BENEVOLENT REPUBLICANS: PHILANTHROPY AND IDENTITY IN THE EARLY UNITED STATES

By

LAURA R. MICHEL

A dissertation submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment for the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in History

Written under the direction of

Andrew Shankman and Camilla Townsend

And approved by

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

New Brunswick, New Jersey

October 2021
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Benevolent Republicans: Philanthropy and Identity in the Early United States

by Laura R. Michel

Dissertation Directors:
Andrew Shankman and Camilla Townsend

This dissertation considers the role of philanthropy in the construction of American identity in the years and decades following independence from Britain. A multifaceted project that necessarily went beyond the drafting of new governing documents, the achievements of republican benevolence came to validate the success of the new nation at home and abroad. Utilizing annual reports, published speeches, newspaper accounts, minute books, and private correspondence, the emergence of the penitentiary or the growing number of free schools take on added meaning as they reveal the complexities and contingencies of social status, power, identity, and belonging in the early United States. With such an approach, this project adds to existing scholarship on the function of benevolence as a tool of social control, facilitator of cosmopolitan relations, or means of alleviating genuine suffering. By recognizing that these need not be mutually exclusive outcomes, the multiple functions of philanthropy come to the fore. With this also comes to the ability to consider a diverse array of those who claimed – or attempted to claim – the character of “benevolent republican.” For those who did not enjoy the privilege of being an elite white Christian, philanthropy and its connection to the construction of American identity provided a platform from which to make claims about the new nation and their place in it. Even as the voices of African Americans, Jewish Americans, and the poor remained largely sidelined, benevolence allowed some to speak from the margins and, even in a small way, shape the final product. Through the
framework of benevolent republicanism and its complex, at times seemingly
contradictory, and multi-focal operation, this project incorporates the multitude of voices
and priorities that formed the early American republic.
Acknowledgments

When I began my PhD at Rutgers in September 2014, I knew the process would bring challenges, triumphs, and unexpected outcomes. That I found myself finishing my dissertation while navigating my first year of teaching was not, in the end, altogether surprising. I can safely say, however, that not once did I anticipate doing either – let alone both – of these things in the middle of a pandemic. But here we are, and I am immensely grateful for this outcome and to everyone who helped me get here.

My journey as an historian began not in New Brunswick but in Northfield as an undergraduate at Carleton College. My time at Carleton helped me embrace a love of learning and grow as a scholar. Not many undergraduates get the opportunity to spend spring break organizing and analyzing English workhouse records or the summer doing archival research in Philadelphia and London. It is not an overstatement to say without the support of Carleton’s History department, I would not be where I am today. In particular, I would like to thank Susannah Ottaway and Serena Zabin for their continued mentorship. Your commitment to teaching and excellent scholarship is one I strive to emulate in my own career. Although the transition from small-town Minnesota to Liverpool, England was at times jarring, I was fortunate to be able to continue my historical training as an MA student at the Eighteenth-Century Worlds Research Centre at the University of Liverpool. There too I benefitted from the support and friendship of talented academics who helped me refine my research and feel comfortable engaging in broader scholarly debates.

As my academic home for almost seven years, the Rutgers History department has provided innumerable opportunities for personal and intellectual growth. Alastair
Bellany, James Delbourgo, Ann Fabian, and Seth Koven have been extraordinarily generous in their time and feedback that has pushed me to think in new and important ways. Paul Clemens has been a constant source of support and advice since my first day on campus. Also in my corner from the start was Cami Townsend, who stepped up as advisor and served as a steadfast guide throughout the highs and lows of graduate school. I am grateful for her tireless advocacy and humanity. Andy Shankman likewise did not hesitate to take on the challenge of co-chairing my dissertation committee. In the world of scholars of the early republic in Philadelphia, being Andy’s student confers immediate esteem, a reflection of his tireless community-building and intellectual generosity. I would also like to thank Seth Rockman for agreeing to serve on my committee. At the heart of the Rutgers’ History department is Dawn Ruskai – without her kindness in expertise in navigating all levels of bureaucracy, I would probably still be wandering College Ave trying to register for my first semester of classes.

One of the best parts of being an historian is archival research. In addition to the thrill of gathering the puzzle pieces of personal letters, diaries, and printed material into a coherent narrative, it has served as a great excuse to spend time in interesting places. This would not have been possible without the financial and practical support of many. At Rutgers, five years of full funding made the pursuit of a PhD possible in the first place and additional support from the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, Neal Ira Rosenthal Travel awards, and the School of Arts and Sciences’ Professional Development Fund helped fill important gaps. The Colonial Dames of America Doctoral Award and graciousness of the Colonial Dames of New Jersey gave me the freedom to spend a summer doing research abroad while still undertaking coursework. Visits to the
American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, MA and the Brunel University Archives in London importantly shaped Chapter Three. My thanks especially to Phaendra Casey at Brunel for helping me navigate the BFSS collection and willingness to chat about the idiosyncrasies of Joseph Lancaster. Research at the American Jewish Historical Society as a Sid and Ruth Lapidus Fellow likewise contributed to key parts of Chapter Four. Last but certainly not least, I am enormously grateful to Cathy Matson and the Program in Early American Economy and Society. In addition to the valuable research done during my time in Philadelphia, being part of the scholarly community was enlightening and invigorating. My thanks to everyone at the Library Company of Philadelphia and Historical Society of Pennsylvania for their hospitality and intellectual generosity both during my time as a PEAES fellow and otherwise. From my first encounter with LCP as a SHEAR/Mellon Undergraduate Fellow to the final stages of the PhD process, Jim Green and Connie King have in particular provided thoughtful feedback to my ever-evolving ideas and pointed me in the direction of collections that have come to play foundational roles in my work.

I would be remiss here not to mention those who have supported this research in less academic but equally important ways by letting me stay with them rent-free or providing a familiar face during my weeks or months away from home. My gratitude to Missy and Lee (and Poppy) in New York, Aunt Sonya and Uncle Jeff in DC, and of course my parents who let me stay with them for four months mere weeks after moving into their “empty nest” home. Thanks as well to Katie and Rogan for allowing me to invite myself to countless happy hours on their roof deck, to Blair for never questioning how British panel shows fit into my research plans, and to all the friends along the way
who have met up for dinner and provided 21st-century conversations after a day of reading 19th-century correspondence.

Amidst the solitary and often frustrating dissertation-writing process, editing and teaching opportunities have provided an opportunity to learn new skills and renew my love of history. My time as an Editorial Assistant at the *Journal of the Early Republic* kept me in touch with the latest developments in the field and refined my research skills as I tracked down missing citations. Thanks to Andy Shankman for the opportunity and Kate Tyler-Wall for answering all of my obsessive questions about comma placements. Working as a substitute teacher at Akiba/Barrack provided valuable classroom experience and reminded me of my love of teaching. My especial thanks to my current colleagues and students at Montrose for your patience, support, and enthusiasm. It has been an immensely rewarding and revitalizing year as both an educator and a scholar.

This dissertation is ultimately dedicated to my family and husband. In what was often an isolating and even dispiriting process, the confidence of my grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and sister in my ability to succeed was a source of comfort and encouragement. I feel enormously lucky to be part of such an accomplished, caring, and chaotic extended family, from whom I have learned a love of stories and an appreciation for the past. Your commitment to traveling the country – and even the world – to show up for one another in both good and difficult times has helped me stay grounded and keep sight of what is truly important. And to my parents, whose hard work has allowed me to pursue this long and winding educational journey. I am grateful for your unwavering support and thank you in advance for doing your best to read this whole dissertation. Finally to my husband Edwin, who has lived with the consequences of my decision to
pursue a PhD most directly. Your support has taken so many forms over the last seven years that they would be impossible to list completely (though you have come over and suggested quite a few adjectives – including “erudite,” “suave,” and “worldly” as I write this.) Your partnership has been a source of joy, comfort, and stability as it also pushed me to expand my very well defined comfort zone. Thank you for your patience, for putting everything into perspective in my more dramatic moments, for telling me just to get on with it during periods of apathy, and for celebrating my accomplishments during episodes of insecurity. I could not have done this without you.

Boston, MA
April 2020
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................................... i–ii
Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................... iii–vii
Table of Contents ........................................................................................................ viii

Introduction .................................................................................................................... 1

Part I: Benevolent Republicanism .................................................................................. 14
Chapter One: Benevolence and the Construction of National Identity in the Early
Republic .......................................................................................................................... 15
Chapter Two: Prison Reform, American Character, and Cosmopolitan Collaboration .... 45
Chapter Three: Educating Citizens: The Rhetoric and Reality of American Philanthropic
Distinctiveness .................................................................................................................. 79

Part II: Benevolent Republicans .................................................................................... 102
Chapter Four: “In This Happy Country”: Jewish-American Benevolence in the Early
Republic .......................................................................................................................... 103
Chapter Five: “To Help Forward the Cause of Freedom”: Free Black Benevolence and
the Claims of Citizenship ............................................................................................... 165
Chapter Six: The Voices of the Poor ............................................................................. 184

Conclusion: The Limits and Lessons of Benevolent Republicanism ......................... 215

Bibliography ................................................................................................................... 229
Introduction

“But above all, the philanthropists of Europe ... know that among this new and rising people, the minds of men are, by the constitution of their government as free as the air they breathe. They know that we are not fettered with the prejudices of ages, that the chains of superstition were broken and thrown off in our Atlantic flight.” (John Griscom, 1823)

In his travels throughout the United States in 1831, the French philosopher and diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville regularly encountered a “novel kind” of national character. While the two-volume account of his journey, Democracy in America, contains countless examples of American distinctiveness, Tocqueville observed that he particularly “admired the extreme skill with which the inhabitants of the United States succeed in proposing a common object to the exertions of a great many men, and in getting them to voluntarily pursue it.” The ubiquity of benevolent associations in the United States – be it merely “to give entertainment” or “to advance some truth” – suggested to the Frenchman that Americans were highly adept at “the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires.” Thus, while in the Old World “private interests” reigned supreme, in the United States, “Americans make great and real sacrifices to the public welfare.” Indeed, Tocqueville observed, “I have remarked a hundred instances in which they hardly ever failed to lend faithful support to each other.” For the Americans whom Tocqueville and his companion Gustave de Beaumont encountered during their journey – particularly those privileged members of the young

---

1 John Griscom, A Discourse, on the Importance of Character and Education, in the United States (New York, 1823), 14.
3 Ibid., 115.
4 Ibid., 112.
nation’s founding generations – this characterization of the United States as remarkably benevolent would have been consistent with their own sense of self and community.\(^5\)

A brief detour to the colonial period reveals that such notions about the distinctly benevolent character of those residing in North America were not without historical precedent. In his sermon *A Model of Christian Charity*, John Winthrop, governor-elect of Massachusetts Bay Colony, emphasized to his fellow travelers the importance the “Bond of brotherly affection”\(^6\) would play in their new settlement. By embracing the teachings of the gospel “to bear one another’s burdens” as a civic – as well as a religious – obligation, Winthrop famously declared, “We shall be a City Upon a Hill … we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.”\(^7\) The centrality of benevolence in civil society endured throughout the long eighteenth century. In *Charity and its Fruits*, Jonathan Edwards also employed a “much more extensive signification” of the term that went beyond the standard “disposition to hope and think the best in others”\(^8\) along with the occasional almsgiving. For Edwards, charity was an all-encompassing “sincere love” for God and fellow man that manifested itself in piousness, generosity, and “acts of justice toward [one’s] neighbors.”\(^9\) Here, like Winthrop, Edwards linked good government and social harmony to genuine charity, in that “it will dispose a people to all the duties they owe their rulers, and give them all that honor and subjection which are

---

\(^5\) For a list of Tocqueville and Beaumont’s American acquaintances, see George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* (New York, 1938), 782–86.
\(^7\) Ibid., 273–74.
\(^9\) Ibid., 10.
their due [just as it will also] dispose rulers to rule the people over whom they are set, justly, seriously, and faithfully.”

These ideas about the function of benevolence within good governance and civic life were not limited to religious tracts. In the Preface to the Frame of Government of Pennsylvania, William Penn described the “two ends” of government – “first, to terrify evil doers; secondly, to cherish those who do well.” Thus while government should be “corporal and compulsive in its operations … to evil doers,” this was but the “coarsest part” of its remit. Just as – if not more – important was the government’s non-punitive role, that is, to promote and perform acts of “kindness, goodness, and charity.” Nor were these empty words for Penn and his expectations of Pennsylvania’s leaders. In 1684, at the start of what would be a fifteen-year absence from North America, Penn instructed his newly-appointed deputy John Blackwell to take care that “the widow, orphan, and absent may be particularly regarded in their rights, for their cry will be the loudest in all ears.” Of course, certain cries were deemed more important and legitimate than others. While the widow and the orphan have long been compelling objects of charity, the same beneficence was not generally extended to colonial Pennsylvania’s indigenous or enslaved populations. Nevertheless, charity and benevolence – if in theory but not always in practice – were considered central to the foundation and success of the province.

The English settlement of Georgia was also rooted in an explicit commitment to active philanthropy. As a Member of Parliament and chairman of the Gaols Committee,

---

10 Ibid., 12.
James Oglethorpe witnessed first-hand the “cruel and barbarous”\textsuperscript{13} treatment of inmates in London’s overcrowded prisons. Dissatisfied with what he felt were piecemeal and often ineffective reforms, Oglethorpe and several colleagues devised a plan for the settlement of “unfortunate” but “reputable”\textsuperscript{14} debtors and their families in the proposed province of Georgia.\textsuperscript{15} With the motto non sibi, sed aliis – not for self, but for others – the venture from the start emphasized the importance and centrality of benevolence. Indeed, while he had a fair amount to say about the colony’s financial and strategic benefits, Oglethorpe focused on Georgia’s philanthropic achievements in his reports. In “sympathizing with the Miserable, and Labouring to relieve them,” he wrote, the Trustees for the Corporation for Establishing Charitable Colonys in America “have, for the Benefit of Mankind, given up that Ease … which they were entitled by their Fortunes.”\textsuperscript{16} By pursuing neither wealth nor power, but instead seeking to live up to the standards of “Humanity and Charity”\textsuperscript{17} in a way that was, per Georgia’s charter, “becoming on our crown and royal dignity,”\textsuperscript{18} the colony would allow impoverished individuals a genuine opportunity to maintain themselves and their families. Through these benevolent designs and the “good example” set by redeemed debtors, “the settlement of Georgia may prove a blessing.”\textsuperscript{19} Just as Penn saw Pennsylvania as an opportunity to conduct a “holy

\textsuperscript{14} [Oglethorpe], \textit{A New and Accurate Account of the Provinces of South-Carolina and Georgia} (1732; London, 1733), 29.
\textsuperscript{15} For more on how this came about, see Leslie F. Church, \textit{Oglethorpe: A Study of Philanthropy in England and Georgia} (London, 1932), 47–66.
\textsuperscript{16} Oglethorpe, \textit{New and Accurate Account}, vii.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 35–36.
\textsuperscript{18} “Charter of Georgia” (1732) from \textit{The Avalon Project}, \url{https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/ga01.asp}
\textsuperscript{19} Oglethorpe, quoted in Wright, \textit{Memoir of James Oglethorpe}, 61.
experiment” where “there may be room”\textsuperscript{20} and inclination for benevolence, Georgia also represented an opportunity to more fully integrate charitable ideas in civic life in a way that seemed impracticable in England.

Returning to the early republic, then, while ideas about the relationship between communal character and benevolence had long circulated throughout colonial America and the Atlantic World, this association took on added import and magnitude in the years and decades after independence. And not without reason – the early republic was unquestionably a period of immense philanthropic vigor as old problems received renewed and enlarged attention, new methods were studied, debated, and implemented, and an immense variety of organizations were established on behalf of an equally great number of philanthropic causes. The biographies and memoirs of prominent early republicans clearly display the diversity and widespread enthusiasm for benevolent endeavors in this period. In a biographical sketch of Roberts Vaux, a Philadelphia Quaker who was asked by the Marquis de Lafayette to provide “good advices” to Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont during their “philanthropic researches,”\textsuperscript{21} a footnote listing his philanthropic engagements took up the better part of three pages. They included:

- Attican Society, 1803, President.
- Philadelphia Hose Company, one of the founders and a Director, 1803.
- Philadelphia Society for the establishment and support of charity Schools, 1807.
- Philadelphia Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery, 1807, by which body he was appointed a delegate to represent it in the American Convention for that object.

\textsuperscript{20} Penn to Robert Turner, Sept. 4, 1681, in Cope, \textit{Passages from the Life}, 237.
\textsuperscript{21} Marquis de Lafayette to Roberts Vaux, Mar. 25, 1831, Vaux Family Papers (hereafter VFP), Box 3, Folder 13, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter HSP), Philadelphia. Vaux also received a letter of introduction for Beaumont and Tocqueville from then-Secretary of State Edward Livingston. Even after the Frenchmen left Philadelphia, the three evidently stayed in touch, corresponding in French. See: Edward Livingston to Vaux, May 31, 1831, VFP, Box 3, Folder 14; Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont to Vaux, Feb. 9, 1832, VFP, Box 3, Folder 16.
The merchant John Murray Jr. of New York had a similarly diverse philanthropic career. As his memoirist (and well-regarded philanthropist in his own right) Thomas Eddy described, Murray’s “first public engagement of benevolence” came in 1782 when he was elected a Governor of the New York Hospital, a position he retained for thirty-seven years until his death in 1819. The proliferation of charitable societies in the early republic is evident in the sheer number of organizations Murray helped establish, including the Society for promoting the manumission of slaves, and for protecting such of them as have been or may be liberated; the New-York Free School Society; the New-

23 Thomas Eddy, Memoir of the late John Murray, jun. (New York, 1819), 05.
York Historical Society; and the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism. While his roles a Governor of the New York Hospital, Inspector of the state prison, Elder in the Society of Friends, and Vice-President of the New-York Savings Bank made him a recognizable philanthropic figure, his benevolent endeavors went beyond those for which he received public recognition. Although “he was a member of a greater part of the charitable societies in this city,” Eddy wrote, his involvement regularly involved “a yearly anonymous letter, enclosing 50 to 100 dollars.” This is borne out by the bequests Murray left in his will which, in addition to the aforementioned organizations, included several hundred dollars each to the Manumission Society, the Female Association for the Education of Poor Children, the Society for the Support of Poor Widows, the Orphan Society, and the New York Dispensary.

Similar patterns played out throughout the United States. Upon the death of Stephen Elliott, best remembered today for his work as a botanist, was memorialized by the Charleston Courier as “a zealous friend, and liberal benefactor” in “the promotion of literature and science; and all the institutions among us, having this object in view.” While his eulogist James Moultrie dedicated more space to an account of the Charlestonian’s scientific career, here too benevolence was an important theme. Readers were frequently reminded of Elliott’s extensive “munificence,” be it in his support for Free Schools; service to the Charleston Library Society, including in the capacity of President; devotion to the Philosophic Society; and

---

24 Ibid., 05–14. Murray was also an active member of the American Bible Society.
25 Ibid., 12.
26 Ibid., 33–34. Murray also directed that the income from his land be “set apart for the education and clothing of children of Friends in low circumstances.” An additional $4000 was to be invested in stock, the interest from which was to be used for the same purpose for the children of non-Quakers.
dedication to the “exaltation and improvement of the medical profession in [South Carolina]” as a key figure in the organization of the state’s Medical College.

The many philanthropic initiatives and reform movements that sprung up in the early American republic have not gone unnoticed by scholars. Work on the American “Age of Benevolence” has followed familiar historiographical patterns: early studies provided largely positive and descriptive accounts, while later analyses cast a more critical eye on motivations behind these ostensibly charitable endeavors. In these revisions, the new and expanded importance of philanthropy is linked to the Industrial Revolution, the emergence of capitalism and a new way of thinking about social problems rooted in the market economy, as well as a disciplinary revolution prompted by urbanization, fear of social disorder, and an Enlightenment faith in perfectability. This dissertation puts at its center another major transformation: American independence.

29 Ibid., 32.
Amidst the uncertainties of the early republican period, benevolence served an important function in the construction of a cohesive and distinct national identity. Philanthropy allowed elite members of the founding generations to address what they perceived to be real societal ills while also justifying their place at the top of a republican status quo. Charitable activities provided the young nation a positive project and characteristic around which to rally, while also serving as an example of American distinctiveness and even preeminence. Through what I call “benevolent republicanism,” philanthropic endeavors held meaning far beyond the relief of the indigent, the amelioration of prison conditions, or the provision of universal public schooling. By linking such developments to national character, philanthropy and reform came to demonstrate the success of the republican experiment and validate the achievements of the new nation both at home and abroad.

Chapter Outline

This investigation of the function of benevolence in the construction of a distinct American identity during the early republic is made up of two parts. Chapters One through Three focus on the development and application of “benevolent republicanism” in relatively familiar contexts. Chapter One investigates the ways in which white and primarily male elite and upwardly mobile early republicans utilized the concept to define themselves as good citizens and exemplars of American character. In establishing the importance of philanthropy to both the personal and patriotic identity of those in this group, the value of using benevolence to consider the complexities and contingencies of the early republic emerges.
Chapters Two and Three build on the significance of this link between benevolence and construction American identity through case studies of specific philanthropic efforts: prison reform and education reform, respectively. The transformation of Pennsylvania’s penal practices from longstanding colonial practices provided a tangible example of the young nation’s desire and ability to succeed on its own terms. By connecting the development of the penitentiary to a distinctive republican form of benevolence, American character and competence was legitimized on a national and even international stage. The coexistence of the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism alongside a reality of transnational philanthropic collaboration and exchange is expanded upon in Chapter Three’s study of the popularity of the monitorial system of education in the first decades of the nineteenth century. How, it asks, did a pedagogy developed by the Englishman Joseph Lancaster and spread by British philanthropists translate into the benevolent republican project of creating American schools for American students? The process by which Joseph Lancaster adapted and “Americanized” his rhetoric demonstrates that the Lancasterian system need not mean the same thing in London as it did in Philadelphia, even as ideas, books, and even Joseph Lancaster himself traveled between these and other nodes of a global network.

Part Two significantly expands its focus to engage with a religiously, racially, and economically diverse group of Americans who also took up the mantle of benevolent republicanism. For those that did not enjoy the privilege of being an elite white Christian, benevolence provided a platform from which to make claims about the new nation and their place in it. This section thus seeks to provide a fuller picture of the construction of American identity in showing that even amidst very real imbalances of power,
philanthropy allowed some to speak from the margins. Even if these voices and their claims about American identity ultimately remained sidelined, their engagement with the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism shaped the final product.

To this end, Chapter Four explores the ways in which Jewish-Americans translated their participation in a variety of philanthropic endeavors into claims about belonging in what they hoped would be not just a tolerant but a pluralistic nation. As benevolence provided a space for American Jews to participate in shaping the early republic, I find, it also allowed them to maintain their distinct disasporic religious affiliation. Here, then, the theme of the multiple functions of benevolence remains paramount. Just as philanthropy allowed the early republicans in Part One to assert a distinctive national character without compromising their identity as members of a transnational elite, Jewish-Americans likewise utilized philanthropy in different ways in different contexts.

These multiple functions are also evident in Chapter Five, which considers the experience of free African-Americans. Scholars have previously noted the ways in which Black early republicans utilized charity – especially mutual aid societies – to build and maintain community in a nation built on slavery and white supremacy. By bringing this scholarship into conversation with this project’s conceptualization of “benevolent republicanism,” Chapter Five further reinforces the multiple functions of philanthropy during the early republic. Here, philanthropy was a tool of internal community building as well as external protest as it enabled Black benevolent republicans to affirm and assert their contributions to the American experiment. Finally, Chapter Six examines the ways in which the ostensible beneficiaries of benevolence – the poor, the sick, and the
imprisoned – engaged with these multiple functions of philanthropy. Though often ignored or otherwise marginalized by those with economic and social power, the stories of the poor, I find, were part of the dialectic that shaped benevolence – in its myriad functions – during the early republic. As those seeking aid engaged with the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism, be it for strategic or other reasons, they contributed in their own way to the construction of national identity and negotiated their place in the emerging national character.

A Note on Geography

Philadelphia is at the heart of this dissertation. While the voices represented are by no means limited to the city, particularly in Part One, they are more often than not connected in some form or another to the one-time capital. With such a geographic focus, this project joins a long tradition of scholarship that sees Philadelphia – and its charitable initiatives – as representative of larger trends. As the nation’s second-largest city, Philadelphia represented the possibilities and contradictions of the early national period. Long an important seaport and an emerging manufacturing center, early-nineteenth century economic opportunity in the city existed alongside growing and increasingly intractable poverty. The intellectual heart of the Revolution, the Philadelphia’s ethnic, racial, and religious diversity provided a true test of the scope of the republican

experiment. Early national Philadelphia, as a city founded by Quakers, was also well positioned to embrace and act on the model of benevolent republicanism. The centrality of Philadelphia is also driven by the primary source material. Not only does Philadelphia’s long and varied benevolent history make it an obvious place from which to begin a holistic study of the function of philanthropy in the early republic, contemporaries looked to the city as an example for their own efforts throughout the United States and even abroad. As the birthplace of the penitentiary, the site of some of the first American monitorial schools, and home to dynamic Jewish and free African-American communities, Philadelphia provides a firm center from which to investigate and elaborate the central themes of this dissertation: the function of benevolence in the construction of American identity and how a diverse array of early republicans utilized benevolence. The link between benevolence and the construction of national identity was not limited to Philadelphia nor did it look the same in Philadelphia as it did elsewhere. Indeed, the function of benevolence did not look the same for all Philadelphians. But therein lies the value and importance of considering this connection – philanthropy was a common tool by which early republicans made claims about the new nation and their place in it.

Part I: Benevolent Republicanism
Chapter One: Benevolence and the Construction of National Identity in the Early American Republic

“You, who are the generous patrons and supporters of the Orphan-house, have, by your attention to this institution, shewn yourselves to be charitable men, enlightened patriots, and good Christians.” (George Buist, 1795)

Far from the inevitable outcome of a fundamental incompatibility between American character and British rule, the decades after independence have emerged as a period marked by what John M. Murrin called the “dilemma of national identity.”

Although technological innovations such as the railroad and telegraph were still several decades off, economic and demographic changes due to industrialization, immigration, and urbanization only beginning to take shape, and politics still largely the domain of wealthy white men, these years have come to be understood as ones of contestation and uncertainty as Americans struggled to “make meaning of … independence.” Formal separation from Britain, after all, was only the first step. As scholars of the early republic have come to emphasize, without the immediate pressures of the battlefield and a common martial enemy, there was little that united the new nation. Indeed, if any sense of communal affiliation existed among colonial Americans before the outbreak of war, it was a common British identity. Was a common identity as former-colonial-Britons-

---


2 A key concept here is ‘Anglicization.’ While other interpretations pointed to shared class/economic interests or an ideological consensus in the lead-up and immediate aftermath of the Revolutionary War, Anglicization rejects the idea of an innate or coherent American identity in this period. As John Murrin, the progenitor of this interpretation explained: “To an overwhelming degree [colonists] developed similar features and beliefs, not by copying one another … but by imitating the mother country.” Murrin, “England and Colonial America: A Novel Theory of American Revolution,” in Anglicizing America: Empire, Revolution, Republic, ed. Ignacio Gallup-Diaz, Andrew Shankman, and David J. Silverman (Philadelphia, 2015), 09–19, 11. Here, to the extent that there was a communal identity shared among the thirteen rebellious colonies, it was a British one. This analysis proved enduring and broadly applicable to political, cultural, economic, and social history. In a 1988 article, Timothy Breen described how the growth of colonial consumption of the “baubles of Britain” in the eighteenth century connected colonists to the metropole in unprecedented ways. In the context of this broader ‘consumer revolution,’ increased
turned-Americans enough to sustain the project of nation building? How could (and should) revolutionary rhetoric and aspirations be translated into a political system onto which thirteen distinct former colonies would sign? What good was political separation if the United States was still economically, culturally, and intellectually tied to Britain?

Such questions also plagued early republican leaders. As Benjamin Rush, signatory to the Declaration of Independence and a prominent physician and civic leader in Philadelphia, wrote to a correspondent in London, military victory and separation from monarchical government was not the end of the story. “It remains yet to effect,” he observed, “a revolution in our principles, opinions, and manners.” For Rush and his colleagues, the “great drama” of American independence was a long-term, multi-faceted project that involved the wholesale construction of a distinctive national character. This new American ethos, further, was not only to be different from Britain, it was to be superior, wherein the United States, “instead of receiving, [would] impart customs.”

Thus even amidst concerns about the internal unity and stability of the new nation, leading figures of the early republic were already concerned with external reputation and influence. “A republican state,” Rush remarked in a letter to John Adams, “should be to identification with Britain and British-ness through material goods also strengthened connections with colonists elsewhere in North America. While individuals and localities chose to boycott British goods in the lead-up to the War of Independence for different reasons, the shared experience of the rejection of these objects – and with it an Anglo consumer identity – facilitated the beginning of a shared consciousness along the lines of what Benedict Anderson called an “imagined community.” Such connections to the metropole went beyond consumption, as Brendan McConville observed in The King’s Three Faces, colonial Americans were united by a strong sense of Britishness and, specifically, loyalty to the British monarch up through the eve of the war. Timothy H. Breen, “‘Baubles of Britain’: The American Consumer Revolution of the Eighteenth Century,” Past & Present, 119 (1988), 73–104; Breen, The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence (Oxford, England, 2004); Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (New York, 1983); Brendan McConville, The King’s Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688–1776 (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006).


5 Ibid.

monarchical governments what a good Christian should be with respects to the fashions of the world.”

This project of the construction of national identity happened on a number of levels and on several fronts. Scholars have shown the ways in which this was achieved through public celebrations, architecture, and claims about the achievements of early republican politics, science, and print culture. That benevolence was a key part of this new American character is seen even in the death notices of early republican newspapers. The Savannah Republican remembered the young “JAMES MADDEN, aged 25 years” as a “philanthropist and true republican,” while, almost one thousand miles to the north, the much longer-lived Jeremiah van Rensselaer was similarly described as a “venerable patriot and philanthropist.” In Charleston, South Carolina, the City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser lamented “the Statesman, Philanthropist, Patriot, Poet, and Philosopher, JOEL BARLOW, IS NO MORE.” In Albany, Colonel Benjamin Walker was remembered not just for his martial achievements but also for his character as an “enlightened patriot and philanthropist.” Likewise, the Georgia Journal praised Isham S. Fannin not just for his “unusual industry and enterprize” by which he “honestly accumulated a handsome fortune,” but, more importantly, for the ways in which he used his status to act as “a warm and zealous advocate for the political as well as religious

---

7 Ibid.
9 Savannah (Georgia) Republican, July 21, 1810.
10 Columbian Gazette (Utica, NY), Mar. 6, 1810.
11 “Death of Mr. Barlow,” City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser (Charleston, SC), Mar. 17, 1813.
12 Albany (NY) Gazette, Jan. 21, 1818.
prosperity of his country; and by the exercise of public spirit, benevolence, and charity."\(^{13}\)

Charitableness as a quality worthy of celebration, of course, was not an invention of the early republic. As noted in the Introduction, ideas about the importance of benevolence to both religious and civic virtue circulated throughout colonial America and these concepts were themselves firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian ideologies. Indeed, even the connection between philanthropy and patriotic service cannot be described as a uniquely American construction. After all, charity, benevolence, and philanthropy – three terms that were used more or less interchangeably in this period – were by definition meant to assist someone in a less fortunate or capable position. To ensure that children were educated, a poor family had the means to heat their home in the winter, or a town’s fire brigade had adequate equipment were all activities in service of a broader communal welfare, no matter the community.

In the context of the early republic, however, there were two important differences. First, this benevolence needed to reflect republican ideals and characteristics. This, then, was not simply a matter of relabeling British practices as American and continuing on as before. Merely switching out “this kingdom” for “the United States” in an otherwise wholesale adoption of *An Act for the better Relief of the Poor of this Kingdom*, for example, was considered neither sufficient nor desirable. Under the “barbarous usages, corrupt society, and monarchical principles”\(^{14}\) of the Old World, Thomas Eddy described, “the mild voice of reason and humanity reached not the thrones of princes.” Rather, the work of “benevolent and virtuous men” went unheeded in favor

\(^{13}\) (Milledgeville) *Georgia Journal*, May 6, 1817.

\(^{14}\) Thomas Eddy, *An Account of the State Prison or Penitentiary House, in the City of New-York* (New York, 1801), 09.
of longstanding practices that professed philanthropy but in the end were nothing more than “the growth of a rude and barbarous age.” However, in the context of the new nation, “a country [with] simple manners, and a popular form of government,” Eddy continued, it “was not to be expected, that a people enamoured of freedom and a republic”\(^{15}\) would long tolerate such practices. Here, then, improvements in approaches to poverty, criminality, and a multitude of other social ills were directly linked to the “political advantages”\(^{16}\) of the new republic. As James Madison wrote to Thomas Jefferson, “I have no doubt the misery of the lower classes will be found to abate wherever the Government assumes a freer aspect.” Part of this, in Madison’s view, would come from “laws [that] favor a … more equal partition of property” over the concentration of land and wealth in the hands of a hereditary aristocracy and other members of Britain’s “idle rich.”\(^{17}\) A second major piece of this puzzle was republican benevolence. In addition to supporting government officials who enacted legislative changes, Americans, through their philanthropy, would help ensure the nation’s political and geographic advantages would be matched by the existence of a virtuous citizenry. In a sermon delivered to the Humane Society of Massachusetts, Salem minister Thomas Barnard described some of the most salient differences between Old World practices and the benevolent, republican ethos of the United States:

> Instead of the expensive ostentation of European courts, instead of wars of ambition, instead of the immense sums expended to gratify the pride and favorite humors of State Ministers; our revenues might be consecrated to the more reasonable purpose of rendering our country more productive, a more comfortable and delightful abode; in founding establishments for the increase of knowledge

---

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 05.  
\(^{17}\) Ibid.
and improvement of the mind; for the encouragement of Christian piety and good morals; for the alleviation and relief of every kind of suffering and misery.\textsuperscript{18}

Here, philanthropy was both a building block for and a reflection of American character. Without the pretensions and greed of monarchy, republican benevolence was more sincere and effective in its efforts to both relieve suffering and improve the status quo. Thus while benevolence, charity, and philanthropy as the subject of sermons and treatises long predated the existence of the United States, they were not static concepts. As early republicans grappled with the immense transition from British colony to independent republic, these topics took on new shape and significance as they were transformed by – and helped in the transformation of – the new nation.

A second and very much related characteristic of early republican philanthropy was its imprecision. While there was general agreement that benevolence was important and even that Americans were uniquely benevolent, much like the nation’s overall identity, the specifics of what constituted republican, distinctly \textit{American} practices were still very much in flux. Elite early republicans, therefore, had the opportunity not only to demonstrate their status as good Americans through philanthropy, they had an opportunity to shape precisely what this meant. Benevolence, in other words, provided a means by which early republicans could fashion themselves and, in turn, the nation as dedicated republicans and virtuous Americans.

\textbf{Thomas Branagan, Benevolence, and the Creation of a Benevolent Republican}

The relationship between benevolence and the construction of American identity on both a personal and national level is particularly vivid in the example of Thomas Branagan. “Some readers may say,” he wrote in the opening lines of \textit{The Charms of Thomas Barnard, \textit{A Discourse, Delivered Before the Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts} (Boston, 1794), 16.}

\textsuperscript{18} Thomas Barnard, \textit{A Discourse, Delivered Before the Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts} (Boston, 1794), 16.
Benevolence, and Patriotic Mentor, “that there is no connection between the words benevolence and republicanism; and consequently, that the sound of the preceding title is not an echo to the sense of the performance.” Preempting the presumed skepticism of his readers, the Philadelphia-based author explained that in his view, “republicanism and benevolence, as also monarchy and usurpation, are synonymous terms.”19 Best known for his many, often “eccentric”20 anti-slavery writings – and infamous for his subsequent embrace of colonization and what scholar Padraig Riley characterized as “racist paranoia”21 – Branagan’s work touched on a wide range of philanthropic causes, from slavery to poor relief, vagrancy laws, education, and prison reform. Underlying these varied causes, however, were two consistent stimuli: Christian teachings about charity and a belief that benevolence was critical to the success of the United States. Indeed, as evinced from his introductory remarks in The Charms of Benevolence, Branagan saw these two matters to be fundamentally linked. Only in a republic could true Christian benevolence be realized and only with genuine philanthropy could the United States fulfill its revolutionary promise.

Born in Dublin in 1774 to a reasonably affluent Catholic family, Branagan’s father reportedly took “great pains to give [him] a good education.”22 Despite these early advantages, Branagan’s childhood was by own account an unhappy one and, by age

---

19 Thomas Branagan, The Charms of Benevolence, and Patriotic Mentor; or, the Rights and Privileges of Republicanism, Contrasted with the Wrongs and Usurpations of Monarchy (1813; 5th ed., Philadelphia, 1814), 03.
22 Branagan, The penitential tyrant, or Slave trader reformed: a pathetic poem, in four cantos (2nd ed., New York, 1807), 03.
fourteen, he left school and home in favor of life at sea. While his time as a sailor did not necessarily bring him greater happiness, Branagan did seem to find some stability and purpose. After roughly six years of work along Atlantic trade routes, Branagan settled in Antigua, where he found employment as an overseer on the island’s sugar plantations. At some point during his tenure in the Caribbean, Branagan converted from Catholicism to Protestantism – most likely Methodism – at which point he began to question the morality of slavery and his own role in the system. The depth of his doubt coincided with his return to Dublin to settle the affairs of his recently-deceased father. Any prospects of a joyous homecoming were dashed when, after learning about his conversion, Branagan’s family allegedly “persecuted [him] as a heretic and defrauded [him] of [his] rights with impunity.” Unwelcome in his native Ireland and unwilling on moral grounds to return to his previous life in Antigua, Branagan once again set sail in 1798, this time for Philadelphia, where he hoped to find work as a preacher. Thus, just as the newly independent United States was endeavoring to distinguish itself from its colonial past and articulate an independent national identity, so too was Branagan, the Irish-Catholic born former slave overseer, attempting to begin anew in Philadelphia with a “self-constructed identity” as a Protestant abolitionist campaigner in the early republic.

23 Ibid., 04–05; Leary, “Thomas Branagan,” 333–34.
24 The record is unclear on this front. Lewis Leary concluded that Branagan was converted “probably by the Moravians, possibly by the Methodists,” Christopher N. Phillips wrote of Branagan’s “Methodist conversion experience,” while Beverly Tomek provided nothing more specific than an “evangelical Protestantism.” Leary, “Thomas Branagan,” 335; Christopher N. Phillips, “Epic, Anti-Eloquence, and Abolitionism: Thomas Branagan’s Avenia and the Penitential Tyrant,” Early American Literature, 44 (2009), 605–37, 605; Beverly Tomek, “‘From motives of generosity, as well as self-preservation’: Thomas Branagan, Colonization, and the Gradual Emancipation Movement,” American Nineteenth Century History, 06 (June 2005), 121–47, 127.
25 Branagan, Penitential tyrant, 20.
26 Tomek, “From motives of generosity,” 128.
Branagan’s first major work – and one of his best known – was the *Avenia*. In this epic “tragical poem” that was “written in imitation of Homer’s Iliad,” Branagan offered a fairly straightforward and familiar account of the evils of slavery. The first lines of the book set up the overarching theme of European violence and greed:

```
AWAKE my Muse, the inharmonious strain!  
I sing of arms on Afric’s crimson’d plain:  
Of war, ’gainst Afric’s sons by Christians wag’d,  
With all the accursed love of Gold enrag’d.  
```

27 This stands in contrast to the “terrestrial bliss” of the “peaceful” African kingdom, unaware of Christians – Europeans – and their “bloody arts.”28 Over and over, Branagan stressed the hypocritical and immoral behavior of European slavers through descriptions of the “artful Christians” and “baptiz’d ruffians”29 who, once at sea with a boat full of slaves after a bloody battle in Africa:

```
Quaff the wine, and then devour the feast.  
In deep debauch they drown their guilty fears,  
And bury in oblivion all their cares.  
And lo’ the imperious hypocritic crowd,  
With insolence, and wine elate and loud.  
Give three proud cheers, denoting victory,  
And fill again “To Heav’n and liberty.”  
```

30 In addition to illustrating the ways in which all aspects of capturing, transporting, selling, and exploiting the labor of slaves was contrary to the will of “Heav’n,” Branagan also emphasized that it was contrary to the tenets of “liberty.” Not just in the irony of toasting to freedom while denying it to those in the hold of the ship, but also in relation to the prospect of living up to its promises while engaging in the slave trade and profiting from

---


28 Ibid., 20.

29 Ibid., 22–23.

30 Ibid., 188–89.
enslaved labor. Branagan was explicit about this in his extensive notes that follow the poem. Not only was slavery incompatible with “christian rectitude,” he explained, the idea that it “can … be compatible with republicanism or philanthropy … is impossible.”

According to Branagan, continued engagement with the decidedly un-benevolent institution of slavery would not allow the United States to fulfill the promise of its revolution and republican destiny. “The fact is,” he wrote, “slavery is an indelible disgrace to the American constitution, as well as an eternal reproach to the whole nation.” The “philanthropic heart” and “tender emotions” of “every real patriotic American” thus should engage in the benevolent task of supporting abolition, for both the sake of “Afric’s sons” and the future prospects and reputation of the United States.

These future prospects and reputation, Branagan argued, depended upon a complete and genuine embrace of benevolence. Unlike the “unutterable misery and distress in Europe” wherein “despots” were maintained “in their extravagance,” with its republican government, the United States enjoyed a different outlook. “Like a city placed upon a hill,” Branagan declared, Americans had the opportunity and responsibility to “show a pattern of political rectitude and pacific moderation to a world of despots and slaves.” The ability to forge this path was linked to an innate national character – indeed, he observed, “no other nation can boast so fair an origin.” While even the “proudest” governments in the “old world originated from individual ruffians and murderers, or united bands of them … the first settlement of America was with honorable patriots.”

Thus founded in uniquely honorable circumstances and now free to live up to the promise of its distinctively benevolent ethos, the character of the young republic could not be

---

31 Ibid., 220.
32 Ibid., 222.
33 Ibid., 241.
articulated separately from its philanthropic endeavors. For Branagan, the United States would not continue to enjoy its place as “the only free [government] in the world”\textsuperscript{34} without the abolition of slavery and the slave trade, improved penal practices, and other philanthropic reforms.

Unlike in Europe, where monarchs and despotic rulers merely enriched themselves at the expense of their subjects, republicanism both inspired and required philanthropy and patriotism – philanthropic patriotism and patriotic philanthropy – to succeed. “Pure patriotism,” Branagan described in \textit{The Beauties of Philanthropy}, “inspires the citizen to prefer public good to his own private interest, from the sole love of his country.” As such, “pure philanthropy will stimulate us to promote the good of our neighbor, though it may in some measures be detrimental to self, merely and purely from the force of our affection for him.”\textsuperscript{35} Philanthropy enabled Americans not only to live up to their duty as Christians but also as republicans, committed citizens, and compassionate neighbors. Here, then, Branagan used benevolence as a means by which to make claims about American character.

Indeed, Branagan’s engagement with these topics went beyond just words on a page. Despite his long and prolific career as a writer, Branagan was not a particularly skilled essayist or poet. His sentences were long and rambling – even by nineteenth-century standards – and although the \textit{Avenia} was “written in imitation of [the] Iliad,”\textsuperscript{36} he could hardly be considered a latter-day Homer. At least part of this was due to the fact that Branagan, by his own admission, was an uninspired student and left school at

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Branagan, \textit{Avenia}.
thirteen. Beyond this, however, literary scholars have also interpreted his style – or lack thereof – as a republican affectation. Branagan’s purposeful simplicity, or, as Christopher N. Phillips characterized it, purposeful “ineptitude,”\textsuperscript{37} demonstrated the extent to which Branagan embraced the spirit of republican simplicity. In this way, Branagan’s style acted as a rebuff against the celebrated customs of ancient and modern European authors who, for all their apparent literary superiority, were unable to actually inspire a benevolent and virtuous public.

