

“IN GOD WE TRUST” ORIGINATED FROM A
COLUMBIA COUNTY PRESIDENT JUDGE

By André Dominguez

The following excerpt from a 1937 WPA booklet in the Society’s Depression-era Works Progress Administration collection makes some interesting claims:

Fifteen judges have filled the office of President Judge in Columbia County since the formation of the county from a part of Northumberland, by Act of Assembly of March 22, 1813. Two of the judges later became state Supreme Court Justices and one became governor of Pennsylvania.

One of the judges of the county courts, Judge Ellis Lewis, appointed in 1833, later became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. Judge Warren J. Woodward, who served as judge from 1856 to 1861 became a Justice of the Supreme Court and Judge James Pollock, who was appointed in 1851 later became Governor of Pennsylvania.

Judge Pollock served in many public offices and was director of the mint at Philadelphia. He was the originator of the motto ‘In God We Trust’ that continues to appear on United States coins.

At first glance it would appear that a local Columbia Countian, James Pollock, had become very well accomplished, but I could not recall that the county had produced a governor or that the famous motto had its origins in Columbia County. WPA booklets have a wealth of information, but although usually correct, they rarely include any citations to indicate their sources. The claim that someone associated with Columbia County originated a motto that appears on U.S. currency used by millions of people around the world seemed pretty bold. So I checked some sources to find out more about James Pollock and the motto.

James A. Pollock was born in the Borough of Milton in Turbut Township, Northumberland County, Pennsylvania, on September 11, 1810, a year and a half before Columbia County was formed. He was the youngest son of William and Sarah (Wilson) Pollock, natives of Chester County, Pennsylvania. James Pollock graduated from Princeton College in New Jersey in 1831 and began as a student of law in the office of Samuel Hepburn, Esq. in his native town. In 1834 he opened a law office in Milton and in 1835 he was appointed District Attorney of Northumberland County. James Pollock married Miss Sarah Ann Hepburn, daughter of his former law mentor, on December 19, 1837. James and Sarah raised three sons and five daughters. They included Samuel H., born c. 1839, William C., born c. 1841, Louisa , born c. 1843, James Crawford, born c. 1848, Sarah A., born 1850 and Emma, born c. 1853.

The *Northumberland County Genealogical and Biographical Annals* describes James Pollock as follows. “In personal appearance, Governor Pollock was of commanding figure and somewhat above the average height, with dark eyes and hair, smooth-shaven face, and a countenance expressive of intelligence and benignity. In religious affiliation he was a Presbyterian.”

James Pollock probably reached higher political position than any other native of Northumberland County. Pollock was a Whig in politics and in 1844 was elected a member of the U.S. Congress and subsequently re-elected twice, holding the office for three terms, or six years. He was a member of the Committee on Territories with Stephen A. Douglas. This Committee dealt with all bills relating to the organization of new Territories, and the question of excluding slavery from them. Texas was annexed and California was acquired while Pollock was in Congress. During this period Pollock was also on the Ways and Means Committee. The country was then engaged in the Mexican war and that conflict greatly increased the business of this Committee. Before he left Congress in 1848, he offered a resolution for the appointment of a special committee to inquire into the construction of a railroad to the Pacific.

In 1850 James Pollock was appointed President Judge of the 8th Judicial District of Pennsylvania, composed of the counties of Northumberland, Montour, Columbia, Lycoming and Sullivan. He held the office until the amendment of the Constitution, requiring the election of Judges by the people, came into effect. He declined a nomination for the position, left the Bench, and resumed the practice of law. In 1854, he was nominated and elected by a large majority, Governor of Pennsylvania.

Pollock's most notable milestone of his administration was the sale in 1857 of the western division of the State Works – consisting of canals and the Allegheny Portage Railroad – to the Pennsylvania Railroad. This started the process of liquidating the expensive and increasingly obsolete State Works. Governor Pollock also brought about the Normal School Act of 1857, which instituted a system of regional teacher training institutions throughout the Commonwealth (Bloomsburg University was one of these Normal Schools), the charter for the Farmer's High School (the institution that would grow into the Pennsylvania State University), and the creation of a secretary of Common Schools.

When the Panic of 1857 struck the economy, there were mounting bank and business failures, unemployment, and concerns about possible winter riots and martial law. Pollock called a special legislative session that convened on Election Day and pushed through a temporary suspension of the requirement that banks pay their depositors and those who held their bank notes in gold or silver, thus preventing more bank failures as well as protecting the credit rating of Pennsylvania. Pollock did not run for re-election but resumed his law practice when his term expired.

