

The Cheese and the Words:  
Popular Political Culture and Participatory Democracy in the Early American Republic

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[NOTE TO READERS: For more illustrations than can be comfortably inserted in this file or included in the oral presentation, please see <http://jeff.pasleybrothers.com/images/cheese.htm>.]

President Thomas Jefferson and his guests rang in the new year of 1802 as many later generations of Americans would celebrate New Years' Day, by consuming some snacks and watching a spectacle. In this case, however, the snack *was* the spectacle: the long-awaited "Mammoth Cheese" from Cheshire, Massachusetts, four feet in diameter, eighteen inches tall, 1200 pounds heavy and already an American icon.<sup>1</sup>

The cheese and its saga were several months old by the time it reached President Jefferson. The "Ladies of Cheshire" had made the cheese back in August as "a mark of the exalted esteem" in which Jefferson was held by a small Berkshire County farming community that was monolithically Baptist in religion and Democratic Republican in politics. The Cheshire Baptists' esteem for Jefferson was especially exalted, and his accession to the presidency especially sweet, because of their minority status in New England and their intense disapproval of the Congregational establishment that still reigned and collected tax money in most of the region. Exalting God even above Jefferson (most of the time), the Baptists of Cheshire believed that no government or other human institution should have authority over matters of faith, which were God's alone. Allegedly following the example of a similar large dairy product made in Cheshire, England, to celebrate George III's recovery, they had gathered "the milk of 900 cows at one milking" in a vat six feet wide and used a giant cider press to actually create the cheese. A few weeks later, a bemused but admiring newspaper report of the project appeared in Rhode Island, where most of the Cheshire Baptists were born, ending with the warning that "if some of the

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<sup>1</sup>The two standard scholarly works on the cheese incident are C. A. Browne, "Elder John Leland and the Mammoth Cheshire Cheese," *Agricultural History* 18 (1944): 145-153; and L. H. Butterfield, "Elder John Leland, Jeffersonian Itinerant," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 62 (1952): 154-252. Both works are thorough but not particularly analytical. The most recent study, focusing more on the surrounding issues of religious freedom than the cheese itself, is Daniel L. Dreisbach, "Thomas Jefferson, a Mammoth Cheese, and the 'The Wall of Separation Between Church and State'," in James H. Hutson, ed., *Religion and the New Republic: Faith in the Founding of America* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 65-114

high-toned Adams men do not soon turn and become friendly to Jefferson and the ladies," they might "have to eat their bread without cheese" in the future.<sup>2</sup>

The reporting newspaper was a strongly Republican one, but it was the Federalist press opposing Jefferson that was most active in spreading word of the cheese. Embittered by defeat but convinced that Jefferson's manifest unfitness and incompetence would soon drive him from public favor, Federalists could not believe their luck. "If we were not so convinced of the stupidity of the Jacobin encomium-mongers," wrote one editor, "we should imagine the whole introduction to the *cheese vat* to be conceived in a vein of irony." In an endless stream of reports, comments, and satirical poetry that continued long after their subject was delivered and consumed, Federalist writers lampooned Cheshire's gift as the "Mammoth Cheese," after the mastodon bones that Charles Willson Peale had unearthed in New York that summer with aid from the Jefferson administration. It was considered a devastating stroke to link Cheshire's tribute to Jefferson's well-known interests in natural history and scientific research, which Federalists considered intolerably frivolous and had often satirized before.<sup>3</sup>

The joke turned out to be on Jefferson's critics, however, as both the word mammoth and the mammoth tribute caught on with the populace. Giant foodstuffs and fossils seemed to speak some democratic, patriotic idiom that the Federalists did not understand. Their ridiculing publications introduced a new adjective into the English language, one that connoted nationalistic pride more than

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<sup>2</sup>Pittsfield *Sun*, 16 Nov. 1801; Providence *Impartial Observer*, 8 Aug. 1801, also reprinted in Butterfield, "Elder John Leland," 219-220; Boston *Columbian Centinel and Massachusetts Federalist*, 12 Aug. 1801.

<sup>3</sup>Pittsfield *Sun*, 16 Nov. 1801; Butterfield, "Elder John Leland," 220-222; Charles Coleman Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale, Volume II: Later Life (1790-1827)* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1947), 127-48. The Federalist quotation is from Boston *Columbian Centinel*, 12 Aug. 1801. The latest Federalist broadside against the cheese that I have found is the entire seventh chapter of William Fessenden, *The Political Farrago, or a Miscellaneous Review of Politics in the United States* (Brattleboro, Vt.: William Fessenden, 1807). The best treatment of Federalist satire on Jefferson remains Linda K. Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970).

the woolly pretentiousness that they intended. A copycat baker in Philadelphia advertised "Mammoth Bread" for sale; a "Mammoth Eater" in Washington downed 42 eggs in ten minutes; and two admiring Philadelphia butchers sent what Jefferson himself referred to as a "Mammoth veal," a hindquarter of the largest calf "we remember ever to have seen in this part of the country," 436 pounds at only 115 days old. Far from finding Jefferson's scientific investigations silly, butchers Michael Fry and Nathan Coleman had actually been inspired by Jefferson's much-tweeted debate with European naturalists over the size and vitality of American fauna. They expressed joy "in being able to place confidence in the Man who while a private citizen laboured . . . to remove the European prejudice that animals were inferior & Degenerated in the New World." Sadly, despite Fry and Coleman's promise that the cool weather would allow their historic veal to arrive in Washington as fresh "as if it had been dressed this day," Jefferson declined to dine on the gift, though he did agree that it was a most impressive example of "enlarging the animal volume."<sup>4</sup>

A much more successful display of animal volume took place at Charles Willson Peale's museum in Philadelphia, where the eponymous Mammoth bones went on public display in December. The artist and his sons had spent several months piecing the bones together into a full skeleton, making some unintentional (but not unwelcome) anatomical errors that made the beast even more mammoth than it should have been. After a VIP showing Christmas Eve, there was a gala opening that included a parade replete with a trumpeter and an actor in Native American costume (keying into a Shawnee legend used in Peale's advertising). Crowds thronged the "Mammoth Room," paying an additional 50 cents a head over and above the Peale museum's usual 25-cent admission price. The Pennsylvania state legislature was so thrilled that it soon allowed Peale to move his museum into larger quarters at the city

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<sup>4</sup>Sellers, *Peale II*, 142-43; Thomas Jefferson to John Beckley, [22 Oct. 1801], Michael Fry and Nathan Coleman to Thomas Jefferson, 17 Oct. 1801, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress; Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President: First Term, 1801-1805* (Boston: Little Brown, 1970), 107.

and state's most prominent building, the former State House, now better known as Independence Hall.<sup>5</sup>

However, mere bread, meat, eggs, and bones could barely begin to rival a half-ton appetizer.

While originally planned as a spring gift, the extreme weight of the Mammoth Cheese dictated that it be delivered in winter, when as every good northern farmer knew, the snow and ice made it infinitely easier to haul heavy goods to market. The assigned delivery men were John Leland and Darius Brown, Cheshire's leading Baptist divine and the son of his leading parishioner, respectively. The two men were on the road with the cheese for a month, travelling by sled, boat, and wagon, and creating a sensation wherever they appeared. A Stockbridge newspaper reported that twenty cheese-loaded wagons escorted Leland and Brown to their embarkation point on the Hudson, and even greater throngs seem to have materialized for their later stops. A prolific evangelist and the New England clergy's most radical exponent of religious freedom, Leland happily accepted the sobriquet "Mammoth Priest" and preached frequently along the way. The cheesemongers stopped just short of letting the tour become an actual circus: he turned down a thousand-dollar offer to use the cheese in a show for twelve days in New York.<sup>6</sup>

Even the ceremony-averse Jefferson, whose typical manner on public occasions was low-key to the point of sedation, appeared "highly diverted" by the arrival of the cheese.<sup>7</sup> He stood in the doorway of the presidential mansion to receive the emissaries and their cargo, which had been decorated with a paper sign bearing the inscription "THE GREATEST CHEESE IN AMERICA — FOR THE GREATEST MAN IN

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<sup>5</sup>Sellers, *Peale II*, 143-45, 148-53.

