Fate plays some strange tricks on men, and individuals of prominence are not excepted. Unfortunately the subject of this article suffered from such a quip of the unreliable goddess. At the time of his death in 1865, one of the leading newspapers of Pittsburgh in eulogizing William Wilkins, editorially, commented, "a man so venerated and so beloved, will have no lack of eulogists and biographers, who will embalm his memory in the hearts of his fellow citizens." Despite his prominence, and the optimistic prediction of the press, no biography of the man was attempted until the second quarter of the twentieth century!

William Wilkins, born at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, on December 20, 1779, was of Welsh ancestry. His father, John Wilkins (1733-1809), lived and owned land in Bedford County for several years and was of sufficient prominence that he was chosen as one of the seven delegates to the Constitutional Convention which met at Philadelphia on July 15, 1776. His signature appears at the end of the

1 *Pittsburgh Post,* June 24, 1865.
2 Some years ago the author of this article made an extensive study of the life of William Wilkins, and a brief paper based on this study was read by him at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on May 26, 1931.
During the Revolution John Wilkins raised and equipped, at his own expense, a company of men which he commanded. As captain of that company he saw service at Brandywine and Germantown. After leaving the army he operated a store and tavern in Carlisle. That venture failed and he moved with his family to the frontier village of Pittsburgh, where, on November 11, 1783, “two of Carlisle’s most prominent citizens”—Captain John Wilkins and Colonel Ephraim Blaine—started a mercantile establishment under the name of “John Wilkins & Co.”

Captain Wilkins’ description of the Pittsburgh of that date possesses more than passing interest:

“I found the place filled with old officers and soldiers, followers of the army, mixed with a few families of credit. All sorts of wickedness were carried on to excess, and there was no appearance of morality or regular order.—There appeared to be no signs of religion among the people, and it seemed to me that the Presbyterian ministers were afraid to come to the place lest they should be mocked or mistreated.”

In the year following the arrival of the Wilkins family, Arthur Lee, the well-known diplomat, visited Pittsburgh. His journal also carries a description of the village:

Pittsburg is inhabited almost entirely by Scots and Irish, who live in paltry log-houses, and are as dirty as in the north of Ireland, or even Scotland. There is a great deal of small trade carried on; the goods being brought at the vast expense of forty-five shillings per cwt., from Philadelphia and Baltimore. They take in the shops, money, wheat, flour and skins. There are in the town four attorneys, two doctors, and not a priest of any persuasion, nor church, nor chapel.... The rivers encroach fast on the town; and to such a degree, that, as a gentleman told me, the Alleghany had within thirty years of his memory, carried away one hundred yards. The place, I believe, will never be very considerable.
That William Wilkins’ father was not content to live in such an atmosphere is apparent from Captain Wilkins’ statement that he “often hinted to the creditable parts of the people that something ought to be done toward establishing a Presbyterian Church.” That something was done about the situation is proved by the statement that he worked “with his own hands” in the erection of the First Presbyterian Church.7

It has been said that William Wilkins was the “son of a distinguished father and one of four sons, all of whom attained prominence.”8 The father, Captain John Wilkins, in addition to his war services while in Cumberland and Bedford counties, also assumed various positions of responsibility after he moved to Pittsburgh. Among the positions that he filled were the following: associate judge in the Allegheny county court, chief burgess, treasurer of Allegheny County, commissioner of public buildings, and elder in the Presbyterian church. The most outstanding of William Wilkins’ three brothers was the eldest, John Junior, who served his community and country in many capacities. He enlisted in the Revolutionary army at sixteen as a surgeon’s mate; was appointed associate judge of Allegheny County; became a brigadier general of militia during the Whiskey Insurrection; was the first president of the Pittsburgh branch of the Bank of Pennsylvania; was a member of the supreme executive council of Pennsylvania; and was quartermaster general of the United States Army. Charles Wilkins, another brother, was the first recorder of the city of Pittsburgh and was admitted to the bar in 1807. He and his brother, John Junior, were in partnership in the whiskey business for a short time in Pittsburgh. Ross Wilkins, the third brother, began as a lawyer in Pittsburgh, but later moved to Michigan. After engaging in the practice of law there for a time, he was elevated to the bench of the district court of Michigan, a position which he held for many years.9

