NEW CASTLE IN 1860-61: A COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO A WAR CRISIS

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Historians and other writers have frequently described the impact of the Civil War on northern and southern economic and social institutions. There are, however, relatively few studies of the effects of the war crisis upon local communities such as towns and counties.

This article does not pretend to be a full study of the impact of the Civil War upon New Castle, Pennsylvania, but rather seeks to point out some of the more outstanding elements of New Castle's response to the approach of this conflict. Because of the magnitude of their effects, their unexpectedness, and the rapidity of development, the events between the election of Lincoln and the battle of Bull Run produced in New Castle such a reorientation of business life, political activity, and psychological outlook as to constitute a local crisis. The limits of the crisis may, therefore, be defined as beginning with the recognition that war was possible and continuing until the secession of the border states, in June, 1861, provided a background for the acceptance of a new routine of war effort.

The north central part of Lawrence County, of which New Castle was the leading town, was at this time in the midst of a transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy. The change began with the erection of the Aetna Iron Works in 1839; during the next twenty years a number of iron manufacturing establishments were set up in New Castle, and by 1857 iron manufacturing was the principal business of the town. The furnaces, rolling mills, and nail factories were supplied with ore and limestone from near-by hills and could turn out products varying from threepenny nails to railroad iron. All together iron manu-

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factures in New Castle were valued at $154,000 in 1860; the nearest commodities in value were flour and meal, valued at $140,000.

This industrial development was temporarily arrested by a serious depression between 1859 and 1863. One of the two most important of the New Castle ironworks, the Orizaba, which manufactured some 7,500 tons of iron and nails per year during the fifties, was idle from 1859 to 1863. Machinery rusted; men whose only income had come from the mills and factories of the Orizaba since its establishment in 1845 were without means of supporting themselves; and many who could find no other employment were forced to move out of New Castle during 1860 and 1861. A purchaser was not found for the furnaces, keg factory and dozens of nail machines, which together were called the Orizaba Iron Works, until 1863. In that year the Beaver Valley railroad, connecting New Castle with the road from Erie to Pittsburgh, was finished, allowing coal to come into New Castle other than by wagon and canal (frequently frozen during the winter months) and giving new life to the iron manufacturing industry. The depressed condition of industry in the county was further accentuated by the dissolution of the Cosala Iron Company, with two-thirds the productive capacity of the Orizaba, in 1857, and by the abandonment of the charcoal blast furnace ten miles away, at New Wilmington, in 1860. Neither of these appear to have been revived during the war years.

No important efforts to restore New Castle's industrial prosperity were made during the years from the beginning of the depression in 1857 to the establishment of the railroad in 1863. This lack of effort was due partly to the presence of oil in the region near by; as each new well or rumor of a well came in, the hope was expressed that New Castle would soon become the center of a great oil industry. It is perhaps too much to say that New Castle was a stagnant town during the months of the war crisis; but its rate of growth was slow (the decade 1850-1860 showed an increase from 1,614 persons to 1,882), and there was no industrial or other economic development to give its citizens a sense of pride in an expanding community.

It will be noted, therefore, that the months between Lincoln's election and the secession of the border states were contained within a period of
depression for New Castle, as they were for a large part of the Shenango-
Beaver Valley and for much of the country.

Neither the election of November, 1860, nor the secession talk that
developed in the gulf states during October and November drew from
New Castle a response comparable to the gravity of the crisis into which
the country was being drawn. Republicans were prepared to do what
was necessary to eliminate slavery or at least to confine it in those places
where it then existed. Democrats showed considerable doubt as to the
wisdom of electing a sectional candidate to the presidency, particularly
in view of possible southern disaffection. However, the party’s leaders in
New Castle expressed the opinion, as early as November 17, that seces-
sion would amount to treason. Even then the problem was considered
largely an academic one as no articulate group seemed to want or expect
war. As the secession movement grew through November and early
December the reaction of New Castle people, as far as can be ascer-
tained, was one of surprise and curiosity rather than of resentment and
excitement. During the first fortnight of the month of December the
activities of the lower South began to be discussed around the “cracker
barrels” and on street corners. Unfortunately we do not have transcripts
of any of these discussions; such comments as appeared in local papers
suggested that they were not heated as late as December 22, although
the paper of that date carried an account of the proceedings of the South
Carolina secession convention.

