Urban Rivalry in the Upper Ohio Valley: Wheeling and Pittsburgh in the Nineteenth Century

The historical examination of urban competition for trade and commerce has frequently focused on such important eastern cities as Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York. These urban giants established their preeminence in America's colonial era, but continued to bicker as new forms of transportation, first the canal, then the railroad, offered economic advantages to the city that secured new improvements. Yet at the turn of the nineteenth century new cities in the West were just beginning their struggle for urban hegemony, and their rivalries took on a different cast as the cities grew up with the market revolution and the transportation technologies that became vivid signals for a growing nation. Western urban growth was tied to trade and the initial agent of that commercial development was the Ohio River. Flowing west from its origins at Pittsburgh, the Ohio River fueled the growth of that city and sparked a secondary round of urban competition with downstream rivals at Cincinnati and Louisville.

In his classic study of urban development, historian Richard Wade noted that "before a city could hope to enter the urban sweepstake for the largest prize, it had to eliminate whatever rivals arose in its own area." In some local regions the battle was uneven and the weaker town was quickly eliminated. Louisville annexed nearby Shippingsport and Portland to eliminate their competition. Pittsburgh had similar motives in moving to annex Allegheny. Farther west, the rapid growth of St. Louis quickly dashed the
developmental dreams of boosters in Edwardsville, Illinois.¹ Yet in other cases smaller cities managed a long and bitter struggle before admitting defeat. Wheeling's rivalry with Pittsburgh was such a struggle. Like that between other western cities, this contest took place as "westward migration and the rapid settlement of the Northwest Territory opened up a vast agricultural region and a new market for eastern goods."²

In the early nineteenth century, both Wheeling, Virginia, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, possessed advantages that made them natural candidates for urban growth. The strategic location of each city near navigable rivers, the construction of important trade roads through the cities, and the establishment of iron and other manufactories suggest that each had potential for success. This urban potential fostered a fierce competition between the cities, which became manifest in the struggle for domination of commerce and traffic on the Ohio River. As the main navigable river between the long-settled eastern seaboard and the Mississippi valley, the Ohio River played a crucial role in the American settlement of the West, and in the commercial development of the country in the early national era. To some extent, Wheeling and Pittsburgh served different hinterlands. Pittsburgh was strongly tied to Philadelphia and the established commerce of the Atlantic trade, and fed its growing iron industry from Pennsylvania's Juniata iron range. Wheeling drew trade from the developing agricultural base of southern Appalachia and built a reputation for iron, nail, and glass production using the resources available in the Upper Ohio Valley. The connection each city had with the growing western trade gave birth to an intraregional rivalry that eventually involved Wheeling and Pittsburgh residents in a contest to gain control of the larger share of commerce on the Ohio River.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Pittsburgh quickly outgrew its neighbor. Boasting a number of developmental advantages and support from


eastern commercial interests in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh seemed destined to win the rivalry. Yet this conclusion was not foregone. Unlike railroads, canals, and other man-made sources of conveyance, traffic on the Ohio River could not be completely bought and directed by either corporate or individual state interests. Holding a slight natural navigational advantage over Pittsburgh, Wheeling boosters managed to extend the contest for regional commercial dominance throughout most of the antebellum era. Despite the economic and developmental advantages Pittsburgh could claim, Wheeling's actions in the contest for commercial dominance of the Ohio River trade raised appropriate fears in the Pennsylvania city. Many Pittsburgh citizens believed their downriver neighbor might indeed usurp Pittsburgh's commercial position in the Upper Ohio Valley.

The deciding factor in the contest turned not on natural advantages, or even on the campaign actions of local boosters. The rivalry between the two cities got embroiled in the conflicting development goals of merchants, planters, and state-level politicians. In the end, Pittsburgh became the dominant city because the state of Pennsylvania, and especially wealthy mercantile interests in Philadelphia, had a vested interest in promoting Pittsburgh as Pennsylvania's link with the growing trade of the West. In contrast, those who promoted the economic and infrastructure development of Wheeling received only negligible support, at best, from the government of Virginia. The city's location in the northwestern section of the state, between Pennsylvania and Ohio, made it of little importance to Virginia's planter-dominated legislature which was focused on development options that linked the James and Kanawha rivers and centered commerce in Richmond. The fact that Wheeling was able to challenge Pittsburgh without much assistance from Virginia makes this case of intraregional rivalry unique and worthy of a closer examination.

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In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, rivers were central to the location of cities in the American West. Many new towns and cities built their main streets along the river, the town growing inland from its beginnings along the riverbank. Wheeling and Pittsburgh were no exceptions; each city found its growth linked to the importance of the Ohio River and western trade. The Ohio River is formed in southwestern Pennsylvania at Pittsburgh from the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers. It flows in a southwesterly direction, separating the states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois from the states of Virginia and Kentucky. The Ohio follows a course more than 950 miles long to link with the Mississippi River at Cairo, Illinois. In the nineteenth century, the Ohio River became noted for its gentleness and ease of navigation. “For nearly three-quarters of the year, the stream moves with so much gentleness, that an object floating on its bosom would be carried scarcely more than two and a half miles an hour.” Pittsburgh was first founded at the head of this “gentle giant,” and soon Wheeling was located ninety-five miles downstream.

