The Death of Joseph Dennie:
A Memoir by Nicholas Biddle

Joseph Dennie,¹ whose death on January 7, 1812 is the subject of this melancholy memoir, moved from Walpole, New Hampshire, to Philadelphia in 1799. As founder and editor of the *Port Folio²* and guiding spirit of the Tuesday Club,³ he was the teacher and arbiter of taste for a whole generation of men and women in the Pennsylvania city. Thirteen of these appreciative admirers, on May 14, 1812, banded together to perpetuate his memory by a monument over his grave, writing: "We the surviving friends & companions of the late Joseph Dennie Esquire, desirous of testifying our affection for the man & our recollections of the many qualities of the head & the heart which endeared him to us & rendered him the delight & the ornament of Society agree to contribute fifteen dollars each for the purpose of erecting a suitable monument to his memory."⁴

This memorial was finally erected in the burying ground of St. Peter’s Church in 1819, and on it were inscribed the following words: "Joseph Dennie, Born in Lexington⁵ in Massachusetts, August 30th, 1768, Died at Philadelphia, January 7th, 1812. En-

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¹ Joseph Dennie (1768-1812) was born in Boston, but moved to Lexington in 1775. He was graduated from Harvard in 1790 and was admitted to the bar at Charleston, N. H., in March, 1794. Disliking the practice of law, he turned to literature as a profession, editing the *Tablet* in Boston from May 19 to Aug. 11, 1795, and the *Farmer’s Museum* in Walpole, N. H., from April, 1796, to September, 1799. He despaired of making a success of a literary magazine in a small town and accepted an appointment as a clerk in the Department of State in Philadelphia where he began publication of the *Port Folio* on Jan. 3, 1801.

² *Port Folio* (1801-1827), Philadelphia.

³ The Tuesday Club was an informal organization of the contributors to the *Port Folio* which met at various places—the houses of Joseph Hopkinson and William Meredith and the bookshop of Asbury Dickins, the owner and publisher of the magazine.

⁴ This memorandum is among the papers deposited by Col. Nicholas Biddle, HSP. The thirteen signers of the document were William Meredith; Nicholas Biddle; Nathaniel Chapman; Richard Peters, Jr.; William S. Biddle; Horace Binney; Charles Chauncey; Sam Ewing; Charles J. Nicholas; John R. Ingersoll; J. B. Wallace; Thomas L. Wharton; and C. W. Hare.

⁵ The designation of Dennie’s birthplace as Lexington is in error.
dowed with talents, and qualified by Education To adorn the Senate, and the Bar, But following the impulse of a Genius, Formed for Converse with the Muses, He devoted his life to the literature of his Country. As author of the Lay Preacher, And as first editor of the Port Folio, He contributed to chasten the morals, and to refine the taste of the nation. To an imagination, lively, not licentious, A wit sportive, not wanton, And a heart without guile, He united a deep sensibility, which Endearèd him to his Friends, and an ardent piety, which we humbly trust, Recommended him to his God; Those friends have erected this tribute to his Memory. To the Mercies of that God is their resort For themselves, and for Him.”

The wording on this monument indicates the high view that his contemporaries had of Dennie and indicates why it was that his successor as editor, Nicholas Biddle, was impelled to record in such detail the circumstances of his death. Later generations have not shared this evaluation of Dennie although he has not been entirely neglected. Professional students of American literature have prepared theses and articles on his writing, the magazine, and its contributors, but his surviving works are unread, and the living fire of his genius—which made his friends believe that he was one of the immortals whose every word and deed must be treasured and remembered—has passed away.

Part of this fate is attributable to Dennie himself. His Harvard classmate, Josiah Quincy, III, in his reminiscences of the class of

6 Quoted in Harold Milton Ellis, Joseph Dennie and his Circle: A Study of American Literature from 1792 to 1812 (Austin, Texas, 1915), 245.

