John Israel: Printer and Politician on the Pennsylvania Frontier, 1798-1805

The trans-Allegheny portion of Pennsylvania, known to contemporary residents as "the western country," was still a sparsely-settled frontier area in the decade following the ratification of the Constitution. It was to this place that John Israel, a young printer of Jewish extraction, migrated to take up his duties as a much-needed Jeffersonian Republican editor. Youthful, able, and zealously devoted to the Jeffersonian cause, Israel soon emerged both as a potent party manager and the storm center of a bitter politico-religious controversy, culminating in the hard-fought presidential campaign of 1800.

Jews were something of a rarity in eighteenth-century America generally, and in western Pennsylvania in particular. The fact, therefore, that Israel did not practice his faith did not deter his Federalist opponents from using his ostensible religion as a means of attacking the editor as a stranger, an outsider, and worse. Because Israel was valuable to their cause, and because the Jeffersonians (some of whose leaders were Deists) were inclined to cherish freedom of conscience, certain of Israel's compatriots spoke out on his behalf, thus adding an unusual and interesting twist to the vital politicking evident in that area and the United States generally at the turn of the nineteenth century. Israel's brief, volatile political and editorial career, complicated by the religious overtones involved, provides, then, something of a mosaic of western Pennsylvania attitudes in hard circumstances both toward the principle of freedom of conscience, and party operations.

Only scraps of information shed light on Israel's early years. He went west in 1798, leaving Philadelphia to settle in Washington, Pennsylvania, where he founded the Herald of Liberty. The son of a "qualified elector" of Pennsylvania—most certainly an offspring of the prominent Israel family of Philadelphia—he had been involved in
Republican politics there in the 1790's. Apart from his own meager recorded recollections, Israel was listed as a member of a Philadelphia democratic society in the middle of the decade. Inasmuch as these societies were well-known vehicles of Jeffersonian party propaganda, a degree of political activism on Israel's part can be inferred. Also, he must have completed an apprenticeship with a Philadelphia printer, for on his arrival in the western country at the age of twenty-one he was already skilled in that trade. Two years after founding the *Herald of Liberty* he was called upon in 1800 to establish a paper in Pittsburgh, the growing political and commercial center of the trans-Allegheny region. With the help of the local Republican interest, he started the *Tree of Liberty* and two years later suspended publication of the *Herald* to devote his energies exclusively to the *Tree*.1

From the creation of the *Tree of Liberty* until his retirement, the Jeffersonian Republican party rewarded well Israel's diligent editorial and political efforts. Repeatedly noting this fact, the Federalists charged Israel with being the tool of Hugh Henry Brackenridge, second only to Albert Gallatin among the Republicans of western Pennsylvania. Brackenridge, a graduate of the College of New Jersey at Princeton, friend of James Madison, Philip Freneau, and later of Thomas Jefferson, and a leading literary figure of his day, sparked the movement that brought to Pittsburgh its first Republican paper, just prior to Jefferson's election to the presidency.2

Although extremely close to the *Tree*, it is doubtful however, that Brackenridge concerned himself with its day to day operations. So

1 Biographical data cited below indicates clearly that Israel was generally thought of by the public as being Jewish. His own identification in this connection, however, has never been clearly established; ambivalent evidence exists. On a few occasions Israel referred to himself as a Jew. On the other hand, he was married by a Protestant minister. What is important for the purposes of this article is that most western Pennsylvanians identified him as Jewish. For details of Israel's life generally, and for specific evidence on the above point, see the *Tree of Liberty*, Feb. 6, 1802, Feb. 5, 1803; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Sept. 24, 1802, Oct. 14, 1806; John Israel to Albert Gallatin, Sept. 23, 1798, Oct. 6, 1799, Albert Gallatin Papers, New-York Historical Society; Eugene P. Link, Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790-1800 (New York, 1942), 58n; Russell J. Ferguson, Early Western Pennsylvania Politics (Pittsburgh, 1938), 151f; Harry M. Tinkcom, The Republicans and Federalists in Pennsylvania 1790-1801 (Harrisburg, 1950), 186, 232, 235.

