Robert Morris and the Episode of the Polacre "Victorious"

On April 20, 1779, there arrived at Philadelphia the ship Victorious, bringing in a somewhat diversified cargo. A Mr. Sollekkoff of Baltimore went aboard her before she came to anchor. Almost immediately her owners or her supercargoes promised to him the preference of purchasing or of not purchasing the cargo as a whole, the transaction to be carried through in conjunction with Robert Morris. By May 3 various conflicting or parallel overtures had been made by other merchants for the acquisition of the polacre's stock; but, despite the desire of the Commercial Committee of Congress to acquire a portion of it for the public use, no business could be done with the owners, since the disposal of the cargo lay, by that time, entirely in the hands of the Baltimorean and of Robert Morris. On that same date, however, Morris offered to the Continental purchasing agents, on terms which they agreed were "very moderate," the privilege of buying what they wanted for the Army.

The circumstances of the purchase and resale of the Victorious' cargo provoked considerable comment. Morris, like all other wealthy merchants, was constantly suspected of a willingness to make personal profit at public expense and he quickly became the summer target for the disaffected of Philadelphia. Late in May meetings were held, a committee was appointed to inquire into the affair, and as the
summer went on conferences, charges, countercharges, and rebuultals followed each other in quick succession. Finally, after an exchange of communications with the Philadelphia committee, Morris decided to lay his defense before the citizens of Pennsylvania. In due time his interpretation of the matter received the approval of Congress, and quieted both committee insinuations and popular antipathy. But this contemporary investigation of Morris' motives set the stage for subsequent questionings by historians and biographers: the patriot's name had been impugned for more than contemporary political opponents and politicians, and his integrity had been exposed to lasting debate.¹

The recent discovery in the Morris Family Papers of Morris' original draft of his address "To the Citizens of Pennsylvania," a holograph manuscript incorporating all the revisions, additions, substitutions, and excisions made in the text before its publication in the July 21 issue of the Pennsylvania Gazette, makes it possible to let Morris himself be read and heard in that mercantile cause célèbre of the spring and summer of 1779. Three other items in the family collection relate to the affair of the Victorious. These are: Morris' draft of his letter of June 26 to Timothy Matlack, David Rittenhouse, Tom Paine, Charles Willson Peale, and J. B. Smith, the committeemen investigating the marketing of the cargo of the Victorious; the committee's formal report; and their letter of July 21, apprising Morris of their intention to put the report before a town meeting "on Monday next." From these four documents, the story of the arrival of the polacre and of the subsequent procedures relative to her cargo can be clearly ascertained.

As has been noted, the French ship Victorious came into Philadelphia on April 20, consigned by Messrs. La Caze and Mallet. Preference in the purchase of her cargo was obtained by Mr. Sollekoff.¹

¹ See, for example, C. Van Doren, The Secret History of the American Revolution. Mr. Van Doren mentions the rich merchants "like Robert Morris with his warehouses full of flour," who were blamed for forcing prices up and who remained unconcerned by the distress they occasioned the public. W. E. Woodward in his recent biography of Tom Paine remarked that Morris and "a Mr. Solikoff, of Baltimore, had bought up the entire supply of flour in the Philadelphia area and were keeping it off the market in order to raise the price." On the other hand, E. P. Oberholtzer, a consistent apologist for Morris, relates this controversy to the purchase by Morris and Holker of flour for the French fleet; and R. L. Brunhouse sees the whole thing as one engagement in the struggle between conservatives and radicals for the abrogation of the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776.
That French-speaking Baltimorean some days later approached Robert Morris with overtures to have him share in the purchase, manage and receive a commission on the sales of its contents, and supply to the polacre a cargo of tobacco for its outgoing voyage. Morris acceded to the proposal, stated his own terms in the trans-action as might any experienced merchant, and left it to Mr. Sollekoff to draw up the written agreement between them. This, accordingly, was drawn as of May 3; but it was in the French tongue, which Morris did not read; and, unfortunately, before he realized fully the precise conditions, he had disposed of one-fourth of the cargo to official Continental agents. Then, when the written terms had been brought to his attention by the supercargoes, he stopped further sales, investigated, and found he had sold cheaper to the public than he had been authorized to do. Renegotiation became necessary; matters were left in Mr. Morris’ hands by Mr. Sollekoff and the French owners; and the Continental purchasers were obliged to buy at a higher price than they had first had the advantage of. Other salable articles were promptly disposed of. A number of products, unsuited “to this season and to this Country,” remained aboard.

