

PITTSBURGH AND THE "TERRIBLE HEMPFIELD"¹

E. DOUGLAS BRANCH

PITTSBURGH was spawned and spanked by commercial rivalry. Its wedge at the Forks of the Ohio was coveted, quarreled over, by France and England, and nearly as keenly (though with fewer drums and muskets) by Pennsylvania and Virginia. Until the defeat of the particularistic tradition by the Civil War, Pittsburgh was as tenaciously jealous in behalf of its own interests as was any other city or any state. The exchange of inverted compliments between Pittsburgh and its rival river town, Wheeling, is a dialogue covering some fifty years. Its most profane sequences were invoked by the building of the National Road to Wheeling, Wheeling's persistent claim to be the head of unobstructed navigation on the Ohio, the location of the Government Marine Hospital, rivalry between the Pittsburgh-Cincinnati and the Wheeling-Louisville steamboat packet lines, the construction of the Wheeling bridge, and the competitive efforts of each city to coax the Baltimore and Ohio to its spot on the Ohio.²

This latter struggle endowed Pittsburgh, in 1846, with another cordial dislike—for Philadelphia. With Philadelphia legislators and merchants obstructing the way of the B & O into Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh's ire was manifested in a shower of editorial gauntlets and town-meeting resolutions, pledges of nonintercourse with Philadelphia merchants, and proposals to abolish "the obsolete law of state treason" so that the boundaries of eastern and western Pennsylvania might be "peaceably settled."³ But

¹ This article is a by-product of Dr. Branch's work, as research professor of history in the University of Pittsburgh, in the preparation of a forthcoming volume on "Travelways of Western Pennsylvania." *Ed.*

² F. Frank Crall, "A Half-Century of Rivalry Between Pittsburgh and Wheeling," *ante*, 13: 237-255 (October, 1930).

³ E. Douglas Branch, "Success to the Railroad," *ante*, 20: 3-7 (March, 1937).

with the creation, out of this scuffle, of the Pennsylvania Railroad, and the vigorous beginnings of work on this road from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh, the animus in Pittsburgh was quickly sweetened. "Philadelphia, at last wide awake, stretched out her hands and asked for help to reach us"—as editor David N. White benignly recalled the action of the Allegheny County councils in 1848—"we gave her our credit to the amount of *one million of dollars*, a sum which would have frightened us out of our propriety a few years before."⁴

Almost simultaneously with the beginnings of Pennsylvania Central construction, Pittsburgh funds were launching a railroad enterprise into the West—the Ohio and Pennsylvania, designed to bisect the heart of the rich wheat region of Ohio and to link into a complex arterial system with Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois railroads. Charters existed for other railroads to emanate from Pittsburgh; but these projects slept in the pleasant incubator of the future. Pittsburgh seemed secure with its two great roads under construction—to quote again from the editorial just cited, "one stretching to the Atlantic tide-water, and the other marching westward with rapid strides, to the Pacific; and which will never rest until it laves its western terminus in that magnificent highway of Oriental nations." Philadelphia again seemed the older sister with whom Pittsburgh shared the commercial and sentimental fruits of mutual interest; and the labors of the B & O in hacking its tortuous way over the mountains from Cumberland to Wheeling were a subject of patronizing jest.

When the Hempfield Railroad intruded, on May 15, 1850, into this picture of incipient prosperity, its entrance was so quiet that Pittsburghers were unaware even of the incorporation of the road until mid-June. Within three years the Hempfield had reopened the old rancor between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, poured brine into the sore spots of Pittsburgh-Wheeling rivalry, and impelled Pittsburgh and Allegheny County upon a railroad building spree which added four million dollars to the civic obligations and tapped private pockets with like avidity.

