John Buchanan McCormick,
Ballad Singer of Many Talents

John Buchanan McCormick was born at Skelp, Huntingdon County (now Blair), Pennsylvania, on November 4, 1834, to Joseph Alexander and Rachel Buchanan McCormick. The father, a distant relative of Cyrus Hall McCormick of reaper fame, moved his family to Smicksburg, in northern Indiana County, when young John was three years old. There the elder McCormick, who had been a schoolteacher and wagon maker, worked as a tanner.1

In 1851, while a partner with his uncle David Buchanan in a cabinet and chair shop, young McCormick became interested in music. In a short time he was conducting singing schools in the churches and schoolhouses of Indiana and surrounding counties. For more than twenty years he enthusiastically pursued this work, walking, according to one estimate, over 40,000 miles in managing his schools. Not only did he direct singing schools, but “Professor” McCormick also organized a local band and was acclaimed in his own and adjoining counties for his expertise in the rendition of balladry. As if to affirm his lifelong devotion to music, during his eighty-first year he sang two of his favorite ballads at a concert that was held in the county seat town of Indiana to raise money to build a hospital. Appearing with him on this occasion were several entertainers from Pittsburgh, among them Willie Pickels, boy soprano and Red Seal artist.2

Although McCormick had little formal education, he had many interests and about as many talents. In addition to his occupation with music, he liked to carve wood and to paint. One of his paintings shows Donati’s Comet over Smicksburg. The only one of six comets discovered by the Italian astronomer that bears his name, this one

1 “Welcome to the John B. McCormick Residence, an Indiana Co. Historic Site,” a mimeographed guide for visitors.
was seen early in June, 1858. Water wheels, however, were to fascinate McCormick more than painting for they became the controlling force in his life for a quarter of a century. With funds realized from his successful singing schools, he began in 1868 to work on a turbine that he hoped would function in the low water heads of the western and southern regions of the United States. Until early in 1897 he was to devote his time and talents to perfecting the "Hercules" water wheel, spending most of these years in machine shops in or near Holyoke, Massachusetts, where he had access to James Emerson's Holyoke Testing Flumes that were used by engineers seeking reliable data on the wheels they had built.

When McCormick was not building or testing models, he was protecting them in the courts and before the Commissioner of Patents, an endeavor that often proved discouraging. Little is known of McCormick's work with turbines outside engineering circles, though the records disclose that mills, factories, and hydroelectric sites around the world installed his wheel. Research may well prove him to have been a central figure in implementing the dreams of Henry W. Grady for a "New South" based on industrial foundations.

McCormick was a "true Yankee type" mechanic, who, without the slightest knowledge of the theory of hydraulics, developed an efficient wheel by combining his natural talents for experimentation

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3 McCormick's wheel had several other names, among them "McCormick's Holyoke Turbine," "The Jolly-McCormick Turbine," and the "Victor." In Scotland it was known as the "Archilles Turbine." These and other names were found in: The Lumber World, January, 1892; American Trade Paper, Jan. 14, 1893; The Iron Age, Nov. 20, 1902; and John B. McCormick to John Turnbull, Jr. (Glasgow, Scotland), Aug. 16, 1892. Correspondence herein cited is in the possession of Mrs. Margery Stephenson, Smicksburg, Pa. Mrs. Stephenson is the daughter of McCormick.

4 McCormick to J. L. Brown, Nov. 18, 1876; to his father and mother, Feb. 8, 1878; to Turnbull, Aug. 16, 1892; John B. McCormick and James L. Brown vs. E. R. Stilwell, On Appeal Before the Honorable Commissioner of Patents (1879).

5 The Iron Age, Nov. 20, 1902; Royalty Sheets of Morgan Smith Company to John B. McCormick, 1895-1905, in possession of the author. The Morgan Smith Company has become the York (Pa.) Plant, Hydraulic Products Division of Allis-Chalmers.

6 Ibid. During 1895-1905 McCormick received modest royalties from eighty-six mills, factories, and hydroelectric plants in Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. During this time there were 109 installations in New York alone. Payments to McCormick appear to have been surprisingly small, amounting to a single remittance after each wheel was installed. Mrs. Stephenson to the author, Nov. 2, 1967.
with patience and observation. As a young raftsman on the Allegheny River, he had observed that a log drawn through the water required less power if towed butt first. Such discernment required no body of erudite learning. Had he known more, he might have seen less. As a contemporary professor of engineering asserted in a paper before the Institution of Engineers and Shipbuilders in Scotland, had McCormick's background included a sophisticated education he very probably would have lost the acuteness of perception that enabled him to work out his patterns without the benefit of drawings.\(^7\)

With a comfortable income from the success of his wheel and with the conviction that he "had made the load borne by mankind lighter," McCormick decided near the turn of the century to quit Holyoke.\(^8\) Accordingly, he returned to Pennsylvania and bought a large farm in northern Indiana County. In 1902 he brought to his new home a bride forty years his junior. Soon afterwards he began the expansion of the farm's old four-room stone house into a magnificent Scottish structure of sixteen rooms. There he resided until his death at the age of ninety in 1924. Two children were born to the McCormicks early in the twentieth century; both are still living in northern Indiana County.\(^9\)

