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ORATION

Delivered before the

Pennsylvania State Society of Cincinnati,

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ON THE

FOURTH OF JULY,
MDCCCXI.

BY NICHOLAS BIDDLE, ESQ.

Published at the request of the Society.

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1811:

AT a meeting of the Pennsylvania State Society of Cincinnati, held at the Statehouse in the City of Philadelphia, on Thursday, July 4, 1811, the following resolution was unanimously adopted:

RESOLVED,

That the thanks of the Society be presented to Nicholas Biddle, esquire, for the excellent oration which he has this day done the Society the honour of delivering before them, and that he be respectfully requested to furnish a copy for publication.

D. LENOX, *President.*

Attest,

HORACE BINNEY, *Secretary.*

ORATION, &c.

WE are assembled, fellow citizens, to commemorate the birth of our republic. A great and powerful people, who from this era date their independence, are now uniting with us in grateful remembrance of its blessings, and renewing on the altars of their country the sacred offerings of patriotism.

And well may this be a proud day of triumph and festivity: for no nation can boast a more illustrious origin: the annals of no people are adorned by an event, so splendid in itself, so important in its consequences, as that which we are now celebrating. The festivities of the old world are too often the affectation of joy purchased by government to decorate with smiles the languid misery of the nation—but this day witnesses the spontaneous rejoicings of an emancipated continent. Other nations celebrate the birth of new sovereigns, to whose hereditary

vices they may soon be transmitted—we are consecrating the cradle of our infant liberties. They praise sanguinary victories, which to the people announce only a change of oppressors—ours is the glorious triumph of freedom, in which the meanest citizen of the republic can participate.

On this occasion then, let us review together that interesting period of our country. Let us dwell on the blessings which it procured for us, and pause to inquire how we may yet preserve them.

The early history of nations is generally obscured by fable or superstition: and all that can be distinguished by the dim light of tradition is the casual union of wandering plunderers, or the more authentic atrocities of the first usurpers. But the pure and virgin annals of our country are unstained alike by crime or subjection. She never felt, she would never submit to, despotism; but, at the first signal of usurpation, trampling on the fetters that would have restrained her, she marched boldly at once to empire.

We had struggled unobserved through a long and painful childhood. The seeds, which freedom had scattered through the wilderness, ripened

in the hardy shade of exile till they attracted the rapacity of that government which should have protected us. As long as gentleness might conciliate or danger might alarm a vindictive ministry, our rights were successively asserted in the mildest form of supplication, the bolder tone of remonstrance, the sterner style of opposition. These were despised for their weakness, or spurned for their insolence. At last force came to compel obedience: and the people of America, whom a common danger had brought together, had now to choose between unqualified submission and the desperate hazards of resistance. A people less highminded, less proud of their rights, might have hesitated to measure their weakness with the unequal superiority of their parent nation, and compromised perhaps for the forms of liberty and the substantial vassalage of submission. But the men of the revolution did not stop to calculate the dangers of defending their freedom. The same spirit, with which their fathers had preferred the laborious liberty of the wilderness to the more servile indolence of civilization, still animated them. They were menaced with oppression, and had vainly

demanded justice. If danger and anarchy were before them, subjection was behind. They might repair the calamities of war; but who among them wished to outlive their freedom? and finding nothing in the uncertainty of the future more terrible than submission, they threw at once the sword into the scale, and on this day raised the standard of Independence.

What a hopeless contest! A powerful nation, old in war, strengthened by alliances, was directing its vengeance against a feeble and dispersed population, whose very freedom revolted from the necessary habits of subordination—friendless abroad and directed by temporary councils, who governed only by advising. But the world then learned that the pliant affections of a free people yield a far more effectual obedience than the sullen submission extorted from their fears. The want of arms, the want of discipline, the want of every thing that renders a common army formidable, were supplied by the gallant patriotism of our country. The hasty levies triumphed over the veteran legions of their adversaries. Their arms were soon sharpened by discipline; and more than once, when the great

cause of freedom seemed lost and the dawn of the republic overshadowed for ever, that army, whom distress only rendered more terrible, gathering resources from danger, drove back upon its enemies the clouds of misfortune. Despised at first, their valor soon acquired the respect and the fear of their adversaries. From rebels they became enemies: they then became conquerors, and, upholding with their swords the infant republic, forced her humbled enemies to acknowledge her. They did indeed triumph: and each succeeding year has given us new causes to bless the prophetic wisdom and the heroic gallantry, which have revealed to future times the glorious passage by which an oppressed nation may achieve its independence.

