

HONEST JOHN COVODE¹

A. JOHN DODDS

THE PERIOD of the Civil War was an era of transition both in national and state politics. Few if any of the political leaders of western Pennsylvania did more at that time to change the existing order than did Congressman John Covode.

John Covode was born on March 17, 1808, on a farm about eight miles north of Fort Ligonier in Westmoreland County. His financial inheritance was small, but he was endowed with rich family traditions. Counselor of his youth was his paternal grandfather. Doubtless the old man often told of the time, almost a century past, when he had been kidnapped from the streets of Amsterdam as a little child and sold into bondage in Philadelphia, and of his long and bitter struggle for freedom. From his mother Covode also learned the story of a struggle for human rights, for her progenitor, Abraham Op dem Graeff, moved by the preaching of William Penn, left the Crefeld weaving mills and his Rhineland home to join the colony of Friends at Philadelphia. He was a leader among the founders of Germantown and a signer of the famous anti-slavery manifesto of 1688, the first document of its kind in American history. A dynamic spirit, an iron will, therefore, were Covode's heritage.²

¹ Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on May 23, 1933. A more extended treatment of the subject will be found in a thesis submitted by the author in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of master of arts at the University of Pittsburgh in February, 1933. The author is a teacher of history at Ambridge High School. *Ed.*

² George D. Albert, ed., *History of the County of Westmoreland, Pennsylvania*, 436 (Philadelphia, 1882); William H. Barnes, *The Fortieth Congress of the United States*, 1:215 (New York, 1869); Albert B. Faust, *The German Element in the United States*, 1:34-46 (New York, 1927); *Greensburg Gazette*, March 3, 1826; *Johnstown Tribune*, September 28, 1860; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, January 11, 1928.

As a boy Covode obtained a scanty education in the newly-established Westmoreland County schools, working, meanwhile, as farmer and blacksmith's helper. Then he learned the trade of the fuller,³ a trade traditional with his maternal ancestry on both sides of the Atlantic. When little more than twenty years of age he built a woolen mill on the Tub Mill Creek, a stream that ran through his father's farm; and around this factory Covodeville sprang up. Here for more than two score years, wool manufacturing held his interest. Yet he had the opportunity and the vision to enter other fields of industrial endeavor, and he soon became identified with lumber, brick, lime, and coal companies. Chief of these was the Westmoreland Coal Company, organized in 1847 by John Covode and William Larimer, Jr., which soon became one of the largest coal companies in the nation. Its rapid development was in part due to the construction of the Pennsylvania Railroad. When the railroad company was organized in 1846, Covode was a stockholder. He was an intimate friend of J. Edgar Thomson and Herman Haupt, organizers of the company, and he watched with more than casual interest its corporate development. At the time of his death his stock in this company was valued at approximately \$125,000.⁴

Shortly after the famous gold rush of 1849 William Larimer, Jr., who was then speculating in western land, noticed the opportunity for railroad construction in the Platte Valley and wrote to Covode to obtain financial and political assistance to promote such construction. In 1857 Covode went west, obtained a land grant from the territorial legislature of Nebraska, and organized the Platte Valley Railroad Company.⁵ Among the original incorporators were Covode, Haupt, J. M. Larimer, and Thomson. In 1852 Covode had married Hannah Thomson Peale, a cousin of Frank Thomson, a later president of the Penn-

³ John N. Boucher, *Old and New Westmoreland*, 2:627 (New York, 1918).

⁴ Westmoreland County Archives, Writ of Partition, Inventory of Estates; William D. Kelley, in *Memorial Addresses on the Life and Character of John Covode*, 7 (Washington, 1871); John Scott, in *Memorial Addresses*, 27; *Greensburg Tribune*, January 18, 19, 1871; *Congressional Globe*, 40 Congress, 2 session, 2425, 3236.

⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 40 Congress, 2 session, 2425, 3 session, 486; William Larimer, Jr., to Covode, January, March 25, 1857, Covode Papers. These papers are in private hands but it is hoped that they will be placed in a public depository in the near future.

sylvania Railroad.⁶ These connections form a basis for an interpretation of his political acts and attitude.