2 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Nov. 30, 1799, and *passim*. One student claims that Brackenridge not only helped to found the paper, he also "saw to it that the *Tree of Liberty* began operations smoothly, assisting Israel in every possible way." William F. Keller, The Nation's Advocate: Henrie Marie Brackenridge and Young America (Pittsburgh, 1956), 60, 63.
long as the politics of the *Tree* remained sternly Republican, Brackenridge was content to allow Israel a free hand, Federalist assertions to the contrary notwithstanding. On the other hand, Brackenridge's importance to Israel's venture cannot be doubted. It was clearly true, as one historian of the area's politics has put it, that for an extended period Brackenridge remained "friendly to Israel."\(^3\) Israel himself admitted in 1801, at the time of Brackenridge's appointment by Governor Thomas McKean to the state supreme court, that the poet-politician did "assist in the establishment of [his] press." He denied, however, that "Mr. Brackenridge has been . . . the editor of this paper"; nor, Israel went on to assert, did Brackenridge have any hand in controlling the press.\(^4\)

Brackenridge's aid—and that of the party generally—took other forms. Brackenridge, Gallatin, and many others supported the *Tree* with semi-anonymous articles attacking the Federalists. Leading Republicans encouraged their followers to subscribe to the *Tree*, advertise in its pages, and provide its editor with useful information.\(^5\) As the Republicans gained ground locally, in the state and nationally after 1800, Israel like most Republican editors, received his share of patronage.

Soon after his election, Jefferson and his cabinet received requests to aid Israel. Nathaniel Irish, a Pittsburgh Republican, wrote to Gallatin, now Secretary of the Treasury, that authority to print federal laws (for a fee paid by the government) be shifted from John Scull's Federalist *Pittsburgh Gazette* to Israel's paper, "which you know," Irish reminded Gallatin, "has been a support to the Republican Interest and the President's character."\(^6\) Brackenridge at about the same time also wrote to Jefferson seeking patronage for Israel, suggesting that publication of the laws of the United States be "transferred to the *Herald* and the *Tree of Liberty*."\(^7\) The entreaties were successful. From its issue of February 13, 1802, onward, the

\(^3\) Ferguson, 163.
\(^4\) *Tree of Liberty*, Aug. 22, 1801. See also the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Nov. 30, 1799, Aug. 23, 29, 1800; Israel to Gallatin, Aug. 12, 1801, Albert Gallatin Papers.
\(^5\) See for example, Israel to Gallatin, Sept. 23, 1798, Oct. 6, 1799, *ibid.*; *Tree of Liberty*, Nov. 15, 1800.
laws of the nation were published "by authority" in the *Tree.* A month later, the *Tree* was also printing the laws of the state of Pennsylvania. Thereafter, Israel's establishment received increasing amounts of local patronage; surrounding counties, as they became Republican, gave the *Tree* practically all of their public printing, and allowed Israel to supply at least some of their stationery needs. In addition to these marks of Republican preference, Governor McKean appointed Israel Recorder of Washington County in 1800, a return for services rendered McKean in his successful election bid of 1799. Israel held this office until his death.

The young printer's rewards from the party were not merely a return for his editorial duties, however. Like most Republican editors, Israel was a full-time party manager. Because of his newspaper, he was the recipient of all sorts of information. It was he who gathered the views of Republicans in western Pennsylvania toward the candidacy of Gallatin for Congress in 1798. He collated and passed on these sentiments to Gallatin, and probably to other local party leaders as well. He occupied much the same position—campaign co-ordinator for the western country—with respect to Thomas McKean's efforts in 1799 to gain the governor's chair. In this connection, Harry M. Tinkcom claims that "the young editor virtually turned his newspaper office into a western headquarters."

