John Beckley
Mystery Man of the Early Jeffersonians

ETON-EDUCATED John James Beckley—member of the original Phi Beta Kappa Society, first clerk of the House of Representatives, and first librarian of Congress—has long deserved a full-length biography. Not one even of essay-size has appeared. Yet he was an intimate of the political family of Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Taylor, Logan, Frenieu, Bache, Duane, and others, and a secret power in the Republican affairs of 1790 to 1801. An implacable enemy of Hamilton, Pickering, Smith, Fenno, and the administrations of Washington and Adams, a passionate lover of France and hater of Britain, gatherer and distributor of extensive secret information, he was the undercover political strategist of his time.

Recognized by historians as an ever-present figure behind the curtain of party affairs, often mentioned in biographies, he has yet to "make" the Dictionary of American Biography or The National Cyclopedia of American Biography. Man of mystery, go-between, gossip, messenger for Jefferson and his friends, the party watchdog pointing at Hamilton and the "monarchists," he covered his tracks too well. Even now, with many of his letters available, he remains elusive, ever the cautious lawyer, hard to find, pursue, or corner. Almost in self-defense, a student of his period is impelled to gather the elements of a tentative biography.

He was born, it seems, in Louisa County, Virginia, in 1757, son of Sir William Bickley (of the Bickleys of Devonshire, Sussex, and other English counties), and Margaret Overton or Prince. Sir William died March 9, 1771,1 but meanwhile had sent his son to Eton. Returning to America, John entered the College of William and Mary and became a member of the first Phi Beta Kappa Society there.2

1 Malcolm H. Harris, History of Louisa County, Virginia (Richmond, 1936), 239.
2 Hugh B. Grigsby, History of the Virginia Federal Convention of 1788, R. A. Brock, editor (Richmond, 1890), I, 63-64 (note). Also William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine, First Series, IV (1896), 250. Oscar Voorhees, The History of Phi Beta Kappa (New York, 1945), 1, 18-19, indicates that Beckley was not one of the original group of five, but that by 1779 he was a member, and was chosen for at least two committees.
In the Revolutionary War he was a lieutenant, and was active in state affairs early in 1776, by April of that year becoming assistant clerk of the Committee of Safety at Williamsburg, soon afterwards assistant clerk of the House of Delegates, and later clerk of the Senate. By 1779, he had been made clerk of the House of Delegates, succeeding Edmund Randolph. He continued in this capacity until 1785 or longer, apparently gathering a working knowledge of law.

In Richmond, he was elected alderman (1782) and mayor (1788). He served as secretary to the Virginia Federal Convention of 1788, and, upon the organization of the federal government, was elected first clerk of the House of Representatives. In this post he remained from April 1, 1789, to May 15, 1797, when the Federalists—with many of his friends absent—ousted him by one vote. After Jefferson became President, he was returned to his old position, where he served until he died. In 1802, he was given the additional office of congressional librarian, the first to be so appointed, and retained this sinecure also.

He died on April 8, 1807, leaving a wife, Maria, Elizabeth Prince (perhaps a sister-in-law), and a young son, Alfred. His name is perpetuated in Beckley, West Virginia, founded and named for him in 1838 by his son, General Alfred Beckley.
John Beckley was a personable and able speaker. In his *Recollections*, Arthur Stansbury, recalling the inauguration of Washington in 1793, thus described the delivery of Beckley as he read the presidential message:

> The paper was then taken up by Mr. Beckley, the clerk of the House, and again read from beginning to end. Beckley's enunciation, by the by, was admirably clear, giving every syllable of every word, and I may say, he was almost the only officer whose official duty it is to read, who I ever heard read well.

This elocutionary ability was also evident in oratory—for on at least two occasions he appeared as a political orator, once in praise of Jefferson and once as a Fourth of July speaker, heralding the triumph of democracy in 1801. His niceties of enunciation were carried over into a meticulous care in writing. The Beckley letters are exactly, even daintily written, perhaps the most clearly decipherable of all the letters of his time—masterpieces of penmanship and diction. That this speaking and writing talent may have found expression in the pseudonymous political debates of the time appears from at least one campaign document of 1800, signed “Americanus.” This is a strong argument for the election of Jefferson.

