Philip Freneau and His Circle

What sort of man was Philip Freneau? As a personality, he remains shrouded in mystery. No painting from life exists; he abhorred the idea as a counterfeiting of nature. Not until after his death in 1832 was a portrait constructed from the memory of his surviving relatives, and the artist’s work approved by them.¹ This picture presents the sad, tragic futility of a face that yet tries to smile. It is the countenance of a sensitive, dreamy individualist.

Some of Freneau’s commentators have mistakenly assumed that, as a man, he was like some of his satiric poems—fierce, bitter, un Forgiving, ruthless, belligerent. Nothing could be further from the truth. By his own confession and from authentic anecdotes, we are obliged to describe him as a physical weakling, at least. In 1775, he fled the oncoming war with England to the West Indies, where he idled pleasantly for nearly two and a half years. He returned home in 1778; but he hated and feared war, and in 1780 he tried to escape to his beloved West Indies again. His capture and imprisonment aboard a British prison ship nauseated him completely.² In no part of his record do we find a suggestion of physical combat or combativeness. His only belligerence, it seems, appeared in his writings.³

The exact course of his life is not known. During spasmodic periods, he wrote for, or edited, several liberal papers from the start of the Revolutionary War excitement until well past 1800. He spent long intervening periods sailing the sea, stopping at New York, Philadelphia, Norfolk, Charleston, Savannah, Bermuda, Madeira, and the West Indies. Beyond these meager facts, we have little proof of what

² See Some Account of the Capture of the Ship Aurora, by Philip Freneau (N. Y., 1899), ed. by Jay Milles. This is filled with details of the writer’s physical sufferings: its tone a self-commiserating one.
he did. More information would have been available, had not the Freneau homestead burned in 1818, and with it many manuscripts, letters and papers.

But what of his friends? If we could know who they were and what they were, we should be much nearer to Freneau himself. The observation that birds of a feather flock together argues that human nature tends to seek its own kind; hence it seems reasonable to assume that Freneau's friends were in many respects like him. With a knowledge of their character, their aims, their interests, and their outlook on life, we should know better their common friend, Philip Freneau.

Only a small number of his letters are left to us, and letters are probably the best written evidence of character and friendships. Freneau was no Jefferson, broadcasting his interests to a wide circle of acquaintances through the mail. Apparently, he wrote to few persons, and generally preferred interviews to correspondence. He kept Jefferson waiting for eight months for an answer to his offer of a position, and then called upon him without an appointment. He had few intimate friends, and in his letters to them he reveals little about himself or his personal relations with others.

There are, however, among his various writings and in the few memoirs about his life, some references to friendships and associations. In the newspapers that he edited, and in his contributions to other papers, are occasional suggestions as to his special interests and friends. Bits of history concerning his presence at certain events, his visits at Charleston with his brother Peter, whose friends he probably knew, a list of New York associations noted by his friend Dr. Francis—these are among our few guides. It seems clear that his friends were of all classes, of different types, but having qualities in common that occur and recur in each new figure with surprising regularity. They are people who possessed an individualism, a vigor, and a sense of the dramatic that made them actors and central figures in the theatre of the birth of American independence and democracy.

His favorite correspondent was James Madison. Others were Jefferson, H. H. Brackenridge, and his brother, Peter Freneau.

See the present writer, "Freneau and Jefferson," American Literature, June, 1936, in which is reprinted a public letter by Freneau defending his relations with Jefferson.

For an account of Peter Freneau, see E. S. Thomas's Reminiscences of the Last Sixty-five Years (Hartford, 1840), I, 74-83.
I

Philip Freneau was the eldest child of his family, born in New York City in 1752 of a father of French Huguenot, and a mother probably of Scottish ancestry. His brother Peter was five years younger; another boy died in infancy; and there were two younger sisters, Mary and Margaret. The father was a well-read, kindly, successful merchant who, before his death in 1767, had bought 1,000 acres in New Jersey. This farm, at first used as a summer place, became the family home from 1762 on. For six years thereafter, however, Philip remained at school in New York and Penolopen. In 1768 he entered Princeton.7

At Princeton, he was the friend of James Madison, later President; of Henry Lee, later general and governor of Virginia; of William Bradford, later the United States Attorney General; and of Hugh Henry Brackenridge, later Pennsylvania judge and novelist. Others attending Princeton at this time were Aaron Burr, Brockholst Livingston, Gunning Bedford, Samuel Spring, and Aaron Ogden. Freneau’s college days must have been delightful, for some of his letters written shortly after carry a gaiety and youthful, amusing nonsense fully in the spirit of the perennial collegiate manner. His activities there were literary, and a word battle between two college literary societies found him writing his first Whig satires against the Tories.

The most valued of these college friends was to be Madison. The closest for a long time was to be Brackenridge; with him he collaborated in much college writing; for some time, he assisted him as teacher in a Maryland academy; in 1779, he helped fill the pages of The United States Magazine, of which Brackenridge was editor. They maintained their friendship and correspondence for many years. Brackenridge moved to Pittsburgh in 1781, and there became a prominent lawyer. Involved in the “Whiskey Rebellion” of 1793–1794, he was exonerated and later appointed state judge. His most important literary work is Modern Chivalry, in which Captain Farrago and Teague O’Regan are the American Don Quixote and Sancho

7 Biographical data are largely based on F. L. Pattee’s introductory “Life of Philip Freneau” in his Poems of Philip Freneau (Princeton, 1902), Vol. I; and Mary Austin’s Philip Freneau (New York, 1901). Special sources used will be indicated.
Panza. Like Quixote, Brackenridge was visionary, nervous, and eccentric; but he was an able scholar and a writer of genuine talent.\(^8\)

William Bradford, who seems to have been the roommate of Brackenridge, was of a disposition likely to be most congenial to Freneau. Potentially a fine poet, urged by his genius to follow literature, he listened instead to the counsel of common sense, and chose law. He was a great-grandson of Philadelphia's first printer, also William Bradford. During the Revolution, he was made deputy quartermaster-general; later on, he rose to a judgeship, and finally to the Attorney Generalship of the United States. Never strong physically, he died suddenly in 1795 at the early age of forty. An able scholar as well as something of a poet, he wrote an inquiry into capital punishment that is still readable and compelling.\(^9\) It contains respectful references to Montesquieu, Beccaria, and "the enlightened patriots who composed the first National Assembly in France"; and throughout the pamphlet there is a tone of idealism and abhorrence of torture definitely stamping the author as an idealist of a high calibre.

