THE SAMUEL J. RANDALL PAPERS

BY THOMAS R. ADAMS*

THE papers of Samuel Jackson Randall, Pennsylvania politician-extraordinary, have long eluded historians. Today they are in the University of Pennsylvania Library. They arrived, as do so many things, as the result of something that had absolutely nothing to do with them.

Two and a half years ago the Library published a catalogue of a very fine exhibition on Benjamin Franklin. It was one of the activities associated with the celebration of our bicentennial. During those hectic days of preparation someone suggested that we send a copy of the catalogue to Mrs. Susan R. Bacon of Goshen, New York. This lady had apparently been the assistant to our librarian, Morris Jastrow, in 1903 when we purchased our collection of Franklin papers. To this day I cannot remember who made the suggestion, but a catalogue went off to Goshen and the whole matter was promptly forgotten. Sometime that following summer, when most of us were taking a well deserved vacation, Mrs. Bacon came to the library for a visit. She had not been a passive bystander when the Franklin Papers arrived. Indeed, she had had a good deal to do with their purchase. Through ignorance we had failed to mention her in the catalogue, and she had come to chide us gently for the omission. In the course of her conversation with my assistant, Mrs. Neda Westlake, Mrs. Bacon mentioned that she was the daughter of a former Philadelphia Congressman named Samuel J. Randall, and that she still had her father’s papers in Goshen. The name rang a bell in the back of Mrs. Westlake’s mind so that she remembered to mention Mrs. Bacon’s visit when the fall term started. Soon the library and the history department were in touch with Goshen and, after numerous telephone calls and two trips, the papers arrived on the University of Pennsylvania campus.

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It is a generally accepted tradition that in the years following the Civil War American politics reached a low point in our national history. The major figures of the time were not, it is felt, to be found in Washington but among the great and growing industries of the country. Yet had the national government not had a policy which actively supported business its growth would have been badly hampered. The political figures who played important roles in this relation between government and industry were engaging and fascinating people, and among them Samuel Jackson Randall was a major figure.

Born in 1828, Randall was by inheritance a Whig, but his family had been close friends of James Buchanan and in 1858 Randall entered the Pennsylvania State Senate as a Democrat. In 1863 he was elected to the House of Representatives in Congress, where he was to remain until his death in 1890. Representing the river wards of Philadelphia, he was the only member of his party to be returned regularly to Congress by Pennsylvania in that twenty-seven year period.

During his early years in Washington, Randall kept very quiet mastering parliamentary techniques and watching the Republicans. Then, when Congress met in December of 1865, he stepped forward as one of the leaders of about forty Democrats who opposed the excesses of Republican leadership under Thaddeus Stevens and gave their support to the reconstruction policies of President
Johnson. Randall's skillful use of his knowledge of House rules to oppose Republican legislation earned for him, by 1871, the leadership of his party in the House and the Chairmanship of the Democratic National Committee. With the corruption of the Grant administration, he took a lead in the demand for retrenchment and reform, so that when the Democrats gained control of the House in the last half of Grant's second term, Randall was the logical choice for Speaker. Unfortunately, however, he believed in a protective tariff which alienated the southern and western members of the party, and Michael C. Kerr of Indiana was elected. Nevertheless, Kerr's death within the year left Randall as the only logical choice and he was elected Speaker in December of 1876.

The principal order of business of this Session of Congress was the disputed Hayes-Tilden election, and Randall's conduct during this difficult period made the country realize that in him they had a political figure of the finest kind. The Election Committee turned out to be a strictly partisan group with the Republicans having a regular majority of one. The only way that the Democratic House of Representatives could block the election of Hayes was to make the count of the electoral vote impossible through dilatory tactics and thus leave the country without a President on inauguration day. This Randall would not allow. A master of dilatory procedures himself, he insisted that the count be carried out. The pressures that he was under and the chaos that reigned in the House have been vividly described many times. At one point members were dashing about, yelling, and climbing on desks. With cool firmness Randall brought order. His admonition is still famous:

If gentlemen forget themselves, it is the duty of the Chair to remind them that they are members of the American Congress.

