

COMMENCEMENT OF 1781

The following account of the Commencement exercises of the College held July 4, 1781, is reprinted from the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of July 11 of that year. The occasion seems to have been that to which Barbé-Marbois, the French consul-general, referred in his letter to the Comte de Vergennes, July 5, quoted in the *Library Chronicle* of October, 1934.

On Wednesday last, the Anniversary of our Glorious Revolution, the commencement for degrees in the Arts was held in the Hall of the University, at which were present, by particular invitation, His Excellency the President¹ and the Honourable Congress of the United States, His Excellency the President of this State² and the Honourable Council, and the family of His Excellency the Chevalier Luzerne, the Minister of France. Besides these, the Hall was honoured with a very great concourse of Officers of the army, Foreigners of distinction, Ladies and Gentlemen of the first rank from the different States, and respectable Citizens.

An excellent band of music striking up, as the Hon. Congress entered the Hall, and playing until His Excellency the President and the Hon. Board of Trustees and Faculty of the University were seated, ushered in the Exercises of the day, and by interludes, between the several performances of the young gentlemen, heightened the pleasure of the entertainment.

Order of the Exercises

1st. Prayer by the Rev. John Ewing, D.D. Provost.

2d. Salutatory oration in Latin on the advantages which the United States may expect to derive from a free trade with the whole world, by James Wade.

3d. A Forensic disputation on the question, 'Is it for the interest of America to remain Independent of Great-Britain?' in which all the candidates took part, and supported with great spirit and address their respective sides of the question.

The debate was opened, the advantages of Independence

¹ Samuel Huntington of Connecticut, was President of the Continental Congress from 1779 to July 10, 1781.

² William Moore, of Philadelphia, a trustee of the University 1784-1789. His daughter married Barbé-Marbois, the French consul-general.

described, and the folly of re-union pointed, by William Clarkson.³

He was replied to by Andrew Proudfoot, who was followed by George Swift, both in favour of dependence.

Their arguments were replied to by James Wade and William Ewing,⁴ and the Provost concluded by observing, that the subject was chosen as an exercise of genius,⁵ not as a doubtful question; every reason pointing to the wisdom of the declaration of Independence.

4th. An oration in praise of ignorance, by William Clarkson. The genuine humour and attic salt of this performance gave universal and high satisfaction, and produced general applause. It concluded with the following lines:

‘Since then all knowledge is at best but vain,
 Since it not lessens but increases pain.
 It is most evident, we may conclude,
 That in *sheer ignorance* consists all good;
 That to be happy we need know more—
 No! not so much, as, *two* and *two* make *four*;
 And therefore as they care for nought that passes,
 The happiest creatures in the world are *asses*.’

5th. An oration on the advantages of peace, by George Swift.

6th. An oration on the advantages of cultivating oratory in a free government, and the utility of the healing art, by Solomon Drown.

7th. Conferring of degrees by the Provost, when the degree of Bachelor in the Arts was conferred on William Clarkson, William Ewing, Andrew Proudfoot, George Swift and James Wade; of Bachelor in Medicine on Ezekiel Bull, Solomon Drown and Samuel Powel Griffiths; and the honorary degree of Master in Arts on William Bradford, Esq., Attorney General of Pennsylvania, and William Barton, Esq.

8th. Valedictory oration on the duties of a good citizen, and the glorious prospect of the diffusion of learning in the

³ Subsequently became a Presbyterian clergyman, and was one of the founders, and a Fellow, of the College of Physicians, of Philadelphia.

⁴ A son of Provost Ewing.

⁵ An interesting example of the “academic mind,” that this question was debated, solely as “an exercise of genius,” while the war was still being fought.

United States, by means of the University of Pennsylvania, by William Ewing.

9th. The Provost concluded the business of the day with a very warm, affecting and sensible charge to the Graduates, on that dignity of conduct becoming men of education, who wish to become useful and respectable citizens.

The pleasure which so brilliant and sensible an assembly expressed in every part of the exercises of the day, was the best and most honourable testimony that could be given to the merit of the young gentlemen. The alliance with France was mentioned in the performances of the day repeatedly, in the most honourable terms.⁶

The distresses of our sister States, which have suffered by the ravages of the enemy, the Southern States particularly, were described in so lively and pathetic a manner, as to draw tears from many of the auditors, and shewed that the citizens of Pennsylvania were not insensible to their misfortunes.

The exercises being over, the Hon. Board of Trustees and Faculty of the University partook of a cold collation, given at the State-House by the Hon. Congress, to the Officers of the Army and Navy of our illustrious Ally and these United States.

⁶ Compare with the account given by Barbé-Marbois (*Library Chronicle*, 2:39): "The literary exercises of the pupils, which lasted nearly six hours, have as their chief object to inspire in them the keenest devotion to the cause of independence and to the King and the French Nation, and to stir up their hatred against the English The name of his Majesty was repeated over and over in these exercises, and the heads of the University said that an essential point in the training of youth was to foster these sentiments in a way to form a new generation free from all the prejudices of the old in favor of England, and to enkindle a spirit of gratitude for France."