For, contrast what we now enjoy with the condition in which, five and thirty years ago, this day found our country—in which we might still have been—in which all other nations at this moment are—and whose heart does not swell with gratitude? But for this day, we might have gone back to our allegiance, and, bending in suppliant repentance before an offended ministry, purchased, with a surrender of our rights, a

charitable oblivion of our rebellion. We might have continued good and loyal and submissive colonies, with a commerce fettered by monopolies, an agriculture shrinking before the restrictions of trade—dependent on a foreign government, without strength, without union, without empire. We might have been perhaps the humble auxiliaries of its ambition; our resources exhausted, our population drained in some European war; in which our only share would have been of the burthen and the disaster. Into what misfortunes that career would have led us defies our calculation; but we should often look (for the view is full of warning and of consolation)—we should often look at the state of other countries, and read, in the undistinguished desolation which has settled on the old world, what might have been our condition but for the happy exemption which this day secured for us.

During the long interval of our repose, a war of unexampled fury has shaken to their foundations the strongest thrones, and convulsed the hidden elements of society, till at this moment scarcely a single government, which saw our weakness, survives to witness our glory. We

look round for the companions of our national childhood; but they all seem to have gone prematurely to the tomb.

Animated by our example, that France, who once pitied our misfortunes, strove also to be free; but it was only the impotent fury of a maniac struggling with his chains. In the dark hour of her bloody anarchy, there did seem to be a dawning brightness; and our hopes mistook the transient gleam of arms for the sober rays of freedom. It dazzled for a moment like the bewildering lights that glitter over the corruption which feeds them; and then a night of far deeper gloom closed on the fairest prospects of human nature.

There is now no Holland. The heroic people, who first won their country from the ocean, and planting there the freedom which they wrested from a powerful monarch, claimed the sovereignty of the seas, are now bending beneath a foreign government. Their commerce, which once covered the Indies, now creeps along their coasts. Their fleets, which once carried terror to the bosom of England, now lie along their deserted strands.

There was once a formidable power, the terror of the north, whose army, guided by the distinguished veteran of Prussia, roamed round her frontiers panting for plunder. The successor of Frederic, without an army or a capital, has begged back his ravaged empire from the mercy of a conqueror. A foreign soldier usurps the throne of Charles XII: and Austria, that Austria, who balanced with the Bourbons the fate of Europe, sitting among the ruins of her own Germany, turns westward her humbled pride, and bows before her hereditary rival.

Spain, whose alliance we once courted, is now suffering the bitterness of affliction—her monarch in captivity—her colonies renouncing their subjection—her territory delivered over to the ravages of foreign enemies; while on the shores of America the last of the kings of Portugal wanders, a lonely exile from his ruined country.

Not a state, scarcely a fragment, a solitary monument, of all the Italian governments, is now standing. They have all gone down in this wild tempest, which has thrown up, from the bosom of the ocean, new powers and new king-

doms, spreading over the world, like their own volcanoes, the burning lava of war and conquest—of conquest which seems to have no object but desolation—of war which promises no end till the human race be extinguished: for, while the south of Europe is still smoking in ruins—while the adverse religions are furiously encountering each other in the east, the watchfires of the north seem already lighted for a new struggle.

Approach nearer this gloomy picture; and see over the prostrate fragments of so many nations a fierce and criminal ambition brooding with a savage delight on the misery it has caused, and coldly listening to the groans its cruelty has excited. Scarcely a valley of Europe which has not startled at the sound of arms: not a stream which has not swelled with tears or been tinged with blood. Her fields are desolated; her uncertain harvests trodden under foot by a ruffian soldiery; her villages abandoned to pillage and conflagration; her scanty fortunes burthened with the support of insolent ostentation; her youth torn from their homes to be sacrificed in foreign wars, where defeat augments their

calamities, and victory only rivets their domestic oppression. The rulers seem to govern only to destroy. The people, exiled from power, learn no duty but submission—submission to a cruel authority; which leaves to its wretched victims all the bitter sensibility to feel their wrongs, without the generous courage to avenge them. They are afflicted; but the melancholy consolation of complaint is denied to them. They mourn; but their sighs are watched. They would weep; but the tears of sorrow are criminal: while the detested usurpation, which calls itself government, plants among the household gods of every fireside the grim and spectral image of suspicion frowning upon the generous expansions of the heart, and terrifying all the social endearments which render existence estimable.

