



A MEMOIR OF THE LIFE OF WILLIAM BARTON, A.M. (1754-1817)*

BY MILTON RUBINCAM
Washington, D. C.

THE Barton family of Pennsylvania has contributed several men who are outstanding in the history of the Keystone State about whom much has been published.¹ Indeed, members of the line have attained such brilliance in their respective fields of activity that one may suppose no important Barton has been overlooked by the biographers. But this is by no means the case. William Barton, elder brother of the more famous Dr. Benjamin Smith Barton, seems to have been neglected generally. No adequate biography of him has been published thus far.² Yet his story is perhaps more interesting than that of his brother; not more significant, for Dr. B. S. Barton made important contributions to our knowledge of medicine and botany. Of the two, William was the more self-effacing. As a scholar and philosopher, he was of a contemplative

*A lecture delivered before the Pennsylvania Historical Junto, Washington, D. C., September 24, 1943. The author holds the position of Editor of the Junto's publication.

¹See, for instance, in the *Dictionary of American Biography* the articles and references cited on Dr. Benjamin Smith Barton, Dr. William P. C. Barton, Dr. John Rhea Barton, and Hon. Thomas Pennant Barton. A branch of the family settled in Virginia, producing, among others, Hon. Richard Walker Barton, member of Congress from Virginia; and Hon. Robert Thomas Barton (see *Dict. Am. Biog.*). Others worthy of notice are William Barton's brother, Matthias, member of the Pennsylvania Legislature; and Judge George Washington Barton, of Pennsylvania and California.

²A brief biography of William Barton was published by Alexander Harris, *A Biographical History of Lancaster County* (1872), pp. 38-39.

turn of mind. His public offices were few and of minor importance. He was the friend of many of the national leaders of his day. He possessed all of the culture and refinement that made up the 18th century gentleman. He will ever be remembered as the biographer of his illustrious uncle, David Rittenhouse, the astronomer-statesman; few people know that he was one of the designers of the Seal of the United States that now graces our dollar bills, or that he projected a monumental dictionary of American biography that, had he lived to carry out his plans, would have been a notable predecessor of all later encyclopedias of similar scope.

William Barton was born in Philadelphia April 11, 1754.³ He was the eldest of nine children of Rev. Thomas Barton, of Carrickmacross, county Monaghan, Ireland, a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, who came to America as a young man and in 1751 opened a school near Norriton, in present Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. William's mother, Esther Rittenhouse, was a sister of the astronomer and daughter of Matthias Rittenhouse by his wife, Elizabeth Williams, daughter of a Welsh colonist, Evan Williams. Mrs. Barton was a granddaughter of Nicholas Rittenhouse, a paper-manufacturer and Mennonite clergyman, by his wife, Wilhelmina de Wees, from Leeuwarden, The Netherlands, and great-granddaughter of William Rittenhouse (Wilhelm Rittinghausen), from Mülheim-an-der-Ruhr, duchy of Berg, Germany, and Amsterdam, Holland, who became the first American paper-manufacturer in 1690 and subsequently the first minister and bishop of the American Mennonite Church. William Barton's immediate ancestry was thus composed of sturdy Irish, German, Dutch, and Welsh families.

In 1754, the year of his eldest son's birth, Thomas Barton went to England and was ordained a minister of the Church of England. In 1755 he returned to America as a missionary for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, and in due time assumed charge of the churches at Pequea and Caernarvon, in Lancaster County, and St. James's Church, in the city of Lancaster.⁴

³ Barton pedigree in the College of Arms, London (MS.J.P.90; Sir Isaac Heard's *American Pedigrees*), published by Milton Rubincam in the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* for March 1942.

⁴ William Barton, *Memoirs of the Life of David Rittenhouse, LL.D., F.R.S.* (1813), pp. 100, 111-112.

