

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Citizen Marsillac on Philadelphia

Jean de Marsillac, the writer of the subjoined letter, was the descendant of a French Protestant noble family. Born about the middle of the eighteenth century, he was educated for the army and served for a time as captain of a regiment of horse. Becoming interested in Quakerism in the 1770's, Marsillac resigned his commission and went to Montpellier to study medicine. He was, subsequently, one of the leaders of the French Quakers, and as such visited among the Friends in England, and with their aid undertook the spreading of the Quaker principles through France. In 1791 Marsillac published a life of William Penn; and both during the reign of Louis XVI and during the period of the Revolution, did what he could to ensure the rights of the Society of Friends to practice their religion without hindrance. Coming to the United States about 1795, Marsillac settled in Philadelphia and began to practice medicine there. He was well received as a doctor and as a Quaker, being admitted to the Philadelphia Meeting soon after his arrival. Marsillac stayed in Philadelphia for three years, returning to France in 1798.

Although expressing an interest in a number of things which were of concern to Friends, notably in religious toleration and in the "civilizing" of the Indians, Marsillac's letter does not seem particularly "Quakerish" in tone. It echoes rather the tenets of the *Philosophes*, and the political and economic philosophy of the French Revolution. This may, of course, have been due to the author's proper consideration for the predilections of the journal in which the letter was intended to be published. Reading it, however, one is not surprised to learn that Marsillac's professions of Quakerism have been questioned, tradition reporting that he threw off his Friendly garb and Quaker ways as soon as he boarded the vessel which was to take him back to France.

Georg Friedrich von Rebmann, the editor of the German periodical *Die Geissel* which published Marsillac's letter, was a student of law and political science, and an enthusiast of the French Revolution. As a result of the publication of his pamphlet, *Die Franzoesische Revolution, ein warnendes Beispiel*, Rebmann was invited by Vollmer,

an Altona bookseller, to edit a revolutionary magazine. *Die Geissel*, which appeared from 1797 to 1799, expressed the ideals of the Revolution in Germany. To escape the censors in the different German states, the magazine carried various imprints which would seem to indicate that it had been edited sometimes from Paris, sometimes from Mainz, sometimes from Upsala. In fact, it was at all times printed by Vollmer and published in Altona. The magazine expressed the feelings of those German intellectuals who were in favor of a republic or at least of a moderate monarchy. Strongly anti-Prussian and quite atheistic in tone, *Die Geissel* advocated the republican form of government, which it was thought would unite Germany and place her among the influential nations of Europe.

Antioch College

OTTO CHOMET

Philadelphia, the second Brumaire in
the fifth year of the existence of the
French republic.

My dear Friend,

To give the detailed account about the sciences, religions, commerce, political activity, etc., in the United States, that you desire, would require several volumes. I have, therefore, to limit myself by giving you only some general impressions of this country, which I deem correct.

The sciences here are still in their infancy. There are three schools, a university with branches in theology, law, and medicine, and five or six inactive academic societies. There are, furthermore, many energetic associations which are especially interested in the development of territory, maritime commerce, and of manufactures. In addition there are many private schools for children. This is almost all that is offered to meet the moral requirements of the human intellect. But in general, people read more in order to increase their business than out of love of the sciences and their advancement. The newspapers, of which there are a great many, corrupt the public spirit here, just as much as in Europe. They serve to cover up the mistakes of a weak government often disturbed by the activities of ephemeral, political factions. But in order to understand all these problems, one must have lived in this country for some time. I have

devoted myself to the study of these questions and can assure you that I have collected material which I hope will be advantageous to my fatherland in respect of its political and commercial interests.

The laws in the United States are very liberal, and the people are kind *unless their interests are at stake*. The true majority of the population are favorably inclined toward France with the exception of the rich merchants who, because of rank and distinctions, continue to long for British monarchism. For instance, only friends of the French republic were elected in the last ballots for the mayoralty and for other civic offices.

With regard to religion, all are tolerated, gentle, and friendly toward each other because none enjoys the exclusive privilege of the government. But in no other country there exists, perhaps, less true piety. The young people go to church because, without a strict observance of religious custom, they could get no position in a business firm; they could not set up a firm, and they would not be able to marry. The older people, on the other hand, go to church either from habit or because they wish to acquire the confidence of the public and to exert influence upon public affairs. Only a few people go there because they feel in anticipation of death, the need to open their hearts to the Almighty, or because they wish to help their unhappy fellow men. They preach divine virtue rather through good actions which are useful to mankind than through empty ceremonies.

