ALBERT GALLATIN
WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA POLITICIAN

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The details of State politics are not a subject of great interest to the general public, even in their freshest condition, and the local politics of Pennsylvania in 1790 are no exception to this law. They are here of importance only so far as they are a part of Mr. Gallatin’s life, and the medium through which he rose to notice.” Those are the words of Henry Adams, biographer of Albert Gallatin, and upon first thought they seem to discourage such a study as the present one. It must be remembered, however, that Adams dealt with the entire life of a prominent man whose activities were significant not only nationally but internationally, an actor whose parts were played on two continents and in several countries. Furthermore, it must be remembered that Adams by birth and training was not so constituted that he would be attracted to the activities of a young democrat on the frontier. If he did not find the details of Pennsylvania state politics interesting in comparison with activities of the later life of Gallatin, it does not follow that they are uninteresting to Pennsylvanians now, and particularly to western Pennsylvanians delving into the early life of their region.

Albert Gallatin’s previous training and experience prepared him admirably for the activities in which he engaged during the decade from 1790 to 1800. He was born in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1761 of an

1 Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on April 25, 1933; also at meetings of the Pennsylvania Historical Association at Bethlehem on April 29, the University of Pittsburgh chapter of Phi Alpha Theta on May 9, and the Westmoreland-Fayette Branch of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania at West Overton on June 17. The author is associate professor of history in the University of Pittsburgh and research associate of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey. Ed.


3 James T. Adams, Henry Adams, passim (New York, 1933).
old and aristocratic but not noble family. Five of his ancestors had served as chief magistrates of that little self-governing city. His grandmother knew Voltaire well and young Albert occasionally accompanied her to call upon the great thinker. His academic education was completed at the college of Geneva, where he fraternized with a group of young men who, while not radicals, understood and sympathized with the philosophy of Rousseau and the Physiocrats. After his graduation in 1779 his grandmother urged him to enter the army and upon receiving his reply that he would not serve a tyrant, she gave him a cuff on the ear, which probably did much toward stimulating his journey to America. With a young companion, Henri Serre, he landed at Cape Ann on July 14, 1780. In 1783 he met Savary de Valcoulon, a Frenchman, who had claims against the state of Virginia and who established a partnership with Gallatin for the purpose of procuring 120,000 acres of land. Gallatin's share was one-fourth of the estate and was to be paid for until his majority by his superintendence of the enterprise. Thereafter he spent the years 1783-89 as an agent, interpreter, and partner of Savary. The winters he passed in Richmond, Virginia, where he increased both his experience and his circle of friends. The summers he utilized in purchasing, surveying, and clearing land, in storekeeping, and in making intermittent journeys to New York and Philadelphia. He soon concluded that land in Fayette County, Pennsylvania, was more valuable and that Indian raids were less likely there than in Monongalia County, Virginia, with the result that he made an effort to establish a base of operations as near as possible to the Pennsylvania line. Consequently, he selected the farm of Thomas Clare, situated upon the Monongahela River and Georges Creek about four miles north of the Virginia line, and in 1785 he leased a house and five acres from Clare, upon which he established a store. Two years later he purchased from Clare 450 acres, to which he transferred the store and where he built his home, Friendship Hill.4 Grounded in European culture and educa-

4 Adams, Gallatin, 3, 7, 10, 16, 26, 46, 60, 62; Albert Gallatin, Writings, 2:659 (edited by Henry Adams—Philadelphia, 1879); Albert Gallatin, "Diary," 1785, in the Gallatin Papers, vol. 15. The Gallatin Papers are in the library of the New York Historical Society and include twenty-three folio volumes of letters, diaries, accounts, and various other documents. Photographic reproductions of many of these papers of western Pennsylvania interest have been acquired by the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.
tion, acquainted with the tradition-smashing Voltaire, conversant with the philosophical democracy of Rousseau and the practical self-government of Geneva, he was now established on an American frontier where his theoretical democracy was to receive the test of practical application.

