The Attack on Fort Wilson

The Pennsylvania Constitution, framed in 1776 by the radical Whigs, had been under attack from the first by the conservatives. Led by James Wilson and Robert Morris, the Republicans, as they called themselves, made bitter assaults on the "Constitutionalists" and their handiwork. In November, 1778, when the Assembly resolved to "take the sense of the people" of the state on the question of the constitution, the unrelenting agitation of the Republicans seemed at last to have borne fruit. Encouraged by the prospect of replacing the radical constitution with a frame of government more in conformity with their own political theories, Wilson and his fellows worked assiduously in the early months of 1779 to rally voters to the Republican cause.

But the Constitutionalists were once more ahead of them. Word reached Wilson that even the ministers of the gospel in the western counties had been enlisted by the radicals to inveigh against the proposed referendum. Petitions calling on the Assembly to rescind the resolves circulated throughout the state. Thousands of Pennsylvanians, assured by the radicals that the Republicans were Tory aristocrats bent on establishing a "House of Lords" in the State House, added their signatures. Such charges found a ready acceptance among frontier farmers, men with an instinctive suspicion of eastern politics and politicians.

As the petitions calling for the abrogation of the November resolve poured in upon the none-too-resolute Assembly, the members of the Republican Society tried to stem the tide with a public statement of their aims and character. Wilson drew up a long letter defending the Republican leaders and attacking in bitter terms the "general weakness, inactivity and confusion" of the existing constitution. The enemies of the constitution had been called a cabal with no motive but avarice and a desire for power, but Wilson assured his readers that "we have, and can have no common interest with one another, but that which we already have with you. We are of different occupa-
tions; of different sects of religion; and have different views in life. No factions or private systems can comprehend us all; but one powerful source of attraction unites us all—The liberty and happiness of Pennsylvania.” Wilson challenged those who doubted the truth of his words to “read over the list of subscribers; enquire into our occupations and professions,” and they would be convinced that the charges against the Republicans were “the greatest absurdity.” “Are we all desirous of becoming Lords?”

Passing to the attack, Wilson criticized the single legislature as the incubator of despotism. There was no hope of settled justice where judges were “tossed about by every veering gale of politics,” and where the Council of Censors at the end of every six years celebrated “a jubilee of tyranny” by turning up the very foundations of government.

“You are called upon by your representatives in the Assembly,” Wilson reminded his readers, “to testify your sentiments, on the first Tuesday of April next, whether you will choose to labour under the disadvantageous parts of the Constitution, or will substitute in their place such establishments as will insure to you the blessings of freedom, happiness and independence.” The people of Pennsylvania must not let the opportunity pass.

The name of Richard Bache, as chairman of the Society, led the signers, followed by a representative group of Philadelphians, chosen to refute the charge of cabal. Wilson; Sharp Delany, a Philadelphia druggist; Alexander Nesbitt, a merchant; Isaac Melcher and Jacob Hiltzheimer for the German element; General Thomas Mifflin, and Admiralty Judge Francis Hopkinson were included, as were Mark Bird, Thomas Smith, Robert Morris and a score more.¹

The letter had not even appeared in the Gazette before the Republicans were routed. On February 27, the majority of the Assembly, fortified by petitions from “a very considerable and respectable number of the inhabitants of this Commonwealth,” resolved to “rescind said resolves, and the said resolves are hereby rescinded.” Once more Wilson and his forces had been turned back.

¹ Pennsylvania Gazette, Mar. 24, 1779. I have attributed the authorship of this letter to Wilson on the basis of mannerisms of style and phraseology that appear frequently in his writings, and on the statement of Timothy Matlack that Wilson was the author.
The Republicans for their part were quick to charge bad faith on the part of the Constitutionalists. Why, if the people of the state were so overwhelmingly in favor of the Constitution, should the radicals resort to every possible artifice to prevent them from expressing this approval?

Timothy Matlack, member of the Constitutional Convention in 1776 and secretary of the Supreme Executive Council, undertook to answer Wilson and his allies. Wilson had suggested that most supporters of the new government were dependent on it for their livelihood and thus bound to support it, however faulty, at all hazard. Matlack expressed himself quite ready to admit that his daily bread depended on his office. But could Wilson “without a blush, charge poverty on any man as a crime?” It had not been so long ago that Wilson himself, “who now holds up his head so very high,” was equally impecunious.

The Republican Society, Matlack implied, was financed by British gold and its true purpose was to “divide and govern.” “Let some cool and dispassionate member of your club look on the path in which you are treading,” wrote Matlack, “and count how many more steps there remain before you, between you and the line which is marked Conspirators, and I suspect that he will be induced to think that you have gone far enough.”

