Among the leading figures of the founding generation James Wilson of Pennsylvania has not received the recognition his accomplishments merit. Historians in general do not seem to know him very well. But those whose fields embrace the era of the Revolution and its aftermath are well-acquainted with his achievements. Indeed, he appears to have provoked more conflict than consensus among scholarly specialists in recent years, as they have disagreed over the nature of his role as a founding father, his neglect by historians, his lack of fame, the value of his contributions during the founding era of the nation, and the sincerity and motivation which undergirded his actions. Additionally, specialists have disagreed over the facts and significance of certain events of his career and his ideological niche among the founders of the republic. Few episodes in Wilson’s life have not stirred disagreement. Nevertheless, the consensus among recent scholars is that Wilson continues to be largely forgotten. Political Scientist Robert G. McCloskey, writing several years after the publication of C. Page Smith’s biography of Wilson, best summed up the situation by noting that “Wilson is well-known only to a few constitutional historians . . . [but] he is not much more than a name to most other American historians, and . . . to educated Americans in general he is not even a name.” Such neglect continues to be perpetuated in contemporary history textbooks adopted for use in American history classes on the secondary and post-secondary levels in the nation.

Yet numerous scholars in the fields of history, political science, and law have attested to Wilson’s significant role as one of the principal Founding Fathers of the nation. Indeed, beginning with the publication of his significant anti-Parliamentary pamphlet in 1774, Wilson became
a part of the mainstream of the Founders who participated in most of the vital activities of the new emerging nation for almost a quarter of a century thereafter. A contributor to and signer of the Declaration of Independence, he later performed important services in the Continental Congress and the Congress under the Articles of Confederation. He was a leading architect and signer of the Federal Constitution and a principal force in securing its ratification in Pennsylvania. He also led the political forces which managed, after a long battle, to replace the Pennsylvania document of government of 1776 with a more balanced constitution in 1790. He was, in addition, a member of the original Supreme Court of the United States. On balance, not many of Wilson’s contemporaries could match his activities and achievements.

Yet scholars have continued to disagree about the merits of Wilson’s credentials. There is no consensus on the nature of his political ideology and philosophy. Through the years, Wilson has received many different labels from scholars. The most popular depictions describe him as a nationalist or conservative or democrat. His other sobriquets include radical, moderate, liberal, aristocrat, pragmatist, realist, optimist, and combinations thereof. His biographer, C. Page Smith, in various places of his study calls Wilson a realist, conservative, radical, moderate, aristocrat, and democrat. A careful examination of Wilson’s career compels scholars generally to agree that Wilson was a nationalist who was both pragmatic and optimistic as well as realistic about certain matters, if not all. Where scholars appear to part company is on the question of Wilson’s political views: Was he a pragmatic, optimistic and realistic conservative or was he a pragmatic, optimistic, and realistic democrat?

In determining a response to the question of Wilson as a democrat or a conservative, one must take into account Wilson’s Scottish years and the influence these had upon his later development and aspirations. One must also consider his involvement in the mainstream of Pennsylvania politics where the self-proclaimed Republicans squared off against the self-styled Constitutionalists for more than a dozen years, from 1776 to 1790. Here the Republicans became the Federalists who championed the new Federal Constitution and its strong central government, separation of powers and nationalizing tendencies, while the Constitutionalists became the Anti-Federalists who preferred the Articles of Confederation with its unicameral legislature, balance of powers, and states’ rights orientation.

Historians have not given enough weight to Wilson’s formative years. Born and educated in Scotland, Wilson studied at St. Andrews begin-
In 1757 and four years later entered the seminary there in anticipation of pursuing a clerical career in adherence to the desires of his parents. The unexpected death of his father prompted Wilson to eschew further studies toward ordination. Instead he took a position as a tutor and, subsequently in early 1765, he went to Edinburgh and studied accounting for several months. He then determined that his future prospects for a successful career lay across the ocean rather than in Scotland.

Wilson's Scottish period provides insights into many of his successes and failures in America. In studying Wilson's Scottish upbringing and education, historians have generally concentrated upon the Scottish intellectual renaissance, the Scottish Enlightenment, which came to influence higher education there during and after Wilson's attendance at St. Andrews. Thus, his Common Sense philosophy has been well-examined and is readily documentable. This thinking developed from the school of philosophy founded by Thomas Reid in order to refute the ideas of David Hume, another Scot, whose extreme skepticism was unacceptable to Reid. Other luminaries of the Common Sense theory included Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, William Robertson, and Dugald Stewart. Wilson accepted the Common Sense notion that made reason an integral part of common sense, but added intuition to it as well. For Wilson, skepticism was the ultimate enemy of liberty, while common sense or intuition was the measure which enabled one to realize what is self-evident and knowable, as in the Declaration of Independence. The Common Sense philosophy formed the base for his republican thinking.

