NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Who Was "Colonel Sidney"?:
A Note on the Meaning of the
October 13, 1681, Penn-Sidney Letter

In 1834, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania published in its Memoirs several letters of William Penn. One of the Society's members, Joshua Francis Fisher, had copied them from originals at John Penn's residence in London. Among the correspondence was a letter addressed to a "Colonel Sidney," dated October 13, 1681. The following passage in it is especially interesting:

I have been ask't by severall, since I came last to town, if Colonel Sidney and I were fallen out, and when I deny'd it, and laught at it; they tould me I was mistaken, and to convince me, stated that he had used me very ill to severall persons, if not companys; saying, I had a good country, but the basest laws in the world, not to be endured or lived under, and that the Turk was not more absolute than I. This made me remember the discourse we had together at my house, about my drawing constitutions not as proposals but as if fixt to the hand. And that as my act, to which the rest were to comply if they would be concerned with me. But withall, I could not but call to mind that the objections were presently complyed with, both by my verbal denyall of all such constructions as the words might bear as if they were imposed and not yet free for debate. And, also, that I took my pen, and immediately altered the termes, so as they corresponded, (and truly, I thought more properly,) with thy objection and sense. Upon this thou didst draw a draught as to the frame of government, gave it me to read, and we discourst it with a considerable argument; it was afterwards called for back by thee to finish and polish, and I suspended proceeding in the business of the government ever since. . . .
Fisher prefixed the letter with the heading “To Algernon Sidney.”

Six years later, however, he changed his mind. In the interim he had uncovered some more Penn correspondence, including a letter unmistakably addressed to Henry Sidney, Algernon’s younger brother. Fisher added a footnote to this letter when it appeared in the 1840 Memoirs: “to [Henry], and not to Algernon, it is believed the letter of William Penn published in the last volume [of the Memoirs] is addressed.”

These were Fisher’s last words on the matter; Henry, not Algernon, had been consulted by Penn when the Pennsylvania Frame of Government was being drafted.

Fisher’s first guess led several historians to link Algernon Sidney and the Frame of Government (some went so far as to name him as the author of the document), but these efforts drew fire from more careful scholars who had noted Fisher’s 1840 reconsideration. Drawing attention to Fisher’s footnote, they argued that whatever debt Penn owed “Colonel Sidney,” the debt was due to Henry, and that reference to Algernon was “clearly erroneous.”

Neither position, to


Algernon Sidney (or Sydney) (1622–1683) was an English patriot and natural rights philosopher. For the most recent treatment of his career see Brigid Haydon, “Algernon Sydney, 1623–1683,” Archaeologia Cantiana, LXXVI (1961), 110ff. The author thanks Professors William Sachse and David Lovejoy, both of the University of Wisconsin, and the members of their 1965-1966 graduate seminars, for thoughtful criticism in the preparation of this paper.


date, has been satisfactorily established, and, as Caroline Robbins has written, the whole matter "deserves further attention."4

Henry Sidney, created Earl of Romney in 1694, was a skilled courtier who ingratiated himself with three successive monarchs, and had long been a friend of Penn. Henry was never known as a political theorist. Algernon, on the other hand, was remembered as one who had "studied the history of government in all its branches beyond any man" in his age.5 Both men were referred to as "colonel."

In the October 13, 1681, letter Penn wrote of having "given so much occasion to them that hate us, to laugh at me for more true friendship and steady kindness than I have been guilty of, to any man I know liveing." In spite of Penn's professed friendship for Henry, this passage would appear to describe the close relationship that existed between Penn and Algernon since the two first met in 1678. In 1679 and 1680, Penn had campaigned vigorously, and unsuccessfully, for Algernon in Algernon's two bids for a seat in Commons, and on one occasion the two joined forces in a vain attempt to prevent the election of Henry Sidney! These embarrassing setbacks must have given "much occasion" to Penn's enemies to "laugh at" his discomfiture. At no time had Penn done for Henry what he had done for Algernon in the English hustings.6

In the October 13, 1681, letter Penn complained of Colonel Sidney's having "used me very ill . . . saying . . . the Turk was not more absolute than I." Henry was known by his contemporaries to be a man "of sweet and caressing temper, with no malice in his heart," whereas Algernon's "overruling Temper and Height" and "churlish humor" offended many. And Algernon was not above

comparing people to the "Ottoman."? The description and conduct of "Colonel Sidney" would appear to fit Algernon more than Henry. Moreover, in the letter in question, Penn referred to a "discourse we had together at my house." No evidence could be found that Henry Sidney visited Penn at Worminghurst, but a 1679 letter from Penn to Algernon included an invitation for Algernon to "lye . . . with us at Worminghurst." 8

