IN 1849, PARTNERS TURNED ENEMIES COMPETED TO PRODUCE THE FIRST LITHOGRAPH DRAWINGS OF PITTSBURGH — AND TO DECIDE HOW LOCAL CITIZENS AND THE NATION WOULD VIEW THE NEW INDUSTRIAL CITY.

A TALE OF TWO CITY VIEWS

RINA C. YOUNGNER

VIEW OF PITTSBURGH

Two artists, Mssrs Whitefield and Smith are now soliciting subscriptions to publish an elegant view of our city as seen from Coal Hill. The sketches, which we have examined, do the city ample justice and the engraving when finished, will be very valuable. The same artists have taken views of Boston, Brooklyn, Rochester and Cincinnati and we hope will be encouraged to add Pittsburgh to the list. To do this three hundred copies must be secured, and we think will be readily. The expense is five dollars, payable on delivery of the engraving, so that no one will be called upon for pay, until he has the value received in hand.

WHEN the Pittsburgh Daily Gazette printed this story on April 15, 1848, lithographic drawings or “views” of the landscape, especially of cities, had been popular for more than a decade, but this view by Whitefield and Smith was the first to be offered of Pittsburgh. It is worthy of some study because of a controversy that swirled around its producers for several months.

Lithographic views depicted towns as seen from a hilltop or other elevated point above the city, and showed street patterns, buildings, and recognizable landscape features. Views functioned both as advertisements for town boosters and as decorations in homes and offices. Lithography, a printing technology developed in the early 1830s, made possible these early examples of popular art, in the form of cheap, mass-produced images, though the view-making industry did not flourish until after the Civil War. Lithograph views were especially popular in the northeastern United States. Between 1830 and 1920, at least one view was printed for 2,400 places, and 10 metropolitan areas inspired more than 30 views each.¹

A view-maker would enter a town, show a preliminary sketch, and solicit subscriptions for a composition which would be lithographed and delivered some time later. The artist often had agents work with him to create interest among townspeople. After securing enough subscribers to make the enterprise worthwhile, he got a street plan, adjusted it to an oblique perspective, and then spent days walking the streets and drawing the individual buildings, homes, and landmarks which he placed on the plan. Most artists drew the image on a transfer sheet and sent it to the printer. When the view was complete, the artist or his agent would return to town, deliver copies to those who had bought

¹Rina Youngner iscurator of an exhibition of prints, paintings and photographs called “The Artist Looks at Industrial Pittsburgh, 1838-1993,” June 3-30 at the University Art Gallery in the Frick Fine Arts Building, University of Pittsburgh. The subject of this article, Edwin Whitefield’s “View of Pittsburgh, Pa., 1849” (bottom) and G.W. Smith Co.’s “Pittsburgh and Allegheny from Coal Hill, 1849,” (top) will be part of the exhibition. Youngner adapted this article from research for her 1991 dissertation at the University of Pittsburgh, “Paintings and Graphic Images of Industry in Nineteenth Century Pittsburgh: A Study of the Relationship Between Art and Industry.”
them by subscription, and also arrange to sell copies through a gallery or other retail establishment. Views sold for $5 to $5 a sheet, and it is clear that the viewmaker had to calculate his costs very closely. The asking price had to be cheap enough to attract the greatest number of buyers and yet high enough to give the artist a return on his time and effort.2

When Whitefield and George Warren Smith came to Pittsburgh in 1848, Whitefield had been a viewmaker for several years and had collected favorable reviews for his other work. (Whitefield, in fact, had a long but not very successful career as a painter and illustrator.) Smith traveled around the city with him, working as his agent. Some 15 months later, a pencil and ink sketch of the city was shown at the offices of the Gillespie company on Wood Street, according to the Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch of July 10, 1849. The sketch promoted the final drawing which was to cost $5 when complete that fall — payable to the G.W. Smith Co. According to the newspaper story, George Smith would be in town for a few more days signing up subscribers. Whitefield had not yet finished his view, and now his former agent was soliciting for his own!

The resulting race between Whitefield and Smith to claim credit for the first popular view of Pittsburgh was fought in the pages of the Daily Gazette, and reviewing the struggle exposes the peculiar subculture of this mid-nineteenth century art business. In fact, trying to follow, 140 years later, the episode’s bizarre twists and turns, charges and counter-charges, gives some idea of the complex nature of the business. Although there was potential for substantial profit, the demands of the trade were many: the viewmaker not only had to be an able draftsman but also had to gauge the market for his view in advance of its production. This required him to rely on a network of agents and helpers who continually traveled between cities to market his work. As the Whitefield-Smith story shows, agents often worked without the supervision of the viewmaker; if conflict arose or opportunity otherwise presented itself, co-workers easily became competitors. As the reader will see, the situation was aggravated greatly by the fact that no lithographer existed in Pittsburgh to print the view when Whitefield began to sign up subscribers.3

On September 10, 1849, two months after the Dispatch’s notice appeared, Smith placed an ad in the Gazette promising his view later in the fall and disavowing any connection with a “view of Pittsburgh about to make its appearance” in the city. He went on to say the drawing was to be published by “Hudson and Smith” — identified later by Whitefield as the New York lithographer with which he’d had a long relationship.

