THE PITTSBURGH GAZETTE—A PIONEER NEWSPAPER

Only in recent years have we come to realize the importance of the newspaper as an historical source. The historian has long acknowledged his dependence upon government records, upon letters, diaries, account books, and relics for a knowledge of the past, but only yesterday did it flash into his mind that the newspaper and its files might present an admirable cross section of the past. The fruits of this belated discovery are various histories of journalism and some excellent studies of individual newspapers. Our metropolis, New York, has been a favored field of investigation; the influence of its dailies has been well depicted. But up to now the region west of the Atlantic seaboard, with one or two notable exceptions, has been almost totally unexploited. None of the journals in this area surviving in the present day better deserves to have its career chronicled than the first newspaper to be printed west of the Allegheny Mountains, the Pittsburgh Gazette.

The long-continued existence of the Gazette is one of its most unique features. It is surprising to find how few of the twenty thousand odd newspapers in the United States today were contemporaries of the Gazette when it made its bow to the public in 1786. They could be numbered on the fingers of two hands—the Hartford Courant is perhaps the best known of them. Its antiquity, however, is by no means the most important aspect of the Gazette. Its long life is

1 The author of this paper, Mr. J. Cutler Andrews, is instructor in history in the Carnegie Institute of Technology at Pittsburgh. The paper was read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on March 29, 1932. Ed.
but evidence of certain permanent qualities that its management and editorial policy have presented. We often forget that objects bequeathed to us from preceding generations are evidences of a living past. The pioneer’s axe carefully preserved in the museum is far more than an out-of-date tool; it is a symbol of the frontier that has so strongly conditioned our historical development. Plymouth Rock is something more than a large boulder that the sea rolled up on the Massachusetts coast a few thousand years ago; it stands for a movement, an emigration, if you will, that peopled this land with one of its most persistent, rugged, and virile stocks. The Pittsburgh Gazette is more than the vehicle of news for a century and a half to the people of western Pennsylvania. It has both reflected and molded the life of this section. Its editors and sponsors have taken the lead in the activities of their constituents. It grew as the community grew, partook of the intense spirit of political rivalry that has always characterized this region, and played no small part in transforming a raw backwoods settlement into a large self-possessed city that has struggled hard to preserve its schools, its literature, its art from the dangers inherent in an encroaching industrialism.

The files of the paper constitute a significant social document so various and all-inclusive that one is hard put to it to see the forest for the trees. Sententious comments upon the policy of the federal government, violent controversies in the letter column, miscellaneous advertisements, encounters with the savage who prowled through the dense forest that stretched up to the editor’s door in 1786, anecdotes that appealed to the direct humor of that day are sample specimens of the profusion of incident and idea spread over the pages of the Gazette. The purpose of this preliminary study is to make a running survey of the external control of the paper before the Civil War with particular emphasis on two great personalities who exerted that control at the outset.

In the summer of 1786 two young printers from Philadelphia, John Scull, a member of one of the finest Quaker
families there, and Joseph Hall, came over the mountains and set up a hand press, "probably purchased from Andrew Brown, proprietor of The Philadelphia Federal Gazette," and "hauled across the mountains by one of the pioneer freighters, John Walker." ² From this press on July 29, 1786, issued the first number of the Gazette. We would give much to have that first issue, but the earliest complete number known to be extant is the fifth, of August 26. Browned with age, it is a curious memento of the days when Pittsburgh was young—a four-page leaflet about one-fourth of the size of the present morning paper. There was no space to waste. The first page was devoted to editorial comment, which spread over to the second page, where it shared columns with a group of news items from leading American cities that bore the general heading "American Intelligence." The third page contained local news and some advertisements; the fourth page held news from abroad, under the superscription "Foreign Intelligence," and more advertisements. At the bottom of the last page came a terse statement of ownership, as follows: ³

PITTSBURGH:  Printed and Sold by JOHNN SCULL and JOSEPH HALL, at their Printing-Office in Water-Street, near the Ferry, where Subscriptions, (at 17 s 6 [[$4.37\frac{1}{2}$]) per ann.) Advertisements, &c. for this Paper, are thankfully received, and PRINTING in its differnt [sic] Branches is done with Care, Elegance, and Expedition. - - - ADVERTISEMENTS not exceeding a Square are inserted Three Weeks for a Dollar, and every continuance after one-fourth of a Dollar; those exceeding a square are inserted in proportion.

