On July 3, 1793 in Philadelphia, Alexander James Dallas, wealthy merchant and Secretary to Governor Thomas Mifflin, speaking in his capacity of promoter and member of the Correspondence Committee of the Democratic Republican Society of Pennsylvania, read in the presence of the officers of the Society a circular letter addressed to the several counties of the State. This letter sought to furnish Pennsylvania inhabitants “a copy of the constitution of the Democratic Society” and addressed itself to the citizens of the State “in hopes, that after a candid consideration of its principles, and objects, you may be induced to promote its adoption in the county of which you are inhabitant.” According to this document, the United States of America faced a challenge as “the seeds of luxury appear to have taken root in our domestic soil; and the jealous eye of patriotism already regards the spirit of freedom and equality, as eclipsed by the pride of wealth and the arrogance of power.”

Citizens present at the meeting of the Democratic Republican Society of Pennsylvania made some changes in the circular letter: “It was moved and seconded, that the word Sir be struck out throughout the Letter and the words Humble Servants from the subscription thereof, and that the words Fellow Citizen and Fellow Citizens be substituted in lieu thereof.” In this way, with the stroke of a pen, they signaled a rejection of the deference that had always characterized political documents and popular petitions, in the pre-revolutionary period and afterwards, Shays rebels included. Nor was it simply a formal change of attitude, comparable to a republican transformation of street names in towns: from Queen Street to Liberty Street, from King Street to Broad Street, for example. It was a deeper change, reflecting the modifying of conceptual relationships underlying subaltern classes and elites in power.

Deference rituals that had characterized petitions and alternative political proposals gave way to the demand for mutual respect. The United States had reached a point of no return: Americans acquired consciousness of taking part in political
A map of Western Pennsylvania in 1791.
decisions as "fellow citizens" and not as "servants." American lower classes had already brought their voice to local assemblies. Moreover, it was not unusual for "common people" to take the field directly, furnishing their opinion on particular political issues without respect for "good manners" or established authority. Furthermore, long before this moment, the elites had had to obtain the approval of an electorate composed especially of middle classes which were able to take part in the choice of political representatives.

Now, social changes were encoded in written form and would influence all future petitions advanced by the lower classes. Petitions not only increased in "forthright language" blended with "traditional phrases with suggestion of republican citizenship," but they lost the characteristic tone of subjects imploring redress of oppression or inequity. Petitions assumed the characteristics of political proposals put forth by citizens in whom power originates and is legitimated, citizens ready to rescind institutional bonds and propose an alternative form of government—no longer "humble servants" but "remonstrants."

Especially in the frontier territories, hierarchic relationships creaked under the weight of social, economic and political conflict between yeomen, local élites in formation, and consolidated coastal classes. It is not surprising that this circular letter found an audience beyond the Appalachian Mountains. In July 1793, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, poet and lawyer, who had moved from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh searching for a better life, had already read to an assembly of Western Pennsylvania delegates a letter from the people of Kentucky aimed at creating a common bond of interest between western communities. All the delegates at this meeting endorsed the contents of this letter.

During the first months of the following year three Democratic Republican Societies were established in Western Pennsylvania. The Democratic Society of the County of Washington, born as a branch of the Democratic Republican Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, the Society of United Freeman of Mingo Creek and the Republican Society at the Mouth of the Yougiogh'eny, fueled the request for more direct participation in political decision-making. They also advanced several proposals in which it was already possible to see the outlines of a yeomen empire "beyond the temptations of Old World commerce and corruption," well before the "democratic" aspirations of Thomas Jefferson's administration.

In an area already disturbed by the "whiskey taxes" protest, these societies were an additional source of problems for the Federalist administration, especially

A map showing the distribution on the "frontier line" of the Democratic Republican Societies.

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on the Pennsylvania frontier, but not only there.\textsuperscript{14} The same kind of protest was spreading in the Virginia and North Carolina backcountry and in Kentucky. And if we consider the map of distribution of the societies, we can note that almost half of these organizations are placed along what Eugene Perry Link, one of the first scholars to study the Democratic Republican Societies, called the “frontier line.” The popular petitions/political proposals of these societies clearly delineate the common problems of the frontier and illuminate the frontier view of democracy.\textsuperscript{15}

Certainly the consequence of life on a western frontier induced the emergence of a culture independent of the “Eastern” values and laws. People living on the edge of political and economic power were contemptuous of authority. The wide territory beyond the Appalachian mountains was evolving according to its own inner socio-political logic as a zone where the frontiersmen would still fight over racial superiority, popular sovereignty and economic destiny in a “tale of continuing tragedy.”\textsuperscript{16}

