GEORGE WASHINGTON AND THE CRYSTALLIZATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

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George Washington made, in all, seven trips to Western Pennsylvania over a span of forty-one years. Of these, five were made in Washington's capacity as a military man: in 1753, as a Major sent to warn the French to leave the Ohio valley; in 1754, as the Colonel commanding a Virginia Regiment; in 1755, as an aide-de-camp to General Edward Braddock; in 1758 as a Colonel with the army of General John Forbes; and in 1794 as the Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the United States marching against the Whiskey Rebels—Commander-in-Chief, of course, in his constitutional capacity as the President of the United States.

Certainly these military expeditions of Washington—some ill-fated and some crowned with success—are the best known of his Odysseys over the mountains. He made two other trips, however, as a private citizen—one in 1770 to seek out and lay claim to land which was due him as a bounty for his military service against the French, and another trip in 1784. It is this last trip which provides the topic for this paper. Although Washington made the trip as a simple citizen, landowner and businessman, it had national repercussions of the most profound nature, as well as local consequences which have never been fully traced.

Following Washington's dramatic resignation as Commander-in-Chief of the American Army on December 23, 1783, he was able to return to his private affairs for the first time in almost a decade. He found them in a deplorable state. Farms, and even more so, large plantations, do not run themselves. When Washington was able to collect rent or other debts owed him from an earlier day, he was paid in depreciated paper money. During the confusion of the war, a number of his slaves had run away. The bookkeeping of Mount Vernon, which included a ferry, fishery, and mill as well as agricultural enterprise, was hopelessly tangled. To the man who had managed Mount Vernon for him during his absence, Washington owed six years back salary. Washington himself had refused any compensation during his eight years with the colors.

And if all this were not enough, Washington found himself forced

1 A paper read at a meeting of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on May 26, 1955. The paper is an outgrowth of Mr. Cleland's research on his recently published book, George Washington in the Ohio Valley—Ed.
into maintaining a standard of living even higher than the already expensive one which he had followed before the war. Visiting dignitaries, foreign travelers, and old comrades-in-arms of all sorts called at Mount Vernon in a steady stream, and availed themselves of the General's hospitality by the day, week, or even month. This was expensive.

And anyway, Mount Vernon had rarely been a paying enterprise; like much of the rest of tidewater Virginia, the soil was already wearing out by 1784.

However, Washington had extensive holdings of lands in the west, lands selected by him on his earlier trip to the interior as a private citizen in 1770. It was to these lands that he looked to recoup his fortune. With the war over, he expected that a flood of immigrants to the frontier would send land prices soaring and would thus greatly increase the value of his own holdings, which he had carefully selected not only for the richness of the soil but with an eye to mill sites, nearness to transportation, and timber value.

Washington was right in his belief that the West would rapidly fill up with settlers. Where he miscalculated was in thinking that the flood of immigrants would respect the claims of absentee landlords in the East who had done nothing to improve their holdings. The American frontiersman felt that vacant land had been put in his path by divine providence so that Christians might raise their families there, and he acted accordingly.

For these and other reasons, Washington was anxious to visit again his western holdings. Not only were these squatters on much of his land, and not only had he received no income from his mill in Fayette County, but in addition, his western land agent, Colonel William Crawford, had been killed by Indians during the Revolution. This meant that Washington was not sure of the titles or the exact locations of some of his holdings in the Ohio Valley and the valleys of the Great and Little Kanawha. All these matters needed personal attention.

There was another reason for Washington's trip. He had long been interested in linking up Virginia's great river, the Potomac, with the waters of the upper tributaries of the Ohio. Such a union would firmly tie the growing western settlements to Virginia. Virginians, including Washington, were aware of the possibility of a New York route linking the Hudson and the Great Lakes—the route which became in time the Erie Canal. Virginia, at the time the largest and most populous of the states, hoped to beat New York in the race for the trade of
the interior settlements. But no one had precise information about the practicality of linking the upper Potomac with the headwaters of the Ohio. Therefore, at the urging of Virginia's former governor, Thomas Jefferson, Washington agreed to look into this important matter while visiting his western holdings.

The result of Washington's exploration of the mountains and valleys between the Potomac and the Monongahela would make an interesting paper in itself. Washington decided that the two river systems could be linked, but the most likely connections were either the Cheat River or the Youghiogheny. To Washington's chagrin, however, both of these rivers emptied into the Monongahela within the boundaries of Pennsylvania—which meant that an all-Virginia water route to the Ohio Valley would be almost out of the question. This discouraging discovery must have had a great deal to do with Washington's thinking about the need for a central government stronger than the one provided by the Articles of Confederation then in force. A stronger central government could prevent one or another of the states from interfering with inter-state commerce.

