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Philip A. Grant, Jr.

*THE CAMPAIGN OF 1834
AND THE BANK QUESTION*

In 1834 Maine experienced one of the most acrimonious political campaigns in her entire history. The United States Senator from Maine, Peleg Sprague, destined to be the Whig nominee for Governor, offered a preview of the 1834 campaign in a fiery speech delivered at Boston on the Fourth of July. Sprague asked for a comparable period in the annals of free government in which there had been "such enormous encroachments of actual tyranny under the forms and professions of republicanism" as had developed since Democratic President Andrew Jackson's first inauguration in 1829. Not only did Sprague accuse the President of stretching every power within the letter or spirit of the Constitution to the "utmost limit," but also charged that, whenever laws or the Constitution impeded Jackson's desires, "they were to be struck down and trampled upon." (1)

By July 1834 President Jackson was in his third year of fierce conflict with the Second Bank of the United States. Although its charter was not due to expire until 1836, the Bank had applied for its renewal in 1832. A bill approving the Bank's recharter

passed Congress in that year, but was vetoed by the President in scathing language. Ridiculing Jackson's veto message in their campaign literature, the opposition Whigs chose to wage the 1832 presidential election exclusively on the Bank issue. The result of the election was a resounding victory for Jackson, who outpolled his Whig opponent, Henry Clay, by a margin of 219-49 in the electoral college.

After the election Jackson decided to challenge the Bank directly. One function of the Bank was to hold deposits of government money, and, according to the terms of its charter, the Secretary of the Treasury was authorized to withdraw these deposits if he had reason to suspect that the Bank was unsafe. At the President's urging the Secretary in September 1833 began to transfer government funds from the Bank to a number of state banking institutions.

The Whig majority in the United States Senate, strongly objecting to the removal of the deposits from the Bank, retaliated by censuring Jackson for having "assumed upon himself authority and power not conferred by the constitution and laws, but in derogation of both." Retorting with a formal protest to the Senate, Jackson argued that he had been denied the "right of every citizen to a notice before trial, to a hearing before conviction, and to an impartial tribunal for deciding on the charge."

Within weeks after the removal of the deposits, the nation began to suffer a serious business recession. The Whigs promptly blamed this recession on the President's Bank policy. Jackson's supporters countercharged that the Bank itself had precipitated the recession by deliberately curtailing its services, hoping to coerce the government into granting it a recharter.

The state and congressional elections of 1834 in Maine were held at a time when Jackson's struggle against the Bank was at its climax. These elections would not only reflect the level of public support for the President, but would also determine whether the dominant Democratic Party would be toppled by the Whig opposition. As the political tumult intensified, local

and state issues in Maine were to be completely subordinated to the Bank dispute.

A forecast of the bitterly contested 1834 political campaign occurred on January 26 when the Democratic Legislature adopted resolutions on the Bank question. The Legislature denounced the Bank for having abandoned the object of its existence

by engaging in political controversies, by wielding its power and influence to embarrass the administration of the General Government, and by bringing insolvency and distress upon the commercial community.

Concluding that the powers vested in the Bank "endanger the stability of Republican Institutions," the Legislature hailed the removal of the deposits as "an adherence to constitutional rights, and the performance of a public duty." (2)

In diametric contrast to the legislative resolutions, citizens of nine Maine communities memorialized Congress in behalf of the Bank between January and May 1834. Residents of Portland complained of a "fearful stagnation" of employment and industry, and urged that relations with the Bank be "speedily restored." Citizens of Bangor, alleging that their prosperity had been "most disastrously and suddenly affected," favored rechartering the Bank with modifications or establishing a new financial institution. Apprehending "little less than universal prostration, bankruptcy, and ruin," residents of Bath left to the "wisdom" of Congress the choice of rechartering the Bank or authorizing a similar institution. Legal voters of Hallowell, lamenting that business had been "paralyzed," viewed a national bank as "indispensably necessary to carry on the financial operations of this great and hitherto flourishing country." Reporting an "unexampled scarcity of money," citizens of Gardiner and Pittston insisted that a national bank was "indispensable." Residents of Augusta, looking to Congress "as their only hope under God in

this hour of adversity," asked for a restoration of the deposits and a renewal of the Bank's charter as a remedy for the existing evils." Congress also received forcefully written memorials of protest from Eastport and Lubec, both of which were distinctly partial to the Bank. (3)