Despite the paucity of extant documentary evidence, it cannot be
doubted that New Castle was conditioned for the coming crisis by a wide
acceptance of anti-secessionist feeling and widespread suspicion of sou-
thern democracy. Expressions of such feeling in January and February are
plentiful and suggest that feelings were expressed verbally during the
eyearly weeks of the crisis rather than in writing. One interesting bit of
evidence of the breadth and depth of this attitude is shown in the action
of the editor of the Lawrence Journal. In 1849 in the first year of its
publication under the editorship of J. M. Kuster, this paper avowed
Jeffersonian and Jacksonian principles, opposed the “peculiar institution”
of the South and claimed the distinction of printing all the news. At
this time there was a well organized Whig party in Lawrence County.
The Whigs continued to grow, becoming Republican in time to support Lincoln. The Journal, however, remained Democratic; during the campaign of 1860 Kuester supported Douglas and Johnson and the straight Democratic ticket, urging his readers to do likewise.

Immediately after the election Kuester expressed the opinion that Lincoln's election might cause hard feelings in some quarters but indicated that all real Americans should abide by the decision of the electorate. Early in December he printed a rather sharp criticism of the president-elect; this proved to be his last important objection to Republicanism during the months of the crisis. Within less than a month, in the January 5, 1861, issue, the editor of the Journal was forced to abandon his Democratic tenets and to begin using the slogan "A Local Family Newspaper—Independent on All Subjects." This action he explained as follows: "For a number of years we have been publishing a political journal, and as papers belonging to certain faiths cannot find admittance in every family we have assumed this new position to obviate the difficulty, as we wish the Journal to find a place in every family. The Journal [is] generally acknowledged [to be] the best paper in the county but on account of politics was discarded by many. . . . As we are now independent we ask the people to support us in our new undertaking."

Of the other papers in New Castle, one, the Gazette, was edited by a W. H. Shaw who supported the war to the extent of leaving his position in 1862 to take a more active part in the struggle. The other, the Courant, had been the abolitionist American Freeman until purchased by a Mr. Durban in 1857.

During January, the third month of the war crisis, increasing attention was paid in New Castle to the progress of the secession movement; the supplying of the garrisons at Pensacola and Charleston, the military preparations in Georgia, and speeches of secessionists were described in local papers under such headings as "The Progress of Treason" and "The Mobocratic Spirit of William M. Yancey." Still, New Castle lagged behind the eastern part of the state in its activities. Union meetings, such as were held in Philadelphia before Christmas, did not gather in the New Castle area until January 22. The first such meeting occurred in the Westminster Chapel at New Wilmington. Those who attended considered the crisis a grave one, their purpose in assembling as
peaceful, and Jackson and his phrase “the Union must be preserved” as immortal. They opposed compromises that might tend to nationalize slavery or allow it to be extended to the territories, and condemned those who incited slaves to rebel.

In New Castle the anti-compromise forces were gaining strength though there was still a strong element that was ready to compromise on the basis of “no extension of slavery.” New Castle’s first union meeting was held on Washington’s birthday. But so great was the intensity of concentration on the issue at hand that the Father of His Country was not mentioned in the resolutions condemning secession, concession, and compromise. These resolutions, stronger in their opposition to compromise than those made at New Wilmington, were sent to Washington in the name of the Republicans of Lawrence County. With the union meeting over, and their attitudes having been given formal expression, the literate public in New Castle, minds now made up, turned toward Washington and watched the new President for indications of the precise steps to be taken in the critical weeks of March and April. During these weeks emphasis was laid on a re-examination of the political principles of the Constitution, the American system of government, presidential powers and other politico-legal aspects of the question at issue. The full text of Douglas’ plea for compromise by a constitutional amendment was printed in the March 23 issue of the Lawrence Journal; an editorial comparing the United States and Confederate States constitutions appeared the following week; a series of lectures on political science, signed ‘Junius,’ began in the April 6 issue in order to “break the shackles from the minds and bodies of men”; these were dropped after Sumter.