7 Nicholas Biddle (1786-1844), editor of the Port Folio, 1812-1814, is, of course, best known as president of the Second Bank of the United States, 1823-1839. This holograph manuscript has been recently deposited in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania by Col. Nicholas Biddle of Philadelphia.

8 Dennie's publications were The Lay Preacher; or, Short Sermons for Idle Readers (1796, 1817); Desultory Reflections on the New Political Aspects of Public Affairs (1800); and The Spirit of the Farmer's Museum, and Lay Preacher's Gazette (1801). A selection of his correspondence was published in Laura G. Pedder, ed., The Letters of Joseph Dennie, 1768-1812 [University of Maine Studies, and ser., No. 36, XXXVIII (1936)]. Studies of the magazine are to be found in Albert H. Smyth, The Philadelphia Magazines and Their Contributors (Philadelphia, 1872); Ellis P. Oberholtzer, The Literary History of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1906); Frank L. Mott, A History of American Magazines (Cambridge, Mass., 1938); and Robert E. Spiller, et al., eds., Literary History of the United States (New York, 1948). The biography by Ellis and an article by Randolph C. Randall, “Authors of the Port Folio Revealed by the Hall Files,” American Literature, XI (1940), 379-416, have been particularly helpful in the editing of this manuscript.
1790, wrote: "The most talented, taking light literature as a standard, was Joseph Dennie. . . . he might unquestionably have taken the highest rank in his class, . . . but he was negligent in his studies, and not faithful to the genius with which nature had endowed him." Dennie's entire career as lawyer, editor, and writer was characterized by this same willful perversity, which along with his delight in society and overindulgence in drink prevented his accomplishment from ever equalling his promise.

This loss to American literature was more than regained by Dennie's contribution to the young and able group in Philadelphia who began to write at his urging and published their earliest efforts in his magazine. None of these men gained his greatest fame as a writer, nor is any one of them mentioned among the great contributors to American literature, but to list their names—Nathaniel Chapman, Horace Binney, Charles J. Ingersoll, Nicholas Biddle, Joseph Hopkinson, Thomas I. Wharton, Thomas Cadwalader, Robert Hare, William Meredith, Condy Raguet, Robert Walsh, Richard Rush, and many others—is to call the roll of the leading lawyers, physicians, merchants, scientists and bankers in the first half of the nineteenth century. The study and criticism of literature under Dennie's guidance enriched the lives and minds of these men, and perhaps is in part responsible for the genuine and creative conservatism which characterized their thought and action. It is thus as a teacher that Dennie had his greatest influence, and he suffered the common and pleasant fate of such men in having his own fame overshadowed by that of his pupils.

One other reason for Dennie's subsequent obscurity and neglect must be mentioned. He had the misfortune to be a pronounced Anglophile in literature and an extreme Federalist in politics at a time when the Republican Party had gained virtually complete ascendancy in the United States and growing American nationalism was rendering everything English suspect. His hostility to native writers and themes put him out of step with the spirit of his times and prevented him from having an effective influence upon subsequent writers and critics in this country. Few of his friends and associates in Philadelphia shared these extreme views, but this

9 Edmund Quincy, Life of Josiah Quincy, By His Son (Boston, 1874), 30-33, quoted in Ellis, 31-32.
divergence in literary tastes and political loyalties was not permitted to interfere with their personal love and devotion to him. The following manuscript, therefore, has its greatest importance as a tribute by a subsequently famous disciple, Nicholas Biddle, to the teacher whose influence upon him and his contemporaries was of lasting benefit to the city of Philadelphia and the nation as a whole.

_The University of the South_  
_THOMAS P. GOVAN_

I always remember with melancholy satisfaction the last hours of my excellent friend Joseph Dennie since it was in my power to alleviate in some degree his afflictions.

