WILLIAM FINDLEY
IN PENNSYLVANIA POLITICS

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Western Pennsylvanians should know more about William Findley, who, as a pioneer in Pennsylvania and national politics, earned distinction as a promoter of free education and of the abolition of slavery in Pennsylvania, as a spokesman of democratic ideals, and as a champion of states' rights.

Although Findley was an astute politician, influential in molding political views and active in the organization of Pennsylvania government and politics, he had little educational background. He was born in the Province of Ulster, Ireland, about 1742. His father taught him to read the Bible and supplemented his reading with books on church history and divinity. Findley was more interested, however, in secular history and geography, and he read every available book and newspaper on these subjects. Through his reading he became acquainted with the New World, and, in 1763 when he was twenty-one years old, he came to America with a group of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. Indian warfare on the frontier determined him to buy property in Cumberland County, in what is now Franklin County, where he accepted a position to teach school.*

During the Revolutionary War Findley enlisted as a private in the Pennsylvania Line and later became a captain of the seventh company of the Eighth Cumberland County Battalion. Lack of information concerning the military activities of Findley is probably due to his political activities during the war. He was sent as a delegate to the standing committee of conference in Philadelphia from the revolutionary committee of

1 Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on May 26, 1936. Miss Schramm, who is a teacher of history in the Knoxville Junior High School, presented a thesis on this subject in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree at the University of Pittsburgh in 1936. Ed.

2 "William Findley of Westmoreland, Pa.," in Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 5:441 (1881); William Findley, Observations on "The Two Sons of Oil:" Containing a Vindication of the American Constitutions, 306 (Pittsburgh, 1812).
correspondence of his township; he was elected to the “first Grand Jury”; and for six years he served on the county board of finance, the first board that levied taxes under the state constitution of 1776.3

In 1783 Findley decided to move his family across the mountains to Westmoreland County where he owned property that bordered upon the present site of St. Vincent College, Latrobe. He became a member of a frontier settlement of Scotch-Irish and German pioneers, and this democratic, agricultural society formed a perfect setting for a display of his democratic political philosophy.

The Pennsylvania Council of Censors was the “first public body” of which Findley was a member. The council, a check on the possible aggressiveness of the legislature, was provided for in the last section of the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776. This elective body of twenty-six members was to meet at seven-year intervals to determine the need of amending or revising the Pennsylvania Constitution.4 The first occasion for the election of a council occurred in 1783, the year in which Findley removed to Westmoreland, and the district elected William Findley and John Smilie as censors.5 During the first session Findley and Smilie were among the minority who debated against Judge Samuel Miles, Frederick A. Muhlenberg, General Arthur St. Clair, and General Anthony Wayne on the question of revision. The minority of the first session won enough members to become the majority during the second session of the council. Under the leadership of Findley and Smilie of Westmoreland and Robert Whitehill of Lancaster, this group was responsible for preventing the revision of the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776. “That singular political body,” as Findley called the council of censors, was the “best political school” he attended.6

When Findley returned from the council sessions, the citizens proved

3 Pennsylvania Archives, sixth series, 6:140, 529; Farmers Register (Greensburg), September 8, 1804.


their high esteem for his power of decision and ability by annually electing him to the Pennsylvania General Assembly from 1785 to 1788. During his first years in the assembly Findley was continually with the majority, and his influence over the members was greater than his opponents were willing to admit. During his third term in the assembly he proposed the moving of the state capital to a more central location since Philadelphia enjoyed undue influence over the government and profited by all the public business. His suggestion of Harrisburg as the seat of government was approved without debate. When the Philadelphia members realized the significance of the bill they used their influence in the house to dismiss the committee until further consideration and indefinitely tabled the bill.

Hugh Henry Brackenridge, a Westmoreland colleague of Findley in the general assembly, published in the Pittsburgh Gazette a summary of the activities of this session and inserted a defense for his personal viewpoints. Findley termed the publication a “pompous account” of the assembly transactions and published his own views in the same paper. He accused Brackenridge of making a prey of the people’s confidence and betraying their interests. This incident marked the beginning of the public hostility between Findley and Brackenridge, and the debate continued in the Pittsburgh Gazette for months.

