Poetical Descriptions of Pennsylvania in the Early National Period

At the end of the Revolution Americans wanted to create a national literature and be as independent of England culturally as they were politically. But in the face of conventions and standards decreed immutable by men of good taste everywhere, be they English or American, such independence was difficult to achieve. Most of the prose and poetry turned out by Americans in the years following the Treaty of Paris is scarcely distinguishable in quality, form, or subject matter from the productions of their cousins overseas. In poetry especially, neoclassic rules and proprieties enforced barren and stereotyped performances. One of the few poetic forms that encouraged any real originality was the so-called “local,” or topographical, genre, defined by Dr. Samuel Johnson as a “species of composition . . . of which the fundamental subject is some particular landscape, to be poetically described, with the addition of such embellishments as may be supplied by historical retrospection, or incidental meditation.” With official sanction from the high priests of neoclassicism, American poets began turning out relatively large amounts of poetry marked by a “spirit of place,” evidently believing that indigenous subject matter would in itself make their poetry reflect what Americans really saw and felt and not merely imitate what Britons saw and felt.

Since Philadelphia was the literary, political, and commercial capital of the new federation, it is not surprising that Pennsylvania should lead the other states as a subject for descriptive poets trying

1 Lord Kames, the Scotch rhetorician who greatly influenced American tastes of the early national period, decreed that men of good sense everywhere agree upon universal standards of excellence in art. His Elements of Criticism (1762) appeared in at least nine American editions between 1796 and 1835. See William Charvat, The Origins of American Critical Thought (Philadelphia, 1936).
to particularize their effusions. Although much of this poetry specifies the location in the title only—the body of the poem being just another insipid pastoral in praise of rural retirement—it is nevertheless worthy of examination if only for what it reveals of those aspects of city and country life that poets found most interesting. And they found much that was interesting, whether surveying prospects from their favorite hill, flattering the owners of picturesque estates, memorializing towns and regions, recounting their travels, or advertising the beauties of rivers and waterfalls.

Philadelphia itself appeared rather frequently as the subject of "town" poems. As a subspecies of topographical poetry, the town poem was influenced greatly by the popularity of Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village," which swept through late eighteenth-century America as an outstanding example of strictly contemporary verse. Goldsmith's delineation of rural villages as "bowers of innocence and ease" held obvious appeal to American readers, who seized avidly upon any poetry which developed the theme of rural contentment. Although by the late eighteenth century Philadelphia had far outgrown the status of a rural village, poetic convention nevertheless demanded that the poet extol rural contentment over urban pleasures. Reference to the city therefore provided occasion for a city-country contrast. In the anonymous "Written After a Visit to Philadelphia," the poet delights at being home once again in the country:

Escap'd from fashion's gaudy haunts,
Where dissipation frolics round,
Where mirth her bright allurement chaunts,
And pleasure thrills her joyous sound:

Escap'd from these—how dear the scene
Where oft I've passed the thoughtful hours!
Where blest retirement, mild, serene,
Awakes reflection's noblest powers.

2 Of 187 topographical poems uncovered in my survey of American magazines and books between 1783 and 1812, forty-five describe Pennsylvania; New York is second with thirty-seven. Consult the complete checklist in Bulletin of Bibliography, XXV (September-December, 1966), 8-13, and (January-April, 1967), 35-36, 39.

3 Western Missionary Magazine and Repository of Religious Intelligence, I (1805), 479-480. This poem and others cited in the following footnotes were often reprinted within the period 1783-1812; only initial publication data is herein given.

4 Besides Philadelphia, Bethlehem and Colebrookdale were subjects of town poems exploiting the rural retirement theme. The only specific allusions in the text of either poem are
Even when writers of town poetry managed to steer clear of the well-worn theme of rural contentment, they often foundered in the Slough of Despond and abandoned themselves to moods of sentimental self-pity. In a poem dated "Philadelphia, June 8, 1792," the beauty of evening as seen from a prospect overlooking the Delaware inspires "Ella" to strike a mood of restrained sadness:

Day slow retreats on showery wing,
And Evening climbs the eastern skies,
The hovering vapours round the shores arise,
Or to the tall rock's frowzy summit cling:
  The hum of busy care is done,
  A welcome respite twilight brings;
And in the ear of Labour's son,
The lulling song of Quiet sings.
All, all is still and peaceful as the grave
Save where the Delaware's distant billows roar,
When driven by rushing gales, the yielding wave
Throws its white waters on the echoing shore.
Hark!—the shrill Quail with deep swoln note
Breaks the dumb silence of the scene;
The waking breezes sullen round it float,
Fold their soft wings, and sink to rest again.  

Unfortunately the quiet pensiveness of the opening is not sustained and the poem degenerates into trite bromides on the theme of solace in nature. The reader soon learns that the poet's heart is "surcharg'd with grief" and that she finds the silence and growing darkness furnish a "balm" and "sweet relief" for her sad heart. Well she knows the power of evening silence while she wanders weeping and in vain suppressing "the big sigh" called forth by memories of "all my heart holds dear."