La Caze and Mallet subsequently made declaration that Morris had dealt honestly in the transaction. But Philadelphians, immersed in a period of rising prices and always doubtful of the practices of rich merchants, considered Morris’ willingness to make a profit through commissions on in-coming cargoes, and through consign-ments of out-going tobacco, tantamount to securing a monopoly on scarce articles and disposing of them to his own advantage rather than to the public benefit.

Town meetings were held, and measures taken to curb further in-creases in price. The resolutions from the town meeting of May 24, pointing directly at Robert Morris and the Victorious, were printed in the Gazette. The first part of these resolutions noted the great rise in the price of “goods and provisions” during the past five or six months, and stated the privilege of citizens to inquire “into the causes of such extraordinary abuses, and prevent them.” The clauses following bore immediately on “the late importation of a cargo of goods, said to have been purchased or to have been con-signed to the management of Mr. Robert Morris, Merchant, or
others,” since which “the prices of all kinds of dry goods have been greatly advanced, to the injury of the public, and the great detriment of trade.” Finally, they called for the selection of a committee to inquire of Robert Morris or others “what part he or they may have acted respecting the said cargo,” and to require an answer in writing. By May 28 another popular committee, constituted under town-meeting authority, with William Henry as chairman, had assumed responsibility for fixing the prices on numerous commodities sold in the city. This committee held further sessions during June, and decreed the prices to be maintained through July, fixing most of them as they had been discovered to be on April 1; set penalties for buying or selling above the stipulated ceilings; continued the prices of flour and middlings as of May; rejoiced that the prices of molasses and of various kinds of salt were lower than they had been in early April; declared that no consignment of goods exceeding one hundred pounds in value should be removed from Philadelphia without the consigner’s first obtaining “a permit from the Committee”; ruled that any “goods, so removed, or so offered to be removed,” should, “on detection, be retained under the care of the Committee, until the next Town-Meeting, and the owner to abide the consequence.”

Meantime there had been consultation between the investigating committee,2 appointed after the State House Yard town meeting of May 24, and Morris. An inflammation of his eyes, an affliction from which he periodically suffered,3 made it impossible for Morris to leave his room on May 26 to meet with these gentlemen at the City Tavern; and they waited upon him next morning at his own house, where they found the Reverend William White and John Nixon, Esquire, in his company. The effects of their conversation on the matter of the polacre Victorious were recorded in the report, a copy of which was forwarded to Robert Morris with a letter on July 21.

2 The Committee members were Messrs. Matlack, Rittenhouse, Smith, Paine, Peale, and Joseph Blewer. The last named was out of town and could not, therefore, attend the meeting.

3 During March, 1777, Morris, on account of the condition of his eyes, held up for nine days an official and cordial letter to General Washington which he had begun on the 6th and concluded only on the 15th. “I have been attacked,” he wrote as his apology for the delay, “by a weakness in my eyes, and writing is the most dangerous thing I can do whilst it continues. On this account I am obliged to absent myself from Congress, and refrain from business; but in all situations of life I shall ever remain, with the sincerest esteem, your Excellency’s Most obedient and humble servant.”
This report the Committee expected to render to a town meeting on the following Monday. Apparently the report came to Morris on the date on which his address "To the Citizens of Pennsylvania" was printed in the Gazette.

The report admitted that the Baltimorean had made no terms with Morris before boarding the polacre and securing the right to purchase her cargo. But the committee expressed without reservation their opinion of the "ill consequences" of Sollekoff's and Morris' transactions, and insisted that the agreement of the two men, whatever Mr. Morris' intentions, "effectually laid the cargo fast, till it was hawked from person to person and from place to place; and, when the highest price should be offered," Mr. Sollekoff still was in position to refuse to sell. In brief, they complained, the cargo was "to be bidded for not to be bought."

Continuing, the committee recorded the proposals by the Commercial Committee of Congress to purchase all the goods brought on the polacre; their offers to pay in tobacco and in bills of exchange; their inability to buy on account of the owners' prior engagement; the misunderstanding between Mr. Sollekoff and Mr. Morris as to the terms agreed upon between them; and the terms on which on May 3 Mr. Morris dealt with the agents of Congress in disposing of part of the cargo. Toward the end of their formal statement, the committee men admitted that this partial purchase "came cheaper to the Public" than might otherwise have happened; but they were not averse to observing that this resulted from a mistake, despite their wish to give Mr. Morris "credit for making the ratification a condition when the other part of the bargain was resolved." More than that, they cast doubt on the reasons Morris advanced to explain "why the owners found him a convenient purchaser." They left the implication that "irremediable" results had grown out of his action, however "unavoidable" it might have been.