In a 1683 letter to Henry Sidney Penn praised Henry's "good-nature" and friendship, and noted that his regard for Henry "hath not wandered in any one respect." He added, "I know not if your brothers are on so good terms or allyance with me, that I may remember myself to them." 9 Henry's brothers were Algernon and Philip, Earl of Leicester. There is no evidence of correspondence between Penn and Leicester, and even if there were, Penn would never have referred to the earl as "Colonel Sidney." Clearly, Penn and Algernon had "fallen out" sometime between 1680 and 1683. Once again, the evidence indicates that it was Algernon to whom the 1681 letter was addressed, that it was Algernon who "didst draw a draught as to the frame of government," that it was Algernon who had accused Penn of having settled on "the basest laws in the world."

The meaning of the letter is clear. Sidney's "objections" had been disregarded, and he, like Thomas Rudyard, Benjamin Furley, George Hutchison, and Jasper Batt, was gravely disappointed. Gary Nash has recently given us a persuasive account of Penn's shift to an economic and political conservatism in order to attract wealthy Quakers to invest in his new colony. 10


8 Sydney Letters and Memorials, I, 154.

9 Memoirs of the Historical Soc. of Pa., IV, Pt. 1, 174–177. The last word in this quotation is actually "him," not "them," according to the original manuscript at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

10 Gary Nash, "The Framing of Government in Pennsylvania: Ideas in Contact with Reality," William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series, XXIII (1966), 183–209. I have compared Algernon Sidney's handwriting with the various frames of government in the William Penn manuscripts at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in an attempt to locate the draft dis-
settled on by 1682, the Governor and Council drafted all legislation; the lower chamber was left with little more than a right to consent, was denied the right to elect its own speaker, and was permitted to meet for only nine days a year. In short, the Pennsylvania Frame of Government of 1682 was no more democratic or "liberal" than John Locke's Carolina Constitution.

Algernon Sidney and William Penn had been close friends prior to October, 1681; both had displayed the "liberalism" of the natural rights "Classical Republican." But by October, 1681, Penn had retreated pragmatically to less "liberal," and more profitable, political precepts. Sidney continued to reject a political imbalance that favored King and Lords at the expense of Commons, and busied himself with his Discourses Concerning Government and with a mysterious "Project to settle the government of East Jersey." In company with Lord William Russell, the Duke of Monmouth, John Hampden the Younger, and others, Sidney conspired to overthrow the government of Charles II. For this he perished on the scaffold in December, 1683. Two months later, Penn wrote from his new colony to Lawrence Hyde, Earl of Rochester, the favorite of Charles II, to reassure Rochester of the Quaker's "unfactious and peaceable principles," and to berate "the madness and folly of some evill and restless men," among them, by inference, Colonel Algernon Sidney.

cussed in the Oct. 13, 1681, letter. Of the drafts in the William Penn Mss., VIII, 49-149, those on folios 80-81 and 82-83 show some resemblance to Sidney's handwriting, but the similarity is not sufficient to maintain positive identification. It is entirely possible, of course, that Penn, irritated by Sidney's criticism, destroyed Sidney's draft.


12 In July, 1683, the English Privy Council investigated a plot to assassinate the royal brothers. In the course of this investigation a certain Colonel Rumsey referred to a coded plan of revolution, couched in the language of a written constitution, fashioned by Colonel Algernon Sidney. As Rumsey reported it: "England was called East-Jersey, the proprietors meant the lords and the assembly the commons. Chimney money was to be abolished, the parliament to sit a certain time, etc. . . . the title of the paper was 'A Project to settle the government of East Jersey.'" Robert Ferguson carried this proposal to Monmouth, Rumsey explained. Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, July-Sept. 1683 (London, 1860), 54-57. Rumsey's account may have been accurate; or he may have mistaken a genuine draft of the frame of government for East Jersey to be camouflage for what was being planned in England.

Penn's 1681 letter obviously should not be read, as William Hepworth Dixon and others read it, as an indication of Sidney's influence on Penn's first Frame of Government for Pennsylvania. On the contrary, it indicates that when Penn moved to lessen the power of the lower chamber of his proposed colony he lost the respect of one of the more illustrious seventeenth-century natural rights philosophers. The letter should provide some solace, then, to those disappointed by John Milton's *Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* and John Locke's role in the drafting of the Carolina Constitution. Algernon Sidney's rejection of Penn's first Frame of Government, and the little that is known of his own curious "Project to settle the government of East Jersey," ought to please those who may have concluded that "Whig" theory and "Whig" practice were always, quite literally, oceans apart.

