THE PENNSYLVANIAN: ORGAN OF THE DEMOCRACY

For thirty years before the outbreak of the Civil War the Pennsylvanian was the leading Democratic newspaper in Philadelphia. Established in August, 1831, as a weekly paper, its original proprietors, Benjamin Mifflin and Rowland Parry, transformed it into a daily on July 9, 1832. Its first editor was said to have been Joseph C. Neal, an individual of some note in the annals of American humor, who in addition to his political editorials enlivened the paper with quaint wit in his Charcoal Sketches, which resembled some of Charles Dickens' early work. Another editor in the first years of the paper was James Gordon Bennett, later to win fame with his New York Herald. In 1833 Bennett had an interest in the paper, but when he insisted on defending the United States Bank which Andrew Jackson was then attacking, he was forced by the withdrawal of party support to leave the paper. In spite of its strict adherence to Democratic principles, James Buchanan, a sound party man, complained in 1840 that the Pennsylvanian had never done him "common justice." The paper, however, passed into the control of his friends in 1845 when it was purchased by John W. Forney and A. Boyd Hamilton. From that time until it expired the paper was a Buchanan organ. Indeed in 1850 it was said to be the only paper in the state friendly to him, and was described as having "a limited circulation of only 5,000, oppressed with debt, and barely able to live from day to day." Some relief was soon forthcoming for in December, 1851, Forney was elected clerk of the House of Repre-

\[\text{Footnotes:}\]
3 Besides the daily there was a weekly and tri-weekly edition. The account of the early years of the Pennsylvanian is drawn principally from two sketches; one an obituary editorial in the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, April 2, 1861, the other in J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884, III. 1998. The material here supports many of the following statements although it is not cited each time.
4 National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, VI. 29-30. Neal was said to have been connected with the paper from 1831 to 1844.
5 Frederic Hudson, Journalism in the United States from 1690 to 1872, 411-14.
7 John Tyler, Jr., to Henry Wise, October 25, 1856, Philip Auchampaugh, Robert Tyler, Southern Rights Champion 1847-1866.
sentatives for the thirty-second Congress and at about the same time Hamilton received a contract for the congressional printing. Thus aided the partners conducted the Democratic organ "with much spirit, though no profit"; finally in 1853 they sold it to J. M. Cooper from the interior of Pennsylvania. Sometime later the paper was purchased by William Rice who was the proprietor in 1856.

Rice was closely associated with William Bigler, a prominent Democratic politician. Bigler after serving from 1841 to 1847 in the Pennsylvania senate was elected governor in 1851, and later sat in the United States Senate from January 14, 1856 to March 3, 1861. While Bigler was governor Rice held the office of harbor master. When Rice acquired the *Pennsylvanian*, he was understood "to be backed up" by Bigler. Since Rice was "incapable of writing editorials," under his proprietorship these duties were performed by others, among them Edward G. Webb, Theophilus Fiske, and William Magill. In 1856 Fiske, who came to the *Pennsylvanian* from the Philadelphia *Argus*, held a clerkship in the office of the storekeeper of the Philadelphia navy yard, but performed no duties there beyond drawing his stipend, said to be $750, from the public treasury. Magill had a place in the custom house, and received compensation from the government for services which he rendered in the office of the *Pennsylvanian*. In addition to the assistance afforded