Tension mounted in Philadelphia when the Constitutional Society, a successor to the left-wing Whigs, was formed in April with Charles Willson Peale as chairman. “We have too much reason,” the Constitutionalists declared, “to apprehend that the public wealth is plundered by defaulters, and the whole country imposed upon by fore-stallers and monopolizers.” The Society intended to expose and punish all such enemies of the cause.

To the Republican cry of tyranny and inefficiency, the Constitutionalists would reply with the charge that their opponents were malefactors of great wealth, bent on destroying the liberties of the people. The statement of the Constitutionalists was aimed specifically at the friends and associates of Robert Morris and at Morris

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., Mar. 31, 1779.
4 Ibid., Apr. 28, 1779.
himself for refusing to abide by the price regulations that had been promulgated at a rump meeting of radical Whigs. As an enemy of price controls and a friend of Morris’s, Wilson shared the opprobrium. In addition, Wilson had drawn attention to himself by his skillful defense of Philadelphians accused of treason.

There was, of course, some truth in the radical charge that certain businessmen were speculating in public money and withholding vitally needed commodities. As Benjamin Rush wrote a friend, the “quality and instability” of paper money “would corrupt a community of angels.” Yet the efforts of the radical committees to regulate prices were, in Rush’s medical analogy, like “a violent puke given to a man in the last stages of consumption.”

Frustration merely raised blood pressure. Cargoes of wheat going down river were seized and returned to the city. The flour stocks of merchants were inventoried by self-appointed committees. Wagons rattling out of Philadelphia with tea, sugar, and rum were sequestered by the radicals. When General Cadwalader, one of the heroes of Trenton, but suspected of strong Republican leanings, tried to address a restless, noisy mob, he was prevented from speaking by Constitutionalists wielding clubs. The Republicans thereupon moved to the yard of the College on Fourth Street and organized a rump meeting of their own. With Morris presiding, his own actions, not unexpectedly, were completely vindicated. A committee consisting of Wilson, Sharp Delany, Whitehead Humphreys, Major David Lenox, and Benjamin Rush was appointed to take measures against the misrepresentations of the Constitutionalists. Humphreys suffered for his activities by having his house raided and his sister knocked down by a party of marauding radicals.

The raw nerves of both Republicans and Constitutionalists were further irritated in July when Charles Willson Peale told a group of Whigs at the Coffee House that a bribe had been offered Tom Paine, presumably by Silas Deane or one of Deane’s friends, to refrain from exposing Deane’s defalcations as commissioner in France. Word quickly reached Deane, who wrote to Peale demanding that he dis-

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close the name of the “person or persons who had made this offer to Mr. Paine.” Deane, Wilson, and John Nixon delivered Deane’s letter to Peale. Wilson and Nixon evidently felt that their business association with Deane placed them under the same cloud.

The next day Paine himself stepped into the quarrel by promising that he would “tell all.” After laboring for two days, Paine produced a very small mouse, in fact, hardly a mouse at all. “It is sufficient on my part,” he declared, wrapping his rather tattered dignity about him, “that I declined the offer; and it is sufficient to Mr. Nixon and Mr. Wilson that they were not the persons who made it.” Mr. Paine had pulled in his horns, but, having done so, he attempted to retrieve something from the exchange by addressing Wilson. “I take the liberty of asking Mr. Wilson,” he wrote, “if he is or was not, directly or indirectly, a partner in the Foreign Commercial Company in which Mr. Deane, with several other members of Congress at that time, and others were concerned.”

Paine’s technique was that of the oblique insinuation, subtly damaging and very difficult to meet because so broadly stated. To such a dramatic charge, “no” sounds flat and unconvincing. There was no evidence anywhere available to support Paine’s charge. He failed to produce any, and none has been found since, but the letter, printed in the Advertiser, received enough credence among the ill-informed to increase the suspicion and hostility that already grew too luxuriantly in the city.

Underlying all the particular issues and immediate antagonisms in Philadelphia in the fall of 1779 were the lurking animal violence and panic that move in the wake of war and revolution. Old loyalties and old social forms had been shattered. The rough tides of conflict had cast up with the able and devoted, the warped, the greedy, the pathologically bitter. Anger, fear, suspicion and restlessness were the volatile chemicals that produced riot and insurrection.

