FRANCE AND PENNSYLVANIA:
AN EXCHANGE OF GREETINGS IN 1791

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In May 1776, the Continental Congress recommended “to the respective Assemblies and Conventions of the United Colonies, where no government sufficient to the exigencies of their affairs hath been hitherto established, to adopt such government as shall, in the opinion of the representatives of the people, best conduce to the happiness and safety of their constituents in particular, and America in general.” To a well-organized and militant group in Pennsylvania this advice was unnecessary as this group had already started a movement to do away with the old conservative government established by William Penn in 1701. The resolution of Congress, however, did give an impetus and encouragement to this movement and a constitutional convention met in Philadelphia on July 15, 1776, with Benjamin Franklin as president.¹

This convention drew up one of the most democratic constitutions of its day, and this document was to have a profound effect not only on the other provincial or state conventions of the former British Colonies, but also on the political thought in France. It is a strange commentary, too, on the transit of ideas that the framers of the Pennsylvania Constitution got some of their ideas from the earlier French philosophers. With the outbreak of the revolution in France in 1789 and the ensuing need for a constitution, these ideas were to return to France in a concrete fundamental law of government. As Bernard Fay so well wrote: “It is a curious case of a people imitating itself by taking as a model a concept that another people has formed of it.”²

It was Benjamin Franklin who was largely responsible for

² The Revolutionary Spirit in France and America (New York, 1927), pp. 131-2.
making known to the French the constitutions of the new American states, and particularly that of Pennsylvania with which he had so much to do. In fact, the unicameral legislature established in Pennsylvania was generally conceded to be due to Franklin's efforts and this feature was incorporated in the French Constitution of 1791. Franklin sailed for France in October 1776, soon after the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention completed its work, and took a copy of the new constitution with him. As early as 1778 an edition of the constitutions of the American states appeared in France. This was followed by many other editions of the constitutions as well as commentaries on them, particularly on Pennsylvania's. The most notable of the latter was written by J. P. Brissot de Warville. It was printed in 1782 with the title "RÉFLEXIONS Sur le code de PENNSYLVANIE." Brissot was most laudatory, referring to the constitution as "the model of an excellent government."4

The debates in the National Assembly in France on a constitution were long and bitter, particularly on whether the legislative body should have one or two chambers. In all these discussions Pennsylvania was referred to more times than any other American state. On September 9 and 10, 1789, the debate became particularly violent. As the journal says: "The disorder is at its height."5 On September 10, 1789, the question of a single chamber was put and 490 votes were in the affirmative, 89 for two chambers, and 122 were either lost or had come to no decision.6 The debates were to continue, however, for almost two more years before the constitution was approved by the King on September 13, 1791. The new constitution of France thus followed the example of Pennsylvania in establishing a unicameral legislature.

While this struggle was going on in France a violent reaction had developed in Pennsylvania against the democratic constitution with its unicameral legislature. It was a veritable counter-revolution and finally succeeded in discarding the constitution of Pennsylvania in April, 1946, a unicameral legislature was provided for in the draft of the French Constitution. This constitution was rejected by the popular referendum held the following month. A revised draft creating an upper house with greatly limited powers was approved by the electorate on October 13, 1946.

4 The present writer is now translating and editing this essay by Brissot de Warville.
5 Archives Parlementaires de 1787-1800, 1. série, Tome 8, p. 604.
6 Ibid., p. 608.
1776 and establishing a new one late in 1790. As Robert L. Brunhouse wrote: "It took fourteen years to complete the curve from the days in 1776 when the conservatives lost their control until 1790 when they returned to complete leadership in the State."7

When the new assembly of Pennsylvania met on December 7, 1790, some of the "radicals" had been returned by their constituents, particularly in the western counties. Their sympathy with the French revolutionaries was obvious. Many French writers and leaders in the National Assembly had extolled their prized document of 1776 with its single chamber, its Council of Censors and its liberal suffrage—the most liberal of any government of that day. Of course the conservatives, flushed with victory, were not too enthusiastic about the work of the French "radicals." The death of Benjamin Franklin on April 17, 1790, with the eulogies on him in France, gave the Pennsylvania democrats their opportunity to testify to the work of their fellows across the Atlantic.

