

**HUGH HENRY BRACKENRIDGE,**  
**AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY, 1768-1771\***

BY MARTHA CONNER.

The College of New Jersey grew out of a need to provide training for American boys for the Presbyterian ministry, but it was controlled neither by the church nor the state. A liberal charter granted by the Governor of New Jersey in 1746 stated that "every religious denomination may have free and equal liberty and advantage of education," and made no mention of any set purpose to educate for the ministry. The first trustees were from the states of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York, and the most of them were Presbyterians, two were Episcopalians, two Quakers, and one a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church. (1)

The Rev. Jonathan Dickinson was elected president and the school opened in his parsonage in Elizabethtown in May, 1747, with not more than ten students. Pres. Dickinson died in October of that year and the Rev. Aaron Burr succeeded him when the school with eight pupils was moved to his parsonage at Newark. A permanent home for the college was sought and propositions were made both to New Brunswick and to Princeton. The latter promptly accepted the proposal to provide £1000, ten acres of cleared land and two hundred acres of woodland not more than three miles from the town. The bond for £1000 was signed by John Horner, a Quaker, Judge Thomas Leonard, a trustee, and Judge John Stockton. The site for the buildings was given by Mr. Nathaniel Fitz Randolph, a Quaker resident, who raised in all £1700 for the College. (2)

Princeton is beautifully located on rising ground on what was then the post road, half way between New York and Philadelphia. The village consisted of somewhat less than threescore houses scattered along this thoroughfare, with a well-found tavern or two. The Fitz Randolph land

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\* This paper, one of several to appear in this volume of the magazine, grew out of a seminar, at the University of Pittsburgh, under the direction of the editor, on "The Life and Times of Hugh Henry Brackenridge."

was opposite the thickest clustering of the houses. The advantages of the location were that the students were free from the temptations of a city, any irregularity was easily discoverable in so small a place, but at the same time the "Flying Wagons," as the coaches on the post road were called, brought many distinguished visitors and all important news of the day. "The romance and pageant of colonial life passed back and forth along that highway and many scenes in the drama of our early history were enacted there." (3) Tho the village was small, many wealthy land-owners and cultivated men of prominence lived in the vicinity. The names of Richard Stockton, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and of William Paterson, U. S. senator and governor of New Jersey, are familiar in American history.

The plan of the principal building, afterwards named Nassau Hall in honor of William III who was of the house of Nassau, as well as that of the President's House, was drawn by Mr. Robert Smith of Philadelphia, the architect of the Pennsylvania State House, and by Dr. Shippen of Philadelphia. The stone for building was obtained from a nearby quarry. The building was 170 ft. long, 53 ft. wide, with a rear extension 15x36 and front extension of three or four feet. It was three stories high and made to house one hundred and forty students. There was a large assembly room, or "prayer hall", on the first floor, and on the second floor over the entrance was the library. (4)

President Burr with about seventy students moved to Princeton in 1756, tho the building was not completed until 1762. Mr. Burr died the following year and was succeeded by the brief occupancy of Jonathan Edwards. Princeton had lost five presidents when in 1768 the Rev. John Witherspoon of Paisley, Scotland, accepted the presidency.

President Witherspoon is described as a heavily built man of forty and is said to have had more of the quality called presence than any man of his time in America save George Washington. He was, moreover, kind and companionable; young and old enjoyed his society and his conversation sparkling with wit. In theology he would even now be called a modernist, for he said in his lectures, "I am of the opinion that the whole scripture is perfectly agree-

able to sound philosophy; yet certainly it was never intended to teach us everything. The political laws of the Jews contain many noble principles of equity and excellent examples to future law-givers, yet it was so local and peculiar that certainly it was never intended to be immutable and universal." (6)

On his arrival he found the idealism of Berkeley supported, but by ridicule and argument he drove it from Nassau Hall, substituting the realism of the Scottish common sense school. (7) His popularity as a preacher rested on his earnestness, clarity of thought and excellency of style, rather than great oratorical skill, tho his manner was free and easy. His power of adaptability and force of personality were soon felt, not only in the College but in the Colony and the Presbyterian Church. He soon fell in with the spirit of the revolution tho he harbored no bitterness towards England, merely believing her misguided. As things were he felt the revolution had to be. He became a member of the Continental Congress and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. In Congress his opinion was greatly respected. He was a powerful influence in the reorganization of the Presbyterian Church and was the first moderator of its General Assembly, in 1789.

