

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 2: Philip Morin Freneau (1752-1832)

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Primary Works

Poems. Edited with a critical introd. by Harry Hayden Clark. NY: Hafner Pub. Co., 1960, 1929. PS755 .A5 C6

The poems of Philip Freneau, poet of the American Revolution. (1902) Edited for the Princeton Historical Association by Fred Lewis Pattee. NY: Russell & Russell, 1963. 3 vols. PS755 .A2

Father Bombo's pilgrimage to Mecca, 1770. by Hugh Henry Brackenridge and Philip Freneau; edited, with an introd., by Michael Davitt Bell. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U Library, 1975. PS708 B5 F3

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Goudie, Sean X. *Creole America: The West Indies and the Formation of Literature and Culture in the New Republic*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2006.

Hollander, John. ed. *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century, I: Philip Freneau to Walt Whitman*. NY: Library of America, 1993.

I. Freneau as Leader of 18th Century Naturalism

1. Fresh interest in nature.
2. The belief that nature is a revelation of God.

3. Humanitarian sympathy for the humble and oppressed.
4. The faith that people are naturally good.
5. That they lived idyllic and benevolent lives in a primitive past before the advent of civilization.
6. The radical doctrine that the golden age will dawn again when social institutions are modified, since they are responsible for existing evil.

II. Aspects of Freneau

1. Poet of American Independence: Freneau provides incentive and inspiration to the revolution by writing such poems as "The Rising Glory of America" and "Pictures of Columbus."
2. Journalist: Freneau was editor and contributor of The Freeman's Journal (Philadelphia) from 1781-1784. In his writings, he advocated the essence of what is known as Jeffersonian democracy - decentralization of government, equality for the masses, etc.
3. Freneau's Religion: Freneau is described as a deist - a believer in nature and humanity but not a pantheist. In deism, religion becomes an attitude of intellectual belief, not a matter of emotional or spiritual ecstasy. Freneau shows interest and sympathy for the humble and the oppressed.
4. Freneau as Father of American Poetry: His major themes are death, nature, transition, and the human in nature. All of these themes become important in 19th century writing. His famous poems are "The Wild Honey-Suckle" (1786), "The Indian Burying Ground" (1787), "The Dying Indian: Tomo Chequi" (1784), "The Millennium" (1797), "On a Honey Bee" (1809), "To a Caty-Did" (1815), "On the Universality and Other Attributes of the God of Nature," "On the Uniformity and Perfection of Nature," and "On the Religion of Nature" (the last three written in 1815).

| [Top](#) | Philip Freneau (1752-1832): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Nicholas von Teck

Philip Freneau: Voice of Revolution

In 1598 King Henry IV of France issued the Edict of Nantes, promising to protect the rights of his Huguenot (Protestant) subjects and allowing them to worship in their own churches. The Bourbon King Louis XIV rescinded the Edict of Nantes with the Act of Revocation of 1685, condemning the Protestant Huguenots to trials of heresy by the Roman Church; those who were not massacred fled to any place that would take them. Two large communities of Huguenots settled in the colonies of North America: one in the area around Charleston, South Carolina and the other, larger colony in the city of Nieuw Amsterdam. Shortly after the arrival of the Huguenots in Nieuw Holland, that colony was forfeited to the United Kingdom and renamed New York. In the early but nonetheless cosmopolitan environs of New York Town, these French Protestants found themselves with Dutch colonists, English colonial administrators, Jewish-German merchants, African slaves, and Native American converts. One of these Huguenot families was the Fresneaus from La Rochelle, France (Austin 50). They arrived there from England in 1709 (Leary 5).

After a few generations, the Fresneaus who fought for space with the other New Yorkers in the small area of the city bounded by the Hudson and East rivers and Wall Street became the Freneaus who owned a prosperous plantation called Mount Pleasant in Monmouth County, New Jersey, and had a thousand slaves (Clark xiv). Some traditions remain in families: Mont Plaisant was the name of the residence of the Fresneaus in La Rochelle, France (Austin 65). Despite being gentlemen farmers, each successive generation of Fresneaus carried on the family trade in wine, begun long before the Edict of Nantes, and Philip Freneau made many voyages to bring back port wines and madeiras (Clark xiv).

Philip Morin Freneau was born at Mount Pleasant on 2 January 1752 (Old Style: the United Kingdom and its colonies had yet to convert to the Julian calendar and still used the Gregorian at this time — as a result, an Englishman traveling to the Continent had to set his calendar ahead twelve days after crossing the Channel). Philip was the eldest of the five children of Pierre Freneau and Agnes Watson (Austin 65), and the first to use the spelling Freneau (Bowden 15).

