

## *Social Disorder and the Philadelphia Elite Before Jackson*

OUR understanding of the 1820s suffers from our intellectual domination by the events of the 1830s. One area in which perspective on these years is blurred is the study of elites. Because Andrew Jackson triumphed over a symbol of patrician rule in the election of 1828 and because an aroused electorate aided his victory, historians have assumed his prestigious predecessors were under attack. The mercantile-Federalist elite, in this view, marked time until their heads were slipped into a Democratic noose. Some became reformers, seeking to regain their status and authority by advocating programs for social control. But their efforts were doomed. However successful temperance, antislavery, or public schools may have been, the urban gentry would never again command the respect and deference enjoyed in the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

Describing this decline, historians have argued in contradictory terms. Some have suggested that the elite became social reformers because their Federalism was no longer attractive to the American voter. Rebuffed by politicians and unwilling to make the compromises necessary to achieve shared power, the elite rejected public life altogether. Active members devoted themselves to private philanthropies and local leadership. They established institutions to care for the poor, the sick, and the deranged; they fostered societies to exalt the revolutionary past and to promote the economic future. Untidy political affairs they abandoned to the unprincipled practitioners of faction.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Examples of this argument appear in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1945), 269–270; Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York, 1956), 67; Clifford S. Griffin, *Their Brothers' Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800–1865* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1960), 36–38; Gerald N. Grob, *Mental Institutions in America: Social Policy to 1875* (New York, 1973), 50.

<sup>2</sup> David Donald, "Toward a Reconsideration of the Abolitionists," in *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (New York, 1956), 33; Raymond A. Mohl, *Poverty in New York, 1783–1825* (New York, 1971), 159.

A different view maintains that American society, unlike European, offered few sinecures for the talented. Lacking the hierarchies of a national church, a military caste, and an educational elite, the United States offered only one sure path to social exaltation—political leadership. Only the paucity of positions worthy of the American elite can explain the mad scramble for the Presidency in 1824. As George Dangerfield has written, "The passion for the Presidency in those days was a fever that gave its victims no rest. Its cause was, in part, social malnutrition—society had few rewards to offer, aside from political ones; so that those who hoped to be Presidents, and those who hoped to make something out of making Presidents, were seized with an anxiety amounting to desperation."<sup>3</sup>

Both views of the American elite before Jackson—one positing their withdrawal from politics, the other their passion for it—are colored by a knowledge of what happened to them in the 1830s. Both succumb to the same logical fallacy, a reverse causality.

But the generation of American leaders that followed the Founding Fathers did not know that their social prestige, political leverage, and economic security were on the verge of collapse in the 1820s. In these years they continued to act in accord with the values that they had evolved and learned from their parents. They were no more anxious than elites have always been about their ability to withstand threats to their prerogatives and to carry out the responsibilities of leadership.

Historians must deal with this elite on its own terms, in relation to its own times, and not as a preface to the Jacksonian crisis. A study of this elite in Philadelphia reveals no crabbed, paranoid patricians, but a group of men who were earnest and humane, confident and optimistic.

The Philadelphia elite, its community of leadership, had much in common with the elites in Boston, New York, Charleston and other mercantile cities.<sup>4</sup> Children of the Founding Fathers, they were

<sup>3</sup> George Dangerfield, *The Era of Good Feelings* (New York, 1952), 332. See also, Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, Second Edition (Chicago, 1968), 142–143; David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York, 1965), 30–45.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Goodman, "Ethics and Enterprise: The Values of the Boston Elite, 1800–1860," *American Quarterly*, XVIII (Fall, 1966), 437–451; Dixon Ryan Fox, *The Decline of Aristocracy in the Politics of New York* (New York, 1919); William W. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War:*

trained to fill political offices, to exercise influence in economic affairs, and to impart their values to posterity. They grew up within a very small circle of wealthy, prestigious families. Yearning to travel, they received letters of introduction which led to friendships with the pre-eminent families in America and some of the most important in Europe. Anxious to enter business, they became apprentices with the prominent mercantile houses in the city. Desiring a life in one of the professions, they received instruction from established lawyers and physicians. Choosing public service, they were almost sure to be elected.<sup>5</sup>

During the 1820s the men who were officers of the city's leading financial institutions were also the directors of its insurance companies and societies for internal improvements. Some of them engaged in philanthropic activities—not the mere dissemination of charity, but the more time-consuming work of committees investigating crime, poverty, or ignorance. They contributed books to libraries, delivered lectures to lyceums, wrote memorials to public officials, and, in some cases, acted on the petitions as public officials themselves.<sup>6</sup>

John Sergeant (1779–1852) and Samuel Breck (1771–1862) were typical of these Philadelphia gentlemen. Each was a bank director and each had his favorite insurance company. Sergeant was a

*The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816–1836* (New York, 1966); Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> Isaac Weld, Jr., *Travels Through the States of North America . . . During the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797*, Third Edition (London, 1800), I, 21; Thomas Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America* (Edinburgh, 1833), 206; Charles C. Binney, *The Life of Horace Binney, with Selections from His Letters* (Philadelphia, 1903), 30, 45; Marquis James, *Biography of a Business, 1792–1942: Insurance Company of North America* (Indianapolis, 1942), 98; Philip S. Klein, *Pennsylvania Politics, 1817–1832: A Game Without Rules* (Philadelphia, 1940), 16; Gary B. Nash, "The Philadelphia Bench and Bar, 1800–1861," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, VII (January, 1965), 206–207; Elva Tooker, *Nathan Trotter, Philadelphia Merchant, 1787–1853* (Cambridge, 1955), 40, 42; Eleanor Morton, *Josiah White: Prince of Pioneers* (New York, 1946), 40; Miriam Hussey, *From Merchants to "Colour Men": Five Generations of Samuel Wetherill's White Lead Business* (Philadelphia, 1956), 6–7.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Wilson, *Directory of 1825 for Philadelphia City and County* (Philadelphia, 1825); Nicholas B. Wainwright, ed., *A Philadelphia Perspective: The Diary of Sidney George Fisher Covering the Years 1834–1871* (Philadelphia, 1967); Alan M. Zachary, "Social Thought in the Philadelphia Leadership Community, 1800–1840" (Doctoral Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1974)

member of the American Philosophical Society, and Breck of the Athenaeum. Both promoted internal improvements, Sergeant chairing a convention at Harrisburg in 1826, and Breck writing well-researched pamphlets on the subject. Finally, each had political careers devoted, in part, to opposing slavery. Sergeant led the contingent in Congress that fought the admission of Missouri as a slave state, and Breck during his term in the state legislature drafted a resolution to eliminate slavery in Pennsylvania.<sup>7</sup>