Brackenridge’s accusations were based on personalities rather than on Findley’s actual record in the legislature. He jeered Findley’s talent of eloquence, mocked his Irish dialect, scorned his former occupations as teacher and weaver, laughed at his lodgings “up the alley at Boyd’s the auctioneer,” and spoke of his illiberal attacks on various measures in the house. Brackenridge, treating Findley as an inferior, refused to speak to him and accused him of spending his time in distilleries and ferryhouses talking with ferrymen, peddlers, and market people of what he had said and done in the house of assembly. Findley, however, was not, as Brackenridge proclaimed, the “poor, pedantic fool” whose “phraseology was beneath criticism,” but a clever politician capable of refuting these slanderous attacks.

7 Pittsburgh Gazette, September 23, 30, October 14, 21, November 4, 18, 1786; January 13, February 10, 1787.
8 Pittsburgh Gazette, March 24, September 25, 1787.
9 Pittsburgh Gazette, January 6, February 10, 1787.
10 Pittsburgh Gazette, March 24–August 11, 1787.
Although he sometimes warmly contested public measures, Findley claimed that he had never had a serious personal contest with anyone, and he was reluctant to resort to personalities. After offering legitimate reasons for his votes on the measures for which he was criticized, Findley, not afraid to risk his word against Brackenridge’s, challenged the latter to publish his addresses in the Philadelphia papers, where, he said, the “judicious gallery” could be the “judges and the evidences.”

Findley’s remark that Brackenridge through his publications would punish himself but could do Findley no real injury materialized in the next general election when Findley was re-elected to the assembly and Brackenridge was replaced by John Irwin.

When the convention to revise and to amend the Articles of Confederation dissolved after four months’ deliberation, the venerable Benjamin Franklin and other Pennsylvania delegates returned immediately to the general assembly to deliver the report of the convention. The motion was made to obtain the opinion of the house on recommending the selection of representatives to meet to ratify the proposed federal Constitution. A debate took place immediately in which Findley and Robert Whitehill took the greater part of the morning in trying to persuade the assembly against calling a convention. After a vote of forty-three to nineteen had been returned in favor of a convention, the session adjourned. In the afternoon, eighteen of those who had voted “no” were absent and prevented a quorum. The speaker sent the sergeant at arms and the clerk of the house to bring in the members. The sergeant reported that he saw three of the truants, but he lost sight of Findley who he supposed entered a house. In the meantime some ruffians who had followed the sergeant returned with two of the absentees, and the quorum thus formed passed the measure to call the convention.

In his summary of the transactions of the house, Brackenridge seemed thoroughly to enjoy the opportunity to spread the story of Findley’s running away. Through the *Pittsburgh Gazette* he tried to convey to the people of western Pennsylvania the idea that Findley was a cowardly, rude, and vicious lawbreaker; but at the general election Findley was re-

11 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 21–September 22, 1787.
12 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, August 18, October 21, 1787.
elected to represent Westmoreland in the general assembly for his fourth consecutive year. In addition, the election returns a short time later revealed that Findley was chosen to represent his county in the Pennsylvania convention to ratify the federal Constitution.14

The records of the ratification convention indicate that from the first day the burden of debate in convention fell upon the Antifederalist leaders, Robert Whitehill of Cumberland, John Smilie of Fayette, and Findley of Westmoreland, against the Federalist leaders, Thomas McKean and James Wilson of Philadelphia. Findley in the course of his debates opposed the destruction of state sovereignty and the extensive powers given to the national congress.

When James Wilson addressed the opposition on the values of the foundation of the proposed government, Findley protested that the minority did not wish to reject it. A few amendments, he said, would remove every objection, and these Whitehill presented in the form of a bill of rights. The amendments, however, were negatived by a vote of forty-six to twenty-three, and neither the minority's amendments nor their reasons for dissent were permitted to be entered in the minutes. By a similar vote the Constitution was ratified a few minutes later, but the minority did not wait to sign the ratification. James Madison wrote that the similarity between these amendments and the ten that were afterwards added to the Constitution could hardly be accidental.15

The ratification of the federal Constitution antiquated the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 and made alterations and amendments to it immediately necessary. At the annual general election in October, 1789, Westmoreland elected Findley to the supreme executive council, and at the same election sent him with William Todd to the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention which convened in Philadelphia in November, 1789.16 This convention was unique for its personnel, the obvious lack of leadership of the eastern members, and the control of party spirit. Its roll contained the names of such leaders besides Findley as Judge James Wilson, Chief Justice Thomas McKean, Thomas Mifflin, John Smilie, Robert Whitehill, Albert Gallatin, and James Ross.

