

ELECTION JAMES K. POLK:

A BLOOMSBURG INAUGURATION CELEBRATION

By George A. Turner

The two major presidential candidates in the 1844 election were Henry Clay for the Whig party and James K. Polk for the Democratic party. The Whigs who enjoyed great party unity met in Baltimore on May 1, 1844, and nominated Clay by acclamation on the first ballot. He was one of the nation's foremost political leaders since the War of 1812. This Kentuckian had an impressive list of accomplishments: elected as the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, participated in negotiating the Treaty of Ghent ending the War of 1812, framed the famous 1820 Missouri Compromise on slavery, served as secretary of state from 1825-1829, elected to the U.S. Senate for two terms beginning in 1831, and championed the use of federal aid in building internal improvements.

When the Democrats convened in Baltimore on May 27, they did not have the same kind of unity as experienced by the Whigs. The leading candidate for the party's presidential nomination was former President Martin Van Buren, the titular leader of the Democrats. The convention adopted a rule requiring a person to receive a two-thirds vote to be nominated. Despite the fact that he was able to get a clear majority of the votes, he was unable to attract enough delegate support to win a two-thirds vote. Southern delegates who actively favored the annexation of Texas voted against Van Buren since he opposed acquiring Texas. The convention was deadlocked and after several ballots decided to nominate a compromise candidate on the ninth ballot, James K. Polk of Tennessee. Historians pointed out that he was the first "dark horse" candidate elected to the presidency. Polk was not really a political unknown; he was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1825-1839, last four years as its speaker, and governor of his state, 1839-1841. He had excellent party credentials and former President Andrew Jackson strongly supported him. In addition, Polk appealed to the southern delegates since he favored territorial expansion and specifically supported the annexation of Texas. To balance the ticket a Northerner, George M. Dallas, a prominent Pennsylvania politician, became the vice presidential candidate.

Texas was the dominant issue in the 1844 presidential election. It had become an independent country when it succeeded in breaking away from Mexico in 1836; however, the Mexican government never accepted its claim of independence. Polk clearly advocated annexing Texas regardless of how Mexico would view such a development even if there were a possibility of war. The Democratic platform promoted territorial expansion not only in Texas but also in Oregon which was embroiled in a diplomatic dispute with Great Britain. It was Clay's assessment that if the United States moved to incorporate Texas into the country, it would surely result in a war with Mexico. The country needed to avoid such a provocative step since he felt there was little public

support for such a policy. Elements in the Whig party also opposed Texas annexation since it would add more slavery territory to the country. The election highlighted a strong urge of American nationalism called manifest destiny. There was the belief that it was God's will that the United States should expand across the entire North American continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. This idea held that territorial growth was essential for the country's future.

The outcome of the election gave Polk a very narrow popular vote victory. He received 38,175 more votes than Clay out of nearly 2.7 million cast; this resulted in a winning margin of 1.4 percent. But the votes in the electoral college gave him 170 to Clay's 105. Polk carried fourteen states out of twenty five; six were in the south, and the remaining eight included Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Maine, Missouri, New Hampshire, New York, and Pennsylvania. Polk's victory over Clay in Pennsylvania was a little less than two percentage points. His strength was widespread throughout the state by winning forty-one of the state's fifty-eight counties. Clay was stronger in the state's two major urban areas, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, by winning fifty-six percent of the votes.

Columbia County voters overwhelmingly supported Polk who received almost sixty-six percent of their votes. This margin of victory made the county the sixth highest in the state in backing Polk. There were twenty-one townships in Columbia County at that time which included the area that became Montour County in 1850. Polk carried seventeen of them; eleven he won with margins from 72.2% to as high as 92.5%. Clay's victories were in the two largest townships, Mahoning (Danville), and Bloom, which he carried by a slim victory of some nineteen votes, but in Catawissa and Franklin he easily won by getting nearly fifty-nine percent of the votes.