The letter accompanying this report of "T. Matlack, Davd. Rittenhouse, Thomas Paine, Charles Wilson Peale, and J. B. Smith" recapitulated much of the report and went, naturally enough, into comments upon Mr. Sollekoff's "forestalling." Moreover, it suggested a great deal as to the motives behind, but not present within, the actual drafting of the report. The first sentences indicated that the drafters of the document did not seek a second interview with
Robert Morris after May 27, partly because of his indisposition, and partly because of the publication of a letter by Morris "in Mr. Dunlop's paper of the 8th July and in Mr. Bradford's paper of the 14th . . . appealing not from a report, but prior to a report." (For Morris, it would seem, was no more disinclined to direct conference than were his investigators.) Additional reference was made to the candor of the committee; and the hope expressed that, "tho the relation may, in some parts, appear unpleasant," they will be absolved of exaggeration by the recipient.

More impressive, however, than these amenities was the comment in a succeeding paragraph:

The cargo in question had created much conversation before any Town Meeting was thought of. Its remaining so long in the river without any proposal for sale, and a public guard being placed over it, gave rise to many conjectures, among the rest, and which was a very general one, that it was the property of Mr. Silas Deane and detained by Congress till he should settle his accounts, and as your connections with Mr. Deane had been known from an account published by you in February last, the idea, without the assistance of any thing malignant, easily extended to yourself and perhaps quickened other apprehensions when it was first given out, that you was become a purchaser of the whole, and however unwilling Mr. Morris may be to acknowledge the term engrossing, or monopolizing, yet, as he did not import the cargo and did, in partnership with Mr. Solliekooffe, get the whole into his possession, we are at a loss to find any other name, tho the expedition with which he entered on the sale abates the rigorous sense generally applied to those words.

Significantly, then, the committee who drafted both the report and the letter which accompanied the copy sent to Morris, drew the name of Deane into the affair of the *Victorious*. Here, the pen of Tom Paine, during the winter and spring especially acrimonious upon the subject of Silas Deane, may be suspected. When Deane was out of favor in Philadelphia, it was good politics to suggest by the merest innuendo that Morris might be connected with one who was a notorious contemporary object of suspicion. In other words, if Morris was culpable in the matter of the *Victorious*, he was the more so for having been earlier the vindicator of another reputed culprit. Obviously the *Victorious* affair provided the occasion for a series of attacks on Morris; and it is also obvious that both he and his accusers used the situation to air their various dissatisfactions on a wide variety of points.

At any rate, having ventured to narrate the suspicions of the
popular party and then having reverted to the subject of Mr. Sollekoff, to forestalling and to the arrival of the polacre with her cargo in April, Morris' five censors next conceded his privileges of private trade and offered counsel—if it was not to be interpreted as warning—on how to be both a merchant and a good citizen. Finally, they agreed to deliver Morris' answer, if he pleased to convey anything further to them, to the town meeting and "to do everything in our power to remove uneasiness, and restore tranquility and public friendship."

Ostensibly both letter and report were a rejoinder to the censors' interview with Morris on May 27 and to the letter he addressed to them on June 26. Beginning with a note of the "painful inflammation" in one of his eyes, Morris had indicated in that letter that he expected to hear from the committee again within a few days, as he remarked that Mr. Smith and Mr. Rittenhouse observed at parting that he would, and followed with a statement that he had understood from the printed report of the town meeting in May that a written answer from him to the committee was requested. More importantly, his letter, in response to Timothy Matlack's plea that the committee "being untimely ignorant of the transaction" wished a general relation of the matter from him, set forth an extended account of the writer's connection with the "French Polacre's Cargo." It told forthrightly of the Baltimorean's first approach to Morris; of the bargain between Mr. Sollekoff and himself; of his sending for Continental agents, who culled out one-fourth of the whole for their uses, "entirely in articles the most saleable of any in the ship"; of his present discovery that he had sold to them without a proper observance of terms written in the contract in French by Mr. Sollekoff; of his stopping further proceedings until the original supercargoes honorably agreed to void their first bargain; of their then proposal to him to undertake, as a factor, the sale of their cargo and of his consent to do so if they ratified his erroneously made sale to the Continental agents; of how, on their agreeing to that substitute proposal, the supplies already chosen by the Continental agents went to them "considerably cheaper" than "could possibly have happened in any other way"; of how he became factor to the Victorious on May 11; of his subsequent disposition of the salable parts in the balance of the cargo; of his conviction that it was im-
material to the public whether or not he accepted and undertook to sell these parts after the bulk of the cargo had been sold, since acceptance of them could not alter the prices of commodities there-fore delivered; of his understanding that the parts still unsold “will be as subject to your regulations as any other imported Goods are.” Finally, on closing his “true account,” Morris hoped for “justice” to his “Character” from the committee, and called attention to an enclosed declaration in which “La Caze and Mallet, the consigners,” averred that he had made a true statement regarding the transaction.