Henry ("Light Horse Harry") Lee, like Bradford, was in the class below Freneau, Brackenridge, and Madison. A dashing, turbulent, charming fellow, he, along with Aedanus Burke, in 1791 showed his friendship by suggesting to Madison that Freneau be appointed Jefferson's translator in the Department of State.\(^10\) He became one of the romantic heroes of the Revolution, and rose to power as governor of Virginia, but died in poverty. He was the stirring orator whose eulogy of Washington lives on: "First in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen."

Madison and Freneau maintained their happy relations through life, and their affection increased with the passing years. Intellectual, studious, upright, a brilliantly successful young politician, Madison yet had a stiffness that, perhaps, doomed him to failure in his courtship of Mary Freneau, Philip's beautiful sister. No résumé of his

\(^8\) Biographical data on Freneau's friends are largely taken from Dictionary of American Biography; National Cyclopaedia of American Biography; Encyclopaedia Americana; and Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography. Special sources will be indicated.

\(^9\) An Enquiry How Far the Punishment of Death is Necessary in Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1793).

\(^10\) Letters and Other Writings of James Madison (Philadelphia, 1865), I, 569. See also T. Boyd's Light-Horse Harry Lee (New York, 1931), 216.
steady march to the presidency is needed here. Deficient in action, but not in principle, conscientious, high-minded, he was the true friend to the end. It was he who instigated Jefferson to appoint Freneau to the translatorship, a position that helped to make the National Gazette possible. This friendship was of the gayest, most trusting, most spiritual quality. Dr. Francis said that, next to New York, Freneau liked to talk most about his college days with Madison.

These college friends were to shape the poet's career strongly within twenty years of graduation. They were idealists during both youth and maturity; and their idealism impelled them to reach out for the new ideas that were to control the destiny of the new nation. All eventually became Democratic-Republicans in political alignment, as did Freneau.

For an indefinite period after graduating in 1771, probably at least a year, Freneau taught school, assisting his older friend Brackenridge in a little Maryland academy. Excerpts from a letter to Madison at this time are gems of his gayest prose:

*I arrived at this Somerset Academy the 18th of October, and intend to remain here till next October. I am assistant to Mr. Brackenridge. This is the last time I shall enter into such a business; it worries me to death and by no means suits my "giddy, wandering brain." I would go over for the gown this time two years, but the old hag Necessity has got such a prodigious grip of me I fear I shall never be able to accomplish it. I believe if I cannot make this out I must turn quack. . . .

School teaching was not to his liking, however, and the next time we hear of him he was back in New York. Here, in the midst of the war excitement of 1775, he wrote the first of the satires that were to make him famous. But he soon met a friend who was to change the course of his life for several years. He was a Captain Hanson of Santa Cruz, an island of the Lesser Antilles, now called St. Croix, near Puerto Rico. Hanson took a liking to the footloose young poet and invited him to sail back to his tropical home. The invitation was accepted, and Freneau spent the next two and a half years as guest and mate of Captain Hanson, sailing to neighboring islands and wandering about Santa Cruz.\(^{12}\)

\(^{11}\) Pattee, *op. cit.*, I, xxi. The letter is dated November 22, 1772.

\(^{12}\) It is interesting to note that Alexander Hamilton, Freneau's political opponent in 1791-93, spent his boyhood in the Virgin Islands, only a short distance away. Peter Markoe, too, a talented writer in Philadelphia from 1783 to 1792 and probably acquainted
It was a very beautiful and lazy two and a half years, devoted to reading, reflection, and the occasional writing of poetry. Surrounded by scenery of a rich loveliness, at leisure to do as he wished, Freneau wrote three of his finest poems, “The Beauties of Santa Cruz,” “The House of Night,” and “The Jamaica Funeral.” In this pleasant, easy existence, while the colonies declared their independence and fought the first heartrending battles of the war, he lived in idyllic happiness, varied by a five-weeks visit as guest of the governor of Bermuda. It seems that we have no record of the personality of his generous host, Captain Hanson. Very likely he was Danish, as were many of the families living in the vicinity of the Danish Virgin Islands. Like Hanson, most of Freneau’s companions at this time were sailors. Perhaps the poet’s love for the sea began then; in any case, he returned to it again and again. It may not be far wrong to assert that the most important friendship in this long vacation was the subject of many of Freneau’s later poems—the sea.

But upon his return home in 1778, he was immediately faced with the rigors of war. His ship was captured by the British, though as a passenger he was allowed to go free. Shortly after this event, near the time of the Battle of Monmouth, it appears that he was enrolled briefly as a soldier, though his service was apparently temporary and devoid of action.

During the year 1779, Freneau was associated with his friend Brackenridge again, who was now editing the United States Magazine, as perhaps its chief contributor. This year was probably spent at home in New Jersey, where he wrote and laid vague plans for the future. A Philadelphia printer, Francis Bailey, later Freneau’s printer and publisher of The Freeman’s Journal, also printed the United

with Freneau, was born in Santa Cruz. And the wife of B. F. Bache and later of William Duane, both editors of the Philadelphia Aurora, which published many of Freneau’s essays, had been Margaret Markoe, Peter’s sister. (See B. Fay’s The Two Franklins, Boston, 1933, pp. 108–9.) These leaders of the political battles of the youthful republic were strangely associated with the same remote island country.