7 Centennial Volume of the First Presbyterian Church, 17.
8 Pittsburgh Gazette Times, September 21, 1919.
9 Pennsylvania Archives, second series, 3:672, 791 (Harrisburg, 1875); National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, 6:9 (New York, 1896); Dahlinger, “A Place of Great Historical Interest,” 219; Pittsburgh Post, August 9, 1908; Pittsburgh Gazette, November 2, 1793, ff.; Sarah H. Killikelly, History of Pittsburgh, 508, 509, 520 (Pittsburgh, 1906).
Little is known regarding the personal story of William Wilkins for the first twenty years of his life. Apparently his home life did not differ from that found in other families of equal standing in the town. Though an elder in the Presbyterian church, his father liked an occasional drink of liquor and indulged in some social card-playing and drinking, with the knowledge and permission of the minister of the church; but never to excess. William probably received his elementary education around the family tree, with the Bible as a basic textbook. His higher education was obtained at Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He was a member of the class of 1802, but he never completed the requirements for graduation. After young Wilkins withdrew from Dickinson he took up the study of law with David Watts of Carlisle. He was admitted to the bar in Pittsburgh in 1801.¹⁰

For the first few years of his professional life William Wilkins attracted little attention. However, when he did draw the light of publicity in his direction, there was a shadow with it. It was during the winter of 1806 that two young village hot-heads—Tarleton Bates, prothonotary of Allegheny County and Thomas Stewart, merchant—resolved to settle a quarrel on the field of honor. William Wilkins was selected as Stewart's second, while Morgan Neville occupied the same position for Bates. The spot chosen for the encounter was the old Chadwick farm near the end of present-day Bates Street in the Oakland district of the city. There the duelists faced each other on the morning of January 8, 1806, and each fired two shots. Bates fell mortally wounded at Stewart's second shot. His death was a shock to the community and interest in the episode led to considerable comment, both near and far. It was said that the funeral of Tarleton Bates "was attended by the largest number of people that had ever collected at a funeral in the borough." Ordinarily, the seconds in a duel receive little consideration; but in this case there was a difference. For some reason or other a rumor was spread through the community that the seconds had not tried to stop the encounter; in fact, it was reported that Wilkins had urged the antagonists to go ahead with the

¹⁰ Minutes of the Presbytery of Redstone of the Presbyterian Church, 50 ff. (Cincinnati, 1878); Pittsburgh Gazette Times, July 30, 1922; communication received by the author from Dickinson College, dated January 9, 1931.
fight. Apparently, the charges were false; but both Wilkins and Stewart became so unpopular that they left town. The latter settled in Philadelphia; while Wilkins journeyed to Lexington, Kentucky, where he lived for more than a year with his brother Charles. 11

Upon his return from exile, young Wilkins evidently resolved to make amends for the reflection which had been cast upon him. From that day to the end of a long life the name of William Wilkins was usually found connected with those things which were of an uplifting character. Among his earliest activities, of which we have a record, were those having to do with speculation in real estate. In 1809 and 1810 he was especially active in the purchase of land in and around Pittsburgh. 12 Soon, however, his interests widened.

When the Bank of Pittsburgh was organized early in February, 1810, William Wilkins was chosen as the first president; but a subsequent change in the banking law of the state practically destroyed the infant institution and led the bank officials to seek a charter of incorporation from the legislature. The memorialists blamed the branch of the Bank of Pennsylvania in Pittsburgh and the Bank of Philadelphia branch in Washington for draining the precious metals out of western Pennsylvania and for limiting the capital available to the people. They promised large contributions to worthy causes in exchange for the charter; but it was not granted. As a result, the organization changed its name to the Pittsburgh Manufacturing Company. William Wilkins was unanimously elected president of the new organization on December 18, 1811. 13

The preamble clearly sets forth the purpose of the association:

We the subscribers, believing that an Association for the purposes of making insurances on houses, stores, and other buildings, with the furniture, goods,

11 Commonwealth (Pittsburgh), January 8, 15, 22, 1806; Pittsburgh Gazette Times, September 21, 1919; Pittsburgh Gazette, January 14, 1806; Daniel Agnew, "Sketches of Prominent Lawyers of the Allegheny County Bar of the Last Century and Earlier Years of This," a reprint from Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 13:19 (Philadelphia, 1889); Dahlinger, 225.

12 Deed Adsement of Allegheny County, 1788–1880, pp. 119–120.

13 Memorial of the directors and company of the Bank of Pittsburgh to the legislature of Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh, 1810), a reprint in the form of a pamphlet; the writer is indebted to officials of the Bank of Pittsburgh (pre-depression) for allowing him to examine records in their vaults relating to William Wilkins; Pittsburgh Gazette, December 20, 1811.
utensils of trade, and materials for manufacture therein contained, against loss or damage by fire; on vessels descending or boats ascending or descending, the rivers, together with their cargoes, against loss or damages by the perils of navigation; for raising a fund for the purpose of assisting the farmers, mechanics, and merchants ... to encourage the spirit of improvement and enterprise in commerce, manufactures and the mechanic arts, ... form ourselves into a company ... called the Pittsburgh Manufacturing Company.  

