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Pittsburgh During the Civil War 1860-1863

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Few events in American history have received as much attention as the Civil War. Thousands of books and articles document all aspects of the conflict, carefully dissecting battle plans and troop movements, painstakingly documenting the smallest details. Historians—both amateur and professional—have examined every day of the four year war. And historical re-enactors have devoted thousands of hours and dollars to recreating this chapter in American history. Despite this tremendous amount of literature and attention, we know surprisingly little about the personal experiences of ordinary soldiers or civilians during the war, as they relate to a social historian’s field of study. We have countless diaries and letters, but social historians have just begun to analyze these texts in a broader, historical context. As a result, a great deal of information about the war and its citizens as it pertains to the field of social history remains untouched.

There is another omission in the history books. Historians also have largely neglected the city of Pittsburgh in their studies of the war, probably because no battles were fought on its soil. But even though no southern troops came closer to Pittsburgh than 40 miles (except as prisoners), and no hostile shots were fired in the city, Pittsburgh played a very prominent role in the war. The city was one of the country’s industrial giants, turning out vital artillery, guns, ammunition, wagons, harnesses, and the heaviest armor plate produced in the country at the time. Trains carrying hundreds of thousands of Union soldiers passed through the city as a sort of gateway to the Civil War theater of the east. And thousands of Allegheny County men enlisted to fight—hundreds more than the region’s quota required. This paper will aim to show that Pittsburgh played an important role in the Civil War and had a profound impact on the Union’s efforts to win the conflict. It will also explore the mood of the city at the beginning of the war, which was heavily influenced by its strong support of, and enthusiasm for, the newly-formed Republican Party.

This paper is limited to Pittsburgh’s first few years of involvement in the war. Several histories of Pittsburgh that include brief chapters on the Civil War indicate no great change in Pittsburgh’s involvement over all four years of the conflict. If there is a degree of difference in the City’s reaction in the latter days of the war, it is a decline of enthusiasm—a sentiment which seems to be common to all northern states and cities.

When social historians have examined the Civil War, at least one
question has been commonly asked: What were soldiers fighting for? One study based on the letters of soldiers to their friends and families indicates the patriotic swell soldiers felt during enlistment and battle had more to do with a desire to fulfill masculine, heroic ideals than patriotic ones.\(^2\) Another study argues that soldiers fighting for both the Confederacy and Union thought they were upholding the legacy of their forefathers who had secured their independence from Britain in the 1700's.\(^3\) The mood of a Civil War soldier may indicate a great deal about the mood of his home city. Historian Reid Mitchell theorizes that the constant communication between soldiers and their families at home through letters and newspaper articles often led to rumors and gossip affecting the troops in the field or their families at home. And because troops were most often organized locally, and soldiers fought next to their neighbors and family members instead of strangers from other states, the battlefield often became an extension of soldiers' home communities.\(^4\) Reid Writes:

Soldiers believed they were fighting for their families. . . . Their communities had presented them with homemade American flags, promised always to remember their bravery, and had marched them out of town to the accompaniment of brass bands. To be a good son, a good brother, a good husband and father, and to be a good citizen meant trying to be a good soldier.\(^5\)

But there were, of course, a number of political as well as emotional and personal reasons for which soldiers fought. Northern soldiers fought the war over national solidarity, economics, emancipation, and a number of other issues. In Pittsburgh, the reasons for fighting appear to have been linked more closely with national solidarity and a hatred and fear of southern secessionists than to a serious concern over slavery. In his book, Forging a Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848–1860, Michael Holt writes:

Republican appeals were aimed at the unfair power of the minority South and its aggressions against the rights of the Northern majority, rather than at slavery. Republican rhetoric in Pittsburgh opposed slavery expansion primarily to hurt the South and preserve the territories for white men, not to help the Negro. Indeed, one reason Republicans played down their antislavery appeal and spoke instead of white men's rights was a respect for the anti-Negro prejudices of many of the people in the city.\(^6\)