When the purport of the committee’s two written communications to Morris is compared with the purport of his letter to them, it becomes clear that not all the exchanges of investigators and investigated square with one another. If comments on the affair of the polacre agree, and if amenities match amenities, it still remains true that the committee censured Morris’ behavior as a citizen, insinuated fault in his having let his name be associated with that of Silas Deane, and let him understand their intention as a committee to review his conduct before a town meeting. On the other hand Morris neither conceded to them the privilege of reviewing with the public anything which he had legally done in his private capacity of merchant and factor, nor did he deny that sales of his own shall thereafter be “as subject to your regulations as any other imported Goods are.” Yet it may be remarked that both parties, inquisitors and unrepentant merchant, are careful to keep to the windward side of the law.

The alterations Morris made as he wrote and rewrote his speech, “To the Citizens of Pennsylvania,” demonstrate this clearly. His original, impolitic, and vexed utterances have been smoothed out, and the irritation characterizing parts of the first draft of his address is not in evidence in the printed version. In total effect Morris’ speech as it appeared on July 21 in the Pennsylvania Gazette was comprehensive, fully and frankly documented, disinterested, dispassionate, grave, cool, quietly eloquent. Venturing to claim the attention of his fellow citizens, Morris spoke first of the hopes of the enemies of America to sow division among the Whigs of America, and of his own forbearance in not responding to his critics lest he do any-thing which might seem to further the wishes of the foe. But fearing that the frequent unfavorable use of his name might make a strong
impression on citizens not personally acquainted with him, he undertook a plain narrative of such facts as were related to the charges and insinuations made against him. Accordingly he called attention to attacks made upon him some time ago in Congress respecting the state of his accounts with the government, and to the prompt proof of his innocence to "that respectable Body" and its "unanimous vote of acquittal," in which even his accuser concurred. He added that subsequently a committee of Congress, appointed to examine his accounts, but "occupied by a variety of other objects," deferred examination for a time; and that, during that interval, the happy circumstance of the release of goods, which had been for two years detained in the French West Indies, made possible a final settlement of all his accounts—a state of affairs which he pronounced preferable even to a favorable report of a committee.

After setting forth the facts in the Victorious affair he challenged the justice of the censure of his conduct and the affront offered his name before inquiry had been made in the affair of the French ship; and forthwith proceeded to describe a third attack on himself. This, he showed, had resulted from Dunlap's reprinting, in the June 3 issue of the Packet, of a memoir previously published in Rivington's paper in New York, and supposedly supplied by M. de la Fere at Edenton, North Carolina, in January, 1778. Morris quoted the text of the memoir to the effect that he had deliberately connived in the depreciation of the currency emitted by Congress, wishing to confute claims that the Congressional issues were equivalent to gold values. To the insinuation that he had offered to a person of his acquaintance a rate of "13 sols and some deniers" for a "Continental dollar," he replied that in January, 1778, he had had no bills of exchange to sell; that he had settled for two bills which he had paid on France in March, 1778, that these had been contracted for before depreciation set in, at 400 per cent—a price far below 13 sols and some deniers, which would have meant a cost of 1200 or 1300 per cent. Moreover, he had not only ceased to be a Member of Congress in October, 1778, before accusations that Congressmen themselves tried to confuse Continental values, but in January, 1779, he was adhering faithfully to the rate of exchange, 900 per cent, then in effect—not exceeding it by an additional 300 or 400 per cent increase. Furthermore, Morris asserted it had never been his practice to sell
any but imported goods to the public or to purchase any produce of
the country but for exportation.

The facts being such, he was surprised to receive from William
Heysham on June 17 a brisk note requesting him to attend the Com-
mittee on Complaints next morning at ten o’clock to answer a
charge concerning flour. To this he made immediate reply. In his
letter he deplored the inflammation in his eyes which had confined him
for the past month, and must make him, if he came at all, attend a
conference only after sunset. He stated that he had purchased no
flour for months past beyond an occasional barrel for his family’s
use. He supposed that the charge against him had arisen out of pur-
chases in that article made by him for the French fleet at the request
and order of his Most Christian Majesty; and he volunteered to wait
upon any appointed members of the committee, should they wish it,
after sunset hours.