Turn from the sad contemplation of such misery, to the cheering prospects which this day presents to our own country. Enjoyment may perhaps render us insensible to their value; but the time may not be distant when we shall look back with anxious regret on the happy years which have succeeded the revolution; and which posterity will deem the golden age of the repub-

lic. For, was there ever a nation so blest with all that should render her happy? or were more brilliant destinies ever given to the hopes of any people? From the misfortunes of Europe—from her wars and her crimes we are separated by an ocean yielding its treasures to our industry, rolling its waves for our commerce; but interposing all its tempests for our protection: in peace, the beneficent distributor of our wealth: in war, the terrible defender of our freedom. Behind this barrier we have reposed in safety, and standing almost alone amidst the general wreck have listened to the miseries of the old world which faintly reached our retreat, and seemed like the waves of that ocean moaning as they burst impotently on our shores. Whilst the rest of the world has been devoted to wanton destruction, like the Genius of Peace, we have visited the camps of contending nations and passed unhurt behind the sacred shield of our neutrality. A hardy and intrepid people, nursed in tempests and familiar with danger, have made every ocean tributary to our greatness, and gathered from the follies of other nations whatever might enrich our country. All Europe

has witnessed their triumphant enterprise; our flag has been borne to the remotest African; the sluggish inhabitant of Asia has gazed with astonishment at the sudden greatness and the hazardous daring of this new people; and our adventurous soldiers have taught every wandering nation of America, whose retreats were hidden from European industry, at once the name and the valor of the republic.

At home, what eye has not witnessed our prosperity? in whose gigantic career, the improvements of ages are condensed into years; and the memory of man almost embraces the history of an empire. Not a century and a half since the savages of the wilderness were roaming over this spot, where now all the arts, which accompany the last stage of refinement, are rivalling the slowly accumulated wealth and genius of the old world. But yesterday our helpless infancy girt round by a hostile frontier scarcely ventured towards the west. The desert is now every where receding before our persevering industry; the inmost recesses of the forest have been lighted by the torch of cultivation; and the exuberant tide of population, scorning

its narrow limits, has burst over the Allegany, and rolled its torrent westward: till now the American hunter has built his cabin three thousand miles from that Atlantic, on whose desert coast his ancestors so lately found a precarious refuge. The footsteps of our enemies are overgrown by the luxuriance of our soil; their ravages remembered only to be contrasted with our present happiness; our valleys are loaded with plenty; our harvests reaped in peace; and over all preside the free institutions which, balancing the rights of individuals with the public safety, distribute a freedom unmingled with licentiousness and felt rather than seen, pervade every avenue of public happiness, and guard with the invisible majesty of the laws the lowliest shed of poverty or misfortune.

Around us all is prosperity and peace. Cast our view forward, and the fancy droops her flagging wing over the wide horizon of our future greatness. Not ours only is the triumph: let the world rejoice with us. These institutions, which have practically proved the capacity of man for freedom, the reproach and the envy too of despotism, may yet be chosen as the last asy-

lum of free government. However modified by accident or partially endangered by faction, the great principles which our revolution consecrated, the generous zeal to defend them, the proud scorn of oppression, can never be destroyed. Should the remaining free institutions of Europe be overwhelmed; if, as our fears will sometimes anticipate, the lights of liberty be there extinguished; this country, the last and fairest child of freedom, herself the mother of embryo nations, will receive the sacred wreck, and carry to the future republics of a new world the vestal flame of laws and liberty and civilization. That were indeed a destiny fit for a great nation. These were blessings well worth a glorious struggle. To have shared in that contest—to have fought in that great cause of our country and of human nature—to have thus triumphed, outweighs an age of ordinary existence. That was no strife between slaves fighting to gratify a cruel ambition—no dispute of courtesy—no controversy about a barren territory. It was a holy struggle between the eternal principles of freedom and the encroachments of oppression: a war in which the liberties of a na-

tion and the destiny of a continent were staked against the fretful cupidity of a faction.