In his discussion of the rise of the Republican party in Pittsburgh, Holt points out that anti-Southern sentiment bolstered support first for the Whig party in the late 1840's, and later for the Republican party.\(^7\) Pittsburghers rallied quickly around this anti-Southern message, since most resented the
national influence of the South. It is perhaps this sentiment that in 1860 sparked Pittsburgh’s enthusiasm for the war, mobilizing the city as a war machine. Holt writes:

The unanimity of [Pittsburgh’s] citizens against compromise with the South during the secession crisis is ample proof of [anti-Southern] sentiment. In January 1861 Russell Errett wrote Simon Cameron, “Those who are familiar only with the public sentiment at Harrisburg, Philadelphia, New York, and Washington can have no idea of the fierceness of sentiment, here, in opposition to anything that looks like compromise. It amounts to almost a fury.”

This fury manifested itself on Christmas day, 1860. Morning newspapers reported Secretary of War John B. Floyd’s order that 124 heavy cannons and other guns and ammunition should be shipped from the Allegheny Arsenal down the rivers to Galveston and New Orleans. But many Pittsburghers questioned why the government was sending arms down the Mississippi, and instantly questioned whether the Secretary of War was treasonous. The Pittsburgh Dispatch wrote:

“The plain object of shipping guns South at this juncture is to put them in the hands of enemies of the United States, and it must not be permitted. It is not enough that we are to be sold out to the secessionists—the administration would bind us hand and foot, deprive us of arms and deliver us tied neck and heels to the traitors who would destroy the Union. It has already ordered 124 heavy guns from our Allegheny arsenal to the far South—not to defend the stars and stripes, for which our skillful mechanics made them, but to batter it down under the pirate flag of some Lone Star or Rattlesnake government.”

The city’s leaders met and formed a committee to wire President Buchanan asking that he countermand Floyd’s order. The city also appealed to Edwin M. Stanton, Buchanan’s attorney-general, formerly a popular Pittsburgh attorney. Pittsburgh was in a strange position. A Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reporter in 1961 wrote, “Everyone knew the South was planning rebellion but the Federal Government had not yet declared that rebellion existed. Thus, technically, Floyd was not treasonous in sending guns South. Yet Pittsburgh would be in rebellion if, with force, she resisted a Federal order.”

On January 3, 1861, Pittsburgh received word that, thanks to Attorney General Stanton, Floyd’s order had been rescinded, and, at President Buchanan’s request, the Secretary of War had resigned. In many ways, the City felt it had won a victory for the Union.
To understand the importance Pittsburgh placed on its role in the war, and the seriousness and fervor with which it approached the war effort, one must recognize one of the war’s internal conflicts: localism versus nationalism. On the surface the study of the Civil War is denoted as a nation’s struggle for survival, as a clash between southern states’ rights and northern nationalism, and as a conflict of economic, social, political, and constitutional differences. But there was also a conflict between 23 separate state governments and the relations of these units to the nation’s capital. A 1961 Pennsylvania Historical Museum Commission handbook, *Pennsylvania and the Civil War*, states:

> The dual authority exercised by the state and federal governments inevitably produced friction. The governors found causes of disagreement on appointment of officers, the assignment of troop quotas, the recruiting by individuals from one state among the citizens of another state, and a host of other matters. Such disagreements occurred even when the utmost good feeling existed on both sides.\(^{14}\)

As a result of this conflict, states and their largest cities (in Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Harrisburg) took a lot of initiative in organizing for the war, and cities such as Pittsburgh took pride in making their own contribution to the effort. The leadership of Pennsylvania governor Andrew Gregg Curtin, who in January, 1861, was the first governor to pledge a northern state against secession, was an important part of this organization. Under Curtin’s lead, Pennsylvania set itself apart from most other northern states in its financial and industrial contribution to the Union. Pennsylvania’s coal, oil, clothing manufacturing, woolen textiles, lumber, and leather, and Pittsburgh’s coal, iron, steel, and leather were distinct factors in the winning of the war.\(^{15}\)