13 S. E. Forman, The Political Activities of Philip Freneau (Baltimore, 1902), 22. Forman says Freneau entered the army and achieved a sergeant’s rank, referring to Jerseymen in the Revolution, 465. But Freneau never mentioned this service in any of his writings, as he did his later imprisonment in “The British Prison Ship”; it seems probable that he would have done so, had his experience impressed him seriously. Mr. Lewis Leary of Miami University, Miami, Florida, is preparing a biography of Freneau that will doubtless shed light on this and other matters up to now unclear.
States Magazine. Perhaps it was then that Bailey's long friendship with Freneau began.

After a short voyage to the Azores late in 1779, Freneau took passage for the West Indies in May, 1780, intending to revisit his old friend Hanson. But his ship was captured; and, along with a nondescript crowd of prisoners, he was thrown, protesting his rights as a non-combatant passenger, into the British prison ship Scorpion. His sufferings there and on the hospital ship Hunter left a mark upon him never to be erased, and increased his antipathy to England to the bitterest hatred. Attacked by fever, abused by guards, fearful of death, he was finally released, so haggard and unkempt that he "came home round about through the woods for fear of frightening the neighbors." His poem, "The British Prison Ship," and his prose account, "Some Account of the Capture of the Ship 'Aurora,'" were the results.14

It cannot be said that his first experiences upon his return home in 1778 were particularly happy or productive of important friendships. The country was in the grip of war, and apathetic to the pursuits most dear to him. His home had been threatened by the campaign around Monmouth; he had endured the naval battle in which his ship was captured; and his health had been shaken by his imprisonment. It was not until 1781, when comparative calm prevailed the country over, that he recovered his normal spirits. For the next two years, probably as a sort of editor of Francis Bailey's new paper, the Philadelphia Freeman's Journal, he led a happy and productive life, writing many poems and his first important prose—a series of essays entitled "The Pilgrim." At least a part of this time was apparently spent in postoffice clerical work;15 but, on the whole, this period is one of the most obscure periods of his life.

During these years of comparative peace, of ultimate victory, of reaction and currency depreciation from 1781 to 1784, Freneau lived in Philadelphia, where, in all probability, he came to know for the first time many friends and enemies of the hectic years 1791 to 1793. His friends very likely included Peter Markoe, who arrived fresh

14 The manuscript material is available in book form with editorial comments by Jay Milles, op. cit.
from his London law studies in 1783 to write poetry and drama. Here Freneau must have renewed his college friendship with William Bradford, a really congenial spirit whose home was in Philadelphia. His most significant association at this time, probably, was with his printer-publisher, Francis Bailey, a sturdy, enterprising man nearly fifty years of age. Bailey was the son of a Pennsylvania farmer, and, though "bred a carpenter," had chosen to be a printer for Congress and Pennsylvania. He continued his friendly relations with Freneau for many years, publishing his books, and in 1803 recommending him to Madison for the postmastership of New York City.16

From 1784 to 1790, Freneau followed the calling of sea captain, making commercial voyages mainly between Charleston and the West Indies or Azores. His movements at this time, however, are still extremely obscure, and he may have sailed much more widely than we know. It is said that he took up this vocation in real earnest, so as to augment his fortune enough to marry Miss Eleanor Forman, daughter of a neighboring family.17 Perhaps love of the sea had as much to do with the matter as love for Eleanor. Yet she was beautiful enough to inspire great sacrifices: of regular features, fair complexion, and blue eyes, she was twelve years younger and something of a poet in her own right. Certainly some of his poems written during these six years suggest that he looked yearningly back to romantic rewards awaiting his return home. They were wed in 1790; to them were born four daughters. She was of a more practical nature than he, and was often impatient with the slovenly management of their estate. After the first few years of married life, Freneau absented himself much from home, going to sea again from 1802 to 1809, and spending many latter-year evenings in the village libraries of Matawan and Freehold, New Jersey, where he lived. Perhaps his wife's deafness, together with her practicality, opened a chasm between them and tempted him to seek consolation elsewhere.

Coincident with his marriage was his entrance upon land duty as a kind of co-editor of the *New York Daily Advertiser*, printed by Childs and Swain. These printers must have been good friends of Freneau, since they later moved to Philadelphia in order to print his *Rational Gazette* there. In New York, he was associated also

16 Ibid.
with John Pintard, another editor or contributor to the *Advertiser*. Pintard was a cultured business man, also of French Huguenot ancestry; and nothing seems more likely than that they were utterly congenial, though Pintard appears to have been a mild Federalist,\(^{18}\) and thus of the party opposed to Freneau. Pintard became an alderman and member of the state legislature; later, he was very active in historical societies, and in bank and chamber-of-commerce work. In 1790, he was translator in Jefferson’s Department of State, a position that he resigned upon the removal of the government to Philadelphia, and that was ultimately given to Freneau. Pintard was a “man of distinguished presence and active habits, had an unusual acquaintance with classical and modern literature, and a remarkable knowledge of public affairs”; and, at Freneau’s death, he wrote a flattering biographical sketch of the poet.\(^{19}\) In John Pintard, then, Freneau must have found a satisfying, trusted, lifelong friend.

Life in the New York of 1790 was doubtless very fascinating to an observant writer. Freneau was newly married and entering a renewal of literary work in the most active commercial center in the country, also its capital. Here, where the baby republic was just beginning to test its new Constitution and President, he must have felt the thrills of a compelling interest in the many signs of fresh growth all around him. It was an era of swift change. New ideas, along with immigrant faces, were entering on every foreign ship and bringing news of ominous rumblings in France. Republican enthusiasts were eagerly watching Europe, expecting France and other nations to follow the United States’ example by throwing off their monarchical fetters. Here, doubtless, were seeds sown in Freneau’s mind that grew in 1791–1793 to the proportions of a passionate, sweeping radicalism.