Randall remained the Speaker through the forty-fifth and forty-sixth Congresses. To the position he brought an authority that foreshadowed the power of Reed and Cannon. His most outstanding contribution during these years was made as the chairman of the committee to codify the rules. The welter of amendments that had been added to the last rules passed in 1860 made it at times almost impossible to conduct business. The work of the committee,
which was adopted without change, prepared Congress for the expanded duties which lay ahead.

In the forty-seventh Congress the Democrats lost control of the House, but by 1884 they were again in the majority. Once more Randall lost the speakership because of his position on the tariff, but the next two years were to bring him his greatest power, for he was made the Chairman of the Appropriations Committee. Under his leadership, this committee controlled almost all bills that involved the appropriation of money, and Randall, remembering all too well the waste and extravagance of some of the Republican Congresses, did not hesitate to pigeonhole measures of which he disapproved. Indeed, to a large extent he controlled the legislation that Congress could consider.

This concentration of power brought protests from many sides. The *Washington Post* claimed that Congress had too long "consisted of the Senate and Sam Randall." With the election of Grover Cleveland, Randall received complete control of the Pennsylvania patronage, and he wielded that power with all the skill of a professional politician.

Within two years, however, Randall's influence in national politics began to decline. In 1888 he made a fatal mistake by opposing President Cleveland on the Mills Tariff. When the President withdrew his support, Randall's power in the national Democratic organization, as well as in that of Pennsylvania, began to go. About the same time he developed cancer of the stomach, and in the last year of his life he was confined to his bed. Yet at the time of his death, racked with a pain that only those who have suffered it can know, Randall was at the service of his party. When the Republicans returned to power in 1890 under Harrison, the former Speaker took his oath in his home, a few minutes walk from the Capitol. The Democrats were again in the minority, and they badly needed the services of this man who had led them through their lean years—but within a few months he was dead.

What the University has acquired, then, are the papers of a leading figure in the Democratic party during that era when it was fighting to regain its influence in the governing of the nation. Sam Randall, more than any other man, personifies his party in that struggle. He was the only prominent Democrat to be con-
stantly on the national scene from Lincoln to Cleveland, and under his leadership the party was by no means powerless. His knowledge of the House rules and his grasp of parliamentary tactics made it possible for the Democrats to temper, and on occasion even block, Republican legislation. Yet, strangely enough, historians and biographers have published relatively little about Randall. The most complete sketch of him is to be found in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, and there the author, Albert V. House, relied almost entirely upon biographies of contemporaries like Blaine and Cleveland, and on studies of the House of Representatives. The only full dress study is an unpublished Master's thesis by Sidney I. Pomerantz written for Columbia University in 1932.¹ Mr. Pomerantz did a superb job of combing the secondary works, memoirs of contemporary figures, party and government publications, and newspapers. The result is a fine general outline of Randall's public life as drawn from the printed sources, but it has only scratched the surface.

The size of the Randall Papers alone gives some idea of the work yet to be done on this man. They arrived from Goshen in fourteen large wooden cases, apparently the same ones in which they had been originally packed. During the past year we have sorted the collection in a general way and can now make a report on what the prospective user will find in terms of bulk, pointing out some possible areas of investigation which the material suggests.

¹ *Samuel Jackson Randall: Protectionist-Democrat.*
The largest part of the papers consists of letters written to Randall between 1844 and 1890. They are now arranged chronologically in 220 manuscript boxes. Their density corresponds closely to Randall’s rise and fall as a political figure. There is about one box per year until 1875, when he became nationally prominent for his defeat of a Force Act. From this time on, the correspondence fills at least 10 boxes a year, and in 1885, the first year of Cleveland’s administration, it fills 25 boxes.

In going through the papers, we found that Randall had attempted to classify certain parts of his correspondence under such headings as “Patronage 1883-87” and “3rd Session 46th Congress.” Where we came across such groupings, they have been preserved. In addition to the manuscripts there is a large mass of printed matter: pamphlets, drafts of bills, newspapers, and other ephemeral material. All of this bears directly on Randall’s activities and is being arranged so that it can be used in conjunction with the rest of the collection. Although the job of processing the papers is still far from complete, they can now be used if one is willing to work with the rough year-by-year arrangement.