Geographically, western Pennsylvania is a portion of a great plateau that slopes westward from the Appalachian Mountains and extends far enough to include the territory now contained in the eastern counties of Ohio and the northwestern counties of West Virginia. This wooded highland, separated from the seaboard by a mountain barrier and drained by the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers and their tributaries, forms a geographic unit that was a part of the West and essentially an agricultural frontier. Politically, western Pennsylvania in 1790 was comprised of four counties: Washington, Fayette, Westmoreland, and Allegheny; and the part of Bedford that was organized as Somerset County in 1795. Washington County was divided in 1796 and the lower part was formed into Greene County. The population of the four western counties as enumerated in the first United States census was 63,566. The pioneers, among whom Scotch, Scotch-Irish, and German racial elements predominated, like the land upon which they lived, were segregated from the seaboard by the mountains, and their sympathies, like the rivers, ran generally toward the West.

There were, of course, exceptions to this generalization. Some individuals like Hugh Henry Brackenridge of Pittsburgh had been born and educated east of the mountains; many had relatives along the seaboard; and others, particularly in Pittsburgh, had financial and commercial affiliations with Philadelphia and Baltimore. The merchants of Pittsburgh imported from those cities manufactured articles such as books, furniture, and clothing in quantities that exceeded in volume and value the products exported to the seaboard. The farmers, on the other hand, were shipping most of their agricultural and extractive products down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, thereby tending to divide the commercial and political allegiance of the people. A complexity of geographic,

5 William J. Holland, The Educational Needs of Appalachia, 4-6 (Morgantown, W. Va., 1901).
political, ethnic, economic, and perhaps religious problems confronted the young foreigner who had the temerity to assume the responsibility of representing and leading his fellow citizens of western Pennsylvania during the last ten years of the eighteenth century.

Gallatin’s public political life began on August 18, 1788, when he and John Smilie were authorized to represent Fayette County in a convention to be held at Harrisburg on September 3 of that year.7 The selection of a man who had lived in the community only three years and who spoke the English language with a decided accent appears incredible unless one recalls that it was a comparatively new community, in which tradition, birth, and rank meant little, and in which none of the families had lived more than a quarter of a century. Under such circumstances personal contacts and evidences of ability were quite necessary to leadership. Gallatin’s activities as a land agent, surveyor, and storekeeper doubtless presented the opportunity to meet many men; his calm, tactful personality and methodical mind quickly inspired their confidence. In the convention at Harrisburg, which met for the purpose of proposing amendments to the federal constitution, he reflected the attitude of the people in the western part of the state, a majority of whom had previously opposed the ratification of the constitution. He thought that the constitution had granted too much power to the central government; that the executive and even the legislative departments of the government had not been sufficiently restricted in their powers, and that a conference should be held to consider amendments to the constitution.8 Thus he justified the confidence that the people of his county had placed in him. He had made an auspicious beginning and was now a prominent man in Fayette County.

The following year the state legislature provided for a convention to revise the constitution of 1776, which had been unsatisfactory to the conservatives in the eastern part of the state. Gallatin opposed the convention, ostensibly because he doubted its legality, but actually because he feared that a more conservative and aristocratic government would

7 Certificate in Gallatin Papers, vol. 4.
8 John B. McMaster and Frederick D. Stone, eds., Pennsylvania and the Federal Constitution, 1787–1788, 482 (Lancaster, Pa., 1888). The printed resolutions that were offered by Gallatin but not accepted by the convention are in McMaster and Stone, Pennsylvania and the Federal Constitution, 557.
be established. His opposition consisted of an attempt to stimulate among the western men an adverse sentiment to the proposed revision. He wrote to Alexander Addison, who was a candidate for the convention, urging him to withdraw; he received letters from David Redick and James Marshall of Washington, Pennsylvania, and from John Flenniken of Fayette County concurring with him and suggesting additional methods of opposition. But his efforts were unsuccessful and later he himself was chosen as a delegate from his own county to the convention. Years later in 1838 he said that he took but a subordinate part in that body, yet among his papers in the library of the New York Historical Society are many documents and notes indicating that he was thinking much even though he may have taken an insignificant part in the deliberations. And the memoranda indicate that he held a consistently democratic viewpoint upon all questions. He favored such measures as larger representation in the House, election of state senators by popular vote, greater liberty of the press, extension of the franchise, and greater equity in law. Once more the people of his county had trusted him to serve as their spokesman and his sentiments had coincided with theirs. It was only natural that they should continue to turn to him for leadership.