Even before a town was built on the spot, both the French and the British coveted the position at the head of the Ohio River, realizing its strategic importance to the Upper Ohio region, and building on the site Fort Duquesne and Fort Pitt, respectively. Pittsburgh was formally laid out as a town in 1764, making it one of the oldest cities west of the Allegheny Mountains. One historian considered Pittsburgh to be naturally situated for urban growth. He remarked that “no place in the West seemed more certain to be the site of a great city.” The heart of the city is a triangular plain known as “the point,” where the Allegheny and Monongahela meet to form the Ohio River. At Pittsburgh the Allegheny River completes its 325-mile journey from the lake plains of New York and Pennsylvania, while the Monongahela flows ninety miles north from its origin in Marion County, West Virginia. Surrounding the point, settlers found the requirements for

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5 Wade, Urban Frontier, 29; and Lloyd’s Steamboat Directory (1856; reprint, Louisville, Ky., 1979), 46.

6 Lloyd’s Steamboat Directory, 49.
a great city: "water power, coal and iron, ready access to farm lands, and a market area of almost limitless extent."  

Growth was initially slow; the census of 1790 listed only 376 inhabitants in Pittsburgh, but in two decades' time, the town was a burgeoning industrial city with a population of 4,768. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Pittsburgh could be described as a town with "a straggling and makeshift look, but [one] ennobled by a grand topography." In 1800 the town spread along the Monongahela, across the river from the foot of the hill known as Mount Washington. In the early years, it was the coal deposits of Mount Washington, known then as Coal Hill, which fed the early factories and iron furnaces in the town. 

Already gaining a reputation for its industry, Pittsburgh was alive with iron forges, glass manufactories, a distillery, a brewery, tanneries, and brickyards. The growing town also gained a reputation for its smoke and, as one account notes, the town had a "sombre hue." Coal smoke from the cannon stoves and open grates of the period created great quantities of sulphurous vapor and smoke. Wood smoke from houses and steam mills added to the problem which grew worse as industry flourished. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Pittsburgh witnessed the addition of more iron foundries, nail factories, and engine shops, and in addition to its reputation for poor air quality, it soon became known as the "Iron City."

Commerce grew along with manufacturing, and in 1803 the town could boast of forty-nine stores and shops. As important as the factories and forges were, Pittsburgh also gained an early reputation as the gateway to the West, establishing itself as the stopping place for travelers, emigrants, and trade. A steady stream of emigrants, Yankees and Europeans alike, came to Pittsburgh every spring to embark on their western journeys. The Navigator, published at Pittsburgh between 1801 and 1824, was one of the earliest printed guides to traveling on American rivers. It listed both Pittsburgh and

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7 Wade, Urban Frontier, 10.

8 Bureau of the Census, Aggregate Amount of Persons within the United States in the Year 1810 (Washington, D.C., 1811), 44; and Walter Havighurst, River to the West: Three Centuries of the Ohio (New York, 1970), 135.

Wheeling as among the best places for embarkation on a westward journey. To meet the needs of travelers, merchants in Pittsburgh offered necessary supplies, and for thirty-five dollars a family could buy a flatboat with a shed shelter for the family and an open area for livestock. Early emigrants with more money could add a fireplace to their flatboat for ten dollars more.\textsuperscript{10}

Pittsburgh boatyards built more than flatboats for emigrants and their families. River commerce became such an integral part of the city that construction ranged from simple flatboats, to the keelboats popular in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, to seagoing vessels. The surrounding countryside offered the necessary wood to allow the firms of John A. Tarascon Brothers, James Berthoud and Company, and Eliphalet Beebe to prosper in the building of merchant ships such as the \textit{Pittsburgh}, a 270-ton cargo ship which sailed for Europe in 1803. Pittsburgh's center for ship and boat building expanded once steamboats came to dominate river commerce. The city became "the oldest and most important" of steamboat centers, consistently outproducing other important manufacturers in Cincinnati and Louisville throughout the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{11}

Wheeling, established in 1795, eventually became the second largest city in the state of Virginia. Strategically located on the Ohio River ninety-five miles southwest from Pittsburgh, the settlers who founded Wheeling believed it was destined to be the trade and manufacturing center for its region. The new town possessed a natural advantage over upstream rivals since deepwater navigation on the Ohio began at Wheeling and the river was navigable most of the year. Like Pittsburgh, Wheeling was also surrounded by coal, limestone, and iron ore deposits which fueled the iron and glass industries that emerged soon after settlement. The county seat of Ohio County, Wheeling is situated in a narrow northern panhandle between the states of Ohio and Pennsylvania. The flood plain of the Ohio River created

\textsuperscript{10} Dahlinger, \textit{Pittsburgh}, 102; Leland D. Baldwin, \textit{The Keelboat Age on Western Waters} (Pittsburgh, 1941), 56–58; and Havighurst, \textit{Rivers to the West}, 137–38.

a number of islands and bars, one of which is Wheeling Island, now a part of that city.\textsuperscript{12}

In many ways the early growth of Wheeling mirrors that of its upstream rival. Even before a proper town was platted, the site where Wheeling stands served as a supply station for hunters, trappers, and adventurers on their way west. The first packet of four keelboats each carrying twenty tons of freight passed Wheeling in 1794. As such traffic continued to grow the crews of these river boats often rested overnight at Wheeling Island in the center of the Ohio River. Wheeling’s location between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati made it a convenient stopping place for river travelers, especially after the town became a stop on the central mail route in 1795. The town soon became a center for the manufacture of flatboats, gaining its own reputation as a place for embarking on a westward journey.\textsuperscript{13} English traveler Thomas Ashe found early Wheeling to be “one of the most considerable places of embarkation to traders and emigrants.” He also observed that Wheeling “is a pleasant town, healthfully and pleasantly situated on a high bank of the river.” Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the famous engineer and architect, chose to depart from Wheeling when he took a trip to New Orleans in 1820, although he could not resist criticizing the roads and bridges approaching the town as being “constructed much more with a view to appearance, and at a much greater expense, than with skill or judgement.” Many travelers preferred to embark at Wheeling instead of Pittsburgh in times of low water, for above Wheeling the Ohio River makes numerous winding turns that caused navigation to be challenging.\textsuperscript{14}