No one here pays seigneurial revenues or tithes. During the reign of British despotism, the United States refused to elect Catholics to public offices. But this unjust law has already been abolished, and they are now admitted to all government offices. A Roman Catholic, a member of the Greek church, a Presbyterian, a Quaker, a Mohammedan or a Jew may, therefore, be elected to any public office and worship God in his own way. There are also Separatists, who do not belong to any denomination, and who declare allegiance only to the voice of their conscience without binding themselves to any form. Toleration is even greater here than in France, for a Presbyterian church recently elected a negro from Guinea as its minister, a righteous and enlightened man who fills his new position in a very dignified manner. I have seen him in his clerical garb and heard him preach with unction and edification. I have no doubt that his congregation will greatly benefit from him.

The United States has a population of approximately five million people. The western settlements are not included in this figure; they are densely populated and may have at least 1,200,000 people. But the exact and official census-statements show that in general the population doubles every fourteen years. This increase is therefore faster than Franklin had calculated.

The main occupations of almost all the people are agriculture and commerce. Arts and factories would be in a very flourishing condition if the rich merchants would not suppress the manufactures. They act so in order to have the exclusive privilege in the trade with England, thus acquiring great wealth in a short time. Shipbuilding alone occupies thousands of workers. Whereas France has to pay 300 Livres per ton for ships of white wood of an inferior quality, the American builds his ships of red cedar or white oak, excellent kinds of timber which last twice as long and are much more durable than the European ships, at only 170 Livres per ton ready to sail. If some time France should need 20,000 tons of new ships, the United States could deliver them for this price, which will go down in times of peace.

Without counting the not officially declared merchandise, the exports of the United States from September, 1794, until September, 1796, according to official documents, amounted to 26 million dollars. (This is 140,000,000 in French money.) Land speculation is here a very important part of the stock jobbing. But only a few make their fortunes in this way; many are actually ruined.

I do not know any work which would merit being included among the books of the library of the National Institute of Arts and Sciences. The journals are a chaos of lies in which even trade announcements are falsified. Some Anglo-American writers have written valuable, moral works, which, however, are so voluminous, so expensive, and so rarely read, that they here, as in Europe, serve only for the ostentation of some book collections, which one visits without any profit.

The great source of the wealth of the American people is their fertile soil, the moderate climate, and the cheap price of land which attracts the desire of immigrants. Land transactions attract mostly the attention of the capitalist who buys thousands of acres, a *Morgen* for 3 Sols, and later sells this land to the poor immigrants for 10 Livres. But the immigrants often resell the same land to peasants, because of lack of labor and money for hiring workers and

ploughing the land. Although agriculture is highly estimated, it is carried out extensively only in the interior of the United States. The frontiers of this vast empire are still wide deserts, which are inhabited by a few unhappy families who live on milk, potatoes, or Turkish corn.

The number of American manufactures increases daily, but slowly since the mercantile despotism hinders their development. Machinery has here been perfected and surpasses by far the machinery in Europe. A collection of drawings of those machines, which I intend to publish some day, will indicate the truth of this statement. For instance, three miles from Philadelphia is the watermill of Johnston, which is regulated by two men who accomplish the same amount of work as one would expect from 300 men. By simplifying the work, by saving man power and expenses, and by increasing the production, these machines are lasting sources of wealth and happiness. Franklin, Rittenhouse, and other mechanics have enriched America with many useful and ingenious crafts, of which Europe has not the least idea, though I have the most accurate plans of most of them.

I am closely associated with Volney, and we have very often conferred about our travels. At the moment, I live in his room. Volney has visited Carolina and some settlements on the Ohio. During this year, I have visited the northern part of the United States—Long Island, New York, the Jerseys, Connecticut, and Maryland. I have arranged with Volney to visit during the next spring the southern part of the United States and the western settlements. I was elected at the last meeting of our Friends, the Quakers in Philadelphia, as one of their deputies to visit the Indian Nation and to provide them with workers, smiths, and carpenters, and to introduce to the western tribes some means of civilization. We call these tribes in Christian gentleness “savages,” although they have more humanity than some of the civilized nations. I hope to visit the Mohawks, the Delawares, and the Shawanesees, and I intend to collect among the Indians, the original inhabitants of this country, moral and physical curiosities.

I am your friend,
Marsillac.*

* Translated from *Die Geissel, herausgegeben von den Freunden der Menschheit* (Upsala, 1797), sechstes stück, pages 217–224.