TERENCE V. POWDERLY

TERENCE V. POWDERLY: POLITICIAN
AND PROGRESSIVE MAYOR OF
SCRANTON, 1878-1884

By Vincent J. Falzone

TERENCE Vincent Powderly was a pioneer in the American labor union movement. Between 1879 and 1893 he served as the leader of the Knights of Labor, the foremost labor organization of the age. Though his labor activities occupied almost three-quarters of his attention and effort, between 1878 and 1884 he also served as mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania. He was the city's first three-term mayor and also earned a position of influence in Luzerne and Lackawanna county political circles.

Powderly's early political activities provide some insights into his subsequent career as a labor leader. As a city and county politician, he displayed a genuine concern for the plight of his fellow workers, a feeling which moved him to devote more than thirty years of his life to the alleviation of their ills. Yet, as always, Powderly was a cautious and temperate reformer. Unlike some of his more zealous labor allies, he recognized that some accommodation with the business interests and their Democratic and Republican city council representatives was necessary in order to carry out his campaign pledges. So too, as a labor leader, Powderly's conciliatory approach often assuaged a hostile press and business community but earned for him the contempt of uncompromising members of the Knights of Labor.

Similarly, his natural preoccupation with all aspects of the task before him, as well as his disinclination to delegate authority, would bode well for him as a city official but not as a labor leader. He was a man of administrative and organizational talents, but one who often preoccupied himself with petty details as well as important matters. Thus he was able singlehandedly to lay the foundation for the establishment of a modern and

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efficient city government for this twelve-year-old community of 45,000 inhabitants. In 1886, however, when the Knights of Labor reached a membership of over 700,000 workers, his attempt to handle personally all labor matters, from trivial membership correspondence to important strike negotiations, proved to be an impossible task. Finally, the highly sensitive Powderly incurred deep personal wounds as a result of his participation in Pennsylvania political contests. His political skill and intense ambition at times caused him to associate with politicians whom he personally detested. These crises of conscience, as well as the scars of battle acquired in numerous city and county contests, influenced his subsequent withdrawal from elective office and his reluctance to involve the Knights of Labor in partisan political activity.

Powderly was born on January 22, 1849, in Carbondale, Pennsylvania, a small community fifteen miles north of Scranton. His parents emigrated from Ireland in 1826 and were among the first settlers of the Carbondale coal mining area. Terence attended the local public schools for six years, and at the age of thirteen he took a job in the shop of the Delaware and Hudson Canal and Railroad Company. He began as a switch tender, later became a car examiner, and finally completed a three-year apprenticeship in the machinist trade in the shops of the Delaware and Hudson.

In 1869 the young man moved to Scranton where he secured employment in the locomotive shop of the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad Company. Soon thereafter, he joined the Machinists' and Blacksmiths' International Union and embarked on a long and eventful career in the field of organized labor. A short time later he was elected president of his local union. In 1872, upon completion of his term, his colleagues named him secretary of the group, a post which he held for the next eight years. Here for the first time, Powderly demonstrated a


2 Powderly to John E. Barrett, January 15, 1889, Terence V. Powderly letter books, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Catholic University of America (CUA).

3 Rochester *Advocate and Mail*, December 17, 1882, in Powderly scrapbooks, CUA.
powerful and eloquent speaking voice and an intimate knowledge of parliamentary procedures, attributes that enabled him to gain positions of power and influence in urban and labor circles.

In 1873 young Powderly's connections with "subversive" union activity and a national economic crisis cost him his job. In the autumn of that year a severe panic and ensuing depression swept over the country, resulting in a large number of business failures. Along with many others, Powderly refused to abandon his unionist activities and lost his job.\(^4\) Dejected, he left Scranton in search of employment. His travels took him to Chicago, Cleveland, and St. Louis, as well as Galion, Ohio; and Oil City, Pennsylvania. At each stop his name appeared on various company blacklists because of his unionist connections. While in Oil City, the young man became the deputy president of the Industrial Brotherhood for the state of Pennsylvania.\(^5\) Finally, in 1875, he returned to Scranton. There the machinist found employment at the Dickson Company, where he remained until the company suspended all of its employees for lack of work two years later.\(^6\)

Shortly after resettling in Scranton, Powderly's preoccupation with labor matters and his penchant for political activity drew him into active participation in city and county reform activity. In 1876 he organized a Greenback-Labor club, the first of its kind in Luzerne County.\(^7\) He was elected president of the club

\(^1\) Ibid.
\(^2\) The Irish World, February 16, 1878, Powderly scrapbooks, CUA. The Industrial Brotherhood was a national federation of trade unions formed in 1873. Among other things, the brotherhood opposed organized political action, opposed contract immigration laws, advocated arbitration as a substitute for strikes, and supported the establishment of producer and consumer cooperatives. The organization was short-lived. It was unable to recover from the economic effects of the 1873 depression and thus faded into insignificance by 1875. Yet it is important to note that the Knights of Labor would later incorporate many of the brotherhood's planks into its own program of action in 1878.