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6 Congressional Globe, 32 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 121-23.
8 The author has found nothing further about Cooper nor just when he disposed of the paper to Rice. In Scharf and Westcott, History of Philadelphia, III. 1998, William H. Hope is mentioned as a publisher of the *Pennsylvanian*, though his tenure is not given. The author has found no other mention of Hope.
9 Bigler had begun his career in 1833 by publishing a party journal, the *Clearfield Democrat*. Bigler's own file of this paper, together with a large collection of his correspondence, was recently acquired by The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
10 An editorial obituary of William Rice in the Philadelphia Inquirer, March 27, 1861.
12 Buchanan to Forney, July 18, 1857, Buchanan MSS., H.S.P.
13 Both the date and length of tenure of these men are uncertain; Webb may or may not have presided as editor under Rice. He was with the *Pennsylvanian* in December, 1855; by July, 1856, he was writing for the Philadelphia *Demokrat*, a German paper. Buchanan to Webb, December 14, 1855, Buchanan MSS., H.S.P. Auchampaugh, Robert Tyler, 117.
14 Testimony of John H. Bryant, chief clerk in the storekeeper's office, Philadelphia Navy Yard, Covode Report, 348-49; Auchampaugh, Robert Tyler, 118.
15 Joseph B. Baker to Buchanan, September 14, 1857, Buchanan MSS., H.S.P. Baker wrote: "Mr. Magill for several years past held an office & was paid by the Custom House—but was employed until his death in the *Pennsylvanian* office."
by these sinecures the *Pennsylvanian* was receiving advertising patronage from the local sheriff's office and the departments at Washington.\(^\text{16}\)

Thus favored the *Pennsylvanian* displayed partizan zeal in the presidential campaign of 1856. Looking forward to that contest Webb wrote to Buchanan on November 28, 1855: "As the Editor of the *Pennsylvania*, I shall devote all my mental and physical energies to the accomplishment of your nomination."\(^\text{17}\) Before this happy event was consummated the *Pennsylvania* opened fire upon the Americans and Republicans and invited the Whigs, left now without a party, to help "swell the Democratic triumph" in November.\(^\text{18}\) To that end the Republicans were labelled "Nigger Worshippers,"\(^\text{19}\) and John C. Frémont was belabored as "the candidate of the Ultra-Abolitionists."\(^\text{20}\) As a climax to this campaign the *Pennsylvania* sought in October to convince its readers that a Republican victory would blight the material prosperity of Philadelphia and the Northern states, and bring upon them the curse of a free Negro population:\(^\text{21}\)

The main source of the great wealth and prosperity of Philadelphia, and indeed of all the Northern States, is the trade of the slaveholding States—this it is that builds up and sustains the cities and towns of the North—builds up and sustains our commerce and our manufacturers, and gives to the real estate in and about Philadelphia its present increased value.

Will you—workingmen, mechanics, manufacturers, merchants, or property-holders, strike it down, as is proposed by Black-Republican leaders, either by a dissolution of the Union, or by endangering its peaceful continuance? or by alienation of the friendly feeling of the Southern States? Will you destroy or jeopard it that the three or four millions of negro slaves in these States may be set free, let loose upon the country, to come upon you, the people of Pennsylvania, to fill your cities, towns, and country, with paupers and crime, as is now exhibited in St. Domingo and Jamaica, to take the place of you, white workingmen, mechanics, and manufacturers, or to become your equals and companions? Ask the Judge Kelleys and the Speaker Banks', and all their Fremont Abolition leaders and their Fillmore aiders and abettors, these questions.

\(^\text{16}\) Philadelphia *Pennsylvania*, April 1, 1856; *Dollar Weekly Pennsylvania*, September 6, 1856.

\(^\text{17}\) Webb to Buchanan, November 28, 1855, Buchanan MSS., H.S.P.

\(^\text{18}\) Philadelphia *Pennsylvania*, April 1, 1856.


\(^\text{20}\) Philadelphia *Dollar Weekly Pennsylvania*, September 6, 1856.

When Buchanan triumphed at the polls in November, Rice quite naturally felt that since he "had fought, bled, and died" for the cause, he deserved a profitable piece of government patronage for the support of his newspaper.22 Probably his financial difficulties23 made such aid seem imperative. President Buchanan, however, in whose hands the distribution of the patronage lay, was dissatisfied with the *Pennsylvania*. He revealed his feelings to Forney in July, 1857:24

In regard to the *Pennsylvania*—I love the name. It is associated with nearly all of my political trials & triumphs. I dislike to witness the fall of that time honored Democratic organ as if it were an old friend. I have not approved its course under WM Rice & this he knows full well; yet I believe he has ever been personally true to me.