Those liberties are established: that prosperity—that peace—those destinies are ours. There yet remains one duty—to be grateful for them. In the midst then of this day's enjoyment, let us not forget that, under heaven, we owe it to the patriots of the revolution: that we chiefly owe it to that gallant army, whose remains are now sharing with us the festivities they won. They remember our country poor and prostrate, overrun by a foreign soldiery, menaced with ruin. They bared their bosoms to the tempest; and they live to see her free and prosperous and powerful, outstripping all the nations who frowned upon her infancy. To them therefore, while they yet remain among us, let our hearts be turned in grateful affection. Their numbers are here few; for many of their companions have been overtaken by infirmity and misfortune; and the survivors yet lament many a brave and generous soldier, on whose valor the tomb has closed.

They lament too the most brave and generous spirit that ever led the patriot armies of a nation: they mourn their heroic chief on whom no tomb

has yet closed. The humblest soldier of his army sleeps beneath the sod which affection raised for him—but in the wide empire which Washington established, there has not been found space enough for his tomb. In the first hour of their sorrow, the assembled people of America solemnly decreed a monument worthy of his glory and their affections. Yet that body, which the republic thus withdrew from the care of his kindred; that body, which conjugal tenderness surrendered to a nation's afflictions, now lies in almost undistinguished ruin, exposed to midnight rapine; and the ashes, which should have been moistened by our tears, may soon be scattered by the winds of heaven.

Why Americans! are we then grateful only in our distresses, liberal only in lamentation? Or is this indeed the country which he saved? Is this that America whose hopes so often rested on his virtues, whose destinies so often depended on his sword? Was this neglected body the soldier, who in the darkest hour of her calamities propped her falling fortunes, and, like the pillar of her safety, lighted her path along the yawning gulf of ruin? Was this the statesman who, when

the freedom he gave us was degenerating into a wild anarchy, fixed the solid foundations of the republic; and twining his own glory round its columns rendered both secure? who, when the madness of Europe again menaced our country, threw round us the spotless mantle of neutrality and stayed the pestilence? who, when a new enemy assailed us, left the retirement he loved and again hazarded for us even his renown? Are we the children of the republic, all whose glories are associated with the name of Washington? and shall not our country contain one solitary memorial of his existence? It cannot be that time has decayed our veneration for his memory: time that only adds new value to his services.

Do we then think these honours superfluous? But that heart is cold and cheerless which, because virtue is its own best reward, should abstain from expressing its gratitude. That man would but dishonour his nature whose stoicism should leave to his benefactor the consciousness of his goodness, without one generous mark of the affection it had inspired.

Are we content to believe the fallacy by which tyranny would alarm us into chains, that

freedom is always ungrateful? As if the man who acquired a nation's liberties could not receive from their voluntary homage prouder honours than he who crept into the humiliating greatness of despotism.

Or do we deem these monuments too perishable? Believe me, they will long survive our freedom. They will exist long after the republic is in ashes. As durable as history, they will illustrate our annals: more impressive than letters, their eloquent silence shall proclaim to posterity our gratitude. The voice you now hear exhorts you to this duty, because it has itself mourned over the ruins of the republics which have gone before us; of whose fallen greatness there exists at this hour scarcely any thing except the monuments of their heroes. Those tombs are still standing, which more than two thousand years ago Plataea erected to her soldiers. Among the forsaken fragments of Mycenæ the stranger still pauses with awe before the sepulchre of Agamemnon: and on the lonely strand of Marathon may yet be traced the columns reared to the heroes who perished in defending their country—as our soldiers, men of America, de-

fended this good land of our fathers—from foreign insult and invasion. Ages since, the freedom of Greece has perished; her institutions are destroyed; her soil is usurped by barbarians: but the tombs of her soldiers, the offerings of a nation to its benefactors, still shed their melancholy glories on the desert. They excite a generous sympathy for a people whose only relics are the memorials of their gratitude. Even the Gothic conquerors, who came to plunder, revered and spared them. Over these graves of departed valor, there still seems to linger, amidst their country's darkness, some gleam of ancient renown; and from their ashes, as from the dying embers of the republic, her freedom may yet be rekindled. The last and only republic of the world similar to them in freedom—imitate too the gratitude of that stupendous people. The ruins of our republic will be one day thus visited: and the traveller may hereafter seek in this desert for the monuments of our heroes. But he will find none; and will tread with indignation the soil of a people who merited their ruin, because they knew not how to reward the champions of their freedom.

