CONGRESSMAN HARMAR DENNY

CATHERINE BACKOFEN

HARMAR DENNY, Pittsburgh lawyer and civic leader, state and national legislator, politician and exponent of the American System, was particularly fortunate in the factors that governed his life. His ancestry and education, his excellent marriage, and the environment in which he lived all fitted him admirably for a career that extended over nearly four decades of the early nineteenth century. His family name extends far back into sixteenth-century Ireland, and was brought to America by William Denny, of English descent, who settled in Chester County, Pennsylvania, about 1720. The latter's son William, the ancestor of the Pittsburgh branch of the Denny family, settled in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. His log house and the lot on which it stood were later presented by Matilda W. Denny, granddaughter of Major Ebenezer Denny, to Dickinson College.

Ebenezer Denny, grandson of the second William Denny, and a famous Indian fighter and Revolutionary War soldier, was born on March 11, 1761, in Carlisle. At the age of twenty-two, he married

---

1 Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on May 30, 1939. Miss Backofen is librarian of Aspinwall High School, and her article is based upon a more extended account produced by her as a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh. Ed.

Nancy Wilkins, daughter of Captain John Wilkins of Revolutionary fame, and sister of Quartermaster-general John Wilkins, Jr., and of the Honorable William Wilkins, who was subsequently to enjoy a prominent career as a United States senator, minister to Russia, and secretary of war. This marriage naturally paved the way for a promising business and political career and soon Ebenezer Denny became prominent in Pittsburgh affairs. He was elected commissioner of Allegheny County in 1796, the first treasurer of the county in 1803, a director of the Branch Bank of Pittsburgh in 1804, and the first mayor of Pittsburgh in 1816. He was active in the affairs of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh and a founder of the Western Theological Seminary in Allegheny City. On his death, July 21, 1822, he was buried in the churchyard of the First Presbyterian Church.3

Harmar Denny, eldest son of Ebenezer and Nancy (Wilkins) Denny, was born on May 13, 1794, in Pittsburgh, and was named for General Josiah Harmar, a friend and fellow officer of his father. Young Denny began his early studies in Pittsburgh and continued them at Dickinson College, where he graduated in 1813. He returned to Pittsburgh, read law, and, on the motion of Henry Baldwin, was admitted to the bar on November 13, 1816. Baldwin, who had been Denny’s teacher and was to become an associate justice of the United States Supreme Court, took the new barrister into partnership.4

One year later, the young lawyer married Elizabeth Febiger O’Hara, daughter of General James and Mary (Carson) O’Hara. This union enhanced his social and financial position, because his wife inherited great wealth, including “Springfield Farm” on the Allegheny River. Another O’Hara property, “Deer Creek,” came under Harmar Denny’s control through his father. This estate consisted of 640 acres, located just above the present Harmarville railroad station. Harmarville lies about thirteen miles above the mouth of the Allegheny River, and Deer Creek empties into the river at this point, just opposite the present railroad station.


Harmar Township was named for Harmar Denny in 1875. In 1911 Anna Malazina Spring, Denny’s granddaughter, donated nine acres of land to the Federation of Girls’ Societies for a Convalescent Home for Women at Harmarville. The town-house of the Denny’s, destroyed a few years before 1916, stood beyond the roundhouse, near the Pennsylvania Railroad station at what is now 412 Penn Avenue, Pittsburgh.5

In addition to his social heritage and prominence, Denny soon acquired practical business experience, because, as administrator of his wife’s estates, he was required to travel to Indiana, Illinois, New York, and parts of Pennsylvania, tracing claims, paying taxes, attending court trials, and adjusting tenants’ leases. He was a busy real-estate operator throughout his whole life as administrator of both the O’Hara estate and of his own property. It is recorded that he concluded 232 transactions as administrator of the O’Hara estate, and 74 involving his own property.6

It was inevitable that a man with Denny’s social and economic background and cultural heritage should be plunged into the civic affairs of the community. He had much to offer to Pittsburgh, because the city was only a small but rising manufacturing center, advantageously situated at the forks of the Ohio River. Its location and the wealth of mineral and fuel resources so near at hand proved such a stimulus to industry that the borough status was quickly outgrown, and on March 18, 1816, the municipality was changed to a city government.7