During the whole summer of 1811 his health & his regard for his own appearance & situation seemed sadly declining. Under an impression that the waters of Bristol might renovate his strength he passed the warm months at that place residing in the Bath hotel. But this situation was by no means congenial to him. The house was filled with a crowd of strangers with scarcely any of whom he could associate, and at last he withdrew himself from company & gave himself up but too often to solitary intoxication—In this condition he was seen by his acquaintance, and in the estimation of all who visited Bath was thought to be completely lost. Yet even in this humbled & wretched state he preserved a singular vigour & vivacity of mind, nor can I ever read the affecting letters he wrote to Abercrombie on the 8th & 11th of Sept without mingled emotions of admiration & pity.

During this period he had completely absented himself from the Port Folio office & abandoned the journal to its fate. Soon after the date of these letters Mr. Bradford the proprietor of the P.F whose interests manifestly suffered by this secession went to see him at

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10 This statement concerning Dennie’s overindulgence in alcohol, written in love and respect by Biddle, disposes of the contention that such statements about Dennie were merely unconfirmed rumors. Cf. Ellis, 200.

11 The Rev. James Abercrombie (1758-1841) was assistant to Bishop William White, rector of Christ Church and St. Peter’s in Philadelphia, and headmaster of the Philadelphia Academy.

12 Samuel F. Bradford (1776—1837), printer and publisher, was the son of Thomas Bradford, publisher of the _True American_ in Philadelphia, grandson of William Bradford who was known as the “patriot-printer of 1776,” and the great-great-grandson of William Bradford, the first printer in Philadelphia.
Bristol, and after remonstrating with him on the ruin of his health & the disgrace which would ensue from his present career urged him to return—and that he might not be deterred by the fear of creditors liberally offered to assume the debts which gave him most uneasiness & ultimately to discharge the whole. His persuasions were at length effectual, and Mr. Dennie removed to town soon after, & took lodgings at Mrs. Malcolms at the corner of Eighth & Walnut Streets.¹³

About the same time Mr. Bradford, fearing that the aid of Mr. Dennie would be at all times irregular, and wishing to ensure permanent & constant support to the P. Folio as well as to facilitate some other pecuniary arrangements of his own made me an overture to conduct the P. Folio jointly with Mr. Dennie. This had often been suggested by Mr. Dennie himself, and having now more leisure than when it was proposed before I therefore assented, and our final arrangement was made about the middle of December.¹⁴ Until then though I had often called on Mr. Dennie I had seen him very rarely, for his habits were still irregular he was often from home and slept during the day & was studying through the night; or would sometimes exclude himself totally not only from his friends but even the family with whom he lived. But when the arrangement was finished I found him, & proceeded to concert our future plan of operations—He was delighted with the association which he had long wished, & I now began to conceive hopes of accomplishing what was near to my heart a total reformation from his unhappy propensities. I saw him now constantly, we conversed on every subject connected with our literary enterprize—his spirits revived—his whole character seemed renovated. That he might be no longer embarrassed by pecuniary concerns Mr. Bradford & myself assured him that if he would give a list of everything which he owed he should never again hear of a single debt; and this assurance perfectly tranquillized his mind. To wean him from his present habits I cautiously avoided every thing like an allusion to them in relationship to himself though I mentioned when an opportunity occurred their dreadful effects on

¹³ Mrs. Jane Malcolm was a widow who lived at 199 (old numbering system) Walnut Street. The Mr. Malcolm, mentioned later, was probably her son, J. G. Malcolm, a merchant.