When Count de Mirabeau announced in the National Assembly on June 11, 1790, that Benjamin Franklin was dead, a profound silence followed.8 After Mirabeau paid a short but touching tribute to Franklin, the Assembly adopted by acclamation his motion that its members wear mourning for three days. The eulogy was ordered printed and the president was to write to the American Congress in the name of the Assembly telling of the action taken.9 A few days later the President of the French Assembly referred to Franklin as "the most famous man in the annals of the two worlds."10

Many Pennsylvanians were touched by these tributes to Franklin, and on February 14, 1791, Samuel Maclay moved, and was seconded by the radical leader from Franklin County, James McLene, the following:11

> Whereas the National Assembly of France have testified their regard to the memory of our late venerable fellow-citizen, Doctor Benjamin Franklin, in terms equally

9 Ibid., p. 171.
10 Ibid., Tome 17, p. 178.
respectful to him, and honorable to themselves: And as it is for the general interest of humanity, that a tribute of respect should be paid to virtue in every clime, and that such benevolent actions as those of the National Assembly, founded on general philanthropy, should be reciprocated through the civilized world:

Resolved, therefore, That a committee be appointed to draught a letter to the President of the National Assembly of France, expressing the high satisfaction the Representatives of Pennsylvania derive from the proceedings of that august body, who have paid so honorable a tribute to virtue, by their attention to the memory of our late venerable President, Benjamin Franklin; and also expressing the exalted respect they entertain for that illustrious band of patriots, who, forgetting localities and national distinctions, consider mankind as members of the same family, and have nobly exhibited so great a pattern of universal benevolence.

This motion was ordered to lie on the table, as was customary, but while under consideration the following day an addition was proposed. This time the motion was made by McLene and seconded by Maclay. It was far more pointed in expressing favorable support of the French revolution. It asked that a committee be appointed to draft a "congratulatory" address to the French National Assembly "expressive of the sympathetic feelings of this House on the subject of their virtuous exertions in the cause of freedom, and on the flattering prospect of their success in effecting a revolution, which will restore to the blessings of equal liberty so many millions of our fellow-men."12

Was not this going a little too far? What had this to do with a tribute to Benjamin Franklin? The Senate of the United States had already acted very coldly toward the message from the National Assembly, according to Senator William Maclay of Pennsylvania, whose brother Samuel, referred to above, was a member of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. As early as December 10, 1790, a packet directed to the President of the United States and members of Congress was received from the French Assembly. President Washington refused to open it and sent it to the Senate, who sent it back to the President. It was finally returned opened to the Senate and "contained a number of copies

12 Ibid., p. 192.
of the eulogiums delivered on Dr. Franklin by order of the National Assembly."\textsuperscript{13}

The "whole matter was received and transacted with a coldness and apathy that astonished me," wrote Maclay, "and the letter and all the pamphlets were sent down to the Representatives as if unworthy the attention of our body."\textsuperscript{14} A further episode occurred on January 26, 1791, when Maclay wrote in his \textit{Journal}:

A letter from the National Assembly of France, on the death of Dr. Franklin, was communicated from them and received with coldness that was truly amazing. I can not help painting to myself the disappointment that awaits the French patriots, while their warm fancies are figuring the raptures that we will be thrown into on the receipt of their letter, and the information of the honors which they have bestowed on our countrymen, and anticipating the complimentary echoes of our answers, when we, cold as clay, care not a fig for them, Franklin or freedom. Well we deserve—what do we deserve? To be d----d!\textsuperscript{15}

It was not until February 21, 1791, that the House of Representatives received from the Senate a message "communicating a vote of the Senate, in which they request the concurrence of this House for transmitting to the President of the National Assembly of France, a resolution expressive of the sensibility of the Legislature of the United States at the very respectful attention paid by that free and enlightened Assembly to the memory of BENJAMIN FRANKLIN."\textsuperscript{16} Upon motion of Mr. Madison the House of Representatives of the United States resolved to "wear the customary badge of mourning for one month." President Washington finally replied to the French Assembly and Thomas Jefferson, Secretary of State, wrote a sympathetic letter dated March 8, 1791, which was read in the French Assembly on July 2, 1791.\textsuperscript{17}

But Pennsylvania was not so "cold." The consideration of the McLene motion was postponed, however, and the preceding resolution of Mr. Maclay was adopted, with the committee consisting