The Hempfield was a road to run from Greensburg, twenty-six miles

⁴ *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, August 19, 1852.

east of Pittsburgh, to Wheeling.⁵ The project would divert the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad on a tangent twenty-five miles south of Pittsburgh, directly toward Wheeling. Especially since Allegheny County's million dollars had been contributed to the Pennsylvania with the understanding that the funds were to be used on the Pittsburgh division of the road, the sponsors of the Hempfield bill preferred to be anonymous. The Pittsburgh press variously accused the leading citizens of Greensburg, the directors of the Pennsylvania Railroad, and an "unscrupulous clique" from Wheeling alleged to have burrowed into Pennsylvania politics.⁶ The Greensburg *Intelligencer* reached a verdict according to the evidence available in 1850: "The important question as to 'who did it' is in the same category with the individual who 'struck Billy Patterson.'" But the dangers in the enterprise for Pittsburgh were clear; and at the first alarms from the press Pittsburghers met in town meeting. Where, editorials inquired, were the Allegheny County representatives "that they did not arrest this insidious movement"? Was it true that engineers of the Pennsylvania Railroad had been granted leave of absence to survey the Hempfield line? Should not the county commissioners withhold the bonds yet undelivered to the Pennsylvania Railroad "until this fraud can be investigated and defeated"? But at the town meeting none of the legislators was present to be quizzed. Solomon W. Roberts, chief engineer of the Ohio and Pennsylvania, cited the enormous costs of the Hempfield route, over two large streams and rugged terrain, against the heavy commitments of Philadelphia and Wheeling to other railroads, to imply that the Hempfield would not be built; whereas the O & P and its allied roads would soon be "a vast funnel sucking business into the vortex" of Pittsburgh. The reassured citizens adopted a series of facetious

⁵ *An Act to Incorporate the Hempfield Rail Road Company*, Philadelphia, 1853 (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

⁶ E.g., in the *Daily Commercial Journal* (Pittsburgh), April 4, 1853: that the people of Wheeling had been in "opposition, unscrupulous and unrelaxing from the beginning"; had somehow obtained control of the press of Philadelphia, and "awakened unnatural jealousies and distrust against Pittsburgh."

⁷ *Westmoreland Intelligencer* (Greensburg), quoted in *Pittsburgh Daily Gazette*, June 22, 1850.

resolutions, and, as the press recorded, "adjourned in the midst of uproarious bursts of laughter, and applause."⁸

But Greensburg harkened to the future sounds of metropolitan bustle. In forty years the town had grown from a population of 685 to—according to the census of 1850—1,057; it was essentially a double string of taverns along the Pittsburgh Turnpike, a courthouse, and a cow-pasture commons. Now it was marked as a central point in a chain of railroads; and the editor of the village weekly extended a tolerant rebuke to Pittsburgh's distrust of the Hempfield project: "We ask for no money from the common treasury to make this road; private enterprise will do that, and if any of the citizens of Pittsburgh desire to flee from the 'wrath to come,' let them make their homes in our midst, where they will meet with a hearty welcome and plenty of room and scope for their enterprise and industry."⁹

And in Washington, thirty miles south by southwest from Pittsburgh, on the Hempfield line, the enterprise was taken up with more than verbal enthusiasm.¹⁰ Citizens volunteered for service in the preliminary explorations under the supervision of the Hempfield's engineer; and here books for the subscription of stock were first opened, on August 26, 1850.

In January, 1851, the Hempfield was organized with a full slate of officers. The Virginia legislators disappointed Pittsburghers' expectations by granting a charter permitting the road to run across the Virginia Panhandle to Wheeling. Hempfield prospectuses listed five western "tributaries"—from Cleveland, Alton, Indianapolis, Columbus, Nashville, Cincinnati—designed to focus at Wheeling, where their trade, plus the Ohio river traffic, would seek the East: "It is not pretended," the literature modestly stated, "that this trade . . . is all to be monopolized by the Hempfield. Such a monopoly is impossible. It will be divided, in some proportion which experience is to decide, between our own line and that

⁸ *Pittsburgh Daily Gazette*, June 8, 11, 1850; *Daily Commercial Journal* (Pittsburgh), June 10, 12, 1850.

⁹ *Pennsylvania Argus and Westmoreland Democrat* (Greensburg), June 14, 1850, quoted in *Pittsburgh Daily Gazette*, June 15, 1850.