The promoters opened their books and began the sale of stock in the enterprise before the middle of January, 1812. Agencies were opened in all the important towns in western Pennsylvania from Washington to Erie. It is interesting to note that in a month "upwards of 4,000 shares" of stock were sold in Fayette County alone. By the middle of March all the stock ($500,000 in shares of $50 each) had been subscribed and three payments had been made on each share. The organizers announced that as soon as the vault was completed business would be started.

On January 12, 1813, William Wilkins was re-elected to the presidency of the company. He kept up a running battle to get a charter of incorporation. He failed both in that and in his effort to win a seat in the legislature in the 1813 election. At last, however, the legislature changed its attitude and on March 5, 1814, a bill was passed that allowed the chartering of the Bank of Pittsburgh and two other similar institutions in western Pennsylvania. The law was vetoed by the governor and immediately re-passed over his veto by the legislature. Regarding the bill it has been said: "The passage of the general banking act of 1814, particularly that portion relating to the Bank of Pittsburgh, was secured largely through the sagacity and persistence of William Wilkins." Thus the Bank of Pittsburgh came into existence, with William Wilkins as president, his election having taken place on November 28, 1814.  

But business was not the only interest that Wilkins had. When a group of progressive citizens met in November, 1813, to discuss the formation of a library company he was there and was elected to the

14 Pittsburgh Gazette, December 20, 1811.
committee that drew up a constitution for the first permanent library association. Fifty-nine subscribers voluntarily joined in the company’s formal organization on January 10, 1814, with William Wilkins serving as one of the directors. No exact date for the organization of the Greensburg and Pittsburgh Turnpike Company has been found, but it is known that William Wilkins served as president of that company for a number of years. Another basic civic enterprise which attracted Wilkins’ attention, as well as his money and time, was the Vigilant Fire Company. He served that exclusive group as president for a number of years, beginning in 1815.¹⁶

Sometime during the year 1815 Wilkins married Catherine Holmes of Baltimore. On July 16, 1816, she died—at childbirth—and today lies buried in Homewood Cemetery by the side of her infant daughter. Apparently moved by a resolve to assuage his grief by greater activity in the civic affairs of his town, Wilkins turned his efforts toward the promotion of a worthy project, which had already suffered one failure. Two bridges were planned for Pittsburgh’s rivers, one over the Allegheny at Robinson’s Ferry and another at Smithfield Street to span the Monongahela. Wilkins was chosen as one of the commissioners to get public support organized and on June 10, 1816, he was unanimously elected to the presidency of the Monongahela Bridge Company. In the latter part of November, 1818, the last plank was laid and the opening of the new bridge to traffic was celebrated by the discharge of a cannon, after which there was a parade and a banquet. Among other toasts drunk at the banquet was one to the president of the company, “distinguished for his public spirit.” The structure remained in use until destroyed by the great conflagration which engulfed the city in 1845.¹⁷

In the spring of 1816 it was deemed advisable to transform the borough of Pittsburgh into a city. The act of incorporation provided for two councils, to be known by the names common and select. Wilkins

¹⁶ Pittsburgh Gazette, December 17, 1813, August 19, 1814, January 3, October 7, 1815; Pittsburgh directories, 1815 (Appendix, pp. 119, 126–128), 1819 (p. 113 and unnumbered pages at the back); Killikelly, History of Pittsburgh, 546.

¹⁷ Commonwealth (Pittsburgh), August 6, 1816; Pittsburgh Gazette Times, July 30, 1922; Pittsburgh Gazette, February 24, June 22, 1816, November 24, 1818; Neville B. Craig, History of Pittsburgh, 277 (Pittsburgh, 1851).
was chosen as a member of the common council, and at its initial meeting, held on July 2, 1816, he was elected its first president.  
Honors seemed to be falling thick and fast upon the young politician about this time. When President Monroe visited the city in September, 1817, he was met by a large delegation of officials and citizens. The event was celebrated by a parade—including the President, on foot—which proceeded along Market Street to Fourth Street, up Fourth to Wood Street, down Wood to Water Street, “thence to the house of William Wilkins, Esq. . . . where he was received in a manner which reflects great credit on the taste and liberality of that gentleman, to whose polite and public spirited exertions we are so much indebted on this occasion.”