14 *Pennsylvania Packet, and Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), October 30, 1787.
16 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, October 24, 1789.
Findley characterized the personnel of the convention by saying that its members consisted of many of the most prominent leaders of the state, although they were "greatly influenced by the old party Jealousies." The "well-known judge Wilson," considered the "most able politician in the state," took the lead in opposition to the constitution of 1776 and presented to the convention an original plan of government. Findley told Wilson that "declamatory attacks on the Constitution . . . would irritate the Spirit of party and make things worse instead of better." He confided in Wilson that he had supported the constitution in the council of censors because he had thought it "inexpedient to make a change," but that he had never approved of it.17

In a rather long opening address before the convention, Findley reviewed "Penns Government with all its perfections and defects" and the constitution of 1776. He concluded by showing that even though the present constitution might be good in theory, many deviations had been made from it, great differences of opinion had always existed about it, and the voluntary election of the convention was such a testimony of lack of confidence in it that it was inconsistent to think of retaining it without essential alterations. Findley acknowledged that this address had the greatest influence in harmonizing parties of any he ever made.18

The mode of conducting the business of this convention, the selection of the committee members, and the discussions and decisions of questions were all prearranged in private conferences by each party and, finally, by a meeting of those who chose to attend from all parties at the "Bunch of Grapes later called the Harp and Crown tavern." The secret session decided to refer the alterations to a select committee of nine members, instructed to form and to prepare a draft of a proposed constitution. Too important to be left to the choice of the chairman or president, the committee was chosen by ballot. Findley was the only member who received the unanimous vote of the convention to serve on the committee, and for this reason he was made its chairman.19

The proposed plan for the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1790 contained many provisions and restrictions for which Findley was directly re-

19 Farmers Register (Greensburg), September 28, 1799.
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responsible, such as the insertion of a bill of rights and the establishment of free education. The position he held in the formation of this constitution won for him a seat in the first and second sessions of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, where his “experience was of use in making such changes of the laws as was necessary to adopt them to the new constitution.”

Great preparations were made for Findley’s departure whenever he rode his horse to the legislature in Philadelphia. Dressed in the conventional long waistcoat, knee breeches, high boots, and broad-rimmed, white beaver hat, he undoubtedly was the pride of the community. The neighbors gathered to wish him a safe journey and to add notations to the memoranda in his pocket that contained a variety of orders to be purchased in Philadelphia—a “Good Gown Patren” for Mrs. Campbell, twelve yards of “middling light” calico for Nancy Bole, a copy of “fisher’s Catticismes” for Mrs. Bole, a “quarter pound of bark” for Jenny Little, and black handkerchiefs for “the children’s company coming in.”

Although Findley reserved time to shop in the city for his neighbors, his participation in legislative work was most extensive. A review of his activities in the house of representatives yields a picture of the general business of the two sessions and reveals the manner in which the house was organized, its method of transacting business, the questions that came before the legislature, and the opinions of early Pennsylvania legislators. His activities during the initial session are also indicative of his diligence throughout his legislative career. Not only in the technical organization of the assembly was his leadership shown, but also in the legislative business itself. Each day the minutes recorded a motion or suggestion of Findley, his appointment on a committee, or a report of the committee on which he served. His colleagues solicited his influence, respected his ability, and honored his efficiency.


The pre-eminence of Findley in the first and second sessions of the Pennsylvania legislature was supplemented by his participation in the patronage of the governor. Findley had been a colleague of Governor Mifflin for many years in various public bodies and had won his confidence and friendship. No officer, from a judge of the supreme court to the president of a district court, was appointed without consulting Findley. With one exception, Mifflin never refused an appointment that Findley approved. Findley, however, found the "situation disagreeable." Applications for positions were made to him as well as to the governor, and, when Findley entered the national Congress, he discontinued the practice of approving appointments.\textsuperscript{23}

Findley’s resignation from the Pennsylvania House of Representatives was followed by the announcement of Governor Mifflin, in his opening address to the assembly, of the election of Findley to the United States House of Representatives. Pennsylvania’s quota consisted of eight Congressmen, and Findley was elected to represent the "western District." For this reason he was often consulted about such important matters as the Indian wars, the defense of the frontier, and the maintenance of General Wayne’s army.\textsuperscript{24}