Philip was schooled at Mount Pleasant until he was boarded with the Reverend William Tennent of Tennent's Church, New Jersey for his preparatory education in his tenth year in 1762 (Austin 72). His first known poem, "The Wild

Honeysuckle," was penned about this time; the actual date of inscription is unknown, but tradition has Freneau writing it shortly before arriving at Tennent's Church (Austin 70). A little over three years later, in February, 1766, he was enrolled in the Penlopen Latin School in Monmouth under the tutelage of the Reverend Alexander Mitchell; he remained there until he was admitted to Nassau Hall at Princeton College, Princeton, New Jersey in 1668. During his time at Penlopen Latin, Philip's father died (Austin 73). Philip's mother, however, decided that Philip should continue his education and sent him along to Nassau Hall in due course, but with a tacit understanding between mother and son that he was to seek a degree in Divinity. He didn't (Leary 50).

The roster of Philip's classmates reads like a litany of the American Pantheon: the Honorable Justices Hugh Brackenridge and Brockholst Livingston of the Supreme Court of the United States; Gunning Bedford, a framer of the Constitution; Aaron Burr, Vice-President of the United States; Colonel Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee of Virginia; and James Madison, Fourth President of the United States of America; and several others, in addition to having as the president of his college the Reverend Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence (Austin 74). Seldom has such a small group of students achieved such enduring legacy for Freneau's graduating class of 1770 held but ten students (Austin 75).

| [Top](#) | During his sophomore year he wrote "The Poetical History of the Prophet Jonah," a "rhythymical (sic) poem, or 'versified paraphrase' to use his own expression" (Austin 76). At one-hundred-thirty-five lines it was considered remarkable for so young a poet and much commented on at the time, both at Princeton and at rival colleges such as Kings in New York, Harvard in Boston, and William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia (Austin 78). For graduation in 1771, he collaborated with the (later Mr. Justice) Brackenridge on a poem they recited, "The Rising Glory of America," a blank verse dialogue (Austin 78). Brackenridge had earlier collaborated with Freneau on the mock epic "Father Bombo's Pilgrimage" (Bowden 22). Freneau also immortalizes Witherspoon in the poem "Caledonian Sage" and praised the "liberal education" he gained under Witherspoon's administration (Bowden 17). Among other activities, Witherspoon instituted student orations as a form of entertainment, and even allowed the students to chose their subjects for discourse, which Freneau satires in "The Distrest Orator" (Bowden 19). Interestingly, despite being a prodigal and prodigious student, Freneau did not attend his own graduation from Princeton; the fact that his mother remarried may have had something to do with it, but this period of Freneau's life is vague (Bowden 28).

Freneau's first occupation was as a school teacher in Flatbush, Bruecklin (Brooklyn) County on Nassau (Long) Island. He lasted thirteen days with "the youth of that detested place" and "finally bid adieu" to "that brainless crew, ... devoid of reason and grace" (Austin 80). He said his employers were "gentlemen of New York: bullies, merchants, and scoundrels" (Austin 80). In the same letter to a classmate, he also mentions that he had just written and published a poem of "some four-hundred-and-fifty lines ... called 'The American Village' and a few short pieces as well" (Austin 80). However, he was soon forced to accept another teaching position, this one at Somerset Academy near Baltimore, Maryland, where he stayed until the end of term, 1773.

Freneau had evidently collected his year's salary from Flatbush in advance, "some forty pounds," and expected his ex-employers to "trounce" him if they should find him (Austin 80). A Jamaican planter named Hanson invited Freneau to pay a prolonged visit to Hanson's plantation. As Hanson was also master of his own ship and was preparing to ship on the next tide, Freneau thought it behooved himself to clamber on board (Austin 83). During the passage, the first mate died and Freneau found himself learning the art of navigation by the "trial-by-fire" method (Austin 83). He discovered that he enjoyed it and eventually took master's papers (Austin 83).

During his prolonged stay in Jamaica, he developed a dislike for slavery. This is interesting because, like most large farmers of the era, the Freneaus had both house and field slaves at Mount Pleasant, although they also had tennant farmers as well on their fairly large holdings (Austin 60). Freneau obviously villianized Hanson by creating the character of Sir Tobey the slave-owner in the poem "To Sir Tobey" (Austin 83). During the next few years, Freneau sailed as master around the Caribbean and visited the Bermudas, the Danish Virgin Islands, and the Gulf of Mexico (Austin 83). These travels were the inspiration for such poems as "House of Night" and "The Beauties of Santa Cruz"(Austin 85). In 1775 he also publishes "American Liberty" (Bowden 13).

While Freneau sailed to and fro between the balmy Carib and the Delaware Bay, hostilities between Mother England and her colonies were growing to a fighting pitch. As soon as Freneau learned of the outbreak of revolution, he sailed back to New Jersey in the bark *Amanda* (it may not have actually been his, for he was recorded as being only the master of it) (Austin 105). Interestingly, the name for the "beauty" for whom his sings praises in his poem of the Caribbean poems is "Amanda" (Austin 86).