It was undoubtedly young Wilkins’ intention to make some profitable use of his popularity; but he failed a second time in the fall of 1817 to win enough votes to get himself elected to the lower house of the state legislature following his nomination in September. Despite his defeat he continued active in the official and civic life of his community. Agitation for the erection of a penal institution in the western part of the state led the city council to appoint a commission to choose a site for the structure. Wilkins was one of the commissioners who, after due deliberation, picked a site on the western side of the borough of Allegheny.

Like many another ambitious young man, it appears that Wilkins misjudged his financial success as a rising practitioner of the law. He built a large brick house on Water Street, on the site later occupied by the old Monongahela House. By 1818 the structure had assumed something of the role of a “white elephant.” In the above year his friends made a valiant effort to get the Bank of the United States to purchase the Wilkins home for a branch bank. His well-wishers became so insistent that they made the banking officials suspicious, with the result that the bank was not located on the Wilkins property.

19 Pittsburgh Gazette, September 9, 16, 1817; Fleming, History of Pittsburgh, 61 ff.
Not finding his single state of life a happy one, Wilkins was married a second time, in the autumn of 1818, to Miss Matilda Dallas, daughter of Alexander J. Dallas, of Philadelphia. To that union seven children were born: three sons and four daughters. They were Alexander J. Dallas, who died in his thirteenth year; Charles, a "brilliant young lawyer" of Santa Rosa, California, who died August 1, 1864, leaving a wife and three children; Richard Biddle, who died shortly after the demise of his father; Maria B., who married Captain John Saunders of the United States Army; Catherine H., who married James A. Hutchison; Sophia B., who became the wife of Commander Overton Carr of the United States Navy; and Henrietta C., who never married. Wilkins' second marriage brought him in touch with a family which achieved considerable prominence. His father-in-law, Alexander J. Dallas, served as secretary of the treasury under President Madison; George M. Dallas, a brother-in-law, was Vice President of the United States under Polk; Trevanion B. Dallas, another brother-in-law, became a judge in the courts of Allegheny County.21 Such important connections must undoubtedly have had their good effects on the political life of Wilkins.

During the year 1819 a number of activities, civic, educational and political, enlisted the energies of Wilkins. At that time he and a number of other public-spirited citizens were engaged in the important business of improving navigation on the Ohio River, though it is not known whether a company was formed for the purpose. His name also appears on the board of trustees of the Western University of Pennsylvania. There is evidence to support the belief that he also favored colleges for women about that time. But it was in the field of politics that Wilkins at last achieved his greatest personal success.

Perseverance is said to have its rewards. The record of this eminent man tends to support such a belief. On July 24, 1819, a number of Pittsburgh citizens met at the home of J. B. Oliver to draw up a

ticket for the approaching election on "liberal and impartial principles." Wilkins was nominated a third time for a seat in the lower house of the state assembly. He was successful in the fall election, and though nominated on a liberal ticket, he was listed as a Federalist and entered the legislature with that classification. Wilkins found the presidency of the Bank of Pittsburgh incompatible with his new duties in the assembly, so he resigned his business position. In their letter of acceptance the directors of the bank replied in part: "to your able, prudent and upright administration, much of the credit is due, for the maintenance of the honorable character of this institution in these times of general embarrassment."

When the legislature was organized in December, 1819, Wilkins was appointed to the chairmanship of the judiciary committee. He was also assigned to a lay position on the roads and inland navigation committee. In addition, he served on no less than nine special, or select, committees assigned to a number of different tasks. Possibly the most important special committee on which Wilkins served was the one that examined the charges of misconduct against Governor Findlay. After an extensive investigation, the majority of the committee reported that the charges were untrue and appeared to have been raised for political reasons. The Pittsburgh Gazette said it was willing to accept the majority report as final and gave no credence to the dissenting minority report.

During his first session in the legislature Wilkins presented a variety of memorials and petitions from western Pennsylvania citizens. In substance they ranged from private petitions for pensions to public demands for internal improvements. He submitted only two bills at his initial session: one was a supplement to an act giving the governor power to incorporate two companies for building a road from Pittsburgh to Meadville; the other was an act authorizing the recovery of money paid into treasuries in the several counties.