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**The Professor and The Quack**

In the nineteenth century, distinctions between traditional medical therapy and quack remedies were often blurred. The ever popular "Metallic Tractors" devised by the outcast Connecticut physician Dr. Elisha Perkins were obviously fraudulent. His medical colleagues rightly scoffed at the supposed curative powers of a pair of three-inch metal rods made of brass and iron.¹ But the great Theophile Laennec, inventor of the stethoscope, advocated treating patients suffering from angina pectoris, a common heart ailment, by the application of two strong, oval-shaped magnets; one to the chest and the other to the back.²

Given these unsettled conditions, it is not surprising that an entirely respectable physician, Nathaniel Chapman (1780–1853), Professor of the Theory and Practice of Medicine at the Medical

School of the University of Pennsylvania, future first president of the American Medical Society, and often celebrated as the "unquestioned head" of the Philadelphia medical profession, should be involved in a quackery imbroglio.\footnote{Robley Dunglison, MSS Ana, Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, IV, 553; Irwin Richman, "Nathaniel Chapman, M.D.," Pennsylvania Medicine, LXIX (1966), 58.}

Chapman became ensnared in this twilight zone existing between orthodoxy and credulity by his endorsement of a patent medicine manufactured by William Swaim, a prince of the charlatans. A harnessmaker or bookbinder in New York, Swaim, according to the many versions of the tale, either found the recipe for his "Panacea" in an old book he was rebinding or obtained it as a prescription from a physician.\footnote{James Harvey Young, The Toadstool Millionaires (Princeton, 1961), 58.} But by whatever means he got the formula, he knew what to do with it; he manufactured and promoted "Swaim's Panacea"—one of the most lucrative of the early nineteenth-century patent medicines.

Employing the informational booklet as one of his major advertising gimmicks, he modestly entitled the 1824 edition \textit{A Treatise on Swaim's Panacea; Being a Patent Discovery for the Cure of Scrofula or King's Evil Mercurial Diseases, Deep-Seated Syphilis, Rheumatism, and All Disorders Arising from a Contaminated or Impure State of the Blood.}

What were the ingredients of the Panacea? Essentially sarsaparilla syrup mixed with oil of wintergreen flavoring. Swaim explained his preparation's name: "With respect to the use of the term Panacea as the title of his medicine, there is, in fact, nothing ostentatious or empirical in this designation. It has been often employed, both by the ancients and moderns in the restricted sense of a remedy for a large class of diseases, and not in its literal and more comprehensive meaning. The Proprietor of the present remedy has never deemed nor really styled it an universal specific: but he became convinced that it was applicable to a greater variety of morbid cases than any other of which he had heard or read; and he thought himself therefore entitled to invest it with the name which would best express its peculiar merit, and under which it had been common to announce and distribute what was alleged or held to possess a similar character."\footnote{William Swaim, \textit{A Treatise on Swaim's Panacea} (Philadelphia, 1824), vii.}
The patent-medicine man knew the value of the testimonial: "In order to make fully known in what estimation Swaim's Panacea is held by the medical profession, the proprietor subjoins certificates from gentlemen, who in their private as well as public characters, are deservedly ranked among the brightest ornaments of our country." Swaim admitted that at first a number of Philadelphia medical men were skeptical of the Panacea, but they soon came to see its value.6

The brightest of the city's ornaments heartily endorsed the "Panacea." "I have within the last two years," Chapman wrote on February 16, 1823, "had an opportunity of seeing several cases of very inveterate ulcers, which, having resisted previously the regular modes of treatment, were healed by the use of Mr. Swaim's PANACEA; and I do believe, from what I have seen that it will prove an important remedy in scrofulous, venereal, and mercurial diseases." So influential, indeed, was Chapman's testimonial, that one of Swaim's imitators had the nerve to pirate the doctor's good words as an advertisement for "Shinn's Panacea."

Dr. William Potts Dewees "witnesses the most decided and happy effects in several instances of inveterate disease from Mr. Swaim's Panacea." Dr. William Gibson "Employed the PANACEA . . . and . . . always found it extremely efficacious, especially in secondary syphilis and in mercurial disease." Drs. James Mease, Thomas Parke (President of the College of Physicians), and Alexander Knight (Port Physician of Philadelphia) were others who praised the medicine.7 If the city's medical men could endorse the Panacea, so certainly could the institutions which they controlled.