As a College president he was a strict disciplinarian, but he had a sense of humor and knew how to handle boys. He knew how to inspire leadership, and his influence as a teacher was lasting. He sent out from Nassau Hall many leaders for the troublous times to come, indeed the College "seemed for a little a seminary of statesmen rather than a quiet seat of academic learning." (8) Nine of the twenty-five college graduates in the Constitutional Convention were Princetonians and five had graduated under Witherspoon. He signed the diplomas of a President, a Vice-President, nine cabinet officers, twenty-one U. S. senators, and thirteen college presidents.

The student body over which this new President was to preside numbered upwards of a hundred, including the grammar school. The College of New Jersey, being neither the college of a particular church nor of a single colony, was cosmopolitan in character; its faculty graduates of Harvard, Yale, Glasgow and Edinburgh; its students sons

of New England Puritans, English Friends, Virginian and West Indian planters. We hear of the only son of a Dutch Patroon, a Van Rensselaer, arriving with full military escort, a full blooded Delaware Indian chieftain struggling with Caesar, and negroes, expecting to return to Africa as missionaries. From its very beginning the College had a national character.

In 1768 or 1769, an eighteen-year-old Pennsylvania boy of Scottish parentage by the name of Hugh Henry Brackenridge, presented himself to President Witherspoon as a candidate for entrance. His only financial resources were his savings from three years of teaching. The President evidently recognized the youth's ability and admired his perseverance and zeal for learning, for he gave him an opportunity to teach in the grammar school in exchange for college expenses. (9) He was examined by the President and tutors and found able to translate Virgil and Tully's Orations into English, to translate English into good Latin, and to render any part of the four Greek Gospels into Latin or English. Arithmetic to the rule of three concluded the test. Having passed the entrance requirements he was given a copy of the College Laws to transcribe, which being countersigned by the clerk was his matriculation card, "to be kept by him whilst he continued a member of said College as the Rule of behavior."

The Curriculum at that time was as follows: (11)

Freshman Year—Horace, Cicero, Lucian, Xenophon, Declamation five nights per week.

Sophomore Year—Homer, Longinus, Mathematics, Logic, Geography, English Grammar and Composition, Declamation five nights per week.

Junior Year—Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Moral Philosophy, Metaphysics, History, English Grammar, Eloquence, Adv. Comp., Criticism, Style; Weekly public declamations and disputations.

Senior Year—History, Ethics, Politics, Government, Eloquence, Hebrew and French elective.

The faculty consisted of President Witherspoon; Junior Tutor, William Churchill Houston; Sophomore Tutor, James Thompson, "remarkable for his skill in the Sophomore studies, having taken care of that class for several years

past"; (12) Freshman Tutor, F. Tapping Reeve. (13) In 1770 Mr. Reeve and Mr. Thompson were succeeded by Samuel Stanhope Smith and Richard Devens. President Witherspoon taught moral philosophy, politics and government, theology, history, composition and criticism, as well as Hebrew to those studying theology, and French to such as desired it. His lectures on politics and government were a timely innovation and did not fail to bear fruit. Public speaking was approached in a more intelligent manner, as well as being made the subject of formal study under his regime. He instituted prizes in college and grammar school for excellence in this study and the prayer hall resounded with youthful oratory. Undoubtedly Hugh Henry Brackenridge owed the great oratorical power of his later life to this early training.

Dr. Witherspoon was a skilled teacher. He dictated a syllabus to his classes, filled in the outline which each student made with illustration and comment and then held recitation. The duplication of these outlines was called "making studies" and copies were sold from class to class. Copies of his lecture were used in many other colleges by teachers who had first heard them in Nassau Hall.