22 Pittsburgh Gazette, August 6, September 21, October 19, November 19, 1819, February 15, 1820; Pittsburgh directory, 1819, p. 115; Bank of Pittsburgh, Souvenir, 1810-1896, p. 17. See also Western University of Pennsylvania Catalogue for 1819.
Since no stenographic record was kept of the legislative proceedings in that day it is difficult at times to detect the real interests of the legislators. Actually contemporary newspapers are often more enlightening than the official journals of the legislative bodies. From the newspaper files we learn that as a legislator Wilkins was interested in promoting turnpike building—especially the Great Turnpike from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh; uniform judicial practice throughout the state; the idea of a state tax on dividends declared by the Bank of the United States within Pennsylvania and conditions of greater security for Pennsylvania negroes from kidnapping and sale in southern states.5

Possibly the most significant of any of Wilkins' acts in this session concerned the Missouri question. In December, 1819, Representative Duane introduced a resolution to the effect that Pennsylvania oppose the admission of Missouri to the Union as a slave state, and that our representatives in Congress be so informed. Wilkins favored the resolution, and according to the Pittsburgh Gazette, he made some strong statements in favor of it, which were to be used later against him. While the house was meeting as a committee of the whole on the resolution, Wilkins is reported to have said, "so cordially did the sentiments in the resolution correspond with his own feelings and sentiments, that he was extremely anxious it should pass not only unanimously, but by acclamation. He did not wish to see it adopted by a cold vote. . . . Why pause on this resolution to arrest the march of this great calamity of slavery from the banks of the Mississippi to the shores of the Pacific?" The resolution was passed by the requested unanimous vote on December 16, 1819.6

Wilkins did not serve long in the 1820 session of the legislature. He was appointed to the same standing committees as before, but he resigned his legislative position to accept an appointment to the president-judgeship of the fifth judicial district of Pennsylvania. The conditions under which he secured the appointment were rather unique. Judge Roberts, who immediately preceded Wilkins on the common pleas bench, became seriously ill in the early part of December, 1820, and

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5 Pittsburgh Gazette, December 24, 28, 1819, February 4, 1820.
6 Pittsburgh Gazette, December 31, 1819; Pennsylvania, House Journal, 1819-1820, pp. 53, 54, 97, 98.
was not expected to recover. The friends of Wilkins were anxious that he should succeed Roberts in case of death and they prepared his credentials for the emergency. Governor Findlay was a warm friend of the western Pennsylvania legislator and deeply appreciated Wilkins' masterful defence of him when charges were brought against him for conduct unbecoming a governor. It was made known to the friends of Wilkins that he might have the seat on the bench should Judge Roberts die. The situation was becoming critical, however, as Findlay had been defeated in a close election by General Joseph Hiester, and his term was soon to expire. On December 13, 1820, Judge Roberts succumbed to his illness and Wilkins' backers in Pittsburgh got very busy. Simon Small, an old stage driver, was sent as a special messenger to Harrisburg bearing credentials for the coveted appointment. He rode horseback and by relaying horses managed to reach the state capital between eleven and twelve o'clock on December 18, the last night of Findlay's term! The governor was unceremoniously roused from sleep and signed the commission which made William Wilkins a western Pennsylvania judge. Had the old stage driver been delayed a few hours Wilkins might never have been a midnight jurist. 27

Wilkins continued on the local bench until May, 1824, when he was appointed to the federal district court for western Pennsylvania by President Monroe. During his years as a federal judge he continued his interest in political and civic affairs. At one time he even presided at a meeting called for the purpose of devising ways and means to help the Greek patriots who were being persecuted by the Turks. Usually, however, his speaking engagements were limited to domestic affairs. Since he was an active politician, most of the dinners he attended and the speeches he made had a political tinge. He never missed an opportunity, it appears, to praise the great frontier hero, Andrew Jackson, and to point out to western Pennsylvanians that he was their champion. 28

Strange as it may seem, Wilkins sought after and succeeded in getting


himself elected to the lower house of the United States Congress in 1828 and then resigned the position before taking his seat. Apparently, he wanted to accept the position in Congress, but his colleagues on the bench issued a touching plea that "if consistent with his views of the public good, he . . . remain in the situation which he at present fills with pre-eminent honor and usefulness to the country." As a result, Wilkins continued on in his position as a jurist.

Subsequent events indicate that he was only biding his time until a new legislative opportunity presented itself. He had only a few years to wait. When the Twenty-second Congress convened on December 5, 1831, William Wilkins was one of the new United States senators. The other senator from Pennsylvania was Wilkins' brother-in-law, George M. Dallas. Wilkins was destined to have many stormy debates in his first experience in the national legislative halls.

