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csac.history.wisc.edu > Ratification at a Glance > Pennsylvania > Significant Events and Outcomes Associated with Pennsylvania > The Carlisle Riot and its Aftermath

An Old Man

Carlisle Gazette, 2 January 1788

As the riot on Wednesday last [26 December], and the burning of the effigies of two of the most distinguished characters in the state, in the public streets of Carlisle, by a mob on Thursday, has already made a considerable noise in the county, an impartial spectator desirous of furnishing the public with a just and true state of facts, to enable them to form a proper judgment of the conduct of the parties concerned—begs leave to lay before them the following representation, for the truth of which he pledges himself, and which will appear by the depositions of a cloud of reputable and respectable witnesses, in the possession of John Agnew, Esquire.

About five o'clock on Wednesday afternoon, public notice being given by ringing the bell and beating the drum, a number of persons met at the public square, to testify their approbation of the proceedings of the late Convention, in the most decent and orderly manner. A piece of artillery having been brought to the ground, and materials collected for a bonfire; a number of men armed with bludgeons came in regular order from one quarter of the town, while others sallied forth from different streets armed in the same manner. Major James A. Wilson (having been appointed with two other gentlemen, to make the necessary arrangements for the occasion), was preparing to have the gun loaded, when he was ordered by many of the armed party to desist, and many threats thrown out against any person who would attempt to kindle the bonfire; to which the Major replied, that those who were not disposed to rejoice might withdraw; and that he hoped people so pregnant with liberty as they appeared to be would not wish to hinder their neighbors to show marks of joy, when they were pleased. Immediately after a number of barrels and staves were thrown at him, one of which struck him on the breast. He then sprung forward to the persons who threw at him, and struck one of them with a small pine stick, to which a piece of match rope was fixed; he was then beat down by a number of blows from six or seven persons with bludgeons, who continued beating him after he fell. They would have taken his life had not a trusty old soldier thrown himself on the Major and received the blows aimed at him; a general confusion took place. Mr. Robert Miller, Jr. was attacked by a person, who with both hands wielded a massy bludgeon, and while he was engaged with the first, received several blows from one who stood behind him. The persons met for the purpose of the celebration, altogether unprepared for such an assault (being even without walking canes), were forced to return. The armed party having accomplished their premeditated designs of preventing the public rejoicing, proceeded to spike the cannon, and having made a large fire, committed to the flames the cannon and its carriage, together with a sledge on which it had been drawn to the ground. They then sent for an almanac, containing the Federal Constitution, which was formally burned. Loud huzzas were repeated, with damnation to the 46 members, and long live the virtuous 23.

On Thursday at 12 o'clock, I understood that the friends to government intended to carry into execution their resolution of the celebration of the event from which the evening before they had been so violently prevented. I went to the place, found them at the courthouse armed chiefly with muskets and bayonets; they discovered every pacific disposition, but at the same time the most determined resolution to repel, at the risk of their lives any attack which might be made on them. A bonfire was made, and the ratification of the Constitution by this state was read, accompanied by the acclamation of all the people present, repeated volleys of musketry and firing of cannon.

I cannot help giving my praise to the good order and coolness and determined spirit with which the business was conducted, although the mob made their appearance in several places, armed with guns and bludgeons, and even came close to where the Federalists were firing the cannon, and used threatening language, which was treated with every possible contempt, and no violence offered to them. The Federalists remained 2 hours on the ground, testified their joy, with every appearance of harmony and good humor, and returned without any disturbance to their homes. Immediately after, a drum beat—the mob gathered—collected barrels, and proceeded to the courthouse with noise and tumult, when there was brought from an adjacent lot two effigies with labels on their breasts, THOMAS M'KEAN, Chief Justice and JAMES WILSON the Caledonian. They formed in order, had the effigies carried in front, preceded only by a noted captain of militia [Joseph Frazier], who declared he was inspired from Heaven, paraded the streets, and with shouts and most dreadful execrations committed them to the flames. It is remarkable that some of the most active people in the riot of Wednesday evening, and the mob of Thursday, have come to this country within these two years—men perfectly unknown, and whose characters were too obscure to attract the notice of the inhabitants of this place, and others who but lately have stripped off the garb of British soldiers. I think it improper to prejudice the public by naming the persons concerned in these atrocious riots, as prosecutions are about to be commenced in the name of the state against them. Every lover of good order must lament the wound the dignity of the state has received in burning in the public street, in one of the largest towns in open day, the effigy of the first magistrate of the commonwealth. Proceedings of this kind are really alarming, directly tend to the dissolution of all governments, and must receive the reprobation of every honest citizen.

I was invited, being an old man, to spend the evening with the Federalists, at Mr. Joseph Postlethwait's tavern, where an elegant supper had been prepared. A number of the respectable inhabitants of Carlisle convened there and spent the evening with the most perfect harmony, good humor, and conviviality. After supper, the following toasts were drank.

1. The Federal Constitution.
2. General Washington, and the Federal Convention.
3. The states who acceded to the Federal Constitution.
4. A speedy accession and ratification of the Constitution by all the states.
5. The patriotic forty-six.
6. The president of the state.
7. The chief justice of Pennsylvania, and member of the late Convention.
8. The Hon. James Wilson, Esquire of Philadelphia.
9. Major James Armstrong Wilson.

10. An increase of the agriculture, manufactures, and commerce of America.
11. May the flag of United States fly triumphant in all the ports of the world.
12. Our friends in Europe.

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