Contending against executive displeasure Rice, assisted by Senator Bigler, persistently pressed his claims. After many conversations between the President, Postmaster General A. V. Brown, Rice, Bigler, and Cornelius Wendell who as proprietor of the Washington *Union* wanted the patronage for that organ, it was agreed that Rice should have a share of the post office printing.25 On December 31, 1857, he was appointed printer of the post office blanks, and made Wendell his agent.26 The latter was to do the work and pay Rice the profits, assumed to be forty-three per cent of the amount received for the printing.27 Just before the award was made, Joseph B. Baker, the collector of the port of Philadelphia, wrote to Buchanan questioning its wisdom:28

I still think important Government patronage should not be given to the *Pennsylvania*—while Mr. Rice is at its head. He is a Mill Stone to the party, and the paper never can be made effective until he leaves it. The printing of the Post office blanks could not satisfy his rapacity, but would only sharpen his appetite. He is a very obnoxious man to the party.

Rice's fault, however, was not disloyalty. Early in 1858 he stood by the administration when many Democrats, alienated by the Kansas question, were deserting it. On this controversial issue the Pennsylvania...
vanian sturdily defended the President's stand with the sentiment that it was "the duty of all Democrats to vote for and advocate the admission of Kansas with the Lecompton Constitution."90

While the claims of the Pennsylvanian were under consideration, the friends of the National Argus, another Democratic paper published in Philadelphia, put forward a plea for a share of the spoils. The Argus, established in 1853, was owned by Joseph Severns, a practical printer, who held a place as naval storekeeper in Franklin Pierce's administration.91 Harris N. Martin, editor of the Argus, was second clerk in the storekeeper's office; he was succeeded in the latter part of Pierce's term by Theophilus Fiske in both editorship and sinecure.92 An interest in the Argus was owned by Thomas B. Florence, a Democratic politician who represented a Philadelphia district in Congress from March 4, 1851, to March 3, 1861.93 Florence and Severns were anxious to obtain federal bounty for the Argus.94 In the spring of 1857 Buchanan, not particularly anxious to sustain the Argus, promised Severns' place as naval storekeeper to another. By December, however, the President's attitude had changed, for the Argus, resisting the disruption of the party over Kansas, was faithfully defending his administration from the fire of former friends. The President then felt that "without other patronage from the Government, it would seem both hard & ungrateful to take this little office naval storekeeper from Severns,"95 and asked Baker to provide a place for the deserving newspaper man at the custom house. When Baker explained this plan to Florence, the congressman pointed out Severns' reluctance to replace another Democrat at the custom house, and suggested that the Argus be given a portion of the post office printing.96 Wendell also desired more pa-

90 Philadelphia Pennsylvanian, February 4, 1858.
91 Scharf and Westcott, History of Philadelphia, III. 2023; Buchanan to Joseph B. Baker, December 17, 1857, Buchanan MSS.; Lambert A. Wilmer, Our Press Gang, 44-45. Since there is not a file of the Argus either in the Library of Congress or in the libraries of Philadelphia, it is probable that none exists. Scharf and Westcott say that the Argus was owned by Severns and McGill, but neither date such proprietorship, nor give the first names of the men. The author has seen no other mention of a McGill in connection with the Argus.
92 Testimony of John H. Bryant, chief clerk in the storekeeper's office, May 4, 1860, Covode Report, 348-49.
94 Testimony of Cornelius Wendell, Covode Report, 461-63.
95 Buchanan to Joseph Baker, December 17, 1857, Buchanan MSS., H.S.P.
96 Joseph B. Baker to Buchanan, December 30, 1857, Buchanan MSS., H.S.P.
tronage for the Union, and their importunities, after many con-
ferences with the President, brought about a new division of the profits
from the post office blanks. In April or May, 1858, Rice’s forty-three
per cent was reduced to twenty-one and a half per cent, and the re-
main ing twenty-one and a half per cent was divided equally between
the Argus and the Union. Under this arrangement the Argus re-
ceived $5,400 and the Pennsylvanian $9,707.28. Just before the
congressional election of 1858 Wendell, discontented with the share
he was getting for the Union, stopped the payments with the Presi-
dent’s tacit consent.