The high subscription rate may be attributed to the fact that since there was no paper mill in the West the necessary paper had to be transported over the mountains. When in 1797 the paper mill of Jackson and Sharpless was set up on Redstone Creek, the subscription price was lowered to two dollars per year. ³

³ Pittsburgh Gazette, June 24, 1797; Grundish, in Gazette Times, July 27, 1919, section 4, p. 1.
The advertisements do much to relieve the otherwise dull tone of the early numbers. Here a general store lists its merchandise often on terms encouraging barter or exchange; there a sheriff recommends himself to the voter's attention at the next election. Just how important they are is indicated by the following significant comment of a recent writer:

The meagre columns of the Gazette were filled with European news two years old, with long disquisitions on public affairs, with personal controversies, with moral essays, and with poems amatory and didactic. The modern reporter and the city editor had not yet been evolved. News of a local character was almost entirely wanting. Who died or who was married, who came or who went, was very rarely noticed. Only from the advertisements, as a rule, can we get any glimpses of life in Pittsburgh in those early years.

The following examples of advertisements are particularly interesting because they recall the labor system that existed in the households of eighteenth-century Pittsburgh:

Fifteen Dollars Reward. RAN AWAY on the sixth instant from the subscriber an Irish servant, named Charles Jordan, 20 years of age, five feet six or eight inches high, short, black hair, round face, knock-kneed, large flat feet, has an old sore on the sole of one foot; took with him a straw hat, an old blue coat, linen hunting shirt, three coarse shirts, pair coarse trowsers, pair backl plush breeches, pair worsted stockings, a pair of coarse shoes; whoever secures said servant so that the owner near the forks of Cheat may get him, shall be paid the above reward and reasonable expences, by JOHN WILSON.

The other example is slightly different:

TO BE SOLD, (For Ready Money, only) A German woman servant, she has near 3 years to serve, and is well qualified for all household work: would recommend her to her own country people, particularly as her present master has found great inconvenience from his not being acquainted with their manners, customs and language. For further particulars enquire at Mr. ORMSBY's in Pittsburgh.

4 T. J. Chapman, Old Pittsburgh Days, 136 (Pittsburgh, 1900).
5 Pittsburgh Gazette, September 2, 1786.
6 Pittsburgh Gazette, September 16, 1786.
These advertisements were repeated in several successive issues. How successful they were we do not know, but the community in which they circulated was a small one. A reliable estimate antedating the first census reports indicates that Pittsburgh in 1786 contained thirty-six log houses, one stone house, one frame house, and six small stores.\footnote{Niles' Weekly Register, 30:436 (August 19, 1826). Neville B. Craig and the later historians of Pittsburgh accept this estimate.} The best description of the appearance of the town at this time is afforded in a pen picture that ran serially in the early numbers of the Gazette. The author was H. H. Brackenridge, who had induced Scull and Hall to try their unpromising venture, and who was one of the most prominent early citizens of Pittsburgh. In after years he explained that the purpose of the series was to induce immigration to Pittsburgh. The inflated style of his writing is remarkable even for an age when lofty and grandiloquent enthusiasm was the mode, but his article is the best contemporary account of Pittsburgh’s external features in 1786, and it is the best-known contribution of perhaps the ablest contributor to the paper in its early years. It is entitled “On the Situation of the Town of Pittsburgh and the State of Society at that Place.”

After some preliminary remarks about the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers, the author states his purpose and proceeds with his description:

It may be said by some who will read this description which I have given, or may be about to give, that it is minute and useless, inasmuch as they are observations of things well known. But let it be considered that it is not intended for the people of this country, but for those at a distance, who may not yet be acquainted with the natural situation of the town of Pittsburgh, or having heard of it, may wish to be more particularly informed. Who knows what families of fortune it may induce to emigrate to this place?