William's early years were passed in the turmoil of the French and Indian War, in which his father saw active service in His Majesty's forces, serving from 1755 to 1758 as a chaplain with the rank of captain.⁵ His letters in the *Pennsylvania Archives*, 1st and 5th series, and the *Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council* graphically describe the perils that beset him in his campaigns.

The years following the war were trying ones for the Bartons. Sickness and straitened circumstances laid them low. Rev. Mr. Barton wrote on October 31, 1766, to his intimate friend, Major General Sir William Johnson, the famous Superintendent of Indian Affairs, that "since I had the honour of writing you last, I was so unfortunate as to lose my second Son⁶ in the Smallpox; which, with the long & dangerous illness of Mrs. Barton, have for some time depriv'd me of the Pleasure of addressing a Letter to you."⁷

About this time Sir William Johnson sent one of his illegitimate sons, William, who was part Indian, to the Barton home to be instructed by the minister. In a letter dated December 2, 1767, Mr. Barton wrote to General Johnson a favorable report of his offspring's progress, and added:

Upon his first coming to Lancaster, he challenged almost every Person he met with; & box'd half the Young Dutch Men in Town. Had he lived at Rome in her Days of Glory, when Wrestling & Boxing were brought upon the Theatre as publick Diversions, he would have been deem'd an *Athletick Champion*, & entitled to the prize at every Exhibition; But in these Days of Degeneracy, when these once glorious Exercises claim no Honours or Rewards, & are attended with Nothing besides *black Eyes & Broken shins*, I have prevail'd upon him to lay them aside, So that he is now as peaceable a Lad as any in the Place. My Children are all exceedingly fond of him, & my eldest Son,⁸ who is a good Scholar, is constantly instructing him at Night.⁹

⁵ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 5th ser., vol. I, pp. 31, 132, 177.

⁶ David Cradock Barton. A later son was named David Rittenhouse Barton.

⁷ Original in the Sir William Johnson Papers, MSS. Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Sir William replied in Dec. 1766: "I am heartily Sorry for the melancholy occasion which deprived me of hearing from you. It will be needless for me to recommend a Philosophical resignation to such a Loss, I hope your attention to M^{rs} Barton has diverted it, and that she is now recovered."

⁸ William Barton, the subject of this article.

⁹ Sir William Johnson Papers, Library of Congress.

Unfortunately, this tranquillity did not long prevail. Early in the year 1768 a fellow named Stump murdered several Indians (in present Snyder County, central Pennsylvania), an event which, together with the rescue of the murderer by the colonists, occasioned so much turbulence and disorder that the lad's Indian nature asserted itself. He became restless and discontented, begged for permission to return home, and, after rejecting all of Mr. Barton's persuasions and remonstrances, left Lancaster and re-joined his father at Johnson Hall in the province of New York.¹⁰

Mrs. Barton died on June 18, 1774,¹¹ and the following year her son William went to England, perhaps to complete his legal training, for he had decided to embrace the profession of a counsellor-at-law. The Public Record Office, in London, possesses an extract from a letter he wrote from Bristol, October 10, 1775, to his father, Rev. Thomas Barton, then in Philadelphia. As the document in question is clearly labelled "Extract,"¹² the inference is that his letter was intercepted by the British authorities, his political comments copied, and the letter then forwarded to America. As the Revolutionary War had just commenced, this document is important as reflecting public opinion in the Mother Country at that time:

Since my arrival here, [he wrote] I have taken a good deal of pains to discover the sentiments of the People here, with regard to the Contest subsisting between Grt. Britain & the Colonies. I am sorry to find that we seem to have few friends. They say the Ministry are determined to reduce the Inhabitants of New England to Obedience, & such of the other Colonies as continue to resist them. . . . That if Matters are not soon accomodated Virginia & South Carolina, with the New-England Provinces, are to be made Examples of, & that great Numbers of Troops will be sent to America for that Purpose. . . . That the Non-importation & Non-exportation, are so far from distressing the trading People of this Country, that Commerce was never in a more flourishing condition here, than

¹⁰ Rev. Thomas Barton to Sir William Johnson, March 25, 1768 (Johnson Papers).