As Branagan’s initial optimism about the advantages of life in the United States were challenged by everyday frustrations and the reality of sectional and political divisions, philanthropy remained an important part of his sense of self and adopted nation. Indeed, with benevolence as a cornerstone to the character and success of the republic, Branagan was able to fashion himself as an expert voice. In his first-person, largely autobiographical work \textit{The Penitential Tyrant, or Slave Trader Reformed}, the very title hints at Branagan’s iniquitous past and “conversion” to the abolitionist cause. This was further emphasized in a second frontispiece included in the 1805 edition of the text, which described Branagan as a “Late Slave-holder from Africa, and Planter from Antigua; who, from conscientious motives, relinquished a lucrative situation he held in that island; and now publishes to the world the tragical scenes he daily witnessed, and the infinite goodness of the Almighty in giving him the fortitude to forsake an iniquitous employ.” In just these preliminary titles, Branagan rooted his benevolence and ability to contribute to the philanthropic endeavors of the early republic in experiences that were markedly different from most other Philadelphians, particularly the prominent members of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, and as such were invaluable to the cause. Through

\textsuperscript{37} Phillips, “Epic, Anti-Eloquence, and Abolitionism,” 605.
these benevolent qualifications and undertakings, Branagan constructed a personal identity around philanthropy and, in turn, articulated a broader national character rooted in republican benevolence.

Branagan’s sense of the importance of benevolence to the formation and success of the early American republic is also evident in the audience he sought for his work. Through poetry and prose, multiple genres and print mediums, Branagan was remarkably adept at ensuring his work had a wide audience. His letters to Thomas Jefferson also suggest that Branagan believed his mission had particular significance for those at the highest levels of society. In his correspondence with the third President, Branagan characterized his work not only as one of religious and general philanthropic merit, but as “productive of public utility” and in particular “intrinsically momentous to the citizens of America.” While in “every nation, savage or civilized” serious considerations of and devotion to benevolence “must be deemed important,” Branagan emphasized the ways in which this was “doubly important” in the context of a “Body Politic whose very existence exclusively depends upon the purity of their political principles.”

Evoking the widespread anxiety that the United States, like all historical republics, would eventually decline and fail, Branagan warned Jefferson that the lack of “indefatigable assiduity” in the safeguard of benevolence “was the Radical cause of [ancient republics] premature Anhilation.” With a sincere wish that America would avoid such a fate, Branagan

---

38 Ibid., 606.
40 Branagan to Jefferson, May 7, 1805.
concluded his letter with the hope that the President would “ever continue to be a pattern to a World of despots and the means of not only keeping the glowing taper of republicanism from being extinguished but fanning it to a flame which will illuminate the benighted minds of the enslaved the wretched the degraded sons of europe Asia and Africa.” Through its distinctive benevolence, then, the United States would not only succeed in its republican experiment where all others had failed, it would do so in a way that would set an example for the rest of the world.

Benevolence ultimately served several purposes for Thomas Branagan. First and foremost, Branagan saw philanthropy as a calling and responsibility of his Christian faith. However, it also allowed him, after religious conversion, to remake himself from a Caribbean slaver into a republican abolitionist. Through claims about the centrality of philanthropy to American character, Branagan worked to rehabilitate his uncharitable past into a justification for his present, desired role as a patriotic example and persuasive voice in the early republic. If genuine and Christian philanthropy, as his work repeatedly claimed, was a prerequisite for and fundamental characteristic of a successful republican nation, Branagan (re)shaped both himself and the character of his adopted country.

**Pillars of the Benevolent Republic**

For all of Branagan’s quirks, he is representative of a larger pattern: elite members of the founding generations understood benevolence to be a central part of their identity. In a letter to a friend, a young Roberts Vaux – whose memoirist would later require the better part of three pages to list his philanthropic engagements – wrote that he hoped he was “not altogether insensible of the privileges which I enjoy.”

---

41 Ibid.
42 Vaux to James Pemberton Parke, Aug. 7, 1806, VFP.
taking his birth to a prominent Philadelphia Quaker family for granted, Vaux continued, he imagined these privileges to “often stand as it were before me the character of a judge adorned with Robes of authority, making this inquiry, “art thou returning suitable fruits, of gratitude to that kind Providence whose supreme pleasure it is to allow these benefits?”” Born to a favorable position in society, Vaux considered this as a divine blessing that came with significant responsibility to “prove thy privileges.” For Vaux, then, the privilege of elite birth was not carte blanche access to power and authority for personal gain, but rather the ability to identify and advocate for reforms that would improve society as a whole.

Beyond its more traditional connection to the obligations of socio-economic status, however, benevolence was also a key part of Vaux and his peers’ sense of American national identity and their responsibilities as citizens. Indeed, sermons and speeches from throughout the early republic emphasized philanthropy’s role in both religious and civic character. “Revere your GOD – your REASON – and your CONSCIENCE,” Samuel Magaw declared to parishioners at Christ Church in Philadelphia in October 1775. “Be kind, humane, [and] benevolent to one another,” he continued, for the “same pure flame which raises the soul to God, and constitutes the Christian and the Saint, is that very thing, only in another direction, which animates the real Patriot; which influences the honest man; the upright magistrate; the good citizen; the sincere friend.” As in Vaux’s private reflections, here too benevolence is at the core of what will allow an individual to act effectively and honorably as a Christian, neighbor, and American citizen. Such conduct, these discourses emphasized, required sacrifice to

---

43 Ibid.
44 Samuel Magaw, A discourse preached in Christ-Church, Philadelphia, on Sunday, October 8th, 1775. By the Rev. Samuel Magaw, M.A. of Kent County, on Delaware (Philadelphia, 1775), 08.
the greater good, often beyond straightforward monetary donations. For Vaux, the ultimate example of such unselfish, disinterested benevolence was the abolitionist Anthony Benezet, whom Vaux wrote was “the rare example of a man” that surrendered “every selfish and ambitious passion” in order to “advance the happiness of his fellow-beings.”

Civic virtue, in the end, could not sustained by individual pursuits of property and happiness, but was rooted in a more expansive “benevolent temper” that, according to a speech given in support of an orphan asylum, “glows with a peculiar ardor in the love of his country” and “is the spring of the noblest enterprises of public spirit.” This public spirit, Presbyterian minister Isaac Anderson observed, was seen eminently in the character of George Washington who “was not influenced by interested, selfish, or mercenary motives; but was disinterested or impartial in his motives; superior to regard of private advantage.” Although Washington was extraordinary example in many ways, this broader link between benevolence and honorable citizenship was not. As Nicholas Biddle wrote at the beginning of a career that would include serving as President of the Second Bank of the United States: “If, at any moment, I feel any ambition, any wish to gain the applause of others, it is by [giving myself] to the world and politics [by] building a sort of name as a statesman.” In these reflections, benevolence is more than a religious duty, it is also an important American characteristic, one that would create community and motivate civic virtue wherein “the public interest … and the happiness of

46 William Hollinshead, An Oration, Delivered at the Orphan-House of Charleston, South-Carolina, October 18, 1797, Being the Eighth Anniversary of the Institution (Charleston, 1797), 06, 03.
47 Isaac Anderson, Letters Addressed to a Friend on the Following Subjects (Knoxville, TN, 1817), 12.
48 In Thomas P. Govan, Nicholas Biddle, Nationalist and Public Banker, 1786–1859 (Philadelphia, 1942), 20.
the whole … is the highest good to the benevolent person.”

This national good, further, was one of continuous improvement. Benevolence not only ensured the public good in the present but also moved “forward this desirable revolution” through “an accumulation of private virtue and public happiness.” Amidst the need to make sense of the new cultural, economic, political, and social realities of the independent nation, benevolence emerged as a valuable framework by which early republicans could both articulate, facilitate, and validate good personal character and upright, dedicated citizenship.

***

In the historiography, the capacity of philanthropy to function on multiple levels has been strongly tied to the social control thesis. This approach emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a challenge to consensus interpretations – particularly the assumption that philanthropy was a straightforward good – with a desire to account for class differences. Rather than celebrating American benevolence within a narrative of steady progress, the social control thesis depicted philanthropy as an exertion of power, wherein well-off philanthropists set the standards to which those seeking aid must conform. While from the outset there was pushback against an “overtly cynical” view “that all these beneficent institutions were founded primarily with the object of indoctrinating the poor and wayward with a middle class morality,” the idea that benevolence in early America is best understood in the context of economic, political, and/or social self-interest has remained a persuasive and persistent analytical framework.

---

The incorporation of the social control thesis covered a range of philanthropic issues and agenda. In *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, David Brion Davis linked the emergence of both the American and British antislavery movements to the development of capitalism and the market economy. He observed that the elites who made up the core of the abolition movement had previously managed to live with—and profit from—the institution of slavery without moral outrage. The shifting economic interests of an emerging capitalist world order and the desire of those with economic and social status to maintain their position, Davis argued, explains the chronology of abolition, not a sudden moral awakening to the evils of slavery.\(^{52}\) Even religion does not get a pass in the social control thesis. In *The Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, Paul Johnson considered the connections between the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening and the proliferation of reform movements in the United States during the early nineteenth century. Though he allowed for the possibility of genuine religious conviction, Johnson argued that in the context of a growing working class, the habits emphasized by evangelical Protestantism—particularly sobriety and self-discipline—provided a new way for an anxious middle and upper class to control the behavior of workers under the guise of humanitarian reform. For Johnson, Davis, and other social control historians, the philanthropic endeavors of the early republic were intimately

\(^{52}\) Davis’ analysis was famously challenged by Thomas Haskell in a two-part article “Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility,” *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), 339–61, 547–66. Haskell argued that while an individual might in some way confer a personal gain through participation in a reform movement, capitalism at its core created the “cognitive style” that allowed for the genuine and expansive human impulse to relieve the suffering of those at a distance. See also Thomas Bender, ed., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley, CA, 1992).
related to the conservative reactions of those with economic, political, and social power during a period of immense change.\textsuperscript{53}

In their analysis of the many philanthropic initiatives and reform movements that emerged during the early American republic, practitioners of the social control thesis emphasize the pathologization, criminalization, and institutionalization of those deemed deviant. Although poverty – and thus responsibility for caring for those in need – was traditionally considered an inevitable feature of society, with the emergence of capitalism and the market economy, the root causes of penury were increasingly attributed to personal failings. The institutionalization of poverty, according to Robert Cray, “heralded the beginning of a new social ethos whereby many of a community’s destitute residents were viewed less as neighbors and more as outcasts.”\textsuperscript{54} Poverty in the early republic thus became a condition that could be eradicated if the behavior and attitudes of the poor were reformed to embrace the industrious and sober character traits required of a wage laborer. The almshouse, penitentiary, and charity school were in this context all interpreted as “instruments” of the middling and upper classes “designed to reform the behavior of the poor”\textsuperscript{55} through “a rehabilitative and corrective program.”\textsuperscript{56} Here, the innovations in philanthropy and reform in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries were not the result of genuine – if somewhat misguided – benevolence, but revolutions in social control.


\textsuperscript{54} Robert E. Cray, Jr., \textit{Paupers and Poor Relief in New York City and Its Rural Environs, 1700–1830} (Philadelphia, 1988), 68.

\textsuperscript{55} Alexander, \textit{Render them Submissive}, 06.

As is often the case, the most useful conclusions come from an understanding that reality typically exists within shades of gray rather than in black and white – or, in this case, that benevolence could simultaneously further the personal interests of elite philanthropists and also genuinely improve broader social conditions. This can be seen in the evolution of the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Economy (PSPPE). Established in February 1817 by twelve prominent Philadelphians, these men (and they were all men) likely had preexisting opinions about “public economy” and how those who would fall under the organization’s philanthropic purview did or did not live up to those standards. Nevertheless, the decisive factor that brought them together at that particular moment had less to do with an explicit desire to control the behavior of the lower classes in the name of public economy and more to do with the immediate exigencies of a particularly harsh winter. Newspaper reports of the “unusual and unnatural”\(^{57}\) weather throughout 1816 reveal the widespread impact of this extraordinary season. Some accounts brought humor to the situation, as one correspondent in Cape May, New Jersey observed that “the ducks have suffered so much, and have become some impotent, that a dog will take three or four hundred in a day.”\(^{58}\) More often, however, the tone was bleak. While freezing temperatures may have been a duck-hunting dog’s dream, the “distressing winter,” another writer observed, “was a calamity [for] the poor.”\(^{59}\) The founders of the PSPPE would have also seen this first hand – while they certainly had the resources to survive an unusually long and frigid winter unscathed, their regular travels throughout the city would have brought them face-to-face with the distressing impact of the cold for those who could not easily afford extra coal or bear the

\(^{57}\) American and Commercial Daily Advertiser (Baltimore), May 11, 1816.
\(^{58}\) Weekly Aurora (Philadelphia), Mar. 3, 1817.
\(^{59}\) Weekly Aurora, Feb. 17, 1817.
rising cost of food. Thus “induced by the inclemency of the season, and consequent
distress among the poor,” the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public
Economy was born. Though informed by their experiences and interests as wealthy,
white, men, the philanthropy of the founders of the PSPPE was also at its core a response
to the immediate, visible suffering happening that winter.

Although the initial goal of the organization was to address the urgent needs
occasioned by the harsh winter of 1816–17, by the following summer the PSPPE had
significantly expanded its membership and formed several sub-committees. Under an
expanded remit, members focused their benevolent energies on the investigation of “the
causes of mendacity, and to recommend such plans for meliorating the conditions of the
poor as they might seem practicable.” In pursuit of these ends, the PSPPE distributed a
list of eighteen questions to public poor relief officials and managers of charitable
organizations throughout Philadelphia. The survey covered basic information such as
“What description of persons are most improvident” and “What do the poor allege as the
cause of their poverty?” The Society also sought to determine what, if any, groups of
people were most affected by poverty, and thus included questions such as “What
proportion of the indigent are widows and single women … are strangers not entitled to
legal residence … or descendants of Africa?” The final part focused on the daily life of
the poor with queries about the education or lack thereof of poor children, alcohol
consumption, pawnbrokers, and “the effects of soup houses.” The results of this survey

---

60 Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Economy (PSPPE), Report of the Library Committee (Philadelphia, 1817), 03.
61 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 39–41.
64 Ibid., 48.
serve as an important reminder that philanthropy sought to ease very real suffering.\textsuperscript{65} According to one respondent familiar with the recipients of public poor relief, “of 1239 paupers, 672 were widows and single women; the latter in very small proportion,”\textsuperscript{66} suggesting that for many lower-class women, the death of a husband had the danger of being both financially as well as personally devastating. The observation that “the mortality of the children of the poor is greatest in the summer,” due to the “impurity of the air at that season” likewise evoked the physical toll of poverty. Here, penury involved not just the lack of monetary resources, but also, for these children “doubtless hurried to the grave from this cause,”\textsuperscript{67} a paucity of breathable air.

The extent of the relationship between social control and philanthropy momentarily aside, the aid provided by the PSPPE at least temporarily alleviated serious and potentially fatal conditions such as hunger, homelessness, and illness. Nevertheless, this survey also demonstrates the imbalance of power between elite philanthropists and recipients of aid, as well as the ways in which elite assumptions and biases marginalized the poor even as their immediate physical conditions may have improved. For one, although the PSPPE was explicitly concerned with improving the situation of the impoverished, their survey did not invite the opinion of the needy or at-risk members of the working class directly. In fact, even when the voices of the poor were indirectly included, they were not taken seriously. “In most instances,” the report stated, “want of employment … especially in the winter season” was given by the impoverished as the “alleged cause” of their circumstances. This first-hand testimony, however, ultimately

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{65} Amanda Moniz, “‘Labours in the Cause of Humanity in Every Part of the Globe’: Transatlantic Philanthropic Collaborations and the Cosmopolitan Ideal, 1760–1815” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008), 06.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 39.
\end{footnotesize}
was overruled by a privileged respondent who concluded “although this [unemployment] may temporarily operate,” in reality “idleness, intemperance, and sickness are most frequently the real causes.”68 Here, benevolence also meant the erasure of the voices of the poor and delegitimization of their knowledge as individuals who directly experienced the causes and hardships of poverty. In this sense, a historiographical narrative that sees philanthropy as a means by which the upper and middling classes dictated the standards of behavior for the poor is valuable. After all, two of the three major causes of distress – idleness and intemperance – stem from personal failings, rather than systematic inequality. In this scenario, elite philanthropists validated their own status with the knowledge that their affluence came from superior self-control and determination, not at the expense of others. This allowed them to confidently make claims such as “the use of ardent spirits is probably in nine cases out of ten the cause of poverty,”69 even when there was no evidence of a strong desire among the lower classes for teetotalism. The fact that so many members of the PSPPE were proponents of the temperance movement thus in the end says more about elite misgivings about the role of alcohol in society and fears about its potential to cause disorder and reduce the productivity of workers than the actual opinions of the poor regarding the causes of their penury.70

***

This function of benevolence as both a justification for and evidence of elite status was particularly important in the context of the early American republic. When the Revolution successfully freed the United States from the yoke of British monarchy, it by

---

68 Ibid., 38.
69 Ibid., 42.
extension also destabilized other traditional social hierarchies. This put the economically and socially privileged members of the founding generations in an awkward position. While a full-blown hereditary aristocracy never existed in colonial America and there were – particularly in comparison to Europe – opportunities for social mobility, many philanthropists were the beneficiaries of generational wealth and status. Thus, as the founding generations struggled to construct a national identity around which a diverse population could unite, they were also faced with the task of justifying their authority to do so. This anxiety was not unwarranted. On a theoretical level, a democratic republic that valued self-determination, popular sovereignty, and (ostensibly) equal access to a range of “unalienable Rights” was at best suspicious of and at worst fundamentally incompatible with anything that resembled aristocratic rule. In practice, incidents such as Shays’ Rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion, and countless other so-called “excess[es] of democracy” evoked fears that the nascent, delicate republican experiment would fall victim to the short-term gratifications of populist politics.

Through the unquestionably virtuous but also conveniently vague characteristic of benevolence, elite members of the founding generations were able to validate their position in a republican society while differentiating themselves from the masses. Although philanthropy took many shapes and existed on all levels of society during the early republic, mutual aid societies and informal, often ad-hoc, relief were generally hyper-local and almost always less publicized. Participation in the efforts most often


72 Declaration of Independence. Needless to say, there were a lot of caveats in regard to who actually had the ability to pursue “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

associated with the ‘age of benevolence’ – prison reform, education reform, the rise of workhouses and almshouses, to name a few – required both economic and social capital. To return to Roberts Vaux, almost all of the organizations with which he was associated involved annual dues. The amounts varied from group to group – the yearly subscription for the Philadelphia Society for the Establishment and Support of Charity Schools was only $1, while the Academy of Natural Sciences required an initiation fee of $10 and quarterly contributions of $3. These sums would have made formal participation in any of these societies, let alone several of them, beyond the means of most in the early American republic. For perspective, members of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, which Vaux served as Secretary for more than two decades, paid seven shillings and six pence – roughly $1.50, equal to about two days wage for a skilled tradesman – in fees every year. Between these subscriptions, mandatory attendance at annual, quarterly, or even monthly meetings, and unpaid administrative work, there were very real economic and social barriers to participation in early republican benevolence, at least in an official capacity.

This is not necessarily a problem in and of itself – after all, what good is a charitable organization that lacks the resources to carry out its own benevolent goals? When this benevolence is deeply entangled with American identity, however, when obituaries regularly praise men in the same breath as both a “venerable patriot and

philanthropist,”77 these circumstances take on additional implications. If a central characteristic of the ideal republican was benevolence, then active and broad participation in philanthropic organizations was also indicative of one’s qualifications to serve in other public positions. On its surface, this does not exclude the non-elite from positions of leadership. If anything, by supporting institutions such as orphanages – where children who previously would have been housed at an almshouse alongside (the often unsuitable example of) the adult poor could instead receive an education and go on to achieve “useful and honorable stations in society; adorning and improving their country”78 – theoretically facilitated the emergence of new philanthropists amongst those who might have otherwise spent their lives in poverty. Holly Brewer, for one, has connected these changes in the treatment of poor children to the specific context of “the new republic, with the revision of laws and policies that accompanied the Revolution, [which] accelerated the acceptance of certain elements of Enlightenment thought,” particularly with an emphasis on reason and by extension formal education, which were both “deeply embedded” in Enlightenment ideas and “in republican political theory.”79 Ultimately, whether or not these new approaches to the problem of poor children were the result of a new republican ethos or merely social control with a republican gloss, for the purposes of this project, are not treated as mutually exclusive options. What is of primary importance here is that, as those with economic and social capital were facing philosophical and

77 Savannah Republican, July 21, 1810.
78 George Buist, An Oration Delivered at the Orphan-House of Charleston, South-Carolina, October 18th, 1795, Being the Sixth Anniversary of the Institution (Charleston, SC, 1795), 06. See also John Lathrop, A Discourse, Delivered Before the Members of the Boston Female Asylum, September 21, 1804, Being their Fourth Anniversary (Boston, 1804). As orphanages opened throughout the early republic, many of the earliest residents came directly from the local almshouse. See Orphan Society of Philadelphia Records, Series 3, HSP.
actual challenges to their leadership and authority, the archetype of the benevolent republican functioned to validate their continued positions of influence in society.

The benefits brought on by this profound connection between benevolence and republicanism were regularly described in annual reports, charity sermons, and other publications. Philanthropy in the United States, these discourses emphasized, was not merely a duplicate of efforts elsewhere, but was something that both reflected and helped sustain the republic and its eminence. As John Bartlett described in a speech to the Roxbury (Massachusetts) Charitable Society, American benevolence was not merely more of the same, but “an additional plume to polished humanity.” For William Bradford, Attorney General of Pennsylvania, benevolent republicanism meant meaningful engagement with prison reform. Whereas, he observed, on “no subject has government in different parts of the world, discovered more indolence and inattention than in the construction or reform of penal codes,” in the “youthful republic” this benevolent project could be “made with so much safety” and a high “probability of success.” Free from the “old and corrupted governments of Europe,” Bradford continued, early republican philanthropists would be able to capitalize on the national “progress of freedom, science, and morals” in order to shape penal codes – amongst other endeavors – in a way that was fully “animated by the pure spirit of philanthropy.”

Such efficacious benevolence was thus tied directly to a republican ethos. Without the “iniquitous impositions” of monarchy and nobility, where the private interests of

---

80 John Bartlett, *A Discourse, Delivered before the Roxbury Charitable Society at their Anniversary Meeting, 19 September, 1796* (Boston, 1796), 06.
82 Ibid., 05, 15.
aristocrats reigned supreme, philanthropy in the early republic may truly help those it purported to serve. Compared to “some parts of Europe,” David Ramsay observed in 1795, where “the condition of peasantry” is at best “not quite so bad,” the poor of the United States did not have to settle for such mediocrity. Instead, in no other country “are the rights and happiness of the common people so much respected” and the poor free from the “galling yoke of oppression”84 of intractable destitution. While monarchical benevolence was nothing more than a “burlesque” and did little to actually ameliorate the condition of the poor, republican philanthropy actually improved conditions and respected the “dignity of human nature.”85 Here, then, American philanthropy and philanthropists were worthy of respect in that their endeavors actually advanced the welfare of the entire nation. While the English gentry were charitable only insofar as it served their own interests, American philanthropists were animated by patriotism and dedicated to effective benevolence. “O happy Americans!” Mason Weems declared in The Philanthropist, “with us the political body still preserves its exquisite shape and symmetry: the head is not bloated and the feet are not starv’d.”86 The prominence of this rhetoric therefore helped shape a national identity that closely linked benevolence and republicanism, and also saw this connection to result in exceptional philanthropic enterprises. In these comparisons to European practices, benevolence therefore not only validated elite privilege and leadership in the early republic, it also served as a salient example of American distinctiveness.

85 Branagan, Charms of Benevolence, 277.
86 Weems, The Philanthropist, 23.
“The American is a new man,” J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur declared in *Letters from an American Farmer*, he “acts upon new principles” and “must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions.” Written in the lead-up to the Revolutionary War, Crèvecoeur’s pronouncement, though celebratory, also anticipated the project that would continue well into the nineteenth century: the construction of American identity. It was not enough for Americans to achieve military victory and formal political separation from Britain; early republicans were also faced with the task of distinguishing themselves culturally, politically, and socially. In this context, benevolence functioned as both a building block in and proof of the project’s success. By emphasizing benevolence as a key characteristic of this “new American” character, elite early republicans were able to link their philanthropic endeavors and reform initiatives to the fulfillment of a republican ethos that lived up to the promises of the Revolution. At the same time, the financial and social barriers to the most celebrated forms of benevolence served as a safety net against what were perceived to be the excesses of a popular political system. Within this chosen group, philanthropic initiatives further provided a common project and vocabulary amidst increasing sectional and partisan differences. Free from the perceived political and social impediments of the monarchical Old World, Americans had the opportunity to take the best of Enlightenment philosophy, republican ideology, and Christian teachings in order to create a more just and effective means of addressing social issues such as poverty and crime. Whether or not these endeavors were rooted in genuine altruism, a self-interested desire for social control, or a combination of the two, early republicans embraced this opportunity. Amidst the anxieties and uncertainties of the period, benevolence did much more than fix social ills;

it provided a common, estimable characteristic around which the new nation could identify and rally. The new American was not merely a Briton-in-all-but-name, he was a republican and, crucially, a *benevolent* republican.
Chapter Two: Prison Reform, American Character, and Cosmopolitan Collaboration

On May 22, 1823, a small but enthusiastic group of Philadelphians gathered to celebrate a milestone in Pennsylvania’s – and, they hoped – America’s penal practices. At six o’clock on that late spring day, amidst piles of stones and masonry tools poised for action, the cornerstone of the Eastern State Penitentiary was laid. Although it would still be another six years before the ten-acre site was completely transformed from a cherry orchard to a state-of-the-art prison, the moment represented more than three decades of campaigning on behalf of prison reform. To mark the occasion, Roberts Vaux – a prominent Quaker philanthropist and long-serving secretary of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons – gave a short speech to the gathered group of “Commissioners, Architect [John Haviland], Superintendent [sic] and Work men [and] a few citizens.”¹ He began with the observation that such an “occasion was calculated to awaken reflections at once painful and gratifying.” While it was indeed a moment of triumph for Vaux, other members of the PSAMPP, and those generally concerned with fashioning what was perceived to be an ethical and effective means of addressing crime and criminality, the very need for such an institution was also a reminder of the “erring character of man.” Nevertheless, Vaux celebrated the ways in which the long-desired institution represented “a correct view of human nature, coupled with the indispensable exercise of Christian benevolence.”

Up through this point in his speech, the ideas and methods that Vaux praised and would allow Eastern State to “wisely and compassionately … secure and reform the criminal” were ostensibly universal. Although many of those present at the ceremony

were Quakers, Vaux gave no indication that *Christian benevolence* was necessarily limited to fellow Friends. Human nature – both in its tendency to err and the ability to take a correct view and bring about successful reform – was until this point discussed broadly in relation to the new penitentiary. If a Catholic in Bologna, Calvinist in Utrecht, or Anglican in Liverpool read a copy of Vaux’s speech, they would have no reason to think the achievements of prison reform in Philadelphia could not be replicated in their own community.

The second part of Vaux’s remarks, however, was more specific to the United States and Pennsylvania in particular. He congratulated his “fellow citizens of Pennsylvania, because their Legislators were the first almost forty years ago, to abolish those cruel and vindictive penalties which were in use in the European countries from which we had descended.” This statement was also part of a relatively familiar narrative – Pennsylvania had long stood apart in relation to its penal practices. William Penn’s “Great Law” of 1682, in accordance with the new colony’s Quaker ethos, eliminated capital punishment for all crimes except murder and replaced most types of corporal punishment with imprisonment.² Although these laws were rolled back as England consolidated its authority in North America over the course of the eighteenth century, many Pennsylvanians remained aware of and committed to their reputation as pioneers in incarceration and reform. Indeed, in the aftermath of independence – amidst feelings of both optimism and anxiety about the future of the nascent United States – this history took on new significance. It provided a rallying point from which Pennsylvanians could differentiate themselves from their colonial past and articulate their achievements as

---

republicans. With this in mind, Vaux’s statements about the achievements of Pennsylvania, particularly in comparison to the European countries from which [they] had descended takes on additional meaning. It was not a one-off moment of local pride on a festive occasion, but part of the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism that emerged as part of a broader process of the construction and articulation of national identity in the early republican period.

The prison, at first glance, seems like an odd place for the articulation of national identity. Even as a cautionary tale – viz. “the residents of this place provide an example of the types of behavior upright citizens avoid” – why bring extra scrutiny to the existence of criminality? Although a well-ordered and fair criminal justice system is laudable, surely there are other – more pleasant – aspects of society worth highlighting first? While the early American republic and republican benevolence was by no means characterized solely by its carceral practices, the prison reform movement intersected in important and significant ways with the construction of a distinct national identity in the years and decades after independence. This chapter therefore focuses on one project within early republican benevolence – prison reform – in order to take a closer look at the ways in which the evolution of incarceration in the United States paralleled and overlapped with the construction of American character. With an emphasis on

---

developments in Philadelphia, which, as “the birthplace of the penitentiary” scholars have long regarded as an “ideal site for an examination” of the topic, this investigation acts as a specific case study for the ideas discussed in the first chapter and also considers how republican benevolence operated in making space for American involvement and even leadership on an international stage.

Reputation and Reform: Republicanizing the Prison

The idea at the center of the prison reform movement, that penal codes and incarceration should not only punish but also reform offenders, did not emerge with an independent United States. Rather, calls for change had been gathering momentum over the course of the eighteenth century. By the onset of the American Revolution, the circulation and popularity of tracts such as Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* (1721) and *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), John Howard’s *The State of prisons in England and Wales* (1777), and Cesare Beccaria’s *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764) had brought widespread attention to the cause. Much of the work of these early actors was focused on bringing attention to the deleterious effects of incarceration across Europe and North America. In his celebrated and widely-distributed *The state of prisons in England and Wales*, John Howard exposed the unhygienic conditions of jails and emphasized the dangers of indiscriminately incarcerating accused criminals of all ages and backgrounds in a single, monolithic institution. “The evils mentioned hitherto,” Howard wrote, “affect the health and life of prisoners, [and] I have not to complain of what is pernicious of their MORALS; and that is, confining of all sorts of prisoners together; debtors with felons,

---

men and women, the young beginner and the old offender; and with all these, in some
countries, such as are guilty of misdemeanors only…”

It was in this context that notions about the need to reform the criminal system
and penal practices inherited from Britain emerged before the colonial officially came to
an end. As early as 1773, the Connecticut General Assembly passed a resolution calling
for the construction of a facility “for the purpose of confining, securing, and profitably
employing such criminals as may be committed to them by any future law or laws … in
lieu of the infamous punishments in divers cases now appointed.” Beyond this general
sense of the inadequacy of present practices, American dissatisfaction with the British
system was compounded by experiences during the Revolutionary War. In his poem The
British Prison Ship, Philip Freneau described the “seven long weeks” he spent in the
“damn’d hulks” in 1780. In addition to his visceral descriptions of the “dens of hunger
and despair” where “fevers rage where health was seen before,” Freneau also highlighted
the hypocrisy and “hellish pride” of British penal cruelty:

“A generous nation” – is their endless cry,
But truth revolts against the daring lie;
Compassion shuns them, an unwelcome guest,
They to humanity are foes protest;
In their dark bosoms pity claims no share,
For God in anger never plac’d them there;
A brutal courage is their ruling pride,
For one short hour of fame have thousands dy’d
All nations they abhor, detest decry,

---

But their dear race emblazon to the sky.⁸

Thus according to “the poet of the American Revolution,”⁹ British tyranny manifested itself not only through unjust taxation and denial of representation, but also in its immoral treatment of prisoners of war. Freneau and his fellow captives’ experiences in the prison brig thus revealed more than iniquitous penal practices – it struck at the very heart of Britain’s claims about its own character as an enlightened, generous, and Christian empire.

Thomas Eddy, who would go on to be a leading proponent of prison reform in New York State after independence, was also awakened to the cause through first-hand experience. Mistakenly captured as a Loyalist spy¹⁰ by the New Jersey militia, Eddy and his future brother-in-law Lawrence Hartshorne spent over a month in custody. Like Freneau, Eddy described repulsive conditions – the “miserable dungeon,” he later recalled, was “much crowded” and had a “foul and noxious air,” no doubt intensified by the “extremely dirty straw, which [Eddy] believed had not been changed since the other prisoners had occupied the room.”¹¹ While Eddy’s harsh treatment came at the hands of patriot soldiers and officials, he ultimately attributed these flawed practices to a

---


¹⁰ While Thomas Eddy was definitely not a Loyalist spy, he was no means an obvious Patriot. As a Quaker, Eddy neither fought for nor – he later claimed – strongly supported either side, recalling that at the outbreak of war he decided it was best not only to eschew martial life, but also to avoid “intemperate political zeal, then manifested by all parties. This stance was likely economically as well as religiously driven, as his fortune grew during the war through selling imported goods and remittances to the British army. Eddy later characterized his position as a “vain expectation” that colonial grievances could be resolved without political separation, a mistake he attributed to inadequate education, noting that “the science of government was not then so well understood as at present; and great numbers, having the knowledge they now possess, would then have adopted very different political sentiments.” Samuel L. Knapp, *The Life of Thomas Eddy* (1834; 2nd ed., London, 1836), 31–37.

regrettable colonial inheritance from the “parent state.”\textsuperscript{12} Following a successful career in the insurance industry, Eddy applied his “learning in the school of adversity”\textsuperscript{13} to his efforts as a prison reformer. “The peace, security and happiness of society,” he wrote in \textit{An Account of the State Prison or Penitentiary House, in the City of New-York}, “depend on the wisdom and justice of the means devised for the \textit{prevention} of crimes.”\textsuperscript{14} Perhaps recalling his own experience in the “gloomy abode”\textsuperscript{15} of a British-style prison, Eddy linked these endeavors to the success of the new nation as a natural outcome of the character of “a people enamoured of freedom and a republic.”\textsuperscript{16}

As discontent with British rule – including what was perceived to be the indiscriminate and ineffective use of corporal punishment and the death penalty – came to a head during and after the Revolutionary War, the project of penal reform thus became explicitly linked with the nation’s new sovereign status. In \textit{Notes on the State of Virginia}, Thomas Jefferson highlighted the need for Americans to review and rewrite their legal codes. “Many of the laws which were in force during the monarchy,” he wrote, “being relative to that form of government, or inculcating principles inconsistent with republicanism,”\textsuperscript{17} cannot remain on the books if the republic were to achieve its full potential. This view of the incompatibility of the British penal system to the potential of the early American republic was not limited to elite circles of prison reformers. Newspapers and popular rhetoric increasingly emphasized the “bloody” nature of British penal law, which, according to one author in the \textit{Massachusetts Centinel}, was “a disgrace

\textsuperscript{12} Thomas Eddy, \textit{An Account of the State Prison or Penitentiary House, in the City of New-York} (New York, 1801), 08.
\textsuperscript{13} Knapp, \textit{Life of Thomas Eddy}, 39.
\textsuperscript{14} Eddy, \textit{Account of the State Prison}, 07.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 05.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 09.
\textsuperscript{17} Thomas Jefferson, \textit{Notes on the State of Virginia} (1785).
to a civilized nation.”¹十八 From these wide-ranging calls for reform, then, it was understood that a republican and enlightened penal system would not develop of its own accord. Rather, like the broader project of the construction of American identity, a system of carceral policies worthy of a successful republic would require the careful attention and dedicated exertion of its citizens.

The Evolution of the Prison in Colonial and Early Republican Pennsylvania

Penal experiments in Pennsylvania began small – literally, that is, with a 35 square foot cage. In November 1682, “William Clayton, one of the Provincial Council,” was ordered to “build a cage against the next council day, of seven feet long by five feet broad”¹⁹ to detain criminals. Before long, however, Clayton’s cage was upgraded to a more permanent structure, the “hired house of Patrick Robinson” on Second and High Streets. Half of the building remained the residence of the Robinson family while the other part was “refit[ted] … with … fetters and chains.”²⁰ This too was soon deemed inadequate and in 1685, citing “the want of a prison,” the provincial council authorized the construction of a purpose-built jail. According to a report received by the Court of the Quarter Sessions that same year, the structure would be:

Twenty feet long and fourteen feet wide in the clear, two stories high, - the upper seven feet, and the under six and a half feet, of which four feet under ground, with all convenient lights and doors, and casements – strong and substantial, with good brick, lime, sand and stone, as also floors and roofs very substantial; a partition of brick in the middle through the house, so that there will be four rooms, four chimneys, and the cockloft, which will serve for a prison; and the gaoler may well live in any part of it, if need be – the whole to cost £140.²¹

---

²⁰ Ibid.
²¹ Ibid., 358.
Opened in 1695, the High Street Gaol almost immediately fell short of its intended purposes. Rather than serve as a place of punishment and reformation as envisioned by Penn’s Great Law, it was soon declared a “common nuisance.” Finally, at the behest of “sundry persons [who] offered large subscriptions for erecting a new prison,” an Act of Assembly authorized the construction of what was then known as the New Stone Jail in 1718. Intended to be both larger and more secure than its predecessor, the Stone Jail was comprised of two separate buildings, one for debtors and a “workhouse” for criminals, “joined … by a high wall forming part of the yard enclosure.”

Described almost from the outset as an “abode of wretchedness” with conditions that could “scarcely be conceived by” the average person, the early years of the New Stone Jail also coincided with the restoration of English criminal law in Pennsylvania. The British-style prison in colonial America was not meant to be a place of punishment, let alone reform. Rather, it was a place where men, women, and even children were held together while awaiting trial, whether they were accused of stealing a loaf of bread or murder. In colonial newspapers, jails were most often referenced in connection to advertisements seeking the capture of runaway slaves, servants, or apprentices. One such notice described a runaway “Irish servant named John O Neal, about five feet six Inches high, of a redish complexion, about 30 years of age” and offered a five pound reward for “whoever secures said servant in any county gaol, or brings him to his master in

---

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 360.
cumberland county four miles from carlisle.”  

Another advertisement offered an eight dollar reward “and reasonable charges” for “securing” a “runaway Mulatto Slave, named Peter Brown” to the “Dover goal [sic] or in Philadelphia goal or work house.” For colonial Pennsylvanians, then, jails functioned as processing centers – John O’Neal and Peter Brown would be punished by their masters, not through extended incarceration.

Even for those deemed guilty of transgressing criminal or civil codes in colonial Pennsylvania, punishment also typically occurred outside of the walls of the jail. A report from the Court of General Sessions from April 1752 published in the *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser* described the result of several trials, including that of “Christopher Burnet, and John Thomson, of Robbery on the Highway; Peter Hover, of the Murder of his Wife; John Morrison, of Burglary; James and Francis Scot, of Stealing and killing Cattle; Edward Bailey, of Petty-Larceny; and Mary Stammers of assaulting a Constable in the Execution of his Office.” For these various crimes, four – Burnet, Morrison, Thomson, and Hover – received the death penalty. James and Francis Scot, “craving the Benefit of the Clergy” – a centuries-old mechanism in English law that, by the eighteenth century, allowed offenders convicted of certain crimes to receive a lesser sentence – “were only burnt on the Left Cheek with the Letter T, and whipp’d … round the Square.” Finally, Edward Bailey and Mary Stammers “were also whipp’d … at the Gaol Door.”

---

26 *Pennsylvania Journal*, Nov. 13, 1776.
public assertion over the body of a criminal in retribution for an apparent transgression against the desired legal and moral order of society.\textsuperscript{28} 

Even though all but a handful of offenses were punished publically in the pillory, at the whipping post, or by execution, the New Stone Jail was still regarded with “horror and disgust,” its disorder and overcrowding visible to “the public eye by ill constructed walls.”\textsuperscript{29} However, it was not until 1773 that the construction of a second prison was authorized. The resulting Walnut Street Jail opened its doors in January 1776 and immediately received over one hundred prisoners from its sister institution. Any hopes for an improvement to the penal status quo, however, were soon dashed when six of the “felons, debtors, prisoners-of-war, and Tories” brought over to Walnut Street “broke jail the night after their transfer.”\textsuperscript{30} Moreover, after only a few months of operation, Walnut Street was requisitioned by Congress for use as a military prison. The next year, it changed hands yet again with the British occupation of Philadelphia, during which time it was known as the “British Provost Prison.”\textsuperscript{31} It was not until 1780, following the sale of the Stone Prison, that Walnut Street at last reassumed its original purpose as a jail for the incarceration of non-martial convicts.

As an initial step in its post-Revolutionary prison reform efforts, Pennsylvania – along with several other states, including Maryland, South Carolina, and Vermont – explicitly called for a decrease in the “sanguinary” laws imposed by British rule in their new state constitutions. While therefore not alone in its endeavors, Pennsylvania’s Plan

\textsuperscript{29} Teeters, \textit{They Were in Prison}, 12.
\textsuperscript{30} Quoted in Teeters, \textit{They Were in Prison}, 15.
\textsuperscript{31} Teeters, \textit{They Were in Prison}, 17.
or Frame of Government for the Commonwealth or State of Pennsylvania of September 1776 was generally regarded as the most complete and formal articulation of a plan for penal reform in the years following independence. In order to create a judicial system that reflected republican values, Section 38 explicitly called for the reform of “penal laws heretofore used” and for “punishments [to be] made in some cases less sanguinary, and in general more proportionate to the crimes.” Section 39 further outlined a system for improving carceral culture through the erection of institutions for punishment by hard labor. In 1786, robbery, burglary, and sodomy became non-capital offenses and by 1794, only first-degree murder was punishable by execution.

As Pennsylvania’s elected officials continued to reform the commonwealth’s penal practices through legislation, prison reformers embraced the rhetoric of a distinct republican benevolence in support of their cause. In An Enquiry How Far the Punishment of Death is Necessary in Pennsylvania, State Attorney General William Bradford declared: “[On] no subject has government in different parts of the world, discovered more indolence and inattention than in the construction or reform of penal codes.” Such negligence, Bradford continued in his 1792 report addressed to Governor Thomas Mifflin, came at the moral and social peril of the commonwealth and, indeed, the entire “youthful republic.” Fortunately, he concluded, despite the injurious carceral customs inherited from Britain, “in no country can the experiment [of prison reform] be made with so much safety, and such probability of success” as in the United States and, in particular, Pennsylvania. Unlike the “old and corrupted governments of Europe,”

34 Bradford, An Enquiry, 12.
Bradford and his colleagues were in a position to capitalize on “the progress of freedom, science, and morals” in order to shape a system “animated by the pure spirit of philanthropy.”

This rhetoric of philanthropic distinctiveness and superiority in relation to penal reform was further bolstered in Pennsylvania through the evocation of the legacy of the state’s founder and namesake, William Penn. In *Notices of the Original, and Successive Efforts, to Improve the Discipline of the Prison at Pennsylvania*, Roberts Vaux linked contemporary exertions to improve penal practices to “the great law given by Penn, upon the banks of the Delaware.” Much like the commonwealth’s Constitution of 1776, Penn attempted “in incorporating, with the frame of his government, a criminal code, which he believed to be judicious and practical.” While Penn’s laws were ultimately “too much in advance of the age which they were embodied” and were duly terminated under the yolk of British colonial rule, his “example encouraged other minds … to devote themselves to the production of similar results, in more modern times.”

