DANIEL STURGEON, A STUDY IN OBSCURITY

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The Constitution of the United States has provided for only two senators from each state, a factor which ought to attract more than the average amount of public attention for those who have made the grade. A state as large and politically important as Pennsylvania should be able, by virtue of this fact alone, to list its representatives in the upper house by name as well as by accomplishment. Such, however, is not the case, for in the long list of senators who served in the nineteenth century, few attained any degree of national prominence and then only as a President, political boss, or member of a Presidential cabinet.

The reasons for the well-known and lamentable obscurity of Pennsylvania senators are many and varied, and are quite often explainable only as a result of rather complete studies of the lives of those involved. One of these unknowns, Daniel Sturgeon of Uniontown, is worth considering because he combined the factors of long service in state and national public life with an almost total obscurity as far as the pages of history are concerned. From 1818 to 1858, Sturgeon pursued a political career that began with his election to the state house of representatives, took him to the state senate in 1826, made him speaker of the senate in 1828, saw him appointed auditor general under Governor George Wolf in 1830, elected him state treasurer in 1836, and finally carried him into the United States Senate where he remained from 1840 to 1851, his length of service being unsurpassed by a Pennsylvanian until Don Cameron's twenty years of service from 1877 to 1897. From 1851 to 1858, Sturgeon was director of the mint at Philadelphia and left that post to enter banking in Uniontown, where he died in 1878.

In spite of the length of his career, Senator Sturgeon became known around Uniontown as the "Silent Senator," an appellation not entirely

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2 The Dictionary of American Biography does not list his name. The Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1949, includes only a short reference to him, and the only local history to accord him a place in proportion to his career is Franklin Ellis, ed., History of Fayette County, Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1882).
deserved, and outside Uniontown he has been largely unconsidered by historians of his period of service. Had he been a ward politician or an accidental beneficiary of some political death in Pennsylvania, his obscurity might be explained, but such was not the case. He was born in Mount Pleasant, Adams (then part of York) County, Pennsylvania, on October 27, 1789. At the age of seventeen he came west with his family to Allegheny County. After attending Jefferson College in Canonsburg, and Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, he journeyed to Fayette County where he attached himself to a local physician for further medical training. In 1812, the young Dr. Sturgeon opened his first office in Greensboro, just across the Monongahela River, in Greene County. But the following year he moved his office to Uniontown, and for five years before his first steps in the field of politics, he served the community as one of several physicians. Fayette County was prosperous, with both agriculture and small industry to bring economic stability. Its population was growing and a career in medicine should have been profitable.

Lack of evidence confines Sturgeon's decision to enter politics to speculation, but for one reason or another he made his first bid for office, which was a successful one, and in 1818 he became a member of the state house of representatives. The Genius of Liberty, Uniontown's leading newspaper, called Sturgeon a Federalist, but the county was predominantly Democratic and the House Journal of the 29th Legislature listed all three Fayette County legislators as Democrats.3 Some of the confusion concerning the political position of Sturgeon came as a result of the one-party system in Pennsylvania. Federalism was dead on a national basis by 1818, but the party followers often operated successfully within the several states. Most of these followers of Federalism called themselves Democrats for practical reasons, which made for factionalism within the party. A third faction emerged when the early Jeffersonians became more conservative as the party became more liberal. Thus a middle-class medical practitioner such as Sturgeon, a banker such as John B. Trevor of Connellsville, and a "Jacobin" farmer such as George Dearth of Luzerne Township could all claim to be Democrats while being political opposites and serving as representatives

3 Genius of Liberty, Uniontown, Pennsylvania, October 17, 1818.
from the same county in the same legislature. Four legislative terms occupied the attention of Sturgeon from 1818 to 1821 when he failed to seek re-election. During that period of Sturgeon's career he became known as a sponsor for such local projects as the county home, highway construction, education, and river improvement. In spite of such an ordinary legislative program he represented a younger more vigorous element in politics and was not unwilling to seize the initiative in order to further his political career. Local political battles illustrate this quality, as for example in 1820, when it was alleged that Sturgeon and Trevor had forcibly adjourned a meeting of "Old Democrats" at Uniontown in behalf of their own candidacies. A letter was published about the event as follows:

Before this reaches you, rumors will have told you of the disgraceful and violent outrage committed upon your rights by the enemies of the people who lately assembled at Uniontown.