In the first days of October the city was full of militia, many of them Germans, a sorry lot of soldiers for the most part, ill-disciplined, led by officers who stirred up old resentments and played upon new prejudices. On Monday morning, October 4, a handbill was passed

8 Paine to Wilson, July 28 and July 30, 1779, ibid., 27-30.
around calling for the militia to collect on the commons to "drive off from the city all disaffected persons and those who supported them." Militiamen began to congregate early at Paddy Byrne's Tavern on Tenth Street between Race and Vine, full of dark threats and mutterings against Tories and profiteers. Some small-fry Loyalists were dragged from their homes and placed under guard in the tavern, but the mob's wind was up, the bottle passed freely around, and the cry arose to bag some of the nabobs.⁹

As chairman of the Constitutional Society, Charles Willson Peale was one of the radical leaders. The militia had requested him to assume the direction of their campaign to rid the city of "un-American elements." When Peale arrived at Byrne's Tavern he found the Falstaffian Dr. Hutchinson, a medical professor at the College. The two men, realizing the temper of the crowd, tried to persuade the soldiers to draw up some resolves and disband, but to no avail. Two militia officers named Bonham and Pickering reviewed a long inventory of wrongs, and heated by language and liquor, the crowd gave tongue—"Get Wilson!" As the mob set off to the ragged cadence of a drum, Peale, now thoroughly alarmed, headed for Joseph Reed's house to urge the President of Pennsylvania to intervene.

Wilson, having heard earlier that he was among the proscribed, applied to the Assembly for protection. The Assembly referred him to the President and Council, but there was hardly time for the orderly operation of government. With no faith in the wish or the ability of the state officers to enforce order, Wilson gathered a company of his friends and prepared to stand off the militia. Rachel, his wife, near the end of her fourth pregnancy, was bundled off with her frightened children to the Robert Morries.

A group of twenty or so Republicans, who, like Wilson, were in extreme disfavor with the mob, gathered on Second Street and proceeded to organize themselves into a kind of military unit. They made a bizarre picture—stout, prosperous-looking men clutching muskets and pistols. Yet the group was salted with experienced soldiers. Colonel Stephen Chambers was a militia officer and a member of the Supreme Executive Council. Wilson's old friend William Thompson from Carlisle had commanded a Cumberland County battalion in action; Captain Campbell was an invalid Continental officer; and Wilson’s brother-in-law, Mark Bird, had led a Berks County militia battalion of his own raising. The unit thus displayed a rather military air as it marched and countermarched on Walnut Street. Included in the little force was Staats Lawrence, a law apprentice of Wilson’s; Staats’ brother Thomas; Robert Morris, if anything more hated by the mob than Wilson; Sharp Delany, who was dispatched to Carpenters’ Hall to cram his pockets with powder and bullets; Dr. Jonathan Potts, another Carlisle friend and purchaser of Wilson’s house; his brother Nathaniel; George and Daniel Clymer, Samuel Morris, John Mifflin, and William Lewis. A message was sent to General Mifflin, who arrived quickly to take command of the small company, and the drill continued under his experienced eye.

In the midst of these maneuvers, word came that the militia were on the way, headed for Wilson’s house on the corner of Walnut and Third. The little force promptly fell back on the “fort” and barricaded the doors and windows. The house was a solid, brick structure, set back a little from the street with a view down Walnut as far as Dock and down Third beyond Pear. By the time the militia, their ranks swollen by the curious and idle, had made their way down Arch to Front Street and thence to Chestnut, the garrison of Fort Wilson was waiting with weapons primed.

From Second Street the mob surged into Walnut, where two Continental officers, Colonel Grayson and Captain Allen M’Lane, tried to deflect them. A militia captain named Faulkner was leading the procession, and as the defenders of Fort Wilson watched from the upper windows of the house, their hands sweating on their guns, they could see the officers arguing with Faulkner while the mob milled uncertainly in the street, those in the rear pressing forward on the leaders. For a moment it looked as though Grayson and M’Lane
would halt the marchers. Then Pickering and Bonham broke angrily through the packed ranks and threatened the officers with their muskets, Pickering making short, stabbing motions with his bayonet to drive M'Lane back, the blade winking evilly in the sun. Led by Pickering, the stream of men broke forth, engulfing the officers, and moved on toward the corner of Walnut and Third.

As the disorderly crowd drew abreast of Wilson's house, Captain Campbell called out peremptorily from a window, ordering the soldiers to move on. The answer was a musket shot that killed him instantly. Fire blazed from the house, and the siege began. The acrid smell of smoke and powder and the flash of musket fire transformed the scene at once. The crowd scattered into its component parts as men dashed for cover. Five bodies lay sprawled in the street, their blood staining the cobblestones. Grayson and M'Lane, caught between the fire from the house and street, were recognized by General Mifflin, who opened a door and allowed them to slip inside.

