeches in James Albert Woodburn, The Life of Thaddeus Stevens (Indianapolis, 1913), pp. 14 ff.

15 For instance, the brawls between negro and Irish laborers in Philadelphia in 1842 when the militia had to be called out; and the turbulence between Native Americans and Irish in the Catholic district of Kensington (1843-44).
between slaveholders and members of the Underground Railway over fugitive blacks became common as soon as the growing laboring class was large enough and acute enough to see that slave labor was a great menace to free workers. Both Abolitionism and industrialization began seriously to develop in the 1830’s, at the very time when agrarianism began seriously to decline. In brief, the new economy, with its laboring class, mill towns, urbanism, protective tariff, and similar features, brought on considerable friction in its impact upon the existing agricultural society. The sparks that flew were numerous.

It is possible to show that friction occurred every time a new phase of the industrial system made its appearance. It is worth recalling just a few examples.

One of the earliest instances was connected with the canals, which, by the way, were desired by hinterland towns because industries would then arise. As the canals advanced into formerly isolated, farm areas, the impact between two phases of society made for trouble. There was of course no established labor supply, although the farmers roundabout were willing to help out when their own work was slack. Irish workers had to be brought in, and conflict often resulted when the two came into contact.

Cf. the words of Terence V. Powderly: “The anti-slavery agitation and the organization of the mechanics of the United States kept pace with each other; both were revolutionary in their character, and though the agitations differed in method, the ends in view were the same, viz.: the freedom of the men who worked.” In Thirty Years of Labor (1859-1889) (Columbus, Ohio, 1889), p. 30; cited by Charlotte Todes, in William H. Sylvis and the National Labor Union (N. Y., 1942), p. 16.

A pertinent example is the Lycoming riot of August, 1833. New York Irishmen, who had been imported to construct the Great Dam on the West Branch canal, got into a brawl with Germans who were boating the stone for the Dam from the other side of the river. The affair arose because an Irishman had raided a certain woman's apple orchard, and in the ruckus one of the sons of Erin was wounded. Then the Irish attacked the Germans and tore down their shanties. A company of militia was called out. Sixteen Irishmen were jailed in Williamsport, but the Germans escaped to the hills. See Clara M. Cassel, “Canal Construction Marked by Lively Happenings. Problems of Building Greatly Aggravated by Political Interference and Labor Disorders,” in Monthly Bulletin: Department of Internal Affairs [of Pennsylvania], March, 1940, p. 13.

An interesting item which shows the problems arising as agricultural areas were first invaded by canals is a letter to the Canal Commissioners in reference to the Juniata Division. Said the writer, in part: “Our Irishmen are gone and going away daily for fear of the Juniata sickness (a form of malaria); and the country hands are clearing out by dozens to Harvest. For five or six weeks, during the season of fun and frolick and hard work among the farmers, our energies will be completely penalized.” Loc. cit.
The early anthracite coal industry produced the same sort of friction. The novel and difficult problems that were introduced by the hard coal business included boom towns, riots between Irish and English laborers, unemployment, and strikes. Such strange, new developments fell like a blight upon a people who were still largely agricultural in their outlook and who were without experience in dealing with industrial controversies.

Perhaps better known, because of the research work of Giddens, is the story of the impact of the oil industry upon a former agricultural region. Sudden wealth, boom towns, labor troubles, and brawls caused difficult problems from the standpoint of law and order. The stories of Pithole and Coal Oil Johnny are perfect examples of what occurred when industrialism hit a community and jarred the people out of their older mores and traditions. It took time to learn techniques for grappling with such situations.

As was the case with canals, anthracite, and oil, so it was with railroads. The extension of railroads to Pittsburgh met objections from farmers who thought the new means of transportation would do away with horses and feed crops; and from substantial citizens of Pittsburgh who, protesting against the use of the streets for trains, dug up rails of the Pennsylvania Railroad on Penn Avenue. Draymen also opposed the use of the new railroad bridge over the Allegheny River, and so it was not until 1858 that unbroken bands of steel connected Pittsburgh with the East and the West.

