

290 MCKEEHAN, DAVID

Bookseller

Wellsburg

Bookseller at Wellsburg (1806-07), best known as the editor and publisher of the journal of Patrick Gass, a member of the Lewis & Clark expedition, in Pittsburgh in 1807.

McKeehan was a lawyer who was forced from active legal practice by advancing deafness, turning instead to editorial writing as his principal remuneration, although finding a lifetime of financial hardship in that pursuit. He was born about 1771 in Pennsylvania (probably in Westmoreland County) and became acquainted as an adolescent with Revolutionary War veterans from that area, among them General Arthur St. Clair (1737-1818), later governor of the Northwest Territory. McKeehan attended Dickinson College in Carlisle, graduating in 1787, and studied for the law there afterward. Later in life, he noted that he had met with Washington and Hamilton during their 1791 expedition to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion, advising on how to provision the force as it moved west into the neighborhood of his youth. Admitted to the bar in 1792, McKeehan moved to Greensburg, the seat of Westmoreland County, to practice law there; as he claimed later that he had served as a postmaster "for two or three years" in Pennsylvania; Greensburg was likely the setting for that employment. That suggestion is supported by the central role he was assigned, as a key Federalist figure, in the 1800 Fourth of July celebration held there. In 1801, though, McKeehan developed an unspecified condition that led to complete deafness in a few years; unable to follow court proceedings, he was forced into new employments, initially as a schoolmaster.

By 1806, McKeehan was living in Wellsburg (then known as Charles Town) in Ohio County, just west of Pittsburgh, conducting a school and bookstore there, as many frontier schoolmasters did. In that role, he was approached with a publishing proposition by Patrick Gass (1771-1870), a member of the Corps of Discovery who had just returned to his Wellsburg home from his nearly three-year-long journey under the command of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Gass had kept a journal during the expedition and now wanted to publish it, recognizing both a large public demand for an eyewitness account of the journey and the potential income that such a book could generate for its debt-ridden compiler. McKeehan quickly negotiated an agreement with Gass in which he would prepare the rough text for publication in exchange for an interest in the sales of the completed work. When their plan was announced, it ran into trouble with Lewis, who believed that he alone had the right to publish *the* authoritative account of the adventure and that McKeehan's publication of an underling's journal was an inherently fraudulent act. In reading the exchange of published letters, it becomes clear that Lewis saw the journey as a personal triumph; essentially, the others in the Corps were his servants, and so not permitted to contradict or preempt their master. McKeehan differed, in a published open letter to Lewis, arguing that Gass and his compatriots were as essential to the success of the publically-funded mission as were its leaders, and that his journal was a compilation of many perspectives among the explorers, and not just the narcissistic view of Lewis. Thus McKeehan went ahead with publication, despite Lewis's continuing protests, issuing the polished journal from the Pittsburgh press of Zadoc Cramer in early 1807. He retained and sold the bulk of that production run, while

assigning Gass the registered copyright and giving him about 100 copies of the imprint.

McKeehan, however, was bankrupted by this publishing venture. His store was essentially a consignment business offering the products of the Philadelphia publisher Mathew Carey; so the Gass journal represented a convenient way for him to settle the debt accumulated in dealing with Carey. It appears that he moved his bookselling business to Pittsburgh shortly after the journal appeared in an attempt to generate sales in that larger commercial locale; but the economic recession generated by the Embargo that year limited cash sales, forcing McKeehan to use his copies as exchange items in barter with Carey, rather than generating cash. Even so, his scheme fell short, resulting in Carey reclaiming his consigned books from McKeehan's store and taking possession of the prepared manuscript of the Gass journal as compensation for monies still owed him. Over the next five years, Carey published at least four editions of the journal without seeing any need to pay either McKeehan or Gass for the privilege. Both men would blame Carey for initiating the fiscal problems that beset both of their lives thereafter. As for Lewis, his "official" journal did not see publication until 1814, after the market was saturated with Carey's ensuing editions of the Gass journal; and with the country embroiled in a war with Britain, sales of his chronicle were limited.

McKeehan soon moved on to new ventures in the west. In the immediate post-Pittsburgh days, his whereabouts are unclear, but he probably taught in locales downstream from that port city. By June 1811, he resided in Natchez, Mississippi Territory, conducting the weekly *Natchez Gazette and Mississippi General Advertiser*, apparently after purchasing it from its founder Andrew Marschalk; but the Federalist McKeehan was soon in competition with the Republican Marschalk, when his new *Washington Republican* (as in Washington County) issued in April 1813; McKeehan's *Gazette* foundered, prompting its closure in mid-1813 and a removal to New Orleans. There he took up the editorial desk of John Mowry's established *Louisiana Gazette*, before buying that paper in early 1814. As a result of his Federalist views, McKeehan's loyalty was suspect in the wartime environment; so he made a considerable show of his fealty by attempting to join a local militia unit as British troops advanced on the city in late 1814, but was exempted as a result of his deafness. Still, at the war's end, he was compelled to close his paper, once again from a lack of support for his perspective.

Thereafter, McKeehan's employments are unknown, although he may have found work as a legal copyist, as he pursued such work in Washington in 1828, some twelve years after his *Gazette* closed. In the interim, he apparently resided in St. Francisville, Louisiana – which he still referred to by its former name, West Florida – living under a like-minded benefactor's roof. That individual suggested that he go to Washington to seek either employment with or a pension from the Federal government, claiming a right for such patronage from his public service over the preceding thirty years. Hence, McKeehan pressed for a full year-and-a-half for a clerical appointment in the Federal bureaucracy, first in the waning days of the Adams administration, then among the flood of office-seekers that famously inundated the Jackson administration in 1829. That December, McKeehan published a page-long appeal in the *National Intelligencer*, detailing his frustrations with the government department heads in the capital, by name, and then pleading for work with someone in Congress or with a state legislature somewhere. That plea provides the last glimpse we have of McKeehan.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1771 Pennsylvania

Died: after 1829 Unknown

No record of spouse or offspring yet found.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; US Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Gass Journal; Kimmel, "Philanthropic Enterprise" (2004); Jackson, "Race to Publish" (1998); autobiographical account in the *National Intelligencer*, 27 Dec. 1829.