Not so easily discernible are the effects and influence Wilson's other Scottish experiences had upon his future development, activities, and career. Taken together, these can help to explain his later behavior, both professionally and personally, and establish the framework for what contemporaries and posterity alike came to misunderstand and misinterpret. Wilson's political foes in Pennsylvania, however, seem to have had a better 'feel' for their adversary than many twentieth century scholars.

Wilson was raised in a family with devout fundamentalist or orthodox Presbyterian parents who were involved in a break-away group or secession from the Presbyterian Kirk and who sought, with his father as one of the leaders, to establish an independent church known as the Associate Presbytery. The factors which led to this secession began in the 1720's when the Scottish national church, the Kirk, began to infringe upon the rights of the local congregations to elect their own presbyteries, synods and assemblies and even to appoint their own local
ministers. Moreover, the local Elders became increasingly convinced that the Kirk was demonstrating an alarming tendency to depart from the tenets of their founders, particularly in the matter of free will. This they took to be subversive and an Anglican influence, and in the matter of apparently increasing obedience to civil authority. Thus, the secessionists had both organizational and doctrinal motives. The Associate Presbytery was established in order to adhere to the traditionalist path and resist the doctrinal alterations and organizational changes of the Kirk. Wilson's parents expected their intellectually talented son to become a minister of the Associate Presbytery or Church.  

Wilson's family was not affluent, and the only way young James could attend a university was through a scholarship. At St. Andrews Wilson confronted social snobbery, a system based first upon family ancestry and second upon wealth. One can readily imagine the indignities young James may have suffered at the hands of these upper class students as he performed the menial tasks assigned to him in return for his scholarship aid.

But Wilson was never really content to pursue a clerical career. The death of his father prompted his immediate withdrawal from the seminary. Still, had he personally been committed to becoming a Presbyterian minister, he would have found a way to return to the seminary, perhaps after completing his accounting courses in Edinburgh and securing employment with such a goal in mind. Yet he chose instead to migrate to the American colonies to seek his fortune in a more favorable environment for a young man of no social, financial or family prominence and standing.

Wilson's later obsession with wealth and social connections and social prominence are directly related to his less-than-pleasant student experiences. It was no accident that he married into a wealthy and socially prominent Reading, Pennsylvania, family, sought to associate as much as possible with the rich, well-born and well-to-do, and was obsessed to the point of greed with the desire of acquiring personal wealth. Expressed somewhat differently, Wilson undoubtedly sought to achieve fame and fortune in order to win the respect of his contemporaries as well as posterity. Such a goal was far from ignoble and, as Douglass Adair has shown, "transmuted the leaden desire for self-aggrandizement and personal reward into a golden concern for public service and the promotion of the commonwealth as the means to gain glory." In his desire to attain fame, to achieve an everlasting immortality based upon achievements of action or thought, Wilson traveled in good company.
IN SEARCH OF JAMES WILSON

Such giants as Washington, Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson and Madison all sought the same objective.\(^{13}\)

Despite his aspirations or, perhaps, because of them, Wilson maintained a consistent political outlook which was generally the antithesis of that held by the class with which he associated. He was a democrat in his political outlook and demonstrated this philosophy with dogged persistence beginning in 1774 with his famous tract on the relations of Parliament to the American colonies. His commitment to democracy was evidenced in his activities in the Continental Congress, the Congress of the Articles of Confederation, the Federal Convention, the Pennsylvania Ratifying Convention, the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1790, and in all of his writings, including his law lectures as first Professor of Law at the University of Pennsylvania. Wilson’s political enemies in Pennsylvania recognized how formidable an adversary they had. Their commitment to democracy was on occasion considerably less than Wilson’s despite the fact that they posed as radical democrats and branded their opponents—Wilson’s group—as Tories or conservatives. Their criticisms of the republicans in general and Wilson in particular have seduced a number of modern historians into reaching inaccurate conclusions about the man and his work.

