

NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Attachment to publick Faith and national Honour. Let us establish our Character as a Sovereign State on the only durable Basis of impartial and universal Justice; for whatever plausible Sophistry the artful may contrive, or the avaricious be ready from self-interested Motives to adopt, we may depend upon it, that the Observation of the wise Man will, through all Ages, be found an uncontrovertible Truth, that *Righteousness exalteth a Nation, but that Sin* (of which Injustice is one of the most aggravated) *is the Reproach of any People.* . . .

WIL. LIVINGSTON

13 Ashbel Green, Sr., to Ashbel Green, Jr.

[Joseph H. Jones, ed., *The Life of Ashbel Green, V.D.M.*
(New York, 1849), pp. 37-43.]

While the immediate consequence of the revolutionary war was American independence, the long-range outcome of the Revolution itself was profound political, social, and economic change in American society. Ashbel Green, Sr., (1762-1848) was one of the few Jerseymen who lived to record and reflect upon the impact of the Revolution on American ideals, institutions, and practices. As the son of an ardent Whig, the Reverend Jacob Green of Hanover in Morris County, young Ashbel experienced firsthand the events leading to the break with Great Britain in 1774-1776; like many other teenaged boys, he saw militia service during the war. He later made significant contributions to the new nation as one of the foremost theologians and educators of the times. A member of the College of New Jersey class of 1783 (later Princeton University), he served his alma mater as tutor (1783-1785), professor of mathematics and natural philosophy (1785-1787), founder of the Presbyterian Seminary (1811), and president (1812-1822). Universally acknowledged as the dean of American Presbyterianism at the time of his death, he was for many years the minister of the Second Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and from 1792 to 1800 was chaplain of the Congress of the United States. In the following letter to his youngest son, Ashbel, Jr., the elder Green comments on some of the more pronounced developments that had occurred during his lifetime. It is a very personal observation, one that reflects his special interests and biases. Others of his contemporaries might well have discussed such things as the advent of universal white adult male suffrage; the rise of political parties; the political and social ascendancy of the "common man" symbolized by the election of a folk hero president, Andrew Jackson, ("Old Hickory"); the development of manufacturing capabilities that heralded an industrial revolution; the creation of a cultural identity through art and literature devoted to American subjects; the development of a national consciousness through the formation of historical

XIII THE SPIRIT OF '76

societies and the publication of American histories; or the onset of a nationwide reform movement in the 1820s and 1830s that encompassed everything from the abolition of slavery and the establishment of women's rights to temperance movements and communitarian experiments. But whatever the specific content of any reminiscence, the message would inevitably be the same: in large measure because of the Revolution, the Americans of 1840 lived in a world vastly different from that inhabited by their forebears in 1776.

June 26, 1840

My Dear A.

At the commencement of the controversy with Great Britain, which resulted in our national independence, our whole country exhibited a simplicity and plainness of manners and habit of living, exceedingly different from those which we now witness. In this respect, indeed, a difference, and a wide one, was then palpable between the Eastern¹ and Southern Provinces; so that it was among the peculiarities of the revolution, as has been often remarked, that a heterogeneous population was on a sudden so pervaded by an all-controlling spirit of liberty, as to forget all other distinctions, and become a homogeneous mass. Climate, of course, produced some dissimilarity between the more northern and southern colonies; but it was mainly attributable to two other causes — slavery and the inequality of landed property.² Slavery, indeed, then existed in all the provinces;³ but in the east, the number of slaves was not great, and their condition was a mild servitude; the master often working, and sometimes eating at the same table with his slave. In the south, slaves were then, as they are now, multitudinous, and in a very degraded situation — considerably more so, I think, than they are at present. In both cases, the quantity of landed property originally held by Europeans and their descendants, had great influence in giving character to the whole population. In the eastern and middle colonies, the cultivators of the soil generally owned but small plantations; so that a farmer seldom needed more than from two to five or six slaves, and of course, he could treat them with a lenity and an approximation to equality, not practicable if the number had been much greater. In the south, on the contrary, large tracts of land were often the property of a single individual, requiring many hands for their cultivation; and this, with the nature of the climate, led to the purchase of numerous slaves — in some instances, to the amount of hundreds — and rendered it wholly impracticable to treat them as was done in the more northern colonies. These circumstances, to say nothing of an aristocratic spirit, and an aversion to Puritanism and Presbyterianism, gave complexion to the state of society in the south, very dissimilar to that of the other provinces. Yet throughout the whole country, the habits and manners of the people, and the style of living, were greatly different from what they now are; not rude, (at least I will not so characterize them,) but far more plain and simple. At that time there were but few taverns. In no part of the country were they numerous, or well kept; and in the south, they hardly had an existence. Southern gentlemen expected to entertain strangers at their own dwellings; and were sometimes desirous to detain them even longer than was convenient to their guests, for the sake of their company and conversation. Hence, southern hospitality became proverbial. In New Jersey, New York, and all New England, it is hardly too much to say, that every clergyman's house was a clergyman's tavern. A travelling brother,

NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

without the scrape of a pen, or any knowledge of his person or his name, as an introduction, claimed a brother clergyman's house for his own accommodation, and the keeping and care of his horse, with as much freedom, and as little ceremony, as if the kindred in question had been natural and not ecclesiastical.

Dr. Young,⁴ who lived to be an octogenarian, exclaimed — "At the age of fourscore, where is the world into which we were born?" referring to the death of coevals and rising up of a new generation. But if this was proper and pithy in the capitol of Britain, with how much greater propriety and emphasis may it be uttered by an inhabitant of the United States, at the age contemplated? Not only will he have survived the most of his contemporaries, and seen them succeeded by a new race, but the whole face of nature and of society will have been changed during his lifetime. I can remember the time when there were dense forests where there are now fertile fields; and when agriculture in the whole United States, did not furnish an Irish potato which would now be thought tolerable. Cities and towns, within the scope of my recollection, have sprung into being, in number and beauty, and with a rapidity, of which the world does not afford another example. Cincinnati, and all the other towns, in what are now called the Western States, and, indeed, the States themselves, had no existence in the days of my youth.⁵ I well remember that it was at college, about the twentieth year of my age, that I first heard of a fertile region of country, called Kentucky. You know, I suppose, that the capitol of this State received its name in honour of the Lexington in Massachusetts, where British troops were first resisted by arms.⁶ Pittsburgh, at this time, was just coming into notice, and Baltimore was yet quite a small town. Philadelphia was scarcely a third as large as it now is. The extension of New York city has been still greater; and what is now called Western New York, was then literally a howling wilderness. Boston has been greatly enlarged; and the towns of the eastern States generally, as well as those in the south, have, many of them, come into existence; and those which before had being, have been much beautified, and in every way received great improvements.⁷

As to canals, steamboats, railroads and cars, every body knows that they are things of yesterday's production.⁸ Even turnpike roads did not exist in our country till long after a period to which I can look back. There was something that was called a turnpike road, although it little deserved the name, across Horse Neck, in the state of New York, in 1790. The first good turnpike was that between Philadelphia and Lancaster.⁹ A great clamor was raised against this by some of the German population of Pennsylvania; and several owners of farms opened their fields adjoining the turnpike gates, to let all who were so disposed pass without paying toll. Experience, however, soon not only reconciled the Germans and other opposers of the turnpike to this improvement, but made them its ardent friends, and prepared them to be advocates for other meliorations.

Before our revolutionary war, there were no more than seven colleges, or institutions authorised to confer degrees in the arts, in the whole of British America. These were Harvard, in Massachusetts; Yale, in Connecticut; King's College, now Columbia, in New York; Nassau Hall, at Princeton; and Queen's College, now Rutgers, at Brunswick, in New Jersey; a college and charity school, since grown into the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia; and William and Mary's College, in Virginia.¹⁰ The number at present is six or seven-fold more numerous—far more so than is really advantageous to the cause of sound science. Academies and common schools have multiplied in like proportion, and are not obnoxious to the like censures.

XIII THE SPIRIT OF '76

I will just set down, as they occur to me, some of the most important scientific discoveries or improvements, which have been made during the period to which my memory extends. I thus notice, the planet Georgium Sidus, or Herschell; and the four smaller planets, Ceres, Pallas, Juno and Vesta, denominated asteroids, by Dr. Herschell,¹¹ and several satellites of the larger planets; nearly the whole of what is called modern chemistry; the application of steam to the useful arts. The great power of steam had been long known, but its application (particularly after Watt's famous discovery or invention,)¹² to engines, mills and boats, and a variety of other purposes, is comparatively of recent date. To these I only add ballooning, vaccination, and the life-boat. This enumeration, I am well aware, is very far from being complete, and I with design omit all military improvements, or facilities for the destruction of human life.