At the turn of the nineteenth century, Wheeling was “a few acres of cleared ground whittled out of the forest above the river.” The town consisted of a few mud roads that could not yet be called streets, and most of the dwellings were made of logs, but the Ohio River brought commerce and growth to early Wheeling.\textsuperscript{15} Building on the river traffic, the town flourished on a base of retail trade. A French visitor in 1802 found “from fifteen to twenty large shops, well stocked, [to] supply the inhabitants twenty miles round with provisions. Wheeling also shares with Pittsburgh in the export trade carried on with the western country. Some Philadelphia merchants prefer to send their goods here, although the journey is a day longer. That trifling inconvenience is well compensated for by the advantage gained in avoiding the long winding of the Ohio beyond Pittsburgh.”\textsuperscript{16}

Less concerned with image than their upstream neighbors, Wheeling residents cultivated a true frontier town, and early on earned the city a reputation for drinking, gambling, and other crude behavior.\textsuperscript{17} During his 1806 visit, Thomas Ashe was a keen observer of the aberrant actions of the townspeople and remarked that the residents of the town spent most of their time engaged in drunkenness, horse racing, and cock fighting. He believed that “had they attended to worthy commercial pursuits and industrious moral dealings, their town could have rivaled Pittsburgh long since and now enjoyed a reputable name.”\textsuperscript{18}

The struggle between Wheeling and Pittsburgh began early in the nineteenth century and came to a head in the decade before the Civil War. The rivalry first became manifest in the competition each city waged to command commerce on the Ohio River. Beyond traffic in the manufactured goods being produced in the two cities, there was much to gain from dominating river transport in the Upper Ohio Valley region. In 1835 steamboat trade on the Ohio River totaled as much as $15 million, with

\textsuperscript{15} National Bank of West Virginia, \textit{Wheeling's First 250 Years} (Wheeling, W.Va., 1942), 18.


\textsuperscript{17} May, \textit{Principio to Wheeling}, 82–83.

\textsuperscript{18} Thomas Ashe quoted in Smith, “Wheeling in 1806,” 18.
nearly half of that commerce originating in the southern Appalachian counties of the Ohio Basin. Wheeling served as an important transport center for the prime flour-milling zone of western Maryland and western Virginia, and between that city and neighboring Wellsburg, more than three hundred thousand barrels of flour were exported down the Ohio River each year. As early as 1832, Wheeling was the principal center of commerce and supply for western Virginia and was that region's link with trade in the northeast United States. Pittsburgh was tied closely to this regional trade network as well, specializing as a transportation and distribution center for livestock moving to eastern meatpacking facilities. Pittsburgh attracted goods and commodities from western Virginia on the northerly flowing Monongahela River, and manufactured products and supplies from Philadelphia came through Pittsburgh en route to points in western Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and beyond.\(^\text{19}\)

In fact, Wheeling's only true advantage over Pittsburgh lay in the downriver position it held on the Ohio. Because it "outflanked the shoals and rapids which dominated the approach to Pittsburgh," Wheeling became an important shipping point during dry spells in late summer, when low water made navigation from Pittsburgh difficult or, at times, impossible. In most years hot weather between late June and early October significantly reduced the level of the Ohio River and exposed rocks and shallow points below Pittsburgh. During that period of the year, traveling overland to Wheeling was the safest option for embarkation on the Ohio River. However, beyond its downstream position, Wheeling held few advantages over Pittsburgh. In Charles Henry Ambler's classic study of transportation in the Ohio Valley, he found Wheeling to be, overall, less advantageously situated than its upstream neighbor. Ambler notes that unlike Pittsburgh with its important confluence of rivers and streams, no large tributary streams empty at Wheeling and the natural resources in the area are somewhat limited. He points to the location of the city in the narrow panhandle between Pennsylvania and Ohio and argues that Wheeling received "favors from neither and was too far removed from the center of Virginia to come within the scope of the state's feeble efforts to conserve her

commercial interests." In fact, Virginia's legislature seldom expressed interest in Wheeling's developmental and internal improvement needs. The single advantage of almost year-round embarkation on the Ohio would prove to be an important catalyst in the continued growth of Wheeling, and allow that city to continue to challenge Pittsburgh.

In 1815 when Pittsburgh could claim to be the leading metropolis in the West, Wheeling's population had reached only one thousand. That Wheeling could be a serious threat to Pittsburgh seems almost silly, yet the one natural advantage of low-water navigation was enough to bring the National Road to Wheeling, and therefore, to pose a serious challenge to Pittsburgh. The Cumberland or National Road was first authorized in 1806 to connect the new state of Ohio with commercial centers in the East. It began at Cumberland, Maryland, and would eventually connect towns along its route to its final western terminus at Vandalia, Illinois. It was to be the first national highway and the first major internal improvement funded through the federal government. To reach the state of Ohio, the road would have to cross the Ohio River, and in 1806 a panel of commissioners was appointed to survey the most advantageous route for the road and for the crossing. Each eligible crossing point from Pittsburgh to Wheeling was "busy urging its own superior claims and advantages, as it was anticipated that a city would at once spring into existence wherever the point for crossing the river was definitely fixed." Early recommendations that the route should follow the original Braddock Road through Maryland into Pennsylvania brought the commissioners as far west as Brownsville in Fayette County. It was at this point that Pittsburgh business interests became a factor in the negotiations. Merchants and politicians at Pittsburgh feared that if the National Road were located at Wheeling, that town would "threaten to rival Pittsburg [sic] in prosperity, wealth and greatness, and to become the head of navigation on

20 Wade, Urban Frontier, 323; Baldwin, Keelboat Age, 58, 136; and Ambler, Transportation in the Ohio Valley, 212-13.

21 Wade, Urban Frontier, 323-24; Ambler, Transportation in the Ohio Valley, 134-37; and Gibson Lamb Cranmer, History of Wheeling City and Ohio County, West Virginia (Chicago, 1902), 58-59.