A well-known landmark in Philadelphia—the Gloria Dei, or Old Swedes, Church—provided the setting for an interesting "graveyard" poem that sermonizes on the vanity of human wishes. Thomas Gray's popular and influential "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" (1751) furnished the model for hundreds of English and American
poems in which melancholy sentiments on life, death, and immortality were uttered amid mortuary landscapes. In England Gothic churches and mouldering castles generally furnished the paraphernalia for "graveyard" gloom. Americans, lacking such ancient and decayed structures, more often than not used as settings the "ruins" of the natural world—mountains, precipices, and wilderness tracts. The Old Swedes, or "Church of Wicacoe," was, however, already old enough to furnish "Sylvia" with the conventional trappings to accompany her thoughts on mutability.6

The time is evening as "Sylvia," walking in the graveyard, contemplates the church building—"the gothic-pile, whose hospitable door/ First woo'd religion to this savage shore. . . ." After establishing the "solemn stillness of this pensive scene," "Sylvia" summons personified Truth and Religion (who abide in the church) to preach to her on the vanities of pride and ambition. Even if, they caution, her "wildest wish" should come true, she will yet find herself in the grave. No one escapes, and even the hands "which held despotic sway o'er half mankind" have perished. Better be an "untutor'd savage of the wild" than a ruler consumed with the passions of "mad ambition." The reference to the noble savage as exemplar of virtue and peace of mind is not the only device by which "Sylvia" delineates the good life. A ghostly voice from "heaven's own choir" speaks ex cathedra on the virtues of sensibility and benevolence. "Once," the voice claims,

I trod this vale of life,
Engag'd in all its active cares and strife;
Condem'n, for sixty years to go
A painful journey thro' this vale of woe;
Till heaven, in mercy, sign'd the wish'd release,

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Yet think not heaven shall e'er its joys bestow
On those who meanly thus their toils forego,
Let not such dreams delude your youthful hearts;
You in the world must take allotted parts;
Must tread, with dignity, the varied scene,

6 "Lines Occasioned by the Writer's Walking One Summer's Evening in the Graveyard of the Church of Wicacoe, in the Southern Environs of the City of Philadelphia . . .," Universal Asylum, and Columbian Magazine, VII (August, 1791), 121-123.
And keep your souls unstained, your minds serene.
Go chace [sic] each selfish passion from your breasts,

Extend your social love, till it shall bind,
In its delightful chain, all human kind;
Go, and exert your softest, sweetest powers,
To gladden with delight a parent's hours:
By every tender office, go improve
The binding ties of fond parental love.
Go watch the sick-bed of some parting friend.

Go wipe from misery's eye the falling tear . . .

Michael Forrest in *Travels through America,* which in thirty-six pages of heroic couplets covers the seaboard from Boston to Charleston, naturally gives much attention to his stopover in Philadelphia. If his poetry is simple-minded, he at least has his eye on the object, as demonstrated by his apostrophe upon approaching the city by stage from Baltimore:

Hail Philadelphia! I now behold
Thy regularity, as I've been told;

The streets are wide, and in a line direct;
The angles right where they do intersect;
The footway pav'd nicely with bricks and tiles,
From north to south, nearly two English miles;
And from both rivers to the centre street,
Nam'd, first, second, and so on till they meet . . .

The inanity of these lines is almost matched by his description of youths swimming in the Schuylkill "void of those robes which Eden did disdain" and by the sentimentalism of his expression of grief in losing his only brother while in the city:

Oft have I to the lonely fields retir'd,
To pay a tribute nature oft requir'd.
The gloomy rocks, and desolates unknown,
Have often heard my solitary moan.

It turns out that his brother's death had been a false report! But this fails to stop Forrest from moralizing on the need to meet grief with equanimity, before he leaves for Bordentown on a stage boat.

7 (Philadelphia, 1793).
Probably the best known short poem about Philadelphia to be published during the period 1783–1812 was “Farewell to Philadelphia” by the English poet Thomas Moore, who purportedly sent the verses to the admiring editor Joseph Dennie while en route to New York after a visit in the city. Though personal in tone, his verse lacks the substance and originality to lift it above mediocrity. Yet its display of introspection puts it in the category of “pre-Romantic” poetry, in which subjectivity predominates over neoclassic decorum. Adopting the role of a solitary wanderer, the poet recalls his kind reception while visiting the city and pictures himself strolling by the Schuylkill and gazing “with a sigh” at its “flowery banks.”

The ornithologist Alexander Wilson published in magazines of this period at least two poems with settings in Philadelphia. In “The Invitation” he invites his friend Charles Orr to share in the beauty of the countryside around Gray’s Ferry, and while on walks together to think of suffering kindred abroad. And in “A Rural Walk” he describes his friend William Bartram’s “hospitable dome.” Bartram had befriended Wilson when he arrived, penniless, to teach at Kingsessing, and Wilson wrote a part of his great _American Ornithology_ while living on the Bartram estate. Both poems contain extensive catalogues of flora and fauna, and Joseph Dennie, in a headnote to “A Rural Walk” when it appeared in the _Port Folio_, praised Wilson for discovering fresh materials indigenous to American nature:

He delights in pictures of American scenery and landscape and wisely, therefore, leaves to European poets their Nightingales and Skylarks, and their dingles and dells. He makes no mention of yews and myrtles, nor echoes a single note of either Bullfinch or Chaffinch, but faithfully describes American objects...
Certainly Wilson’s close observation results in catalogues that astound the average reader. In “The Invitation” are listed “the flow’r-fed humming-bird,” the “orange Baltimore,” the “tyrant kingbird,” as well as owls, crickets, frogs, “kitty-dids,” “flashing fireflies,” and a woodpecker attacking a black snake. In “A Rural Walk” the trees alone are impressive—cedars, spicewood, hickories, walnuts, dogwood, chinkapin, sloes, catalpas, magnolias, peach, pears. If the tendency to “describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest” is characteristic of the Romantic poet, then Wilson is a Romantic, for his specificity is remarkable in an age when neoclassic regard for universals still predominated. Of course, the Bartram farm, location of the first and still one of the most impressive botanical gardens in America, offered the poet almost an infinite variety of nature as material for poetry. In fact, in “A Rural Walk” the poet admits that some of the plants are too exotic for his pen:

Unnumber’d plants and shrubb’ry sweet,
Adorning still the circling year,
Whose names the muse can ne’er repeat,
Display their mingling blossoms here.