¹¹ Daniel Kolb Cassel, *A Genea-Biographical History of the Rittenhouse Family* (1893), pp. 215-217.

¹² A photostatic copy of this document has been furnished the writer by the Public Record Office.

at present. . . . They profess themselves extremely desirous that a Reconciliation should take place: but say, that it cannot be effected, unless the Congress be dissolved, & the several Assemblies either petition, or make some kind of Propositions. . . . They declare that Government. has no Designs inimical to the Liberties of the Americans; but that it wishes, they would put it in their Power to reconcile both Countries once more. . . . They wish the several Assemblies had accepted the Terms contained in Lord North's Motion in the House of Commons, *with this Difference*, that, instead of the Parliament liquidating the Sum to be paid by every Province, from Year to Year, each Province had granted a certain Quota for *one Year*, and for the subsequent Years, to enlarge, or diminish it, in such a Manner, as would best suit the situation & Circumstances of the People, & as the Exigencies of the State might require; & that Requisitions might be occasionally made as heretofore. . . . This, I say, they wish had been done, as they imagine it would at least have paved the Way for an Accommodation. All this is the Language of the People here. . . . I make no Comment upon it. The Parliament will meet very soon, when I hope something will be done towards healing the Wound; tho' indeed there is only room left to *hope* it, unless our Assemblies will make some advance.

When in London in 1778 young Barton became acquainted with Isaac Heard, an official of the College of Arms, who later received the honor of knighthood. Heard, whose wife was a Massachusetts girl, was interested in constructing pedigrees of American families.¹³ At his suggestion, Barton registered with the College of Arms the pedigree of his family, the Bartons of Carrickmacross, county Monaghan.

In 1778 Barton went from England to the Continent. While in Holland, remembering that his mother was descended from a family that had resided for a time in Amsterdam, he visited that famous city and called upon a gentleman named Adrian Rittinghuysen, aged 85, who he learned was a son of Bishop William Rittenhouse's brother, Nicholaas Rittinghuysen, alderman of Rosendaal, Gelderland, and a first cousin, therefore, of Barton's great-

¹³ Anthony R. Wagner, Portcullis Pursuivant, College of Arms, "An Eighteenth Century King of Arms' Collection of American Pedigrees," *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, Jan. 1941, pp. 23-26.

grandfather, Nicholas Rittenhouse.¹⁴ Barton himself has left us an interesting account of his visit with this venerable Dutch representative of his mother's family.¹⁵

Early in 1779 William returned to America, and immediately went to Lancaster, where he received a letter from his distinguished uncle, David Rittenhouse, who wrote: "I most sincerely congratulate you on your safe arrival, and impatiently expect the pleasure of seeing you here. I received yours from Baltimore, ten days after the date, and immediately wrote to your father, supposing him to be still at New-York; though we cannot be certain as to that matter."¹⁶

Young Barton found conditions at home sadly changed. His father had always been a loyal subject of the King, and the breaking out of war between Great Britain and her American colonies was a matter of deep concern to the minister. His situation at Lancaster became untenable, and he retired to New York, then held by the British, with the best wishes and kindest sentiments of his parishioners.¹⁷ "I am just informed that my son has returned to his native country," Rev. Mr. Barton wrote to John De Hart, of Elizabethtown, N. J., January 30, 1779, "after an absence of between three and four years. How melancholy and distressing is my situation! separated from eight children, and three congregations, to whom I was bound by duty, gratitude, and every tie of affection."¹⁸

Barton made several attempts, with his brother-in-law, Paul Zantzinger,¹⁹ to visit his father in New York, but at different times he was permitted by General Washington to go as far as Elizabethtown, where he was met by his father and step-mother.²⁰

¹⁴ Calvin Kephart, "Rittenhouse Genealogy Debunked," *Nat. Geneal. Soc. Quarterly*, Dec. 1938, pp. 107-108; Milton Rubincan, "David Rittenhouse, LL.D., F.R.S.: A Study from Contemporary Sources," *Bulletin Hist. Soc. of Montgomery Co.*, Oct. 1939, pp. 11-12.

