

Pennsylvania's "Lost" National University: Johann Forster's Plan

EVEN while the negotiations which would bring a formal end to the war for American independence wound toward a close in Paris in 1783, elsewhere on the continent an elderly German professor was at work on a remarkable document in anticipation of their successful conclusion.* Johann Reinhold Forster, a natural scientist at the University of Halle, wrote feverishly to complete his "Remarks relative to a Plan for the Foundation of a new National extensive & useful Institution for the Education of Youth in A—a" before the peace talks ended, because he wanted to transmit the plan to the American delegate Benjamin Franklin. He somehow got his manuscript to his former student Benjamin Vaughan, at this time Franklin's friend, editor of his papers, and pro-American member of the British delegation to the talks, but, apparently, Vaughan never passed the plan on to Franklin. This may have been due to a failure of communication between the two, or, more likely, it was the result of Vaughan's reaction to Forster's own ambivalence concerning showing the plan to Franklin.¹ Whatever the case, there is no indication that any eighteenth-century American ever read it. The original is now located in the Vaughan Papers at the American Philosophical Society Library in Philadelphia. Thus died stillborn the most comprehensive plan for a national university penned in the era of the early republic.

One may question the value of exhuming an unread document almost two hundred years after its composition, but a close reading

* The author wishes to thank the American Philosophical Society Library for permission to consult Johann Forster's "Remarks relative to a Plan for the Foundation of a new National extensive & useful Institution for the Education of Youth in A—a," and Professors Jurgen Herbst of the University of Wisconsin and Frederick Rudolph of Williams College for their critical reading of an earlier version of the manuscript.

¹ No trace of it ever having been in Franklin's possession has been uncovered by the editor of the *Franklin Papers*. William B. Willcox to the author, Nov. 26, 1973.

of the text broadens our understanding of the Revolutionary period in two ways. First of all, the authorship of the plan provides a fascinating commentary on at least one continental European's hopes for the new American republic, thus further illuminating Robert R. Palmer's argument that the American Revolution was but one element in a transatlantic movement. Also, Forster's political perspective was quite similar to that of the English Commonwealth Whigs as portrayed by Caroline Robbins and Bernard Bailyn, and his plan therefore casts light on the direction they thought republican education ought to take. The plan, then, is valuable for its context. Its content, too, is worthy, for Forster's proposals, academic and political, were sophisticated, anticipating solutions to the problems which rendered unproductive the eighteenth-century movement for an American national university. For a better understanding of Forster's prescience, it is helpful to compare his plan with the ideas of Benjamin Rush, for those ideas provided the informational base for congressional debate on the national university in the 1790s. It is hypothetical, of course, but the evolution of American higher education might have been considerably different had Benjamin Franklin read Forster's plan.

The apparent oddity of a German professor writing a plan for an American national university is deceiving, for Forster was subject to the influence of an educational reformation overtaking northern Europe and America in the eighteenth century. Moreover, he had long-standing contacts with England and influential, though second hand, acquaintance with America. Both made Forster sympathetic to the American Revolution and anxious that the new nation should succeed.

Forster was born in Germany in 1729 and educated at the Royal College of Berlin and the University of Halle. At Halle, especially, Forster absorbed the ideas of the educational revolution sweeping northern Europe during the Enlightenment.² The modernization and secularization of education led to a rejection of scholasticism and diminished enthusiasm for classics and theological pursuits centering on supernatural Christianity. The focus of education

² The following discussion is based on: Frederick Paulsen, *German Education, Past and Present*, T. Lorenz, trans. (New York and London, 1908), 95, 122; R. Freeman Butts, *A Cultural History of Education* (New York and London, 1947), 326-328, 334-335, 340.

shifted toward the real world, toward natural philosophy and the scientific method. Both the middle classes and the children of the aristocracy became legitimate recipients of educational concern. Polite accomplishments, knowledge of the world, and practical courses leading to careers in military, civil, or commercial pursuits all became standard educational fare. Fitness for these professions meant knowledge of contemporary languages, natural science, mathematics, modern political history, geography, and modern philosophy.