One interesting result of Wilson’s tendency to particularize is a vivid prospect of Philadelphia as seen from a “woodland path” leading to the Bartram estate. Emerging from the “dark sequester’d path” among cedars into a clearing, the poet surveys the scene:

Rich waving fields of yellow grain,
Green pastures, shelter’d cots and farms,
Gay glittering domes bestrew’d the plain,
A noble group of rural charms.

A wide-extended waste of wood
Beyond in distant prospect lay,
Where Delaware’s majestic flood
Shone like the radiant orb of day.

Down to the left was seen afar
The whiten’d spire of sacred name\(^\text{13}\)
And ars’nal, where the god of war
Has hung his spears of bloody fame.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{13}\) Christ Church, Second St. near Market.
\(^{14}\) Schuylkill Arsenal at Gray’s Ferry Road.
The city's painted skirts were seen,
Through clouds of smoke ascending high,
While on the Schuylkill's glassy scene
Canoes and sloops were heard to ply.

There upward where it gently bends,
And Say's red fortress tow'rs in view,\textsuperscript{15}
The floating bridge its length extends
A living scene for ever new.

The allusion to Gray's Ferry bridge in this formal prospect description suggests another poem, published anonymously, that similarly describes the area around Gray's, or Lower, Ferry across the Schuylkill. "Verses upon Gray's Ferry" paints another prospect; such panoramic surveys were a common feature of topographical and other descriptive poems of the period.\textsuperscript{16} Some were quite clearly depicted, as in "A Rural Walk," and others, like this one, were less accurately drawn:

And Schuylkill here in gentle murmur glides:
Above the rest two rocks of equal size,
With their aspiring fronts assail the skies;
The one ascended, yields the glorious sight,
Where Delaware and Schuylkill's streams unite:
The other [rock] by the hand of art array'd,
Affords a mansion's shelter and a forest's shade.

\[\ldots\]
Beyond these rocks, the vale obliquely bends
To where the woodland's airy mount ascends \ldots \textsuperscript{17}

The gardens, or "pleasure grounds," located at the west approach to Gray's Ferry, were celebrated in verse by the Philadelphia Congressman John Swanwick. Reading like copy from a modern

\textsuperscript{15} Dr. Benjamin Say's house at Gray's Ferry.

\textsuperscript{16} The hill, or prospect, poem established the topographical genre. Sir John Denham's "Cooper's Hill" (1642) was so widely imitated as to initiate a distinct species of descriptive poetry. Although many of the poems on Pennsylvania uncovered in this study contain set prospect descriptions, only one was found wholly organized around a hilltop view. And in its prolific use of vapid pastoral conventions it reveals nothing of interest about the area it purports to describe. See Francis Hopkinson, "Extempore Verses from the Top of Mount Parnassus, a Lofty Hill in Lancaster County," \textit{The Miscellaneous Essays and Occasional Writings of Francis Hopkinson, Esq.} (Philadelphia, 1792), III, 112-113.

\textsuperscript{17} "Verses upon Gray's Ferry," \textit{Columbian Magazine}, I (August, 1787), 607.
press agent, the quatrains celebrate the pleasures to be found at George Gray's woodland retreat, long the goal of summer excursionists. Everybody—"sober old matron," "sprightly young lass," merchant, sailor, beau, doctor, lawyer—goes to "the garden of Grays." There they will find Nature and Art in balance, an arrangement demanded by neoclassic aesthetic dicta. The poem closes with a panegyric to George Washington, who was a frequent visitor to the Gardens:

And thou, noble Chieftain, whose valour in arms,  
Forever shall crown thee with bays,  
Descend for a moment, and view all the charms  
Prepar'd for thy landing at Gray's.

"The Beauties of Harrowgate" by the bookseller William Prichard extolled another well-known Philadelphia resort with the same kind of extravagant praise as that lavished on Gray's Garden. Advertisements for the resort abound in slogans such as "Let England, Bath or Buxton's charms relate,/ We Philadelphians praise sweet Harrowgate" and "Hither the gen'rous and the gay repair,—/ Sip the clear wave, and breathe salubrious air." The two foregoing poems illustrate a popular subspecies of the topographical genre—spa, or watering-place, poetry—that flourished with the rise of spas as commercial ventures. Perhaps "resort" would be a better label than "spa," for it was of little account to poets whether the establishment actually featured a mineral spring; pleasant landscaping and gaiety of clientele lured them more than healthful mineral waters. What one authority suggests about Harrowgate—"more a road house than a health resort"—must have been true for most such places.