At the time of his election, the forty-nine year old Polk was the youngest man to become president. He was a strong executive. Historians consider his presidency as being very successful since he achieved all of his major goals: restoration of an independent treasury, lower tariffs, favorable resolution of the Oregon question, and an expansion policy resulting in the defeat of Mexico that allowed the incorporation of California and what is now the southwest area of the country. Recently, in December 15, 1996, *The New York Times* printed an article in which fifty-five leading presidential scholars ranked all the presidents. They concluded that Polk was one of the "near great" presidents, along with Jefferson, Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, and Truman. In their assessment, three "great" presidents were: Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt.

On the day of President Polk's inauguration, March 4, 1845, the Columbia County Democrats had a party at Enoch Howell's public house, a Bloomsburg hotel, to celebrate the occasion. A newspaper described it as a young men's celebration, but women were in attendance; it reported they enjoyed a pleasant evening, excellent supper, and adopted resolutions and offered a number of toasts. The following is an account of this festive event as reported in the Bloomsburg newspaper, *Columbia Democrat*:

Fourth of March Celebration

A meeting was organized with the following officers.

J. F. Tobias, President

Z. P. Gross, Vice President

J. Vanderslice, Vice President

H. C. Hower, Vice President

G. B. Jackson, Secretary

The Committee of Arrangements then reported the following resolutions, which were, on motion, unanimously adopted.

Resolved, That in the election of James K. Polk and George M. Dallas, to the offices of President and Vice President of the U. States, the democracy of the Nation as covered itself with enduring honor. No political victory since the election of Thomas Jefferson has been so complete, so decisive, so triumphant and so glorious!

Resolved, That our opinion the two thirds rule of the Baltimore Convention, thereby nominating James K. Polk and George M. Dallas, saved the party from defeat, and secured the measures of the great Republican Party of the nation,

Resolved, That we most heartily ratify and approved the proceedings of the convention, and as an evidence of it, we refer to the vote of the 'Star of the North' on the first of November, and her **1632** majority!!

Resolved, That in the election of Francis R. Shunk, to the office of Governor of Pennsylvania, the democracy have not only elevated an honest man to office — but have shown the Union that Pennsylvanians still remain true to their principles, and to the creed of their fathers.

Resolved, That we heartily rejoice in the proceedings of Washington this day, for placing James K. Polk and George M. Dallas in the highest stations in the gift of the American people.

Resolved, That the proceedings of this celebration be published in all the democratic papers in Luzerne and Columbia, and in such other prints as may choose to do so in the State and elsewhere.

The Committee of Arrangements presented the following Regular Toasts, which, as well as the Volunteer ones, were enthusiastically received and drank with cheers and flowing bumpers of *pure, cold water*.

Regular Toasts

1st The day we celebrate.

2d The memory of the signers of the Declaration of Independence

3rd George Washington. May his name never be forgotten by the sons of America.

4th Andrew Jackson. A democrat of the school of '98. In his steps we delight to tread. May he descend to his grave in peace.

5th Lafayette. The distinguished champion of American liberty. May his memory never be forgotten in the land where he aided to plant the 'Star Spangled Banner.'

6th The President of the United States.

7th The Vice President of the United States.

8th The Governor of Pennsylvania.

9th The principles of Democracy. The poor man's true interest is consulted in their supremacy.

10th Our County. The prayers of all good men rest upon it. May an overruling Providence guard and protect it.

11th The Fair Sex. The truest and best of democrats — the lovers of all mankind.

Volunteer Toasts

By the President — The democratic party may its ranks never be broken, its principles more and more developed, until the whole world shall understand and embrace them.

Z. P. Gross, V.P. — The Ballot Box. It is but a small box; but it proved to be large enough last fall to coffin all the hopes of Federalism.

H. C. Hower, V.P. — To the Company; Fair and honorable may they always be found advocating the cause of liberty.

J. Vanderslice, V. P. — Martin Van Buren. May his services long be remembered.

Joseph Fisher — George M. Dallas. May he become the first choice of this nation.

Miss Mary Hartman — James K. Polk, the talented son of Tennessee, Democracy may be proud of her choice.

