

AN
ORATION,

DELIVERED AT

PROVIDENCE,

IN THE

BAPTIST MEETING-HOUSE,

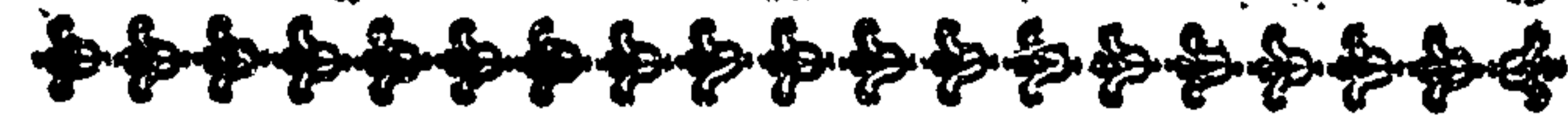
ON THE

Fourth of July, 1803.

By ASA MESSER, A. M.

President of RHODE-ISLAND COLLEGE.

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The Committee of Arrangements for the Celebration of the Fourth of July, present their compliments to President MESSER, and request him to favour them with a copy of his excellent ORATION, delivered yesterday, for the press.

WILLIAM ALLEN,
 THOMAS P. IVES,
 JAMES BURRILL, jun.
 JOHN WHIPPLE,
 WILLIAM LANNED,
 HENRY SMITH,
 WHEELER MARTIN,
 Providence, July 5, 1803.

Town's Committee of Arrangements.

Providence, July 5, 1803.

To the Committee of Arrangements, and through them to the Citizens of the Town of Providence, the following ORATION, with fervent wishes for their progress in knowledge, virtue and religion, is respectfully dedicated, by their friend and servant,

ASA MESSER.



AN

ORATION.

IT is impossible, fellow-citizens, to feel the spirit of this anniversary, without the ideal presence of those important scenes which gave it birth. Invincible necessity will, therefore, impel you to cast back the eye of reflection on the calamitous times of seventy-six; and, while your hearts vibrate with the prospect of them, you will insensibly catch the flame which then burst on the world, and melted the chains of slavery which were forging for our country. In the ardour of your imagination you will see the town of Boston invested by a band of mercenary soldiers; her commerce proscribed, her citizens massacred. You will see the blood running from the veins of your Lexington brethren, You will hear the roaring of cannon from Bunker's awful mount, and the groans of your wounded, dying friends. You will see the drawn sword of despotism hanging over your own heads, and threatening yourselves with chains, or death. Loaded with insult, abuse and danger, you will feel yourselves crowding with your fellow-citizens to the American standard, and pledging your property, your honour and your lives, for the welfare of your country.— In the midst of this wakeful dream, while your hearts are beating high with perturbation and alarm,

you will hear a voice, declaring in thundering accents, that "these United States are, and of right ought to be, free and independent."—You will look over the whole history of the revolutionary war; the monstrous madness and tyranny which occasioned it; the diabolical cruelty with which it was carried on; the dark, loathsome malignity of our enemies—but the fortitude and perseverance of our fellow-citizens; their inflexible intrepidity in the depths of danger and distress; their noble, patriotic disinterestedness; their fixed, united determination never to wear the chains of slavery; and finally the wonderful interpositions of divine Providence, in promoting their exertions, and in enabling them to triumph over their more powerful and haughty foes, and to crown themselves with freedom and independence.—But, though it is impossible to feel the spirit of this anniversary without reflections of this kind, still there are reflections of another kind which ought at least to coalesce with them. Those days of darkness are gone. Those tyrannical struggles to tax us without our consent, and to render us the servile tributaries of an arbitrary, overbearing step-mother, have been baffled. The rod of the oppressor has been broken. Our freedom and independence have been established. If we cannot forget, let us forgive those hostile invaders of our rights, and let us "hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war; in peace, friends."