The Samuel J. Randall Papers provide a body of rich source material which offers a point of departure for a number of lines of investigation. First of all there is the biography. The papers, of course, are but one side of Randall’s correspondence and the other would have to be sought among the papers of most of the important men of the period. The Grover Cleveland, Samuel J. Tilden, and Jeremiah Black manuscripts all contain a large number of Randall letters. In the Randall Collection itself, most of the personal biographical material is to be found in the years before 1875, and it consists almost entirely of family letters. One particularly interesting series is the correspondence from his brother, Bob Randall, who apparently acted as his political agent in Philadelphia—keeping tabs on the doings of the local Democrats as well as on family matters. The correspondence from the later years, however, seems to be almost entirely official, and deals with affairs connected with Randall’s work as a Representative and a Democrat.

There are also two corollary fields of investigation which the papers strongly suggest. They are studies of the Democratic Party
on both the national and on the state level during the Randall era. Sam Randall was first of all a Pennsylvanian. As a member of the only branch of our national government to which Pennsylvania sent popularly elected members, he felt strongly the duty of representing the whole state, not just his own district. To do this, he built an effective political machine. At the height of his power there were a large number of Randall Clubs that sported a large blue silk badge with gold tassels. From these Clubs and from the local leaders, Randall received a constant stream of reports on developments in the state. His papers are filled with letters telling him the size, strength, and activities of the Democratic party at home. An understanding of the operation of a minority party's machinery might throw into relief many of the hidden factors that control the operation of a two party system of government.

Randall's place in the national scene played a large part in determining the role that the Democratic party was to play during those years when the nation was first readjusting itself to the complexities of the new urban-industrial economy. He represented a manufacturing state in a party which had traditionally stood for the interests of the farmer and for a philosophy of local self government. His position on the question of the tariff and money was often the despair of his colleagues in Congress, but they could not ignore him. He was nominated for the presidency in two National Conventions, and was constantly being called outside his state to present the Democratic case to the American people. Throughout his correspondence you find letters that reveal his power in the national party. People from the midwest and far west were constantly writing to gain his support for their interests. An understanding of Randall's place in councils of his party is essential to a comprehension of the adjustment of the Democratic party to the new America.

These are but three of the more obvious uses to which the Randall Papers can be put. Randall was so important on both the state and national levels that he provides an entry into either field. However, out of the Randall Papers there cascades a mass of information in yet another era of our history. This is the story of political patronage. Only one broad study has ever been made
Yet the power to provide government jobs was the life blood of the political parties of the nineteenth century. When Cleveland became President in 1885, there was only the slightly effective Pendleton Act between the spoils of office and the job-hungry Democrats. The turnover was enormous. In return for his support in the National Convention, Randall was given absolute control over the Pennsylvania patronage. He was deluged with demands, requests, entreaties, and prayers. There were men to be put out and men to be put in. There was this interested group that wanted this man appointed and there was another group that didn't. However, Randall was an old hand at dispensing patronage. While Speaker he had had a number of jobs to fill. Throughout his Congressional career, hardly a day passed without a letter requesting that he use his influence in one direction or another. Much of this correspondence must have been very dreary stuff, but every once in a while a bit of sunshine works its way through. The following letter should have made one day a much gayer one for Sam Randall.

Washington, D. C., June 19, '78

To Hon. Samuel J. Randall:—

Dear Sir: I am an “interesting young man” from the Fourth Congressional District of Philadelphia, and I am not happy. I have a Sweetheart—an “interesting young lady”—and we are desirous of entering into a legal partnership for the laudable purpose of increasing the Democratic Majority in your district. This is well, as far as it goes. But my prospective Mother-in-law interposes an “objection,” on the ground, that I am not “relevant” to her daughter, for the reason that my income is disgustingly infinitesimal—in short, to use the crusty old lady’s italic language, my present Salary “would not Sustain a feminine cat decently.” Now, Sir, what’s to be done? Am I to stand aside, and allow Some Republican Snoosen, who happens to fraudulently hold a fat position, to come to the front, and gobble up “my girl,” and eventually train up a brood of voters in the heterodox political faith? Perish the thought! I’ll turn Communist first, and Support my “lady love” by loafing around bar-rooms and lamenting the ingratitude of republics.