¹⁰ *Pittsburgh Daily Gazette*, August 16, 1850.

of our enterprising southern competitor"—the Baltimore and Ohio!"¹¹

Pittsburgh editors might decry the folly of locating railroads with a ruler and pencil on a common map, might remark that "mountains, rivers, steep grades, and short local curvatures are small matters to gentlemen who locate rail roads as the bird flies through the air";¹² that a railroad entering Grave Creek (the only practicable ingress to Wheeling from the south or east) perforce must terminate in a graveyard; but Pittsburghers had now to face the stubborn probability that the road would be built. "This terrible Hempfield humbug," said the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, "is the awful dragon in the way of every line looking towards Pittsburgh"; and the *Pittsburgh Commercial Journal* put the exigent query, will Pittsburgh "sit idle and take her chance of the competition?"¹³

The first proposals for an aggressive defense seized upon a quaint enthusiasm of the times—the intercepting of a portion of the Hempfield trade by the building of a plank road from Pittsburgh to Washington. The *Commercial Journal* volunteered the remarkable advice that "it is well ascertained that locomotive engines, if required, could be used upon it as efficiently as upon an iron railroad; but it is probable that every good purpose would be answered . . . by the use of ordinary vehicles and horses. We believe that a great deal of travel and transportation could be diverted from the Hempfield road to our city."¹⁴ But this wistful gesture of competition remained unmade because the managers of the Pittsburgh-to-Washington turnpike company, protecting their macadamized lane, stood pat on its chartered monopoly.

On July 12, 1851, a large number of Pittsburgh citizens gathered "for counteracting certain schemes calculated materially to affect the interests of Pittsburgh"—specifically, to adopt measures for the speedy construction of a railroad to Steubenville. This enterprise, mulled opti-

¹¹ *The Hempfield Rail Road and the Bonds*, Philadelphia, 1852 (Historical Society of Pennsylvania); *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, January 28, March 20, 1851.

¹² *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, January 29, 1851.

¹³ *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, February 4, 1851; *Daily Commercial Journal* (Pittsburgh), January 18, 1851.

¹⁴ *Daily Commercial Journal* (Pittsburgh), January 14, 18, 1851.

mistically but unproductively since its chartering in the spring of 1849, was to link with the Steubenville and Indiana to Newark, thence by the Ohio Central to Columbus, the heart of a radiant network of railways on paper and in the field. The Pittsburgh meeting dispatched a goodwill committee to Philadelphia, whose members sinuated among the folk explaining the merits of the Pittsburgh and Steubenville and the ineptitudes of the Hempfield project. The directors of the Pennsylvania were most friendly in explaining their present lack of funds available for the aid of connecting railroads; the newspaper editors courteously inserted puffs. The committee returned to report (at a town meeting in August) their trust that amicable relations between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh would be fully resumed, and all heart burnings and jealousies ended.¹⁵

But that autumn Washington County voted a two hundred thousand dollar subscription to the Hempfield; Ohio County, Virginia—that is, Wheeling—added three hundred thousand dollars; and private subscriptions brought the capital of the Hempfield above three-quarters of a million.¹⁶ Pittsburgh that same autumn took active measures to launch the Allegheny Valley Railroad. This project, a road from Pittsburgh to Olean passing through the richest of the iron and timber regions of the Allegheny Valley and intersecting the New York and Erie Railroad, had been discussed in 1850, with the conclusion that “Pittsburgh, however anxious to secure the improvement, is engaged to the extent of her ability at present in constructing her western road”—the O & P; “if any thing is done to secure the charter, and build the road, New York must do it.” But a year later the town meeting resolutions were of different tenor: that the interests of western Pennsylvania demanded the construction of this railway along the banks of the Allegheny, for its regional benefits, and because this route would be the cheapest and most direct for distributing the sugar, cotton, tobacco, of the West and South among the populous districts of the East. Was it wise, ran the query, for Pittsburgh to rest dependent for its eastern connections upon the Pennsylvania

¹⁵ *Pittsburgh Daily Gazette*, May 10, 1849; *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 14, August 12, 1851.

¹⁶ *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, December 20, 1851.

