

AN
ORATION,
IN COMMEMORATION OF
THE
AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE.

DELIVERED

AGREEABLY TO AN APPOINTMENT OF THE

LYSIAN SOCIETY,

ON WEDNESDAY JULY THE FOURTH, 1804.

BY JOHN EWING PORTER.

Hail! Independence! hail! Heaven's next best gift,
To that of life and an immortal soul!

THOMSON.

Philadelphia :

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FOR THE LYSIAN SOCIETY.

1804.

Resolved,

That the thanks of the Lysian Society be tendered to Mr. I. E. Porter, for the Oration by him on the 4th instant, and that he be requested to furnish a copy thereof for publication.

(Extract from the minutes.)

THOMAS ALLIBONE, JUNR. Sec'y.
of the Lysian Society.

Philadelphia, July 6th, 1804.

AN ORATION.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

THE commemoration of remarkable occurrences has been customary in all ages and in all times : it is sanctioned by the wisest and most enlightened nations. In conformity with this laudable practice, we have assembled to celebrate the anniversary of that auspicious day on which the beams of Independence first illumined our happy land. It has become my duty on the present occasion, to lay before you a narrative of the circumstances which gave rise to this memorable event. Deeply sensible of my inability to do justice to the illustrious subject, I undertake with diffidence the task, which has been assigned to me. Yet from the candour of the respectable audience which I have the honour to address, I am encouraged to hope that my defects will be viewed with indulgence—that the feebleness of my efforts will be excused by my solicitude to comply with your wishes.

Previously to the settlement of America, Europe was buried in the profoundest ignorance, and the darkest superstition. Priestcraft had entangled in her mysteries the great mass of the civilized world ; and having obtained dominion over the bodies of men, was struggling to extend her empire over their consciences. In England this enthusiastic system prevailed in its greatest rigour. Pompous ceremonies and unmeaning rites assumed the name of devotion ; the mild and benevolent principles of Christianity gave way to the most rancorous bigo-

try ; and the worship of God became a solemn mockery. The Puritans alone had penetration to discover and courage to resist this infatuating delusion. For their refusal to conform to the established religion, they were persecuted, imprisoned or suffered death by the most cruel tortures. But so ineffectual is coercion in restraining the operations of reason and conscience, that the arbitrary measures which were instituted against them tended only to inflame their zeal, and increase the number of their proselytes. Despairing to effect its purposes, (while the Puritans remained in England) the British government changed the usual punishment of non-conformity into banishment.

Thus driven from their native land, our pious forefathers sought an asylum in America. Arrived at the place of their destination, they were yet to encounter a formidable opposition. A strange climate—pathless deserts—a wild and uncultivated country lay before them. To men actuated by less exalted motives, these would have been insurmountable obstacles. But that spirit which had been tried in the fire of fanatic fury—those principles which had withstood the most violent attacks of monkish enthusiasm, were not to be shaken by slight difficulties and dangers. Encouraged by the animating prospect of religious freedom, supported by the purity of their intentions and the goodness of their cause, they pursued with unremitting ardour their adopted plan.—At length heaven smiled upon their labours, and crowned their perseverance with success : a settlement was effected, and the barren wilderness was converted into fertile fields.

This new settlement was followed by a rapid emigration. Adventurers were excited by various mo-

tives to embark in the undertaking.—To the persecuted, America presented a peaceful retreat—to the oppressed a refuge from tyranny—to the enterprising a vast theatre of action—and to the industrious poor a wide field for the acquirement of wealth and independence. Nor did the wisdom of the original emigrants contribute less to the progress of population. From a recollection of their own distresses they were touched with sympathy for the misfortunes of others. Having themselves experienced the miseries of intolerance and oppression, they determined to impose no arbitrary restraints upon the opinions or pursuits of their fellow creatures. Securing to each the fruits of his industry, they permitted every man to worship the God of nature according to the dictates of his own conscience.

The nations of Europe were now beginning to awake from the lethargy in which they had so long slept. The scales of delusion were fast falling from their eyes. Superstition beheld her kingdom tottering on its base, and priestcraft in vain attempted by her anathemas to silence the voice of reason and conscience. The rage of bigotry had subsided, and the storm of fanaticism was succeeded by the calm of dispassionate reflection. A mild and liberal policy reigned in the councils of Britain. For a considerable time the colonists were treated with tenderness, indulgence and affection. Participating in the general advantages of the British constitution, they were authorized to establish what local regulations they pleased. Nothing was reserved on the part of the mother-country but the benefit of their commerce, in return for which she afforded them assistance and protection. Thus, were sown the first seeds of independence. The colonies united under one common head, partaking extensively the privi-

leges of freemen, by their prudence and industry, had risen to a degree of improvement which was unparalleled in history.