Mr. Houston taught mathematics and the natural sciences and the equipment was as good as any on the continent, including an orrery lately invented and contributed by David Rittenhouse of Philadelphia. (14)

Students were required to lodge in the College and to be in their rooms during study hours. Tutors also resided in the College to "stimulate the slothful." There were quarterly examinations, of which Madison noted, "The near approach to examinations occasions a surprising application to study on all sides." (14a)

The College seems to have possessed a fair library. (15) In 1755 Governor Blecher presented his library of 500 volumes. In 1760 President Davies made a catalogue of about 1200 volumes. This must have been a joy to the boy who once walked thirty miles to borrow a book. That he was an omniverous reader we know from his writings, for not only was he familiar with Greek and Latin literature, but he quotes from the literature of every country. The students paid a small quarterly fee for the support of the library

and we hear of requests to travellers to bring back a bundle of books for the College.

Among the classmates of Brackenridge were James Madison, Gunning Bedford, and Philip Freneau. There is a tradition that Madison and Freneau roomed together, and Brackenridge and Freneau were close friends, for they wrote together a poem and a novel. Aaron Burr, William Bradford, later Attorney-general of the United States, and Philip Fithian, whose journal we have, were juniors. In the class of 1773 were Henry Lee, Jr. (Light Horse Harry Lee), governor of Virginia 1792-95 and Aaron Ogden; Henry Brockholst Livingston belonged to the class of 1774,

In the dining room of Nassau Hall were three tables, with tutors presiding at the first and second and the master of the Grammar School at the third. The students sat in alphabetical order and the seat was moved up one each day. Regular duties were assigned; the sixth man from the top on the right carved, a prized office because of the privilege of laying aside a choice portion for himself; "he that sat opposite him cut bread."

The journal of Philip Fithian embodying a letter to his father gives us the daily routine. The bell rang at five and the bell ringer beat upon the doors to be sure the boys wakened. At five-thirty prayers were said in the assembly rooms, with excuses required from absentees. After prayers, study by candlelight; breakfast at eight; recitations from nine to one; dinner; free until three; study from three until five, when bell rang for prayers; supper at seven; study bell at nine. Tutors went through the halls to see that every boy was in his own room. "After nine any may go to bed, but to go before is reproachful."

In spite of this strenuous schedule there was time for merriment. There is mention of a club "Instituted for inventing and practicing several new kinds of mischief in a secret and polite manner." Hazing was called "Naturalizing strangers." Some of the pranks were, strewing the halls in the night with greasy feathers, freezing the college bell, ringing it in the night, "writing witty, pointed, anonymous papers and songs, Confessions, wills, Soliloquies, Proclamations," etc., and leaving them at the door of the subject at night. Henry B. Livingston was fined by the

magistrate of Princeton for stealing turkeys, and one "unregenerate Glover" was expelled for stealing hens. (16)

Already the spirit of insurrection was abroad and these young collegians sensed it tho they did not yet know what it was. In July, 1770, the letter of the New York merchants inviting the Philadelphia merchants to break the agreement not to import passed thru Princeton. The students seized it and in black gowns went in procession to a place fronting the college where it was burned by the hangman, to the tolling of the college bell. At Commencement that September the entire graduating class wore American cloth. (17)

The extra-curricular activities of that time centered in the literary societies. Two societies were organized in Nassau Hall in 1765, The Well Meaning, and Plain Dealing clubs, which were suppressed by the faculty in 1768. With faculty sanction in 1769 these clubs were reorganized, the Plain Dealers becoming the American Whig Society and the Well Meaning, the Clisophic Society. Madison, Freneau, Brackenridge, and Bradford, were Whigs; Henry Lee, Aaron Burr and William Patterson were Clios. Great rivalry existed between the societies, each of which met in its own room directly over the entrance, on the third floor of Nassau Hall. Each member assumed a fictitious name which was at first classical but later became humorous. Cincinnatus and Fliberty Gibbet debated 'Is Ambition Beneficial to Society?' Beelzebub, Plato and Hyder Ali formed a debating team. Members were fined for all sorts of things, sleeping in church, cutting recitations, taking books from the library without covering them, appearing at meeting without gown, etc. The societies met behind closed doors and discussed the affairs of the nations among other things. (18) Hugh Henry Brackenridge was one of the organizers of the American Whig Society and took a prominent part in its activities. The manuscript papers of William Bradford in the Pennsylvania Historical Society Library contain some of the satires called forth in a Clio-Whig contest: "Satires against the Tories; written in the last war between the Whigs and Clisophians in which the former obtained a complete victory." The Mss book begins