When the Union officially entered into war on April 12, 1861, Pittsburgh also made major physical contributions in the form of manpower. Shortly after the first shots of war were fired, the President called for 75,000 soldiers. Quotas were assigned to states, cities, boroughs and townships. The City of Allegheny was assigned a quota of 1,609, and enrolled 5,709 soldiers; while Pittsburgh was assigned a quota of 3,277, and enrolled 11,187 soldiers.\(^{16}\) In a matter of days the governor and state legislature had prepared for war; they had mobilized a fighting force double the state quota of 14,000 men, thanks in large part to the very high enrollment in Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh and Allegheny City had ten volunteer companies when the war broke out. But these companies were unarmed and mainly disorganized. They were the: Jackson Independent Blue Grays, Washington Infantry, Allegheny Rifles, Pennsylvania Dragoons, Pittsburgh Turner Rifles, Lafayette Blues, Pennsylvania Zouaves, National Guards, and United States Zouave Cadets.\(^{17}\) These companies all met and quickly organized themselves as best
they could. They were joined by the other volunteer groups. A number of German gymnastic groups called Turner Societies enlisted immediately.\[18\] The propaganda of war was used effectively in Pittsburgh newspapers as calls were made for companies and regiments. Recruiting posters made their blatant appeals in Allegheny County’s towns, and in Pittsburgh the fife and drum were used to encourage enlistment. By April 18, 20 companies—two regiments—from Pittsburgh and Allegheny had received marching orders.\[19\] Within less than a week, Pennsylvania had filled its state quota of soldiers. There were 40 companies in Allegheny County alone that the national government refused to accept because it had enough soldiers for what it expected to be a short war. These unaccepted companies held together by sheer will, receiving no pay from the state or national government. On April 27, 1861, the governor decided to form a camp, Camp Wilkins, at Pittsburgh’s fair grounds, mainly to provide rations for the unaccepted companies.

Pittsburgh was also a bastion of industrial strength that helped the North to win the Civil War. One of the City’s most important contributions was the Rodman guns cast at the Fort Pitt Works, which supplied the North with 1,193 cannons during the war—nearly 15 percent of the total manufactured.\[20\] Not only did Pittsburgh’s mills pump out steel and its arsenals create guns and other war supplies, but boats of many kinds used in the war on the Mississippi were built in Pittsburgh, particularly the steam rams which helped to smash the Confederate fleets at Memphis.\[21\] The City’s river docks were always busy and troops and supplies moved up and down the Ohio. The City also became a railroad center through which thousands of troops, and supplies were shuttled. Many soldiers had to spend stop-over time in Pittsburgh, and hundreds of thousands of City dollars went into providing supplies—particularly medical ones—for these soldiers. Also, Pittsburgh women and children spent a great deal of time and money feeding and caring for the troops, sewing their uniforms and raising money to care for the wounded and war orphans and widows.\[22\]

Pittsburgh was the gateway through which soldiers poured from the west and northwest on their way to Washington. From the very beginning of the war trains and steamboats transporting troops were often unavoidably delayed in Pittsburgh, and as a result soldiers often ran out of food. At first, relief measures for the soldiers en route to Washington were temporary and erratic—citizens brought crackers, apples and cheese to help feed the soldiers. One of the leaders of these individual philanthropic efforts was B. F. Jones of the Jones and Laughlin steel corporation.\[23\]

On August 3, 1861, a mass meeting was held to formally organize subsistence efforts for the soldiers. The Pittsburgh Subsistence Committee was vested with the power to provide subsistence of soldiers who were being recruited in the City until they were regularly mustered into service, and to supply soldiers passing through the city with food and other comforts.\[24\] The Committee created a kitchen and dining room capable of feeding an entire regiment at one time in the Leech warehouse at the corner of Penn Avenue.
and Wayne Street. In October, 1861, the city councils of Pittsburgh and Allegheny granted use of the old city hall to serve as a dining room. The Subsistence Committee transferred its headquarters there, where 10 long tables were set up to serve up to 1,200 soldiers at one meal.\(^2\) The women’s branch of the Subsistence Committee was primarily responsible for feeding the soldiers. According to one report, the women provided meals for 409,745 soldiers during the war.\(^2\) In addition, the women set up a soldiers’ home near Union Station where 79,000 men were fed and given medical attention during stopovers.\(^2\) One reporter writing 100 years after the war wrote that several of the city’s hospitals became military hospitals, with women working around the clock providing care for wounded and sick soldiers.\(^2\)