The Philadelphia elite was also characterized by its familial ties with associates of William Penn or with patriots of the American Revolution. Roberts Vaux (1786–1836), the city's greatest philanthropist, was descended from Hugh Roberts, a close friend of Penn.<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Biddle (1786–1844) traced his line to William Biddle, a Nonconformist ally of Cromwell and friend of Penn. Another Biddle was a naval hero during the Revolution.<sup>9</sup> Sergeant's father had been Pennsylvania's attorney general between 1777 and 1780, and Richard Rush (1780–1859) was the son of a Signer of the Declaration of Independence.<sup>10</sup>

Other members of the Philadelphia leadership community in the early nineteenth century were themselves notable contemporaries of the Founding Fathers. Peter Stephen DuPonceau (1760–1844) left France to become an officer in the American Continental Army, and Richard Peters (1744–1828) had been a captain in the Continental Army, secretary of the Board of War, and a member of the Continental Congress.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Dumas Malone, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1936), XVI, 588–590; III, 4–5; [Anonymous], *Memoirs and Auto-biography of Some of the Wealthy Citizens of Philadelphia*. . . (Philadelphia, 1846), 20; Samuel Breck, *Sketch of the Internal Improvements Already Made by Pennsylvania*. . . , Second Edition, revised and enlarged (Philadelphia, 1818).

<sup>8</sup> *Dictionary of American Biography*, XIX, 239–240; Henry Wikoff, *Reminiscences of an Idler* (New York, 1880), 57, 65n; Henry Simpson, *The Lives of Eminent Philadelphians Now Deceased* (Philadelphia, 1859), 922–923; Roderick N. Ryon, "Moral Reform and Democratic Politics: The Dilemma of Roberts Vaux," *Quaker History*, LIX (Spring, 1970), 3–14.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson Westcott, "Biographies of Distinguished Philadelphians," *Philadelphia Sunday Mercury* (1861), volume of newspaper clippings, II, Part I, 174, 175, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereinafter cited as HSP); Dixon Wecter, *The Saga of American Society, 1607–1937* (New York, 1937), 64; Thomas P. Govan, *Nicholas Biddle, Nationalist and Public Banker, 1786–1844* (Chicago, 1959), 10–50.

<sup>10</sup> *Dictionary of American Biography*, XVI, 588–590; J. H. Powell, *Richard Rush, Republican Diplomat, 1780–1859* (Philadelphia, 1942), 6–8, 12–16, 32.

<sup>11</sup> Fischer, *Revolution of American Conservatism*, 342; *Dictionary of American Biography*, V, 525–526.

The Philadelphia elite shared a basic purpose as well as a common background. Self-conscious about their inherited position in society, its members wished to justify their status through acts of public service. "I hope," wrote Vaux at the age of twenty, "that I am not altogether insensible to the privileges which I enjoy." He responded, therefore, to the admonition, "*prove thy privileges*."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Sergeant was eulogized as a man "possessed of a deep love of country, of patriotism in its highest sense, of the desire of extensive usefulness; but he never thought [these could not] consist with a devotion to the concerns of private and professional life, and the rejection of public service. He never spoke of his public life as a sacrifice, nor was it so: still less did he speak of professional life, or any form of useful private life, as being a selfish seclusion."<sup>13</sup>

Voluntary service entailed not only a duty of the privileged class but a duty to the public. These men did not question their own capacity. Biddle, scarcely out of college, announced, "If, at this moment, I feel any ambition, any wish to gain the applause of others, it is by [giving myself] to the world and politics . . . building a sort of name as a statesman."<sup>14</sup> None in the elite would have disagreed with Rush, who believed the commonwealth was protected when "the powers of legislation are deposited in the hands of those who are imbued with the collective intelligence of the community."<sup>15</sup>

The compulsion to serve and the desire for distinction were natural outgrowths of their heritage. The elite sought to emulate ancestral roles and to equal their achievements. Rush asked John Adams to list for him "some of the great rules that should in one of these rising republics, direct the studies, the employments, the obligations" of aspiring leaders.<sup>16</sup>

Their sense of identity and shared values in turn shaped their behavior in the 1820s. Determined to sustain the society they inherited, Philadelphia's leaders concerned themselves with the elimination or control of forces that threatened their perception of that

<sup>12</sup> Roberts Vaux to James Pemberton Parke, Aug. 7, 1806, Vaux Papers, HSP.

<sup>13</sup> Horacy Binney, *Remarks to the Bar of Philadelphia on the Occasion of the Deaths of Charles Chauncey and John Sergeant* (Philadelphia, 1853), 37.

<sup>14</sup> Govan, *Nicholas Biddle*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Powell, *Richard Rush*, 206.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Rush to John Adams, Apr. 7, 1821, Gratz Coll., HSP.

society. This perception was one of fundamental unity among social classes, of deference by lower orders, of responsibility by the well-born. Society was fluid enough to permit social mobility and rigid enough to protect privilege. All Americans supposedly shared this view and thus insured social harmony. Consequently, the leadership community sought to prevent vertical disorder. The existence of impoverished, ignorant masses belied the assertion that the elite was suited to preserve and improve upon their republican legacy. The elite was equally concerned with horizontal disorder. Disagreements within the leadership community or among sections of the nation disrupted social peace more seriously than any actions of the powerless poor. In the 1820s, members of the Philadelphia elite became activists, not to preserve their place but to fulfill their duty as stewards of a great nation.