While they were in the peaceable exercise of this right at the house of Colonel Wiggins a body of Federalists, headed by Sturgeon and Trevor and a few others of the stamp, broke in upon them and after producing the greatest confusion, broke up the meeting. Measures, it has been discovered, were taken during the day to effect this extraordinary outrage. . . . Let us convince Messrs. Trevor and Sturgeon that they cannot effect their election by such violent measures. In another day the use of such measures might have had a greater publicity value, and the energy displayed could have been used on an imaginative legislative program and career. The ability to stay right side up on the turbulent sea of politics in Pennsylvania was for this period a more practical if less noteworthy accomplishment. What the Democratic party lacked was an effective leadership which in the person or program of one man might serve to unite the shades of political opinion. With such a well-defined political establishment a young man of Sturgeon's background and ability might have come to state and national attention. Without it, political survival was an accomplishment.

An anti-administration bias in politics began to develop in Fayette County as early as 1824. As the "era of good feelings" came to an end,

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4 Dearth sponsored a bill in 1819 that would have created a new county out of part of Fayette County (the Brownsville or western section) and Washington County. This would have divorced that district from control of the Uniontown and Connellsville politicians. See Pennsylvania, House Journal, 29th Legislature, 584.

5 Genius of Liberty, September 12, 1820.
the *Genius of Liberty* began to print "bargain and corruption" charges against Adams and Clay. As a result, by 1827 there was sufficient Jackson strength in Fayette County to warrant the publication of a Jackson newspaper in Brownsville under the picturesque title, *Fayette and Green Jacksonian Galaxy*. Most Fayette County Democratic factions rallied around the Jackson banner, as in 1826 Sturgeon became a candidate for the state senate. He defeated some of Fayette County's leading politicians, including his old enemy from the legislative wars, George Dearth, and entered the senate for the most eventful years of his political career.

In the state senate, Sturgeon gradually became associated with the Jackson movement, first, through his support of Isaac D. Barnard of Chester as successor in the United States Senate to William Findlay. Barnard had been a Jackson Democrat since 1823 and in 1826 was elected to the Senate by a margin of 103 to 11 votes. In 1827, Sturgeon became openly a Jackson advocate when he served as director of a Fayette County Jackson Democratic meeting.

The legislative session which opened in December, 1827, began with the election of Alexander Mahon as speaker of the senate. On January 8, 1828, however, the problem of electing a state treasurer was before both houses and Mahon, only recently elected speaker, was selected for the more remunerative job. Sturgeon's support of Mahon in both instances resulted in his election as speaker on the fifth ballot.

During his career as speaker of the state senate, Sturgeon continued to show an interest in local affairs, participating in local agitation for a protective tariff, and serving on a committee for river improvement involving the Monongahela River in 1832.

After the conclusion of his senate career, the young legislator was appointed auditor general by Governor Wolf. The appointment was not without possible repercussions and it suggests an ability to carry water on both shoulders, for James Buchanan, who was becoming a power in eastern Pennsylvania, had been unsuccessful in drawing Wolf

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6 Several issues of this publication are included among the files of newspapers in the Uniontown Public Library.
8 Pennsylvania *Democrat and Literary Gazette* (Uniontown), November 14, 1827.
completely into his wing of the party. Sturgeon's appointment might have caused difficulty for the new auditor with his friend Buchanan. He avoided any rupture, however, and was able to proceed to bigger things.

The state legislature elected Sturgeon state treasurer in 1836, a position which he held until he resigned on January 17, 1840. During the “Buckshot War” he had reportedly thwarted the Antimasons’ attempt to seize the office by barricading himself therein.10

Sturgeon’s service to the Democratic party was now sufficient to make him a candidate for the United States Senate. The term of Samuel McKean was coming to an end without McKean’s being able to arouse much legislative enthusiasm for his re-election. No candidate in 1838 was strong enough to replace him, however, so the election was carried over to January, 1840, when Daniel Sturgeon received 87 votes to 43 for his two opponents.11 After being represented by only one senator from March 4, 1839, to January 24, 1840, Pennsylvania now had normal representation.