The growing iron industry produced its share of conflicts. Working hours, running from eleven to fourteen hours a day (obviously copied from the farm) were disliked by laborers, and bitter strikes resulted in the Pittsburgh area between 1840 and 1860.

Thirdly, industrialization has had an important effect upon Pennsylvania leadership. Pennsylvania politics after 1790 had always been bitter and therefore destructive of leadership. Klein

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20 Paul Henry Giddens, The Birth of the Oil Industry (N.Y., 1938), especially chapters IX and X.
22 Ibid., pp. 222-27.
suggests that one reason why Pennsylvania has produced no Websters or Clays is that by the time a man has served as Governor his reputation is so besmirched that he is dead so far as national politics is concerned.  

The period from about 1830 to 1860, with its violence and civil disorder, was also a period of unstable party alignments with bitter and often close elections between Anti-Masons and Democrats, Whigs and Democrats, Know-Nothings and Democrats, Republicans and Democrats. The long tenure of the Democratic party was being challenged by various other parties and factions. The political instability of the era was highlighted by the greatest tidal wave in the history of the Pennsylvania Congressional delegations, when, in 1854, seventy-six per cent of the previous delegation was defeated.

In brief, industrialization, with its labor problems, mill towns, large cities, and protective tariff, simply exacerbated Pennsylvania factionalism. But it was a different kind of factionalism from that which obtained within the Democratic party during its period of domination in the state. The insinuation of industrial issues into the politics of the commonwealth created parties, like the Whigs and Republicans, which had tenets favorable to business and industry. Instead of factions within the Democratic party, each of which was out mainly for the spoils of office, there arose parties with programs. Soon the state became politically doubtful, and so received some notice in federal affairs, as will be noted shortly.

The way in which industrialism forced leaders in the Democratic party to trim their sails is shown by the tariff question in the middle 1840's. Hendrick B. Wright of Wilkes-Barre, later

29 Philip Shriver Klein, Pennsylvania Politics, 1817-1832: A Game Without Rules (Philadelphia, 1940), pp. 367-68. See also William E. Smith's review of this book in Pennsylvania History, VIII (July, 1941), pp. 255-56. In another study of Pennsylvania politics Klein quotes the report of the committee which was attempting to impeach Governor Findlay. The committee was able to get nowhere because witnesses on both sides were so involved in corruption they did not dare say anything for fear of incriminating themselves. Said the committee: "But mercenary parties, whose sole object is ... office, are the real bane of republican institutions. ... Unfortunately for the honor, as well as the peace, of Pennsylvania such parties have too often forced themselves into notoriety." "John Binns and the Impeachment of Governor William Findlay," in Northumberland County Historical Society Proceedings, XI [1939], pp. 51 ff.

permanent chairman of the Democratic national convention in 1844, told James Buchanan that Van Buren would not do as the presidential candidate because he was anti-tariff. Wright continued: “There is, Sir, a revolution in Penna., on the question of protective & discriminating duties . . . our creed must be tempered to the times or we will find in the end our party in this State will be prostrated.” In his annual message to the legislature in 1844, Governor David R. Porter, who, though a Democrat, owned several iron furnaces, came out for adequate protection of Pennsylvania’s industries or “our incalculable mineral deposits may lie useless for ages.” In the campaign between Polk and Clay, the tariff question was as important in Pennsylvania as were Texas and Oregon. Polk carried the state largely because he said he was for reasonable protection. The Democratic campaign cry was “Polk, Dallas, and the Tariff of 1842.” To show their sentiments, the Democrats in the legislature elected Simon Cameron to the United States Senate in 1845 only after getting his promise (not hard to secure) to sustain the tariff of 1842. When it became clear that Polk would support a low tariff bill, the Democrats of the state passed resolutions against it. The Pennsylvania delegation in the House fought bitterly to defeat the Walker Tariff; and, of the twelve Democrats in the delegation, David Wilmot alone supported the President and voted for the bill. When Pennsylvania’s own son, Vice President Dallas, cast the deciding vote in the Senate for the measure, the anger of Democrats knew no bounds. Temporarily, however, the low tariff did not depress prices; and so, the Democrats, taking heart, in due course dared to come out in defense of the Walker Tariff. In 1847 when the Whig nominee for Governor, James Irvin, demanded protection because he was interested in several iron furnaces in Center County, the Democrats hurled a number of epithets at him, including: “An Aristocratic Iron Master,” The Advocate of the Gettysburg Railroad!,” and “The Worshipper of the United States Bank!”