Freneau arrives at Mount Pleasant to find it burned, and his mother and younger siblings living elsewhere; the Battle of Monmouth had been fought on Mount Pleasant (Austin 103). Freneau arranges for "lettres of marque," authorizing him to be a privateer and attack English shipping in order to seize cargo and vessels (Austin 104). While the bark *Amanda* sails under another master with him as the recorded owner, Freneau orders a new sloop built at Philadelphia; he names her *Aurora* (Austin 104).

| [Top](#) | On 25 May 1778, *Aurora* left the ways at Philadelphia and stood out into Delaware Bay for Cape Henlopen and the Atlantic Ocean. Less than six hours later, *Aurora* had been chased and run aground by the English Captain Sir George Collier in *HMS Iris* (which before her own capture was ex-USS *Hancock*) and Freneau was captured (Austin 110). Lacking gallantry usually expected in a ship's master, Freneau at first denies he is the master when confronted by the prize-captain of *HMS Iris* (Leary 82). After he is handcuffed below decks with the "stench of seamen," Freneau finds a Tory aboard the frigate who knows him and begs recognition (Leary 82). Freneau was transported to the prison ship *HMS Scorpion* in New York Harbor, and later transferred again to the prison hospital ship *HMS Hunter* (Austin 113). This internment of nearly eighteen months was the genesis for the poem "The Prison Ship" (650 lines; published in 1780) in which he "compares the flight of [the] *Aurora* to the flight of Hector pursued by Achilles" (Austin 109). During this time, however, he does manage to contribute to Brackenridge's *United States Magazine* (Bowden 13). Freneau never recovered from the financial loss of *Aurora* (Clark xxiii).

He was paroled on condition that he not resume arms against the King, and he evidently kept his word, but Freneau must have reckoned the old saw about the pen being mightier than the sword had some verisimilitude for he continued to raise his quill in rebellion for the rest of the Revolution (Austin 121). He found work as a printer and editor with the *Freeman's Journal* in Philadelphia (Bowden 13). Freneau wrote poems on various patriotic subjects such as the departure of the traitor Benedict Arnold, the Battle of Temple Hill, the melting by the printer Isaac Sears of his type into bullets, etc ... (Austin 133). By 1786, he was master of the brig *Washington* and making round-trips to the Madeiras (Austin 138). He left behind a newly published volume, *The Poems of Philip Freneau* (Bowden 13). The next year, 1787, he returned long enough to publish a second volume, *A Journey from Philadelphia to New York* before again standing out to sea (Bowden 13). 1788 saw the publication of a third volume, *The Miscellaneous Works of Mr. Philip Freneau* (Bowden 13).

In 1789 Freneau married Helen Forman of New Jersey, a sister of General David Forman, one of the founders of the Order of the Cincinnati (Austin 147). Helen Freneau is recorded as having a pleasant and "poetic" personality, and was a gracious hostess (Austin 149).

Freneau was offered the position of editor of the Philadelphia *Daily Advertiser*, but before he could assume that position he was induced to become editor of the *National Gazette* instead at the paltry salary of \$250 per annum (Austin 152). Freneau had never financially recovered from the loss of *Aurora*, and was still trying to run his family's estate at Mount Pleasant, and maintain all who depended on him: "family and slaves" (Austin 152). Despite writing "To Sir Tobey" nearly twenty years before, Freneau was still a slaveholder himself.

| [Top](#) | The Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson, offered Freneau the clerkship of "Interpreter of the French language for the Department of State" in 1793 (Austin 153). This raised a hue-and-cry of such proportions, and the appointment was so loudly denounced, that the offer was withdrawn; for some reason, many Philadelphians at that time suspected Jefferson and Freneau of collusion and intrigue (Austin 156). Since Philadelphia was the seat of government at the time, and since Benjamin Franklin was then opposing Jefferson as to which form of government the founding United States should adopt, Freneau was likely just a handy target for the pro-Franklin faction in their bid to undermine the Jeffersonian Republican-Democrats (Austin 156). The idea seems to have been that a clerk under Jefferson who just happened to be the editor of a major newspaper would give the Jeffersonians a propaganda leverage that would be nearly impossible to undermine if it were not stopped immediately (Austin 156). Franklin is recorded as saying, "What Tyrtæus was to the Spartans, was Freneau to the Republicans ... (Austin 160). The allusion is that the *National Gazette* was, with Freneau as editor, a "powerful political paper" (Austin 160).

