

# THE ALLEGHENY DEMOCRAT, 1833-1836.<sup>1</sup>

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A study of the *Allegheny Democrat* reveals the biography of a political journal committed to the support of Andrew Jackson. Launched in 1824, the year in which Jackson was first given the support of the Pennsylvania delegation, the *Democrat* became a cog in the political wheel that led to the development of Jacksonian Democracy in the Keystone State. The *Democrat* was conceived and born out of the turbulence of the American scene that was witnessing the breakdown of the National Republican party. This party for some years constituted the only national political organization, but by 1824 it was rent with widespread dissension. Until new party alignments could be achieved, newspapers were generally obliged to give their allegiance to individuals. Thus it was that the *Allegheny Democrat*, though an independent journal, espoused the cause of Andrew Jackson in the Pittsburgh area where it was the outgrowth of a number of other political papers which had preceded it and had wended their ways up other political channels.

As early as 1797 the Anti-Federalists talked of establishing an organ in Pittsburgh, but the proposal did not come to fruition until 1800 when John Israel founded the *Tree of Liberty*, which issued violent editorials against Scull's *Federalist Gazette*. For an unknown reason the *Tree of Liberty* did not long survive,<sup>2</sup> and in 1804 the *Commonwealth* succeeded it as the Anti-Federalist or Democratic-Republican organ in Pittsburgh. As time passed, however, the *Commonwealth* grew less vigorous in its praises of Thomas Jefferson's party, and gradually the patronage of this party was transferred to the Pittsburgh *Mercury*, a weekly started by James C. Gilleland in 1811.<sup>3</sup>

The *Mercury* waxed eloquent in its defense of the men and measures of the Democratic-Republican party, but by 1824 many Pittsburgh supporters were dissatisfied with the political allegiance of their party organ

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<sup>2</sup> Erasmus Wilson, ed., *Standard History of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania*, 838-839 (Chicago, 1898).

<sup>3</sup> *Daily Post* (Pittsburgh), February 7, 1870. With the few exceptions noted below, all other materials are taken directly from files of the *Allegheny Democrat*, the more specific references being kept on file at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

to the caucus nomination of William H. Crawford for the Presidency. One of these rebellious personages was John McFarland who immediately organized aggressive opposition to the *Mercury*. His plan called forth a rival newspaper, and within twenty days after the inception of the plan the first number of the *Allegheny Democrat, and Farmers' and Mechanics' Advertiser* was published on June 22, 1824, from his printing office on Wood Street between Fifth and Sixth streets, opposite the First Presbyterian Church. Through the campaign of 1824 McFarland's weekly editorials deplored Crawford's nomination and promoted the candidate of the masses, Andrew Jackson.

After three years of dissemination of Jacksonian theories and philosophies McFarland died in 1827, and the *Allegheny Democrat* was purchased by Leonard Shryock Johns, a young man of twenty-two who retained the editorship until June, 1836, when he gave up a journalistic career for one of politics and private business. It is regrettable that the files of the *Democrat* for its adolescent period 1824 to 1833 are far from complete, but there is sufficient evidence to show that McFarland and Johns gave their journal a firm foundation in these years because on November 26, 1833, when Johns shortened the official title of the publication from the *Allegheny Democrat, and Farmers' & Mechanics' Advertiser* to simply the *Allegheny Democrat*, he was able to announce semi-weekly publication for the future. Two editions per week lasted for only six months, but the lack of subscriptions can in no way be attributed as the cause. (Circulation had increased from 300 subscribers in 1831 to 900 in 1834.) The explanation lay in the fact that Johns had been appointed alderman and had too many political obligations to continue semi-weekly publication. When he was appointed to the political post, he wished to sell the *Democrat* in part or *in toto* to a suitable buyer. He declared that his newspaper must pass to someone "in every way competent to conduct a Democratic paper." Thus his failure to find a successor willing to accept the political qualifications which he would impose meant that he had to curb his newspaper activities to accomplish his political duties. The *Democrat* returned to weekly publication on May 27, 1834, and so continued throughout the editorship of Johns, which ended with the June 21, 1836, issue.

