

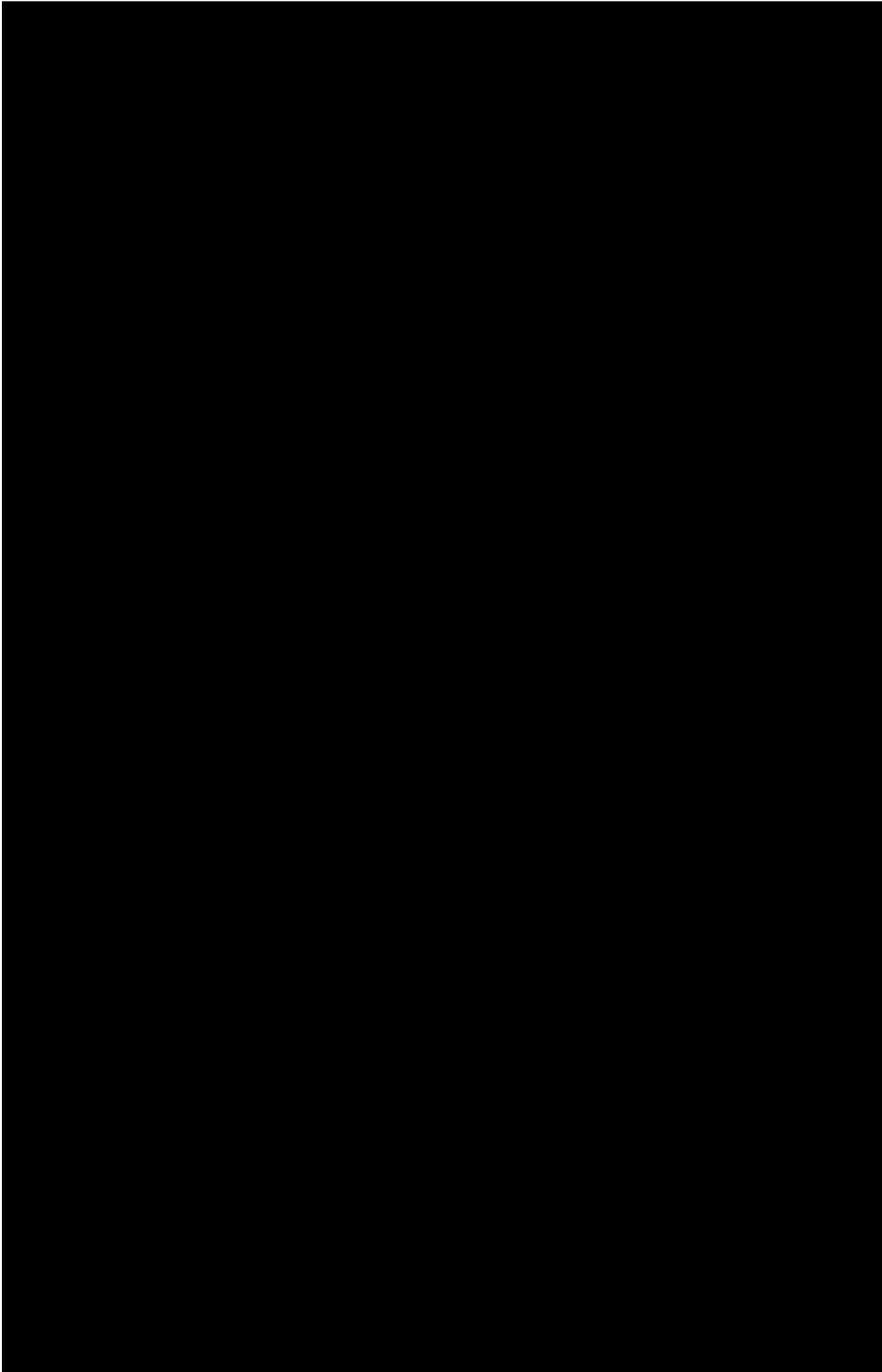
The Beginning

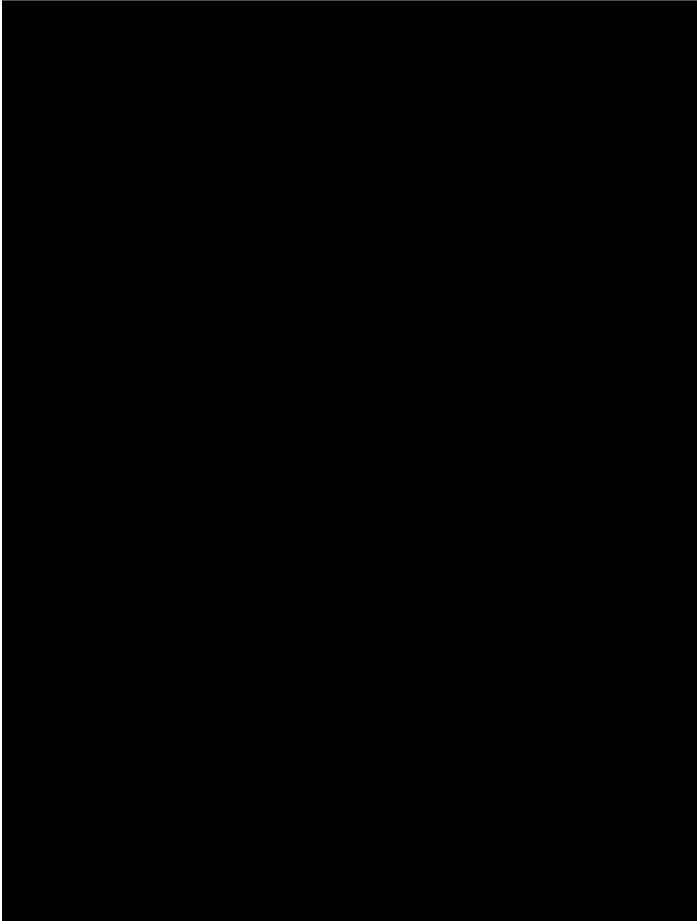


JULY 29, 1786, WAS an exciting day for the village of Pittsburgh, a collection of huts and taverns around Fort Pitt inhabited by three hundred people, at most. On that Saturday, the initial issue of the *Pittsburgh Gazette* emerged, one page at a time, from a hand press. The first newspaper west of the Allegheny Mountains, it was three columns wide and 15 x 9¾ inches, with a front page that was a solid mass of advertisements.

Behind this triumph for two printers, John Scull and Joseph Hall, both twenty-one years old, was one of the most colorful characters in Pittsburgh's history. Princeton-trained lawyer Hugh Henry Brackenridge, born in Scotland in 1745, had moved from York County, Pennsylvania, to Pittsburgh in 1781, and, according to his eulogy, determined "that a newspaper was indispensable to the future of the community and going to