But I must say a word or two about banks. Before our Revolution there was no bank in the British colonies, and probably no thought of ever creating one. The first that was established was the bank of North America, in Philadelphia; which was formed on the suggestion of Robert Morris, to aid his operations for sustaining the credit of our country, when the old continental paper money was becoming extinct.¹³ It was some years, perhaps eight or ten, before there was another bank in the United States.¹⁴ Who can ascertain the number which now exist?¹⁵

Thus, my son, I have adverted to some of the mutations and improvements which have come into existence, since I was a boy of the age of ten years. You may live to see others as numerous and as great. Would to God that our progress hitherto had been only in that which is good, that we had not changed for the worse in the desecration of the Christian Sabbath, in open blasphemy, infidelity and atheism; in duels, murders, and assassinations; and in that insatiable cupidity of wealth, which has produced our present financial embarrassments. May a merciful God turn us from our evil ways, that his displeasure may not rest upon us. May his providential corrections, in tornadoes, inundations, floods, and numerous and extensive conflagrations, be sanctified to us all, lest still greater and more general calamities come upon us.

Affectionately adieu,

1. That is, the New England states.

2. By 1840 it was clear that slavery was the single most divisive issue in America. The long-standing controversy over the fate of the peculiar institution became perceptibly more heated in the 1830s with the appearance of William Lloyd Garrison's antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator* (1831); the outbreak of Nat Turner's slave insurrection (1831); the Virginia Convention (1831-1832), which defeated emancipation proposals and led to the institution of stricter slave codes in the South; the creation of the American Antislavery Society (1833); the adoption of the "gag rule" which prevented debate on slavery in Congress (1836); the formation of the antislavery Liberty Party (1839); and increases in mob violence, propagandistic publication, and flight from bondage by slaves.

NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

3. Despite the emancipation law of 1804, there were still slaves in New Jersey in 1840. For the slavery debate in the state during the Revolution, see Docs. 6, 8-10.
4. Edward Young (1683-1765), English poet, playwright, and satirist, whose most famous production is "The Complaint; or Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality", written in nine installments from 1742 to 1745. The quotation is from the poem "Resignation."
5. Westward expansion, one of the most significant developments of post-revolutionary America, was set in motion when the United States acquired the territory east of the Mississippi River from Britain through the Treaty of Paris of 1783. The United States added some 828,000 square miles between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains through the Louisiana Purchase from France in 1803, annexed West Florida in 1810, and wrested East Florida from Spain through the Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819. By 1840 thirteen new states, extending as far west as Missouri, had been added to the union, and Americans were on the verge of making the great treks west across the plains and deserts to California, Oregon, and Washington.
6. Frankfort replaced Lexington as the capital of Kentucky in 1792.
7. The United States experienced a population boom from 1790 to 1840, increasing in inhabitants from 3,929,000 to 17,120,000; during the same period the population of New Jersey nearly doubled from 184,139 in 1790 to 373,306 in 1840.
8. Territorial expansion was accompanied by a transportation revolution. From 1790 to 1820 numerous improved highways, or turnpikes, were built connecting the mid-Atlantic states with the Ohio Valley. From the 1820s to the 1840s the emphasis shifted to the construction of canals, the most famous being the Erie Canal, completed in 1825. The Morris Canal connecting New York Harbor and the Lehigh River was built across New Jersey during the years 1824-1832; the Delaware and Raritan Canal between Bordentown and New Brunswick was built between 1830 and 1834. Robert Fulton's round-trip voyage aboard the *Clermont* from New York City to Albany in 1807 inaugurated the era of steamboat navigation. But by the late 1820s Americans were looking to the railroad as the source of fast, efficient, economical, and dependable transportation. The thirty miles of track in 1830 had increased to 3,000 by 1840; the boom in rail construction would gather momentum throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.
9. The Philadelphia-Lancaster Turnpike was begun in 1790 and completed in 1794.
10. Actually, there were nine colonial colleges. Green neglected to mention Rhode Island College (later Brown University), chartered in 1764, and Dartmouth College, established in 1770.
11. Sir William Herschel (1738-1822), famous German-born English astronomer.
12. In 1769 the Scottish inventor James Watt patented the steam engine, a device that gave an important impetus to the Industrial Revolution in England.
13. The Congress named Robert Morris of Philadelphia to the post of Superintendent of Finance in February 1781 and in December of that year chartered the Bank of North America, a private commercial bank.

XIII THE SPIRIT OF '76

14. The First Bank of the United States, with its main office in Philadelphia and eight branches in major commercial centers, began operations in 1791 as a fiscal agent for the federal government. The operation came to an end when the Congress failed to recharter the bank in 1811.

15. When President Andrew Jackson allowed the Second Bank of the United States (chartered in 1816) to expire in 1836, the states issued charters to local banks in unprecedented numbers. The fate of the Bank of the United States and the state banks was a primary political-economic issue of the "Age of Jackson."