¹⁵ In his *Memoirs of Rittenhouse*.

¹⁶ Barton, *Memoirs of Rittenhouse*, pp. 278-280.

¹⁷ A pass was issued to Rev. Thomas Barton and his second wife, Sarah de Normandie, to go to New York, Sept. 17, 1778 (*Minutes Supreme Exec. Council*, vol. XI, p. 579).

¹⁸ Barton, *op. cit.*, pp. 279-280, note 52.

¹⁹ Paul Zantzinger, a merchant who made clothing for the Revolutionary War soldiers, held several public offices in Lancaster, namely: Assistant, 1773-77; Chief Burgess, 1780, 1791-94; and Burgess, 1790 (Franklin Ellis and Samuel Evans, *History of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania*, 1883, pp. 369, 373-375). His wife was Esther Barton.

²⁰ *Mins. Sup. Exec. Council*, vol. XII, pp. 256, 312-313, 317, 339, 357.

Vice-President George Bryan, of the Supreme Executive Council, distrusted Zantzingers motives, but he expressed the opinion that "Young Mr. Barton is a much clearer character with us, than his Brother-in-Law," and that, having just returned from England, "he has been weaned of all attachment to that corrupted Country, & brought to see the happiness & independence of North America in their proper light & connection."²¹

Reverend Thomas Barton died in New York on May 25, 1780, and was laid to rest in the chancel of St. George's Chapel, in that city.²² In his will, dated February 14, 1780, he named as executors his wife Sarah, his son William, and his brothers-in-law, John Abraham de Normandie and David Rittenhouse.²³

July 14, 1779, the Supreme Executive Council appointed Barton an agent of the Loan Office for Lancaster County, as one of several officials whose duty it was to borrow \$20,000,000 on interest, in conformity with a resolution of Congress dated June 29, 1779.²⁴ In the fall of that year David Rittenhouse tried to secure for his nephew the position of secretary to Henry Laurens, newly appointed minister to Holland. "I wish you could obtain some handsome thing of this kind," the astronomer wrote to Barton, "but there are such numbers of humble suitors to, and dependents on, members of Congress, that every thing is snapped up, before you or I know any thing of the matter."²⁵

On October 2, 1779, William Barton was admitted to the bar of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, and in March 1781 he became a member of the Philadelphia bar.²⁶

June 14, 1781, Mr. Barton married Elizabeth, daughter of John Rhea, a Philadelphia merchant, by his wife, Mary Smith, sister of Col. Jonathan Bayard Smith, a Revolutionary War soldier and member of the Continental Congress. To them were born nine children: William P. C., later first Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, U. S. Navy; John Rhea, a prominent Phila-

²¹ *Penna. Archives*, 1st ser., vol. VII, pp. 225-226 (Bryan to Washington, March 5, 1779).

²² Barton, *op. cit.*, pp. 287-288.

²³ *Abstracts of Wills*, New York, vol. IX, pp. 132-133 (Collections N. Y. Hist. Soc., 1900).

²⁴ *Mins. Sup. Exec. Council*, vol. XI, pp. 46-47.

²⁵ Barton, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-282.