At the time of Pittsburgh’s incorporation, the triangle between the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers was well covered with residences, business houses, and factories, and had a population approaching 10,000. The progressive citizens were not blind to the fact that there were many defects which must be remedied before the city could be regarded with pride. The dirt and smoke were so thick that it was sometimes impossible to read in broad daylight without the aid of candles; the streets were

5 William H. Egle, Pennsylvania Genealogies, 588 (Harrisburg, 1896); Annie C. Miller, Chronicles of Families, Houses and Estates of Pittsburgh and Its Environs, 14-16 (Pittsburgh, 1927); History of Allegheny County (1889), 2:163; Bulletin Index, October 8, 1931.
6 Allegheny County Deed Books, 1778-1880.
muddy, overrun with hogs and dogs, and unlighted until 1830; a water-
works was not in operation until 1828, and then it was of doubtful ade-
quacy; police protection was practically non-existent, and fire protection
was on the volunteer basis; sanitation was so poor that disease was ram-
pant; and education was decidedly inadequate, for it was not until 1834
that public schools were established.8

In view of these drawbacks, a few ambitious leaders—Henry Baldwin,
later an associate justice of the Supreme Court; Walter Forward, lawyer
and later congressman; William Wilkins, United States minister to Rus-
sia and secretary of war; Judge Henry M. Brackenridge and his son,
 Alexander; James Ross, erstwhile United States senator, and others—
were all working to secure for the newly created city that position of
prominence which they firmly and faithfully believed to be its right, and
Harmar Denny was soon allied with this group.

His associations with these ambitious and civic-minded young men, in
addition to his deep interest, plunged him into virtually every civic activity
of the day: as one of the group that worked for the improvement of
physical conveniences; as a faithful church attendant and president of
religious societies; as a humanitarian; as a member of cultural societies;
and as a liberal in educational matters. Although he was rated as an out-
standing lawyer, with an office at the corner of West and Water streets
from 1819 until at least 1826, he did not appear in any great cases, and
after entering politics he practically gave up the pursuit of his chosen
profession.9

As a progressive citizen, interested in developing Pittsburgh, Harmar
Denny soon turned his attention to those things that would advance the
city. Bridges were a prime necessity and the first one to be built was the
one across the Monongahela River at Smithfield Street, which was com-
pleted in 1818. The first bridge across the Allegheny River, between St.
Clair and Federal streets, was completed the next year, and the rising
young Pittsburgher was a manager of the Allegheny Bridge Company

8 Leland D. Baldwin, Pittsburgh, the Story of a City, 202, 203, 206-208, 211, 212,
214-218 (Pittsburgh, 1937); Killikelly, 157.
9 J. M. Riddle and M. M. Murray, comp., The Pittsburgh Directory for 1819, p. 47
(Pittsburgh, 1819); S. Jones, comp., Pittsburgh in the Year Eighteen Hundred and
Twenty-six, 113 (Pittsburgh, 1826); Wilson, 381.
in the year of the bridge’s completion. Because fire was an ever-increasing danger, volunteer fire companies were organized. Denny was a member of one of these organizations, which were intended as much for social purposes as for fire-fighting, and, it has been suggested, provided a refuge for harassed husbands. He was vice president of the Eagle Fire Company in 1819, and one wonders whether he entered into the spirit of rivalry and camaraderie that was the order of the day in such organizations. As a member of the city councils in the early 1820’s, this active young leader helped in solving the water and street-lighting problems of the city, and years later, in 1848, he again sat with the select council and served as president of the group for the next year. During the terms that Denny served on the select council that group was concerned mainly with ordinances pertaining to street-paving and railroads.\(^1\)

Although Pittsburgh was fast becoming a manufacturing center in the second decade of the nineteenth century, agriculture remained the prevailing occupation of the inhabitants of the surrounding country. Harmar Denny was deeply interested in agriculture because of the large farm lands that he managed, both at Deer Creek and Springfield. A neighbor, in a letter to a friend, wrote that Denny had a good reputation among the farmers owing to the skillful and fruitful operation of his lands. He greatly encouraged and aided the farmers by introducing improved implements and by the importation of improved breeds of stock. In 1823, he served as secretary of “The Society for the Promotion of Agriculture and Domestic Manufactures in Allegheny County.” William Wilkins was the president and Henry Baldwin the vice president of this society, which had been founded the previous year.\(^1\)