II

The income from Freneau’s work with the *Daily Advertiser* was hardly sufficient for a family man, especially as his first baby girl arrived in September, 1791. About the first of this year, his college friends Henry Lee and Aedanus Burke suggested to Madison that


\(^{19}\) Duyckinck’s *Poems Relating to the American Revolution*, . . . xxx.
Freneau be given the translatorship, now vacated by Pintard, since the government had moved to Philadelphia. Madison promptly wrote to Jefferson, who as promptly offered the post to Freneau. He was at this time contemplating the establishment of a newspaper in New Jersey; but the advantages of Philadelphia and the willingness of Childs and Swain to move thither finally induced him to accept, though his interest in the translatorship seems to have been a purely incidental one.

There is a rather involved story, too long for rehearsal here, about the efforts of Burke, Lee, Madison, and Jefferson to establish Freneau as a Republican editor in Philadelphia. But it can be said that there is no evidence of collusion on Freneau's part, though there does seem to have been some degree of collusion among the others. In any case, by October, 1791, he had issued the first copy of the National Gazette and was established as Jefferson's translator, daily meeting the Secretary of State and frequently receiving from him material in the form of foreign intelligence, copies of the Leyden Gazette, even contributions for his paper from Jefferson's correspondents. Here, too, the poet-editor must have been stimulated editorially by meeting the various callers on diplomatic and state missions.

During this two years' relation with Thomas Jefferson, Freneau very likely acquired as close a friendship with his chief as most of Jefferson's colleagues ever did. Their official relations were probably formal, and it may be questioned whether their private attachment ever passed the official border line. The story of Freneau indicates no affection for Jefferson such as he had for Madison. Certainly the Secretary possessed an elusive quality that made intimacy difficult for anyone. Unimpressive personally, like Freneau shrinking from conflict, Jefferson was yet an adroit politician, a profound thinker, and a stimulating writer of many letters. This rare ability to stimulate others, and then to profit by their action, made him president. Unquestionably he was, in his quiet way, sincerely sympathetic with Freneau's Democratic-Republican sentiments. It was not his nature, however, to enter any battle; and, when he found his editorial champion in the midst of a wild war of words, he raised no public voice to support him, or even to defend himself. This failure to defend Freneau publicly in a time of great stress hardly supports any belief

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20 See the present writer, "Freneau and Jefferson," cited above.
that their friendship was a deep one. It was probably a superficial friendship of sympathy with common ideas, with Democratic principles of government. Their strongest common ground may well have been their mutual affection for James Madison.

In his new situation at Philadelphia, Freneau was faced by a variety of conditions stimulating to his pen. The Federalist administration, led by Hamilton, was assuming power faster than the Democratic-Republicans thought it should. There was a rebellious element in Freneau's soul that resented the abuse of power, and even power itself. It had found expression in his poems against England and King George. Here in his own country's capital, in the form of the Federalist government, was his old enemy—power. Adding fire to his hatred was the development, among supporters of the administration, of a society imitative of the English aristocracy; and he began to hate the Federalists as he had hated King George. And so he attacked the Federalists in the columns of the National Gazette with a complete disregard of prestige quite amazing to his chief editorial opponent, John Fenno of the Gazette of the United States.

This attack upon Federalism and monarchistic society and ideas went hand in hand with an espousal of French Revolutionary ideas so thorough that all American conservatives were astounded. The effect of these radical sentiments, circulated by Jefferson, Lee, Madison, Monroe, John Hancock, and other Democratic-Republican leaders, was little short of intoxicating. The National Gazette went all over the country, especially into small settlements and frontier villages formerly much out of touch with newspapers, and soon became the leading Democratic-Republican newspaper in the country, with nearly 1700 subscribers. Meanwhile, its editor remained as translator to Jefferson, an inconspicuous clerk, but no doubt glared at by the very Federalist officials whose position and philosophy he was undermining in his editorials.

A bitter newspaper war soon developed. After months of attack upon his policies, Hamilton himself entered the battle in July, 1792, with anonymous attacks on Freneau, but really aimed at Jefferson. The resulting furore forced Washington to call for an accounting from his two secretaries; but the war went on until Hamilton finally drove his opponents to cover by the vigor of his pen.

21 Forman's Political Activities of Philip Freneau, 78.
This mud-slinging episode was hardly over when a still more explosive one occurred. Following the execution of the French king in 1793, the new ambassador, Genêt, arrived. He was determined to involve the United States in war with Britain and hopeful of subduing all Spanish America to French rule. His coming was the signal for a series of enthusiastic demonstrations. French caps and flags and French songs were seen and heard everywhere. At the Philadelphia wharf, the ambassador was met by a great crowd headed by a committee of Democratic-Republican sympathizers. Immediately two political feasts were held, at each of which Philip Freneau held an important place as the recognized literary representative of American Republicanism. He was assigned the translation of a popular French ode, and his translation was later published. At the second feast, his own ode, "The Rights of Man," was sung by the gathering to the tune of "God Save the King." Jacobin clubs, whose chief purpose was a radical opposition to Federalism, sprang up like mushrooms. The air was filled with sentiments about liberty, equality, fraternity, the death of monarchy, and the new era of human freedom. Freneau solicited funds at this time for the French Society of Patriots of America, and his office was a regular Republican meeting-place.