with ten pastorals by Brackenridge. (19) The ninth begins:

Spring's Soliloquy That Morning Before He Hung Himself. (a)

O World adieu! the doleful time draws nigh  
I cannot live and yet I fear to die.  
Warford is dead! and in his turn Freneau  
Will send me headlong to the shades below.  
What raging fury or what baneful Star  
Did find—ingulf me in this Whiggish war.  
The deeds of darkness which my soul hath done  
Are now apparent as the noonday sun.  
A thousand things as yet remain untold  
My secret practice and my sins of old.

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(a) Samuel Spring, founder of Andover Academy.

Then follow satires by Freneau, full of fire and invective but not always quotable in print. His satire "*McSwiggin*," printed in 1775, contains the part of these poems which have merit. The three concluding poems are from the pen of Madison but not quotable. There is also a fragment of a novel, written alternately by Brackenridge and Freneau, between Sept. 20, and Oct. 22, 1770. The title page reads: *Father Bombo's Pilgrimage to Mecca in Arabia. Vol. II. Wherein is given a true account of the immeasurable and surprising adventures which befel him in the course of that long and tedious Journey, Till he once more returned safe to his native Land, as related by his own mouth.* Written by H. B. and P. F.—1770. The book is a succession of Arabian Nights adventures. "The work is crude and hasty, whole chapters of it were evidently written at one sitting. The part signed H. B. is unquestionably the best, the prose is vigorous and the movement rapid." (19)

Here undoubtedly Brackenridge acquired or accentuated the habit of writing satire both in prose and verse. Here, too, his rhetorical powers were enhanced as well as his tendency towards disputation; he rather complains later in life of a lack of guidance to keep these tendencies in check, or rather proportion. But the training in clear reasoning and public speaking were to stand him in good stead at the bar. The satirical turn of mind and habit of disputation were a disadvantage on the bench.

The inns of the village where the stagecoach passengers stopped for the night on their journey between New



York and Philadelphia were favorite gathering places for the students. A billiard table was kept for the amusement of the guests and here the students could procure the luxuries of the table.

That there were charming girls in the vicinity is to be expected. William Paterson writes, "We have a number of pretty girls here, Jack, a new race of beauties since you left. . . . A scholar in love is very assenine. . . . the College always has teemed with fools of this cast." Elizabeth Stockton was called the Belle of Princeton. She was a daughter of Capt. John Stockton, whose wife was a famous beauty. Paterson complains in a poem:

A Satire on Betsy's College Suitors.  
I've grown of late confounded jealous  
Of the dressy college fellows;  
E'en (though Betsy let you pass)  
Of Cook who is an arrant ass. (20)

The President's daughter married Samuel Stanhope Smith, a future president of Princeton.

Commencement, which was held on the last Wednesday of September, was a great public holiday attended by a large number of people from the different parts of the province and from New York and Philadelphia, often including many distinguished persons. From Philip Fithian's *Journal* we learn of the commencement of 1773. "Commencement is over. . . and what is more, never was there such a commencement before and likely never will be again. The galleries were cracking now and then all day—every mousehold in the church was crammed full—the stage covered with gentlemen and ladies amongst whom were the Governor and his Lady; and that he might not appear singular, he was stiff with lace-gold lace. A band of music from Philadelphia assisted to make all agreeable and to crown the whole the eloquence of Demosthenes was heard in almost every man's mouth, so that the person who spoke last was always the hero of the tale." (21)