Between elections Israel continued to devote his newspaper almost exclusively to what he called "The Cause." Republican propaganda and vigorous editorial attacks filled his pages throughout the year. It was from Israel's office on "Clapboard Row" (Pittsburgh's business district) that petitions went out to the surrounding country calling for the impeachment of Judge Alexander Addison, a leading western Pennsylvania Federalist. When completed, these petitions were returned to Israel, who sorted and organized them and sent

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8 *Tree of Liberty*, Feb. 13, 17, 1802, and *passim*.
10 See for example, *ibid.*, Feb. 12, 1803, Feb. 4, 1804.
12 Israel to Gallatin, Sept. 23, 1798, Apr. 15, Oct. 6, 1799, Albert Gallatin Papers. It is clear from his letters to Gallatin (the only ones extant) that Israel was an avid political correspondent.
13 Tinkcom, 232; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Sept. 24, 1802.
14 Israel to Gallatin, Oct. 15, 1799, Albert Gallatin Papers.
them on to the legislature, which ultimately impeached the judge.\textsuperscript{16} In short, Israel's duties can not be described merely by the appellation "printer" or "editor," for in the style of the day his position embraced a host of political tasks, all part of the new politics introduced by Jeffersonians across the nation.

When Israel established the Tree of Liberty in Pittsburgh, the threat he posed to Federalism in the leading population center of the western country was one that could not be ignored. The appearance of his first issue was the signal for an all-out assault on the editor and his supporters, where, it was thought, he and they were most vulnerable. The method followed was based on activities in Philadelphia, where Federalists had been using anti-Semitism against non-Jew as well as Jew.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus a wave of attacks on Israel's presumed religion ensued during the course of the generally bitter presidential campaign of 1800. These religious thrusts were conducted through the medium of the Pittsburgh Gazette, the leading Federalist newspaper. The Gazette undertook a vicious anti-Semitic campaign, a campaign joined with a more typical but equally malicious assault on Republican Deism.\textsuperscript{17}

Scull pulled all the stops. "The Judge [Brackenridge] and the Jew" were alluded to repeatedly.\textsuperscript{18} Brackenridge the Deist was ridiculed because "of late [he] seems to have a hankering after the Jews."\textsuperscript{19} Pointing out the supposed perfidy of the Jews, a Federalist correspondent queried, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?"\textsuperscript{20} Another correspondent, this time to the Tree, disclosed that some Federalists were referring to Israel as "The Jew, and your office [as] a Synagogue." He continued: "Taking you for

\textsuperscript{15} Tree of Liberty, Nov. 15, 1800, Jan. 2, Mar. 27, 1802, Nov. 5, 1803.
\textsuperscript{17} See Tinkcom, 245ff., for a full explanation of the intricacies of the presidential canvass in the Keystone State generally. Although no general election for President was held in Pennsylvania in 1800, this fact did not become clear to the voters and participants until after the state elections held in the middle of October. In the meantime, the legislative and congressional polls were caught up in the groundswell of party combat for the presidential office.
\textsuperscript{18} See for example the Pittsburgh Gazette, Aug. 29, October, 1800, and passim.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., Aug. 23, 1800; Newlin, 214; Keller, 60.
\textsuperscript{20} Pittsburgh Gazette, Aug. 39, 1800.
one of the circumcised, [they] find fault with your Motto, taken from the New Testament ["And the Leaves of the Tree Were for the Healing of the Nations"] with which you have no right to meddle."  

This response was triggered by one of Scull’s contributors, who, in striking out at Israel’s patron, charged: “That he [Brackenridge] should turn Jew in his old days, and build him a synagogue in his own ground, surprises nobody. . . . Are we all to be circumcised without benefit of clergy?”

Many references to Israel classified him as an intruder. A Federalist supporter wrote:

You [Scull] have a wife and family to maintain. This new printer is but a young man and a stranger among us. . . . I fear there are some who do not believe there is a Hell. . . . This I fear is the reason why they with their tongue loose and their presses free, and like the heathen [they] call off all restraint of God and man. . . . They have no regard for religion.

Both the Jew and the Deist were accused of putting the “Holy Bible on a level with a French ballad. I do not wonder that a Jew who denies the New Testament, or a Deist who denies both Testaments should do so.”

A biographer of Brackenridge has noted: “There was unquestionably a considerable amount of anti-Semitism in Western Pennsylvania, as reflected by the nature of the publications of that one paper [the Gazette] alone.” Perhaps this was too broad a conclusion to draw on the basis only of the Gazette’s activities, but unquestionably Israel was made to feel his Jewishness. Indeed, Hugh Brackenridge admitted to feeling it also. “The patronage of this paper,” the Judge wrote to Thomas Jefferson, “has drawn upon me personally much abuse and ribaldry.”