At that time the *Democrat* passed into the hands of Wilson F. Stewart, who enlarged the official title of the journal to the *Allegheny Democrat and Workingman's Advocate*. The appended part of this title was taken

from the name of a new political party, the Working Men's Party, introduced into Pittsburgh and Allegheny County as early as 1830. The *Democrat* gave full sanction to its activities which were chiefly concerned with the banding together of the mechanics of the nation, and Stewart wished to emphasize his sympathies with respect to this party by including its name in his newspaper title. Stewart, a young man not too deeply indoctrinated in Jacksonian principles, decided in time to change the political affiliation of his paper when he editorialized in behalf of the Whig Party. This about-face stirred the indignation of the Democratic editors of Pittsburgh with whom Stewart was shortly engaged in violent journalistic warfare.

Stewart's turbulent career, both as a proponent of Whiggism and as editor of the *Democrat*, was rather brief, because in April, 1838, less than two years after its purchase from Johns, he sold out to Benjamin Pattons a United States district attorney, and others who brought the paper's editorial policy back into the Democratic fold. The title *Allegheny Democrat* was restored and William Jack was installed as editor.<sup>4</sup> The group that now owned the *Democrat* added, early in 1839, a second publication from the same office entitled the daily *Pittsburgher*, while the *Democrat* continued on a weekly basis, but became known as the *Weekly Pittsburgher*, and *Allegheny Democrat*, signifying the two great areas serviced by the publication, Pittsburgh and Allegheny.<sup>5</sup> In February, 1841, the two papers were sold to William H. Smith, who was also editor of the *Pittsburgh Mercury*. In selling out to Smith the owners declared him to be a sound Democrat and asserted that the union of the papers was a means of furnishing to the party a more efficient and independent journal. The newspaper produced as a result of this merger became known as the *Pittsburgh Mercury and Allegheny Democrat*, and in assuming this new responsibility, Smith pledged a continuation of his support of the tenets of Jeffersonian Democracy and argued that support of the policies and measures of the Van Buren administration (although it had been defeated four months earlier in the presidential election) was the only method of preserving the "liberties of the republic and the happiness of the people." The consolidation of Pittsburgh newspapers did not end with this merger, because on September 10, 1842, the *Mercury and Democrat*

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, *History of Pittsburgh*, 847.

<sup>5</sup> *Daily Post*, February 7, 1870.

joined the *American Manufacturer* to form the *Daily Post*. Eventually, in 1927, the *Daily Post* joined the *Pittsburgh Gazette* to form the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. This change brought the consolidation of Pittsburgh newspapers to its present position and affirms that the *Allegheny Democrat* is an ancestor of a current publication.

There can be no question about the political affiliation of the *Allegheny Democrat* in the period 1833 to 1836, because Editor Johns upheld to the best of his ability the tenets of the Jackson Democrats. He did not regard the Jacksonian principles as a break with the political past or as the evolution of a great heritage. He looked upon Jackson as a second Jefferson and a second founder of Democracy with principles similar to those of the father of his party; he argued the cause of Jeffersonian Democracy which he felt was being reasserted and revitalized by the enthusiastic Westerner. He wrote with absolute conviction and refused to tolerate any divergence, no matter how slight, from the Jackson policies. This feeling was perhaps more the result of party prejudice than anything else, and it is certain that Editor Johns did not employ a liberal interpretation of his function as a newspaper publisher. He argued that, since he had supported General Jackson before his elevation to the presidency, he could not afterwards deviate from complete adherence to Jackson's policies. He did not realize that his primary duty was not to a given individual, but to the welfare of the nation. He felt that to admit any flaw in the Jackson program was to forge a wedge that the aristocratic Federalists would use to regain the political reins of the nation which they had once seized under the unsuspecting Washington.