His first clash was with Clay over the tariff. On January 9, 1832, Clay introduced a resolution into the Senate asking for the abolition of the tariff on "articles imported from foreign countries, and not coming into competition with similar articles made or produced within the United States," with the exception of wines and silks, and he favored a reduction on those. When the resolution came up for debate, Wilkins entered the fray. He said he favored compromise since so many southern senators opposed the duties, but that "he had no idea of abandoning the principle of protection." Continuing, Wilkins declared: "If desolation had followed the system in South Carolina . . . he was certain desolation in his State would mark its abolition." The debate dragged on into March when he submitted a compromise amendment to Clay's resolution, though he defended the right of continued protection for the manufacturers. Then followed the submission by Wilkins of two hazy resolutions designed to recompense the manufacturing interests for the loss of some of their protection. Clay and several other senators immediately stepped into the breach, criticized the Pittsburgher severely, and led him to drop his plan.

As no agreement had been reached on the tariff question between the two houses by July, Wilkins made a motion that a conference committee be appointed to confer with the House on the points of difference.

*9 Pittsburgh Gazette, November 13, 1829.*
The motion carried and, according to custom, Wilkins was asked to head the conference committee, the other two members being Senators Dickerson and Hayne. Senator Hayne was expected to favor low duties, while the protectionists placed their faith in Wilkins and Dickerson, only to be disappointed. When the conference report was submitted by Wilkins a groan of dismay emanated from the believers in the American System, because Wilkins and his colleagues had almost completely surrendered to the House group. Since iron was not one of the commodities on the reduced list, Webster, Clay, and other senators accused him of weakness in giving up the Senate duties on cotton-bagging, sugar and woolens. Webster was especially vitriolic in his charge that Wilkins purposely got himself on the conference committee. The lanky Pennsylvania senator defended himself against the barbs hurled at him by denying that any other motive than that of expediting legislative business was back of his motion. As for his compromise in the committee, he shielded his stand there by saying the public had demanded a change in the 1828 law. He argued further that a study of the rates would convince his antagonists that the rates were not too low. Senator Dickerson's efforts in Wilkins' behalf were feeble; but Senator Hayne struck a more powerful note when he declared that the protective duties were higher than formerly and warned that dangerous principles were involved. Senator Holmes of Maine took a parting shot at the whole committee when he blurted: "One member was ultra-anti-tariff; another was a candidate for the Vice-Presidency [meaning Wilkins]; and the third was an old bachelor, who cared nothing for posterity."

Wilkins' second forensic clash with a prominent figure in national life came in the same session, when Senator Benton of Missouri asked leave to introduce a resolution which declared that the United States Bank had violated its charter by issuing certain forms of paper currency. He wanted those issues suppressed. The erstwhile Pittsburgh banker jumped to his feet and accused Benton of trying to undermine the confidence of the public in the nation's currency. When the question of leave came to a vote Benton lost.

Sometime later, when the subject of rechartering the United States Bank came before the Senate, both Wilkins and Dallas, under explicit
instructions from the Pennsylvania legislature, voted in favor of a new charter. Jackson vetoed the bill and when an attempt was made to pass it over his veto, the Pennsylvania senators again voted as instructed; but the bill was lost. Upon the arrival of Wilkins in Pittsburgh, after the close of the session, a local newspaper commented: "It gives us pleasure to announce that Messrs. Wilkins and Dallas both adhered to the Bank of the United States, and voted for the renewal of its Charter, notwithstanding the Veto." It must have pained Wilkins when he had to vote against the wishes of his hero, Jackson; but future occasions were to give him opportunities to undo the damage.

As early as the summer of 1831 the name of William Wilkins was being discussed as the vice-presidential candidate for the 1832 campaign; and clubs were formed in Allegheny County to develop support for him. Agitation for the Senator continued throughout the fall and winter, and in March the Democratic-state convention in Pennsylvania nominated William Wilkins to the vice-presidency of the United States. Wilkins undoubtedly secured support in Pennsylvania from two sources: those who knew him to be a sincere Jackson Democrat, and those who were anti-Jackson and anti-Van Buren. But his candidacy never got beyond the "favorite son" stage.