22 May, Principio to Wheeling, 85-86; and Report of Commissioners Eli Williams, Thomas Moore, and Joseph Kerr to the Ninth Congress, Jan. 31, 1807, quoted in Thomas B. Searight, The Old Pike: A History of the National Road (Uniontown, Pa., 1894), 28-35.
Because of its northerly position, Pittsburgh could not secure the road for itself, but it could work to assure that the road reached Wellsburg, Virginia, fifteen miles upstream from Wheeling and the point on the Ohio where the road would pass nearest to Pittsburgh. In addition to the support of Pittsburgh politicians and merchants, topographical advantages suggested that the road should be routed through Wellsburg. The distance of the road would be shorter if steered through Wellsburg, and in fact, that course offered much easier terrain than the Wheeling route.

The commissioners who viewed the road had several objectives. First, they sought to find the shortest distance between navigable points on eastern and western waters; then, the best mode of diffusing transportation benefits to surrounding territory with the least distance of road; and most important, to find the point on the Ohio River most capable of combining certainty of navigation and road accommodation. In 1816 Congress selected Wheeling

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as the western terminus of the road. The preference for Wheeling as the crossing point on the Ohio River came from the fact that obstructions in the river above the town had long "given decided preference to Wheeling as a place of embarcation [sic] and port of departure in dry seasons." Wheeling's other advantage was its position in direct line with the chosen route of the road from Brownsville, Pennsylvania, to the state of Ohio. But the most important and deciding factor that brought the National Road to Wheeling was the "practicability of a bridge at Wheeling Island," and this future necessity "counterbalanced the advantages of the Wellsburg route." The commissioners were also pleased with the ferry service available at Wheeling, for it would be several years (and another controversy) before the National Road would secure a bridge over the Ohio.25

The National Road reached Wheeling in 1818 and brought commercial success and prosperity. Once the road was in operation, much of the western commerce shifted from Pittsburgh to Wheeling. One early student of Pittsburgh's history remarked that "for a decade after the completion of the road in 1820 it actually looked as though Wheeling's boast might come true."26 That year Wheeling could claim a population of 1,567 and the town became the station for commerce from Baltimore, and a return station for produce from the West. As early as 1822, five thousand wagons from the East arrived in the town each year, collecting transportation charges in excess of four hundred thousand dollars. Wheeling became a stop for the mail stage from Washington, D.C., when the road opened, and within twenty years it could boast of one of the largest post offices in the nation. The connection between the Ohio River and the National Road made Wheeling such an important commercial center that an act of Congress declared it a port of entry in 1831.27

Wheeling's manufacturing interests and its population were also bolstered when the road opened. Visiting Wheeling in 1829, Benjamin L. C. Wailes, a planter from Natchez, Mississippi, recorded a rare glimpse at early


industrial Wheeling. Arriving there on December 15, Wailes first went shopping for window glass. He was disappointed because “the furnace was cold, & the hands were not blowing glass.” Wailes had better luck at a flint glass furnace where he witnessed workers “making Tumblers & phials.” Clearly delighted with all he encountered, Wailes recorded the glass-making process he witnessed in intricate detail. He visited several other glass manufactories and a “large Cotton factory in which I counted about 2100 spindles.” He noted that there are “two establishments of the kind, of considerable extent, occupying three or four stories.” Other stops that day included a woolen factory and two iron foundries. Wailes found that the “scenery about Wheeling is naturally fine but is deformed by the buildings which are ordinary & blackened by coal, the atmosphere being constantly obscured by it.”

With a strong foundation in commerce and manufacturing, by 1830 Wheeling’s population had increased to 5,221, and by 1836 it was as high as 8,850. The city became a center for steamboat manufacture, turning out its first ship, the Washington, in 1815. From that year through 1835 the shipyards at Wheeling produced as many as twenty-five steamboats. Other significant manufactures included various flint glass, cut glass, and window glass establishments; one iron-rolling mill that employed 100 men; and four iron foundries employing a total of 150 men. At least two paper mills as well as commercial saw and flour mills were also established following the opening of the National Road. In fact, J. B. Bowen’s Wheeling Directory and Advertiser notes that the total number of manufacturing firms in the city rose from 8 in 1814 to an astounding 104 in May 1838.

This rapid growth at Wheeling was the “first blow to Pittsburgh’s commercial prestige” and one the businessmen of Pittsburgh refused to take lightly. The editor of the Pittsburgh Statesman expressed the sentiments of many of the city’s residents when he wrote of his shock that, “a miserable Virginia country town, which can never be more than two hundred yards wide, having the mere advantage of a free turnpike road and a warehouse or

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two, [could] become rivals of this *Emporium of the West*!"\(^{30}\) Unlikely as it might appear, Wheeling was indeed challenging Pittsburgh for commercial hegemony in the Upper Ohio Valley.