Although prison reformers in Pennsylvania regularly acknowledged their ideological debts to Old World campaigners such as John Howard, Montesquieu, and Cesare Beccaria, by emphasizing the links between their efforts and Penn, rather than the intervening developments in Europe, they situated their project within a distinctly *American* context and genealogy. While work in England, France, Italy, or elsewhere revealed a desire to move past outmoded penal practices, the rhetoric of Pennsylvanian prison reformers and its connection to the legacy of William Penn demonstrated that the current inept system was “an exotic plant, and not

---


the native growth of Pennsylvania.” Buoyed by the distinctive political, social, and philanthropic milieu of the early republic, the “new and rising people” of Pennsylvania were finally free to realize the long-suppressed intention of the Founder’s “elevated mind [that] rose above the errors and prejudices of his age, like a mountain.” Here, Pennsylvania’s leadership in the prison reform movement was not only uniquely suited by virtue of its current, republican ethos but also influenced by a long-standing character that went back to the commonwealth’s founding.

In 1786, the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed its first major act of penal reform with the introduction of public convict labor. While the excessive use of public execution and other forms of corporal punishment were connected to monarchical ineffectiveness and tyranny, proponents of public labor emphasized its suitability to republican ethos. Of particular import, supporters claimed, was that public labor provided an opportunity for reform. At best, public whipping might deter an individual from committing another crime – or, at least, being caught a second time. Not to mention, William Bradford noted, in “a country – and such there are in Europe – [even] the prospect of death can be no restraint to a wretch whose life is of so little account, and who willingly risks it to better his condition.” Even so, deterrence through fear and true reform were not considered to be equivalent outcomes. The latter result – in which an offender was not only punished but also transformed into a productive member of the community – was crucial to a republic. Public labor, argued an author in the

38 John Griscom, A discourse, on the importance of character and education, in the United States, Delivered on the 20th of the 11th Mo., (November,) 1822 (New York, 1823), 07.
40 Meranze, Laboratories of Virtue, ch. 2.
41 Bradford, An Enquiry, 07.
“Pennsylvania Packet,” would allow criminals, “by dint of hard labour, [to] acquire such a spirit of industry and sobriety” that they would be able to rejoin “the community, which their misdemeanours had forfeited.” In this system, offenders would not only be punished for their transgressions but also rehabilitated. Ultimately, asserted William Bradford – who nevertheless ignored the existence of slavery and broad exclusion of women from public, political, and economic life in the early republic – this commitment to reform reflected the unique situation of “a nation where every man is or may be a proprietor, where labor is bountifully rewarded, and existence is a blessing of which the poorest citizens feels the value.” This early chapter of Pennsylvania’s prison reform was thus deeply connected to the broader anxieties about the future success and character of the commonwealth and country. While forced public convict labor was still certainly a means by which the state asserted control over inmates, prison reformers also characterized the policy as a development that was fundamental to the unique milieu of the republic.

Before long, however, public penal labor was deemed a failure. Despite optimism about its ability to reform, “unfortunately for the friends of humanity,” noted one observer, the practice “was found by no means to embrace the views of its supporters.” Even here, however, the distinctive philanthropic ethos of the young republic proved invaluable. While the regressive policies of European governments prevented meaningful reform, “the rapid growth and magnitude of the evil” unintentionally caused by public labor “served rather as a new incentive to awaken them more” and impelled

---

43 Bradford, An Enquiry, 07.
44 Turnbull, A Visit, 09.
Pennsylvania’s philanthropists to be even more “indefatigable”\(^{45}\) in their pursuit of effect and just prison reform. Indeed, the failures of the 1786 reforms arguably were the major turning point for Pennsylvania’s pioneering experiments in incarceration.

**From Walnut Street to Eastern State**

Pennsylvania’s self-identified position as a pioneer in prison reform was not without merit. In addition to the commonwealth’s stated commitment of reform in its post-independence legal codes and constitution, at the center of this reputation were the widely praised efforts of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons (PSAMPP). Initially established in 1776 as the Philadelphia Society for the Relief of Distressed Prisoners, members “procured a wheelbarrow, properly covered with canvas”\(^{46}\) in order to collect and deliver donated food to prisoners; a task they undertook daily until British occupation of Philadelphia forced them to cease operations.\(^{47}\) Reconvened as the Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons in 1787, the group’s constitution described its aims as the promotion of “such degrees and modes of punishment [that] may be discovered and suggested, as may, instead of continuing habits of vice, become the means of restoring our fellow creatures to virtue and happiness.”\(^{48}\) In addition to these substantial goals, the PSAMPP situated their efforts within the broader context of “the numerous improvements both in government and the arts, which mark the present age.”\(^{49}\) The use of such rhetoric in Society publications is not altogether surprising – founding members included a number of prominent figures from the

---

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 10.  
\(^{48}\) *Act of Incorporation and constitution of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons* (Philadelphia, 1835).  
\(^{49}\) PSAMPP, *Extracts and Remarks on the Subject of Punishment and Reformation of Criminals* (Philadelphia, 1790), 03.
Revolution, including Benjamin Rush, Thomas Wistar, and William White, a bishop in the Episcopal Church who served as Chaplain of the Continental Congress and Chaplain of the Senate.

The connection between the work of the PSAMPP and national character was reinforced by local public opinion. As an article published in the same year as the group’s post-independence renewal observed, “there is nothing which has a tendency more highly to dignify or adorn a nation, or which can better promote the ease, happiness, and comfort of a people, than the number and skillful direction of its public institutions for necessary and charitable uses.” The efforts of the PSAMPP to improve the conditions and organization of prisons to ensure humane treatment and rehabilitation, according to the author, “will come in aid of the merciful designs of their country, in its late … mitigations of sanguinary punishments, and will probably lay the foundation of a charitable system, whose utility and fame will spread and increase with the progress of society.”

Here, the success of prison reform was seen to shape and be shaped by the distinctive character and opportunities of the early republic. Philanthropic innovations that enabled the more humane treatment of inmates and better guaranteed their restoration as productive citizens reflected the achievements and exceptionality of the United States in a time when much was uncertain.

The first major victory for the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons came soon after its founding, with an act of the Pennsylvania Assembly in April 1790 that overturned earlier legislation authorizing the use of public labor as punishment in favor of incarceration and work inside of prisons. In particular, this

legislation created Pennsylvania’s first state prison and authorized the transformation of
the county jail on Walnut Street in Philadelphia into a reformative prison. Soon after this
initial authorization, the Walnut Street Prison mandated separate living quarters for
women, debtors, and male offenders. Within a few years, these classifications were
developed further, separating prisoners into four distinct sub-categories: “Those
sentenced to confinement only; the select class; the probationary class; and repeat
felons.”51 Within the institution, different groups of prisoners were kept completely
separate from each other and would sleep, eat, and socialize only with members of their
own ‘class.’ This meant that the most experienced and hardened criminals, “prisoners
who are well known to be old offenders,” could not act as a negative influence on less
experienced inmates, including the “probationary class,” those “whose characters and
circumstances both before and after conviction induce a belief that they are not habitual
offenders.”52 The separation of inmates by category, Caleb Lownes described in a 1799,
almost immediately corrected the “state of wretchedness” produced by the indiscriminate
mixing of prisoners and reduced the “excesses of debauchery and riot, that had long
prevailed.” The implementation of these policies and the management of the Inspectors –
most of whom were members of the PSAMPP – allowed for genuine reform, wherein
“employment, at length, became desirable” over criminality. It was only, Lownes
concluded, when inmates displayed “order in their employment; [respectable] demeanor
towards the officers; harmony amongst each other; and … decorum and attention, at
times appointed for religious worship,” that they were deemed ready to rejoin society. It

51 In Larry Sullivan, The Prison Reform Movement: Forlorn Hope (1990), 06.
52 Board of Inspectors of the Walnut Street Jail, Minutes, May 19, 1795, in Rex A. Skidmore, “Penological
Pioneering in the Walnut Street Jail, 1789–1799,” Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, 39 (1948),
167–80, 173.
was, also, at this point that the PSAMPP felt they could truly claim “a happy influence toward promoting the great object contemplated by the change of the Penal Code by the Legislature of this commonwealth.” While the innovations of the early American republic are more popularly associated with those crafted one block away at the Pennsylvania State House – now known as Independence Hall – the changes at Walnut Street were also celebrated as progress for the republican experiment. Long scorned by Philadelphians as a “den of debauchery” and a “school of crime,” these reforms were celebrated as measures that would directly improve local conditions and contribute to the success and permanency of the new nation.

Such lofty expectations of meaningful reform and change to prison discipline proved easier said than done. Indeed, by 1815, the commonwealth’s penal system appeared to have reached a breaking point as overcrowding compromised the segregation of the different classes of prisoners, the physical well being of inmates deteriorated as close quarters facilitated the spread of disease, riots intensified in regularity and severity throughout the 1810s and 1820s, and rates of recidivism increased. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism endured. Even as the Board of Inspectors offered a fifteen-dollar reward for the capture of William Pinkerton and Peter Lacey, two “notorious offenders” who had “made their escape over the walls of the prison,” an article in the *Aurora General Advertiser* praised “the regulation of the Philadelphia prisons, with the late alterations of the penal laws, and the substituting of reformation for the bloody code of death for every petty crime which prevails in Great Britain” as a

---

55 Ibid., 91.
deserved “panegyric of every philanthropist.” Even the author of an article with the seemingly straightforward title of “A Brief Sketch of the Origin and Present State of the City of Philadelphia” did not shy away from moralizing. “The public institutions of Philadelphia,” he wrote, “are peculiarly numerous and beneficial.” In addition to the enumeration of the roles of a “recorder, fifteen alderman, common council, &c. &c.,” the author directly connected the “benevolent exertions” of the prison reform movement and resulting “present safety of the inhabitants from … depredations” and subsequent “increase of wealth and splendor” to the “late auspicious revolution” that lifted the “stain of colonial dependence.”

Amidst multiple public and administrative setbacks, prison reformers in Pennsylvania continued to describe their efforts within a narrative that emphasized an outstanding benevolence enabled by an enlightened, republican citizenry. By virtue of the “blessings of Christianity” and a “free and republican government,” with its attendant “vigour in legislation,” remarked Job Tyson in his Essay on the Penal Law, Pennsylvanians enjoyed “an enlarged philanthropy.” Here, the transformation of penal culture in Pennsylvania from the “bloody” code of Britain, to public labor, to incarceration and separation by class in prisons, and – it was hoped – to total solitary confinement in a proposed penitentiary was described within the context of a distinctly American and republican benevolence. With due deference to the intellectual contributions of European campaigners, Tyson nevertheless pointed to 1786, “when the

---

thunder of Liberty having pealed through the United States,” as the turning point for prison reform and its subsequent improvements in the young nation.

The work of the PSAMPP and ongoing reforms to the city’s carceral culture also received national attention and praise as others looked to Philadelphia and Pennsylvania as a guide. The aforementioned Thomas Eddy carried out extensive correspondence with colleagues in Philadelphia as he worked to promote prison reform in his own city. In 1796, Eddy and Philip Schulyer – then a member of the New York State Senate – visited Walnut Street and, within a week of their return, drafted a bill “for making alterations in criminal laws of the State, and the erecting of state prisons.” Robert J. Turnbull, a politician from South Carolina, likewise called the prison a “WONDER of the world.” Turnbull’s account linked these developments to the distinctive context and character of the early republic, observing that the changes implemented were only possible after “the bands of connection between Great Britain and America were dissolved,” allowing the United States and, especially, Pennsylvania, to achieve “full possession of a liberty.”

Beyond the accounts of visitors to Philadelphia, reports from the PSAMPP were reprinted in newspapers and magazines throughout the United States. In addition to providing readers with information about the cutting-edge of prison reform, these reports further reinforced the connection between American identity and benevolence. “We have reason,” wrote the editor of Forthingham’s Long Island Herald in introduction to a 1791

59 Ibid., 48.
61 Robert J. Turnbull, A Visit to the Philadelphia Prison: Being an Accurate and Particular Account of the Wise and Humane Administration Adopted in Every Part of that Building; Containing Also an Account of the Gradual Reformation, and Present Improved State, of the Penal Laws of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1797), 05–06.
report from the Inspectors of the Prison of Philadelphia, “to congratulate our fellow citizens on the happy reformation of the penal system.”

Here, then, developments in Philadelphia were linked to a national character – the praiseworthy work of the PSAMPP was identified as that of “fellow citizens.”

Amidst all this praise, however, even the most ardent supporters of the prison were willing to recognize that the system was far from perfect. While the classification and separation of prisoners was an improvement on the colonial status quo, Walnut Street, according to a report read in the Pennsylvania Senate, was ultimately only a well built county prison that was “never designed” to fully realize the PSAMPP’s vision. These limitations were further exacerbated by population growth – the number of inmates in Philadelphia prisons nearly quintupled in the first decades of the nineteenth century. In response to these issues, the PSAMPP redoubled their advocacy for the erection of a new penitentiary, purpose-built on a plan of total solitary confinement. These efforts ultimately proved successful when, in 1821, the Pennsylvania legislature allocated $100,000 for the construction of a state penitentiary “capable of holding two hundred and fifty prisoners, on the principle of solitary confinement of the convicts.”

As the ‘Pennsylvania system’ of prison discipline – with its trademark single-occupancy cells where inmates would sleep, labor, and even exercise in total isolation – took shape, so too did its first meaningful opposition from elsewhere in the country. From the 1820s onward, the work of the PSAMPP and the plan of the Eastern State

---

62 Frothingham’s Long Island Herald (Sag Harbor, NY), Feb. 16, 1792.
63 Letter Report and Documents, on the Penal Code, from the President and Commissioners appointed to superintend the erection of the Eastern Penitentiary, adapted and modelled to the System of Solitary Confinement. Read in the Senate, January 8, 1828 (Harrisburg, PA, 1828), 03.
64 Act of 20th March 1821 in A Digest of the Laws of Pennsylvania from the Year One Thousand Seven Hundred to the Seventh Day of April, One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty, ed. John W. Purdon (Philadelphia, 1831), 366.
Penitentiary faced an often-contentious challenge from the Prison Discipline Society of Boston and other advocates of the Auburn system of penal organization. Also known as the New York or congregate system, inmates at the titular Auburn Prison in New York State were also subject to solitary confinement. Unlike Eastern State, however, isolation was only imposed at night; prisoners would work in communal spaces during the day, though a strict silence – or “non-intercourse”\(^{65}\) – was imposed at all times. According to its supporters, the Auburn system of partial solitary confinement was not only more economical, it also “sustained” the “physical and moral health … [against] that depression or ferocity, which must necessarily result from uninterrupted solitude.”\(^{66}\)

Pennsylvanians responses to these challenges demonstrate the centrality of benevolent republicanism and the importance of American philanthropic distinctiveness. In addition to correcting what they saw as misinformation about the commonwealth’s penal practices, reformers also sought to portray Auburn as unsuitable to the distinctive character of the early republic. In *A Defence of the System of Solitary Confinement of Prisoners Adopted by the State of Pennsylvania*, George W. Smith summarized the history of prison discipline, from the ancient Egyptians to the “great experiment of Penitentiary Reform” in which the “humane citizens of Philadelphia” enjoyed the “particular merit of first leading the way.”\(^{67}\) While innovations in Pennsylvania improved the conditions and effectiveness of prisons with “policy and humanity,”\(^{68}\) Auburn, according to Smith, had “scourged itself into notoriety [with] not one particle of


\(^{66}\) Ibid.

\(^{67}\) George W. Smith, *A Defence of the System of Solitary Confinement of Prisoners Adopted by the State of Pennsylvania, with Remarks on the Origin, Progress, and Extension of this species of Prison Discipline* (1829; Philadelphia, 1833), 16, 06.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 05.
originality in any essential feature.” Indeed, he maintained, far from an improvement on the Pennsylvania system, Auburn was “a mere servile copy of the prison at Ghent”\textsuperscript{69} – and a poor one at that. Ultimately, another essayist echoed, only the Pennsylvania system was “sufficient with our race and at the stage of civilization we are now in.”\textsuperscript{70} Even if prisons on the Auburn system were cheaper to construct and superintend, these authors argued, penal practices should not be shaped by “hasty numbers and rash conclusions.”\textsuperscript{71} The Pennsylvania system, by contrast, had not only proved itself to be effect but also “vivified … the spirit of benevolence and patriotism”\textsuperscript{72} in the realization of the promise of republican philanthropy. Thus as the prison evolved in early republican Pennsylvania, claims about its connection to American character remained a constant. Competing methods of prison discipline were rebuked for being derivative of the Old World – “a mere servile copy of Ghent”\textsuperscript{73} – and the Pennsylvania system defended by virtue of being not just more effect but more patriotic. From the earliest reforms at Walnut Street to the innovative organization of the Eastern State Penitentiary, penal practices in the commonwealth were held up as evidence of the character and achievements of the new nation.

**International Reputation and Cosmopolitan Connections**

Despite appeals to American character and republican benevolence, arguments made in favor of the Pennsylvania system went largely unheeded. Of the thirty-one prisons established in the antebellum period, only four used total solitary confinement at

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 09.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Smith, *Defence of the System of Solitary Confinement*, 09.
any point: the infamous Eastern State Penitentiary, its sister-institution the Western State Penitentiary in Pittsburgh, the New Jersey State Prison (1838–1844), and the penitentiary in Rhode Island (1833–1858).\textsuperscript{74} How, then, could prison reformers in Pennsylvania continue to connect their efforts to a broader national identity? Pride and genuine (though perhaps misplaced) confidence in an approach to which so much time and effort had been dedicated are surely part of the explanation. Another key consideration is the popularity of total solitary confinement abroad.\textsuperscript{75} Although it had several, vocal European critics – including Liverpudlian philanthropist William Roscoe, Revolutionary war hero the Marquis de Lafayette, and Charles Dickens, who after visiting Eastern State described the prison as “cruel and wrong”\textsuperscript{76} – as total solitary confinement failed to gain traction at home, it flourished abroad. By 1851, the Pennsylvania system had been adopted in prisons in England, Belgium, Sweden, Hungary, France, Prussia, Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{77}

This was part of a longer history of European prison reformers looking to Pennsylvania for direction, as well as engaging with and disseminating the concept of benevolent republicanism in the process. In addition to the publication and distribution of works steeped in American philanthropic distinctiveness such as William Bradford’s aforementioned \textit{An Enquiry how far the Punishment of Death is Necessary in Pennsylvania}, foreign visitors to Walnut Street and, later, Eastern State connected reform to national character in their reports. Writing under the pseudonym “an European,” the

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 61–62.
\textsuperscript{76} Charles Dickens, \textit{American Notes} (1842).
\textsuperscript{77} Harry Elmer Barnes, \textit{The evolution of penology in Pennsylvania; a study in American social history} (Indianapolis, 1927), 176.
French Duc de La Rochefoucault Liancourt described his time in Philadelphia and his interactions with the members of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons glowingly. “In the good intentions of this beneficent society, and in the patriotism and sagacity of the inspectors,” wrote the French Duc de La Rochefoucault Liancourt in *On the Prisons of Philadelphia*, “the adoption of a mild conduct … [has] more effect upon the prisoners, and prove a better means of correction, than … harshness and severity.”\(^78\) Originally published in Paris in 1795 but soon translated to English (Philadelphia, 1796; London, 1796), Dutch (Amsterdam, 1796), Russian (Moscow, 1799), Spanish (Madrid, 1801), and Italian (Lucca, 1808), prison reform in Pennsylvania was characterized in at least six languages as a reflection of the distinct national character and patriotism of early republicans. Even as the United States struggled to find its footing on the world stage politically and economically, Liancourt’s account reinforced the idea of the distinctiveness of American benevolence. Although the “new continent” was “accustomed to receive from Europe, that illumination, which her youth and inexperience require,” in relation to prison reform, according to the Duke, it was Europe that was “indebted” to America “for the first example”\(^79\) and leadership.

Following his extended tour of the United States and its prisons, Briton William Crawford’s report, “Presented by His Majesty’s Command,” displayed “no hesitation in declaring … that [the Pennsylvania system] is a safe and efficacious mode of prison management.”\(^80\) These were not empty words – upon his return to Britain, the secretary of the London Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline continued to assert that


\(^{79}\) Ibid., 33.

“the Silent System” (or, Auburn system, as it was generally called in the United States) used in many prisons throughout Europe was “not efficacious” and the only total separation as carried out in Eastern State managed to serve “the purposes which it contemplates.” Likewise, in the Netherlands, Swiss-born John Etienne Mollet, a schoolteacher and founding member of the Nederlandsch Genootscap tot zedelijke verbetering der gevangeners (Netherlands Society for the Moral Improvement of Prisoners) advocated for the system of total solitary confinement, with the observation that “such prisons leave nothing to be desired for … safety, order, and cleanliness.” With this recommendation, he also singled out “Pennsylvania, and in particular Philadelphia” as the place where the system “is carried out to the highest degree.”

Thus even as the rest of the nation eschewed the practice of total solitary confinement, the broader relationship between republican identity and benevolence – reinforced by the praise of European reformers – remained. As Governor George Wolf observed in a message to the state legislature, “Foreigners, whose especial business it has been to visit the penitentiaries in this country … have, with one voice awarded the meed of merit to that established in the Eastern penitentiary of Pennsylvania.” The “envied fame” and “peculiar merit” awarded to the project of prison reform in the commonwealth thus continued to sustain a sense of early republican identity constructed within the rhetoric of philanthropic distinctiveness. As Europeans looked to Pennsylvania

---

84 Wolf, Defence of the System of Solitary Confinement, 16.
and the United States’ penal practices to guide their own reform efforts, accounts of pioneering methods of incarceration were seen to provide insight into American character, the success of the young nation’s experiment in republican self-governance, and its rightful place as an equal – if not leading – member of the international community.

The articulation and legitimization of American character on the international stage in turn facilitated individual transnational relationships and collaboration. On the surface, such entanglements seem to undermine claims of a unique republican philanthropic ethos, but it is important to understand that the project of the construction of American identity was one that involved both separation from and inclusion in the affairs of the Old World. No longer engaging in international relations as part of the British Empire did not mean that early republicans wished to be excluded from playing a robust role in international affairs. Philanthropy, Amanda Moniz aptly observed in her study of early national humanitarianism, fostered “transatlantic reconciliation” in the aftermath of revolution and provided “a new basis of transatlantic cooperation … for an enduring community that was no longer a polity.”

The function of benevolence in the articulation of a distinct national identity and as a tool of foreign relations can be seen in the public rhetoric and private correspondence of William Bradford. In *An Enquiry How Far the Punishment of Death is Necessary in Pennsylvania*, Bradford credited both Montesquieu and Cesare Beccaria for “[leading] the way in the discussion” of prison reform and cited the “beneficial effects” of

---

86 Bradford, *An Enquiry*, 05.
87 Ibid., 26.
Beccaria’s work throughout the pamphlet. Nevertheless, as discussed above, Bradford’s account ultimately prioritized a narrative that connected Pennsylvania’s penal practices to an innate benevolence inculcated in the “Great Law” of William Penn, rather than as part of a broader, transnational, and contemporary prison reform movement inspired by Beccaria, Montesquieu, John Howard, and others.\(^88\) Bradford’s own correspondence, however, suggests a much closer connection and entanglement. In a 1786 letter to Luigi Castiglioni, Bradford informed his Italian correspondent about the recent amendments to penal laws in Pennsylvania and observed that “One must attribute to this excellent book [Beccaria’s *On Crimes and Punishment*] the honor of this revolution in our penal code.”\(^89\)

While Bradford eschewed the “old and corrupted governments of Europe” in favor of the “pure spirit of [American] philanthropy”\(^90\) in *An Enquiry*, to Castiglioni he described “the beneficent spirit sown by Beccaria”\(^91\) in the commonwealth. Bradford thus utilized the project of prison reform in different ways depending on his audience and desired outcome. Just as the prison reform movement functioned as a site for the articulation of benevolent republicanism within the broader project of the construction of American

---

\(^88\) It is worth noting that while Penn’s penal code represented a significant shift from the policies of Britain, it was not developed in a vacuum. Almost four years before King Charles II granted him a royal deed for Pennsylvania, Penn accompanied George Fox on a trip through Holland and Germany. While there, he visited Dutch *tuchthuisen* (literally “discipline homes”) where, instead of public punishments, criminals were confined to labor for the length of their sentence. Like John Howard a century later, Penn was evidently inspired by the substitution of corporal punishment for reformative labor that prevailed in Holland. If nothing else, his trip across the North Sea provided Penn with a real-world example for what was then still his hypothetical penal system. Amidst the uncertainties of the early republic, however, this more complex history was not as useful, and the importance of Penn’s legacy lay primarily in its ability to separate and elevate Pennsylvania’s past and future penal practices from the “sanguinary” policies imposed by Britain during colonial rule. See Orlando F. Lewis, *The Development of American Prisons and Prison Customs 1776–1845* (Albany, NY, 1922), 10. A few early republican accounts also noted the influence of the Dutch on Penn, including Smith, *Defence of the System of Solitary Confinement*, 06.


\(^90\) Bradford, *An Enquiry*, 15.

\(^91\) Bradford to Castiglioni, 132.
national identity, it also existed within the burgeoning cosmopolitan networks of philanthropists in the early republic.

Pennsylvania’s carceral practices, as facilitated by reformers with local and national interests as well as transatlantic intellectual, philanthropic, and religious connections, must therefore be positioned within the entanglements and exchanges of the Atlantic World. One of the hallmarks of Pennsylvania’s penal practices was the categorization and separation of prisoners and, eventually, the use of total solitary confinement. While this became known as the “Pennsylvania system,” the idea was first widely introduced by the Englishman John Howard.92 Even at the level of the British government – supposedly the ultimate monarchical antithesis to the early American republic – the Penitentiary Act of 1779 drafted by Howard was a directive for the construction of two penitentiaries where prisoners would continue to labor together during the day but would be separated into individual cells at night. Extenuating political circumstances and clashing personalities thwarted the realization of Howard’s plan, but its ideas were later adopted and at least partially implemented at the Walnut Street Jail in the 1790s. This was facilitated by much more than the passive circulation of pamphlets in a transatlantic world of print – Pennsylvania’s prison reformers were in constant contact with colleagues across national borders. Indeed, one of the first acts of the PSAMPP was to write a letter to John Howard. Dated January 14, 1788, the letter expressed that the members of the new society “heartily concur with the Friends of Humanity in Europe”

92 In Section III – “Proposed Improvements in the Structure and Management of Prisons – of The State of Prisons in England and Wales, Howard suggested that “Solitude and silence are favourable to reflection; and may possibly lead them to repentance.” While he acknowledged the potential pitfalls of total separation, he did not seem explicitly opposed to the practice, “I wish to have so many small rooms or cabins in this ward, that each criminal may sleep alone. If it be difficult to prevent their being together in the day-time, they should by all means by separated at night.” John Howard, The State of Prisons in England and Wales, With Some Preliminary Observations, and an Account of Some Foreign Prisons (Warrington, England, 1777), 43.
and thanked Howard for bringing attention to “the Miserable tenants of Prison” and “for having pointed out the means of not only alleviating their Miseries but of preventing these Crimes of Misfortune which are the Causes of them.”93 The PSAMPP’s letter to the English prison reformer was not based on a vague knowledge of the reformer’s work; English physician and practicing Quaker John Fothergill was a close friend and ally of John Howard as well as a regular correspondent of Benjamin Rush in Philadelphia.94 Through Fothergill and other British associates, Rush established a direct correspondence with Howard when, in October 1789, Howard sent the Philadelphian a copy of the second edition of his *Account of Lazarettos and Hospitals* and the Duke of Tuscany’s new penal code, which abolished capital punishment. Rush, in turn, sent Howard a copy of his recent essay on the dangers of tobacco use and provided insight into the “ignorance and inhumanity” of American prisons. “Upon the subject of criminal jurisprudence and the treatment of prisoners,” Rush concluded in his letter, “the waters are troubled in every part of America. Come then, dear sir, and direct them into their proper channel.”95 Although Howard never traveled to the United States or, it seems, responded directly to the PSAMPP’s letter, he did apparently approve of and take inspiration from the Philadelphia society. According to long-time PSAMPP secretary Roberts Vaux, Howard strongly supported the establishment of a similar organization in London and made it known that “Should the plan take place during my life, of establishing a *permanent charity* under some such title as that at Philadelphia, viz: *A Society for alleviating the

---

93 Philadelphia Prison Society Papers, HSP.
miseries of Public Prisons,” Howard would “most readily stand at the bottom of a page for five hundred pounds” in support of the cause.96

These networks of collaboration and exchange, as Bradford’s exchanges with Italian prison reformers demonstrated, were not limited to an Anglo-Atlantic sphere. Over the course of his considerable philanthropic career – which included twenty-one years as PSAMPP secretary – Roberts Vaux maintained longstanding and substantial correspondence with colleagues abroad on a variety of subjects, including prison reform. Typically, these letters opened with an acknowledgment of Vaux’s international philanthropic reputation. Such was the case in a letter from Jean Etienne Mollet, the aforementioned officer of the Netherlands Society for the Moral Improvement of Prisoners. Writing from Amsterdam, Mollet explained the state of prison reform in the Netherlands and requested information about Vaux’s efforts in Philadelphia and specified that he would “gratefully receive any publications which might be useful and interesting on this Subject of any other of a philanthropic nature.”97 Nor was this a one-way flow of information. In another letter from Mollet, the Dutch prison reformer wrote that he included “3 Reports of our Netherlands Society” as well as a book entitled Religious or Moral Manual for Prisoners. The note implied that Vaux had expressed interest in such information, as Mollet preemptively apologized that he was unable to “supply thee with Books of this description in English or French but I hope some persons may be found at Philadelphia who understand Low Dutch” in order to provide Vaux with a suitable translation “to give [him] an idea of their contents”98 as requested.

96 Quoted in Teeters, They Were in Prison, 40–41.
97 Mollet to Vaux, May 25, 1827, VFP.
98 Mollet to Vaux, Apr. 4, 1828, VFP.
Through such correspondence, prison reformers in different countries were not only aware of one another, but also worked together to achieve common goals. In 1824, Elizabeth Fry, founder of the British Ladies’ Society for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners, wrote to Vaux that she “frequently wished to hear of such associations being formed in America.” In addition to the suggestion that Vaux and other interested parties in the United States “attentively read” the Society’s annual reports, Fry detailed her organization’s methods, from the daily visits of members to the specific books they distributed to female prisoners. “It would also be very agreeable & valuable to us,” Fry continued, “to hold with such associations as may be formed in America a regular … correspondence as by that means we might mutually aid each other from our different experiences and observations.” Indeed, encouraged by the example of Fry, women in Philadelphia had already begun visiting prisons in 1823. Importantly, however, they did so not as uncertain and feeble Americans who relied upon the expertise and wisdom of Europeans, but as colleagues capable of collaboration and exchange.

The function of benevolence in the construction of American national identity was not limited to the domestic context; it also provided a means by which elite Americans could continue to participate in cosmopolitan networks and champion their new, exceptional identity on an international stage. The extent to which early republican philanthropists succeeded in disseminating a benevolent reputation abroad is seen in a review of the first London edition of William Bradford’s *An Enquiry how far the Punishment of Death is Necessary in Pennsylvania*. This text, which strongly condemned

---

99 Elizabeth Fry to Vaux, June 14, 1824, Box 2, VFP.
100 Teeters, *They Were in Prison*, 249.
the British penal system and embraced a rhetoric of American philanthropic
exceptionalism, nevertheless received a positive assessment from a critic in The
Analytical review, who described the book as “of great use” and one that should “merit
the attention of our legislature.” Hopefully, the author mused, Bradford’s work would
bring about “the happy time … in which reform shall no longer be a word of terror in the
ears of Englishmen.”\footnote{101} Only thirteen years after the end of the American Revolution, the
United States had already built a reputation as a leader in prison reform and an example
for its former colonial sovereign.

A full accounting of the prison reform movement in Pennsylvania therefore
extends beyond a local, statewide, or even national narrative. It reveals not only the
connection between benevolence and the construction of American identity in this period,
but also the broader transnational pieces of this project. The place of the United States as
a nation and individual Americans within the international community was far from
certain in the years and decades following independence. As relationships built upon the
once-solid ground of a common British identity sought new meaning and amidst theories
about the inevitable degeneration of life in North America\footnote{102}, benevolence allowed early
republicans to shape and assert their identity as Americans not only at home, but –
necessarily – also on the international stage.

\footnote{101} The Analytical review; or, History of Literature (Jan. 1796), 102–04, 104.
\footnote{102} See Lee Alan Dugatkin, Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose: Natural History in Early America
(Chicago, 2009).
Chapter Three: Educating Citizens: The Rhetoric and Reality of American Philanthropic Distinctiveness

“The good Education of Youth has been esteemed by wise Men ... as the surest Foundation of the Happiness both of private Families and of Commonweals.”
(Benjamin Franklin)

“There has, it is true,” wrote the editor of the American Journal of Education in February 1827, “always been a formal respect accorded to general education, as the distinctive feature in our national superiority.”¹ Like prison discipline, education reform was deeply connected to the articulation and preservation of a distinct national identity in the early American republic. But if the prison represented the worst inclinations of society, the schoolhouse arguably signified some of the best. The early republican school was a place of immense potential, where the next generation of Americans could be brought up in the habits of engaged and productive citizens. As “the Palladium of our national liberties,” where “the sacred flame of freedom ... is kept alive,”² it was particularly important that republican schools also be as universal as possible. In the colonial period, education was primarily a domestic matter, with children acquiring skills by observing and laboring alongside their parents. Formal schooling – that is, instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic – was limited to the children of those who saw value in such training and could afford tuition fees.³ After independence, however, priorities began to shift. While piety and even basic work habits could be acquired at home, republican citizens – elected leaders and electors alike – required a different kind of

² “An Address, pronounced on the Anniversary of the Concord Lyceum; by Cornelius C. Felton,” AJE, NS 1 (Mar. 1830), 132–34, 132.

Long understood as a means by which to promote “religion, morals, [and] manners,” now that “the form of government we have assumed, has created a new class of duties to every American,” the “equal diffusion” of knowledge took on new urgency. Rush was by no means alone in his assessment – Georgia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Vermont all included provisions for the instruction of youth at public expense in their post-Revolution constitutions. In this context, the school – along with the prison, the workhouse, and other institutions – emerged as a major site of concern and activity for early republican philanthropists.

Even as public opinion coalesced around the importance of education, difficult questions remained. Traditional methods were inadequate to the task of converting “men into republican machines,” but what kind of education could surmount the many differences that threatened to undermine national cohesion to produce steadfast, civic-minded Americans? Simply building more grammar schools or expanding access to existing academies did not seem practical or desirable. While there was no doubt that the intellectual and social refinement attained through the advanced study of history, languages, mathematics, science, and philosophy was necessary for those in elite

---

5 Ibid., 09. As Rush rightfully observed, the education of youth had long been a topic of consideration, see Benjamin Franklin, *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania* (Philadelphia, 1749). On the relationship between education and good, pro-social habits, especially among the poor in England in this period, see Thomas Belsham, *The Importance of Giving a Proper Education to the Children of the Poor* (London, 1791).
6 Ibid., 13, 04.
7 Ibid., 09.
professions and positions of leadership, it seemed unlikely that the future of the republic relied on a universal knowledge of Latin and Greek. For the average free, white, male American, a “general” elementary education would be enough to “enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom.” Still, the costs of such an endeavor were daunting. Expanding access to education necessarily, it seemed, meant finding a way to pay for more schools, more teachers, and more supplies without a corresponding increase in tuition fees. Public funds and private philanthropy provided some relief, but a funding gap remained. It was in this context that monitorial schools – also known as the Lancasterian method – emerged as a pedagogically effective and economically efficient alternative.

**Monitorial Schools**

The chief selling point of the Lancasterian method was the ability to educate hundreds of children with just one teacher by using more advanced students to monitor the behavior and lessons of younger pupils. The son of a humble sieve-maker, Joseph Lancaster did not initially set out with the goal of becoming an internationally regarded education reformer. Though intent on providing educational opportunities for poor children, there was nothing particularly innovative about Lancaster’s first school, which he opened in his London neighborhood of Southwark in 1798. Teaching many “without remuneration” and operating out of a spare room in his father’s home, the school ran on a modest budget primarily out of necessity. As the school grew, however, Lancaster realized that his operation was not scalable; providing a low-cost (and often completely

---


free) education attracted students, but did not provide the means to hire a second teacher. It was at this crossroads that Lancaster began “to try several experiments in education, by which it could be ascertained, what number of children could be educated under one person, by the most expeditious means, and at the smallest expense.”¹⁰ These efforts led Lancaster to empower his more advanced students as “juvenile teachers,” eventually creating a replicable plan that rendered their duties – and his pedagogy as a whole – “systematic and regular.”¹¹ Using student-monitors allowed Lancaster to increase the number of pupils in his school without significantly increasing operating costs, eventually, by Lancaster’s own account, educating almost one thousand children under his sole direction at his increasingly well-known school on Borough Road in London.

Joseph Lancaster was not the first overburdened educator to delegate supervisory and tutoring duties to trustworthy older students. Indeed, in addition to earlier examples, Lancaster’s immediate contemporary, Dr. Andrew Bell of Scotland, developed an almost identical system while teaching at an orphanage in Madras, India. After returning to Britain, Bell continued to promote his own “invention” and opened several monitorial schools in England in parallel to Lancaster’s own efforts.¹² Ultimately, what

¹⁰ Lancaster, Outlines of a Plan for Educating Ten Thousand Poor Children, By Establishing Schools in Country Towns and Villages; and for Uniting Works of Industry with Useful Knowledge (London, 1806), 07.
¹¹ Lancaster, Short Account of the Rise and Progress, 57.
¹² The relationship between Bell and Lancaster was contentious. Although Bell published An Experiment in Education, Made at the Male Asylum of Madras (London, 1797) three years before Lancaster first attempted to use monitors in his school and six years before the publication of Lancaster’s Improvements in Education (London, 1803), it seems likely enough that both men developed their similar systems separately. (Not to mention, as Lancaster’s biographer David Salmon observed, the question of “invention” is somewhat moot as while “it is beyond doubt that [the idea of monitors] occurred to Bell first … it is also beyond doubt that the idea had occurred to others before Bell was born, [and therefore] his priority is not worth much.”) The two engaged in a cordial correspondence in 1804–05, during which Lancaster visited Bell at his home in Dorset in December 1804 and Bell visited Lancaster’s school on Borough Road in April 1805. Any prospect of a symbiotic relationship, however, was soon dashed by the intercession of sectarian functionaries. Spurred particularly by prominent philanthropist Sarah Trimmer’s criticism of Lancaster – a Quaker – as a “formidable” threat to the established church, the Bell-Lancaster System of mutual
differentiated Joseph Lancaster and his system of education from the others was, according to general scholarly consensus, “not … his originality but … his genius as a systematizer and a publicist.” Over the course of his career, Lancaster published dozens of books, pamphlets, and articles that described his system in minute detail, from the ideal shape of the room (a parallelogram) to how a monitor should assess student work (with a pointing stick, in order to avoid touching and accidentally erasing what is written on a slate.) The ideal Lancasterian school took place in a large room with desks placed in even rows with ample room between the desks, so that “the scholars in one desk may go out without disturbing those in another.” All desks should be facing the head of the room, where the schoolmaster sits on an “elevated platform” with “a good view of each boy at once.” Overcrowded schoolrooms and desks placed against walls, Lancaster warned, created disorder and “afford pretence for idleness and play.” Students were then divided into smaller classes of around ten to twenty pupils based on age and ability, with a monitor in charge of each group. To avoid the cost of providing lesson books to every student or at even every class, Lancaster devised a system of cards. Large pieces of pasteboard that were hung on nails spaced along the school wall, each card contained one instruction.

---

13 Kaestle, *Joseph Lancaster and the monitorial school movement*, 04. David Salmon summed up Lancaster’s flair for self-promotion well: “Lancaster was a man who, if he had only found out for himself the advantage of tying a knot on the end of a thread, would have proclaimed aloud that he had made an original discovery destined to regenerate society, and would have elaborated a complete scheme of knots for different threads of different kinds of sewing.” Salmon, *Joseph Lancaster*, 07.


15 Ibid., 01–02.
lesson. Standing in a semi-circle around a card, students would repeat the printed exercises until all members of the class had perfected the material before moving on to a new card, thus enabling “two hundred boys may all repeat their lessons from one card, in the space of three hours.” Through an almost obsessive attention to order, economy of operation, and learning through the emulation of monitors and classmates, Lancaster’s system provided not only a solution but also a detailed blueprint for mass education.

Through the passionate but often manic work of Joseph Lancaster and the more even-handed publicity efforts of the British and Foreign School Society (BFSS), the Lancasterian method quickly spread throughout England, Europe, and around the world. By 1820, there were more than 150 such schools in the United States, spread out throughout the country “from Nantucket to Cincinnati, and from Detroit to New Orleans.” What should be made of the success of this London-born pedagogy in the early republic? Is it an example of the continued cultural and intellectual dominance of England, this time through representatives of the BFSS? Or were early republicans able to separate the mechanics of the system in a way that respected national distinctiveness? How, in turn, does an understanding of the function of benevolence in the construction of American identity enrich the narrative of this global phenomenon?

17 I would not be the first to suggest that Joseph Lancaster likely suffered from more than an overinflated ego. His personal and professional life was marked by an endless cycle of manic enthusiasm for a new project followed by paranoid accusations of mistreatment and underpayment, and depression over perceived betrayals. Lancaster burned bridge after bridge time after time; his efforts to start over in Philadelphia, Washington, DC, Caracas, and Montreal all ultimately unsuccessful. I have spent a lot of time reading Lancaster’s correspondence and witnessing the ebb and flow of his relationships first-hand. I am familiar with the ways in which his letters can go from a neat script that followed the conventions of nineteenth-century correspondence to a rambling and paranoid scrawl in a matter of paragraphs. While Lancaster’s eccentricities and habit of creating chaos make him an engaging object of study above and beyond the popularity of his pedagogical system and help highlight the ways in which monitory schools were valued as a tool separately from a cult of personality, let this also be a reminder that Lancaster’s life was also one characterized by very real mental anguish.
As seen in the case of prison discipline, education reform was both connected to the articulation of a distinct national identity and inextricably linked to a broader transnational context of collaboration and exchange. In this chapter, I will continue to flesh out the ways in which early republican benevolence – in this case, those efforts related to education reform – did not exist within a local or national vacuum. The study of the spread of Lancasterian schools and the philanthropic career of the eponymous Joseph Lancaster expands upon the multiple functions of benevolence described in Chapter Two. Attention to these various operations reveals the ways in which the rhetoric of American philanthropic distinctiveness existed alongside a much wider transnational reality of collaboration and exchange. The ways in which Lancaster adapted his methods to the context of the early republic, on the other hand, demonstrate the importance of the concept of benevolent republicanism in this period.

**American Schools for American Students**

For Roberts Vaux, education was inseparable from the character and potential of the new nation. As he wrote in a letter to Pennsylvania Governor George Wolf, the unique political and social circumstances of the United States called for “a system of education, liberal, and as extensive as circumstances can possibly authorize,” wherein children are “happily ignorant of distinctive grades in society; aware that no one is debarred by our political constitution.” Ultimately, Vaux believed, “in a government … happily constituted like our own,” universal education “should be a fundamental principle.”