¹⁴ Bradford, earlier in 1811, had offered Biddle and Robert Walsh (1784-1859) an opportunity to buy a half-interest in the Port Folio for $9,000, if they would agree to join Dennie in editing the work. At that time the profits were estimated at $6,000 a year. Bradford and Inskeep to Mr. Biddle and Mr. Walsh, n. d., Papers deposited by Col. Nicholas Biddle, HSP.
others, but meant to make him correct by treating him as if he were so—by introducing him to my own family & trying to bring him back to the society of his former friends & by piquing his pride raise him above the wish for low indulgences. This succeeded so well that his inmates Mr & Mrs Malcolm declare that he was an altered man—that his habits were already in a great degree reformed, and I had the most sanguine expectations of seeing him again what he once was. Even yet I cherish the belief that had his life been prolonged my exertions would not have been fruitless. The proof of his renewed vigor and his determination to persevere in his new course may be seen in the Address for the January number of the P. Folio. When our arrangement was concluded he wished me to announce it, but as he was in every respect better qualified than myself I requested him to perform that duty—He after some hesitation concented [sic] and although he had not written a line for the P. Folio during many months, and was even now indisposed, yet he determined to accomplish it—and shutting himself up for several days & abstaining even from the festivities of Christmas produced that beautiful piece of composition which he told me a few days afterwards he had written in a paroxysm of pain. Nor was this all for on carrying it to the printer’s and finding that there was still some matter wanted he sat down and write [sic] the Article to readers & correspondents and remained at the office until nine o’clock at night when he saw everything in print. From such activity what might I not have expected had it not pleased Providence to order otherwise.

When the number was finished he had more leisure, and for the first [time] after a long interval went about visiting his friends to whom he spoke in the fondest terms of the new arrangement from which he anticipated so much pleasure—In the course of our conversations he had expressed a wish to become acquainted with Mr Joseph Sansom a valuable correspondent of the P. F and a distant connection of mine & I promised to bring them together. They were therefore invited with Doctor Chapman to dine with me on Friday Jan 3d 1812, but Mr Sansom not being able to come, nor Dr Chap-

15 Port Folio (January, 1812), 89–96.
16 Joseph Sansom (1767–1826) was a merchant of Philadelphia, whose article, “Outlines of the Life and Character of William Penn,” appeared in the March, 1809, issue of the Port Folio.
17 Nathaniel Chapman (1780–1853), physician, teacher, and writer, married Rebecca Biddle, cousin of Nicholas, on Sept. 1, 1808.
man till after dinner, we sat down at three o'clock with no persons except Mr. D, Mrs. Craig and the boys Jane being unwell. During the dinner he became exceedingly animated & agreeable. He had long desired to be introduced to Mrs. Craig who on her part had been taught to esteem his character, & being perfectly at ease with all the exhilaration which fine wine could inspire, I never saw him more like an estimable & courteous gentleman. After the ladies retired we sat with Dr. Chapman for several hours and after he retired we went down stairs to my office where we remained till nearly ten o'clock smoking, & chatting over a thousand literary schemes & projects—discussing what we should do for the advancement of letters—what we should compose—reviving the old plan of a joint series of papers to be called the Pilgrim and indulging in a thousand delightful anticipations from our new connexion.

When we separated he promised to meet Mr. Bradford & Mr. Allen at my office on the Monday following for the purpose of concerting about the materials of the next Port Folio—On Sunday the 5th I called in the afternoon at his lodgings, but he was not at home. The next morning he did not come at the appointed time so that late in the afternoon I went round to see him. I looked into his room & finding the windows closed & no one there I came downstairs; but on enquiring of Mr. Malcolm & finding that he was upstairs unwell, I returned with Mr. Malcolm & sat by his bedside for some time. He complained very much of being sick and I requested him to let me go for Dr. Chapman, but this he declined until I renewed it, and he then consented adding “you may go now.” I immediately went for Dr. Chapman and not finding him left word for him to come & then returned to Mr. Dennie. It was now just dark, and as he was in bed & I could do nothing, he begged me not to stay in his sick room and I left him.

On his return home on Friday evening as I afterwards learnt from the family of Mrs. Malcolm and from other persons, he was in excel-

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18 Mrs. Margaret Craig, widow of John Craig, merchant of Philadelphia, was the mother of Jane Craig Biddle, Nicholas' wife. Mrs. Jane Backhouse was the kinswoman and companion of Mrs. Craig, and “the boys” is a reference to her youngest son, John Craig, and his companion, John Dillon. The Craig house was at 181-183 Chestnut Street.