This young editor had no time for deliberation. His emotions dictated emphatically to his pen; his energies, which always called for prompt, concise action, were usually released in the form of short pungent editorials, which grew shorter and more caustic as Johns added political and private responsibilities that consumed more and more of his time. He had no appreciation, for example, of the Congressional debates over the question of the removal of the federal deposits from the Bank of the United States; after printing for many weeks the seemingly endless proceedings of Congress on this subject, he became irritated and remarked: "Less speaking and more action would be a desirable thing." Also when the Democratic party was considering the proposition of a national convention to replace the caucus nominations, Johns had no sympathy for the opinions of the

various states. He did not proclaim his newspaper's support for or against the plan, but rather called upon the administration to decide one way or the other, and he would support that choice. He apparently cared only that the haggling and debating give way to concerted action. This youthful aggressiveness, cloaked under such guises as hero worship, inconsistency, and newspaper wars, characterized the editorial page of the *Democrat* throughout Johns' editorship.

Where Editor McFarland had spoken at length about the Democratic party and its principles, his successor personified his allegiance in the name of Andrew Jackson. Johns' youthful spirit was thrilled by tales of General Jackson's great victories at Fort Mims and New Orleans, and prior to each anniversary of the latter battle Johns always attempted to stir Pittsburgh into festive celebration. In an editorial of 1834 commemorating the great triumph over Sir Edward Packenham's forces, he declared that victory had been accomplished by the "consummate skill and intrepidity of General Jackson" without a word to acknowledge the efforts of all the other Americans at New Orleans on the memorable January 8, 1815.

To demonstrate further Johns' support of his hero, it may be pointed out that he spent his own time and money to facilitate Jackson's political success in the Western Pennsylvania region. On one occasion he served as secretary to the Independent Jackson Club of Pittsburgh, and on another, at his own personal expense, he printed a large number of copies of the Democratic ticket for an election in 1835, and then invited "the true friends of Jackson" to call at his printing office and take a sufficient supply for their respective districts. He also recognized the fact that some of the western counties of Pennsylvania were without Democratic printing offices and offered to supply these counties with copies of the party ticket upon request.

Such complete submission to the principles of the New Orleans hero created dangerous pitfalls which the editorial policy of the *Democrat* could not escape. In his anxiety to have all his patrons regard Jackson with the same esteem that had penetrated his own thoughts and actions, Johns sought to uphold all of Old Hickory's measures as the acme of perfection. In order to develop this feeling he resorted to short unequivocal editorials which at times were much more explicit than the measures that they were defending warranted. Then when related measures were introduced,

Johns could not support them without appearing somewhat inconsistent after his original dictum. It was his custom, however, to support subsequent measures with the same dogmatic fervor which characterized the first and appear inconsistent.

An article appeared in the *Daily Advocate and Advertiser*, a rival Pittsburgh journal, which stated that Senator Wilkins of Pennsylvania was in line to replace William T. Barry as postmaster-general because he was out of step with the "kitchen folk." The *Advocate* was quoted: "We trust that the rumor may turn out to be true, as Mr. Wilkins is everything which Mr. Barry is not, at least he is a man of talents and business." If this were true, it would indicate that all was not running smoothly and efficiently in the Jackson government and the President was having a little trouble. Johns could not allow this impression to endure. He rallied to the support of Jackson's appointee, Barry, whose "abilities, assiduity, and efficiency," he claimed, "have rendered his department of increased and all-pervading utility," and, if any change does occur, "Mr. Barry will, probably, receive a foreign embassy, in which capacity he will, we opine, acquit himself with credit."

Within a few short weeks Johns did exactly what he had criticized the *Advocate* for doing. He censured the same postmaster for his neglect of duty, for the irregularity in the delivery of the eastern mail, especially the eastern newspapers which supplied the bulk of the printed matter for the *Democrat*. He expressed his desire that this abuse would soon meet with reform. About a year later Barry was finally replaced, in what Johns described as a "judicious move," by Amos Kendall, whose "indefatigable and industrious habits," he further asserted, could "disentangle the Post Office Department from the meshes of folly and extravagance into which imbecility and speculation had brought it." Thus the journalistic practice which caused Johns to condemn the *Advocate's* article now made the editor appear inconsistent. When Jackson elevated Kendall into his regular cabinet to replace Barry, Johns had to ridicule Barry's work, an open contradiction of his editorial against his newspaper rival, in an effort to have the President's appointment of Kendall appear all the more expedient.