What, we could ask (Swaim wrote), "can a greater proof of the estimation in which it is held by the profession of medicine, than to know that some of the cures were considered so extraordinary in character, that they were exhibited in the University of Pennsylvania, as wonders in the healing art? What can be a greater proof of its utility, than to know that it is recommended by some who stand in the most exhalted [sic] rank in the profession of Medicine? What can be more satisfactory to the public than to know that it is used in two public institutions in this city . . . the PENNSYLVANIA HOSPITAL and the PHILADELPHIA ALMS HOUSE. . . ."8

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6 Ibid., 5.
7 Ibid., 8-10.
8 Ibid., 14-15.
Swaim waxed rich, but the proverbial fly soon appeared in the ointment (or the panacea). Ugly rumors spread that some batches of the brew contained poisonous corrosive sublimate (mercuric chloride). The medical profession was also growing increasingly uneasy because Swaim's extensive use of physicians' testimonials tended to suggest that all practitioners approved of the Panacea. On June 16, 1827, the Philadelphia Medical Society appointed a committee made up of Drs. William Horner (chairman), Thomas Harris, Joseph Klapp, Charles D. Meigs, and John Bell to study the "remedial value of the more prominent specifics now sold in Philadelphia, under the assumed name of Panacea, Catholicon, Minervia Pill & C. . . ."

Especially concentrating on Swaim's Panacea, the newly established body sent questionnaires to the city's practitioners, asking for a clarification of "the sense in which the physicians, who gave their certificates in favor of the Panacea intended their evidence to be received." The effects of the inquiry were almost instantaneous, and a more rapid about-face by a group of reputable physicians who had earlier, in good faith, endorsed Swaim's Panacea could not be imagined. On September 29, 1827, Chapman led the procession of the repentant. He acknowledged "having 'over rated the value of the panacea of Swaim,' and 'for a long period' he has entirely ceased to prescribe it,'—says he is in possession [sic] of not a few cases, which, if desired, are at the committee's service, and 'eminently calculated to alarm the public on this subject.'" Gibson and Dewees also considerably modified their earlier views.

The institutions joined the medical men in recanting the heresy. The Philadelphia Alms House admitted using sixty-three bottles of the nostrum, but asserted that since January 20, 1825, "there has not one drop been purchased for the use of said institution." The Pennsylvania Hospital blamed Dr. William Price for its lapse from the straight and narrow: "The cause of Dr. Price's admiration of the Panacea need not be dwelt on at present. It is sufficient to remark that he went to Europe, in the year 1823, as agent of Swaim for vending and distribution of the Panacea."}

10 Ibid., 3-7.
The *First Report of the Committee of the Philadelphia Medical Society on Quack Medicines*, published in 1828, armed with new quotations from repentant physicians and anti-Panacea case histories attacked Swaim. Never one to be caught short, the patent-medicine man answered the Committee’s thirty-seven-page attack with a fifty-two-page rebuttal in which he boldly reprinted the original testimonials of the recanting physicians. It would be heartening to report that the committee’s attack spelled doom for the panacea, but like “truth” in Mrs. Howe’s stirring song, it “went marching on” into the twentieth century!

An interesting footnote may be added to Chapman’s public role with Swaim’s Panacea. Although he had admitted overrating its value, six years later he was willing to prescribe the medicine. However, he stressed that it be prepared somewhat differently and he warned against ill-effects which occasionally resulted from the way Swaim manufactured the dosage. In April, 1833, he wrote his brother-in-law, General Thomas Cadwalader, as follows:

> “I send you the formula of Swaim’s Panacea, which he originally procured from Professor McNeven [Dr. William James MacNeven] of New York. It is taken from the French Pharmacopoeia & is called in that work ‘Syrap de Cuisinier.’ [Chapman then lists the contents of the Panacea.] These ingredients are made into a syrup in the common mode, and when deemed useful some corrosive sublimate is added, and the dose is a wine glassful three times a day. I have found this syrup preferable to the Panacea, since the latter is prepared in such quantities that the ingredients are unequally divided, some parcels being too [ ? ] and others inert. Besides which, Swaim puts in too much mercury, which in some cases is [ ? ], and I have repeatedly known the [undecipherable disease] to result from the use of his medicines. Whatever the Panacea can do will be better done by the Syrap de Cuisinier. Comparative trials in our public & private practice have demonstrated the fact.”

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11 Young, 65–66.  
12 Nathaniel Chapman to Thomas Cadwalader, Apr. 1, 1833, Thomas Cadwalader Papers, Box 10, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.