As Pittsburgh progressed commercially, the young community needed money for industrial expansion and the organization of banking facilities followed as a matter of course. Denny, in his capacity as administrator of

---

\(^1\) Baldwin, 205-207; Riddle and Murray, 115, and an unnumbered page in the back; Minute Book, Pittsburgh Council, 1816-1836; Jones, 36; Killikelly, 167-168; Deed Book of Allegheny County, 56:341-342; Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post, February 5, 1844, June 17, 1848, January 13, 1849; Boucher, 2:365; Pittsburgh Gazette, June 19, August 31, 1848.

\(^1\) George Smith to John McAleese, in Denny-O’Hara Papers, 1836; Pittsburgh Gazette, November 7, 1823.
the O'Hara estate and as a real-estate operator, was interested in the financial agencies of the city. This interest, combined with his business acumen, recommended him to the bankers and he was soon pressed into service. During the years 1823 and 1824, he was a director of the Bank of Pittsburgh, established in 1810 with William Wilkins, Denny's uncle, as its first president. In 1834, Denny, then a representative in Congress, was delegated by this bank to present its cause to President Jackson during the controversy between Jackson and the Second Bank of the United States over the removal of the government deposits from the latter. Denny's final connection with banks was his work as a director of the Exchange Bank of Pittsburgh, organized in 1836 under William Robinson, Jr., as the first president. Denny served on the board of directors of this bank in 1843-45, 1847, and 1850-51.  

Social and religious activities as well as cultural societies also claimed his attention, and he acted as an official host to some of the famous guests who came to the city. When Lafayette came to Pittsburgh in 1825, Denny was one of the group that entertained the famous general. Again in 1848, when Clay visited the city, Denny was among those who planned for the guest. Like his father, he was an active attendant of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh and was a supporter of the organizations affiliated with that church. He and his wife were extremely charitable; they, along with Captain Schenley and his wife, in 1848 donated the land on which the Western Pennsylvania Hospital was built. He belonged to the Pittsburgh Chemical and Physiological Society in 1815, was president of a reorganized Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, beginning in October, 1843, and was a member of the American Philosophical Society, founded at Philadelphia in 1743.


In a growing and briskly progressive city, education became a problem that demanded attention. Denny was identified with the cause of the liberals, but he was less interested in high schools than he was in the Western University of Pennsylvania. He served this institution as a trustee from 1840 to 1852 and as one of its board of inspectors. The Western Theological Seminary also received his attention and support and he served this institution both as a director, from 1830 to 1852, and as the president of the board of trustees, from 1845 to 1848, after which he remained on the board until his death in 1852.14

His interests were not circumscribed, however, by the cultural and civic activities of his own community; they led him into the interesting game of politics, into the state and national legislatures. His career as a member of the Pennsylvania house of representatives, 1824–1829, though lacking in color, was significant because his experience there helped fit him for his later and more important career in Congress. He served principally on the committee of ways and means, where the bulk of his work consisted of motions and petitions. His few speeches were decidedly brief. For the most part, he was concerned with the question of turnpikes and canals and it is notable that most of his work was for the benefit of Allegheny County alone. In this period, he revealed the characteristics that were to dominate his later career: his interest in internal improvements; his support of the western section of Pennsylvania; and, more particularly, his support of the manufacturing and financial interests, especially where the O'Hara holdings were concerned.15
Harmar Denny proved to be an astute judge of political trends. His foresight was so keen and unerring that one might almost class him as an opportunist. He accepted the Antimasonic nomination as representative to Congress for the 1829 special election and declared himself an avowed enemy of Masonry in all its phases. Late in 1833, however, the Antimasonic party began to form an alliance with the National Republicans, who later merged with the Whigs. The election of 1834, in which Denny was running for re-election to Congress, was the occasion for a bitter quarrel between the Pittsburgh Gazette and the Allegheny Democrat. The latter attacked Denny in undignified terms but the people favored him and re-elected him. By 1840, he had deserted Antimasonry and was very prominent in the Whig party, serving as a delegate to its various conventions and as one of the presidential electors who elected Harrison in 1840.\(^\text{16}\)

