

## THE EUROPEAN ADVENTURE OF AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN

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**A**LTHOUGH foreign adventurers played a conspicuous part in eighteenth century American military history, it was not a common practice for the educated young American of the latter part of that century to seek adventure, fame and fortune in the armies of Europe. Such, however, was the rather unusual endeavor of John Phillips Ripley, honor student and graduate of Dartmouth College and grandson of the eminent Eleazer Wheelock, the founder of Dartmouth.<sup>1</sup> Ripley completed his college education in 1791 at the youthful age of sixteen. After teaching for a term at Phillips-Exeter Academy at Exeter, New Hampshire, he found employment in the summer of 1792 at the United States treasury department in Philadelphia as a clerk under Oliver Wolcott, the comptroller. While serving in that capacity he devoted his leisure hours to the study of law under Joseph B. McKean, son of Thomas McKean, who was then Chief Justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.<sup>2</sup> Little is known about the experiences of Ripley as a clerk in the treasury department aside from the facts that he suffered poor health, that he had an attack of smallpox, that during his illness he became financially indebted to Chief Justice McKean,<sup>3</sup> and that certain undisclosed plans by which he had hoped to better his official and financial position miscarried. Suffering disappointment and humiliation, he decided to break loose from his moorings in America and to strike out on what was then considered a daring life of adventure in foreign lands. By this he hoped to salve his wounded pride and possibly win a fortune.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John Phillips Ripley was eldest son of Sylvanus Ripley, professor of theology and trustee at Dartmouth College and Abigail Wheelock Ripley, a daughter of Eleazer Wheelock.

<sup>2</sup> J. P. Ripley to Polly and Nabby Ripley, October 17, 1792, original MSS. Ripley Letters, in the possession of Mrs. T. A. Bonser, Spokane, Washington.

<sup>3</sup> J. P. Ripley to Mrs. A. Ripley, May 4, August 13, 1793.

<sup>4</sup> J. P. Ripley to A. Ripley, May 20, 1794.

The rather indefinite and opportunistic plans of Ripley for his venture and the misgivings entertained by him in regard to the ultimate success of his plans are disclosed in a letter of May 20, 1794<sup>5</sup> to his mother in Hanover, New Hampshire, about three weeks before he embarked for England. He relates: "I mentioned to you an idea I had, if my design failed,<sup>6</sup> of going to Europe. This I shall now carry into execution. I have written to Phil[adelphia] and if the state of European affairs does not prevent some negotiations, I shall probably obtain the appointment under the agent of loans.<sup>7</sup> I am however prepared for a disappointment, which I do not expect.

"My next resort in case of failure will be—to arms—in the best service in Europe, the Russian. The regular troops of the Empress are the best disciplined and the encouragement for adventuring foreigners the most flattering in the world. For the proof of the latter's position we need but cite the example of some of the greatest generals of the last age and of our own, who, without family or fortune, found in this service what cannot be uniformly found in any other and seldom anywhere in the Americas, the *reward of merit*. But this, I solemnly assure you, that whether successful or in adversity, sentenced to the knout or condemned to the cold regions of Siberia, *my friends shall never have occasion to blush for my conduct*. It shall never be such as to disgrace my family or connexions, provided poverty and misfortune cannot effect it. I am resolved, 'Whatever fate betide, my conduct till my final breath, shall not disgrace my life nor death.' Pecuniary assistance I do not want. I have learnt economy, and pursue it as a system, tho' it shall always be adapted to my situation and circumstances. For one thing and only one, I feel what sorrow I cannot express, I leave my family in indigence.<sup>8</sup> Should I chance to shed a tear at parting from my native shore, it may be placed solely to this account. Let me entreat you to bear it with Christian

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> The "design" is not disclosed.