In 1860 he was appointed by Governor Curtin, as a delegate to the Peace Conference held in Washington, D.C. in February and March 1861. The object of this conference was to consider and if practical to adjust the differences existing between the North and South on the much vexed question of slavery. In May 1861, he was appointed by President Lincoln to be Director of the U.S. Mint at Philadelphia, and held the office until October 1, 1866. He was re-appointed as Director in 1869, by President Grant, and held this office until 1879, when he was appointed Naval officer. Pollock held the post of Naval officer for four years. His last official position was that of Federal chief supervisor of elections, to which he was appointed in 1886. He died at Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, April 19, 1890 and he was buried in the Milton Cemetery.

It was at the suggestion of James Pollock that the motto "In God We Trust" is stamped on coins of the United States. This motto was placed on U.S. coins largely because of the increased religious sentiment that existed during the Civil War. Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase received many appeals from devout persons throughout the country urging that the United States recognize the Deity on United States coins. From Treasury Department records, it appears that the first such appeal came in a letter dated November 13, 1861. It was written to Secretary Chase by Rev. M. R. Watkinson, minister of the Gospel from Ridleyville, Pennsylvania. As a result, Secretary Chase in a letter dated November 20, 1861 instructed James Pollock, Director of the Mint at Philadelphia, to prepare a motto. It was found that the Act of Congress dated January 18, 1837, prescribed the mottoes and devices that should be placed upon the coins of the United States. This meant that the mint could make no changes without the enactment of additional legislation by the Congress. In December 1863, the Director of the Mint submitted designs for new one-cent, two-cent, and three-cent coins to Secretary Chase for approval. Pollock proposed that either OUR COUNTRY; OUR GOD or GOD, OUR TRUST should appear as a motto on the coins. In a letter to the Mint Director on December 9, 1863, Secretary Chase responded:

I approve your mottos, only suggesting that on that with the Washington obverse [front side] the motto should begin with the word OUR, so as to read OUR GOD AND OUR COUNTRY. And on that with the shield, it should be changed so as to read: IN GOD WE TRUST.

The Congress passed the Act on April 22, 1864. This legislation changed the composition of the one-cent coin and authorized the minting of the two-cent coin. The Mint Director was directed to develop the designs for these coins for final approval of the Secretary. IN GOD WE TRUST first appeared on the 1864 two-cent coin. This motto continues to be used on U.S. currency up to the present. Just look on the back of a \$1, \$5, \$10, \$20 or \$50 bill.

So, while the readily retrievable information indicates that Pollock was deeply involved with the creation of the motto, it doesn't appear that he single-handedly originated it. He may have been the driving force behind its creation or he may have been one of several forces working with the politics of the day to make a final decision.

James Pollock was a very accomplished man, involved in the important politics of his day. And as the WPA booklet states, he was a President Judge of Columbia County who later became Governor of Pennsylvania, but he was not from Columbia County. James Pollock was from Northumberland County, although for a brief time he did live in Columbia County. Milton Borough is located in Turbut Township.

When Columbia County was formed in 1813, it included Chillisquaque and Turbut Townships, but in 1815, these two townships were returned to Northumberland County. This prompt return of the townships after establishing the location of the county seat was construed by many to be a trick to give Danville preference over Bloomsburg in the selection of the county seat, and for years thereafter a continual controversy raged between the rival towns as to the location of the courthouse. As for James Pollock being the originator of the motto, "In God We Trust", the WPA booklet may be correct, but it appears that he had some help.

SOURCES

- Columbia Co. Judges & High Officials*, (WPA, Project No. 15253, 16 December 1937), pp. 3-4.
- Genealogical and Biographical Annals of Northumberland County, Pennsylvania* (Chicago: J.L. Floyd & Co, 1911), p. 489.
- Historical and Biographical Annals of Columbia and Montour Counties, Pennsylvania* (Chicago: J.H. Beers & Co., 1915), p. 83.
- John G. Freeze, *A History of Columbia County, Pennsylvania* (Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania: Elwell & Bittenbender, 1883), p. 135.
- 1850 and 1860 U.S. census, Northumberland County, Pennsylvania.
- Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, *Pennsylvania Governors Past to Present*, (<http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/governors/pollock.asp?secid=31>).