The way in which friction was created when industrialism began to creep into agricultural areas, thereby effecting changes in leadership, is a fascinating study. For instance, in the Berks congressional district the tariff of 1846 played a part in the

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This paragraph is based upon Henry R. Mueller, The Whig Party in Pennsylvania, pp. 100, 102-3, 115, 120, 123, 141.
elections of that year. The low-tariff people were in control of the Democratic convention and served notice on the Whigs that "they were fully able to conduct their own affairs, and wanted no interference or advice from that source or the railroad or the iron manufacturers in and about the borough of Reading." 26

Low-tariff Democrats continued, therefore, to elect clergymen and lawyers from the district; but the industrial forces were gaining. They got their chance in 1858 when high-tariff interests in the Democratic party denounced J. Glancy Jones for voting for the tariff of 1857 and elected John Schwartz, who campaigned in favor of a protective tariff. Schwartz, appropriately enough, was in the iron business. It is little wonder that the defeat of Jones was called a local revolution. 27

David Wilmot's sponsorship of his famous Proviso as a foil against his vote for the low tariff of 1846 is another case in point. The story has been known for some time. He was re-elected on the prestige arising from his connection with the Proviso, in spite of his low-tariff vote. As Stenberg says, the Pennsylvania tariff press then poured the vials of its wrath upon greater men—Buchanan, Dallas, and the "apostate Pennsylvanian, Walker." 28

The vials of wrath that were poured upon Buchanan were typical. Feeling that he had a chance for the presidential nomination in 1852, he wrote as follows: "In other States, they consider the honor of furnishing a President to the Union so great, that the prospect of it heals all divisions in the ranks of the Democracy. In Pennsylvania, however, one of the old thirteen which has never yet furnished a President this circumstance exasperates my enemies and calls forth greater exertions." 29

Pennsylvania did get two of its sons into high federal office during this period of instability. They were Dallas in the vice-presidency in 1845 and Buchanan in the presidency in 1857. The

26 Benjamin Alderfer Fryer, Congressional History of Berks (Pa.) District, 1789-1939 (Reading, Pa., 1939), p. 118. This was the first time in which railroads were mentioned in local politics in Berks County.
27 Ibid., p. 132 and passim.
29 James Buchanan to Col. Henry C. Eyer of Selinsgrove, Dec. 9, 1851. This is one of a packet of Buchanan letters formerly in the possession of Miss Agnes Selin Schoch of Selinsgrove, who has since presented them to the Wheatland Association.
doubtful alignment of the state in its party allegiance explains the two honors. It was worth while for the declining Democracy to pick a man now and then from Pennsylvania. Thus Buchanan was chosen as Democratic candidate in 1856, partly as a matter of political necessity; as it turned out, if Fremont had carried Pennsylvania and either Illinois or Indiana, the Democrats would have lost.