Following the peace settlement of 1815, English manufactured goods glutted American seaport cities, and helped to cause a severe depression.<sup>17</sup> The arrivals from the countryside, augmented by an influx of Europeans, swelled Philadelphia's population and increased the total of unemployed.<sup>18</sup> More than 5,000 Philadelphians were thrown out of work and by 1823, 1,500 people needed a public pension to avoid the poor house. The city spent nearly a million dollars on its poor between 1816 and 1827.<sup>19</sup>

As a consequence of this distressing situation, a committee of twelve Philadelphia gentlemen, among them Roberts Vaux, met "to investigate the causes of mendicity, and to recommend such plans for meliorating the conditions of the poor as they might deem practicable."<sup>20</sup> This group organized the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Economy which attracted numerous mem-

<sup>17</sup> Dangerfield, *The Awakening of American Nationalism, 1815-1828* (New York, 1965), 72-74; Mohl, *Poverty in New York*, 114.

<sup>18</sup> David Montgomery, "The Working Class of the Pre-Industrial American City, 1780-1830," in *New Perspectives on the American Past, Vol. I: 1607-1877*, Stanley K. Katz and Stanley I. Kutler, eds. (Boston, 1972), 227-228; O. A. Pendleton, "Poor Relief in Philadelphia, 1790-1840," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (PMHB), LXX (1946), 164-165.

<sup>19</sup> William A. Sullivan, *The Industrial Worker in Pennsylvania: 1800-1840* (Harrisburg, 1955), 51; Benjamin J. Klebaner, "The Home Relief Controversy in Philadelphia, 1782-1861," *PMHB*, LXXVIII (1954), 415, 417.

<sup>20</sup> Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Economy, *Report of the Library Committee*. . . (Philadelphia, 1817), 3.

bers of the city's elite. Its spokesmen agreed that the "prosperity and happiness of a nation depended upon the industry, the economy and the morals of its people."<sup>21</sup>

The Society sought answers to a number of questions thought to be at the root of the economic crisis. "What do the poor alledge [*sic*] as the cause of their poverty? . . . What proportion of the poor are strangers, not entitled to legal residence? . . . What proportion of paupers are descendants of Africa? . . . Is . . . the use of ardent spirits a principle cause of poverty? . . . What proportion of the children of the poor actually go to school?"<sup>22</sup>

The elite did not consider the problem of poverty insoluble. Indeed, its leaders were convinced that they understood the crisis better than did the victims themselves. Lack of "employment is the alleged cause," they reported, but "idleness, intemperance, and sickness are most frequently the real causes."<sup>23</sup> The task of social guardians, therefore, included the development of "the productive powers of labor," the "prudent and judicious expenditures of money, by instructing the great mass of the community in the modes of economizing in their fuel and diet," and the capacity "to cherish a regard for moral and religious obligation. . . ."<sup>24</sup> It was the duty "of the public authority," said one prominent Philadelphian, "to provide the means of preventing mendicity, and to encourage moral habits among its citizens. . . ."<sup>25</sup>

Philadelphia's leaders concerned themselves with poverty because it embarrassed them. Idle masses had no place in their conception of what American society should be. The existence of poverty challenged their ability to create a community that fit that conception. "In this country, where there are no philosophical orders, where all classes . . . have equal rights, and where our population is far from being so dense, as to press upon our means of subsistence, it is indeed alarming to find the increase of pauperism progressing with such rapidity."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>25</sup> James Mease, *An Address on the Progress of Agriculture with Hints for its Improvement in the United States*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1817), 26-27.

<sup>26</sup> "Report of the Committee appointed to inquire into the operation of the Poor Laws," *The Register of Pennsylvania*, II (Aug. 16, 1828), 68.

Many of the city's leaders followed Vaux in his belief that free public education could remedy unemployment and its ugly cousins, crime and pauperism. Vaux proclaimed that schooling could "*prevent* crime; and in a single generation . . . contribute more toward diminishing the number of paupers & convicts than the best converted criminal & poor laws. . . ."<sup>27</sup>

Though Vaux's goal of bringing free public schools to the city and state took a decade to achieve, his success in attracting members of the Philadelphia elite to the program was unqualified.<sup>28</sup> Local leaders who had scattered their energies in a variety of philanthropies united in support of the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Schools.<sup>29</sup> Free public education, as they described it, was a panacea. It was humane; children received educational opportunities long denied them. It insured social order; ignorant children were susceptible to criminal elements. It was economical; uneducated children grew to be paupers and cost taxpayers great sums in poor relief. Finally, education gave social leaders control of the value-systems of the next generation; the wealthy were taught social responsibility, and the less fortunate learned the usefulness of hard work and the importance of morality.

The memorials and reports Vaux produced in this cause revealed basic assumptions of the Philadelphia elite. It saw itself presiding over a nation free of class antagonism. As long as this situation persisted, and free education guaranteed that it would, the elite remained confident of their country's well-being. We are "Happily ignorant of distinctive grades in society; [and] aware that no one is debarred from any station his talents and virtues may fit him to assume," Vaux petitioned. It is our duty, therefore, "to establish a system of education, liberal and extensive as circumstances can possibly authorize."<sup>30</sup>

Since none in the United States was "debarred from any stations his talents and virtues . . . fit him to assume," it made sense to

<sup>27</sup> Vaux to Robert Baird, Sept. 12, 1828, Gratz Coll.

<sup>28</sup> Warren F. Hewitt, "Samuel Breck and the Pennsylvania School Law of 1834," *Pennsylvania History*, I (1934), 63-75; Joseph J. McCadden, *Education in Pennsylvania, 1801-1835: And Its Debt to Roberts Vaux* (Philadelphia, 1937).