18 "Lines Written at a Country Seat near This City, on Seeing Croud[sic] Passing to the so justly Celebrated Garden of Messrs Grays," Poems on Several Occasions (Philadelphia, 1797), 102-104.
19 "The Beauties of Harrowgate" in [John Parke] Lyric Works of Horace, Translated into English Verse; to Which Are Added a Number of Original Poems (Philadelphia, 1786), 318-319. In another version of the poem, appearing a year later, the diction was considerably revised, evidently with the aim of making it less obviously "poetic." For instance, "clear wave" was changed to "clear stream" and "salubrious air" to "purer air."
20 Bath, in England, was the subject of several "distinguished" topographical poems. See R. A. Aubin, Topographical Poetry in XVIII-Century England (New York, 1936), 162-163.
Pennsylvania furnished numerous examples of estate poetry, another highly stereotyped topographical subspecies. Like "spa" poems, the "estate" poem generally contains effusive panygeric and elaborate descriptions of landscaping in which Art and Nature complement each other. The anonymous sonnet "On a Country Seat near the City of Philadelphia" exhibits the standardized product:

Here the smooth lawn its verdant bosom spreads;  
And white in aether storied walls ascend;  
Majestic trees uplift their leafy heads,  
And with wide arms the storied walls defend.  
Bright as the gems that deck the throne of night,  
Fair as the rainbow in the showery skies,  
Unnumbered floral forms imbibe the light,  
And wide in air the breath of fragrance flies.  
Fruits mock the golden tints of morn, and glow;  
And blushing orchards wave their tresses green;  
Birds warble, zephyrs fan, rills murmuring flow;  
And peace and plenty crown the beauteous scene.  
For F*****t here delights to tread the plain,  
And Art and Nature mingle in his train.\textsuperscript{22}

This poem was evidently too hackneyed and too full of hyperbole even for poetry-starved Philadelphians, for it inspired a parody a week later in the same magazine. The irreverence of the parody—and parodies of descriptive poems were rare in this period—provides a welcome relief from the pompous rhetoric that beclouds so many early American poems, but as a parody it fails largely because it too closely mocks the original:

And discord marks the dark tumultuous scene.  
For rudeness here delights to tread the plain,  
Nor Art nor Culture mingle in his train.\textsuperscript{23}

William Hamilton's "The Woodlands," overlooking the Schuylkill near Gray's Ferry, was a natural subject for an elaborate estate

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Weekly Magazine}, I (Mar. 31, 1798), 285. The reference is evidently to Col. Thomas Forrest whose countryseat, "Pomona Grove" on Germantown Ave., was notable for its fruit trees. S. F. Hotchkin, \textit{Ancient and Modern Germantown ...} (Philadelphia, 1889), 181, 184.  
poem. Known as one of the most beautiful country seats in America, it was described by one “Laura” in an 1809 issue of the *Port Folio.*

In alluding to the renowned gardens on the estate, the poet manages considerable flattery of Hamilton:

> Rear’d by his care, unnumber’d balmy sweets,  
> The gladden’d eye in gay confusion meets.  
> The flow’ry treasures of each distant land,  
> Collected, cherish’d by his fostering hand;  
> And all the produce of the varying year,  
> Profusely scattered at his wish appear.

On the grounds one finds a standard feature of eighteenth-century estates—a “Shenstone’s urn,” surrounded by mourning naiads. Evidently this ornament of landscaping is evidence to the poet that “classic pleasures reign” at the Woodlands. Inside the mansion hang paintings that indicate the owner’s “Taste.” One shows a god pursuing a fleeing maiden and another—according to the poet “the most beautiful in the collection”—shows the figure of Night, “with starry robe and silver bow,” shedding “her mild lustre on the calm below.”

Two other famous Philadelphia estates received their due during the early days of the Republic. “The Grange,” on the Schuylkill, the seat of the wealthy John Ross, featured all the adornments of the landscaper’s art: “crescent-seats,” “embroider’d walks,” “pansied bowers,” “moss-clad grotto’s, founts, and cool alcoves.” The walk skirting the hilltop seemed particularly contrived to evoke the picturesque:

> Yon *mazy* walk which overlooks the vale,  
> . . . skirts, in graceful curves, the rural *steep,*  
> Where jasmines twine and sadden’d willows weep,  
> Where flowers adorn, where shrubs perfume the way  
> And nodding poplars check the blaze of day.

The poet discloses that “such lone haunts” as one finds on the estate make excellent retreats for studying the stars (“the glories of the stellar way”), reading poetry (“enwrapt o’er [Erasmus] Darwin’s

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matchless line"), or struggling with chemistry ("tho' chemic mazes . . . with Lavoisier"). The Lemon Hill estate, built by Robert Morris and later owned by Henry Pratt, was described in the *Port Folio* in rhymed couplets that form a series of estate-poetry clichés: the picturesque prospect, the Art-Nature contrast, the formal panegyric, and, as something extra, an apostrophe to the Schuylkill:

> Romantic stream! though still unknown in song,  
> Thy name shall yet inspire the poet's tongue.  
> The votive lay, by some enraptur'd bard,  
> In sweetly flowing accents shall be heard;  
> Not lov'd Scamander's fairer fame shall crown,  
> Or Ganges, boast a more diffus'd renown.  

In most estate poems the panegyric is so formal and the expression of personal emotion is so restrained that whatever other weaknesses the poem might display maudlin sentimentality is not one of them. But with the gradual shift in taste toward "romantic" subjectivity, poets increasingly indulged their feelings. The opening lines of an estate poem published in 1805 reveals this tendency:

> Why, tranquil mansion, does the heaving sigh  
> Arise half smother'd, from its troubled seat:  
> Why stands the drop, big swelling in the eye,  
> When fate compels me from your lov'd retreat?  

Having established a mood of sad reminiscence, the poet recalls scenes through "imagination's eye" that "never shall return." Often, until late at night "in these lone walls," he and his friend "G——n" had studied "the learned dead" as "Contemplation" culled "the labour'd page." Sometimes the poet grew weary of his studies and relaxed with lighter reading, substituting the poet James Thomson and the novelist Sterne for the "stern quaintness" of Coke and the "dullness" of Bacon. Thus passed the days until his companion was sent away, ending this friendship of "kindred souls." Now only memories remain as solace.

