

*A Voice in the Wilderness:
Alexander Addison's Case for Peace during
the Whiskey Rebellion*

On the first day of September 1794, while tension seized western Pennsylvania over whiskey excises, Alexander Addison, president of the Court of Common Pleas for the Fifth Circuit, delivered a charge to the Grand Jury of Allegheny County on behalf of peace and order. Addison's presentation came at an important moment, as new whiskey excise laws had threatened to sever relations between the young United States government in Philadelphia and the western counties of Pennsylvania. At the time of Addison's presentation, the citizens of western Pennsylvania, gathered together in township halls, were asked to choose whether or not to consent to legal terms of submission to the United States in an effort to avoid a violent confrontation between the government and western "insurgents."¹ In his presentation, Addison made a plea for submission to the laws of the United States and to peace.

The alarming and awful situation of this country, at this time, are [*sic*] too well known to require a statement.—On the part of government, we are now offered a forgiveness of all that is past, on condition that we sincerely submit to the excise law, and all other laws. The question now is, whether we will accept of the terms proposed or not.

The decision of this question is of such importance, that I am sure it will receive a solemn consideration from every citizen of a sober mind. If we accept of the terms, we shall have *peace*. If we reject them, we shall have *war*. . . . War is so dreadfull [*sic*] a calamity, that nothing can justify its admission, but an evil against which no other remedy remains. . . . If we determine on *war*, look forward to the consequences. Either we shall *defeat* the United States; or the United States will *subdue* us. If the United States subdue us; we shall, at the end of the war, be certainly not in a better situation, than we are at present. . . . In a state of open war, we shall be considered as any other enemy, with the additional rancour attached to a

¹ As H. M. Brackenridge—son of Hugh H. Brackenridge, a central person in the events of the Whiskey Rebellion—records, "the President issued his proclamation of the 25th of September, declaring the western counties in a state of insurrection, and calling on the militia force to march for its suppression." H. M. Brackenridge, *History of the Western Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania, Commonly Called the Whiskey Insurrection* (Pittsburgh, 1859), 266.

civil war. Our agriculture will be destroyed, our fields laid waste, our houses burnt, and, while we are fighting our fellow citizens on one side, the Indians, (and God knows how soon) will attack us on the other.—The consciences of many among ourselves will shrink back with horror, at the idea of drawing a sword against our brethren. . . . And O! may the God of wisdom and peace inspire this people with discernment and virtue, remove from their minds blindness and passion, and save this country from becoming a field of blood.²

Addison's statement reveals the substantive political discussion and profound moral reasoning that residents of western Pennsylvania grappled with during the Whiskey Rebellion. Addison, arguing that individuals are empowered to choose between "wisdom" leading to "peace" and "blindness" leading to "a field of blood," illustrated for the people of western Pennsylvania (the publication of his speech on the front page of the *Pittsburgh Gazette* broadcast his message far beyond the confines of the courthouse) the dreadful consequences of initiating a civil war. Both Addison's eloquent appeal and the attention western Pennsylvanians paid to his words challenge the popular images that abounded then and continue today of western frontiers inhabited by rancorous, unenlightened frontiersmen.³ On the contrary, western Pennsylvanians read, digested, and ruminated on the consequences—legal, political, and moral—of their public actions.

Addison's work did not fall on deaf ears. William Findley, member of the House of Representatives, recorded in his 1796 *History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties of Pennsylvania* that "on the Monday previous to the day appointed for signing the assurances to government, the court at Greensburgh was opened by a sensible speech, well adapted to the occasion, by president Addison, and he was not insulted nor the business of the court interrupted, and he went through the circuit

² "Charge, Delivered by Alexander Addison, Esq; President of the Court, to the Grand Jury of the County of Allegheny, at Pittsburgh, September 1st, 1794," *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Sept. 6, 1794. The above section is merely a small portion of Judge Addison's presentation, the charge consuming the entirety of the first page and the majority of the second page of that edition of the *Pittsburgh Gazette*. The entire work is an effort to convince citizens against initiating a civil war. Reprinted in *Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania*, Oct. 19, 1833, and in *Pennsylvania Archives*, ed. Samuel Hazard et al. (Philadelphia and Harrisburg, PA, 1852–1935), 2nd ser., 4:201–9.

³ Brackenridge reports, "there is even at this day an astonishing amount of prejudice against the villainous insurgents." Brackenridge, *History of the Western Insurrection*, 251.

without meeting with any embarrassment.”⁴ Alexander Addison’s charge reveals the sophisticated oration and philosophical conversation that took place in western Pennsylvania during the Whiskey Rebellion.

National Park Service

JEFFREY MEYER

⁴ William Findley, *History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1796), 137.