BOOK REVIEWS


It may seem difficult in view of the tight grip on City Hall that the Democratic Party has maintained in Pittsburgh during the last generation to realize the dominant role of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh politics throughout most of its history. In this well-researched volume, begun as a doctoral dissertation at Johns Hopkins University, the author, an assistant professor of history at Yale, explores the early years of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh as part of a social analysis of the politics of the 1850's. Making use of quantitative techniques to determine the appeal, leadership, and constituency of local political parties at that time, Professor Holt musters a considerable amount of support for his contention that local issues were more important than national conflicts in explaining the political behavior of Pittsburghers.

Challenging traditional interpretations that stress the importance of anti-slavery and tariff stands in promoting Republican success, Holt attaches greater weight to ethnic and religious antagonisms. A depression in Pittsburgh's leading (iron) industry in the late 1840's combined with increasing competition from municipal rivals like Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Chicago to exacerbate tensions in the community between the native born population and the largely Irish and German immigrants that constituted more than a third of the city's population in 1850. These tensions enabled the Know Nothing Party that emerged in Pittsburgh after the breakup of the Whig Party organization to develop unusual and persistent strength that deflected a straight line evolution from Whigs to Republicans. Yet in the long run the Know Nothings furthered the Republican cause by providing a "halfway house" through which Anti-Nebraska Democrats could pass on their journey into the Republican Party.

Split by factionalism, Pittsburgh Democrats were unable to prevent their Republican adversaries from constructing a broad coalition that exceeded even the Whig mastery of local electoral contests. So it was that by 1860, a well-organized Republican Party in Pittsburgh was in a position to give Lincoln a larger percentage of the popular vote than in any other major city in the country.

With an impressive quantity and variety of manuscript collec-
tions, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia newspapers, church and census records, and other public documents, Holt demonstrates in this study the complexity of motivation and behavior of Pittsburgh voters. Also he suggests that by concentrating on events leading to the Civil War, historians may have ignored the essential continuity in politics of the prewar and postwar years.

The strengths of this book are obvious. Its principal shortcoming, which affects its readability, is its author's preoccupation, perhaps inherent in his method, with groups and classes at the expense of individuals. From time to time Holt mentions the names of leading Republican politicians like Congressman James J. Moorhead and Thomas M. Howe and Democratic chieftains such as David Lynch and Charles Shaler. But their personalities remain indistinct in contrast to the party machinery they manipulated.

One other reservation may be voiced that relates to the author's use of statistics. The table on "Comparative Population Growth of Cities" among the appendices (p. 318) tends to give an exaggerated impression of the slow rate of Pittsburgh's population growth in relation to other cities. Although Pittsburgh's population grew only about six per cent between 1850 and 1860, the increase in population of Allegheny County from 138,000 to about 178,000 in the same decade is indicative of demographic trends that the table does not disclose. Indeed the much greater apparent population growth of Philadelphia and St. Louis is explained by major annexations of outlying territory of a kind that Pittsburgh did not experience until after the Civil War.

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James T. Flexner has written a series of biographical sketches on pioneering medical men of America. His narrative style has made each one of these men very much alive — their personalities clearly outlined. He has looked behind the front of the M.D. and depicted the true image of the man: small, arrogant and impulsive on some occasions, and then again magnanimous, humble and cautious on others.