<sup>7</sup> Ripley may have hoped to receive an appointment under William Short, who since 1791 had been sole agent for the United States government in loan negotiations with Dutch banking houses, but who in 1793 was appointed minister to The Hague. See *Works of Alexander Hamilton*, edited by H. C. Lodge, IV (New York, 1885), 362; R. A. Bayley, *The National Loans of the United States from July 4, 1776 to June 30, 1880* (Washington, 1882), p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> By "my family" he meant his widowed mother, his sisters, Polly and Nabby, and his brother, Eleazer Wheelock Ripley.

fortitude, and under all embarrassments to give that education to your other children which your circumstances will admit, and for which they and I will ever bless you. Struggle with misfortune for two or three years longer when with God's assistance your children who are not young may alleviate it. Should my life be preserved in the conflict between French democrats or Turkish Janizaries, you may expect it from your eldest. At present all I can say is, God bless and preserve you and grant that we may bear the dispensations of his providence with humility and patience. I calculate you see for the worst and I am resigned in either case. Should I go to Holland I shall write to you frequently as I can do it with little expense. Should I go to Russia, as I shall have letters probably by means of Mr. H[ammond], British Amb[assador] at Phil[adelphia] to his Excellency Sir [*sic*] Charles Whitworth, the British Envoy Extraordinary [to Russia], I shall have liberty of transmitting letters in his official dispatches to London, from whence they may be sent to you by the packets.<sup>9</sup> In this way you will hear from me once a quarter. Departure will be on the first of June in the good ship *Minerva*, Capt. Scott. Your happiness I value more than my life and be spared it shall ever be the first object of your truly dutiful and loving son. . . . You will show this letter confidentially to our family and Mr. Fisk, but not to . . . the *hawkers of news* which don't concern them."

Supplied with numerous letters of introduction from his uncle, John Wheelock,<sup>10</sup> to influential persons in England, the twenty-year-old Ripley set sail from Boston on June 11, 1794. Twenty-four days later he debarked at Falmouth. After four days overland travel he arrived in London<sup>11</sup> where he proceeded to make contacts with the various parties for whom he had letters and to await what he hoped would be favorable news from Philadelphia regarding his appointment under the agent of loans. In the former endeavor he was only moderately successful, for people of importance were usually not in London during the summer months. Lord Dartmouth, a friend and benefactor of Dartmouth College, for whom he had a letter was in Yorkshire during the recess of Parliament and consequently was not available. Sir Isaac Heard

<sup>9</sup> Charles Whitworth later became Earl Whitworth.

<sup>10</sup> John Wheelock was a son of Eleazer Wheelock and president of Dartmouth.

<sup>11</sup> Unfavorable channel winds caused him to debark at Falmouth instead of London. J. P. Ripley to A. Ripley, June 6, 11, October 25, 1794.

had been sent to the continent to invest the young duke of Gloucester with the insignia of the Garter and therefore was not accessible. Similarly M. Montague and Dr. Southgate were not in London. But those gentlemen that he did have the good fortune to meet treated him with "much hospitality and politeness" and particularly was he befriended by Dr. Peters.<sup>12</sup>

During the entire month of July and the first part of August, Ripley impatiently awaited instructions from the United States government which would give him employment. He waited in vain for the instructions did not come. He finally decided to act upon the alternative plan of entering foreign military service.<sup>13</sup> Since coming to England, however, his ardor for service in the Russian army had cooled. In a letter to his mother he explained: "On reflecting on the Russian service, my mind involuntarily recoiled with horror and I resolved rather to starve than to serve in so disgraceful and inhuman a cause as the reduction of Poland. I embraced then solemnly the cause of Polish liberty which I consider not only as a service agreeable to my own feelings and principles, but as one which will receive the approbation of my friends and my country."<sup>14</sup> Without disclosing his intentions to his friends whom he knew would endeavor to dissuade him, he took steps to make possible his entrance into the service of Poland. He called upon Chevalier Bukaty, the Polish minister in London, and requested aid in the execution of his plans. Although the Polish minister received the petition courteously and sympathetically, he informed Ripley that he could not think of sending him, a stranger, to Poland to suffer the fate which he feared awaited Polish confederates but that if the project met with the approval of Mr. Jay, the United States envoy who was in London negotiating the Jay treaty, he would cheerfully afford him all the assistance in his power. A visit to Jay was equally barren in its results, for to Ripley's "inexpressible mortification" Jay was as averse to the plan as the Polish minister had been.<sup>15</sup> Discouraged but not defeated the unseasoned young American adventurer next turned

<sup>12</sup> Sir Isaac Heard was Garter principal king-of-arms. M. Montague is unidentified. Dr. Southgate was probably Richard Southgate, assistant librarian at the British Museum. Dr. Peters may have been Mathew William Peters, portrait and historical painter and divine.