\(^3\) In 1876 Scranton was a part of Luzerne County. On August 13, 1878, the state legislature split the county into two parts, with Scranton designated as the county seat of newly formed Lackawanna County. Allan Nevins, The Emergence of Modern America, 1865-1878 (New York, 1927), 392-93. The Greenback-Labor party represented a union of the Greenback farmers of the West with the labor forces of the East. In February, 1877, delegates from twenty-eight states met in Toledo, Ohio, and joined together on the national level for the purpose of financial reform and industrial emancipation. The purposes of this movement were to break up the bosses prevalent in Pennsylvania politics, to lead agitation for the rights of labor and the wrongs heaped upon it by monopolistic parties, to secure the
by acclamation and through this organization rendered considerable service to the cause of reform.

In the summer of 1877 Powderly set in motion a drive for election reform and the Greenback-Labor party. Since voting irregularities had been flagrant throughout the county, he immediately established an organization of poll watchers to police the voting stations during the upcoming county elections. On September 11 he called a county convention of the Greenback-Labor party and nominated a full slate of candidates for county offices. Powderly traveled on foot from one end of the county to the other distributing tickets and documents with the intention of arousing the people to the causes of currency, labor reform, and honest election practices. He also delivered many effective speeches on behalf of the ticket. Powderly's efforts were indeed successful, as the Greenback-Labor ticket triumphed over the older Republican and Democratic parties by over 5,000 votes. As a reward for this effort, on December 20, he became the Greenback-Labor nominee for mayor of Scranton.

As the mayoralty campaign got underway, Republican and Democratic leaders sensed that the young upstart was a potential threat to their dominance over local affairs. The two parties united to form a citizens ticket and nominated a fusion mayoral candidate, Daniel Jones. Jones was a wealthy and influential Scranton businessman whom most observers expected to end Powderly's political career once and for all. Scranton's two leading newspapers energetically supported Jones. The Republican editorialized: "We expect Powderly's defeat as we look for the setting sun." The Daily Times, Scranton's Democratic organ, alleged that Powderly's election might foster a return to Molly Maguirism. The young politician countered by attacking the large debt which the city had incurred. This theme continued throughout the campaign. Scranton had a standing debt of

balance of power in the state legislatures, and in Congress, in order to produce legislation favorable to labor, and to educate people to the evils inherent in monopoly.

5 The Irish World, February 16, 1878, in Powderly scrapbooks, CUA.
6 The Trades, January 17, 1880, in Powderly scrapbooks, CUA.
7 Scranton Daily Times, February 11, 1878.
8 Scranton Republican, February 19, 1878.
9 Scranton Daily Times, February 19, 1878. The Molly Maguires were Irish Catholic coal miners who committed acts of violence against officials of mining companies. Their reign of terror ended in 1876.
$350,000 in 1878. Jones, a former city tax official, came under attack for alleged fiscal mismanagement.13

On February 19, 1878, Scranton voters registered approval of Powderly's electoral reform activities. The official returns showed him a 524-vote victor over his fusion opponent. Clearly, in less than two years the young machinist had become a capable labor politician. He had fashioned a Greenback-Labor organization sufficiently moderate in tone and platform to precipitate significant defections from the ranks of the older political parties. The Greenback-Labor victory, however, was not complete, since it captured only six of the twenty-one contested seats on the select council. Powderly's running mates had more success on the common council where they took twenty-eight of the fifty-seven seats.14 Thus the mayor-elect faced the task of maneuvering reform legislation through two predominantly hostile city councils. On April 1 he took over the reins of city government at a yearly salary of $800.

Immediately after assuming office, Powderly set forth a definite program designed to fulfill his dream of a modern city. His major proposals were the establishment of a board of health, the investigation of frauds and impositions upon the city in the past, the erection of an adequate sewage system, and the paving of city streets. Never during his mayoralty did a majority of the members of either council belong to the same political party as Powderly. Yet when he left office, he could boast that his proposals had either become law or were nearing passage in the city councils.15

The city charter of 1866 had already provided for the mayor's first request, the establishment of a board of health. Yet previous city officials had failed to exert positive leadership necessary to implement this provision. Under Powderly's guidance, a board of five members was created with the mayor serving as ex officio president. The other four members of the board served two-year terms upon their appointment by the councils. The board had

13 Scranton Daily Times, February 19, 1878.
14 Scranton Republican, February 20, 1878. The official returns were: Powderly, 2,935; Jones, 2,411.
the authority to act on all matters affecting the health of the city.\textsuperscript{16}

Throughout his mayoralty Powderly expressed a firm desire to maintain law and order in the city. He felt that the police force, which he inherited from the previous administration, was inadequate. The deficiencies of the force were indeed evident during the 1877 strike of anthracite miners in the Scranton area. During the disturbances Scranton Mayor Robert McKune had been forced to call upon the state militia in order to quell the ensuing violent demonstrations. Before peace had been restored, three men were killed and twenty-five were wounded.\textsuperscript{17} Thus on June 12, 1878, Powderly suspended the entire force and appointed a new expanded fourteen-man force, pruned from a select list of forty-nine men. Many of the new recruits were men of proven ability and presumed integrity whom he had chosen carefully from the ranks of the Greenback-Labor party or the Knights of Labor. They proved to be very effective law enforcement agents. The \textit{Daily Times} later referred to Scranton as "the model of order."\textsuperscript{18}