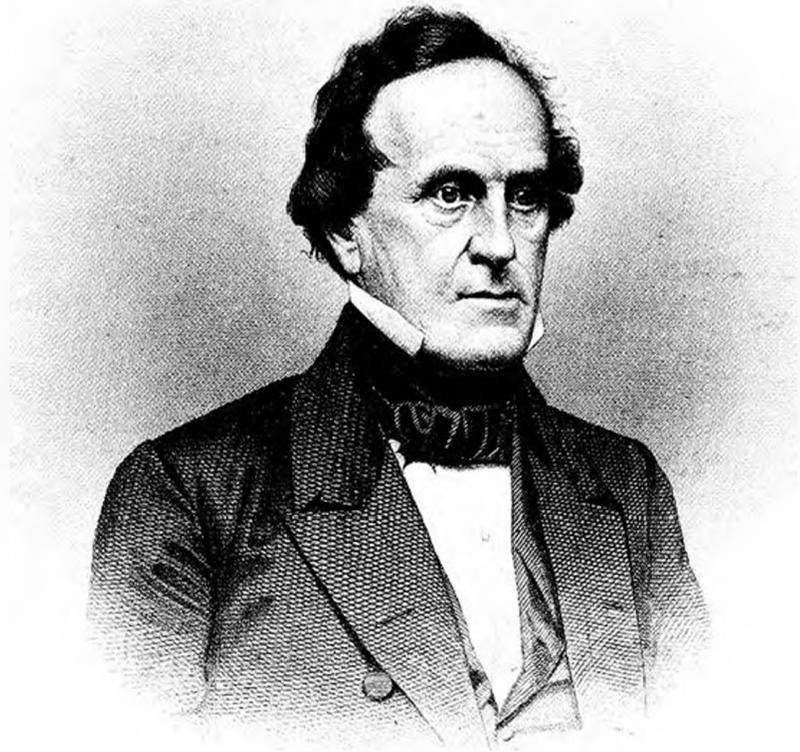
Altogether, nearly three thousand citizens of Maine signed memorials of protest on the Bank dispute. Whether these memorials were representative of prevailing sentiment throughout the state would undoubtedly be determined by the forthcoming elections. The incompatibility of the legislative resolutions and the various memorials was probably indicative of how polarized the people of Maine had become on the Bank question.

At their state convention in Augusta on July 31, the Whigs nominated Sprague for Governor and assailed the Jackson Administration. Assessing the President's record the Whigs were appalled by

a series of executive usurpations, not less astounding than unjustifiable - not less alarming than unprecedented - not less atrocious than wicked; putting at defiance the positive laws of the land, and manifesting, to an abused and insulted people, the most shameful ingratitude....

The Whigs also maintained that Jackson's Bank policy was the "result of an evil premeditation." Further charging that the State government was being conducted in "slavish subservience" to the Jackson Administration, they scorned the Democratic Legislature's willingness to sanction the "arbitrary course" of the President's Bank policy. (4)

The Democrats of Maine had earlier renominated Governor Robert P. Dunlap. Denying that Maine's financial distress had been caused by the removal of the deposits, the Democrats attributed the distress to the "convulsive struggles of the United States Bank to prolong its existence beyond its chartered



A. C. Dunlap

limits." The Democrats vowed that, as their fathers in the revolution had endangered "their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor," they would endure any future hardship sooner than surrender to a "corrupt moneyed oligarchy" and praised the President for having rescued the nation from the "fangs of a moneyed despot." (5)

Throughout the summer of 1834 Maine's two political parties held numerous county conventions, the proceedings of which invariably reflected the rancor of the campaign. One such gathering was the York County Democratic Convention. The convention delegates, shocked over the Bank's "enormous and dangerous power," charged that the Bank, abetted by the President's political enemies, had "endeavored to spread alarm, distress and ruin through our whole country - and eventually to subject both the Government and people to the dictation and control of that oppressive corporation." Accordingly, the York Democrats reasoned that the Bank had "justly incurred the reprobation of a virtuous and indignant people." (6)

