Journalism and Politics in Jacksonian New Jersey: The Career of Stacy G. Potts

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Abstract
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Journalism and Politics in Jacksonian New Jersey: The Career of Stacy G. Potts

The year was 1831, and the President of the Bank of the United States, Nicholas Biddle, was preparing for a difficult campaign to win the re-charter of his institution. Facing the hostility of Andrew Jackson, and the partisan newspapers that supported him, Biddle was determined to put his own views before the American public. As he explained in a letter to Philadelphia attorney James Hunter,

the whole influence of [Jackson's] government, and of the presses subservient to his government, is employed in endeavoring to break down the Bank. In this situation, the Bank can only find safety in such explanation of its proceedings as will satisfy the country that it has been [un]justly assailed and that its operations are highly beneficial. But how is it to make these explanations, except thro' the press, the only channel of communications with the people?¹

Biddle's comments captured one of the central realities of Jacksonian America: for those who shared a vision for a rapidly growing country, the press was an essential instrument. Foreign visitors like Tocqueville recognized this, as did business leaders, politicians, organizers of the benevolent societies that proliferated during the period, and virtually everyone with an interest, a message, a cause. In an age of associationalism, Tocqueville observed in Democracy in America, people "need some means of talking every day without seeing one another, and of acting together without meeting." Newspapers met this need.

Regular newspaper publication in America dated back to the early eighteenth century, with the establishment of papers that published "by authority" in several eastern seaport communities. The spread of the press and its increased influence coincided with the growth and dispersion of the American population, and in particular, with the rise of urban centers along the Eastern seaboard. Although originally established as nonpartisan organs that opened their pages to all shades of opinion, colonial newspapers eventually took on a character imposed by the editors' views on public policy—a process which was dramatically advanced by the imperial issues raised after 1763.³

¹. Reginald C. McGrane, ed., The Correspondence of Nicholas Biddle Dealing with National Affairs, 1807-1844 (Boston, 1919), 126-27.


3. Frank Luther Mott, American Journalism: A


John Quincy Adams, left, and Andrew Jackson, protagonist in the party wars of the 1820s. New Jersey Historical Society.

Because of New Jersey's overriding rural complexion, and the inevitable impact of proximity to New York City and Philadelphia, the role of the press in the state has been obscured in histories of journalism. Yet in the quality of the writing, and the ferocity of partisan combat, the New Jersey press was equal to its counterpart in virtually any other state. Such men as William Tuttle, John Hall, Philip J. Gray, and David FitzRandolph exemplified the best (and at times, the worst) that the New Jersey press had to offer. Possibly the most gifted, and certainly the most controversial of this breed was the Jacksonian editor of the Trenton Emporium, Stacy Gardiner Potts, whose career in journalism extended from 1821 to 1838—the seedtime of the second American party system. Descended on both his maternal and paternal lines from Quaker families who emigrated from England to West Jersey in the late seventeenth century, Stacy Gardiner Potts was born in Harrisburg on November 28, 1799. Soon after the boy's birth his father purchased a tract of land in Fishing Creek, Northumberland County, Pennsylvania, on which the family lived and toiled for the ensuing decade. Stacy's early years were typical of a "hardy, healthy" rural youth. He walked, hunted, chopped wood, fished, swam, rode horses. By his eighth birthday, however, Stacy's parents decided he needed schooling, and because no school was in the vicinity, his father took the boy to Trenton in 1808. There Stacy was put in the care of his grandfather, also named Stacy Potts, a successful tanner who at this time was serving as mayor of Trenton. According to one memoir, Stacy and
his father walked the entire distance to 
Trenton from their Fishing Creek home— 
some one hundred and twenty miles—and 
when they reached the bank of the 
Delaware River, opposite Trenton, the 
boy remarked, "I like the looks of that 
place; I think I shall live there all my 
life." He did.

In Trenton, Potts' grandfather placed 
him in the local Friends school, where 
the youth remained for four years and gained 
his formal education. In 1813 Stacy entered a 
newspaper apprenticeship under his uncle 
(through marriage) George Sherman, on 
the Trenton Federalist, one of the state's 
leading political newspapers. There Stacy 
learned the printer's trade; and more im-
portant for his subsequent career, he 
began to write—primarily poetry, roman-
tic sketches, and discourses on living a 
better life. Working on the Federalist, 
Potts undoubtedly met many of the 
leading political figures of the day, and 
saw how they operated hand in glove with 
their uncle. But Potts was also kept busy 
as his uncle's factotum, overseeing the 
paper's books and travelling on horse-
back collecting monies owed for subscrip-
tions and advertisements.