At this momentous crisis, Great Britain inflamed by ambition, and intoxicated by power, beheld with envy the rising greatness of her children. Looking to the continent of America, she trembled lest the spark of liberty which she there perceived, should at some future period be kindled into a flame. This awoke her suspicion and roused her jealousy. She determined to check the operations of freedom, and to extinguish by severity the glimmerings of independence. From the fond caresses of a parent she suddenly assumed the haughty tone of magisterial authority. To render us wholly dependent upon her, she enacted a number of laws to crush the growth of our manufactures. We had long carried on a profitable trade with the Spanish colonies : this she destroyed, and thus struck the fatal blow to our commerce. To restrain our population, she prohibited in the most arbitrary terms the rights of citizenship from foreign emigrants. Her conduct throughout exhibited a series of unmerited insult—unprovoked injustice, and unprecedented oppression. Our legislative bodies were continually interrupted ; harrassed by importunity, and disturbed by menaces no alternative was left to them but to obey or dissolve. A multitude of unnecessary offices were created, to fill which, an host of harpies, the minions of despotism, were appointed to tyrannise over the people, and to snatch from the famishing mouth of labour its hard earned bread. Utterly excluded from the smallest representation, we were burthened by an oppressive load of exorbitant taxes. To compleat our wretchedness an army of pampered rullians, mercenary slaves, and

hired assassins were sent over to riot upon the fruits of our industry—to trample upon our rights—to sport with the blood of our citizens, and to enforce by the bayonet the cruel mandates of a tyrannical government.

America, it is natural to suppose, would not tamely submit to so gross a violation of her rights: but various circumstances combined to protract her vengeance, and to prevent her indignation from bursting into action. Connected with the people of Great Britain by the ties of nature and affection, accustomed to look up to her government with filial reverence, beholding her power and resources with awe; we were unwilling to undertake a war where we had so much to lose, and in which we could not flatter ourselves with the most distant prospect of success. Pacific measures were therefore our aim; every expedient was tried, every honourable mean was employed to effect an accommodation.—We petitioned for redress, but in vain! we supplicated, but our supplications were addressed to a nation deaf to the voice of humanity! we expostulated, but to no purpose! we remonstrated, but our remonstrances were rejected with the most insulting scorn! Even the patriotic Franklin, our ambassador, was denounced as a traitor; nor were his talents, his virtues, and venerable age, a sufficient protection against the most brutal insolence, and inveterate abuse. We implored heaven to dispose our parent country to peace;—we called upon the Ruler of the Universe, and the nations of the earth to witness our unwillingness to unsheath the desolating sword of war. Stung by repeated insults; exasperated by incessant provocations; roused by reiterated injuries, the sleeping lion of America at length awoke. Disappointed in every peaceful at-

tempt to obtain the removal of our grievances, in the last extremity, we appealed to the God of Battles, resolving to maintain our rights, or perish in the bloody conflict.

Compelled to vindicate her rights, America looked around her in search of a chief to direct her armies. Nor was she to remain long in suspense. The genius of liberty pointed to *Washington*, and the united voices of the nation confirmed the choice. Eager to avenge his Country's wrongs, he quick obeyed her summons. Forsaking the shades of retirement, the seats of affluence and ease, and the endearing embraces of conjugal love, he hastened to enter the field of danger and of death.

The hostile drama was now opened, but how great the contrast between the combatants. A people unaccustomed to war, unused to military discipline, destitute of resources, naked at the approach of winter, was to oppose an army of veteran soldiers, regularly paid, flushed with recent conquest and stimulated to exertion by the hopes of speedy victory. Exulting in the superiority of her numbers, Great Britain beheld with derision the shadow of an army with which she was to contend. But how vain are the lofty hopes of aspiring man. The ways of providence are inscrutable.—Frequently is the cup of success dashed from the lips of ambition. The fate of battle is not with mortals, it rests only with him who rules the destinies of nations. The energies of America increased with her difficulties. Firm and undaunted she rose superior to adversity. United by common danger, one principle pervaded her citizens. The generous flame of patriotism like electricity penetrated almost instantaneously through all ranks and de-

scriptions of the people. Every heart beat high for the cause of Freedom ; and to arms! to arms! Liberty or death, reverberated throughout the continent.

Then war grew glorious, heroes then arose,
 Who scorning coward self for others liv'd,
 Toil'd for their ease and for their safety bled.
 THOMSON.

To relate particularly the progress of this long and sanguinary contest would be too great a trespass upon your time and patience ; nor is it necessary. To the faithful historian is allotted this honourable duty. It is sufficient to remark that the armies of Great Britain worn out by fatigue, exhausted by disappointment, and humbled by defeat were obliged at length to capitulate. The object which America had in view was now attained. Declared by her former oppressors free and independent, she rejoiced to lay down the arms which she had taken up in her own defence. The harsh clangor of the martial trumpet was succeeded by the sound of peace ; and the din of arms was silenced by the acclamations of joy and gratitude.

