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

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Abstract
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Keywords
Stacy G. Potts, New Jersey, Jacksonian Era, journalism, politics, Nicholas Biddle

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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?

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.

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3. Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A
During the Revolutionary years and after, the press both shaped and represented public opinion, a development which matured with each passing year. Supporters of the nascent political parties of the 1790's took pains to establish and sustain party organs, and by 1800, every state in the nation had its party presses. In New Jersey, the Jeffersonian-Republicans were particularly active in employing the press as a political instrument and their efforts paid off handsomely. Aided by such organs at the Newark Sentinel of Freedom, the Trenton True American, the New Brunswick Freeman, and nearly a dozen smaller presses, New Jersey's Jeffersonians gained control of the state in 1801 and, with the exception of a single year (1812-13), never again relinquished power to their Federalist foes.

Editors played an important role in the political life of the state. Often active behind the scenes in the process of candidate selection, editors also publicized the organization's choices, rallied local partisans to mass expressions of support for their ticket, articulated the party platform, and assailed the opposition's principles and personnel. In return, loyal newsmen were rewarded with printing contracts, influence in patronage appointments, and, not infrequently, appointive office as well. Occasionally editors themselves became political candidates, as True American editor James J. Wilson did in a successful bid for the United States Senate in 1814, but this was an exception, not the rule. Most journalists were more comfortable as controversialists than as policy makers.

Although the political influence of the press in New Jersey temporarily declined from 1815-1823, as party politics grew disorganized with the decay of Federalism, the precedent for press activism in politics had been firmly established. By the advent of a new political era, defined by support for or opposition to Andrew Jackson, the press was reaching a new maturity and unparalleled influence in both New Jersey and the nation. Never before the 1820's had the average citizen been as interested in reading about and debating public issues; never before had there been as many newspapers; never before had readership been so extensive. Never before were effective editors at such a high premium.

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 fierceness 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. Gey, and David PirieRandolph 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 decades. 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 that 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
boy remained 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
his 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 Em-
porium, which advertized itself as a week-
ly devoted 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
honesties published under the signature
"Oliver Oakwood," were widely re-
published.

The Trenton Emporium appeared at a
time of political disorientation in New
Jersey, as Federalists abandoned active
campaigning under their old banner, and
Republican stalwarts faced increasing fac-
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
listing candidates for local and county of-
ices. 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
Hunterdon 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-
an’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-
certed 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-
ths." 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
delamation, and abuse enough—I want
tacts, that we may be able to reason the
matter coolly and respectfully—in such a
way as will best produce effect." 12

Specifically, the young editor needed

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8. Stacy Potts, "Biography," Archives Divi-
sion, New Jersey State Library, Trenton. Potts’
autobiography was discovered by New Jersey state
archivist William C. Wright in July 1976. In the
genealogical files of the New Jersey archives, Inter-
nal evidence suggests that the memoir was written
shortly after he left his seat on the state supreme
court in 1839. The main body of the document was
completed in 1860 and a yearly entry is provided for
the years 1861 to 1864. The manuscript Potts left
runs ninety-three handwritten pages in a 7” x 6”
bound notebook with lined pages.


11. Michael Birkes. "Politics, Law, and Em-
porium in Jacksonian America: The Career of Samuel
L. Southard," unpublished Ph.D. diss., University
of Virginia, forthcoming, 1990, c. 3; "Autobio-
graphy." Herbert Ehrlichwitz, "The Election of 1824
in New Jersey," Proceedings of the New Jersey
Historical Society, 44 (Apr. 1960), 113-131. Potts’
political inclination can be followed in the pages of
the Emporium for 1822-24.