A vitally important measure involving the sale of adulterated foods was the last significant reform Powderly sponsored in 1878. He was deeply concerned about the widespread sale of such foods in the Scranton area. He therefore guided an ordinance through the councils which prohibited selling or exposing to sale the flesh of any diseased animal, unwholesome milk, or other contaminated goods. A stiff fine penalized violators of this act. The act also provided for a qualified inspector of meat to enforce vigorously the provisions of this ordinance.\textsuperscript{19}

In addition to his mayoral and labor union duties, Powderly became involved in the 1878 Pennsylvania gubernatorial contest. His electoral triumph had marked his party's only success in

\textsuperscript{16}Scranton, Common Council, \textit{An Ordinance Establishing a Board of Health}, File No. 1, 1878, May 29, 1878, Scranton City Clerk's Office (SCCO).

\textsuperscript{17}Frederick L. Hitchcock, \textit{History of Scranton and Its People} (New York, 1914), 502; Scranton \textit{Republican}, October 17, 1877.

\textsuperscript{18}Scranton \textit{Daily Times}, January 13, 1879.

\textsuperscript{19}Scranton, Select Council, \textit{An Ordinance Providing for the Sale of Adulterated Foods}, File No. 8, 1878, November 9, 1878, SCCO. Also see Arthur M. Schlesinger, \textit{The Rise of the City, 1878-1898} (New York, 1933), 133. Schlesinger pointed out that by 1881 only four states, New York, New Jersey, Michigan, and Illinois, had food regulating laws comparable to Powderly's proposal.
Pennsylvania in recent mayoral elections. Understandably then, party leaders came to respect his demonstrated political talents and asked him to play an active role in the ensuing campaign. For his part Powderly was outspoken in support of the Greenback-Labor nominee, Samuel Mason. He asserted that he was "out every night stumping both old and new counties for the success of the ticket." Mason ran against Andrew Dill, the Democrat, and Henry Hoyt, the Republican challenger. In Powderly's mind, the battle was between Hoyt and Mason. He considered Mason the stronger of the two aspirants, but on election day his prediction was not borne out. Hoyt won the contest by a small margin over his Democratic opponent, and Mason came in a poor third. Apparently, Mason's pitiable showing resulted from the successful Democratic campaign to convince potential Greenback-Labor voters that the stronger Democratic party stood for the same principles as their splinter group. In any event, the Pennsylvania Greenback-Labor movement suffered a crippling blow from which it never recovered.

Many of the Greenbackers were former Democrats and thus were wooed feverishly by the different factions of the Democratic party. Frank A. Beamish was the publisher of the Scranton Sunday Free Press and the boss of the regular Democratic party. He had assembled a strong political machine which featured a group of well-disciplined ward leaders. At length a branch of insurgent Democrats under the direction of Aaron A. Chase, publisher of the Daily Times, attempted to overthrow Beamish and capture control of the party.

The Beamish faction worked hard to consolidate its position. It concentrated on winning Greenback-Laborites, who had been Democrats, back into the fold. The special target of the Beamish forces was Mayor Powderly. Beamish felt that the mayor was the glue holding the Greenback-Labor movement together. He believed that if the Democrats could discredit the mayor, the movement would flounder, and the members would return to the Democratic party. Five days after the gubernatorial election,
therefore, Beamish charged that Powderly had abandoned Mason’s candidacy and had defected to the Republicans. 22

The mayor fully understood the motives behind this attack. Instead of playing into Beamish’s hands by engaging in a pointless name-calling contest, he calmly filed an affidavit in which he categorically denied the charge. 23 This placid approach quickly convinced the Greenback-Laborites of Powderly’s genuine integrity and thus foiled Beamish’s plan. In truth then, despite Beamish’s ability to maintain control of the party machinery, it was Powderly, rather than Beamish or Chase, who emerged victorious from the torrid political struggle.

The year 1879 was one of plots and counter-plots, as the regular Democrats renewed their efforts to win over the Greenback-Laborites. On June 17 a convention of Democrats and Greenbackers met and adopted the name, the Democratic Labor party of Lackawanna County. This appeared to be an attempt by the Beamish faction to incorporate the Greenback-Labor party into the Democratic ranks in time for the November county election campaign. 24 This development aroused Powderly and his devoted Greenback-Labor followers. They met on June 21 and expressed discontent over the recently formed party. They vowed that the only conditions upon which they would fuse would be for the convention “to adopt our entire platform and rules without change of name or principle.” 25

In a desperate attempt to unite the two parties for the coming campaign, another convention met on August 2. Mayor Powderly, who had issued the convention call, chaired the meeting. The Powderly forces proposed that both parties put no separate tickets in the field under their party labels but, rather, unite in slating a ticket consisting of the best qualified men, regardless of party affiliation. In the course of the convention some delegates demanded that the new organization adopt the name the Democratic Greenback-Labor party. Powderly emphasized that one could not add the words Greenback-Labor, since the national Greenback-Labor committee never ceased to exist. At length the Scranton chief executive, ever the realist, concluded that

