NASSAU HALL

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE
THE NEW JERSEY SOCIETY OF COLONIAL DAMES
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BY

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Nassau Hall

OBEDIENT to your request—a request which I assure you is an honor I deeply appreciate—I am to bring before you in brief survey some of the memorable scenes that have claimed this building for their background, and so have added their touch of picturesqueness to its history.

I need not ask you to consider the origins of this University, nor shall we linger over its early struggle for existence. That struggle was by no means over when in 1753 Mr. Nathaniel Fitzrandolph of Princeton presented to the trustees of the college the 4½-acre lot on which Nassau Hall was to be built. The plans were drawn by Dr. Edward Shippen and Mr. Robert Smith, the architect builder of the State House and Christ Church steeple at Philadelphia. The cornerstone was laid in July, 1754, and a year and a half later the roof was at length raised. And in a moment of happy inspiration Governor Belcher of New Jersey named the building in honor of William of Nassau, Prince of Orange. To that tenderhearted old colonial governor more than to any other individual do we owe the existence of this edifice. It is his only monument on our campus, but a better he could not have desired.

The vicissitudes through which Nassau Hall has passed during the century and a half of its existence have necessarily led to many alterations in its appearance, chiefly internal. The Revolution left it a ruin; fires in 1802 and 1855 destroyed all but the walls; successive college administrations have added and taken away; it has just been through a process of partial restoration. To convey to you some idea of the original appearance of the historic apartment in which we are assembled, let me quote the following contemporary official account:

"It has also," says this time-stained pamphlet, "an elegant hall of genteel workmanship, being a square of near 40 feet with a neatly furnished front gallery. Here is a small tho exceeding good organ, which was obtained by a voluntary subscription, opposite to which is erected a stage, for the use of the students in their public exhibitions. It is also ornamented on one side with a portrait of his late majesty George II at full length; and on the other with a like picture (and above it the family arms neatly carved and gilt) of his excellency Governor Belcher."

By a happy coincidence the presence here to-day of the Society of Colonial Dames marks Nassau Hall's sesquicentennial. For 150 years ago this autumn the college with its 70 students moved from Newark to occupy the new home here, at that time the largest structure of its kind in America; and on November 14th of that year 1756, President Burr, that most winsome of early American academic figures, preached the sermon in this room, with which the record of collegiate exercises at Princeton begins. But to Mr. Burr was granted scarcely more than a glimpse of the promised land, whose vistas now seemed to open so fair before the college. For he did not outlive his first year at Princeton, and one golden afternoon in September, 1757, just before Commencement, he was carried from these walls, for which he had labored so valiantly, down to the quiet graveyard a hundred steps away.

Then to the presidency followed Jonathan Edwards, Samuel Davies, and Samuel Finley, in such quick succession that it seemed as if some Nemesis were pursuing the institution. But in August, 1768, the spell was broken, and there came to Princeton a Scotsman who, during the quarter of a century that he ruled its ways, was to witness the darkest yet the proudest years of its history; who was to instil something of his own rugged personality into its graduates, and who was to leave an impress here at once a tradition and a legacy, a vision unto which the Princeton of to-day is once more obedient—the service of the nation.

Each window in the building was lighted by a tallow dip that summer evening when John Witherspoon arrived; and the enthusiastic welcome he received was equalled only by the superb energy with which he plunged into his new duties and seized his opportunities. For a time things went well; the Doctor's advertising tours and moneygathering expeditions resulted in immediate increase of students and of funds. The college bid fair to prosper, when the clouds began to darken in the political sky. Every movement of those clouds was mirrored on this campus. In 1770, when the letter of the New York merchants, breaking their non-importation agreement and inviting the city of Philadelphia to do the same, passed through Princeton, the collegians seized the cowardly document and with the utmost gravity burnt it in front of Nassau Hall. A letter home from a boy in college is the record of this incident. His name was James Madison.

The Boston Tea Party also furnished a cue for undergraduate impetuosity, and late one afternoon in January, 1774, the embryo rebels of the campus broke into the steward's storeroom in the basement of this building, confiscated his whole winter supply of tea, and, ransacking all the other rooms for the same cheering non-intoxicant, carried it in solemn procession to the front campus, and there piling it around an effigy of Governor Hutchinson with a cannister about his neck, soberly set fire to it, the students in their black gowns making "spirited resolves," the college bell tolling dismally.

It was in the autumn of that year that John Adams, on his way to the First Continental Congress, loitered here a day and a half. In this room, where George Whitefield had preached, he attended evening prayer and bethought him of his flattering comment on the students singing—it was "as bad as that of the Presbyterians of New York." And from the balcony above the door he admired the wide extent of view—for our trees were few and slender in those colonial days—and, after drinking a glass of wine with the president and talking long with him, he went back to his tavern convinced that Dr. Witherspoon was as high a son of liberty as any man in America. And when on successive nights in April, 1775, those two shadowy horsemen came galloping across the state, past this restless seat of learning, with the news of Lexington and Concord, and New Jersey was stirred at last to action, in the course then taken Dr. Witherspoon, as you know, had a prominent share. We find him in June, 1776, sent to the Provincial Congress and elected by that body to the Continental Congress, and at Philadelphia he was in his seat on those memorable first few days of July.

In 1776 the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed from the steps of Nassau Hall on the 9th of July, and was greeted with a triple volley of musketry. Once more every window was lighted—"Nassau Hall was grandly illuminated," says a local chronicler. A company of volunteers was formed from the undergraduates and joined Washington's army that summer, and at the same time Nassau Hall was used more than once by passing American troops. In August the first legislature of New Jersey under the constitution sat here in the library room over the front entrance, and thereafter its sessions here were frequent.