Sturgeon’s new position called for the utmost in political astuteness, for in addition to the problems of maintaining a satisfactory relationship with the leading factions of the party, of which there were several, the new senator was also faced with changing economic conditions in the western half of the state. Although industry as it is currently known had not been established, enough ironworks, weaving establishments, mills of various types, and distilleries were operating to produce almost a million dollars worth of goods as early as 1810.12 In the election of 1828 in which Sturgeon had been elected to the state senate, “Tariff Andy” Stewart was sent by the very same voters to the House of Representatives in Washington, D. C. “Tariff Andy” became well known as a consistent supporter of Henry Clay’s “American System” and was Fayette County’s leading Whig. Obviously, Sturgeon had to carry the Democratic party’s program of a “tariff for revenue only” with less than crusading zeal. Rather, as he was to state before Congress, he accepted the principle of majority rule, and when evidence could be obtained of the wishes of the people, he would cast his

10 Pittsburgh Mercury, January 22, 1840.
12 United States, Census Report, 1810.
vote accordingly. To Sturgeon, even resolutions of the state legislature were collateral evidence of the people's wishes and thus he could justify a position which almost made him appear as a high-tariff Democrat.

By March 4, 1841, the Democratic party was in the depths of a political depression. Harrison and Tyler became President and Vice President, and the Democrats a party of opposition. On a variety of Whig measures, Sturgeon's was a consistent negative vote and just as consistently a minority vote. Only on the tariff issue did Senator Sturgeon fail to heed the call of the party, for both of Pennsylvania's senators voted in support of the tariff in 1842. Pennsylvania's industry had not failed to impress upon its senators the need for protection. Both Sturgeon and Buchanan voted for the tariff of 1842 and claimed that they did so only to supply the treasury with sufficient revenue. A report of the U. S. Census Bureau on manufacturing in Pennsylvania might have been more enlightening however.

As the election of 1844 approached, Sturgeon introduced petitions, resolutions, and interjected remarks in Senate debates in support of a tariff high enough to offer incidental protection. On March 20, 1844, he related the story of Pennsylvania iron manufacturers who were forced to close shop because of tariff reductions before 1842.13 No other issue seems to have called forth as much effort by the junior senator as the question of the tariff. As a result, when the Democrats nominated Polk and Dallas as their candidates for President and Vice President, Pennsylvanians were led to believe that the party stood also for the tariff of 1842. Uniontown newspapers hastened to assure its readers that the cause of protection could best be served by the Democrats and not the Whigs.14

The election of Polk was not the only concern of Dr. Sturgeon in 1844, for his own term was due to expire in March, 1845, and it was not customary for the state legislature to honor its previous choice by a second term. Buchanan had been re-elected in 1840, but before that every Pennsylvania senator had been denied a second term. In addition to precedent, there was also an undercurrent of political intrigue that was even more dangerous. The party in Pennsylvania was struggling with its various factions so that Sturgeon was required to mend his politi-

13 Congressional Globe, 28 Congress, 1 session, 576.
14 Genius of Liberty, July 25, 1844.
cal fences. He had already been approved by a party caucus, but even so he wrote to Henry Buchler in Harrisburg on December 27, 1844, and apprised him of the desirability of supporting that nomination. The legislature responded with 42 out of 71 Democrats returning Sturgeon to the Senate for his second term, not an overwhelming victory, but satisfactory.

The first session of the Twenty-ninth Congress was to greatly disillusion Pennsylvania Democrats. On both the questions of Oregon and the tariff, Polk gave evidence of being willing to view the platform figuratively rather than literally. To the 49th parallel compromise which the Polk administration effected with Great Britain, Sturgeon thrice voted nay. In debates over the tariff of 1846, Sturgeon insisted that not only was he not a free trader in the ordinary sense of the term, but insisted that Polk, prior to his election, had himself favored a tariff for revenue with incidental protection. In July, 1846, Sturgeon was forced by conviction to vote against the administration's tariff bill, an act not conducive to administrative favor.