At the head of the Ohio stands the town of Pittsburgh, on an angular piece of ground, the two rivers forming the two sides
of the angle. Just at the point, stood, when I first came to this country, a tree, leaning against which I have often overlooked the wave, or committing my garments to its shade have bathed in the transparent tide. How have I regretted its undeserved fate when the surly winters flood, tore it from the roots and left the bank bare.

From the verdant walk on the margin of this beautiful river, you have a view of an island about a mile above, round which the river twines with a resplendent brightness... When the poet comes with his enchanting song to pour his magic numbers on this scene, this little island, may aspire to live with those in the Egean sea where the song of Homer drew the image of delight, or where the Cam or Isis embracing in their bosoms gems like these are sung by Milton, father of the modern bards.

In the year 1781 a bower had been erected covered with green shrubs. The sons and daughters of the day assembling, joined in the festivity, viewing the rivers at a distance, and listening to the music of the military on the plain beneath them. When the moon light rising from the east had softened into grey, the prospect, a lofty pile of wood enflamed... illumined both the rivers and the town, which far around reflected brightness. Approaching in the appearance of a river god, a swain begirt with weeds natural to these streams... hailed us, and gave prophetic hints of the grandeur of our future empire. His words I remember not, but it seemed to me for a moment, that the mystic agency of deities well known in Greece and Rome, was not a fable; but that powers unseen haunt the woods and rivers... and are pleased with the celebration of events that spring from great achievements and from virtue.

The town consists at present of about an hundred dwelling houses, with buildings appurtenant. More are daily added, and for some time past it has improved with an equal but continual pace. The inhabitants, children, men and women are about fifteen hundred; this number doubling almost every year from the accession of people from abroad, and from those born in the town. As I pass along, I may remark that this new country is in general highly prolific; whether it is that the vegetable air, if I may so express it, constantly perfumed with aromatic flavor and impregnated with salts drawn from the fresh soil, is more favorable to the production of men and other animals than decayed grounds.
There is not a more delightful spot under heaven to spend any of the summer months than at this place. I am astonished that there should be such repair to the Warm Springs in Virginia, a place pent up between the hills where the sun pours its beams concentrated as in a burning glass, and not a breath of air stirs; where the eye can wander scarcely half a furlong; while here we have the breezes of the river, coming from the Mississippi and the ocean; the gales that fan the woods, and are sent from the refreshing lakes to the northward... Here we have the town and country together. How pleasant is it in a summer evening, to walk out upon these grounds; the smooth green surface of the earth, and the woodland shade softening the late fervid beams of the sun; how pleasant by a chrysal fount in [sic] a tea party under one of those hills, with the rivers and the plains beneath.8

Verily Mr. Brackenridge was looking out from rose spectacles for he wrote these words not two years after the highly respected Arthur Lee of the Virginia Lees had stated in his journal that Pittsburgh "is inhabited almost entirely by Scots and Irish, who live in paltry log-houses, and are as dirty as in the north of Ireland, or even Scotland... There are in the town four attorneys, two doctors, and not a priest of any persuasion, nor church, nor chapel; so that they are likely to be damned, without the benefit of clergy... The place, I believe, will never be very considerable."9 These quotations represent extreme views, but it is largely because of their exaggeration that they have been preserved.

In this lonely backwoods village, squalid and dirty if you hold with Lee, a vision of loveliness if you prefer Brackenridge, Scull and his partner plodded along with a press so small that they had to strike the paper off in eight sections; eight pulls were necessary to print the four pages.10 On November 10, 1786, at the age of twenty-one, Hall died, and Scull, who was left as sole editor, reporter, typesetter, and

8 This sketch is conveniently reprinted in Hugh H. Brackenridge, Gazette Publications, 7-17 (Carlisle, 1806).
delivery boy, had to find another helper. He turned to Brackenridge, and the latter, who at the time was in Philadelphia occupying a seat in the general assembly, sent one John Boyd out to Pittsburgh with a letter of introduction. On January 6, 1787, the association of Boyd with Scull in the paper's management was announced in the *Gazette*. The new employee does not seem to have had much influence in the direction of the paper. On July 19, 1788, the *Gazette* identified his name with a circulating-library project, for which subscriptions were to be taken at its office, but within a month he walked out of the Market Street office, climbed a hill just back of the present courthouse, and hanged himself for unassigned reasons. Scull, omitting all comment, simply dropped Boyd's name from the statement of management, and stoically went on alone.