In Congress, from 1829 to 1837, Denny appeared in the role of a strong protectionist, the friend to domestic manufacture and industry. He served first on the committee on Revolutionary pensions but was later raised to the committee of manufactures which position he held as long as he was a member of Congress.\(^\text{17}\) In his speeches, he showed a clear grasp of the subject, and presented his arguments logically, always opposing those acts that would help Great Britain's trade at the expense of the United States in general and of Pennsylvania in particular. Although his chief interests were the tariff and the bank, he always gave some attention to internal improvements.

The Tariff Act of 1828 was the subject under consideration in Congress as the Pittsburgh representative entered the House. Few approved...
of it and the South blamed the act for southern economic distress. Denny, a protectionist, delivered a speech on May 8, 1830, in which he asserted that this belief of the southern men was fallacious. He pointed out that thousands of industrialists depended on the government to pursue a protective system in order to strengthen their enterprises; that the South was cursed with over-production of its staple product, cotton; that Great Britain had a deceptive tariff system, which, were the United States to enter into a reciprocal agreement, would spell ruin to this country. Referring to various presidents’ opinions on this subject, and quoting Jefferson, Denny declared that American political freedom, natural resources, and internal commerce depended on absolute independence. While pointing out the effect that tariff repeal would have on the rest of the country, he spoke of Pennsylvania and the death blow that would be dealt to her iron, salt, and other manufactures; the devastation that would be wrought in Pittsburgh. In this matter, he was undoubtedly influenced by the thought of the O'Hara holdings in the iron industry, which were a part of the estate in which his wife participated. Should the act be repealed, Denny warned, conditions would be worse, and the South would not escape in the general ruin and collapse.

The Tariff Act of 1832 was passed, and the protection advocates hoped it might guarantee that the protective system would be retained permanently. High duties were levied on cotton and woolen goods, iron, and other articles that needed protection, while articles not produced in the United States had either low duties imposed, such as on silks, or no duties at all, as on tea and coffee. As usual, an extended discussion attended the framing of the bill, and the South, of course, fought against protection. Again, Denny upheld protection and in June made a speech in which he repeated his aversion to increasing foreign wealth at the expense of the United States. He felt that the United States was able to rival Britain and in a few years would surpass her in wealth and power.

There was a very strong movement in January, 1833, to repeal the act of July, 1832. The Pittsburgh legislator spoke on the subject on Jan-

19 *Congressional Debates*, 21 Congress, 1 session, 916–920.
20 Taussig, 109–110; *Congressional Debates*, 22 Congress, 1 session, appendix, 1–11.
January 19, expressing his displeasure that repeal was to be enacted before much was known about the operation of the law. He felt that the committee of ways and means had prepared the new bill hastily and incautiously, merely to reduce revenue and duties, and with little consideration of the great interests to be affected. He refused to support the bill because of the disastrous results it would bring to Pennsylvania and declared that he would expose it to the country as an instrument of destruction. As the loyal defender of western Pennsylvania, Denny was particularly interested in the committee's proposed schedule of import duties on iron. The bill would cause foreign ironmasters to reduce their prices in order to compete with our manufacturers, with the result that our markets would be flooded with foreign products.

In keeping with his stand against the bill, he wrote a letter to a friend on February 14, 1833, in which he condemned Clay. He had cause to regret this letter later when he wished to run as Clay's vice-presidential associate during the campaign of 1844, for it was referred to again and again by the opposition. The Pittsburgh leader addressed the House on February 25 concerning the bill, branded it as giving foreigners all the protection that Americans should have, and concluded by remarking that the knell of the protective policy was "sounded in this bill and he had only to regret that the task had not fallen to abler hands of pronouncing its funeral oration."

Pittsburgh's representative, in response to the demand of many of his constituents, and because of his previous banking experience, fought for the rechartering of the Second Bank of the United States—a question of equal importance to the business interests as the tariff question. He reviewed the bank's history; protested against a proposal to investigate the bank; spoke in favor of foreigners and naturalized citizens owning stock; and expressed regret that the recharter question should be regarded politically and that it was to have an effect upon the approaching election.