Since the establishment of our freedom and independence, it has become a matter of greater moment to ascertain how they may be preserved, than whence they originated. For if we cannot preserve them, the mere recollection that they were once established will be extremely painful and mortifying. If, indeed, these sublime subjects of our rejoicing should ever be wrested from us, may no letter of our history, after the declaration of independence, be suffered to escape the flames. Let it never be

told that we had once broken the yoke of bondage, and had made ourselves free and independent; but let all future generations consider us, as they well might, a race of despicable mortals, fit only to wear the manacles of despotism.—On this occasion, then, you will permit me to solicit your candour, while I suggest a few thoughts on the means of preserving our freedom and independence.

It is at once observable, that the state of things in this nation differs radically from that in almost any other. In the greatest part of what is called the civilized world, the greatest part of the inhabitants are doomed to wear the shackles of despotic power. Having no voice either in the form of government, or in the choice of rulers, or in the enactment of laws, they are mere cyphers in the political eye. The rulers are every thing: the people, nothing. Hence in those countries the permanency of any political system must depend chiefly on the stability of the men in power. They give a colour to the whole nation; and you may infer the state of the nation from that of the court. If the court is composed of bad men, the nation must be wretched; if of good men, the nation may be happy.—In this country the scene is reversed. Freedom is our birth-right. We choose our own form of government, our own rulers, and in them our own laws. Hence in this country the permanency of any political system must depend not so much on the stability of our rulers, as of our nation.—I am sensible, indeed, that we are wont to make large calculations on the proceedings of our rulers. When their laws coincide with our views, we are wont to imagine that all our national concerns are in a happy train: when the opposite happens, we are wont to imagine that all is lost. In this, however, we are taking but a partial view of the subject. For, however desirable it is that our rulers should enact good laws, or lamentable that they should enact bad ones,

still it must be remembered that neither they themselves, nor the laws which they enact, can claim a permanent existence; and hence that all the good or evil which they can produce, will be but temporary. Notwithstanding all our rejoicings or lamentations at the election of good or bad rulers, the whole scene, at the very next election, may be entirely changed. Unless, therefore, we can find some basis of calculation more permanent than that which at any time can be found in the complexion of our rulers, all our future political prospects must ever be clouded with doubts and uncertainties.—As all our civil powers originate from the nation, it is manifest that our civil policy will vibrate with the vibrations of the nation. Hence our attention must be especially directed to the nation itself, when we wish to calculate on the continuation of our civil privileges. Let the nation be right, and the rulers and laws will be right of course.

On this ground I apprehend that a general diffusion of knowledge among our citizens is essential to the preservation of our freedom and independence. A very ignorant man must be but wretchedly qualified to make up a correct judgment on national concerns. Let his intentions be ever so upright, he will be almost as likely to vote for a wrong, as for a right measure. A fair story, told by a designing neighbour, may turn him in almost any direction, and make him instrumental of promoting perhaps the most wicked intentions. If a large portion of the nation should at any time be made up of such men, should we not be in the most imminent danger? Would there not be an ample field for intrigue and deception? Would not the most artful, or the most eloquent men, be likely to bear off the prize? And might not thousands of honest, well-meaning citizens be made the instruments of ruining not only their friends and neighbours, but even themselves?—It is impossible, on any ground, to believe

that a state of general ignorance is compatible with the permanency of civil freedom. Prejudices of the most deep-rooted and pestiferous kind are always found in the company of ignorance; and it is well known that men, hurried on by prejudice, are always liable to be carried into the most dangerous extremes. Whether you are right or wrong, will make no part of the enquiry of such men. Evidence will not affect them more than it will a stone. You may reason with them, but your labour will be lost. They are fully satisfied with their present views; and hence are as much prepared, perhaps before as after trial, to acquit or condemn. What discord, what danger might not prejudice excite, when extensively diffused among a nation, holding its own destiny in its own hands! And yet prejudice is the inseparable companion of ignorance. How extremely dangerous, then, must ignorance be in a free country! —In Spain, or Russia, or Turkey, the case is very different. In any country, where the will of the prince is the law of the land; where the object of government is to enrich some, by impoverishing others; where the people have no voice but that of homage and adulation, the dominion of ignorance may there be the very preservation of government. There, the diffusion of knowledge would certainly generate civil convulsions; for nothing but ignorance can render men contented in a state of slavery. —But in our country, where all civil power emanates from the nation, it is inexpressibly important that the minds of all classes of our citizens should be enriched with useful information; for nothing short of this can secure us against those evils which must inevitably subserve the subversion of our invaluable civil privileges.