During all this uproar, at which the Federalists were quite aghast, it is not difficult to imagine the probable associates of Freneau, who was now the leading Democratic-Republican editor of the nation. Visited by party leaders, present at heated discussions in the Jacobin clubs, meeting diplomatic agents in the State Department, probably he was then acquainted with a larger circle than ever before or after. In 1792, he had possessed the goodwill of Ternant, the French minister preceding Genêt. He must have known Genêt; but it seems rather likely that, for all his culture, this impetuous firebrand was too flamboyant and boisterous to attract Freneau, whose intimates were usually quiet, undemonstrative people. He was probably on good terms with Benjamin Franklin Bache, grandson of the great Franklin and editor of another Philadelphia Republican paper, the

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23 On these feasts, see Pattee, op. cit., III, 92, 99.
24 See Forman, op. cit., 70.
Aurora. He surely knew well the leading lights in the Democratic Society of Philadelphia, among whom were the soldier-governor, Thomas Mifflin, the brilliant young patriot-surgeon, James Hutchinson, and the lawyer, Alexander Dallas. Dallas had been editor of the Columbian Magazine, and at this time was Secretary of State for Pennsylvania. He was active in the founding of the society and one of its natural leaders. Some years later, he won damages of $2,500 from Fenno, the Federalist editor of the Gazette of the United States and Freneau's bitter opponent in a suit for libel. Under Madison, Dallas was appointed Secretary of the Treasury, and was not only a talented lawyer, but also a polished, witty personality and a writer of ability.

Another Democratic writer associated with Freneau in the exciting spring and summer of 1793 was St. George Tucker. Born in Bermuda, educated at William and Mary College, he was of the same age, political bent, and satirical nature as Freneau. By turns a lawyer, judge, and professor of law, Tucker had for an avocation the writing of dramas and poetry of a rather high order. In the spring of 1793, there began to appear in the National Gazette a series of poetic satires called "Probationary Odes" by a "Jonathan Pindar, Esq., a Cousin of Peter's." "Peter Pindar" was the pen name of an English writer, John Wolcot, whose caustic satires on royalty had been for some time joyfully received by Republican editors on this side of the Atlantic. "Jonathan" now proposed to take up the family task of monarch-baiting in America. This pseudonym belonged to Judge Tucker, who was one of the most successful of all our early Federalist-teasers. His satires were cleverly-turned, biting thrusts at the vanity and pomp of Adams, Hamilton, Jay, and all "monarchists." A sample follows:


27 Wolcot's poems are found in The Works of Peter Pindar, several editions of which were published in Dublin, London, Boston, and Philadelphia from 1789 to 1835. The linking of Wolcot's work with Freneau is evidenced by M. Carey's 1809 edition of The Cabinet of Momus, a volume of poems that includes poems of both Wolcot and Freneau. "Peter Pindar" poems appeared in Freneau's papers frequently, and probably influenced his own poetry. See Pattee, op. cit., III, 28.

28 The Probationary Odes of Jonathan Pindar, Esq. (Philadelphia, 1796), 9, from "To a Would-be Great Man," aimed at John Adams, then Vice President and called "Daddy Vice."
O Thou! whatever be thy Title lov'd,
King of the Romans, Caesar, Czarowitz,
Dauphin, or Prince of Wales, if more approv'd,
Infant, or Daddy Vice, as best befits,
Deign from my hands t'accept this sav'ry sprig
To greet thy nostrils, or adorn thy wig.

These odes created another outburst of Federalist temper, and Freneau was blamed for them. Bache's 1796 edition, however, makes it clear that Freneau was not the author; Jefferson also accredits them to Tucker. In Bache's edition, on introducing the second part of the odes, Tucker makes a reference to Freneau that is suggestive of the two men's intimacy; and in his next ode he says, referring to the discontinuance of the National Gazette:

That rogue FRENEAU has left me in the lurch,
Or, I'd been with you early in the Winter;
Bishops could better do without a Church
Than lofty Poets can without a Printer.

What sort of man was St. George Tucker? We are told that he was an excellent scholar, that he published an annotated edition of Blackstone's commentaries, that he was called "the American Blackstone," and that he was noted for his "taste, wit and amiability." His personality was one of undeniable charm, and we know too little about him; we ought to know more. He remains, perhaps, of all Freneau's friends, the most intriguing.

Philip Freneau doubtless knew Mathew Carey, former anti-Federalist editor of the Pennsylvania Herald, the Columbian Magazine, and the American Museum, though at this time chiefly occupied in printing and business. That he was interested in the poet's work is evidenced by his including some of Freneau's poems in the collection The Columbian Muse, published at Philadelphia and New York in 1794, by Mathew and James Carey.

Other acquaintanceships, perhaps largely by correspondence, may easily have been those of sympathetic editors like Matthew Lyon, the roaring radical of Fair Haven, Vermont; Benjamin Austin ("Honestus") of Boston; Thomas Greenleaf of New York; and the

29 The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, P. L. Ford, editor (New York, 1895), VI, 328. In a letter to Madison, June 29, 1793, Jefferson says, "The Probationary Odes (written by S. G. T. in Virga) are saddled on poor Freneau, who is bloodily attacked about them."

30 See also footnote 27.
army of Jeffersonian friends and supporters, including James Monroe, Edmund Randolph, and Albert Gallatin. Those were busy days, but it seems likely that Philip also kept in touch with his brother Peter, now Secretary of State in South Carolina, and his old college friends, James Madison and Hugh Brackenridge.

On “the other side of the street” were the wrathful Federalists, watching their support slip rapidly from beneath their feet to those of Jefferson, under the inspired stimulation of Freneau’s pen. Washington was their nominal, Hamilton their real leader. The Secretary of the Treasury was assisted in the defense of his party’s power and position by Vice President John Adams and his brilliant son, John Quincy Adams; by Postmaster General Timothy Pickering, a bitter Federalist to his death; by Timothy Dwight, president of Yale University; by that brilliant lawyer and Congressman, Fisher Ames; by the able Senator George Cabot and his abler colleague, Rufus King. And the Federalist editorial attack was powerfully led by Benjamin Russell in the Boston Columbian Centinel, by Noah Webster in the New York American Minerva and by John Fenno in Philadelphia, whose Gazette of the United States was Hamilton’s immediate publicity organ. Besides these able champions, the Federalist party had the backing of most of the wealthy, conservative people throughout the nation.