Coinciding with the rivalry sparked by the opening of the National Road, Pittsburgh's economic interests took a hard blow from the Panic of 1819 and the depression that followed. While editorials in the Pittsburgh *Gazette* called for an association to provide relief and employment to the poor "during the present period of difficulty," others lamented, "Where now are the thousands of wagons which formerly gave life to our streets and employment to our draymen? They have gone to Wheeling. Where now is the enlivening hum of the boatmen, and the numerous fleets of boats that formerly covered our rivers? They have stopped at Wheeling."\(^{31}\) The depression exacerbated the downturn Pittsburgh factories suffered because of an influx of cheap British goods following the reopening of trade after the War of 1812. Even before the opening of the National Road and the Panic of 1819, Pittsburgh showed a loss in the value of iron production, textiles, and products such as brass and tin. One historian argues that the depression that hit Pittsburgh in the 1810s was much more than a panic. It began in 1816, well before a crisis reached the rest of America, and was punctuated by the opening of the National Road and subsequent siphoning of commerce.\(^{32}\) Instead of accepting defeat, Pittsburghers became more determined to shake off the cloud of depression and to regain commercial dominance in the Upper Ohio Valley.

To tip the balance of commercial trade in their favor, Pittsburghers took two courses. The residents first tried to develop local alliances that would return commerce to Pittsburgh. In a letter to the editor of the Pittsburgh *Gazette* in early 1822, "A Citizen" proposed an association with the town of Brownsville in Fayette County, Pennsylvania. Located approximately thirty-five miles south of Pittsburgh on the Monongahela River, and crossed by the National Road, Brownsville waged a campaign to capture the title of county


Prior to 1822 businessmen in the Pittsburgh district opposed moving the county seat to Brownsville and also opposed state spending for navigation improvements on the Monongahela River between that town and Pittsburgh. But in light of recent economic distress in Pittsburgh, “A Citizen” urged support for Brownsville, imploring Pittsburgh businessmen to “examine whether such a policy is not selfish in us & contrary to our own interests.” He went on to explain that if improvements on the Monongahela between Brownsville and Pittsburgh were completed, the river would allow “the transportation of merchandise at all seasons, and thereby divert that portion of western commerce which now passes the channel of the National Road to Wheeling down river by our City.” If trade could be taken from the road and brought into the “more cheap and easy route” of the river, then the western merchant would be encouraged to “supply himself at our Factories, with the same convenience as if he shipped at Pittsburgh.” “A Citizen” concluded that the interests of Brownsville and Pittsburgh were the same. He believed that only through “uniting in improvements of the river, and in every other way which will result to the benefit of each other that the injury resulting from the National Road going to Wheeling can be countered.”

Brownsville lost its campaign for county seat to the larger town of Uniontown, but remained an important access point for Pittsburgh commerce once river improvements were completed. With its location on the route of the National Road, the town did indeed aid Pittsburgh in diverting some traffic from Wheeling. Brownsville benefited as well through the establishment of factories and boatyards within its boundaries. The town became a small center of steamboat manufacture, and by 1826 approximately 150 keel and flat boats were sent to Pittsburgh each year for sale to westward travelers.

A second avenue to regain commercial advantage turned toward a statewide campaign for internal improvements that would better link Pittsburgh with Philadelphia. Earlier Pittsburgh businessmen had urged

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Letter to the editor, Pittsburgh Gazette, Jan. 19, 1822. Original emphasis.

Samuel Jones, Pittsburgh in the Year 1826 (1826; reprint, New York, 1970), 15; and Baldwin, Keelboat Age, 52.
turnpike construction under state-incorporated private contracts. Subscription books were opened in August 1806 for a turnpike that would connect Harrisburg and Pittsburgh.\(^{36}\) This major link would eventually become the Pennsylvania turnpike, a toll road between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Paved and in good repair, by 1820 it carried more than four thousand tons of goods annually. The turnpike eased some stress at Pittsburgh, but travel on land was still arduous and slow. The opening of the road reduced the time of transport between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh from between six and ten weeks to an average of four, but winter ice and snow could delay the arrival of goods for some time, and the round-trip toll between the cities was about twenty-four dollars.\(^{37}\)

Pittsburgh was aided in its quest for internal improvements by the state of Pennsylvania which was concerned with reaping the benefits of western commerce. The state recognized the importance of connecting Pittsburgh with Philadelphia as well as maintaining free navigation on the Ohio River. As early as 1819 Pennsylvania was involved in a congressional commission to examine and recommend improvements on the Ohio River.\(^{38}\) In fact, Wheeling began to lose its grip on deepwater navigation once Pittsburgh businessmen launched their campaign to remove some of the obstructions in the Ohio. Pittsburghers became obsessed with making the river improvements which they believed were essential to the city's recovery from economic depression. The project proved to be difficult and involved much effort; throughout the 1820s crews worked to remove rocks, sand bars, and snags that might hamper navigation. Pittsburghers were determined to "remove even the shadow of a reason, for driving one solitary wagon to Wheeling."\(^{39}\)

Another project favored by Pittsburgh and state politicians was the Pennsylvania Main Line Canal, which opened in 1834 to connect the Ohio River at Pittsburgh with Philadelphia. When it was completed, the


combination of canal and railroad was the most important trade route for goods traveling east from the Ohio Valley. According to the Pittsburgh Gazette, this project aimed to put Pittsburgh "beyond the reach of any rival or visionary project for scaling the mountains." The editor maintained that the link would put the city on the "pinnacle of prosperity" and form the "true Chesapeake and Ohio Canal." 40