Covode was just twenty-four when he first entered politics. In 1832 Governor George Wolf appointed him justice of the peace of Fairfield and Ligonier townships. "Then, and in this humble office, it was that his neighbors bestowed upon him the *sobriquet* of honest John Covode." This reputation gained in youth remained with him throughout life—full forty years later it was said, "His moral character . . . has been summed up by the popular voice in the single epithet, 'Honest John Covode.'"⁷

Covode was at first a Whig, a follower of Henry Clay, and a firm believer in the American System. In the election of 1845 and in the following election, at the time when the Pennsylvania Railroad was being formed, he ran as a Whig for the office of state senator. He was defeated both times, the second time by a very narrow margin, in an overwhelmingly Democratic district. In 1854 he ran for Congress with the support of the Whigs, the Know-Nothings, and the Anti-Masonic parties. He defeated the incumbent by more than twenty-five hundred votes, and he served his district (the nineteenth) for four successive terms. Most worthy among his defeated opponents was Henry D. Foster, who had been referred to by John Quincy Adams in 1846 as "the coming man" in politics and who in 1860 was the Democratic nominee for governor.⁸

The outstanding accomplishment of Covode's four terms in Congress, and indeed of his whole life, was his investigation of the Buchanan administration. When he first entered Congress he was placed on the committee on public expenditures, a position that gave him opportunity to observe and to oppose administrative extravagance. In his first

⁶ Information from Mrs. Emma Covode Blair, a daughter of John Covode.

⁷ Covode to John Mathiat, January 20, 1832, Covode Papers; Kelley, in *Memorial Addresses*, 5; Horace Maynard, in *Memorial Addresses*, 21.

⁸ Albert, *Westmoreland County*, 437; Boucher, *Old and New Westmoreland*, 2: 56, 627; *Greensburg Tribune*, January 19, 1871; *Philadelphia Press*, January 12, 1871; Benjamin P. Poore, comp., *The Political Register and Congressional Directory*, 347 (Boston, 1878); William Egle, ed., *Andrew Gregg Curtin: His Life and Services*, 106 (Philadelphia, 1895).

term he succeeded in reducing, below executive recommendation, appropriations to the war department. The Democratic leaders retaliated by sending federal employees into Westmoreland County to campaign against him.⁹ Apparently this was the beginning of the Covode-Buchanan feud. The roots of disagreement, however, were embedded in the diverse political philosophies of the two men.

In 1857 a financial depression embarrassed the Democratic administration. The federal budget became unbalanced, and the president, to solve the economic problems, recommended a controlled treasury-note inflation. Covode believed in sound money; he therefore opposed inflation and favored, instead, a drastic reduction of the budget.¹⁰ He pointed out that treasury notes would drive the gold out of the country; Congress, nevertheless, passed the inflation measure.

In 1858 Buchanan attempted to bring Kansas into the Union under the pro-slavery Lecompton constitution. Excitement ran high throughout the nation. Northern congressmen charged that votes had been purchased and coercion employed in a futile effort to pass the Lecompton bill. At the same time Buchanan charged that public elections in Pennsylvania had been unduly swayed by the influence of money. Covode, then treasurer of the Republican state committee, immediately moved for congressional investigation, but this motion was defeated.¹¹ Intermittent charges of corruption continued for more than a year, until, on March 7, 1860, Covode renewed his motion for an investigation. This was election year, and the motion passed. Covode was made chairman of the committee and was empowered to investigate any charge of corruption in any election or of abuses at any navy yard or any post office in the United States.

Friends and foes unite in testifying to the memorable energy with which Covode carried on the inquisition. According to the minority report, he "usurped all the powers of the committee."¹² Funds appropriated by Congress were delayed, but Covode advanced the needed money

⁹ *Congressional Globe*, 34 Congress, 1 session, 411, 1988; 35 Congress, 2 session, 589.

¹⁰ *Congressional Globe*, 35 Congress, 1 session, 109.

¹¹ *Congressional Globe*, 35 Congress, 2 session, 195.