<sup>13</sup> J. P. Ripley to A. Ripley, August 19, 1794. War in Europe in 1794 may have caused the plans for an appointment to miscarry.

<sup>14</sup> J. P. Ripley to A. Ripley, October 25, 1794.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

for aid to M. Estavenon, an acquaintance of his uncle, from whom he carried a letter of introduction.<sup>16</sup>

M. Estavenon lived in Haarlem. He was known to espouse liberal principles, and because of his previous public service at The Hague, Ripley hoped that through him he could make contacts with M. Middleton, the Polish minister at the Dutch capital. In quest of M. Estavenon, Ripley, in October, 1794, repaired via Amsterdam to Haarlem. The elder man greeted the American youth warmly and treated him with marked friendliness and hospitality. To the youth's requests for letters of introduction M. Estavenon responded that since he had retired from public service and the seat of the Dutch government some time before, he could not furnish letters to The Hague, but he promised to procure letters to the Polish minister. Ripley does not disclose whether the promise was carried out, but judging from the course of events and from his esteem for M. Estavenon, it probably was more than fulfilled.<sup>17</sup>

From Haarlem to The Hague the youth persistently and successfully pressed his case until he finally completed arrangements for entering Polish service. His trials were related in a letter to his mother: "At the Hague I was a stranger. By dint of *honest* impudence, I introduced myself to M. Middleton the Polish Minister. He spoke no English and I very poor French. I made out, however, to converse with him and to explain to him my views. I found him a friend to his country, a man of sense and science and of an amiable heart. He soon after did me the honour to visit me at my lodgings and at length gave me a passport with letters of introduction to General [Thaddeus] Kosciusko (the minister), to his brother, and to Count Ignace Potocki with his ministerial dispatches to the latter, who is at the head of the council of state and marshal of Poland, and to whom I have four letters more from M. Estavenon's friends. I returned to Amsterdam, received my letters which are to the principal patriotic characters in Poland, bade adieu to M. Estavenon after engaging to write to him as often as possible, and set out for Hamburg and this place [Altona] one mile distant."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> M. Estavenon's connections in public life are not known.

<sup>17</sup> J. P. Ripley to A. Ripley, October 25, 1794.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* General Kosciusko of American revolutionary fame.

Upon arriving at Altona, circumstances intervened which caused Ripley to alter his plans abruptly in regard to his route to Poland. Again he relates: "My intention was to go to Lubec [Lübeck] and from there take passage up the Baltic to Dantzic or Memel. This would be necessarily attended with some risque and I feel happy that I have now an opportunity of going with no risque at all, thro' Berlin and by a passport from a *Russian* minister. It is by the advice of a friend of M. Estavenon's here, of three or four Poles to whom he has introduced me and of our celebrated countryman, M. Barlow,<sup>19</sup> that I shall take that route. In Amsterdam I bought a cheap post chaise which is absolutely necessary in travelling thro' these countries. In this I have a proper place for all my Polish letters while I have others to show on the road in *case* of an examination. I shall set out tomorrow with an English gentleman, nephew of Dr. Moore,<sup>20</sup> whose travels you so much admire. We shall keep company as far as Berlin where we shall part to pursue our different travel, he to Dresden and I to St. Petersburg with permission in my passport to visit Warsaw as one who has no concern in politics or wars and who wishes to travel only for the purpose of science and improvement. The advanced season and the difficulty of the roads to Warsaw and St. Petersburg, in case I should make any delay will be sufficient apology to gentlemen to whom I am ad[d]ressed in Berlin for my passing speedily thro' that capital. To see St. Petersburg in its true glory I must see it in winter and defer my residence at Berlin to a future oppo[rtunity]. If I fail in my journey, it will I think be justly ascribed to my imprudence. The gentleman who travels with me knows nothing of my intentions and tho' I could confide in this honour and his friendship to the cause, I shall not communicate them to him nor to any one else. It is unnecessary for me to give a more particular account of this route. I think it is safe and will not lead me to *Magdeburg*.<sup>21</sup> I trust that in ten or eleven days I may be in the Polish camp. It is thought by my friends that the Generalissimo (who it is feared is no longer the brave Kosciusko) will give me the rank of supernumerary aide de camp and such commission in the line as I may, after serving in the above station and getting some knowledge of the language in the winter quarters, have courage and merits to deserve.

<sup>19</sup> Probably Joel Barlow, poet and statesman.