This illustration is not an isolated one; it was quite a common practice for the *Democrat's* editor to appear inconsistent because he was constantly in editorial debate with the other newspapers of Pittsburgh, the *States-*

man, the *Gazette*, the *Times*, and the *Mercury*. In this newspaper rivalry, as stated above, Johns expected all editors to give the same blind submission to the administration's measures as he was willing to grant. Any promotion by rival editors of policies that were not completely favorable to Jacksonian Democracy incited Johns to action. In fact, it would appear that denunciation of newspaper editors had become an obsession with him. No editor could expect to disagree with the men and policies of Jacksonism in any manner without receiving an editorial reprimand from the *Democrat*. It appears that the editor of the *Gazette* commented in an annoying manner on the subject of democracy, but, when Johns came to censure "the Creature of the *Gazette*," he could not find that particular issue of the paper. The misinterpretation had been so grave that he couldn't remember what it was, and he could write no condemning editorial, so he simply warned his readers concerning the "iniquitous" article in the *Gazette* and informed them that he would condemn it when he discovered the lost paper. When quoting some "misconceptions" from another journal, Johns remarked: "We make the following elegant extracts from the *Pennsylvania Advocate*, premising that they are but mere drops in the bucket compared with the 'wishy washy everlasting flood,' which daily issues through that grand canal of scurrility and falsehood." Of a Whig editor he once said: "We pity the Editor of the *Statesman*, for the imperfect knowledge he seems to have acquired, since his residence in this state, of our public men. We hope he will mend in this respect, or surrender all pretensions of being 'cute and knowing'."

This bombastic criticism of his rivals was continued by Johns in a most aggressive manner, and was oftentimes based on such trivial matters as the report of a fire, which appeared in the *Advocate*. The article told of a fire which had broken out in the small offices and booths attached to the public buildings of the city and expressed, as an aside, the idea that the fire should have continued its devastation until it would have consumed the "old rookery of a court house, which disgraced our city." Johns, to be sure, made the most of this remark: "The reader will doubtless be shocked at the audacity with which the wish is expressed for the destruction of valuable county property.—When it is taken into consideration, that the important papers in the Commissioner's, Recorder and Register's, Sheriff's, Prothonotary's and other offices would share in the fate of the 'old rookery,' we are astonished at the reckless effrontery

that induced this production. . . . We admonish them to entertain no such incendiary wishes in the future."

Such absurdities were the result of either direct or indirect attempts to raise the prestige of Jacksonian Democracy. These were not, however, the only qualities which characterized Editor Johns. He possessed many of the traits of his hero, President Jackson, and both men at many times in their careers felt that they were battling "all the hosts of error." Johns felt that the United States was engaged in the most important contest that had agitated this country since the American Revolution when it was confronted with the problem of the United States Bank. He feared that the forces which had caused the Revolution were again squaring their lines for battle; these, of course, were the forces of slavery and tyranny vs. freedom. Johns, like Jackson, believed that the decision regarding the Bank held American Democracy in the balance and that a Jacksonian victory in the mid-term elections of 1834 would reaffirm the Bank's defeat in the preceding presidential campaign and would be the "last vote for freedom." In the mind of Johns the Bank issue then would preserve democracy for all time or destroy it on the American continent. "The times are portentous—the sentinels should be at their post," he remarked and, of course, regarded himself as one of the sentinels.