After 1860, when the industrial forces were securely in control and when the Republicans were dominant, the state received little notice because its electoral vote went Republican anyway. And when it did get a native son as a candidate for president—Hancock in 1880—it turned him down. Since 1860 the brains of Pennsylvania have gone into industry and business. Giants like Carnegie, the Mellons, and Wanamaker either stayed out of politics completely, or entered politics only after making their marks elsewhere. Pennsylvania's industrial leaders have normally limited their political activities to contributing to campaign chests, rather than to seeking office. The people of the commonwealth have paid a fearful price for this condition of affairs because statesmanship has been left to lesser men—men who, as Thaddeus Stevens said, all too often could be bought.

Fourthly, industrialization has changed the make-up of the population. The well-known diversity during the colonial period and thereafter arose out of the desire of immigrants for farms. Poverty-stricken Germans and Scots-Irish, hungry for land, increased the agrarian character of the colony. During the late agricultural era, as has been seen, the canals, railroads and industries brought in Irish Catholics who did not like farming. After the Civil War the diversities multiplied. Employers, needing cheap labor, imported South and Central Europeans by the boatload. Soon Pennsylvania, which had been mainly North European in its composition had its "Polacks," its "Hunkies," and its "Wops." Most of these settled in cities, worked in mills, mined coal. Need for laborers in World War I and afterwards induced thousands of negroes to migrate from the South. Penn's "greene Country Towne" of Philadelphia has become a great urban center, with its ghettos, tenements, and negro wards. The mixture of na-

*This problem is further analyzed in William A. Russ, Jr., "What Is the Matter with Pennsylvania?" in Pennsylvania History, II (Jan. 1935), 17-35.
tionalities in the steel towns around Pittsburgh and in the coal region is well known. With the influx of more nationalities, religious diversity has continued.  

Fifthly, industrialization has made Pennsylvania society more complex. The simple, compact, agrarian economy which continued long after the gaining of independence was progressively made more complicated as better transportation facilities and growing industries produced new and trying problems. During the agricultural age the farmer lived a simple life, grew most or all that he and his family consumed, and believed in local freedom. With industry came the highly technical and intricate aspects of what we call modern industrial-urban civilization: cities with all their headaches from corrupt government to juvenile delinquency; wealth and aristocracy vis-à-vis chronic unemployment; bureaucracy and centralized government; and many more of which a farmers’ community never dreamed.

Not the least difficult phase of the developing complexity which faces the historian emerges from improved transportation. As early as the building of the Cumberland Road, the old-time isolation began to fade in a small way. Those migrants who crossed the Alleghenies to the forks of the Ohio and then floated down that river to build up new states in the Northwest, are, in a sense, part of Pennsylvania history. They make the history of Pennsylvania more than merely the story of a geographic area; it is Pennsylvania as colonizer and the mother of states. Canals and railroads increased this complexity. The Pennsylvania Railroad, for instance, is a proud part of the state’s history; but the historian can hardly stop, say, at the Ohio boundary, for the railway has expanded over many states. The initiative of Pennsylvanians in a Pennsylvania corporation has carried into Michigan, Missouri, and even into New England.

Still another phase of the complexity concerns itself with such metropolitan areas as those around Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.


As a matter of fact those Pennsylvanians who, during colonial times, drifted southward into the Valley of Virginia are also part of Pennsylvania history. The red barn of the Pennsylvania German is still extant in that section.
Certainly the historian cannot give a true picture of the influence of the state if he stops at boundaries, for the metropolitan environs of Philadelphia spill over into New Jersey and into Delaware; and those of Pittsburgh into Ohio and West Virginia. People of adjacent states buy their goods and have jobs in Pennsylvania, but do not live there. Can they be neglected in assessing the influence of the state?

This article has attempted to suggest some of the underlying forces that have shaped the history of Pennsylvania. Surely there are many more, and it is hoped that the generalizations herein expressed will lead others, perhaps in agreement and perhaps in disagreement, to explore further into the meaning of the state's past. If a summary for the thesis that has been presented is needed it is this: The central theme of Pennsylvania history is an evolution from agriculturalism to industrialism; from ruralness to urbanism; from simplicity to complexity.