Indeed, the canal allowed Pittsburgh to answer the challenge Wheeling posed. The canal system was completed as railroads were coming into vogue and the Main Line was actually a combination of canal and railroad. Construction of the Main Line pleased businessmen in Pittsburgh, who "renewed their faith in the destiny of their region." One link in the system, the Pennsylvania Canal, reached into the center of downtown Pittsburgh, prompting the editor of the Pittsburgh Gazette to print an illustration of the city as the center of a system of existing or proposed roads, canals, and railways. Most important, the Main Line breathed new life into the commercial economy of Pittsburgh. Once it opened, the flow of western farm products such as flour, pork, beef, and wool to Philadelphia doubled. A similar increase occurred in the flow of eastern manufactured goods, such as cotton cloth, coffee, tea, and spices, from Philadelphia to the West. 41

The transportation improvements allowed Pittsburgh to recover its population and manufactures as well as its trade. During the depression, Pittsburgh lost as many as 1,000 residents, but with recovery came growth. In the 1830 census, just before the completion of the canal, the population of the city proper rose to 12,450, but if one counted the nearly connected surrounding industrial towns, the population of the Pittsburgh region amounted to 22,433. 42 Manufactures witnessed a similar growth once recovery was assured, and Pittsburgh came to rank first in industrial production in the Ohio Valley. In 1826 manufactures were valued at $2.5 million, with iron goods accounting for nearly half of the total production value. That year the city could boast six iron processing mills employing 181 men, eight foundries employing 108 men; and six nail manufactories

40 Ambler, Transportation in the Ohio Valley, 147–48; and editorial, Pittsburgh Gazette, May 28, 1824.

41 Baldwin, Pittsburgh: The Story of a City, 192–93; and Ambler, Transportation in the Ohio Valley, 149.

42 Wade, Urban Frontier, 193–94.
employing 16 men. Newly discovered local deposits of coal also boosted industry following the depression. According to historian Alfred Chandler, growth in Pittsburgh industry was tied to the fact that in 1830, "Pittsburgh was the only industrial center in the United States that had enough coal for both household and industrial purposes." 

Completion of the canal and Pittsburgh's recovery from the depression should have given the city the necessary advantages to claim regional hegemony, including natural control of commerce on the Ohio River. Yet while Pittsburgh recovered from near disaster, trade at Wheeling grew as well. Transportation services from the wharf at Wheeling expanded to 1,602 steamboat arrivals and departures in 1836, as well as 228 keelboat and flatboat departures. The city could count eight stage lines with daily east-west service, as well as two daily and one triweekly stage departing for the north. Commerce included eighty-seven retail and wholesale stores selling $2 million in goods annually. Wheeling merchants also purchased $1.4 million worth of flour, more than a quarter million dollars in wool, and over one hundred thousand dollars in pork products. In 1836 Virginia finally recognized the importance of Wheeling's growth by granting a charter to the growing city. Wheeling had no intentions of allowing the rivalry to die, and instead was only warming up for the battle that would bring both Wheeling and Pittsburgh, as well as the states of Virginia and Pennsylvania, to the attention of the nation and the Supreme Court of the United States.

When Wheeling was designated as the western terminus for the National Road, federal construction plans did not include a bridge across the Ohio River. During construction of the road in 1816, the Virginia and Ohio legislatures incorporated the Wheeling and Belmont Bridge Company, a private venture authorized to erect a bridge across the Ohio River at Wheeling. A stipulation in the charter held that the bridge must be


"constructed so as to avoid injury to navigation." Unfortunately for the businesses at Wheeling, the Virginia legislature did not provide funding for the project and the company was unable to raise sufficient funds to construct the bridge. In a move to skirt Virginia's lack of support, representatives from the company tried a different avenue in 1830 when they requested national subscription to the bridge project. The Wheeling and Belmont Bridge Company initiated a memorial to the United States House of Representatives, claiming that "the great increase of travelling on the Cumberland Road requires that the obstructions presented by the Ohio river [sic], be obviated by a bridge." Federal funding in the amount of one hundred thousand dollars was required because "such is the want of capital in this country that but few men can spare any considerable sum from his business." The bridge company representatives also informed Congress that completion of the project would expedite the "transportation of the mail" and greatly facilitate "communication between East and West." The House favored the request, providing that "if the said bridge shall be so constructed as to injure the navigation of the said river, the bridge shall be treated as a public nuisance, and shall be liable to abatement." So began Wheeling's last attempt to challenge Pittsburgh for commercial advantage in the Upper Ohio Valley.

If the bridge could be constructed in such a way as to satisfy Congress yet still create navigation concerns for steamboats, then Wheeling might gain the commercial advantage on the Ohio River. Indeed, Pittsburgh merchants and shippers were concerned that the forty feet of draw clearance planned for the bridge would not allow for the passage of steamboats with tall chimneys. If Pittsburgh and Cincinnati steamer packets could not navigate on the Ohio River above Wheeling, then that city and not Pittsburgh would become the head of commercial navigation on the river. The old rivalry over river commerce was resurrected, and this time the debate centered on the issues of dominance of trade on the Ohio and just what constituted an obstruction to navigation.47

This initial concern at Pittsburgh led the state of Pennsylvania to address a remonstrance to Congress in 1831. Listed as a memorial of subscribers,


47 Monroe, Wheeling Bridge Case, 35; and Callahan, "The Pittsburgh-Wheeling Rivalry," 44.
merchants, shippers, and other citizens of Pennsylvania, the document claimed that "great harm will be done the navigation of the Ohio river, by a bridge proposed to be erected across the Ohio river at Wheeling, Virginia." More specifically, the Pennsylvanians claimed that the bridge would "not only present a dangerous obstruction to the navigation, particularly at night, but would totally arrest the passage of steamboats, and detain them for several days." The petitioners requested that instead of the bridge at Wheeling, Congress concentrate its resources on a project they desired: removing obstructions within the Ohio River between Pittsburgh and Louisville, Kentucky. Regardless of the protest, or perhaps in spite of it, in 1836 the Wheeling and Belmont Bridge Company erected a wooden bridge across the back channel of the Ohio River, stretching from the Ohio side to Wheeling Island in the center of the river, but leaving the main stream of the river navigable on the Virginia side of the island.