The Democrats and Whigs of Cumberland County were in total disagreement on the Bank question. Delegates to the Cumberland County Democratic Convention accused the Bank of exercising "corrupt influence" over the press, exacting "usurious interest" from its customers, "arbitrary control" of foreign exchange, and "interference" in popular elections, and applauded President Jackson's opposition to the Bank as having "rendered abortive the insidious attacks upon the liberties of the people." (7) By contrast the Whigs of Cumberland County defended the Bank and alluded to the removal of the deposits as

an arbitrary exercise of executive power for which no sufficient reason has been rendered to Congress or to the people, and which has proved in its operation equally injurious to the industry and prosperity of the country, oppressive to a useful institution, and disreputable to the character and motives of the National Administration. (8)

The two parties in Oxford County were likewise in sharp disagreement. Avidly supporting the President's Bank policy, the Oxford Democrats were confident that his efforts to "crush that great monied monster" would be sustained by "every true friend of liberty." The Oxford Democrats also criticized the Senate's censure of Jackson as "unworthy of men of high honor and the high station to which they have been elected." (9) Incensed that Jackson had assumed "extraordinary powers" neither claimed by his predecessors nor granted by the Constitution, the Whigs of Oxford County feared that his protest to the Senate was designed to concentrate "all political power in the hands of a single individual" and "foster alarm in the minds of friends of true liberty." Consequently, the Oxford Whigs strongly endorsed the "patriotic stand" pursued by a majority of the Senate. (10)

Upset over the power wielded by the Bank, the Democrats of Hancock County warned that such an institution was "not to be tolerated in a free government." Moreover, the Hancock Democrats declared that the Bank's "cold blooded attempt... to enforce a renewal of its charter, contrary to the will of the people, is an act of treason against the sovereignty of the country and merits the execration of every patriot." (11) The Whigs of Hancock County expressed rather different views. Without explicitly mentioning the Bank controversy, the Hancock Whigs argued that the existing economic distress "loudly demands a change in our national policy," castigated the "venality and corruption" of the Jackson Administration, and alleged that at no time since the adoption of the Constitution was there more reason "to despond the permanency of our free institutions." (12)

Voicing unqualified approval of the removal of the deposits, the Democrats of Lincoln County branded the Bank as "that dangerous and oppressive institution." The Lincoln Democrats also accused the Whig Party of contriving to "subvert the liberties of the country," and denounced the Senate's censure of Jackson as an "invasion" of the President's rights and a "stretch of power" unauthorized by the Constitution. (13)

According to the Whigs of Kennebec County, the Bank dispute demonstrated that the Executive had become a "monster in the hands of President Jackson, too strong to be restrained by the Constitution and Laws." Furthermore, the Kennebec Whigs insisted that, because of the "recklessness" of Jackson's Bank policy, "the best interests of the people, the security of the nation, and tried institutions of the Country are prostrated or put in imminent hazard." (14)

Both political parties accorded priority status to the Bank issue throughout the 1834 campaign. The Democrats, convinced that the President's popularity was undiminished, repeatedly disparaged the Bank. The Whigs, surmising that Jackson had alienated many voters, purposely concentrated on the Bank question. Having suffered a series of defeats in four previous statewide elections, the Whigs were hopeful that, under Senator Sprague's leadership, they would oust the Democrats in Maine. Although Sprague was indeed a formidable contender for the governorship, the Democrats had considerable justification for confidence as election day approached. Their leader, Governor Dunlap, had compiled an unblemished record of success over a fifteen year political career. In 1833 Dunlap had defeated his Whig opponent 25, 731-18, 112, and in 1834 he enjoyed the enthusiastic support of his party in a state which had become increasingly Democratic in political complexion.