Genêt’s rise and fall were now to be closely associated with the fate of Freneau and his newspaper. Washington’s policy of neutrality was ultimately approved by the people, the impolitic ambassador was displaced, and the wild Jacobin outbursts passed away, leaving the Democratic leaders bewildered and, probably, somewhat ashamed of their excesses. In the fall of 1793, yellow fever invaded the city and drove half of the populace into the country for weeks. Financial troubles beset the National Gazette and it was discontinued, its editor withdrawing, at the same time, from the translatorship. Jefferson, weary of Hamilton’s unceasing aggressive opposition, also resigned. The new year 1794 opened with little enthusiasm for the French, and with Freneau and other Republican leaders scattered and gone from the capital city. The scare was over, and Federalism seemed to have regained, temporarily, its waning prestige.

What, then, of Philip Freneau? He had failed in his greatest effort. His cherished new paper had risen swiftly to an unprecedented suc-
cess. His dream of instigating a Republican party revolution, of converting a Federalist government into a democratic one, had seemed momentarily on the verge of success. But the National Gazette had been a financial failure, and he had suffered the most humiliating abuse in his life. Dignified people all over the country had followed the example of Hamilton and Washington in excoriating him. He was classed with the bloody French Revolutionists, and with apparent atheists like Paine. He had retired under a cloud, still vaguely hopeful, but sensing the futility of his efforts and beginning to acquire a cynicism about life. He did not lose all hope; in his next journalistic ventures he was to continue to broadcast his Republican sentiments and Shaftesburian philosophy. But his sweeping enthusiasm for ideals was gone, never to return.

III

It was a year and a half before Freneau again ventured to preach the gospel of Republicanism. After printing an almanac for 1795, he began, in the spring of that year, the Jersey Chronicle, which he edited and printed at his home. It lived only a year; for, like the National Gazette, it was a financial failure. This period, from late 1793 to early 1797, was spent at home in comparative isolation. Here he still wrote for his principles, but the old intensity was gone. It was a time for reflection, and resulted in a series of essays by “Tomo Cheeki, The Creek Indian in Philadelphia,” portraying the artificialities of civilization and the beauties of primitive life.

Following the demise of the Jersey Chronicle, Freneau returned to New York in 1797 as editor of a news-literary paper, The Time Piece, and continued there for the better part of a year. His partner in this undertaking was at first one Alexander Menut, a printer; for the last few months, it was Matthew L. Davis, later famous because of his friendship for Aaron Burr, whose second he was in the duel with Hamilton and whose unscholarly biographer he later became. Davis’s story is a dramatic one of many successes and vicissitudes. Freneau was assisted in his editorial work by that insatiable radical

31 In influence and wide distribution, this assertion is true. Probably it is also true in circulation. Freneau’s letter defending Jefferson, in the Aurora of August 14, 1802 (also in article by present writer, “Freneau and Jefferson,” op. cit.), says: “Before the conclusion of the first year’s publication of the National Gazette, I had acquired nearly, if not quite, seventeen hundred subscribers. . . .”
and dramatist, John Daly Burk, the Irish refugee. After establishing *The Polar Star* in Boston, Burk was forced to flee to New York, only to be indicted under the Sedition Law for a *Time Piece* editorial. Freneau’s prose in the *Time Piece* is significant in that his “Hezekiah Salem” essays represent his first humorous prose in any quantity since his *Miscellaneous Works* volume of 1788. He was recovering his sense of humor, and there are other indications that he no longer regarded his editorial duties very seriously.

This year in New York, after all, must have been a very pleasant one. Engaged in the work of his first great interest, literature and its creation, again in the city of his youth, surrounded by old friends and landmarks, he was reasonably happy. The bitter Federalist attacks he formerly bore were now being discharged upon Callender and his Philadelphia *American Annual Register*. Near by was his friend Thomas Greenleaf, enterprising editor of the *Republican Argus*, with whom he had once almost arranged a partnership, and other congenial spirits.

At this time and in later years, he enjoyed the friendship of General Gates, a maligned but liberal and democratic man; of George Clinton, New York’s great war governor and the “Cato” of letters opposing the adoption of the Federal Constitution; of Bishop Provoost, the patriotic preacher who had taken up arms in defense of his home, a fine classical scholar; of Dr. Samuel L. Mitchill, the scientist-congressman whom Jefferson named “the Congressional dictionary,” and whose pamphlet, “A Picture of New York,” is said to be the basis of Washington Irving’s *Knickersbocker’s History of New York*; DeWitt Clinton, later great liberal New York governor and presidential candidate, a writer and active in literary and historical societies; Cadwallader D. Colden, the lawyer who married Bishop Provoost’s daughter, an ardent advocate of emancipation who later wrote a biography of Robert Fulton; Colonel Nicholas Fish, political leader and ancestor of political leaders; and, perhaps, that firebrand of 1793, Edmond Genet, a really accomplished person, whose fire had cooled and who had married an American girl and settled on Long Island.

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83 Pattee, *op. cit.*, I, lxxi–lxxii.
84 The friendships mentioned in this paragraph are chiefly those suggested by Dr. J. W. Francis in Duyckinck’s *Cyclopaedia of American Literature* (New York, 1855), I, 333.
These were men of high calibre, cultured, liberal, idealistic, capable, stimulating in thought and action, of the sort to generate pride in their friendship.

In January, 1798, after only nine months as editor of The Time Piece, Freneau made a visit to see his brother Peter at Charleston. Affairs of the paper had begun to go wrong, and the end was near. In Charleston, he found Peter editing the Charleston City Gazette and spreading Jeffersonian ideas throughout the South. In this hospitable Huguenot community, Philip must have renewed his old friendship with Aedanus Burke, now judge of the state supreme court and one of the state's political leaders. Burke had given proof of his interest in Freneau by suggesting his appointment to the translatorship, in 1791.\(^3\) A vigorous, upright Irishman, Burke had been sent in his youth to France to study for the priesthood, but instead had gone to the West Indies and thence to Charleston, where he made a lifelong home and many friends. He distinguished himself by writing a pamphlet against the aristocratic tendencies of the Society of Cincinnati that resulted in the modification of its constitution, and that was translated and highly praised by Mirabeau in France. Burke was regarded by his Charleston contemporaries as an able and honorable man.