Senator Wilkins was in his seat when the memorable second session of the Twenty-second Congress opened. He was appointed chairman of the judiciary committee and a member of the committee on Indian affairs. Very soon he was in the thick of the nullification controversy. In the middle of January, 1833, President Jackson sent a message to the Senate asking that legislation be enacted which would enable him to deal properly with South Carolina, if she persisted in her proposed course of disobedience to the laws of the United States. Senator Wilkins, as chairman of the judiciary committee, brought in the bill which was "further
to provide for the collection of the duties on imports." In presenting the Force Bill, as it came to be known, Wilkins said he deemed the nullification question important, but not on a level with the Declaration of Independence as Calhoun had earlier inferred. A bitter, but spasmodic debate between Wilkins and Calhoun flared during January. Toward the end of the month, in one of his speeches in defense of the Force Bill, Wilkins pointed out that if South Carolina’s wishes were carried out and the protective duties removed, “it would prostrate at once and forever the policy which Pennsylvania had long cherished, which South Carolina had united with her in establishing and maintaining.” Then by way of a personal thrust at Calhoun, he said: “The admirable speech made by the Senator from South Carolina [Calhoun], in 1816, in favor of the protective policy, was engraved on the hearts of the people of Pennsylvania.” Wilkins’ speeches were quite nationalistic during those perilous days. “The moment we fail to counteract the nullification proceedings of South Carolina, the Union is dissolved; for, in this Government of laws, union is obedience and obedience is union.” Of course Calhoun failed in his attempt to block the bill.

When the compromise tariff debates got under way Wilkins took little part in them and when the bill came to a final vote he was among those who unsuccessfully opposed its passage.

In the first session of the Twenty-third Congress which assembled on December 2, 1833, Wilkins occupied a less conspicuous place. Only one committee appointment fell his way and that was on the committee on finance. By the time the session was well under way, the ill effects of Jackson’s banking and currency policy were being felt. Criticism of the President poured in from all sides. For some reason, not quite clear, unless it was the hope of personal gain, Senator Wilkins took it upon himself to defend Jackson against his many critics. His position was so illogical at times that it seemed pathetic, especially when it is remembered that Wilkins had been a banker for a number of years himself. Refusing to face the facts, Wilkins contended that the approaching panic was local and that only the speculators, brokers, and stockjobbers were affected. The fact that a number of memorials and petitions were sent to Wilkins from his own district seemed to affect him not at all. He presented a
number of them to the Senate, but said he did not agree with them.\(^3^3\) Wilkins' dogged defense of Jackson practically overshadowed all of his other activities during that session of Congress.

Such devotion could not be overlooked, and in June, 1834, Jackson paid his debt. Senator Wilkins was appointed minister to Russia in place of James Buchanan. Nothing of importance transpired while he was in Russia, and, in April, 1836, he was given permission to relinquish his post and return home.\(^3^4\)

It is said that Wilkins' appointment as minister to Russia was his "first lift out of straitened pecuniary circumstances." Just before leaving for Europe it was reported that he had "to exercise great circumspection as imprisonment for debt had not then been abolished." The caution was necessary, it appears, because his property was covered with mortgages and his creditors were clamoring for settlement. But by the time he returned from Russia, the great land "boom" was fully under way and the Water Street property was disposed of for ten times the value placed on it a few years earlier. His profit on that transaction, added to what he had saved while abroad, enabled Wilkins to pay his debts and have a comfortable amount left. At last the active politician was ready to turn country gentleman. While on his European mission he is supposed to have sketched plans for his new home. At the time when the new residence was under construction, the Wilkins family resided in the Lawrenceville section of the city. The new family home was located on a 650-acre tract of land in what is now the east end of the city of Pittsburgh. The tract extended from Penn Avenue, between Dallas and Lang avenues, south to a point beyond what is now Forbes Street, and from there east. Embraced in the eastern strip was land which is now included in the Homewood and Smithfield Cemeteries, Forbes and Braddock Junction, Forbes Manor, Regent Square, Frick Park, and parts of Swissvale, Eddgewood, and Wilkinsburg. The imposing residence, called "Homewood,"


stood on Penn Avenue, almost opposite the southern end of Murtland Avenue, facing south toward Willard Street.\textsuperscript{15}

Andrew Carnegie, who was a neighbor of the Wilkins family, commented in his \textit{Autobiography}, "the stately mansion at Homewood, which was to the surrounding district what the baronial hall in Britain is or should be to its district—the center of all that was cultured, refined and elevating."\textsuperscript{16}

However, the act of becoming a country gentleman did not divorce Wilkins from politics. In 1840 he ran for Congress on the Van Buren ticket, but he was defeated. Two years later his efforts were more successful and he was elected to the Twenty-eighth Congress. When the House was organized Wilkins was given the chairmanship of the judiciary committee. But his service in that Congress was brief, because he resigned in February, 1844, to accept appointment as secretary of war, tendered him by President Tyler. Though no outstanding accomplishment can be credited to Wilkins during his brief stay in the cabinet, his report does indicate that he was a believer in the "manifest destiny" theory of American history.\textsuperscript{17}