Without discounting the possibility that Vaux was genuinely sympathetic to the plight of poor children in Pennsylvania, his dedication to education reform was also

---

rooted in a belief that the very success of the republic – and his own future within it –
was closely linked to these efforts. In a letter to Vaux later published as a pamphlet,
Benjamin Shaw echoed a common refrain in his assertion that “Ignorance is the
foundation on which despotism is built. The principles of liberty cannot be put into
practical effect, nor maintained, in a country where the people are uneducated.”20 Here,
then, education reform in the early republic held meaning far beyond the ostensible
benefits gained by individuals through literacy and numeracy. A program of general
republican education – American schools for American students – functioned as a critical
building block in the construction and future success of the nation itself.

As was the case for penal practices, accounts of education reform in the late-
eighteenth and early-nineteenth century United States not only emphasized a republican
distinctiveness but also did so with direct comparisons to practices in the ‘Old World,’
particularly in Britain. In line with the rhetoric described in previous chapters, such
accounts demonstrated both the uniqueness and superiority of early republican schooling
and – by extension – the nation itself. This was achieved in several steps. First, as
reformers connected education and the inculcation of “the principles of virtue and
liberty” to an “inviolable attachment to their own country,”21 they stressed that the
present, inadequate practices that the sought to improve were “foreign, and not
American.”22 Efforts to improve educational access and standards were more than just the
newest iteration of a longstanding march of steady improvement. Rather, the scholastic
innovations of early republicans were achieved in spite of rather than through the

enhancement of practices inherited from the former colonial metropole. Indeed, observed Noah Webster, despite the young nation’s lack of experience and wealth compared to Europe, “America affords the fairest opportunities for making the experiment [of universal education] and opens the most encouraging prospect of success.” Americans were not merely part of a larger, transnational education reform movement, they “stood first” and forged their own path in the “establishment of this new order of things” thanks to the “highest wisdom and virtue” afforded by their unmatched national character.

An important part of the distinctive – and superior – plan of American education reform was practicality. Education in Britain and Europe, according to an article in the *American Journal of Education*, was full of “wasted” time with its emphasis on dead languages, “metaphysics, logic, and mystery” instead of “things that certainly do exist.” This, the author continued, had repercussions beyond political economy – if education were more useful, “we should now have citizens better instructed in their duties, better morals, and better government.” Thanks to the superiority of American benevolence, however, the curriculum of a proposed school in Boston was to include “nothing … that is showy, expensive, and merely ornamental, but rather [only] that which is useful and profitable, becoming the dignity and prosperous condition of an American citizen.”

While the author recognized that practical education had been introduced “both in Europe and in this country … with great success,” they did not fully link their efforts to a broader, shared project of improvement. Instead, this progress was rooted in the “peculiar character” of the United States, where “the sober, patient, discreet, sagacious character of our people” was shaped by “our early history, our rigid climate, stubborn hills, and iron

---

23 Webster, *On the Education of Youth*, 68.
24 “Reviews,” *AJE*, 01 (Jan. 1826), 42–50, 47.
bound coasts” as well as an innate ingenuity” to overcome whatever “nature … denied.”25 Ultimately, this created a rather dramatic, self-perpetuating account of philanthropic distinctiveness. The exceptional character of Americans, shaped not only by their political system but also by the very landscape of their country, generated an economic and political system of education that, in turn, produced well-informed, engaged, honorable, and benevolent citizens.

With this link between education and good citizenship, a second ostensibly distinctive aspect of American education reform was its universality.26 Of course, the desire to provide educational access to poor children was not unique to early republican philanthropists – the aspiration that “education for the poor will … be a universal thing”27 motivated Joseph Lancaster long before he ever planned to leave England. Lancaster, furthermore, received extensive support for his early efforts from private donors and even institutional backing after the founding of the British and Foreign Schools Society in 1808. Despite these developments, early republican education reformers questioned the substance of foreign efforts. American accounts deemed education reform in the Old World as limited by entrenched political, economic, and class hierarchies and “the European policy of leaving the mass of the people at a respectful distance from the few.”28 Education of the lower classes in Europe was useful only when “applied to the melioration of the [immediate] condition of the poor”29 and insofar as this was seen to reduce crime, limit social unrest, and produce better workers. In the United States, where

25 “Proposed Institution in Massachusetts,” 159.
26 Universal, of course, was by no means total and access very much depended on race, gender, religion, and economic status.
27 Joseph Lancaster to Richard Lancaster, May 16, 1809, Simon Gratz Autograph Collection, Gratz Family Papers, Box 163, Folder 7, HSP.
28 “Prefatory Address,” AJE, 02 (Jan. 1827), 01–13, 04.
29 “Address,” AJE, 01 (Jan. 1826), 05–08, 06.
the “spirit of improvement” was a virtue not a source of “jealousy,” European practices became “inadequate to the object of training the mass of our youth for the discharge of their duties as men and as citizens.” Thus, while other philanthropists undertook education reform only to maintain the status quo, American reformers saw the extensive education of all classes of white youth as a duty that was necessary to the continued success and development of the republic.

Evidence for the distinctive – and superior – nature of education reform in the United States was also seen in legislative support for these efforts. As John Griscom observed in an address marking the opening of a new high school in New York City, there were “few nations in Europe in which the best schemes for the universal extension of education, have not had to struggle with the opinion that to instruct the working class would be to render them dissatisfied with the relative conditions they hold in society, and thus disturb the social order.” This, Griscom continued, stood in contrast to “a government as ours, where one of the dearest objects of each and every one of the state legislatures is, to contrive the means of extending the blessings of education to every male and female child within the sphere of its influence.” In local newspapers and widely circulated magazine such as the *American Journal of Education*, the regular inclusion of legislative reports and statutes decreeing the establishment of new schools or funds for the support of existing institutions therefore stood in contrast to the apparent reticence of European philanthropists and governments to fully embrace widespread

---

30 Ibid.
31 “Prefatory Address,” 05.
33 Ibid., 79.
education.”34 Here, then, American philanthropic and, by extension, overall distinctiveness was evident not only by its more extensive and practical plan for education, but also by the liberal patronage of state and national legislatures.

Finally, republican lesson plans and liberal funding required American educators. In 1791, Robert Coram bemoaned the “shamefully deficient” qualifications of many teachers, who were “generally foreigners” and “not seldom addicted to gross vice.”35 Noah Webster echoed this sentiment, adding that the colonial era practice of sending children abroad for their education or bringing teachers over from Europe “was right before the Revolution, at least so far as national attachments were concerned, but the propriety of it ceased with our political relation to Great Britain.”36 The rejection of European teachers was perhaps the most concrete manifestation of American philanthropic distinctiveness in relation to education reform. National character was apparently so different and the “infection of European vices”37 so great, that even an enlightened, highly qualified foreign teacher posed a threat to the ideological, political, and social functions of early republican schools.

How, then, did the Lancasterian system, a pedagogy developed by an Englishman and spread by British philanthropists, fit into the development of American schools for American students? Were early republican education reformers perhaps more beholden to

35 Robert Coram, Political Inquiries: to Which is Added for the General Establishment of Schools throughout the United States (Wilmington, DE, 1791), in Essays on Education, 136.
37 Rush, Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools, 36.
their former metropole than they liked to admit? Or – given that there are only so many ways to teach children to read and write – were they able to borrow the relevant ideas from abroad before retreating back into their national context? Indeed, there were some notable adaptations made to the Lancasterian system in the United States. Many monitorial schools also integrated the object lessons and sensory activities of Swiss education reformer Johann Pestalozzi in order to ensure that “scholars are pushed on no faster than they comprehend their subject.”38 Though such practices were also of European origin, the combination of the Lancaster and Pestalozzi plans allowed American philanthropists to boast that they did “not feel bound to adhere uniformly to the peculiarities of any system, farther than experience proves them to be serviceable to good instruction.”39 This apparent prioritization of individual comprehension aligned with the narrative that while Europeans were primarily interested in placating the poor through education, Americans displayed “no jealousy” toward the lower classes’ “spirit of improvement”40 and indeed considered a meaningful education necessary for future citizens who, “in the common course of things [were] to become the future actors in the affairs of [the] nation.”41

The compatibility between the monitorial system and republican values was also evident in the application of the pedagogy beyond elementary education. The first Lancasterian High School was opened in New York in 1824, private as well as free schools adopted the method, and there was even talk of using the system for the

40 “Address,” AJE, 01 (Jan. 1826), 05–08, 06.
41 “Importance of Education,” AJE, 01 (Apr. 1826), 250.
education of medical students. Finally, the use of the Lancasterian system did not mean that American monitorial schools were bound to British lesson plans. Rather, they could take advantage of a growing number of American-produced textbooks that assured “that the rising generation be made acquainted with the leading events which produced our separation from the crown of Great Britain, and our establishment of an independent nation” in a way that also reflected the “chaste” style and “simplicity” of the republican ethos.

All the same, there were significant and ongoing connections between American education reformers, Joseph Lancaster, and the British and Foreign School Society. Lancaster’s first pamphlet on his system of education came to the United States via the ongoing correspondence of Thomas Eddy, a Quaker philanthropist and founder of the New York Free School Society, and Patrick Colquhoun, the London police magistrate. As the monitorial method spread throughout the early republic, so too did transnational philanthropic networks of philanthropists and educators. Most telling, perhaps, of the gap between the rhetoric of American educational distinctiveness and reality was the presence of Borough Road-trained teachers at many of the first Lancasterian schools in the United States. These instructors did not happen to emigrate from Britain, but were requested by representatives of organizations such as the Georgetown (Washington, DC) Free School Society, who wrote to Joseph Lancaster in December 1810 asking him “to engage & send us a Teacher instructed & recommended by you.” Obliging, Lancaster sent Robert

---

42 Kaestle, Joseph Lancaster and the monitorial school movement, 40. Griscom, Monitorial Instruction.
44 Thomas Eddy to Patrick Colquhoun, June 5, 1802 in Samuel L. Knapp, The Life of Thomas Eddy; Comprising an Extensive Correspondence with Many of the Most Distinguished Philosophers and Philanthropists of This and other Countries (New York, 1834), 178–81.
45 Committee of the George Town Free School Society to Joseph Lancaster, Dec. 5, 1810, Joseph Lancaster Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.
Ould, who helped “aid this great national work” of education in the United States but also kept the connection between the American school and the BFSS alive through regular correspondence and requests for materials, including Lancaster’s “Bust, Portrait or Profile to adorn the first genuine Lancasterian School in America.” Ultimately, amidst an emphasis on the importance of American schools for American students and a rhetoric of benevolent republicanism, education reform in the early republic existed within a reality of the transnational movement of ideas and people throughout philanthropic networks of collaboration and exchange. This apparent gap between rhetoric and reality, however, need not diminish the ways in which philanthropy and reform contributed to the construction of a distinct national identity. Indeed, the ways in which such efforts were translated to fit the specific context of, for example, the early American republic, but were also part of a broader movement usefully complicates and expands our notion of the relationship between benevolence and the construction of American identity.

The Americanization of Joseph Lancaster

The arrival of Joseph Lancaster in the United States did not come without trepidation. While many newspapers throughout the country eagerly reported on the arrival of “the celebrated founder of the Lancasterian system of education,” philanthropists in Philadelphia privately received word to approach “the celebrated teacher” with caution. Roberts Vaux, then-President of the Controllers of the Public Schools of the First District of the State of Pennsylvania, received at least two written warnings regarding Lancaster’s imminent arrival in Philadelphia. Word first arrived from Benjamin Show, with whom he had an extensive correspondence on issues of education

46 Robert Ould to Joseph Lancaster, Apr. 23, 1812, Lancaster Papers, Box 1, Folder 1.
47 Trenton (NJ) Federalist, Oct. 19, 1818.
48 Albany Gazette, Aug. 27, 1818.
in America and Europe; both men were longtime supporters of the monitorial method. In August 1818, Vaux received word from Shaw about the emigration of a “well qualified and excellent Master” trained in the Lancasterian method, as well as another “importation which I fear will give you some trouble (without extreme caution used) namely Joseph Lancaster himself.” Vaux, Shaw continued, had “frequently heard from me and others what sort of spirit he is of, and thus informed you will act as you think fit, he always rides a high horse that will neither drive or lead, unless discipline … corrected [his] restiveness.”

This “questionable spirit” was reinforced to Vaux in a letter from his cousin Samuel Smith, who wrote after seeing Lancaster lecture in Burlington, New Jersey on his way from New York to Philadelphia. “Knowing that thou art active in [the System of] general school Education,” Smith remarked, “I thought it might not be amiss to give thee this information, that a little previous consideration before meeting him might prepare thee how to act on an occasion which may prove a delicate one.” While Smith acknowledged that the Briton had every right to make “a provision for himself & family” in the United States, he warned that Vaux and his colleagues should “exercise a care not to bestow too much attention but by inflating a mind which has been represented as but too susceptible of vanity.”

Despite these warnings, by November 1818, Joseph Lancaster was employed as Superintendent of Philadelphia’s new monitorial Model School, working closely with Roberts Vaux and his colleagues. In fairness to the Board of Controllers of the Public Schools in Philadelphia, the fact that even Joseph Lancaster was only granted a one-year contract does suggest that they approached the situation with some caution. It would soon

---

49 Benjamin Shaw to Roberts Vaux, Aug. 04, 1818, Vaux Family Papers, Box 1, HSP.
50 Samuel Smith to Roberts Vaux, Oct. 15, 1818, Vaux Family Papers, Box 1.
become clear, however, that even this safeguard was not sufficient as, within weeks, Lancaster began to chafe under the Board’s careful supervision. “Our success in a noble cause,” he wrote to Vaux on November 20th, “depends upon cordial cooperation and unanimity.” Perhaps aware that his reputation preceded him, Lancaster reassured Vaux: “Never did I enter on a local work or public object with the same degree of dedication as at present” and only asked in return “for that kind and prompt attention which is due to ever proper wish on my part.” Also never one to undersell his apparent talents, Lancaster went on to emphasize his view that he was, in fact, bestowing a favor upon Philadelphia with his presence. “Had I not objects essentially connected with the desire of our hearts – I should not have staid in Philadelphia.” Given this sacrifice, Lancaster continued, “I have therefore felt that I have not been kindly attended to” and went on to ask for an advance on his salary.⁵¹ Later that same day, Vaux received a second letter from Lancaster, which more or less repeated the first, along with the declaration that “however unpleasant the circumstance I have met … nothing shall prevent my completing every arrangement and discharging every duty incumbent on me.” Most interesting, perhaps, is Lancaster’s concluding appeal to Vaux’s character and patriotism – “Knowing the sensibility of thy mind – to this momentous undertaking,” the newly-arrived Briton wrote, “I have felt anxious to prelude a moments uneasiness for the object so worthy of thy pursuit, and useful to thy country.”⁵² Four days later, Vaux received a somewhat hysterical note from Lancaster, informing him “that no one is the amount of all the

---

⁵¹ Joseph Lancaster to Roberts Vaux, Nov. 20, 1818 [AM], Vaux Family Papers, Box 1.
⁵² Joseph Lancaster to Roberts Vaux, Nov. 20, 1818 [PM], Vaux Family Papers, Box 1.
applications yet made to the School” and – for the first but far from the last time – insisted that Vaux call an emergency meeting of the Board of Controllers.

Lancaster’s list of slights and accusations of inadequate support continued to grow, as did the Board’s frustration with the British educator. As he fought to keep his job, Lancaster not only appealed to his qualifications as the founder of the Lancasterian system, but also to his contributions to republican benevolence. The connection Lancaster drew to Vaux between Vaux’s support for the educator and Vaux’s “anxious” desire to be “useful to thy country,” therefore, was not a one-off. Amidst criticism that Lancaster was neglecting his duties by leaving for an extended lecture tour in the crucial weeks before the opening of the girls’ monitorial school, Lancaster regaled Vaux with an account of the “Genuine warmth of American patriotism” evoked by his speech in Washington. “The Classing of the Girls School” and selection of monitors “will be done in a day,” Lancaster assured the Philadelphian, and in the meantime he was doing valuable work to ensure “that the polar star of Education in Pennsylvania will not be eclipsed by any [other] star.”

While his efforts in Philadelphia ultimately fell short and his contract was not renewed for a second year, Lancaster continued to integrate the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism into his private and public writings. In a series of four letters to Virginia Congressman Burwell Bassett, President James Monroe, and Speaker of the House Henry Clay, published together under the title Letters on National Subjects, Auxiliary to Universal Education, Lancaster carefully flattered the achievements and potential of the

53 Joseph Lancaster to Roberts Vaux, Nov. 24, 1818, Vaux Family Papers, Box 1.
54 Joseph Lancaster to Roberts Vaux, Jan. 25, 1819, Vaux Family Papers, Box 2.
young nation while also carving a space for himself as “a stranger.” In these communications, Lancaster echoed a general belief that “systematic education, must consist … [of] practical application” that was “universally applied” to all children. In addition to reiterating these important tenets of republican education, he also took pains to describe himself and his work as imbued with an innate American-ness, repeatedly referring to the United States as his “adopted country.” In his letter to Henry Clay, Lancaster even claimed that his suggestions were in fact “of American origin” as they had only “sprung up and matured in my mind since I first trod your shores.”

Whether or not Lancaster had been inspired since arriving in the United States, the ‘Americanization’ of Joseph Lancaster is also evident in the absence of certain narratives after his trans-Atlantic move. Prior to 1818, a major source of Lancaster’s credibility came from royal patronage. “The names of the King & Queen and Royal Family,” he observed in an 1809 letter to King George III, “have opened the way in many minds to receive the plan, who would not have attended the Inventor without such Sanction.” From the number of times Lancaster mentioned the “most gracious interview the King, the Queen and Princesses were pleased to favor me with” in his correspondence – not to mention the many, many scraps of paper found amongst his personal papers recounting the meeting – this was undoubtedly a major event in Lancaster’s personal and professional life. Indeed, for someone born in “respectable

---

55 Joseph Lancaster, *Letters on National Subjects, Auxiliary to Universal Education, and Scientific Knowledge; Addressed to Burwell Basset, Late a Member of the House of Representatives; Henry Clay, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and James Monroe, President of the United States* (Washington, DC, 1820), 01.
56 Ibid., 25, 29, 26, 04.
57 Lancaster to King George III, June 30, 1809, Gratz Papers, Box 163.
58 Lancaster to Col. Disrowe, Feb. 4, 1806, Lancaster Papers, Box 1.
poverty”\textsuperscript{59} who was also a “zealous Nonconformist,”\textsuperscript{60} the support Lancaster received from the royal family and other members of the aristocracy was a testament to the successes of the Lancasterian system in England.

The approbation of King George III, needless to say, was not a prominent feature of Lancaster’s rhetoric once in the United States. While on a tour through Delaware, Maryland, and Washington, DC in January 1819, Lancaster gave two well-received lectures on the monitorial system to a joint session of Congress. After the first night’s speech, as Lancaster boasted to Roberts Vaux over the course of two letters, “The Speaker [Henry Clay] came up to me in the House and amidst the cheering of the members – and pointing to his own chair from which I had just descended he said: “I have never saw that chair better filled on any occasion in my Life.”\textsuperscript{61} Just as the story of his audience with the royal family allowed Lancaster to claim legitimacy amidst ongoing financial and reputational crises, recognition from the Speaker of the House served a similar purpose. Clay’s praise bolstered Lancaster’s claims about the relationship between his system, his work as an educator, and his contributions to American character.

“I only wish the whole board of comptrol at Philadelphia,” Lancaster recounted to Vaux, “could have been present & seen the spirit and feeling … of patriotism … which prevailed and the words of assembled representatives of their country who … were

\textsuperscript{59} Salmon, \textit{Joseph Lancaster}, viii.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 02. In adulthood, Lancaster identified as a Quaker. There is some question as to when this conversion happened and whether it stemmed from genuine belief or a desire to gain access to well-endowed charitable networks. Jeremy Bentham reportedly called Lancaster a “self-styled Quaker.” These rumors followed Lancaster to North America – in his letter to Roberts Vaux, Samuel Smith noted amidst his other warnings: “I suppose it is no secret to thee that he [Lancaster] is unconnected with our religious society.” Not helping the matter, even Lancaster’s own account of his conversion was contradictory. His biographer David Salmon also acknowledged that Lancaster was not a typical Friend, writing: “Certainly there is nothing Quaker like in Lancaster, except the garb and grammar. The restrained ardour, the modest demeanour, the severe self-control, the prudence and probity in affairs, that generally marks Friends, were all conspicuously lacking in him.” Smith to Vaux, Oct. 15, 1818, Vaux Papers; Salmon, \textit{Joseph Lancaster}, 03.

\textsuperscript{61} Lancaster to Vaux, Jan. 25, 1819, Jan. 27, 1819, Vaux Papers, Box 2.
crowding round to congratulate me.” Here, then, benevolent republicanism provided Lancaster with a response to the criticism he experienced in Philadelphia. Certainly if he was met with “universal satisfaction” and “received invitations to all parts of the union,” the problem lay not in Lancaster’s inability to live up to the demands of republican education reform, but in the philanthropy of Philadelphians.

It bears mentioning here that a slightly different interpretation of Clay’s statement circulated alongside Lancaster’s version. While most newspapers related the incident with the same positive tone seen in the letter to Vaux, some observed that the Speaker’s statement was also descriptive. As a poem published in newspapers from Maine to South Carolina recounted, the corpulent Lancaster literally filled the chair better than the famously lanky Clay:

When slim Speaker Clay looking up at his Chair,
Saw that very fat man Joseph Lancaster there,
He said, while with pleasure the pun thro’ him thrill’d,
“Sir I never before saw that Chair so well fill’d”
The Teacher well pleas’d, to reply was not slow;
For witty tho’ serious was dignified Joe.
He mildly remarked, in the same punning way,
“He who fill’d this Chair best no better than Clay”

That Joseph Lancaster knew his audience and adjusted his rhetoric accordingly is not necessarily a remarkable occurrence, though it does demonstrate the importance of the idea of benevolent republicanism in this period. Indeed, Lancaster made such rhetorical shifts not in two or even three, but in four different national contexts over the course of his career. After leaving Philadelphia for Maryland and then New York, Lancaster lived and worked in Caracas from 1825 to 1827 at the invitation of Simón Bolívar. After

---

62 Lancaster to Vaux, Jan. 25, 1819.
63 “Mr. Lancaster and Mr. Speaker Clay,” Eastport (Maine) Sentinel, Mar. 27, 1819; South-Carolina State Gazette and Columbian Advertiser (Columbia), Mar. 30, 1819. The South-Carolina State Gazette print gives the poem’s original place of publication as the Baltimore Federal Gazette.
falling out with Bolivar, Lancaster appealed to King George IV for assistance, “humbly”
asking the monarch to provide free passage back to England as well as an annuity in
recognition of Lancaster’s work in providing “the means of Educating many thousands
and tens of thousands of British Subjects,” thus “enrich[ing] and exalt[ing] the minds of
my countrymen in knowledge and benevolence.”

When these efforts failed, Lancaster returned to North America and opened a school in Montreal before returning to the
United States, where he remained until his death in 1838.

While Joseph Lancaster certainly lived a life of extremes, his experience usefully
shows how the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism – which, like Thomas Branagan in
Chapter One, Lancaster used in an effort to build a life in and contribute to the
development of the early republic – was not mutually exclusive to participation in
broader, transnational networks. Ultimately, Lancaster himself played a small role in the
rise and spread of monitorial schools in the United States. However, the process by which
he adapted to and “Americanized” his rhetoric demonstrate that the Lancasterian system
did not need to mean the same thing in London as it did in Philadelphia, even as ideas,
books, and even Joseph Lancaster himself traveled between these and other nodes of a
global network.

In the historiography that does exist on the Lancasterian system, studies are
generally limited to nation-states or small regions. Most often, monitorial schools are
described as a symptom of the market revolution, disciplinary revolution, class dynamics,
colonialism, or some combination thereof. Without discounting the ways in which
scholastic standards were shaped by the biases and agenda of those with economic,

---
64 Lancaster to King George IV, May 02, 1825, Gratz Papers, Box 163, Folder 18.
political, and social power, by considering an equally important context – the political revolutions of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries – a more complicated and perhaps more interesting and certainly more comprehensive narrative begins to emerge. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the monitorial system of education grew from a pedagogy employed at an orphanage in Madras and a free school on Borough Road in Southwark, London into a truly global phenomenon. While a common node existed in London, those at this center by no means were the sole arbiters of the system’s spread or meaning abroad. Amidst the anxieties and uncertainties of the period for newly-independent United States, education and, in particular, education via the Lancasterian system emerged as a means by which to ensure a competent, engaged citizenry that would allow the nation to live up to the promises of revolution and challenges of independence.
Part II: Benevolent Republicans
Chapter Four: “In This Happy Country:”

Jewish-American Benevolence in the Early Republic

The world stands upon three things: the Torah, upon divine service, and upon acts of kindness. (Pirkei Avot, 1:2)

Rabbi Hillel says: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I? And if not now, when? (Pirkei Avot, 1:14)

With a better understanding of the multiple functions of philanthropy in the early republic, the question remains: who could claim the identity of a “benevolent republican”? Solomon Etting was certainly a good candidate. Upon his death in 1847, Etting was remembered by The Sun newspaper as a “venerable citizen.” The long-time Baltimorean, his obituary recalled, enjoyed a career of “unwearied activity” and “possessed, in the most eminent degree, that first of civic virtues, public zeal.” Born in York, Pennsylvania in 1764, Etting’s biography seemed to check all of the requisite boxes. He was fully engaged in political life and advanced his partisan preferences not only by exercising his right to vote but also through membership in the Baltimore Republican Society, support for the Republican Fire Company, and as a longtime trustee of the Union Bank of Maryland, an institution founded on Jeffersonian economic principles. With an eye to the future, Etting ensured that his children received a comprehensive education that included the classics, modern languages, and “every other branch of useful … literature” so that they too could serve the nation as thoughtful, engaged citizens. Beyond the economic impact of his flourishing mercantile business,

---

2 “Death of Solomon Etting,” The Sun (Baltimore), Aug. 9, 1847.
Etting contributed to the development of the United States as a principal in the Baltimore-Reistertown Turnpike (1805), a commissioner in the planning of the Susquehanna Canal (1822), and President of the Board of Commissioners to repair the Baltimore City Courthouse in 1836. This commitment to civic welfare went beyond infrastructure projects. As a Visitor to the Poor, Etting distributed aid to some of Baltimore’s most vulnerable residents and, amidst the strain of a particularly harsh winter, “called aloud” on his “fellow citizens” to “exercise their humanity” and contribute to a second subscription in order to replenish funds for additional relief. He supported prison reform and served as the foreman of a Grand Jury appointed to visit and report on the conditions in Baltimore’s jails. In 1817, Etting was part of an ultimately unsuccessful effort to establish a Surgical Institution intended to serve both Maryland and the nation as an “emporium for practical knowledge, and a resort for the afflicted” that would produce “benefits at once to science and humanity.” In addition to all of these activities, Etting was also a Trustee of the Society for the Promotion of Science and Literature and served several terms as Vice-President of the German Society of Maryland.

As a wealthy white man living in early nineteenth-century Baltimore, Solomon Etting certainly seemed to live a life of republican benevolence. Indeed, his obituary concluded, “In his family and social relations, Mr. Etting was equally worthy of honor

---

6 *American Commercial and Daily Advertiser*, Feb. 5, 1805.
7 “To the Honorable Judges of Baltimore City Court,” *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, Dec. 12, 1826.
8 *Harrisburg Republican*, Sept. 30, 1817.
and imitation.” What the article fails to mention, however, was that though he helped organize public protests against the Jay Treaty in 1794, the Constitution of Maryland legally barred Etting from holding any local or statewide elected office until 1824. Or that, despite his prominent role in the defense of Baltimore during the War of 1812 as a member of the General Committee of Safety and Vigilance, wherein Etting took regular guard shifts and was authorized to coordinate a city-wide emergency plan, he was not allowed to hold any rank in the state militia for another twelve years. Perhaps constrained by the genre, the writer for The Sun did not explain why, even with Etting’s proven commitment to benevolence and decades of unwavering support for the Republican Party, questions remained about his loyalty to the nation and very ability to possess the “warm patriotic attachments” required of office. Nor does the obituary capture the ways in which Etting’s reputation as a “model of industry … integrity, and impartiality” with a “rigid sense of justice” existed alongside the belief that his personal beliefs were “contemptible,” “uncouth and unreasonable,” and full of “defects and improprieties.” Solomon Etting may have displayed all the salient characteristics of a benevolent republican, but he was also a Jew, and for that reason his status in the nation was neither manifest nor guaranteed.

There is no reason to believe that Solomon Etting’s above-mentioned accomplishments were motivated by anything other than a genuine philanthropic

---

11 In 1826, Etting was elected to his first of several terms on the First Branch of the Baltimore City Council.
12 “Solomon Etting,” Maryland State Archive; Goldstein and Weiner, On Middle Ground, 38.
13 Charles King, New-York American, Oct. 22, 1823, in A Letter to Charles King, from an American Jew (New York, 1823), 03. There is no author for this publication, but a likely candidate is Mordecai Manuel Noah, who was the then-editor of the New York Enquirer and frequently clashed with King, the editor of the New-York American.
14 “Death of Solomon Etting,” The Sun.
impulse, political belief, or patriotic feeling. Yet, Etting also understood that because of his religious identity, these activities took on additional meaning. His philanthropic undertakings gave weight to Etting’s petition to the Maryland House of Delegates that there was no reason why Jews, heretofore prevented by the state constitution from enjoying “many of the invaluable rights of citizenship,” should not “be placed upon the same footing as other good citizens.”16 Through benevolence, Etting and his co-religionists throughout the early republic were able to demonstrate, assert, and insist upon their identity as Americans.

**From Alien to Inalienable**

Jewish settlement in North America began much as it did elsewhere: as the result of dislocation and with only the begrudging acquiescence of the would-be host community. Thus none of the “twenty-three souls, big and little”17 who arrived in New Amsterdam from Recife, Brazil in 1654 were strangers to the experience of displacement and insecurity. These first settlers were Sephardic Jews, with roots in Spain and Portugal, where their ancestors had lived and worshipped until the Iberian Inquisitions forced them to choose between conversion and exile. Amidst this dual biblical and contemporary diaspora, many found refuge in the Dutch Republic. While the “Dutch Golden Age” of the long-seventeenth century is widely regarded for its religious toleration, as foreigners and non-Christians, members of the Joodsche Natie (Jewish Nation) were still a

---

vulnerable minority. Nevertheless, even as concerns about Jewish “disparagement of [the] Christian religion” or the possibility of efforts “to seduce any Christian person away from [the] Christian religion” persisted, Amsterdam became the center of the Sephardic diaspora as the Jewish community there grew in size and wealth. In the end, as educated, multilingual merchants with global trade connections, Jewish contributions to Dutch merchant capitalism in the metropole as well as in far-flung colonies like Brazil certainly made the policy of tolerance more palatable.

It was in this context that the twenty-three Jewish “souls” were greeted by director-general of New Netherland Peter Stuyvesant not as fellow denizens of the Dutch Atlantic, displaced by the shared national misfortune of the re-conquest of Brazil by the Portuguese, but as “deceitful” and “very repugnant” “hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ” that would “infect and trouble [the] new colony.” Stuyvesant’s concerns about Jewish character and fears that the acceptance of Jews would later mean an inability to “refuse the Lutherans and the Papists,” however, were ultimately overruled by the more practical considerations of the Dutch West India Company (WIC). WIC officials’ philosophical commitments to tolerance are unknown and, in the end, unimportant. Rather, their calculation was almost certainly a financial one, based both on

---

21 Cf. 16.
22 Peter Stuyvesant in Sarna, *American Judaism*, 02.
the economic value Jews had historically provided as well as the fact, as a letter from leading Amsterdam Jews emphasized, “many of the Jewish nation are principal shareholders in the Company.” Thus the first permanent Jewish community in North America was established, not in a moment of triumph that anticipated the stated religious freedoms of the United States, but one that revealed the fragility of tolerance and precariousness experienced by the tolerated.

Similar patterns occurred throughout the colonial period. In July of 1733, not long after the colony was founded, forty-two Jews arrived in Georgia from London aboard the ship William and Sarah without the prior approval of Georgia’s Trustees. Technically, the colonial charter granted freedom of religious opinion to all but Catholics and three prominent English Jews – Anthony da Costa, Alvarez Lopez Suasso, and Francis Salvador – had actually received commissions to help fund and populate the fledgling colony. Nevertheless, the Trustees immediately called for their removal, for fear that Georgia “will soon become a Jewish colony.” Despite repeated calls that these Jewish settlers should “meet with no sort of encouragement,” Georgia’s governor, James Oglethorpe, allowed them to stay. Like the WIC, Oglethorpe’s decision was guided by an on-the-ground calculation that Jewish settlement would be a net gain for the nascent colony. Compared to a typical, Trustee-approved migrant, these would-be Georgian Jews were relatively affluent and their ability to purchase land would provide a much-needed

---


boost to the colonial treasury. Indeed, new arrivals such as Dr. Samuel Nunes, who provided critical medical care during an outbreak of febrile illness in Savannah, demonstrated their value even as the Trustees pushed for Jewish removal.\textsuperscript{26} It is important, however, not to confuse the right of settlement and a lack of economic restrictions with inclusion or the granting of natural rights. Even after Oglethorpe’s decision to allow Jewish settlement, a committee was formed and a statement released to reassure the public that there was no plan afloat “to make a Jew’s colony out of Georgia.”\textsuperscript{27} Jews were still outsiders – useful and therefore tolerated outsiders – but outsiders nonetheless.

By and large, as the WIC officials and James Oglethorpe predicted, Jews flourished in colonial North America. Their extensive transnational familial and communal ties facilitated economic success within the British mercantile system and this wealth, in turn, enabled social integration at the highest levels of society. This status, in general, did not come at the expense of Jewish identity or practice. Granted, North America was by no means a center of Jewish intellectual or cultural production in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. “In spite of the fact that the London and the American communities were equally old,” observed Jacob Rader Marcus in his seminal study of colonial Jewry, “what a difference there was between the two! The North American Jewish colonies had produced nothing in the humanities; English Jewry could boast a number of competent Hebraists, preachers, apologetes, poets, and even devotees

\textsuperscript{26} Oglethorpe credited Nunes with stopping the epidemic before it completely crippled the colony. Indeed, the timing of Nunes’ arrival was fortuitous: the colony’s doctor, William Cox, died in April 1733 and had not yet been replaced when the illness first struck in early July, mere days before the arrival of the William and Sarah. See Eric L. Altschuler and Aesha Jobanputra, “What was the cause of the epidemic in Savannah in 1733?” Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, 107 (Dec. 2014), 468–73; Diner, Jews of the United States, 18–20.

\textsuperscript{27} In Jones, “Settlement of the Jews in Georgia,” 07.
of science.” Nevertheless, for a group that on the eve of the Revolutionary War numbered approximately 2000 (less than one-tenth of one percent of the overall population) and operated without formal rabbinic leadership until 1840, Jewish communal life was robust. Each of the main population centers – Savannah, Georgia; Charleston; Philadelphia; New York; and Newport, Rhode Island – had a synagogue that was the center of Jewish life, providing a place for worship, religious education, celebration, and solace.

Older scholarship has explained the unprecedented freedoms available to colonial Jews in terms of an innate American character, evident in men like Oglethorpe who moved beyond “the narrow-minded and illiberal suggestions of the Trustees” back in London and the representatives of the Continental Congress who were of a “mind rising superior” to the “narrow view” of the Old World, making them more accepting “of men of all shades of religious belief.” While such whiggish narratives have fallen out of historiographical favor, there is much to be said for the unique aspects of colonial North America that enabled Jewish life to flourish as it did. Colonial America, for all of its very real religious biases and outright prejudices, was remarkably pluralistic and diverse, particularly in comparison to Europe. As Jonathan Sarna observed, “whereas in so many other diaspora settings Judaism stood all alone in religious dissent, Jews in America shared this status with members of other minority faiths” such as Huguenots, Quakers,

and Baptists. While the Jewish experience was different by virtue of being the only non-Christian group on this list, colonial Jews nevertheless benefited from a broader societal need to accommodate a range of religious practices. Race also played an important role. In Europe, with its long history of sectarian division and anti-Jewish animus, religion was key in the determination of who belonging and who was an outsider. While traditional anti-Semitism was by no means absent from colonial America, as scholar Hasia R. Diner remarked, the major divide here was racial. Whereas in Europe, she explained, “Jewishness had ipso facto put [Jews] outside of mainstream society and rendered them different and defective … in America that position came to be occupied by Africans.” Along with Enlightenment ideas about tolerance, religion, and religion’s role in society and government, these circumstances did indeed make colonial North America much different from other times and places Jews had previously found – or hoped to find – refuge.

Nevertheless, even as white, generally well-to-do and socially respectable individuals, Jews were still outsiders; any freedoms they did enjoy were granted in toleration of their presence rather than a sense of their innate right to such privileges. Over and over again in the colonial period, the limits and impermanence of tolerance became apparent as Jews came up against systematic and arbitrary barriers to full

---

32 Sarna, American Judaism, 28.
34 See Sarna, American Judaism, 37.
equality and inclusion. Thus, while the Naturalization Act of 1740 allowed colonial Jews to become citizens – a privilege not granted to their co-religionists residing in England – they soon discovered that the success of their application for naturalization was determined by the whims of others. Aaron Lopez, a powerful and well-respected merchant who was for a time the richest man in Newport, had his petition rejected by the Rhode Island Legislature in 1761 and 1762. When naturalization was granted to colonial Jews, it was widely regarded to confer economic and residency rights only. In the few places and on the few occasions that Jews did vote, observed Richard B. Morris, it came as “the result of indifference rather than a positive grant of political rights.” Jews therefore occupied a liminal place in colonial society. Their wealth and social integration meant they were never completely excluded from the political realm and discourses, but their religious identity prevented them from enjoying the rights and privileges that their Christian counterparts possessed without question.

And thus American Jews encountered the Revolution. As William Pencak observed, given the unprecedented economic and social status that Jews enjoyed in

35 Leon Hühner, “Naturalization of Jews in New York under the Act of 1740,” _PAJHS_, 13 (1905), 01–06, 05. See also J.H. Hollander, “The Naturalization of Jews in the American Colonies Under the Act of 1740,” _PAJHS_, 05 (1897), 103–17. There are questions as to whether of not the refusal to grant Lopez citizenship was due to anti-Semitism or the desire of the dominant coalition of rural farmers and democrats from Providence in the Rhode Island House to block the naturalization of someone who would have sided with the aristocratic politics of the Newport mercantile elite. Regardless, Lopez’s Jewishness allowed him to be excluded. See William Pencak, “Anti-Semitism, Toleration, and Appreciation: The Changing Relations of Jews and Gentiles in Early America,” in _The First Prejudice: Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in Early America_, ed. Chris Beneke and Christopher S. Grenda (Philadelphia, 2011), 241–61, 248.


37 This can be seen in the case of Benjamin Levy, who in 1767 was invited to be part of a formal address that welcomed John Penn as the new Lieutenant Governor of Pennsylvania. Unlike his fellow signatories, however, Levy did not possess political rights. Hertzberg, _Jews in America_, 55.
colonial America, as well as the freedom to settle and practice their religion, “the seminal event in the founding of the American nation was not an altogether positive development for the Jews.” 

For one, the revolutionary promise of the extension of democratic rights to middle and lower class white, Christian men meant further diluting whatever status and influence Jews happened to hold in the colonial status quo. Furthermore, independence meant leaving the economic orbit of the British Empire where Jewish merchants had thrived. Nevertheless, the majority of colonial Jews supported the patriot cause. Earlier historiography has given lofty, idealistic reasons for this that emphasize trust in Enlightenment ideals, promises about freedom of religion, and an overall sense that the new nation would finally be able to achieve the full promise of its innate pluralist ethos. These accounts likewise give a relatively passive account of the means by which Jews finally began to gain rights as Americans with inalienable privileges rather than as perpetual aliens. Here, scholars such as Samuel Rezneck, Jacob Rader Marcus, Arthur Hertzberg and others celebrate the sacrifices and bravery of the “unrecognized patriots” of the Revolutionary War, while at the same time describing early republican Jews in the end as the “principal beneficiaries of Jefferson’s successful fight for religious freedom.” 

The importance of early republican Jews, concluded Arthur Hertzberg, “lies not in what they [Jewish-Americans] did, but simply because they were there.” Jewish-Americans understood the great promise of the Revolution, supported the cause where and when they could, and perhaps by their very presence served as a reminder of the need for

39 Rezneck, _Unrecognized Patriots._
40 Joseph Sherbow, “The Impact of the American Constitution Upon the Jews of the United States, _PAJHS_, 43 (Sept. 1953), 159–69, 163. Even the title of this article suggests a passive narrative – the American Constitution is what impacted the Jews of the United States --- is it possible that the Jews of the United States also had an impact on the American Constitution?
41 Hertzberg, _Jews in America_, 65.
religious freedom, but without any “figures of great intellectual attainment or political stature,” they were by and large “passive politically” and did little to actually guarantee their status in the new nation.

More recent scholarship, however, has emphasized the ways in which Jews “actively fashioned their communities” in the early republic. Early republican Jews, affirmed Hasia Diner, “did not believe that they had to accept America as it was” and, as such, “Jewish acquisition of rights in postrevolutionary America” involved “Jewish self-defense” in a variety of forms. Be it through military service, political engagement, social participation, or philanthropic endeavors, Jews in the years and decades after the Revolution worked to guarantee “the pluralistic promise of America and the possibility that the United States might offer what Jews throughout the diaspora history sought but were denied: the chance to be part of the world while remaining loyal to their own faith.”

With this reinterpretation about the existence and shape of Jewish engagement in the process of nation building during the early republic has also come a reassessment of the prejudices Jews faced in the process. Previously, the absence of physical violence, compulsory ghettos, or the most extreme types of political and social disabilities led to the conclusion that “anti-Jewish prejudices … were not crushing or keenly felt.”

Without diminishing the very real security and opportunity afforded to Jews in the early republic, these revised interpretations have also emphasized the uphill battle faced in

---

43 Marcus, Early American Jewry, 2: 527.
44 Diner, Jews in the United States, 01.
45 Ibid., 52.
47 Marcus, Early American Jewry, 2: 494.
securing political rights and social inclusion, along with overt and “hidden springs of anti-Semitism beneath the mainstream of toleration.”

Such springs existed at the highest levels of early republican society. Thomas Paine, renowned for his condemnation of Christian bigotry, also, observed William Pencak “went out of his way to single out the Jews as especially backward, ignorant, and superstitious.” Likewise, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Rush all at various times at least privately questioned whether or not Jews could be trusted as fully loyal and productive citizens of the new nation. Beyond working against longstanding biases, Jewish-Americans were also trying to assert their place in a society that espoused freedom of religion at the same time as it operated upon a broad assumption that Christianity was the “religion which holds out society together.” Even with a wall of separation between church and state, there was still an assumption of Christian faith – albeit not necessarily of one particular denomination – and that this practice, in turn, was a critical part of was ensured the virtuous citizenry needed for the republican experiment to succeed. Such an assumption inherently meant that Jews and Judaism fell into the category of ‘other.’ Jews were therefore a means by which Americans proved their religious tolerance, insofar as they, as a Christian republic, still tolerated the “Jews, Infidels, and Hottentots” among them. While on an individual basis early republican

---

49 Pencak, Jews and Gentiles, 09.
50 Ibid., 09–10. See also Hertzberg, Jews in America, 85–88.
52 “Fore- Warned-Fore-Armed Mr. Printer,” (Springfield) Massachusetts Gazette, June 3, 1783.
Jews were seen as upstanding members of the community, more broadly, Jews were still tolerated outsiders who existed outside of the idea of the virtuous Christian American.