This action threw Severns into financial difficulties, and the Argus
passed into the sheriff’s hands. Aware of these straits and appreciating
the faithfulness of the Argus to the administration, Baker wished to
assist Severns with an appointment, and explained to Buchanan that
such aid was necessary to prevent the Argus from falling into the
hands of Douglas Democrats who were making overtures to Severns.
While the appointment was pending in October, 1859, Baker was
paying Severns seventy-five dollars a week. The collector at first
urged that the President appoint Severns stamp agent, but later de-
cided that in a weighership “he would be more under our control.”
Still, the proprietors of the Argus were not satisfied. In February,
1860, Florence asked Buchanan for the executive binding for Severns,
saying: “This favor will go very far to aid him and myself, and may
save us both from irretrievable bankruptcy and ruin”; but the Presi-
dent refused the request.

Although denied this important patronage, the Argus received $577 for the publication, in its columns, of the
laws passed by the thirty-sixth congress, and $159 for advertising
ordered by the department of the interior in the last three months
of 1860. All further patronage was cut off by the rout of the Demo-

86 Buchanan to Joseph B. Baker, January 11, 1858, Moore, Works of Buchanan, X. 176.
87 Testimony of Cornelius Wendell, Covode Report, 502.
88 Statement of John Larcombe, Wendell’s bookkeeper, Covode Report, 21, 505-506.
89 Baker to Buchanan, October 22, also July 21, October 13, 20, 1859; a memorandum
of facts laid before Buchanan, September 17, 1859, by Baker and J. Hamilton, surveyor
of the Port of Philadelphia, Buchanan MSS. Unfortunately, the correspondence does not
show what place, if any, Severns received.
90 Florence to Buchanan, Buchanan MSS., H.S.P.
91 Buchanan to Florence, February 27, 1860, ibid.
92 Register of Officers and Agents, Civil, Military, and Naval, in the Service of the
United States, on the thirtieth September, 1861 (hereinafter cited as the United States
The Democratic party in the fall elections of 1860, and the *Argus*, whose sickly life had for so long been artificially sustained, died in the spring of 1861.

When the *Pennsylvanian*, along with the *Argus*, ceased to share in the post office printing late in 1858, plans for its purchase were being matured by Buchanan's friends in Philadelphia. Chief responsibility for engineering the transfer of the party organ to more satisfactory hands seems to have rested upon Collector Joseph B. Baker. He approached Dr. Edward Morwitz, a German physician who was obliged to leave the fatherland because of his revolutionary activities in 1848. In Philadelphia the exile operated a dispensary for indigent Germans, and also published the *Demokrat* and other German language papers. Upon Baker's urgent plea Morwitz consented to purchase the *Pennsylvanian* for ten thousand dollars in order, as he said, to assist his party in "the hour of need." Baker then faced the problem of subsidizing the organ. The lowest possible cost of conducting it was six hundred and fifty dollars a week, but the weekly income of the paper was only one hundred and forty-five dollars. This discrepancy would create, so Baker figured, an annual deficit of over twenty-three thousand dollars. The deficit, Baker wrote the President, would not be eliminated by the continuation of aid at the rate it had recently been extended to Rice—ten thousand a year. To help solve the problem Morwitz was willing to stand a loss of five thousand a year, and, the collector suggested, the editor might be made stamp agent. A discrepancy between expenditure and income,
however, would still remain, and to eliminate it Baker strove to increase the government subsidy. He was successful, for after arranging with Wendell for the money, he promised to pay Morwitz a thousand dollars a month. Relying on this promise Morwitz purchased the Pennsylvania in January, 1859. Wendell, however, failed from the start to furnish the funds, and forced Baker to default in his payments to Morwitz. On March 26 Morwitz gave notice that if the delinquent payments were not made by April 1, he would be forced to stop publication of the paper.\(^49\) Apparently the money was forthcoming for the Pennsylvania continued. Six months later another patronage tie was formed between the administration and the organ: in September or October, 1859, George W. Baker, who held a twelve hundred dollar a year position at the custom-house, became the editor. He was the brother of the collector and the husband of Buchanan's niece, a sister of Harriet Lane.\(^50\)