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 indubitably 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 awes every emergency with prompt and fearless irrepressibility—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 fatefuly changed Stacy Potts own political course. In March, a Pennsylvania convention ostensibly organized to pledge support for Calhoun instead declared its fidelity 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.
The building was large enough for an office, as well as a dwelling, and it was in a good location. That same year Potts obtained his license as an attorney-at-law and solicitor in chancery, and he immediately opened a law office 'in the front room of my house.' His practice brought in $400 in fees for the first year, a reasonable if not munificent income for the day and, as he recalled in his autobiography, from that point on, he never again had financial worries.19

Having successfully established a law practice, Potts gave some thought to quitting both newspaper work and politics. In fact he did neither. Instead, in 1828 Potts sought and received the Hunterdon Republican caucus's nomination for a seat in the New Jersey Assembly, and gained election without difficulty. Serving in the legislature during a year or intense and often bitter maneuvering between Adams' supporters and Jackson men, Potts played a major role. In particular, he was influential in the two most newsworthy events of the legislative session: the election of United States Senators, and the decision to incorporate a canal which would link the Delaware and Raritan Rivers.

The political campaign of 1828 had been strongly contested by the two parties, and the result, despite Potts' efforts, was a decisive victory for the Adams men. Under normal circumstances, this result would have enabled the anti-Jacksonians in the legislature to name two United States Senators for terms in the twenty-first Congress—one for six years to replace the Jacksonian incumbent, Mahlon Dickerson, and the other, for three years, to fill the vacancy left by Ephraim Bateman, who resigned his seat in January, 1829 on account of ill health.

Most of the anti-Jacksonians anticipated a cut-and-dried election in Joint Meeting, whereby Theodore Frelinghuysen, 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 Bateman. 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 resentment a West Jersey anti-Jacksonian assemblyman, Dr. William B. Ewing, felt for Samuel Southard. Out of this flowed Ewing's ambition to gain the Bateman Senate seat for himself, and Potts' determination to assist Ewing—to a point.20

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 line, 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 Bateman seat and to provide ammunition against Southard which the Jacksonians would use to great effect when batting for the Senate seat. Only a week prior to the joint meeting, the Ewing men circulated a broadside attacking Southard

Stacy G. Potts

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 I, Section 3 of the Constitution, Southard could be disqualified as a Senate aspirant because he had, in January, 1829, no home in New Jersey.21

When the broadside, written by Lucius H. Stockton, appeared, Southard's friends quickly worked to counter its arguments. Southard himself penned an eight-page tracts, "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 "enemies" 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."22

The election, however, did not turn on Southard's views on slavery; rather, Southard's Achilles heel was the issue of representation. In the joint meeting, five candidates were nominated for the Bateman seat: Southard, Dr. Ewing, Mahlon Dickerson, Garret Wall, and William Jef fers (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 paralysed.23 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 perfidy, 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.24

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, N.U.

23. "A Short statement of Facts, Connected with the Conduct of Mr. Southard, on what is usually called the Missouri Question," Southard Papers, N.U.

24. "Autobiography." The Newark Sentinel of Freedom, Feb. 3, 1829, contains the most complete newspaper analysis of the election. Birkner, "Samuel L. Southard," does not credit Potts' claim to have shocked the assembly with his motion to strike Southard's name from the list of candidates for the Senate. Price D. Lewis, The Behavior of State Legislative Parties in the Jacksonian Era: New Jersey, 1829-1844 (Rutgers, 1977), 56-99, indicates that the National Republicans' division over the Senate election marked the last time that a legislative party in the Jacksonian era would evidence disunity in disposition of offices.
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’ Em- porium 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 Whiggery in New Jersey, and the main target of the Whig press.25

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 Garret D. Wall and Peter D. Vroom, Potts was an outspoken proponent of the canal proj- ect. By the time the matter came to a vote in the legislature in 1829, however, a com- plicating 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 en- dorsed by the state in place of the canal. Potts’ own opinions on the subject were unqualified. As he recalled in his auto- biography: “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 Rail- roads.” 26 Potts helped to write (indeed, claimed to have authored) 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.27

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 construc- tion. 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 spon- sored by the state. Convinced that the railroad men had 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 in- dividual monopoly charters for the two enterprises. Subsequently the two com- panies were re-incorporated as a giant monopoly, in a move that earned Potts widespread criticism.28

During the years 1829-1832 the Jackson- sonian party in New Jersey achieved control of the legislature and the gover- norship. 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 over a two-year wait. He had been a strong supporter of Garret Wall for the governor- ship in 1829, and pressed Wall to ac- cept the position despite the later’s

25. “Autobiography”: Fine Potts as a target of the Whig press, one needs simply to sample repre- sentative Whig journals. John Hall’s comments in the Sunsat Register, Sept. 29, 1856, exemplify some of the most extreme attacks on Potts’ character: “There is not an editor in the United States more destitute of candor, of honor and integrity, than he of the Trenton Emporium. He is a disgrace to the party which sustains him, and a scandal to the church whose communion table he pollutes by his presence.” The provocation for this outburst was Potts’ charge in the Emporium that Whig Presiden- tial candidate William Henry Harrison had sup- ported improvement for debt.