Throughout his life McCormick exhibited a passion for individual liberty, freedom of conscience, frugality, and hard work.\(^{10}\) Often generous to a fault, he was kind, considerate, and devoted to his family. He abhorred pretense and sharp practices, and he may have believed that some of the political developments of the 1850's were

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\(^7\) Reprint of R. H. Thurston, "On the Reliability of Tests and Turbines," from *Transactions of the Institution of Engineers and Shipbuilders in Scotland* (Glasgow, 1884), 2. The "true-Yankee-type-Mechanic" schema offers a meaningful approach to American social and intellectual development; though the assertion that the traits of this type sprang miraculously from the primeval forest and locked themselves within the consciousness of the first settlers and their descendants is to attribute to British North Americans a uniqueness that was not theirs. British engineers, among them the President of the Institution of Engineers and Shipbuilders in Scotland, challenged this claim in 1884 by observing that it was well known that good mechanics very often "could make a mill although they could not draw it on paper." See *ibid.*, 9.

\(^8\) McCormick to his mother, Sept. 12, 1894.

\(^9\) *Indiana Evening Gazette*, Mar. 12, 1949; "Welcome to the John B. McCormick Residence."

\(^{10}\) McCormick to his mother, Oct. 7, 1879; to Leila A. McCormick, Mar. 14, 1892; to his wife, Mar. 23, 1905.
undertaken in bad faith. In any case, this man of indomitable will clung stubbornly to the party of Jefferson and Jackson at a time when many of his friends and neighbors were joining the newly formed Republican Party. On the eve of the Civil War, at a local rally in support of the Union cause, McCormick and a friend named William Duke, both probably yielding as much to mischievousness as to disapprobation, hauled down the flag.\footnote{Mrs. Stephenson, personal interview with the author at Smicksburg, Pa., Sept. 5, 1966.}

Although both of his younger brothers served in the Union army, one of them losing his life, McCormick himself was far from committed to the cause. In 1862 he went to Maryland to bring home the younger brother, who had been fatally wounded at the Battle of Antietam. From Chambersburg he wrote his parents on October 11, describing the hazards of railroad travel and offering some impressions on the recent visit of J. E. B. Stuart’s cavalry to that Pennsylvania town. Considering McCormick’s mission, one might expect him to have excoriated the Confederate raiders. On the contrary, he reported that the people of the Chambersburg region regarded them as gentlemen and that he believed Stuart to be a kind and considerate foe. McCormick’s only animus was directed at the railroad men, whom he castigated as cowards for refusing to take their train from Shippensburg to Chambersburg, thereby requiring him to make the distance afoot.

Like many loyal northerners, McCormick was an honest dissenter, disturbed by the centralizing and abolitionist tendencies of the Lincoln administration. His Democratic upbringing compelled him to distrust the former and his feeling that many opponents of slavery were opportunists made him suspicious of the latter. McCormick belonged to that sizeable group of conservative opponents of Lincoln’s policies who were called “Copperheads,” “Butternuts,” or “Peace Democrats.” Unfortunately, the politics of hysteria precludes the kind of discrimination necessary to distinguish dissent from betrayal. It was the fate of many of Lincoln’s critics to become the victims of crisis politics. McCormick would seem to have been no exception.\footnote{Richard O. Curry is a young historian who has tackled this problem of the Copperheads with perception. See his “The Union as It Was: A Critique of Recent Interpretations of the ‘Copperheads’,” \textit{Civil War History}, XIII (March, 1967).}
JOHN B. McCORMICK

Courtesy of Frank B. Hood
After the war McCormick retained many conservative feelings, and they were to give his appearance as a ballad singer in 1868 at Bellefonte an ironic twist. Bellefonte was the home of Andrew Gregg Curtin, war governor of the Keystone State. During the war Curtin had been a source of great strength to President Lincoln, convening the famed Governors' Conference at Altoona in 1862 to rally support to the President's call for more troops. But Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles thought he was “limber, deceptive, and unreliable,” and accused him of snap judgment in addressing a circular letter to the governors in 1866, inviting them to convene their legislatures immediately to adopt the proposed Fourteenth Amendment. In 1868 there was an unsuccessful effort to make him the Republican nominee for the vice-presidency. The following year President Grant appointed Curtin Minister to Russia.

On April 28, 1868, while Curtin's friends were promoting their favorite for the vice-presidential nomination of the Grand Old Party, McCormick, heralded as “the great ballad singer” of “happy and brilliant style,” appeared at Bush's Hall in Bellefonte. The audience was said to have received McCormick's ballads “in the most enthusiastic manner.” He introduced at least five of his own compositions on this occasion, one of them a timely and satirical number entitled “The Ku-Klux-Klan.” Bitterly critical of the Radical Republicans, it was addressed primarily to ladies and politicians. The views expressed were those of a man who had hoped throughout the Civil War for the restoration of the old decentralized Union. As a dissenter, McCormick had long since felt the lash of Republican resentment. With the aid of balladry, he now sought to get even with his persistent foes of the Abolitionist-Radical-Republican persuasion. Ever the conservative Democrat, in his ballad McCormick dismissed the Klan as a passing aberration and dutifully chided its critics with the reminder that they had had their own fling at chicanery with the old Know Nothing masquerade. He recommended that they resurrect that garret-habituated order and put it to Klan watching. If McCormick's style was lacking in brilliancy, “The Ku-Klux-Klan” leaves no doubts about the com-