One reason Pittsburgh was able to play such an influential role in the war was the state’s governor, Andrew G. Curtin, who held office from 1861-1867. “Wholeheartedly devoted to the Union, he worked unceasingly for victory and marshaled the people and resources of Pennsylvania to that end,” writes the Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission.\(^2\) Curtin earned the moniker, “the soldier’s friend,” for his efforts intervening for soldiers in their dealings with the federal government. He created special schools for soldiers’ orphans so they could be educated at state expense. He also made regular visits to the camps and hospitals. Curtin also introduced legislation that provided for the body of every Pennsylvania soldier who died in military service to be brought home and buried at the state’s expense. Curtin was clearly responsible for arousing a strong spirit of loyalty and purpose among Pennsylvanians during the war.\(^3\)

In Pittsburgh, there appears to have been a feeling that not all parts of the state were as supportive of the war effort as they could have been, however. On several dates in his diary, Colonel John I. Nevin, a Pittsburgh newspaper editor and Civil War officer, talks about his troops not receiving a warm welcome from farmers near Gettysburg during the infamous battle there. “It would not be that way in Pittsburgh,” Nevin writes in his July 5, 1863 entry.\(^3\) Newspapers seem to echo Nevin’s sentiment that Pittsburgh was somehow doing more for the war effort than other parts of the state, however a closer reading of the papers may show that Pittsburgh would have changed this attitude had it been subjected to a battle on its own soil such as the one at Gettysburg.

Pittsburgh newspapers during the war frequently report on the large, enthusiastic meetings that were held to organize subsistence organizations and rally support for the war effort. Time and again, articles describe meetings as being large and enthusiastic, such as the one held after the surrender of Fort Sumter and the President’s call for 75,000 troops: “An immense war meeting was held at the City Hall on Monday night, April 15, which was one of the largest assemblages ever convened in the City, there being between 4,000 and 5,000 people crowded into the rooms.”\(^3\) This enthusiastic response was not particular to Pittsburgh, However. Three days later, in Claremont, New Hampshire, citizens held similar rallying meetings,
Pittsburgh During the Civil War 1860-1863

with newspapers reporting similarly packed houses: "The town hall was filled to overflowing... It was such a meeting of the citizens of Claremont, without distinction of party, as had seldom been held." It is likely that meetings of this kind were held throughout the North.

There is, however, an element of excitement surrounding the war that is particular to Pittsburgh: the threat of invasion in spring 1863. Pennsylvania's southern border, three hundred miles in length, was contiguous to the borders of slave states, which left the state open to invasion. Pittsburgh was protected by the hills that surrounded it, yet its industrial resources may have been a worthwhile prize for Lee's army. Several historians and newspaper reporters have theorized whether Pittsburgh was ever in Lee's plans. In Allegheny County's Hundred Years, George H. Thurston writes:

There is little or no doubt that the capture of Pittsburgh was contemplated by the rebels. Its geographical position, its resources and the vast arsenal that was, and could be made, all rendered it a strong strategical point, whose possession or destruction was most important. At the time the city was fortified, General Lee was marching into Pennsylvania, while the rebel forces were being massed along the frontier line of West Virginia and Pennsylvania. A body of the cavalry advance had crossed the Cheat River to proceed to Pittsburgh, which, by cross country roads, was less than a sharp day's ride, when word was received by the leaders, through messages sent by spies, that the city was being strongly fortified. Upon which information they retreated across the river, and finally fell back from Morgantown.