As the national problems of expansion and slavery came to be more important than the tariff, Sturgeon's interest came to be concentrated on the several Senate committees of which he was a member. In Pennsylvania, the party leaders were finding it difficult to maintain an even keel. Simon Cameron, now junior Senator, became a Whig. In a communication with Lewis Cass, Sturgeon had indicated some surprise at Buchanan's public explanation of his opposition to the Wilmot Proviso. To some Northerners, the Proviso was a vital blow at slavery. Buchanan was inclined to view it as "mere humbug." Lewis Cass indicated to Sturgeon that on such vital problems it might be well for politicians to remain silent. Senator Sturgeon's actions seemed to indicate his agreement.

While the struggle over expansion and slavery became more pertinent, Senator Sturgeon fought a rear-guard action against his own party on the tariff question. The Genius of Liberty had used the slogan, "We go for our own state first," in the preceding election, and evi-

15 In Pennsylvania Division of Public Records.
16 Congressional Globe, 29 Congress, 1 session, 1188, 1224.
17 Cass to Sturgeon, 1847, and Buchanan to Sturgeon, December 17, 1849, in the possession of the Sturgeon family.
dently Sturgeon was committed to such a program. The repeal of the tariff of 1842 was to have an undesirable effect on the Democratic party in Fayette County if not in the entire state of Pennsylvania.

The political picture in Pennsylvania then took on a rather peculiar aspect. Democrat Francis R. Shunk was elected governor in 1847, but poor health forced him to resign and the Whigs took advantage of the special election in 1848 to elect William F. Johnston governor. This reversal of what seemed to be a Democratic trend continued to the end of Senator Sturgeon's second term. Even James Buchanan was pessimistic about the future, for in the above-cited letter to Sturgeon in 1849, he wrote as a man might write who had his career behind him.

Two possibilities, both unlikely, could have served to continue Sturgeon's career. One course might have made Sturgeon governor, for the idea had been presented by one writer in a Pittsburgh paper as early as 1848. "All can and would unite behind him. . . . With Daniel Sturgeon as our candidate for Governor, Pennsylvania will roll up her 20,000 majority with ease," said the writer, who remained anonymous, as was the custom of the day. The second course of action might have placed him in the White House. Some Southern editorial writers are said to have suggested the name of Senator Sturgeon as a suitable candidate for the Presidency in 1852.18 That nothing came of this beginning was probably due to Sturgeon's new found position on the slavery issue as well as to his lack of political personality. By 1852, Sturgeon had finally drifted away from the lead of Southern Democrats, surprising such political observers as Salmon P. Chase of Ohio, who felt that Sturgeon was probably the only Northern Senator who would vote against the admission of California.

From a middle of the road position with regard to the slavery issue, Sturgeon gradually lapsed into silence as his term of office came to an end. The Pennsylvania legislature was controlled by a coalition of members of the Whig and Know-Nothing parties, and any hope that the retiring Senator might have had for a continuation of his Senate career was gone.

Sturgeon left Washington in the summer of 1851, at a time when the Democratic party was on the verge of a short-lived comeback. He

joined the campaign of 1852 as committee head of the "Pierce and King Club," which won for him an appointment as treasurer of the Philadelphia branch of the United States Mint. This position he held until 1858, when he became associated with private banking interests in Uniontown. 

With such a career behind him it is difficult to see how the numerous contacts Sturgeon made, the political programs he supported, or just plain accident did not project him into greater prominence. A consideration of the political climate in Pennsylvania, the gradual decline of the Democratic party in the state and union, and the justifiable caution which the political wars produced in Sturgeon and other Pennsylvania politicians all contributed to the failure of such men as Sturgeon to achieve a greater place in history. If it is the function of the elected representative to reflect the opinions of his constituents, then Sturgeon would occupy a rather important place in the list of Pennsylvania senators. If, on the other hand, it is the role of the officeholder to formulate his own program, and then, through his ability to lead, win public support for it, Senator Sturgeon's obscurity is perhaps justified. Thus the problem of historical interpretation becomes wedded rather permanently to political science.

19 *Genius of Liberty*, September 3, 1858.