But why is this lively picture darkened by the melancholy shades of grief ?—It is the sad emblem of mortality ; the mournful monument of a nations loss, sacred to the fame of those who have fallen in the cause of freedom, whose blood hath flowed in rich libations on the altar of Liberty. Generous martyrs! magnanimous heroes! illustrious victims! The recollection of your untimely end, while it calls forth, the sighs of sorrow, writes upon our hearts the lasting debt of gratitude. Never, never shall the remembrance of your virtues be effaced. Nor shall your well earned laurels wither or decay ; watered by our tears, they shall flourish in eter-

nal verdure, and the memory of your noble deeds, shall descend unsullied to the latest posterity.

The situation of America after the close of the war, pointed to the necessity of establishing a form of government. To reconcile the diversity of opinions and the collision of interests, which must have prevailed among a people, scattered over a wide continent, of different manners and pursuits, altho' a necessary, was an arduous task. It was accomplished. The wisdom of our sages framed a constitution, which has attracted the admiration of all nations. Securing to man every particle of Liberty which is compatible with his happiness, it was sufficiently energetic to restrain his excesses, to correct his vices, and to keep strong the ligaments of civil union. The experiment was novel and rendered difficult by the prejudices which were excited against it. Many politicians had contended that man was utterly incapable of self government. The advocates for this opinion, founded their arguments upon the instability of the ancient democracies. On the other hand it was urged that this circumstance, was owing to the blunders of unwise statesmen, and not to the insufficiency of the governments themselves. Thus hung in the doubtful balance the decision of a question infinitely important and interesting to mankind. America has cleared away the doubt; she has solved a problem too difficult for the whole world besides.

The chief who had conducted our armies to victory was now called upon to take the direction of civil affairs. Great as was Washington in the field, he was not less eminent in the cabinet. The world has seldom witnessed such an assemblage of talents in one man. With every qualification for

command, he united the high endowments of a wise politician and an enlightened statesman; Possessing a vast and comprehensive mind, cultivated by education, and matured by study, observation and experience, his measures were distinguished by penetration, calmness, moderation and prudence. Once satisfied of the propriety of his opinion he adhered to it, with invincible firmness.— Twice did the unanimous suffrages of his fellow citizens, raise him to the Presidency. At length the infirmities of age, added to a life of toil and fatigue, compelled him to seek repose in the bosom of solitude far from the busy scenes of public action. How affecting his resignation, yet alas it was but the prelude to an infinitely more painful separation. Providence in its wisdom, summoned him to a better world! Solemn and distressing was the decree! In that hour the veil of the temple of Liberty was rent in twain, and the glory of America, was enveloped by the thick clouds of dark despondency! Her children clad in the sable habiliments of woe, lament in tears the bereavement of their father! But is he dead? no, he liveth forever. Virtue is eternal: the shafts of death fall hurtless from her impenetrable shield. Peace to thy ashes venerable shade! distant generations shall hail thee as the guardian of American Liberty; the protector of the rights of man: the friend of the oppressed, and the parent of Freedom!

But hark! the sound of lamentation is hushed. Lo from the tomb of Washington a fair Phoenix arises. The mantle of Elijah hath descended upon Elisha, and Jefferson ascends the chair of state. Philosophy points to him, as her favourite son, virtue hails him as her beloved child, and peace, mild peace, waits to crown him, with the civic wreath.

Happy æra! I congratulate my country upon the auspicious event.

Jam redit et Virgo redeunt Saturnia regna,
Jam nova progenies Cœlo demittitur alto.

VIRGIL.

His mild and pacific measures have restored our national tranquility: they have secured our peace abroad, and our happiness at home: they have added new lustre to the American character.—Permit me briefly to notice a transaction which you have lately celebrated; I allude to the acquisition of Louisiana. The wise policy of the executive, has in one act averted the horrors of war; quenched the flames of civil discord; admitted to the rights and privileges of freemen, thousands of our oppressed fellow creatures; and acquired on the most advantageous terms a Country fertile, salubrious, of vast extent, and inexhaustible resources.

Here fellow citizens let us pause—and from the eminence that we have gained, take a momentary retrospect of the scenes through which we have passed. Examine the records of ancient and modern history: turn over the annals of all the governments of the earth: survey the progress of the most flourishing nations: America stands without a rival. In a short lapse of time, during which the transatlantic world has been convulsed by commotion, or desolated by slaughter, she has advanced with rapid strides towards the highest pinnacle of human greatness. The vast scope of imagination is not sufficient to measure the glory to which she may yet attain. Americans! unite your efforts to assist the operations of liberty.

