DAVID WILMOT, THE STATESMAN AND POLITICAL LEADER

By JAMES H. DUFF
Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

SOME one has said that "an institution is the lengthened shadow of a man." A man in turn has among his distinguishing components something of the texture and fibre and character of the community where he lives, and of the people among whom he was reared and where he made his home.

David Wilmot was distinctly a product of this northeastern sector of Pennsylvania—at a time when the region still retained many of the features and habits of the pioneer days.

Like many of the men who shaped the destiny of this nation in the days leading up to the Civil War, Wilmot early showed a preference and inclination for politics. A splendid presence, an engaging personality, an ability to express himself clearly and forcibly, and a keen interest in public affairs led naturally to a participation in politics.

He was only twenty when he was admitted to the bar. Thereafter he began immediately the kind of activity that led to political notice and advancement. He made himself available as a speaker on important occasions, served on party committees, became a delegate to party conventions, made campaign speeches supporting party candidates and generally brought himself, by his activities, to the attention of the party leaders and the public.

By 1841, when twenty-seven years old, he held his first public office—as assistant to the Superintendent of the Tioga Line of the North Branch Canal Company. By September of that year he had his first important party office—Chairman of the standing committee of his party in Bradford County; equivalent to what is now designated as the county chairman.

1 An address delivered Sept. 24, 1946, at the Wilmot Proviso Centennial sponsored by the Bradford County Historical Society.
He thus had a thorough apprenticeship in routine political work, and early established a solid foundation for a future political career.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when he was only thirty years of age he was rewarded for his activity and proficiency by being tendered the unanimous nomination for Congress both by the Bradford County and the district party conventions.

At that time the Wilkes-Barre *Banner* made the following brief appraisal of him:

This rapid promotion of so young a man has not been the result in Mr. Wilmot's case of accident, for he is personally known to a large majority of his constituency. It has not been the result of intrigue, for he is known to be above and beyond the practice of the low expedients of the demagogue. Nor has his rise been the off-spring of family influence and family combinations pushing, as is too often the case, mediocrity into places; for, within our knowledge, Mr. Wilmot has not a relative within the district. To abilities the most brilliant and solid, there is added in Mr. Wilmot's character a thorough, straightforward fixedness of principle that never swerves or falters—that abides the issue whether for good or ill—whether in prosperity or defeat. It is these qualities—that have endeared Mr. Wilmot to his constituents, and recommended him, while comparatively so young, to their affection and confidence.

David Wilmot took his seat in the House of Representatives at Washington at the opening of the first session of the 29th Congress, December 1, 1945. His early activity was not noteworthy, but he kept actively in touch with his constituents, carefully studied the legislative process, and served on several important committees.

Wilmot's independence and fearlessness were demonstrated for the first time by his stand for the Tariff of 1846, amending and lowering the Tariff of 1842. Pennsylvania was already an industrial state, and most of its people favored a tariff which would protect its rising industries. The state legislature passed resolutions, and the newspapers of the commonwealth carried editorials, urging the entire Pennsylvania delegation in Congress to vote against the new tariff. Wilmot, however, still had faith in the
low tariff principles of his party, and stood firm, when all the
other Democratic Congressmen from Pennsylvania voted against
the new bill.

Wilmot's vote for the tariff on July 3, 1846 aroused a storm of
criticism in Pennsylvania. Governor Porter was quoted as ac-
counting for Wilmot's support in his home district on the ground
that "in that region the only things the people manufactured were
shingles, and they stole the lumber to make them, and the only
protection they wanted was protection from the officers of the
law." This is a statement that I presume, in that era, shows that
angered politicians could be irresponsible then as now.

The Harrisburg Telegraph said:

This recreant son who basely betrayed Pennsylvania's
interests and voted with the other free traders should be
banished from her territory. His infamous treachery
should be revenged by disowning and turning him upon
the South for support.

In future years this vote of Wilmot on the tariff question came
back to haunt him when he had become a leader and founder
of the Republican Party. As matters turned out it was politically
an error in the overall long run picture. At the time, however, his
vote expressed the views of the people in his own district.

Nothing, however, in Wilmot's first days in the Congress sug-
gested that he would be the author and introducer of a contro-
versial measure which would shake the nation to its foundations
and determine the course of national politics for a generation.

His prominence and fame came out of a situation that ap-
peared to be a very casual one. Soon after the outbreak of the
Mexican War, President James K. Polk asked Congress for
$2,000,000 in order to aid in negotiation of peace. It was generally
understood that the President wished to annex New Mexico and
California. On August 8, 1846, the so-called "Two Million Bill"
was introduced in the House of Representatives. David Wilmot,
who had sounded out and gained the support of other Northern
Democrats, rose to introduce his famous amendment to the bill.

Following are the words of the famous proviso:

Provided, That, as an express and fundamental con-
dition to the acquisition of any territory from the Re-
public of Mexico by the United States, by virtue of any treaty which may be negotiated between them, and to the use by the Executive of the moneys herein appropriated, neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist in any part of said territory, except for crime whereof the party shall first be duly convicted.²

This bill, with the Wilmot Proviso, passed the House of Representatives, but the Senate adjourned before a vote could be taken on it.

After Wilmot's re-election in 1846 and his return to Washington, the Proviso came to life again.

In reply to pressure and charges that he was betraying his party, Wilmot told Congress in a speech on February 8, 1946:

I am not one of those who move without reflection, or change without reason. In the discharge of my duty, I have stood alone among my delegation on this floor. If the delegation choose to change their action, I shall not shrink from the responsibility of again standing alone, even in opposition to the wishes of that Administration, the general policy of which I approve. Intrenched behind the right, neither "powers nor principalities—things present nor things to come" shall change my purpose nor swerve me from my object. The history of my public life will be brief. The page upon which it is written shall bear the record that I acted the part of a fearless Representative; that I took my position upon the great National questions after mature deliberation, and maintained it with the firmness and consistency of a man.