²⁶ Frank Willing Leach, "Old Philadelphia Families," CXXXIII, "Barton," *The North American*, Phila., Pa., Oct. 20, 1912.

delphia physician;²⁷ Thomas; Charles; Esther Ann; Mary Rhea; Elizabeth Sophia; Susanna Juliana, afterward the wife of Samuel Clement Hopkins, M.D., of New Jersey; and Nancy.²⁸

In this same year (1781) the University of Pennsylvania awarded William Barton the honorary degree of Master of Arts,²⁹ and in 1785 the same degree was conferred upon him by the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University.³⁰

Barton issued what was probably his first publication in 1781, a 40-page pamphlet entitled, *Observations on the Nature and Use of Paper Credit*. In 1786 he followed this up with a 31-page brochure, *The True Interests of the United States and particularly of Pennsylvania considered; with Respect to the Advantages Resulting from a State Paper Money*.³¹

Meanwhile, a matter of some importance was being considered by Congress. Since 1776 various committees had been studying the matter of devising an official seal for the United States. Such an insigne would not only serve as our national coat-of-arms but would indisputably proclaim to the world our sovereignty and independence. In May 1782 William Barton was called into consultation. In those days every cultured family possessed a knowledge of heraldry, and young Barton's fame as an heraldic authority was already well established.

Barton submitted two designs for the seal; in the second, only the reverse was adopted, for the committee was not satisfied with the obverse he had drawn. In collaboration with Charles Thomson, he worked out the design until it met with general satisfaction.³² Their report, in Barton's handwriting and bearing Thomson's endorsement, "Mr. Barton's improvement on the Secretary's device,"

²⁷ Through his son, Dr. John Rhea Barton, William Barton was an ancestor of Vincent Astor, the present head of the American branch of the Astor family.

²⁸ Leach, *loc. cit.*; D. K. Cassel, *The Family Record of David Rittenhouse* (1897), p. 24.

²⁹ *General Catalogue of the Officers and Graduates in the Department of Arts in the University of Pennsylvania from 1749 to 1849*, p. 22.

³⁰ Leach, *supra*.

³¹ Copies of these pamphlets are possessed by the Library of Congress.

³² The full story of Barton's participation in the designing of the Seal is told by Gaillard Hunt, *The History of the Seal of the United States* (1909), pp. 23-40. Referring to the collaboration of Thomson and Barton, Hunt comments (p. 37): "The distinction of producing the arms of the United States can not justly be accorded wholly to either, but belongs wholly to both, with the larger share of distinction to the Secretary, Charles Thomson."

is entitled: "Device for an Armorial Atchievement for the United States of North America, blazoned agreeably to the Laws of Heraldry—proposed by Wm. Barton, A.M." The Seal was adopted by Congress, June 20, 1782, and four days later Thomson wrote to Barton: "I enclose you a copy of the device by which you have displayed your skill in heraldic science, and which meets with general approbation."

The importance of Barton's contribution in assisting Thomson to design our national seal can be measured only when we consider the uses to which the Seal is put, *i.e.*, it is affixed to the commissions of all Cabinet officers and diplomatic and consular officers nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate; all treaties, conventions, and formal agreements of the President with foreign powers; all Presidential proclamations, etc. The eagle is the prominent feature of the obverse, or front, of the seal and the pyramid is the paramount feature of the reverse, as one can notice by looking at a dollar bill.

The statement has been made that at about this time William Barton served as a soldier in the Revolution; and he has even been identified with the William Barton who was a private, 8th class, in Capt. Martin Shetter's Company of Associators in 1782.³³ The writer has made an examination of the muster-roll of Shetter's company in the *Pennsylvania Archives*, 2nd series, vol. XIV, p. 773, the authority for the above statement. There is nothing to indicate that the co-designer of the national emblem was the soldier in question. The locality from which Shetter's company came is not known; it seems more likely that if our William Barton had been a Revolutionary War soldier, he was one of those men bearing his name who served in the Philadelphia City Militia.