<sup>6</sup>L. F. Greene, ed., *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland, Including Some Events in His Life, Written by Himself, With Additional Sketches, &c.* (New York: G.W. Wood, 1845), 32; *Stockbridge Western Star*, 5 Dec. 1801; Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, Washington, 1 Jan. 1802, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. On Leland's radicalism compared to the rest of New England's dissenting clergy, see William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1883: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 2:928-35.

<sup>7</sup>Jefferson's expression is described in Benjamin Robinson to D. Robinson, 1 Jan. 1802, mss. letter in a private collection, reprinted in Browne, "Leland and Cheese," 151; and in *Springfield Union and Republican*, 15 Jan. 1933, clipping in Local History file, Berkshire Athenaeum, Pittsfield, Mass.

AMERICA." Leland read Jefferson a message from the people of Cheshire, likely penned by the parson himself, that cast the freethinking president in the unlikely role of God's chosen instrument: "The supreme Ruler of the Universe . . . has raised up a JEFFERSON for this critical day to defend Republicanism and baffle all the arts of *Aristocracy*."

The message laid out the ideological grounds for the cheesemakers' veneration of Jefferson, giving the typical Jeffersonian themes of strict construction and limited government a northern, Baptist, and democratic spin. They considered the constitution "a description of those *Powers* which the people have submitted to their Magistrates, to be exercised for *definite* purposes, and not a charter of favors granted by a sovereign to his subjects." Among the frame of government's most "beautiful features" were the "right of free suffrage, to correct all abuses" (something actually not guaranteed by the constitution in terms of its extent or form, but more and more widely claimed as a right after Jefferson's "Revolution of 1800") and "the prohibition of religious tests," which was alleged to "prevent all hierarchy." Perhaps most remarkably given the modern view of Jefferson as an avatar of slavery, the cheese producers of Cheshire went out of their way to boast that their gift had been made "by the personal labor of freeborn farmers" — more accurately of freeborn farmers' wives and daughters — "(without a single slave to assist)."

On the spur of the moment, Jefferson decided to deliver his written reply to the message as a speech, making appropriate pronoun changes as he went. Declining to accept the messianic mantle offered by Leland, Jefferson praised the Cheshireites for their constitutional theory and pronounced himself particularly grateful for the nature of the gift, a "mark of esteem from freeborn farmers, employed personally in the useful labors of life" who expressed themselves through the medium of the goods that they produced.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>*Washington Federalist*, 2 Jan. 1802; *Boston Mercury and New-England Palladium*, 12, 15, 22 Jan. 1802; *New York Evening Post*, 7 Jan. 1802; Thomas Jefferson to Daniel Brown, Hezekiah Mason, et al, 1 Jan. 1802, Jefferson

Visiting Federalist congressmen were not impressed by this democratic love-feast. The Reverend Manasseh Cutler of Massachusetts and several other New England solons went to the President's House that morning intent on tweaking the head of the household. Upset at Jefferson's studied efforts to reduce the formalities surrounding the presidential office, they "were determined to keep up the old custom, though contrary to what was intended, of waiting on the President with the compliments of the season." An aggressively genteel man who delighted in reviewing the social performances of others in his diary, Cutler grudgingly admitted that he and his friends were "tolerably received, and treated with cake and wine." With the Federalist delegation thus lulled into a false sense of gentility, it was Jefferson's turn to tweak, inviting them to "Go into the mammoth room"(now the East Room) to see what Cutler regarded as a "monument of human weakness and folly," the Mammoth Cheese.<sup>9</sup>

Two days later, on January 3, the Mammoth Priest himself preached the sermon at Sunday services in the House of Representatives chamber, with Cutler and other pious Federalists among the captive audience. Though wildly popular with audiences, the rough-hewn, poorly educated Leland was considered something of an embarrassment even by some of the more polished clergymen in his own denomination. Besides alienating many of them with his uncompromising religious and political views, he was given to such colorful eccentricities as recounting his triumph over the "groaner," an evil spirit lurking in the Leland family home that he claimed to have exorcized through forceful prayer. (One can imagine that Leland's fellow clergy cringed particularly when he performed his blood-curdling impression of the demonic shrieks with which the groaner fled his house.) As a preacher, Leland was

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Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>9</sup>William Parker Cutler and Julia Perkins Cutler, eds., *Life, Journals, and Correspondence of Rev. Manasseh Cutler, L.L.D.* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1987), 2:65-66. For more on Cutler and gentility, see Jeffrey L. Pasley, "Private Access and Public Power: Gentility and Lobbying in the Early Congress," in Kenneth R. Bowling and Donald R. Kennon, eds., *The House and the Senate in the 1790s: Petitioning, Lobbying, and Institutional Development* (Athens: Ohio University Press, forthcoming).

much closer to a political stump speaker in style than anybody's idea of an elegant, erudite homilist. Never a man to measure his always hyperbolic words, Leland took as his text, "And behold a greater than Solomon is here," almost sacrilegiously applying the sentiment to Jefferson (who sat in the audience) instead of Christ. No full record of Leland's sermon has survived, but it is apparent that he gave the assembled statesmen a relatively full-strength dose of backwoods preaching, utterly and aggressively lacking in the qualities of smoothness and control that gentlepeople expected in their speakers. "Such a farrago," Cutler reported, "bawled with . . . horrid tone, frightful grimaces, and extravagant gestures . . . was never heard by any decent auditory before."<sup>10</sup>

Federalists apparently did not speak the homely language of popular political bombast, evangelical religion, and compressed milk curds. The honorary *philosophe* Thomas Jefferson did not exactly *speak* this language either, but he understood it well enough to know how to respond. Jefferson had probably never given a stump speech in his life and typically preferred his religion more intellectual and his cheese more French, but he treated Leland as an honored dignitary and paid him 200 dollars to reimburse some of his travel expenses. Jefferson also chose the very day of the cheese's arrival to issue his most important statement on the issue of greatest concern to the Cheshire Baptists, the separation of church and state. Jefferson thus scored points both with a key constituency and against his Federalist opponents. Nor did Jefferson drop the mammoth theme after Leland's visit. While the cheese's final fate cannot be definitely ascertained, indications are that it was kept in the White House and served, with the occasional pruning of rotten bits (actually more like boulders), for at least two years.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Cutler and Cutler, eds., *Journal and Correspondence of Manasseh Cutler, L.L.D.*, 2:58, 66-67; Greene, ed., *Writings of Elder John Leland*, 44-45. For a very useful delineation of the elements of self-conscious gentility, see Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 30-99. For aspects of John Leland's characterization in this paragraph, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 95-101, 138; and McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 2:931-32.

<sup>11</sup>Butterfield, "Elder John Leland," 227-28. The cheese-religious freedom connection is most strongly made in Dreisbach, "Jefferson, Mammoth Cheese, and Wall of Separation," 65-69.



Besides the probable disposal of the cheese, 1804 also saw another mammoth democratic event. As the first session of the Eighth Congress neared its end, Jefferson apparently gave his blessing to the official Navy baker's creation of a "Mammoth Loaf," made from an entire barrel of flour and baked in a specially built oven. On March 26, the loaf was covered in white linen and carried on the shoulders of decked-out bakers to the Capitol, where it was placed in a committee room off the Senate chamber along with plenty of roast beef, hard cider, wine, and whiskey. A wild all-city party ensued, with (as one disapproving observer put it) "people of all classes & colors from the President of the United States to the meanest vilest Virginia slave" crowding into the Senate to enjoy the victuals and offend gawking New England Federalists. Jefferson himself was there "in the midst of the motley crew," reportedly eating beef and bread off his pocket knife and doing some justice to the liquor as well. Shocked Federalists claimed to have heard the president "sneeringly" compare "the unhallowed bread and wine" at "this disgraceful entertainment" to the elements of the Christian communion, which rumor was hotly debated in the press. Nor was Jefferson's comment the only political event of the day. Some members of the crowd brought large prints caricaturing certain senators who had proposed moving the government out of the city, and a large number of the partygoers lingered loudly in the chamber for the rest of the afternoon. The sergeant at arms tried and failed to eject them, and even when he later did get the floor cleared, the revelers only moved to the public gallery. At one point, Sen. James Jackson of Georgia paused in mid-speech to threaten the unruly citizens of Columbia with violence if they ever behaved so badly again: "You shall be punished — I will inflict it — The navy shall be brought up & kill you outright." One assumes that Jefferson had gone home by this point, but then he did write an unusually small number of letters that day.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Everett Somerville Brown, ed., *William Plumer's Memorandum of Proceedings in the United States Senate, 1803-1807* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 179-80; *Norristown Register*, 10 May 1804; Cutler and Cutler, eds., *Journals and Correspondence of Manasseh Cutler*, 2:170.