By November, 1833, the point at which this detailed study of the *Allegheny Democrat* was begun, Editor Johns' hatred of everything anti-Jackson was centered in Bankism. He was certain that a crisis "of the deepest moment to every citizen who has at heart the interest and the honor of his country" had arisen. He felt that "the issue in the broadest and plainest language is the CONSTITUTION on the one side and BANK MONARCHY on the other." That autumn of 1833 Samuel McKean was appointed to the United States Senate by the Pennsylvania legislature, and Johns expressed great exultation over this appointment on the grounds that McKean opposed the re-charter of the Bank and that he would be a great asset in sustaining the administration. Johns felt that this support was needed against the vicious coalition of Clay-men and Calhoun's Nullifiers whom he charged with a plot to overthrow the "present able and patriotic administration of President Jackson." He claimed that they allied themselves on all leading questions against the administration, that they were marshalling their forces for the next presidential campaign, and that Clay, Webster, and Calhoun wished to place



one of their number in the presidency and the other two in the cabinet. According to Johns, under such a triumvirate a new era would commence in this hitherto free country and the United States Bank would fasten its fangs on the people and reduce them to slavery. Thus with the purse they would associate coercion by the sword until their reign would be firmly established. Johns warned that these "fallen statesmen" sought to keep the Senate inactive so that they might force the House to combine with them in effecting the restoration of the deposits or perhaps even the re-charter of the Bank.

Besides his attack on the pro-Bank statesmen, Johns attacked the *Advocate*, a pro-Bank newspaper of Pittsburgh. He claimed the *Advocate* supported the Bank because it received approximately two thousand dollars to do so. When an attempt to re-charter the Bank in 1834 failed, "that inconsistent and versatile sheet," as Johns termed it, contained an article tinged with a feeling of disappointment and revenge. The *Democrat* quickly disclosed that the *Advocate* had committed treason because "revenge" meant "outrage" and "outrage" connoted violence, and rebellion, and even civil war—terms with which he wished the Bank to be identified.

The Bank could not accept such damaging criticism from the *Democrat*, and from allied Jackson papers all over the country, without retaliation, and the Bank authorities issued a statement saying that that institution had accumulated a surplus of nearly ten million dollars by May 1, 1834. In spite of such a favorable report, the pungent editorials of Johns still rolled on in protest. He argued that every cent of that surplus must of necessity have come from the "toil and sweat of the Poor" and yet that "greedy glee"<sup>6</sup> was demanding a re-charter to accumulate more. He then rhetorically asked: "Are the poor orphans who own stock in the Bank, not yet able to take care of themselves after sixteen years of nursing?"

Johns soon felt that this relentless attack bore fruit when in the autumn election of 1834 the Bank party (that is Whiggism and Anti-Masonry) suffered a decisive defeat in Western Pennsylvania. Proud of his triumph, Johns editorialized with much exultation: "It is our painful duty to record the DEATH AND BURIAL of BANKISM in the County of Allegheny. The funeral obsequies were discharged with great solemnity

<sup>6</sup> Or "glede," a bird of prey—Webster.

and order on Tuesday, the fourteenth day of October. The Democracy of the country buried her deep-deep in the dark grave of OBLIVION and INFAMY. The feet of nearly three thousand freemen are planted upon her grave and will prevent forever, we trust, her appearance again to life."

To the end of his journalistic career, Johns continued to translate the *Democrat's* motto, "my country, right or wrong," as "the Jackson Administration, always right." This was true, not only of domestic issues, but of foreign problems as well, although the latter were considerably fewer in number. In those years the United States was still pressing France for reparations as a result of depredations committed during the Napoleonic wars. France recognized the claim at one point and appeared on the verge of meeting the obligations when she reneged under the guise that no money had been appropriated for that purpose. When Johns learned of this failure, he urged "a contest, not of diplomacy, but of the thunders of contending fleets," and called upon the nation through the *Democrat's* subscribers to enforce to the letter Jackson's maxim: "We will ask nothing but what is right, and submit to nothing that is wrong." Thus Johns was demanding action rather than deliberation, and when a few months later the American minister was presented with his passports and the French minister to Washington was recalled, he became more belligerent in his editorial tone. "There is but one response to the hostile attitude of France. The people of the United States will not brook wrong, insult or indignity, come from what quarter it may. It now devolves upon Congress to authorize reprisals or declare war. In so doing they will be cheered and sustained by the people." Here Johns was using the *Democrat* as an instrument to stir up international animosities rather than to promote diplomatic arbitration and a peaceful sentiment toward France.