22 Scranton Sunday Free Press, November 10, 1878, in Powderly scrapbooks, CUA.
23 Affidavit File Box, November 11, 1878, Powderly documents, CUA.
24 Scranton Republican, June 18, 1879.
25 Powderly to J. K. Helmbold, July 2, 1879, Powderly letter books, CUA.
Beamish controlled the convention and that his plan had failed.26

The rift among the various factions of both parties continued, with the result that in the county elections the whole Republican ticket swept to victory. Powderly refused to vote for any of the Beamish candidates whom he accused of buying their nominations. Instead, he voted for the entire Greenback-Labor slate.27

In the field of municipal affairs 1879 was a much more successful year. Powderly continued to compile an enviable reputation as a competent administrator and progressive mayor. On January 10 he signed into law an ordinance which set up a constitution for the fire department. Before the passage of this ordinance, Scranton's fire-fighting unit was a loosely organized, inefficient volunteer department with only one full-time fireman, the fire chief. Powderly carefully drew up an ordinance involving seventeen sections which dealt with every matter of importance to the establishment of an effective fire department. It laid down specific provisions concerning the terms of office and duties of officers, standards regulating the use of equipment, and the determination of elective procedures for the naming of officers.28 Further improvements came on November 25, when the mayor signed an ordinance establishing the office of fire marshal and creating a board of fire commissioners to supervise the department.29 In the field of fire-fighting and prevention Scranton was now at least on a par with the larger Pennsylvania municipalities.

The year 1879 was also memorable for Powderly's labor activities. In January he became Grand Worthy Foreman of the Knights of Labor. This office placed him second-in-command to the Grand Master Workman, Uriah Stephens. When Stephens resigned in September, the Scrantonian assumed leadership of the union. His fellow knights re-elected him Grand Master Workman for ten consecutive terms concluding in 1893. As the premier labor spokesman in the United States, most observers interpreted his every utterance on the problems of the day as

26 Powderly to Editor Lackawanna Union, July 2, 1879, in Powderly letter books, CUA.
27 Powderly Diary, November 5, 1879, CUA.
28 Scranton, Select Council, A Supplement to an Ordinance Establishing a Fire Department in the City of Scranton, File No. 1, 1878, January 10, 1879, SCCO.
29 Scranton, Common Council, An Ordinance Establishing the Office of Fire Marshal and Creating a Board of Fire Commissioners for the City of Scranton, File No. 16, 1879, November 25, 1879, SCCO.
labor's official position. He spoke throughout the country and wrote articles for many of the leading American labor journals.29

As Powderly became an increasingly prominent national figure, his chronic inability to delegate authority, a trait that served him well as Scranton's mayor, hindered his efforts as leader of the Knights of Labor. In the city post he generally worked alone. He personally read most of his correspondence and composed prompt and exhaustive responses to numerous inquiries. He painstakingly wrote and formulated the various directives and ordinances on which he desired favorable action by the councils. In due course, every matter affecting the management of the city received the personal attention of its efficient and well-organized chief executive. In like manner, Powderly initially attempted to manage singlehandedly the affairs of the Knights of Labor. These efforts were effective until the labor union's membership began to rise sharply in 1885.31 Thereafter his meticulous attention to details forced him to abdicate his policymaking role and to allow others to involve the union in strike activities which he personally opposed. In desperation, the embattled Powderly reluctantly moved to salvage his leadership. Although he began to delegate administrative details to fellow officers, his power over policy continued to erode and his insecurity increased. His acutely sensitive nature caused him to engage in numerous bitter quarrels with his associates. Finally his inability to curb excesses by John W. Hayes, the power-crazed general secretary-treasurer, led to his eventual fall from power.

Despite ever burdensome labor responsibilities, Mayor Powderly declared his candidacy for a second term in 1880. He awaited the nominating convention with some apprehension but easily won the Greenback-Labor party's nomination. His only promise in accepting the nomination was to strive for "equal rights for all men."32

The Democratic party was still in a state of shock, due to

29 John R. Commons and associates, History of Labor in the United States (New York, 1918), II, 370. Also see Proceedings of the General Assemblies of the Knights of Labor, 1878-1893, Powderly documents, CUA.
31 Foster Rhea Dulles, Labor in America (New York, 1949), 133; Norman Ware, The Labor Movement in the United States (New York, 1929), 60-66. The yearly membership figures for the Knights of Labor between 1880 and 1886 were: 1880, 28,136; 1881, 19,422; 1882, 42,000; 1883, 51,914; 1884, 71,326; 1885, 111,395; 1886 (as of July 1, 1886), 729,677.
32 Scranton Daily Times, January 12, 1880.
the antics of the previous year. A note of discord carried into
the mayoralty battle. One group of Beamish-bossed Democrats
met on January 12 and nominated Edward Mellon as their
candidate. Several Chase Democrats, who were naturally op-
posed to the bossism of Beamish, left the hall, held their own
convention, and nominated Mayor Powderly. The mayor, always
an astute political operator, was fully aware that the race would
be a tight one and that he would need all the support he could
muster. He therefore accepted the additional nomination. The
Republicans met the following day and nominated George W.
Bushnell, a former president of the board of city commissioners.