In Germany the contemporaneous rise of a strain of pietism concerned with the real world and its practical problems, and also suspicious of and hostile to the pedantry of academic philosophy and theology, led to a fusion of the religious and educational movements. The point of fusion was initially the University of Halle, created by the Bavarian state in 1694. There the European educational revolution produced a curriculum in which modern philosophy and science were taught not as doctrines to be memorized but as disciplines designed to promote free thought and research. There the vernacular replaced Latin as the language of instruction, and the lecture replaced the exposition of texts as the favored teaching method. Under Hermann Francke and later Christian Wolff, Halle was strong in law and jurisprudence, pietistic theology, mathematics, physics, natural science, and modern languages.

Forster absorbed both the learning and the intellectual atmosphere of Halle. They led him first into the ministry, but he soon followed his inclination toward natural science and linguistics. He pursued his profession in Russia, where he began the practice of mastering the native language, and then, in the 1760s, went to England where he began a two-fold career as a translator of travel narratives and as an educator.³

For his university plan, the years 1768–1770 were crucial. He was teaching then at Warrington Academy, one of the leading dissenting academies in England, which had just reached its peak of influence. The educational philosophy Forster had brought from Halle proved

³ "Johann Georg Adam Forster," *Dictionary of National Biography*, Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, eds. (New York, 1908–1909), VII, 455–456 (hereinafter cited as *DNB*); H. McLachlan, *Warrington Academy, Its History and Influence* (Manchester, Eng., 1943), 68.

valuable, for the academy, under the leadership of John Taylor, John Seddon, John Aiken, and, pre-eminently, Joseph Priestley, had become a leader in the English phase of the movement toward educational liberalism. Educationally, Warrington aimed to produce students "free to follow the dictates of their own judgements in their inquiries after truth, without any undue bias imposed on their understandings [and] to give some knowledge to those who were to be engaged in commercial life, as well as the learned professions, in the most useful branches of literature, and to lead them to an early acquaintance, and just concern for, the true principles of liberty, of which principles they must, in future life, be the supporters."⁴

To accomplish these goals the academy offered a five-year course including instruction in ancient and modern languages, mathematics, logic, natural history, natural philosophy, belles-lettres, moral philosophy, geography, history, theology, and in the last year "those studies that particularly relate to [the student's] profession, and those Exercises which are to prepare him for the Public Office he has in view."⁵ What Forster found at Warrington amounted to an expansion of Halle's educational commitment, extending beyond the training of courtiers to preparation for any of life's worthy pursuits, be they civil, theological, cultural, or commercial. While there, Forster himself made significant contributions to knowledge in the natural sciences and modern languages, all the while broadening his educational outlook, becoming more aware of the diversity and utility of learning.

In addition to widening Forster's educational philosophy, his experiences at Warrington introduced him to America and cultivated his interest in its cause. Again the agent was Joseph Priestley, although the influence was indirect, for Priestley left Warrington as Forster arrived. Still, Priestley's love of liberty, his Commonwealth Whig political views, and sympathy for the American colonies were

⁴ Joe William Ashley Smith, *The Birth of Modern Education: The Contribution of the Dissenting Academies, 1660-1800* (London, 1954), 160-161. A general discussion of the dissenting academies appears in *ibid.*, 237-265, while Irene Parker, *Dissenting Academies in England* (Cambridge, 1914; reprint ed., New York, 1969), 105-120, discusses Warrington's place in the academy movement.

⁵ McLachlan, *Warrington*, 39-40.

well known.⁶ They were transmitted to Forster most directly by Benjamin Vaughan, the Jamaica-born son of a wealthy London merchant, Samuel Vaughan, and a Warrington student under both Priestley and Forster.⁷ Vaughan had been Priestley's protégé, had lived in his home, and had eagerly absorbed the master's teachings. Vaughan's relationship with Forster also developed into more than just student-teacher, for Forster's own son Johann Georg, also a Warrington student, became Vaughan's good friend. Thus the elder Forster absorbed the ambience of Warrington and saw the growing Anglo-American conflict through the lens of the dissenting Commonwealth Whig tradition.