Elsewhere, Jews were conceptualized not only as less evolved ‘others,’ but as an active threat to the young nation. In *Cursory Remarks on Men and Measures in Georgia*, the author’s attitude suggests that the anti-Jewish feelings of the colonial-era Trustees had not significantly advanced in the intervening years. To begin, the author explicitly noted that Jews were merely guests in an otherwise “Christian country.” He proceeds to draw upon age-old anti-Semitic stereotypes, claiming that Jews “enter very little into politicks further than to favour that system which is the most promotive of their pecuniary interest.” The protections of the Constitution, the author claimed, promised no more “than a mere religious privilege” and no part of it can or should “be made to signify a grant of any civil right whatever.” To grant Jews such rights, would allow them to “obtrud[e] themselves” so that Christianity became “a capital heresy, [and] the synagogue become the established church.” The idea that Jews were dangerous outsiders also proved to be politically expedient, as opponents to the establishment of the Second Bank discovered when they characterized the backing of (American) Jewish supporters as an example of “foreign influence” in the institution. In the same vein, a letter published in a North Carolina newspaper warned that Americans needed a tariff on imported goods in order to keep from “enriching the shopkeepers and Jews at the ruin of others.”

One final challenge of Jewish life in the early republic was a growing movement dedicated to converting Jews to Christianity. Under the guise of benign, philanthropic names such as the “Society for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Jews,” the main

---

54 Pencak, “Anti-Semitism, Toleration, and Appreciation,” 256.
goal of these organizations was to improve the circumstances of Jews by having them accept Christ as their savior, thereby helping them avoid present and eternal suffering. These efforts came at least in part from benevolent concern—“As one deeply interested in the everlasting welfare of your Nation,” prefaced the author of *A Word of Entreaty to the Jews, Dispersed Throughout the United States of America*, “I beg you reader, to use all the means in your power to communicate this little tract to your brethren.” While on the whole unsuccessful, the very existence of these groups, their immense popularity, and support from high-ranking officials such as John Quincy Adams, Elias Boudinot, and Peter Jay reinforced the outsider status of American Jews.

The process of going from tolerated alien to Americans with inalienable rights, therefore, was neither straightforward nor smooth. Throughout the early national period, Jewish efforts to articulate and assert their place in the new nation involved an uphill battle not only against, as Jonathan Sarna described, “those who sought to define the nation (or its soul) in restrictively Christian terms” but also against those for whom the perpetuation of anti-Semitic tropes of Jews as disloyal, money-driven, and narrow-minded served a larger purpose. Early republican Jews, therefore, were faced with the dual task of proving that they possessed the virtue and loyalty to be considered American in the first place as they endeavored to articulate a more inclusive vision of religious freedom and pluralism as a minority faith in an overwhelmingly Christian nation.

**To Bigotry No Sanction: Jewish-American Identity and Belonging**

---

56 *A Word of Entreaty to the Jews, Dispersed throughout the United States of America* (New York, 1810), 12, American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS), New York.
Despite all these external challenges, Jews in the early republic saw no inconsistency between their religious and national identities. Indeed, on a theological level, not only were Jews free to engage as citizens, they were doctrinally obligated to do so. Throughout the diaspora, Jews followed the pronouncement of the prophet Jeremiah to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city which [God] has carried you into. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”59 While still bound by the obligations of their faith, civically, Jews were able and in fact required to abide by the laws and communal responsibilities of the place in which they lived. The diasporic condition was punishment wrought by God, but exile was penalty enough – Jews were not also expected to live as permanent and vulnerable strangers in foreign lands. Rather, Jeremiah explained, they were to “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce … Increase in numbers there, do not decrease.”60 For the Jews of the United States, there was no contradiction between being full citizens of the new republic with the inalienable rights thereof and the ability to fully practice their religion. The problem was whether others felt the same.

Confidence in and insistence upon the possibility of an identity that was both fully Jewish and fully American were expressed in a variety of ways during the early republic. Amidst the uncertainty and anxiety of the War of 1812, Grace Seixas Nathan wrote to her niece Sara Kursheedt, “I am so true an American – So warm a Patriot that I hold these mighty Armies – and their proud-arrogant-presumptions an over-powering Nation as Beings that We have Conquered – and shall Conquer again – this I persuade myself will

59 Jeremiah, ch. 29, v. 7.
60 Ibid., v. 05–06.
be so. And may the Lord of Battles grant that it may be so.”

This sense of being totally and proudly an American – rather than, say, a Jew who happened to live in the United States – was also expressed in more public forums. In an address to George Clinton, the “Antient Congregation of Israelites, lately returned from Exile,” welcomed the Governor to New York City during a visit in 1783. Just as Grace Nathan considered herself “so true an American,” so too did the authors of the letter unreservedly describe their natural place in the general national story. Here, the “Exile” they described was not the one traditionally associated with the Jewish community, that of Diaspora from the Promised Land, but from New York during British occupation. No other group, the authors expanded, had “Manifested a more zealous Attachment to the Sacred Cause of America, in the late War with Great Britain.” As they and their fellow citizens recovered from war and set about building the new nation, the address concluded, “We look forward, with Pleasure to the happy days we expect under a Constitution, Wisely framed to preserve the inestimable Blessings of Civil, and Religious Liberty.”

Thus the representatives of the Jewish community in New York articulated a vision for the nascent republic that not only guaranteed Jewish civil rights and religious liberty, but also emphasized Jewish entitlement to these rights not as tolerated outsiders, but as Americans.

Of such efforts, one of the most well-known – and oft-quoted – instances is the correspondence between George Washington and the Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island. In fact, Washington’s famous assurance that the new nation will give “to

---

61 Grace Seixas Nathan to Sara Seixas Kursheedt, Nov. 14, 1814, Box 1, Folder 2, Nathan Family Papers, AJHS.
62 Address to George Clinton, Dec. 9, 1783, Series I, Box 1, Folder 13, Papers of Jacques Judah Lyons [hereafter JYL Papers], AJHS.
bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance” was not an axiom of his own devising, but the repetition of an expectation expressed by the Newport Jews in their initial letter. In terms of attitudes about religious freedom in the early republic, Washington’s response – however cribbed – is arguably more impactful. However, a fuller picture and order of events facilitates several important conclusions. First, it demonstrates the ways in which Jewish inclusion in the early republican polity was not merely bestowed upon an otherwise passive community by enlightened and magnanimous founding fathers. Rather, Jews were active in the articulation and defense of their identity and rights in a pluralistic America. This episode also shows were both confident in their American identity while also aware of their vulnerability and the importance of demonstrating their patriotism while asserting their vision for and place within the nation. In praising Washington’s “unexampled liberality and extensive philanthropy,” Jewish communities were not alone – letters arrived from groups of all kinds following the selection as a sign of respect and patriotic zeal. However, the dispatches sent from the representatives of Jewish congregations not only reminded the new president of their past and ongoing service to the nation, but also emphasized their own interpretation of how Washington’s stated extraordinary character would allow him to be a leader that dispelled “that cloud of bigotry and superstition which has long, as a veil, shaded religion.” These notes emphasized the importance of making the rhetoric of religious liberty a reality to a people “deprived as we hitherto have been of the invaluable rights of free citizens.” Where other nations had failed, the United States, under the

64 Savannah Congregation to Washington, May 1790, in ibid., 24.
65 Hebrew Congregation in Newport, in ibid., 35–36.
leadership of Washington, was poised to truly walk the walk of tolerance and, it was hoped, pluralism. Despite their small number, the presence and voice of the Jewish community in the early republic affected the process of nation building. After all, freedom of conscience and inclusion are very different if they only need to embrace different Christian denominations or if these rights and liberties are extended to a non-Christian group that otherwise demonstrated civic virtue.

Beneath such confident assertions, however, was also a real sense of vulnerability. That early republican Jews were aware of the importance of the claims they were making can be seen in their anxiety to send a letter to Washington as soon as possible. In May 1790, the trustees of Congregation Shearith Israel (KKSI) in New York wrote to their counterparts in Newport to suggest that they send a joint missive, being “led to understand that mode will be less irksome to the President than troubling him to reply to every individual address.” Their desire to have their voice heard along with an awareness that they were in a delicate position and could not afford to be a bother, the KKSI trustees continued, was exasperated by the “hurtful”66 decision of the Savannah congregation to send their communication without notice or consultation. While early republican Jews felt that they had an unarguable claim to equal rights and the full immunities of citizenship, they were also conscious of maintaining a good public image. In an address by Gershom Mendes Seixas (brother of Grace Seixas Nathan) to his congregation soon after their return from “exile” to New York, he reminded the congregation of the “Duty incumbent on us to exert ourselves as a religious Society” in a way that will “command Respect, instead of Contempt.” In particular, he urged “those who art Parents to enjo

66 Trustees of K.K.S.I. to Newport congregation, June 20, 1790, Series I, Box 3, Folder 175, JIL Papers.
their Children not to commit those Misdemeanors which are so highly reprehensible but admonish them on every thing that tends to Indecency.”

Jewish life in the early American republic was one of diligence and balance. It meant fully embracing the ethos of the new age and nation on all levels, including communal organization. Whereas synagogues – around which almost every aspect of Jewish life was organized in this period – were traditionally run by self-perpetuating groups of elite men, in the years and decades after the Revolutionary War, voting privileges were expanded to include more ordinary (male) members of the congregation. At the same time, it meant an awareness that no matter how fully they embraced the tenets of republicanism, no matter how many times they declared their “grateful thanks, that I can boast being born a citizen of these United States” in speeches and publications, Jews had to make an extra effort to prove their loyalty and take the time to explain that “We love our native land, as other human beings do. The spot where we drew our first breath; the scene of our childhood; all the associations of

---

67 Copy of English address given by G. Seixas after his return to New York City, 1784, Series I, Box 4, Folder 242, JJL Papers.
68 Many early republican synagogues also undertook constitution-writing exercises, utilizing language that would have sounded very familiar to any American. In Richmond, the newly-established Beth Shalome – which also gave full voting privileges to every male congregant over the age of twenty-one – began its constitution with the preamble: “We the subscribers of the Israelite religion resident in this place desirous of promoting divine worship.” (Quoted in Diner, Jews of the United States, 62.) In New York, the venerable Shearith Israel opened its new governing document with: “We the members of K.K. Shearith Israel…” These new regulations, it continued, would allow the congregation to fully align with and thrive in a “state happily constituted upon the principles of equal liberty, civil, and religious.” (Quoted in Sarna, American Judaism, 43.) Indeed, Jonathan Sarna observed, the very use of the word “constitution” to refer to these documents, rather than the traditional Hebrew word “askamot,” meaning “communal regulations,” signals the ways in which American Jews incorporated the rhetoric of democracy and republicanism into all areas of their life. (Sarna, American Judaism, 43–45.)
our youth, are as dear to our memory, as the same things are dear to the memory of others.”

As Uriah Phillips Levy discovered, the balance between service to country and commitment to Judaism was not always easy or straightforward in practice. Over the course of his five-decade service in the Navy, Levy was court-martialed six times, demoted in rank, and even dismissed from service. That these incidents may have had more to do with his “fellow sailors and even the navy itself [considering] him as an undesirable Israelite” is evinced by the fact that Levy was cleared of wrongdoing on every occasion, including the two times his court-martial was reversed by the sitting President. Despite these obstacles, Levy never made any attempt to hide or apologize for his Jewish faith. Rather, as he famously proclaimed in his “Memorial to Congress,” “I am an American, a sailor, and a Jew” as he diligently insisted that there was nothing mutually exclusive about either his American or Jewish identity and that his ability to observe “the faith of [his] ancestors” was a “right guaranteed by the Constitution.”

For Levy and others, the balance of Jewish-American life in the early republic thus meant articulating a vision of inclusion that enabled full citizenship as well as the right to worship in ways that were outside of the mainstream. It meant participating “fully and freely” in public celebrations after the ratification of the Constitution, when the hazzan (spiritual leader) of Philadelphia’s Mikveh Israel Jacob R. Cohen marched in a celebratory procession “arms locked with other clergymen,” but sat at a separate table

---

70 Letter to Charles King, 10.
71 Malamed, Jews in Early America, 160.
72 Ibid., 161–64.
with kosher refreshments after the parade.\textsuperscript{73} It meant comprehensive economic and social integration alongside “long funny”\textsuperscript{74} stories of the inconveniences that could arise when working or socializing away from other Jews, including using an intermediary to write a business partner about a delayed shipment on account of “this being the Holy-Days”\textsuperscript{75} or needing to camp out on the side of the road and use a gas lamp to welcome the Sabbath after travel delays.\textsuperscript{76} Being an American Jew meant the freedom and security to treat those who “will never like us” with hospitality and friendliness so as to “return dislike with Love,”\textsuperscript{77} the responsibility to teach one’s children “to be faithful to their religion, to their friends and country, [and] equitable to all mankind,”\textsuperscript{78} and the hope that these lessons would continue to be passed down from generation to generation.

**Republican Tzedakah**

Any account of Jewish benevolence in the early American republic necessarily includes the life and work of Rebecca Gratz. Born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1781 and raised in Philadelphia, Gratz enjoyed an education and social status befitting her rank as the daughter of a successful merchant. In addition to the wealth of religious, cosmopolitan, and philosophical knowledge available in her father’s personal library, Gratz attended the prestigious Young Ladies’ Academy, the first chartered institution for


\textsuperscript{74} Henry Etting to Benjamin Etting, Jan. 8, 1826, Box 70, Etting Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP), Philadelphia.

\textsuperscript{75} Charles Matheson to Michael Gratz, Apr. 10, 1776, Box 67, Etting Papers.

\textsuperscript{76} H. Etting to B. Etting, Jan. 8, 1826.

\textsuperscript{77} Miriam Etting to B. Etting, June 15, 1829, Box 70, Etting Papers.

\textsuperscript{78} Mordecai M. Noah, *A Discourse, Delivered at the Consecration of the Synagogue יַרְדֵּנִי הַשָׁרוֹן in the City of New York, on Friday, the 10th of Nisan, 5578, Corresponding with the 17th of April, 1818* (New York, 1818).
women’s higher education in the United States.\textsuperscript{79} Along with her “literary ease” and “close familiarity with the [intellectual] rhetoric of the day,”\textsuperscript{80} Gratz was a regular attendee of Philadelphia’s Assembly Balls and society teas. Indeed, her biographer Dianne Ashton observed, Rebecca Gratz’s social life was a veritable who’s who of the early republican influential and glamorous, with “the children of Alexander Hamilton, publisher John Fenno, … Rev. John Ewing, the provost of the University of Pennsylvania … among her companions” and Gertrude Meredith, “whose home served as Philadelphia’s literary salon … one of Gratz’s most intimate friends.”\textsuperscript{81} So well known and respected was Gratz’s geniality, intellect, and overall refinement that she is widely considered to be the model for Rebecca, the heroine of Sir Walter Scott’s novel *Ivanhoe*.\textsuperscript{82}

Amidst her active social life as a member of early republican Philadelphia’s elite and close friendships with her Christian neighbors, however, Gratz was also firmly committed to her Jewish faith. She attended synagogue regularly and observed the dietary restrictions of *kashrut*.\textsuperscript{83} While she never married or had children of her own, Gratz was


\textsuperscript{80} Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz*, 38.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{82} The connection between Rebecca Gratz and the character in *Ivanhoe* was first popularized by Graetz van Rensselaer in “The Original of Rebecca in Ivanhoe,” *Century Magazine*, 24 (1882), 679–82. See also Joseph Jacobs, “The Original of Scott’s Rebecca,” *PAJHS*, 22 (1914), 53–60; Judith Lewin, “Legends of Rebecca: *Ivanhoe*, Dynamic Identification, and the Portraits of Rebecca Gratz,” *Nashim: A journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issues*, 10 (Fall 2005), 178–212.

deeply invested in the Jewish education and fidelity of her family. “Do not imagine,” she wrote to her brother Joseph after his arrival in New Orleans, “I have been led to this subject by any doubts of your observance of the duties enjoined upon you,” but nevertheless urged him to maintain “an adherence to the forms and principles of [our] religion.”\textsuperscript{84} She likewise reminded her brother Benjamin about the upcoming “mournful anniversary of our Beloved Parents death … on the 27th inst.”\textsuperscript{85} Referring to the Hebrew date of their parents’ deaths, here Gratz observed and reminded her youngest sibling to observe \textit{yahrzeit}, the practice of lighting a memorial candle and reciting the mourner’s prayer to mark the anniversary of a close relative’s death.\textsuperscript{86} On happier occasions too did Rebecca gently remind her brothers of upcoming holidays and endeavor to preserve tradition: “The 10th of April,” she wrote in another letter to Benjamin, “is Passover.” Normally, she remarked, “I might expect you to keep it with us, when you went away I did certainly hope to see you at that time – you must let me know where you will be at that period.”\textsuperscript{87}

Born in the final months of the Revolutionary War, Rebecca Gratz came of age with the young republic and, in her final years, watched the adolescent nation cleave apart and begin the difficult process of reconstruction. While she had clear ideas about a woman’s place as “an ornament to society,”\textsuperscript{88} Rebecca was by no means a mere spectator

\textsuperscript{84} Rebecca Gratz to Joseph Gratz, Nov. 1, 1807, Box 2, Folder 8, Gratz family (Philadelphia) papers, AJHS.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid. Rebecca’s mother and father died six days shy of three years apart, on September 12, 1808 and September 8, 1811, respectively. On the Hebrew calendar, however, their deaths were only one day apart (or possibly even on the same day, depending on if they died before or after sundown) on the 20th of Elul 5568 and 19th of Elul 5571.
\textsuperscript{88} R. Gratz to Rachel Gratz, Sept. 16, 1798, Box 15, Gratz Family Papers, American Philosophical Society (APS), Philadelphia.
to these developments. For all her erudition and social graces, however, she was still a product of her time and therefore limited by her status as a woman – arguably doubly so as a Jewish woman – in the early republic. In this context, Dianne Ashton suggested, benevolent societies “seemed to offer Rebecca her only chance for a rewarding life outside the confines of a narrow domesticity.”

Much has been written on the ways in which women in this period made their voices and interests heard through philanthropic activities and Rebecca Gratz was no exception. Philanthropy gave her the opportunity to contribute to the project of construction the early republic and navigating her place as a woman and a Jew in the new nation.

Rebecca Gratz’s first foray into the world of organized benevolence came in 1801, when she, along with her mother, two of her sisters, and twenty other women from a variety of religious backgrounds came together to form the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances. The organization’s mission to help middle and upper class women who, as “victims of misfortune,” had fallen on hard times is admittedly not the most groundbreaking initiative. Nevertheless, it is instructive to an understanding of the function of benevolence for Gratz and, more broadly, the ways

---

89 Ashton, Rebecca Gratz, 52.


91 The Constitution of the Female Association of Philadelphia for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances (Philadelphia, 1803), 03. “How hard,” it was reflected, “it is to have the tastes, the habits, the longings and recollections, if not of affluence, at least of comfort, and yet to be poor.” See Ashton, Rebecca Gratz, 62.
in which philanthropy provided a space for the expression of Jewish-American claims about the shape of the new nation and their place in it. As a founding member and later the executive secretary of the first nonsectarian women’s organization in the city, Gratz was an integral part of the self-described “number of Ladies of Philadelphia” at the helm of the project. From a belief that “union alone will give equal strength to the undertaking,” the founding members of this new type of charitable organization – one in which women not only comforted the suffering but also controlled the finances – came together and wrote a constitution so that their “design may be carried into effect in a manner the most advantageous.”

The Female Association provided privileged women with the opportunity to contribute to the project of republican benevolence and engage in the construction of national identity without compromising their status or respectability. For Rebecca Gratz, participation in the Female Association not only demonstrated Jewish civic commitment and even “refinement” – that ineffable quality related to though not necessarily guaranteed by wealth – it also allowed her to model pluralism and normalize Jewish inclusion.

By her very presence, Gratz’s contribution to organizations such as the Female Association challenged long-held anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jewish “ill-temper” and assumptions about the uniform Christian character of the early republic. With her reputation for benevolence and “quality,” Gratz was not content to blend into the background but rather used her platform to combat the anti-Jewish and exclusionary
attitudes she encountered. She described one such occasion when she “had [her] philosophy a little tried the other day by some good Christians”\(^96\) in a letter to her sister-in-law. Gratz explained her consternation when several of her fellow Managers at the Orphan Society of Philadelphia (OSP) – an organization she helped establish and served for many years as Secretary – moved to reject a petition for adoption on the grounds that the prospective parents were Unitarians.\(^97\) “‘Ladies’ said I,” Gratz recounted, “‘there are many children under my special direction – you all know my creed – suppose I should want one to bring up in my family?’” – “You may have one, said a church woman – because the Jews do not think it a duty to convert” but said a Presbyterian “I should not consent to [the child] being put under the influence of a Unitarian.”\(^98\) By speaking up, Gratz challenged her longtime colleagues and friends to walk the walk of their stated nonsectarian mission and, as suggested by her notice of their denominational allegiances, found their responses unsatisfying, unchristian, and hypocritical. Not content to let the issue rest and unwilling to be seen as an exception to the rule of Protestant moral superiority, Gratz “got into a long discussion on the subject of religion, with a lady” after the meeting ended. “Though we have been more than twenty years acquainted,” she wrote, “I expect she will look shy on me the rest of our lives.” It is a “pity,” Gratz concluded the letter, that such “favoured” circumstances could be “perverted into a subject of strife.”\(^99\) Here, benevolence not only provided Rebecca Gratz with a way to

---

\(^96\) R. Gratz to Maria Gist Gratz, 1832, in *Letters of Rebecca Gratz*, 145.

\(^97\) The petitioners were the Reverend William Henry Furness and his wife, Anne Furness. Ostensibly a nondenominational organization, the OSP managers should have had little reason to refuse the petition of a white, married, economically stable, and respected couple. Rebecca’s indignity may have been amplified by the fact that she enjoyed a friendship with Anne and often went to the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia to hear William preach. William Wagenknecht, *Daughters of the Covenant: Portraits of Six Jewish Women* (Amherst, MA, 1983), 20.

\(^98\) R. Gratz to M. Gist Gratz, 1832, in *Letters of Rebecca Gratz*, 145.

\(^99\) Ibid., 146.
participate in society as a woman, it provided her with the “communal authority”\textsuperscript{100} to push back against – although not always successfully – those with an exclusionary and “illiberal spirit”\textsuperscript{101} and defend the rightful place of Jews in a pluralistic early republic.

In general studies, Rebecca Gratz’s prominence is generally regarded as a one-off curiosity rather than a challenge to the standard narrative of how mainstream Protestant culture shaped early republican benevolence. In her account of philanthropy and the rise of civil society in the United States, Kathleen McCarthy observed that Gratz’s involvement with the OSP might easily be “construed as a sign of her assimilation into mainstream Protestant culture” were it not for the fact that “the causes she subsequently embraced illustrate her growing interest in Jewish communalism.”\textsuperscript{102} In general, McCarthy concluded, “while Protestant women engaged in both charitable activities and social reform in increasing numbers, spanning the country with their auxiliaries, services, and fund-raising campaigns, Jewish women focused on communal needs.”\textsuperscript{103} Rebecca Gratz’s Christian contemporaries also tended to regard her as an exception to the rule. At the beginning of what was to become a long and close friendship, Gertrude Meredith described Gratz to her husband as a “sensible and amiable woman” who, “like the few righteous persons [that] saved the city of Nineveh from destruction,” might “save her family from that scorn and contempt which we liberal Christians generally attach to Jews.”\textsuperscript{104} While Rebecca Gratz was exceptional in many ways, she was by no means one of a righteous and benevolent few early republican Jews who dedicated their wealth and

\textsuperscript{100} Ashton, \textit{Rebecca Gratz}, 92.
\textsuperscript{101} R. Gratz to M. Gist Gratz, 1832, in \textit{Letters of Rebecca Gratz}, 146.
\textsuperscript{102} McCarthy, \textit{American Creed}, 62.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{104} Gertrude Meredith to William Meredith, Sept. 27, 1805, Box 17, Folder 11, Meredith Family Papers, HSP.
service to philanthropic endeavors that served the broader community. Jewish
benevolence and American benevolence, like Jewish identity and American identity,
were not mutually exclusive. For Rebecca Gratz and for Jewish-Americans throughout
the early United States, philanthropy functioned as a means by which to demonstrate
Jewish respectability and civic virtue, combat implicit and explicit anti-Jewish attitudes,
and promote the full inclusion of Jews in the early republican polity as well as protect
their distinct religious identity.

Philanthropic Tradition, Change, and Scope

Judaism, like other religious traditions, includes charity – tzedakah – among its
core obligations. The commandment to practice tzedakah is found in the Book of
Deuteronomy, where, amidst directives about the Passover festival and ritual sacrifice,
Moses instructed the Israelites: “tzedek, tzedek, tirdof” – “justice, justice, you shall
pursue.”

105 Hebrew is a language of roots, wherein words are formed from different
three-letter bases. The connection between the root tzedek (צדק), meaning ‘justice’ and
tzedakah (צדקה), the Hebrew word used to describe benevolent activities, is therefore
significant. Tzedakah literally means “righteousness,” which, one scholar explained,
“suggests that charity is not only good, but also right.”

106 In Jewish tradition, therefore, tzedakah goes beyond doing what is humane, compassionate, or charitable, but includes
pursuing justice through generosity and a wide range of individual and communal action.

As Jewish practice evolved, tzedakah remained a central tenet and also adapted to
reflect the needs of the specific time and place. Throughout the colonial period, the
Jewish poor and disadvantaged were provided for within the community. The reasons for

105 Deuteronomy, ch. 16, v. 20.
106 Michael Walzer, “On Humanitarianism: Is Helping Others Charity, Duty, or Both?” Foreign Affairs, 90
(July/Aug. 2011), 69–80, 70.
this case-by-case approach, wherein “the local poor were given grants for fuel and rent and food, the luckless in the debtors’ jails were helped; the sick were given subsidies and the service of a physician, the impoverished and the helpless aged … were given pensions”\textsuperscript{107} are several. As a small group with close transnational connections, the poor – even those who had recently arrived from elsewhere – were not an anonymous mass, but were more often than not the relatives or acquaintances of others. At the very least, they were brethren within a minority and marginalized (if not outright persecuted) group. Thus while British policy increasingly curtailed the movement of the poor through restrictive vagrancy laws, notices about the arrival of destitute Jews to a new city were sent not in order to prevent settlement, but to allow the community to effectively attend to their particular needs. In 1761, officials in New York City received a letter from their counterparts in Newport informing them of the situation of “Mess.rs. Abraham & Mathias Cohen” who were “recommended to Us by the Gabay [in Jamaica] … as Objects of Charity.” While, the letter continued, “We On Our parts have Contributed As Much as the Nature of Our Affairs Would Admitt of at this Time,”\textsuperscript{108} they were sending them to New York in the hope that a larger city and Jewish community could afford the men better prospects. Rather than “warning out”\textsuperscript{109} Abraham and Mathias Cohen to avoid the cost of poor relief, there was a coordinated effort among the Jewish communities in Jamaica, Newport, and New York to share responsibility and work together toward a positive outcome. Beyond a long tradition of communal tzedakah, these practices also

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{107} Marcus, \textit{Early American Jewry}, 2: 484.
\item \textsuperscript{108} Letter from Newport to K.K.S.I. regarding Abraham and Mathias Cohen, two poor men, May 26, 1761, Series I, Box 3, Folder 173, JJJL Papers.
\end{itemize}
lessened Jewish reliance on public funds. As tolerance of Jews in the colonial period was often rooted in an expectation of economic benefit, the presence of even just a few Jews in the almshouse was a circumstance best avoided. When they did find themselves caught up in the mainstream legal and poor relief system, colonial Jews made personal appeals – often successfully – to the synagogue in their city for assistance.\footnote{110}

These practices continued into the early republican period. In 1800, the budget for Congregation Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina included “salary items for the minister, the shohet [ritual slaughterer], the sexton, the meat inspector, the secretary, the wax and candle maker, as well as items for the kabana [Tabernacle], for sick persons and doctors’ bills, and allowances and pensions for transient and sundry poor.”\footnote{111} Personal appeals and communal assistance continued to predominate, be it for “masoth [matzah] for the insuing Pesah [Passover]” for a “family amounting to Eight persons,”\footnote{112} enough fuel and bread to keep a widow out of the almshouse, or funds to allow an orphaned boy to return to his surviving family “comfortably and decently clad.”\footnote{113} As certain practices persisted, other functions of philanthropy within the Jewish community reflected general trends. Utilizing the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism and American philanthropic distinctiveness, philanthropy became a place for Jews to both shape and demonstrate American identity. Like their Christian neighbors, early republican Jews articulated these qualities in organizational constitutions, annual reports, and speeches.

\footnote{110} Such was the case for Michael Jacobs, a “poor distressed Petitioner” who appealed to the leaders of Shearith Israel in New York for relief after being confined in debtors jail “for upwards of twenty six Weeks which has so reduced him that he is no longer able to support under it, and cannot afford himself the common Necessary’s of Life.” Petition of Michael Jacobs for assistance, Sept. 9, 1773, Series I, Box 2, Folder 122, J JL Papers.
\footnote{111} Uriah Zevi Engelman, “Jewish Education in Charleston, South Carolina, During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” \textit{PAJHS}, 42 (Sept. 1952), 43–70, 52.
\footnote{112} Request of Simeon Levy to K.K.S.I. for matzoth, Mar. 19, 1805, Series I, Box 2, Folder 122, J JL Papers.
Thus as the early republican Jewish community continued to help its poor, sick, and otherwise destitute within the synagogue structure, separate organizations were also established to address specific issues in a more focused and effective manner. Reflecting contemporary attitudes, these organizations distinguished between the deserving and undeserving, as the Constitution of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society in Philadelphia made clear, their new association would provide help only to those who were “of good moral character.”¹¹⁴ These ostensibly positive developments in benevolent practice were linked to the unique opportunities of the new nation, inspired, Myer Moses observed in an address to the Hebrew Orphan Society in Charleston, “the mild and liberal constitution of our country.”¹¹⁵ Moses and other benevolent Jewish-Americans situated their efforts not only within the tradition of tzedakah, but as part of a national custom where “the means of alleviating the sufferings of the poor are considered of high importance”¹¹⁶ that were “in strict accordance with the spirit of the numerous societies [in the United States] instituted for benevolent purposes, which are … the boast and pride … of [the] country.”¹¹⁷ Jewish benevolence, they insisted, did not exist outside of the mainstream of early republican society, but imbib[ed] in the spirit” of the unique “age of benevolence”¹¹⁸ wrought by American independence that both reflected and contributed to the success of the new nation.

As these accounts insisted upon the innate ‘American-ness’ of organizations like the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society of Philadelphia, the Society for the Education of

¹¹⁴ Constitution of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1825), 06, LCP.
¹¹⁵ Moses, An Oration, 06.
¹¹⁶ Constitution of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, 03.
¹¹⁷ David L.M. Peixotto, Anniversary Discourse, Pronounced Before the Society for the Education of Orphan Children, and the Relief of Indigent Persons of the Jewish Persuasion (New York, 1830), 10, AJHS.
¹¹⁸ Ibid., 14, 11.
Orphan Children and the Relief of Indigent Persons of the Jewish Persuasion (New York), and the Hebrew Orphan Society (South Carolina), they did not attempt to downplay their Jewish character. Nor should they have to, contended Myer Moses, for the same Constitution behind republican benevolence also “[knew] no distinction in our citizens.” If anything, he continued, Jewish-Americans had a “particularly … sacred love [of] our country” and appreciation for the opportunities of the United States as compared to the “oppressed days of our forefathers” as well as the “chains of oppression” experienced by all colonists under British rule. Indeed, orators often emphasized the centrality of benevolence in Jewish tradition, as David Peixotto observed, “the ear of the Israelite can never be deaf to the cry of the sufferer … The first law imposed upon his heart, and engraved upon his memory, is to love his neighbor as himself, and not to afflict the stranger within his gates.” Within the discourse of benevolent republicanism, the instinctive philanthropy and eager patriotism of early republican Jews demonstrated their commitment to be part of ensuring that the new nation achieved its full potential. For all the ways in which the Jewish experience was unique, in a society where “institutions [have] such direct and liberal influence on the people,” early republican Jewish benevolence reflected a commitment to furthering the American cause. May, then, exclaimed Myer Moses, the Abi Yetonim (the Jewish orphanage in Charleston) “pluck from its promising stock … a WASHINGTON for the field; a JEFFERSON for the cabinet, and a PREBLE for the Navy.” The purpose of this institution, like the other

120 Ibid., 21, 18.
recently established orphanages throughout the early republic, was to save destitute, parentless children from the ill influences of the almshouse and provide them with an education and skills that would allow them to “walk in the path” of virtuous “fellow citizens” such as “WASHINGTON … FRANKLIN … [and] RITTENHOUSE.” As these efforts added “manifestly to the respectability of the Hebrew character,” they also demonstrated a sound American character.

While any one speech or pamphlet could not possibly undo centuries of anti-Semitism and Jewish exclusion, the claims of Jewish-American philanthropists were heard and valued by a diverse audience. In an anniversary oration given in honor of the Hebrew Orphan Society in Charleston, Isaac Harby “pronounced a discourse in the presence of its members, and a large assembly of its citizens.” The audience, an attendee reported, included “most of the first literary character Charleston could … boast of.” They were so moved by Harby’s words that “tears [were] made flow” and “warm admiration was expressed in the strongest terms.” Conscious of his platform, Harby’s speech clearly “assert[ed] the truth and sublimity of his own faith” and, in so doing, “he was as convincing to his hearers as he was liberal to the convictions of all other believers.” In this public forum, Harby used benevolence to celebrate Jewish contributions to the early republic and, as he “united” his audience “in feelings of true benevolence and sympathy,” model pluralism and appeal to his audience to do the same.

---

124 Ibid.
125 Ibid., 24.
As Jewish philanthropic endeavors engaged with and contributed to republican benevolence, individual Jewish-Americans also participated in mainstream efforts in significant – given their relative size – numbers. Throughout the United States, Jews subscribed to and served on the executive committees of a variety of organizations. They were founding members of the Philadelphia and Boston Athenaeums and vocal supporters of the free school movement in New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston. Jewish early republicans served their communities as Postmaster, on the Board of Health, and as Commissioner of the Poor House. They were incorporating members of the Orphan Society of Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Institute for the Deaf, the Marine Society of Baltimore, and the Library Society of Georgetown, South Carolina.

In Charleston, Jacob De La Motta served his community as a physician for the city’s Dispensary and was elected Secretary of the Medical Society in 1824, Commissioner to the Poor-House in 1831, and Secretary for the Literary and Philosophical Society in 1832. Indeed, Dr. De Law Motta’s character was so widely known and valued that he was named a corresponding member of the Royal Academy of Medicine at Paris in 1836. His commitment to benevolence and desire to “alleviate the distresses of humanity and meliorate the suffering condition of mankind”\(^\text{127}\) was also felt in the Jewish community directly – De La Motta held several leadership positions in Charleston’s synagogue, Beth Elohim, and was a lifelong member of the Hebrew Orphan Society.\(^\text{128}\) Judah Touro was remembered in his adoptive city of New Orleans as “the foremost of our rich men in all contributions to charitable objects.” Along with bequests

\(^{127}\) Jacob De La Motta to Samuel Wilson, in Thomas J. Tobias, “The Many-Sided Dr. De La Motta,” American Jewish Historical Quarterly, 52 (Mar. 1963)

to Jewish organizations in Louisiana, Boston, New York, and Rhode Island, his will left $3000 to the First Unitarian Church of New Orleans, $5000 each to the Asylum of Orphan Boys and Female Orphan Asylum in Boston, $10,000 to the Massachusetts General Hospital, and dozens of other “associations not connected with his own faith.”\footnote{“The Late Judah Touro,” Feb. 11, 1854, \textit{Christian Inquirer}.}
The examples of Jewish-American philanthropy are many and varied: Uriah Phillips Levy, the naval commodore, purchased a then-derelict Monticello in 1834 and restored Jefferson’s homestead at personal expense; Hyman Gratz, brother of Rebecca, was the treasurer of the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia; Jacob I. Cohen helped established Baltimore’s public school system – the list goes on.\footnote{Malamed, \textit{Jews in Early America}, 160–62; J. Solis-Cohen, Jr., “The World of Hyman Gratz,” \textit{P AJHS}, 50 (1961), 240–47; Altfield, \textit{Jew’s Struggle}, 47.}

On a very basic level, these cases suggest that early republican benevolence was less uniformly Protestant than traditionally assumed. While the presence of one or two Jewish-Americans in an organization’s leadership would not have represented any sort of serious challenge to the Christian ethos that prevailed in the United States or its “age of benevolence,” it is worthwhile to acknowledge this diversity as a widespread reality rather than the occasional exception to the rule. Particularly in the context of the relationship between benevolence and the construction of American identity, the presence, contributions, and opinions of Jewish-American philanthropists provide a more diverse and complex narrative of the function of philanthropy. Representation, after all, is important; Jewish participation in republican benevolence allowed them to build relationships with their Christian neighbors in new and meaningful ways that normalized Jews not just as tolerated outsiders, but as fellow citizens. For Jewish-Americans, participation in mainstream efforts provided them both with an outlet for \textit{tzedakah} and a
platform from which to articulate their vision for the new nation and their rightful place within it.

**Mordecai Manuel Noah and the Question of American Character**

Born in Philadelphia in 1785 to a Sephardic family and raised in Charleston, Noah was a well-known public figure throughout the early republic with a keen sense of patriotic responsibility to rid the young nation of the “follies and extravagance of Europe” and foster the innate American “genius and … judicious character.” As he sought to shape his country as an elected official, foreign consul, playwright, journalist, and philanthropist, Noah did not hide or downplay his religious identity. Indeed, he felt that the United States also represented a unique moment in Jewish history, where “for the first time in eighteen centuries, it may be said that the Jew feels he was born equal” and may at last “breathe freely.”

Described by scholars as “vainglorious, boastful, and extravagantly theatrical” and even prone to the occasional “ostentatious and delusional declaration,” Noah used his platform to contribute to the project of nation building and “demand continuous recognition as both a devoted American and a devoted Jew.”

For Noah, philanthropy functioned as a space in which to articulate a distinct American identity that was also inclusive, rather than just tolerant, of Jews. In 1822, he

---

131 Noah, *Essays of Howard, on Domestic Economy* (New York, 1820), 40, 105, AJHS.
133 Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York, 1981). A favorite example of Noah’s theatricality is his response to the work of the American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews. In addition to regular editorials opposing their efforts in the *National Advocate* (of which he was the executive editor), Noah would attend the society’s annual meetings. “His presence,” observed Jonathan Sarna, “eloquent in its silence, served as indubitable public testimony of missionary failure.” (Sarna, “American Jewish Response, 48.)
gave an address to the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen in New York City, an organization founded soon after American independence with the aim to provide educational and social support to craftsmen and their families. As one of the organization’s managers, Noah celebrated the opening of the Mechanic Institution and the Apprentices’ Library, which would provide patrons with the educational resources to succeed in business and as citizens. \(^{136}\) Noah’s speech is at heart a patriotic one, inciting listeners not only to continue to support the organization and its efforts to improve life in the community, but to work toward common benevolent goals so that the new nation could achieve its full potential. He thus encouraged his audience, as the “legitimate owners to the soil,” to utilize their “native ingenuity” now that they were no longer “indebted to England for every object of utility and ornament” or “checked by foreign agents.” \(^{137}\) Like other benevolent republicans, Noah saw independence as an ongoing project that involved more than just political independence, but one that also required becoming “independent of Europe” on all levels, in addition to being “free in government.” \(^{138}\)

Given his use of “we” and “our” throughout the address, it is clear that Noah considered himself to be part of the American polity and an authoritative voice in the process of constructing a distinct national identity. Although he was respected enough to be asked to represent the General Society on this milestone occasion, Noah also regularly encountered those who considered his religious identity a disqualification. When he was removed as Consul to Tunis less than two years after his appointment, Secretary of State


\(^{137}\) Noah, *An Address Delivered Before the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New-York, on the Opening of the Mechanic Institution* (New York, 1822), 06, LCP.

\(^{138}\) Ibid.
James Monroe explained only that Noah’s religion had become “an obstacle to the exercise of ... Consular functions.” Although his diplomatic record was not without fault, Noah was “shocked” that his Jewish identity could be used to “at once” strip him “of office, of rights, of honour, and credit.” This incident, which was covered widely in American newspapers and further publicized by Noah’s release of Travels in England, France, Spain, and the Barbary States, was closely associated with Noah for the rest of his career. Thus when Noah gave his address before the General Society, he did so not just as a benevolent republican, but also as a well-known and outspoken Jewish benevolent republican.

Noah did not actually mention his Jewish faith or Judaism in his speech. However, the ways in which he articulated the promise of the Mechanic Institute is informative. The new library, he hailed, would open the doors of knowledge to apprentices and allow them to develop their “thinking faculties” and thereby contribute to a civil society that does not “check the progress of intellect” but supported “all those improvements which new times, new laws, and a new people demand.” Free from the early inculcation of “polemical doctrines that close the mind,” this method of education would instead perpetuate “an equality of rights” wherein “merit” was the only “passport to power,” therefore securing “to our country all those blessings, which result from intelligence and virtue.” Here, virtue was first and foremost rooted in accomplishment. While faith was regarded as important – “no community ever yet prospered without religion,” Noah observed – no one particular creed was specified. “In your piety,” he

---

139 James Monroe to Noah, Apr. 15, 1815, in Noah, Travels in England, France, Spain, and the Barbary States, in the Years 1813–14 and 15 (New York, 1819), 376.
140 Ibid., 377.
141 Noah, Address Delivered Before the General Society, 13.
142 Ibid., 13–14.
continued, “be tolerant of others, remember that “peace on earth and good will to man” is a doctrine that you cannot adopt with too much zeal and sincerity.” In Noah’s account, religion was a personal tool in the success of the republican experiment, a practice that promoted discipline and humility in an otherwise pluralistic society united by “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” on “equal terms.”

The significance of Noah’s speech in relation to the articulation of an inclusive American identity is all the more evident in comparison to the one it was published alongside. Given by Thomas R. Mercein at the start of construction in 1821, the two addresses concur on many points. Both Noah and Mercein described the work of the Mechanic Institution as “devoted to future usefulness” that would allow a broader section of society to “seek the deep fountains of knowledge” in order to support “civil liberty and multiply the blessings of social life.”

Mercein likewise observed the importance of “civil and religious freedom,” but still described the promise and path of the new nation in religious terms, with “an unseen and divine hand [that] appears to have seized on the rising generation … to save and make happy every quarter.” This imagery, even if not explicitly Christian or exclusionary toward Jews, nevertheless represents a difference from Noah’s account. While Noah saw religion as an important personal quality that facilitated the broader “progress of intellect” and pursuit of civic virtue, for Mercein God was infused throughout the entire process and national and religious righteousness were deeply intertwined. Ultimately, he observed, the Mechanic Institute will “add

143 Ibid., 18, 16.
145 Ibid., 24.
146 Noah, Address Delivered Before the General Society, 13.
dignity to the human character, and assimilate the creature to the creator.”\textsuperscript{147} It is possible that Mercein included Noah and his co-religionists as part of this dignified effort – or at the very least did not intend to exclude them. Nevertheless, the fundamental differences between Christianity and Judaism meant that in the end Jews, to their mortal peril, abstained from any sort of true religion that might assimilate the creature to the creator. Certainly on an individual basis it was possible for Christian benevolent republicans to appreciate Jewish contributions to “civil liberty” and even their ability to improve the “blessings of social life,” but they were still an exception to a rule that saw Christian morality and American virtue as synonymous. From his platform as a leading and respected member of the General Society, Noah was able to articulate an ideal American character in a way that emphasized the importance and possibility of pluralism in the republican experiment. Standing before the audience as a benevolent republican and an unapologetic Jew, Noah insisted on an American character that not only tolerated him as a Jew but saw no inconsistency between his religion and civic virtue.