The cornerstone, the very foundation of Wilson’s political philosophy and ideology, was his belief and faith in the idea that the basis of all good government, the basis of all liberty, is a government which rested upon the consent of the governed, for it was precisely such consent which gave force to the laws. “Free and voluntary consent” was the basis of the legitimacy of both statute and common law.\(^{14}\) Thus he insisted in 1774 that because Americans were not represented in the English Parliament, that English body did not possess the authority to enact legislation governing the Americans. Thus he opposed the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776, in part because that document permitted the curtailment and limitation of the franchise by its devotees who enacted test oaths to accomplish this purpose. Wilson’s contributions to the formulation of the Constitution further reflect his commitment to government by consent. He sought to have a government of checks and balances and separation of powers with a strong executive and an independent judiciary in order to minimize any temptations to tyrannize into which any of the branches of government might fall. His concern was with the elected rather than with the electorate.\(^{15}\)

Wilson labored to secure the election of both houses of Congress as well as the president by direct popular vote. His hopes concerning the
Congress have been, of course, ultimately realized, while the Electoral College method of selecting the president resulted from an original suggestion which he made. As Wilson himself stated, "The government ought to possess not only the force, but also the mind or sense of the people at large." That the completed Constitution bears an unmistakable Wilsonian impression cannot be denied. It conformed in general principle to what he sought to achieve. Although he was a determined debater and could cling stubbornly to a point of view, Wilson nonetheless knew when to yield and accept those modifications which made possible the successful drafting of the Constitution. Its many compromises are a tribute to the reconciliation of opposing philosophies and perspectives which Wilson labored indefatigably to attain.

Historians, however, have had considerable difficulty themselves trying to achieve a reconciliation between Wilson's faith and commitment to democracy and his alliance and persistent association with those elements on Pennsylvania's political scene who were obviously not committed to the notion that widespread democracy is the basis of good politics and good government. Expressed differently, the question might be asked: If Wilson was truly committed to democratic principles, how can one explain his opposition to the Constitution of 1776 of Pennsylvania and its unicameral state Assembly? Or, how can one explain the vehemence of the attacks by "democrats" against him in the newspapers during the Pennsylvania ratification discussion?

As Owen S. Ireland has noted in his studies of Pennsylvania politics during these years, the prevailing view of a number of historians has been that the Pennsylvania Republicans, later Federalists, shared certain qualities. They were comprised of men who largely inhabited the eastern urban regions of the Keystone State, tended to be cosmopolitan and nationalistic in their social and economic behavior, tended to have had experience in political office outside of Pennsylvania, tended to be better educated, and tended to possess greater economic resources. In contrast, the Constitutionalists, later anti-Federalists, were not usually well-educated, tended to be parochial and local in their social and economic behavior, tended to hold local, not national, political offices, and tended to reside principally in the Western districts. But they did not necessarily have fewer economic resources than their Republican foes. Indeed, as John K. Alexander has shown, "the leading Constitutionalists were, like the Republicans, typically men of wealth." This wealth, however, came from new rather than old money. James Wilson's wealth, it should be noted, was also a result of new rather than
old money. (He did, of course, marry into a family of wealth and prominence.)

Politically, the Republican-Federalists tended to oppose the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution of Pennsylvania of 1776, the State unicameral legislature, the Test Oaths, the assumption of the Confederation debt and demands for the increased issuance of paper money and ceilings on consumer prices. They favored the College of Pennsylvania, the Bank of North America, and the Constitution. The Constitutionalist-Anti-Federalists represented the antithesis of what their political foes favored or opposed.

Economically, the Republican-Federalists were engaged principally in industry, finance, and commerce, while agriculture was not vital to their economic well being. The Constitutionalists-Anti-Federalists were primarily engaged in agriculture and tangentially involved in industry, finance, or commerce.

There was yet another vital and elemental difference between the major political antagonists and this difference seems to have been significant and basic in governing their political behavior on the issues delineated above. As Ireland puts it in his discussion of the repeal of the charter of the Bank of North America, "the division on the Bank bill was not a reflection of an East-West split, a frontier-settled area conflict, or an agricultural-commercial dispute, but rather a direct manifestation of the old ethnic religious antagonisms . . . which were represented by the two dominant factions, the Republicans and the Presbyterians [Constitutionalists]." The basic difference between the two major political factions, one which determined their positions and votes on the various issues, was not economic, financial, geographic, or nationalist, but rather, strongly ethnic and religious. According to Bockelman and Ireland, this feature "was the most salient characteristic of the contending political forces in Pennsylvania." The Republicans tended to be, and were, supported by persons who were English Anglicans, English Quakers, German Lutherans, and German Sectarians. The Constitutionalists tended to be, and were, supported by those who were Scotch-Irish Presbyterians or Scottish Reform Presbyterians and Reformed Germans.