The campaign was especially bitter. The Beamish forces
charged that Powderly took a $1,000 kickback from the Republic-
sians to stay in the field and defeat Mellon. The mayor drew fire
from Republicans and Beamish Democrats alike for not being a
true Democrat, but rather one who "has abused and villified the
Democratic party yet has the unblushing effrontery to ask the
endorsement of the party." The Republicans also attacked
Powderly as a carpetbagger who had been a resident of the city
only a short time. Bushnell, on the other hand, had been a
Scrantonian for the past thirty years. The Republican later con-
ceded that Powderly, as the nominee of an enterprising and
honest party, would not have been so objectionable, but un-
fortunately "the elements with which he surrounds himself are
not such as a great and growing business center can feel easy
with." Thus they felt an "obligation" to oppose his candidacy
and support Bushnell.

The election occurred on February 17, 1880. The official re-
turns showed Powderly the victor by a mere ninety-nine votes
over Bushnell. Mellon polled only eighty-nine votes. Mellon's
showing indicated the woeful state to which the Democratic
party had deteriorated. It also attested to the tremendous popu-
ularity which the mayor had amassed during his first term. The
people of Scranton had clearly ignored the scathing attacks on

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33 Scranton Republican, January 13, 1880.
34 Scranton Sunday Free Press, January 18, 1880, in Powderly scrapbooks, CUA.
35 Scranton Republican, February 10, 1880.
36 Scranton Republican, February 20, 1880. The official returns were: Powderly, 2,607; Bushnell, 2,508; Mellon, 89.
his character and the tremendous pressures exerted by the Beamish machine. They displayed a genuine confidence in his ability to aid labor.

As Mayor Powderly embarked on his second term, he once again faced two hostile councils. The select council now numbered eleven Republicans, nine Democrats, and only one Greenback-Laborite. To the contested seats on the common council, the voters elected fourteen Republicans and six Democrats.37 Once more, the mayor realized that his reform legislation would face concerted opposition in the city councils. As a result, he showed himself a practical politician, even to the extent that he made an accommodation with the local political machines. Repeatedly, the mayor displayed a genuine love of political power which triumphed over loyalty to party or principle. Only his acutely sensitive nature, stung once too often by political criticism, eventually quenched his natural thirst for political office.

In 1880 and 1881 Powderly sponsored and signed into law three significant pieces of legislation. These laws attested to his passion for efficiency, his close attention to administrative detail, and his concern for fair and equitable taxation. The first concerned levying and collecting taxes. On January 18 the mayor signed an ordinance which set up a board of appeals and revision to hear appeals on tax matters and to revise tax assessments. The ordinance laid out in specific terms the methods by which the collection of taxes would take place. This bill also provided that a joint session of the two councils would select the seven-or-nine-member board. At the session of April 17 the councils decided on a board of nine members, five Republicans and four Democrats.38

The second measure involved the establishment of distinct sewer districts. This was the fulfillment of one of the mayor's chief pledges of 1878. It divided the city into two sewer districts and specified the boundaries of each in some detail. This was only the preliminary step in Powderly's drive to set up an adequate sewage system. Subsequent proposals which the councils

37 Scranton Republican, February 19, 1880.
38 Scranton, Select Council, An Ordinance Relating to the Levying and Collecting of Taxes in the City of Scranton, File No. 10, 1879, January 18, 1880, SCCO. Also see David Craft et al., History of Scranton, Pennsylvania (Dayton, 1891), 139.
enacted during his mayoralty provided for the establishment of a modern sewage system for the city of Scranton.39

In 1881 a controversial and highly significant piece of legislation passed the city councils. This ordinance provided for the levying and collection of license taxes within the city. It required merchants to secure a license in order to operate a business. This bill provided for a merchantile appraiser to determine an equitable license tax rate for each individual business firm. The act also established a classification system, through which the merchantile appraiser would make his evaluation. The selection of this new city official was the responsibility of the select council, which promptly named Beamish to the post. Despite this unfortunate appointment, one that the mayor could not control, the provisions of this act effectively underlined Powderly's fervent desire for a more equitable distribution of wealth. This attitude further increased his popularity among the miners in the Scranton area.40

Subsequently, Powderly also had an opportunity to demonstrate his genuine humanitarian concern for the plight of others. In 1881 a major health crisis confronted the city administration. The dreaded smallpox disease struck with ferocious intensity, killing countless Americans as it passed across the land. In May the Scranton board of health detected its first four cases. The city acted quickly and by the eleventh of the month had administered vaccinations to 5,600 citizens.41 The disease continued to spread, prompting Powderly to take more drastic action. In November he sent a communication to the councils calling for a full-time health officer to be on call during this emergency.42 He later called for the construction of a "pest house," for the isolation and treatment of the afflicted. The board approved this request and appropriated $600 for its construction.43 The mayor ordered a sharp increase in the number of free vaccination centers and

39 Scranton, Common Council, An Ordinance Relating to the Division of the City of Scranton into Sewer Districts, File No. 4, 1880, July 6, 1880, SCCO; Allan Nevins, Grover Cleveland: A Study in Courage (New York, 1934), 86. In the 1870s every American city was dilatory and unenlightened with respect to public sanitation. Indeed, New York City did not build an adequate sewage system until the post-Civil War years, and Philadelphia delayed even longer.