At the same time the nearest outside paper (the Republican Mercer County Dispatch) seemed not opposed, as late as March 27, to the idea of a broken union. The editor thought that the idea of two confederacies was widely held in Washington by leading Republicans including two or three cabinet members. He added:

I can say, furthermore, that the executive acts bearing upon the Southern question will be largely influenced by a belief in the probable contingency of a separation, and a desire to make it a peaceable one. While it is deemed due to the honor and dignity of the government, both at home and abroad, to vindicate its authority in the seceded States, and while blows will be struck if
necessary, it will be only to redeem the credit of the federal power, and not to permanently maintain its authority over an unwilling people.

The editor seemed, at this time, to expect that a national convention would be called to settle all grievances and that Virginia would remain in the Union. His chief worry was that the low Confederate tariff would lure commerce away from northern ports.

On receipt of the news of the firing at Fort Sumter, New Castle, already morally prepared, responded immediately and decisively. Considerable surprise was shown but the community was well prepared psychologically for the outbreak of war. The firing at Sumter occurred on Friday, April 12; the news arrived in New Castle that night and on Saturday morning Dr. Daniel Leasure began enrolling names of those who wished to fill out the Lawrence Guards, a military unit organized shortly after the Mexican War. Lincoln issued his call for volunteers on Monday; all business activity in New Castle ceased for the remainder of the week; the Lawrence Guards were filled and parading by the end of the week. Phrases such as "the memory of Washington," "the Flag of Our Country," "an appeal has been made to the God of Battles," "righteous cause," and "the American Eagle fears not to brave the mad rebellion" appeared in editorials and letters to the editors of local papers. Anti-Confederate propaganda, lacking before Sumter, appeared in stories showing how the slave states had adopted many of the practices they had formerly condemned, such as tariffs and export duties. Reviewing the "Effects of Southern Repudiation," on June 8, the editor of the Lawrence Journal wrote:

Since this rebellion has broken out these States have again commenced their old game of repudiating their honest debts due by their citizens to the citizens of the loyal States and the amount of indebtedness thus repudiated amounts to millions of dollars. The morality of this course is shocking to every honest man. The moral sense of Christendom is shocked by this want of commercial honor and common honesty. Whatever may be the result of this war and its result is not doubtful the credit of these States is gone forever.

Quips suggesting that heaven, purgatory, and hades were represented respectively by the northern states, border states, and seceded states were passed around. By the end of the week ladies were on the streets collecting money with which to buy material for flags to contain thirty-four stars each; a meeting was called to raise "substantial aid" for the dependents of volunteers and for outfitting the Lawrence Guards.
In short, New Castle was preparing to carry on a segment of the war, using its own resources and drawing upon its own man power. The first contingent of the Lawrence Guards, fully organized and officered and partially equipped, left for Pittsburgh at eight o'clock Sunday morning, six days after Lincoln's call, after a send-off party had offered prayers, made speeches, and played martial music to speed them on their way.

On Monday, April 22, New Castle sent a second detachment of the Lawrence Guards, thirty-three strong; business was still at a standstill.

For the protection of the county in the absence of the natural defenders who were volunteering in large numbers, the veterans of the War of 1812, calling themselves the Silver Grays, formed, with some forty to fifty boys who were too young to volunteer, a Home Guard; an early move was to burn Jeff Davis in effigy. At the same time other towns in the county were organizing home guards as well as volunteer companies; New Castle formed the Rifle Guards and the Zouaves in addition to the Lawrence Guards.

Institutionalization of New Castle's response to the war crisis was begun at a mass meeting held in the public square on April 24. This meeting made itself a convention and after the usual prayer, speech, and martial music, proceeded to adopt a number of resolutions relating to the crisis. Had the program planned at this meeting been carried out it might well have been considered the initiation of a war program rather than a move in the crisis, but the plans were superseded by others after the nation, state, and county realized that the political crisis was to become a major war and to last for years instead of months. The resolutions adopted at the mass meeting called for drill for all able-bodied men; for the collection of equipment such as bandages and blankets for all who were drilled; for local economy and gifts of grain, money, and clothing to support the fighting men; and for readiness for instant service in defense of Lawrence County.