28. Stacy G. Potts, 169
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. 28

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. 29

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

28. Stacy G. Potts to Garrett D. Wall, Oct. 28, 1829, Wall Papers, RUL; Potts to Wall, Oct. 30, 1829, Philhower Collection, RUL. Wall’s formal declination of the governorship, dated Nov. 2, 1829, is in the Philhower Collection. The Emporium became the Emporium and True American on July 11, 1829.


message in 1832. And once that message appeared, Potts hailed 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.17

However deep or shallow Potts' 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.18

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
capitalism and "the liberties of the Country;" that it played favorites in giv-
ing 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.19

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 develop-
ments, 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;
it's awareness that the Whigs were making

31. Emporium and True American, July 21, 1832. For Potts' editorials defending the Joint Companies, see ibid., Feb. 18, Mar. 5, Nov. 19, Dec. 17, 24, 31, 1831, Jan. 7, 14, 21, 28, Feb. 4, Mar. 10, 1832.
32. As Potts wrote to Democratic Congressman Ferdinand Schneck at the height of the Bank war, "The people of the whole country should unders-
stand 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 as triumphs." Potts
to Schneck, June 14, 1834, Ferdinand Schneck
Papers, RUL; see also Potts to Schneck, Feb. 22,
1834, Schneck Papers.
33. Emporium and True American, Aug. 18, 25,
Sept. 1, 15, 26, Oct. 13, 27, 1832; a number of Leg-
gett's editorials are conveniently reprinted in Joseph
t. Blass, ed., Social Theories of Jacksonian
Democracy: Representative Writings of the Period
1825-1859 (Indianapolis, 1954), 66-68. Potts' limi-
tations as a thinker and politician on the subject are
ev iden ted 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.
34. Michael Birkner, "Peter Vroom and the
Politics of Democracy," in Paul A. Suchman, ed.,
Jacksonian New Jersey (Trenton, 1979), 11-38; Em-
porium and True American 1837, 1838, passim.

political capital of the Democracy's in-
consistency about monopolies; and in-
creasing conviction by Potts that he
should be consistent if he really subscrib-
ed to his own antimonopolistic rhetoric.
Ultimately Potts' stance against monopo-
lies led him, Governor Vroom, and
United States Senator Gurnet Wall to
espouse an antincorporation position in
keeping with the hard money trends in the
national party. Potts strongly supported
the Van Buren administration's commit-
ment to hard money, its renewed opposi-
tion to a central bank, and its support for
an independent, or subtreasury, system.20
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 in-
vestment, 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, over-
banking 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 presi-
dent thought, prevent future economic
fluctuations of the kind that had pro-
duced the panic and depression.21

35. James C. Curie, The Fox at Bay: Martin Van
Buren and the Presidency, 1837-1841 (Lexington,
Ky., 1970), 4, 4; James Roger Sharpe, The Jackso-
nians versus the Banks: Politics in the State After the
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-Banking and the independent treasury were different kinds of policy. Anti-Bankingism 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 ascendency, 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.19

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.20

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 Emporium 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.20

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 rapprochment 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 disunity 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.16 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 complexion 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 Vroom, 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."17

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 ailment 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."18 On April 9, 1865, Potts died at his home in Trenton.19

As a journalist, Stacy Potts' career was replete with content, 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, Greeley, who proposed numerous sincerely introduced and often thoughtful programs for social and economic reform in society. No, at the other extreme, was he as consistently crusad, callous, 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 rolled 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.20

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, ineffective, materialistic, optimistic American. In his commitment to the main chance 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.21

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 doer, not the striver, was the anomaly. There is nothing anomalous about the autobiography Potts wrote, nor the life he led. It was in virtually all respects characteristic of his age.

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