The problems he had to face were sufficiently complex. The East was remote; news trickled in from it only fitfully and then if it were congressional news it was at least a week stale, if from abroad more likely from five to seven weeks old. What wonder if to fill up space the editor fell back on "numerous religious, moral and philosophical articles, usually written by ministers, doctors and lawyers, often scholarly, ornate, and rhetorical, sprinkled with gems from classical authors, after the somewhat florid fashion of the times." The problem of delivering the paper to subscribers was equally vexatious. There was no post office until Scull improvised one and found himself recognized by the government as postmaster. Meanwhile the editor had to depend upon friends to carry his paper to rural subscribers. John M'Donald of Bell-Mont advertised in the *Gazette* boat service between his landing and Pittsburgh, reminding all and sundry that "said

boat is also the most speedy and sure way of transporting the Pittsburgh Gazette to the subscribers on Youghiogany, Peter's creek, Mingo creek and Pigeon creek." Similarly John Blair opened up boat service on the Monongahela and stated that "all persons on or near said river who have subscribed for the Pittsburgh Gazette, or may hereafter subscribe, can have their papers brought to them every week, at a more reasonable rate than any other conveyance and without disappointment." Two years later Scull's hopes were realized when a regular mail route was finally opened between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh by James Bryson and he no longer had to depend upon the occasional traveler to transmit intelligence. Furthermore this was the best insurance to still the tongues that were already agitating separation from that far-away government east of the Alleghenies.

The fluctuating supply of paper must also have perplexed Scull grievously. Issues of reduced size were by no means infrequent. On several occasions cartridge paper of inferior quality had to be borrowed from Fort Pitt. Major Craig, the commandant, fortunately preserved the following letter of July 1, 1792, in which Scull figures as the petitioner:

Dear Sir: John Wright's pack-horses, by whom I receive my paper from Chambersburgh, has returned without bringing me any — owing to none being finished. As I am entirely out, and do not know what to do, I take the liberty of applying to you for some you have in the public stores, (and of which I have had some,) as a loan, or an exchange, for the kind herein enclosed — and as this kind is smaller, I will make an adequate allowance — or if you could wait two or three weeks, I will return you paper of a superior quality . . . as I have sent to Philadelphia, by Mr. Brackenridge, for a large quantity, and John Wright's pack-horses return immediately for Chambers- burgh, and will bring me up some — as I conceive you will not want the paper as soon as I can replace it, I flatter myself you will let me have three reams, and as soon as I receive mine it shall be returned, or if you choose to take the inclosed in exchange, it shall be immediately sent you — if you can oblige

14 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 2, 1786.
me with the paper it will do any time this day, and I shall consider myself as under a very particular obligation.

I am, dear sir, your most obedient servant,

JOHN SCULL.⁵

A fourth embarrassment came to Scull from time to time because of the inability or unwillingness of the canny Scots of the hinterland to pay their annual dues promptly. The combined owner, editor, typesetter, and city postman did not mince words with them. He was quite willing to receive payments in kind (pelts, wheat, corn, whiskey, barley, and wood were listed on one occasion) but prompt payments were demanded. "For the satisfaction of such as are doubtful respecting the commencement of their payment I do hereby inform them, that payment for the Pittsburgh Gazette commences from the date of the first paper each subscriber receives." Thus the warning appeared in copies of the Gazette of December 9, 1786. Considering how the average purse must have been taxed to defray the cost of a year's subscription, the constituency of the Gazette grew rapidly. By 1790 copies were circulated among a population of over sixty thousand in the four southwestern counties of Allegheny, Westmoreland, Fayette, and Washington. North of the Ohio and west of the Allegheny was Indian territory, closed country for the Gazette.

