ABNER LACOCK, BEAVER COUNTY'S EXPONENT OF THE AMERICAN SYSTEM

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ABNER LACOCK was born at Alexandria, Virginia, on July 9, 1770, but at an early age his family removed to the frontier of western Pennsylvania, where from the village of Beaver Town Abner eventually carved out for himself a political career in the legislature of Pennsylvania, in the national House of Representatives, and in the United States Senate. After his retirement from the Senate, in 1819, his activities until his death, in 1837, were directed toward the building of canals and roads, the improvement of river transportation, and the making of plans for the building of railroads.

His father, William Lacock, a descendent from a respectable English family, settled first in Virginia, but sometime during the Revolution he joined the procession of settlers in the trek westward along the Braddock Road into western Pennsylvania. Turning aside he settled on a farm in the valley of Ten Mile Creek, in Amwell Township, Washington County, about two miles from the present town of Amity.

Here young Abner first began to assimilate the atmosphere of the frontier. Little is known of the boy's early life except what may be inferred from his environment. Undoubtedly he lived the life of an average farm boy, assisting in the planting and harvest ceremonies, chopping wood, hoeing corn and potatoes, building fires, fishing, and protecting cattle, sheep, horses, and hogs from prowling animals of the forest. Although farming was the chief activity, every farmer was at times a "Jack-of-all-trades"—lumberman, miller, blacksmith, hunter, and trapper.

1 Based on a master's thesis, a copy of which is available in the library of the University of Pittsburgh, and presented at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on its annual "University of Pittsburgh Night," May 24, 1938. Mr. Houtz is a teacher of history in the Coraopolis High School. Ed.

Abner had little formal education. He probably attended what was reputedly “the first classical and mathematical school west of the Alleghenies,” located at Amity, 1782–1786, and conducted by Dr. Thaddeus Dodd, because in later years Lacock exhibited a thorough knowledge of surveying.\(^3\)

The leisure hours from his many occupations on the farm were filled with the courtship of a neighbor girl, Hannah Eddy, whom he married in 1788.\(^4\) In 1796, Lacock established residence in Beaver Town, then in Allegheny County. He was one of the first settlers in that historic place, the site of Fort McIntosh. For the next two years he made profitable use of the talents that force of circumstances had developed during the formative period of his life in Washington County. According to entries in his private ledger from April, 1796, to February, 1798, he collected forty-eight pounds, two shillings, and one penny from the people of Beaver Town for services such as felling and splitting timber, scoring and hewing for sleepers and rafters, laying cabin floors, shingling houses, building chimneys, making doors and window frames, and hauling stones, logs, and brick.\(^5\)

From 1798 to 1800 he kept a store, conducting an extensive trade with the white settlers, and with the Indians, many of whom still remained in that section. He operated a tavern in Beaver Town from 1800 to 1810, and at this time he moved into a new home on the north bank of the Ohio about two miles above the mouth of the Beaver River. The site of the house is just within the limits of the borough of Freedom. He was the owner of extensive tracts of land in this section, comprising in all about 1,165 acres. In 1832, the Phillips and Graham Boat Building Company purchased 101 acres of land from him and founded the town of Freedom.\(^6\)

\(^3\) James D. Moffat, Pioneer Educators in Washington County, Pennsylvania (Nashville, Tennessee, 1896), 181; Joseph Smith, Old Redstone (Philadelphia, 1854), 144.

\(^4\) Lacock Family Records.

\(^5\) This ledger is in the possession of his great-granddaughters, Louise, Abby, and Adelaide Linnenbrink of Rochester, Pennsylvania.

\(^6\) Beaver County Deed Book, B, No. 2, 632, and X, No. 23, 4; Warner and Company, History of Beaver County, Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1888), 64; Tree of Liberty (Pittsburgh), August 15, 1801; Western Argus (Beaver), May 20, 1832, as quoted in Sherman Day, Historical Collections of the State of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1843), 110.
Lacock's public career began almost immediately after his settlement in Beaver Town. In 1796, he was appointed justice of the peace for Pitt Township, Allegheny County, which included part of what is now Beaver County. Thus, he was the first justice of the peace within Beaver County, which was formed out of Allegheny and Washington counties on March 12, 1800. In 1801, he was elected the first representative to the state legislature from Beaver County, and he served in this capacity until 1803, when he was appointed the first associate judge of Beaver County. The first session of court in that county was held in Lacock's tavern, since no courthouse was available. He resigned his judgeship a year later, when the people of Beaver, Allegheny, and Butler counties elected him to the state house of representatives, where he served until 1808. Here he won the confidence of the Democratic Republicans of western Pennsylvania through his support of education and internal improvements, his foresight in the removal of the state capital from Lancaster to Harrisburg, his efforts to procure a more democratic state constitution, and his interest in securing a more acceptable judicial system for Pennsylvania. From 1808 to 1810 he served as a state senator.7

Elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1810 as a war candidate, Lacock joined a group of young men known as the "War Hawks" who represented the new West.8 Among this group were Henry Clay, Speaker of the House, and Richard M. Johnson, of Kentucky; Langdon Cheves, William Lowndes, and John Calhoun, of South Carolina; Felix Grundy, of Tennessee; George Troup, of Georgia; and Peter Porter, of New York. These young "War Hawks" felt that the weak and shifting diplomacy of the Madison administration was humiliating the United States in the eyes of Europe, and they were indignant at the seizure of American ships and impressment of Amer-


8 Pennsylvania, Senate Journal, 1809-1810, 550; Annals of Congress, 12 Congress, first session, 330-331; Commonwealth (Pittsburgh), June 30, 1812; Pittsburgh Mercury, July 9, 1812.
ican sailors. As representatives of the frontier they were especially incensed over the encouragement that they believed the hostile Indians were receiving from British fur traders in the northwest.

By June 1, 1812, the "War Hawks" had whipped up the confidence of Congress in our military resources and had influenced President James Madison to request a war with Great Britain. After the adoption of the resolution declaring war, on June 18, Lacock wrote to a friend in Pittsburgh informing him of the action of Congress. This letter was quoted as follows, in a circular, or handbill, issued by the Pittsburgh Gazette on June 25: "I embrace the first opportunity to inform you that WAR has this day been declared, and the injunction of secrecy taken off. This measure passed in the House of Representatives by a majority of 30, and in Senate 19 to 13. This is an unqualified, unconditional War, by land and sea, against the United Kingdoms of Great-Britain and Ireland."

Having served six terms in the Pennsylvania house of representatives, one term in the state senate, and with his term in the United States House of Representatives terminating in March, 1813, the final step in Lacock's political evolution seems naturally to have followed. The climax came on December 8, 1812, when he was elected to the United States Senate. Incidentally, Lacock had been re-elected to the House in the October election of 1812, but he resigned his seat in that body on March 3, 1813, at the close of the Twelfth Congress.

Lacock's greatest activity in the Senate was manifested in the promotion of the "American System." This system, to some extent a by-product of the War of 1812, recommended a Second United States Bank, a protective tariff, and a program of internal improvements that included the building of canals and the improvement of river channels and harbors. The American System would combine the western demand for internal improvements at national expense with the eastern desire for a protective tariff. A tariff would shield the American manufacturer from European competition and open wide to him a great home market in the West and South. These farming areas could in turn furnish the food-

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9 The original is in the files of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.
10 Commonwealth, November 13, 1812.
stuffs and raw materials required by the workers of the North and East. In this way the different sections of the country would be bound together in an economic unit more nearly independent of Europe.

In 1813, Albert Gallatin resigned as secretary of the treasury to become one of the commissioners for negotiation of the treaty of Ghent which terminated the War of 1812. President Madison wanted to appoint Alexander J. Dallas of Pennsylvania to the vacancy in the treasury, but due to the opposition of Abner Lacock and his colleague, Jonathan Roberts, Madison altered his choice and appointed G. W. Campbell of Tennessee to the treasurership. The two Pennsylvania senators had flatly refused their votes in the Senate for a "mere Philadelphia lawyer," as they classified Dallas, but Campbell proved to be a disappointment as head of the treasury and he resigned on September 14, 1814. Since the nation's finances were in a critical condition, Lacock is reported to have remarked to President Madison's private secretary, "Tell Doctor Madison... that we are now willing to submit to his Philadelphia lawyer for head of the treasury. The public patient is so very sick that we must swallow anything the doctor prescribes, however nauseous the bolus." Dallas was appointed on October 5 and was confirmed as secretary of the treasury the next day.\(^1\)

In two years, with the support of the National Republicans, Dallas placed the finances of the country on a sound basis. On May 10, 1816, the Second National Bank of the United States was founded; and seventeen days later the Tariff of 1816 was enacted to protect our "infant industries" against British competition. Lacock added his votes and his support to both the Second United States Bank and to the Tariff of 1816, again joining forces with the young National Republicans of the West.\(^1\)

The program for internal improvements, however, received his greatest efforts. In December, 1816, President Madison recommended

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a system of roads and canals in his message to Congress. In February, 1817, the House passed a bill, introduced by John Calhoun, which proposed to set aside the bonus of $1,500,000 paid by the Second Bank of the United States for its charter, together with the annual dividends on the bank stock held by the government, as a fund for internal improvements. In the Senate, the bill was referred to Lacock's committee on roads and canals, which presently reported back with general recommendations reduced to specific terms as follows:

1. An inland or shore navigation, from the harbor of Boston to the river St. Mary's, in Georgia.
2. A canal from the Hudson or North river to Lake Erie, and from that lake to some of the many navigable waters of the Ohio river.
3. The improvement of the navigation of the Ohio river, more particularly the Falls at Louieville.
4. The improvement of several Atlantic rivers, and the corresponding streams that empty into the Mississippi and Ohio rivers.

