

John Montgomery to James Wilson, Carlisle, 2 March 1788

I beg leave to inform you that a scene was exhibited at this place yesterday, which it was apprehended would have been the first act of a tragedy; but which turned out to be a harmless comic opera. You have no doubt heard that about Christmas last the people of this place received the account of the adoption of the Federal Constitution by two-thirds of the Convention of this state. That thereupon, a number of the people, who believed that Constitution was well calculated to render us respected abroad, as a nation, and to secure tranquility, freedom, and happiness among ourselves on the most firm and lasting basis, resolved to testify their approbation of the vote of adoption, by the firing of a cannon, etc., at the courthouse. That they met there for that purpose and were interrupted by a number, who immediately made their appearance armed with bludgeons and made an attack upon the unsuspecting and unarmed Federalists and drove them off the ground; after having nearly killed one of them and much hurt another. That the next day the Federalists met again at the same place for the same purpose and prepared to repel any attacks which might be attempted to be made on them again. That the party who had made the attack on them the preceding day perceiving that it would be dangerous to renew it, appeared soon after the federal friends had separated and paraded the streets with the effigies of the Chief Justice of this state [Thomas McKean] and of Mr. [James] Wilson, which they afterwards committed to the flames. That complaints were afterwards made to a justice of the riot, assault and battery committed the first day. That the parties injured demanded a warrant from the justice against the rioters. That the justice being a cautious, prudent, and rather a timid man, transmitted the affidavits, which were made in the premises, to the judges of the Supreme Court. That two of the said judges granted a warrant to apprehend the rioters (it is presumed that the Chief Justice declined acting in the affair, because his own political character had been attacked next day by the same party). The warrant came up two or three weeks ago, directed to the sheriff [Charles Leeper]. The rioters had notice of it immediately, although no attempt was made, I believe, to take them for about ten days, during which time they had an opportunity of forming combinations, and it will appear that they instantly embraced and made the best of it, by riding, and sending their emissaries through the country inflaming the minds of the people by representing themselves as in danger of becoming victims in the cause of liberty, and for daring to lift up their voices against the most detestable system of tyranny and arbitrary power that was ever devised for the total and final destruction of freedom. Although the sheriff is by no means a decided character, I can hardly impute his improper conduct to corrupt motives—he asked the advice of every person and was too timid to act with firmness, and the advice of those to whom he applied was so various, that it distracted his irresolute mind. About a week ago he gave notice to *all* the rioters to appear *the same afternoon* before Justice [John] Agnew. Mr. Agnew, believing the affair to be of some importance and delicacy, requested the assistance of the three nearest justices. Justice [Samuel] Irwin attended—the others did not. Those named in the warrant appeared—they started some objections to the *form* and *effect* of it. The justices, being cautious, thought it proper to give the parties day until the 25 March in order that they might in the meantime apply for the directions of the judges, on the points in question; but six [seven] of the rioters refused to have the matter postponed and insisted on being discharged altogether or of going to prison. The justices told them they could not discharge them,

therefore they went to gaol the same evening. Immediately the drum beat to arms and the bell was rung. A few creatures of no character and a number of the blackguard boys collected; but not being joined by the party whom they expected, they dispersed in a short time—damning the fools, who would not accept the terms which the others had done, but had gone to gaol, where they might stay and hatch lies till they were tired. A party consisting chiefly of such boys and fellows of dissolute character went through town every night afterwards beating the drum, and information was given that in consequence of a preconcerted plan, riders had gone out to all quarters warning the friends of freedom to collect and rescue their persecuted brethren. Very exact intelligence was communicated from time to time of their proceedings. Meetings of the friends of good order were had where it was proposed by some ardent men to oppose the rescuers by force, and a plan was suggested by the adoption of which a dreadful carnage might have been made, among our misguided fellow citizens at the onset. Many lives might have been lost on both sides afterwards, and at least *parts* of Pennsylvania might have been involved in the horrors of a civil war; but happily the most temperate councils prevailed almost universally—not to attempt to prevent a rescue—to avoid giving the most distant pretext of offense either by word or action; but to be in readiness to repair with our arms in order at a moment's warning, and to act under proper command, according to the contingency.

It was known that the people from all parts of the country were to be in yesterday morning to take the prisoners out of gaol; but on the preceding day, some Anticonstitutionalists of character and property, apprehending fatal consequences, came to town and, joining with people equally disposed to preserve peace and good order, entered bail for the prisoners; but the obstinate tools refused to go out of gaol until they were taken out by force of arms.

Yesterday at break of day, according to appointment and expectation, the bell began to ring, the militia armed and under their officers, from all parts of the county and a few from Dauphin County and from the Redlands of York County, came into town to the number of, I suppose, about five hundred; but I cannot, be very certain as to their numbers, as they made several ingenious military maneuvers to make their numbers appear as large as possible, to people unacquainted with such devices. You will now naturally expect to hear that when so many people met, with minds highly inflamed and irritated by the numerous aggravating falsehoods which had been industriously propagated among them by designing men, they would not separate without committing desperate outrage or doing or suffering some mischief. You will therefore sincerely rejoice when I inform you that a few of their most intelligent officers met some of the inhabitants, some in favor of and some opposed to the Federal Constitution, and it being agreed that the prosecutors should request the Executive Council to recommend to the Attorney General to enter a *nolle prosequi*, and that the militia should return to their homes. They marched to the gaol where the voluntary prisoners presented themselves, and were received and conducted to the courthouse in triumph. There the militia discharged their guns and after they had again paraded the streets as they had done during four hours before from the time of their coming to town. They left town by different routes, without being guilty of the least mischief or insult, excepting what I shall mention respecting the printers.