Railroad, with its diverse interests over which Pittsburgh had no control? In the following spring Allegheny County made a liberal subscription in furtherance of the Allegheny Valley Railroad.¹⁷

Then, early in 1853, Pittsburgh received the unkindest cut. Edward Miller, chief engineer of the Pennsylvania, offered the directors an elaborate report on the "Western Connections and Extensions" of the railroad. "There can be no doubt," he stated, "that the interests of Philadelphia require her to be connected by ties of sympathy with those railroads which will afford the best and most direct communication with the important points" of the West.¹⁸ His primary recommendation was that the Pennsylvania Railroad or the Philadelphia councils (which were hand in glove) give pecuniary aid and comfort to the Hempfield and to the Marietta and Cincinnati Railroad. The latter company possessed the only charter spanning the entire distance from Wheeling to Cincinnati and would adapt its gauge, under proper persuasion, from the Ohio standard of four feet, ten inches to the Pennsylvania width of four feet, eight and a half inches. These recommendations, perhaps prearranged, ran through smoothly. The Pennsylvania Railroad subscribed for \$750,000 of the Marietta stock; the Philadelphia councils voted \$500,000 for the Hempfield, and added a million for the Sunbury and Erie. This road was to twine upward from the Susquehanna past Ridgeway and through northwest Pennsylvania to Erie, tapping the Great Lakes trade in behalf of Philadelphia and leaving Pittsburgh far to the southward.¹⁹

Pittsburgh could not have wanted a more stimulating irritant. Civic pride forthwith rose to bellicose dignity. The *Pittsburgh Gazette* put it: "Revenge is a small business, and perfectly ridiculous, where money and commercial business is concerned. . . . But the action of one city may create the necessity for action on the part of another. . . . Nearly all the great Railroads in the country have originated in the intense presence of

¹⁷ *Pittsburgh Daily Gazette*, September 14, 1850; *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 10, 1851, December 8, 1852.

¹⁸ *Daily Commercial Journal* (Pittsburgh), February 3, 1853.

¹⁹ *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, February 5, 1853; *Daily Commercial Journal* (Pittsburgh), February 8, 1853.

a present necessity. Such a necessity is now upon us, growing out of the action of Philadelphia." The Pittsburgh councils forged similar resolutions of that same white heat. And the *Commercial Journal* was explicit: "The course of Philadelphia instead of provoking an ineffectual wrath, should inspire us with new energy and new determination to carve out fresh and multiplied channels of self-independence and success. . . . Let us like her subscribe largely to the stock of every road which promises to strengthen our independence and augment our trade. In proportion to our population, let us emulate Philadelphia in issuing our bonds with a lavish liberality . . . Any other spirit less vigorous and effective than this is unworthy a great community." General William P. Robinson of Allegheny went to Philadelphia to shame the Pennsylvania Railroad stockholders, at their annual meeting, with the awful warning that if the Pennsylvania ventured further in its present policies, "it will not be the first corporation which, seduced from the plain path of its interest and duty by distant speculative temptations . . . has fallen under the burthen of accumulated errors and wrongs, and has been remembered for its ruin of all who trusted to its faith."²⁰

The president of the Baltimore and Ohio had, when the Hempfield fever was in its second temperature—the summer of 1851—issued a honeyed pronouncement to Pittsburgh: that when the contractual obligations to Wheeling and Parkersburg were disposed of, "it would be the interest of the people of Baltimore to encourage, by every proper means in their power, a communication with the great and populous city of Western Pennsylvania."²¹ Now Pittsburgh avidly returned the compliment. The charter for a railway—the Pittsburgh and Connellsville—designed to follow the Monongahela and Youghiogheny valleys from Pittsburgh toward a connection with the B & O at Cumberland, which had been granted in 1837, was still in effect. The project now became vitalized, Pittsburgh citizens and civic bodies contributed liberally, and the city and county councils pledged further largess contingent upon a contribution from the city of Baltimore. As the *Gazette* put the popular

²⁰ *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, February 5, 1853; *Daily Commercial Journal* (Pittsburgh), February 5, 11, 1853.