His letters are numerous. They reveal him as a devoted family man and friend, a man of moderate wealth who profited in the land speculations of the time, a minor statesman deeply absorbed in political problems. His particular friend was General William Irvine, an independent figure in Pennsylvania politics to whose home in Carlisle Beckley frequently travelled while he lived in Philadelphia. Another close friend was Benjamin Franklin Bache, grandson of the great Franklin and editor of the *Aurora*. Beckley once defended him from the impetuous fists of John Ward Fenno, son of John Fenno, editor of the Federalist *Gazette of the United States*, with whom Bache had exchanged bitter editorial blows. That he was a friend of

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14 On Jefferson's first inauguration and the following Fourth of July. Cf. *Aurora* of March 6, 1801, and *An Oration delivered at Philadelphia on the Fourth of July, 1801*. By Mr. Beckley (Portsmouth, 1801).

15 *Address to the People of the United States; with an Epitome and Vindication of the Public Life and Character of Thomas Jefferson* (Philadelphia, July, 1800).

16 August 8, 1797. Bache gives an account of the incident in the *Aurora*, and John Ward Fenno his version in the *Gazette of the United States*. In Bernard Fay's *The Two Franklins* (Boston, 1933) is the story of the Bache-Beckley friendship at some length.
Bache's successor, Duane, and consorted for political purposes with Callender, Reynolds, Clingman, and others of unsavory repute, may be taken for granted. To Callender he lent a copy of the notes about Hamilton's illicit affair with Mrs. Reynolds. In fact it was Beckley, not Monroe, who was responsible for the revelation that forced Hamilton in anguish to confess his shame, in order to clear himself of charges that he had speculated in government securities while Secretary of the Treasury. The act was like Beckley—anything to injure those who attacked his friends!

Jefferson, whom he served faithfully, did not always believe the information he supplied, estimating him as “a man of perfect truth as to what he affirms of his own knowledge,” but overly credulous. Reports and rumors uncomplimentary to Hamilton, which might give support to suspicions of Treasury corruption, Federalist speculation, or the existence of a secret monarchistic party were always welcome grist for Jefferson's »Anas. Still, Beckley was cautious and avoided loose charges for which he might be held responsible.

He probably helped to get subscriptions and articles for Freneau's National Gazette, which Hamilton thought Beckley was subsidizing, reported “scoops” to Jefferson, and assiduously forwarded fact and gossip to Madison in Virginia and to Monroe in France. Madison trusted him with his code for letters to Monroe, and gave him legal business to execute. He was secretly active in the political plots and underplots of the 1790's, and in 1796 he helped to circularize Pennsylvania with campaign circulars for Jefferson for President.

As a result of conversations with the blackmailer Reynolds and his close friend, Clingman, it was Beckley who called Monroe's attention to the former's wild charges that Hamilton had speculated in government securities, thus precipitating the "investigation" by Monroe, Venable, and Muhlenberg. They found Hamilton guilty of no more

17 Monroe to Burr, December 1, 1797. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
than extra-marital relations with Mrs. Reynolds and the payment of blackmail, and agreed (1792) to suppress their notes of the affair, whose publication in 1797 by Callender was unjustly blamed on Monroe.23 In 1793, Beckley sent to Monroe more nasty rumors about Hamilton on the same subject.24

He gave his confidences to Irvine and Monroe, was more formal with Madison and Jefferson, and was always cautious about involving himself. As House clerk, he was in a position to hear and see a great deal. Of this he told much if not all, and had a talent for imagining and believing the worst about the Federalists, while flitting with gossip from Republican to Republican. In 1792, he wrote to Madison about Hamilton’s attack on Jefferson as follows25:

It would have met, here [in Philadelphia], with its merited contempt, but for the artful misrepresentation of Mr. Jefferson’s letter respecting the French debt, of which, the public at large being uninformed, many, are disposed to think, that the writer speaking from official information, would not have dared, so to state it, if untrue. For myself, I know it to be unfounded, but am not now at liberty to disclose my information, and, if I were, should deem it injudicious to do so, until, the accuser, being challenged to his proofs, should either recede from the charge, or, by producing the proof, convict himself of falsehood.