About this time or shortly thereafter William Barton was engaged in writing a short treatise on Heraldry, a manuscript copy of which he presented to General Washington in a letter dated August 28, 1788, in the course of which he wrote:

When very young, I made myself acquainted with this science;—and notwithstanding it may be considered by some as a matter of amusement, rather than utility: I will

³³ Leach, *loc. cit.*; Elisabeth Ellicott Poe, in "Half-Forgotten Romances of American History: William Barton-Elizabeth Rhea," *Washington Post*, Dec. 23, 1935, refers to Barton as a "soldier-lawyer."

venture to assert, that it is a study both pleasing & instructive, as well as innocent in its tendency. I am likewise persuaded, Sir, that Blazonry not only merits the notice of an inquisitive mind, viewed merely as an affectative science; but that Coat-Armour, the Object of it, may be rendered conducive to both public and private uses, of considerable importance, in this infant nation, now rising into greatness; and I trust that your Excellency, to whom every true American looks up, as the guardian of your Country and patron of its increasing glory, will concur with me in the sentiment, that every institution which may assist in promoting the great cares of Government, is worthy of public attention.³⁴

In 1789 President Washington appointed Barton one of the Judges of the Western Territory. Most writers for this reason refer to the latter as "Judge" Barton, but actually he never served in that capacity.³⁵ He declined the appointment, as we learn from a letter written by Washington to James Madison in August 1789,³⁶ and from the President's message to the Senate dated September 11, 1789.³⁷ George Turner was appointed judge in his place.

Meanwhile, Barton identified himself with The American Philosophical Society, of which his uncle, Dr. Rittenhouse, was an active member. He was elected a member on January 19, 1787. On January 1, 1790, he became a Councillor and was re-elected on January 7, 1791, the occasion on which his uncle, Rittenhouse, was elected President of the Society to succeed the venerable Dr. Franklin, who had died the preceding year. On January 4, 1793, Barton was elected a Councillor for three years, but he resigned this office to take up his duties as one of the secretaries of The American Philosophical Society. He was re-elected secretary January 2, 1795, January 1, 1796, and January 6, 1797, the last time

³⁴ Original in the George Washington Papers, MSS. Division, Library of Congress. Washington's courteous reply, dated Sept. 7, 1788, from Mt. Vernon, was published by Barton at the close of his *Memoirs of Rittenhouse* (1813), and is also to be found in the recently completed *Writings of George Washington*, vol. XXX (1939), pp. 87-89.

³⁵ In his article on the Barton pedigree (see footnote 3), the present writer mentioned Barton's appointment as judge, but at that time he had not found evidence that the latter had not accepted the position.

³⁶ *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, edited by John C. Fitzpatrick, vol. XXX (1939), p. 393.

³⁷ *Journal of the Executive Proceedings of the Senate of the United States*, vol. I (1828), p. 25.

being the occasion of Thomas Jefferson's election to the presidency of the Society as successor to Rittenhouse, who had died in June 1796.³⁸

In spite of his long association with the Society, Barton appears to have written only one paper for its publications. This was his *Letter to David Rittenhouse containing observations on the probabilities of the duration of human life, and the progress of population in the United States*, which was printed in the Society's *Transactions*, volume III, 1796.

Probably some time between 1797 and 1800 William Barton and his family removed to Lancaster, the home of his youth. In the latter community he took an active part in local affairs, becoming Prothonotary in 1800, Justice of the Peace in 1808, auditor in 1810, and again Justice in 1811.³⁹

In 1802 Barton published a work bearing a lengthy title, of which the first part is: *A Dissertation on the Freedom of Navigation and Maritime Commerce, and such Rights of States Relative Thereto, as are founded on the Law of Nations*. This volume was dedicated to Thomas Jefferson. In this treatise the author examined the Law of Nations in relation to the principle that "Free Ships Make Free Goods," as understood by the chief maritime powers of Europe prior to the formation of the Treaty of Armed Neutrality in 1780, and he demonstrated that this was a fundamental principle recognized as such in that treaty. He also investigated the question of the rights of neutrals and endeavored to designate the articles to be considered as contraband of war and to define the right of search. The book covered 339 pages, plus 45 pages comprising an appendix of 16 documents quoted in full.