For three successive years Fayette County elected Gallatin as its representative to the lower house of the state legislature. Adams states that in the election of 1790 there was a contest in which Gallatin received approximately two-thirds of the votes cast and that he was reëlected without opposition in 1791 and in 1792. Gallatin, in speaking of his activities during those years, said, "I acquired an extraordinary influence in that body (the Pennsylvania House of Representatives),—the more remarkable, as I was always in a party minority." His statement proves to be no exaggeration, for among his papers is a small committee book,

9 Gallatin to Addison, October 7, 1789, Gallatin Papers, vol. 15; Redick to Gallatin, October 9, 1789; Marshall to Gallatin, October 9, 1789; Flenniken to Gallatin, October 11, 1789, Gallatin Papers, vol. 4.


11 Pennsylvania, House Journal, 1790-91, p. 4; 1791-92, p. 4; 1792-93, p. 5; Adams, Gallatin, 85, 84.
similar to a carefully kept schedule or diary, which indicates that in his first session, that of 1791–92, he served upon twenty-seven committees. In another place he stated that during the session of 1791–92 he was placed upon thirty-five committees for which he prepared all the reports and drew all the bills.\textsuperscript{12} During this time he was not unmindful of the interests of his constituents. He favored measures to further education; he served upon committees that planned and sponsored the improvement of canals and roads to facilitate transportation between the eastern and western parts of the state; he was interested in making public lands more available to settlers; he urged greater protection for the frontier; and he opposed the excise on whiskey, both federal and state. On January 22, 1791, he offered the following resolution in the House, "That every species of taxation, which shall operate, either directly or indirectly, as a duty on articles exported from any state, is unconstitutional." On April 9 of the same year he introduced a bill entitled, "An Act to repeal ... so much of every act or acts of Assembly ... as relates to collection of excise duties." In neither of the above efforts to defeat the excise was he successful but the representatives of the western counties, except James Findley of Gallatin’s own county, stood solidly behind him. Cosmopolitanism and broader experience raised him above the stature of a mere local politician, however, and gave him a grasp and vision of state problems. So meteoric was the rise of his influence that in February of 1793 he was elected United States senator by a vote of forty-five to thirty-seven in a Federalist legislature.\textsuperscript{13} As Gallatin had anticipated, the Senate refused to seat him because he had not yet been a citizen of the United States nine years and was therefore ineligible. Various reasons explain his unusual political success.

Gallatin himself attributed his preferment in the legislature to his ability to conduct current business. The preparation of the report for the committee on ways and means in the session of 1790–91 established his standing in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives.\textsuperscript{14} That

\textsuperscript{12} Gallatin Papers, vol. 15; Adams, \textit{Gallatin}, 84. Gallatin served on more than thirty-five committees, many of them, however, relatively insignificant. \textit{House Journal}, 1791–92, passim.