Who am I? You ask. I am a Free Communion Locofoco Democrat, by birth, training, and inclination. Born in New York, raised in Philadelphia, and a cosmopolitan in every Sense of the word.

C. R. Fish, Civil Service and Patronage. N. Y., 1905.
That is to Say, I do not believe that any Section of our country has a title-deed for raising good men or scoundrels. It is an even thing from Maine to Texas, or from New York to California. In regard to politics, I consider the whole business a game, in which two or more parties engage to Struggle for a big “pot.” It is not so much a question of principle as it is one of profit.

In regard to my antecedents, I need only refer to the fact that my male progenitor was a lusty member of the “old Moya” Hose Company, and for his enthusiasm in Sustaining the reputation of “the gang,” he was frequently entertained at the expense of the city—in jail. That’s his history. My good old Mother was a consistent Friend, or Quakeress. That tells her history.

As to my personal claims on your influence to enable me to contribute a ten-dollar note to Some Minister who has the authority to make two hearts beat as one, I need only mention that I was at one time well known to “Alderman” McMullin, Col. Thomas Fitzgerald (the coming Governor of Pennsylvania—A.D. 1976) and his Six European Sons, and his gigantic newspaper, The Item: not forgetting “Coal Oil Johnny,” and other Philadelphia lunatics too numerous to mention. I might allude to the fact that it always afforded me pleasure to vote early and often for you and the straight ticket, Etc.; but this is unnecessary, after stating that I am a personal friend of “Kurnel” Thomas Fitzgerald and his Six European Sons.

As to qualifications for a Clerkship in the Pension or Some other Bureau (which is what I need to enable me to assist in increasing the census), I am au fait. My original occupation was that of a type-erector, but I have drifted into various pursuits. I am considered a reliable third baseman; a fair hard-Shell Baptist preacher; play a steady game of poker; can write Machine poetry or Star-Spangled banner Speeches; have played Hamlet on two occasions for “one night” only, by particular request; and have been in jail for assault and battery.

Now, Sir (or, Mr. Speaker), this is my case. It remains for you to decide whether I shall enjoy the unspeakable felicity of inviting my prospective Mother-in-law to go to hell, or by refusing my petition, give her cause to pronounce my aspirations in the direction of her daughter not “relevant” by about $100 per month.

Remember, my friend, that life is short and fleeting, and that the good that men do in their lifetime is more lasting than monuments of marble or brass—or words to that effect.

My girl desires me to add that she is just as good a Democrat as Vinnie Ream is, and that the chances of her becoming the Mother of Democrats, with my aid, are far more in her favor than the lady who makes stone babies.

In conclusion, I will remind you that I am the man who applied to you, about two years ago, for employment as a Printer in the
Government office. In reply to the said application, you informed me that, owing to the fact of your denouncing Mr. Clapp as a wasteful officer, you could not ask a favor at his hands. This answer satisfied me, and led me to think you would if you could. But now, Mr. Clapp is among the men who were, and is numbered with the vast majority—of "outs." So if you cannot marry me off as a $100-clerk, see what you can do for me in the Government Printing Shop. At present, I am a Serf on the Daily Post of this city—engaged as Proof-reader. If I don't soon find an opportunity of earning my daily bread in the daytime, and be released from my present condition of Slavery, the District Commissioners will have to increase the Police force of this city.

Hoping that this will awaken a fellow-feeling in your breast, and that you have both the will and the power to aid us (my girl wishes to be included).

I am,
Respectfully Yours,
John Foster,
Daily Post,
Washington, D. C.

Formerly of 107 Union st., Philadelphia.

Unfortunately, Randall only noted on the back of the letter "Ans. June 22nd/78." It would be nice to know how the courtship came out.