\textit{Bonds of Benevolence: The Rise and Fall of David G. Seixas}

Participation in mainstream philanthropy facilitated relationships between Jewish-Americans and their Christian neighbors. While economic partnerships had long served similar purposes, these were largely limited to the mercantile elite, vulnerable to the vagaries of trade and taste, and had the unfortunate tendency to reinforce age-old stereotypes about Jews and the pursuit of wealth. Likewise, though military service during the Revolution and War of 1812 provided powerful common cause on the common ground of the battlefield, these opportunities were limited to able-bodied men for the duration of the conflict. Benevolence extended these interactions to a broader

\textsuperscript{147}Mercein, “Remarks on Laying the Corner Stone,” 27.
portion of society in a long-lasting way. These collective efforts normalized Jews as engaged neighbors and fellow patriots by providing a space where Jews and Christians worked together toward a shared mission as Americans.

In 1819, David G. Seixas – son of Gershom Seixas, the leader of Shearith Israel in New York – began to educate deaf children in the back of his small crockery store in Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{148} Seixas’ efforts soon attracted the attention of Philadelphia’s broader benevolent community and, by April 1820, a meeting was convened at the American Philosophical Society for the purpose of establishing a formal institution that would serve the entire state. With the venerable Reverend William White as chair, the new organization’s leadership included William Meredith (husband of Gertrude), Roberts Vaux, and Rebecca Gratz’s brothers Joseph and Jacob.\textsuperscript{149} In \textit{An Account of the Origin and Progress of the Pennsylvania Institution}, Seixas was described as a “humane individual” who “had for some months past applied his knowledge and talents in the most unostentatious manner to that benevolent object” of educating deaf children. In addition to the task of successfully instructing “eleven of twelve children” who had previously been “labouring under the deplorable privation of the sense of hearing and speech,”\textsuperscript{150} Seixas was praised for his contributions to the development of an independent American benevolence. In a public address, William Meredith situated the Institution and the efforts of David Seixas firmly within the “exemplary liberality” of the early republic. “It does not become,” Meredith emphasized, “\textit{Pennsylvania} to look \textit{abroad} for benevolent solutions.” Fortunately, he continued, “a few months since, a young man, seemingly

\textsuperscript{149} \textit{An Account of the Origin and Progress of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb} (Philadelphia, 1821), 03, LCP.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.
endowed by Providence with a peculiar and extraordinary talent for this work of goodness” had found success that “has equaled, perhaps … surpassed that of any of contemporaries.” In this benevolent context, Seixas – an artisan and son of a hazan – was described in the *Weekly Aurora* not by his religion but as “a young man of this city … of truly philanthropic and elevated views” whose “disinterested benevolence” was an “honor of human nature.” As a philanthropist, Seixas’ “extraordinary talents” proved his “superior[ity] to any man in this country, and certainly … any [in] Europe,” and brought “honour upon our native city.” As an exemplar not just of benevolence, but specifically of a distinct *American* benevolence, Seixas had “kindled a flame of charity in others” and sparked the “co-operation” that led to the creation of the estimable Pennsylvania Institution.

Members of the Jewish community were aware of the ways in which philanthropy in this instance functioned as a means of integration and provided recognition as Americans without qualification. In a letter to her sister-in-law, Rebecca Gratz reported that their “old acquaintance David Seixas is distinguishing himself among the benefactors of mankind, and is likely to reap the reward due to his talents and humanity.” These efforts, she continued, attracted “the notice of our humane and scientific citizens” who together with Seixas had put together “a truly philosophical plan” to establish “an Institution – of which this ingenious and philanthropic young man will be the principal.” As this work brought Seixas renown, it also expanded his social circle,

---

151 Ibid., 08.
152 *Weekly Aurora* (Philadelphia), June 12, 1820.
154 *Account of the Origin and Progress of the Pennsylvania Institution*, 08.
including that of the Meredith family, whom Rebecca Gratz described as “among his best friends.”

It was through the Pennsylvania Institute that David Seixas also became acquainted with George Houston. Houston’s daughter Janet was a student at the Institute and her letters home attested to both the quality of her education and the kindness of her instructor. With the appreciation of a young girl far from home, Janet reported that David’s sister, “Miss Rachel Seixas gave me bitters and sweet sugar, peaches and cherries” and, when she was sick, “Mr. David G. Seixas gave me many many prunes, yellow candy, and oranges, and large apples, roasted.” What makes this connection particularly interesting is that George Houston was almost certainly the anonymous author of *Israel Vindicated*, a “vigorous polemical work” that – as the subtitle of the book explained – was “a refutation of the calumnies propagated respecting the Jewish nation; in which the objects and views of the American Society for Ameliorating the Condition of Jews are investigated.” Writing under the pseudonym “An Israelite,” Houston challenged the “pernicious principles” that arose from such evangelism on a philosophical level as he also insisted on the humanity and patriotism of Jewish-Americans. Through the (fictional) perspective of an American Jew, *Israel Vindicated* not only underscored the false charity of assistance that was actually “regulated by the cold calculating rules of sectarianism” but also revealed how such treatment “by …

---

159 An Israelite [George Houston], *Israel Vindicated: Being a Refutation of the Calumnies Propagated Respecting the Jewish Nation: in which the Objects and Views of the American Society for Ameliorating the Condition of the Jews are Investigated* (New York, 1820), AJHS.
160 Ibid., vi.
161 Ibid., 10.
fellow-citizens as being of an inferior cast” prevented Jews from being able to fully
“employ their talents to advantage for public good.” Thus, Houston contended, while
“many individuals have sprung from the Jewish nation, highly celebrated for their talents
and virtues,” continued exclusion and harassment would deny the republic of valuable
statesmen, soldiers, and philanthropists.

There is no definite explanation for why Houston wrote Israel Vindicated, though
scholars generally agree that he did not conceive of the project himself and was likely
paid for the work by members of the Jewish community. All the same, his relationships
with Jewish-Americans in a variety of contexts certainly influenced the process. Houston
made his living as a journalist and was a regular contributor to Mordecai Noah’s National
 Advocate, working his way up to the position of assistant editor. Perhaps through Noah or
merely by virtue of having a young daughter who was deaf and nonverbal, Houston was
also aware of Seixas’ efforts, sending Janet to the Pennsylvania Institute as soon as she
was old enough to attend. Thus in his characterization of Jewish-Americans as
benevolent, committed citizens, he was not writing in abstract or from second-hand
reports, but with first-hand knowledge of the ways in which their efforts helped families
like his own. It is, of course, entirely possible that Houston would have written Israel
Vindicated as he did without these personal relationships. Much of the work is abstract
and Houston, having arrived in the United States in 1817 following imprisonment in
England for blasphemy, certainly had strong ideas about freedom of religion. Still, an
awareness of these relationships provides a more nuanced perspective on the ways in
which Jewish rights were asserted and gained in the early republic. As Jewish-Americans

162 Ibid., vi.
163 Ibid., vii.
articulated their vision for an inalienable place in the new nation in a variety of ways, including through benevolence, the abstract pluralism of Christian-Americans became concrete. While David Seixas did not use his platform as principal of the Pennsylvania Institute to make specific claims about his status as a Jewish-American, his philanthropy still had multiple functions. Benevolence facilitated relationships across religious creed and created a space where philanthropy – rather than religious difference – was the main focus and, in the words of Mordecai Noah, a “passport to power.”¹⁶⁴

The story of David Seixas and the Pennsylvania Institute, however, soon took a dark turn. Sometime toward the end of 1821, the Board of Directors received “complaints … of the conduct of Mr. Seixas, to certain of his female pupils.”¹⁶⁵ Without presuming to re-litigate the matter, the circumstances surrounding Seixas’ departure from the Institute only a few years after it was formally established, seemingly at the height of praise for his system of education, is troubling and uncertain. To their immense credit, the Directors took the accusations and testimony of young, female, and deaf students seriously. At the same time, their report shows that the process was beset by some odd testimony – the investigation was seemingly sparked by the mother of a pupil, whose “uneasiness had originated in consequence of a dream, from the tenor of which “she was sure some harm would come to her daughter””¹⁶⁶ – leading questions, and, quite understandably, communication challenges. All the same, at no point in the documents outlining the case against Seixas was his religion mentioned, even obliquely. The ways in which philanthropy provided common cause among Christians and Jews is also suggested by the

¹⁶⁴ Noah, Address Delivered Before the General Society, 14.
¹⁶⁵ Documents in Relation to the Dismissal of David G. Seixas, from the Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb: Published for the Information of the Contributors, In pursuance of a Resolution of the Board of Directors, passed the 3d of April, 1822 (Philadelphia, 1822), 15, LCP.
¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 16.
fact that Jacob Gratz was one of the six Directors appointed to the investigative committee. Rather than see all Jewish-Americans as an amorphous “other” loyal to tribe over all else, Jacob Gratz was considered to be a fair adjudicator who would, if necessary, vote for the dismissal of his co-religionist. (That said, such attitudes did not prevent the committee from holding many of their important meetings on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings, during the Jewish Sabbath.)

Private correspondence and a handful of newspaper editorials following Seixas’ dismissal, however, suggested cracks beneath the united philanthropic front. Rebecca Gratz, who doubtless heard reports of the investigation from her brother, expressed some doubts about the case against Seixas. Unless more concrete evidence emerged, she wrote, for Seixas to be dismissed “destitute on the world” even “after he had devoted himself to such a school … I think [would be] so cruel.”

An editorial in the National Advocate – Mordecai Noah’s newspaper – was even less equivocal on the matter. Readers were first reminded of David Seixas’ “well-earned fame” and benevolence that gained him the support of “a generous public … ever ready to bestow [encouragement] on merit.” With these qualifications and in the context of a society that rewards service, Seixas was happily “appointed Principal with unanimous approbation, and was considered the most benevolent – the most kind and charitable of men.” This continued until “two or three persons, among the directors, influenced, probably, by personal feelings, probably controlled by religious prejudices, were anxious to get rid of Mr. Seixas.” In Philadelphia, the author alleged, “a knot of a few men” held so much power that “nothing can be established without their interference. Let an individual conceive of a great design,

---

and if fame be the result, they will snatch it from him.”¹⁶⁸ The perspective of the National Advocate is at best a particularly dark interpretation of early republican Philadelphia and at worst the defense of a sexual predator. Nevertheless, in the alleged failure of republican benevolence as a platform for inclusion also lies proof of its multiple functions. That is was thinkable some might see Seixas’ work as a threat to their own status and authority reveals the ways in which philanthropy facilitated inclusion and allowed, for example, a Jewish artisan of limited means to participate in the construction of American character.

“This, then, gentlemen, is my creed”¹⁶⁹

Through their mere presence, vocal insistence on the pluralistic promise of the new nation, or some combination thereof, philanthropy provided Jews in the early republic a space in which to participate in the construction of American identity and build relationships with their neighbors based on shared patriotic goals. Jewish-American contributions to the multifaceted world of benevolent republicanism therefore challenge traditional historiographical narratives that describe Jews as the passive beneficiaries of rights in a uniquely tolerant and enlightened United States. Jewish-Americans did not merely wait to be granted the full privileges and immunities of American citizenship, they insisted upon their rightful inclusion on their own terms. While service to country – be it through philanthropy, military service, or in another capacity – was not necessarily done with an ulterior motive, it became an important part of Jewish-Americans’ response to continued inequality and exclusion.

¹⁶⁸ National Advocate (New York), Mar. 19, 1822.
¹⁶⁹ Jacob Henry, in The American Orator, Selected Chiefly from American Authors; for the use of Schools and Private Families, ed. Samuel Clark (Gardiner, ME, 1828), 48.
Such was the case for Jacob Henry, who, during his second term in North Carolina’s House of Commons, used these arguments to successfully repel efforts to vacate his seat on account of religious identity.\footnote{170} Strictly speaking, Jews (and Catholics) were prohibited from holding office in North Carolina. In practice, however, the clauses in the state’s post-Revolutionary constitution barring any who “deny … the truth of the Protestant religion” and the “divine authority … of the … New Testament”\footnote{171} were not actively enforced until Henry’s case in 1809. In his impassioned speech before his fellow representatives, Henry employed several lines of reasoning, in particular emphasizing the connection between his unyielding commitment to civic duty and his Jewish faith. “The religion I profess,” he declared, “inculcates every duty which man owes to his fellow man” and directed him to observe “just, honorable, and beneficent maxims.” He asked only that the “same charity”\footnote{172} which he had shown to others be extended to him in return. Rather than minimize his differences and hope that his “life and conduct” would excuse his existence outside of the presumed (or in North Carolina’s case, \textit{de jure}) connection between civic virtue and Protestant faith, Henry insisted on his inclusion without qualification. “This, then, gentlemen, is my creed,” he avowed, “it was impressed upon my infant mind; it has been the director of my youth, the monitor of my manhood, and will, I trust, be the consolation of my old age.”\footnote{173} Unwilling to wait for a more pluralistic attitude to emerge of its own accord, Henry made his own luck. With his job and reputation at stake, Henry did not seek tolerance as a Jew but the full privileges of


\footnote{171} Constitution of North Carolina (1776), Avalon Project, \url{https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/nc07.asp}

\footnote{172} Henry, in \textit{American Orator}, 47–48.

\footnote{173} Ibid.
citizenship – including the ability to hold office – as a white man who had served his state and nation with benevolence and constancy.

Henry’s speech produced mixed results. Although he was allowed to keep his seat in the House of Commons, the religious test in North Carolina’s constitution was not fully removed until 1868.174 Indeed, these exclusionary clauses were enforced with even more regularity after 1809, leaving Jews, Catholics, and others at the mercy of a case-by-case tolerance decided by the whims of a ruling Protestant majority.175 While it failed in its goal of achieving meaningful inclusion and equality for Jews in North Carolina, Henry’s message found an enduring audience elsewhere. It was regularly republished in essay collections, including The American Orator, a book intended “for the use of Schools and Private families.” Thus, albeit not in the manner originally intended, Henry’s speech still contributed to the construction of American identity and provides a prominent example of the ways in which Jewish-Americans played an active role in advocating for their full inclusion as citizens in the early republic.

All of Israel is Responsible for One Another176

As benevolence provided a space for Jewish-Americans to participate in shaping the early republic and insist upon their inclusion with the full privileges and immunities of equal citizenship, philanthropy also allowed them to maintain their distinct practices and transnational religious identity. Thus for all of Rebecca Gratz’s contributions to

174 In 1835, at the urging of William Gaston, a Catholic who served with Henry in the House of Commons and went on to hold office in the state Senate, U.S. House, and North Carolina Supreme Court, to abolish the test altogether, a compromise was reached to amend the requirement to affirm the truth of the “Protestant religion” to merely be “Christian religion.” This, of course, still excluded Jews. See David W. Owens, “Additional Information on the North Carolina Constitutional Provisions Regarding Religion” (Aug. 1997), https://www.sog.unc.edu/resources/legal-summaries/additional-information-north-carolina-constitutional-provisions-regarding-religion.
175 Huhner, Jews in America, 16–17.
176 Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shavout, 39a.
mainstream early republican philanthropy, these efforts were only one part of her benevolent endeavors. In addition to her central role in the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances, she was also a founding member of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society (FHBS). Like the Female Association, part of the FHBS’s mission was to help “reduced families” who had “seen better days.” Further, in their assistance for women of less elevated socio-economic backgrounds, their remit also overlapped with organizations such as the Indigent Widows and Single Women’s Society. Keeping with general practices, the FHBS made an effort to differentiate between the deserving and undeserving poor, empowering a Visiting Committee to “inquire respecting [the] character” of potential recipients of aid. To avoid the harm of unnecessary dependence upon charity, the FHBS, like other organizations, opted to provide assistance through “necessaries, rather than money”177 whenever possible. Indeed, the principal difference between the FHBS and existing organizations in Philadelphia was the population it served. However, for Gratz and her colleagues, the goal of being “useful to their indigent sisters of the house of Israel”178 had important functions beyond the relief of indigence. As a charity run by Jews for Jews, it allowed these vulnerable women to avoid falling under the sway of missionaries who often targeted their destitute co-religionists.

In a society where non-sectarian still almost always meant Christian, Jewish-American benevolence was an important tool of social organization and perpetuation. Thus the Hebrew Orphan Society of Charleston allowed the city’s Jews to both

---

177 Constitution of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, 03.
178 Ibid.
“contribute towards the general good of our country”\footnote{Moses, \textit{An Oration}, 19.} as well as “clothe and give Hebrew education”\footnote{J.C. Levy, \textit{An Address Delivered in Charleston, South-Carolina, 5th November, 1834. Before the Hebrew Orphan Society on Dedicating the Society Hall, being the 33d Anniversary} (Charleston, 1834), 04.} to Jewish children. In Philadelphia, after decades of work with the Orphan Society of Philadelphia, Rebecca Gratz advocated for the establishment of a separate institution for Jewish children. Too often, one of her colleagues wrote in an appeal, Jewish children who “are cast destitute on the world” end up “estranged from the religion of their fathers … with no feeling for the faith of Israel.”\footnote{Mrs. D. Samuel, in Samuel M. Fleischman, \textit{The History of the Jewish Foster Home and Orphan Asylum of Philadelphia} (Philadelphia, 1905), 11.} Even if they did not fall into the orbit of missionaries, the small number of Jews in orphanages, almshouses, free schools, and elsewhere made Jewish education and consistent practice difficult for those of limited means. Organizations like the Hebrew Orphan Society in Charleston, the Jewish Foster Home in Philadelphia, and the Society for the Education of Orphan Children of the Jewish Persuasion in New York allowed Jewish-Americans to ensure that future generations were devoted to both their country and their faith.

As benevolence enabled early republican Jews to form relationships with their Christian neighbors and fellow-citizens, it also sustained Jewish communal networks throughout the United States and abroad. While many scholars emphasize the centrality of “synagogue communities” and lack of any formal national organization of Jewish life in this period, philanthropy once again provides a more nuanced account.\footnote{Sarna, \textit{American Judaism}, xvii; Marcus, \textit{Early American Jewry}, 2: 491–92.} For example, although there was no Jewish equivalent of the American Sunday School Union that organized lessons and disseminated books to widespread auxiliary societies, such coordination and collaboration occurred through more informal networks. Until the early-
nineteenth century, formal religious education was available only to those with the means and inclination to pay for private instruction.\textsuperscript{183} Inspired by “the example of other religious communities”\textsuperscript{184} and her correspondence on education with Jacob Mordecai, a Jewish scholar and master of the Female Academy in Warrenton, Virginia, Rebecca Gratz opened the first Jewish Sunday School in the United States.\textsuperscript{185} Like its Protestant counterparts, this Sunday School was free to all Jewish children, regardless of means or formal synagogue affiliation. Although there was no overarching union between the Philadelphia school and the ones that subsequently opened in Charleston, New York, Baltimore, Richmond, and beyond, these groups did not operate in a local vacuum. Indeed, for many years the Rebecca Gratz would forward the copy-book where she wrote out the lessons to Charleston, “where Miss Sally Lopez made copies of it and distributed them to the teachers”\textsuperscript{186} in South Carolina. When Isaac Leeser released \textit{Instruction in the Mosaic Religion} for “the younger part of Israelites, of both sexes,” his support was by no means limited to his fellow Philadelphians and he distributed the book through agents in New York, Richmond, Baltimore, Ohio, Charleston, and Kingston, Jamaica.\textsuperscript{187}

Even as Jews and Christians found common cause and formed relationships through benevolence, the broader Jewish diaspora was still an important source of support and connection for Jewish-Americans. When Philadelphia’s Mikveh Israel found themselves in financial straits and in danger of being unable to complete the construction

\textsuperscript{183} Julia Richman, “The Jewish Sunday School Movement in the United States,” \textit{Jewish Quarterly Review}, 12 (July 1900), 563–60. See also Simon Levy’s proposal to establish a Hebrew school at K.K.S.I., Sept. 3, 1792, Series I, Box 1, Folder 53, JIL Papers; Address to K.K.S.I. regarding Polonies Talmud Torah, 1804, Series I, Box 3, Folder 194, JIL Papers.
\textsuperscript{185} Ashton, \textit{Rebecca Gratz}, 135–36.
\textsuperscript{186} Engelman, “Jewish Education in Charleston,” 63.
of their new synagogue, several prominent Philadelphians, including Benjamin Franklin, David Rittenhouse, and William Bradford all responded to the congregation’s appeal.\textsuperscript{188}

For the most part, however, the synagogue’s leaders relied on assistance from their co-religionists in the United States and beyond, including to “the benevolent and well disposed promotors and Supporters of our Holy Religion and Supporters of our Holy Religion and Worship our Brethren of the Congregation in Suranam [Suriname]”\textsuperscript{189}

Similar appeals regularly circulated throughout the Jewish diaspora, connecting otherwise small and isolated communities through benevolence. When congregation Beth Shalome in Richmond, Virginia lacked the means to adequately support “those in needy circumstances with large families to provide for,” they petitioned wealthier Jews in their own community and throughout the early republic.\textsuperscript{190} When Congregation Neidha Israel of Baltimore made its request for donations to the Jews of Philadelphia, they sent a form letter, with a pre-typed appeal and the name of the congregation written in by hand at the top.\textsuperscript{191} These relationships went beyond the confines of the United States. Jews in the early republic acted to relieve the suffering of their co-religionists throughout the diaspora, from Europe to North Africa and even in China.\textsuperscript{192} Through philanthropy, Jews

\textsuperscript{188} Marcus, \textit{Early American Jewry}, 2: 501.
\textsuperscript{189} Mikve Israel (Barnard Gratz) to Jewish Congregation of Suriname, 1790, Box 1, Folder 5, Gratz family (Philadelphia) papers, AJHS. See also Sarato Morais, “Mikve Israel Congregation of Philadelphia,” \textit{PAJHS}, 01 (Jan. 1893), 13–24. The address was also sent to the Jewish communities of New York, Newport, Charleston, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Cape François, St. Thomas, and St. Croix.
\textsuperscript{190} Unsigned appeal for funds for Beth Shalome synagogue, Richmond, March 1822, Series I, Box 6, Folder 333, JJL Papers.
\textsuperscript{191} Appeal of Neidha Israel (Baltimore), July 24, 1837, Mikveh Israel Congregation Papers, Microfilm Drawer 293, HSP.
were able to articulate their distinct American identity as well as continue to feel an affiliation to their brethren throughout their far-flung diaspora.

“We ask not your pity;” wrote – indeed, insisted – Isaac Leeser in *The Claims of the Jews to an Equality of Rights*, “only we claim your justice!”\(^{193}\) In a system where power is held by the people, Leeser reasoned, the freedom to worship is not in and of itself inclusive or equal. Toleration, he observed, “is a word fitting only for a despotic government, where one as the sovereign, or many as the privileged class, suffer certain others differing from them to enjoy certain rights, or privileges, revocable at pleasure.”\(^{194}\) As such, inclusion rooted in mere toleration or, worse, outright pity still left Jews vulnerable and unequal. Inclusion rooted in civic service and republican benevolence, on the other hand, available to all those who “are capable of discharging a public trust,”\(^{195}\) allowed Jews to claim a place as “citizens with equal rights, not … tolerated aliens.”\(^{196}\)

---


\(^{194}\) Ibid., 95.

\(^{195}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{196}\) Ibid., 82.
Table 4.1
A Sample of Jewish-American General and Religious Philanthropic Involvement in the Early Republic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jacob Raphael Cohen</th>
<th>Public Service (General)</th>
<th>Jewish Communal Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. 1738, N. Africa; d. 1811, Phila.</td>
<td>Trustee, Young Ladies’ Academy (Philadelphia)</td>
<td>Minister, Shearith Israel (Montreal), 1779–82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educated in London.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Minister, Shearith Israel (NY), 1782–84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Famously walked “arm-in-arm” with two Christian ministers during parade celebrating Pennsylvania’s ratification of the Constitution.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Minister, Mikveh Israel (Phila.), 1784–1811</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elkalah Cohen</th>
<th>Subscriber, Orphan Society of Philadelphia (OSP)</th>
<th>Teacher, Hebrew Sunday School (Phila.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jacob Cohen</th>
<th>Donor, Academy of Science and Fine Arts of the United States of America (Richmond)</th>
<th>Founder, Beth Shalome (Richmond)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. 1744, Bavaria; d. 1823, Phila.</td>
<td>Master, Royal Arch Chapter #3 Masonic Lodge (Richmond)</td>
<td>President, Mikveh Israel (Phila.), 1810–11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolutionary War veteran. Banker and merchant.</td>
<td>Inspector of the Penitentiary (Richmond), 1801</td>
<td>Manager, Hebrew Society for the Visitation of the Sick (Phila.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jacob I. Cohen</th>
<th>Treasurer, Public School Board President, Patapsco Fire Co.</th>
<th>Petitioner to Maryland General Assembly for Passage of the “Jew Bill”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. 1789, Richmond; d. 1869, Baltimore. Banker, city councilor.</td>
<td>Member, Baltimore City Commissioners of Finance</td>
<td>Host of minyanim (prayer services) in his home</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mordecai Cohen</th>
<th>Commissioner, Poor House (Charleston), 1811–18</th>
<th>Member, Beth Elohim (Charleston)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. 1763, Poland; d. 1848, Charleston. Planter.</td>
<td>Commissioner, Charleston Orphan House</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commissioner of Streets and Lamps (Charleston), 1817</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Member, Board of Health (1819)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commissioner of Markets (1819–23)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rachel Cohen</th>
<th>Subscriber, OSP.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solomon Cohen</th>
<th>Treasurer, Library Society (Georgetown), 1799</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. 1757, d. 1835; Georgetown, South Carolina. Postmaster and tax collector.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Etting</td>
<td>Subscriber, OSP.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solomon Etting</td>
<td>Member, Baltimore Republican Soc. Member, Republican Fire Co. Trustee, Union Bank of Maryland Principal, Baltimore-Reistertown Turnpike Commissioner, Susquehanna Canal President, Board of Commissioners to repair the Baltimore City Courthouse Visitor to the Poor (Baltimore) Trustee, Society for the Promotion of Science &amp; Literature Vice-President, German Soc. of MD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyman Gratz</td>
<td>Director &amp; Treasurer, PA Academy of Fine Arts Treasurer, Mikveh Israel (Phila.), 1824–56 Manager, Jewish Publication Society (1824–56) Member, Committee Against the Persecution of the Jews in Damascus (1840) Benefactor, Gratz College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob Gratz</td>
<td>Treasurer, Philadelphia Athenaeum President, Union Canal Co. (1822) Director, PA Institution for the Deaf &amp; Dumb Officer, Mikveh Israel (Phila.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Gratz</td>
<td>Director, PA Institution for the Deaf &amp; Dumb Secretary, Mikveh Israel (Phila.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca Gratz</td>
<td>Secretary, Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances Secretary, OSP Secretary, Fuel Society (Phila.) Founder/Supervisor, Hebrew Sunday School Society (1838) Manager, Female Hebrew Benevolent Society (1819) Founder, Jewish Foster Home Member, Hebrew Ladies’ Sewing Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Gratz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Gratz</td>
<td>1788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac Harby</td>
<td>1788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel Hart</td>
<td>1784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac Hays</td>
<td>1796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judah Hays</td>
<td>1770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Levy</td>
<td>1742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah Levy</td>
<td>1796</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date of Birth</th>
<th>Date of Death</th>
<th>Contributions and Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moses Levy XXII</td>
<td>b. 1757</td>
<td>d. 1826</td>
<td>Trustee, Univ. of PA, 1802–26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Subscriber, OSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Donor, Fund for the completion of the spire of Trinity Church in NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uriah Phillips Levy XXIII</td>
<td>b. 1792</td>
<td>d. 1862</td>
<td>Purchaser/restorer of Jefferson’s Monticello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Charter Member, Washington Hebrew Congregation (DC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sponsor, Bnai Jeshrun Educational Institute (NY)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Member, Shearith Israel (NY)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ephraim Merchant XXIV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Incorporator, Marine Society (Baltimore)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua Moses XXV</td>
<td>b. 1780</td>
<td>d. 1837</td>
<td>Donor, Soc. for the Education of Poor Children &amp; the Relief of Israelites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Donor, Hebrew Benevolent Soc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Donor, Female Hebrew Benevolent Soc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses L. Moses XXVI</td>
<td>b. 1773</td>
<td>d. 1843</td>
<td>Donor, Free School Society of New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Member, New York Society Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Member, Shearith Israel (NY)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Subscriber, Hebrew Orphan Soc. (Charleston)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myer Moses XXVII</td>
<td>b. 1779</td>
<td>d. 1833</td>
<td>Member, SC Soc. for the Promotion of Domestic Arts &amp; Manufactories (1809)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Commissioner, Free School Soc. (1811)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Commissioner, Public Schools (1823)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Director, Planters and Mechanics’ Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel Gratz Moses XXVIII</td>
<td>b. 1783</td>
<td>d. 1823</td>
<td>Subscriber, OSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Lyons Moss XXIX</td>
<td>b. 1804</td>
<td>d. 1874</td>
<td>Subscriber, Musical Fund Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Member, Mikveh Israel (Phila.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>President, United Hebrew Beneficent Soc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Founder, United Hebrew Charities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Contributions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Jacob de la Motta         | **Attending Physician**, Charleston Dispensary  
                          | **Secretary**, SC Medical Soc. (1824)  
                          | **Commissioner**, Poor House (Charleston), 1831  
                          | **Secretary**, Literary & Philosophical Soc. (Charleston), 1832–40  
                          | **Corresponding Member**, Royal Academy of Medicine at Paris (1836)  
                          | **President**, Beth Elohim (Charleston), 1836  
                          | **Preacher/Founding Member**, Mickve Israel (Savannah, GA) |
| Abraham Myers             | **Member**, Library Soc.  
                          | (Georgetown, South Carolina) |
| Levi Myers                | **Member**, Library Soc.  
                          | (Georgetown)  
                          | **Member**, Winyah Indigo Society  
                          | **Member**, SC Medical Soc. |
| Jacob Myers               | **Member**, Library Soc.  
                          | (Georgetown) |
| Moses Myers               | **Member**, Library Soc.  
                          | (Georgetown)  
                          | **Member**, Winyah Indigo Society |
| Mordecai Manuel Noah      | **Manager**, Mechanic Institution (NY)  
                          | **Member**, Shearith Israel (NY)  
                          | **Founder**, B’nai Jeshrun (NY) |
| Gershom Mendes Seixas     | **Trustee**, Columbia College (1787–1815)  
                          | **Trustee**, Humane Society of NY |
| Abraham Touro             | **Donor**, Boston Humane Society  
                          | **Donor**, Boston Female Asylum  
                          | **Donor**, Mass. General Hospital  
                          | **Donor**, Shearith Israel (NY)  
                          | **Benefactor**, Preservation of Newport, RI synagogue |
| Judah Touro               | **Donor**, Bunker Hill Monument (Boston)  
                          | **Benefactor**, Free Library Soc. (New Orleans)  
                          | **Benefactor**, Preservation of Newport’s Jewish cemetery  
                          | **Donor**, Hebrew Benevolent Society |
Jewish residents of New Orleans.

| Founder, Touro Infirmary for the Sick Poor | Benefactor, New Orleans Almshouse | Donor, Israelite Society for the Relief of the Sick Poor |


4 E. Milton Altfeld, The Jew’s Struggle for Religious and Civil Liberty in Maryland (Baltimore, 1924), 47.


7 Elzas, Jews of South Carolina.


9 Cfa. 1–12.


12 Morais, Jews of Philadelphia, 26, 298.

13 Cfa. 79–89.


16 Abraham Moise, ed., A Selection from the Miscellaneous Writings of the Late Isaac Harby, Esq. (Charleston, SC, 1829); Gary Phillip Zola, Isaac Harby of Charleston, 1788–1828: Jewish reformer and intellectual (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1994).

17 Jewish Encyclopedia, 240


22 Morais, Jews of Philadelphia, 431. Moses Levy’s brother, Samson, was also a prominent lawyer, but for reasons unknown to scholars, converted to the Protestant Episcopal Church and never participated in early republican Jewish life.

Emanuel Milton Altfeld, *The Jew’s Struggle for Religious and Civil Liberty in Maryland* (Baltimore, 1924), 56

“Marriage Register, Sarah Rodrigue Brandon and Joshua Moses,” in *Jews in the Americas, 1776–1826* (London, 2017); Last Will of Joshua Moses, Dec. 6, 1837, AJHS, Box 1, Folder 10, Moses Family of New York, AJHS. Moses’ wife, Sarah Rodrigues Brandon was the daughter of Abraham Rodrigues Brandon and a Barbadian slave. See Laura Arnold Leibman and Sam May, “Making Jews: Race, Gender and Identity in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation,” *American Jewish History*, 99 (2015), 01–26.


First Annual Report of the Philadelphia Orphan Society


Cfa. 128.


*The Jews of Boston* (New Haven, CT, 1995), 40.

Chapter Five
“To Help Forward the Cause of Freedom”¹: Free Black Benevolence and the Claims of Citizenship

“What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?” (Frederick Douglass, 1852)

As the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793 abated with the onset of cooler November temperatures, Philadelphians were left to come to terms with the months of “extraordinary public panic”² caused by the “dreadful disorder”³ that killed more than four thousand. Those who had chosen flight over fight and left the city at the height of the pestilence – abandoning homes, businesses, and even ill family members – faced the judgment of those who had stayed to keep order, care for the sick, and bury the dead.⁴ In *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia*, Mathew Carey commended those who, from the “purest motives of humanity” remained to take on these “dangerous and praiseworthy [offices].” Among these “benevolent citizens” included merchant Stephan Girard and barrel-maker Peter Helm, who volunteered to superintend the emergency hospital set up at Bush Hill. While Philadelphia’s Black community contributed to relief efforts in disproportionate numbers, Carey excluded them from his general acclaim. While Girard was “touched with the wretched situation of sufferers,”⁵ the work of Black Philadelphians, by comparison, was described as an “opportunity … eagerly seized.” Here, the “beneficent conduct” of white residents stood in contrast to the Black nurses who “extorted two, three, four, and even five dollars a night for attendance,” not to mention those who were “detected in plundering the houses

---

³ Ibid., 74.
⁵ Carey, *Short Account*, 59–60.
of the sick.” Although Carey did acknowledge the “great” service of Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, William Gray and “others of their colour,” Carey’s description of the behavior of the “vilest of blacks” was prominent and severe.

Such slights did not go unnoticed by the city’s African American population. As Carey’s narrative sold out of its first three editions in a matter of weeks, two Black Philadelphians, the aforementioned Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, produced their own account and refutation. In *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia*, Jones and Allen challenged Carey’s “partial representation” of the African-American community’s response to the epidemic. “We have buried several hundreds of poor persons and strangers,” they observed, “for which service we have never received, nor never asked for compensation.” Beyond correcting the factual record, Allen and Jones used these benevolent activities to address broader distortions and mistreatment. Acknowledging that, inevitably, a few Black Philadelphians took advantage of the situation, they noted that “We know as many whites who were guilty of [plundering the distressed.]” Prejudice and unfair discrimination, Allen and Jones continued, meant that the misbehavior of white Philadelphians was “looked over, while the blacks are held up to censure.” “Is it a greater crime,” they asked, driving the point home, “for a black to pilfer, than for a white to privateer?” Indeed,

---

6 Ibid., 76–77.
7 On the reception and circulation of Carey’s account, see: Thomas Apel, “‘A Proneness to Terrific Narration’: Mathew Carey’s *Short Account* and the Archaeology of the Plague Narrative,” *Early American Studies*, 16 (2018), 381–404; Sally F. Griffith, “‘A Total Dissolution of the Bonds of Society’: Community Death and Regeneration in Mathew Carey’s *Short Account of the Malignant Fever*,” in *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation: The Public Response to the 1793 Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic*, ed. J. Worth Estes and Billy G. Smith (Canton, MA, 1997).
9 Ibid., 07.
through the story of “A poor black man, named Sampson, [who] went constantly from house to house where distress was, and [gave] assistance without fee or reward”10 Allen and Jones articulated an account of widespread and instinctive Black philanthropy.

By speaking against misrepresentation and mistreatment through what some scholars have identified as “the first account of a free black community in action,”11 Allen and Jones utilized the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism to defend their place in the community and push back against exclusion and misrepresentation. Given, they observed, “we have seen more humanity from poor blacks, than from poor whites,”12 the ways in which they were politically and socially excluded from the promises of full participation in early republican Philadelphia were unwarranted. While white Philadelphians fled, leaving behind family and friends, their Black neighbors rose to the challenge and provided essential services to the city during a deadly epidemic.

This was not a one-off. As Richard Newman observed in his biography of Richard Allen, “by marshaling the tools of modernity (institution building and mass organizing, print culture and public demonstration, the deployment of democratic ideals and nationalist ideologies),” Allen and others “sought to refute the notion that blacks were either subhuman, political outsiders, or nothing better than maroons at the edges of Western society.”13 Organized Black benevolence in the early republic was an important tool of community building as it became clear to the growing free population in the North that freedom from slavery would did not mean access to the political liberties and social

10 Ibid., 11.
12 Allen and Jones, Narrative of the Proceedings, 10.
support enjoyed by their white neighbors. At the same time as this work addressed very real and very immediate needs, it also provided a platform by which Black Americans could make claims about their individual and communal character as well as their rightful place not just as objects of philanthropy but as benevolent republicans in their own right. Here, then, just as Jewish-Americans refused to merely serve as passive and otherwise marginalized examples of American (Christian) tolerance, Black Americans refused to let growing support for abolition replace true acceptance and respect for Black agency. In this way, Black benevolence functioned as a form of protest in several important ways. First, it helped organize a community and facilitated achievement despite the disabilities imposed upon them. Further, philanthropy provided a means by which Black men and women could articulate their vision of a truly equal society and demonstrate their ability to contribute to and participate fully in the republican experiment.

***

Beyond the strain of an epidemic, Philadelphians in 1793 faced an uncertain future. As has been discussed at length elsewhere, the character and security of the new nation was far from certain. For Black Philadelphians and free African Americans throughout the early republic, these anxieties included additional layers as the prospect of their inclusion in the realization of revolutionary ideals quickly foreclosed. In this context, the importance of Black-led benevolence is not new to scholars. The function of these organizations came into historiographical focus toward the end of the twentieth century as, Gary B. Nash observed, studies began to focus on “what transpired within”
urban Black communities, rather than “what happened to [them.]”\textsuperscript{14} These initiatives were generally linked with two major functions. First, they provided relief and support as many of the initiatives traditionally associated with the ‘Age of Benevolence’ either excluded African Americans or reflected white priorities rather than the actual needs or desires of the free Black community.\textsuperscript{15} Secondly, these groups provided communal organization and discipline. Such studies utilize philanthropic institutions as a means by which to show that “alongside a history of discrimination and oppression must be placed the internal history of a people striving to live life as fully, as freely, as creatively, and as spiritually rich as their inner resources and external circumstances allowed.”\textsuperscript{16} In this way, benevolence allows for an understanding of free African Americans in the early republic as more than just passive victims (or beneficiaries) of the construction of American identity. Rather, they utilized benevolence to delineate and strengthen their own communal identity and assert the place of that community in the broader nation.

Slavery formally began to come to an end in Pennsylvania in 1780, with the passage of “An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery”. Recognizing the inconsistency between the ‘peculiar institution’ and the promises of the Revolution, the Act connected abolition to a broader freedom from “the Tyranny of Britain.”\textsuperscript{17} Nevertheless, the rights and liberties enjoyed by the authors of the Act were by no means automatically extended


\textsuperscript{16} Nash, \textit{Forging Freedom}, 07.

\textsuperscript{17} An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery (1780)
to the commonwealth’s growing population of free African Americans; legal emancipation was no guarantee of freedom from race-based economic, political, and social marginalization. Unlike Jewish-Americans in Chapter Four, there was no preordained communal identity. A common heritage of slavery – more recent for some than others – provided a strong foundation, but how that translated outside of formal bondage was by no means self-evident. Free African Americans in the early republic therefore faced the prospect of constructing identity on two different fronts – in their own immediate community and the nation more broadly. These two projects, of course, were inextricably linked. As Richard Newman observed, “before the Revolution, the overwhelming majority of blacks … were slaves; in the nineteenth century, free black communities thrived along the Atlantic coast, and black founders envisioned themselves as a rising moral force in American culture.”

That benevolence played an important role in articulating and demonstrating this moral force should, by now, come as no surprise. As Gary Nash argued, “from the beginning black Philadelphians understood that the only secure foundation upon which to fashion their lives was one constructed of independent organizations embodying their sense of being a people within a people and relying on their own resources rather than on white benevolence.” This is not altogether different from the function of philanthropy and benevolence for elite early republicans as described in Chapter One – genuine independence required more than freedom on paper, be it in the form of the Treaty of Paris or An Act for the Gradual Emancipation of Slavery, it also entailed independent institutions, including those with philanthropic aims. However, Black philanthropy took

---

18 Newman, Freedom’s Prophet, 19.
19 Nash, Forging Freedom, 05.
these functions a step further, insofar as its very existence and engagement with the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism challenged the hegemony of these “pillars of the republic.”

The language of the earliest organizations established by free Black communities in the North reflected the capacity of African Americans to organize as philanthropists in their own right. In 1788, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen established the Free African Society (FAS) “in order to support one another in sickness, and for the benefit of their widows and fatherless children.” Other organizations likewise pushed back against assumptions that African Americans were natural objects of philanthropy, but unlikely philanthropists in their own right. “Duly reflecting upon the various vicissitudes of life” and “stimulated by the desire of improving our condition,” the New York African Society for Mutual Relief (NYAS) was formed by Black New Yorkers for Black New Yorkers. Rather than rely on white-run organizations and conform to white assumptions about the place of African Americans in the early republic, the founding documents of the NYAS stressed that the “the most efficient method of securing ourselves from the extreme exigencies to which we are liable to be reduced [is by] uniting ourselves in a body, for the purpose of raising a fund for the relief of its members.” In Philadelphia, the constitution and by-laws of the Beneficial Society of the Daughters of Africa established a benevolent identity that was linked not only to other Black Philadelphians, but the United States as a whole. “WE, the Subscribers, Coloured Women of the City and County of Philadelphia, and Citizens of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania,” it read, “have associated ourselves

---

20 Preamble and Articles of the Free African Society (Philadelphia, 1787).
together for the Mutual relief of each other, and have Constituted ourselves into a Society.”

In writing, printing, and disseminating these founding documents, free African Americans in the North demonstrated engagement with benevolent republicanism, from the broad strokes of constitution writing to the everyday details of successful associational life. Through benevolence, engagement in everyday, respectable aspects of public life that were not available to enslaved African Americans became possible. Thus for the Beneficial Society of the Daughters of Africa, the responsibilities and benefits of membership were outlined clearly. In addition to regular dues, subscribers were expected to visit and help care for the sick. In return for providing support to others, each member in good standing would receive $10 upon the death of a spouse. The by-laws specified, however, that this benefit would only be paid upon the death of a member’s “lawful husband” and “if the Society is in doubt whether he is her lawful husband or not, the committee shall have the power to search into the case.” Here, then, benevolence reflected and helped shape broader communal standards. While legal marriage was not an option afforded to enslaved couples, participation in the institution was expected of free African Americans. Nor was this the only regulation concerned with members’ behavior. “Should any member appear at a stated meeting intoxicated with liquor,” one guideline detailed, “she shall be compelled to leave the room as soon as ordered, and at the next meeting shall pay a fine of 50 cents, and a second like offence shall be liable to be expelled.” Likewise, in addition to providing financial and emotional support for widows, those attending funerals were expected to wear a “full suit of black, except doubt white book-muslin collars, with broad hems, tied with black bows, fine for not wearing this

dress 25 cents.” The minutes of the Society attest to the seriousness with which improper behavior was treated. At a Committee Meeting in 1835, the gathering began with a prayer, followed immediately by a hearing for a charge brought against Betheny Blonton “For immoral Conduct and Theft.”