²¹ *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 29, 1851.

feeling, "We will have to build it"—the Pittsburgh and Connellsville—"in self-defence. Philadelphia is not content with the outlet which we afford her to the West; she is seeking other connections, without regarding the consequences that are likely to result to us. She is going to Wheeling to compete with Baltimore, and we must allow Baltimore to come here and compete with her. . . . The Allegheny Valley road offers us the connection we want with New York, and the Connellsville road the one we want with Baltimore. *Without* those roads, we are at the mercy of Philadelphia, and Philadelphia is showing her mercy to us by building roads around us to take our trade away . . . The Hempfield road, which appears now to be the pet of our ultramontane friends, has been urged from the beginning as a rival to Pittsburgh interests."²²

In mid-March of this year, 1853, books were opened in Pittsburgh for subscription to a new enterprise—the Chartiers Valley Railroad, to run south from Pittsburgh to Washington and there tap the Hempfield traffic.²³ The Cleveland and Pittsburgh Railroad was already building from its original terminus on the Ohio, Wellsville, down the west bank to Bridgeport, opposite Wheeling; Pittsburgh interests now actively promoted the building of an intervening link, between Beaver and Wellsville, which would offer Pittsburgh a circuitous but continuous railway route (avoiding a crossing of the Ohio) to Bridgeport, where the traffic of the southern Ohio roads could be tapped on the very doorstep of the Hempfield.²⁴ Pittsburgh money and goodwill also bolstered the Cleveland, Warren, and Mahoning Railroad, which promised Pittsburgh access to "the fairest and richest parts of the Western Reserve"; and the Pittsburgh and Erie Railroad, to commence at Enon Valley on the O & P and clamber northward to Meadville and Erie.²⁵ It was now Philadelphia's turn to make plaint: that, as the *North American* put it, "instead of uniting for the protection of a common interest, sectional jealousies and prejudices have destroyed all fraternal sympathies" in Pittsburgh,

²² *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, January 18, 19 (quoted), February 16, April 7, 1853.

²³ *Daily Commercial Journal* (Pittsburgh), February 2, 18, 1853; *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, March 14, 1853.

²⁴ *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, March 30, April 14, 1853.

²⁵ *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, August 19, 1852.

where was evident "a most bitter and hostile spirit . . . her representatives oppose just and necessary legislation asked for by the [*Pennsylvania Railroad*] company;—and a Pittsburgh jury has just returned a vindictive verdict of \$3500 in favor of an emigrant, who asserted that, somewhere between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, he got a toe frost bitten in the winter of 1851."²⁶

Meanwhile, in the late spring of 1853, the Hempfield Railroad was put under actual construction.²⁷ The road lacked one million of the three estimated for the building of its seventy-eight miles from Wheeling to Greensburg. Its completion would doubtless have required more than the estimate; for the line from Washington to Greensburg was found to be an investors' nightmare of sharp curves and appalling grades. In July, 1854, work on the road was suspended, but resumed in the following summer. In late September, 1857, the thirty-two mile stretch between Wheeling and Washington was opened for traffic; and the *Washington Weekly Reporter* of October 7 promised to let its readers know the schedule and the fares as soon as it found out.²⁸

The Hempfield eastward of Washington was never built. It left some physical survivals: in the Monongahela River until floods toppled them, several stone piers for a dreamed-of bridge; and on the terrain various cuts, fills, and stonework, for nature to obscure under its patina of grass and weeds. It is not within the limits of this article to trace the erratic ways of the Hempfield until the B & O acquired it in 1885, or to follow the construction of the railways which Pittsburghers advanced in the years of the Hempfield irritant. All of them, after the travails of panic years and reorganizations, were completed. And the Hempfield Railroad, although constructed for but a scant two-fifths of its projected distance, yet had its far-reaching journeys. From Pittsburgh its influence chugged off in all directions.

²⁶ *North American and United States Gazette* (Philadelphia), quoted in *Daily Commercial Journal* (Pittsburgh), April 15, 1853.

²⁷ *Washington Reporter*, quoted in *Daily Commercial Journal* (Pittsburgh), April 15, 1853; *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, November 26, 1853.

²⁸ *Daily Commercial Journal* (Pittsburgh), March 14, 1854; *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 10, 1854; *Washington Weekly Reporter*, October 7, 1857, quoted in Earle R. Forrest, *History of Washington County*, 1:793-794 (Chicago, 1926).