In this connection it is interesting to note that nowhere in the discussions during the critical weeks is there any suggestion that offensive efforts are to be made. Phrases used in letters to the editors of local papers, in comments from other places printed in local papers, and in editorial comment in no case assumed an attack on another people.
Rather, men wrote of defending the flag, Constitution, and laws of the United States; of the flag having been attacked; of the honor of the country needing defenders. During these weeks there was little disposition to consider the constitutional aspects of the secession movement any further. Papers demanded that their readers be "men or mice," and "for or against" the rebels; men assured each other that the cause for which they were preparing to fight was a "holy and a just cause"; and that the opposition was guilty of fraud, treachery, wrong, and despotism. In Mercer the editor of the Dispatch wrote that the prayers of thousands followed all Mercer troops and that their memories would be cherished as having offered themselves a sacrifice at their country's call, whether they fell in battle or succumbed to disease.

While these attitudes were being expressed, during late April and through May, other and more practical aspects of the war crisis began to become evident. Horses were needed by the growing army; under a quota system Lawrence County farmers from the New Castle area sold sixteen, from "a large number" brought in, at an average price of $125 each; a Mr. A. Cubbison, three weeks after Sumter, had secured a stock of drums, drumsticks and fifes from New York to sell to the constantly growing number of New Castle volunteers; farmers planted more seed in anticipation of good prices for food crops.

On the other hand the already serious problem of industrial unemployment was further complicated by the necessity of providing relief for wives and children of volunteers, many of whom were left without means of support when their husbands and fathers went off to war. The problem had been foreseen when men were encouraged early in April to join the Lawrence Guards, and leading townsmen had called a meeting to provide dependents of volunteers with "substantial aid." Collections for this purpose were taken up, but although the sum raised proved insufficient, no further attempts were made until late in May, after the state had acted to establish local boards of relief and to define the procedure to be followed by those needing relief. During the spring of 1861 New Castle women whose husbands were in the army and who had no children received from seventy-five cents to a dollar and a quarter a week. Family groups that included from one to five children were allowed from one to three dollars per week depending on the circum-
stances as seen by the local relief board. These sums were sufficient to provide sustenance except in some cases where rents of fifty cents to a dollar per week had to be paid out of the allotted amounts. The relief question was not settled satisfactorily during the crisis months.

From this brief account of New Castle’s history it can be seen that the average inhabitant was affected in many ways by events that transpired between Lincoln’s election and the battle of Bull Run.

Sympathy for the problems faced by the southern states was replaced almost immediately after the firing at Sumter by agreement that secession constituted treason and that the rebel leaders were morally depraved; the patriotism of those who sympathized was considered somewhat questionable. This condition was exemplified by the Lawrence Journal’s switch to “independence” from “Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy” because “papers belonging to certain faiths cannot find admittance to every family.” The Journal’s “independence” further emphasized the awakened interest of the community in a question of such proportions and significance that its own problems became insignificant by comparison. Rumors of oil wells still evoked interest in the late spring of 1861, but such news was no longer as important as it had been earlier.

The idea of war was kept ever before the populace by women and by men too young or too old to fight. The women formed committees for the purpose of making flags, bandages, and other articles considered necessary for the defense of the country. Boys and veterans of the War of 1812 organized a home guard which helped to unify opinion in New Castle. Drives to collect gifts of money, blankets, grain, and clothing were made by these and other groups. Finally, New Castle’s contribution to the armed forces made important differences in the life of the town. The early enlistment of two companies of volunteers from a population of two thousand persons immediately and directly affected a fifth of New Castle’s population. In those cases where the departure of a volunteer meant the absence of a son perhaps no hardship was experienced by other members of the family. But in many instances the volunteer had a wife, and frequently children; such cases involved community relief and social disorganization. On the other hand the departure of from sixty to eighty able-bodied males had some salutary effects on a community that had suffered under conditions of unemployment for
from two to three years preceding the crisis months. A further helpful element in the matter of employment was the increased business activity brought on by the sale of army supplies, including food.

By the beginning of the summer of 1861, then, New Castle had experienced a number of changes in the life considered normal during the preceding fall. The day to day responses to events of the crisis months were merging into a unified program of war effort involving a shift in employment, new business activity, the administration of relief, and a greatly broadened outlook on national problems.