¹² *The Covode Investigation*, 31 (36 Congress, 1 session, *House Reports*, no. 648—serial 1071).

from his own pocket.¹³ Twice Buchanan, asserting that the whole proceeding was unconstitutional, appealed to Congress to stop the investigation. "I am to appear before Mr. Covode," he protested, "to cross-examine the witnesses which he may produce before himself to sustain his own accusations against me." In his second protest he said, "The Star Chamber, tyrannical and odious as it was, never proceeded in such a manner."¹⁴ Nevertheless, this unprecedented investigation continued. It centered upon the charge that the administration had advanced its pro-slavery Kansas policy by illegal methods. Star witnesses in this connection were John W. Forney, editor of the *Philadelphia Press*, and Cornelius Wendell, editor of the *Washington Union*. Wendell testified that the post-office department had given him liberal contracts for government printing with the understanding that he was to share his profits with certain other editors who supported the president. His story seemed incredible, yet it tallied with his bank accounts. He further swore that he had distributed on behalf of the administration from thirty to forty thousand dollars to secure the passage of the Lecompton bill. Forney testified that the post-office department had offered him contracts worth eighty thousand dollars if he would support the Buchanan Kansas policy in editorials no longer than a man's hand. Some forty other witnesses were examined, and other charges were investigated, with the result that the Buchanan administration was popularly discredited.¹⁵ Although unethical practices were clearly shown to exist in the Philadelphia navy yards, as well as in the executive departments, no action was recommended against the guilty parties; but the testimony before the committee was printed and sent broadcast. It was used as a textbook by Republican stump speakers throughout the nation. Beveridge, the famous Lincoln biographer, says, this "celebrated report became one of the strongest Republican campaign documents . . . and knowledge of venality thus given had much to do with the election of Lincoln." Lincoln

¹³ *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 1 session, 2545.

¹⁴ *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 1 session, 1434, 3299; Ernest J. Eberling, *Congressional Investigations*, 167-169 (Columbia University, *Studies in History, Economics and public Law*, no. 307—New York, 1928); James Buchanan, *Works*, 10:402, 438 (edited by John B. Moore—Philadelphia and London, 1910).

¹⁵ *Covode Investigation*, 7-9, 31.

himself is quoted as having said that this report "finished the Democratic Party as a national one."¹⁶

In 1860 and again in 1863 Covode was a strong though unsuccessful candidate for the Republican nomination for governor. In each case he felt that Simon Cameron's failure to give him promised support was the cause of his defeat. His campaign manager wrote of Cameron's "perfidy" and "treachery."¹⁷ Covode also was bitter, but at the time political expediency concealed his feelings.

When the first year of the war brought reports of continued military reverses, Congress formed the famous war committee to investigate the causes of defeat and to assist the president in making decisions. Covode was placed on this powerful committee. General Ben Butler says that the war committee meetings were usually "held at the rooms of John Cavode [*sic*], at the Avenue Hotel, who took a leading interest in all war matters, and generally acted as Chairman of the Committee." The work of the committee brought its members often into the presence of Lincoln, and on such occasions Covode's frankness was memorable. Frankness seems to have increased his influence. It was the opinion of General Banks that Lincoln was influenced by Covode to order an exchange of war prisoners contrary to the advice of General Grant and other military leaders.¹⁸

In 1862 Covode refused to run for reelection to Congress, but in 1866 he yielded to his party's call and was elected, displacing the Democrat, the Honorable John L. Dawson, who had meanwhile occupied his post. He was reelected in 1868. Although in 1863 he gave up his seat, it must not be thought that he lost contact with events in Washington. When Lincoln was assassinated he hurried to the capital. On

¹⁶ George T. Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan*, 2: 254 (New York, 1883); Kelley, in *Memorial Addresses*, 6; Scott, in *Memorial Addresses*, 28; Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858*, 2: 561, note 1 (Boston and New York, 1928); *New York Times*, January 16, 1871.

¹⁷ Alexander K. McClure, *Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania*, 2: 49 (Philadelphia, 1905); Gideon Welles, *Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson*, 1: 219 (Boston and New York, 1911); James G. McQuaide to Covode, December 2, 1859, May 1, 1860, Covode Papers.

¹⁸ Benjamin F. Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence . . . during the Period of the Civil War*, 2: 595 (Norwood, Mass., 1917); Charles Sumner, in *Memorial Addresses*, 34; Nathaniel P. Banks, in *Memorial Addresses*, 13; Herman Haupt, *Reminiscences*, 297 (Milwaukee, 1901).

the Sunday evening following Lincoln's death, while Lincoln's body still lay in the White House, he was in conference with Sumner, Stanton, Colfax, and others; they were reading and revising cabinet papers on reconstruction.¹⁹ Apparently they already knew that between the new president's plan of reconstruction and their own was "a great gulf fixed." Covode, who had given his oldest son in the recent conflict, seemed determined that the war should not have been in vain.