The bill with Lacock's recommendations passed the Senate by a vote of 20 to 15. President Madison, however, as an Old School Republican, vetoed the bill on his last day in office. He was convinced that the Constitution gave the federal government no power to spend money for this general purpose. Thus, the burden and expense of construction were shifted to the states or to private citizens.

While devoted actively to the program of the American System, Lacock was also a member of the committees on naturalization, appropriations, rules, foreign relations, military affairs, accounts, and pensions. And near the close of his career in the Senate he was drawn into the most interesting controversy over General Andrew Jackson's entrance into Spanish Florida. The investigation of Jackson's conduct in the Seminole campaign was instigated by Lacock, and his report in the capacity of chairman of the investigating committee severely censured the general's action in raising and organizing armed forces and in attacking Spanish territory as violations of the Constitution and of international law. The action of the committee made Jackson and his friends fu-

rious. Jackson had rushed to Washington some weeks before when the investigation was well under way. Now, he threatened the members of the committee with personal violence. However, Lacock, seemed to be unalarmed. As an illustration of his feeling and spirit, the following extract from a letter of his is offered:

General Jackson is still here, and by times raves like a madman. He has sworn most bitterly he would cut off the ears of every member of the committee who reported against his conduct. This bullying is done in public, and yet I have passed his lodgings every day, and still retain my ears. Thus far I consider myself fortunate. How long I shall be spared without mutilation, I know not; but one thing I can promise you, that I shall never avoid him a single inch; and, as the civil authority here seems to be put down by the military, I shall be ready and willing to defend myself, and not die soft. I will remain here as long as he does, and take the consequences.  

Lacock lingered in Washington for several days after Congress adjourned, presumably for the purpose of giving Jackson an opportunity to execute his threat, but he was not disturbed, being permitted to leave with his ears of natural size. As a matter of fact, the two left the capital on the same day, and in the same public conveyance.

Lacock's participation in governmental affairs, however, was not concluded by his withdrawal from the Senate. Thereafter he maintained as keen an interest in the welfare of the people as he had done previously, and he gave as considerable a measure of his time and talents to public concerns. Throughout his legislative and congressional career he had been a diligent promoter of internal improvements. Consequently, it seems fitting and proper that the nation and the state should now endeavor to enlist the services of the National Republican who had so recently championed the ill-fated Bonus Bill in the Senate.

On April 11, 1825, the legislature of Pennsylvania authorized the appointment of five commissioners to make a complete survey of a route for effecting "the navigable communication between the eastern and western waters of the state and Lake Erie." The governor appointed Abner Lacock, John Sergeant, William Darlington, David Scott, and Robert Patterson as commissioners. Lacock's commission was dated  

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May 16, 1825. For some years prior to 1825, leading merchants of Pennsylvania had repeatedly urged the legislature to devise some system of internal transportation that would enable them to compete with New York and Baltimore for the trade of the West. To reach the West required a long trip down the coast and up the Mississippi, but a more direct route lay across the Alleghenies to Pittsburgh. Crossing the mountains meant a difficult trip over very poor roads. An improved road or a canal from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh would capture the much coveted trade of that region. Either would have been acceptable to the merchants, yet a canal offered easier transportation than by wagon. Then, too, a canal system could take advantage of the natural waterways extending westward across the state.

It was not until February 25, 1826, that the state authorized the commencement of a canal, to be constructed at the expense of the commonwealth, and to be styled the Pennsylvania Canal. Lacock was selected by the canal commission to supervise the building of the western division of the canal, from Johnstown to Pittsburgh, a distance of one hundred and four miles.

Late in the year, 1826, he started operations on the Allegheny River. By June 1, 1829, seventy-five miles of line, from Pittsburgh to the Blairsville Dam, had been completed, and the remaining twenty-nine miles of his division had been put under contract. The canal followed the west bank of the Allegheny as far as Freeport, where it crossed the river to the north side of the Kiskiminetas and followed that river and the Conemaugh to Johnstown. The first canal boat built and operated west of the Allegheny Mountains was named the "General Abner Lacock." It was a freight and passenger packet and was built at Apollo by Phillip Dally, under the auspices of Patrick Leonard of Pittsburgh.

