

Joseph Priestley House

On a hillside in Northumberland, a white Federal-style mansion with symmetrical wings perches a quarter mile above the Susquehanna River. Crowned with a diamond-patterned balustrade on its slate roof, the house boasts a commanding view of the river's north branch. Before the canal and the railroad cut across the expansive lawn, travelers arriving at the riverfront reached the house by following a semicircular carriage drive that echoed the arched fanlight above the pedimented entrance. Sparsely ornamented with a frieze board of triglyphs and a Palladian window centered on the second story of the façade fronting the street, the five-bay residence was the eighteenth-century American version of an English gentleman's country house. In this case, the English gentleman was the famous—some would say notorious—Joseph Priestley: pioneering chemist, political philosopher, and dissenting theologian.

Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) was a leading figure in the Enlightenment who produced more than a hundred works on science, politics, and religion. By profession a Presbyterian minister, he became one of the early founders of the controversial Unitarian movement. Befriended by Benjamin Franklin, who described him as an “honest heretic” for his opposition to state religion and his unorthodox religious beliefs, Priestley popularized Franklin's scientific experiments in *The History and Present State of Electricity* (1767).¹ His own experiments resulted in the discovery of oxygen and the invention of carbonation, for which he was made a member of the Royal Society in London and the Lunar Society in Birmingham. An advocate of American independence and a supporter of the French Revolution, Priestley's pamphleteering antagonized royalists in Birmingham who destroyed his house, library, and laboratory during a riot on Bastille Day in 1791.

Fearing for their lives in England, the Priestley family decided to emigrate to America. In 1793, an advance party of Priestley's three sons and his colleague, the attorney-cum-chemist Thomas Cooper (1759–1840), traveled to the Pennsylvania backcountry, where they planned to establish a haven for British dissenters near the forks of the Susquehanna. The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his friend Robert Southey hoped to join

¹ Benjamin Franklin to Benjamin Vaughan, 1788, quoted in Edgar F. Smith, *Priestley in America* (Philadelphia, 1920), 5.

them, but their dream of living in an egalitarian society named “Pantisocracy” never went beyond the poem Coleridge wrote about it. Priestley received a hero’s welcome when he arrived in the United States in 1794. The press declared that Americans “will be proud to rank among the list of their illustrious fellow citizens, the name of Dr. Priestley.”² David Rittenhouse lauded Priestley’s scientific contributions at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, and Dr. Benjamin Rush offered him the chair in chemistry at the College (now University) of Pennsylvania. But Priestley declined the position in order to be near his sons in Northumberland, a backcountry town 130 miles northwest of Philadelphia.

Established in 1772 by Governor Richard Penn Jr., William Penn’s grandson, Northumberland was laid out as an English village around a green square. Priestley and his wife, Mary, bought riverfront land and built a high wooden wall shielding their property from the street. Unlike the stone or brick mansions favored by Philadelphians, the Priestley’s clapboard-covered house, constructed with kiln-dried wood, resembled the domestic architecture of New England. Designed by Mary, the house interior displayed elements of the Adam style fashionable in England and practical features such as built-in storage under the staircases. Separate one-story wings housed the kitchen and the laboratory, which was conveniently connected to Priestley’s library. “Nothing can be more delightful, or more healthy than this place,” Priestley wrote to an English friend, but the following year his youngest son, Harry, died from an infection, and his wife passed away nine months later.³ Priestley moved into the house in 1797, immersed himself in scientific research, and within two years had discovered carbon monoxide. He made annual visits to Philadelphia, then the capitol of the United States, met with President Washington, and gave lectures at the First Unitarian Church that were attended by John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and members of Congress.

Priestley lived for only a decade in Northumberland, but during that formative period in American history he brought the Enlightenment into the Pennsylvania backcountry. His international role in science and politics linked the provincial interior of the state to the latest developments in American and European culture. A catalyst for political liberty, he emboldened the British émigrés in Northumberland to protest the Alien

² *American Daily Advertiser*, June 5, 1794, quoted in Smith, *Priestley in America*, 167.

³ Smith, *Priestley in America*, 52.

and Sedition Acts passed by the Federalists in 1798. Thomas Cooper wrote scathing criticisms of the Adams administration in the *Northumberland Gazette* and was imprisoned for six months in 1800. The Dublin journalist John Binns (1772–1860), jailed for supporting the Irish Rebellion, founded the anti-Federalist newspaper *Republican Argus* in Northumberland in 1802. Binns later published the *Democratic Press* (1807–29) in Philadelphia, where he served as an alderman. Priestley's firebrands contributed to the defeat of the Federalists and the election of President Jefferson in 1800 and 1804.

During Jefferson's first term, the president corresponded regularly with Priestley, who shared his conviction that democracy depended on an enlightened citizenry. An advocate of the liberal arts curriculum, Priestley was prepared to donate his 1,600-volume library, one of the largest in the country, to establish a new college in Northumberland. Although that college never came to fruition, President Jefferson consulted Priestley in planning the University of Virginia. "Yours," he told Priestley, "is one of the few lives precious to mankind."⁴

Priestley's contributions to chemistry proved to be his most enduring legacy. After his death in 1804, his research was continued by Cooper, who inherited his laboratory equipment and brought it to Dickinson College, where he taught chemistry. The centennial of Priestley's discovery of oxygen was celebrated at his Northumberland home in 1874 and led to the founding of the American Chemical Society. The Priestley House was designated a National Historic Chemical Landmark and is open to the public as a museum.

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⁴ Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, Mar. 21, 1801, in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 9, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York and London, 1905), 217.