THE BICENTENNIAL: A report and an invitation

THE approach of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution has prompted the Pennsylvania Historical Association to set up an ad hoc committee on participation in the national celebration. The committee observes that scholars naturally go about such business by holding meetings and publishing papers. The committee has addressed itself first to publishing because of the advance time required by research. With the approval of PHA's Council and the Editor of Pennsylvania History, the committee proposes a plan of publication for which the undersigned, as committee chairman, has prepared this explanation.

We hope to make a positive contribution by concentrating upon the Revolution's manifestations in Pennsylvania, and we solicit essays in this field broadly conceived to include the movements and processes from the end of the Seven Years War to the election of Thomas Jefferson as President. The Editor of Pennsylvania History will give priority of attention and space to such articles from now on. As they accumulate the best will be collected, and an effort will be made to have them edited and republished in book form. PHA itself cannot undertake such publication because of difficulties of distribution and financing, but a meritorious collection should have considerable appeal for established publishers during the Bicentennial era as it would have a practically guaranteed minimum sale to every public and school library in the state.

The enterprise is worthwhile for more than sentimental reasons. Although a massive literature already exists on the Revolution, and a great flood will certainly be forthcoming, mysteries still abound and new angles of vision are as urgently needed as new masses of evidence. Apart from social and economic phenomena there were no less than three political revolutions in Pennsylvania, occurring simultaneously: the overthrow of the crown, the overthrow of the feudal proprietary, and the overthrow of the representative assembly. Existing historical theories have encountered difficulties because of the complexities of these multiple movements. For example, the libertarianism and democracy often thought to have characterized the new state's
revolutionary government were clouded by its enactment of a loyalty oath that disfranchised conscientious pietists. Were there more qualified voters under the revolutionary regime than under the proprietary rule, or were there fewer? Was the new electorate more popular or merely different? Someone interested in quantitative history ought to tell us the answers and explain their implications.

In conformity with the theory of “frontier history,” an idea is now widely held that the back country residents were more democratic than those in the communities longer established. It does not explain why emancipation of slaves was supported most strongly in the east against general opposition from the frontiersmen. Indeed the whole history of the back country during the Revolution is wide open for research in both its military and political aspects. Why did Pennsylvanians oppose the Sullivan Expedition that presumably was to make them more secure? And why were they overruled by Congress? What roles were played by frontiersmen and Indians in the boundary disputes between states that continued during the struggle for joint independence?

Regarding the Revolution broadly, there is a well-known theory that the era of the Confederation was libertarian, the federalist movement to establish the Constitution was counter-revolutionary and authoritarian, and the triumph of Jefferson overthrew the counterrevolution. But the phenomena in Pennsylvania do not lend themselves well to such an explanation. The two Benjamins, Franklin and Rush, were foremost in the fight for independence and foremost again in that for the Constitution; after Franklin’s death, Rush went on to support Jefferson’s Republicans. Radical Tom Paine also so far deviated from simplistic schemes as to become a champion of Robert Morris’ conservative interests. Were such men merely fickle? It seems unlikely. Who else followed their lead in seemingly switching sides, and did they really switch or have we misconceived what the sides really were?

We need to know more about the interconnections and influence of the great gentry families. An example in point is the friendship between Penns and Livingstons whose kin and connections extended over the whole region from the Chesapeake and Delaware bays to the Mohawk Valley.
These are but a small sampling of the unsolved riddles still on the agenda of Revolutionary scholarship. We have only begun to write.

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