When Israel and Brackenridge proved themselves fully capable of verbal retaliation, this too was deliberately turned into a religious question. “You [Scull] are a man that fears God,” an admirer wrote, “and cannot therefore make such bold strokes [with the pen] as an

21 Tree of Liberty, Sept. 6, 13, 1800.
22 Newlin, 214–215.
23 Pittsburgh Gazette, Aug. 23, 1800.
24 Keller, 60.
25 Newlin, 231.
26 See for example, the Tree, Sept. 6, 20, 1800, and passim.
Infidel can do." 27 Another devotee tried to comfort Scull: "Is it not astonishing, that such profanity and mockery of Religion should be countenanced in this country?" 28 That freedom of religion was so vigorously and immediately defended was one of the most remarkable features of the episode.

The *Tree* became the recipient of communications supporting it, defending Israel’s right to engage in political debate and activity and keep his own religious counsel. These communications, taken in conjunction with other evidence, indicated that the religious attack had backfired. Israel, sensing this, of course did his best to create good political copy, and his judgment that many would be revolted by the nature of the attack proved correct.

Just a short time after Scull’s first reference to Israel’s religion, a correspondent to the *Tree* reported that “it is my opinion that every man of good character, coming into this country . . . ought to be admitted.” 29 Another subscriber at almost the same time defended Israel’s right to edit his paper without being involved in “the mire of scurrility and personal defamation of private characters, which some of the western presses wallow in. . . . Of what consequence is it to ask, who wish pure information, whether a man wears a Broadcloth coat, or a broad brim hat?” 30

Other supporters helped turn the situation to political advantage. “Watchman” warned that unless Republicans were vigilant, Federalists would “amend that part of the Constitution which admits a Jew as President,” for that party felt “we must have an established religion of some sort.” He concluded by reminding the *Tree’s* readers that Republicans championed Thomas Jefferson who introduced a law in Virginia “by which religious oppression is abolished . . . after the manner of Wm. Penn.” 31 Later, when Israel was involved in another political controversy, an antagonist remembered “when you established your paper five years ago . . . you were the friend of the people; the idle [sic] of Clapboard Row.” 32

27 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Feb. 13, 1801.
29 *Tree of Liberty*, Aug. 23, 1800.
Even though expressions of support for Israel were tied in with political advantages accruing therefrom, at this time and place there were political gains to be made by vigorously endorsing religious freedom for everyone. This became clear when the election returns were counted; other issues had clearly taken precedence. The campaign against Israel as a Jew, and against the Deism of some Republicans, had been a failure. Federalists could not halt the changes taking place, and Republicans carried Allegheny County for the first time, electing congressional candidate Gallatin (whose district embraced two other counties as well), and state senatorial candidate James C. Hamilton. Both were recipients of large pluralities in a county that had always gone Federalist.33

In retrospect, a writer, observing the reasons for the decline of Federalism in Allegheny County, judged that Federalist “extravagance and folly, with the insulting manners of some of their hangers-on, drove many moderate and thinking men from their party.”34 In the midst of the state and congressional campaigns of 1802, the Fayette Gazette, another western Federalist newspaper some distance from Pittsburgh, sought to inject anti-Semitism in an effort to rally support for its party. The Gazette published a long diatribe against “The Israelite” in order “to prove themselves men of sense, and the Jew a fool,” according to John Israel. Almost immediately after the appearance of the article in the Fayette paper, a Federalist nominating meeting in Pittsburgh disassociated itself from such extreme tactics, evidently remembering well the catastrophic campaign of 1800. The meeting resolved: “We must take this public opportunity of declaring our abhorrence of the vile calumnies, falsehood and slander which have . . . appeared in certain newspapers.”35

More substantial confirmation of the failure of the religious assault as a political weapon was implicit in the absence of any more latent anti-Semitism in the Pittsburgh Gazette. While Israel was frequently chastised as would be any rival editor and key politico in the opposition ranks, all such assaults were consistent with the political norms of the day insofar as they applied to journalistic combat.36 Israel was