The security of these privileges, however, cannot be effected merely by the diffusion of knowledge. It is possible that knowledge and vice may unite in the same character; and it is certain, that by how

much the more knowledge a vicious man has, by so much the more is he capable of performing mischief. Virtue is essential to a worthy character; and the general diffusion of virtue among our citizens, not less than the general diffusion of knowledge, is essential to the security of our freedom and independence. It is with a nation as with an individual. An individual who has no virtue or moral principle, can never be the subject of confidence. Let his knowledge be ever so extensive, you can never calculate on his persevering in the pursuit of a worthy object. Not influenced by any moral sense, he will always fluctuate with his passions. These will blow him as the winds blow a ship deprived of her rudder; and you may as well expect that such a ship will waft your commerce to the destined port, as that such a man will persevere in the pursuit of public good. As he is *unstable in all his ways*, you cannot, from his pretensions to-day, make any deductions respecting his conduct to-morrow. His own private interest being his great object, he will be willing to sacrifice perhaps even his country at the shrine of his own ambition. Hence the less intercourse you have with him, the greater will be your safety. May not all this be true, when spoken of a nation composed of such individuals? Could you reasonably repose any confidence in such a nation? Could you expect that it would respect and cherish the principles of justice and benevolence? Could you expect that it would persevere in the support of those rights and privileges which are the subjects of our rejoicing on this anniversary?—Might you not rather fear that the hand of every man would be against his neighbour? that both private and public confidence would be abolished? that universal distrust and jealousy would be predominant? and that unbridled contention and anarchy would become the order of the day? Yes, you may as well hope that a garden will flourish without moisture, as that

a nation will flourish without virtue.—Order and concord are the natural offspring of virtue. True virtue will bind men together, and give them all a common interest. It will teach them to treat one another as brethren; to hold the rights of others as sacred as they hold their own; to deal with all on the principles of truth, justice and good-will; and to believe that, while they are labouring for the good of the whole, they are labouring for the good of themselves. Hence true virtue will induce each citizen to be satisfied with his proper station, and to be zealous for that order and concord which alone can give strength or respect to a nation. Cemented by the divine principle of virtue, and enlightened by the radiant beams of knowledge, only five millions, which comparatively are but an handful of people, situated as the Americans now are, may safely defy the united force and intrigue of the whole civilized world. Hence, on a day set apart for celebrating our national freedom and independence, may we not well consider how the general diffusion of knowledge and virtue must be effected?—

It is obvious, that inveterate and confirmed habits become very rigid and inflexible. The power of man can seldom alter them. Being transfused through his whole system, they become a kind of second nature. Hence it is not to be expected, that the habits of men far advanced in life can be easily changed. If they have grown grey under the tree of ignorance, they will be apt to imagine that its boughs afford the most delightful shadow, and its blossoms the most delicious fragrance. No entreaties will induce them to leave it. They must live and die in the embrace of their favourite habits.—Hence arises the importance of making an early beginning with children; of conducting their tender minds to the fountains of knowledge and virtue; of infixing in them the ha-

bits of reading and reflection, and of turning their feet into the path which they ought to walk in, when advanced into life. For good habits, as well as bad ones, become very rigid and inflexible. If we *train up a child in the way he should go*, we are assured by the wise man of the east that, *when he is old, he will not depart therefrom.*—Hence it is worthy our special notice, that a good family government is an important auxiliary to a good civil government. Those parents who train up their children in the right way; who enrich their minds with useful knowledge, and their hearts with wholesome principles; who enforce on them the importance of always acting by the rule of right; who teach them the duties they owe to their superiors, to their inferiors, to their equals, and to themselves; those parents may be truly said to deserve well of their country; for they are training up a race of citizens, who, we have reason to hope, will feel for its rights, and defend them on principle.—Whereas let children be subjected to no family government; let them feel no curb placed on their passions; let them always imagine that they have a right to act as they please; let them be taught no lessons of morality or subordination, and what must we expect of them, when arrived at years of maturity? Shall we expect that a few external accomplishments will make them good citizens? May we not rather expect that they will neither know, nor care anything about the rights of others, but will be ready to trample down every institution which opposes their passions?—The lad who has not learned submission at home, will not be likely to learn it any where. At school, he will certainly complain, if his master chastises him for what his parents allowed; and hence there he will probably be turbulent and untractable. In civil society, the same disposition will follow him. Indeed, it will be a