There was a brief lull as the militia leaders re-formed their forces and made plans for an assault upon the house. One group was dispatched for a fieldpiece; another squad went in search of crowbars and sledges to attack the doors.

General Mifflin, from a second floor window facing Third Street, called to the militiamen to disperse, trying to make himself heard above the sporadic rattle of fire and the shouts and jeers of the besiegers. The only response was a bullet that smashed the sash by his head, showering him with splinters of wood and glass. The General replied with both his pistols.

While the defenders crouched in the house, waiting for the next move of the militia, an assault party, stripped to their shirts and armed with sledges and bars, dashed out of Pear Street on the double, covered by brisk fire, in an attempt to batter down a door and take the house from the rear. Masked from the fire of the defenders, they were quickly successful. As the soldiers rushed through the smashed door, they were met by fire from the stairs. Colonel Chambers wounded one of the invaders, but before he could reload he was dragged from the stairs and bayoneted. The militia fired blindly through the smoke-filled hall and then fled, leaving a badly wounded companion behind. The defenders, in their turn, rushed to shore up the doorway with tables and chairs against another attack.
Before the fieldpiece could be brought into action or the attack on the door resumed, help arrived. President Reed had ordered the City Troop of Light Horse to the spot, and then dashed off himself ahead of them, his knee buttons unfastened and his boots unlaced. Followed by two mounted dragoons with drawn swords, Reed came charging down the street, pistol in hand.

The sight of the militant President had a sobering effect on the rioters, and even before the City Troop clattered up under the command of Major Lenox in his shirt sleeves, most of the militia had faded away. While the troopers seized twenty-seven stragglers and clapped them into the prison behind the State House, the defenders of Fort Wilson sallied out to join their rescuers, flushed with a sense of valor and happy to have endured. Besides five dead, including a Negro boy who had joined the mob, fourteen of the militia had been wounded. Within the fort, Captain Campbell was the only one of the garrison who had been killed. John Mifflin had a bullet through both his hands; Sharp Delany, a minor wound; Colonel Chambers, a bayonet gash. The injured men of both sides were placed in nearby houses to await the arrival of doctors.

General Benedict Arnold, military commandant of Philadelphia, who had already been warned away by President Reed, arrived in his coach soon after the City Troop. He was helped down by ready hands, his dark face twisted with scorn for the militia, his dislike of Joseph Reed breaking forth in bitter words. “Your President has raised a mob and now he cannot quell it,” he snarled, and then, accompanied by several of the defenders, he toured the scene of battle while the action was described to him. At an upstairs window he drew his own pistols and weighed them reflectively as though sorry he had not been present to bag a few of the rabble himself.

Wilson, a most unmilitary figure with his thick-lensed glasses perched precariously on his nose, had acted as Mifflin’s lieutenant in disposing the forces of the defenders. It was in his house that the mob’s intended victims had found refuge; it was from his windows that the bullets had come which had killed or wounded more than a dozen militia. Peace might be made with others, but Wilson’s life was not safe in the city, nor would it be easy to placate the militia and restore order with Wilson around to inflame the mob.
A hasty council of city officers decided that Wilson and the principal defenders of the fort must flee Philadelphia before new disorders broke out. Wilson left reluctantly, yielding at last to the persuasion of Robert Morris, who, hiding in the city, promised to keep in touch with Wilson through Morris's Negro, James.

With a number of the militia in jail and the rest in a sullen and explosive mood, Philadelphia was wracked by rumors and alarms. Next morning the militia officers appeared at the Court House on Market Street to demand the release of the prisoners, and word came at the same time that the Germantown militia were preparing to march on the city to reinforce their fellows. President Reed left Timothy Matlack, the secretary of the Executive Council, to handle the crowd of angry militia and rushed off to halt the Germantown soldiers.

Matlack, faced with a mob that threatened to release the prisoners by force, decided that it was a wise policy to mollify the militia and persuaded the magistrates to let the rioters go.

When Reed returned from Germantown, having prevailed upon the militia there to disband, he called a meeting in the Supreme Court room of the State House and exhorted the responsible leaders of both sides to preserve order and avoid actions or statements that might lead to further violence.