<sup>29</sup> McCadden, "Roberts Vaux and His Associates in the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Schools," *Pennsylvania History*, III (1936), 13-14.

<sup>30</sup> Memorial of Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Schools to Governor George Wolf, Oct. 16, 1830, Wolf Papers, HSP.



provide means to foster talent and virtue. This is what Vaux meant when he declared, "Virtuous education constitutes the moral strength and beauty of every state, and forms the only sure basis upon which good government can rest. In a government therefore, happily constituted like our own, which exists in the will and must partake of the character of its Citizens, it is of infinite moment to its success and durability, that individual independence should be universally diffused; and that the best qualities of the heart should be assiduously cultivated among all classes of the people."<sup>31</sup> Philadelphia's leaders accepted the rise of other citizens to power and influence. They felt that this should happen in a society organized along the republican guidelines they and their fathers devised. However, they needed assurance that this rise perpetuated standards of rectitude. They had faith that education was the best guarantor of this tradition.

Nevertheless, a general state-wide school law did not pass until 1834. Many citizens objected to its cost. German-speaking communities feared it as a threat to their culture.<sup>32</sup> The elite, on the other hand, feared the consequences of inaction. If children were not required to be in school, they were susceptible to the vices of the street. Nicholas Biddle saw them standing alone, "treading on that narrow and slippery verge which too often separates want from crime. . . ."<sup>33</sup>

Lacking the power to prevent innocents from mingling with the venal in public, members of the elite at least wanted to separate them in prison. They distinguished between debtors, petty thieves, and other minor offenders, on the one hand, and hardened criminals, on the other. Solitary confinement, placing prisoners in separate cells, would hopefully prevent corruption from spreading.<sup>34</sup> To some, this proposal seemed cruel, but as John Sergeant argued, "If there is . . . a hope of reforming the criminal, or even deterring him from

<sup>31</sup> Diary of Samuel Breck, Feb. 29, 1828, IV, HSP.

<sup>32</sup> McCadden, *Education in Pennsylvania*.

<sup>33</sup> Nicholas Biddle, *Account of the Proceedings on Laying the Corner Stone of the Girard College for Orphans . . . With the Address Pronounced on that Occasion*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1833), 15.

<sup>34</sup> Vaux, *Memoirs of the Lives of Benjamin Lay and Ralph Sandiford*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1815), 39-40; "Roberts Vaux," *The Pennsylvania Journal of Prison Discipline and Philanthropy*, II (April, 1846), 116-119.

the repetition of crime, these are powerful considerations to be placed in the scale against objections of severity."<sup>35</sup>

Vaux became the elite's most vocal proponent of solitary confinement. He coupled this idea with the suggestion that prisoners be forced to perform hard labor in their cells, from the belief this harsh regimen would bring inmates to repent their sins and amend their ways. Otherwise, society enjoyed no assurance that the criminal, when released, would not repeat his offenses.<sup>36</sup> But he argued that this program was in accord with "the benign precepts and sacred obligations of Christianity. . . ."<sup>37</sup> He had no doubt that it would "restore to virtue this class of our erring fellow men, as well as promoting the security and happiness of human society."<sup>38</sup>

Richard Peters and Samuel Breck supported Vaux and his Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons.<sup>39</sup> Breck noted the benefits conferred by solitary confinement upon individual prisoners and society at large. "Those who have observed the effects of solitude on the mind and on the behaviour of the convict [are] intimately convinced of its never failing effects in subduing, after a short seclusion from the society of man, the most impetuous temper. What then may we expect after an absence of two or three years from that society? It is supposed that the worst dispositions will be tamed and the basest habits corrected."<sup>40</sup>

In their support of educational and prison reform the elite responded to threats of disorder from below. Historians have depicted this as characteristic of a group of men fearful of losing status and power, but their public statements and private letters reveal only humanitarian concern and a desire to preserve social harmony. Indeed, they were perturbed less by the behavior of those beneath them on the social ladder than they were by the attitude of their equals. The elite wished to unite the segments of society more than it needed to repel challenges to its hegemony.

<sup>35</sup> John Sergeant to Vaux, Sept. 8, 1827, Vaux Papers.

<sup>36</sup> Vaux, *Notices of the Original and Successive Efforts to Improve the Discipline of the Prison at Philadelphia*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1826); *Letter on the Penitentiary System of Pennsylvania*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1827).

<sup>37</sup> "Penitentiary System—Memorial of the Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons," *The Register of Pennsylvania*, I (Jan. 19, 1828), 47.

<sup>38</sup> Vaux, *Letter on the Penitentiary System*, 5-6.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Peters to Vaux, May 27, 1827, Vaux Papers.

<sup>40</sup> Breck, *Sketch of the Internal Improvements*, 38.

Richard Rush wrote, "There is a race going on, in the world, of riches and power, as well as freedom, from which sluggard nations will fall back. . . . The prize of the last our fathers won for us, and may it be imperishable. Let us do the rest. . . . Let us raise up, to the proper pitch of social and national exaltation, the country which they gave us."<sup>41</sup> Rush's ideal appealed to men of his generation throughout the country. Sons of the Founders, they felt the comparison between themselves and their renowned parents. Their own place in the history of the republic depended on their success in preserving and extending the nation's freedom while enhancing its wealth and power.

The elite constantly reminded its members of this responsibility. They spoke of the task with optimism, and even a sense of inevitability. Rush observed that he and his friends lived "in an age in which the world is moving forward & we are not the nation to lag behind." He made no distinction between his fellow leaders and his country. It is, he wrote, "a paramount advantage we have, it is in fact an element of power with us, that, having establishments that fetter us less, and minds more ready for new investigations, than is generally seen in older nations, we adopt improvements sooner and more effectually."<sup>42</sup>

In these sentiments, younger members of the elite like Rush echoed opinions held by their elders. Peter Stephen DuPonceau, ardent and hopeful in his sixties, declared, "This Country is under a great process of fermentation." This process pleased and inspired him. The nation "burns to act a great part on the theatre of the world, & to distinguish itself in every branch of knowledge & talent. Let us all contribute to it all we can, & lay the past as well as the present under contribution."<sup>43</sup>

"The very idea of a political union," Rush believed, "involved the necessity of a common cause."<sup>44</sup> Leaders deplored all indications of fragmentation and applauded any factors that might eliminate disunity. Nicholas Biddle thrilled at the advance of steamboats and

<sup>41</sup> Rush, *Interesting Correspondence. Letters From Mr. Richard Rush. On the Policy of the American System*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1830), 8.

