The Critical Period in Pennsylvania History

THE CRITICAL PERIOD IN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY

By

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Critical periods are the cross-roads where nations hesitate as to which way to go, but as a rule there are two ways to go and the hesitation is caused by doubt and fear as to the choice. That was the case in the three critical periods of the United States, but not so with Pennsylvania, whose critical period was caused by the most remarkable combination of unfortunate conditions ever recorded in this country, leaving the State like a ship, in a storm, without captain or pilot, the crew in mutiny and the machinery broken.

On the wall in a corridor in the Capitol at Washington, framed, hangs a mosaic. The artist has entitled it "The Critical Period of American History" and has put the scene at a small stone bridge on a mountain roadway near Granada, Spain. Columbus, mounted, with his servant leading a pack mule, dejectedly returning from an unsuccessful ten days' conference at court. They hear the rapid beating of hoofs behind them, fearing a robber and preparing for defense. The rider suddenly coming upon them, reinig his horse back, and raising his hand denoting that he was a friend, telling them he was a messenger from the court, that Columbus was to return and be given a reconsideration of his plan for a westward passage to Cathay. It was hardly a critical period, but our history starts from that little stone bridge in the mountains west of Granada, Spain, and it is three hundred years to the next critical period, which occurred on Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania.

Mr. Smith very graphically portrays to us in our last month's magazine, the conditions surrounding the signing of the Constitution of the United States. After the Revolutionary War, the Thirteen Colonies were on the verge of a

*Read before the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on March 28, 1922.
civil war. Nothing could save them but a constitution. Civil war would produce anarchy very rapidly, which would be followed by monarchy, the last resort of anarchy. Entirely unable to agree, a motion to adjourn was seconded but failed, on the appeal of the venerable Franklin, for another day. The result of Franklin's appeal was a constitution.

The next Critical Period was the election of Abraham Lincoln. Had he not been elected, civil war again would have been inevitable, a partial state of civil war then existing. Lincoln's election was followed by rebellion, and rebellion is not as dangerous to a nation as civil war. Nations are usually better than ever after rebellion, but civil war is a wasting disease that kills. Three weeks after Lincoln's election South Carolina seceded and established an embassy in Washington, which was closed the day Lincoln was inaugurated and a few weeks later, the dust was rising in every loyal State from the marching columns that saved the Union.

Pennsylvania's Critical Period, as I have said, was caused by a remarkable combination of unfortunate accidents at a very bad time. The Constitution of 1838 did not provide for a Lieutenant Governor but provided that the Speaker of the Senate should succeed the Governor in case of his incapacity or death. When the Senate convened under that Constitution they organized and elected a speaker. For some reason they considered that the speaker should only serve during that session. No one knows where they got that idea. The Constitution gave no such thought. It provided that the Senate should be a permanent body constituted of two-thirds constantly, one-third being elected each term. But that was the construction they placed upon it, and when the session came to a close the speaker who had served, considered it the dignified thing to do, to leave the platform, and take his seat at his desk on the floor, leaving the Senate staring at an empty chair on an empty platform. The only official of the Senate then was the clerk, and the clerk said, "Gentlemen, we are without a Speaker. We need a speaker for the recess." In case anything should happen to the Governor someone must be in a position to take his place, then nominations were made for a speaker to serve during the recess. At the end of the recess and at the beginning of the next session, the regular session, this speaker
considered it the dignified thing to do to remain on the floor, and they all sat down again looking at an empty chair on an empty platform, and the clerk repeated the statement that they were without a speaker for the session, and so on.

This was the condition that had existed for twenty-six years and it worked all right until something happened. Sometimes things happen that no one can forecast. A story told by a distinguished neighbor of mine, Dr. Robert Christie, of the North Side, in a sermon he preached one day, illustrated this very clearly. As a child in Scotland his father had often taken him walking through a long avenue of trees, calling his attention to their beauty, their uprightness, reading him many lectures drawn from them and as he grew older, he became very much in love with those trees and always promptly visited them on his repeated returns to Scotland. Upon his last visit prior to the War, in 1912, he hastened out to see these grand trees and walk through that beautiful avenue again. To his astonishment and horror they were gone. He could not account for it. He knew no one in Scotland would be allowed to raise a hand against these trees that had been there for two hundred years, and he hastened to find out what had happened. Finding the Caretaker of the grounds, who told him of a storm that had blown them down about six months prior to that. The Doctor said “My father told me when I was a child that they were two hundred years old. Do you mean to say that a greater storm struck Scotland in the past year than ever has struck it in the two hundred and fifty years before?” “No,” the caretaker said, “It was not much of a storm. I have seen many worse, but our storms all come from the northeast, and this storm came from the south. Those trees had been trained from infancy to support themselves against storms coming from the northeast, but when a storm of any violence struck them from the south they were not prepared and they went down.