Philadelphia he engaged John Scull, a young printer, a member of one of the finest Quaker families in the community, as well as a man of splendid business capacity and most engaging in manners and deportment." Brackenridge's connections to journalism dated back to 1779. After service as a chaplain in the Revolutionary Army, he settled in Philadelphia and founded a periodical, the *United States Magazine*, which focused on the value of literature in American life. That venture

Front
page of
an early
issue of
the
*Pitts-
burgh
Gazette*

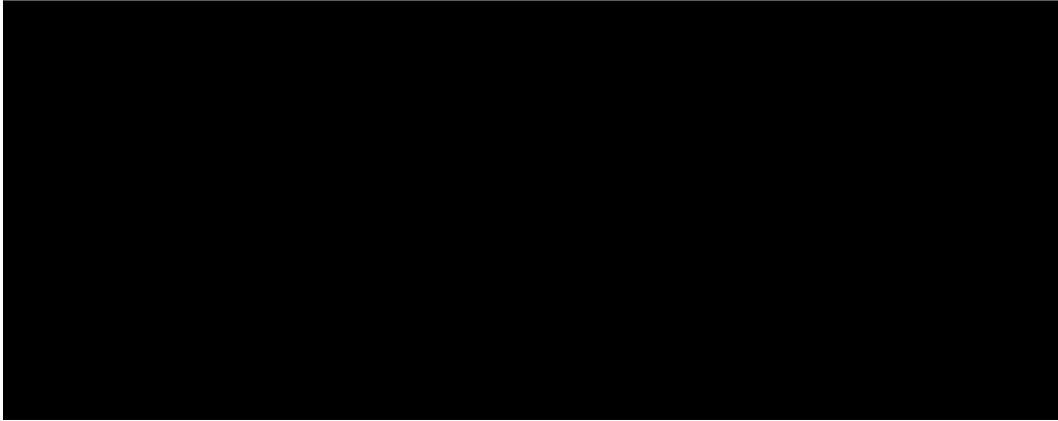




Hugh Henry Brackenridge,
from an oil painting by Gilbert
Stuart
(Courtesy Carnegie Library of
Pittsburgh)

had closed after one year when it ran out of money, and Brackenridge blamed the magazine's demise on the large class of people who "inhabit the region of stupidity and cannot bear to have the tranquility of their repose disturbed by the villainous jargon of a book."¹