26 L. [anon.], "A sketch of Lemon-Hill, the Summer Residence of H——P——,", *Port Folio*, II (Dec. 25, 1802), 408.
27 Headley [pseud.], "Lines Occasioned by the Author's Leaving the Hermitage," *Port Folio*, V (June 15, 1805), 184.
Another maudlin estate poem anticipates the sentimentality of "Home, Sweet Home" and "My Old Kentucky Home." Nineteenth-century Americans delighted in expressions of love of home, and this short poem skillfully mingles glorification of the old home place with childhood memories and the search for solace in nature:

And must I quit these fields belov'd so long,
This lawn so fragrant with it's circling flowers,
Where oft' a train of youthful friends among,
Careless and gay I've passed the flying hours?

This social hearth, by memory held most dear,
Alas! no friendly circles now surround,
No dear familiar faces now appear,
But unknown voices through the roofs resound.

Ah, though no more for me the rolling year
Shall bid these landscapes with fresh beauty shine,
Thy shades, O Alveston! shall still be dear,
And still retrace the joys that have been mine.²⁸

If the estate poem is the most inept of the topographical subclasses, the most diffuse is the region or district poem, which describes areas as extensive as entire countries and as limited as river valleys.²⁹ As the extent of the area described narrows, the type becomes confused with other topographical subclasses, and the broader the scope of such poems, usually the more conventional and stereotyped their features. The travelogue technique, which marks the longer poems, produces a melange of features, most of which appear in Philip Freneau's The Rising Empire, a series of eight poems that satirize and describe states of the eastern seaboard. "Pennsylvania"

²⁸ [Anon.], "Lines of the House at Alveston Changing it's [sic] Possessors," Port Folio, V (July 20, 1805), 224. The location described in this and the preceding poem cannot be determined with accuracy; the fact that they appeared in the Port Folio is the only reason for assuming a location in Pennsylvania. Two other estate poems seem to be set in the state. At Mount Hope, a "towering mansion," "taste and virtue meet with love," and Whitehill, a "rustic mansion," is "majestic in simplicity." See Eugene [pseud.], "Mount Hope," Monthly Magazine, II (October, 1809), 96, and H. [anon.], "The Excursion," Weekly Magazine, II (June 30, 1798), 287.
²⁹ Aubin, 143, 214.
well illustrates conventional features of neoclassic descriptive poetry, including praise of commerce and agriculture, river apostrophe, river catalogue, and tributes to famous men:

Spread with stupendous hills, far from the main,
Fair Pennsylvania holds her golden rein,
In fertile fields her wheaten harvest grows,
Charged with its freights her favorite Delaware flows;
From Erie's Lake her soil with plenty teems
To where the Schuylkill rolls his limpid streams—
Sweet stream! what pencil can thy beauties tell—

Here Juniata, too, allures the swain,
And gay Cadorus roves along the plain;
Sweetara, tumbling from the distant hills,
Steals through the waste, to turn the industrious mill—
Where'er those floods through groves or mountains stray,
That God of Nature still directs the way,

Bade agriculture thus export her freight,
The Strength and glory of this favoured State.
She, famed for science, arts, and polished men,
Admires her Franklin, but adores her Penn . . .

The best known region poem with a setting in Pennsylvania is the Englishman Thomas Campbell's *Gertrude of Wyoming*, which went through several editions in the early nineteenth century both in England and America. Although the poem is more accurately a pastoral romance than a topographical poem, it does have a specific setting—"On Susquehanna's side, fair Wyoming." Joseph Dennie thought "it was a somewhat perilous undertaking to lay the scene in a country to which the writer was a stranger..." This concern with the accuracy of description was well founded, for, although the setting of this story of rural innocence and ease upset by hostile Indians is supposed to be Wyoming Valley, the source for most of

30 *The Rising Empire* was never completed for publication. "Pennsylvania" appeared in Freneau's *Poems* (Monmouth, N. J., 1795), 376.

31 *Gertrude of Wyoming; a Pennsylvanian Tale* (New York, 1809), 1. Many pastoral romances were published in America during the early national period, but only a few of them fall into the topographical category by virtue of localized settings. The only other such poem on Pennsylvania uncovered in this study was "A Pennsylvania Pastoral," by one "Dablerus," which discloses the story of lovelorn Susan and fickle Thomas. See *The Gleaner; or Monthly Magazine*, I (September, 1808), 30-31.

Campbell’s information about America came from travel books, one of which was William Bartram’s Travels, from which were derived the flamingoes, crocodiles, palm trees, and magnolias that make Campbell’s Pennsylvania look “more like Bartram’s southern region than its own reality.”

Unlike the “region” variety, poems on American rivers were turned out in relatively great numbers and were comparatively particularized. No other kind of place name appeared with more frequency in American topographical poetry. Rivers served as symbols of progress and, just as easily, symbols of primitivism; they were catalogued, apostrophized, and made representative of national unity amid geographical diversity; and they became the confidants to whom poets addressed their most secret longings.

The Schuylkill, by far the most popular American stream, served all of these purposes. “Reflections on the Banks of the Schuylkill,” for example, derives themes from both the ideas of progress and of primitivism. On the one hand, the poet pensively seeks retreat from the active life:

On Schuylkill’s banks, far from the madd’n’ing crowds,  
That adoration pay at Folly’s shrine,  
In some cool grove, impervious to the sun,  
I lay me down . . . .