Debate about building a more permanent structure continued for several years. The Ohio legislature, which wanted to enhance commerce along the National Road, would benefit from any Ohio River traffic that could be diverted to Wheeling. The legislature pushed for construction of a bridge over both sides of the island. A special congressional committee on roads recommended completion of a suspension bridge, but objection to navigation obstruction again led to hesitancy. In 1838 engineers operating on behalf of the federal government recommended a plan that called for a suspension bridge with a movable floor to allow the passing of steamboats, but the idea was rejected. In 1840 Wheeling interests convinced the U.S. postmaster general to recommend the construction of a bridge to allow for prompt passage of mail carriages, which had previously faced several delays each year due to ice in the river, but this request was also ignored.

To complicate the matter even further, the construction of new east-west railroad lines through the region became a part of the bridge controversy. As soon as local interests learned of the new commercial potential that rail transport offered, businessmen in both Wheeling and Pittsburgh sought to

48 U.S. House, Remonstrance Against Obstructing the Navigation of the Ohio River by the Erection of a Bridge at Wheeling, March 26, 1832, 22d Congress, 1st sess., 1832, Exec. Doc. 188, 1.

49 Callahan, "Pittsburgh-Wheeling Rivalry," 44.

expand transportation across the land as well as on the river. Concerned with securing rail lines to boost economic development, neither Pittsburgh nor Wheeling residents could know that the development of railroads would make their regional rivalry moot. The new form of transportation would allow economies and markets to become linked on a national, rather than regional level, forcing expensive river improvements and canals to take a back seat to railroad construction.\(^{51}\) Interests in the sparring cities understood the coming of the railroad not as the end to their rivalry, but as a new dimension to be incorporated in the battle where each still held to the supremacy of river commerce.

Even before the completion of the Pennsylvania Main Line Canal, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was pushing west from Maryland seeking the optimum route through the Ohio Valley. To reach the Ohio River, the B&O would need permission from either the state of Virginia or Pennsylvania. In 1828 the B&O obtained a charter from the Pennsylvania legislature giving the company fifteen years to extend its rail line to Pittsburgh. The charter expired before the slow construction of the road reached into western Pennsylvania, and by 1843 business interests in the eastern part of the state had plans to build a rail line, the Pennsylvania Railroad, from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. Although some residents of Pittsburgh may have favored the B&O, the more powerful eastern interests prevailed and the B&O charter was not renewed.

As a result, the Baltimore company looked to Virginia and after a protracted local struggle, in 1847 the Virginia General Assembly designated Wheeling as its western terminus.\(^{52}\) Ironically, it was the Virginia legislature’s concern to keep the B&O from siphoning commerce from Richmond, not support for Wheeling’s development, that led to insistence on such a northern terminus for the railroad.\(^{53}\) The Virginia legislature expressed little interest in aiding Wheeling’s support for the railroad, but did offer to provide some financial support if the city and surrounding county

\(^{51}\) Mould, *Dividing Lines*, 211.


subscribed to $1 million in B&O stock. In an 1847 memorial to the legislature, Wheeling businessmen, led by Mayor William W. Shriver, proved they were trying hard to raise the funds necessary to meet that subscription requirement. They pleaded with the assembly to allow the city of Wheeling to issue municipal bonds, backed by the state's guarantee. The estrangement of this important and growing commercial city from the political center of Virginia was evident in the plea of the memorialists who wondered: "Is it necessary in our case, that we should present ourselves in the attitude of an entire stranger, applying to a capitalist upon whom he has no claim for sympathy or regard, for the endorsement or loan of his name, and therefore be ready to furnish him the fullest indemnity?" After much negotiation, and with bonds finally backed by the Virginia legislature, Wheeling subscribed to five thousand shares, valued at a half million dollars in June 1852.\textsuperscript{54}

In the midst of the bridge controversy, interests in Pittsburgh and the Pennsylvania legislature began to express concern that the terminus of the B&O at Wheeling "will render that improvement the most formidable [sic] rival of Pennsylvania for the trade of the Valley of the Ohio."\textsuperscript{55} Interests in the region were even more dismayed when construction on the project commenced before any of the contentions were settled. Over the continuing protests of Pittsburgh merchants and shippers, the state of Virginia confounded matters by granting a small concession to Wheeling businessmen by issuing a new charter for the Wheeling and Belmont Bridge Company in 1847. The renewed charter allowed the construction of a wire suspension bridge across the Ohio River at Wheeling, again providing that the structure did not obstruct steamboat traffic. The new charter did not specifically define the height required to avoid obstruction. The board of advisors for the company began plans for construction, engaging renowned engineer Charles Ellet Jr. to design and construct a magnificent bridge which reached "1010 feet between supporting towers [and] made it the longest span ever erected by man." The first original suspension bridge at

\textsuperscript{54} "Memorial of the City of Wheeling to the General Assembly of Virginia," Governor's Message and Annual Reports of the Public Officers of the State (Richmond, 1847), Doc. no. 50, 1–5; Virginia, Acts of the Assembly (1848), 179–80; and Dilts, Great Road, 373.