13 John T. Morse, Jr., ed., Diary of Gideon Welles (New York, 1911), II, 529; III, 16.
15 Flier, in possession of Mrs. Stephenson.
poser's views on the impeachment of President Johnson or his feelings toward two of his fellow Pennsylvanians, Congressman Thaddeus Stevens and John W. Forney of Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{16}

Come all you politicians, and listen to my song,
And if you are attentive, I'll not detain you long;
The truth I'm bound to tell, I love to make it ring,
I'll sing about the Ku-Klux, that awful scary thing.
Now all you politicians, and every other man,
Devise some means political for the Ku-Klux-Klan.

Chorus

Oh! isn't it a mighty scare, deny it if you can,
For the printers all are printing 'bout the Ku-Klux-Klan.

At the nation's capitol there is a great affray,
Impeachment of the President's the order of the day;
Among them is a monster, his name is blink-eyed Ben,
His backer is Thad. Stevens, with a host of little men;
Now go it Congress, go it blind, impeach him while you can,
For fear you're interrupted by the Ku-Klux-Klan.

Chorus

There is a fine old printer and Greeley is his name,
He has a host of underlings from Maryland to Maine:
Some of them have talent though more are eight by ten,
And if we credit all they say they're scary little men;
Of all the host of printers John Forney is the man,
Can tell the wildest stories 'bout the Ku-Klux-Klan.

Chorus

Come all you politicians, I'll tell you what to do,
To guard against this scary scary thing, this Klickety-Klucky-Klue;
Call out the Know Nothings wherever you may go,
And meet in garrets, coop and stye, as you did years ago;
Then when your good wives say to you, Where have you been my man?
Just tell them you were watching for the Ku-Klux-Klan.

Chorus

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.} Forney, a leading Democrat until he broke with President James Buchanan in 1857, owned two papers, the Washington (D.C.) \textit{Chronicle} and the Philadelphia \textit{Press}. He sold the former in 1870. Frederic Hudson, \textit{Journalism in the United States from 1690 to 1872} (New York, 1873), 260, for brief reference to Forney's newspapers; Philip Shriver Klein, \textit{President James Buchanan: A Biography} (University Park, Pa., 1962), 281-282, for a full explanation of the break between Forney and Buchanan.
Now ladies, don't grow weary with my little song to-night,
I've told you 'bout the Ku-Klux, say don't you think I'm right;
I hope there's no offence, for I intended none,
My song was just to please you and have a little fun;
Now when this campaign's over, and the people choose their man
I'll bet two cents you'll never hear of Ku-Klux-Klan.

Chorus

McCormick's "blink-eyed Ben" Butler was in 1868 fast becoming an unremitting and diabolical genius to the growing number of conservatives. Whether or not the juridical and political adjustments that began during the 1870's, and that were shortly to suspend the politics of hysteria, were parts of a scheme to repudiate substantially the Fourteenth Amendment, the great clauses of the first section of that amendment were gutted; and significantly this happened because the Republican party's leadership, beginning with the late 1870's, was as guilty of adopting the Copperhead bias toward both Negroes and the nature of the Union as it was of "selling out to the Rebels." Hence by 1900 the Fourteenth Amendment had been eviscerated and the Dred Scott formula of racial distinction restored.

17 Until recently, historians and others who have sought to assess the developments of the last half of the nineteenth century managed to render ignominious both the Copperhead-Conservative Union Democrat and his Abolition-Radical Republican antagonist. Some contemporary historians are zestfully rescuing the latter from the scars left by the historiography of the fifty or so years after 1875. On the other hand, the Copperhead-Conservative Union Democrat would seem to offer a less attractive challenge to modern historians, though from 1875 until about 1935 he was often at least tacitly on the side of the angels. Precisely where the historian should stand with respect to rival forces that come within his purview presents him with his greatest problem. It is often asserted that he is "objective," "scientific," etc. I suggest a different stance, one that calls for occupation of the point of greatest tension, that is the point of contact between antagonists. Standing on this point, he may observe the currents swirling about him and formulate his synthesis.

18 For a review of the constitutional adjustments that were eventually to rob the Fourteenth Amendment of its force see Loren Miller, *The Petitioners: The Story of the Supreme Court of the United States and the Negro* (New York, 1966); for the strictly political part of the adjustments see C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (Boston, 1951).

19 For an excellent treatment of what happened to the Fourteenth Amendment from the time of its adoption until the desegregation cases of 1954 see Miller, *The Petitioners*.
The role of John Buchanan McCormick was that of a young ballad singer whose activities, though limited to four or five counties, helped generate a grass roots backlash against Radical Republicans in the land of Curtin, Stevens, and Forney. Once the reaction became general, both Republican leaders and federal judges dutifully contrived party policy and jurisprudence that reflected their understanding of the popular will.

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