The name of Brackenridge has already been mentioned several times.⁶ He merits special consideration, for his relations with Scull form no unimportant chapter in the early history of the Gazette. As a youth he came with his parents from Scotland to America in 1753. He was graduated at Princeton in 1771, served as a chaplain in the army during the Revolution, and came to Pittsburgh in 1781. Here he doffed the cassock and donned the lawyer's robe. He was the

⁵ Neville B. Craig, The History of Pittsburgh, 201 (Pittsburgh, 1917).
first lawyer in Pittsburgh. Lawyer-clergyman in one, he might likewise lay claim to the title of poet. Before coming here he had collaborated with Philip Freeman in a volume of verse entitled The Rising Glory of America and had written a play called The Battle of Bunker Hill. His best-known work was a political satire entitled Modern Chivalry. Volume 3, printed in Pittsburgh by Scull, was the first book published west of the Alleghenies. The part of Brackenridge in bringing Scull to Pittsburgh has been noted; in addition, he did much of the editorial work on the Gazette and his contributions, whatever form they took—poem, sermon, or political speech—were read with great interest. The frontiersmen greatly admired his cleverness; his political opponents respected it.

In the early years of their acquaintance, Scull and Brackenridge were normally compatible. Brackenridge was the leader of the bar, the prime mover in the organization of Allegheny County, the chief sponsor for the Pittsburgh Academy. Scull recognized these as solid accomplishments. But the Whiskey Insurrection was a rigid test of the friendship of the two men. Scull stood quietly but steadfastly by the government during the crisis; Brackenridge's conduct was, to say the least, equivocal.

To front the fast-running tide of popular feeling would have required the truest kind of courage. The odious federal excise act that taxed the product of the western still, which converted the farmer's grain into a marketable form, was the focal point of discontent. The transition from smashing stills that had paid the excise, to hustling revenue officers about and finally burning the house of Colonel Neville, the chief collector, took no great amount of time. And with the joviality that even a mob can assume, still-smashing was christened still-mending, and since he who mends is a tinker, "Tom the Tinker" became the collective name of the playful destroyers. The name came to assume much the same ominous import that "Molly Maguire" did later.
The federal government demanded submission to its authority but delayed exacting it through the summer of 1794, while Brackenridge took a leading part in the meetings of the malcontents. In the apology that he afterwards drafted, he insisted that he had put himself at the head of the movement in order to restrain its excesses and to induce the insurgents to accept the proffered amnesty—this in spite of his own bitter opposition to the excise and some remarks that sounded perilously like recourse to secession. In his published reminiscences he relates his experiences of these times. On one of his peace missions he visited a family and found in the front room two men whom he suspected of a disposition to assassinate him, Benjamin Parkinson and Andrew McFarlane. Let Brackenridge continue:

I was shocked; but concealing my sensations, I addressed Parkinson with an appearance of perfect confidence. He spoke frankly, and with a countenance of pleasure. Stepping out with young Parker, he left me with M'Farlane, to whom I had bowed, but not yet spoken. I was sitting just by him, within a step, in the small room. I kept my eye upon his hand, and his rifle, and thought, if I saw him move, to seize his rifle; I could, perhaps, by a sudden spring, gain the door. I cast a glance at a window in the room, and thought of springing, head foremost, through it, if I saw him move. . . . I thought my situation precarious, and the chances against me. While these were my sensations, I turned round, with an open and direct countenance, to M'Farlane; Mr. M'Farlane, said I, these are disagreeable times. Indeed they are, Mr. Brackenridge, said he. The expression, and the manner, relieved me from my apprehensions in a moment; and left me only at a loss to account for his seeming cordiality. For, continued he, I have been, for these two days, afraid of my life, because I recommended submission. I have been afraid to sleep at home, and I am obliged now to go with my rifle. Ah hah, thought I, I shall not be shot yet.17

Brackenridge emerged from this experience more agreeably than he had expected but he was not yet out of the woods.