When President Jackson determined to deprive the Bank of the de-

---

21 Congressional Debates, 22 Congress, 1 session, 1142-1149.
22 Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post, December 6, 1843; Congressional Debates, 22 Congress, 2 session, 1792-1793.
posits, Denny championed open and immediate public discussion of the matter. Many of the citizens of Pittsburgh opposed the removal of the deposits and sent a memorial to their representative who presented it in Congress on February 10, 1834. A few days later a delegation of citizens from Pittsburgh came to Washington to lay their cause before the President. Senator Wilkins and Representative Denny took them to the White House. The interview was long and stormy, with Wilkins siding with the President and Denny arguing for the Bank and the interests of the business men of Allegheny County and Pittsburgh.24

He rendered loyal service in Congress to the industrial and financial interests of his constituency, and the experience that he gained in this body fitted him to serve as a delegate to the state convention that met in Harrisburg on May 2, 1837, to amend the Constitution of 1790. Although this group changed the constitution but little, Denny was an active member of the committees that dealt with election rules, voting qualifications, patronage, executive appointments, banks, and money. His service as a bank director and his study of the Second Bank of the United States fitted him particularly well to cope with the problems of regulating the state banking system. He was as alert as he had been in the national legislature and did not hesitate to express his opinions regarding various motions on rules of conduct and order that he considered clumsy and detrimental to the work of the convention.25

Denny's interest in politics from the close of the state convention of 1837 to the election of 1844 was that of an interested observer rather than that of an active participant. National issues and local conflicts engaged his attention and even his support, but it was not until the election of 1844 that he assumed an active role. That campaign intrigued him, and because he felt that he had an opportunity to secure the nomination

24 Congressional Debates, 23 Congress, 1 session, 2196–2198; Pittsburgh Gazette, February 15, 1834; Wilson, 349.

for the vice-presidency, he “threw his hat into the ring” as a candidate for second place on the Whig ticket with Henry Clay.

In western Pennsylvania the opposition revived a letter of Denny’s that he had written while in Congress opposing Clay’s Compromise Bill of 1833. The first blast appeared in the Pittsburgh *Daily Morning Post* when that paper reported Denny’s attendance at a “Grand Whig Rally” in Philadelphia, where he was spoken of as the Whig candidate for governor of Pennsylvania or the vice-presidential candidate on the ticket with Henry Clay. At this gathering, Denny assured the Whigs that “the Whigs of western Pennsylvania would give a good account of themselves in 1844,” that the people there were “well acquainted with the worth and services of Henry Clay.” The Philadelphia Whigs declared for John Sergeant as their choice for vice president, thus ignoring Harmar Denny and treating him with great discourtesy. The Whigs of Greene County voted for Thomas M. McKennan as their choice for the vice-presidential candidate, while the Dauphin County Whigs favored Denny as the running-mate of Clay. As time went on, owing to dissensions in the Whig party, it was predicted that Denny’s chance for the nomination was very slight because the leaders of the party held his pretensions in contempt. The *New York Tribune*, the mouthpiece of the Clay party, disregarded the Pittsburgh Whig and said that Pennsylvania favored Sergeant and McKennan for the position.*6

Denny’s aspirations were completely humbled when the Whig convention at Baltimore chose Theodore Frelinghuysen as their vice-presidential nominee. Opposition to the Pittsburgh leader subsided for a few months only to flare up with renewed intensity when he tried to explain his stand against Clay’s Compromise Tariff of 1833. Once more he found himself the center of a bitter journalistic struggle waged between the *Post* and the *Gazette*.7 His failure to secure the longed-for nomination caused Denny to withdraw from national politics and he devoted the remainder of his life mainly to private ventures, which were successful because of his shrewdness and his insight into business affairs.

---

*6* Pittsburgh *Daily Morning Post*, December 6, 1843, February 15, 26, May 7, 1844; Pittsburgh *Morning Chronicle*, February 21, 1844.