For five consecutive terms Findley represented his district in the national legislature. Although his activities in national politics were numerous and varied, the one of most vital importance to western Pennsylvania was his participation in the question of the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794. During his first term in the federal Congress, he presented petitions from Chester, Washington, and Allegheny counties for the repeal of the excise law. These were read and referred to the secretary of the treasury.\textsuperscript{25} Governor Mifflin questioned Findley concerning the attitude of western Pennsylvania on the duty imposed on "Spirits" distilled within the state. Findley assured Mifflin that "a riotous opposition" to the enforcement "of the Excise Law is neither manifested nor patronized by the leading Citizens" who lived in the western counties of Pennsylvania, and that the instances of such conduct had been few and greatly magnified. When

\textsuperscript{23} Farmers Register (Greensburg), May 17, 1800.


\textsuperscript{25} Independent Gazetteer, and Agricultural Repository (Philadelphia), November 26, 1791; March 10, 1792.
Findley returned to Westmoreland, however, at the end of his first congressional session, he discovered that even those who had originally advocated the law had become unanimous against it. Although he was not an elected representative, Findley attended the excise meetings at Monongahela, Pittsburgh, and Redstone. His appearance at these was contrary to the advice of friends, but he "thought the crises too serious" to consider personal or professional deportment.

No doubt President Washington's call for troops intimidated some of the radicals. The delegates of the townships to a meeting at Parkinson's Ferry promised submission to the laws of the United States and appointed David Redick of Washington County and Findley of Westmoreland County to be the commissioners to present a copy of their resolutions to Washington and to Governor Mifflin. The two commissioners met the President at Carlisle and had several interviews with him, but they received no assurance of amnesty because of the comparatively few signatures on the resolutions for submission to the law. Findley and Redick returned to western Pennsylvania and announced in the Pittsburgh Gazette and by means of a circular letter a meeting of the same delegates to Parkinson's Ferry. More than a thousand of the principal citizens of the four counties attended, and the delegates unanimously agreed that the civil authority of the district was fully competent to enforce the law.

In his History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties, William Findley undoubtedly aimed to vindicate his part in the resistance to the acts of the federal government. In the first movements against the excise law, Findley sided with the insurgents, presented their petitions in Congress, defended their demands for justice, and attended their meetings. When the insurgents turned to riotous activities and open warfare, Findley realized the serious effects of such a disturbance upon the morale of the country and the stability of the government. He shifted his influence to advocate submission to the authority of the federal government, a logical interpretation of justice, and arbitration between the national government and the insurgents.


After a period of ten years' service in the United States House of Representatives, Findley retired with a determination never to return to public life. Personal anxieties over the illness and the death of his wife and the care of his young children caused him to feel a futility in other duties outside his home. In addition, party spirit ran high at that period in Pennsylvania, and, while Findley was "not offended at parties differing in opinion," he said he was "often grieved at want of Candour and unreasonable jealousies." Although he was "disgusted with the conflicts of parties," it was just this party strife that broke his resolutions and drew him back to the Pennsylvania political arena. His friends persuaded him to place his name on the Republican ticket for state senator in order to carry the election of Thomas McKean, who was running for the office of governor against James Ross.\(^2^8\)

During his four years in the Pennsylvania Senate, Findley accepted the leadership imposed on him. His name was recorded daily as the originator of resolutions, the chairman of committees, the presenter of petitions, and the reporter of committee decisions or resolutions.\(^2^9\)

William Findley retired from state politics only to enter the national Congress again, and the lure of politics and his popularity as a delegate detained him in Congress for fourteen years. During his continuous political career, which extended for thirty-four years from 1783 to 1817, Findley remained a democratic representative of a democratic community and a faithful guardian of the rights of the frontiersmen who were his associates and his friends. To the interests and needs of his constituents he applied foresight and judgment through which he displayed genuine statesmanship. Because of his strong character, he became a formidable factor in shaping public opinion throughout the state. After a long and creditable career this remarkable politician retired from public position in 1817. After a severe illness he died in 1821 in his eightieth year at his residence in Unity Township, near Latrobe, and was buried in the Unity Meeting House cemetery.\(^3^0\)


\(^{30}\) *Niles' Weekly Register*, 20:112 (April 14, 1821).