After some debate the French chambers, however, passed a bill to appropriate money for payment of the American spoliation claims, but then they declared that Jackson had used abusive language concerning the claims in his message to Congress. The French refused payment until an apology was forwarded. This again stirred our Jacksonian editor who replied for the Pittsburgh faction of Jacksonism with a terse editorial: "That is rather too much!—The conqueror of Wellington's invincibles, the victors of these identical insolent French, to assume the

humiliating posture of the culprit, and solicit pardon from men, who have by asking it, added insult to injury! . . . No, never!"

Before relations between the two countries could become more critical, the reparations were paid, effecting a satisfactory termination of a perplexing question with that "chivalrous and honorable nation" as Johns now termed France. While seemingly on the verge of a war with a European power, Jackson had also become involved in the Southwest with Mexico concerning her rebellious province of Texas. This diplomatic tilt took the spotlight in 1835 when Jackson offered to purchase Texas, but the Mexican government refused to entertain his proposition. From that point on the United States gave hardly more than formal heed to its obligations as a neutral throughout the struggle between Texas and Mexico. Again Johns took the side of Jackson and encouraged the people of Pittsburgh to aid the Texans as the riflemen of the West were already doing. He asked: "Are there not chivalrous spirits in this city ready to respond with alacrity to the call of their brethren in Texas?" He further insisted that a man with a good rifle could earn "broad acres of goodly land" in Texas and that the people of Pittsburgh were honor bound to hold a meeting and devise ways and means of supplying relief to the Texans in this their hour of need.

This plea for aid was apparently well received in Pittsburgh; in the first week of March, 1836, seventy-five persons, principally Poles and Germans, departed from that city for Texas while many others were preparing to follow. By the time these settlers reached their destination, the reports of the battle already raging indicated that the Mexicans were sweeping the Texas country without much opposition. The *Democrat*, forgetting its responsibilities as a journal of a neutral nation, remarked: "We hope this desolating tide may be checked, and that the brave spirits contending for freedom may repel its foes, and achieve their independence." Johns became convinced that perhaps the people of the United States were not employing their total abilities in the strengthening of the cause of Texan independence; his attack against the enemies of Texan freedom in the United States hit chiefly at the Abolitionists: "Some misguided fanatics in our country refuse their sympathies to the brave men struggling for the independence of Texas, on the jesuitical ground that slavery would, in that event, be perpetuated in that country! These false philanthropists would prefer the most odious tyranny, the most oppressive despotism—

one in which neither a ray of religious toleration or republican equality ever penetrated, if *white men* in common with the colored were but the victims of such galling slavery!"

This particular bit of sarcasm and other editorials demonstrate conclusively Johns' desire and ability to support and extend Jacksonian Democracy beyond the political boundaries of his country as well as to sustain it at home.

This attempt, however, to train the Jacksonian vine across international borders bespeaks the earnest conviction of Johns in the justness of his cause. At times he grew impatient and even despondent over the reluctance of many people to support whole-heartedly the Jackson party, but he did not wish to convey to his subscribers that the task before the Jacksonites was at all difficult. He would have them believe that their privileges and power were moving "ever onward and ever upward" under the tutelage of President Jackson. Every possible effort was utilized to draw support to the cause, even if it entailed going beyond the nation's borders or contradicting an earlier pronouncement. Almost any method was sanctioned to achieve the desired result, the glorification of Andrew Jackson whose actions were likened unto the appearance of a majestic hickory tree and who was saluted in verse on occasion atop the editorial column of the *Allegheny Democrat*:

Freeman cheer the Hickory Tree!  
In storm its boughs have sheltered thee  
On Freedom's soil its branches wave,  
It was planted on the LION'S GRAVE!