

BLOOMSBURG AS A "TOWN" 125TH ANNIVERSARY

By George A. Turner

Bloomsburg has the unique distinction of being the only "town" in Pennsylvania. It became a town due to the efforts of Charles R. Buckalew of Bloomsburg, member of the Pennsylvania Senate, who authored the legislation. March 4, 1870, is the 125th anniversary when the state legislature enacted the law transforming Bloom Township into the Town of Bloomsburg. The act stipulated: "The town of Bloomsburg in the county of Columbia shall hereafter include all the territory now included within the limits of Bloom township in said county and shall possess in addition to the organization and powers of a township, a town organization and government, under the provisions of this act."

People often ask, why is Bloomsburg a town and not a borough? The answer, in part, comes from circumstances surrounding the size of Bloom Township. The township created in 1797 was initially part of Northumberland County from which Columbia County was formed in 1813. It was one of the original twelve townships that comprised the establishment of Columbia County. In its early years, Bloom Township was rather large; its boundaries were Fishing Creek to the north and west and to the east to Briar Creek township, and south along the Susquehanna River. However, over time the size of Bloom Township became much smaller with sections being carved out to create in part or totally the townships of Mt. Pleasant (1818), Orange (1840), Center (1844) and Scott (1853). By 1870 there was a growing demand from the citizens living in Bloomsburg that it should become a municipality. The township's population increased from 2,668 in 1860 to 3,339 in 1870; this growth of twenty-five percent occurred mainly in Bloomsburg. Since the Bloom township was rather small in size, people felt that if Bloomsburg became a municipality, there was not enough area or population left to support the continuance of a township. To solve this problem, Senator Buckalew proposed that the legislature make Bloomsburg a town encompassing all of the area of Bloom Township. This decision to create the "town of Bloomsburg" was similar to the practice followed in New England states.

The law provided for a town government consisting of a council with six members and a president (commonly called the mayor). The length of term was one year for council members and the president. Council members were elected at large. Five and half weeks after the enactment of the law, the first town government election occurred on April 12, 1870. There were two sets of candidates: the "People's ticket" consisting of Elias Mendenhall for President of Council and Charles G. Barkely, Caleb Barton, Elijah R. Ikeler, Joseph Sharpless, and Simon C. Shive for council. The Democrats nominated Robert F. Clark for President of Council and William B. Koons, Stephen Knorr, and Frederick C. Eyer for council. In a close contest,

Mendenhall, a merchant, received 213 votes and defeated attorney Robert F. Clark by a margin of eleven votes to become the first president of town council. Charles Barkely, an attorney, garnered 429 votes, the highest number of votes for a council seat. The other elected council members were: Eyer, a merchant; Koons, a hotel keeper; Knorr, a blacksmith and wagonmaker; Barton, a farmer; and Sharpless, owner of a foundry and machine shop. The election produced a town council with its six members evenly divided between the People's Ticket and Democrats.

Vote reform was really a second factor that prompted Senator Buckalew's decision to draft special legislation for making Bloomsburg a town. By foregoing the law for establishing boroughs, a new law creating the town of Bloomsburg provided the opportunity to introduce a new voting procedure, known as "cumulative voting." It was a political reform long advocated by Buckalew. It gave a voter as many votes as the number of individuals that were to be elected to an office, such as a town council. The Bloomsburg Town Act stipulated: "When six persons are to be chosen each voter may give one vote to each of six persons, one vote and half to each of four, two votes to each of the three, three votes to each of two, or six votes to one." The idea behind this new method of voting was to permit a voter to distribute or concentrate his six votes as he thought best, but when he voted for more than one candidate, he had to give equal support to those he voted for. The election of the Bloomsburg town council and its president was the first time in the country's history to use cumulative voting system.

John G. Freeze, a prominent Bloomsburg attorney and close friend to Buckalew, wrote that this new way of voting ". . . will purify elections, establish justice in representation, elevate the tone of public life and give additional credit and lustre to the system of government by the people which is our proudest boast, and our best legacy for those who come after us." A major argument supporting cumulative voting rested on the belief that it would assure two party representation and to prevent a political party from winning all the seats on the council. Therefore, it could prevent the inherent dangers from a situation in which one political party could win all of the seats and have absolute control over the entire council. The Bloomsburg newspaper, *The Columbia and Democrat*, in an editorial praised the idea of cumulative voting:

Our town election on Tuesday last (April 12) tested the merit of reformed voting in a satisfactory manner and gave to it the sanction of popular opinion for the future. Theoretically it had been accepted by reflecting men in our community as just and expedient, but as an untried plan it was still open to question among the mass of our people. Now, all doubts of its utility, fairness and practicability have disappeared."

The newspaper believed this new method of voting constituted an important political reform effort. It meant an individual vote would not be lost in the outcome of the election and better candidates would be elected.

The best men can be selected as candidates and elected. Availability, a mere capacity to get votes and often the worse votes in the community -- the whiskey boys of saloons, the bigots of churches, the purchased and the timid citizens -- loses nearly all its importance in the selection of candidates. For the floating vote -- the vote subject to influence -- will no longer hold the balance of power between parties and control elections. The independent, upright citizen, unskilled in the corrupt devices of majority voting, can afford to be a candidate and can succeed in spite of the rogues and ruffians of his district. And in office he can defy them, for they will not hold his re-election and his future in their hands.

The cumulative voting also applied to the school board and all other officials to be chosen by the electors. Bloomsburg's success with cumulative voting quickly spread in the state. The state legislature in 1871 extended it to all boroughs. Interestingly, when Illinois approved a new constitution in 1870, it provided for cumulative voting for representative districts in its legislature. The practice of cumulative voting in Bloomsburg lasted until 1919.