Letter From William Henry Harrison

To Harmar Denny of Pittsburgh, Accepting the Nomination to the Office of President of the United States, by the Convention of the Anti-Masonic Party, Held at Philadelphia, in the Fall of 1838.

After his military successes in the West, William Henry Harrison became governor of the newly created Indiana Territory; he had removed to Ohio and was a member of Congress from that State, State Senator, United States Senator, and Minister to Colombia. Then he had retired to a farm at North Bend, on the Ohio River a few miles below Cincinnati, living in a log cabin, and for twelve years served in the humble capacity of clerk of the county court. But his early achievements had not been forgotten. The glamour of his military life caused him to be sought out in 1836, as the strongest man available, to be pitted against the candidate for the Presidency, of the intrenched Democracy. The elements supporting him, however, were certain loose organizations known as the Anti-Masonic party and the Whig party. The Anti-Masonic party had a pyrotechnic rise two or three years after the abduction and alleged murder of William Morgan in 1826, by Freemasons, in Western New York. The Whig party was organized in 1834 by men who sprang from the old Federal party, and by persons generally who were in opposition to the Democratic party. The two organizations met at Harrisburg on December 14, 1835, in a convention which was more Whig than Anti-Masonic, and nominated Harrison for President; and because Harrison's views did not entirely accord with their own, radical Anti-Masons, like Thaddeus Stevens and Harmar Denny of Pittsburgh, withdrew from the convention. The coalition did not prove effective and Harrison was defeated, and Van Buren elected. However in this election Harrison carried Allegheny County, receiving 3623 votes against 3074 for Van Buren.

A financial crisis followed Van Buren's election. The mutiny of 1836 became a revolution. The Anti-Masonic party was never more than a hysterical eruption, born of an unexplained outrage, and taken up by designing politicians like Thurlow Weed of New York, in order to elevate themselves to office on the wave of passion which the event created against Freemasons. The passion was dying out and the Anti-Masons were swallowed up in the more substantial Whig party. In the fall of 1838, what was left of the Anti-Masonic party held a convention in Philadelphia and nominated Harrison for the Presidency.

Harmar Denny had been the member of Congress from the Pittsburgh district from 1829 to 1837, being elected as an Anti-Mason and soon becoming a leader in that party. It was largely through his efforts that Harrison was nominated in 1838, he being now a warm supporter of the hero of Tippecanoe and the Thames. On December 4, 1839, the Whig national convention met in Harrisburg and nominated Harrison for President. A noisy and exciting campaign followed. The Democrats scoffed at Harrison's candidacy. "Give him a log-cabin and a barrel of hard cider, and he will be content to stay in Ohio, and not aspire to the Presidency," they said. The taunt was immediately caught up by the Whigs: "Log cabins," and "hard cider," became the watchwords of the canvas. Harrison was a poor man,
and the candidacy of a poor man is always more popular, than that of a man who is more prosperous. This was particularly true in that time of poverty and woe. Huge processions paraded the streets of the cities and towns, containing wagons on which were log cabins and men drinking cider, and Indians in war paint and feathers. In Pittsburgh on February 11, 1840, an immense meeting was held in the old Court House in the Diamond, in advocacy of Harrison's election, at which Harmar Denny presided. Harrison was triumphantly elected, receiving the largest majority in the electoral college ever given to a candidate for President. His reception in Pittsburgh in January, 1841, while on his way to Washington to be inaugurated, was the greatest ovation ever given to any man, not even being exceeded by the demonstration accorded President-elect Abraham Lincoln in 1861.

The following letter of William Henry Harrison was sent by him to Harmar Denny, in response to his notification of Harrison's nomination by the Anti-Masonic convention of 1838. Harrison believed that the President should serve only one term. Some of the other views expressed by the candidate are also in marked contrast with opinions held today on the consolidation of power in the hands of the President.

North Bend 2d Decr 1838

Dear Sir

As it is probable that you have by this time returned to Pittsburg I do myself the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your letter from Philadelphia covering the proceedings of the National Democratic Anti-Masonic Convention which lately convened in that city. With feelings of the deepest gratitude I read the resolution unanimously adopted, nominating me as a candidate for the Presidency of the United States. This is the second time that I have received from that patriotic Association of which you are yourself a distinguished Member the highest evidence of confidence that can be given to a citizen of our Republic. I would attempt to describe my sense of the obligations I owe them if I were not convinced that any language which I could command would fall far short of what I really feel. But if the wishes of the convention should be realised and I should be selected as the candidate of those opposed to the principles of the present administration and success should ultimately attend their efforts, I shall have it in my power to manifest my gratitude in a manner more acceptable to those whom you represent, than by any professions of it which I could at this time make. I mean by exerting my utmost efforts to carry out the principles set forth in their Resolutions by
arresting the progress of those measures "destructive of the prosperity of the People tending to the subversion of their liberties," and substituting for them those sound Democratic Republican Doctrines, upon which the Administrations of Jefferson & Madison were conducted.