On June 1, 1829, Lacock resigned as acting canal commissioner of

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19 Lacock to David Scott, March 1, 1830, printed in pamphlet form. The original is owned by Mrs. C. C. Noss of Rochester, Pennsylvania.
the western division. On December 9, James S. Stevenson, Lacock’s successor, accused Lacock of inefficiency in a report at a canal board meeting in Harrisburg. The report was accepted by the board and turned over to the governor. It was later ordered to be printed and distributed throughout the state.21

Since Lacock was not present at the board meeting, he was unaware of the accusations until they appeared in some of the newspapers of western Pennsylvania. Then he sent a long letter to David Scott, the president of the board. After refuting Stevenson’s accusations, Lacock stated that he had given an entire year of his time for which he never received any pay, and that Stevenson was endeavoring to injure him throughout the state, at the expense of the state. Lacock asked that he, at his own expense, might be pardoned for seeking to defend his reputation and character among his neighbors and fellow citizens, thus preventing his name from being dishonored in the public archives of the state. In conclusion, Lacock requested Scott to present his letter to the board. He added, “If my request is not granted, I will enclose copies of the letter to each member of the Board, to Stevenson, himself, to the members of the Assembly, the Governor, heads of departments and to such other persons as I think disposed to examine the subject matter with impartiality.”22 Lacock’s letter to Scott, later printed in pamphlet form, must have adequately refuted Stevenson’s accusations because no further reference to the controversy has been found.

In 1829, plans were being made to extend the Pennsylvania Canal from Pittsburgh to Lake Erie by the nearest and most practicable route in accordance with the provisions of the law of February 25, 1826. By extending the canal to Lake Erie, the commerce of the northwest might be deflected from the New York system to Pittsburgh and Philadelphia; and Lake Erie would be tied up with New Orleans by way of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. In western Pennsylvania, local interests were at a high pitch. A contention arose between Allegheny and Beaver counties with respect to which was the better route from Pittsburgh to Lake Erie, one by way of the Allegheny River, French Creek, and Conneaut

22 Lacock to David Scott, March 1, 1830.
Lake, or another by way of the Ohio, Big Beaver, and Shenango rivers and Conneaut Lake.

A committee of Beaver County citizens requested Abner Lacock and Robert Moore, a Republican candidate for the state assembly, to express their sentiments, firstly, on a general system of internal improvements and protection to domestic manufacturers; secondly, on the continuation of the Pennsylvania Canal from Pittsburgh to Lake Erie; and thirdly, if the canal commissioners should locate the canal by the Beaver and Shenango route, where the work should commence.

The following extracts from their reply show Lacock's great interest in the American System:

On the subject of internal improvements and the protection of domestic manufactures, we think there should be but one opinion entertained among us, and that should be favorable to the policy—and those who manifest adverse sentiments must found them in error, or be influenced by personal motives hostile to our primary interests.

A nation that has the raw material and will not manufacture not only the articles of the first necessity, but those of ornament and luxury, within the compass of their mechanical skill, but depends on foreign nations for their supply—that nation will soon find itself involved in debt, frequent bankruptcies and much distress among her citizens followed ultimately, perhaps, by a total loss of her independence.

Intimately connected with this subject, and forming a part of what is emphatically called the American System, are increased facilities of intercourse, by means of roads and canals. By them the mutual wants of society are supplied, good feelings, mutual friendships, with wealth, comfort and national prosperity produced, cherished and consumated.

Repeal the Tariff of 1824, and check the progress of internal improvement, and in effect we cancel the Declaration of Independence, and revert back to a state of colonial dependence on Great Britain. We firmly believe that the future prosperity and happiness of not only Pennsylvania but the Union, depends upon the maintenance and vigorous prosecution of this system. There is not a natural advantage possessed in the County of Allegheny, but what a corresponding advantage will be found in the County of Beaver. And in the possession of water privileges, our advantages are exclusive and superior to anything found in Western Pennsylvania. We aim not at rivalship but at competition. For this purpose we wish a canal from Pittsburgh to Beaver and from thence to the Lakes.23

23 Warner and Company, History of Beaver County, 236; Rochester Semi-centennial Souvenir (Pittsburgh, 1899), 45.
The Ohio, Beaver, and Shenango route to Lake Erie was finally adopted; and in March, 1831, Governor Wolf approved an appropriation of one hundred thousand dollars for the construction of a canal from the mouth of the Beaver River to its source at New Castle.

In 1836 Lacock was again appointed a canal commissioner, this time to survey and construct the Pennsylvania and Ohio Canal, connecting the Erie division with the Portsmouth and Ohio system. While at Youngstown, Ohio, Lacock was stricken with a severe illness, brought on by exposure in the execution of this project. In November he was forced to resign as commissioner; his condition became worse upon his return home; and he died the following spring, on April 12, 1837.

Abner Lacock's death terminated a long career in public life filled with services as justice of the peace, associate judge, member of both houses of the legislature, member of both houses of the United States Congress, and as a friend and earnest champion of the American System.

24 Western Argus, March 18, 1835, March 19, 1837.