Forster's avocation, the translation of travel accounts into English, both increased his knowledge of America and caused personal alienation from England. In 1768 he and Georg together prepared an edition of Peter Kalm's *Travels into North America* which made them vicarious explorers of the colonies.⁸ The success of this venture prompted Captain James Cook to enlist the Forsters on his second voyage around the world, begun in 1772. On their return in 1775 the Forsters attempted to publish an account of the trip. This drew the ire of Cook and his backers who had selected someone else to prepare the "official" narrative. The elder Forster's indiscretion cost him his reputation in England and a term in debtors' prison. Georg, who had gone to Germany to take a teaching post at the University of Cassel, presumably secured his release.⁹ Perhaps Georg was helped in this by Vaughan, who spent these early years of the American Revolution in London, propagandizing for the Americans, ascending into the political orbit of the Earl of Shelburne, and pre-

⁶ For an outline of Priestley's politics, see Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), 348-353, and, for a direct statement, see Joseph Priestley, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government, and on the Nature of Political, Civil, and Religious Liberty*, 2nd ed. (London, 1771).

⁷ "Benjamin Vaughan," *Dictionary of American Biography*, Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds. (New York, 1928-1936), XIX, 233-234 (hereinafter cited as *DAB*); William Vaughan, *Tracts on Docks and Commerce* (London, 1839), 5.

⁸ Leonard Labaree, et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 1954-), XV, 147-148; Peter Kalm, *Travels into North America . . .*, Johann Reinhold Forster, ed. (Warrington and London, 1770-1771). Forster also translated Bougainville's *Voyage Round the World* and Baron Von Riedesel's *Travels Through Sicily* while at Warrington. Parker, *Dissenting Academies*, 109.

⁹ *DNB*, VII, 456.

paring an edition of the papers of his recently acquired friend, Benjamin Franklin.¹⁰ Whatever the case, at his release Johann Forster returned to Germany, to his intellectual home at the University of Halle, where he no doubt observed without distress the fortunes of the English in their contest with the American colonies.¹¹

Vaughan, meanwhile, rose in Shelburne's estimation. When, in 1782, the King gave Shelburne the task of concluding a peace with the Americans, Vaughan, thanks to his close association with Franklin, became a confidential messenger who shuttled back and forth between Paris and London and played a significant role in the peace negotiations.¹² He was therefore ideally suited to be the middleman between Forster and Franklin, and it was to Paris that the German sent the plan which parlayed his love of liberty and learning, his antipathy toward England, and his sympathy for the American colonies into a scheme to insure the success of the new republic through the proper education of its youth.

The merit of Forster's plan is most apparent when it is considered in the context of the unsuccessful attempts to establish an American national university at the end of the eighteenth century. Even before the Constitutional Convention met, Benjamin Rush developed a plan for such a university in a series of essays and newspaper articles.¹³ Several members of the convention were familiar with the Rush proposals, and they served as the bases for James Madison's and Charles Pinckney's unsuccessful efforts to include

¹⁰ *DAB*, XIX, 234.

¹¹ McLachlan, *Warrington*, 68-69.

¹² Vaughan's role in the negotiations may be followed in Edmond George Petty-Fitzmaurice Fitzmaurice, *Life of the Earl of Shelburne* (London, 1875-1876), III, 242-391; George S. Rowell, "Benjamin Vaughan—Patriot, Scholar, Diplomat," *The Magazine of History*, XXIII (1916), 43-57; see also, Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (New York, 1935), 222-225, 229-230, and Richard B. Morris, *The Peacemakers* (New York, 1965), 315, 358, 362-364, 366, 377-379.

¹³ See Benjamin Rush, "A Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools and the Diffusion of Knowledge in Pennsylvania; to Which is Added, Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," *Essays on Education in the Early Republic*, Frederick Rudolph, ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1965); Rush, "An Address to the People of the United States," *American Museum*, I (January-June, 1787), 11; [Rush], "To the Friends of the Federal Government; A Plan of A Federal University," *Federal Gazette* (Philadelphia), Oct. 20, 1788," Lyman H. Butterfield, ed., *The Letters of Benjamin Rush* (Princeton, 1950), I, 491-495.

the establishment of a national university among the powers of Congress.¹⁴ After that, the passing years brought an occasional plan or plea for a national institution,¹⁵ but it was not until President Washington's first annual address to them that Congress considered the subject. Washington proposed a national university as one means to educate the people and to counteract emerging sectionalism. The congressional response was polite; one Representative even recommended committee consideration of the measure, but the full House did not even vote on it.¹⁶