These standards of behavior were not, of course, unusual in early republican benevolence and were seen across Black philanthropic organizations. In the regulations of the FAS, Allen and Jones specified that membership was limited to those “persons [who] lived an orderly and sober life.” If a member “should prove disorderly after having been received, the said disorderly person shall be disjointed from us.” Additionally, anyone who neglected to pay their dues – disorderly or not – would be removed from the society “without having any of his subscription money returned.” The Friendly Society of St. Thomas’s African Church in Philadelphia specified that its Treasurer “be of good character and reputation, possessed of freehold property.” As Erica Dunbar observed, these standards of behavior meant that charities served a dual purpose, with groups like the Daughters of Africa, FAS, NYAS and others “not only assisted the disadvantaged, but also formalized a black … social sphere connected to reform and respectability.” As Black benevolent organizations provided services, they also defined standards of communal behavior. Cognizant of the ways in which philanthropic activities were viewed by others, Dunbar continued, Black philanthropists “worked to promote social uplift

---

23 Ibid., 15–16.
25 Articles of the Free African Society.
26 Constitution and Rules to be Observed and Kept by the Friendly Society of St. Thomas’s African Church, of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1797), 04.
through education and financial support [as] they simultaneously monitored their communities, ostracizing those who failed to follow ethical codes.”

The centrality of this uplift ideology has, understandably, posed “dilemmas” for scholars. Were the characteristics of “hard-working and practical, abstemious and God fearing, obedient to law and self-respecting, frugal and upright” assimilation or capitulation to white middle-class standards? Or do they represent genuine engagement with the ideas of personal and communal perfectibility that permeated economic, intellectual, and religious attitudes throughout the early republic? While this remains an important topic of investigation and debate, many scholars have come to emphasize the value of understanding Black engagement with uplift as a form of protest and activism. “Powerless to demand accountability from whites for their condition,” argued Joanne Pope Melish, “people of color had little choice but to accept the burden of proof of their inherent worthiness.” Here, then, the very ability of the free African American community to promote and achieve respectability challenged ideas that justified white hegemony by virtue of an “insurmountable barrier of color” which left Black Americans “for ever a distinct and inferior race” unable to embrace “our republican feelings, and dangerous to our republican institutions.” Thus Black participation in the early republican ‘Age of Benevolence’ was not a matter of submitting to white standards of respectability and, therefore, white supremacy. Rather, as Patrick Rael aptly remarked, as “African Americans in public appropriated the ideas of antebellum society” they...

28 Ibid., 52.
fundamentally challenged the “ideological conceptions intended to justify their iniquitous treatment.” By succeeding in communal uplift, Black Americans “place[d] whites in a position whereby they would be forced to change their practice” in order to “live up to their religious and political principles.” In this context, African Americans were not merely participants in the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism, they also “co-created” it as they “reformulate[d] hostile notions into potent sources of empowerment and uplift.”

Throughout the North, Black benevolence worked to address the immediate crisis of living in a slave society where free African Americans were “kidnap.d” and “Confined in irons” by men with “Evill Desines” while also building a communal character that “challenged existing stereotypes” and served as “the bedrock of social reformation.” Black libraries, debating clubs, and lyceums heeded calls to not only address poverty, but also support “improvement in moral and literary knowledge.” The function of Black benevolence beyond addressing the immediate needs of the community is seen in white response to planned celebrations following the incorporation of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief. In order to “strengthen our compact, to consolidate our interest, and to raise us to the dignity of a body politic,” the NYAS applied for incorporation in the State of New York in January 1809. After fourteen months of collecting the necessary paperwork and two separate trips to Albany by Mayor DeWitt


34 Levi Brown to Absalom Jones, September 26, 1801, Box 9, Folder 45, Cox-Parrish-Wharton Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

35 Dunbar, Fragile Freedom, 102–104.

36 Minutes of the Fifth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour in the United States, Held by Adjournment, in the Wesley Church, Philadelphia, from the First to the Fifth of June, Inclusive, 1835 (Philadelphia, 1835), 09. See also: Elizabeth McHenry, Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies (Durham, NC, 2002).
Clinton on the organization’s behalf, NYAS’s application was finally approved in March 1810. Perhaps precisely because it was possible to interpret this development as evidence that African Americans were capable of operating in the same philanthropic sphere as white benevolent republicans, NYAS representatives were warned that any celebrations would be met with “howling mobs” where “the authorities would be entirely powerless to protect you on the streets, and you would be torn to pieces.” Avowing that “we will go though death stare us in the face,” more than one-hundred members of the Society moved forward with a public celebration, “carrying painted silk banners from their first anniversary, accompanied by musicians and members of the black community … through the main streets of Manhattan” and concluding with a reading of the charter and an oration.37 In light of the connection between benevolence and American identity, Black philanthropic enterprise – particularly public sanction and celebration – began to undermine a definition of American identity and citizenship that was exclusively white. Not content to define freedom as legal emancipation from slavery or settle for a self-sufficient black community within a white-dominated nation, free African Americans here insisted upon public recognition as part of the broader landscape of benevolent republicanism.38

Even instances of purposeful multiracial benevolent collaboration did not guarantee equal recognition of Black benevolent republicanism. In this context, humane societies, a new charitable cause that emerged in the late-eighteenth century to rescue the drowned, were in many ways an exception to the rule. “Although the number of cases involving people of African descent as rescued victims or rescuers was small,” Amanda

---

37 Wilder, “Rise and Influence”
Moniz observed in her study these groups, “they reveal no pattern of discrimination either in valuing the lives of African Americans preserved from drowning or in recognizing the efforts of African Americans as lifesavers.”39 That the lives of Black drowning victims and heroic acts of Black rescuers were assigned the same monetary value as white victims and resuscitators was by no means a foregone conclusion. However, this did not necessarily translate into a broader recognition of Black benevolent capability – the trustees of early republican humane societies were all white, elite men.

The antislavery movement does, however, provide an instance of Black and white philanthropic collaboration on the organizational level. These efforts, remarked Erica Dunbar, “provided the first organized forums in which white and black men and women could come together as political activists, Christian brothers and sisters, neighbors, and, in some cases, friends.” As was the case with Jewish-American participation in broader philanthropic causes, these efforts provided a space where Black and white early republicans could work together toward a shared mission as Americans. Indeed, Dunbar continued, although Black participation in the abolitionist movement was generally limited to a small population of well-to-do African Americans, their presence nevertheless “strengthened the position of black elite within their community and among white organization.”40 This inclusion did sometimes come at the highest levels of the organization – in 1833, two of the fourteen drafters of the constitution of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society [PFASS] were Black women – Margareta Forten and Sarah

40 Dunbar, Forging Freedom, 72–73.
Unlike Rebecca Gratz’s role in the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances, however, such multiracial organizations were considered to be quite radical and faced opposition from many white Northerners who were otherwise sympathetic to the antislavery cause. The inclusion of Black philanthropists as members and even elected officials in organizations like the PFASS, scholarship shows, served more as a “powerful political symbol for white members” than it fully accommodated Black voices. In the end, Dunbar concluded, Black members of the PFASS “always remained a controllable minority within the organization.”

As the PFASS’s priorities shifted away from what many Black members saw as key issues – dedicated assistance for newly free Blacks and fugitive slaves – this imbalance of power did not go unnoticed. “Mortification [was] in my breast,” wrote Sarah Forten to a white colleague, “when I saw that many were preferred before me, who by education – birth – or worldly circumstances were no better than myself – their sole claim to notice depending on the superior advantage of being White.” The depth of white supremacy, Forten continued, “clings” to many “like a dark mantle obscuring the many virtues and choking up the avenues to higher and nobler sentiments.” That white Philadelphians did not trust the benevolent inclinations of their Black neighbors to do what was best for their community was also evident in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society’s termination of support for Absalom Jones’s preschool after inspectors deemed Jones to be too “lenient” with his pupils, concluding that “it is not practical at present to

---

41 Ibid., 77. Charlotte and Sarah Forten, Harriet Forten Purvis, Grace and Sarah Douglass, Hetty Burry, and Mary Wood were all early members of the Society and signatories to the PFASS constitution.
42 Ibid.
43 Sarah Forten to Angelina Grimké, April 15, 1837, Weld-Grimké Papers, William Clements Library, University of Michigan.
have black children properly taught by a black person.” In response, in 1807, Allen organized the Society for the Free People of Color for Promoting the Instruction of School Children of African Descent. Here, then, these charitable societies were not merely “modeled on White societies,” but represented a “distinctly African American character” as they enabled Black philanthropists to address the real needs and goals of their community on their own terms while still engaging with the broader rhetoric of benevolent republicanism and – in so doing – shaping this aspect of American identity from the margins. Ultimately, Richard Newman observed, this marginalization “did not prevent them from seeking to expand the discourse of American rights,” including through philanthropic ventures.

That these societies were meant to alleviate suffering and provide opportunity as well as make claims about the treatment and rightful place of African Americans in the new republic is evident not only in actions but also in rhetoric seen in published speeches and other accounts of Black benevolence. Just as Richard Allen and Absalom Jones used *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia* to both establish the upright conduct of Black Philadelphians’ during the Yellow Fever outbreak and make claims about the hypocritical mistreatment and exclusion of the free African American community, others did the same. Using Black achievement to challenge degradation and push back against justifications for their marginalization was part of a broader rhetorical strategy. To this end, the literary

---

44 Pennsylvania Abolition Society Board of Education minutes, in Dunbar, *Forging Freedom*, 56.
45 Such separation was also done by choice. In 1840, Sarah Mapps Douglass requested the formal separation of her female academy from PFASS control. Dunbar, *Forging Freedom*, 70–71. See also Margaret Hope Bacon, “New Light on Sarah Mapps Douglass and her Reconciliation with Friends,” *Quaker History*, 90 (2001), 28–49.
achievements of Phillis Wheatley and scientific contributions of Benjamin Banneker were highlighted to demonstrate the ability of Black Americans to contribute to society.\footnote{John L. Rury, “Philanthropy, Self Help, and Social Control: The New York Manumission Society and Free Blacks, 1785–1810,” \textit{Phylon}, 46 (1985), 231–41, 239.} That most free African Americans had a long path of uplift between their current station and that of Wheatley and Banneker was a not a reflection on Black character but on the society that white Americans had created. Indeed, some argued, Wheatley’s achievements were not a complete reflection of her potential – “what opportunity,” one commentator asked, “was there for her to make physical, moral, or mental progress?”\footnote{Ethiop, “Afric-American Picture Gallery,” \textit{Anglo-African Magazine}, 01 (July 1859), 218 in Rael, \textit{Black Identity and Black Protest}, 175.} As Samuel Cornish wrote in an editorial for the \textit{Colored American} newspaper, “never were any people more exposed to infidelity, than are the colored people of our country.” In the United States, he continued, structural inequities, rather than innate inferiority, were responsible for any achievement gaps. “Point us,” Cornish insisted, “to the one \textit{individual} who has enjoyed the full extent of all the privileges of his fairer brethren.”\footnote{Freedom’s Journal (New York), June 1, 1827.}

In this way, Black philanthropy and accounts of Black benevolent republicanism can be seen as an accusation regarding the inequities of the status quo as well as articulation of a more inclusive future. In an 1818 speech given before the Pennsylvania Augustine Society for the Education of Colour, Prince Saunders evoked the language of the Society’s constitution in pursuit of these aims. “Fully persuaded,” Saunders observed, “that it is to the prominently defective system of instruction, as it now exists among us, that we must in great measure attribute the contemptible and degraded station which we occupy in society.” To overcome these “formidable barriers, that prejudices, powerful as they are unjust, have reared to impede our progress in the paths of science and virtue,”
the group set about to establish “a Seminary, in which children of colour shall be taught all the useful and scientific branches of education” in order to “qualify them for the useful walks of society.” The contradictions between the promise of the United States and reality – and the function of African-American benevolence in rectifying these failings – was also evident in Hosea Easton’s address to the Black community of Providence, Rhode Island. “Everything,” Easton declared, “is withheld from us that is calculated to promote the aggrandizement and popularity of that part of community who are said to be the descendants of Africa.” Although many in “the white population will deny the fact above stated,” he continued, “the clouds of evil [are] thickening over this Republic” and, therefore, “the time has come, when our necessities calls aloud for exertions.” Here, then, Black involvement in shaping the new nation is not only a right that they should be afforded, but also a responsibility. To this end, Easton remarked, “the first thing necessary is, to cultivate the principles of concord and unanimity among ourselves, that we may become aids to each other.” Through benevolence and communal harmony, African Americans may “bend [the] course” of the nation by “[opening] a field of labour for the reception of our youth, who are coming upon this stage of action, and give them an opportunity of displaying their intellectual talents, which will give a character to our community, and take away our reproach.”

Even as greater numbers of white Americans in the North came to recognize the incompatibility between the institution of slavery and promises of the new republic, it

---

also became clear to free Black Americans living in the region that freedom from slavery would not mean freedom to enjoy the full rights of citizenship. As such, free African Americans were left to build and protect their community largely on their own. In this context, philanthropy played an important role. Mutual aid societies and a variety of relief organizations filled a gap that could not or would not be addressed by broader (white-led) efforts. Schools, professional associations, and literary societies, among others, further worked to guarantee that prospects beyond basic survival were possible. In a nation that increasingly defined citizenship explicitly as something that could only be achieved by white men, Black benevolence was also a form of resistance to marginalization. Though voting rights were never predicated on proof of charitable involvement, as seen in earlier chapters, philanthropic pursuits functioned beyond ameliorating the condition of the needy. The rhetoric of benevolent republicanism contributed to the construction of American identity as a key characteristic of good citizenship in the young nation. While a usefully flexible definition of benevolence helped members of an existing elite validate their continued social, economic, and political influence, is also created an opening. In this space, men like Thomas Branagan, Joseph Lancaster, and Mordecai Manuel Noah fashioned themselves into benevolent republicans as part of an effort to obtain influence and respect. In this context, Black benevolence also had multiple functions. Philanthropic undertakings contributed to an ever-growing list of ways in which free African Americans – despite racist stereotypes to the contrary – were able “to participate fully in national life.”

As seen in the claims of Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, Hosea Easton, Prince Saunders, and others, these benevolent endeavors provided a means by which to

---

challenge Black exclusion from the full rights and privileges of citizenship. In utilizing this platform, free African American philanthropists fundamentally shaped benevolent republicanism and, in turn, American character. While Black philanthropy did not end the marginalization of African Americans or topple white hegemony in the early republic, a full accounting of benevolent republicanism and its multiple functions in the early national period must necessarily include these voices.
Chapter Six: The Voices of the Poor

In January 1788, the directors of the recently reestablished Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons (PSAMPP) received a letter containing several suggestions intended to bolster the organization’s ongoing “Humane [and] Honourable” efforts at the Walnut Street Jail. Such correspondence was not altogether unusual – as seen in Chapter Two, Philadelphia’s prison reformers were part of a broader network and regularly exchanged letters with colleagues from throughout the United States and beyond. In accordance with the epistolary standards of the day, the writer praised the work of the PSAMPP as he segued into the main purpose of his letter. Specifically, he proposed two changes to Walnut Street’s operation, along with a confidence that it “fully lay in [the directors’] power to Remove” the “abuses of Public Charity” in question. The letter was friendly in tone – the writer did not accuse the directors of mismanagement or indifference – but approached them as an ally in the efforts to alleviate the issues that continued to beset Philadelphia’s public prison.

His first suggestion, the separation of residents by gender and by crime, was notable for its specificity rather than its original content. There was, the letter writer observed, “sufficient Room over Each of [the] Wing” of the jail to allow “for the female Debtors and Criminals” to have space and allow “for Every Improvement.” His second point likewise aimed to minimize the effects of the most dishonest characters at Walnut Street on the general inmate population. Under the current system, the writer warned, whenever representatives from the PSAMPP came to distribute aid, their “intended

---

1 Address from Jail, Jan. 30, 1788, Box 1, Folder 10, Pennsylvania Prison Society Records (hereafter PPS Records), Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
goodness [was] abused” and “Imposed on.” These visits were “so hurried and confused with such a Crowd about them,” he explained, “the Gentlemen” from the PSAMPP did not notice that “the Same person that was there before” returned and is given “a Second” while others leave empty-handed. Instead, he proposed, “let one” of the directors arrive “some time before the others, & Get a list of the number in Each Room, from the Turnkey” and distribute the goods by the exchange of “a Ticket of paper or Card” so that “by this means, no fraud, Can be Committed, & much less Trouble.” The ticket system would thus allow the PSAMPP to continue to do its good work without the risk of rewarding bad behavior.

The letter writer engaged in the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism by connecting these improvements to the broader reputation of the young nation. Having seen at least “Forty Prisons, in England and Ireland,” he observed that many of those buildings “Exceed that of Philadelphia in neatness, and to appearance, Convenience.” In particular, he observed, the Sheriff’s Jails in London and Dublin were “much Stronger Buildings” where “the greatest Care is taken, at locking up time, that Every man shall go to his apartments, & the Women to Theirs.” While Philadelphia still struggled to effectively separate their prisoners, elsewhere “Such treatment naturally have Some Good Effect in their lonely hours, when they have time to Reflect on their past follies and misfortunes.” The absence of such opportunities at Walnut Street was not only to the detriment of the possibility of reformation, but also to national character. The “startling” conditions in Philadelphia, the writer continued, “must in Some measure Convey to the minds of Strangers, this must be a Country, Where neither Religion or Decency is observed.” The letter writer’s suggestions were therefore intended not only to improve
the operation of law and order in Philadelphia, but also to protect and enhance the reputation of the city and country.

What makes this letter particularly interesting, however, is the place from which it was written: the Walnut Street Jail itself, where the author was imprisoned for debt. The writer did not make any attempt to hide this fact. Originally “a native of Ireland,” he explained that his current situation was caused by a misfortune of timing, when his intended business partner in Philadelphia departed “for Europe about ten days before my Arrival in this City.” Were it not for these unforeseen and uncontrollable circumstances, he lamented, “I should not have had occasion to Incur any Debt or perhaps an opportunity of seeing the Prison of Philadelphia.” He was not, he assured his readers, an incorrigible debtor. All of his observations about the prisons of England Ireland came by voluntary visits during his business-related travels, where his work “obliged me in my turn to Attend Public Buildings” and a general “Curiosity” about the “mode of treatment the prisoners Rec.d” in different places. Although he claimed to be above the fray, his depiction of the “Troublesome” consequences of the unfettered mingling of men and women reflected his first-hand experience, as in the supposedly hypothetical case of:

A very honest Industrious man [who] may from Misfortunes be Sent to Gaol for Debt, his poor Wife Comes perhaps the next day with food to him, & finding him perhaps placed a long Side of Some Strumpet by the fire, without Consulting that he Can not help it, Immediately Conveys to her self, the worst Consequences, She Returns home in Anger, informs his friends the Situation she found her husband in, they despise him, will lend him no Aid to get out, She declines to bring him necessaries, & the longer his delay, the more she is Confirmed in her Opinion, so that perhaps this side of time may not Remove it, but at least unhappiness, Surely attends the Remaining part of their lives.\(^3\)

---

\(^3\) Address from Jail, PPS Records.
While it is possible that the writer was merely relaying the experience of an acquaintance, the repeated use of qualifiers – an “honest Industrious man [who] may from Misfortunes” find himself imprisoned for debt, whose wife perhaps came to bring him supplies, and perhaps found him “placed a long Side of Some Strumpet” – followed by very specific details suggest that he possibly wrote from a more personal experience.

Whether or not the letter writer did frequently find himself in the company of “strumpets,” his letter to the PSAMPP is instructive. It is all too easy to imagine philanthropy as something that happened to its ostensible beneficiaries, that benevolent practices were developed by and among an elite cadre away from the practical considerations and preferences of those in need. This letter, however, shows that the anonymous debtor was not a passive recipient of the PSAMPP’s aid, but that he had opinions about their work and felt able to make suggestions for its improvement. In debt and with an uncertain future, he nevertheless sought to contribute to the development of American benevolence and, in so doing, assert some control over his own circumstances. To support these efforts, further, he drew on his personal observations as well as the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism. While there is no evidence that the PSAMPP was moved to act by his specific recommendations or, indeed, that there was any correspondence beyond this initial letter, he had – at least momentarily – made his voice heard.

Although perhaps uniquely amusing, this letter was not particularly exceptional. Personal appeals to benevolent organizations, government officials, and individual philanthropists from the imprisoned, poor, or otherwise destitute were relatively common. Generally deferential in tone (though one impoverished father in Boston did
begin a letter to Thomas Jefferson with “You infernal villian [sic]” and declared if Jefferson did not “afford us some kind of relief … god knows what I shall do I certainly must & will take to high way robbing”\textsuperscript{4}), these accounts nevertheless provide important insight into the opinions and contributions of the “lower sort.”\textsuperscript{5} For even as these men and women endeavored to describe their circumstances in a way that they believed would evoke a positive reaction from a prospective benefactor, they were still bringing their experiences into the conversation. Though often ignored or otherwise marginalized by those with economic and social power, the stories of the poor were part of the dialectic that shaped benevolence – in its myriad functions – during the early republic. The development of philanthropic practices in this period did not exist in an elite vacuum, but was informed by and often in conversation with potential recipients of aid. The stories of the poor required philanthropists to reconcile their theories about the causes of penury with what were usually much messier realities. As those seeking aid engaged with the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism, be it for strategic or other reasons, they contributed in their own way to the construction of American identity and negotiated their place in the emerging national character.

**The Stories of the Poor**

Although poverty had traditionally been understood as an unfortunate but inevitable part of society – and thus care for the needy a necessary responsibility of the middling and upper classes – by the late-eighteenth century, this attitude was largely obsolete. Increasingly, neediness was seen to stem not from unavoidable misfortune but


rather from the idleness and depravity of the impoverished. This reassessment of the causes of poverty, in turn, brought critical attention to the system of poor relief itself. One particularly prominent critic of the colonial method of ‘outdoor’ relief was Benjamin Franklin, who wrote that the practice of providing assistance to the able-bodied-but-poor in their own homes “tends to flatter … natural indolence, to encourage idleness and prodigality, and thereby promote and increase poverty, the very evil it was intended to cure.” Franklin was by no means alone in his assessment and by the end of the colonial period, outdoor relief was no longer the norm. While some types of penury – that of the widow, the elderly, the orphan, or the chronically infirm – were still provided with direct assistance, for others, public poor relief was only available in an almshouse or workhouse. These institutions were places of reform where, under the watchful eye of a supervisor, the poor could acquire the habits of industry that would “cure” their poverty and allow them to become productive members of society. Institutionalization, Franklin noted, allowed those living in poverty to “become useful to themselves, their families and the public for many years after."

The transition from outdoor relief dominates the historiographical narrative of poverty and poor relief in the early republic. This shift is noted not only as a moment of

---


9 Franklin, *Some Account of the Pennsylvania Hospital* (Philadelphia, 1754), 03.
change in the historical experience of those living in poverty, but more generally as a transformation in the relationship between social classes in this period. “The departure from previous practices of public welfare,” one scholar observed, “heralded the beginning of a new social ethos whereby many of a community’s destitute residents were viewed less as neighbors and more as outcasts.”

Here, the institutionalization of poverty, with the distinction between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor, as well as the criminalization of penury, is seen in the historiography as indicative of a growing “distrust and antagonism” between the ‘lower sort’ and the middling and upper classes. The poor, David Rothman contended in his influential monograph *The Discovery of the Asylum*, thus “become suspicious and culpable characters, albeit persons whose conditions might be elevated and improved through a rehabilitative and corrective program.”

Poor relief in this context became a tool of social control, where those with economic, social, and political power could set standards of behavior for those who found themselves with no other choice but to appeal to others for assistance in order to survive. Institutionalization thus not only meant leaving one’s home and, often, being separated from family, but also signified a separation from the larger community. Rather than being seen as an unfortunate but unavoidable part of the community, poverty was regarded as an unnatural condition and the poor seen as a societal menace that required quarantine and rehabilitation.

Although private philanthropy – that is, aid from non-governmental organizations funded by donations rather than taxes – often provided an opportunity to avoid

---

12 Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*, 156.
institutionalization, caution and the importance of serving the truly needy was also central. Amidst these tendencies toward social control, the stories of the poor were central to the operation and narrative presentation of early republican benevolence. As the need to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor took on increased importance, so too did knowledge of the individual circumstances and experiences of those seeking aid. More than just thorough record keeping, these accounts served as warning of the consequences of antisocial behavior and celebrated stories of reform and redemption. With these object lessons, organizations demonstrated the direct impact of their work and solicited continued support for their benevolent undertakings. Certainly, the stories told were heavily edited – if not at times outright fabricated – to fit the desired outcomes of elite philanthropists. But, more often than not, they were also a version of the lived experience of poverty, illness, criminality, or just plain bad luck. At once a tool of social control, the centrality of these stories to early republican benevolence also humanized the poor in a way that was not achieved through hypothetical outcomes or charts that compared expenditure to the number of men, women, and children aided in a given year. The stories of the poor were a prominent and important part of benevolent republicanism, and this came with complications and opportunity for all involved.

***

These stories were collected in several ways, most especially through regular visits by appointed representatives to the homes, prison cells, almshouse lodging, or hospital bed of the poor. Such interactions allowed philanthropists to gain a deeper sense of the circumstances and experiences of a potential recipient of aid beyond a fleeting intake interview. As benevolent practices evolved in this period, scholars have long
observed, the “friendly visitor” – as they were often called – “played several roles: friend, moral instructor, snoop, [and] scientific investigator.” While at least in part aspiring “to know the poor in the subjective capacity of a neighbor,” they were also exemplars of “middle-class meddling,” insisting upon the universal appeal of their own standards of “cleanliness, thrift, and sobriety.”

In their first annual report, the Managers of the Society of the Prevention of Pauperism in the City of New-York appointed a Districting Committee that divided the city into wards and assigned visitors to ascertain the circumstances and character of the poor in each sector. Specifically, they were to:

Become acquainted with the inhabitants of the district, to visit frequently the families of those who are in indigent circumstances, to advise them with respect to their business, the education of their children, the economy of their houses, to administer encouragement or admonition, as they may find occasion; and in general, by preserving an open, candid, and friendly intercourse with them, to gain their confidence, and by suitable and well-timed counsel to excite them to such a course of conduct as will best promote their physical and moral welfare.

In Philadelphia, the Washington Benevolent Society likewise endeavored to cultivate “an acquaintance with one another; acquiring a knowledge of the character, vocations, circumstances, and necessities of those who might be thus associated; of affording … aid, encouragement, counsel, and support.” The St. Andrew’s Society of Charleston, South Carolina also required “an exact and particular account of [the] circumstances” of an individual or family before distributing aid. In North Carolina, the by-laws of the Raleigh

---

16 In J.H. Easterby, *History of the St. Andrew’s Society of Charleston, South Carolina* (Charleston, 1929), 88.
Female Benevolent Society included the specific “duty of the Managers to enquire out fit objects of benevolence, and to give such persons a note … containing a statement of her necessities, and pointing out the means of relief best adapted to her case.” As was true elsewhere, these relationships were meant to be on-going, with each manager obliged to continue to “receive and examine the work done by the individuals whom she has recommended.”  

Such practices represented a change from traditional systems of poor relief in two major ways. First, the extent of the interaction between the needy and philanthropist expanded. Previously, poor relief officials interacted with the poor insofar as it allowed them to determine a pauper’s official settlement and, if they were not chargeable to local poor rates, where they should be sent. In Rhode Island alone, observed Ruth Wallis Herndon in her study of the transient poor in colonial New England, officials “interrogated thousands of people who were likely candidates for warning out” between 1750 and 1800. Here, the stories of the poor were sought only when necessary and interactions limited to the determination of a legal question about financial liability. As philanthropy in the early American republic evolved to place an even greater importance on the distinction between the deserving and undeserving, rely more on institutionalization, and emphasize reform as the ultimate goal, more in-depth accounts

---

17 Revised Constitution and By-Laws of the Raleigh Female Benevolent Society, Adopted July 23d, 1823 (Raleigh, NC, 1823), 04.
19 Herndon, Unwelcome Americans, 03.
and ongoing relationships became crucial to success. If poverty was more often than not the result of a moral failing, it was necessary to ascertain the nature and repercussions of an individual’s inadequacies in order to determine the best way to move forward. Here, the impulse to collect and share the stories of the poor was rooted at least in part in a system of social control, whereby those with good character – as evinced by their station in life and benevolence – “helped” those who supposedly lacked such qualities better conform to genteel standards of behavior.

The language used to describe the work of visiting committees demonstrates how these relationship-building endeavors were rooted in a sense of superiority and distrust of the character of the poor. Regular contact and knowledge of the individual disposition of potential recipients of aid was seen to prevent habitual paupers from taking “advantage of the public willingness to support them, and put themselves into a condition to require support.” This reliance, it was contended in an echo of Franklin’s argument from the colonial period, was “the foundation of their ruin. Idleness, profligacy, and intemperance, are its early and almost universal fruits.”

Because, a report from the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in New-York maintained, “visiters [sic] cannot always depend on the answers they may receive,” it behooved them to take the time to “examin[e] the poor” and determine for themselves “the moral character of the pauper” and form their own “opinion concerning his circumstances.” This was done by visiting the homes of the impoverished, talking with their neighbors, and “informing themselves, by the report of dispensary physician, of their [the pauper’s] ability to work.” All of these efforts were aimed, ultimately, at answering three key questions: “1. Whether the visited be culpably

---

20 Fifth Report of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in the City of New-York. Read at the Anniversary Meeting of the Society, December 17, 1821 (New York, 1821), 10, LCP.
or innocently indigent. 2. Whether relief be afforded by benevolent institutions, or
religious societies. 3. In what manner it may be necessary to afford them further relief.”

The stories of the poor thus played an important role in efforts to distinguish early
republican benevolence as more effective, innovative, and rational – though more
interaction did not necessarily translate into less marginalization for the impoverished. At
least officially, first-hand experience of the causes and realities of poverty did not confer
any authority in working toward its eradication. Nevertheless, these diverse realities were
sought out and – even in their relegation – were part of the dialectic by which early
republican philanthropy developed and operated.

A second important development came in who engaged with the stories of the
poor. Of course, the impoverished were not an otherwise unknown quantity to middling
and elite early republicans. Even as class lines hardened in the late-eighteenth and early-
nineteenth centuries, the “lower sort” still walked the same streets on their way to work,
the market, church, or the tavern. In Philadelphia, would-be philanthropists certainly
saw the laboring poor perform backbreaking work on the city’s docks and noticed their
absence in the winter when the Delaware River froze and ship traffic ceased. Likewise, in
Baltimore, an interview was not needed to see that many of the poor “remain almost
naked and in the utmost distress, from the want of raiment to protect them” from the
elements. There was a difference, however, between passing a beggar on the street or
reading about the disorder of a (fictionalized) prison in Moll Flanders and encountering
the poor and the (mediated) realities of their experience in the context of organized

21 Report to the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in New-York; By their Committee
on Idleness and Sources of Employment (New York, 1819), 08, LCP.
23 In Seth Rockman, Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore (Baltimore,
2009), 182–83.
benevolence. The stories of the poor were not only collected by an ever-growing cohort of early-republican philanthropists, they were shared in Annual Reports and other publications read by an even larger group of donors as well as members of the general public.

Indeed, the stories of the poor came to be an expected part of the narrative. Though “weary with writing the history of human miseries,” Ezra Stiles Ely quickly discovered that the communication of such anecdotes was an expected part of his philanthropic endeavors. Despite his hesitation, Ely was all but obliged to keep and publish a journal of his work in the New York almshouse and charity hospital upon “the suggestion … that those who contribute to my support, will expect some account of my … services” so that his records “contribute to the edification of the saints [and] prove a solemn warning to the wicked.”24 While the appeal of a good human interest story is certainly not a new model, why the insistence on sharing these tales of woe? Could Ely not have satisfied his backers with an inventory of the number of paupers converted, sick criminals given last rites, and vagrants released to stable employment? Could he not provide a “solemn warning” to the wicked through weekly sermons, which he gave in his capacity as a Presbyterian minister? Quite possibly, but these alternatives would not have adequately encompassed, demonstrated, or promoted the spirit of republican benevolence. For philanthropy involved not just action, but sentiment – benevolence demonstrated national character as well as emotional refinement and, in turn, a refined national character. In sharing the suffering of the poor, Ely – and by extension his

benefactors and those who supported his work by purchasing his published diary – demonstrated his ability to react to the plight of the poor with humanitarian sensibility.

The history of sensibility and emotions is a broad field that encompasses a chronology and geography that extends well beyond the early United States. While debates about modernity and civilization, hydraulics and social constructionism are beyond the scope of this study, the idea that emotions and emotional responses have historical meaning provides a useful framework through which to consider the stories of the poor.\(^{25}\) Past and present, observed Barbara Rosenwein, people live within “emotional communities” and are subject to “systems of feeling: what these communities (and the individuals within them) define and assess as valuable or harmful to them; the evaluations they make about others’ emotions; the nature of the affective bonds beyond people that they recognize; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and deplore.”\(^{26}\) Over the course of the long-eighteenth century, a system of feeling emerged in the Anglo-Atlantic world around a “culture of sensibility” with “a new set of attitudes and emotional conventions at the heart of which was a sympathetic concern for the pain and suffering of other sentient beings.”\(^{27}\) That this occurred contemporaneously with the rise of the “age of benevolence” is not a coincidence.\(^{28}\) The two were deeply connected and enjoyed a reciprocal relationship –

\(^{25}\) On such debates, see Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions in History,” *American Historical Review*, 107 (June 2002), 821–45.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 842.


\(^{28}\) There is, however, what could be described as a chicken-and-egg debate around this topic. Was the proliferation of benevolent activity in this period an outcome of this new sensibility? Or were there other factors responsible for the growth of benevolence and the culture of sensibility emerged as a result? This is most prominently associated with the social control versus humanitarianism debate exemplified by the work of David Brion Davis and Thomas Haskell. In works such as *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770–1823* (Ithaca, NY, 1975) and *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New*
philanthropy provided a means by which to respond to and perhaps alleviate perceived suffering, while participation in benevolent activities also demonstrated the refined emotions of the philanthropists. In this context, the stories of the poor, both in the sympathy they evoked and the sentiment they demonstrated, substantiated the character of the benevolent republican as sincere and commendable.\textsuperscript{29}

Thus organizations relied not only on the stories of the poor but specifically the ways in which their work was met with “gratitude and tears”\textsuperscript{30} from recipients of aid and included details that would enable readers to sympathize with the suffering poor as well as well as celebrate the achievements of republican benevolence. In \textit{An Account of the Origin and Progress of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb}, the inclusion of the names, ages, and background of the children enrolled helped in sure that the issue was seen as one that “emphatically demanded … notice and sympathy.” It was one thing to reference “the deplorable privation of the sense of hearing and speech” in abstract, it

\textit{World} (Oxford, UK, 2006), Davis schematized a fundamentally intertwined relationship between self-interest and reform. In the case of abolitionism, Davis observed that the elites who made up the core of the early abolition movement had managed to live with – and profit from – the institution of slavery with no moral outrage previously. That abolition emerged as a viable reform at the same time as the development of the market economy is thus no coincidence. In this context, reformers were able to denounce slavery while legitimizing the also-exploitative practices of industrial wage labor. The shifting interests of an emerging capitalist world order and the desire of those with economic and social status to maintain that control, Davis contended, explains the chronology of abolitionism, not a sudden moral and sentimental awakening to the evils of slavery. In “Capitalism and the Origins of a Humanitarian Sensibility,” \textit{American Historical Review}, 90 (Apr. & June 1985), 339–61, 547–66, Thomas Haskell provided a much different account. Whereas individuals were previously largely unaware of the broader world and plight of distant strangers, the extended networks of exchange in a capitalist world order fundamentally changed people’s perceptions. For the first time, individuals were aware of the impact of their actions on people at a distance. Thus capitalism provided a new “cognitive style” of humanitarianism. Although an individual might in some way confer a personal gain by participating in a reform movement, capitalism at its core created the cognitive circumstances that allowed for a genuine and expansive sympathetic humanitarian impulse. As is often the case, many – myself included – see value in a middle ground, wherein both social control and genuine humanitarian feeling are important phenomena, but not mutually exclusive explanations.


\textsuperscript{30} Report … By their Committee on Idleness and Sources of Employment, 13.
was another when it was connected to the plight of James McCauley, John Carlin, and Rebecca Rockhill, all seven years old and the youngest residents of the Institution. That all but three of the eighteen students were listed as “Indigent” also provided context for an even deeper sympathetic reaction from readers. Without family wealth to support them through adulthood, a narrative emerged, the Institution was probably the last opportunity for William Erringer, “of Philadelphia, aged eighteen years” and Edward Cook, also from Philadelphia, “aged fifteen years,” to acquire any sort of skills that would enable them to find a stable income in the working world. Likewise, a sympathetic reader might be moved by the plight of the Hartman family, who sent away not one but two daughters, Catherine and Mary, to the Institution.\textsuperscript{31} The stories of these students who are by and large “totally dependant [sic] on the bounty of the institution”\textsuperscript{32} contributed to an account of an institution that not only addressed a societal ill, but also demonstrated the “modern benevolence” and “exemplary liberality”\textsuperscript{33} of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and the United States.

The inclusion of the stories of the poor helped demonstrate the enlightened, sympathetic benevolence of American philanthropists. Through regular visits to poor neighborhoods, a representative of the Howard Benevolent Society in Boston reported, suffering was more effectively identified and alleviated. Such was the case for “a mother with her four miserable children” who was found “tenanting the ground floor of an old building at the head of the wharf – the father at the Hospital.” Unable or unwilling to seek assistance, they were “entirely destitute” and their living conditions were deplorable, with

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{An Account of the Origin and Progress of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb} (Philadelphia, 1821), 03–04, 12, LCP.  
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 13.  
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 08.
water covering “the floor to the depth of about six inches – and the shivering children were seated upon a board, which had been raised above the water, by the side of the wall.” So “deeply touched” was the visitor by “this spectacle of poverty of suffering,” he quickly moved to provide them “the succor they then needed, and procured for them soon after a more comfortable abode.” Sharing this story allowed the benevolent visitor, members of the Howard Benevolent Society, and indeed anyone with the motivation to purchase and read the published annual report to commend themselves not only on the ways in which their benevolent inclinations addressed the problem of poverty but also their emotional refinement.

Likely shared without permission and modified to serve the interests of elite philanthropists and the economic, gendered, racial, and social structures through which they maintained their privilege, the stories of the poor were absolutely part of a system of social control. At the same time, the importance of such accounts provided the sources of these stories – that is, those actually living in poverty – with an opportunity to shape the narrative for their own purposes. In Ezra Stiles Ely’s published journals, the preacher for the New York almshouse and hospital shared many examples of what he and his supporters would consider successful outcomes. This included the case of “an aged woman [who] was often visited, and instructed in the things which appertain to a sinner’s peace.” Inspired by these lessons, Ely reported, the woman’s lucid moments were dedicated to repentance and the exclamation “O Lord Jesus! I am a vile sinner: I deserve hell; but, Oh! Pardon me! pardon all my sins! Lord Jesus, I come to thee, I confess to thee, I trust in thee.” Thus despite her unsavory past, “she died … with those

---

34 Report of the Standing Committee of the Howard Benevolent Society, Presented at their Annual Meeting, October 30, 1827 (Boston, 1827), 06–07.
expressions” of faith “on her lips.” Ely felt hopeful that the man would be able to return to society rehabilitated. For every success, however, there were frustrations that challenged the neat linear narrative sympathy, philanthropy, and reform. One such example was “M.D. – [a] girl of fifteen years [who] with returning health, appears less humble, so that the intended benevolence of the ladies who compassionated her, will probably frustrated.” Given her deteriorating attitude, Ely lamented, “much is to be feared that she is ruined for time and eternity.” While Ely likely intended this story to serve as a cautionary tale, for M.D. it might not have represented an altogether undesired outcome. Knowing that she needed access to care and the succor of benevolent individuals, she represented her story in a way that would merit the attention of philanthropic agents but, upon her recovery, was no longer willing to bend to the standards of Ely and his colleagues.

That the stories of the poor were not completely in the control of elite philanthropists is further evident in the ongoing saga of Caroline, a teenage girl whom Ely encountered during his charitable ministrations. Upon hearing Caroline’s story and her seemingly earnest desire for reform, Ely observed that her situation had improved physically as well as spiritually, and “through the compassion and instrumentality of Mrs. B-, some necessary articles of dress for Caroline were procured from the wardrobe of the

35 Ely, The Journal of the Stated Preacher to the Hospital and Almshouse, in the City of New-York, for the Year of our Lord 1811 (New York, 1812), 14, LCP.
36 Ibid., 51.
37 Ibid., 74.
Dorcas Society.” Only a few weeks later, however, Ely opined that “the foolish Caroline left her safe asylum. Whither she went I know not; but disappointed as we all are, who sought her restoration.” As it happened, Ely’s brother soon encountered Caroline “weeping at a window,” whereupon “he entered the house with the intention of ascertaining whether she were abandoned in principle.” During this meeting, Caroline confessed that while “her mother’s name was Martha, and she did live in G-I1,” she had “borne a fictitious name” and otherwise fabricated her story so that she could “find shelter … get well … [and] go home.” As the stories of the poor played a function in demonstrating the success and refinement of early republican philanthropy, it also created a space for the poor to work the system to fit their own needs.

The importance of the stories of the poor thus is deeply intertwined with the significance of sensibility and emotions in this period. “The culture of sensibility,” Karen Halttunen observed in her study of benevolence, “broadened the arena within which humanitarian feeling was encouraged to operate.” In showing their sympathy for the suffering of the poor, philanthropists were demonstrating their refinement and, in turn, confirming the legitimacy of their elite status in the new republic. This process, however, was not a closed loop. As engagement with the stories of the poor took on greater meaning for philanthropists, the space for the ostensible beneficiaries of philanthropy to utilize their stories to achieve their own aims also grew. By emphasizing certain parts of their experience, withholding information, and/or using philanthropists’ expectations and rhetoric in pursuit of their own aims, the poor used their stories as a tool for survival on

---

38 Ibid., 198.
39 Ibid., 216–18.
their own terms. In this ongoing dialectic, those at the bottom economic rungs of early republican society were by no means silent on matters relating to the shape of benevolence or, indeed, their place in the new nation. The voices of the poor in the early United States forced philanthropists to consider where the poor fit into the new nation, not only as human beings worthy of sympathy, but also as fellow republicans worthy of aid.

**Voices of the Poor**

History from the bottom-up does not necessarily guarantee the inclusion of the voices of the poor into the historical narrative. In reconstituting the lived experience of poverty, scholars often rely on reading against the archival grain of fleeting accounts filtered through texts composed by other, better-off individuals. This is at least in part borne out of necessity – this particular population’s lack of time, material, and/or ability means that first-hand accounts are not always readily available. The voices of the poor, however, are present and informative. The personal correspondence of elite early republicans reveals regular appeals for assistance. In going directly to a potential benefactor rather than through the public poor relief system or a charitable organization, the poor were able to communicate their stories on their own terms and advocate not only for their physical survival but also their place in the new nation.