Among the principles proper to be adopted by an Executive sincerely desirous to restore the administration to its original simplicity & purity I deem the following to be of paramount importance.

I. To confine his service to a single term.
II. To disclaim all right to control over the Public treasure with the exception of such part of it as may be appropriated by law to carry on the public service & that to be applied precisely as the law may direct & drawn from the treasury agreeably to the long established forms of that Department.

III. That he should never attempt to influence the elections either by the people or the State Legislatures, nor suffer the Federal officers under his control to take any other part in them than by giving their own votes when they possess the right of voting.

IV. That in the exercise of the veto power he should limit his rejection of Bills to 1st such as are in his opinion unconstitutional, 2nd Such as tend to encroach on the rights of the States or of individuals.
3rd. Such as involving deep interests, may in his opinion require more mature deliberation or reference to the will of the people to be ascertained at the succeeding Elections.

V. That he should never suffer the influence of his office to be used for purposes of a purely party character.

VI. That in removals from office of those who hold their appointments during the pleasure of the Executive the cause of such removal should always be communicated to the person removed, & if he requests it, to the Senate at the time that the nomination of a successor is made.

And last but not least in importance

VII. That he should not suffer the Executive Department of the Government to become the source of legislation but leave the whole business of making the laws for the
Union to be done by the Department to which the constitution has exclusively assigned it until they have assumed that perfected shape when and where alone the opinions of the Executive may be heard. A community of power in the preparation of the laws between the Legislative & Executive Departments, must necessarily lead to dangerous commutations & greatly to the advantage of a President desirous of extending his power. Such a construction of the constitution could never have been contemplated by those who framed it, as they well knew that those who propose the bills, will always take care of themselves or the interest of their constituents & hence the provision in the constitution, borrowed from that of England, restricting the originating of Revenue bills to the immediate Representatives of the people. So far from agreeing in opinion with the distinguished character who lately retired from the Presidency that congress would have applied to him for a project of a Banking System I think that such an application would have manifested not only great subserviency upon the part of that body, but an unpardonable ignorance of the chief danger to be apprehended from such an institution. That danger unquestionably consists in an union of interests between the Executive & the Bank. Would an ambitious incumbent of the Executive chair neglect so favorable an opportunity as the preparing of the law would give him to insert in it provisions to secure his influence over it? In the authority given to the President by the constitution "to recommend to congress such measures as he shall judge necessary & expedient," it was certainly never intended that the measures he recommended should be presented in a shape suited for the immediate decision of the Legislature. The sages who made the constitution, too well knew the advantages which the crown of England derived from the exercise of this power by its ministers, to have intended it to be used by our Chief Magistrate on the Heads of the Departments under his controul. The boasted principle of the English constitution, that the consent of the Democratic Branch of the Government was not only necessary to raise money from the people, but that it was its inviolable prerogative also to
originate all the bills for the purpose is true in theory as in the letter, but rendered utterly false & nugatory in effect by the participation of the ministers of the crown in the details of Legislation. Indeed the influence they derive from sitting as members of the House of Commons & from wielding the immense patronage of the crown (constitutional or usurped) gives them a power over that body that render plausible at least the base flateries or, as is more probable the intended sarcasm, of Sir Walter Raleign in an address to James the 1st, That the demand of the sovereign upon the commons for pecuniary aid was intended only that the tax might seem to come from themselves, when as the inference is, it was really laid by the sovereign himself.