Even the navigation of the Potomac presented inter-state problems. Although it marked the boundary between Virginia and Maryland, it was technically under the control of Maryland. This was a problem when, upon his return from his western trip of 1784, Washington helped to organize a canal company, the Potomac Company, aimed at improving the navigation of the Potomac as the first link of a waterway system to the Ohio Valley.

Washington became the president of this company upon its formation in 1785. It is not unreasonable to say that the Constitution of the United States sprang in part from the activities of this company. In order to proceed, it had to have the cooperation of both Virginia and Maryland. Washington succeeded in getting the legislatures of the two states to agree to this. Further, commissioners from the two states, meeting at Mount Vernon as Washington's guests, agreed that representatives of the two states should meet every year to discuss their trade problems.

In 1786, the other states were invited to attend this annual meeting, held that year in Annapolis. It was this meeting at Annapolis which issued the call for the constitutional convention to meet the following year in Philadelphia. There were, of course, many other causes why many Americans of 1787 were for a new government, but in a very
direct sense, the machinery which launched the movement grew out of Washington's desire to link Virginia and the Ohio Valley commercially.

The subject of this paper, however, is not the influence of Western Pennsylvania on the formation of national political parties, but the influence of Washington on the formation of Western Pennsylvania political parties.

Washington's role in Western Pennsylvania politics grew out of his status as a Western Pennsylvania landowner. So long as Washington was a distant figure, a vague national hero far away, he enjoyed the affection of Western Pennsylvania. When he arrived in 1784 in the midst of the Monongahela country in person, however, and firmly requested the back rent, he suddenly seemed less glamorous.

Probably Washington's first cool reception in his trip to the back country in 1784 came when he visited his mill at what is now Perryopolis, Fayette County. Colonel William Crawford had selected the mill site for him, and Washington had approved the location personally on his trip of 1770. In 1773, he had entered into a partnership with a Virginia neighbor, Gilbert Simpson, to build and operate the mill. Washington provided slaves, tools and capital, while Simpson was to superintend the building and operation of the mill. But although Washington expended £1200 on the mill, he had by 1784 received almost no income from it. He had resolved, therefore, to sell his half of the mill, and had advertised in advance an auction sale of his share of the partnership.

At the auction, however, he met a situation often found at auctions among farmers who are in debt. Though many attended the sale—largely out of curiosity, Washington believed—no one would bid on Washington's share of the mill. To do so would have been unneighborly to Simpson. In the end, Washington was forced to renew his unremunerative partnership with Simpson.

This was a disappointing beginning, but even greater difficulty lay ahead. It was to appear when Washington crossed the Monongahela River into Washington County. Ironically enough, Washington County, Pennsylvania, probably gave George Washington more trouble than any other county in the United States. Later, of course, it was to be the central stronghold of the Whiskey Rebels.

In 1784, Washington owned 2800 acres of land in Washington County. It had been selected for him in 1771 by Crawford, and was located on Miller's Run, a branch of Chartier's Creek, near Canons-
burg. Colonel George Croghan, however, disputed Washington's title to the tract; Croghan claimed he owned it. Further, Croghan had been selling the land to settlers ever since 1775. Therefore, in 1784, Washington found that a number of families had been living on his land for ten years, had made improvements, and believed that they owned it.

These settlers had come to see Washington at Gilbert Simpson's. Of their visit, Washington wrote in his diary at the time: "This day also, the people who live on my land on Miller Run came here to set forth their pretensions to it; and to inquire into my right—after much conversation and attempts in them to discover all the flaws they could in my deed—and to establish a fair and upright intention in themselves—and after much counselling which proceeded from a division of opinion among themselves—they resolved (as all who lived on the land were not here) to give me their definite determination when I should come to the land. . . ."

Since these tenants were not only Scotch-Irish but also Presbyterians—Washington called them "a society of seceders"—they proceeded to go home and organize themselves.

Several days later, Washington met with the leaders of his tenants—David Reed, who was a Justice of the Peace, and James Scott (remember this name) who was the real leader of the tenants, as it turned out. This is how Washington described the meeting in his diary for the day:

Dined at David Reeds, after which Mr. James Scott and Squire Reed began to enquire whether I would part with the land, and upon what terms; adding that tho' they did not conceive they could be dispossessed, yet to avoid contention, they would buy, if my terms were moderate. I told them I had no inclination to sell; however, after hearing a great deal of their hardships, their Religious principles (which had brought them together as a society of seceders) and unwillingness to separate or remove; I told them I would make them a last offer. [This] they had a long consultation upon [and] then determined to stand suit for the Land; but it having been suggested that there were among them some who were disposed to relinquish their claims, I told them I would receive their answers individually; and accordingly by calling them as they stood . . . they severally answered that they meant to stand suit, and abide the issue of the law."