The day was a holiday for the entire countryside who assembled around the College, set up refreshment stands along the roadside, and eating, drinking, dancing, fiddling, pitching pennies and horse racing were some of the amuse-

ments by which the assembly beguiled themselves while the exercises were going on in the church. (22)

The competition for prizes open to the three lower classes, was held on the day preceding commencement in the Library room of the College. The first contest of this kind occurred in 1771. The Valedictory was given to the greatest orator in the graduating class, the Salutatory to the greatest scholar. (23) In the class of 1771 Hugh Henry Brackenridge was Salutatorian, thus recognizing his unusual mental ability. Madison was excused on account of ill health. Freneau for some unknown reason was absent. The following account of the commencement of 1771 appeared in a Philadelphia paper.

The *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, Sept. 30—Oct. 7, 1771, p. 148, Princeton, September 25.

"Yesterday was held in the public Library of the College in this Place, before about Twenty Gentlemen of liberal Education, a Competition for Premiums in the following Branches of Study.

1. Reading the English Language with Propriety, and answering Questions in Orthography. On a Division by Ballot, the first Premium was adjudged to *Aaron Burr*, of the Junior Class; the second to *William Linn*, of Ditto; the third to *Belcher P. Smith*, of the Sophomore Class.

2. Extempore exercises in the Latin Language. The Judges thought proper that the Premium should be equally divided between *Brockholst Livingston* and *David Witherspoon*, both of the Freshman Class.

3. Reading the Latin and Greek languages with the proper quantity. The First Premium was given to *John Witherspoon*, of the Sophomore Class; the second to *Aaron Burr*, of the Junior; and the third to *Henry Lee*, of the Sophomore Class.

4. Written Translation of English into Latin. The Judges on reading the several Pieces, decided in favor of *Henry Lee*, of the Sophomore Class.

5. Public Speaking. As the competitors were numerous, and the judges were highly pleased with each of the Performances, it was very difficult to decide the Pre-eminence. On a division, the Majority of Votes adjudged the first Premium to *William Bradford*, of the Junior Class;

the second to *William Linn*, of Ditto; and the third to *Hugh Hodge*, of the Freshman Class.

This day the anniversary Commencement of the College of New Jersey was held in the church here. After the usual Procession, the Business of the Day was introduced with Prayer by the President, and a Piece of vocal Music performed by the Students, the exercises were conducted in the following Order.

1. Mr. Brackenridge pronounced a salutatory Latin Oration "*De Societate Hominum.*"

2. The following Proposition, "*Mendacium est semper illicitum,*" was defended by Mr. Williamson; who was opposed in the syllogistic way, by Messers McKnight and Taylor.

3. Mr. Black supported this thesis, "*Moral qualities are confessedly more excellent than natural; yet the latter are much more envied in the Possessor, by the Generality of Mankind; a sure sign of the corrupt Bias of human Nature.*" Mr. Cheesman opposed him and was answered by Mr. Taylor.

4. Mr. Campbell delivered an English oration, "*On the Advantages of an active Life,*" and the Business of the forenoon was concluded with an Anthem.

5. At Three o'Clock the Audience again assembled; and after Singing by the Students Mr. Spring delivered an English oration on "*The Idea of a Patriot King.*"

6. An English forensic Dispute on this Question, "*Does ancient Poetry excell the modern?*" The Respondent, Mr. Freneau, being necessarily absent, his Argument in favor of the Ancients was read to the Assembly; Mr. Williamson answered him, and supported the moderns, and Mr. McKnight replied.

7. A Poem, on "*The Rising Glory of America,*" was spoken by Mr. Brackinridge, and received with great Applause by the Audience.

8. Mr. Ross delivered an English Oration, on "*The Power of Eloquence.*"

9. The students sung an anthem; after which the following young gentlemen were admitted to the First Degree in the Arts; viz. Gunning Bedford, John Black, Hugh Brackinridge, Donald Campbell, Edmund Cheesman, Philip Freneau, Charles McKnight, James Madison, Joseph Ross,

Samuel Spring, James Taylor, and Jacob Williamson.