Although Brackenridge never had any official connection to the *Gazette*, other than as a contributing writer, he helped to bring the paper into existence when he facilitated the purchase of an old wooden hand press from Andrew Brown, proprietor of the *Philadelphia Federal Gazette*, and its transport across the mountains in the autumn of 1785. The press had been designed by Adam Ramage, the most celebrated of the early American pressmakers. It was so small that it was necessary to print a newspaper in sections; eight pulls were required to make four pages. A printer and apprentice would have to work at top speed to pro-



*Pittsburgh
Gazette* mast-
head of settler
and Indian

duce seven hundred copies in a ten-hour day. Of course, a printing press alone was not sufficient to spread the word about this developing community. The Scull and Hall printing shop at the corner of Market and Water Streets thus expanded its newspaper enterprise.

From the outset, the *Gazette* reflected the propensities that would run through its history: a serious nature, a friendly attitude toward business, involvement in community affairs, and openness to varying opinions—within limits. Under Scull, the *Gazette* was basically conservative in tone and in political leanings. While Pittsburgh was still a raw frontier community, its crucial position in the Ohio River system made it a boarding station for travelers sailing farther west. Scull's *Gazette* proved to be a good match for the region.

Unexpected problems soon mounted for Scull, however. first, John Hall died on November 10, 1786, of an unknown disease. Furthermore, John F. Boyd, a replacement for Hall recruited by Brackenridge from Philadelphia, hanged himself in February 1789 on what became known as Boyd Hill, later the site of Duquesne University. Delivery difficulties already had prompted Scull to take on the role of Pittsburgh's first postmaster when postal service was inaugurated in 1788. Thereafter, Scull utilized the *Gazette* to publish lists of people whose letters were lying uncollected in his shop. In a letter to subscribers in the August 1, 1789, issue, Scull complained of the expense of "the carriage of paper from the east of the mountain" but wrote that he hoped to lower the price as soon as paper became available locally. Scull's letter scolded, "Surely in a couple of years a man may find two dollars worth of information, but if not, he will consider that in time it may improve." At one point, he

was forced to borrow cartridge paper—an essential for firing flintlock weapons—from the commander at Fort Pitt, Major Isaac Craig. No precise circulation figures were ever made available for early newspapers such as the *Gazette*, but the first federal census, taken in 1790, showed a Pittsburgh population of 376.

Despite the increasing difficulties facing the paper, Brackenridge found in the *Gazette* an outlet for his view on how Pittsburgh's development should proceed. In the August 26, 1786, issue, in an article titled, "Observations on the Country at the Head of the Ohio River," Brackenridge wrote presciently: "This town must in future time be a place of great manufacture. Indeed the greatest on the continent, or perhaps in the world. The present carriage from Philadelphia is six pence for each pound weight, and however improved the conveyance may be and by whatever channel, yet such is our distance from either of the oceans, that the importation of heavy articles will still be expensive. The manufacturing then will therefore become more an object here than elsewhere. It is a prospect of this, with men of reflection, which renders the soil of this place so valuable." Brackenridge understood the need to overcome impressions such as those expressed after a 1784 visit by Arthur Lee of Virginia, who described Pittsburgh as a town of "paltry log-houses, [which] are so dirty. . . . There are in the town four attorneys, two doctors, and not a priest of any persuasion, nor church, nor chapel; so that they are likely to be damned without the benefit of clergy. . . . The place, I believe, will never be very considerable."² On September 2, 1786, Brackenridge countered such sentiments in an article urging the state legislature to fund an institution of higher learning in Pittsburgh: "The situation of the town of Pittsburgh is greatly to be chosen for a seat of learning; the fine air, the excellent water, the plenty and cheapness of provisions render it highly favorable."

While such pointed articles appeared regularly in the *Gazette*, technically, the early paper carried no editorials. Many opinion pieces authored by Scull and Brackenridge were signed with pseudonyms such as "Democritus," "Vindex," "Observer," and "Farmer," and others were printed as unsigned letters or dispatches. Some letters were addressed from actual subscribers, usually circulation complaints. Scull welcomed contributions from many disparate voices, and allotted space to long proclamations, whether from the president, Congress, or Pennsylvania's General Assembly. In a September 9, 1786, response to a

letter from Gilbert Gichen of Peter's Creek, asking about the *Gazette's* policy on receiving articles, Scull attached this note:

As the above correspondent wishes to be informed whether we are confined to the publication of essays of one, two or three authors, or whether the plan is more general: the Printers are happy to acquaint him that the *Pittsburgh Gazette* shall never be a vehicle for conveying abuse abroad, either on public or private matters, they also inform him, they will thankfully receive (from any person) essays which may tend to the entertainment or improvement of the readers of this paper. They are sorry to add, that many pieces already have been received for insertion, which, if complied with, would have tended greatly to the injury of the *Pittsburgh Gazette*.