There was no break in the ranks. The country people stood together against an outsider, no matter how famous.

3 Ibid., II, 297-8.
It is here that the political thread begins. The lawyer who took the case for the settlers was Hugh Henry Brackenridge, later to be one of the founders of the Anti-federalist party in Western Pennsylvania. No doubt the case helped Brackenridge to solidify his ties with the farm folk.

The political thread continues when it is learned that the man who eventually bought the Miller's Run tract from the Washington family was Alexander Addison, who in the 1790's was a staunch Federalist judge. When the Anti-federalist Party took over the government of Pennsylvania, Addison was one of the first persons removed from office. His impeachment and conviction was one of the hottest party battles of the day. Perhaps his unpopularity with the Anti-federalist farmers can be traced in part to his purchase of the Miller's Run lands.

Washington won the ejectment suit. The test case was tried against James Scott, the man everyone knew to be the leader of the settlers.

The antagonism aroused, however, remained alive in the area for a long time. In the 1880's and 1890's, a century later, when county histories were being compiled, descendants of the evicted families still talked about the case.

In the J. H. Beers Record of Washington County, one finds a descendant complaining that "General Washington would not allow the settlers any rights nor any compensation for the improvements." In McFarland's Washington and Washington County one reads, "This was the most distinguished company of visitors which has ever called at a country farm house in Washington County—General Washington, Sheriff Swearingen, Colonel Nevil, Colonel Canon and Captain Richey—but the plain McBrides, Biggers, Scotts and Reeds were not to be frightened off their eleven years holdings by dignity. There was no ovation in Washington County at his coming and no tears shed on his going." Boyd Crumrine, in his History of Washington County, recalls hearing the story from a very old surviving son of one of the evicted settlers. Crumrine writes: "Concerning the interview between Washington and the settlers, the story has been told and retold for almost a century that the general declared he would have the land, and accompa-

4 J. H. Beers, Commemorative Biographical Record of Washington County (Chicago, 1893), 885.
nied the declaration with an oath, for which Squire Reed promptly fined him five shilling, which the Commander-in-Chief as promptly paid, and accompanied the payment with an apology . . ."6 Crumrine believed the story was untrue, but the fact that it was retold for so long indicates the attitude of the local residents.

James Scott, leader of the tenants of 1784, reappears on the political scene in Western Pennsylvania in 1796. Again the issue in question was land titles. A number of farmers had begun settlements in the newly opened Beaver Valley, only to have two large land companies dispute their claim. Again the settlers met to organize resistance, this time in a formal way.

They met at the home of James Scott and created what became a permanent organization, the Pennsylvania United Settlers, usually referred to by the shorter title of the "Actual Settlers." The lawyer retained by the Actual Settlers was the lawyer who had defended Washington’s tenants in 1784, Hugh Henry Brackenridge. The spokesman for the Actual Settlers in the legislature of Pennsylvania—and he was an eloquent one—was Albert Gallatin, a future Anti-federalist Cabinet member. The elected agent of the Actual Settlers was John B. C. Lucas, who was to go on from this political springboard to the bench, the state legislature, congress, and finally a federal judgeship. Abner Lacock, another of the founders of the Actual Settlers, eventually reached the United States Senate. The purpose of the Actual Settlers, its form, and the people involved—James Scott and Hugh Henry Brackenridge—suggest strongly that it sprang from George Washington’s eviction suit of the previous decade.7

The Actual Settlers had a long career in Western Pennsylvania politics, and were a stepping stone for many Democratic-Republican party leaders. Until well after the turn of the century, district newspapers carried notices of their meetings and resolutions. A full history of this interesting frontier organization is yet to be written.

In concluding, one can ask—would the formation of parties have been the same in Western Pennsylvania if Washington had never been

6 Boyd Crumrine, History of Washington County (Philadelphia, 1882), 858.
7 For a more detailed account of the formation and functioning of the Actual Settlers, see Hugh G. Cleland, “John B. C. Lucas, Physiocrat of the Frontier”, Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine, XXXVI, 92-100 (June, 1953.)
a landowner here? It is probable that they would, although the personnel and form would no doubt have differed. However, Washington's activity here—because he kept records, and because the records have been preserved—gives us an additional insight into the early politics of this region.