The following Gentlemen, Alumni of this College proceeded Masters of Arts, viz. Waightstill Avery, Richard Devens, William Ch. Houston, Thomas Reese, Thomas Smith and Isaac Story.

Samuel Wilson, Esq. of Md. for his known literary Merit and Reputation was complimented with the Degree of Master of Arts.

The Rev. William Jackson of Bergen in New Jersey, M. A. in Yale and in Kings College, was admitted ad eundem.

Messieurs John M'Clarren Breed, and Thomas Wooster, Masters of Arts in Yale College, were admitted ad eundem.

Jacob Bankson, M. A. in Philadelphia College, was admitted ad eundem in this college.

Michel Joye, B A. in Harvard College, was admitted ad eundem.

10. A pathetic valedictory Oration on "*Benevolences*" by Mr. Bedford concluded the Exercises.

The whole was conducted with the greatest Propriety. The Speakers performed their Parts with Spirit, Ingenuity and Address; and met with the highest Approbation and Applause from a numerous, polite and discerning Audience."

"The Rising Glory of America," is a poem of about 500 lines in blank verse. It is in the form of a conversation between Leander, Acasto and Eugenio, beginning

LEANDER

No more of Memphis and her mighty kings,  
Or Alexandria, where the Ptolemies  
Taught golden commerce to unfurl her sails,  
And bid fair science smile.

A theme more new tho' not less noble, claims  
Our ev'ry thought on this auspicious day;  
The rising glory of this western world,  
Where now the dawning light of science spreads  
Her orient ray, and wakes the muses song;  
Where freedom holds her sacred standard high,  
And commerce rolls her golden tides profuse  
Of elegance and ev'ry joy of life.

A strangely prophetic note is struck in the following lines:

I see, I see  
A thousand cities raised, cities and men  
Num'rous as sands upon the ocean shore;  
The Ohio then shall glide by many a town  
Of note; and where the Mississippi stream,  
By forests shaded now runs weeping on,  
Nations shall grow and States not less in fame  
Than Grece and Rome of old:

How could I weep that we were born so soon,  
In the beginning of more happy times!

By far the greater part of the poem was written by Freneau and the better part. Brackenridge acknowledged that writing poetry was labor for him while with Freneau it was spontaneous. Freneau had caught the new poetic impulse in America—the epic note, but an epic cannot be condensed into a commencement oration. “It is not a great poem when we measure it by absolute standards, but ‘The Rising Glory of America’ is a very great poem if we view it in connection with the conditions and the environment that produced it. Full as it is of Latin influence and Commencement day zeal, it is the first real poem that America ever made—the first poem that was impelled hot from a man’s soul. It is more than this, it is the first real fruit of a new influence in the world of letters, the first literary produce of that mighty force that was to set in motion the American and French Revolutions, with all that they mean in human history.” (24) Mr. Brackenridge remained for some time at Princeton to study theology, and he received an M. A. in 1774 on which occasion he delivered a poem on Divine Revelation.

Mr. Brackenridge was a finished classical scholar and considered the classical studies most important of all. His passion for learning continued thru life, he considered every hour lost that was not employed in the cultivation of the intellect, and he “set a greater value on the praise of genius than all else obtainable amongst men.” (25) He acknowledged that in early life he had a great desire for distinction. His wit and superior conversation made him socially popular. Even in youth he was probably intolerant of other peo-

ple's opinions and impatient with those of lesser intellectual endowments, which traits probably prevented his becoming a really great man. That his college mates esteemed him highly is shown in Madison's letters in which he longs to see him again and means to do so soon. Mr. Brackenridge's illness in 1774 gave Madison great uneasiness and he said if Brackenridge were gone "the country could furnish such a pomp for death no more." (26)

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6. Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, p. 4
7. *Ibid.*, Introduction.
8. Wilson, Woodrow (In *Memorial of the Sesquicentennial*) p. 113
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