For many years Barton had been collecting material for a full-length biography of Dr. Rittenhouse. He possessed many of his uncle's papers, as well as the latter's letters to his father, Rev. Thomas Barton. He received also much assistance from his uncle, Captain Benjamin Rittenhouse, and from David Rittenhouse's friends, Andrew Ellicott, Thomas Jefferson, and Dr. Benjamin

³⁸ *Early Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge*. Compiled by one of the Secretaries from the MS. Minutes of its Meetings from 1744 to 1838 (1884), pp. 147, 178, 187, 211, 217, 227, 245, 246.

³⁹ Ellis and Evans, *History of Lancaster County, Pa.* (1883), pp. 215, 217, 375.

Rush, as well as from many other associates of the late astronomer. Much interest was aroused in his project by Rittenhouse's friends; on November 3, 1812, in a letter to Secretary of State James Monroe, then at Washington, the infant capital of the Republic, Barton stated that former President Jefferson had subscribed for six copies of the book. In his letter to Rittenhouse's biographer, the great statesman, writing in the third person, said that by purchasing several copies, "he has equally gratified his affectionate reverence for the character of Dr. Rittenhouse, and his friendship & best wishes toward his much esteemed connections; and he is satisfied that the life of such a man must offer a model & useful lesson to mankind in general. He salutes Mr. Barton with friendship & respect."⁴⁰

Inevitable delays in the printing of the book were experienced and it was not until the closing months of 1813 that it was published. Meanwhile, permission was granted to secure a copyright in England, as we learn from a letter written by Barton to James Monroe, October 29, 1813, in which he enclosed several papers he was sending to England. We were then engaged in our second war with Great Britain, and these letters were left unsealed for the Secretary of State's inspection. He requested that the papers "be forwarded to England by the very earliest safe conveyance known to you—either directly thither, or by way of Halifax, or the West Indies."⁴¹

Barton's *Memoirs of the Life of David Rittenhouse, LL.D., F.R.S.*—the shortened form of a title which, in conformity with the custom of the time, occupied a full page—is the most complete and authoritative biography of the eminent astronomer that has thus far been issued. The biographer's admiration for his subject was profound, and the reverence he felt for the name of Rittenhouse induced him to write in exaggerated style in some instances. Like most biographers of that time, he indulged in numerous digressions; thus, Rittenhouse's ancestry suggested to him a short history of paper-manufacture, his association with The American Philosophical Society resulted in a brief account of that organiza-

⁴⁰ The original letter by Barton to Monroe is in the State Dept.'s Miscellaneous Letters in The National Archives, Washington, D. C. Jefferson's note to Barton, quoted in the latter's letter, has been published in Lipscomb's *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Library Edition), vol. XIX (1903).

⁴¹ Original letter in the State Department's Miscellaneous Letters, The National Archives, Washington, D. C.

tion, and the first entrance into the book of Rittenhouse's friends and associates caused Barton to launch forth into biographical sketches.⁴² Nevertheless, the book does not make heavy reading; the author's style is clear and interesting, and his comprehensive grasp of his subject's varied activities and interests renders it an important document of the formative period of our national history.

Jefferson was delighted with this biography of his old friend, though he admitted humorously that Barton was "an over-zealous biographer."⁴³ The book had a different reception with ex-President John Adams, who never had been very friendly toward Rittenhouse, and who could not account for Barton's sending the book to him. "The book is in the modern American style," Adams wrote to Jefferson, March 14, 1814, "an able imitation of Marshall's Washington, though far more entertaining and instructive, a Washington mausoleum, an Egyptian pyramid. I shall never read it, any more than Taylor's Aristocracy. Mrs. Adams reads it with great delight, and reads to me what she finds interesting, and that is, indeed, the whole book. I have not time to hear it all."⁴⁴

While he was thus engaged in producing the biography of his uncle, Barton had another work in contemplation which, according to the prospectus,⁴⁵ had seventy words in the title, which may be abbreviated to: *Select American Biography, Or, An Account of the Lives of Persons, Connected by Nativity, or Otherwise With the History of North America, Since the First Discovery of that Country*. In discussing the scope of his proposed work Barton wrote:

It is the intention of the author, not only to concentrate in one point of view the lives of men distinguished in the New World, of whom some notices are already published; but also to rescue from oblivion the merits of many char-

⁴² In a letter to George Logan, M.D., June 7, 1814, he said: "In my 'Memoirs' of Rittenhouse (which I suppose you have seen) I have introduced some concise Notices of Mess^{rs} Logan, Norris & Dickinson—The nature & design of that work restricted me to *very brief sketches*, in those & similar cases."