The profession proved congenial to 
Stacy Potts. Before he turned twenty-one, 
he joined forces with a friend, Joseph

Justice, to design a new journal, The 
Emporium, which advertised itself as a weekly 
dedicated to "literary, religious, and 
miscellaneous" affairs. Some four hun-
dred subscribers signed on in a matter of 
several months and, in June, 1821, the 
first issue was published. Justice, who 
provided the bulk of the capital to start the 
enterprise, was the silent partner, while 
Potts carried on both the business and 
editorial responsibilities of the paper. He 
Wrote, he recalled in his "Auto-
biography," under "a dozen" signatures, 
and some of his articles, notably the 
nominalities published under the name 
"Olive Oakwood," were widely re-
published.

The Trenton Emporium appeared as a 
time of political disorientation in New 
Jersey, as Federalists abandoned active 
campaigning under their old banner, and 
Republican stalwarts faced increasing frac-
tionalism within their own ranks. Given 
the uncertainties of partisan identity at 
the time, the electorate's apathy, and 
Potts' own literary bent, it is probably 
not surprising that the Emporium tended 
to steer clear of political issues, beyond 
noticing the Congressional debates and 
telegraphic dispatches from Washington.

But he did not remain long on the 
political sidelines. By 1823, with the 
emergence of wide speculation about a 
successor to President James Monroe, 
Stacy Potts began to weigh his paper's 
possible role in a Presidential campaign. 
Following his own inclinations, and en-
couraged by such state political leaders as 
U.S. Senator Samuel L. Southard and 
Hudson County assemblyman Garret 
D. Wall, Potts steered the Emporium 
behind the candidacy of John C. 
Calhoun, then Secretary of War, who was 
running as the candidate who would 
follow the Monroe administration's 
policies, albeit with greater vigor and 
perhaps greater sympathy to economic 
development and, in particular, internal 
improvement.

The Emporium's first significant notice 
of Calhoun's candidacy appeared on Octo-
ber 18, 1823, emphasizing the Carolin-
ian's solid record in Congress and the 
War Department, and stressing his sup-
port for domestic manufactures, a protec-
tive tariff, and internal improvements— 
all issues of deep interest to Jerseymen. 
For several months following this notice, 
however, the Emporium made no con-
cerated effort on Calhoun's behalf. 
Reports from other newspapers did, 
however, take favorable note of Calhoun, 
and cited his increasing popularity around 
the country. Shortly before the Emporium 
campaign for Calhoun hit full swing, Potts wrote to 
Samuel Southard, recently named Secre-
tary of the Navy, seeking political intel-
ligence and assistance. "We are looking 
with increasing earnestness into the 
Presidential matter, in this part of the 
country," he told Southard, "and I do not 
believe there can be a question but that 
Mr. Calhoun has been gaining ground rapidly among us for a few mon-
th." Given his own conviction that 
Calhoun was "incomparably the best man 
for the Presidency among the can-
didates," Potts told Southard that he in-
tended to press the effort, but needed a 
commodity Southard could help provide: 
"I want facts; we have operations, and 
declaration, and abuse enough— I want 
Facts, that we may be able to reason 
the matter coolly and respectfully—in such a 
way as will best produce effect." 
Specifically, the young editor needed
documents, and he needed materials from "credible sources," which Southard conceivably could provide.  

Evidently he received them, for in January, 1824, the *Emporium* began a series of essays on the Presidential contest which weighed the merits of Jackson, Adams, Crawford, Clinton and Calhoun, and found the latter indisputably best. After detailing the Carolinian's position on issues of interest to Jerseymen, Potts observed:

In fine, this gentleman has invariably exhibited the high and lofty spirit, which assists every emergency with prompt and fearless impetuosity—the foresight and prudence which grasps and returns every advantage—and the zeal and energy which are always the harbingers of success, in such measure as peculiarly stamps his character with a fitness for the office now within the gift of the people.

Together with Southard's and Garret Wall's organizational activities, this kind of propaganda had its impact in New Jersey, Calhoun was taken increasingly seriously as a candidate for the Presidency, and some leading politicians, like U.S. Senator Joseph McIlvaine, freely predicted that Calhoun would carry the state. Forces outside New Jersey, however, detailed the Calhoun campaign, and in doing this faultily changed Stacy Potts' own political course. In March, a Pennsylvania convention ostensibly organized to pledge support for Calhoun instead declared its fealty to a hitherto dark-horse candidate, Andrew Jackson. With the loss of Pennsylvania, Calhoun was doomed, while Jackson gained markedly in public attention and support.  