<sup>20</sup> Probably Dr. John Moore, who wrote on travels in France and Italy.

<sup>21</sup> Magdeburg evidently recalled the horrors of the Thirty Years' War.

"This is then all I have to inform you. Everything has been done by friends that could be expected. I enter service with every advantage, except a fortune, and that is often an injury. If I have courage (and as it has never been tried, it cannot be impeached) I shall either live and live with honor, or fall and close the scene forever. Many, I am sensible, will blame my present purposes, and consider them as resulting from the romantic brain of a headstrong, rash and volatile young man. Others will either pity them or condemn entirely. But, the surmises or the advice of another can never be a rule for any man, and ought never, unless when enforced by convincing argument, to induce a change in his resolutions."<sup>22</sup>

Despite his intense desire to aid the cause of Poland, Ripley's plans, due to no fault of his own, did not materialize. His journey from Altona to Berlin was completed without grave difficulty, but serious trouble was in store for him as he drew near to the Polish frontier. Six months later, after his Polish adventure had unheroically collapsed, Ripley from Amsterdam wrote to his mother the story of his buffetings: "Madalinski's army which I intended when at Berlin to attempt to join was, before my arrival on the frontiers, retreating toward Cracow. I then turned my course toward Silesia, passed thro[ugh] that province from Crossen to Plesse and entered Gallicia [*sic*] with the design of passing to Sandomierz or Lublin where the Polish army was in considerable force. Before I could reach the last place, I was arrested by an Austrian officer who had received news respecting M. de la Fayette,<sup>23</sup> who had escaped from Olmütz, and his companions, and suspected me as a stranger to have some part in aiding his flight. I was sent back by him to Silesia where I was given to a Prussian officer and escorted by a small party of dragoons to Breslau about a hundred and thirty miles. All my papers relating to my object in Poland were concealed under a false floor in my carriage, and as nothing appeared to prove that I had other intentions than merely those of a common traveller I was in a few days set at liberty with a passport from the Governor of Silesia, Count de Wendessin, to return either to Amsterdam or Hamburgh. After

<sup>22</sup> J. P. Ripley to A. Ripley, October 25, 1794.

<sup>23</sup> Lafayette, aided by an American named Huger and a German named Bollman, attempted to escape from imprisonment at Olmutz on November 8, 1794.

the fatigues of a long journey I was attacked by a fever shortly after my arrival in this city, which confined me nearly six weeks to my bed. I am, however, at present in pretty good health and enjoy a very agreeable flow of spirits."<sup>24</sup>

By the time Ripley had regained his health, Poland had capitulated. Again he relates to his mother: "The misfortunes of that unhappy country I need not describe to you. You are doubtless by the public papers advised of the victories of the Russian army and of the subsequent disasters which have befallen the brave people of Poland. Kosciusko beaten and imprisoned, Warsaw taken and Rega [Riga], the king in arrest at Grodno, Potocki, Dambrowski and other chiefs in violation of a *capitulation* signed by General Suvarov on the surrender of Warsaw, put in chains and now on their way to Siberia. Poland covered with its conquerors and any one who had the virtue to rise in insurrection either exiled or in chains. These facts are enough to give you an idea of the present state of a country which nine months ago bade fair to triumph over its foreign and domestic tyrants."<sup>25</sup>

Thus the Polish adventure of John Phillips Ripley came to an inglorious end. The youth did not immediately return to America. He went to England where, according to unrecorded family history, he fell in love with an English girl, but due to paternal opposition suffered the disappointment of having to return to America without his loved one. The known facts concerning his activities in America after his return are limited. Sometime before 1797 he was employed as clerk in the office of the Secretary of State at Philadelphia. During that year he was offered the consulship at Tunis only to suffer disappointment again when another was finally appointed to the post.<sup>26</sup> Ill health prevented him, in 1798, from seeking new opportunities in the West, for he had planned to migrate to Kentucky with a large party organized by Governor Howell of New Jersey.<sup>27</sup> Instead, he remained in Philadelphia where he practiced law until his death in 1816.

<sup>24</sup> J. P. Ripley to A. Ripley, April 24, 1795.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> J. P. Ripley to A. Ripley, January, February 11, August 1, 1797.

<sup>27</sup> J. P. Ripley to A. Ripley, February 16, 1798.