Speaking of Hamilton’s possible self-betrayal by an unscrupulous attack, he wrote again to Madison, that he had a “clue to something far beyond mere suspicion on this ground,” but was prudently withholding “a present disclosure” of it. Hamilton, whom he both feared and admired, he thus described26:

It would be wise to be watchful, there is no inferior degree of sagacity in the combinations of this Extraordinary Man, with a comprehensive Eye, a subtle and contriving mind, and a Soul devoted to his object, all his measures are promptly and aptly designed and like the links of a chain, dependent on each other, acquire additional strength by their union & concert.

That Monroe trusted Beckley is clear from an exposé, in the Gazette of the United States, of an intercepted letter written by Monroe to Dr. Logan on June 24, 1795, about his plan to present, in

the *Aurora*, news of France fairly interpreted to counteract the same news written from the British viewpoint. In it, Monroe named Beckley as a friend and confidant.27

I give you within a short sketch of the actual state of things here, a copy of which, I likewise send to one or two other friends, of whom Mr. BECKLEY is one . . . You promised me a visit . . . In your absence, Mr. BECKLEY can attend to the little object of my communications, for I wish you and him to act in concert whilst he is in that neighborhood.

Beckley was also led to believe a rumor that, while Secretary of the Treasury, Hamilton had bought £100,000 worth of British funds held for him in London,28 and, during the furor over the Jay Treaty with Britain, to suspect even Washington as the "head of a British faction."29

You can have no idea, how deeply the public confidence is withdrawing itself from the President, and with what avidity strictures on his conduct are received; sensible of this, his friends are redoubling their efforts to exalt his name and exaggerate his past services—But all in vain, the vital blow aimed at the Independence & best Interests of his country, by the impending treaty, mark him in indelible character as the head of a British faction, and no longer blinds the public mind. I have not yet secured the Calm Observer.

This violent opinion of Washington appears to lend support, despite the innocent-looking reference, to the current widespread belief that Beckley himself was "A Calm Observer," who had attacked the Treasury Secretary (Wolcott) in the *Aurora*, asserting that the President had been paid thousands of dollars in unearned salary—an accusation soon silenced by Hamilton's lengthy "Explanation."30

Beckley's violent hatred of Britain and the Jay Treaty, of Federalists, Hamilton, and the acts of the executive office (if not of the person), as well as his close friendship for the editor of the *Aurora*, provides a fair basis for supposing that he had a share in the bitter

27 *Gazette of the United States*, January 16, 1799. The capitals and italics are probably the editor's work. Also in issue of January 12, 1798.

28 Beckley to Madison, May 25, 1795 Madison Papers, New York Public Library

29 Beckley to Madison, September 10, 1795 Madison Papers, New York Public Library

30 "A Calm Observer," *Aurora*, October 23, 27, 29 and November 5, 1795 Wolcott's replies were rather ineffectual. Hamilton's able "Explanation" appeared in the *Gazette of the United States*, November 16 and 17, 1795.

An ironic twist appears in Edmund Randolph's denial that he was "A Calm Observer" in a letter to Beckley of November 19, that appeared in the *Gazette of the United States*, December 14, 1795, after being published in the Boston Chronicle.
attacks on the treaty and on Washington in that newspaper during the summer and fall of 1795. Moreover, his friendship for Randolph, after the latter's humiliation by the President and resignation as Secretary of State, may have motivated an attack.