Cherish virtue! she is the vital principle of all popular governments. Hannibal, it is said, was un-

able to effect a passage through the alps until he found means to soften the rocks which resisted his progress : thus will violence assail us in vain unless we are first weakened by corruption. A government founded upon virtue may bid defiance to all outward opposition : but, when this firm basis is removed, the fabric totters on the brink of dissolution. Reason, experience and history confirm this solemn truth. To what cause are we to attribute the downfall of the most powerful governments in the world? why do the shades of the once mighty republics of Greece and Rome now stalk among the ruins of departed empires? alas, they have fallen from virtue ! shun then the vices which accelerated their destruction.

Encourage the dissemination of useful knowledge. Ignorance is the parent of error and the subject upon which despotism performs its most successful operations. Shew me a wise, and I will shew you a free people ! The American Revolution was accomplished not less by the exertions of our writers and orators, than by the sword ; and we may date our degeneracy from the moment that knowledge is neglected. 'To him, who, in the face of reason and common sense, will undertake to say that "*learning and the learned are useless lumber,*" no credit is due. The author of such a doctrine is a factious demagogue, an infuriated maniac, an insidious knave, or an execrable traitor. His visionary schemes, if carried into execution, would precipitate us into the whirlpool of anarchy ; turn order into confusion ; unhinge government ; and reduce us to the condition of brutes and savages. Happily for America, we have few such men among us.

Keep sacred the liberty of speech and of the press. The free examination of public men and public measures, is the most valuable privilege of a citizen. So long as the conduct of a representative remains open to the view of his constituents there is little to apprehend from the power with which he is invested. But when office becomes a covert for intrigue ; when the servant of the people takes upon himself to silence the voice of public opinion ; when the divulging of facts becomes sedition, and the publication of truth a libel ; an highway is opened for the inroads of tyranny, and we may prepare to mourn the exit of departing freedom.

The right of election should constantly be regarded as the strong hold of liberty. The exercise of this important trust, is emphatically the standard of our national character : for as the deportment of an individual is the index of the company with which he associates ; so the conduct of our representatives forms the criterion by which mankind will judge of the virtue or depravity of our citizens. From the nature of popular elections it is to be presumed that despotism will in this quarter, make its most desperate attacks. Man is an ambitious, as well as a selfish being ; not less pleased by the prospects of honour and preferment, than by the hopes of wealth. The ambitious will therefore seek to insinuate themselves into office by artifice and intrigue, by falsehood and misrepresentation ; to the gratification of their wishes they will sacrifice every principle of honour, of virtue, and of patriotism. Unbiased by prejudice, unseduced by flattery, unswayed by party, and unawed by power, it is the indispensable duty of every good citizen to examine with attention the qualifications of the candidate who seeks his support. Virtue, talents, and independence should

be the only recommendation for office. A representative, who is not virtuous, however he may be deterred by the fear of detection, will (when a favourable opportunity occurs) pursue his vicious inclinations; if destitute of talents, he will be an image of wax in the hands of the artful; if not independent, he will become the tool of an arrogant party, rather than the agent of a free people.

Too long has the spirit of party spread its baleful influence over our nation! too long has it convulsed our councils, distracted our concerns, agitated our citizens, and embittered the peace and happiness of society! be it your care, as it is your duty, to exterminate this horrid monster. Remember that a difference in political sentiments does not always result from the superior wisdom and virtue of one party, and the ignorance and wickedness of another. That men see things in different lights, frequently form their conclusions at first view, and are naturally attached to opinions which they believe to be correct. That we are all liable to mistake: that a degree of charity is due to the frailties of human nature: that coercion can never produce conviction: that error should be combatted by reason, argument, and persuasion; not by scurrility, detraction and abuse.

In vain have our fathers fought, in vain has our independence been sealed by the blood of heroes, if, by our neglect and imprudence, we are yet deprived of this invaluable treasure. Watch therefore with unremitting care the citadel of freedom: guard with incessant vigilance every avenue to the sacred temple of Liberty.

Let us consecrate to social joy this memorable day. Calling to mind the miseries of our oppression, let our hearts swell with gratitude for the happy deliverance which we have experienced. Thankful to heaven for the blessings we enjoy, let us resolve to surrender them only with our lives.

“ Thus shall America the nation’s head,
 Upon the fame of former ages tread :
 “ And with the varied gifts of nature bless’d,
 “ Where science, virtue, shall exalt her throne,
 “ The kind, and common refuge of the oppress’d,
 “ By the warm blood of gen’rous heroes won,
 “ Thrive and exult, ’till from her orbit hurl’d
 “ Th’ eternal sinks the flaming fabric of the World.”