*7* Pittsburgh *Daily Morning Post*, May 7, 21, August 21, 24, 27, 29, September 4, 5, 6, October 5, 1844; Pittsburgh *Gazette*, August 6, 1844.
Denny's connection with the third phase of the American System, internal improvements, reached back to the canal movement of the 1820's and the 1830's. He was a delegate to various conventions; urged Pennsylvania to build canals in order to compete with New York, Maryland, Virginia, and Ohio; gave the state from his own private estate, for the use of the Pennsylvania Canal, a strip of land about one mile in length; and promoted the cause of internal improvements generally in Congress. Upon his retirement from political life, railroad-building in Pennsylvania caught his attention, and he became active in that field in 1843. He was a delegate to many railroad conventions and bent his efforts to combat Philadelphians who were concerned with trying to keep western Pennsylvania out of the running. The Pittsburgh and Connellsville Railroad Company was organized on May 1, 1846, with Denny serving as a director and as chairman of the committee that went to Baltimore to persuade Louis McLane, president of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, to connect that road with the Pittsburgh and Connellsville road. Refusal of the Baltimore and Ohio Company to consider such an alliance caused relations between the two companies to be severed and Denny then turned his attention to the organization of the Pittsburgh-Steubenville Railroad Company. He served both as a director and as president of this company and went to Philadelphia in July, 1851, to meet representatives of the Pennsylvania Railroad and discuss the Pittsburgh-Steubenville project with them. While there, Denny unfortunately contracted a severe lung inflammation from which he never fully recovered, and he resigned in December, 1851, as president of the company.²⁸

As Denny lay ill, he could muse in retrospection on years that were

²⁸ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, August 12, 19, 1825; January 14, 1834, July 14, 21, 29, August 6, 1851, January 12, 1852, and an undated extra edition; Wilson, 118; *Butler Sentinel*, October 8, 1826; *Allegheny Democrat*, December 3, 1833; *Congressional Debates*, 23 Congress, 2 session, 1206, 1475, 24 Congress, 1 session, 3287, 4485, 2 session, 2006; *Pittsburgh Morning Chronicle*, April 17, 1843; *Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post*, September 10, 25, October 4, December 18, 1845, March 17, April 29, 1846; *Pittsburgh Gazette and Advertiser*, May 14, December 8, 1846; *Pittsburg and Connellsville Railroad Company*, *Annual Report*, 8-10, 18-19, 1847; F. Frank Crall, "A Century of Rivalry between Pittsburgh and Wheeling," ante, 13:245-255 (October, 1930); Address of Mr. McLane to the Stockholders of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad on the Pittsburgh and Connellsville Railroad Company, April 5, 1847, p. 12, 26; Wilson, 137; J. H. Andrews, *Centennial Souvenir of Steubenville and Jefferson County, Ohio*, 22 (1897).
filled with activity. He remembered with pleasure his work as a civic leader in early Pittsburgh; as a state and national legislator when he supported the American System—internal improvements, the bank, and especially, the tariff; as a delegate to amend the state constitution in 1837; as a leader of the Antimasonic and Whig parties. He remembered with less pleasure his ambitious desire to be Clay's running-mate in the presidential election of 1844 and the disastrous journalistic attack that placed him in such a painful position. He recalled the railroad movement, a predominant issue of the period, in which he participated both as a delegate to various conventions and as an executive. His reveries, however, were terminated by death, after a painful and lingering illness, on January 29, 1852.

The deepest regret was expressed that a man so talented and useful should be lost to Pittsburgh, and resolutions to that effect were adopted by both the select council and the local bar association. William G. Johnston's summary of Denny's character and appearance portrays Denny as he appeared to his associates in his last year. Following a brief characterization of Col. William Croghan, Johnston observes:

Harmar Denny was likewise exceedingly fine looking and dignified, but more reserved. He would often sit an hour or so without speaking to any one. Absorbed in meditations while gazing intently into the grate, it seemed as though the burning coals held him by some magic power. Usually his neck was enclosed in a high black stock, quite common in that day, though to the wearer it always lent an appearance of stiffness and discomfort. His hair, worn long, was prematurely white, and made him more venerable than his years would indicate; as at his death he was yet in his fifty-eighth year. But if not venerable, he was venerated, as a truly excellent, Christian gentleman with right views and purposes.29