His efforts on behalf of Calhoun having come to nothing, Potts did not simply withdraw to the sidelines. The *Emporium* quickly joined the Jackson tide, endorsing a ticket of Jackson for President and Adams for Vice-President, citing the old hero's "independence of sentiments and action," and running regular features on his military accomplishments. On November 13, 1824, the *Emporium* announced a "GLORIOUS VICTORY!" for Jackson in the New Jersey Presidential contest (Jackson carried the state by roughly 1000 votes over John Quincy Adams), and thereafter closely watched the national electoral trends. Despite the New England man's ultimate triumph in the House of Representatives in March, 1825, Potts' course, and that of his paper, was set. He was a Jackson man, and within several years, he would be the pre-eminent Jacksonian editor in New Jersey.  

Politics did not, however, entirely dominate Potts' life in the 1820's. He had married Ellen Burrows, whom he met at a Presbyterian Sunday School, in 1822, and set up house on Hanover Street in Trenton. Shortly after his marriage Potts made a decision to study law, working under a local attorney, Lucius H. Stockton, and then under a younger Trenton lawyer, Garret Wall, with whom he had worked on behalf of both Calhoun and Jackson. The decision to study law was based, in large measure, on Potts' doubts that the *Emporium* would provide an adequate support for his family, particularly after his partner insisted on reducing subscription rates in order to compete with other papers which had taken this tack to increase readership.

Whatever his motives for branching out beyond his newspaper work, Potts' regimen during the mid-1820's was remarkable. Not only was he charged with operating and writing copy for his weekly paper but he studied law each night, made speeches during campaigns, wrote literary articles for various magazines, and even taught at a school for young women in Trenton. By earning extra money through his teaching and writing, Potts was able to move his growing family to a large house on State Street, for which he paid $40 rent a year. He lived there until 1827.  

The year 1827 was auspicious for Stacy Potts. His wife inherited $800, and with another $900 willed to his sister-in-law, a deaf-mute who lived with the family, and a small loan, he took out a mortgage on a handsome brick house on Warren Street.
Most of the anti-Jacksonians anticipated a cut-and-dried election in Joint Meeting, whereby Theodore Frelinghuyzen, the state’s long-time Attorney General and a leading Adams man, would take Dickerson’s seat, and Adams’ retiring Navy Secretary, Samuel L. Southard, would replace Baeteman. But a quiet election did not occur, and Stacy Potts had a key role in stirring the waters and upsetting the plans of Secretary Southard and his supporters. Potts alone, as a member of the assembly minority, could not effect this end. His own action was made possible by the resignation a West Jersey anti-Jacksonian, assemblyman Dr. William B. Ewing, felt for Samuel Southard. Out of this flowed Ewing’s ambition to gain the Baeteman Senate seat for himself, and Potts’ determination to assist Ewing—to a point.

Since his emergence on the political scene in New Jersey in 1812, Southard had won a succession of patronage and elective positions unparalleled in the state’s history. Because Southard’s quest for office was so frequently successful, some of his colleagues nursed resentment against him. Lacking his name (Southard’s father, Henry, was a revered, long-time Republican Congressman) and good fortune, Ewing in particular felt that Southard was aggrandizing too much influence and, for a change, should be denied his wishes. This led Ewing and a small group of West Jersey assemblymen to promote Ewing for the Baeteman seat and to provide ammunition against Southard which the Jacksonians would use to great effect when ballotig for the Senate. Only a week prior to the joint meeting, the Ewing men circulated a broadside attacking Southard for his vote in the Senate in 1821 on the second Missouri Compromise (Southard had not taken as hard an anti-slavery line as was found in most of the state) and, more pointedly, on the ground that Southard was not an inhabitant of the state, since he had sold his house in Trenton in 1824 and moved to Washington. It occurred to Southard’s opponents, Potts included, that under the strictest construction of Article 1, Section 3 of the Constitution, Southard could be disqualified as a Senate aspirant because he had, in January, 1829, no home in New Jersey. When the broadside, written by Lucius H. Stockton, appeared, Southard’s friends quickly worked to counter its arguments. Southard himself penned an eight-page treatise, “A short statement of facts, connected with the conduct of Mr. Southard, on what is usually called the Missouri Question,” which attempted to counter the impression that he had ever worked for the extension of slavery to Missouri. In the pamphlet, which Southard wrote anonymously, he challenged his opponents to “point to a single vote, or to a single act of his life, private or public, which can justly bring on him, the imputation of being favorable to slavery.”