⁴³ *Writings of Jefferson*, Lib. Ed., vol. XIV, p. 79.

⁴⁴ *The Works of John Adams*, edited by Charles Francis Adams, vol. X, pp. 89-90.

⁴⁵ A copy of the prospectus is in the Madison Papers, vol. 76, Rare Book Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

acters of worth, related in various ways to this country,—of whom no public record has yet appeared. And, in order to render more valuable,—and more especially useful to the citizens of the United States,—a work, expressly designed to comprise a history of the lives and transactions of such departed American worthies as are entitled to grateful remembrance, the writer of the “American Biography” will use every means in his power to render it a comprehensive, fruitful, and interesting repository of information relating to those objects.

The *Select American Biography* was to consist of three volumes a year, to be published in numbers every four months. The terms of subscription were \$4.50 per volume, on delivery. Persons subscribing to seven copies of the set would be entitled to eight. “This work will be put to press,” said Barton, “soon after a sufficient number of subscriptions shall have been obtained. The first number will probably be published in the course of the ensuing autumn”. (1814).

Among the persons whom Barton invited to contribute to his projected biographical encyclopedia was Dr. George Logan, of “Stenton,” Germantown, to whom he addressed a letter from Lancaster, June 7, 1814, asking the physician to communicate materials on his distinguished ancestor, James Logan (William Penn’s secretary) and relatives, Isaac Norris and John Dickinson.⁴⁶ Barton declared that it would be his endeavor to render his projected work “worthy of such aid & support.” “Profit is by no means my sole object in this undertaking,” he continued, “I have a mind to my reputation in it; and hope to acquire some share of literary honour, by rendering the work extensively useful, as well as interesting.”

There is no indication that any part of the manuscript of this proposed work ever saw the printer’s ink. The inference is that it either became too unwieldy in scope for any one man to handle, or not enough subscriptions were received to warrant its publication, or the editor died before his plans could be consummated. We may assume that the last-named supposition is correct, for William Barton was a true scholar who would not abandon any

⁴⁶ Original letter in the Logan Papers, vol. 6, MSS. Department, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

literary enterprise into which he had entered wholeheartedly. His death took place at Lancaster, October 21, 1817.

When we review the career of William Barton in order to determine his place in the history of American scholarship, we are confronted by his own words in the prospectus of his *Select American Biography*, expressions which ably explain the motives that actuated him in all his deeds. He wrote that in contemplating the lives of persons who bestowed important benefits upon the world, "men of congenial endowments are stimulated to follow their example; a disposition to emulate their virtues, wisdom, and meritorious conduct in society is thus naturally excited in persons of ingenuous minds." These reflections are further confirmed by his letters to Secretary of State Monroe and Dr. Logan, previously quoted, in which he wrote that it was his hope that his proposed *Select American Biography* would "contribute somewhat to the reputation" of the author. His ambition was to be a success in his chosen undertakings, and he was spurred on to such efforts by his intensive studies of the careers of his forerunners on the world's stage. His constant companionship with Dr. Rittenhouse was an important stimulus to him.

We are the fortunate heirs of William Barton's ambitions and labors, for, through his study of heraldry and by his determination to earn a reputation for himself, we possess an impressive national seal, a learned exposition of a significant principle of international maritime law in wartime, a scholarly biography that occupies a conspicuous niche in the literature of our Revolutionary and early republican history, and an early, comprehensive proposal for a dictionary of American biography.