<sup>42</sup> Rush to Joel Poinsett, Feb. 18, 1838, Poinsett Papers, X, folder 5, HSP.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Stephen DuPonceau to J. Pickering, Sept. 13, 1824, DuPonceau Papers, HSP.

<sup>44</sup> Rush to James Madison, Jan. 10, 1829, Richard Rush Letters, HSP.

canals because they brought the people of the country closer together. In this they were as useful as if they were a "great political institution."<sup>45</sup>

Tariff protection for American manufacturing became a favorite cause of Philadelphia's leadership community. Its members believed that aids to industry produced "a reciprocity of interests" among the groups of the nation. Robert Waln (1765-1836), a wealthy merchant and the head of a Quaker family prominent in Philadelphia for generations, described the happy scene he expected after the adoption of a tariff. He saw a country village with shopkeepers exchanging the manufactured articles in their shops for the cheese of the local farmers, artisans in iron works buying the produce of agriculture, and farm laborers themselves working at manufacturing "when cultivation did not require their use at home."<sup>46</sup>

A few members of the Philadelphia elite did not share this optimistic view. A merchant claimed that adoption of tariffs, while beneficial to industry, would produce incalculable harm not only "to that extensive class of society of which we are members . . . but also to the numerous . . . Tradesmen and Artizans who depend on us for their employment and support. . . ."<sup>47</sup> To most of the elite in Philadelphia, however, this argument contradicted their notion of the proper relationship between social groups. It suggested a pernicious rivalry among occupations which was at variance with the reciprocity of interests they believed possible. Every speech and every pamphlet arguing for tariffs, manufacturing, and internal improvements addressed this point and denied it. Richard Peters insisted that public improvements united "in friendship & good-will all the citizens of our Nation; thereby rendering us truly one people. . . ."<sup>48</sup> Another declared "that the interests of Agriculture and of Commerce are [not] at variance. On the contrary, they are inseparable."<sup>49</sup> Mathew Carey (1760-1839), the ubiquitous publicist

<sup>45</sup> Govan, *Nicholas Biddle*, 103.

<sup>46</sup> Fischer, *Revolution of American Conservatism*, 352; Robert Waln, *An Examination of the Report of a Committee of the Citizens of Boston . . . Opposed to a Further Increase of Duties on Importation*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1828), 83.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Ralson, Memorial, Apr. 18, 1820, John Sergeant Papers, HSP.

<sup>48</sup> Peters to Sergeant, June 15, 1825, *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> William Tilghman, *An Address Delivered Before the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1820), 11.

and intimate of Philadelphia's leading citizens, summed up the argument. Our "grand object," he wrote, established "an identity of interests between agriculture and manufactures . . . and the improbability of inflicting a deep or lasting harm on the latter, without the former suffering severely."<sup>50</sup>

Though they emphasized consensus, the Philadelphia leadership community did not agree on political issues. Before Jackson's election, however, party identities were so blurred they did not hinder mutual cooperation. DuPonceau, Rush, and Vaux considered themselves Jeffersonian Republicans, but Rush ran for Vice-President with John Quincy Adams in 1828.<sup>51</sup> Breck and Sergeant identified with Federalist beliefs.<sup>52</sup> Still, Breck reminded a despondent Daniel Webster that the fears of men of his persuasion were as "loudly proclaimed" in 1801 "as they can be now; yet our successful rivals, stepped into our shoes, only to tread in the same paths we had followed . . . it will be a change of *men* and not of *measures*. Public opinion is omnipotent, and the nation is too enlightened to adopt any opinion hostile to its welfare."<sup>53</sup>

A clear measure of the quest for a national consensus and the suppression of sectional disorder was the debate over slavery and abolition. No members of the Philadelphia leadership community condoned slavery. Yet every public utterance condemning the institution raised the spectre of disunity they wished to avoid. During the Missouri debates, Congressman Sergeant was an able advocate of antislavery. Vaux and Peters encouraged him with memorials of northerners opposed to the extension of the institution. The existence of slavery, they believed, worked against national unity.<sup>54</sup> Rush, as a proponent of the American System, agreed that slavery presented a barrier to schemes of national unification.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Mathew Carey, *Address Delivered Before the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture*. . . (Philadelphia, 1824), 10.

<sup>51</sup> DuPonceau to Alexander J. Dallas, Jan. 5, 1815, George Mifflin Dallas Coll., HSP; Powell, *Richard Rush*, 7-10; Vaux to Robert L. Pitfield, May 22, 1811, Vaux Papers; Vaux to Wolf, Apr. 18, 1835, and June 23, 1835, Wolf Papers.

<sup>52</sup> Breck, Aug. 10, 1819, May 7, 1822, and Aug. 23, 1826, Diary, II and III; Glover Moore, *The Missouri Controversy, 1819-1821* (Lexington, Ky., 1953), 143-144.

<sup>53</sup> Breck, Mar. 24, 1827, and Nov. 26, 1828, Diary, III and IV.

<sup>54</sup> Sergeant to Vaux, Jan. 20, 1820, Vaux Papers; Peters to Vaux, Feb. 19, 1820, *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Powell, *Richard Rush*, 203.