Most news appeared in the form of letters or dispatches, some from foreign sources. This policy was in keeping with an opinion piece from Brackenridge asserting that a newspaper should print distant rather than local news: "Who would not give half a guinea to know, exactly as he knows his own calf pasture, what is going on everyday when he rises, at Smyrna and Amsterdam, the armies that are on foot in Europe."³ Already, the September 2, 1786, issue, under the heading "Foreign Intelligence," had letters from Constantinople (dated April 10), Copenhagen (May 30), London (June 13), and The Hague (May 13).

"Distant news" could also include items from Philadelphia, which had become the state capital in 1790. "A principal advantage," Brackenridge wrote, "will be to know what is going on in our own state; particularly what our representatives are doing: Heretofore, like boys creeping into a hay stack at such a remote distance, we could see only their heels, while their heads were hidden away amongst the cabals in Philadelphia."⁴ On September 23, 1786, the *Gazette* reported, for example, that the state government had passed a resolution allowing a William Butler more land for a ferry landing "opposite the town of Pittsburgh" for "the accommodation of the public" because the present site had a tendency to flood.

Scull refrained for more than three decades from assuming the title of editor, but he certainly shaped the *Gazette* with his views. Sometimes his ambivalence on an issue was apparent. For example, he became known for his aversion to horse racing, calling it a "fruitful seminary of all vice."⁵ He refused to accept any advertising for jockeys and their mounts, but his front pages during horse-breeding season contained

many ads for noted stud horses. Scull seemed to struggle, too, with larger issues such as slavery. Although the fight for abolition—led, in Pennsylvania, by the Quakers—was well underway, the *Gazette* published advertisements for runaway slaves, such as this one: “Runaway on the 19th instant, from the subscriber, living on Plumb creek, Allegheny County, a Negro man named Jack. He is about 40 years of age, and his hair is not so curly, nor so much like wool, as the most of Negroes. It [sic] is supposed to be lurking about Pittsburgh. Whoever will take up said Negro and deliver him to his master, shall receive two dollars reward, paid by Thomas Girty.” Despite the occasional presence of these kinds of advertisements, Scull published several pieces that raised serious questions about slavery. A particular example, from the July 25, 1789, issue, is the text of a speech to the Maryland Legislature by member William L. M. Pinckney of Harford County, which included this statement: “that this inhuman policy was a disgrace to the colonies, a dishonor to the legislature, and a scandal to human nature, need not at this enlightened period be labored. . . . We may talk of liberty in our public councils, and fancy that we all feel a reverence for her dictates; we may declaim with all the vehemence of animate rhetoric against oppressions, and flatter ourselves, that we detest the ugly monster, but so long as we continue to cherish the poisonous weeds of partial slavery among us, the world will doubt our sincerity. Call not Maryland a land of liberty!”⁶

Scull was a religious man, believing in supernaturalism, but not narrowly so; he agreed, for example, to advertise the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), the Swedish religious mystic. Although the *Gazette* gave room to news about the gradually developing community of churches in Pittsburgh, at times Scull was accused of unfaithfulness and deism—charges that were also brought against such defenders of religious liberty as Thomas Jefferson.

If slavery and religion were important issues of the day, then no less so was the young government of the United States. On June 8, 1789, the *Gazette* published the entire text of the Bill of Rights amendments proposed by James Madison. Just a few months later, on September 26, the newspaper printed this reminder of apprehensions undoubtedly shared by Scull and many others: “The world is waiting with anxious expectation to see the operation of the new government: Much is justly expected from the legislature of the United States. The people of America

having set an original example by adopting in peace, without force, fraud, or surprise, a constitution, simple, plain, and competent to their exigencies, a doubt cannot remain but that all acts and doings of the legislature will be such a comment upon its principles as will give it that complete force and operation, which will crown the wishes of this great people.”