The election, however, did not turn on Southard’s views on slavery: rather, Southard’s Achilles heel was the issue of iniquity. In the joint meeting, five candidates were nominated for the Baeteman seat: Southard, Dr. Ewing, Mahlon Dickerson, Garret Wall, and William Jeffers (the latter three were Jacksonians). On the first and succeeding nine ballots, Southard had the most votes, but no majority. Jeffers’ support was negligible and he was eliminated after the second ballot. Ewing’s strength ranged from eight to sixteen votes, with Southard never having fewer than eighteen. By the ninth ballot, Dickerson passed Wall and the election was still completely uncertain. At this point, Stacy Potts stood up and read a motion saying that since Southard was not legally an inhabitant of New Jersey (all agreed he was a citizen of the state) he should be stricken from the list of candidates. According to Potts’ recollections, “it fell upon the house like a clap of thunder in a clear sky—everybody seemed astonished and paralyzed.” When the roll was again called, Dr. Ewing and six of his supporters joined the Jacksonian members in supporting the resolution. A majority was thus formed for the first time in the day, and Southard’s name was stricken. When the balloting resumed, a dozen Southard supporters, refusing to accept Ewing as an alternative because of his perplexity, joined ranks with those who voted for Dickerson. And on the twelfth ballot enough Wall men switched to Dickerson to re-elect a candidate who, two days earlier, would seem to have had virtually no chance of victory.

Potts, part in defeating Southard’s Senate bid marked him from that time in the mind of the former Navy Secretary, Southard’s relations with Potts, cordial if

22. “Reasons why Mr. Southard ought not to be elected by the Legislature to supply the vacancy in the Senate, created by the resignation of Dr. Bateman,” Birkner Collection, BLU.
23. “A Short statement of Facts, Connected with the Conduct of Mr. Southard, on what is usually called the Missouri Question,” Southard Papers, PUB.
 Jersey had been introduced in the 1820's, but each time the issue was raised in the legislature, those who would not directly benefit from the canal had mustered enough votes to defeat any state subsidies. Like his fellow Jacksonians Garrett D. Wall and Peter D. Vroom, Potts was an outspoken proponent of the canal project. By the time the matter came to a vote in the legislature in 1829, however, a complicating factor had emerged: railroads. Supporters of a Camden and Perth Amboy Railroad, which would run parallel to the proposed Delaware and Raritan Canal, urged that their project be endorsed by the state in place of the canal. Potts's own opinions on the subject were unqualified. As he recalled in his autobiography: "I thought the state should make the canal, and hold the other projects in abeyance, until time should furnish more experience on the subject of railroads." Potts helped to write a cooperative report on behalf of the canal, thousands of copies of which circulated throughout the state. His efforts helped carry the canal bill through the assembly, but the railroad's supporters were able to defeat the measure in the senate.

In the fall of 1829, after a narrow re-election to the assembly, Potts again turned to the transportation question, and again made his case for canal construction. He knew that if the railroad bill passed, a canal would never be built. He also knew that he and his allies lacked the votes to pass the canal bill in lieu of the railroad measure. After considerable maneuvering and conferences between the two sides, a deal was struck: Potts and the canal supporters would abandon their position that only a canal should be sponsored by the state. Convinced that the railroad men had the advantage, and that it would be better to compromise, Potts and his allies agreed to drop their opposition to the railroad bill if the railroad men would vote for the canal. The deal held, and in early 1830 the legislature passed individual monopoly charters for the two enterprises. Subsequently the two companies were re-incorporated as a giant monopoly, in a move that earned Potts widespread criticism.

During the years 1829-1832 the Jacksonian party in New Jersey achieved control of the legislature and the governorship. As a consequence, Potts gained printing contracts that substantially improved the Emporium's profitability, and enabled him to incorporate some of the features of the True American, a rival paper that went out of business in 1829. During this period, Potts also sought the lucrative clerkship in chancery, a position held by an anti-Jacksonian, John Wilson, brother of the late editor of the Trenton True American. Potts secured the position, but only after considerable effort and a two-year wait. He had been a strong supporter of Garrett Wall for the governorship in 1829, and pressed Wall to accept the position despite the latter's distant to that time on account of their political differences since 1825, became bitterly hostile. This antagonism was long lived. In late 1832, having been swept into the governorship on the strength of a National Republican victory in the state legislative elections, Southard very quickly sought to remove Potts from a key patronage position, clerk in chancery, to which Potts had been named in 1831. Further, Southard spent a great deal of money and considerable effort seeking an effective counterbalance to Potts' Emporium as a party paper in Trenton. Although he did get a paper, the Trenton Union, established, it was not a success. Throughout the decade of their enmity, Potts remained the implacable foe of Southard and Whigery in New Jersey, and the main target of the Whig press.  