When not in politics this man of action and civic mind was to be found promoting worth-while projects, such as the formation of a Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. He was chairman of the 1843 organization meeting and was elected one of the vice presidents for the first year of the society's existence. In 1848, though well advanced in years, Wilkins took up the cause of the Pennsylvania Railroad and helped to sell the idea of admitting it to the city in a day when many people were opposed to such improvements.\textsuperscript{18}

Despite his advanced age, Wilkins ran for state senator in 1855 and was elected. He served on three standing committees: library, vice and


\textsuperscript{16} Andrew Carnegie, \textit{Autobiography}, 95 (Boston and New York, 1920).


\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Daily Morning Chronicle} (Pittsburgh), November 13, 1843, reproduced ante, 6:193 (July, 1923); \textit{Daily Commercial Journal} (Pittsburgh), June 1, 1848.
immorality, and judiciary, of which last he was the chairman. Though a temperate man himself, Wilkins was pledged to work for the repeal of the “Jug” law, which the liquor interests wanted removed from the statute books. Another legislative item over which there were many battles was that having to do with the establishment of a high school in Pittsburgh by the legislature, without the consent of the city. Wilkins was opposed to the school on such terms. He was active along many other lines also, but they were mostly routine in character.

In the 1857 session Senator Wilkins drew the following standing committee appointments: vice and immorality, of which he was made chairman; agriculture and domestic manufactures; and judiciary. Of the special committees on which he served, possibly the most important one had to do with the advisability of establishing normal schools at various points in the state for the training of teachers. The committee recommended that twelve such schools be established in Pennsylvania. In this session Wilkins faced the charge of inconsistency when he voted as if he favored the admission of Kansas as a slave state.

Due to the panic which swept the country in 1857, Governor Pollock called a special session of the legislature to pass laws necessary to alleviate the sufferings of the people. Wilkins distinguished himself by championing progressive labor and banking legislation.

The last session of the legislature in which Wilkins served met in January, 1858. His standing committees in that assembly were: retrenchment and reform, education, and judiciary. He served as chairman of the last committee. His activities in his final year of public office covered a wide range of subjects and were a fitting climax to a long political career.39

From 1858 to the end of his life William Wilkins was content to while away his years at Homewood, except for the part he played in supporting the Union during the Civil War. On April 15, 1861, a mass meeting attended by some five thousand persons was held in Pittsburgh. Soon after the meeting was called to order Mayor Wilson "led upon the

platform the venerable William Wilkins, whose silver hairs were wel-
comed by a tremendous shout. He was, by acclamation, chosen President
of the meeting, and made a few eloquent and patriotic remarks, speaking
for the country with an old man’s wisdom.” Later he was made presi-
dent of the committee of public safety and he was drafted for other
committee work as well. Much too old for active service in the army,
he had to be satisfied with the title of brigadier general of the Home
Guards, and the additional honor bestowed upon him by Governor Cur-
tin, who named the military post at Pittsburgh, “Camp Wilkins.”

It was Wilkins’ hope that he would live to see the Union restored.
That wish was granted and “with tearful eyes and throbbing heart” he
thanked God that he was spared “to see the flag of his country floating
proudly over the United States of America.” On June 23, 1865, he died
at Homewood. He was buried in the Allegheny Cemetery, but was
moved later to Homewood Cemetery, where today he rests under the
sod of the old estate that he loved so well.

Truly, it may be said, that “Judge Wilkins left his impress upon busi-
ness, legislative, judicial and civic affairs and his memory will long be
preserved in the nomenclature of Pittsburgh.”

40 Pittsburgh Post, April 16, 19, 27, 29, 1861.
41 Twentieth Century Bench and Bar of Pennsylvania, 2:811 (Chicago, 1903); Pitts-
burgh newspapers of June 24, 1865; Pittsburgh Gazette, November 12, 1905. The places
named in honor of William Wilkins are not scarce around Pittsburgh. Wilkins Township,
Wilkins Avenue, and Wilkinsburg all derive their names from him. The section of the city
called Homewood was named in honor of the Wilkins homestead. The Pittsburgh Gazette
Times of July 30, 1922, states that the East Liberty post office was formerly called “Wilkins
P. O.” In closing, it should be pointed out that so far as the author knows Wilkins was
never active in the affairs of any church.