In any case, shortly after Randolph's resignation in August, 1795, the *Aurora* was filled with many letters attacking the treaty, Washington, and the administration, under several pseudonyms—"Hancock," "Valerius," "Belisarius," "Pittachus," and others. The clamor of criticism became so insistent that Hamilton wrote to Oliver Wolcott, his successor in the Treasury, to inquire as to the writers of these powerful attacks; but Wolcott could not supply an answer, although he suspected several men of whom Beckley was one.31

Among these critics, "Valerius" was the strongest, most insistent, and least respectful toward the President. The style of all is strikingly alike—and also closely resembles that of "Veritas," who had attacked the attitude of the President and the administration toward the proclamation of "neutrality" and the treaties with France in Freneau's *National Gazette* of June, 1793. This same style, significantly, appears in the letters of "A Calm Observer"—and the similarity was promptly noticed by a contributor to the *Gazette of the United States*, who wrote, "Pittachus alias Belisarius, alias Valerius, &c. &c. &c. appeared yesterday under the name of a Calm Observer."32 Suspect also is the way Jefferson learned of the supposed source of the "Veritas" letters—from Beckley.33

Such a tenuous connection, of course, needs more support before one concludes that Beckley wrote one or all these attacks. His acknowledged writings do not closely resemble those in question stylistically, although they reflect almost exactly the same ideas. But it must be remembered that a concealment of style was one


32 October 24, 1795. Signed "Pacificus."

33 *Anas*, July 18, 1793, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, op. cit., I, 375: "The person who told me of it would not permit the name of his informer to be mentioned; (Note.—Beckley told me of it, and he had it from Swaine, the printer to whom the pieces were delivered;) . . ."

The information was that one Irving, or Irvine, a Treasury clerk, had delivered the manuscripts of "Veritas."
quality of such public letters, that Beckley’s talents evidently included shifts in manner,\(^{34}\) and that the style of the attacks is artificial, stiff, formal to a degree, like some affected oratory of the time, and so not difficult to assume. Moreover, Oliver Wolcott, Hamilton’s informant as well as his successor, was firmly convinced that Beckley had written the “Calm Observer” letters, although their matter might have been a joint product.\(^{35}\)

An assumption of Beckley’s authorship helps to answer the mystery of his secret activities from 1792 on, for, with his known opinions and writing ability, it seems unlikely that he would have remained silent while Madison, Monroe, Freneau, Bache, and others of his circle were actively combatting the Federalists by way of the press. Some comparison of the style and matter of “The Calm Observer” with those of “Valerius” and “Veritas” may be of value here.

“A Calm Observer” (addressed to Wolcott)\(^{36}\):

Had you, Sir, commenced your defence, under the influence of the just reflection, that evasion belongs only to a bad cause, and that the language of indecent invective is the usual retort of conscious guilt, you had spared yourself all the preliminary remarks, with which you introduce yourself to the public. . . .

Upon the whole, sir, I cheerfully appeal to an enlightened public, to decide between you and me, on which side, lie the truth, reason and law of the case, and on which side, sophistry and evasion.

“Valerius” (to the President)\(^{37}\):

Yes, sir, there are such men; men, who had never merited the indignation of Valerius, had not your dark schemes of ambition drawn them from a state of safety and obscurity. . . . Your voice may have been heard when it called to virtue and glory, but it will be lost in the tempest of popular fury, whenever it shall speak the language of lawless ambition. The American People, Sir, will look to death, the man who assumes the character of an usurper.

\(^{34}\) Beckley to Monroe, August 26, 1800. “You will see my reply to it in a series of numbers in the Aurora, disguised in the style & manner from the Epitome.” Monroe Papers, New York Public Library.

\(^{35}\) Wolcott to Oliver Wolcott, Sr., November 19, 1795. Memoirs of the Administrations, etc., op. cit., I, 268. “I am well satisfied that the ‘Calm Observer’ is a joint work of certain patriots. Randolph was doubtless an adviser, and Beckley, Clerk of the House of Representatives, the writer. I think I cannot be mistaken.”