40 Craft, History of Scranton, 142.

41 Scranton Republican, May 11, 1881.

42 Ibid., November 4, 1881.

43 Scranton Daily Times, November 10, 1881.
obtained a substantial increase in salary for Dr. S. P. Reed, the health officer.

Battle against the dreaded disease continued into 1882. In January Mayor Powderly asked council to increase the number of health officers from one to four. Public vaccinations reached 15,000. Two weeks later he demanded and received an appropriation of $5,000 for the board of health. He reported that there were ninety cases of smallpox since the beginning of the epidemic and that only fifteen remained. He concluded that in order to restore these fifteen to health and permanently rid the city of the disease, the appropriation was essential. By March the epidemic had subsided, and there were no reports of any further outbreaks. In all, ninety-three cases had resulted. Twenty-seven of the afflicted died, sixty had completely recovered, and six were on the road to recovery. The usually critical Scranton Republican praised Powderly's initiatives which had prevented many new outbreaks of the disease. It noted with some pride that Scranton, with a population of 45,850 in 1880, had dealt with the health hazard more swiftly and effectively than most other affected communities. By way of illustration, the newspaper noted that in the smaller community of Allentown, Pennsylvania, with a population of 18,063 in 1880, a total of 180 cases of smallpox resulted, forty-two of which were fatal.

With the exception of the smallpox epidemic, 1882 took on a decidedly political tone in Scranton. The ensuing mayoralty campaign elicited great excitement throughout much of Lackawanna County. Those colorful personalities, Powderly, Beamish, Chase, and Bushnell treated Scrantoni ans to a brilliant exhibition of political artistry. The city election was a struggle between the two major political parties. The sad showing which the Greenback-Labor party had made in past city council, congressional, and gubernatorial races marked its demise in Scranton and northeastern Pennsylvania. The Republican commented: "The Labor Reform Party succumbed to the inevitable in politics in which the stronger absorbs the weaker."
For the sake of political survival, Mayor Powderly and his followers bound up the wounds of previous campaigns and wholly embraced the multi-factioned Democratic party. Political expediency forced the mayor to make peace with Beamish, his old political foe. He recalled the close victory margin of 1880 and realized that he could not afford to split Democratic votes with the Beamish faction if he hoped to stay in office. At the Democratic convention, Powderly, though never a registered Democrat, became the party’s mayoral nominee by a unanimous vote. He preached unity in his acceptance speech and pledged that if the party could find a better man around whom to unite, he would “step aside, make way for him, and give him my hearty support.”

The Republicans met in convention and nominated George W. Bushnell, Powderly’s 1880 opponent. They pointed with pride to his creditable record as president of the board of city commissioners. The Republican also blasted the incumbent mayor for not respecting the two-term tradition. The paper’s stand on this question was inconsistent with the position it took on the desirability of a possible third term for President Ulysses S. Grant in 1880. At that time the Republican had editorialized: “If the masses consider it best to nominate and elect Grant for a third term, it will be done. . . . We are willing to trust the patriotism and fidelity of the people.”50 But the chief issue of the campaign was Powderly’s sudden and opportunistic embrace of the Beamish machine. The avidly anti-Beamish Daily Times refused to back the Democratic ticket. The paper stated: “The Times neither has nor seeks to have any share in this triumph with Powderly’s sudden flop over to the arms of Beamish.”51

In the end the combination of Beamish’s revitalized political machine and Powderly’s immense popularity proved too formidable a challenge for the Republicans to overcome. The final returns in the February election showed Powderly the victor by 1,140 votes. In addition, the Democrats made significant gains in the councils. On the select council they placed nine members, while the Republicans sat twelve. Each party won eleven seats on the common council.52

49 Scranton Daily Times, January 14, 1882.
50 Scranton Republican, February 24, 1880.
52 Scranton Republican, February 23, 1882. The official returns were: Powderly, 3,934; Bushnell, 2,794.
Mayor Powderly's stunning election triumph clearly established him as the premier politician in Scranton. As the 1882 Pennsylvania gubernatorial election approached, Scrantonians waited to see what candidate he would support. The skeleton Greenback-Labor party nominated Thomas Armstrong, a member of the Knights of Labor, as its candidate. Powderly sternly refused to campaign for the ticket. He wrote Armstrong that: "I hold myself free to strike a blow in defense of humanity no matter whether it be democrat or republican who gives the provocation." Powderly actually was the leading candidate of the Greenback-Laborites for lieutenant governor, but he declined the nomination, ostensibly because of his position as chief of the Knights of Labor: "I am not a candidate . . . no matter who nominates me. The Knights of Labor is not a political party and will not put a ticket in the field." It seems evident, however, that the mayor foresaw a smashing defeat for the Greenback-Labor ticket and had no desire to share in that defeat. In the 1890s a similar political judgment caused him to abandon the candidacy of William Jennings Bryan and the Populist party.