\textsuperscript{14} Adams, \textit{Gallatin}, 84.
standing was enhanced thereafter by assiduity and methodical work. There were other reasons, however, for his advancement. Western Pennsylvania occupied a strategic position because of the chaotic condition of state politics. The Federalist party, relying chiefly upon the conservatives of the eastern part of the state, was beginning to crystallize by the year 1793. The Republicans, or Democratic-Republicans as they were sometimes called, in the minority, were likewise beginning to present a solid front, but they needed the assistance of the western counties to overcome the Federalist advantage. The principles of the Republican party appealed to the western farmers and it remained only for the eastern leaders to effect a closer understanding with those of the West. Alexander J. Dallas, Philadelphian and one of the most prominent Republicans in the state, assumed that task and from 1792 wrote regularly to Gallatin, displaying an interest in the western counties and their problems, suggesting political methods and alignments, and sending political pamphlets for distribution. In May of 1792, an election year, he wrote a long letter to Gallatin expressing his concern about the danger of Indian raids and inquiring whether or not General St. Clair would be acceptable to the western men in the event that there should be a change in the war department. He also asked Gallatin to remember him to William Findley and John Smilie. Obviously Dallas was catering to Gallatin. On September 25, more than a month prior to the election, he again wrote Gallatin and sent political literature to be distributed. During the same year James Hutchinson wrote three letters to Gallatin informing him of the political situation and advising him upon political methods. These men believed Gallatin to be the leader of Republicanism in the western part of the state, a belief probably growing out of his influence in the state legislature. Certainly their efforts aided the growth of his influence among his own constituents.

In addition to this advantage and advice, Gallatin displayed a natural ability as a local political leader and organizer. Because the Pittsburgh Gazette, edited by John Scull, a Federalist, was much more accessible to Gallatin’s rivals, personal contacts and correspondence were the chief media of spreading his ideas and collecting his political data. An en-

15 Dallas to Gallatin, May 4, September 25, 1792; Hutchinson to Gallatin, June 11, September 14, 25, 1792, Gallatin Papers, vol. 4.
gaging personality rendered his contacts easy, and the fact that he was a farmer enlarged the confidence that his constituents had in him and made his democratic theories more acceptable to his neighbors. Through an exchange of letters with friends he kept himself acquainted with local conditions and situations. In analyzing the election returns of the western counties and constantly gauging the strength of the parties, he showed himself to be an astute politician. During the years 1790–93 he received letters from such men as James Marshall of Washington, William Findley, and, curiously enough, Alexander Addison, a Federalist, in which the writers made reports upon elections and trends, frequently giving the returns of each district for particular elections. These letters were of vast importance to Gallatin then and are of great value to the historian now, for they seem to be the best source for determining the strength of the various parties and men of western Pennsylvania during the period. Gallatin supplemented the reports of others with his own statistical calculations, accompanied by a careful analysis of local conditions.

Finally, Gallatin’s activities in the Whiskey Insurrection enhanced his hold upon the people of western Pennsylvania to such an extent that he became the leader of the Republicans in that section. It is unnecessary to determine his responsibility in instigating resistance to the federal excise on whiskey or his part in terminating the opposition. It is here sufficient to indicate the manner in which his political strength increased. The stoutest opposition to the excise tax existed among the farmers in Washington County and particularly in those regions in the proximity of Mingo Creek and Washington where Democratic societies were active. The farmers of Fayette, Westmoreland, and Allegheny counties were opposed to the measure but were more conservative, probably because they lacked the facilities for organization that the Democratic societies afforded. The people in Pittsburgh and its immediate vicinity were inclined to favor the excise because they were Federalists generally and because few of them were distillers. Gallatin had opposed the law in principle as early as 1790 and later had actively identified himself

16 Marshall to Gallatin, July 16, 1791; Findley to Gallatin, August 20, 1792; Addison to Gallatin, October 11, 1792, Gallatin Papers, vol. 4.
with the opposition, appearing as a member of a protest meeting held in Pittsburgh on August 24, 1792. Thereafter, he was absent from the western part of the state for the greater part of eighteen months, performing his duties in the state legislature. But when the Senate in February of 1794 refused him the right to take his seat in that body, he returned to his home and, unencumbered by political office, took a prominent part in the climax of the insurrection. During the summer of that year the more radical Republicans under the leadership of such men as David Bradford and John Marshall were in the ascendancy and had precipitated acts of violence. Hugh Henry Brackenridge, a Pittsburgh lawyer, Republican, and prospective candidate for Congress in the forthcoming election, was wavering. Undoubtedly he sought the votes of both the Federalists of Pittsburgh and the Republicans of the rural districts. The federal government, at Hamilton’s instigation, insisted upon a restoration of order and submission to the law. To insure acquiescence an army of fifteen thousand was marched into the western part of the state. In a meeting at Redstone Old Fort on August 28, Gallatin and Brackenridge, in hostile territory, favored the acceptance of the federal commissioners’ terms of submission while David Bradford and James Edgar opposed them.