Yet clearly there were limits to Jefferson's cheesiness. In January 1802, both the presidential sons-in-law received letters that testified to Jefferson's enthusiasm for *le grand fromage* — he included its exact measurements — but also to a hint of condescension for its authors. The cheese was "an ebullition," or boiling over, Jefferson wrote, "of the passion of republicanism in a state where it has been under heavy persecution." Though the timing of its release was obviously coated in cheese, the influential letter on religious freedom was addressed not to the famed congregation in Cheshire, but to a more obscure and respectable Baptist association based in Danbury, Connecticut.<sup>13</sup>

Most aspects of the cheeseball story that I have been recounting have been told many times before by historians, journalists, and local colorists, often with additional, probably invented details that I have left out. No Jefferson biography and (I suspect) few courses on the period fail to mention it, but usually only as a humorous example of just how darn popular Jefferson was with those wacky common folk and/or that nutty John Leland. It seems to have been particularly well known during what Sean Wilentz has recently called the "golden age of historical popularization," the 1930s and 40s. During those years of intense anxiety over the fate of middle American values in the face of depression, radicalism, and world war, thousands of historical novels and films, popular biographies, and folksy local histories were produced, and hundreds of museums and memorials were created (including the Jefferson Memorial in Washington and the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis). Most of these productions were done in a spirit of nostalgia and celebration more calculated "to fend off the

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<sup>13</sup>Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph (quoted), Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress; Jefferson to John Wayles Eppes, 1 Jan. 1802, Jefferson Papers, University of Virginia; Jefferson to Nehemiah Dodge, Ephraim Robbins, & Stephen S. Nelson, a committee of the Danbury Baptist association in the state of Connecticut, 1 Jan. 1802, draft and final version, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress, microfilm frames 20593 & 20594. The letter to the Danbury Baptists, which originated the famous "wall of separation" metaphor used by 20<sup>th</sup>-century jurists to explain the "establishment clause" of the First Amendment, has been analyzed in numerous books and articles, including most of the cheese-related works cited above. Recently, this debate has been rejuvenated by the restoration of the scratched-out portions of Jefferson's original draft of the letter. See James H. Hutson, "Thomas Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists: A Controversy Rejoined" and the forum that follows, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 56 (1999): 775-824.

intense insecurities of the day" than spread a deeper understanding of history.<sup>14</sup>

A politically somewhat bowdlerized version of the Mammoth Cheese incident was a natural anecdote for that period, and it was remembered often enough in western Massachusetts to inspire an act of commemoration by the Sons of the American Revolution in 1940. A life-size concrete "replica" of the cider press used to make the cheese was erected on a street corner in the middle of town. A metal plaque featuring the face and a capsule biography of Elder John Leland was affixed to the front. The president of North Adams State Teachers College keynoted the dedication ceremony and managed to find in the once-radical cheese a comment on the corruption of American life by the politics and policies of the New Deal: "We need in America communities like the Cheshire of a century ago, independent and undominated by groups. In addition to the need of having the faith of the early people of Cheshire, there is a need for work for there is no way of getting something for nothing. We cannot save democracy by a life dwelt on race-tracks and bingo games." Unfortunately, reverence for Leland and the cheese in Cheshire appears to have grown less than mammoth in later decades. Though easily America's least prepossessing monument to begin with, it now sits in a state of profound disrepair, secluded behind a bus stop bench in the side yard of what appears to be a day-care center. Missing is the protruding screw on top that once clarified exactly what was being represented, though that must never have been an easy task; the visitor's sense of history is further impaired by the unprintable word that some vandal has etched across Elder Leland's forehead.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Quotations from Sean Wilentz, "America Made Easy: McCullough, Adams, and the Decline of Popular History," *The New Republic*, 2 July 2001. Colonial Williamsburg and the restoration of Monticello date to just before the same period. An excellent discussion of Jefferson memorialization in the mid-20th century appears in Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 347-442.

<sup>15</sup>The information on the memorializing of the cheese in Berkshire County and the dedication of the Cheshire monument comes from various clippings in the Local History file, Berkshire Athenaeum, Pittsfield, Mass. The quotations and the description of the monument in its original condition come from "Leland Monument Dedicated by S.A.R. in Cheshire Rites," *Springfield Republican*, 2 Sept. 1940; and "Cheshire Cheese Monument to Honor Elder John Leland," *Springfield Republican*, 20 Aug. 1940. The author personally inspected its present condition in May 2001, photographs from which expedition have been posted at <http://jeff.pasleybrothers.com/images/cheese.htm>.

Luckily, others outside of Cheshire have carried on the work. When I was first thinking about this paper, my seven-year-old brought home a recent children's book called *A Big Cheese for the White House*. While it was a charmingly illustrated book, and considerably more sprightly than the concrete cheese press, I was shocked to discover how thoroughly the authors had updated the incident for the hypercapitalist 1990s. Instead of religious freedom or Democratic Republican politics, the largely invented tale depicts the cheese as an advertising stunt, undertaken by a town of aggressively commercial cheese-makers trying to maintain their market share in the face of competition from other towns that were coloring and flavoring their cheeses.<sup>16</sup>

Though cheese was indeed sold for cash in the Early Republic, the commercialism involved in cheesemaking was rudimentary at best; an entire year's production was typically sold all at once for a price that was set throughout a neighborhood regardless of cost, decoration, or even quality. Only much later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century would cheesemaking become an aggressively competitive business, and "Mammoth Cheese" only went commercial when some factory dairy of the 1870s used it as a brand name.<sup>17</sup>

I bring up the disheveled monument in Cheshire and the misguided children's book to illustrate the fact that, making a partial exception for a few works on the church-state issue, the Mammoth Cheese has not been taken very seriously, or set in its appropriate context, by historians or anyone else. This would not matter much in itself if were not indicative of a general failure to understand the political culture of which Cheshire's gift to Jefferson was an unusual but nevertheless characteristic product.

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<sup>16</sup>Candace Fleming and S. D. Schindler, *A Big Cheese for the White House: The True Tale of a Tremendous Cheddar* (New York: DK Publishing, 1999).

<sup>17</sup>Sally McMurry, *Transforming Rural Life: Dairying Families and Agricultural Change, 1820-1885* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 43-61; X[erxes] A. Willard, *Willard's Practical Dairy Husbandry* (New York: Excelsior Publishing House, 1877), 380.