Scull’s choices of articles often reflected changing American attitudes, and he, like most, hailed the advent of the French Revolution as an expansion of the tide of liberty emanating from the American Revolution. However, Scull looked askance at the French Revolution as it continued; an August 1 dispatch from London in the *Gazette* reported: “The city is tolerably quiet and the utmost precautions are taking for its continuance, but so alarmed are all ranks of people, natives as well as foreigners, at the late riots, that it will be long before confidence is restored among them: great numbers of persons are emigrating from Paris every hour, and would flock still faster to this country [England] but there are not horses or carriages to bring them.” The early accounts of the revolution tended to be pro-King Louis XVI and anti-mob, but many Americans of the democratic constituency so enthusiastically championed the French cause that they changed their knee breeches for trousers, addressed each other as “citizen,” and began to form “democratic” societies for the promotion of the ideals of the French rebellion. Naturally, this caused dismay among conservatives, Scull among them. The divide in American opinion became deeper as the bitter civil war in France was complicated by military attacks on the new government by other European nations determined to snuff out this threat to the royal concept. By 1793, the acceleration of rebel executions by the guillotine caused enthusiasm for the rebels to wane in many quarters. Dispatches in the *Gazette* played upon these doubts, such as one from London telling of contradictory reports about Robespierre, including a plan to declare him dictator of France. That particular report proved to be all too true as Maximilien Robespierre’s ascension to power set off the bloody Reign of Terror until the dictator himself was consumed by the fury and guillotined on July 28, 1794. The *Gazette*’s sympathies by that time were clear, as this article of January 1, 1794, illustrates: “By yesterday’s mail from Philadelphia. Paris. Oct. 16 [1793]. Yesterday morning the once all powerful and beautiful Marie Antoinette, consort of the unfortunate Louis, king of France, was brought

like the meanest malefactor from the vile prison of Conciergerie, and placed at the criminal bar of the revolutionary tribunal. . . . At the place of execution this morning (the 16th) this unhappy victim of democratic fury was ignominiously carried to the place of execution in a common cart . . . and on the scaffold preserved her natural dignity of mind.”

Events in France complicated political matters in the new United States. By 1794, the overpowering prestige of George Washington as the new president could not stop fissures from forming among the Founding Fathers. Washington and those who later would become the Federalists were being confronted by less conservative politicians such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, despite Madison’s previous warnings against factionalism. Federalists and others who worried about the trends of the French Revolution labeled the more liberal elements typified by Jefferson as pro-French, with all the ills therein cited against them. Conversely, the Jeffersonians painted anti-France leaders such as Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and John Adams as too pro-English, even to the point of being monarchical.

The matter was exacerbated in western Pennsylvania, which abounded in citizens who feared the central government was becoming too strong. The historian Leland Baldwin noted: “Pittsburgh’s enterprise and prosperity thus made it the cynosure of western eyes, [but] with the French Revolution’s popularization of radical democratic ideas it actually became hated as the local exemplar of corrupt aristocracy and soulless materialism. The time was not far distant when this attitude was to be translated into action.”⁷ Also, many western Pennsylvanians were concerned about the continued presence of British troops in forts at Detroit and other western locations that the English were supposed to vacate under treaties ending the American Revolution. Moreover, the British were suspected of surreptitiously arming the Native American tribes and fomenting their resistance to the steady encroachment of American settlers coming across the Alleghenies.

John Scull was a Federalist who favored the new Constitution as a necessary antidote to what he considered the near-anarchy that prevailed under the Articles of Confederation devised in 1778. During the battles over the ratification of the 1787 document, Scull stood shoulder to shoulder with Brackenridge in attempts to persuade their centralization-wary compatriots of the benefits offered by the proposed Constitution. Brackenridge, as a newly elected member of the state legislature,

had been barely able in 1788 to head off an effort by many of his fellow western legislators to block ratification. Led by William Findley of Westmoreland County, a number of legislators had fled the chamber to preclude a vote by the necessary quorum. Guards had to bring enough legislators back from the streets of Philadelphia to restore the required number. This incident essentially ended Brackenridge's career as an elected official; he and Findley remained inveterate foes from that time forward. Still, Brackenridge was chosen to give the oration at a celebration in June 1788, hailing the ratification of the Constitution by New Hampshire, the ninth and final state needed to make the Constitution effective. Brackenridge's audience gathered on the slopes of Grant's Hill, then well outside of Pittsburgh.

Whatever Scull's feelings were on this issue, as A. Warner dryly noted in his history of Allegheny County, one can find no direct trace of it in the pages of the *Gazette*.⁸ Nor were there editorials promoting the establishment of an institution of higher learning in Pittsburgh, only opinion pieces from Brackenridge and also short news items about meetings on the subject, both before and after the incorporation in 1787 of the Pittsburgh Academy, ancestor of the University of Pittsburgh. Likewise, no editorial attention was given to the elevation of Pittsburgh on April 22, 1794, to the status of borough. That milestone, though, was to be overshadowed within months by one of the seminal events in the history of southwestern Pennsylvania and, indeed, of the new nation. Scull's policy of fairness would be strongly tested as growing unhappiness about a federal excise tax exploded in the Whiskey Rebellion.