Morris’ reply induced an answer on the following day from
Alexander Boyd, of the Committee of Complaints, which allowed
for his indisposition but requested that he lay before the committee
the original instructions or agreements by virtue of which he was
purchasing for his Most Christian Majesty’s agent, “an account of
the quantities so purchased and contracted for, and information by
what conveyance and to what places or stores said flour is collected,
and from what place in the country it has been and is now bought.”
Furthermore, Mr. Boyd reported that the committee had been
informed by Alexander Wilson, of Earl township, Lancaster County,
of two transactions in flour, made at Mr. Morris’ behest, in which
through Matthias Slough, of Lancaster, £22.10. per hundred and
sixty dollars per hundred had been given or offered. The Committee
were of opinion that such purchases so near the city, with wagon hire
added, enhanced the price of flour there, and counteracted the re-
solves of the town meeting. Finally, they entertained a suspicion
that Continental teams were being employed in that service.

Instead of replying at once to Alexander Boyd’s letter, Morris laid
the matter before the Honorable Mr. Holker. The representative of
the French monarch not permitting his American purchaser to make
the required report, Morris presently addressed William Heysham
in his capacity as chairman of the Committee of Complaints. He
noted Mr. Boyd’s excusing his personal attendance on the committee
and quoted that gentleman's request to have text of his instructions and agreements transmitted. Morris then spoke of his reference of the request, and of Messrs. Boyd's and Heysham's letters; he rehearsed Mr. Holker's rejoinder; and indicated that he would act according to the French agent's decision. Further he noted that the two transactions with Matthias Slough had taken place in January and February, and gave as reason for dealing with him the fact that Mr. Slough, being an experienced purchaser for Congress, could make purchases without the "raising of prices by contention." Mr. Slough had been limited to prices already given by Congress; what communications Morris had had with him since February had been aimed only toward "a speedy and full execution of the order"; and no other purchases had been made in Pennsylvania outside of Philadelphia, where they had been small, under Morris' own immediate inspection, and in conformity to verbal orders from his principal. Morris presumed that they did not wish to interfere in what was done in the neighboring states.

He then commented on a surprise which had befallen him on the morning of his writing. "Four or five poor women with sacks under their arms" came to him demanding supplies of flour, alleging that they had been directed to him by the committee, and that they had learned that he had received "two wagon loads of flour from the country yesterday." Reflection, he said, told him it was improbable that the committee or any of its members had given such instructions—that the committeemen had been fully informed earlier by his clerks that what flour he had in his care belonged to his Most Christian Majesty. Indeed, he had too good an opinion of the candor of the members of the Committee on Complaints to think they could have sent the women where they must of necessity meet a refusal, even though such a refusal might conduce to prejudices against himself.

From the date of this letter to the chairman, Mr. Heysham, until July 2, he heard nothing further. On that latter day a new letter, enclosing a brace of resolutions, reached him. The communication came now from William Henry, chairman of the Committee on Prices for Philadelphia. It told Morris of "incontestable" evidence that the interest of his Most Christian Majesty was unnecessarily suffering through the payment of greater prices for flour "than there
was occasion for.quot; quot;From a point of politeness,quot; it enclosed a resolve, to be published on the morrow in the papers, relative to a quantity of flour purchased by Jonathan Rumford, Junior, of Delaware, under the direction of Mr. Holker. The price paid for the flour exceeded the regulated market price and so contributed both to the further depreciation of the currency of America and to increasing the costs of provisions to the allies of the United States. Secondly, the committee meant both to protect the interests of these from imposition and to check the continuance of depreciation. They were notifying Mr. Morris, therefore, and intended thanking the committee in Wilmington for the information forwarded from thence. Moreover, they held themselves accountable to that group for the one hundred and eighty-two barrels of flour received.

Mr. Henry's invitation to a conference and his enclosure of the resolutions of his committee on prices failed to have the effect desired. Instead, Mr. Morris responded energetically. Mr. Holker and he, as he saw it, had been quot;positively condemnedquot; without a hearing; he was unwilling to wait upon a committee which had already pronounced judgment. So he crisply refused to appear; deplored the censure of persons by no means opposed to quot;appreciating the Continental currencyquot; or to quot;lowering the prices of commoditiesquot;; assured his correspondent that he would have waited cheerfully upon the committee and have given the information which they ought to have had, had they asked it, before proceeding to their resolution; declared the latter measure entirely undeserved; added that he had no doubt of being able effectually to justify himself to the public; and thanked the committeemen for communicating to him their intended publication of their resolves.