On the other hand, he predicts national progress in the arts and sciences, obviously predicated on robust activity:

Another Rittenhouse again shall rise;  
An Humphreys, whose undaunted arm shall wield  
The sword of freedom, or with daring flight,  
Ascend Parnassus . . . .

Poets and statesmen shall adorn thy lands,  
Myriads unborn shall grace Columbia’s name.

33 N. Bryllion Fagin, William Bartram: Interpreter of the American Landscape (Baltimore, 1933), 183.

34 Probably the position of Philadelphia as a literary center accounted for the popularity of the Schuylkill, as well as some appeal in the name itself that led to its use even when no particular stream was intended. Nothing in Philip Freneau’s “Hermit’s Valley” indicates a specific locale, yet the title “Hermit’s Valley” in the 1795 edition of Poems became “Hermit’s Valley, a Rural Scene on the Schuylkill” in the table of contents of the 1809 edition.

35 A probable reference to Joshua Humphreys, the naval architect, or to Col. David Humphreys, aide-de-camp to Washington and one of the “Connecticut Wits.”

Besides the wish for retirement and predictions of future national glory, the poet's "reflections" embrace Europe at war, specifically Italy, where once peaceful rural villages are now "with human gore encrimson'd." Finding such thoughts too painful to dwell on, the poet addresses "Columbia," telling her that "while Europe's kingdoms groan," it is her duty "to unlock the chain/ Which binds the wretched negro, and to snatch/ From petty tyrants the uplifted lash..."

The anonymous author of "Sonnet to Schuylkill," pensively addressing the stream, compares life to the river's course, a kind of analogy in widespread use among river poets and easily accounted for in light of the almost universal association of flowing water with the vicissitudes of life. This author sees first despair and then hope in the analogy:

*Slow wind thy waters, Schuylkill, fav'rite stream!*
*And as I muse along thy lonely shore,*
*Thy light waves trembling to the noon-tide beam,*
*Still flow, ne'er ceasing, and return no more.*
*Thus silent, unperceiv'd, the stream steals on*
*Which floats us down the tide of life's decay;*
*Sunk in the lapse of years forever gone,*
*Each gliding moment bears its part away.*
*Yet to thy source, fair stream[,] will nature's pow'r*
*From her vast reservoirs thy floods supply;*
*And nature's God, when life's dull flow is o'er*
*Will not extinguish'd let its essence lye.*
*To purer realms th' ethereal beam will raise,*
*Borne on th' eternal stream of being's deathless maze.*

Poems on the Schuylkill illustrate not only the goodness of "nature's God" but also the increasing tendency among poets of the early national period to introduce wild and irregular scenery in the interest of arousing "sublime" emotions. Since it was widely assumed that sublime scenery would produce sublime poetry, Americans were quick to exploit such scenery as a means of promoting literary nationalism. Throughout most of its lower course, the Schuylkill exhibited tame scenery associated with the mere "picturesque," but near Philadelphia was a cataract of sufficient

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37 *Assembly's Missionary Magazine; or Evangelical Intelligencer*, 1 (September, 1805), 456.
magnitude to inspire awe. An anonymous effusion in the *Port Folio* in 1806 attempts to depict the sublimity of the Falls of Schuylkill; however, the use of trite poetic conventions made popular by the English poet James Thomson produces only bombast.\(^{38}\) The poet, seated under a cliff in a “romantic wild retreat,” surveys the “flood” by moonlight. The only sound is that “of falling streams diffusing/Calmness o’er th’ impassioned mind. . . .” His “Fancy” imagines that “yon hanging craggy steep/ Shading chasms dark and deep” is the home of a hermit, who “warbles in sweetest lays.” The revery is broken by the approach of thunder and lightning, and the poem ends with dark clouds presaging a storm.

Practically all the Schuylkill poems illustrate the tendency of topographical poets to preach. To please and to instruct were generally construed during the early national period to be the chief ends of poetry; hence the utility of most descriptive poems was enhanced with moral instruction. One poet of the Schuylkill moralizes on the need to control excessive ardor or else risk losing one’s girl friend, as he did.\(^{39}\) Another bard, meditating by the river, “whose spacious bed but just half cover’d seems,” cannot resist the didactic urge: “Riches without use prove but a curse,” he claims; but the miser is no worse than he “. . . whose store,/ Is rais’d by fell oppressions of the poor” and who, “while the poor man’s wants are unsupplied,/ . . . wastes, in gluttony and pride,/ His untold thousands!”\(^{40}\)

Other streams in Pennsylvania furnish the locale for poems that tiresomely reiterate well-worn themes of river poetry. On Conestoga Creek “Damon” bids a fond farewell to “Delia,” and along its banks “Evander” recounts how as a youth he first learned “the

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\(^{38}\) Z. [anon.], “Written on the Banks of Schuylkill, on the East Side near the Falls,” *Port Folio*, II (Second Series, Oct. 18, 1806), 239. Fairmount Dam, built in 1821, raised the level of the river sufficiently to efface the Falls, once a popular scenic attraction for Philadelphians.