Congress reconsidered the subject in 1797, partly in response to suggestions from the outgoing President, Washington, and the incoming President, Adams, that a national university in the Federal District would be appropriate and useful.¹⁷ In the House, James Madison proposed the creation of a corporation to receive funds for such an institution. This sparked a lively debate over the character of a university in the Federal District, but the result was the same as before. In a procedural move the House tabled the measure and Congress paid no more attention to a national university before the turn of the century.¹⁸ There was, of course, the famous contest held in 1797 by the American Philosophical Society for the best plan of a national institution of education, but none of the plans submitted received much notice outside the Society.

The national university movement was singularly unsuccessful. Historians who have treated the topic have generally agreed that the reasons for failure included local jealousy of a national institu-

¹⁴ Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention* (New Haven, 1937), I, 321, 352, 616.

¹⁵ See, for example, Noah Webster, "Education" and "The Importance of Accommodating the Mode of Education to the Form of Government," *American Magazine*, I (December 1787–November 1788), 22–26, 80–82, 158–161, 210–216, 311–313; John Fenno, "The Importance of a Proper System of Education," *American Museum*, VI (July–December, 1789), 290–291.

¹⁶ John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (Washington, D. C., 1931–1944), XXX, 493–494; *Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States, 1789–1824* (Washington, D. C., 1834–1856), I, 971–973; II, 1601–1603 (hereinafter cited as *Annals of Congress*).

¹⁷ John Adams, "Address to Congress, 4 December, 1796," *Annals of Congress*, VI, 1595; George Washington, "Address to Congress, 7 December, 1796," Edgar W. Knight, ed., *A Documentary History of Education in the South Before 1860* (Chapel Hill, 1949–1953), II, 22–23.

¹⁸ *Annals of Congress*, VI, 1600–1601, 1697, 1704–1705, 1711.

tion, a concern with the constitutionality of such an institution, objections to a strong central government of which a national university would become a symbol, and a lack of public appreciation of the institution, its goals and functions.¹⁹ This last problem resulted in large part from the absence of specifics in any of the plans available for congressional analysis.

Forster's plan met most of these objections. Writing in the early 1780s, Forster must have been aware of the state jealousies and distrust of the central government then emerging. He attacked the problem, on the one hand, by advocating that the university be located in Pennsylvania due to its centrality, but outside Philadelphia, thus consciously dissociating it from the political and moral atmosphere of the capital. But it was the scheme of organization and control which would have gone farthest to assuage provincial egos. Forster envisioned a vast institution of forty faculty, twenty-seven professors and thirteen teachers who would teach "the whole Cyclopaedia of human knowledge." Left solely in federal hands, the university would surely have excited state opposition. For Forster, the key to successful organization was a residential college system composed of one college founded by each of the thirteen states, its size in proportion to the state's population and wealth, the students of each to be identified by their own academic gowns. Each college would have a Head who served also as one of the Professors, and he as well as one of the thirteen teachers would take up residence in each college.

The method of selecting the faculty and administration also entailed input from the states. Forster overlooked the original staffing problems of the university, but provided that for perpetuating the Heads of colleges the assembly of each state should choose its college Head out of a list of three candidates submitted to it by the whole body of college Heads and Professors. Once chosen, the Heads of colleges, together with the Professors, perpetuated the professor-

¹⁹ See David Madsen, *Early National Education, 1776-1830* (New York, 1974), 78-80; John W. Hoyt, *Memorial in Regard to a National University* (Washington, D. C., 1892), 15; Albert Castel, "The Founding Fathers and the Vision of a National University," *History of Education Quarterly*, IV (1964), 267; Merle Curti, *The Social Ideas of American Educators* (New York, 1935; reprint ed., Paterson, N. J., 1959), 48; Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York, 1962), 42.

ships by nominating a list of three for each vacancy, the final choice left to Congress. The university's highest administrative official, the Rector or Chancellor, was to be chosen by Congress and to serve during good behavior. Complaint could be made to Congress by the college Heads and Professors, but it was up to the lawmakers to judge the complaint. This organizational pattern is clearly federalist, involving the states, the university, and the central government in the administration of the institution.