19 Paul Allen (1775-1826), a native of Providence, R. I., was editorial assistant on the Port Folio to both Dennie and Biddle. He later moved to Baltimore where he edited the Morning Chronicle.
lent spirits, spoke of the delightful afternoon which he had passed, of
the courteous manners of Mrs Craig, the excellent wine & particularly
some excellent old Jamaica rum with which he had been regaled.

The next day Saturday he dined with an old acquaintance Mr David Meredith who told me that he never saw him in better or
more regulated spirits nor apparently in better health. They sat
together for a long time—drank moderately and conversed upon
general & literary topics until Mr D took leave, and afterwards went
to the theatre. He returned to supper where he appeared to be in
good spirits and so insensible at least of his own situation that he told
Mrs Malcolm that he had not felt better for the last twelve years.
He had however caught some cold at the theatre which Mrs M con-
sidered as the immediate cause of his indisposition. After the family
retired, he sat with Mr Malcolm some time & when the latter left
him continued in the parlor writing until two or three o’clock in the
morning. Two or three small pieces which he must have composed
at that time being afterwards found in his hat.

On Sunday morning when he was sent for to breakfast he said that
he was unwell and did not want any, and as this was not unusual with
him no particular notice was taken of it by the family who did not
seem to entertain any alarms when I visited the house in the after-
noon.

On Monday morning about one o’clock I was astonished at being
called upon by Dr Chapman to inform me that Dennie was dying. We
immediately hastened there together and as we went along he in-
formed me that on receiving my message the last evening he had
gone to our friend whom he found so ill that he remained there all
night and this morning, and had left him a short time ago to see some
more patients—that he had been struck with paralysis and was now
stone blind nor was there any hope of his recovery. On entering his
room I was struck with horror at his appearance. The livid marks of
death were upon his countenance—his features were so distorted that
the face could scarcely be recognized, the eyes were sunk in the
sockets; and the voice when he spoke dreadfully hollow & sepulchral.
Dr Chapman went up to him felt his pulse, and asked if he knew