The Republicans nominated General James Beaver as their candidate to succeed Governor Hoyt. The Democrats countered with the thirty-two-year-old city comptroller of Philadelphia, Robert E. Pattison. Throughout the campaign Powderly constantly refused to commit himself to any candidate. He asserted that: "I do not belong to any party . . . the moment a man belongs to any party he ceases to own himself. I prefer that the party belong to me instead of my becoming its property." Yet from 1894 until his death in 1924 Powderly would indeed become the property of the Republican party.

The long Republican entrenchment at Harrisburg came to an abrupt end with the accession of Pattison to the governorship. Armstrong suffered a humiliating defeat. Powderly noted in his

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53 Powderly to T. A. Armstrong, May 17, 1882, Powderly letter books, CUA.
54 Powderly to Henry McKenny, June 8, 1882, Powderly letter books, CUA.
55 Scranton Republican, May 20, 1882.
56 Scranton Daily Times, July 1, 1882.
57 Powderly to Richard Griffiths, July 25, 1882, Powderly letter books, CUA.
58 Scranton Republican, November 11, 1882. The official returns were: Pattison, 355,791; Beaver, 315,589; Armstrong, 23,483.
diary that he cast his ballot that day for Armstrong, though refusing to give him any public support. Clearly, his increasing disillusionment with partisan political warfare at this point in his life was a factor in the formulation of this decision.59

On April 2, 1883, Mayor Powderly delivered his last annual message to the city councils. His recommendations for a permanent hospital for the treatment of contagious diseases and for a suitable public building to house city officials were constructive proposals. The request which aroused the most comment, however, was his statement on the triennial assessments of city properties. Here he made a critical distinction between improved property and property in the hands of land speculators. The mayor held that the tax on property of such speculators should be greater than on improved property. He believed that the man who actually occupied the land and made valuable improvements thereon was a public benefactor, since he improved the appearance of the city. On the other hand, the speculator not only refused to improve his land but prevented others from doing so until he received his price. Therefore, the speculator's assessment should be “not less than the highest rate of taxation assessed upon the nearest improved property of like character.”60

This view was closely allied to the views of Henry George, the author of the famous Progress and Poverty and advocate of the single tax. George acknowledged the similarity of their views in a letter praising Mayor Powderly's proposal.61 Perhaps in return for such support, Powderly campaigned for George in his unsuccessful attempt to become mayor of New York City in 1886. In any event, the single tax was completely alien to the business-oriented Scranton Republicans and the Beamish-bossed Democrats. It died a swift and lasting death in the city councils.

In March, 1883, however, a Powderly sponsored reform of the city tax assessment system passed the councils. This ordinance vividly typified the passion which Powderly had for order and efficiency. Before the enactment of this measure, many citizens had been able to avoid paying their full tax assessment due to the inefficiency of the tax collection system. The new measure provided that the city engineer was to prepare up-to-date city maps

59 Powderly Diary, November 7, 1882, CUA.
60 Scranton Republican, April 3, 1883.
61 Henry George to Powderly, April 19, 1883, Powderly file boxes, CUA.
for the use of the assessors; the city clerks were to provide the assessors with duly authorized assessment books; the assessors were to follow carefully the given instructions in making entries into these ledgers; and the councils were to revise the duties of the board of appeals, so that it could enforce more effectively these new tax provisions. The success of this measure was immediately apparent. The assessed valuation of property in the city rose rapidly after the passage of this act. In 1880 the total valuation was a little over $9,000,000 and by 1882 had been raised by only about $200,000. Then, after the passage of this ordinance, the total soared to almost $12,000,000 in 1883 and nearly $13,000,000 the following year. There was consequently a substantial increase in the tax revenues of Scranton.

As 1883 drew to a close, the Scranton municipal elections became a major topic of conversation. The press delighted in speculation on whether or not Mayor Powderly would seek a fourth term. At first he categorically refused to stand for re-election. A few days later, however, he hedged on this stand, declaring that he would make no promises either to stay out of the race or to get into it. He asserted that the reason for his change of heart was his discovery of a plot to force him from the race. According to Powderly, a member of the Beamish organization informed him that if he wanted the nomination, he would have to buy it. In a fit of anger, the mayor called for an open convention to decide on the 1884 Democratic nominee.

By early 1884 the contest for the Democratic mayoralty nomination resolved into a struggle between Mayor Powderly and Frank Beamish. It appeared that the mayor had promised Beamish the mayoralty nomination of 1884 in return for Beamish's support in the 1882 contest. Beamish's recent maneuvers, however, so enraged Powderly that he decided to ignore his earlier pledge to support Beamish. Thus, despite his increasingly burdensome activities with the Knights of Labor, the mayor expended considerable energy in mending his political fences and

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62 Scranton, Select Council, An Ordinance Regulating the Manner of Making Assessments for City Purposes, File No. 8, 1882, March 29, 1883, SCCO.
63 Craft, History of Scranton, 103.
64 Scranton Evening Times, December 15, 1883. The Scranton Daily Times became the Evening Times on May 25, 1883.
65 Powderly to the editor of the Scranton Sunday News, December 23, 1883, in Powderly letter books, CUA.
trying to woo away some of the key members of the well-oiled Beamish machine.  