During the same session of the legislature that witnessed the Senate election controversy, Potts was also active on the great public issue of the time in New Jersey, internal improvements. Like its neighbors, New York and Pennsylvania, New Jersey was caught up in the excitement over transportation advances, and in particular was stirred by the manifest success of the Erie Canal in promoting travel, trade, and prosperity. Numerous attempts to build a canal between the Delaware and Raritan Rivers in New Jersey had been introduced in the 1820's, but each time the issue was raised in the legislature, those who would not directly benefit from the canal had mustered enough votes to defeat any state subsidies. Like his fellow Jacksonians Garrett D. Wall and Peter D. Vroom, Potts was an outspoken proponent of the canal project. By the time the matter came to a vote in the legislature in 1829, however, a complicating factor had emerged: railroads. Supporters of a Camden and Perth Amboy Railroad, which would run parallel to the proposed Delaware and Raritan Canal, urged that their project be endorsed by the state in place of the canal. Potts's own opinions on the subject were unqualified. As he recalled in his autobiography: "I thought the state should make the canal, and hold the other project in abeyance, until time should furnish more experience on the subject of railroads." Potts helped to write a cooperative report on behalf of the canal, thousands of copies of which circulated throughout the state. His efforts helped carry the canal bill through the assembly, but the railroad's supporters were able to defeat the measure in the senate.

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25. "Autobiography." Fire Pots as a target of the Whig press, one needs simply to sample representative Whig journals. John Hall's comments in the Sun. Reg. Sept. 26, 1856, exemplify some of the more extreme attacks on Potts's character: "There is not an editor in the United States more devoid of candor, of honor and integrity, than he of the Trenton Emporium. He is a disgrace to the party which sanctions him, and a scandal to the church whose communion table he pollutes by his presence." The provocation for this outburst was Potts's charge in the Emporium that Whig Presidential candidate William Henry Harrison had supported improvement for debt.

discrimination. Finally Wall declined not only his party’s nomination but his election to the governorship despite Potts’ entreaties that the party had no good alternative. When Wall suggested that assemblyman Peter D. Vroom, Jr., of Somerset County, was a suitable choice, Potts was slow to agree. Hence when Vroom ran and won the election after a bitter fight in the party caucus, he owed nothing to Stacy Potts. Given Vroom’s reluctance to make a wholesale removal of incumbents in government patronage posts, he at first decided to leave the clerkship in chancery in John Wilson’s hands.

By 1831, however, the pressure on Vroom to replace Wilson with Potts was increasing, and when the legislature passed a bill making the office secure for a period of five years, Potts solicited and obtained the position. His work in the clerkship did not materially interfere with his editorial labors, though he was forced to limit his private legal practice. By providing technical services to attorneys with cases before various state courts, for which he received small fees, Potts was able to make the clerkship into a financial goldmine. He left the post a wealthy man. 28


Potts served as clerk in chancery and continued his duties with the Emporium during a decade of intense party competition in New Jersey. The Presidential campaign of 1824 had set in motion the final breakdown of Jeffersonian-era political identities, and by 1828, when Jackson and Adams were again matched for the Presidency, the new alignment had taken hold. The parties that emerged by 1828 were, as Richard P. McCormick has observed, “essentially new parties; they did not represent a continuation of the old parties under new names.” Federalists and Republicans joined both new parties in roughly equal numbers, and sustained their new identities, almost without exception, for the next two decades. 30