Let not that reproach for ever stain our country. Let it not be said that our thankless prosperity forgot the friends of its misfortunes; but on this day, while in the full enjoyment of all that Washington procured for us, prove that we have hearts to appreciate, and hands to honour his memory. This ungrateful delay may now be gloriously retrieved.

These venerable companions of his services, the last of that heroic army whom he conducted to glory, will soon follow him to the grave. But before they separate, their last effort will be to leave behind them some memorial of that distinguished leader, who has been withdrawn for ever from their affections. They would anxiously bequeath to us—they would transmit to future ages that form; such as they remember it in the hour of danger, calm yet terrible, fearing nothing but for our country, and animating that valor to which she owes her freedom. But their strength is feeble: their exertions will be unavailing without the generous cooperation of their countrymen. And who will not share with them in that sad duty? Who will not join these veteran soldiers in rendering the last homage to their


fallen chieftain? What man would not bend in admiration before the image of the most faultless of mortals? What American would not gratefully point out to his children the form of their benefactor, or proudly say to the stranger, this was my countryman?

To us should this duty be peculiarly grateful, since it was eminently our lot to witness his virtues. The patriots who planned the revolution assembled here. That independence which he established was first announced here. When this fair city was possessed by a foreign enemy, his sword relieved us. First then in the arts, and second in prosperity to none of the republic, let us strive to be foremost in gratitude. Let us erect among us some durable image of that father of the country, who will still seem to protect the republic he established; before whose venerable presence, all the demons of party will be dumb with awe; round whom in the last hours of her danger the defenders of our country may rally their desperate valor.

Let not however this zeal be fruitless. Unite with it, what can alone secure our freedom, a

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zealous imitation of that illustrious model of patriotism, and an ardent attachment to the principles of the revolution. If we should ever falter in the path of duty, ever be indifferent to our country's honour, or regardless of her freedom, the memory of the heroes of the revolution, their disinterested sufferings, their gallant devotion, will warn us of the glorious inheritance they won for us, and breathe fresh vigor into the institutions of the republic. These are the true models for Americans—the surest tests of patriotism; and he who cherishes the principles of Washington, by whatever distinction he be known, is the friend of this nation. The time may be approaching, fellow citizens, when we shall all be summoned to imitate his example. Our neutrality, our love of peace, our forbearance, may not save us from the encroachment of foreign ambition: and the reluctant swords of this country may be again drawn in defence of our liberties, for which these men fought. They may not perhaps live to witness that struggle; but let them this day learn that they have not fought in vain. Tell them that the



freedom they won shall be as boldly defended. Our enemies mistake for fear the forbearance of our injured country. They think the long slumber of peace has quenched her energy—they shall learn that it is only the freshening rest of our eagle, who will rouse from his repose with new terrors. They calculate on our distractions—they shall know that the jealousies of a free nation only endear their liberty. What though we do differ? What though we sometimes madly wrestle with each other on the giddy heights of our own prosperity? This is still the land of our ancestors; still the last asylum from oppression; still the freest and happiest nation in existence. Let those who would disturb its peace touch but the soil of this country: instead of finding furious and divided factions, say, should they not be met as they landed, by the armed and united vengeance of seven millions of free people? So shall we preserve our freedom—thus shall the republic long stand. Our ancestors found this country a desert; so shall our enemies before it is surrendered. They subdued the wilderness; they vanquished the

savages; they triumphed over the soldiers of France; they overcame the arms of England; what shall our united strength now fear? The republic was cradled in tempests; what storms shall it now dread? In our infancy we strangled the serpent; our manhood may defy the world.