matter of mere chance, if he is not, through life, a moral pest to society. Hence let it be remembered, that there is no way in which parents can benefit their country, as well as their children, better, than by subjecting them to the discipline and instructions of a good family government.

But, though the education of children must be begun in a family, still, if limited there, it must be extremely imperfect. A moment's reflection will satisfy us, that, in general, it is impracticable for parents to give that personal attention to their children, which is necessary to render them useful and respectable members of society. To the government and instructions of a family, therefore, those of a well directed school form a most excellent and necessary appendage. But as a large number of parents are unable to endure the expence of giving their children the advantages of a private school, it is certain that a large number of children must be schooled either at the public expence, or not at all. Hence arises a question of great political importance. Shall schools be supported at the expence of the public, so that not even the most indigent children may be trained up in ignorance? Or shall they be left to the patronage of individuals, so that the means of information may be limited to the children of the wealthy? While the manner in which I should answer this very important question may be collected from the preceding observations, the manner in which the citizens of the town of Providence would answer it, may be collected from their supporting an establishment of schools as respectable, to say the least, as any in the United States. May we not felicitate ourselves, my respected friends, on the charming prospect which these schools hold out for our rising offspring? And may we not hope that the spirit of patriotism will stimulate every man in the nation to patronize an

institution so congenial with the genius of our government, and so befitted to give permanency to its principles?

To all this you will permit me to add, that, as virtue is dependent on religion, a prime pillar in our political edifice must rest on the encouragement given to religious principle. In confirmation of this I shall only introduce the opinion of a man, whose resplendent name the Fourth of July must ever suggest to our grateful remembrance. Our great and beloved WASHINGTON, in his farewell address to this nation, writes thus. "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labour to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connexions with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked, where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation *desert* the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice! And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education, on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail, in exclusion of religious principle."—

These are the sentiments of that illustrious Father of American independence; and may we not add, that they are worthy to be engraved on the tablets of all our hearts? Notwithstanding our just abhorrence of political religion, we may still aver, that religious principle is of all things the

best fitted to promote that peace, concord and friendship, which are essential to the stability of civil freedom. Even in the view of our national prosperity, not any thing can be of greater importance than the prosperity of that divine religion, which is *pure, peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.* It was, indeed, on this very religion that our success greatly depended in the revolutionary war. A recurrence to those times will convince us, that the fate of that war was in measure suspended on that union and zeal of soul, with which religion had inspired our venerable fathers. The readiness of thousands of them to endure the hardships of the war, arose solely from the conviction that we were fighting in the cause of God. Hence at some times they were clothed in sackcloth, prostrate before the God of nations, and, with adoring humility, invoking his guidance and protection. At other times they were lifting their hearts and voices to heaven, and adoring and blessing their Maker for his merciful interpositions. While our hearts, therefore, glow with the same flame of freedom, shall they not also glow with the same zeal for religion! Yes. We will venerate the religious as well as the political principles of seventy-six. We will venerate that solemn appeal to the Supreme Judge of the world, which our sages in Congress then made for the rectitude of their intentions, when they declared that these United States are, and of right ought to be, free and independent. We will venerate that profound homage which our nation then paid to the Providence and institutions of our Maker. We will venerate that precious, dying advice, which we have all sanctioned by our applauses, and which enforces on us the necessity of morality and religion as “the great pillars of human happiness, the

firmest props of the duties of men and citizens." And we will let the world know, that, aided by knowledge, virtue and religion, and relying on the benedictions of heaven, we will, in spite of all opposition, maintain ourselves free and independent.