It matters not here whether Gallatin or Brackenridge was the more responsible for defeating Bradford’s purpose. What is significant for this study is that Gallatin consciously or unconsciously conducted himself in such a manner that his activities in the Whiskey Insurrection increased his political strength. He had opposed the excise in principle; he had opposed it actively so long as constitutional measures were employed, and he had urged acquiescence to the government when submission seemed the better policy. He had behaved with less recklessness than David Bradford, whose rash statements necessitated his flight down the Mississippi and thus removed him from the political field;

17 Albert Gallatin, Speech . . . in the House of Representatives . . . Touching the Validity of the Elections Held in the Four Western Counties of the State, on the 14th Day of October, 1794, 6, 12 (Philadelphia, 1795); Hugh H. Brackenridge, Incidents of the Insurrection in the Western Parts of Pennsylvania, in the Year 1794, 3:25–27 (3 vol. in 1 —Philadelphia, 1795).

and he had proceeded with less uncertainty than Brackenridge, whose wavering made him unacceptable alike to Republicans and to Federalists. The state election occurred on October 14, 1794, and the citizens of Fayette County returned Gallatin to his seat in the legislature. The congressional district, comprised of Washington and Allegheny counties, dissatisfied with their candidates for the federal House of Representatives—John Woods, H. H. Brackenridge, Thomas Scott, and James Hamilton, enlisted Gallatin as a candidate without his knowledge or consent.\(^{19}\) Resident of another congressional district, his name introduced supposedly three days prior to the election, he was elected by the same people who had shown such evident hostility only a little more than a month before. Yeoman service in the state legislature from 1790 to 1793, the strategic position of the western counties in state politics, his careful and constant analysis of local political conditions, and his fortunate course in the Whiskey Insurrection all served to elevate him to the leadership of Republicanism in western Pennsylvania.

The election of the western members to the state legislature was contested as the result of a petition from Washington County, and on January 9, 1795, they were ejected.\(^{20}\) They were reëlected, however, with the exception of one who declined to run, and Gallatin served from February 14 to March 12, but accomplished very little. The following December he took his seat in the national House of Representatives, which he retained through reëlection until he became secretary of the treasury in Thomas Jefferson’s administration in 1801. He rose to great prominence in a group of unusually able men, and little can be added to the available accounts of his rôle as a national politician. Furthermore, of his activities in Congress, only those directly related to western Pennsylvania fall within the purview of this paper. During his years in Congress his interest in national affairs increased and his interest in local politics decreased. A decade spent on the frontier, however, had given him a point of view that he was not inclined to abandon or forget immediately. Had he been so inclined, the letters from his constituents presenting their views and problems would have reminded him that he represented a western country.

\(^{19}\) Pittsburgh Gazette, October 18, November 1, 1794.