Robert Morris was present and reported to Wilson, via James, assuring him that Mrs. Wilson and the children were safe, and telling of plans to meet the next morning to collect evidence in behalf of the defenders of the fort. Could Wilson suggest reliable witnesses whose testimony might be secured? Morris asked. “The storm is over for this day,” he wrote, “without any mischief except Mr. Lewis is in jail. . . . The President I am told is determined to put the laws in force or resign. . . . The ferment is particularly high against you. . . . The poor unfortunates that lost their lives yesterday have been buried this evening with the honors of war—a circumstance not calculated to allay the passions of men in a ferment.” Wilson, hiding out in Morris’s country house, should move to some place less conspicuous. At all events Wilson had best keep to the attic and contrive his bedding from an old mattress or some blankets. James had the key to the wine cellar so that Wilson could refresh himself and cheer his exile. There were tea and sugar in the house and James would
bring food, but Wilson must not stay there another day “unless the tide changes in the city.”

Wilson, with James waiting to carry his letter back, promptly made up a list of witnesses to be called in behalf of the defenders of the fort. Colonel Hartley had observed the riot. Doctor Ewing, professor at the College, was an unimpeachable witness. Mr. Joseph Hewes, delegate to Congress from North Carolina, could give valuable testimony. John Gibson, city auditor; Colonel Patton, Wilson’s stepfather-in-law; Captain Stoddard, secretary of the Board of War; and Captain Kearney of Sheppards Town in Virginia—all these men had been witnesses to the events of October 4. Some could testify to the fact that the defenders had called out to the mob “not to fire.” The action of the militia, Wilson added, in “forming before the house, and firing into it without any previous demand or complaint” should be shown. Wilson himself wished to return to the city. “My absence, I’m afraid, only makes matters worse.”

Morris placated Wilson by promising to ride out for a visit and a council of war on Thursday, but Thursday night, sitting in a darkened room so that his enemies might not discover he was at home, he wrote his exiled friend that he could not come. “I cannot commit to paper what has passed this day,” he added, urging Wilson, if he valued his life, to remain in hiding. If he insisted on returning to the city, Morris suggested that he dismount several blocks from his house, turn his horse over to James, and slip into the “fort” as unobtrusively as possible. A horse seen at his door might draw enemies there.

The following day Morris wrote to repeat his warnings. Wilson’s present refuge was hardly safe. Morris had heard that “some parties was after you in that neighborhood.” He had best slip across the river into New Jersey. “Retreat,” Morris wrote, “until the ferment is over, you may then be heard patiently and have justice done you. In the present state of things the passions of men might do you injustice that their own judgments would hereafter condemn or their humanity regret.”

10 Undated letter in collection of James Alan Montgomery, Jr.
11 Undated letter in collection of Dr. Joseph Fields, Joliet, Ill.
12 Undated letter in collection of James Alan Montgomery, Jr.
13 Ibid.
It was not Wilson's nature to wait passively while friends tried to appease his enemies. He encountered Captain John Barry, the naval officer who had recently won Washington's encomiums for "gallantry and address," and the two made plans for a counteroffensive against the Philadelphia mobs. Wilson was determined to take "further steps for our security, and to prevent repeated and continual insults." A group of citizens must join together to "give some stability to our defense of the first rights of man," he wrote Morris. If the plan met with Morris's approval, he was to send it from house to house "of those whose sentiments we know," in order to be signed. Once a sufficient number had enrolled, the list could be given to President Reed "with a tender of the services of the subscribers in support of the government." Such measures, Wilson declared, "will unite and strengthen us, and will awe the insurgents." 14 Barry took the scheme to Morris, but Morris felt that Reed would soon succeed in his efforts to restore order.

To quiet popular clamor the order was given for the defenders of Fort Wilson to post bail for court appearance. On October 13, Daniel Clymer posted bail of £5,000 with the Assembly. Wilson himself was back in the city by the 19th and posted £10,000 bail, with George Clymer and Samuel Caldwell as sureties. The rest of the defenders followed suit, and in the face of President Reed's determination to suppress further outbreaks, the crisis spent itself rapidly. Many of the antagonists must have felt, as their tempers cooled, that Philadelphia's war-within-a-war was making a sorry spectacle of Pennsylvania patriotism. Had there been no Revolution, no pressure from the army and from the delegates of Congress for the factions to compose their differences, no such distracting news as word of the arrival of the French fleet off Georgia, the incident might have grown into a minor civil war; but against the larger background of the Revolutionary cause the squabbles of discontented militia and frustrated politicians seemed small and petty, and all parties became at length heartily sick of the whole affair, wishing only to forget the autumnal madness that had swept the city like a fever. In March, 1780, the Executive Council closed a violent chapter in the city's history by passing "an act of free and general pardon" to all concerned.

14 Wilson to Morris, place not indicated, Oct. 7, 1779, Stan V. Henkels Catalogue No. 1337.