This was a minority view. Unhappy as they were with the Missouri Compromise, the Philadelphia elite accepted the notion that discussion of abolition threatened a national consensus more than slavery did. As Rush said in 1820 of the slavery debate, "God grant that it may never be revived."<sup>56</sup>

The elite could not reconcile essentially humanitarian sentiments with the desire for national unity. Samuel Breck, who feared debate over the issue as much as he loathed slavery, wrote, in 1800, "I swear to God, I would not lay out one penny in this nefarious Commerce [*the slave trade*] if its returns were to yield a solid mountain of Gold!"<sup>57</sup> Twenty-four years later his sentiments were unchanged: "What a monstrous stain upon our character, constitution and laws, is the existence of perpetual bondage!"<sup>58</sup>

Breck did not confine his outrage to the privacy of his diary. In the Pennsylvania legislature he denounced the Missouri Compromise as "repugnant to the principles of our constitution . . . inconsistent with republicanism [and] abhorrent to the feelings of humanity. . . ."<sup>59</sup> Observing that his state still possessed vestiges of slavery, he introduced a bill to give freedom to those "persons who are held in perpetual bondage in this Commonwealth. . . . Would it not become us," he asked, "sinners as we are, to have broken the shackles of our grey-headed helots, before we dared to cast a stone at our brethren in Missouri?"<sup>60</sup>

Yet Breck's sense of social responsibility bowed to the demands of consensus. In Congress in 1824 he wanted to secure passage of a law that would prevent slave owners from seizing fugitives in Pennsylvania without a warrant. But he was "told that the subject was of a delicate nature, and would arouse the sensitive feelings of the slave holders, and put the house in a ferment to no purpose; so I concluded not to offer it."<sup>61</sup>

In these years, Philadelphia's leaders separated attacks on slavery from attacks on slaveholders. They seized upon an alternative

<sup>56</sup> Rush to Charles J. Ingersoll, Sept. 2, 1820, Box 2, Rush Letters, Charles J. Ingersoll Coll., HSP.

<sup>57</sup> Breck, Oct. 1, 1800, Diary, I.

<sup>58</sup> Breck, Feb. 11, 1824, Broken Journal of a Session in Congress, *ibid.*, II.

<sup>59</sup> Breck, Dec. 8, 1819, Fragment of a Journal Kept at Harrisburg, *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Breck, Feb. 21, 1821, speech to Pennsylvania Senate, *ibid.*, I.

<sup>61</sup> Breck, Jan. 26, 1824, Broken Journal, *ibid.*, II.

villain—Great Britain. The English, they argued, foisted slavery upon the American colonies despite local objections. According to Biddle, they did this “for the sole reason that to buy or steal black men on the coast of Africa, and sell them into slavery on the coast of America, was a lucrative employment of British capital.”<sup>62</sup> Rush characterized attacks on southern planters as a “strange opinion,” inasmuch as slavery was fostered by English laws. Southerners, he believed, “yield to no people of our population in solid virtues, and in all the elements which go to make up that high character—the gentleman. That Washington was the growth of our Southern soil, ought, of itself, to save it from such inconsiderate denunciation.”<sup>63</sup> In his eulogy of Jefferson, Biddle attempted to dismiss all divisions within the United States. A former Federalist, he praised the nation’s most prominent Republican. A northerner, he excused southern slavery: “If indeed there be any people on earth who should be exempt from censure for holding slaves, it must be the people of this country.”<sup>64</sup>

Roberts Vaux devoted considerable time to organizations opposed to slavery and to programs designed to improve the conditions of blacks. He reminded his fellow citizens that blacks “possessed intellectual powers by no means inferior to any other portion of mankind.”<sup>65</sup> He campaigned for rigid enforcement of the ban against the international slave trade, and protested the horrors of the domestic trade as well.<sup>66</sup> When the Pennsylvania legislature passed a bill forbidding interference with any aspect of slavery, Vaux angrily wrote his representatives: “I am . . . moved with indignation at the knowledge of the fact, that penitentiary punishment and infamy may result from detaining . . . in the street or on the road, a *Maryland slave driver who may be lashing his victim*. If the unfeeling wretch has a judges [*sic*] pass in his pocket, it is to sanctify his doings.”<sup>67</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Biddle, *Eulogium on Thomas Jefferson Delivered Before the American Philosophical Society*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1827), 19–20.

<sup>63</sup> Rush, *Memoranda of a Residence at the Court of London*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1845), 57.

<sup>64</sup> Biddle, *Eulogium*, 19–20.

<sup>65</sup> Vaux, *Memoirs of the Life of Anthony Benezet* (Philadelphia, 1817), 21.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 30; Ryon, “Moral Reform and Democratic Politics,” 5.

<sup>67</sup> Vaux to Stephen Duncan and William M. Meredith, Feb. 9, 1826, Meredith Papers, HSP.

Vaux feared the possibility of personal involvement with any concern that might be linked to the perpetuation of slavery. It led him, almost alone among his friends in the Philadelphia elite, to question the American System. The canals, manufactories, and high tariffs, he believed, insured the continuation of the foreign and domestic slave trades by making possible production and consumption of cotton fabrics. Slave labor produced the cotton, northern factories finished it, and foreign demand for it increased the need for slave labor. The degree to which his city aided the operation of this vicious circle depressed Vaux.

Philadelphia has become the theatre on which the productions of this system are bought & sold. . . . Here, capital is provided to move the vast machine. . . . Our wharves, and ware houses, & highways, groan beneath the bags of cotton, hogsheads of sugar, tobacco & the . . . bales of merchandize . . . purchased at the cost of the blood, & sweat, of our fellow creatures. . . . Unhappily the religious Society of Friends with its high professions of justice & kindness, is largely implicated with the rest . . . notwithstanding I have earnestly sought to lessen at least my participation in the iniquity.<sup>68</sup>

Frustrated in every attempt to persuade his countrymen to mitigate the effects of slavery, Vaux was hardly more successful in his efforts to find means to destroy the institution itself. He supported manumission societies which, in 1813, petitioned legislatures to end slavery.<sup>69</sup> He also prayed that slaveholders might come to experience an "inner light," a sense of guilt about their practices which would inspire them to surrender their human chattel.<sup>70</sup> In the 1820s he expressed ambivalent notions about colonization schemes. At first he rejected the plan to ship free blacks to Africa. He could not accept a proposal whose leading advocates supported slavery. He called it "a hypocritical measure, proceeding from a quarter utterly destitute of any *good feelings* toward that abused race. . . ."<sup>71</sup>