\(^{36}\) Aurora, October 27, 1795.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., September 9, 1795.
“Veritas” (to the President):  

Had you, Sir, before you ventured to issue a proclamation which appears to have given much uneasiness, consulted the general sentiments of your fellow-citizens, you would have found them, from one extremity of the Union to the other, firmly attached to the cause of France. . . . Had you, Sir, considered the importance of retaining your popularity, you would, perhaps, have listened to the murmurs of the citizens.

If Beckley was “A Calm Observer,” he was behaving characteristically when, after being recognized and rumored as the author, he never again used the pseudonym. The literary life of the “Observer” was of surprising brevity, as he never after ventured into print. Moreover, though for years reputed to be the author, Beckley never publicly denied the accusation, although other such denials were made by Randolph and Dallas.

In October of the same year, while the “Observer” and the “Valerius” letters were exciting readers generally, there also appeared in the *Aurora* a mysterious threat directed at both Wolcott and Hamilton to expose the long suppressed Hamilton-Reynolds affair. Was this Beckley also?

*Quere*—Whether a certain head of a department, was not in the month of December, 1792, privy and party in the circumstances of a certain enquiry of a very suspicious aspect, respecting real mal-conduct on the part of his friend, patron and predecessor in office, which ought to make him extremely circumspect on the subject of investigation. . . .?

Would a publication of the circumstances of that transaction redound to the honour or reputation of the parties. . . .?

1796 witnessed a valiant attempt to make Jefferson President, an attempt in which Beckley was a leading spirit in Pennsylvania. The next year was one of abrupt change for him. On the meeting of Congress for the special session called by the President in May, with many members absent, he was voted out of the House clerkship,

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38 *National Gazette*, June 5, 1793.
39 Westcott-Stauffer, *op. cit.*, XIII, 891: “John Beckley . . . was frequently called ‘A Calm Observer,’ and was charged with having written a pamphlet . . . against General Washington . . . bearing that signature.”
Edmund Randolph denied writing the “Observer” (see note 30). Alexander Dallas denied the “Valerius” authorship in the *Aurora*, December 2, 1795.
40 October 23, 1795.
41 to 40—a disappointment also to Jefferson, who described the incident as "the loss of the ablest clerk in the US." 41 But Beckley continued active in Philadelphia politics. He became clerk of the mayor's court, chairman of the local party, an election judge, and a state official briefly under Governor McKean, 42 all in addition to practicing law until his re-election to the clerkship of the House. 43

1797 was an eventful year. In the uproar over the French refusal to accept Pinckney as the new American minister, amid hasty preparations by Congress for war with our Revolutionary ally, James Monroe, the dismissed and disgruntled minister, arrived in the capital city. In the newspaper battle over his dismissal, bitter feeling had developed; and in retaliation, James Callender included in his History of the United States for the Year 1796 some of the suppressed notes about Hamilton's illicit amour. Hamilton, concluding that Monroe was responsible for the leak, entered into a sharp exchange of notes with him that nearly resulted in a duel. 44 Monroe, though asserting his innocence, did not explain how the notes got into Callender's hands; and historians, like the Hamiltons, have never quite forgiven him. But it was Beckley's copy that Callender had used. As clerk of the House, Beckley had had copies made for the "investigators" of Hamilton (Monroe, Venable, and Muhlenberg), kept one for himself, and refused to promise secrecy when Hamilton requested it. Hamilton appears not to have suspected Beckley, strangely enough; nor have the historians done so, except Schachner, who did not follow the trend of his suspicion. 45 Like the fox, Beckley