Thus the hopes and expectations of the unprincipled and desperate wretches who have for some time past, from the worst of motives, inflamed the minds of the unsuspecting people, have been happily defeated. I have good reason to believe that the most respectable and the honest part of those who came to town yesterday, with minds highly inflamed, went home with very different sentiments; and I believe they now begin to look with their own eyes and to think for themselves. You may be assured that if these people are left to the dispassionate exercise of their own good sense, they will think rightly. The incendiaries well know this, and therefore it is a fundamental point with them to keep the minds of the honest unsuspecting men in a continual state of inflammation, by the most impudent declamatory falsehoods—and we all know that in this state of mind, the wisest and most upright men are very credulous and easily imposed upon.

Those who went so willingly and unnecessarily to gaol are only the tools of tools. I verily believe that they, and those here who immediately urged them on, wished and expected to foment a civil war. Happily their attempts, as well as the machinations of those at the bottom of this wickedness, have proved abortive on this occasion and will, I hope, be brought to nought ultimately. I must, however, do many respectable characters, whose minds were for some time greatly adverse to that Constitution, which most of the wisest and best men on the continent so highly approve of, the justice to observe that they seemed upon this occasion as anxious to preserve peace and good order, as any others. Upon the whole, seeming evil has often since the Revolution been productive of real good in our public affairs, and I trust that when the people reflect upon what a trifling and unnecessary occasion they were led to collect in such numbers (and many from a distance) at this inclement season of the year—when they become sensible (indeed some expressed themselves to be so before they left the town) how much their minds have been inflamed by groundless insinuations, they will in earnest think for themselves and act according to the dictates of reason—not the impulse of passions.

The incendiaries here have iniquitously attempted to set the country at variance with the town by asserting that the inhabitants of the town are enemies to equal liberty, and that they are in favor of the Constitution, because they expect to be enabled under it to make dependents of the farmers, who will be reduced to a sort of vassalage. Absurd as this falsehood is, the inflamed mind believes it as proofs of Holy Writ.

Thus, sir, have I taken the liberty of giving you a short and simple narrative of a transaction which may be variously represented. The party in Philadelphia, who by their incendiary publications, and by their deputies in this county, fomented the spirit of jealousy among the people, may enlarge upon it in such varied and aggravated forms as they may think most likely to excite opposition or strengthen the opposition which exists in the two neighboring southern states.

The Antifederal Party will publish their account of it here in such manner as they think best calculated to answer their own purposes, and the printers must, upon this occasion, publish whatever that party sends them, for reasons of which the bearer can give you full information. He will tell you that the printers [Kline and Reynolds] were sent for yesterday by some of the

leaders of that party, accused of partiality, and their printing office threatened. Any account of the transaction which we could publish here would be disregarded. It is for this reason that I have furnished you with these materials of which you can make such use as you think proper in the Philadelphia papers; only I wish that it may not appear as if the account came from any *resident* in this place, while the people are in their present temper of mind. The bearer can give you such further information, as will enable you to publish a true and accurate account of the transaction, which I wish to see published in your papers immediately, for obvious reasons. I need not mention that the foregoing hints are not fit for publication in their present form.

Had the warrant been executed when it came up, I am satisfied by reasons, which professional duty forbids me to mention, that the rioters would all have given bail.

1 RC(?), James Wilson Correspondence, James A. Montgomery Collection, PHI. This undated and unsigned letter is in the handwriting of John Montgomery, who marked it "Confidential." The content of the letter reveals that it was written on 2 March, the day after the prisoners left the jail.

2 "Veritas" described these individuals as "desperate and abandoned fellows" and "men of infamous characters and bankrupt fortunes" (*Federal Gazette*, 22 March. Richard Butler, however, claimed that some rioters were men of property (to William Irvine, Philadelphia, 11 March.

3 Contemporary estimates of the number of armed men varied from 250 to 1,500. Before the marchers reached Carlisle, a rumor circulated in Philadelphia that 5,000 men were moving toward the town from every direction.

4 Others also blamed Philadelphia Antifederalist leaders for the march on Carlisle. For instance, John Vaughan declared that "The pupils of our inveterate town [Philadelphia] leaders and teachers have shown themselves at Carlisle" (to John Dickinson, Philadelphia, 9 March, Dickinson Papers, PPL).

Cite as: The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution Digital Edition, ed. John P. Kaminski, Gaspare J. Saladino, Richard Leffler, Charles H. Schoenleber and Margaret A. Hogan. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009.

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[accessed 21 May 2012]

Original source: Ratification by the States, Volume II: Pennsylvania