Wilson's leading role as a Republican was grounded in his opposition to the rigid, parochial, ultra-conservative, narrow-minded, and artificial democracy which he believed the Constitutionalists to have been espousing and practicing. Having championed the Constitution of 1776, favored the unicameral Assembly as the epitomy of radical democracy,
and gained control of that legislative body, 'democrats' used their power
to disenfranchise hundreds of potential voters through the Test Oaths.
They secured the repeal of rights and privileges of institutions duly
established by law, and did their best to destroy the Bank of North
America and the college at Philadelphia. They also sought to legislate
morality and reform society according to their own precepts and
standards. Thus, in 1779 they outlawed the theater, horse-racing, all
forms of gambling, all recreational activities on Sunday, as well as a host
of other perceived evils.26 "Using their new found power, they consoli-
dated their position, advanced their interests, and punished their
enemies."27 Radicals they may have been, but true democrats they were
not, at least as Wilson viewed them.

Given these circumstances, Wilson was a member of the Republican
faction because he was a democrat, while the Constitutionals demon-
strated, to him at least, that tyranny need not result from national
centralism. It could—and did—occur on the state or local levels. To
Wilson, the political situation in Pennsylvania exposed the Constitutionals for what they really were: petty tyrants and radicals, narrow-
minded, intolerant, and non-democratic in their outlook.

Wilson's Scottish background with his early, though incomplete,
ministerial training had given him an insight, shared by few of his
contemporaries, into how narrow-minded religious conservatism could
be translated into political radicalism wearing the garments of democra-
cy.28 As a result, no member of the Republican faction was more vilified,
more harshly criticized, more the object of vitriol than Wilson. The
Constitutionals did their utmost to depict him as an aristocrat, an
ultra-conservative, a Tory, as "James the Calendonian, lieutenant-
general of the myrmidons of power," as haughty and arrogant in order
to discredit him and thereby blunt his attacks upon their
power.29 While
these attacks largely failed to prevent the Republicans from returning
Pennsylvania to the rule of law rather than of men, the accusations and
criticism seem to have convinced a number of modern historians. These
continue to insist that he was a conservative at the very least, while one
recently described him as a "man of noisy sentiment and moral intuition,
but apparently a humbug—particularly in his expansive expressions of
faith in the common man and in the future of America."30

But it is precisely his faith in the common man, his belief that good
politics and government are grounded upon the consent of the governed,
his optimism about the future of the nation which his significant
contributions had helped to create, that provide Wilson with his
strongest claim to the fame he sought. Wilson was one of the few
Founders who was able to envision what the United States was to become, who labored in his day to provide the framework and foundation for that future.

NOTES


2. As early as nine decades ago Andrew C. McLaughlin observed, “It may seem strange that a man who did so much has received so little general recognition.” See “James Wilson in the Philadelphia Convention,” Political Science Quarterly XII (1897), 20; Cf. Stephen A. Conrad, “Politics Foundation: Citizenship and Common Sense in James Wilson’s Republican Theory,” in Philip B. Kurland, Gerhard Casper, and Dennis J. Hutchinson, eds., The Supreme Court Review: 1984 (Chicago, 1984), 386–387; and Charles B. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, eds., American Political Writing during the Founding Era, 1760–1805 (Indianapolis, 1983), II, 1264: “For a man of such brilliance . . . and such importance to our founding, Wilson is little known by the general public and little read by academics.”


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Revolutionary Crowd,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series XXXI (October, 1974), 590.


25. Owen Ireland noted that "recent studies of the Confederation period have tended to submerge this dimension of post-Revolutionary Pennsylvania politics in what is regarded as a more fundamental ideological, economic and sectional alignment," in which the "ethnic-religious antagonisms are ignored or relegated to a subordinate position." Ireland, "The Ethnic-Religious Dimension of Pennsylvania Politics," 423-424. Eric Foner has rejected the ethnic-religious hypothesis, asserting that the "data . . . does not prove the authors' contention." Yet Foner fails to provide any counter-veiling data of his own to support his position. Foner, Tom Paine and Revolutionary America (New York, 1976), 292. Thomas M. Doerflinger, in a recently published study of Revolutionary Philadelphia, recognizes the bitter religious antagonisms which prevailed there, but assumes a middle ground on the controversy: "Historians have disagreed about whether the Constitutionalists are best described as an economic, a geographical, or a religious faction, but whatever the case, there can be no doubt that the three variables were highly correlated." Doerflinger, A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia (Chapel Hill, 1986), 185.


28. In the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1790 Wilson split with such allies as William Lewis, Thomas McKean, and Timothy Pickering, who failed to understand the depth and extent of his democratic feelings. According to Alexander Graydon, a fellow-delegate to the Convention of 1790, Wilson "hitherto deemed an aristocrat, a monarchist and a despot, as all the federalists were, found his adherents on this occasion, with few exceptions, on the democratic or antifederal side of the house." Quoted in Smith, James Wilson, 302-303.

29. Independent Gazeteer, November 6, 1787; January 12, 1788.