Having thus reviewed the letters exchanged between his several inquisitors and himself, Morris turned directly to the public. He reminded his hearers of his willingness to treat with his accusers cheerfully so long as they dealt with him frankly on affairs which concerned himself personally. He drew a sharp distinction between such affairs and the activities of the French agent, making it clear that Mr. Holker's transactions were the affair, not of a Philadelphia town meeting, but of his royal master. He cited a letter from Mr. Holker to Mr. Henry in which the French consul informed that examiner in respect of three points: 1) that it was under the sanction
of Congress only that he acted as Agent-General of the Royal
Marine; 2) that he had that morning [the date was July 2] informed
Congress of “the transaction of the Committee of Wilmington”;
3) that he alone was accountable for the purchase of the flour re-
ferred to, and that Mr. Morris acted only under “my express orders
and directions.”

Having, then, proceeded so far with his narration of the circum-
stances of the case under review, the orator assumed gradually the
business of refuting his critics. Looking backward, Morris recounted
advice given by himself to Mr. Holker when he agreed to assist that
gentleman in his agency. His counsel had then been followed; the
agent had drawn supplies for the French fleet through the Con-
tinental commissaries, employing the same set of purchasers as
Congress employed and so obviating the risks of competitive pur-
chasing and its inflationary effects. That, he argued, could not be
construed as an effort on his part to cause depreciation of the cur-
rency. When later Mr. Holker could not secure sufficient supplies
from the commissaries and resorted to other purchasers such as
Morris could recommend for prudent management, Congress or the
Committee of Congress for the Commissary remained privy to his
transactions. Moreover, there had been no charge of “raising prices,”
he maintained, until the Frenchman was amply able to support his
transactions. Besides that fact, the regulated price of £20 per hun-
dredweight set by the Pennsylvania committee on prices could not
apply in the other government in which Wilmington was; and he
supposed, ironically, that Mr. Rumford, who bought the flour in
that city, would not have bought it had he known the Wilmington
committee had made itself subordinate to the Philadelphians.

Recurring then to William Henry’s letter to himself, Morris
returned to a consideration of the damage caused to the interests of
his Most Christian Majesty “by the giving greater prices than there
are occasion for,” and retorted that the committee could not pretend
to determine the exigencies in public affairs which had made neces-
sary the questioned supply of flour. Further he reminded them that
their attempt to regulate prices had created a scarcity which induced
them subsequently to apply “for 100 barrels of flour to serve out to
the citizens, as they could not get supplies otherwise at the regulated
prices.”
The insinuation that he sought an "increased commission," he insisted, "ought not to have been hazarded against a Merchant of Reputation"; and he would notice it with that decency of language and sentiment which it was his duty to himself to employ. A merchant, without doubt, was always willing to increase the amount of his commissions, but no responsible merchant would expect to raise prices to his employer and retain the business of that employer. Such a practice would prompt a purchaser to engage another factor and to seek a cheaper market. Furthermore, the committee must know that for many years Mr. Morris had been in receipt of larger and more extensive commissions for the purchase of produce than at present; and that his employers had always been honestly and faithfully served. Why, then, should he have changed from his former practice and principle to sacrifice the interest of his present employer? Indeed, to seek an increase of his property on such terms would reduce the value of the whole of his fortune, a considerable part of which was in Continental paper, so that his very own private interest prompted him to support the value of the currency. Accordingly he would call the proceedings of the committee hasty and their censures undeserved. Morris added that he was at a loss to conceive why his name has been so frequently and so odiously mentioned in the papers. Surely there could be no doubts of his attachment to the general cause of America, which he had served with his greatest exertions in those very times when American affairs had been at their worst.

As a private citizen, he ventured to assert that he had for the twenty years past earned esteem for extending the commerce of Philadelphia, raising the value of lands in Pennsylvania, encouraging industry, making fortunes for his fellow citizens, creating good will among all the tradesmen he employed, and proving himself the generous benefactor to all "that useful body of men who follow the sea." These were not services he cared to boast of; he but mentioned them in order to win as much credit from the public as he knew he deserved. Moreover, the present committee ought not to consider him as an enemy, when he had bought and sold goods agreeable to their regulations and advised other merchants to comply with these. Also, the comment that he was a depreciator of the Continental money when he was the holder of very considerable sums of it was
too absurd to deserve refutation. In that point, Morris remarked that he could only add that he had always paid too much credit to paper money for his own interest, and had liberally staked his property in export and import trade with many heavy losses through use of the currency. Other persons, he knew, had made much more than he without risking a shilling; and he realized, through his few small land purchases, that land investments brought a greater return than mercantile pursuits—and with far less trouble and risk.