42 In the Aurora of June 30, 1801, while clerk of the mayor's court, Beckley protested charges of extortion, which he denied.
43 Shortly after his defeat in the House, Beckley advertised in the Aurora, May 22, 1797, his plan to practice law: "Having qualified as an Attorney and Counsel at law, in the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, and therefore entitled to practise in all the other Courts of the State, I offer my services . . . ." On June 3, in the same publication he advertised himself established as "Attorney at Law and Conveyancer . . . JOHN BECKLEY, late Clerk to the House of Representatives of the United States."
45 Schachner, op. cit., 371.
had disappeared leaving no trail, or almost none; and the only evidence now appears to be Monroe's letter to Burr.\(^{46}\)

Republicans were greatly disturbed about the "Federalist war" with France. In the spring of 1798, "Valerius" again appeared, followed quickly by his blood-brother "Lysander," in bold letters addressed to President Adams, criticizing his monarchical and pro-British leanings, arguing for France and peace, and using the very style of 1795.\(^{47}\)

SIR,

When violent attacks are made on the rights and liberties of the people of America: When a person invested with the office of chief magistrate of the union, becomes the head of a party whose object is to introduce a monarchico-aristocratical form of government upon the ruins of our constitution; when this conduct is countenanced by him both in public and private, a sacred duty obliges us to pause and enquire, how has this been brought about.

In the summer of 1798, caution still dictated Beckley's behavior when, writing to William Irvine about the attempt of President Adams to win a government position for his son-in-law, he said, "The old man is most mortified. When I see you we will converse more at length—letter writing may by possible construction, create sedition."\(^{48}\) The Sedition Law was then in force.

There were many protests against this weapon of dictatorship. Early in 1799, a voice resembling that of "Valerius" came to the obscure haunts of Beckley's home state, Virginia. This time it was "Hortensius" who spoke in ringing tones against the Sedition Law and for the liberty of the press.\(^{49}\) "My object," said

\(^{46}\) "You know I presume that Beckley published the papers in question. By his clerk they were copied for us. It was his clerk who carried a copy to H. who asked (as B. says) whether others were privy to the affr. the clerk replied that B. was, upon wh. H. desired him to tell B. he considered him bound not to disclose it. B. replied by the same clerk that he considered himself under no injunction whatever—that if H. had anything to say to him it must be in writing. This from B.—most certain however it is that after our interviews with H. I requested B. to say nothing abt. it. & keep it secret—& most certain it is that I never heard of it afterwards till my arrival when it was published." Monroe to Burr, December 1, 1797. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Cf. Philip Marsh, "Hamilton and Monroe," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, December, 1947.


\(^{49}\) *Aurora*, February 2, 4, 6, 8 and 11, 1799—all evidently written well in advance. The quotation is from the issue of February 2.
he, "is to demonstrate to the people, and to you [Adams], that the constitution of the United States, has been violated."

That very summer, Beckley became attorney for Editor Duane, whose editorial policy, unpopular with Federalists, had brought on a brutal attack by fifteen cavalry officers. In his letter to Irvine, Beckley was his usual cautious self: "As I am called on to prosecute them, I shall forbear to animadvert here." During the season he sold a tract of "my Kentuckey land" for $12,000.51 His letters to Irvine indicate periodic illnesses, usually colds, and a recurring fear for the health of his wife, Maria, and their little daughter, Nancy, at that time an only child whose death in 1800 deeply affected him.52

During the presidential campaign of 1800, Beckley was again active in Jefferson's behalf. As "Americanus," he wrote a pamphlet Address to the People of the United States; with an Epitome and Vindication of the Public Life and Character of Thomas Jefferson, an argument for democracy important in itself.53 The first phrases typify its idealistic strain:

AUSPICIOUS to the best hopes of Americans, for the universal success of Republican liberty, the revolving year, 1800, presents you with the periodical right of suffrage in the election of a President. . . .

The magnitude of this right, and the deep interests it involves for the fate and happiness of our common country, demand your immediate vigilant, unceasing and deliberate attention.

Like other Republicans, Beckley abhorred militarism, and particularly autocracy in the form of the Federalist Alien and Sedition Laws, because of their injustice to immigrants and their muffling effect on freedom of speech and the press.