In the formation and sustenance of the Jacksonian organization, newspapers played a significant role, and Stacy Potts missed little of the action. Not only did Potts serve on the influential state central committee of the party, but his Emporium, located in the capital, became the most influential Jacksonian organ in New Jersey. In 1831 Potts offered the most vigorous defense of the Jacksonian-controlled legislature’s incorporation of the Joint Transportation Companies on the ground that the move was essential for completion of the Delaware and Raritan Canal, and extremely favorable to the pocketbooks of New Jersey taxpayers in the bargain. Potts was also the leading party spokesman against the re-charter of the Bank of the United States. Apparently convinced that the drift of opinion in the White House was hostile to the Bank, Potts began to attack the BUS as an unwarranted monopoly even before President Jackson issued his famous veto
message in 1832. And once that message appeared, Potts heralded it as

a document worthy of the parent days of our Republic. It brings us back nearer to the original principles which pervaded, and the spirit which animated, the fathers of our country, than any thing which had emanated from the executive from the days of Jefferson. It is the final decision of the President between the Aristocracy, and the people—he stands by the people.11

However deep or shallow Potts’s convictions on the issue were, the President’s veto message sparked an Emporium crusade against the Bank which did not abate until it was clear that the Bank would in fact not gain recharter. To the great advantage of the Jacksonians, the Bank War proved to be the animating force behind party competition during the old hero’s second term of office. It fired partisans’ conviction that their side had the right approach to public policy, that their side represented the republican ideal in its truest form. Apart from matters of ideology, which motivated thousands of party loyalists, the Bank War clearly helped both parties by giving them a standard to rally around. Even if a politician did not have a consistent ideology, he could cite an issue like the Bank recharter as an example of a “measures, not men” approach to politics.12

Above all, for a newspaperman like Potts, the Bank War made good copy. The Bank’s “aristocratic” features gave Potts a weapon with which he could flail political opponents, and he never let up. Issue after issue of the Emporium reiterated the same themes: that the Bank’s “mammoth” size went against republicanism and “the liberties of the Country”; that it played favorites in giving loans; that it supported the anti-Jacksonian cause; that it was controlled by European moneymen; that its director, Nicholas Biddle, was an aristocrat and a monopolist. And when, after several hard-fought political campaigns, the Bank’s supporters in New Jersey in effect surrendered on the issue, Potts did not simply abandon his theme. Instead, he took out after “monopolies” in general, arguing, in the vein of the famous “Loco Foco” editor from New York, William Leggett, that monopolies were bad in all forms.13

The broad anti-monopoly campaign of 1835-36 included attacks on the hitherto sacrosanct (in the Jacksonian press) Joint Companies. The Emporium’s shift on the merits of the New Jersey monopoly was the product of a confluence of developments, including the party leadership’s growing distrust of Joint Companies’ president Robert F. Stockton, who, for personal financial reasons, had deserted the Democrats on the critical Bank issue; its awareness that the Whigs were making political capital of the Democracy’s inconsistency about monopolies; and increasing conviction by Potts that he should be consistent if he really subscribed to his own antimonopolistic rhetoric. Ultimately Potts’s stance against monopolies led him, Governor Vroom, and United States Senator Gayer Wall to espouse an antiscorporation position in keeping with the hard money trends in the national party. Potts strongly supported the Van Buren administration’s commitment to hard money, its renewed opposition to a central bank, and its support for an independent, or subtreasury, system.14

Under the independent treasury plan, government funds would not be placed in a national bank or in state banks, which were essential to large-scale credit and investment, but in selected government depositories where they would lie fallow, unavailable to both conservative banker and freewheeling speculator. Behind this proposal lay straightforward hardmoney Democratic doctrine. According to this analysis, to which Potts subscribed, overbanking and overtrading, in part with the benefit of public monies, had caused the depression. Van Buren’s formula would put a clamp on speculation and, the president thought, prevent future economic fluctuations of the kind that had produced the panic and depression.15


32. As Potts wrote to Democratic Congressman Ferdinand Schneck at the height of the Bank war, “The people of the whole country should understand clearly, distinctly and in a way to satisfy them that they must sustain the administration on the Bank—that there is no other question worthy to be named in the approaching struggle. If this can be done with effect, it will make us triumphant.” Potts to Schneck, June 14, 1834, Ferdinand Schneck Papers, RUI; see also Potts to Schneck, Feb. 22, 1834, Schneck Papers.

33. Emporium and True American, Aug. 18, 25, Sept. 1, 15, 28, Oct. 13, 27, 1832; a number of Leggett’s editorials are conveniently reprinted in Joseph T. Blais, ed., Social Theories of Jacksonian Democracy: Representative Writings of the Period 1823-1850 (Indianapolis, 1954), 66-68. Potts’s limitations as a thinker and polemict on the subject are evidenced in his own disquisition on monopolies in a series of essays for the Emporium, May 9, 16, 23, June 6, 13, 20, July 4, 18, 25, 1833.


In the view of Jacksonians like Potts, the independent treasury program was a sane and sensible measure for the Democratic party and the nation as a whole. Moreover, it gave the Democracy a rallying point. Potts and other Democrats hoped the independent treasury would bear political fruit in the later years of the decade, as the attack on the monster bank had done earlier. This was not to be. For one thing, anti-Bankers and the independent treasury were different kinds of policy. Anti-Bankism was an essentially negative doctrine that permitted people with differing ideas about the economy to unite against the Bank; the independent treasury was a positive program, unattractive—indeed, unpalatable—to the business-oriented.

Entrepreneurs of both parties objected to Van Buren’s scheme. Ex-Congressmen James Parker and Ferdinand S. Schenck, Democratic party stalwarts during Jackson’s ascendancy, believed that the new president’s policies would ruin the party and prolong the depression. In private correspondence with William A. Whitehead, Parker called the independent treasury plan “ill-judged.” Schenck, in a speech, was more emphatic; he called it “pernicious.” Each man, it might be noted, had extensive banking and mercantile interests. Both broke with the Democrats on the issue and eventually defected to the Whigs. 16

Identified by the Whigs with the depression, divided within its leadership, the Democratic party suffered six consecutive defeats in state elections between 1837 and 1842. In Washington, it took the party nearly three years to enact the independent treasury, and then, just as the program was barely beginning, the Whigs won the election of 1840. This killed the program, and the Democratic fiscal policy was dead for one Presidential term at least.

Despite repeated defeats in New Jersey, Democrats strongly sustained their ant incorporation stance. In the legislature they supported hard money and limited incorporations for nearly a decade. The party was similarly united (if palpably smaller) on national issues once dissidents like Parker, Schenck, and Stockton had abandoned it. The independent treasury program became the litmus test of one’s partisan loyalties in New Jersey. 17

Stacy Potts was strongly supportive of President Van Buren, but he was unable to see to its conclusion the struggle for enactment of the independent treasury. The business in his chancery office had increased substantially through the 1830’s, particularly after his appointment early in 1837 as a master and examiner, which meant even more paper work. Potts’ long-time regimen of labor without cease finally began to tell on his health. He was afflicted by a series of severe “nervous headaches” in 1837 followed, in November, by “an attack of violent inflammation of the lungs” which forced him to bed for several months. Although he recovered, his health remained unstable, and in January, 1838 he finally resigned the Emorium editorship to his brother Joseph, who had taken an increasing share of the editorial chores over the years. Potts continued to be active in Democratic politics, and remained committed to the ant incorporation position. Hard times, however, soured the public on the Democracy, and with the sweeping victory of William Henry Harrison and Whigery in the election of 1840, Potts was finally removed as


Clerk in Chancery. Still suffering from headaches and nervous problems, he took an extended European vacation which, he recalled in his autobiography, largely restored his health and sense of well being. 26