Popular politics in the Early Republic was necessarily creative, adaptive, and variable. Because the early political parties were organizationally almost nonexistent, the work of building support for them was conducted by scattered groups of local activists, with little centralized direction or funding. Necessarily reliant on local resources and personnel, these typically self-appointed activists simply made partisan use of whatever existing traditions, institutions, and practices they could, including many that were longstanding features of Anglo-American culture. Among these were holiday celebrations, parades, taverns, toasts, town meetings, petitions, militia company training days, and various products of local printing presses, including broadsides, handbills, almanacs, poems, pamphlets, and, especially, the small-circulation local and regional newspapers that sprang up everywhere after the Revolution. Some of the most interesting artifacts of this type are the plethora of songs published on the back pages of partisan newspapers and sometimes as sheet music or in songbooks, many of which were presumably sung in taverns or at partisan gatherings. The musical output included not only "Jefferson and Liberty" and "The People's Friend," but also such chart-toppers as "Adams and Liberty," "Huzzah Madison Huzzah," and even "Monroe is the Man." Especially popular among local partisans were innumerable sets of new lyrics to popular tunes such as "Yankee Doodle," "Hail Columbia," and the "Anacreonic Song," better known today as the U.S. national anthem.<sup>18</sup>

Each region of the country had its own particular local practices that were drawn into partisan politics and became part of a distinctive regional political culture. In the South, the famous court-day barbecues were transformed from rituals of noblesse oblige into competitive partisan debates, initiating the southern stump-speaking tradition. In the cities and larger towns, fraternal orders, voluntary

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<sup>18</sup> Early political songs can be sampled in Vera Brodsky Lawrence, *Music for Patriots, Politicians, and Presidents: Harmonies and Discords of the First Hundred Years* (New York: Macmillan, 1975); James J. Wilson, comp., *A National Song-book, Being a Collection of Patriotic, Martial, and Naval Songs and Odes, Principally of American Composition* (Trenton: James J. Wilson, 1813); Carl Brand, *Presidential Campaign Songs, 1789-1996* (1999), Smithsonian Folkways CD 45051; Chestnut Brass Company and Friends, *Hail to the Chief! American Political Marches, Songs & Dirges of the 1800s* (1996), Sony Classical CD SFK 62485.

associations, and militia companies were politicized, with the so-called Democratic-Republican societies and the Tammany Society being two of the best-known examples on the Republican side. These groups formed the beginnings of the highly disciplined neighborhood-based political organizations that would in time become known as urban political "machines."<sup>19</sup> In New England, where churches and the clergy had always played an unusually prominent role in public life, many aspects of religious culture were adapted to partisan use. The Congregational establishment was heavily and intemperately Federalist, and its members did not hesitate to put partisan political instructions into their sermons. Around 1800, these instructions usually followed the formula published in the Federalist newspapers: Would the people choose "GOD—AND A RELIGIOUS PRESIDENT; Or impiously declare for JEFFERSON—AND NO GOD!!"? At the same time, the traditions of the jeremiad and the published sermon gave rise not only to a large number of published political sermons and books by the clergy, but also the practice of secular politicians giving and publishing formal orations that often took on a distinctly homiletic tone. Elder John Leland's prominent role in Cheshire politics was just a more bumptious and aggressive version of what many other New England divines were doing.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Charles S. Sydnor, *Gentlemen Freeholders: Political Practices in Washington's Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1952); Daniel Dupre, "Barbecues and Pledges: Electioneering and the Rise of Democratic Politics in Antebellum Alabama," *Journal of Southern History* 60 (1994): 479-512; Kim T. Phillips, "William Duane, Philadelphia's Democratic Republicans, and the Origins of Modern Politics," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 101 (1977): 365-387; Jerome Mushkat, *Tammany: The Evolution of a Political Machine, 1789-1865* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1971); Eugene Perry Link, *Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790-1800* (1942; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1973); Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790-1800: A Documentary Sourcebook of Constitutions, Declarations, Addresses, Resolutions, and Toasts* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976).

<sup>20</sup>The political activities of the New England clergy in the Early Republic still awaits a modern history, but the best single work on New England political methods in this period is David Waldstreicher and Stephen R. Grossbart, "Abraham Bishop's Vocation; or, The Mediation of American Politics," *Journal of the Early Republic* 18 (1998): 617-657. The background can be filled in with William A. Robinson, *Jeffersonian Democracy in New England* (1916; reprint, New York: Greenwood Press, 1968); James Truslow Adams, *New England in the Republic, 1776-1850* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1926); Richard J. Purcell, *Connecticut in Transition, 1775-1818* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1918); Christopher Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1999). Authors of multiple political orations include the Republican Abraham Bishop and the Federalists David Daggett and Theodore Dwight. The authors of published political sermons are far too numerous to catalog here, but two random examples would be Rev. Stanley Griswold for the Republicans and Rev. Jedidiah Morse for the Federalists. A

While always locally controlled and thus highly varied in tone and content, certain practices were nearly universal in this political culture. Among the most important were the holiday celebrations that dotted the civic calendar, each of which brought many of the elements mentioned above together into a single political event.<sup>21</sup> For Republicans, the most important day was the Jefferson-centric Fourth of July, which they had championed as a more republican and democratic alternative to Washington's Birthday or government-mandated thanksgiving and fast days. The festivities typically began with a parade or procession in which townsmen would march by trades, militia companies, and other groupings to a church, meeting hall, or public square. There a lengthy program would be held, featuring political and patriotic music (usually including at least one song written for the day), a reading of the Declaration of Independence, a prayer or sermon, and an oration by some local political activist. Elder John Leland gave the oration in both Cheshire and Pittsfield on the Fourth of July 1802, and the Mammoth Cheese is said to have been first suggested by Leland at Cheshire's celebration of a year earlier. Finally the assembled group would retire to a hotel, tavern, or outdoor space, depending on the prosperity and location of the organizers, for a community banquet. Shady bowers on some prominent

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collection of such sermons covering this period can be found in the second volume of Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805* (Indianapolis, IN: LibertyPress, 1991). John Leland was an especially mammoth producer of political sermons, and much of his output is collected in Greene, ed., *Writings of Elder John Leland*. Another less heavily published but equally significant political preacher in the Berkshires was Thomas Allen (uncle of the Pittsfield *Sun* printer mentioned below), a rare Republican among the Congregational clergy. Allen's church actually split into two over the political content of his sermons; a eulogy that Allen gave his son, a Republican state legislator, was a particular catalyst. See Thomas Allen, *Submission to the Will of God: A Discourse Occasioned by the Death of Thomas Allen, Jun. . . .* (Pittsfield: Phinehas Allen, 1806). Quotation is from Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., ed., *The Making of the American Party System, 1789 to 1809* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 154.

<sup>21</sup>The discussion of "celebratory politics" in the next few paragraphs draws heavily on David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1997), except for the separately noted examples from western Massachusetts. For other works covering aspects of this festive political culture and its precursors, see Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution: Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986). Lest others be blamed for my mistakes, the record should show that I am putting my own spin on some of this material, especially in linking festive political culture so closely with party building.

Republican's property seem to have been popular banquet spots in the Berkshires.<sup>22</sup>

The highlights of such banquets were the toasts, drunk at the end and accompanied by cheers or cannon blasts if possible. At least 15 or 16 toasts were usually prepared in advance of the celebration, and those who could still speak after 15 or 16 belts could offer "volunteers" from the floor. An account of the celebration would then be published in a sympathetic local newspaper, including a verbatim transcript of the toasts. No mere drinking game, political banquet toasts served, and were intended to serve, as informal platforms for the community, party, or faction that held the gathering. Pointed and quite specific political sentiments were expressed, and even the patriotic boilerplate was calibrated to reflect the values of the toasting group. So the Republicans of Tyringham, Pittsfield, and Lenox all toasted the memory of George Washington, but also worked into their salutes fairly bitter criticisms of the Federalist proposal to build a giant pyramidal crypt for the first president. As the Tyringham celebrants put it, "8. *The memory of WASHINGTON* — More durably embalmed in the affections of *Republicans*, than in the most costly *Mausoleum*. — 3 cheers." Not surprisingly, the cheesemaking Republicans of Cheshire were especially pugnacious. Three Federalist statesmen were given the toast, "From such supporters of the Constitution good Lord deliver us." To the federal judges who lost their positions in the Republican repeal of the Federalist Judiciary Act of 1801, they sent the message, "*Sixteen Dead Judges* — As Judges may they sleep in eternal peace."<sup>23</sup> Accounts of celebrations were often reprinted far outside their home region, and the toasts they contained were carefully parsed for the subtle and not-so-subtle indications they gave as to the balance of political forces and the state of