A similar sharing of responsibility appears in Forster's proposals for funding the institution.²⁰ Each state would establish its own college and pay the salaries of its administrative and housekeeping personnel, maintain its amenities, and provide for poor scholars if it chose. The states acting together would bear the expense of erecting the academic buildings of the national university and establishing some of the collections necessary for instruction, while Congress would provide the library books, the philosophical apparatus, and an art collection. Congress would also assume the salaries of the faculty and other general university employees. Finally, the maintenance of the various collections and the library were to be undertaken by the university itself provided Congress granted it the rights to printing and publishing monopolies on such items as Bibles, almanacs, and texts for lower schools.

The federal organizational and funding pattern preserved state influence and even a measure of autonomy over the activities of the national university. To local governments fearful of central power and to citizens leery of taxes of any kind such a division might have been much more appealing than congressional control and full national funding proposed in later plans.

If the public and the Congress failed to appreciate or even to understand what was involved in a national university, it was largely the fault of the proposers, chief among them Benjamin Rush. As previously noted, Rush worked out his schemes slowly, and no fully elaborated plan ever appeared. The closest he came was an October 29, 1788, letter in the *Federal Gazette*²¹ which proposed a

²⁰ It is with respect to items such as funding and academic organization that the Forster plan's completeness so thoroughly outpaces all of the other eighteenth-century plans.

²¹ [Rush], "To the Friends of the Federal Government," I, 491-495.

federal university in the district to be set aside as the national capital. It would be a postgraduate institution "calculated to prepare our youth for civil and public life." Most of the plan was taken up with a suggested curriculum, including: "the principles and forms of government" especially as they related to the United States Constitution and the laws, and also the law of nature and nations covering war, peace, and diplomacy; ancient and modern history and chronology; agriculture; manufactures; commerce; mathematics as it related to property, finance, and war; natural history; philology, including English pronunciation; German and French, "an essential part of the education of the legislator and statesman"; and athletics. This plan merely listed subjects for study, providing little commentary on their usefulness, or relationships to one another. Many practical subjects were included, but much contemporary science and virtually all cultural subjects were missing. The one thread tying the courses together was the goal of producing statesmen, emphasized by Rush as follows:

Let the degrees conferred in this university receive a new name that shall designate the design of an education for civil and public life.

In thirty years after the university is established, let an act of Congress be passed to prevent any person being chosen or appointed into power or office who has not taken a degree in the federal university.²²

This conception of education was narrow in scope and purpose. The goal of producing an educational-governmental elite flew in the face of contemporary practice,²³ no matter how desirable Rush may have thought it. It did nothing to allay local fears of central government domination. The thirty-year provision, moreover, would have proven quite an embarrassment in the mid-1790s when party divisions brought charges and countercharges of a design to subvert the republican form of government. Finally, there were no specifics regarding organization or finance, both crucial matters. The Ameri-

²² *Ibid.*

²³ See Jackson T. Main, "Government by the People: The American Revolution and the Democratization of the Legislatures," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., XXIII (1966), 391-407; Main, *The Upper House in Revolutionary America* (Madison, 1967), 190; James Kirby Martin, *Men in Rebellion: Higher Governmental Leaders and the Coming of the American Revolution* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1973), 127-138.

can people and their legislators were rightly suspicious of such a proposal.

Forster's university was much more broadly conceived. It aimed to produce not only statesmen and soldiers, but also doctors, lawyers, businessmen, scientists, farmers, educators, and artists as well, and to do so by teaching everything from oriental languages to machine technology, from music to metallurgy, from surgery to homiletics. In addition, the progress of a student through the curriculum guaranteed exposure to a wide range of knowledge before any specialization in professional training was possible. Forster charged his university not just with perpetuating a political elite, but with providing the nation the means to satisfy its highest educational aspirations.

As with the curriculum so with the other aspects of the Forster plan: thoroughness was the rule in governance, finance, location, and student discipline. It was a plan the public could understand and the Congress could use as the basis for legislation. In short, it provided what the other plans lacked. Had it been read by Franklin or his contemporaries, Pennsylvania might have gained a national university in the 1780s, and American higher education might have evolved differently as a result.

The University of Wyoming

DAVID W. ROBSON