Then, having concluded his main argument and stated his conviction of his own innocence, Morris digressed, as it were, in search of the motives of enmity to him. His opposition to the present Constitution of Pennsylvania offered one such motive. But Morris thought his hearers (or readers) would surely concede him “a freedom of opinion on such subjects” as an “essential to a free government.” He had taken his position frankly, and his sole object was to obtain such a Constitution as would in his opinion “answer the ends of good government.” He cared not what men should be in the seats of authority, “if sufficient security were provided for the liberty, life, and property of individuals.” He had desired always to be a private man; when he had become otherwise, it was in obedience to his sentiment “that in times of distress it was the duty of a good citizen to act in whatever station his country might call him to.” And in peroration Morris concluded:

While I was your servant it was my pride to serve you faithfully, to serve you cheerfully: I have done so near four years, and made as great sacrifices of private interest as any man among you. I made them with alacrity. I had and still retain a proper sense of the honour of sacrificing my property, my labour and my ease, to the voice of my country. In your applause I shall at all times feel myself overpaid, and if I miss of that reward, I shall console myself with an approving conscience; and I shall at all times be ready to give my tribute of praise to those more fortunate men, who with greater abilities or better opportunities may have rendered you more essential or more agreeable services.

As the address appears, then, in the Pennsylvania Gazette, no small pique intrudes; no evident sense of culpability betrays the author. Morris is moderate in tone, candid, almost detached. But it would not be correct to say that a similar spirit characterized his first draft. His original composition revealed tension, some heated innuendoes, and a fair number of imprudent aspersions. For, whether or not Morris was apprehensive of being judged culpable by his
fellow citizens, when drafting his defense he was obviously both nervous and angry. Genuine interest attaches, accordingly, to the revisions, excisions, and omissions made in the address “To the Citizens of Pennsylvania” before it was sent to the printer.

The striking out of a single word or a single phrase may have no particular significance; the recasting of a sentence may indicate nothing more than a wish to improve the style. No significance is to be drawn from the frequency of such minor revisions as the dropping of an “and” now and then, the adding a “very” to an adverb, or the making “the Goods” in the manuscript read only “goods” in the printed version. But considerably more is indicated when, for example, Morris substitutes for

I considered the attacks made on me as the Effects of Envy, private malice or political opposition & consoling myself in Consciousness of Integrity I thought of nothing but suffering these passions & views to exhaust by venting themselves without making reply,

the following sentence,

I expected that you, my Fellow Citizens, would readily discover the private Reasons which produced these attacks and, until that moment should arrive, consoled myself in the consciousness of innocence & integrity.

It is much more politic to let one’s hearers discover conspiracy in the attacks of one’s foes than it is to point out the conniving and malice of one’s enemies. The orator knew the unwisdom of the lady who protested too much.

A different kind of caution was apparent, however, when Morris discussed the prospect of his making final settlement of his accounts, after the goods released from the West Indies began flowing through his warehouses. He first wrote: “asserting that if every person that has unsettled accounts with the Public, had such as mine to produce there would have been little or no depreciation.” Then he changed “asserting” to “wishing,” and dropped his “if”; and, timid about the use of the phrase, “little or no depreciation,” thought it wise to omit it. The clause which he eventually substituted, “wishing that every person connected with the Public had such accounts as mine to produce,” pleased him better; and, indeed, it indicated a certain serenity—evidence of Morris’ intention to carry all with an even air.

Subsequently, he discussed the town meeting in May and quoted
in full Rivington’s charge in Dunlap’s Packet of June 3. In this section his revisions were all additions. He excised nothing, or nothing of any conceivable importance; and his observations on the several statistics of depreciation were left unchanged. However, when in his heat about Rivington he wrote of that New York Tory, “I am sorry to use the Language, but this author has dared to prostitute his pen most shamefully”; and “of course, this writer is expressly guilty of gross misrepresentation,” he decided to be moderate—and forewent the use of either phrase.

In addition, Morris was politic enough to omit a fling at a more creditable censor. Daniel Roberdeau, who had been Morris’ colleague in the Continental Congress, had served as chairman of the town meeting in May when Morris’ name was publicly impugned. As it happened, Roberdeau’s own business affairs were at least as questionable as were Morris’. This the latter knew and in a marginal addition he remarked bitterly upon Roberdeau’s indulgence in a practice which

would no doubt be classed Criminal in me, however it might be proper in the righteous chairman of the Town Meeting of the 25 May last. This Gentleman, after sitting as chairman there for the express purpose of reducing the price of imported goods, asked 2500 per cent for a bill of Exchange a few days after, and actually sold it at 2000 per cent although the current rate was 1500 per cent.

Then, having expressed either his feelings or his convictions, Morris chose to pull his punch; and it is as well for the names of both men that he spared General Roberdeau this retaliatory thrust.