Through their demands and proposals, Democratic Republican Societies broke into the discourse surrounding the early American frontier. It is possible to trace the borders of this territory and to single out these issues following an imaginary line linking frontier societies across the map and analyzing the requests included in Democratic Republican Societies’ petitions in the backcountry. Indeed, these societies can be used as a framework for the reconstruction of American history in the last decade of the Eighteenth century as well as to link up lower class protest from the moment in which, in Philip Foner’s words, “revolutionary soldiers returned to their homes to find them mortaged, their families in debt, and their government in the hands of wealthy merchants and landed gentry.”\textsuperscript{17}

On April 5, 1794 the \textit{Pittsburgh Gazette} published a petition of the Democratic Society of the County of Washington, dated March 24. “Our situation compels us to speak plainly,” its authors declared. They added:

\begin{quote}
If wretchedness and poverty await us, it is of no concerns to us how they are produced. We are gratified in the prosperity of the Atlantic states, but would not speak the language of truth and sincerity, were we not to declare our unwillingness, to make any sacrifices result from our distresses. If the interest of Eastern America requires that we should be kept in poverty, it is unreasonable from such poverty to exact contributions. The first, if we cannot emerge from, we must learn to bear, but the latter, we never can be taught to submit to. From the general government of America, therefore, your remonstrants now ask protection, in the free enjoyment of the navigation of the river Mississippi, which is withheld from them by Spaniards.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}
If the focal point of this petition was a request for Government aid to obtain free navigation of the lower Mississippi, the general context represents an eloquent testament to the western view of interregional relations in 1794. It was, as Thomas P. Slaughter puts it, "the summary of the handicaps the settlers believed they labored under as a result of their union with the East." The discrepancies clearly visible between their hard frontier life and the comfort they imagined coastal Eastern inhabitants enjoyed, provoked the request for "equal sacrifices." This frontiersman credo acted as part of a "moral economy" undergoing change from below no less fundamental than that proceeding among the middle and upper groups. Increasingly the whole concept of an organic reciprocity in society, at best limited to certain groups, times and places, was giving way. Frontiersmen, from their own experience, set aside the idea of an obligation of the governing classes to protect the poor and industrious part of mankind in favor of a demand for "equality." The traditional request for aid, with its appeal to the humanitarian ethic of the gentleman governor, gave place to an ideology based on personal and group rights, political autonomy and a communitarian economy. As a commentator of the time affirmed: "if the officers in the societies were called simply citizens, this symbolic gesture intended to render men almost indifferent to their private interests." Yet, at the same time, the citizen is a primary formulation of the individual who signs a petition, declares his vote and takes up arms.

The mass support for the societies make an identification of the members and their activities difficult. William Cobbett, the "venomous" pamphletist of the post revolutionary period, described the membership of the Democratic Society of Philadelphia as "butchers, tinkers, broken hucksters and trans-Atlantic traitors." Scholars like Eugene P. Link point to the presence, as in French counterpart Jacobin clubs, of "middle class citizens" in the seaboard societies. In the trans-Allegheny organizations, too, although we find the presence of "extensive land property," the body of the clubs included small farmers, settlers and rentees. Small farmers assuredly constituted the majority of the population in the Western counties, but industry and commerce were expanding. The yeomen protested that economic growth favored only some social classes: merchants, land speculators and professional men.

The rural people fought these classes, as they opposed high government salaries and excise taxes in general. The Scots-Irish communities especially were unwilling to submit to land speculators, excise men, or to the arrogant behavior of
Demonstrating against the treaty with Britain, New York citizens burn an effigy of John Jay. Reactions were violent everywhere.
“overpayed” government officers. Republican enthusiasm for France and for its minister, Edmund Charles Genet, directed the interest of the communities of the frontier to the message of revolutionary France. Democracy became a term not only of honor but of contention and a synonym for a popularly elected government. It was the Democratic Society of Washington, Pennsylvania, which noted:

Revolutionary France has sufficiently proved that generals may be taken from the ranks, and ministers of state from the obscurity of the most remote village.

Is there not fire still remaining in the rock, and billows in the ocean?

This was a clarion cry, parallel to the language of revivalistic preachers, as described by Nathan Hatch, Stephen Marini, and other scholars. According to the Western Pennsylvania club, George Washington was “centralizing the government in the hands of few individuals” trying to establish a de-facto aristocratic government. Frontier counties were certainly entitled to send their representatives to state and federal assemblies, but their delegates sought also to occupy responsible offices in the national political administration. President Washington in 1794 appointed John Jay, an “aristocrat,” as “special envoy to Great Britain” to negotiate a treaty that directly concerned their life. Frontier Democratic Republican Societies did not forget, too, that Jay had once defended “the right of England to hold the Western posts.”