You can see the splendid point the Doctor had for his sermon on Christian character. And so it was with the Senate’s idea of working under the constitution of 1838. A great storm had sprung up from the south and for three years it beat against these northern states beating down men and institutions and constitutions until it rolled over the border of
Pennsylvania, and the flames of Chambersburg, and the roar of Great Gettysburg could be seen and heard from the Capitol steps. If you stand on the Gettysburg field, in front of that great open book of Bronze and read its inscription "Here the high tide of rebellion was rolled back", and you think of those three Pennsylvania generals, Meade, Reynolds and Hancock, standing on their own soil, in command of troops from all the loyal states from Maine to Iowa, forming that wall of granite with its gates of brass, you should give a thought to the great Governor Curtin and the men and women in civil and political life in those awful days who mended the sails and stopped the leaks and did their part toward keeping the ship of state afloat. And tonight a thought of the man who had the courage to take his place alone on the burning deck and hold the broken helm of the ship.

To return to the great Governor. In 1860, Andrew Gregg Curtin was elected Governor of Pennsylvania. Forty-four years old, youthful in appearance, with an elastic step, boyish manner and waving black hair, he made his inaugural address three weeks ahead of the famous inaugural address of Lincoln, so it fell to him to make the first public expression as to the conduct of the North and the position of a leading northern state in the great crisis then confronting the country. At the first sound of rebellion Curtin sprang forth instantly as a leader, calling all the northern governors to meet him at Altoona and pledge their support to the national government. From that day he labored day and night both for the troops, for the maintenance of the Union, and to hold Pennsylvania in its place as the Keystone of the national arch. In three years his hair was grayed, his step was tottering, he was broken physically, and constantly under the care of two New York physicians, fearing he would not live to finish his administration. President Lincoln told him if he would only stay until the end of his term, he would give him a first-class mission abroad where he could recover his health in a mild climate. Very much delighted, the Governor announced to the people that he would not run for re-election, that he was going abroad on a first-class mission. The people and the political leaders realized full well, how much the increase of the peace-at-any-price party had been, how
many men had developed an idea of compromise, and that 75,000 loyal Pennsylvania voters were disfranchised in the army, saw the danger of trying to elect another leader against such conditions, as well as the impression on the country. And in spite of the Governor's statement he was re-nominated. His wife pleaded with him in tears to not accept the nomination, telling him he would certainly die if he attempted it. His reply was, "Other men are dying for this cause and why not I?" At which Mrs. Curtin dried her tears, came to the support of her husband and assisted him all she could during the campaign. He was elected by a 15,000 majority. He was unable to prepare his inaugural address. It was written by Colonel McClure in Chambersburg. He was just able to deliver it on the platform and to be assisted to his residence, where he was constantly under the care of his physicians until they decided that to save his life, he must be taken south to Cuba. President Lincoln had Secretary Wells of the Navy, send a war vessel to Philadelphia, Governor Curtin was carrier on board on a cot, and under strong convoy the boat sailed out on a hostile sea, and the people of Pennsylvania did not know whether their governor had died on Delaware Bay, or on the sea, or had been landed in Cuba safely.

In the meantime, the speaker of the Senate who had been elected to serve during the recess reported to Harrisburg promptly to perform such duties as would come to him should anything happen to the governor. He saw the change the election had made in the complexion of the Legislature and of the Senate. He saw that great loyal men had lost their seats and many men for compromise had taken their places. He saw that the two great parties in the Senate were almost equally divided, on the one side seventeen senators and on the other sixteen, and at that time the news came from the Shenandoah Valley that one of those seventeen senators had been captured by the enemy at Winchester, and was a prisoner of war in Libby. Major White, a loyal son of Indiana County, had been elected Senator while he was in the service and had almost immediately been captured. All efforts to exchange him were without avail.