By 1830, however, Vaux pronounced himself a convert to the

<sup>68</sup> Vaux to Samuel Emlen, May 31, 1831, Vaux Papers.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Collins to Vaux, Feb. 13, 1813, and James Milnor to Vaux, Feb. 13, 1813, *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Emlen to Vaux, Dec. 11, 1812, *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Vaux to Thomas Clarkson, May 1, 1820, *ibid.*



ideas of the American Colonization Society. "Time . . . and a careful notice of the effects which have followed the doings of the Society, have entirely conquered my objections." Vaux seemed to have been persuaded primarily by the argument that the conditions of slaves in the upper South had improved in the past decade. He attributed this improvement to southerners and—most decidedly—not to the propaganda of antislavery northerners. In those states, Vaux maintained, "more has been said, written, & published against slavery in the name of the Colonization Society than would otherwise have been proclaimed, or even tolerated from any other source in these portions of the Union."<sup>72</sup>

Thus, Vaux made his peace with the proponents of national consensus. The degree to which he subjugated his more strident opposition to slavery in the interest of unity appears in his last available letter on the subject. In 1832, he wrote that while he had always believed in the "propriety" of abolition, he "held it to be the duty of our own country . . . to *pay the owners of slaves a fair price for their property*." He claimed that the southern states would have emancipated their slaves long ago if only this policy of remuneration had been advocated. "I do not admit the right of enslaving men," Vaux wrote, "but I speak in reference to *the actual state of things*, as we found them at the Revolution."<sup>73</sup> The urge for national consensus must have been overpowering if a man whose lifetime activity had been expended in humanitarian reform could reason so carefully in favor of attaining common ground with slave masters.

The Philadelphia elite feared any manifestation of vertical or horizontal disorder. The latter disturbed them more because in the 1820s it was more apparent a threat. Proponents of slavery formed a powerful phalanx in Congress and spokesmen for free trade still included a number of prestigious, wealthy gentlemen. Threats from below remained inchoate; workers were poorly organized and poverty and crime were not seen as a failure of the system. Nevertheless, the leaders of Philadelphia wanted to calm the forces producing both kinds of disorder. Proud to be the leaders of a republic a half-century old, and to be citizens of one of the greatest cities in

<sup>72</sup> Vaux to Charles Miner, Jan. 26, 1830, *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Vaux to J. Francis Fisher, July 16, 1832, J. Francis Fisher Section, Brinton Coxe Coll., HSP.

that republic, they felt responsible for its maintenance and troubled by signs of decline.

They were especially sensitive about Philadelphia's reputation. Charges that their city was inferior reflected adversely upon the quality of their stewardship. When DeWitt Clinton produced a pamphlet extolling the United States in general and New York City in particular, Richard Rush took exception at the slight to his native city. "Philadelphia, whose scientific institutions and characters have been prominent for half a century, is now and then incidentally glanced at to be sure; but New York is almost roundly asserted to have the chief part, and the best part, of the genius, learned men, and taste of the country." He suggested that some local gentleman—he favored Nicholas Biddle—be enlisted to make a reply. "It will cross the water as a specimen of what our men of the first order can perform."<sup>74</sup>

Similarly, Samuel Breck defended Philadelphia from the gibes of John Randolph who had compared the city "to a dropsical man, distended to the utmost capacity of his system, and who would burst on making the slightest movement or effort." Breck retorted with a compendium of statistics on its flourishing economy: 5,000 tons of shipping were in the midst of construction; Philadelphia was third in total imports and exports; water power existed for 130 miles.<sup>75</sup>

This local pride was not at odds with the desire for national cohesion. The elite regarded Philadelphia and its traditions as a source of guidance for the country. "Like the heart in the human body," wrote Peter DuPonceau, Philadelphia "is the part to and from which every thing circulates; it is the place where the greatest number of individuals concentrate, where not only knowledge & information, but the necessities & conveniences of life . . . are found in greatest plenty. . . ."<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Rush to Ingersoll, Sept. 30, 1815, Box 2, Rush Letters, Ingersoll Coll.

<sup>75</sup> Breck, May 16, 1824, Broken Journal, Diary, II.

<sup>76</sup> DuPonceau to Meredith, Jan. 16, 1827, Meredith Papers. Not only did Philadelphians hope to make their city an example for the rest of the country, but others regarded Philadelphia as a source of wisdom. A Pittsburgh newspaper recorded, "She is the great seat of American affluence, of individual riches, and distinguished philanthropy. From her . . . we have everything to look for." Richard C. Wade, "Urban Life in Western America, 1790-1830," *American Urban History: An Interpretive Reader with Commentaries*, Alexander B. Callow, Jr., ed. (New York, 1973), 114-115.

Historical societies, pamphlets, paintings, and patriotic ceremonies commemorating William Penn and other famous Philadelphians demonstrated the continuing vitality of the city's tradition of leadership. They also revealed how important their republican legacy was to the elite. DuPonceau, who seemed almost a living embodiment of that tradition, praised "those patriarchal times, when simple, yet not inelegant manners prevailed every where among us; when rusticity was devoid of roughness, and polished life diffused its mild radiance around unassuming and unenvied. . . ." Though he admitted that those days were gone, he admonished his friends "to preserve their memory in the historical page, as a subject of pride to our descendants, and of admiration to succeeding generations through the world."<sup>77</sup>

The past also offered guides to public policy in the present. When Roberts Vaux wrote that "it is high time something was done to awaken worthy feelings concerning our honorable forefathers, & the things of their day," he did not do so out of idle preoccupation with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>78</sup> The weight of tradition provided arguments to convince contemporaries of the wisdom of specific courses of action. For example, apathy, and in some places hostility, prevented consideration of a state-supported system of public education. Vaux noted that in "the Provincial age of Pennsylvania, her founder & law giver, & his associates, wisely provided for the education of all classes of youth, but their successors in power did not enlarge and adopt the system, to the wants of rapidly increasing population. . . ."<sup>79</sup>

The Philadelphia leadership community believed that their position in society wed them to the first generation of leaders. By collecting historical mementos from the era of Penn, by patronizing artists and their historical paintings, they kept faith with their heritage. Breck sought a commission for Rembrandt Peale to do a portrait of Washington, and Rush attempted to raise funds to hire Benjamin West, the expatriate artist, to "execute a painting . . . in commemoration of the early history of the commonwealth."<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup> DuPonceau, *Discourse on the Early History of Pennsylvania*. . . (Philadelphia, 1821), 11.