Therefore, the national government was accused by inhabitants of the frontier counties of “acquiescence with the holding [by the English of] the posts of Niagara, Detroit, &c.” and the English, who were refusing to leave the Northwest, were considered responsible of agitating Indians and stopping westward expansion. The national government’s attempts to dominate hostile tribes continued under the leadership of General Arthur St. Clair, but frontiersmen were not satisfied, especially after the American troops were defeated without fighting in November, 1791. It was difficult to persuade backcountry inhabitants that taxes already collected and new tributes on distilled spirits would be used to free the frontier from Indian assault.

Taxes, land speculation, Indian problems and the Federalist “paranoid style” all pushed Western Pennsylvania farmers toward the Whiskey Rebellion. The Whiskey Rebels’ remonstrances became a further strand in the political protest against the policy and attitude of the federal government. It was consequently easy for the “friends of order” to link the Democratic Republican Societies’ with the Whiskey Rebellion. The Western Pennsylvania Insurrection offered the ideal opportunity—immediately seized upon—to attack the societies’ acting throughout
the nation and to destroy their public prestige without having to come to terms with their proposals and the broader political implications of their democratic republicanism. "I consider this insurrection as the first formidable fruit of the Democratic Societies. George Washington wrote in a letter to Governor Henry Lee of Virginia on August 10, 1794. For the president, these societies were attacking the "foundation of the Government" that is, in substance, the Constitution, provoking "a general tendency toward rebellion."36

The western Pennsylvania societies' conduct did not show any direct connections with the insurrection of 1794. Consequently, charges against the societies as such were mere political opportunism—a less than candid defense of "law and order" in the Federalist formulation. It is nevertheless difficult not to recognize common aims and common rhetoric.37 In "an address" on August 14, 1794 the Democratic Society of the County of Washington affirmed:

It is a matter of surprise and indignation to us, that a system of taxation so apprehensive, should, in the very infancy of our government, have received the approbation of a majority of our representatives. They certainly were not sufficiently acquainted with the genius, situation and circumstances of their constituents.38

It was not the whiskey tax alone which provoked the farmers' revolt; it was the more basic problem of representation that came into play.

For instance, John Neville, regional supervisor for the collection of the federal excise tax in Western Pennsylvania, had not been chosen by Western Pennsylvania inhabitants, but nominated directly by President Washington.39 Certainly, Neville was not appreciated by yeomen who viewed him as representing the conspiracy of wealth, law and power that was strangling the Western economy. Whereas the Western Pennsylvania farmers on the average owned one cow and one horse, Neville possessed ten horses, sixteen cows, twenty-three sheep and no less than eighteen slaves. Moreover, his estates amounted to 1,000 acres, whereas the average landowner worked a 100 acre farm.40 To all this property he could now add his political office as Federal Inspector, with an annual salary of 450 dollars and a commission of one per cent on the taxes gathered.41

When Neville embarked on an expedition to control the most obstinate distillers throughout Allegheny county, the Mingo Creek militia and most of the members of the Mingo Creek Society of United Freemen tried to defend their liberties against this odious agent of the central government. And they chose to do so by "showing themselves" as freemen. On July 17, 1794, between 500 and 700 armed men paraded along the road to Neville's home to the sound of drums, displaying
all the force that a frontier militia could show.\textsuperscript{42} James McFarland, the first chairman of the Society of United Freemen and leader of the expedition, was killed while demanding, under a white flag, the surrender and the resignation of Neville.\textsuperscript{43}

The death of McFarlane, revolutionary hero and local leader, led to a mass meeting on August 1 at Braddock's Field. About 7,000 men attended the assembly and marched on Pittsburgh.\textsuperscript{44} They constituted a solemn public procession against "Sodom," the significant name the farmers gave to the town. But this march on Pittsburgh never spun out of control; people filed through the streets of the town, in an orderly manner, demonstrating their capacity for self-organization and self-control.\textsuperscript{45} Warning and alternative: these were the conscious objectives of the Democratic Republican Societies.
But other and more important objectives could be read in the documents created by Western Pennsylvania Democratic Republican Societies. These declarations of purpose went beyond the phase of vigilance toward anti-republican irregularities or "regulation," and advanced more far-sighted programmatic demands for the republican future. Article 8 of the Constitution of the Democratic Societies of the County of Washington affirmed that one of the objects in view was "to encourage able teachers for the instruction of youth," but added that:

The society shall have the power, with the concurrence of the district and county, to nominate and recommend such persons as in their opinion will be capable to represent us in the government of the state and the United States. To hear and determine all matters at variance and disputes between party and party.46

In the long view, education would permit the formation of a more culturally-prepared republican electorate. But in the short term the Democratic Republican Societies would function as a middleman between the people and their government. In substance this was an embryo of a specific "party system," different from the one which later did develop and which has been the mainstay of what is meant by democracy within the federal political context.47 Although George Washington's attacks and those of the Federalist press on the societies forced them to dissolve, anti-government political activity in Pennsylvania continued in the 1800's, and it was principally organized by the former members of the Democratic Republican Societies.48

Traditional historiography has always considered the political content and long-term effects of experiences like those of the Western Pennsylvania Societies as of secondary interest, engaged as such historiography was in creating national myths. For example myths were based on George Washington's character,49 on the Secretary of War, Henry Knox,50 and on "democratic" Thomas Jefferson.51 These key figures contributed to the creation of an ethos appropriate to a state which had assumed a republican form, but meant to consolidate itself along the lines of traditional authority.52

Today it is possible and opportune to reconsider the documents of the past, to debate and perhaps "deconstruct," but certainly not demolish—historic "monuments." Myths crumble, first perhaps only for the "insiders," but that process need not destroy the strength of the "great nation" as some scholars have feared. So, the historical analysis of George Washington's interests in frontier land,53 research on the great proprietors of the Maine frontier (among them Henry Knox),54 and the close relationship between the Rebellion in Santo Domingo at the end of the
eighteenth century, the “yeoman empire” and Jefferson’s racial prejudice, need not cause perplexity. History should induce “patriots” to reflection, because myths are thus returned to their flawed humanity.

In this case there are no specific dates to celebrate, there are no birthdays or anniversaries to remember, and there are no “monuments to the memory,” except perhaps for such things as the tombstones of such society members as Capt. James McFarland. In the graveyard at Mingo Creek we can read: “He served during the war with undaunted courage, in defense of American Independence against the lawless and despotic encroachments of Great Britain, he fell at last by the hands of an unprincipled villain, in support of what he supposed to be the rights of his country, much lamented by numerous and respectable circle of acquaintances.”

It is then important, when analyzing the deep social and political changes occurring in America at the end of eighteenth century, to pay more attention than has been fashionable to the Democratic Republican Societies, their activities, and their members’ lives, especially on the early American frontier. Only by so doing can we appreciate the important political presence of popular classes and groups in the frontier regions and assess their contributions to the formation of the American republican system after 1789.
Notes

1. This circular letter, dated July 4, 1793 was published in the National Gazette, Philadelphia, on July 17.
3. For a comparison with the pre-revolutionary period see the analysis of Pennsylvania inhabitants' petitions in Elisha P. Douglass, Rebels and Democrats (Chapel Hill, 1955). For the Shays Rebels' petitions see, for example, the "Petition from the Town of Greenwich, Massachusetts, January 16, 1786," Manuscript, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.
4. See the European travelers' reports of that time, for example, Marquis de Chastellux, Travels in North America in the Years 1780, 1781, 1782 (New York, 1827).
6. The analysis of these petitions, that "although used by all levels of American society, give us the voice of people who seldom if ever proclaimed their social goals and political opinion in other written forms," is effectively accomplished by Ruth Bogin, "Petitioning and the New Moral Economy," William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd. ser., 45 (July 1988), p. 392.
7. In this way, the vision of Democratic Republican Societies as "Schools of political knowledge" has grown much stronger. See Eugene Perry Link, Democratic Republican Societies, 1790-1800 (New York, 1942), pp. 156-174.
8. Ibid., p. 16 and Pittsburgh Gazette, July 6, 1793.
10. According to Hugh Henry Brackenridge "A Democratic Society was instituted in the town of Washington in the month of April, 1794 on the same principles, and in correspondence with societies of the same denomination in New York, Philadelphia and elsewhere." Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Incidents of the Insurrection in the Western Part of Pennsylvania in the Year 1794 (Philadelphia, 1795), III, p. 25.
11. For Hugh Henry Brackenridge the Ming to Creek Society "was instituted on February 28, 1794. It consisted of Hamilton's battalion and to be governed by a president and council." Ibid., III, p. 148. "This association" wrote furthermore William Findley, Congressman and Anti-federalist of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, "was never announced in the newspapers, and its existence was known to but a few. A great portion of the Mingo Creek regiment of militia became members" and during its existence its meetings were "frequently attended by three hundred persons." William Findley, History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1796), p. 56.
12. The Republican Society at the Mouth of the Youghiogheny was strictly connected to the Society of United Freemen of Mingo Creek. The idea was to organize the four western counties of Western Pennsylvania—Westmoreland, Washington, Allegheny and Fayette—into a republican society, with representatives elected from each district in the respective counties. Cfr. Pittsburgh Gazette, April 26, 1794. For Brackenridge, "the articles of this society are to the same effect with that of Mingo Creek and equally calculated to abstract the public mind from the established order of the laws." See Brackenridge, Incidents, III, p. 25.
13. The extensive yeoman's empire was an objective of the Democratic Republican Societies, perhaps more than it was Thomas Jefferson's. See for example Jefferson's response to events in Santo Domingo. Michael Zuckerman, "The Color of Counterrevolution: Thomas Jefferson and the Rebellion in Santo Domingo," in Loretta Zaltz...