Many other Charleston people welcomed the poet as a truly congenial spirit, of a kindred ancestry and mind. A very significant testimony to his popularity there is contained in the fact that, of the 463 subscribers to his 1788 volume, published in Philadelphia, 250 were from South Carolina.\(^36\) In this warm-hearted old Southern city was a veritable French Huguenot stronghold. There lived the Hugers, the Horrys, the Porchers, the Manigaults, the Prioleaus, and the Gaillards. It was then the period of ascendancy for the Rutledges, the Moultries, the Gadsdens, and the Pinckneys. The Charleston of 1795 to 1800\(^37\) was an informal community of friendly, generous, happy people who had already, in the early 1780's, opened their doors to the poet's younger brother. Peter, the editor of a popular paper and a friend of state officials, could introduce Philip to every


\(^{36}\) Pattee, op. cit., I, xliii.

\(^{37}\) For an interesting account of this period, see E. S. Thomas, Reminiscences of the Last Sixty-five Years (Hartford, 1840), I, 29-41.
Carolinian of importance, if, indeed, the poet’s own reputation did not make introductions quite unnecessary.

There are evidences that Philip Freneau enjoyed the friendship of Governor William Moultrie, a brave Revolutionary general, whose daughter Peter may have wed, and who wrote a volume of memoirs in 1802. Charles Pinckney, too, was probably a friend, for he and the poet had much in common. Active in the Democratic-Republican politics of the state, three times its governor, he had, like Freneau, suffered the agonies of a British prison ship during the war. Pinckney, like Freneau, was an excellent classical scholar, and an effective political letter writer. In 1799, he wrote a scholarly protest at the action of the Adams administration in the case of Jonathan Robbins, a case that also inspired Freneau’s pen to protest, and with rare fervor even for him. Burke, Moultrie, and Pinckney are only three of what must have been a large circle of Carolina friends and admirers; and Freneau continued to visit them again and again until 1809, when he gave up the sea.

Toward the close of the year 1799, there began to appear in the Philadelphia *Aurora* a series of sprightly, mock-serious political letters signed “Robert Slender.” This was the favorite pseudonym of Philip Freneau. Some of these letters later appeared in book form as *Letters, By Robert Slender* (Philadelphia, 1799); and they continued to grace the *Aurora*s pages as late as 1814. Their chief concern was the political situation in Pennsylvania, their highest

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38 Dr. J. Johnson’s account of Peter in Duyckinck’s *Cycl. of Am. Lit.* (N. Y., 1855), I, 334, says he was never married. But Philip, in a letter to him March 1, 1801, sent his “love and respects to Mrs. Freneau” (Pattee, *op. cit.*, I, lxxix).

39 To be distinguished from the Federalist, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, lawyer, minister to France, and Vice-Presidential candidate.

40 See Pinckney’s *Letters of a South Carolina Planter* (Philadelphia, 1799), 4–19 and appendix. This case aroused much Republican newspaper protest. Robbins, an escaped sailor, despite his claim to American citizenship, was handed over to the British authorities and hanged for murder. By the very evidence in Pinckney’s own appendix, in spite of his belief in Robbins’s right to freedom, it appears that the man’s real name was Nash, that he was a British subject, and probably guilty. Freneau’s impassioned protests occur in the *Aurora* August 24 and September 3, 1799, and in his *Letters, By Robert Slender* (Philadelphia, 1799), 107–123. His “epitaph” reads as follows, in part:

Alas poor Robbins!
Alas poor Liberty!
Alas my Country!
praise for Governor Thomas McKean. Whether Freneau was, toward McKean, more than a mere worshipping journalist is open to question; yet it seems not unlikely that a respectful acquaintance existed here. McKean's record is one of long, varied, almost uninterrupted public service as minor official, soldier, president of Delaware, chief justice of Pennsylvania, president of Congress, and governor of Pennsylvania from 1799 to 1808. One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, for years a consistent anti-Federalist, he declined the Vice-Presidential candidacy to retire in 1808. Probably there was only a formal cordiality between him and his inspired protagonist; but there is little doubt that Freneau was well acquainted with the editor of the *Aurora*, William Duane.

When Freneau abandoned the *National Gazette*, the *Aurora* replaced it as the leading Democratic-Republican paper in the country; and when Benjamin Franklin Bache, its young editor, died of yellow fever in 1798, his assistant, William Duane, replaced him both in the shop and in the home, by becoming editor of the paper and the second husband of the widow Bache. The dominant position of the *Aurora* at this time is indicated by a circular letter of Duane's in 1834, which asserts that in 1798 the *Aurora* boasted 1700 subscribers.\(^1\) Thus, within five years of the *Rational Gazette*'s demise, the *Aurora* had achieved a similar circulation and leadership. It was, moreover, from 1793 to 1801, the strongest single factor in the publicity that resulted in the elevation of Thomas Jefferson to the Presidency. Under Bache, the paper was radical enough, publishing in 1795 an advance copy of Jay's treaty with England and arousing Federalist wrath to great fury. It constantly attacked the policies of Washington, rejoiced at his retirement, and was particularly critical when the Sedition Law was passed. But under Duane the *Aurora* became even more virulent. The new editor was beaten by a group of soldiers for his criticism of the army, and in 1799 was indicted under the Sedition Law, though the charge was dismissed when Jefferson became President.