After all the effort to sustain it, the Pennsylvania seemed to the President to be "a dear bargain," and he was moved to declare in May, 1859, that it was "good for nothing as a National Democratic Organ." He added:\(^51\)

At the present moment, when a reaction is proceeding everywhere in favor of the good old cause of National Democracy, & when the first intellects of the Country are employing their pens in writing convincing articles for the Constitution—these & the subjects of them are entirely ignored by the Pennsylvania.

A year later the course of the Pennsylvania was still unsatisfactory to the administration. In May, 1860, Morwitz was taking a neutral position on the questions dividing the Democratic party, but Collector Baker, convinced that Morwitz was really hostile to the administration wing, feared that, in spite of his assurances to the contrary, he would "soon proclaim for Douglas."\(^52\) For his part Morwitz was

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*Morwitz to Baker, March 26, 1859; also Baker to Buchanan, February 21, March 9, March 28, 1859, Buchanan MSS., H.S.P.*

*Covode Report, 11-12; Auchampaugh, Robert Tyler, 24.*

*Buchanan to Baker, May 1, 1859, Buchanan MSS., H.S.P. The Constitution was then the Washington organ of the party.*

*Baker to Buchanan, May 12, 1860, ibid.*
disgusted with the organ, and wanted to sell it for seventy-five hundred dollars.

Buchanan’s Philadelphia friends tried to raise the money. The task proved difficult, and Baker began to fear that they would lose control of the paper. Morwitz was determined to sell, and reduced the price to five thousand dollars. Finally, when all other efforts to raise the sum failed, Baker shouldered the responsibility alone, and advanced out of his own pocket most of the twenty-five hundred for the first payment. Thus on July 30, 1860, the Pennsylvania became the property of Joseph B. Baker, collector of the port of Philadelphia. Nominally, however, the new proprietor was John H. Brimner, a practical printer. On September 30, 1859, he had been listed among the federal employees as keeper of the custom house with compensation at eight hundred dollars a year. The Philadelphia Press, underlining the dynamics of its contemporary, branded the Pennsylvania “the morning organ of the custom-house,” and contemptuously asserted that its proprietor, a “figure-head,” would have “neither thinking nor writing to do.” “All that will be required of him,” he added, “will be to accept what the Administration leaders may send him.” Concerned over the financial burden of publication Baker solicited aid for the presidential campaign from the Democratic national committee, and asked the President to speak to the members of his cabinet about departmental advertising for the Pennsylvania.

During the latter part of the canvass William B. Reed, according to a deduction made from internal evidence by John W. Forney, wrote editorials for the Pennsylvania. Reed had been a Whig leader in Philadelphia who, upon the dissolution of his party, had led a remnant into the Democratic fold in 1856. In appreciation of this service Buchanan appointed him minister to China. Forney commented, as he identified the ex-minister as a writer for the organ, that Reed was “a grateful man, and . . . could not forget the kindness of Mr. Buchanan to him.”

On July 30, the day that Brimner took over the paper, the Pennsylvania
Pennsylvanian ran up "The Breckenridge Flag," pledging all its energies to promote the election of John C. Breckinridge and Joseph Lane. A few days later the Weekly Pennsylvanian was advertised in the columns of the daily as the "cheapest" and "most efficient campaign document that Democratic Clubs or Associations" could circulate. The Pennsylvanian itself, in a hysterical effort to win votes, raised the specter of "Free Negroes" before its readers.