15. This view of democracy is in contrast with the most important propositions in Turner's enduring frontier thesis. See Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," in The Frontier in American History (New York, 1920), pp. 1-38. If Turner considered "democracy" as an individualistic and competitive way of life and welded Darwin's evolutionary hypothesis into a type of geographical determinism, in this case "democracy" means participation of frontiersmen, as individuals, in the popular community meetings organized by the Democratic Republican Societies and the individual subscription of joint popular petition.
17. See Philip S. Foner, Democratic Republican Societies, p. 5.


23. For the composition of the French Club see Crane Brinton, "The Members of the Jacobin Clubs," American Historical Review, 34 (July 1929): 740. Eugene Perry Link's analysis was modified by Roland M. Baumann, who estimates that the craftsmen were fewer than Link indicated and professional men and merchants were more numerous. See Roland M. Baumann, "The Democratic Republicans of Philadelphia: The Origins, 1776-1797" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1970), pp. 448-551, and appendix, table 3, pp. 598-603.

24. Eugene Perry Link, The Democratic Republican Societies, p. 73.


26. See Robespierre's speech to the Convention on February 5, 1794, where he declared that a republic to be "a state where the sovereign people, guided by laws that are their own work, do by themselves everything that they can do well, and by means of delegates everything that they cannot do themselves." Maximilien Robespierre, Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre (Paris, 1910-67), 1: 352-364.


31. Response to an Address from the Democratic Society of Kentucky, April 26, 1794 in Philip S. Foner, The Democratic Republican Societies, p. 131.

32. In fact John Graves Simcoe, Governor of Upper Canada, advocated an alliance with Indian tribes and with Spain to separate the Western settlements from the Union. See Samuel Flagg Bemis, Jay's Treaty: A Study on Commerce and Diplomacy (New York, 1923), pp. 170-172.

33. In August 1794, General Anthony Wayne, after having organized the Army, was successful in defeating Indians at Fallen Timbers.


36. Ibid.

37. The publications of the Democratic Republican Societies contained frequent denunciations of the Whiskey Rebels. See William Miller, "The Democratic Societies and the Whiskey Insurrection," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 62 (July 1938). What did occur, Miller admits, is that, quite predictably, "though the Democratic Societies themselves took no part in the insurrection, some of the members of the Democratic Societies, Pennsylvania, did. But apparently not in their capacity as members of the club." See p. 327.


40. See also Solon J. Buck, "Frontier Economy in South Western Pennsylvania," Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine, 19 (June 1936): 117.

41. The procedure involved in the nomination of such a figure characterized pre-revolutionary Virginia, where Washington's views were formed. The "middling" gentleman planter was the "old" choice and his rejection by the population a further sign of new self-images and a new political climate, which no longer sees public officials as "tutors" to whom the citizenry "entrusts" itself.


43. Eugene Perry Link, Democratic Republican Societies, p. 147.

44. Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Incidents, 1, p. 66. According to Brackenridge only three-fourths of the people who met at Braddock's Field marched to Pittsburgh.


49. For the formation of George Washington's myth, as idol for the Revolution and image of political and personal virtue, see Barry Schwartz, George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol (Ithaca, N.Y., 1987).


52. For example, as Secretary of War, Henry Knox stated in 1787 that the national government had to have "a legal coercive power" over the people "to govern and control their own citizens." See "Report of the Secretary of War to Congress," July 10, 11787, in Clarence E. Carter, ed., The Territorial Papers of the United States (Washington, D.C.,