A review of past events will but present the painful spectacle of political apostacy, amidst the wreck of principle: and the creation of systems equally subversive of liberty, peace and happiness . . . the right of trial by jury of the vicinage exploded . . . new and arbitrary principles of alienism and sedition . . . restraints on the liberty of the press . . . a standing army, a permanent navy, augmentation of the public debt . . . augmented import duties . . .

50 Beckley to Irvine, May 17, 1799. Irvine Papers, loc. cit.
51 Beckley to Irvine, August 2, 1799. Irvine Papers, loc. cit.
52 Beckley to Monroe, August 26, 1800. Monroe Papers, New York Public Library.
53 Generally credited to Beckley (see note 15), and undoubtedly his work, as his letter to Monroe of August 26, 1800 (see note 52) makes clear: "To you, a friend, I must apologize for the inaccuracies & insufficiencies of the 'Epitome'. . . . The author need not be named."
Having scornfully reviewed the orthodox Federalist iniquities with the scorn of an orthodox Republican, he introduced his candidate as "mild, amiable, and philanthropic . . . the philosopher of the world," and defended him against the stock charges—opposition to the Constitution, atheism, and cowardice when he was governor of Virginia. Denying the last charge, he quoted from the *Gazette of the United States* a letter professedly by a witness and companion of Jefferson (Beckley himself?). Then after meeting other issues, "Americanus" presented a life and the "TRUE and REAL character of THOMAS JEFFERSON, unaided by artificial labourings or the false varnish of deceptive flattery."

Evidently this pamphlet had a wide distribution, as it was published in Philadelphia, Wilmington, Worcester, and other centers. In his letter to Monroe (see note 53) Beckley mentions 5,000 copies printed, 1,000 each in New York, Connecticut, and Maryland, and 2,000 at Philadelphia. He also wrote political letters for the *Aurora* at this time, defending Jefferson against charges of irreligion made by one "Doctor Lima[?]" in a pamphlet entitled "Serious Considerations, on the election of a president, addressed to the Citizens of the United States."54

Like many other fervent Jeffersonians, Beckley poured forth his greatest oratory on the occasion of the inauguration, March 4, 1801. His address was delivered at the climax of a large public celebration in Philadelphia; and it seems that his performance was highly satisfactory to Republicans generally, for the oration was reprinted in newspapers outside the city.

"Republican citizens," declaimed the Orator of the Day, "behold your triumph!"

Then the speaker described a romantic picture of a virtuous nation at last freed from the tyrannic bonds of monarchistic, scheming party rulers, now rising from its shackles to new, undreamed-of heights of utopian peace and liberty.55

Virtue rising on the ruins of corruption—Your country emancipated; a new aera of independence begotten; and the public liberty secured beyond the grasp of force, fraud or factious usurpation. . . .

54 This series was signed "Senex," and appeared in the *Aurora* on August 27, September 2, 5, and 26, 1800.
55 *The True American* (Trenton, New Jersey), March 31, 1801; *Aurora*, March 6, 1801.
Beckley the orator was in deadly earnest. In fact, this was his triumph no less than Jefferson’s, Madison’s, Monroe’s, Freneau’s, or Duane’s. Like them, he had fought the good fight for Republican principles. No man had hated the Federalists more heartily. He had served as an important link binding men of the party together by secret information. He had been a valued sub-commander and leader of meetings where plans were invented, shaped, and executed to defeat the common enemy. Moreover, through it all he appears to have been sincere and scrupulous, worthy of trust, and trusted. Well might he have cried, “Hail to us, champions of the common people, at last victors over their enemies!” There was a strong undercurrent of an emotion akin to religion in his feeling about the Cause.

On the following Fourth of July in Philadelphia, now no longer the capital city but still the nation’s largest and most cultured metropolitan center, Beckley again appeared as the local leader of Republicanism. And once more he proved his talent for the kind of soaring oratory in which the audiences of the time delighted.