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Journal of William Maclay} (New York, 1890), p. 350.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 350.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 379-80.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Archives Parlementaires, Tome 26}, pp. 708-09.
of Messrs. Wells of Philadelphia City, Maclay of Northumberland County and Gallatin of Fayette County. On February 26, the House resumed consideration of the postponed resolution of McLene and it was finally agreed that the Speaker draft an "Address" in conformity with the motion and report to the House. There is no record of the above committee ever reporting, but on April 6 the Speaker had finished his task and the clerk read the "Address" to the House. It was adopted unanimously on April 8, with the title: "The Address to the National Assembly of France." It read as follows:

The Representatives of the people of Pennsylvania have unanimously concurred in the desire of expressing to the National Assembly of France, their sympathetic feelings on the subject of their virtuous exertions in the cause of freedom:—They sincerely offer their congratulations on the success that has attended them, which they have viewed, in its progress, with the most pleasing and anxious sensations.

A nation which has been actuated by such magnanimous policy, which, with a noble enthusiasm, so generously interposed its power, so profusely poured forth its treasures, and mingled its blood with ours, in the defense of the liberties of America, is entitled to a grateful return of our regard, and to the warmest wishes that sensibility or attachment can express.

It was under the operation of these feelings, that we have always lamented that a brave and gallant people, who had become the voluntary champions of our freedom, should not themselves be free;—that after having assisted in erecting for us a temple of liberty, they should return to the house of bondage. Fortunately, the scene has changed, and your present situation awakens the most amiable sympathies of the human heart.

We now view, with grateful exultation, your glorious triumph of reason over prejudice,—of liberty and law over slavery and despotic will. You have nobly broke the fetters that bound you to your former government, and have, in the view of astonished Europe, undertaken a revolution, founded on that pure and elementary principle, that the people are the source of power, that in them

19 Ibid., p. 221.
20 Ibid., pp. 356-57. It was sent to the French Ambassador in England who sent it to the President of the National Assembly. Archives Parlementaires Tome 26, p. 709.
it is naturally inherent, and from them can alone be
derived.

The truth of this hallowed maxim, the pride and boast
of our American constitutions, could not remain undis-
covered, and unattended to, amidst the blaze of patriotism
and philosophy which has long enlightened France.

We rejoice that your government, though differently
organized, is established on such congenial principles, as
to cement by stronger, because more kindred, ties the
friendship that now connects us.

As an evidence of this disposition, we can assure you
that the suffrages and sentiments of our citizens are all
united in the warmest predilections for your cause and
your country. We anticipate the happiness and glory that
will await you, when those various resources by which you
are surrounded, and which nature has so profusely
lavished on you, shall be put into energetic motion by the
operation of a free government.

We fondly hope that no untoward or inauspicious
circumstance may intervene to interrupt your glorious
career, until you have effectually restored to the blessings
of equal liberty, civil and religious, so many millions of
our fellow men; until you have abolished the odious and
arrogant distinctions betwixt man and man; and until
you have implanted in the minds of the people a generous
and passionate enthusiasm for their country, instead of
a confined, though romantic, attachment to the person of
a King.

But whilst viewing with awe and admiration the prin-
ciples you have established, and which we ardently wish
may defy the efforts of time, tyranny and treachery to
overthrow, we cannot but rejoice that you have been ex-
posed in your progress to few of those convulsive
struggles, that so strongly marked the various aeras
[sic] of the American revolution.

If our solicitude for your success could be increased
from the operation of extraneous motives, it would re-
cieve considerable force from the animating and philan-
thropic reflection, that other nations of Europe, from the
influence of your example, will learn to value and vindic-
ate the rights of man;—and that such political institu-
tions will be more generally established, as by experience
are found to contain principles favorable to the happi-
ness of our species, and suited to the dignity of our nature.

Little did the Speaker and the members of the Pennsylvania
House of Representatives realize what a terrible and bloody
struggle was to mark the course of the revolution in France! Was it prophetic when they said they "cannot but rejoice that you have been exposed in your progress to few of those convulsive struggles, that so strongly marked... the American revolution." Just fifteen days after the National Assembly of France replied to the greetings from Pennsylvania, Louis XVI and his family were to flee to Varennes. Less than a month after that occurred the massacre at the Champs de Mars, and on July 25, 1791, Prussia and Austria formed a treaty against France which presaged intervention and war—a war that was to last with few interruptions for the next two decades.

Pennsylvania's greetings were read in the National Assembly in French translation on June 2, 1791, by M. Fréteau-Saint-Just, in the name of the diplomatic committee of the Assembly. It is interesting to note that the resolution said nothing about Benjamin Franklin; it dealt solely with the political conditions in France and the accomplishments of the revolution. When M. Fréteau-Saint-Just came to the third paragraph from the end containing the reference to the King, there was "lively applause from the Left." Reference to the statement that Pennsylvania was happy that France was exposed "to few of those convulsive struggles," was interrupted with "murmurs from the Right," and the concluding part of the sentence "that so strongly marked the various aeras of the American revolution" was followed by "hearty applause from the Left."21

The reply to the greetings from Pennsylvania by the French National Assembly was dated June 6, 1791, and was presented to the Assembly by M. Bureaux de Pusy, the presiding officer.22 It was approved and ordered sent to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, where it was read in English translation on August 27. The French version, however, is also printed in the Journal of the House. The letter read as follows:23

Next to the favourable suffrages of the people of France, from whom the National Assembly derive their

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20 Archival Parlementaires, op. cit., Tome 26, p. 709.
21 Ibid., Tome 27, p. 14. Since the presiding officer changed every fortnight, the president on June 6 was M. Dauchy. M. Bureaux de Pusy, however, signed the letter since he was presiding when the resolution was adopted charging him with drafting the letter.
powers, there could be no incentive better calculated to encourage them to proceed, until they have finally compleated their labours, than the approbation of the Representatives of Pennsylvania.

In the midst of the perplexing silence of those surrounding nations, who are blinded by prejudice, or awed by despotism, it was grateful to the National Assembly, and affords a happy presage, to hear, resounding from afar, prompted by fraternal affection, the congratulatory voice of America.

We too are establishing (under the constitutional authority of a king) that liberty which you have been able to secure under governments of a republican form.

Liberty, not derived from chartered grants or privileges, which subverts, by the introduction of hereditary distinctions, that equality of rank, which in the social state is the unalienable birthright of man; and which, encroaching on the sacred sovereignty of the people, by pretensions founded on birth or adventitious rights, still exhibits, on the bold and resolute features of a regenerated nation, the scars of its ancient slavery.

A country, fit to retrieve and nourish the seeds of this precious Liberty, was only to be sought for in the transatlantic world:—'Twas there, amongst an infant people, pure, and uncorrupt, that the higher virtues were to be found, suitable to carry into effect those speculative truths, against which ignorance and habitual error have waged continual warfare;—truths, which, from the pride and arrogance of the feudal system, have been disdainfully inserted in the list of Utopian opinions, fit only for the dreams of the philanthropist, and not for the practical purposes of government.—After the successful experience of America, it was still difficult to copy the example, and introduce amongst the degenerate nations of Europe this invaluable discovery of the new world; it required the enlightened energy and unremitting efforts of a numerous people, to support a doctrine which was combated by such powerful enemies, and opposed by such inveterate prejudices. But at length the revolution is effected, and already do the rights of man, engraved on the most durable materials, adorn the temples of liberty in the two hemispheres.

France is fully sensible of the benefits she has derived from the influence of your examples: She gratefully remembers that it was in the bosom of Pennsylvania, distinguished for her wisdom, that the legislators of America
first announced to the world, the true principles of the social system.

May the citizens of that glorious and happy country discover, in the decree of the National Assembly, the sentiments, by which the first friends of their independence continue to be animated:—May this act of the people of France, more closely uniting the two nations by the kindred tie of congenial principles, increase their mutual relationship, cement their interests, and perpetually recall to their recollection, that they are reciprocally indebted to each other, for the recovery of their freedom.

By order of the National Assembly of France.

J. V. Bureaux Pusy, President.

Paris June 6, 1791
To the Representatives of the People of Pennsylvania.

This exchange of greetings in 1791 between the representatives of the people of Pennsylvania and France seems to have been genuine and sincere. Both letters are worthy of careful study, for both reveal the democratic aspirations and hopes of two great peoples. The wish expressed in the Pennsylvania letter—"that other nations of Europe, from the influence of your example, will learn to value and vindicate the rights of man"—did come true, though many years were to elapse and much blood was to be shed before it was accomplished. And to defend and safeguard those democratic principles for France, for Europe and for ourselves, Pennsylvania soldiers sacrificed their lives in two wars on the hallowed soil of France.