David Meredith was born in Philadelphia in 1771 and was a close friend of Dennie’s. He
contributed occasional articles to the Port Folio and was apparently an older brother of
William Meredith.
him—he said he began to see & that he did know him. "And who is that gentleman" said he ["] at the fire place." That is your friend Biddle said Dr Chapman. "Ah my dear Biddle ["] said he as I went up to his bed side and pressed his hand, ["] I am glad to see you. You see what a situation I am in. While I am in this way, my literary pursuits are suspended" pointing to little rows of shelves covered with books which were hung round his room. He then went on to the Doctor who enquired how he felt, saying ["] I am now much better I shall soon be well again in a few days. I think Doctor with your skill I have turned the corner of the disease but today at twelve o’clock I would not have given a pin’s fee for my life. Eh! Doctor you thought me very ill did not you? ["] The Doctor spoke some few flattering words, and then least [sic] he should be fatigued by conversation we left him the Doctor observing to me that he had never seen so great and sudden a change—that his prospects were very favorable, but added that it was very difficult to tell whether this new vigor was owing to a radical change or to the powerful stimuli which he had taken. When we came out I asked Dr Chapman if there was any convenience or luxury which I could give him and which he could not procure. He said he wanted nothing but that if I would bring a little of the old spirit or rum which he had taken on Friday it would answer better than the common spirit which they were using in his medicine. I therefore went home and filling a bottle took it round to him. He was now alone in his room, and as I went in I told him that I had brought him some of the rum he had drunk at our house. He said he was very glad of it—that he had thought of it before, but did not wish to give trouble by asking for it. He was partial to such good old liquors. ["] The common wine which was procured about the country was execrable—and increases the natural tendency of the stomach to turn everything to acid—tavern wine is proverbial. For a person of my habits & constitution generous wine was essential and in future I mean to drink only the very best kind of wine and spirit. ["] I told him he was very right and that I would always supply him with old and good liquor. He had been taking [word missing] and he asked me if it was not one of the strongest of all the vegetable alkalis. I told him it was, and Mr Malcolm now came in & brought some of the drink. We gave him some & he then turned to try to sleep & Mr Malcolm left me with him. It was how-
ever a most unpleasant situation for besides his ghastly appearance he uttered perpetual groans or rather moaning unattended with pain but to the hearer. I sat by the head of his bed and thought him asleep or dozing when suddenly turning to me he said ["] Did you ever read a life of James the 3d of England commonly called The pretender. ["] I asked what life? He said any for he had never seen one Hawkesworth undertook it, and next to Johnson no man in England was better qualified to do it justice but death prevented it. He then said something about Hawkesworth’s works I think and the Adventurer. Mr Malcolm again came in with some drink. We raised him upright and he drank some, but as it was desirable to make him drink as much as he could, we endeavored to persuade him to continue his draughts, but he was impatient, and as we were adjusting his cloathes & urging him to drink he said twice Don’t tease me. He now became restless, and his appearance was altogether dreadful. As we stood by his bedside he began to repeat some lines of poetry, and then repeated in a broken & indistinct manner sitting up in bed, “the fire of genius and the brilliancy of fancy gleam through his pages.” Perceiving that he was becoming wild & desirous of fixing his attention I observed “whose pages Mr Dennie are so brilliant.” He said indistinctly “no one in particular. I wanted a guide post.” His situation now became so alarming that we thought it best to send for Dr Chapman & Mr Malcolm left us to tell some one to go. The Dr soon came and was struck on entering with the change. He now said that there was no hope. After remaining some time fearing lest my own family should be uneasy at my stay I asked the Dr if I should have time to go round before the apprehended catastrophe should take place. On his saying that I should, I ran home—I staid but a short time, and on my returning to the sick room Dr Chapman said to me as I opened the door “He is dead” I went to the bedside, and he gave a sort of sigh, the last fluttering of the lungs, as life escaped for ever. It was the first spectacle of dying mortality that I had seen, and the impression can never be effaced. After I withdrew, Dr Chapman says he asked Mr D if he knew him & he said yes that he saw a face which had never met him but with affection. He then asked him where he felt the pain, and Mr D replied about the perecordia, but

21 John Hawkesworth (c. 1715–1773), English miscellaneous writer, was successor to Dr. Samuel Johnson as compiler of the parliamentary debates for the Gentleman’s Magazine.
being desirous of ascertaining it more precisely he asked at what place—& he said it is at the place you call the pylorus. He soon after sunk down & never spoke again, exhibiting a singular presence of intellect when the lamp of life was just expiring. Of the same kind was his conversation with me relative to Hawkesworth. When I returned with the bottle it was about two o'clock and this conversation was between two & three. It was not four when he died, & this conversation occurred perhaps within an hour of his death when all the powers of nature seemed to have been completely exhausted.

Before I saw him in the morning he had had a conversation with Dr Abercrombie and Mr Wm Meredith on a variety of subjects among which was that of religion. He declared himself to be a zealous & sincere Christian not merely from habit or conformity but serious examinations of the Doctrines of the Saviour. What particularly gratified me when it was told to me by Mr Meredith was, that as they were rising to go away they left orders lest he should be disturbed, that no one should come up to see him. He heard this, and raising himself up, said "If Nicholas Biddle comes let him be admitted." I had besides reason to know how much he was gratified by our connection, & with pleasure he reflected on the kindness which he had received from my family particularly Mrs Craig, and nothing would have given me more delight than to have been instrumental in reclaiming him to good habits, and restoring him to happiness.

At his death the whole responsibility of the P. Folio fell upon myself. This tho' an unexpected labor I could not with propriety, even had I been so disposed, decline and I therefore took the administration into my own hands.

22 William Meredith (1772-1844), lawyer and banker, was Dennie's most consistent benefactor and closest friend in Philadelphia. His wife, Gertrude Gouvernor Ogden Meredith, was also an occasional contributor to the Port Folio.