Having thus given you my opinion of some things which might be done, and others which should not be done, by a President coming into power by the support of those of the people who are opposed to the principles upon which the present administration is conducted, you will see that I have omitted one which is deemed by many of as much importance as any other. I alluded to the appointment of members of Congress to office by the President. The constitution contains no prohibition of such appointments, no doubt because its authors could not believe in its necessity from the purity of character which was manifested by those who possessed the confidence of the people at that period. It is however an opinion very generally entertained by the opposition party, that the country would have escaped much of the evil under which it has suffered for some years past, if the constitution had contained a provision of that kind. Having no opportunity of personal observation on the conduct of the administration for the last ten years I am unable to decide upon the truth or error of this opinion. And I should be very willing that the subserviency of the Legislative body to the Executive in several memorable instances should be accounted for in a way somewhat less injurious to the character of our country and Republicanism itself, than by the admission that the fathers of the land, the trusted servants of a virtuous people could be seduced from the path of duty & honour by the paltry trap-
pings & emoluments of dependant officers. But if the evil really exists & if there is good reason to believe, that its source is to be found in the corruptibility of the members of the Legislature an effectual remedy cannot be too soon applied. And it happens in this case that there is a choice of remedies. One of them however, is in my opinion free from the objections which might be offered to the other. The one to which I object is that which the late President has been so loudly called upon to adopt in consequence of a promise made at the commencement of his administration, viz that the Executive under no circumstances should appoint to office a member of either branch of the National Legislature. There are in my mind several weighty reasons against the adoption of this principle. I will detain you but with the mention of one or two of them, because I believe that you will agree with me that the alternative I shall present whilst it would be equally effectual contains no feature to which a reasonable objection could be raised.

As the constitution contains no provision to prevent the appointment of members of Congress to office by the Executive, could the Executive with due regard to delicacy & justice indeed, without usurping power from the people, declare a disqualification which they had not thought necessary? And where is the American Citizen who regards the honour of his country, the character of its people, or who believes in the superiority of a Republican form of Government, who would be willing to proclaim to the world, that the youthful nation, which had attracted so much of its attention, which it had so much admired for its gigantic strength, its undaunted courage, its high attainments in literature & the arts& the external beauty of its institutions, was, within a mass of meanness & corruption? that even the chosen servants of the people were ever ready for a paltry consideration to abandon their allegiance to their lawful sovereign & to become the servants of a servant. The alternative to this degrading course, is to be found in depriving the Executive of all motive for acquiring an improper influence over the Legislature. To effect this nothing in my opinion is necessary but to reestablish the prin-
principles upon which the administration was once conducted, with the slight addition of limiting the service of the President to one term. A condensed enumeration of what I conceive those principles to have been is given above. And I think that no one can doubt, that if faithfully carried out they would be effectual in securing the independence of the Legislature & confining the connection between it & the Executive to that alone which is warranted by fair construction of the constitution. I can conceive of but two motives which could induce a President of the United States to endeavor to procure a controlling influence over the Legislative body—viz—to perpetuate his power, by passing laws to increase his patronage—or to gratify his vanity by obtaining their sanction to his schemes & projects for the Government of the country & thus assimilating his situation to that of the limited monarchs of Europe. The principles above suggested would effectually destroy any disposition of the person elected by the combined votes of the opposition to place himself in either attitude. Retiring at the end of four years to private life with no wish or prospect of "any son of his succeeding, legitimate or adopted, he would be one the Government as prosperous & pure in its administration as when it passed from the hands of the great "Apostle of Democracy," to the father of our constitution.

To the duties which I have enumerated as proper in my opinion to be performed by a President elected by the opposition to the present Administration (& which are as I believe of constitutional obligation) I will mention another which I believe also to be of much importance. I mean the observance of the most conciliatory course of conduct towards our political opponents. After the censure which our friends have so fully & so justly bestowed upon the present Chief Magistrate for having in no inconsiderable degree disfranchised the whole body of his political opponents I am certain that no oppositionist true to the principles he professes would approve a similar course of conduct in the person whom his vote had contributed to elect. In a Republick one of the surest tests of a healthy state of its institutions
is the immunity with which every citizen may upon all occasions express his political opinions & particularly his preferences in the discharge of his duty as an elector.

The question may perhaps be asked of me what security I have it in my power to offer if I should be fixed on as the opposition candidate & they should succeed in electing me that I would adopt the principles which I have herein laid down as those upon which the administration would be conducted. I could only answer by referring to my conduct, and the disposition manifested in the discharge of the duties of several important offices which have heretofore been conferred upon me. If the power placed in my hands has on even a single occasion been used for any purpose than that for which it was given, or retained longer than even was necessary to accomplish the objects designated by those from whom these trusts were received, I will acknowledge that either will constitute a sufficient reason for discrediting any promise I may make under the circumstances in which I am now placed.

I am Dear sir
truly yours
W. H. Harrison

To the
Hon'ble
Harmer Denny