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<sup>22</sup>For examples of Republican Fourth of July celebrations in the Berkshires, see Pittsfield *Sun*, 7, 14, 21 July 1801, 12, 26 July 1802. The *Sun's* account of the 1802 Cheshire toasts can be viewed at <http://jeff.pasleybrothers.com/images/cheese.htm>.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 14 July 1801 (quoted), 12, 26 (quoted) 1802 July. On the Republicans' principled objections to the Federalist efforts to turn Washington into a sanctified, kinglike figure, see Simon P. Newman, "Principles or Men? George Washington and the Political Culture of National Leadership, 1776-1801," *Journal of the Early Republic* 12 (1992): 477-507.



public opinion in a given area. Toasts were also taken seriously enough to sometimes warrant follow-ups, reviews, and rebuttals.<sup>24</sup>

Another common denominator of this political culture was the use of newspapers as partisan political weapons. Indeed, newspapers were so central that, as I have argued elsewhere, we might well consider the parties of this period to be newspaper-based. Federalists commonly blamed Jefferson's election on the loose national network of Republican newspapers led by the Philadelphia *Aurora*, and Republicans tended to agree. After 1800, no serious political activist thought that anything could be accomplished without newspaper support in as many places as possible, and at times they equated the maintenance of a newspaper with the actual existence of a party, faction, or movement.<sup>25</sup> Aaron Burr's chief political henchman wrote in 1805 that "the instant" the Burr faction's tottering newspaper, the *Morning Chronicle*, failed, "the Burrites would become 'uninfluential atoms,' there would be no rallying point," and, even worse, their popularity and organizational vigor would be judged contemptibly weak because they were "*incapable any longer of supporting a press.*"<sup>26</sup>

Newspapers not only communicated party ideas, they represented and *embodied* these loosely organized parties in quite literal ways. Only in the pages of a partisan newspaper was a particular set of ideas, attitudes, policies, and candidates packaged together under the party label. Regular readers got a corporeal link to the party that they had few other ways of obtaining, and more important, they could learn, week to week, election to election, and public event to event, what it meant and how it thought

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<sup>24</sup>For an index of how seriously celebrations and toasts were taken in the Early Republic, see the book *An Historical View of the Public Celebrations of the Washington Society, and Those of the Young Republicans* (Boston: True & Greene, 1823), a compilation of all the toasts given at the celebrations of a particular faction of Boston Republicans over a 17-year period.

<sup>25</sup>For elaboration and documentation on the general interpretation presented in this and the following paragraphs on newspapers, see Jeffrey L. Pasley, *"The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), especially chapters 1 & 9; idem, "The Two National Gazettes: Newspapers and the Embodiment of American Political Parties," *Early American Literature* 35 (2000): 51-86.

<sup>26</sup>Matthew Livingston Davis to William P. Van Ness, 15 Aug. (quoted), 28 Aug. 1805, 1 Aug. 1809, Davis Papers, New-York Historical Society.

to be a follower of that party. Many printers and editors became leading party activists and chief party spokesmen in their communities, and their offices were often unofficial party clubhouses.

As David Waldstreicher has argued, newspapers and other productions of the same partisan printing presses were critical to making the various elements of this political culture work as politics.<sup>27</sup> Since public events could be only be held intermittently, and attended only by a minority of the population of one small region at any given time, even an extremely well-attended celebration or a particularly eloquent oration could have few wide-reaching or lasting political effects unless an account was printed in a newspaper. This was particularly true given the vast geographic extent of the nation and even of some states and individual congressional districts, such as the rugged First Western District of Massachusetts, where Cheshire was located. In such a situation, Alexis de Tocqueville noted, members of a party or any other political group needed "some means of talking every day without seeing one another and of acting together without meeting."<sup>28</sup>

The whole practice of holding political banquets culminating in carefully worded toasts would have been politically meaningless without the newspaper report that allowed a few booze-soaked phrases to become a community's testament to the world. Print transformed toasts, holiday celebrations, and parades from quaint local customs into vital forms of political communication. The Mammoth Cheese would have been nothing more than a hefty hors d'oeuvre without the newspaper publicity that grew up around it.

If words helped make the cheese, the cheesemakers were also involved with the printed end of the Early Republic's political culture on a much broader scale. The Republican newspaper network first established itself in Cheshire's region, the Berkshire mountains of western Massachusetts, in September

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<sup>27</sup>See Waldstreicher, *Perpetual Fetes*; David Waldstreicher and Stephen R. Grossbart, "Abraham Bishop's Vocation; or, The Mediation of American Politics," *Journal of the Early Republic* 18 (1998): 617-657.

<sup>28</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 518.

1800, when a newspaper called the *Sun* dawned in Pittsfield.<sup>29</sup> Though the Berkshires were far less hostile to Republicans than most of the rest of New England, its previous newspapers had all been short-lived, blandly commercial or Federalist-controlled. The area's most prominent journal, the Stockbridge *Western Star*, was under the influence of the area's arch-conservative Federalist congressman, Speaker of the House Theodore Sedgwick.<sup>30</sup> The effect of being presented with serious political choices was electric, the actual metaphor used in an 1801 Pittsfield Fourth of July toast to describe the changes in the "political Thermometer" of Berkshire County since Jefferson's victory and the *Sun's* appearance.<sup>31</sup> "I have lived in a Town, where none but *Federal* newspapers have been taken, until lately, and we all believed them," wrote one of the *Sun's* correspondents, but upon actually reading a Republican journal, "I was astonished to find the sentiments of that party so different from the representations given of them by their enemies. I begin to suspect I have been deceived and imposed upon." The writer sounded distinctly like a future Republican voter.<sup>32</sup> The people of Cheshire, who never needed to have their minds changed but were glad for the company, wished in a toast that "the splendour of the *Republican SUN*" would "continue to eclipse the twinklings of the *Western Lightning Bug*" (the Stockbridge *Western Star*).<sup>33</sup>

The *Sun's* editor, Phineas Allen, was a practical printer just graduated from his apprenticeship with the Northampton *Hampshire Gazette*. He was one of a new generation of young printers who started their occupational lives expecting to be active politicians rather than mere mechanics who

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<sup>29</sup>J. E. A. Smith, *The History of Pittsfield (Berkshire County), Massachusetts, From the Year 1800 to the Year 1876* (Springfield, Mass.: C.W. Bryan & Co., 1876), 82-83.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 24-29; Richard E. Welch Jr., *Theodore Sedgwick, Federalist: A Political Portrait* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), 97, 113-14, 122, 233-34.

<sup>31</sup>*Pittsfield Sun*, 7 July 1801.

<sup>32</sup>"A Plough-Jogger," *ibid.*, 28 July 1801

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 26 July 1802.

sometimes served politicians. Allen and many other printers who started Republican newspapers after 1798 were outraged by the Sedition Act's effort to force their trade into submission and attracted by the opportunity, rare for young artisans, to exercise independent influence in their communities. A eulogist described the teenage Allen saving his earnings to buy printing equipment, with the dream of making his living by "advocating the political principles which *he* believed right." Allen would be the unbending chief tribune of the Berkshire Democracy until the Civil War, serving several terms in the state legislature and enjoying a national audience for his writings.<sup>34</sup> The cheese story was originally broken by another newspaper founded at nearly the same time, and under the same impulses, as Allen's *Sun*. Despite its name, the Providence *Impartial Observer* was actually a much more radical paper than the *Sun*; a lengthy motto on its masthead proclaimed, among many other sentiments, that "a true history of the times, forebodes the entire downfall of all the inveterate enemies of true republican principles."<sup>35</sup>

Elder John Leland became the Pittsfield *Sun*'s most "efficient" supporter, contributing articles and, more importantly, encouraging his parishioners, listeners, and acquaintances to subscribe. The relationship would continue for the remaining 40 years of the Elder's life.<sup>36</sup> Though a considerably staid man than Leland, Phinehas Allen fully understood the power of festive politics, at one point

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<sup>34</sup>On Phinehas Allen, see Smith, *History of Pittsfield*, 82-84; "Death of the Senior Editor," *Pittsfield Sun*, 10 May 1860; John Todd, *The Old Man to Be Honored: A Sermon in Pittsfield, May 13, 1860, on the Death of Hon. Phinehas Allen* ([Pittsfield]: The Sun Print, for the family, 1860), quotation on 20. On the new generation of Republican printers that took up the pen in the late 1790s, see Pasley, *Tyranny of Printers*, chaps. 6 & 7.

<sup>35</sup>Providence *Impartial Observer*, 21 March 1801 ff.; Clarence S. Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1947), 1011-1012. Most partisan newspapers carried such mission-defining mottos, but the *Impartial Observer*'s is easily the longest I have found: "The intrigues of designing men will never deprive a wise and enlightened people of their rights. The wish of every good man must be, that republicans should so guard their rights, as to put it out of the power of Miscreants and Demagogues to destroy or even abridge them. The people of the United States fought for Liberty; they obtained it. They have agreed upon and established a free elective government; and they will support it, the wiles of Speculators and Peculators notwithstanding. The honourable zeal which pervades the breast of every true republican in search of understanding, wisdom, and knowledge, and a true history of the times, forebodes the entire downfall of all the inveterate enemies of true republican principles. Any person, who may be able, at any time, to communicate any information which will aid in the support of the rights of the people, and of good government, is requested to forward it for publication."

<sup>36</sup>"Death of the Rev. John Leland," *Pittsfield Sun*, 21 Jan. 1841.

helping start a Democratic hotel — and, in effect, Democratic function hall — when the local innkeeper refused to let the Jeffersonians hold their Fourth of July banquet at his establishment.<sup>37</sup> Allen did not exactly *promote* the Mammoth Cheese in the *Sun*, but he did vigorously defend it, holding the project to be "not only *innocent*, but *laudable* and *patriotic*, the opposition of the *Federalists* to the contrary notwithstanding." The *Sun* also used the long Federalist obsession with the cheese to lampoon the hysteria and conspiracy theories with which they had filled the political air since the late 1790s. Though "the Cheshire Cheese has not yet been seriously represented to be in itself a violation of the Constitution," Allen wrote semi-facetiously, it was certainly regarded as stemming from "an alarming principle of disorganization and modern philosophy." Moreover, it was "shrewdly suspected that ALBERT GALLATIN, the Genevan instigator of Whiskey Insurrections, instigated the good women of Cheshire to enter into the *Cheese-Plot*, the particulars of which may be expected in the *Appendix* of DR. MORSE'S next *Thanksgiving Sermon*."<sup>38</sup> (Rev. Jedidiah Morse of Charlestown was the leading American promoter of the Illuminati conspiracy theory, of which Jefferson and his allies were thought to be card-carrying members.<sup>39</sup>)

One final aspect of the Early Republic's political culture may help explain the particular form that Cheshire's political statement took. This was the producerist language in which ordinary Americans often expressed themselves on public occasions, the tendency for people who made things to speak through the medium of the things they made. This language has been most frequently noted in the case of urban artisans, who marched in civic processions by trades and held periodic trade festivals. These performances often combined some demonstration of the craft or display of its products with slogans

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<sup>37</sup>Smith, *History of Pittsfield*, 185-187.

<sup>38</sup>Pittsfield *Sun*, 18 Jan. 1802 (quoted), 16 Nov. 1801 (quoted), 26 July 1802.

<sup>39</sup>David Brion Davis, ed., *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion From the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 35-54.

asserting its members' political virtue and contribution to the strength of the nation or some other formulation of the common good. Believing that their trades supplied needful community services as much as commodities to be sold in the market, producers thought it made perfect sense to ground their claims to citizenship at least partly on the utility, quality, and, sometimes, the size of their productions.<sup>40</sup>

The most famous example was the "Grand Federal Procession" held in Philadelphia (along with similar events in Boston and New York) to celebrate and legitimize the ratification of the Constitution. So in Philadelphia, the potters had a horse-drawn float carrying a potter's wheel and men making actual cups, mugs, and bowls during the parade. A flag carried the motto, "*The potter hath power over his clay*," referring to the idea that a man with a trade could make his own independent livelihood and thus controlled his own mind and destiny. The cabinet and chair-makers also had a rolling workshop, with the slogan "*By unity we support society*," a double- or triple-entendre, taking in the solidarity of the craft, the actual crafting of devices to hold up the human bottom (chairs), and the great value to society of a craft that could meet so basic a need as sitting. The bricklayers contented themselves to march with their trowels, aprons, and a banner that made a straightforward link between their pride as tradesman and as republican citizens: "*Both buildings and rulers are the works of our hands*."<sup>41</sup>

These sentiments formed part of the complex of practices and ideals that Sean Wilentz called "artisan republicanism," but to me it seems quite plausible to push a similar idea into the realm of food production. Certainly the makers of mammoth veals and loaves thought so, as did the bakers, brewers, and "victuallers" who marched in the Grand Federal Procession. Such demonstrations did not and could

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<sup>40</sup>This is an elaboration on the seminal discussions in Sean Wilentz, "Artisan Republican Festivals and the Rise of Class Conflict in New York City, 1788-1837," in Michael Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz, eds., *Working-Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 37-77; and Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986),

<sup>41</sup>Quotations from Whitfield J. Bell Jr., ed., *Francis Hopkinson's "Account of the Grand Federal Procession Philadelphia, 1788"* (Boston: Old South Association, 1962), 16, 20, 17-18.

not happen often in rural areas: farmers lacked organized craft traditions and geography made it impossible for them to assemble according to their specialities and march. Yet in some ways the Mammoth Cheese could be seen as a tribute by the farm people of Cheshire to themselves as much as to Jefferson, a testimonial to their prodigious ability to help feed the republic and serve as independent, active, and necessary members of the national community. While I have not yet seen any evidence of a direct connection to the cheese or even of a political dimension, it is certainly intriguing to note that Berkshire County is widely regarded as the originator of that typical American rural festival, the county fair. The event generally recognized as the first county fair was organized at Pittsfield by Elkanah Watson in 1810, and heavily promoted in Phineas Allen's *Sun*.<sup>42</sup> At the very least, we know that the mixture of cheese and politics remained viable in Cheshire. In 1829, two of the 1801 curd suppliers, Israel and Molly Cole, sent another new Democratic president another congratulatory cheese, along with a cover letter inquiring about the new administration's naval policy. At 100 pounds, however, Andrew Jackson's cheese was only relatively mammoth.<sup>43</sup>

It follows from this line of reasoning, then, that the Mammoth Cheese was not just a weird stunt. It was instead a natural by-product of a political culture that could not stray far from the fabric of everyday life, and that often asked people to exercise their political rights purposefully for the first time, to make a choice between alternatives rather than merely give assent. While an outsized version of a humble household foodstuff was a gross intrusion of plebeian specificity into what was often idealized as an impersonal public sphere of competing ideas, it was one of many intrusive elements that helped allow for the political expression and mobilization of people who would never write a philosophical

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<sup>42</sup>Smith, *History of Pittsfield*, 316-351.

<sup>43</sup>A. B. Whipple, "Town of Cheshire," in *History of Berkshire County, Massachusetts, With Biographical Sketches of Its Prominent Men* (New York: A.B. Beers & Co., 1885), 622-23.

essay or give an oration.<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps the most important aspect of this variegated, festive, cheese-producing mode of conducting politics is that it worked. It is rare for historians to write about "Jeffersonian Democracy" or a democratic "Revolution of 1800" anymore unless to debunk or invert them,<sup>45</sup> and the rise of mass participatory democracy is now often delayed in historical interpretations until the 1830s or later.<sup>46</sup> Yet I would argue that this early partisan political culture, which developed during the 1790s, fully emerged after Jefferson was elected in 1800, and faded only when the parties became better organized in the 1830s, was one of the most participatory and transformative that the United States has ever experienced, despite its utter lack of many elements that came to define party politics later. Nationally, this political culture not only elected Thomas Jefferson in the face of government repression and social harassment, but in doing so, fundamentally revised the nature of the United States as a political regime, unofficially but effectively rewriting the constitution to incorporate organized competition for popular majorities. The Founders had created "a republican Constitution, imposing salutary checks on the

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<sup>44</sup>My sense of 18<sup>th</sup>-century ideals regarding public debate is most heavily influenced by Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>45</sup>The current trend is to depict Jefferson's victory as a counterrevolution against the rights of blacks, Indians, and women. For example, see several of the essays in Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara B. Oberg, eds., *Federalists Reconsidered* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998). This was also the general tenor of "The Revolution of 1800" conference held at the International Center for Jefferson Studies, Charlottesville, Va., 1-3 December 2001, though it should be noted that such senior scholars as Joyce Appleby, Gordon Wood, and John Murrin were on hand to demur. The present author's limited defense of the "Revolution of 1800" concept, prepared for the conference, is available on the Internet as Jeffrey L. Pasley, "A Revolution of 1800 After All: The Political Culture of the Earlier Early Republic and the Origins of American Democracy," <<http://jeff.pasleybrothers.com/writings/Pasley1800.htm>>. A volume of papers from the conference will also be published in 2002.

<sup>46</sup>This was the conclusion of the quantitative "new political history" of the 1960s and 70s. For overviews, see: Paul Kleppner and others, *The Evolution of American Electoral Systems* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981); Ronald P. Formisano, "Deferential-Participant Politics: The Early Republic's Political Culture, 1789-1840," *American Political Science Review* 68 (1974): 473-487; idem, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827-1861* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971); idem, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); William E. Gienapp, "'Politics Seem To Enter into Everything': Political Culture in the North, 1840-1860," in *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840-1860*, ed. Stephen E. Maizlish and John J. Kushma (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1982): 14-69; Joel H. Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), 5-32;.



popular will," wrote the Jacksonian-era conservative Calvin Colton, but from 1800 on, "the popular will in the shape of a dynasty of opinion, has habitually triumphed over these provisions. The government has been republican in form, but democratic in fact."<sup>47</sup>

Remarkable changes can also be detected on the level of political behavior. Though dominant interpretations have long brushed the information aside, statistics gathered by J.R. Pole and Richard P. McCormick in the 1950s and 1960s found an "extraordinary surge" over the period 1800-1816 with voter participation approaching 70 per cent of adult white males during the campaigns of 1799 and 1800 in heavily politicized states such as Pennsylvania (see chart 1 below), and trending up to those levels elsewhere a bit later. The surge was especially notable in New England, where Federalist-Republican competition was particularly intense after 1800, as places Federalists once dominated with little challenge suddenly became vulnerable and the Republicans made strong efforts to win over the one region where they were defeated in 1800. According to the numbers generated by McCormick and Pole, it was not until 1840 or so that the better-organized parties of the Jacksonian era managed to match that record.<sup>48</sup>

Nowhere was the surge in voting more pronounced than in the cheese- and word-producing region of Cheshire and Pittsfield, Berkshire County, Massachusetts (see chart 2 below). Before Jefferson's election, voter turnouts had rarely risen above 40 percent of the estimated number of adult white males and usually stayed well below 30 percent. They rocketed up immediately after the two major local political events of 1800, Jefferson's victory in the national election and the founding of the *Sun*. In a special congressional election held a few days after Jefferson's inauguration (not shown on the

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<sup>47</sup>Peterson, *Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, 89.

<sup>48</sup>Richard P. McCormick, "New Perspectives on Jacksonian Politics," *American Historical Review* 65 (Jan. 1960): 288-301; J. R. Pole, *Political Representation in England and the Origins of the American Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 543-64; David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), xiv-xv. The Pole data was originally published in a series of articles in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

chart), more than 51 percent of the voters turned out countywide and an incredible 79 percent in Cheshire. Voting in elections for governor ramped up quickly in Pittsfield and countywide, crossing more or less permanently into the 60-80 percent range by 1805. In Cheshire itself, voting reached maximal levels, and sometimes beyond maximal. After 1800, Cheshire's turnout for governor went above 60 percent immediately, was usually more than 80 by 1805, and often above 90 thereafter. In the bitter near-war and war years of 1810 and 1815, Cheshire actually recorded more votes than, according to my estimates, there should have been voters. And Cheshire elections were not only very well-attended, but nearly unanimous. In 1801, they voted for Republican candidate Elbridge Gerry 175-0, and in most other elections the Federalists would get perhaps two or three votes if they were lucky. In the more-than-full turnout years of 1810 and 1815, there was heavier opposition but even more crushing margins: 244-5 and 253-8. Was it Elder Leland's sermons? The strength of their Baptist identity? The rollicking Fourth of July celebrations? Something in the cheese? Whatever the combination of factors, the Early Republic's political culture had turned a sleepy farming town into one of the most politically energized places on the planet.<sup>49</sup>

The political culture of the Jefferson era not only maximized voting in Cheshire and elsewhere, it also mobilized the non-voting population as well. Calling the cheese a gift from the ladies of Cheshire, as the *Impartial Observer* originally did, was no mere rhetorical device. Cheesemaking on preindustrial dairy farms was indisputably women's work, albeit a form of women's work that produced a commercial product and enjoyed an unusually high level of acknowledgment and esteem from the world of men. While the idea of making a giant cheese has traditionally been assigned to Leland, such a massive project could not have contemplated, much less accomplished, without the enthusiastic support

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<sup>49</sup>The voting statistics are drawn from official state tallies available on microfilm in the Lampi Collection of Early American Electoral Data, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass. Turnout rates were calculated by the author based on federal census data and should be considered general estimates only. Since the censuses occurred only once every ten years and did not break down their data in a way that exactly matches the voting population, several calculations had to be performed to arrive at each yearly estimate of adult male population. "Adult" was defined as 21 and over.

of Cheshire's entire female population.<sup>50</sup> Though voting was limited largely to adult white males, there is much evidence that a lack of voting rights did not prevent women from developing strong and partisan political interests and opinions. Moreover, the festive, community-based political practices of the era afforded particularly wide opportunities for not only women but also other legally disfranchised groups, including children, African Americans, new immigrants, and propertyless white males, to participate in political events. Not everyone was invited to sit at one of those banquet tables or hand in a ballot, but just about everyone could and did attend the civic celebrations, listen to the speeches, or read or hear what was in the newspapers. Non-white groups also had political celebrations of their own.<sup>51</sup>

Acknowledging democratization in Thomas Jefferson's "Revolution of 1800" does not mean we should minimize the damage done to African and especially to Native Americans or ignore the exclusions and limitations that the American form of party politics ultimately entailed. We do not even have to give Jefferson and his policies much credit. His primary contribution may have been the image he projected, or had projected on him, as "The People's Friend," a great statesman who nevertheless respected the values and intelligence of ordinary citizens and was willing to graciously accept their

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<sup>50</sup>McMurry, *Transforming Rural Life*, 62-99. Interestingly, the role of women in the Mammoth Cheese incident was reduced in the semi-legendary accounts that developed later. Following the account often repeated in Federalist satires, these stories often credited the authorship of the project to Leland alone (a claim that the parson himself did not make) and emphasized the more masculine and technological aspects of the actual cheesemaking, such as the use of the cider press and the creation of a giant cheese hoop by the town blacksmith. See "Rev. John Leland," *The Berkshire Hills* 1 (Feb. 1801): 84-87; and most of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century newspaper clippings on the Mammoth Cheese and John Leland in the Local History File, Berkshire Athenaeum, for instance, *Springfield Republican*, 11 April 1943, and *Berkshires Week*, 30 Aug. 1985. More surprising, perhaps, is that the first scholarly piece on the incident, Browne, "Leland and Cheese," committed and fostered the same error. Two female local historians got the story basically right in Ellen M. Raynor and Emma L. Petticlerc, *History of the Town of Cheshire, Berkshire County, Mass.* (Holyoke, Mass.: Clark W. Bryan & Co., 1885), 85-88.

<sup>51</sup>This is a somewhat speculative point, but see the works on celebratory politics cited in note 21 above, along with the following: Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "Political News and Female Readership in Antebellum Boston and Its Region," *Journalism History* 22 (1996): 2-14; Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Thomas C. Leonard, *News for All: America's Coming-of-Age With the Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

cheesy gifts. As a volunteer toaster at Lenox expressed this widespread perception, Jefferson had "virtues, and believes in the virtues of his fellow citizens."<sup>52</sup>

While strange and often rather ridiculous to modern eyes (and greatly lacking in the kind of uniformity and consistency that some social scientific scholars would like to see in a party "system")<sup>53</sup> this political culture was successful precisely because it was NOT a standardized national system. Instead, it was thoroughly embedded, and built out of, the culture of everyday life. Holidays, newspapers, barbecues, and cheese had all long existed in these local cultures. What early American party politicians did was adapt these local customs into something that was politically usable. There were no prefabricated posters and pamphlets mailed from the national party office, no celebrity candidate with entourage and security sweeping in for an appearance, nothing but local people devising their own means of building support for the party with their own local resources. While historians have tended to emphasize the torch light parades, marching companies and mass rallies of the mid-19th-century as democratic ideals, it might be argued that many such practices were merely holdovers from earlier decades that had become routinized and bloated from too many injections of money. The summit of participatory party democracy may have been reached in the age of the Mammoth Cheese.

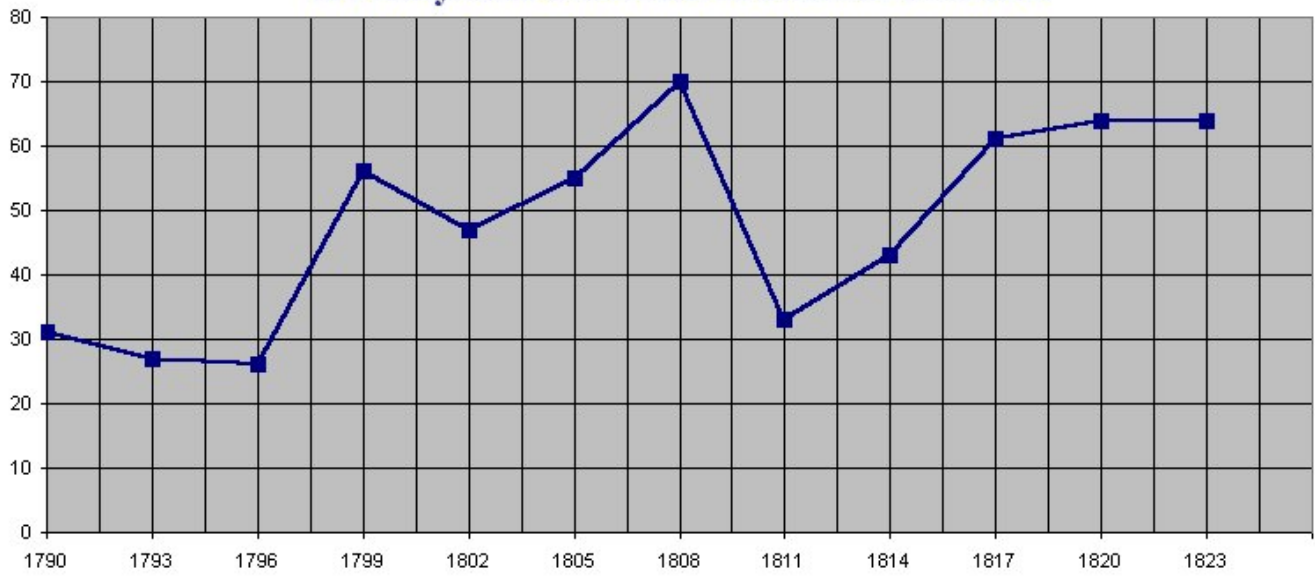
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<sup>52</sup>Pittsfield *Sun*, 12 July 1802.

<sup>53</sup>For instance, see Ronald P. Formisano, "Federalists and Republicans: Parties, Yes — System, No," in Kleppner, et al., *Evolution of American Electoral Systems*, 33-76.

**CHART 1**

**Est. Percentage of Adult White Males Voting  
in Pennsylvania Gubernatorial Elections 1790-1823**



**CHART 2 (color)**

**Estimated Pct. of Adult White Males Voting in  
Massachusetts Gubernatorial Elections, 1796-1819**

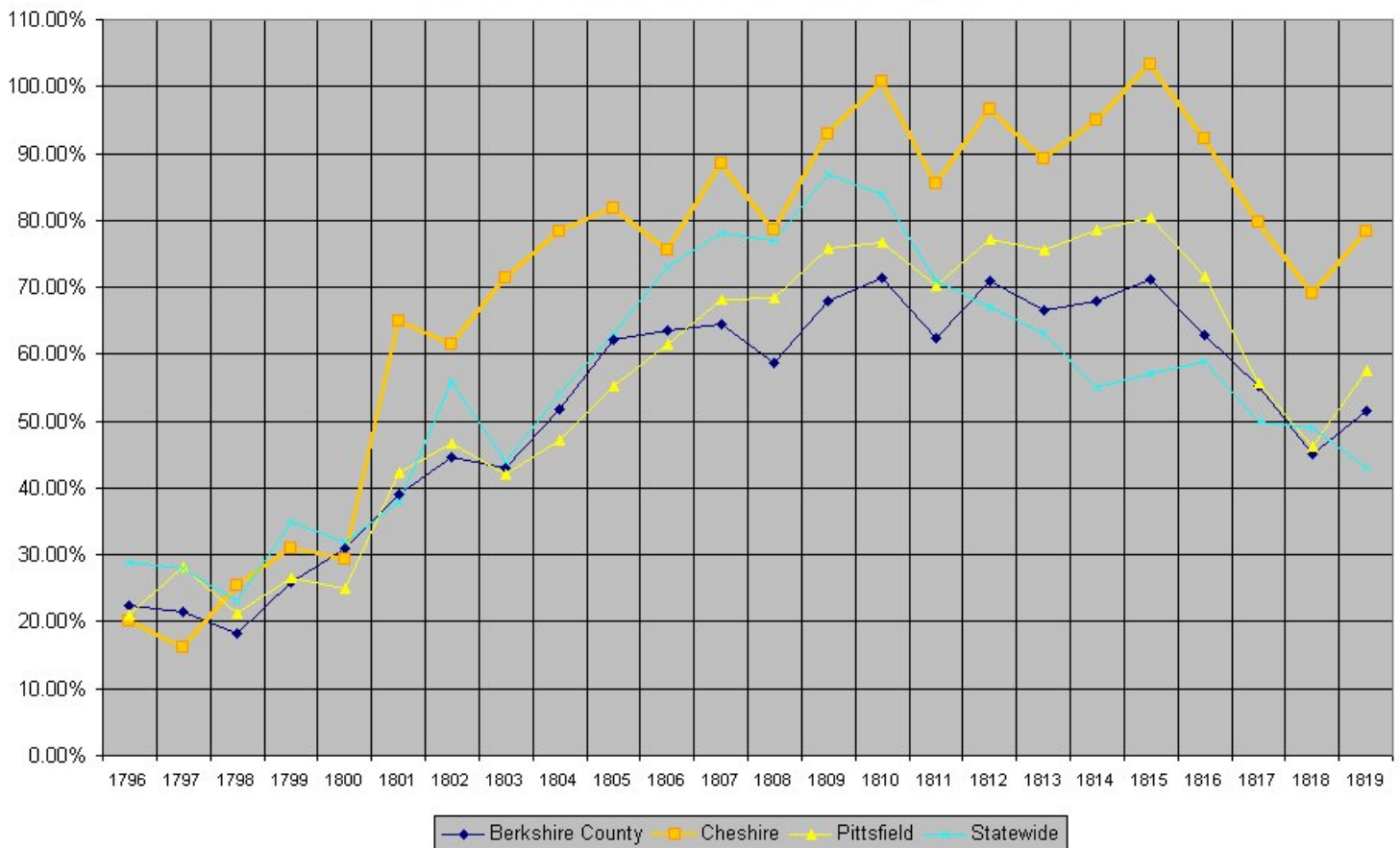


CHART 2 (B & W)

**Estimated Pct. of Adult White Males Voting in  
Massachusetts gubernatorial Elections, 1796-1819**