Back in New Jersey in September, 1841, Potts resumed a regular legal practice for the first time in almost fifteen years. He remarried, in 1843, to Cornelia How, daughter of the locally prominent Presbyterian clergyman Samuel B. How. Potts also plunged back into an active role in the Democratic party, serving as state central committee chairman. During the Tyler administration Potts identified himself with the Democratic faction that supported another Presidential nomination for Martin Van Buren, as against those in the party who favored a rapprochement with the president, an ex-Democrat, or support for a new man. When Van Buren was defeated at the Democratic national convention in 1844 by dark-horse candidate James K. Polk of Tennessee, Potts acquiesced in his party’s choice. But he refused to campaign, or vote, for the Democratic gubernatorial nominee, John R. Thomson, who was a brother-in-law of Joint Companies President Robert Stockton and a major-domo in that corporation himself. The upshot of Democratic dissinity and an aggressive
Whig campaign was Thomson's defeat for the governorship by roughly 1,500 votes, and Polk's failure to carry the state against Whig wheelhorse Henry Clay by an even closer margin. 39 During the years 1845-1852 Potts devoted himself primarily to his legal practice, though he was active in various benevolent associations and party affairs to some degree as well. He remained on the Democratic state central committee, and made an unsuccessful race for Congress in 1848 (given the composition of the district, he recalled in his autobiography, it was a hopeless contest, taken on in a sense of duty to the party). But for the most part he made a good living at the bar, including a lucrative relationship with several major corporations. In 1845 Potts was chosen by the legislature, along with former Governor Vrooman, U.S. Senator William Dayton, and state supreme court justice Henry Green, to revise the laws of the state. This responsibility took approximately one year, whereupon the state legislature ratified the work. In 1852 newly elected Democratic governor George F. Fort invited Potts to choose whatever position in the state judiciary he wanted. Deciding that he was financially secure, and that he could afford to accept a position on the bench, Potts agreed to nomination as justice of the state supreme court. He was confirmed, and remained on the bench until his term expired in February, 1859. Although Potts had no experience in various facets of the work he would perform, he was, according to his colleague Lucius Q. C. Elmer, "quick to learn," and diligent in fulfilling his responsibilities. Not surprisingly, Potts' opinions reflected his facility with a pen. He simply was not a very deep student of the law, but his common sense and good temper made him, Elmer recalled, "a very good judge, and deservedly popular with the bar and the public in general." 40 Upon the expiration of Potts' first term on the supreme court, he decided he had served long enough. "I was 59 years of age, a good deal troubled with rheumatic gout, had accumulated a competent fortune, and my family was reduced to three children," Potts recalled in his autobiography. He retired to his Warren Street home, and wrote his autobiography, which he completed in January 1860, shortly before his third marriage, to Hannah Moore of Hunterdon County. During the last five years of his life, Potts read a good deal, primarily history and theology, and worked on a book—never completed—titled "The Christ of Revelation." His health steadily deteriorated, and his gout, an aliment of long standing, worsened. In the final addendum to the autobiography, penned in 1864, Potts noted that "my ability to write and read are impaired. My left eye is very dim and my fingers stiff." On April 9, 1865, Potts died at his home in Trenton. 41 As a journalist, Stacy Potts' career was replete with contentious, and influential, but not exceptional. He lived by the journalistic credo of his times: a good fight but no grudges held. Potts did not follow the example of his contemporary, Geeley, who proposed numerous sincerely intended and often thoughtful programs for social and economic reform in society. Nor, at the other extreme, was he as consistently crusading, auburn, and obnoxious as James Fenimore Cooper's fictional Steadfast Dodge, a man who never, in Cooper's view, made a move "without weighing whether it would be likely to elevate him or depress him in the public mind." Potts showed, in his early attacks on the Bank of the United States, that he was sensitive to currents of public opinion, and in his shift to antimonopoly rhetoric, he showed that he could play effectively on themes the public was eager to hear. Yet during the late 1830's and early 1840's Potts did not hesitate to take positions that roiled waters in his party, and by 1844 was prepared to express publicly an unwillingness to support his party's nominee for governor because that candidate, John R. Thomson, represented interests he could not abide. 42 Apart from his familial affections, the one passion that stands out in Potts' life was his quest for material success. Here a reference to Tocqueville's analysis is inescapable. Potts was Tocqueville's restless, acquisitive, democratic, unreflective, materialistic, optimistic American. In his commitment to the main change in law and particularly in making the most of his chancery court post, Potts operated with the dedication and acumen of the shrewd capitalist. Potts' successful commitment to becoming wealthy was not the only way in which he reflected the quality of the era. The nervous affections he suffered in the late 1830's, after having worked to the limit for two decades, also fit the Tocqueville portrait—the relentless striver whose apprehension grows as his success increases. Content was not part of the composite. Nor was it for Potts, at least until his retreat from journalism and the daily grind of court business. 43 If any one trait stands out in Potts' life, it is his tremendous energy. It was this energy which led Potts to fill all the tasks at the Emporium, to study law while laboring full-time as an editor, which led him to assume increasing responsibilities in chancery court because that was the way to wealth. It was this kind of energy that undergirded the transition from an essentially agrarian society to a modern and increasingly industrial one. That Potts ever nourished doubts about this trend, about the virtues of growth and change, is not clear. He expressed none in the Emporium, and was similarly silent in his autobiography. In a republic of bees, apparently, the dozzer, not the striver, was the anomaly. There is nothing anomalous about the autobiography Potts wrote, nor life the led. It was in virtually all respects characteristic of his age.


41. "Autobiography." Potts' death was first noticed in the Trenton True American, Apr. 13, 1865. A more substantial obituary appeared on Apr. 15, 1865, where it was considerably overshadowed by that paper's coverage of the assassination of President Lincoln.


43. Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 2:315-34. For an evocation of the values exemplified in the work of a Jacksonian-era businessman, see the discussion of the shoe manufacturer Benjamin Franklin Newhall of Lynn, Massachusetts, in Alan Dawson, Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), 33-41. The analogue to Potts is suggestive.