This was the condition confronting the representative of the Governor, Speaker of the Senate, when the Senate con-
vened. To have followed the old custom of sitting down and looking at an empty chair, and having the Clerk ask for an election, would be impossible. There were sixteen of each party present, and had word of the Governor's death, reached the Senate, there would have been no one to take his place. Realizing this, the Speaker went on to the platform and said. "Gentlemen, considering the conditions confronting us, our Governor, as you know, in a state of health which may at any moment bring to us the sad intelligence of his death, an equal number of both parties on the floor in front of me, a great war raging—under these conditions I consider it my duty to depart from the custom of leaving the Chair, but to remain your Speaker until my successor is elected, and in the event of a tie vote, to perform such duties for the Governor as may come to me to perform, and to succeed him as Governor in case the sad news of his death reaches us. I sincerely trust that you will hasten to an agreement in electing my successor, and relieve me from this most embarrassing position. I have all along believed that this idea of the Speaker leaving his chair before his successor was elected, had no being in point of law, nor according to the Constitution. The time has come when it should be corrected, and I hope you will proceed at once to the election of my successor. Is it your wish to enter into an election at this time?"

There were sixteen Nos and sixteen Ayes, and the great deadlock started. All motions were met with sixteen Nos and sixteen Ayes. All efforts were made without avail and the days went into weeks and the weeks into months, and the storm raged on the floor, and around the speaker, who with perfect confidence in the legality of his position, remained undisturbed at his post.

In the meantime Senator White in Libby Prison came across a newspaper printed on wall paper, a copy of which I hold in my hand, in which there was the statement that the Senate of Pennsylvania was locked and the key was in Libby Prison. He proposed to unlock it. Talking to his fellow-prisoners, they all agreed that if any exchange should be ordered and any one of them selected, they would give their place to him, knowing that he never would be allowed to be exchanged. Finally an exchange of doctors was ordered, and Dr. William S. Hosick, of the North Side, Pittsburgh,
then a prisoner of war, agreed to have Major White take his place, and taking a dose of medicine which he knew would make him violently ill at the time the prisoners were to fall in. White fell into Dr. Hosick's place and left the prison, was put on board a boat on the James River, taken down to City Point where he saw the American flag flying, just as a Confederate officer signaled to them from the bank and came aboard, announcing that he had received intelligence that a man not entitled to exchange was among the prisoners to be exchanged, and if he did not make himself known at once, no exchange would be made. White promptly stepped forward, declared himself as being the one, was put in irons and sent below, taken back to Richmond, put in prison in the dungeon. The disappointment and his long imprisonment so broke him down that he nearly went wild, he rapped on the floor calling to the prisoners above that if he did not hear their voices, he would go crazy. They pulled up a board and talked to him, assured him that he was entirely too valuable to be killed. If he should be executed, that would break the deadlock in the Pennsylvania Senate.

Then he decided that the thing to do was secretly to resign if he could get a resignation secretly out of prison. Dr. Hosick came forward again and supplied him with some paper. He wrote a resignation to the Speaker of the Senate. I have a copy here, which was concealed under the back of the binding of a Bible, and another letter to his father, which was concealed inside the body of a large brass button, then worn on the blouse. Dr. Hosick, his companion, having been exchanged, was exchanged and left the prison soon after, with the Bible in his hand, and the button on his blouse, reached the Union lines and immediately made his way to Indiana, delivered his letter to Judge White, the father of the Major. He immediately sent the resignation to Harrisburg where it was accepted as the official resignation of the Senator from Indiana. An election ordered and held. Dr. St. Clair was promptly elected in Major White's place, hurried to Harrisburg taking his seat the next morning. The motion that they proceed to an election was passed, the Speaker who had been the storm center for months, was promptly re-elected to succeed himself for the full term of the regular session, and so with the machinery repaired,
the crew at work, the same hand at the helm, our ship of State, steamed on through the storm, until, "the shouting and the tumult ceased, the Captains and the troops withdrew, but still stands. Thine ancient sacrifice, lest we forget, lest we forget."