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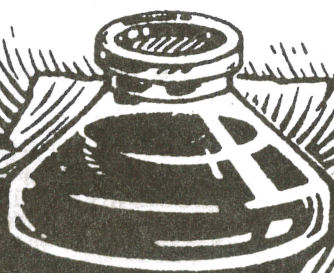
Summer Issue 1998



Philip Morin Freneau

*Poet of the Revolution
and Matawan Journalist
1752 - 1832*

(see article on page 4)



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Philip Morin Freneau

Poet of the Revolution and Matawan Journalist, 1752 - 1832

Nestled among the well-kept homes of Poet Drive, off Route 79, in Matawan's Freneau section, is the gravesite of Philip Freneau, a poet known for his patriotic verse published during and after the American Revolution.

Born in 1752, of well-to-do French Huguenot parents, Freneau was brought from New York by sloop to his new home at Middletown Point, now referred to as the Freneau section of Matawan. The home comprised of 1,000 acres and called Mount Pleasant.

Restlessness, romanticism, rebelliousness — those were the 3 R's kindled in Philip Freneau's brain during his education in colonial New Jersey. All of the sparks exploded into fire after 1770 at Princeton's College of New Jersey where Freneau became committed to both poetry and revolution. He entered the Princeton College in 1768 and fell under the spell of the Rev. John Witherspoon, the college president, who later became a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Witherspoon encouraged independent thought and Freneau's mood of rebellion was further heightened by his roommate, a free-thinking Virginian named James Madison, who in time, was elected to be President of the United States.

After the Boston Massacre of 1770, Freneau's hatred of oppression and England was equalled only by his passionate love for liberty and America. Many of Philip's classmates took an active part in the struggle and have left their names inscribed in the country's annals. In 1772, he began publishing his poetry-verse. Freneau vowed to use his pen in the sacred service of liberty. His theme was generally of patriotism and the common people. His bitterly satirical anti-British poetry was making him a revolutionist of distinction. In time, the young poet earned the nickname "Poet of the Revolution". It has been said that Freneau's sincere, daring poems helped lay the groundwork for the Declaration of Independence. In 1778, Philip joined the N.J. militia and was captured and imprisoned by the British in 1780. While imprisoned, Freneau wrote "The British Prison Ship", an account of his time in captivity. It has been called the strongest anti-British poem ever written in America.

The colonies were not desirous of severing all relations with the mother country. Freneau was no conservative. Finding his countrymen too slow in making use of this golden opportunity now offered in making themselves independent, he bought presses and flooded the countryside with patriotic pamphlets and supplying literature to each of the thirteen colonies. His fame extended far beyond lines of state and country.

After the war, he wrote other poems; proud poems of victory and songs of encouragement until he became known even in Europe as an outstanding figure of the Revolutionary period. His anger against the British did not die when the war ended. The entire course of his life was disturbed by his fierce determination to eradicate forever all British influences from America. He opposed the use of George Washington on American coins because he considered this a monarchical custom. He wore only homespun clothes made in America.

A great believer in democracy and the rights of the common man, Freneau's beliefs drew hostility from the powerful Federalists, among them Alexander Hamilton and John Adams, who favored a strong central government with less power to the people. At the same time, his writings drew praise from democrats or anti-Federalists such as Jefferson and James Madison who worried that the Federalists were moving toward a monarchical form of government and away from democracy. In 1791, at the command of Jefferson and Madison, Freneau went to the nation's capitol, then Philadelphia, to begin a paper called "The National Gazette". Jefferson said this journal "saved the constitution". Philip Freneau also served as private secretary to Jefferson when he was Secretary of State and was also his French translator.

Freneau openly criticized President Washington for lack of attention to the French Revolution. Washington preferred to avoid further involvement with Europe. Feeling the satiric barbs of Freneau, Washington penned the famous nickname "that rascal Freneau".

In December, 1800, when John Adams lost the presidential electoral vote to Thomas Jefferson, making Jefferson the first democratic or anti-Federalist president, it has been recorded that Adams wrote to a friend that the Monmouth Poet, Philip Freneau, was at the top of the list of those who "had encompassed his defeat".

In the early 1800's, Freneau retired to his beloved Mount Pleasant where he set up a printing press. He produced the first almanac in the state and printed the first newspaper, the "Jersey Chronicle".

His home was destroyed by fire in 1818 consuming his fine library and destroying many valuable papers, correspondence, and unpublished manuscripts. He moved to a property near Freehold on which the Battle of Monmouth had raged.

On December 18, 1832, at the age of 80, he set out for home on foot during a blizzard, lost his way, stumbled into a hole, and froze to death. He was buried on his estate at Mount Pleasant on a placid hill dear to his heart. The poet's gravesite sits at the far end of a tract of land several feet above street level across the road from where his home once stood. A tall marble monument bears his name and maintained by Matawan's Historic Sites Commission. It was here atop a small hill, surrounded by maple and oak trees, that Philip Freneau was inspired to write his finest nature poems.

In 1890, in his honor, the name Mount Pleasant was changed to Freneau.

Through his poetry and prose, Philip Freneau helped to form important strands, that, even today, still make up the fiber of this land of ours.