Duane was unquestionably the ablest Democratic editor of his time; but he was an explosive, hot-tempered man who made enemies more easily than friends. He pursued Jefferson and other government

\(^1\) *Letters of William Duane, Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings*, 392 (Boston, 1906).
officials from the beginning of Republican power for favors that were scantily, grudgingly granted, in spite of the fact that he had been their greatest support in the days of Federalism. Hoping for large government contracts, he opened a store in Washington that ruined him; and he spent his last years in continuous financial stress. Something of a military man, he rose to a colonelcy and wrote a military manual. Of great energy, courage, and ability, but lacking in tact and self-control, Duane was a man whose life is a record of misspent force. This was the dynamic, eccentric personality with whom Freneau was associated as a contributor for about fifteen years. It was his last important editorial friendship. No one could get along with Duane without placating him, and the letters of “Robert Slender” may be said to reveal, indirectly, this necessity. They are seldom forceful, generally humorous, mock-fearful, effervescent—the work of a spirit anxious to please his readers, and possibly his editor also. Thus it appears unlikely that between the quiet, thoughtful, solitary-minded poet and the ebullient, vociferous Duane there could have existed more than a superficial alignment of ideas and political interests. They were too far apart in methods of thought to be deeply attached; and there seems to be no evidence that they were.

From 1802 to 1809, Freneau sailed the sea irregularly, returning home and to Charleston for stays of varying length. Age was now creeping upon him, and his activity was lessening, both physically and mentally. There are few suggestions in the now available records that he made any new friendships at this time; and it was natural, as he faced the approach of old age, that he should cherish old friends rather than cultivate new ones. In 1809, at the age of fifty-seven, he returned home, never again to sail or to resume his editorial work.

In the beginning of his years of retirement, 1809 to 1832, it is said of Freneau that he was accustomed to walk the mile and a half to the village of Matawan, then called Middletown-Point, and spend

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42 More or less reliable information about his last years is to be found in Shelburne Essays by P. E. More (N. Y., 1908), 103-4; in William Hall’s “Philip Freneau,” N. Y. Genealogical and Biog. Record, XVIII, 160-1 (October, 1887); in J. O. Grundy’s “Philip Freneau, Jersey Patriot, etc.,” Proceedings of the N. J. Hist. Soc., XIV, 481-6, Oct., 1929; and in History of Monmouth County, New Jersey (New York, 1922), III, 340.
the evening in the library or tavern there. In 1818, his home, at what is now called the village of Freneau, burned; and most of his life after that catastrophe until his death in 1832 he lived near Freehold, New Jersey, his fortunes steadily dwindling, but his interest in literature undimmed to the last, and writing occasional poems with much of his early skill.

Among the few new friendships he formed in these last years was with Dr. John W. Francis, a popular New York physician, teacher, and philanthropist. Studious, amiable, and enthusiastic, Doctor Francis was active in the years 1820 to 1860 in New York's medical, historical, and antiquarian societies, and was especially devoted to literature and the conversation of literary people. He has left to posterity an invaluable description of the poet, and the only known first-hand one:

his private worth, his courteous manner, and his general bearing won admiration with all parties. His pen was more acrimonious than his heart....

He was somewhat below the ordinary height; in person thin yet muscular, with a firm step, though a little inclined to stoop; his countenance wore traces of care, yet lightened with intelligence as he spoke; he was mild in enunciation, neither rapid nor slow, but clear, distinct, and emphatic.... He was free of all ambitious displays; his habitual expression was pensive....

John Pintard, in his biographical sketch of Freneau, said of him that he was "a man of great reading and extensive acquirements"; and James Madison in his retirement remarked that he was "a poet and man of literary and refined tastes, knowing nothing of the world."

These few statements comprise nearly everything we know about the personality of Philip Freneau. Therefore a review of his friends and their natures seems all the more to be desired.

Concerning Freneau's probable friends and acquaintances as a whole, a few generalities seem clear enough. They were men of heart as well as mind; that is, they had the quality of sympathy, of feeling

44 Mr. Leary's forthcoming biography (see note 13) will clarify much that is now obscure about Freneau's last years.
45 Duyckinck's Cycl. of Am. Lit. (N. Y., 1855), I, 333-4. In this account, Dr. Francis also mentions Gulian Verplanck (1786-1870), brilliant New York lawyer and writer, as sometimes present when Freneau visited him.
46 E. A. Duyckinck, Poems . . ., xxx.
47 Pattee, op. cit., I, lxii.
for the sufferings of others, in addition to being intelligent and capable. They possessed, moreover, the idealism of the age, and especially the idealist’s desire to do something about changing the world for the better; many were active in philanthropy as well as in politics. They were educated persons; nearly all were college men who retained their interest in things scholarly throughout life. They were intensely interested in the world of literature. Most of them were writers, if only in a minor way; and all were drawn to literature for its own sake, and continued their pursuit of it long after their college days. Naturally, they greatly admired Freneau for his literary ability.

Association with radicals of his party, among whom he was thrown by his editorial affiliations, blackened Freneau’s reputation for a long time. He was thoughtlessly classed with Paine, Cheetham, Callender, Genêt, Lyon, Burk, Duane, because he supported the same general principles. But it is not at all evident that he was ever personally drawn to this violent element in his party. On the contrary, it appears almost certain that it was repulsive to him, for he was in no sense a brawler. Of the more violent leaders, only Duane, probably, can be said to have been a long-time associate; and their relations may well have been only formal. His real attachments were to men like Brackenridge, Madison, Pintard, and Tucker—men of genuine culture, refinement, and literary tastes.

Thus in Philip Freneau’s friends and through them, perhaps we can see America’s first true poet for what he was. If we accept, as a theory, the idea that no man in the course of a lifetime persistently associates with people who are radically different in elemental thought from himself, that his friends represent an approximation of his own tastes—then, had we never studied the life or works of Philip Freneau, it would be still reasonably safe to assert that he was a cultured, retiring, sensitive man, democratic in ideals, sympathetic with the condition of the lowly, rebellious at tyranny, eager to change life for the better, idealistic to a degree, and devoted to literature. For such was the host of his friends.

_Houlton, Maine_  

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