The principles of the Black Republican party . . . [prophesied the editorial] will place the odorous and ignorant negro, on the same platform with the accomplished scholar and the experienced statesman. They will degrade the fair and refined young lady to a level with the coarse and half-barbarous African wench. They will place the negro laborer in competition with the white laborer. They will lead to a universal depression and degradation of our race in order to bring about this unnatural equality.

The people of Pennsylvania did not heed, if indeed they heard, this warning and in November the Republicans carried the state and the nation. This was, according to the Pennsylvanian, a "most alarming symptom of approaching discord and disruption."

After the election of Lincoln the Pennsylvanian continued its efforts to direct public opinion into the channels desired by the administration. Baker wrote to the President: "I presume the course of the Pennsylvanian is not unsatisfactory or I would have heard from some one in authority." As the secession crisis matured Buchanan set forth his views in his message to congress, December 3, 1860. The President then attributed the crisis to "the long-continued and intemperate interference of the Northern people with the question of slavery in the Southern States," and held that "our Union rests upon public opinion, and can never be cemented by the blood its citizens shed in civil war." With the President, the Pennsylvanian insisted, that the way to prevent secession was "by a prompt and honest redress of grievances so justly complained of by the South." If the North refused this duty to their Southern brothers, then they should "let them go in peace."

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60 Philadelphia Pennsylvanian, July 30, 1860.  
61 Philadelphia Pennsylvanian, August 9, 1860.  
62 Philadelphia Pennsylvanian, September 18, 1860.  
63 Pennsylvanian quoted in the Philadelphia Inquirer, November 8, 1860.  
64 Baker to Buchanan, November 20, 1860, Buchanan MSS., H.S.P.  
65 James D. Richardson, A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents 1789-1897, V. 626.  
66 Philadelphia Pennsylvanian, December 10, 1860.  
67 Philadelphia Pennsylvanian, December 10, 1860.
tended another conciliatory editorial, must avoid at all hazards "a fearful civil war, which will forever render reconstruction of the Union impossible." Such non-resistance to secession harmonized ill with the firm policy enunciated in Lincoln's inaugural. This state-paper the Pennsylvanian dubbed "a feeble declaration of war against the seceding States." A week after his inauguration the Democratic organ advised Lincoln to withdraw the troops from Fort Sumter, for any attempt to reinforce the garrison there would "sound the tocsin of a bloody civil war and the knell of the Union."

Before the fulfillment of its prophecy the Pennsylvanian suspended publication on April 2, 1861. The fifty thousand Democrats of Philadelphia, according to the paper's own confession, had never adequately supported their organ, and when the party was driven from power and demoralized, the paper, deprived of patronage, expired. Thus ended a long career in the manipulation of public opinion, in the puffing of Democratic men and measures. Announcing the cessation of its contemporary, the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin dwelt with frankness upon the dynamics of Democratic journalism and the Pennsylvanian:

The Democratic party at the North being dead, or having sunk into an insignificant Secession party, it is not surprising that its organs are expiring. They never had popular support or sympathy, but were kept alive by contributions from office-holders, and by government patronage, sometimes in the shape of advertisements, and sometimes in that of direct contributions of five or ten thousand dollars. With the success of the Republican party, the glory, the hope and the fortune of Democratic papers expired. The Washington Constitution died suddenly a few days after Mr. Buchanan's administration withdrew its support. Now we have to announce the decease of the old Democratic organ of Philadelphia, the Pennsylvanian, which has survived the Constitution several months, but now expires from inanition. It has labored with great zeal, even in the last months of its existence, to promote the cause of secession, and to exasperate the South against the North. It had a corps of volunteer writers, among whom were some of the most distinguished lights of the Democratic party. But somehow the people of Philadelphia never would support a Democratic paper. . . . Who shall write the history of the defunct Pennsylvanian? It would be, to some extent, a history of the Democratic party since its first number was issued.

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68 Philadelphia Pennsylvanian, January 16, 1861.
69 Philadelphia Pennsylvanian, March 5, 1861.
70 Philadelphia Pennsylvanian, March 12, 1861.