\textsuperscript{55} "Communication from the Canal Commissioners," Harrisburg, Pa., quoted in Monroe, Wheeling Bridge Case, 89.
Wheeling was finally constructed between 1847 and 1849. Even before a wagon crossed its deck, Pittsburghers and the state of Pennsylvania mired the span in legal controversy. Construction was nearing completion when Pittsburgh residents began meeting in protest of the structure. Citizen meetings examined plans for the bridge and concluded that the ninety feet of clearance the company planned would not be sufficient in times of high water, meaning that the bridge would indeed be an obstruction to traffic on the river. Taking the protest to another level, the state of Pennsylvania stepped in to help Pittsburgh by filing formal legal action against the Wheeling and Belmont Bridge Company in August 1849. Requesting an injunction from the United States Supreme Court, Pennsylvania sought to halt construction on the bridge. One scholar notes that this action was an “extraordinarily shrewd move” on the part of Pittsburgh merchants and shippers, because according to the United States Constitution, “a state may file suit directly in the United States Supreme Court,” whereas Pittsburgh interests would have to proceed through district and circuit courts. This action not only allowed “the commercial interests be represented by a powerful state, but the case would [also] be heard and decided initially by the court of last resort.”

In May 1852 following nearly three years of legal battles and investigation, the Supreme Court ruled that the Ohio River was a navigable stream subject to the rule of Congress. As such, the state of Virginia had no jurisdiction over interstate commerce on the Ohio River. Justice John McLean ruled that unless navigation was “relieved from obstruction” by February 1, 1853, the bridge would have to be removed. More specifically, the opinion required that the height of the structure be raised to 111 feet, or for obstructions within the western channel of the river to be excavated, until such a clearance could be reached. The ruling had important implications beyond settling the dispute between Wheeling and Pittsburgh. The case “recognized the importance of steam navigation on western waters to the economic vitality of the nation.”


The legal controversy did not end with the 1852 Supreme Court ruling. Before any action could be taken to remove or alter the bridge, Wheeling supporters convinced Congress, which held the legal right to regulate commerce on the rivers, to declare the bridge lawful at its present height. Congress further declared the bridge to be a part of the post road, to be used for the transport of the mail. Under pressure from interest groups urging steamboat safety and regulation, Congress also demanded that any steamboats or ships navigating on the Ohio River would have to adapt their own vessels "so as not to interfere with the elevation and construction of said bridge." 58 This action brought the original parties in the dispute back to court in December 1855, but the state of Pennsylvania's position had been undermined by the Supreme Court's earlier decision. Because the court had recognized the right of Congress to regulate commerce and determine what constituted an obstruction on the river, Justice Samuel Nelson wrote the opinion ruling in favor of the Wheeling and Belmont Bridge Company. 59 Wheeling's victory was fleeting, however, because the day of the steamship was rapidly giving way to the hegemony of the steam locomotive.

Could Wheeling have challenged Pittsburgh's position in the Upper Ohio Valley following the victory in the bridge case? The comparative demographics suggest that Wheeling never had a chance. In 1850 the population of Wheeling was 11,435, making it the most populous city in western Virginia. At the same time, Pittsburgh was more than four times its size, with a population of 46,601. Manufactures at Pittsburgh had an annual production of more than $16 million, with nearly fifteen thousand residents employed in industry compared to $2 million in production and less than three thousand industrial employees for Wheeling. 60 Yet Wheeling fought bitterly for dominance of commerce on the Ohio River and had the river continued to be the preeminent means of transportation, the Virginia city might have gained more ground on its upstream rival.


59 Monroe, Wheeling Bridge Case, 156–58.

60 Bureau of the Census, Statistical View of the U.S.: Compendium of the Seventh Census (Washington, D.C., 1854), 37, 301, 331, 391.
Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, Wheeling waged a determined battle against the rapidly growing and well-connected Iron City in Pennsylvania. Lacking the backing of the Virginia state legislature for the state's own internal improvement and development goals, Wheeling boosters found help in federal agencies, other states' legislatures, and Congress. Even without much support from Richmond and the state of Virginia, the victory in the bridge case might have made Wheeling the celebrated center of trade on the Ohio River had it occurred a generation earlier. As it stood, river commerce was losing importance by 1850, and Wheeling's hopes of winning the battle for urban greatness in the Upper Ohio Valley were dashed forever.

Historian Louis Hunter marks the beginning of slow decline of steamboat activity on western waters about the year 1850. He notes that by 1870 "the steamboat commerce of Pittsburgh with the important river cities below had virtually collapsed." The commerce from Wheeling shared a similar fate. Once the railroad became the dominant form of transportation, river commerce was relegated to business "done by small packets running between Pittsburgh and the little towns of the lower Monongahela."61 Rivers and canals provided the first important link with the expanding American West, but as B&O historian James Dilts notes, railroads "epitomized progress, not only in the development and extension of the Western frontier but in the revelation that personal travel and the delivery of freight could be dramatically faster, better, and cheaper."62 Although the smaller city waged a determined fight, support and interest from the state of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia helped Pittsburgh shake off Wheeling's challenge. Yet in the years that followed, each city found new sources of competition as the railroads freed them from the bounds of their geographic limitations and opened a new round of regional and national competition for commerce and trade.63

61 Hunter, Steamboats on Western Rivers, 563.
62 Dilts, Great Road, 2.
63 Mould, Dividing Lines, 83–84.