Now the Proviso loomed up as a main topic of public discussion throughout the nation—a major issue of national politics.

One of the leading magazines of the nation said:

... the Wilmot proviso has been discussed in Congress, in the newspapers, on the stump, at the street corners, all over the country, until David Wilmot's name is now mentioned more frequently than those of the candidates for the Presidency—because it stands wedded to a great principle of legislation.

² Italics by author.
Wilmot's action had projected the problem of slavery extension into the forefront of all the problems before the nation, and it was to remain there until it was settled, not in the halls of Congress, but on the bloody battlefields of the Civil War.

It was inevitable that the importance of this issue would cause a fundamental cleavage in the party to which Wilmot belonged, and so it did. The Free Soil Democrats in the North were becoming organized almost into the status of a separate party.

In the thirty-first Congress, the Free Soil Democrats, including Wilmot, took their seats for the first time as a separate party. They numbered only a dozen, but others of the Northern Congressmen openly or secretly sympathized with their views.

At that time Wilmot in support of his position stated publicly,

I will cheerfully stand by any organization established for the advancement of these principles, but if that is not enough, if it be further required that I shall submit in humble and slavish acquiescence to any organization based upon, and intended to promote the one object of slavery extension, then set me aside at once—I will never sustain any such organization, but will do all in my power to break it down.

The battle for the principle of the Wilmot Proviso continued in Congress, and the attacks upon Wilmot in his home state and district became even more determined. Many of his associates in local politics fell away from him, as they felt he was "under a cloud," and feared for their own political futures.

In 1850, as he was again facing reelection, the undercover campaign against Wilmot in his home district gained in effectiveness, and while the Bradford delegates firmly supported Wilmot, both the Tioga and Susquehanna County delegations opposed him. The last two counties named James Lowrey to oppose Wilmot. This meant two tickets in the field. Accordingly, it was arranged by the party leaders that both Wilmot and Lowrey should withdraw in favor of a third candidate. While Wilmot withdrew, the district convention passed a resolution endorsing the "bold, unflinching manner in which the Honorable D. Wilmot has advocated" the Proviso. To all intents and purposes Wilmot was thereby apparently eliminated from the political scene. But the issues raised by the
Proviso he had advocated were beyond any of the concepts of the politicians, and it was inevitable that the man who had taken such a firm and courageous stand in favor of the great issue that came more and more to affect fundamentally the whole American scene would not be lost sight of in this crisis.

Following the compromise of 1850, which admitted California as a free state, and the introduction by Senator Douglas in 1854 of the Kansas-Nebraska measures, repealing the Missouri Compromise, it became clear that the only possible solution was the creation of a new party.

On August 8, 1855, "a large and spirited meeting of persons from all parties and from ten different counties of the Commonwealth, held in the city of Reading" called for a convention "in the city of Pittsburgh, on Wednesday, the 5th day of September next, to organize a Republican Party whose object shall be to place all branches of government actively on the side of Liberty."

Wilmot immediately threw his active support to the new party. He spoke at mass meetings throughout his district, and addressed a Republican convention at Towanda on August 26, which sent ten delegates to the State Convention. The Pittsburgh State Convention named the first Republican State Executive Committee, and appointed David Wilmot the State Chairman.

On January 26, 1856, Wilmot joined the state chairmen of four other states in calling an informal convention to organize the party on a national basis and to provide for a nominating convention. This preliminary convention was held at Pittsburgh on February 22, 1856, and provided for the calling of a National Republican Convention to meet at Philadelphia on June 17 of that year, and appointed a National Executive Committee of one member from each state. David Wilmot was the Pennsylvania member.

The first Republican National Convention was called to order in Musical Fund Hall, Philadelphia, on June 17, 1856. David Wilmot became the chairman of its platform committee, and as such was largely responsible for the first Republican Party platform. On June 18 he presented it to the convention, beginning with the following phrases:

This Convention of Delegates, assembled in pursuance of a call addressed to the people of the United States
without regard to past political differences or divisions who are opposed to the repeal of the Missouri compromise; to the policy of the present Administration; to the extension of slavery into free territory; in favor of the admission of Kansas as a free state; of restoring the action of the Federal Government to the principles of Washington and Jefferson....

Time limitations prevent the interesting recitation and analysis of the balance of Wilmot's career, but enough has been recited to make clear that while he understood and was aided by the experience of the routine of politics, he nevertheless always acted in a crisis not as a politician but as a statesman—a fearless exponent of what he believed to be the right, an intrepid and courageous advocate of whatever the course of right dictated, irrespective of any personal advantages or considerations.

Upon his death in 1868, E. O. Goodrich, editor of the Bradford Reporter, said this of him:

Mr. Wilmot was not a politician in the ordinary and vulgar acceptation of the term... in the ordinary intrigues of party leaders and the movements of party machinery he had a great contempt. In the principles underlying political organizations, he was greatly interested. Instead of forming combinations he relied upon the honesty and intelligence of the people. Honest and sincere himself, he believed that the masses were equally so, and when attacked he went boldly and confidently to the people in school houses and churches for the cause of equal rights. His trust in the voters was repaid by the confidence and regard they had for him as evidenced by many a hard fought battle. No man was ever so firmly entrenched in the hearts of the people as David Wilmot.

He was one of the great Americans at a time when destiny was writing the future of this great nation. It is an honor to speak of him here in the community where he lived, and where he lies buried under the shadow of his native hills.