17 Hugh H. Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection in the Western Parts of Pennsylvania in the Year 1794*, 2:16 (3 vol. in 1—Philadelphia, 1795). This work is an attempt to clear up the questionable aspects of Brackenridge's conduct in this crisis.
An encounter with Tom the Tinker a few days later frightened him greatly, and when the federal troops bore down on the disaffected western farmers, Brackenridge was haled before Alexander Hamilton and severely grilled.\(^1\) His oratorical gifts did him no small service at this time. But the animosities raised by the agitation were not easily laid and in his race for Congress that year Brackenridge went down in defeat before the rising name of Gallatin, who was soon to be heard from in the national arena.

Scull and the *Gazette* had not been immune from Tom the Tinker's spell. From time to time that worthy forced the editor to print manifestoes bidding the discontented stand firm and breathing threats such as: "This is a fair warning; traitors take care, for my hammer is up, and my ladle is hot. I cannot travel the country for nothing. From your old friend, TOM the TINKER."\(^2\) Plainly the *Gazette* did not come out of the whole sorry affair with any great credit. It was an out-and-out case of the community taking the lead and the newspaper following in a halting fashion.

From this time on a coldness began to develop between Scull and Brackenridge. Party differences divided them. Brackenridge was a violent antifederalist. Why should he be allowed to inoculate the paper and, indirectly, the readers with a pernicious virus? The campaign of 1800 brought matters to a head. Brackenridge was deprived of the freedom of the *Gazette*’s columns. The opposition founded a new paper, the *Tree of Liberty*, with a certain John Israel at the helm. The federalists suspected Brackenridge of being back of it but he persistently denied these reports. He contributed some able articles to it, however, and, locking horns with Scull, decisively worsted him.

The following is a specimen of Scull’s flattering allusions to his old friend: "You who get two or three thousand dollars a year for setting up a slanderous press, and for two or three
journeys through the State to sit as a mute on the bench, and wear the new cockade, in your drunken frolics through the country, can afford to buy a press and hire types, and pay under-devils to set types and fetch and carry tales. I cannot afford such things. I have no salary, post, or pension.” 20 Brackenridge retaliated in kind. In 1803 Scull brought suit against Israel for libel and, although both sides had been free with libelous statements, he won the verdict. Such suits were typical features of early nineteenth-century journalism and considering that party feeling ran high in Pittsburgh no surprise need be felt. The next year, the Tree of Liberty ceased to exist and the man whom Scull had apostrophized as “Citizen HUGH H. BRACKENRIDGE, Jacobin Printer of the Tree of Sedition, Blasphemy and Slander” 21 retired upon a judgeship in the state supreme court that he had made sure of in the days of plenty.

The Gazette continued to prosper under Scull’s leadership until, as age crept over him, the tiller began to slip from his hands. In 1818 he retired in favor of his son, John, and Morgan Neville. It would be fascinating to follow the changes of control of the paper in the succeeding years. The McLeans managed it in the twenties, the virile Neville Craig in the thirties. He it was who made it a daily on July 30, 1833. An exponent of personal journalism, he was the sort of man who might have drawn the sentence eulogy of Grover Cleveland: “We love him for the enemies he has made.” Antimasonry was a powerful force in the Pittsburgh of the thirties and Craig was actively enrolled under its banners. His vigor might well have been enlisted in a better cause. He gave way in 1841 to the White régime which, a brief interlude excepted, held sway down to the eve of the Civil War.

This discussion has been confined for the most part to personalities with the result that other important fields have been

20 Dahlinger, Pittsburgh, 133.
21 Pittsburgh Gazette, February 6, 1801.
ignored — internal improvements, the bank, the tariff, slavery, the westward movement, urban and industrial development, the aesthetic side of Pittsburgh life. The Gazette could not, of course, remain oblivious to these pressing questions of the day. But they would lead us far afield. If we understand how the Gazette in 1786 entered a field with no competitors, yet with no guides, survived the financial vicissitudes that an unsubsidized commercial venture on the frontier is heir to, and set high standards of craftsmanship, to which in the main it has adhered, then we shall have gone a long way toward forming a clear picture of this community's interesting past.

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