33 Ibid., Oct. 25, 1800.
34 Ibid., May 25, 1805.
36 Newspaper abuse was characteristic of political propaganda in the period. A good survey of this type of politicking is found in Charles O. Lerche, Jr., “Jefferson and the Election of
moved to remark during the state election campaign of 1801 that the Federalists "are now apparently mild and accommodating," whereas a year earlier they had been "so openly violent and insulting."\footnote{Ibid., Sept. 12, 1801.}

Meanwhile, he continued to make his way in the community. In the years following 1800 the circulation of the Tree mounted, aided, no doubt, by political patronage. In the summer of 1802, Israel was elected captain of a newly-formed militia company in Pittsburgh known as the "republican blues." He also served as vice-president of the assemblage at the town's annual Fourth of July celebration.\footnote{Ibid., July 24, 1802.}

While not in themselves important, these developments indicate both the political utility of Israel's paper and the lightness with which Republicans dismissed the religious attacks made earlier on the editor.

In 1805, however, Israel's growing prosperity was abruptly halted by a serious split in the Republican ranks. A hard-fought gubernatorial election in the autumn of that year found Israel, like many other Republicans, caught between conflicting factions of the now dominant Republican party. Incumbent Republican Governor Thomas McKean was challenged by another Republican, legislative leader Simon Snyder. There was not much choice for Israel to make; he had always supported McKean's candidacy vigorously in the past and had been rewarded by the governor with a lucrative appointment. Because McKean was also the recipient of a good deal of Federalist support, inasmuch as that party was not strong enough to run its own candidate, Republican supporters of McKean throughout Pennsylvania were labeled "tertium quids," or third party men. In Pittsburgh, Israel found himself losing subscribers among the Snyderites because of his refusal to abandon McKean. Indeed, no matter whom he supported, he would have found himself in difficulties, for the Pennsylvania Republican interest was badly divided by this struggle. In fact, a rival Republican press, the Commonwealth, was established in Pittsburgh as a mouthpiece for Snyder's candidacy.

\footnotesize{1800: A Case Study in the Political Smear," \textit{William and Mary Quarterly}, V (1948), 471 ff. A typical Scull remark belittled Israel for the "barranness [sic] of his head," which was "empty of knowledge." Israel rejoined that Scull was a freak because of his "Spindle Shanks and hard scull bone." \textit{Tree of Liberty}, Oct. 2, 30, 1802.}
Israel thus found himself at odds not only with Scull's Gazette, but also with a Republican competitor.\(^{39}\)

Although Thomas McKean was re-elected by a small margin, Israel found that thanks to the split in the party the Tree had seen its best days. With his job as Recorder for Washington County secured by McKean's victory, Israel, in December, 1805, sold the Tree and removed to Washington County, the point at which he had begun his career in the west.\(^{40}\) Less than a year later Israel died before his thirtieth birthday, a victim of blood poisoning that developed from a minor cut which had not been properly treated.\(^{41}\)

Despite his early death, he played an important role in the transition of the western country and Pennsylvania generally from Federalism to Republicanism. Israel lived at a time of significant political change, and he was a living demonstration of the opportunities of the open society that was America's unique birthright. Much more important, the conclusion is inescapable that at that time and place, religious freedom as guaranteed under the then new Constitution was meaningful to a vast majority of the people in Allegheny and Washington counties. John Israel unwittingly put his right to religious freedom to a severe test when he injected himself into the extremely bitter and factious politics that characterized the emergence of the early party system in the United States. It was clear that virtually all who adhered to the Republican party gladly accepted him for what he was, an able printer who could aid the Jeffersonian cause. Few really cared what his religious beliefs may or may not have been.

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\(^{39}\) For Israel's deep commitment in the gubernatorial campaign of 1805, see the Tree of Liberty, May 11, June 1, July 6, Aug. 17, Sept. 28, Dec. 3, 1805.

\(^{40}\) Tree of Liberty, Oct. 3, Dec. 24, 1805.

\(^{41}\) Pittsburgh Gazette, Oct. 14, 1806.