Whitefield arrived in Pittsburgh either on September 10 or September 11, because on September 12, his long, passionate letter in the Gazette brought the struggle to the public. “A large number of the inhabitants of Pittsburgh will remember that they subscribed for a view of their city in the spring of 1848,” wrote Whitefield. “The young man who called on them was an agent of mine named Geo. W. Smith, who, no artist whatsoever himself... I employed... as a canvasser.”

Whitefield then called Smith an “unsatisfactory character” in “financial matters,” so much so that he had threatened Smith with legal measures. Whitefield said he had not heard of Smith’s whereabouts until his reported reappearance in Pittsburgh, where he was gathering new subscriptions, surely using Whitefield’s list of subscribers, “to which he had no more right than the man in the moon.” Whitefield challenged Smith:

[Let him come here, meet me face to face before a legal tribunal.... I shall be found at any time for the next week or ten days at the Monongahela House, where I shall be happy to see and more fully explain matters to any respectable person who may feel sufficiently interested to call. My view is now ready for delivery.

The letter was repeated the next day, September 13. In a short article accompanying the letter, the Gazette’s editor backed Whitefield — after all, the editor reasoned, Whitefield had originated the idea of a Pittsburgh view and was “a gentleman” to boot. (Two weeks later, on September 26, the newspaper would report that Whitefield was executing a new city view and two smaller views — one from Bailly’s Springs and the other from Troy Hill above Allegheny. He probably was doing this to win back his former subscribers. However, no trace of these images has survived.)

On September 28, the Gazette published a lengthy reply from Smith, sent from New York. Some of the language he used in the letter obfuscates the facts terribly, but the upshot is that he claims to have seen a view of Pittsburgh being printed in the New York lithographic shop of Hudson and Smith. The lithography firm almost always prominently displayed its name on the print, but “it was clear” in this case, George Smith insisted, that Whitefield had hoped to benefit from the name “Smith” appearing on the print. Smith further alleged this would make customers think that Whitefield’s view was the one that G.W. Smith & Co. had promised to issue that fall.

In addition, Smith claimed that the view he saw at the lithographer’s shop was not signed by the artist, but this is evidently an oversight or a lie, because Whitefield’s signature appears on it in two places. It is also possible that Smith saw an early version, and Whitefield signed it
after Smith saw it — right before it was prepared for duplication by the lithographer.

Smith goes on in his letter to say that he had encountered Whitefield, bound for Pittsburgh, on a train from New York. The train stopped in Philadelphia, and Smith said they even spent the night there in the same hotel:

[H]e did not take the opportunity of prosecuting those long threatened legal measures against me, or new ones for my more recent flagrant violence of his rights....
[A]lmost anyone in New York can tell him my office is at 131 Nassau Street in that city, and that I am to be found there.

On his arrival at Pittsburgh, he met my notice, and it must have foiled his design. But he was there with a large quantity of printed views, and could not afford to lose them and the expense of his journey. Then it was that he conceived the scheme of blackening my character as a renegade and an imposter, in order to sell his picture in advance of mine and in spite of my subscription... It is for him, if his story be true, as it surely is not — to sue me for that subscription book...I append a document in defence of my character as an artist....

Appearing at the end of the letter was the following, signed by one “B.F. Smith Jr.”:

Boston, Sept. 18, 1849
I, the undersigned, hereby declare I am the only artist G. Warren Smith employed on his view of Pittsburgh. He assisted me in taking the sketches, and the whole thing was made under his directions. Concerning a paragraph which appeared in the Pittsburgh papers, to the effect that G. W. Smith had no knowledge of drawing, I consider a wilful falsehood.

One must wonder why Smith, in his letter, did not identify “B.F. Smith” as Benjamin Franklin Smith Jr., his youngest brother.

Whitefield’s reply of October 1 in the Gazette clarifies some points:

Mr. Geo. W. Smith no doubt finds it very convenient to shift the enquiry from his character to mine.... I will briefly notice his insinuations against me: 1st. The name of Hudson and Smith — this is a house in Fulton Street N.Y. with whom I have long had business transactions, and who have always had my views for sale. The object he supposed I had in using their name is worthy only of himself, and too ridiculous for any sane person to believe.

2nd. Why did I not arrest him in Philadelphia? For the very simple reason that I could not do so until I had procured a warrant, and after obtaining one, he was not be found, although I searched every probable place until 10 o’clock P.M....

3rd. He says I can find him at his office 131 Nassau Street, N.Y. — This is as pretty a bit of gasconading as I have heard of for some time, and will do for those who know no better. He has no office. The place he names is the establishment of Fowler and Wells, Phrenologists, and the simple truth simply is that he is acquainted with one of their clerks, who allows him to have letters directed there...