\(^{20}\) House Journal, 1794–95, p. 79, 80.
The first significant measure confronting Congress in 1796 was the consideration of the Jay Treaty with Great Britain. It had been confirmed by the Senate, but its provisions were such that the House would have to vote appropriations to make the treaty effective. Gallatin believed the treaty to be undesirable and thought the president and the Senate were infringing upon the powers of the House in their action, which seemed to obligate the House to make an appropriation of money. Consequently he opposed the appropriations on constitutional grounds. His constituents were divided upon the desirability of the treaty and their letters to him at that time suggest a number of their ever-present problems. The Federalists in and around Pittsburgh favored the treaty upon commercial and political grounds, and many of the farmers, believing that Indian raids were instigated by English agents along the lakes, hoped that an acceptance of the treaty would diminish the number of attacks. But many of these same people did not want the executive branch of the government to overawe the House of Representatives. The members of the grand jury then sitting at Pittsburgh sent a petition to Gallatin in which they favored the treaty. David Redick reported to him a meeting held at Washington that favored the treaty. The Reverend John McMillan, pastor of a church near Canonsburg, wrote to Gallatin commending him upon his resistance to executive aggression, but imploring him to support the treaty, and informing him that a meeting of his congregation would be held on the following Sunday to take the sense of the people upon the treaty. He informed Gallatin that he would suggest similar action on the part of other churches and congregations. Gallatin was not receptive to these pleas, however, and, in a minority in the House, opposed the appropriation, with the result that many of those who had voted for him in 1794 deserted him in 1796.

The election of 1796 may be traced clearly through a number of Gallatin's letters to his wife, who remained in New York while he made a journey to Fayette County during September and October of that year. He reported in a letter from Philadelphia that it appeared that William Findley would be reelected from the congressional dis-

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21 Petition, March 21, 1796; Redick to Gallatin, April 7, 1796; McMillan to Gallatin, May 5, 1796, Gallatin Papers, vol. 5.
district of Westmoreland and Fayette counties but that he himself would probably be superseded by the Federalist, Thomas Stokely. He did not believe his loss of popularity was due so much to the treaty as to the fact that he did not reside in the district that he represented. The Republicans of his district were hesitating between James Edgar and Brackenridge. From New Geneva he reported that a number of scurrilous newspaper attacks had stimulated his friends to take up his cause again in order to vindicate him. The vigor of his followers won the election for him but by a much smaller margin than in 1794. Federalism, although gaining in the district, was not dominant except in Pittsburgh and its vicinity; the party had not captured western Pennsylvania, as has occasionally been asserted. Certainly the Federalists would not have drafted a Republican from another congressional district to represent them in Congress. Perhaps it has been assumed too often that the history of Pittsburgh comprised the history of western Pennsylvania. Much of the written history of the period has been based upon the Pittsburgh Gazette, a Federalist paper, and upon the writings of "Neville Connections." The more numerous Republican farmers were less literary than the Federalists and naturally left less documentary evidence.

The remainder of Gallatin's career in the House of Representatives to 1801 was occupied with questions that were of less direct local interest, but even in these questions his attitude was that of a Republican. Particularly was this true in his opposition to the alien and sedition acts, which gave such a fortunate political opening to the Republicans. But in the election of 1798 he again faced a determined opposition on the part of the Federalists. John Woods, staunchly supported by Alexander Addison, offered himself for Gallatin's seat in Congress. H. H. Brackenridge of Pittsburgh, after four years of political retirement, sponsored the candidacy of Presley Neville, a Federalist rival of Woods. Gallatin was again reflected by a large majority, probably partly because of the division of the opposition. Again he proved the leader of his party in the western counties. One writer asserts that Bracken-

22 Gallatin to Hannah Gallatin, September 26, October 12, 1796, in Adams, Gallatin, 176.

23 Pittsburgh Gazette, October 20, 1798.
ridge, who had taken little active part in political life for four years, was the founder and leader of the Republican party of western Pennsylvania, and he bases his assertion on the fact that Brackenridge produced a division in the ranks of the Federalists that accomplished their defeat.\textsuperscript{24} No doubt the split of the opposition in 1798 aided the Republican triumph, but the writer fails to recognize the fact that Gallatin had defeated Brackenridge four years before and had been the party's leader during the interval.

Henceforth Gallatin was drawn more completely into national activities. He modified and changed some of his views, even favoring the retention of the federal excise on whiskey and advocating the re-charter of the United States Bank. Regardless of the fact, however, that in later years he inclined toward National-Republicanism and even internationalism, it is undeniably true that while he remained on the frontier he absorbed and reflected much of its spirit and served as a focal point for Republicanism in western Pennsylvania.