However other historians writing just 24 years after Thurston conclude there is little evidence that Lee ever contemplated invading Pittsburgh. "Pittsburgh, while an important manufacturing center which would have been of inestimable value to Lee's army, was a great distance from the main Southern army and even if it could have been captured it could not have been held for any length of time," states The History of Pittsburgh and its Environ.

Nevertheless, on June 12, 1863, Governor Curtin announced the invasion of Pittsburgh was imminent, and thousands of men—as many as 6,000 according to one Pittsburgh Gazette report—were sent out to fortify the city. Until the victory a Gettysburg, the North had experienced nothing but bitter defeat, so it makes sense that Governor Curtin and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton would be concerned about Pittsburgh's safety. Stanton ordered the Department of the Monongahela formed for the city's self-protection. The city responded with great excitement and fear to the orders. Businesses closed, workers were sent to fortify the city, and couriers rode out to the countryside to warn citizens the Rebels were coming. The anticipation the city felt was summarized by one newspaper reporter who wrote, "The rebel
hordes of Lee and Stuart are actually on the soil of Pennsylvania." John Harper, president of the Bank of Pittsburgh around the time of the Civil War, wrote the following in a June 13, 1863 letter to his son, Albert, who was a soldier in the war:

We are all excitement here. The city looks like a camp, business being almost suspended. Allegheny County is preparing for war if it should come upon us. Home guards have ceased to be a mockery. A company is nearly formed of the clerk of banks who will go to any part of the state if needed.

We are constantly hearing startling rumors, sometimes favorable, sometimes otherwise. War is a dreadful business, probably as terrible as a shadow in the distance, as in the brightness of its fields of the operation. The life of a soldier is action; the experience of his friends at home is silent anxiety.

Without the discover of some lost Rebel documents, it is impossible to know whether Pittsburgh was ever a target of the South. It may also be impossible to qualitatively determine the extent of Pittsburgh’s role and influence in the Civil War. But there can be no question the city did indeed play a prominent part, even though the war never came closer to the city than 40 miles. In 1860 the city was alive with the rumblings of the new Republican party. Fervor for this party which lobbied on an anti-Southern message, among other things, and with the awareness that Pittsburgh was an industrially significant place, created a city that was an enthusiastic and patriotic participant in the war. At the same time, the city was fearful of an invasion, and responded strongly by fortifying against an attack that would never come.

On September 20, 1862, John Harper wrote to his son, Albert: Our people in Pennsylvania are warlike and determined never to let a hostile foot tread upon the Old Commonwealth. At least seventy thousand men have gone to Harrisburg at the Governor’s call to resist invasion. Our county sent more than a regiment. If it were necessary a Brigade would go from Allegheny County.

There is a substratum of Common Sense among our people, and they cannot be made believe that the rebels will ever venture to the Head of the Ohio. I think they are right; but I consider it a duty to be ready for any contingency.

And so Allegheny County prepared—unable to fortify itself in part because of the tremendous pro-union, and anti-Southern, sentiment that existed in the city as a result of the formation of the Republican Party there. Throughout the war Pittsburgh contributed to the effort with enormous
amounts of manpower and industry, driving the Yankee army toward its victory in the war against secession from the Union.

Endnotes

5. Mitchell, 81.
6. Holt, 82.
18. Pittsburgh Gazette, April 15, 17, 18, 1861.
22. Wilson, 589.
23. Pittsburgh Gazette, July 31, 1861; Pittsburgh Post, July 30, August 1, 1861; Pittsburgh Evening Chronicle, July 27, August 3, 6, 1861.
25. Pittsburgh Christian Advocate, October 26, 1861.
31. Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Nevin Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, Nevin Diary. July 5, 1863.
32. Pittsburgh Gazette, April 16, 1861.
34. Everett diss., 38.
35. Jacob Hoke The Great Invasion of 1863 (New York, 1959) 93–94.
37. Pittsburgh Gazette, June 13, 1863.
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