<sup>78</sup> Vaux to John F. Watson, July 22, 1824, Letters and Communications addressed to John F. Watson on the subject of his *Annals of Philadelphia*. . . , I, HSP.

<sup>79</sup> Vaux to Baird, Sept. 12, 1828, Gratz Coll.

<sup>80</sup> Breck, Mar. 10, 1824, *Broken Journal, Diary*, II; Rush to Ingersoll, Mar. 31, 1818, Box 2, Rush Letters, Ingersoll Coll.

Vaux became so enthusiastic that he hoped to persuade his favorite painter to choose a vista for the scene of Penn's landing other than the one at which it actually occurred. Instead of New Castle, he insisted, "a more *feeling* Picture, one that would move the best sympathies of our hearts could be designed, if *Phila.* were adopted."<sup>81</sup> In addition to this, Vaux distributed boxes made from the elm tree under which Penn negotiated a peace treaty with the native Indians in 1682.<sup>82</sup>

In their reverence for tradition and concern for stability, these leaders acted in accord with a national model of elite behavior. Idleness was foreign to them. What distinguished the rich from the poor was not their wealth nor their displays of fashion. The mark of the American elite was its devotion to service, to the improvement of the lives of the rest of society and to the maintenance of the ideals of their parents. As Vaux remarked, these tasks demanded the "patronage of suitable persons, who will consent to yeild [*sic*] some portion of their *time* to . . . needful details. . . ."<sup>83</sup> They would be "men in the vigor of life and intellect from whom labour may be expected. . . ."<sup>84</sup>

The elite explained acts of service in remarkably similar terms. "What a delightful old age I shall enjoy," declared DuPonceau, "if I can only have the consciousness of having rendered an essential service to the country. . . ."<sup>85</sup> Rush admonished, "If men will not bestir themselves when important and just objects are at stake, they will fail, all the world over. . . ."<sup>86</sup> Responsible leadership required the recognition, as Biddle put it, of "the claim of ignorance on the superiority of our learning—the claim of weakness on our magnanimity. . . ."<sup>87</sup> The very basis of the republic depended on the quality of its leaders. "The only security for freedom," Biddle declared, "is found in the personal independence of public men."

<sup>81</sup> Vaux to Watson, Dec. 12, 1826, Letters to Watson, I.

<sup>82</sup> Vaux to John Binns, Mar. 19, 1822, Vaux Papers.

<sup>83</sup> Vaux to Fisher, June 24, 1829, Fisher Section, Coxe Coll.

<sup>84</sup> "The Formal Opening of the New Fireproof Building of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania," *PMHB*, XXXIV (1910), 262. See also, Rush to Ingersoll, Mar. 31, 1818, Box 2, Rush Letters, Ingersoll Coll.

<sup>85</sup> DuPonceau to Pickering, May 24, 1830, Autobiographical Letters & Pickering Correspondence, DuPonceau Papers.

<sup>86</sup> Rush to B. O. Taylor, Mar. 2, 1836, Biddle-Rush Correspondence, Lewis Biddle Coll., HSP.

<sup>87</sup> Biddle, *Eulogium*, 35.

In this the United States was fortunate, for here "independence is not a mere abundance of fortune, which makes place unnecessary . . . but it is the independence of mind . . . which makes the possessor conscious that he relies on himself alone—that he seeks no station by unworthy means—will receive none with humiliation—will retain none with dishonor."<sup>88</sup> According to DuPonceau, "The true republican citizen is no man's man; he is his country's man and his own man."<sup>89</sup>

In the 1820s, a continuing tradition of leadership, founded on service, reverence for the past, and maintenance of the republican heritage, animated the American elite. The anxiety it felt in this turbulent decade did not arise from a fear of being displaced. It proceeded from doubts in the elite's ability to protect the kind of society bequeathed to it. That this society did not exist, that sectional antagonism, group-centeredness, and social strife were as much a part of its predecessors' world as of its own was beside the point. It is in the nature of nostalgia to distort reality.

If this elite was sentimental it was not morbid. It did not consist of desperate men clinging to authority. Indeed, there is a splendid poignancy in the optimism they shared, so well expressed in this eulogy by DuPonceau:

All those who, during the last fifty years, or during the fifty years next to come, have distinguished themselves or shall distinguish themselves by their talents, valour or patriotism, will be looked upon as the heroes of old with a degree of reverence that will increase with time. It will be said 'there were giants in those days.' All our distinguished men will be painted larger than the life; it will be an honour to trace one's pedigree to an ancestor who was known in the 'great age.' There cannot be, therefore, a stronger inducement to those who are now living to exert themselves to the utmost, in order to catch the eye of that posterity, whose feelings I have anticipated, and, for the same reason, it is our duty to hold up to their view the meritorious dead.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Biddle, *An Address Delivered Before the Alumni Association of Nassau Hall*. . . . (Princeton, 1835), 20.

<sup>89</sup> DuPonceau, *A Brief View of the Constitution of the United States*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1834), xvii.

<sup>90</sup> DuPonceau, *Eulogium in Commemoration of the Honourable William Tilghman*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1827), 9.