The persuasive power of the voices of the poor is not altogether absent from early republican historiography. One place where such voices are particularly prominent is in studies of the expansion of pensions for Revolutionary War veterans in the 1810s and 1820s. Prompted at least in part by a growing collective memory of the conflict as one fought by a diverse but respectable array of semi-professional soldiers serving long tours
in the Continental Army, early provisions excluded tens of thousands of mostly poor veterans who fought for shorter stretches or in local militias. By virtue of the legislation’s requirement to petition for benefits, these marginalized veterans nevertheless gained “a platform on which to share their stories” and, in so doing, demand their inclusion within the ranks of patriotic veterans worthy of sympathy and support. Although this process was still an act circumscribed by lawmakers with economic and social power, veterans’ ability to put forward their personal narratives allowed them to find “ways to challenge received wisdom.” Even when these efforts failed, their stories, scholars have observed, “did succeed in chipping away at the restricted contours of what was considered legitimate and valuable service” and allowed these otherwise marginalized veterans “to define their own version of patriotism.” Thus in seeking what they felt they were owed – and what would allow them to survive given the physical and economic toll of their service – these veterans not only shaped relief policies from the bottom-up, they also affected more intangible aspects of early republican society related to identity, collective memory, and belonging in the new nation.

Building from this, it is also possible to consider the presence and impact of the voices of the poor in shaping a broader practice of benevolence, including in terms of its connection to the construction of American identity. In European history, a robust field of inquiry has emerged around what are known as “pauper letters.” These documents, the

42 Ibid., 470.
43 Ibid., 486–87.
observed, “illustrate the fact that the poor … had both a political consciousness and will, and participated in local, regional or even national politics.” The ways in which the poor “adopted complex rhetorical and strategic devices in their engagement with officials and welfare donors,” additionally, allowed them to “[garner] power and de facto rights to relief where there might otherwise be none.”

Very little work has been done on equivalent sources in the United States. This is not for lack of availability – the poor wrote letters to prospective benefactors with regularity in this period. An understanding of the broader patterns within these documents reveals the ways in which the poor utilized the language of republican benevolence to tell their stories and make direct suggestions about how their situation might be best relieved. In so doing, these poor correspondents justified their expectations not just as members of the ‘deserving’ poor but as fellow Americans and participants in the republican experiment. Thus even as they used deferential language and asked potential patrons to “forgive an illiterate youth,” “excuse, & pardon this liberty which i’ve [sic] taken,” or “pardon the boldness I have – taken in addressing you,” they at they same time insisted on their place in the new nation.

Although not beholden to a legal formula like petitions, pauper letters are similar in that the letter-writer used his or her story to prompt recognition and, ideally, a philanthropic response. Most of the work in European history on such documents stems

---

48 John Van Horn to Vaux, Nov. 11, 1818, VFP.
from Thomas Sokoll’s transcription and analysis of more than seven hundred letters from county Essex, England.\footnote{Steven King wrote in a review of Sokoll’s \textit{Essex Pauper Letters: 1731–1837} (Oxford, England, 2001) that he “waited for this book with almost as much expectation as for Harry Potter.” King, review of Sokoll, \textit{Essex Pauper Letters}, H-Albion, H-Net Reviews (Apr. 2004).} Since the publication of \textit{Essex Pauper Letters: 1731–1837}, historians as well as literary scholars have expanded the field to include other districts in Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and elsewhere on continental Europe.\footnote{See Gestrich, Hurren, and King, eds., \textit{Poverty and Sickness in Modern Europe}; Steven King, “Pauper Letters as a Source,” \textit{Family and Community History}, 10 (2007), 167–170; King and Alannah Tomkins, \textit{The Poor in England, 1700–1850: An Economy of Makeshifts} (Manchester, UK, 2003); Åsa Karlsson Sjögren, “Negotiating Charity: Emotions, gender, and poor relief in Sweden at the turn of the 19th century,” \textit{Scandinavian Journal of History}, 41 (2016), 332–49.} In their study of England, Wales, and Scotland, Steven King and Alison Stringer identified four major building blocks of the typical pauper letter: a dramatic telling of the pauper’s situation, a “rendering of individual identities,” followed by “forceful logic” about why they should receive aid, and finally “claims to particularly strong connections with”\footnote{King and Alison Stringer, “‘I have once more taken the Leberty to say as you well know’: The development of rhetoric in the letters of the English, Welsh and Scottish sick and poor 1780s–1830s,” in \textit{Poverty and Sickness in Modern Europe}, 70–87, 73–75.} the individual, institution, or local government from which they sought assistance.

This schema provides a useful summary for early republican pauper letters. As noted above, most started with an acknowledgement of the recipient’s (and potential benefactor’s) status and benevolent reputation, opening their letters with “Very Dear and Honoured Sir,”\footnote{Abraham Montague to James Madison, Oct. 21, 1815,), FO, https://founders.archive.gov/documents/Madison/99-01-02-4731.} “Respected Sir,”\footnote{Van Horn to Vaux.} or “Much esteemed Sir.”\footnote{John L.E.W. Shecut to Thomas Jefferson, Aug. 17, 1814, in \textit{The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series}, ed. J. Jefferson Looney (Princeton, 2010), 7: 565–68.} These introductions generally also included an apology for presuming in impose on a prospective benefactor’s time, while at the same time anticipating the dramatic story that would follow. “I am about to address a person I have no acquaintance with,” Abraham Montague wrote to
James Madison in 1815, “But your Goodness Embolens [sic] me also to address [you] on a Subjec[t]” that he never anticipated “in all my life” he would experience such “frenzy” that would lead him with no choice but to appeal “to your Eccellencys favor.”55

From here, Montague endeavored to give “a Short & Correct Narrative of my Misfortunes.” Montague’s account, while by no means short, was as advertised full of hardship. “My Father died when I was about 18 Months old,” he informed Madison, after which “My Mama put the Interest Warrant [for land in Kentucky] in the hands of a man who Gaimed [sic] it away on at the Billiard table in Richmond & after wards took his Bond for it & he proved Insolvant & finally Was lost.” As a result of this early adversity that meant he had “misfortune” to be without an “edducation,” Montague described a life beset by “the lack of knoledge [sic] & information.” Although he managed to stay self-sufficient as his “Small pice of Land” was “Frequently Harrassed & marched [on by soldiers going] from one place to a nother” during the War of 1812, trouble again came “Upon Me [when] My Crop this year has been blasted by the Dearth in our part of the Cuntry.” Lest Madison think he was an incompetent or lazy farmer, Montague assured the then-President that “Hardley have the best Farmers made Enough to Support there Fammilys & this Is not all my troubles.” Thus rendering for himself an identity as a hard-working but unlucky man, Montague moved on to what King and Stringer called “forceful logic.” If Madison did not “have Pity” and provide the “$300 [that] would clear Me of my distress,” Montague’s situation would go from dire to fatal. “Sir” Montague pleaded, “Could you let the Bowels of your Pity Move in a charritable [sic] Way.” Otherwise “the only Bed [would be] torn from under My Wife & Children in the approach of winter & the only cow taken from The support of my tender babes & they

55 Montague to Madison.
dwindling away for the Want of Good & holesome nutriment the milk.” This money, though “Ever So Little”\textsuperscript{56} to a man like Madison, would prevent Montague and his family from total destitution, wherein – without even a bed to share between them – if they managed to survive the winter, they would become totally reliant on government relief at a much higher price.

The final hallmark of the pauper letter genre, “claims to particularly strong connections with, and thus deservingness”\textsuperscript{57} of relief from the desired source, is of particular interest to a broader consideration of the function of benevolence in the construction of American identity. Here, poor letter writers such as Abraham Montague personalized their relationship to a potential benefactor through evoking common service to the nation and participation in the republican experiment. Thus Montague appealed to Madison not just as a deserving pauper worthy of aid, but specifically as a “Poor Unfortunate Fellow Citizen.” In providing an account of his misfortunes, Montague also included his and his family’s patriotic commitment and service. As Montague told his story in a way he felt both reflected his experience and would appeal to Madison’s benevolent republicanism, he also shared his own contributions to “our beloved Country.” The “only Son” of Richard Montague, who served “in the Revolutionary [sic] War with Grate Briton [and] had the honour to be one of the Sons of Liberty that hope to Brake the fetters of Slavory & hand down to his posterity that Indipendance that Is so highly vallued by Evry true Amerrican” Montague did not allow his misfortunes to diminish his commitments as “a Republican [and] glory in the name I received … from my ancestors” and endeavor to “Decend [sic] it to posterity Unsullied.” As a landowner,\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. \textsuperscript{57} King and Stringer “‘I have once more taken,” 75.
Montague’s connection to Madison was also as a voter, as someone who “had the honour to Hand in one Jefferson & Two Maddesson Tickets for the Presidential Chare.”\footnote{Montague to Madison.} In writing directly to Madison, Montague sought his own and his family’s survival on his own terms. Rather than going through established channels of charitable or public assistance, where he had little control over the type of aid received and how his story was told, Montague capitalized on the widely-stated connection between benevolence and American identity to appeal directly to the President of the United States. By engaging in this rhetoric, Montague not only shaped benevolent republicanism ‘from the bottom-up’ but also demonstrated his place within – rather than as an aberration from – American character.

Over and over in early republican pauper letters, impoverished writers couched their deservingness within a commitment to the nation. As a well-known philanthropist in Philadelphia, Roberts Vaux frequently received direct appeals for aid. These requests were not totally in vain – while Vaux was a member of dozens of local, national, and even international charitable organizations, he was also known to provide aid outside of these established structures. Early in his philanthropic career, Vaux took a personal interest in the case of Dennis Frith, a newly-arrived Briton who had the manner of a “gentleman” of “scientifick character” was lacked the “letters of introduction or credit which are customary” and seemed “acquainted with no one.” Nevertheless, from, Vaux later recounted, “obligations of benevolence due to afflicted humanity,” the young Philadelphian arranged medical care for Frith who, though showing “simptoms [sic] of pulmonary disease” had not seen a doctor due to the “smallness of his funds.” When it became clear that even the renowned Dr. Parrish could not stop “the encroachments of
death,” Vaux visited Frith regularly to sit and pray with him in his final days. Following his death, Vaux made sure that the Englishman was interred “in the most respectfull manner” with the Bishop William White officiating the service and a number of Vaux’s distinguished friends accompanying “the corpse to the tomb, being the last office we could perform.”

From this personal relationship with Vaux, Frith was not consigned to die alone in the Pennsylvania Hospital, but was cared for at home by one of the city’s most eminent physicians and, rather than being buried in an anonymous pauper’s grave, was laid to rest in the cemetery of Christ Church, alongside Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, and Continental Army officer David S. Franks.

As it turns out, Frith was a well-educated lawyer from a wealthy family who, according to the Newcastle Tyne Mercury, “absconded” to the United States to avoid legal troubles. Indeed, aside from the murder conviction, the men were very similar – born in the same year, both were the oldest sons of prominent families who possessed a sharp intellect and were in the early stages of their respective professional careers. Vaux’s willingness to help strangers directly, however, extended beyond those who shared his socio-economic background. Almost ten years after Vaux encountered Dennis Frith, Felix Merino appealed to the Philadelphian for “assistance in procuring work to Support a very numerous family.” While Merino’s letter praised Vaux’s “well known philanthropy” and “private good morals and public heroic actions” in service to the nation, Merino also stressed his own commitment and contributions to the strength of

---

59 Vaux to Dennis Frith [Sr.] and Wife, Apr. 2, 1810, VFP.
60 “The Graves,” Christ Church in Philadelphia, http://christchurchphila.org/Historic-Christ-Church/Burial-Ground/The-Graves/98/. Frith preceded Benjamin Rush in death by three years. David Franks’ interment in the cemetery was also thanks to the benevolent intercession of others. Franks, who died during the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793, was Jewish but came to be buried at the Episcopal Church after a Christian friend donated funds so that the down-on-his-luck veteran would not be buried in a pauper’s field.
American character. Merino’s instinctive ‘American-ness’ and the ways in which this made him deserving of Vaux’s aid was made explicit in the personal narrative he provided, which explained that he had “been in this country 17 years” after leaving Spain “because my liberal principles did not agree with that government. I came to this country, flying from the tyranny of Kings and Priests, in search of rational liberty and peace of mind.” Indeed, Merino assured Vaux, “I am an American Citizen, naturalized on the year 1817 … Out of 9 children, (8 living) only two are born in Spain.”

For Felix Merino, appealing directly to Vaux achieved several ends. First, it allowed him to pursue a solution to his financial woes without subjecting himself or his family to the oversight of charitable organizations or constraints of public poor relief. Secondly, by engaging with the connection between benevolence and the cultivation of American identity, Merino also made claims about his own place in the new nation, suggesting that poverty should not be a barrier to inclusion in American character.

The desire to be seen not just as part of the deserving poor, but the deserving American poor is also seen in Thomas Shankland’s letter to James Madison. Here, Shankland not only appeals to Madison’s “illustrious Virtues” but also his family’s contributions to the nation, including his “Father whose name I bear, [who] was one of the Electors of President & voted for you in preference to his near Relative by Marriage [sic] the late Gov. DeWitt Clinton of New York – By that Act my Father incurred the displeasure of Gov. Clinton, who never forgave him after.” Here, Shankland presented a narrative of someone who was deserving of aid not just because he was an honest man with “a Family to provide for,” but specifically because of an enduring familial heritage of sacrifice for the nation. Not only did Shankland’s father choose his “just pride in

---

62 Felix Merino to Vaux, Oct. 6, 1819, VFP.
Contributing his vote & influence to your political Elevation” over familial – and likely economic – ties to DeWitt Clinton, he was also “taken Prisoner by the Indians & carried into Captivity in the Revolution,” escaping in time to see his father’s (Shankland’s grandfather’s) “property burned & destroyed” in the same conflict. This, then, is not just any dramatic tale of misfortune, it is a tale of generational descent into poverty alongside a steadfast commitment to the protecting the physical and political integrity of the nation. Thus with a shared history of sacrifice for the republican experiment, Shankland felt confident that Madison “would feel greater pleasure in acceding to my request”63 for a grant of land in the Wisconsin Territory. Such accounts from Shankland and others like T.D. Clark, who wrote in a letter to John Adams that he was the “son of a Republican who fought and Bled in the Cause of liberty and Equality,” suggested that the poor contributed to and were deserving of inclusion in the republican experiment as “poor (but I hope Respected) Member[s] of the Community” of “our common Country.”64

Others positioned their requests not only within a personal or family history of service to the nation, but also in terms of their ongoing ability to maximize contributions to the common republican experiment. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson, Charles B. Rice opened in a typical fashion by praising “the patritism [sic] wisdom and integrity that you have in such an examplary manner.” After explaining that he was “an orphun,” Rice informed Jefferson that while he currently had work “with my uncle at the Carpenter trade” he “never had no inclination” for the work but rather “people says i have always exhibited a refnd tast for Literature and tha think that i ought not to be prohibited …

[from] what you have built that Lofty Edifice for.” In what could be characterized as a distinctly republican type of what King and Stringer called ‘forceful logic,’ Rice appealed to Jefferson for money for his education, so that he may “improve [my] Talent to the best advantage” for himself and others. “I trust that, as an American,” Charles Trelease echoed in his own letter to Jefferson, “I can call you friend.” Also requesting funds for schooling, Trelease appealed to Jefferson as a fellow, committed American, seeking merely to “render myself Useful to my country.”

Through these requests, impoverished letter writers insisted on their place in the new nation and ability to contribute to its continued progress. Indeed, some utilized this platform to articulate not only the ways in which they were part of a common national project but also to express their disagreement with their potential benefactors. In seeking recourse for what he felt was unfair treatment and lack of advancement in his military career, James G.W. Neale began his letter to Thomas Jefferson with his own analysis of the state of the republican experiment, declaring: “There was a time when republicans felt, or affected to feel an honest indignation at the idea of conferring all offices in the army upon account of family connections, and I had hoped to have found them, when in power, acting up to the principles they then advocated; Yet I find by sad experience, that republicans in theory, and republicans in practice are very different characters.” The “misfortune of being born poor,” Neale contended, should not curtail his military career. “Am I not an american?” he asked, “Is not the blood, that flows in my veins as pure as

---

theirs? Have I not as many ties which bind me to my country? My love, friendship, private and general affection are all American. If so, why then are they preferred, unless it be upon account of their family connections?"67 While Neale’s assertions were particularly bold, his letter to Jefferson represent the extent to which the ostensible beneficiaries of philanthropy shaped benevolence both in its actual practice and its broader meaning. Here, Neale and others did not passively wait for classification as part of the ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ poor, but put their stories before potential benefactors. In so doing, the poor also made use of the concept of benevolent republicanism to insist upon their humanity not only as individuals worthy of aid but also as Americans.  

Conclusion: The Limits and Lessons of Benevolent Republicanism

“Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)”
Walt Whitman, 1855

Although this project has focused largely on the North, the connection between benevolence and national identity need not be seen as either a northern or southern phenomenon, but rather as one that existed throughout the early republic. Of course, philanthropic priorities differed between regions – the abolitionist movement, for one, better represents regional disunity than common cause. Nevertheless, the shared rhetoric of philanthropic republicanism suggests another function of benevolence in this period. Amidst ongoing sectional divisions, benevolence and its relationship to a broader American identity provided a common vocabulary and tangible national project that united early republicans, at least for a time, across state lines.

Traditionally, scholars have described the centrality of benevolence and proliferation of reform movements in the early United States as “primarily … a Northern phenomenon.”¹ In these interpretations, a small and more rural population; a culture of honor and the importance of traditional social hierarchies in a slave economy; and a general suspicion of outsiders meant that philanthropic reforms – such that they existed in the first place – in the early republican South diverged significantly from those in the North.² Recent scholarship has challenged these assumptions and shown the “vigor”³ of

early republican Southern benevolence as well as the ways in which these efforts were, on the whole, “typically national.” This is borne out in the numbers alone – orphanages and the organizations that supported these institutions that were celebrated not only for the ways in which they relieved “poverty and misery” but also for their “incalculable addition to the happiness and improvement” of the “national character” emerged concurrently throughout the early republic. These included Baltimore (1799), Boston (1799), Savannah, Georgia (1801), Norfolk, Virginia (1804), New York (1806), Fayetteville, North Carolina (1813), Philadelphia (1814), Richmond (1815), Natchez, Mississippi (1817), and August, Georgia (1823).

Despite post-facto claims that these and other philanthropic undertakings were Northern impositions, none of them would have succeeded without local, on-the-ground support. Even if the ideas or institutional structures were of a Northern origin, they all required the social and financial support of Southerners. Throughout the early republican South, these benevolent endeavors received local buy-in and were a source of both regional and national pride. This can be seen in the celebrations and fundraising efforts undertaken on behalf of the Charleston Orphan House. As in the North, yearly anniversary speeches – many of which were later published for a wider audience – celebrated accomplishments and encouraged continued support. In one such address to

---

4 Elna C. Green, *This Business of Relief: Confronting Poverty in a Southern City, 1740–1940* (Athens, GA, 2003), 07.
5 Lathrop, *Discourse, Delivered to the Members of the Boston Female Asylum*, 11.
his “fellow citizens,” George Buist praised the ways in which better care for Charleston’s poor, parentless children not only saved them from destitution but also allowed them, in the future, to “adorn and improve[e] their country by their ingenuity and industry, [and] defend it by their valor.” By helping these youth and providing them with an education, Buist continued, supporters were participating in a benevolent project that “improve[s] the national character, and retard[s] the progress of infidelity and impiety, which are the certain fore-runners of the downfall of that state in which they prevail.”

Here, then, philanthropy was described in the South as an admirable and necessary endeavor in the new nation. While orphans had long been objects of sympathy, in the context of the early republic, this charity took on added import as it pertained to the character of the next generation and even the very survival of the nation. Benevolence was part of a broader national project, as Buist remarked, “You, who are the generous patrons and supporters of the Orphan-house, have, by your attention to this institution, shewn yourselves to be charitable men, enlightened patriots, and good Christians.” Of course, one of Buist’s goals in his oration was to ensure continued support for the orphanage and he certainly was aware that a little flattery can go a long way. Taken within a broader pattern of the connection between benevolence and national identity in the early republic, however, this is hardly just superficial praise. In Buist’s speech, the multiple functions of benevolence are evident – it was key to the construction of a strong national identity, demonstrated good character, and should be a cause for any and all proud Charlestonians and patriotic Americans.

9 Ibid., 06.
10 Ibid., 10.
11 Ibid., 13.
Other accounts of local enthusiasm demonstrate that Buist’s national perspective was neither unusual nor, for that matter, limited to just rhetoric. Upon placing of the cornerstone for the Charleston Orphan House in 1792, a long procession that included city constables, the city marshal, members from both houses of legislature, foreign counsels, clergy, future residents of the institutions, the harbor master, and representatives from various philanthropic organizations made its way through the city.\(^\text{12}\) The parade was accompanied by a band playing “God save the United States” and followed by a ceremony that, as a letter to the *State Gazette of South-Carolina* proudly reported, “was attended by a very large and respectable number of citizens.”\(^\text{13}\) This episode suggests that there was widespread local support for the benevolent endeavor and at least an aural link to the broader national community. In his memoirs, audience member Charles Fraser recalled the symbolism of the day as John Huger, Charleston’s mayor and a “patriot of the revolution,” stood on a rampart – a vestige of the military phase of the fight for independence – which would soon be replaced by the orphanage. Connecting the scene in Charleston to “a beautiful clump of trees … which had sprung up on the fascines planted there by the British troops” he had seen in New York, both of these sites were part of a broader “triumph of peace over war.” Indeed, Fraser suggested, the occasion in Charleston was an even “nobler triumph of peace” and evidence of the continued success of the revolutionary movement, in that it represented “charity leveling the battlements of war.”\(^\text{14}\) Thus in the North and the South, as early republicans (re)built their nation in the aftermath of war, benevolence was part of this common project of the construction of national identity.

\(^{12}\) “Charleston, November 15,” *State Gazette of South-Carolina* (Charleston), Nov. 15, 1792.
\(^{13}\) Ibid.
\(^{14}\) Charles Fraser, *Reminiscences of Charleston* (Charleston, SC, 1854), 58.
Of course, poor, parentless children – especially poor, parentless, white children – as victims of tragedy and bad luck, were not controversial objects of sympathy and charity. Popular education, however, was a different story. Although both orphanages and charity schools aimed to help poor children, early republican education reform, while celebrated for its victories in the North has traditionally been regarded as “feeble” below the Mason-Dixon Line. Despite occasional bursts of enthusiasm for public education – most notably with the South Carolina Free School Act of 1811 – the South, according to Edgar Knight, lacked a comprehensive “social consciousness” and a “sound sense of the common welfare.” For a Southern elite who were first and foremost interested in preserving their economic and social authority, the story goes, literacy and education – even if it was only extended to poor white males – was a threat to the desired status quo. Likewise, the argument could be extended, a sense of identity that revolved around benevolence, that is, improving the condition of all, ultimately proved impossible to reconcile with slavery.

Without neglecting regional variance, here too revisionist interpretations have reassessed these differences to be more “a matter of degree rather than of sharp divergence.” As was the case for orphan societies, organizations for the promotion of education existed throughout the early republic. Indeed, with an eye to the function of benevolence in the construction of American identity, the ways in which these efforts facilitated connections and common cause amongst early republicans come to the fore. In

---

16 Knight, *Public Education in the South*, 155–56.
both Pennsylvania and Maryland, philanthropists described the ways in which they were prompted by “the independence of our country” to give “a new complexion” to an educational system that was worthy of a “great and rising nation.” As an article in the Milledgeville Georgia Journal observed, although these schools would serve local children, “the more general this improved system of education shall become, the more beneficial it will be for the United States.” In addition to shared rhetoric, early republic education reformers also shared strategy. By the 1810s and 1820s, Lancasterian schools – a cost-effective system wherein one teacher could oversee the education of hundreds of children with the help of more advanced student who acted as monitors – were being established throughout the United States. As, according to Benjamin Shaw of Philadelphia, “a system calculated for public good,” philanthropists across the early republic, including the author of an editorial in the Richmond Commercial Compiler, celebrated their achievements as part of an ongoing “great and most happy revolution in public instruction.” Thus while there were many reasons for sectional division in the early United States, education reform efforts provided some common ground.

---

20 Samuel Knox, *A Brief Essay on the Best Means of Promoting the Interests of Public Education; to Which is Prefixed, A Memorial to the Honorable General Assembly of Maryland* (Frederick, MD, 1826), 03.
21 (Milledgeville) Georgia Journal, Apr. 8, 1812.
This is not to say that benevolence was a realm of idyllic social harmony in the early republic. While there was certainly more Southern involvement in the ‘age of benevolence’ than traditionally acknowledged, there were also limits. As John Quist detailed in his study of antebellum Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, the rise and fall of the bible, tract, and Sunday school societies in the region had more – at least initially – to do “with the health of the economy than with the peculiarities of slave society.”25 From the establishment of the Alabama Bible Society as a branch of the New York-headquartered American Bible Society in 1824 through the onset of nationwide economic depression in 1837, Tuscaloosans supported the organization’s efforts as “the common cause of the patriot and the Christian.”26 However, even after economic recovery and the resumption of efforts in the 1840s, intensifying sectionalism strained the relationship between Alabama auxiliaries and the national organization as remittances to New York steadily declined and, by 1858, stopped altogether.27

Indeed, the function of benevolence as common ground amidst the sectional divisions of the early American republic is perhaps most evident in its points of failure. Contrary to the traditional historiographical narrative that Southern distinctiveness and northern evangelical support for abolition prevented any meaningful national movements, a closer look reveals not just interdenominational but also trans-regional collaboration in this period. In the accounts of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions (ABCFM), 1812 was regarded as a landmark year, as its first group of missionaries departed for India and the Board voted to allow Presbyterians onto what had previously been an exclusively Congregationalist governing body, setting the stage for

26 American Bible Society, Annual Report (New York, 1825), x.
broader patronage and immense growth.\textsuperscript{28} The following year, however, is also worthy of note – in 1813, the ABCFM received its first documented donation from a Southern donor. This was the first of what proved to be a long and vibrant history of trans-regional collaboration and, by 1825, Southern donors sent several thousand dollars per year to ABCFM headquarters in Boston. Nor was this enthusiasm unique to the ABCFM or the cause of foreign missions. As in the North, a plethora of domestic evangelical philanthropic organizations were established in the first decades of the nineteenth century, from the aforementioned branches of the American Bible Society to the South Carolina Domestic Missionary Society (Charleston), East Tennessee Missionary Society (Maryville, TN), and the Society for the Education of Pious Young Men for the Ministry of the Protestant Episcopal Church (Alexandria, VA).\textsuperscript{29} While these societies worked to address local and regional needs, they were – officially and unofficially – part of broader efforts and engaged with ideas that had a national scope.

One of the major reasons why Southern participation in such early republican reform efforts has traditionally been overlooked is the concurrent emergence of professional theological education. Although by 1830 aspiring members of the Presbyterian clergy could receive training at Maryville College in Tennessee or Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia and the Episcopalian Diocese of Virginia had its own institute in Alexandria, most seminaries – including the prestigious Andover (Congregationalist) and Princeton (Presbyterian) – were in the North. In the context of both a religious and civic zeal for benevolence, however, this was not initially a barrier to participation for early republican Southerners. In fact, between 1816 and 1826, wealthy

\textsuperscript{28} Rufus Anderson, \textit{Memorial Volume of the First Fifty Years of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions} (Boston, 1861), 79–87; Dann, “Humanitarian Reform and Organized Benevolence,” 209.

\textsuperscript{29} Dann, “Humanitarian Reform and Organized Benevolence,” 467–70.
benefactors from South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi separately financed six scholarships at Princeton for aspiring seminarians. By and large, Southerners seemed to have welcomed the young and enthusiastic clergy from Northern schools. In turn, Northern ministers worked hard to ensure that their benevolent message remained a source of common cause. A recent Andover graduate described his work in Charleston with the Female Domestic Missionary Society in glowing terms, reporting that he was supported both materially and socially in his work betting “the condition of the poor, and the ignorant, and the vicious.” Yet still, aware of his circumstances, in his interactions with the city’s enslaved population he “studiously avoided saying anything which should tend to make them discontented with their situation as slaves.” Here, then, benevolence, it provided a common project that, in the right circumstances, facilitated identification with a common philanthropic American identity. However, as initial enthusiasm wore off and it became clear that poverty, irreligion, and other social ills would not be cured so easily, Southern branches began to chafe under the perceived dominance of Northern interests. As groups centralized informal coalitions into formal, top-down organizations, what was once common ground became yet another example of sectional animosity. Nevertheless, this failure is instructive, for in these reversals it is possible to see how, for a moment, benevolence provided an opportunity for unity. That benevolence was not successful in bridging a regional divide that ultimately led to civil war is not, in the end, surprising. However, in this space there are opportunities for further research. To the extent that Southerners engaged in the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism, how did they – if at all – address the existence of slavery? For that matter, how did the growing

30 Ibid., 216.
abolitionist movement connect their activities to the concept? Did, in the face of increasing abolitionist sentiment in the North, the South develop its own version of benevolent republicanism? What role did slavery play in preventing a philanthropic identity from taking place in the South as it did in the North?

This is not to say, however that the framework upon which benevolent republicanism operated could not exist elsewhere. While there were a number of significant differences between the Northern Kingdom of Haiti under the rule of King Henri Christophe and the early American republic, officials in the former French colony also saw education as a fundamental tool in the articulation of a distinct civic identity as well as evidence of their post-revolutionary success. In a letter to Thomas Clarkson, the Duke of Limonade wrote of the nation’s “new and enlightened” ethos wherein the “ideas, morals, customs, and eve habits of the people have undergone a total change. In a word, nothing any longer exists of the former regime.”

An important aspect of the construction of this new Haitian identity, in the mind of King Christophe, was support for monitorial schools. While Clarkson and other members of the British and Foreign School Society provided Haitian officials with information about monitorial education and sent over supplies and Borough Road-trained instructors, this was never a unidirectional network. “Public instruction is making steady progress,” Christophe wrote to Clarkson, “The Royal Chamber is zealously fulfilling its functions … In the publications I am sending you, you will learn of the present situation of public learning.”

The spread of monitorial schools in Haiti, then, was not merely a European project that was vaguely tolerated by government officials. While it is important to acknowledge the ways in

33 Henri Christophe to Clarkson, Mar. 20, 1819, in Christophe and Clarkson.
which the structures of colonialism have shaped ideas about knowledge and civilization, it is also important not to foreclose on the agency of Haitian actors and recognize that BFSS representatives did not convert, as if pedagogical missionaries, Christophe and others to monitorialism. Rather, they were active and engaged participants and the use of the Lancasterian method in Haiti was closely tied to their post-revolutionary project of the construction of a distinct national civic identity.

Thanks to Christophe’s “great care and attention” the Baron de Vastey wrote, “public instruction is making great strides: we have established five new schools, and next year more will be founded.” As such, he continued, “each day the internal situation of our country seems to improve, and we are enjoying the most complete tranquility.”34 These schools, then, were rooted in Haiti – we – as in the Haitian government and the ruling class established these schools; His Majesty was the one lavishing critical care and resources. Indeed, an 1818 ordinance of King Christophe attested to the importance of ensuring Haitian schools for Haitian students. Through the oversight of the decreed Royal Chamber of Public Instruction over all schools and teachers, “the greatest benefits” were to be conferred to the “faithful subjects of the king” by ensuring that all schools were “founded on true principles necessary of the maintenance of liberty, independence, religion, and morality of the Haitian people.”35 The innovations of the Northern Haitian education reformers were recognized and praised, as seen in the report of one British traveller:

Among the first things which I visited, after my arrival in Haiti, was the school established at Cap-Francois. The place appropriated to this purpose was a large building, situated in a retired and elevated part of the town, and was properly arranged, and perfectly furnished with all the necessary

34 Baron de Vastey to Clarkson, Nov. 29, 1819, in ibid.
35 “Ordonnance of the King,” Royal Haitian Gazette, Dec. 28, 1818.
apparatus, as the best schools conducted on this system are prepared in England … Since my return to England, I have visited the Central School of the British and Foreign School Society, in the Borough-Road, London; and granting, as every one must, that it is conducted with admirable order, yet I confess I could not perceive its superiority, in point of general discipline to that consisting of the Haytian youth at Cape-Francois.36

Thus also in Haiti, the monitorial system had a civic function and was inextricably linked to the construction of an independent national identity.

In the Republic of Colombia, Simón Bolívar likewise characterized education as “the point of greatest significance, upon the true cornerstone of any nation’s happiness.” Just as early republican education reformers stressed the need for American teachers for American students, Bolívar too called for educators with “generous and patriotic impulses” who, unlike the “so-called schoolmasters” of the colonial period who oversaw “barbarous … institutions” and produced “servile minds,” this new kind of instructor would “devote himself to the hard task of building citizens for the state – citizens who will defend, enlighten, sanctify, and enoble it.”37 It was in this context that Bolivar passed a decree in 1825 that declared that “the Lancasterian system is the only rapid and efficient method of promoting public education.”38 In Chile, a report reprinted in national newspapers asserted: “the surest method of promoting the happiness of any country is to make all people in it well-informed and industrious.” With independence, the article continued, “an end at length [has] been put to the obstacles which prevented the natives of Chile from enjoying those blessings, which are enjoyed by other nations less favoured.” Free from the disabilities of colonial rule, Chileans were finally free to shape

38 “Decree on the Installation of Several Normal Schools Based on the Lancasterian System” (1825) in El Liberador: Writings of Simón Bolívar, ed. David Bushnell (Oxford, 2003), 207.
their own destiny and, in this context, “the propagation of [the Lancasterian] system holds out the surest means of extirpating those principles formed among us during the time of darkness.” As was the case elsewhere, the author emphasized the function of the Lancasterian system within a larger, homegrown project of the articulation and construction of national identity, observing: “The Government has resolved to zealously protect this establishment” in a way that was “adapted to the circumstances and necessities of the Country.”

Thus despite the presence of Borough Road-provided teachers and supplies in Chile, the nation’s leaders did not hesitate to modify the monitorial system as they saw fit. For one, although the guidelines of the BFSS rejected such a structure, Lancasterian schools in Chile operated under the guidance of the central Instituto, which officials saw as necessary to the effective diffusion of a united, engaged populace. Indeed, throughout Spanish-speaking South America, the dominance of the goal of producing a uniform, civic-minded nation – rather than merely the education of the poor – was evident in the fact that when the manuals for the operation of Lancasterian schools were translated into Spanish, publishers purposefully removed the word “poor” from titles. Accounts from the region likewise reveal that monitorial schools were popular among the upper classes as well as those who could not afford the tuition fees at more traditional academies. Here, then, benevolence in the form of education reform functioned to

---

39 Chile Gazette, Jan. 19, 1822, extracted in James Thomson to James Millar, Jan. 30, 1822, British and Foreign School Society Archive, Brunel University, London.  
articulate broader claims about the shape of national identity and contribute to the process of the construction of national identity far beyond the Northern United States.

***

To return to early republican Philadelphia, an acknowledged center of philanthropic innovation in this period, benevolent republicanism never meant one thing. As it was used to construct American identity, the concept itself was constantly defined and utilized in a variety of ways by a variety of individuals. Indeed, as seen in the ways in which philanthropy allowed elite early republicans to both articulate a distinctive national character and build transnational cosmopolitan relationships or Jewish-American’s use of benevolence to insist upon inclusion as Americans and maintain links to a diasporic community, benevolence could function in multiple ways for just one person. But therein lies the value of benevolence as a means by which to understand this period of American history. The multiple functions of benevolence demonstrates that American identity in the early republic was not only constructed from multiple angles, but itself – to borrow from Walt Whitman – contained multitudes. This is not to minimize the different positions of power and privilege from which early republicans engaged in philanthropic pursuits or overstate the ability of benevolence in challenging these inequalities. Nevertheless, all of these voices, be them from the traditional elite or the margins, engaged in the rhetoric of benevolent republicanism and contributed to one project – the construction of the new nation – and through these efforts sought, with varying degrees of success, to make claims about the new nation and their place within it.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Archival Collections

American Jewish Historical Society (New York)
  Gratz family (Philadelphia) papers
  Papers of Jacques Judah Lyons
  Moses Family of New York
  Nathan Family Papers
  Papers of the Seixas Family

American Philosophical Society (Philadelphia)
  Gratz Family Papers

American Antiquarian Society (Worcester, MA)
  Joseph Lancaster Papers

British Library (London)
  Althorp Papers
  Birch Papers
  Burns Papers
  Clarkson Papers
  Egerton Fry Papers
  Fry and Wood Papers
  Hardwicke Papers
  Lansdowne Papers
  Royal Literary Fund

Brunel University Archives (London)
  British and Foreign School Society Archive

Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia)
  American Negro Historical Society Collection
  Bradford Family Papers
  Coates and Reynell Family Papers
  Cox-Parrish-Wharton Papers
  Etting Collection
  George Wolf Papers
  Gratz Family Papers
  Gratz Family Papers, Simon Gratz Autograph Collection
  Meredith Family Papers
  Mikveh Israel Congregation Papers
  Orphan Society of Philadelphia Records
  Records of the Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church, 1760–1972
Pennsylvania Prison Society Records
Vaux Family Papers

Library Company of Philadelphia
Edwin Wolf 2nd Judaica Collection

Quaker Library (London)
Catherine Braithwaite Collection

Streekarchief Hollands Midden (Gouda, The Netherlands)
Collectie A.B. van Meerten-Schilperoort

Databases – Virtual


Newspapers
Albany Gazette (Albany, NY)
American and Commercial Daily Advertiser (Baltimore)
Ariel (Natchez, MS)
Aurora General Advertiser (Philadelphia)
Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser
City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser (Charleston, SC)
Charleston Courier
Columbian Gazette (Utica, NY)
Democratic Press (Philadelphia)
Eastport Sentinel (Eastport, ME)
Emporium and True American (Trenton, NJ)
Forthingham’s Long Island Herald (Sag Harbor, NY)
Freedom’s Journal (New York)
Georgia Journal (Milledgeville, GA)
Massachusetts Gazette (Springfield, MA)
National Advocate (New York)
National Gazette and Literary Register (Philadelphia)
New-York American
Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch
Pennsylvania Journal (Philadelphia)
Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser (Philadelphia)
Pennsylvania Packet (Philadelphia)
Richmond Commercial Compiler (VA)
Royal Haitian Gazette.
Savannah Republican
South-Carolina State Gazette and Columbian Advertiser (Columbia, SC)
State Gazette of South-Carolina (Charleston)
Steubenville Herald (OH)
The Sun (Baltimore)
Trenton Federalist (NJ)
Weekly Aurora (Philadelphia)

The Analytical Review; or, History of Literature (Jan. 1796)
American Journal of Education (LCP)

Books and Pamphlets

Academy of Natural Sciences. “Constitution of the Academy of Natural Sciences,”
Education Society: Instituted at Washington, December 28, 1829. With an
Address to the Public, by the Board of Managers. Washington, DC: 1830.
African Episcopal Church of Philadelphia. Act of Incorporation, Causes and Motives of
An Account of the Origin and Progress of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and
Philadelphia: 1833.
Allen, Richard and Absalom Jones. A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People,
During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793: and A
Refutation of Some Censures, Thrown upon them in some late Publications.
Philadelphia: 1794.
———. To the People of Colour. Philadelphia: 1794.
Anderson, Isaac. Letters Addressed to a Friend on the Following Subjects. Knoxville,
TN: 1817.
Anderson, Rufus. Memorial Volume of the First Fifty Years of the American Board of
Barnard, Thomas. A Discourse, Delivered Before the Humane Society of the
Bartlett, John. A Discourse: Delivered before the Roxbury Charitable Society at their
Bell, Andrew. An Experiment in Education, Made at the Male Asylum of Madras.
London: 1797.
Belsham, Thomas. The Importance of Giving a Proper Education to the Children of the
Poor. London: 1791.
Beneficial Society of the Daughters of Africa. Constitution and Bye Laws of the
Board of Inspectors of the Walnut Street Jail. Minutes. In Rex A. Skidmore, “Penological
Pioneering in the Walnut Street Jail, 1789–1799.” Journal of Criminal Law and
Philadelphia: 1829.


Confession of John Joyce, alias Davis, who was Executed on Monday, the 14th of March, 1808. For the Murder of Mrs. Sarah Cross; with an Address to the Public, and People of Colour, Together with the Substance of the Trial, and the Address of Chief Justice Tilghman, on his Condemnation. Philadelphia: 1808.


*Constitution and Rules to be Observed and Kept by the Friendly Society of St. Thomas’s African Church, of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: 1797.


———. *The Second Journal of the Stated Preacher of the Hospital and Almshouse, in the City of New-York, For a part of the year of our Lord 1813.* Philadelphia: 1815.


[Houston, George.] *Israel Vindicated: Being a Refutation of the Calumnies Propagated Respecting the Jewish Nation: in which the Objects and Views of the American Society for Ameliorating the Condition of the Jews are Investigated.* New York: 1820.


Knapp, Samuel L. *The Life of Thomas Eddy; Comprising an Extensive Correspondence with Many of the Most Distinguished Philosophers and Philanthropists of This and other Countries.* New York: 1834.

Knox, Samuel. *A Brief Essay on the Best Means of Promoting the Interests of Public Education; to Which is Prefixed, A Memorial to the Honorable General Assembly of Maryland.* Frederick, MD: 1826.


———. *Outlines of a Plan for Educating Ten Thousand Poor Children, By Establishing Schools in Country Towns and Villages; and for Uniting Works of Industry with Useful Knowledge.* London: 1806.

———. *A Short Account of the Rise and Progress of the Lancasterian System.* Baltimore: 1821.

Lathrop, John. *A Discourse, Delivered Before the Members of the Boston Female Asylum, September 21, 1804, Being their Fourth Anniversary.* Boston: 1804.


Letter Report and Documents, on the Penal Code, from the President and Commissioners appointed to superintend the erection of the Eastern Penitentiary, adapted and modelled to the System of Solitary Confinement. Read in the Senate, January 8, 1828. Harrisburg, PA: 1828.


Levy, JC. *An Address Delivered in Charleston, South-Carolina, 5th November, 1834. Before the Hebrew Orphan Society on Dedicating the Society Hall, being the 33d Anniversary.* Charleston, SC: 1834.


Minutes of the Fifth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour in the United States, Held by Adjournment, in the Wesley Church, Philadelphia, from the First to the Fifth of June, Inclusive. Philadelphia: 1835.


“National Pride.” Port Folio 02 (1809): 38.


———. *A Discourse, Delivered at the Consecration of the Synagogue in the City of New York, on Friday, the 10th of Nisan, 5578, Corresponding with the 17th of April, 1818.* New York: 1818.


Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb. *Documents in Relation to the Dismissal of David G. Seixas, from the Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb; Published for the Information of the Contributors, In pursuance of a Resolution of the Board of Directors, passed the 3d of April, 1822.* Philadelphia: 1822.


Purdon, John W., ed. *A Digest of the Laws of Pennsylvania from the Year One Thousand Seven Hundred to the Seventh Day of April, One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty.* Philadelphia: 1831.


Robinson, W.D. *Memoir Addressed to Persons of the Jewish Religion in Europe on the Subject of Emigration to and settlement in, one of the most Eligible Parts of the United States of North America.* London: 1819.


*Sketch of Proceedings in the Legislature of Maryland, December Session, 1818, on What is Commonly Called the Jew Bill*. Baltimore: 1819.


**Published Collections**


**Secondary Sources**


King, Steven and Anne Winter, eds. *Migration, Settlement and Belonging in Europe, 1500–1930s: Comparative Perspectives.* New York: 2013.


Knight, Edgar W. *Public Education in the South.* Boston: 1922.


Tobias, Thomas J. “The Many-Sided Dr. De La Motta.” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 52 (Mar. 1963)

Tomek, Beverly. “‘From motives of generosity, as well as self-preservation’: Thomas Branagan, Colonization, and the Gradual Emancipation Movement.” *American Nineteenth Century History* 06 (June 2005): 121–47.