\(^{40}\) R. W. [anon.], “Meditation on the Banks of Schuylkill, Written in September, 1799,” *Philadelphia Repository, and Weekly Register*, I (June 20, 1801), 256. Of several other Schuylkill poems published between 1783 and 1812, all of which develop the rural retirement motif, only one achieves much originality. John Smith’s “A Rural Poem” extensively catalogues pleasures at a rural retreat on the Schuylkill—among them the “mocking bird,” rival to the nightingale; “Robin”; “Finches gay”; “crested red-bird”; “Yellow bird”; and “cooing turtle.” See *Evening Fire-Side; or Weekly Intelligence*, I (Apr. 20, 1805), 147-148.
rapture of feeling. Brandywine Creek, besides being the abode of "Peace and Contemplation," serves more practically as a canal and as a source of water power, and along its banks often walk the "blooming fair" girls of Wilmington with their beaux. "Lothaire" bids farewell to the Lehigh, scene of youthful joys, as he prepares to seek fame and fortune. And William Moore Smith, disappointed in love, tells the Lehigh his troubles:

Thy banks, mild flood, no more can please,
No more the waving of thy trees,
To me, a transport can impart;
The verdure fades, the landscape dies,
Each air-drawn scene of fancy flies,
When anguish rankles at the heart.

At least three poems that feature rivers prominently achieve an interesting degree of originality if only because of settings in backwoods areas where "Art" and "Nature" are out of balance. In these poems man's hand has hardly begun to alter the primeval rudeness of the landscape. Since there existed few conventions based on English poetry for describing such wild scenery, a poet was forced to look more directly and honestly at his own environment than he might otherwise. Isabella Oliver, called the "first poet of the Cumberland Valley," dealt firsthand with her experiences on the frontier. In "Composed on the Banks of Conoduguinet" she reminds herself to direct her thoughts "upwards" even while washing clothes, a humble act yet one analogous to the soul's salvation:

These hands with soap and water strive to clear
Those outward robes from each polluting stain;
Sure, then, the soul demands superior care;
Shall it unwash'd, unpurified, remain!

For it a fount is op'd, whose crimson stream
Effects this glorious, this important end;
To this with speed apply, nor vainly dream
Of other aid: on this you may depend.

41 "Banks of Connestogoe," Hive (Lancaster, Pa.), I (Aug. 10, 1803), 32; and "Written on the Banks of Conestoga," Gleaner; or, Monthly Magazine, I (May, 1809), 414-415.
45 Isabella Oliver [Sharp], Poems, on Various Subjects (Carlisle, Pa., 1805), 84.
Another poetess of the frontier was Mrs. Susannah Wright, who had moved from Chester to Columbia, in York County, early in the eighteenth century. In verses commemorating the move she realistically points out how the hard life of the frontier leaves no time for enjoyment of nature, which otherwise would compensate for the social pleasures she has left behind:

From all the social world estrang'd,
   In desert wilds and woods,
Books and engaging friends exchang'd
   For pendant rocks and floods.

Nature's uncultivated face
   A varying aspect wears;
But every charm and every grace
   Are sunk in stronger cares.46

Her labor is unending. From dawn “through noontide’s sultry sun” to the “dew of ev’ning” tasks that sap her energy leave no time to read poetry. Each morning renews the day of care and thus passes the “unvarying year.” But in an effort to become resigned to her lot, she will “regulate” her passions and subdue her will, and meantime she can appreciate the “pristine glories” of “scenes that never pall.”

A selection in *Hymns and Poems* by the Rev. William Duke of the Episcopal Church deals with his experience as a missionary crossing the mountains to the Monongahela River. Here the conventional theme of a pilgrim toiling through and overcoming difficulties is intensified by images derived from the setting in the American wilderness.47 The hymn relates how God’s “sufficient grace” sustained the thankful supplicant on his journey “up the steep/ And rugged mountain’s side” and over “trackless passages through deep,/ Dark forests.” God reveals His presence in an “hour of need” when a backwoodsman in the Alleghenies supplies unforeseen help:

46 “A Copy of Verses, Written by S. Wright, on Removing from Chester to the Banks of Susquehannah, in the Year 1726 Where She Afterwards Lived near 60 Years,” *Literary Magazine, and American Register*, II (June, 1804), 91–92.
"Refreshment, unexpected, flow’d/ From rude humanity,/ And indigence herself bestow’d/ The needful charity."

Another category of topographical poetry—the travel, or journey, poem—furnishes additional examples of the influence of the frontier on poetry of the early national period. The Pennsylvania hinterland figures prominently in two journey poems, both by Alexander Wilson. As a naturalist Wilson was well suited to the kind of close observation required for a successful poetic travelogue. In 2,200 lines of rhymed couplets, "The Foresters" records with the completeness of a diary each day’s progress of the poet and his two companions from the “green banks of Schuylkill” at Philadelphia to Niagara Falls. Actual mapping of their route is possible through copious use of place names; Easton, Shades of Death, Keeler’s Ferry, and Wyalusing are some of the landmarks encountered by the travelers before they pass into New York near Newton on about the tenth day. Although this wealth of detail gives strength to the imagery, it proves the poem’s greatest weakness since it is responsible for several embarrassingly prosaic incidents, such as when the young companions spot a nine-foot rattlesnake blocking their path and when, upon taking refuge from a storm in a log cabin in the Pocono Mountains, they offer a testimonial of their favorite brand of gunpowder to a frontiersman who had recognized its quality:

Dupont’s best Eagle, matchless for its power,
Strong, swift, and fatal as the bird it bore.
Like Jove’s dread thunderbolts it with us went,
To pour destruction wheresoever sent.

Even if the attention to detail makes the poem atypical of American topographical poems, “The Foresters” nevertheless exists well within the tradition of neoclassic descriptive poetry. There are four extended prospect-pieces in the poem, including one from Blue Mountain and another from “the brink of an abyss” at the summit of the Alleghenies; there is the usual compliment paid to the cottage of content set amid green fields and meadows; there is a long digression on Indians, the chief part of which is a sentimental mono-

ologue by an Indian “wanderer”; there is an extended apostrophe to the Susquehanna River, as well as shorter ones to personified “Hospitality” and “Rural Industry”; and there is the stock diction: “airy arches,” “domes of Science,” “spots . . . embrown’d with culture,” and “the ravish’d eye.”