A. I. Driesbach — The election of Polk and Dallas has restored democracy to its proper ascendancy in our nation and added the Star of Texas to our flag.

Z. P. Gross — Our able and talented guest C. R. Buckalew, Esq. who can stand higher in the hearts of the people of this county than he now does!

After the cheering had subsided, with which the toast was received, Mr. Buckalew returned this thanks to the company in a very neat and pertinent address, and concluded, by offering the following sentiment: —

The Democratic Ladies present — When the principles upon which the late victory was obtained are sanctioned by such a galaxy of beauty and grace, well may we feel proud of the triumph.

By Henry Webb — The Democratic Flag — With the principles of truth and justice inscribed upon it, may it broad and expansive folds soon wave over the whole earth.

Miss Shindler: — Hail, hail, hail such a nominee as Jimmy Polk of Tennessee!

A Guest — Success to Doctor Duncan for showing the principles of Whiggery by dissecting the Coon.

Miss L. Kahler — May the banner of democracy be waved in the sky, till whiggery shall die away in its shadow.

Jackson Gross — Do the whigs know who James K Polk is now! Ans. President of the United States.

Miss L. Whitenight — The President's wife, Mrs. Polk — May she adorn the white house, unexcelled by any preceding her.

C. R. Buckalew, Esq. — Huntingdon and Fairmont townships: Hopeful and worthy daughters of 'Old Mother Luzerne.' May they continue improving.

Philip Hartman — James Buchanon. A bright star of talent and worth in our national firmament.

Daniel Gross — The passage of the Removal Bill. An act of long deferred justice to the County.

Miss M. Snyder — 'The 'Star of the North,' Well may she be proud of her democratic sons and daughters.

G. B. Jackson — The President. A young and firm democrat — may he in the course of time, become one of the brightest stars of this nation.

M. Hamblin, jr. — Daniel Synder, ex member of the Legislature — a firm consistent and unflinching democrat of the old school. Higher honor awaits him.

Miss R. Eyer — While the whigs last fall were catching coons and raising pine poles, the democrats elected James K. Polk and George M. Dallas.

J. F. Tobias — The Democratic Ladies — The stars of America; may they ever spurn whigs from them, and all get good democratic husbands.

F. Drehr — Gen. W. S. Ross and Thomas A. Funston, Esqrs. Well have they redeemed their pledges given before the election, and earned for themselves a reward that the people of this county will glory in conferring.

Miss E. Shoemaker — Columbia County. The land of the free and the home of the brave!

R. W. Weaver — Hon. B. A. Bidlack. A faithful and honest Representative; the respect and attention of the people attend him.

D. Whitenight — The young rising generation of Columbia county, may they ever remember the services of their fathers of '76.

Sent in by Dr. D. N. Scott — The genius of our government and the old political landmarks of eighteen hundred. Let every Democrat understand them well.

A Guest — We think there is more democracy placed in the Presidential chair this day, than has occupied it for the last four years.

Miss E. Shirkey — The Ladies of this celebration. May they ever be true to their country; and steadfast to democratic principles.

Miss E. Koons — Whiggery of '76 full of patriotism; whiggery of '44 full of hypocrisy and intrigue.

Miss Mary Christman — Polk and Dallas, Democrats of the of the Jeffersonian school. May they be hailed as the sons of Washington.

Thomas McBride — May the whigs be taught a lesson from the result of the late election which shall never be forgotten.

V. Doebler — Columbia county. We hope we trust not vanity; that her great and growing interests will receive proper and merited attention.

A. Guest — Andrew Jackson. The old Hickory has lived to see his enemies the coons defeated, and a young hickory from the old stock this day transferred to the white house.

Miss Osa Vanhorn — The Coons can't sing any more whig songs. They are a used up party now.

Miss A. Webb — Democratic Principles. A government guided by them is a sure protector of the honor and virtue of its citizens.

Joseph Prentiss — Polk, Dallas, Buchanan and Silas Wright. With such men supporting it, democracy is safe.