[H]is cousin [sic], B. F. Smith, Jr. (formerly a pupil of mine,) whose certificate, stripped of its bad English, purports merely that Geo. W. Smith possesses a knowledge of drawing. I again assert that he cannot make the simplest sketch in the world.... I exceedingly regret that I have been compelled to annoy the public with these matters....

My new drawing is now completed, and all who feel a desire to encourage me, will shortly have an opportunity so to do.

As for the newspaper’s position in the dispute, it changed. The editor praised Whitefield’s work on November 10, but switched sides in an article on December 8:

Messrs. G. Warren Smith and Co., have laid upon our table their long promised view of Pittsburgh, and it is certainly a very beautiful affair. We think these gentlemen have fully redeemed their promise, and we cheerfully, commend their work to the inspection and patronage of our citizens.

By that time, Whitefield probably had left town, unable to compete. The Smith brothers had won the struggle in Pittsburgh. Regardless of Whitefield’s charges against them as businessmen, he certainly was both slow and lax. The Smiths may have stolen Pittsburgh subscribers from him, but they also quickly produced a highly detailed, well-printed image of the city. Their image enjoyed wide popularity and dissemination while Whitefield’s never reached wide circulation. A suburban Pittsburgh collector, Raymond Wright of Mr. Lebanon, Pa., is believed to own the only copy of this lithograph in existence.4

Both views of the city are large, designed to hang in an office or home. Both show the city’s busy commercial front, the Monongahela Wharf between the Point and the new Monongahela Bridge. However, Whitefield’s image is inept. The city’s relationship to its surroundings is ill-defined: the entire foreground is the river; the Monongahela Bridge is absurdly stretched out and not anchored to the south bank; the convergence of the three rivers is beyond the frame of the image. Even though Whitefield did show the courthouse and the leading hotel (the Monongahela House), as well as the undeveloped area of Grant Hill, he packed the streets with generalized buildings, making the city seem unreal and generic. He clearly had not studied the city enough.
Whitefield was well into his career, having produced many charming views of other cities and small towns in a “picturesque” style made popular by influential landscape painters and travelogue writers in the early years of the century.\(^5\) It is hard to explain why Whitefield, known to be a methodical and prodigious artist, took nearly a year and a half to execute his view of Pittsburgh. Although there is no evidence to support my theory, it seems likely that he was simply defeated by the smoky, industrializing nature of Pittsburgh at mid-century. Certainly the city’s appearance would have been difficult to sanitize in a picturesque drawing.

By contrast, the Smith view is detailed. Individual buildings are recognizable along the rivers. Although the title is “Pittsburgh and Allegheny from Coal Hill, 1849,” the industries of Birmingham are clear at the right edge of the view. Factories cluster around the four bridges over the Allegheny. The lithograph is richly hand colored and 16 numbers placed along the bottom of the image indicate points of interest: churches, the courthouse, the Monongahela House, and industries — rolling mills, cotton factories, glass works — along the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers.

The foreground of the Smith view is the top of Coal Hill (Mt. Washington); trees, bushes, rocks, and meadow extend across the picture plane; at Jones Landing below Coal Hill, wagons, animals, and men wait for the ferry. These details, however, are only a formulaic decorative frame for a portrait of a manufacturing city. The Smith brothers did not possess the picturesque sensibility evident in many of Whitefield’s works. Instead, Benjamin Franklin and George Warren Smith appealed to citizens’ pride and captured the Pittsburgh market. Their view immediately became the model for a series of locally produced Pittsburgh views which culminated in Otto Krebs’s 1871 view, “Pittsburgh, Birmingham, & Allegheny.” Further, because the Smith view was reproduced in The Ladies’ Repository national magazine of April 1854, it shaped the country’s idea of Pittsburgh for some time.\(^6\)

When Trinity Court, a Pittsburgh studio photographer, copyrighted and re-published this view on December 9, 1905, Andrew Carnegie bought a copy and annotated it, “The year of our Arrival in Pittsburgh.

\(^7\) Like many other Pittsburghers, he was anchoring his memories with this image of early Pittsburgh.

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3. According to ads and articles which appeared in the *Pittsburgh Daily Gazette* in October 1849, the city’s first lithography firm was opened that month by German immigrant brothers, William and George F. Schuchman.
5. See illustrations in Norton.
6. *The Ladies’ Repository*, Spring 1854, frontispiece. The commentary is on page 191, in “Editor’s Table.” A monthly periodical devoted to literature, art, and religion, *The Ladies’ Repository* was published by the Western Methodist Book Concern in Cincinnati from 1841 to 1876. The magazine, printed on good paper and embellished with many engravings, was an immediate success and called by some the “art journal of America.” It soon expanded from 32 to 64 pages, and by 1854, when the Pittsburgh view was published, its circulation had reached 18,000. Circulation peaked at 40,000.

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**PHOTO CREDITS**

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**Directory’s Gallery**

*Courtesy of Meadowcroft Village*