Does it not seem as if the great author of all good, had given us in this auspicious day a special evidence of his favor—after weeks of torrid heat, the sky is overcast, and from the bosom of the heavens cooling showers cheer the half parched earth, the gentle zephyr refreshes the eve of our festivity, and the vaulted asure presents to our gladdened and elated spirits, a serenity congenial with the happy state into which our country has passed, through a season of heat and apprehension.

Having heartily condemned Britain for her crimes, he spoke of the recently ousted Federalists. “What shall we say of those who were entrusted with our security and prosperity, honored by public confidence and reward, pursuing the same measures?”

He condemned a long list of Federalist sins like the use of the titles “honorable” and “excellency,” which he asserted “belong to God,” levees, and the various trappings of popes and royalty. He recited the flaws of the Washington administration, called Adams a weak man, blasted the British treaty and again attacked the evils of the Sedition Law.

“But,” he declaimed triumphantly, “the days of delusion are past, the principles of republicanism again dare be asserted without danger or reproach; the people have chosen, to fill stations of trust,
those whose private lives have been an uniform illustration of their public precepts.”

Then, referring to the new President, he added pointedly, “At the head of these is the author of this immortal declaration, who as Governor in his native state, as an ambassador abroad, as a legislator and as secretary of state, as the head of the first Philosophical society in America . . . and whose pursuits have been from first to last to promote toleration in religion, and freedom in politics; to cultivate the arts and virtues at home, and to shun the vices and depravities of debauched foreign governments; in a word, a man against whom falsehood [sic] has raised its voice, under the garb of religion, only because he has banished tythes and an established church from his native state, and who would brand him with the name of infidel, because he is not a fanatic.”

“Equal liberty is our birth-right!” he argued with religious fervor, and in the same breath warned that watchfulness over that birthright was a constant necessity.

“A free people can never examine their situations too scrupulously!” This was an oft-repeated idea of “Valerius.”

Yet Beckley, like Jefferson, was generous to the defeated, for he concluded in a spirit of charity:

As we have felt persecution, let us charitably compassionate those who differ from us. . . . Let us not condemn them even if they are monarchists; opinion is the right of every man.

For such services, an appropriate reward was due and forthcoming. Beckley was once more elected (in true poetic justice) to his old place as clerk of the House on December 7, 1801. In the very next month he was given the additional post of librarian to Congress,67 to care for “the accumulated books and maps” of the legislators68—a post and an institution that were to grow into world importance. He was now secure for life in the capital city, honored among old friends, serving his master and inspiration, President Thomas Jefferson. It may be wondered why, after such faithful and effective service, he was not rewarded with a more important position. But by long

67 January 29, 1802, by the act of January 26. The original commission is at The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
68 Salamanca, op. cit., 45.
training and experience, his mind was studious and clerical. He was a better critic than creator, a better follower than leader.

He appears to have been an indifferent librarian, leaving most of the work to an underling, although he had the background and ability to be an excellent one. But the Washington of the early 1800's was a small and straggling community, and few of the legislators were book-minded. Beckley's major interest probably continued to be politics, and very likely his last years were happy. He died on April 8, 1807, and was succeeded in both offices by Patrick Magruder.

What estimate shall we place upon John Beckley? Fay credits him with sharing the Democratic-Republican triumph, the victory of the "Second Revolution," with Bache and Dallas, the Secretary of Pennsylvania. It is probably too early—as no study of his life has hitherto appeared—to pass a considered opinion. Was he really "Veritas," "Valerius," "A Calm Observer," and others who wrote in the same style and preached similar ideas, attacking Washington, Adams, Hamilton, Britain, and Federalism while defending Jefferson, Republicanism, and France? How many secrets must have died with him! He remains a challenging enigma, but it is safe to say that history will show an increasing interest in him.

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50 Ibid., 50.
60 Ibid., 60–61.
62 It is hoped that this sketch will stimulate a more serious study.
63 Other pseudonyms: