

COMMENCEMENT OF 1781

In the June issue of the *Library Chronicle* we reprinted from the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of July 11, 1781, an account of the Commencement exercises of the University on July 4. We are glad to supplement that account by printing the following additional information, sent to us by the Secretary of the University, Mr. E. W. Mumford:

“The writer of the article omits a very dramatic occurrence at this Commencement. One of the graduating students, Francis William Murray, insisted on including in his speech a reference to Major André of the British Army that the Faculty had told him to leave out. The Trustees stopped the proceedings long enough to retire and vote that his degree be not conferred that day. All of which must have been very edifying to His Excellency the President and the Honourable Congress of the United States.

“In the minutes of the Trustees of the University of the State of Pennsylvania under date of September 10, 1781 it is recorded that:

‘A letter from Francis W. Murray was Read, requesting that the Board would be pleased to Consider the exceptionable part of his Conduct on the 4th July last, as proceeding from the indiscretion of unreflecting Youth, rather than a premeditated design of shewing disobedience to the Faculty; and that such a line of Conduct and proper Concessions may be pointed out to him as will entitle him to the Degree intended to have been Confered on him.’

“This was referred to a committee to confer with the Provost and Faculty. The committee reported at the meeting of September 17, 1781, but the Board recommitted the matter to the committee, where the matter rested until April 13, 1782, when the following minute appears:

‘On Motion, The minute of the Board of the 5th September 1781 respecting Francis Murray, who was refused a degree on the 4th July preceeding for some part of his Conduct which was then considered as exceptionable, was read, and likewise a Resolution of the Faculty, relative to the concessions, which they think it necessary for Mr. Murray to make to entitle him to the honors of the Institution whereupon

'Resolved, That no publication in the news-papers respecting Mr. Murray's Conduct be now revived, and that Mr. Murray be directed to make such Concessions to the Faculty, in some other manner, as shall be deemed satisfactory by them, before the Board will Consent that the Degree which he requests be Confered upon him.'

"There is no later mention of the case in the minutes, but evidently Murray made due submission and the Faculty relented, for on July 3, 1786, he is recorded as receiving his Master of Arts degree, which would not have been granted unless the bachelor's degree had been previously allowed. The matriculate Catalogue records him with his original class, 1781, although the degree obviously was not allowed before 1782."

Mr. Mumford also calls attention to the fact that the names of two of the candidates for degrees in 1781 were incorrectly given in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. "Andrew Proudfoot" should have been Robert Proudfoot; and "William Bradford" was William Bradford, Jr.

The resolution that "no publication in the news-papers respecting Mr. Murray's Conduct be now revived" we cannot explain, for we find no reference to his rash and unseemly conduct in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, the *Packet*, the *Journal*, or the *Freeman's Journal* (where we would have most expected to find it) between the Commencement of 1781 and the end of April, 1782. The search for further information, however, resulted in our obtaining the following additional knowledge of the exercises that so aroused the interest of the French consul-general and the ire of the Trustees.

An anonymous writer was so much pleased with "the performances of the young gentlemen in general," and so "particularly affected with some strokes in the forensic disputation on the question, 'Is it for the interest of America to be independent of Great Britain,'" that he took pains to secure a copy of one of the addresses, and sent some extracts from it to the *Freeman's Journal*, which published them July 11, 1781, in lieu of the official account of the exercises that appeared in the other papers.

After enumerating “some of the advantages arising from a state of national independence,” the orator spoke thus of Great Britain’s treatment of the colonies:

“How many amongst us have been reduced from opulence and ease to penury and hardship? See yon helpless female, delicate by nature, and educated in all the elegance of southern taste! what misery is painted in her countenance! Her house is no longer permitted to afford her shelter, and she is forced to seek it in the lonely woods: Her weary limbs must rest upon the clay-cold ground, for the British ravager has seized her downy bed: Her table no longer groans under a profusion of delicious food; but she feels most sensibly the keen distress of hunger: Her spirits fail under this sad reverse of fortune: Paleness covers her once blooming cheeks, and her little strength is gone: she faints—she falls—she dies: No friend attends to close her languid eyes: No funeral rites conclude the solemn scene—A *grave* denied, she falls a prey to beasts.”

After recounting other evidences of “British fury,” wreaked alike on “hoary age and helpless infancy”—the “beauteous towns reduced to heaps of rubbish, and e’en our sacred temples wrapt in flames,” the speaker concluded: “Then say, ye votaries of *Britain*, say, can ye find charms in these? If so, go, sordid souls, and enjoy, without a rival, the horrors which enchant you!—go, and experience the mercy of Great Britain!”

We need not wonder that Barbé-Marbois wrote that the exercises of the day were calculated “to stir up hatred against the English.” We can only regret that we have not the text of the censored reference to André, of which, if it could be found, it might be said “Now it can be told.”