The elections were held on September 8. Two days later the *Eastern Argus* of Portland stated that Dunlap had been "nobly sustained." Stressing that the Whigs, both within and outside Maine, had devoted their "strongest efforts" to elect Sprague, this publication reported that Dunlap had "notwithstandingly received a nett gain from the vote of last year." (15)

The Jeffersonian of Portland claimed that a record number of votes had been cast in the election. According to this newspaper, in order to rebuke the Bank the people of Maine had "rallied and gone to the polls *en masse*." Editorializing that the voters had responded to the question of "Bank or no Bank," *The Jeffersonian* concluded that the electoral result was "honorable" to them and "gratifying" to the President. (16)

Maine's foremost Whig publication, the *Kennebec Journal* conceded Dunlap's victory. The Journal regretted that for many years the Whigs had been "laboring against wind and tide, struggling hard against what we have always considered a bad administration, and yet each year losing ground." Nevertheless, the Augusta publication believed the "current turning" and prophesied that the Whigs would "go forward with renewed energy." (17)

The official statistics of the gubernatorial contest were as follows: Dunlap 38,133; Sprague 33,732. In the nine communities which had memorialized Congress on the Bank dispute, Sprague outpolled Dunlap by an aggregate total of approximately two thousand votes. Throughout the remaining sections of Maine Dunlap was easily victorious. (18) Although Sprague compiled a record vote for a defeated candidate, Dunlap accumulated the highest number of votes in the state's history. The Democrats, of course, hailed their victory in Maine as a vindication of both the Dunlap and Jackson Administrations.

The Democrats also won six of Maine's eight seats in the House of Representatives and handily retained control of both branches of the Legislature. (19) The legislative results were especially important, because Senator Sprague's term was due to expire, and the incoming Legislature would have the responsibility of choosing his successor. In January 1835 the Legislature elected Democrat John Ruggles, an avowed supporter of President Jackson's policies, as Maine's new United States Senator. (20)

The campaign of 1834 had been waged almost entirely on the Bank issue, and the voters of Maine had chosen to support President Jackson by continuing the Democratic Party in power. Notwithstanding the vigorous Whig challenge, the electoral verdict was truly decisive. Although one of the youngest states in the Union, Maine had become one of the most steadfast in her allegiance to the Democratic Party and her esteem for the President.

-----NOTES-----

1. Peleg Sprague, *Speeches and Addresses* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1858) pp. 435-436.
2. House of Representatives, *Documents*, Twenty-Third Congress, First Session (6 vols.; Washington 1833-1834), II, No. 75.
3. United States Congress, *Register of Debates in Congress* (14 vols.; Washington: 1825-1837), X, 1243-1244, 1287-1288, 1838-1839, 2570-2574, 2763-2765, 2768-2770, 3327, 3641, 4257; United States Senate, *Documents*, Twenty-Third Congress, First Session (6 vols.; Washington, 1833-1834), II, No. 111; IV, No. 268; V, No. 410; House of Representatives, *Documents*, II, No. 74; III, Nos. 171, 172; IV, No. 250; VI, No. 475.
4. *Kennebec Journal*, Augusta, August 6, 1834, p. 1.
5. *Eastern Argus*, Portland, March 5, 1834, p. 3.
6. *Ibid.*, July 11, 1834, p. 1.
7. *Ibid.*, August 8, 1834, p. 2.
8. *Portland Advertiser and Gazette of Maine*, Portland, August 12, 1834, p. 2.
9. *Eastern Argus*, Portland, August 25, 1834, p. 1.
10. *Portland Advertiser and Gazette of Maine*, Portland, August 12, 1834, p. 2.
11. *Eastern Argus*, Portland, July 28, 1834, p. 2.
12. *Portland Advertiser and Gazette of Maine*, Portland, August 19, 1834, p. 2.
13. *Eastern Argus*, Portland, July 14, 1834, p. 2.
14. *Kennebec Journal*, Augusta, August 20, 1834, p. 2.
15. *Eastern Argus*, Portland, September 10, 1834, p. 2.

16. *The Jeffersonian*, Portland, September 15, 1834, p. 2.
17. *Kennebec Journal*, Augusta, September 17, 1834, p. 3.
18. Edward S. Hoyt (comp.), *Maine State Political Manual and Annual Register* (Portland: Hoyt, Fogg, and Breed, 1870), p. 138.
19. The Democratic majority in the new State Senate would be 18-7, while the incoming House of Representatives would be controlled by the Democrats by a margin of 108-64.
20. Clifford P. Reynolds (comp.), *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1961* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1961), p. 1548.

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