The printed form of the long middle part of Morris’ speech, discussing his correspondence with his critics and his more friendly associates, contains but brief verbal changes. In the following part, however, many modifications occur. Morris revised his phraseology, made marginal additions, and excised matter from both marginal additions and the phrases earliest employed. In one instance he abandoned a sentence which, if true, would certainly have added force to his position: “Those who were my competitors in that business never charged me with raising prices to increase commissions, and if that had been my practice they would not have been silent.” Then, to add strength to his ironic conjecture regarding the folly of sacrificing an employer’s interest, he changed an ejaculatory “for what?” to the scornful and effective, “For an increase of com-
mission paid to me in Continental paper money which at the same
time the Committee supposed me to be rendering of no value.”

Coming to an assertion of his patriotism from Stamp Act days
forward through the worst days of the American cause, Morris
curiously enough chose to omit a phrase which it should have been
no immodesty to include. Speaking of the usefulness of his activities,
he remarked, “of which there is abundant proof in Public Records
and Public Letters of that time.”

Morris was not altogether adept about justifying himself even
when he was on the surest of historical grounds. Evidence of a similar
reticence appears a few sentences farther on. After he had told of his
contributions to the life of the Philadelphia community, he wrote,
“These things I would not offer to public consideration was there
not an evident design to undermine me in the public opinion.” Sub-
sequently, he changed this to the rather more flamboyant, “It gives
me Pain to mention these things, but the God of all knows it is not
from a Disposition to boast my own Powers but a sincere and honest
Desire to possess as much of your esteem as I know myself to de-
scribe.” But apparently he felt the revision to be too histrionic, and
he struck out “but the God of all knows.” An excess of feeling, he
realized, is not a thing to be paraded by a gentleman.

Morris manifested another reserve when he treated the subject of
his own sales. Having noted that he always sold off his cargoes
promptly, he put down a phrase excepting “the remainder of the
Polacre’s cargo,” then removed his exception; and finally found it
wise not to venture at all his original sentence: “I have never bought
from others to sell again, except the remainder of the Polacre’s
cargo now on hand.” Further mention of that topic, he knew, was
like pouring oil on a blazing fire, and he forbore to raise the moot
subject. With regard to his own respect for the credit of the paper
currency he was also a little diffident. Having begun, “I have
always valued,” he changed “valued” to “paid too much respect to
the credit of paper for my own interest.” Then he omitted a clause
as to the profits he had lost by “attachment to it” [the paper
currency]. Evidently Morris thought it poor strategy for a reputably
rich merchant to acknowledge that any pecuniary advantage had
come to him through either depreciation or appreciation. It was
more politic to conjecture the fortune he might have made by sly
practices than to seem to have one.
Something more than mere politic argument characterized the last few paragraphs of Morris' speech. Having referred to the comparative number of his enemies, he was tempted to boast of having friends also, especially two who will not "silently see me run down," then thoughtfully dropped the allusion in order to stand squarely on his own feet. Morris' references to those who were his political enemies because of his attitude toward the Pennsylvania Constitution were also tempered. He struck out a petulant declaration of how "heartily tired" he was of holding public office, and a request to his fellow citizens to find some one else to take his place. He weighed discriminatingly both the tone and the substance of his peroration, and kept modifying his sentences until he had rounded out everything suitably. All that he had to say of partisanship, of free play for free opinion, of his own innocence, of his indifference to office, of the proper ends of good government, of the duty of citizens to the state in times of danger—all these he says with a fine balance of fervor and intelligence. So far as he himself was concerned, Morris was evidently satisfied that he had established—or re-established—his reputation for candid and honest dealings.

Morris did not easily forget the criticism poured upon him in 1779. When in 1781 the position of Superintendent of Finance was offered him by the Continental Congress, he deferred his formal acceptance until that body had agreed to permit him the same privileges in private transactions that other merchants had. Once he had accepted the office, however, Morris declared that he would not make use of his prerogatives while he held it, lest he should give rise "to illiberal reflections, equally painful to me and injurious to the public." This, and his careful preservation of the papers connected with the affair of the *Victorious*, show the considerable personal importance Robert Morris attached to the matter and to his vindication.

*Harrisburg*

Hubertis Cummings

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4 Morris' scruples with regard to his accepting the Superintendency of Finance and his behavior after assuming it are fully set forth by William Graham Sumner: *The Financier and the Finances of the American Revolution* (1891), I, 264–269.

An interesting letter to General Washington from Morris, of June 15, 1781, on his postponing his acceptance, occurs in Jared Sparks' *Correspondence of the Revolution* (1853), III, 339–341. There the writer not only discusses briefly the importance of the office and what must be its purposes but makes it clear that he does not wish to forego, by taking it too early, his seat in the Pennsylvania Assembly, lest he lose opportunity to aid in the passage of certain legislation pending in that body.