From the first, Covode opposed Johnson. The two men differed, not only on the question of reconstruction, but also in their attitudes toward railroads. Johnson wished to curb their growing power; Covode was the congressional spokesman of the Pennsylvania Railroad. From time to time he received his instructions from J. Edgar Thomson, president of the company. In 1860 Thomson wrote, "Allow me to introduce to you my friend Dr. Jeptha Fowlkes . . . who has in charge a bill to effect railroad construction between the Atlantic and Pacific States . . . The bill contemplates two roads and is the only one that will pass. . . . The large amount of iron required for these roads must insure the active cooperation of all the Pennsylvania members." Eight years later he wrote, "Negotiations of great importance are now pending which make it of great moment to us that the amendment introduced by yourself into the North Pacific R. R. bill . . . be adhered to." Again he wrote, "In the appropriation bill, there is a sum to satisfy certain claims of the State of Maine . . . This sum will go toward the construction of a railway . . . in which I have a material interest. I look upon the project as of great national importance."²⁰ President Johnson meanwhile was joining forces with those who were attempting to regulate freight rates and stop land grants to railroads.

In 1866, upon the suggestion of Secretary Stanton, Covode made an investigation as to the progress of reconstruction in Louisiana. Upon his return he submitted a report of observations, together with his recommendations for more and improved methods of reconstruction. Johnson refused to receive the report and suggested that, since his authority for the trip originated in the war department, he might file his report with

¹⁹ Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln*, 7 (Cambridge, Mass., 1929); David M. Dewitt, *The Impeachment and Trial of Andrew Johnson*, 267 (New York, 1903).

²⁰ Thomson to Covode, February 25, 1860, May 2, July 7, 1868, Covode Papers.

that office. Yet the belief prevailed in Washington that Johnson himself had requested Covode, as well as Carl Schurz, to make such a survey.²¹

In 1867 the judiciary committee of the House recommended that the president be impeached. Covode had appeared before the committee and urged that this action be taken. The House rejected the proposal; but on February 21, 1868, when Johnson, in clear violation of the tenure-of-office law, attempted to remove Secretary Stanton from office, Covode moved that "Andrew Johnson, President of the United States, be impeached of high crimes and misdemeanors." The following day, amid great excitement, the House passed this resolution, impeaching for the first and only time a president of the United States.²²

In 1870 Covode declined to run for reelection. He was then chairman of the Republican state central committee and desired to turn his attention to state politics. But this was not to be. On January 11, 1871, while visiting friends in Harrisburg, he suffered a heart attack, and died.²³ His body was buried beside that of his valiant son, Colonel George Covode, in the country churchyard near his home. He left his unfinished work on the state committee to its able secretary, Matthew Stanley Quay, and his life record for the students of history. "The evil that men do lives after them." So does the good. As an investigator of the Buchanan administration, thus clearing the way for a Republican victory in 1860; as a member of the powerful war committee; as an organizer of manufacturing, mining, and transportation companies; as the congressional spokesman of the Pennsylvania Railroad; and as the impeacher of President Johnson, "Honest John" Covode will be remembered. In the words of Senator Sumner of Massachusetts, "he leaves a name which must be preserved in the history of Congress. In the long list of its members he will stand forth with an individuality not to be forgotten."²⁴

²¹ Joint Committee on Reconstruction, *Report*, part 4, p. 118 (39 Congress, 1 session, *House Reports*, no. 30—serial 1273); James G. Blaine, *Twenty Years of Congress*, 2: 148 (Norwich, Conn., 1886); Kelley, in *Memorial Addresses*, 6; Gideon Welles, *Diary*, 2: 580.

²² *Pennsylvania Argus* (Greensburg), March 13, 1868; *Congressional Globe*, 40 Congress, 2 session, 1329, 1336; Blaine, *Twenty Years of Congress*, 2: 355, 360.

²³ Scott, in *Memorial Addresses*, 26; *Greensburg Tribune*, January 19, 1871.

²⁴ Sumner, in *Memorial Addresses*, 33.