Freneau found himself unpopular with Martha Washington because he wrote he thought her coach, "a very large cream-colored chariot of globular form, surrounded by cupids supporting festoons of flowers emblematically arranged around the panel-work," was not in keeping with the simplicity the Jeffersonians thought more appropriate for a Republic (Austin 163). The President called him "that rascal Freneau (Leary 3). He also found himself attacked by Vice-President John Adams and Benjamin Franklin for supporting the French Consul "Citizen" Edmund Genet in organizing "Jacobin" clubs in the United States (Austin 164). President Washington was not in favor of an open coalition with France since he did not want to force the United States into another war with the United Kingdom; therefore he did everything he could to ignore the rabble-rousing Citizen Genet instigated by his "appeals to the people" from their "brothers in France" (Austin 164). Many in the United States, and especially the Federalists, viewed Freneau's *National Gazette* as nothing more than a blank sheet for the diatribes of Jefferson and Genet (Austin 170).

Freneau quit as editor of the *National Gazette* in 1793 and retired to Mount Pleasant (Austin 176). The *National Gazette* itself folded; it seems that Freneau also owned the press and the type and was unwilling to sell; he built a small printshop near the rebuilt Mount Pleasant and amused himself "printing the various inspirations that visited him" (Austin 176). He published his own works, including an almanac, and translations of French works as well (Austin 176). The almanac included his poem "The Pyramid of the Fifteen American States" (Austin 180). Another publication was the beginning of *The Jersey Chronical*, an eight-page quarto described as a "spirited little journal"; it lasted until 1796

(Austin 186). He then became editor of *The Time-Piece and Literary Companion*, a "miscellaneous" paper issued every three weeks; it also folded (Austin 189). Another volume of his own work, *Poems Written Between the Years 1768 & 1794*, was printed during this time in that same, small print shop at Mount Pleasant (Bowden 13).

In 1802 Freneau went into partnership with his younger brother Pierre (aka Peter) Freneau and bought the brig *Washington* which Philip Freneau had earlier mastered (Austin 191). Philip Freneau again made voyages in the Atlantic Ocean, but this time earning the sobriquet "the sailor poet" (Austin 191). A major work to come out of this period is "The Storm" (Austin 196).

| [Top](#) | However, Freneau again settled down & sort of: he had established a print shop at 10 North Alley, Philadelphia and was also at home at Mount Pleasant. He visited often at the home of DeWitt Clinton in New York City (whose wife was the daughter of Citizen Genet and a co-francophone herself) (Austin 203). Freneau also wrote extensively to correspondents during this period. He also wrote a series of letters to the Philadelphia *Aurora* under the pseudonym Robert Slender, which were later collected in *Letters on Various Interesting and Important Subjects* (Bowden 14). Still, for reasons unclear, from 1809 until 1814 the poet in Freneau seems to have been unusually silent (Bowden 125). This is bothersome: where was the patriotic voice that had yelled during the Revolution? Why was Freneau so silent during the War of 1812?

Freneau published *Poems Written and Published During the American Revolutionary War* in 1809 and *A Collection of Poems Chiefly on American Affairs* in 1815 (Bowden 14). While these poems were reviewed kindly by *The Port-Folio*, a conservative and Federalist organ, they take away the feeling of Freneau's raging voice, and substitute one that seems imitative, especially noticeable in his "nonoccasional" poems (Bowden 171).

In 1818 Mount Pleasant burned again. Many of the writings of Freneau burned with it (Austin 203). Between the second burning of Mount Pleasant and Freneau's death in 1832, he produced little. It seems as though the fire, which consumed a fine library and much unpublished work, was too much of a loss. He did not rebuild and he finally let the estate be sold to pay off the creditors who had hounded him since the loss of *Aurora* to the British in 1778 (Clark xxiii). The writings he did produce during this last period have been trivialized as "lost" between his inclination for the Romantics and his franco-Calvinist heritage, although Ralph Waldo Emerson praises the lack in Freneau's writings of what he called "a foolish constancy" (Clark xliii, li). He continued to take an interest in politics and literature, but he seldom even wrote letters after that (Austin 206). However, he did publish "Recollections of Past Times and Events" in the Trenton, New Jersey *True American* in 1822 (Bowden 14).

In the evening of 18 December 1832, at the age of almost 81, Philip Freneau walked home from a meeting of the circulating library in Philadelphia in a snowstorm; he fell, broke his hip, and froze to death. His body was found the next day. His tombstone begins, simply: POET'S GRAVE.

During his lifetime, Freneau printed a dozen books and wrote hundreds of poems, from doggerel to epics. He has a distinguished presence on the Internet: a search of "Freneau" on the search engine Google returns three-thousand related articles.

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Study Questions

1. Although Freneau's "To Sir Toby" is ostensibly about a sugar planter on the island of Jamaica, examine the poem for

evidence that Freneau is also writing about southern slavery. Locate references to slavery in his other anthologized poems and summarize the way slavery, for Freneau, contradicts eighteenth-century principles of reason and human rights.

2. Evaluate the language of Freneau's historical poems against specific passages in Paine or Jefferson, and discuss the relative effectiveness of political and poetic voices within the context of American revolution.

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