Close observation is especially apparent in Wilson’s sketches of frontier life. By and large, the frontiersmen encountered are as ignorant, uncouth, and dirty as popular twentieth-century stereotypes of the southern Appalachian mountaineer as “hillbilly” or “cracker.” The sixth day of the trip, for example, finds the travelers passing the huts of settlers along the upper reaches of the Susquehanna. These people, who have as constant companions a “dog and gun,” are dressed “in fluttering rags, with scarce a hat or shoe.” Seemingly beyond all hope, they pass “Filth, want, and ignorance from sire to son.” Throughout the journey, the poet and his companions find their lodgings to be less than desirable. On the second night of the trip they stop in Easton at an inn distinguished by “scurvy walls,” “wet bread,” “rancid butter,” “beastly drunkards,” “beds with fleas,” and the “grim sulkiness” of the host. Three days later the young adventurers stay at a poor inn, “Of all things destitute save fire and wood,” at which they pass time by jesting with their ignorant host. The seventh evening finds them in the Alleghenies where they start to put up for the night at “Pat Dougherty’s Hotel and Drygood Store.” They renege, however, when they observe in Pat a “soul mass of misery” and when they discover that “all that Filth can boast of riots here.” Although depressing lodgings predominated, especially in the mountains, occasionally they encountered hospitality and cheer, as when, on the fifth night at a friendly “Dutchman’s” cottage on the Susquehanna, they ate well, sang, and enjoyed the company of pretty Susan, the farmer’s daughter.

No other American journey poem of the early national period matches “The Foresters” in length, interest, and detail. Wilson’s other journey poem, “The Pilgrim,” was left uncompleted and hence offers little basis for comparison with his magnum opus. Purporting to be the account of a river journey from Pittsburgh to New Orleans, the poem ends after two days on the Ohio. Like “The Foresters,” “The Pilgrim” pictures the frontiersman disparagingly. Beaching
his little skiff, the poet spends the first night out of Pittsburgh at a "squatter's wretched shed," whose hillbilly owner "scratch'd, and chew'd his quid." 49

The second day on the river provides more pleasing encounters. Wild life seen along the shore offers the poet an opportunity to catalogue, and his list of birds includes red-bird, turtles, jays, woodpeckers, turkeys, ducks, and pigeons. Evening finds him stopping at "Sugar Camp" to observe mountaineers gathering maple syrup. The unaffected pleasures of a frontier social are captured in a "genre sketch," a type of description of country labor and pastimes common to poetry of rural contentment. Evening in the camp presents a scene of idyllic gaiety:

The lasses from the kettles neat,
Their vigorous sweethearts oft regale,
With pliant lumps of sugar sweet,
Dropp'd in the cool congealing pail.

And while the blazing fire burns high,
Within the hut the leaves are prest,
Where snug as squirrels close they lie,
And Love and Laughter know the rest.

If the foregoing survey of topographical poetry in Pennsylvania reveals little else, it shows the enthusiasm which American poets directed toward creating a truly national literature. What was going on in Pennsylvania was repeated throughout the country, and by the end of the nineteenth century few natural features of interest in the United States remained unheralded in poetry. Yet, throughout the century, patterns of form and content established in the early national period persisted so thoroughly that one finds the same characteristics again and again—glorification of rural life, failure to assimilate the frontier into a literary tradition that would

49 "The Pilgrim, A Poem; Descriptive of a Voyage and Journey from Pittsburg [sic] to New-Orleans, In the Spring of 1810," Port Folio, III (Third Series, 1810), 512–519. Although Michael Forrest's Travels through America is by all rights a travel poem, it is cited above under town poetry (footnote 7) because of the apostrophe to Philadelphia. Two other Pennsylvania place names receive brief mention in the poem: Brandywine Creek, "once tinctured with the gore/ Of heroes brave," and "Schuylkill's silver stream," where youths swim "void of those robes which Eden did disdain."
do justice to the frontier, genteel sentimentality, and over-all a sincere if often ineptly expressed love of the land and faith in America as a new Eden.

Although as ardently devoted to independence in the literary sphere as in the political, these early writers failed to realize that indigenous subject matter would not alone produce original poetry. Seeking forms and motifs abroad by which to shape their exciting new material, they produced verse displaying an incongruity between convention and experience, form and content, intention and effect, that led to its subsequent neglect as belles lettres. Most writers felt strongly the need to work within tradition, and they could be only bewildered by material that did not fit into their tradition. Many of his contemporaries must have shared the frustration expressed by Hugh Henry Brackenridge as he read Sir Walter Scott’s “The Lady of the Lake” on the banks of the Ohio. “Cut off from romantick base,” he cannot find in his frontier environment poetical inspiration to honor his homeland as Scott had done:

It can’t be said that such a dale  
Where deeds were done, is where I dwell;  
Or that I vegetate among  
The hills which once were hills of song.  
Here neighbouring to the savage tread  
Inglorious I must bend my head,  
And think of something else than fame;  
Though in my bosom burns the flame  
That in a happier age and clime  
Might have attempted lofty rhyme.60

Michigan State University       Eugene L. Huddleston

50 An Epistle to Walter Scott. Written at Pittsburgh . . . Sept. 9th, 1811, on reading “The Lady of the Lake,” undated imprint on microfilm, University of California, Berkeley.