Ultimately, power politics prevailed. At the Democratic convention on January 29 Beamish easily defeated his celebrated opponent. The Republican, which naturally delighted in the bruising Democratic in-fighting, commented: “The machine juggernaut with Beamish on top was run over Powderly in the most ruthless manner, and the retiring mayor could not possibly be treated worse were he worthy of oblivion.” Powderly took his defeat in stride, and campaigned loyally, if not vigorously for his perennial foe. On February 20 Beamish became the sixth mayor of Scranton with a 465-vote victory over A. B. Stevens, his determined but outclassed Republican opponent.  

The departing mayor still had about six weeks of his term remaining. During this period he engineered the passage of four important bills which served as lasting contributions to the city of Scranton. On March 15 he signed an ordinance extending the term of the city clerk from one to two years. This put the city clerk’s term in line with those of other municipal officers and helped to establish better continuity in the administration of the city. A second measure set up an orderly program dealing with the excavation, obstruction, occupation, and repairs of streets. Powderly also signed a bill which laid down specific provisions for the appropriation and expenditure of money by the various departments of the city government. The final measure provided for the preparation and publication of a city digest and the

Powderly to Patrick Corcoran, January 24, 1884, Powderly letter books, CUA.  
Scranton Republican, January 30, 1884.  
Ibid., February 21, 1884. The official returns were: Beamish, 4,179; Stevens, 3,714.  
Scranton, Common Council, An Ordinance Amending Section One of An Ordinance Providing for the Election of a City Clerk and Defining His Duties, File No. 10, 1883, March 15, 1884, SCCO. Also see L. S. Rowe, Problems of City Government (New York, 1908), 175. In speaking of the difficulties which might arise as a result of frequent transfers of power, Rowe commented: “When finally, he [the city official] becomes familiar with the details of his office, the close of his term is so near at hand that he usually deems it inadvisable to make any radical changes.”  
Scranton, Common Council, An Ordinance Relating to the Excavation, Obstruction, Occupation, and Repairs of Streets, File No. 5, 1883, March 10, 1884, SCCO.  
Scranton, Select Council, An Ordinance Relating to the Appropriation and Expenditure of Money, File No. 10, 1883, February 6, 1884, SCCO.
annual publication of council proceedings.\textsuperscript{72} These measures served to bring about a modern and efficient city government. They were clear indications of the administrative skill and organizational genius of the mayor.

Throughout his mayoralty Powderly established an enviable reputation as a careful handler of financial matters. At the start of his first term, Scranton had a bonded debt of $350,000.\textsuperscript{73} Six years later the debt totaled only $20,000.\textsuperscript{74} At the same time, the cost of municipal government rose during his incumbency. His first budget called for an appropriation of about $68,000. It included a request for an additional $19,000 to cover unpaid debts of the previous administration.\textsuperscript{75} By 1884 the annual appropriation necessary to govern the city rose to over $120,000.\textsuperscript{76} Yet, the amount needed to cover previous deficiencies amounted to only about $10,000.\textsuperscript{77} Thus, while the cost of city government rose by more than $50,000 in the six-year period, deficiencies in the budget fell by almost $9,000. Mayor Powderly readily acknowledged the aid of the "competent, trustworthy men as controller, city solicitor, treasurer and city clerk," who made this record possible. He thanked them for giving their time and best efforts to the financial affairs of the city.\textsuperscript{78}

On April 7, 1884, Powderly relinquished his post. The city owed a real debt to the efficient, hard-working mayor. At the age of thirty-five, he left the field of municipal administration and turned his full attention to the Knights of Labor.

In retrospect, it is highly probable that Powderly's political
career influenced his refusal to involve the Knights of Labor in political activities. Although an interested and astute politician, he always tried to divorce himself from the vulgar and distasteful side of politics. Perhaps his bitter struggles against the two major political parties, the press, and the business community, and, in particular, his failure to win a fourth mayoralty nomination caused him to shun further involvement in politics.

Consequently, as a labor leader, he expressed the view that the Knights of Labor should avoid partisan political involvement, but instead should support Republican and Democratic candidates who were sympathetic to the needs of organized labor. Despite his warnings, the success of prolabor candidates in 1886 and 1887 election contests spurred on individual knights to slate independent labor tickets. Only at the direction of the labor union's executive board did Powderly participate in the ill-fated 1892 Populist crusade. Personally he was so critical of this proposed farmer-labor coalition and labor politics in general, that by 1896, he supported William McKinley and the Republican party.

Notwithstanding his disenchantment with labor politics, Powderly demonstrated considerable organizational talent and a firm commitment to social reform during his mayoral incumbency. On the other hand, he retained his basic inability to confide in or inspire loyalty in others as well as his overly defensive and tortured reaction to the taunts of his critics. As Scranton's mayor, and as leader of the Knights of Labor, Powderly's shortcomings hindered his effectiveness in office and minimized the legacy of this otherwise gifted and committed political and labor leader.