The summer and autumn passed, but with the patriot army things were going from bad to worse. Princeton, a hotbed of rebellion, lay in the path of the victorious enemy, and was certain to receive special attention at their hands. Accordingly, one morning late in November the undergraduates were called together in this hall and with deep emotion Dr. Witherspoon announced the disbandment of the college. A few days later Washington came hurrying through the deserted village with his retreating forces. On the 8th of December the British and Hessians took possession and began their twenty days' tyranny, quartering themselves in this empty building, in the Presbyterian Church and in half the dwelling houses of the neighborhood. But early in the morning of January 3, 1777, the British reinforcements which had issued so confidently from these quarters to assist in the capture of Washington at Trenton, came streaming back in disorder to seek refuge here. The American artillery was trained upon the building and, after two or three solid shot had been thrown at it, an eager band of local militia burst open the door and demanded the surrender of the demoralized redcoats. Scores of them had fled, but about 200 gave themselves up. Washington captured a quantity of baggage and provisions, made a bonfire of what he could not carry, and hurried off to safety. For Cornwallis was coming up from Trenton and Lawrenceville; and in a few hours Nassau Hall fell back into the enemy's hands. But later in the afternoon it was left by them forever, as they made all haste to get on to New Brunswick. What damage the British and Hessians had left undone, in their use of this building as a barracks and a hospital, was completed by the American troops who took their place. The library had been ruined; the furniture and woodwork had been used for fuel; this hall was a wreck; one of the American cannon balls had come through the window and had struck the portrait of George II on the opposite wall full in the face, tearing the canvas to ribbons. No one knows what happened to Governor Belcher's portrait. The entire building was polluted and dismantled. College exercises were resumed in the following summer, but in the president's house. Nassau Hall remained a barracks and a hospital for American troops and British prisoners until the summer of 1778, when its military occupants finally left it. Recovery was slow, for money was scarcer than ever. Four years later the basement and upper stories were still uninhabitable. The grammar school, to be sure, occupied temporary quarters at one end of the basement, and another room had also been sufficiently repaired to be used as a dining room; but the college proper was crowded into the centre of the building, and even there many of the rooms still lay waste.

But in the summer of 1783 we find Nassau Hall on the threshold of the supreme epoch in its history, when it became the shelter of the federal government, and Princeton for five months was the capital of the young republic.

In June, 1783, the members of Congress, frightened for their lives, fled from Philadelphia to continue their session here. President Elias Boudinot had been directed to adjourn Congress either to Trenton or to Princeton. Why he, a trustee of the college, chose Princeton, where in his boyhood he had played along the village street, we need not ask. Colonel George Morgan, who lived at Prospect just outside the college grounds, at once offered to Congress the use of his house, and the faculty invited the fugitives to occupy Nassau Hall. The first three meetings were held at Prospect, and then Congress moved hither and for the rest of the stay at Princeton occupied ordinarily the library room. On state occasions the meetings were held in this apartment. Here the nation's representatives played the part of audience at the Fourth of July exercises of that year.

But it was on the 26th of August that the great unforgettable scene was enacted. There was abroad that morning an air of ill suppressed excitement which must, I think, have played havoc with the recitations of the young gentlemen who were fortunate to be undergraduates. Congress assembled, the members sitting in groups by states, President Boudinot facing them, and wearing his hat as a sign of authority. By his side was a vacant chair. Just before noon a little cavalcade came riding slowly into town on the Rocky Hill road, a familiar figure in buff and blue at its head, behind him an escort of twelve troopers, who halted at the campus gate while the tall figure in the continental uniform dismounted and strode up to the steps of Nassau Hall, amid the shouts of Princeton undergraduates. At the stroke of twelve the door of this room swung open and, escorted by two members of the congressional committee on arrangements, George Washington entered. He was conducted to the empty chair beside Mr. Boudinot. In obedience to the call of Congress, he had come to receive the thanks and congratulations of his country. If in this chamber he had needed any reminder of that exciting winter morning in 1777, he had but to raise his eyes, for hanging on the wall was an empty gilded picture frame. The portrait which his cannon had ruined was gone. The frame was waiting for another occupant.

Meanwhile Mr. Boudinot, still seated, but now uncovered, read amid intense silence the formal address from Congress congratulating Washington on the successful termination of the war and thanking him on behalf of the nation for the great services he had rendered. It alluded gracefully to his personal character and to the esteem in which he was held, and it hinted at the work that Congress still had for him to do ere he should return to private citizenship. The Commander-in-Chief then read a brief and modest acknowledgment, giving the entire credit to his soldiers and to Providence; and it was all over. But the very simplicity of the ceremony lent it striking dignity. There was neither pomp, nor pageantry, nor blare of trumpets. In truth these soberly clad gentlemen knew no better way—they could have found none—to mark the climax of their hero's military career and to make the occasion impressive, than by stripping it of all that was merely external. The genuineness of their feeling was stamped on every act and word.

This hall had little to do with the remarkable commencement exercises of that year, for they were held in the Presbyterian church. But when Washington presented fifty guineas to the college as a token of his regard, the trustees begged him to give sittings to Charles Wilson Peale, the painter, and the portrait when finished a year later was placed in the empty old gilt frame. And yonder it hangs!

The audience given in October to His Excellency Peter Van Berckel, the Minister Plenipotentiary from the Netherlands, was more ceremonious and artificial. He had landed at Philadelphia after a tempestuous voyage; he was dismayed to find Congress gone from the city; he was disgusted to learn that arrangements for his house and horses had not been made; he deemed himself insulted by Mr. Boudinot's steward, when this bluff old retainer intimated that a new Minister ought not to loiter in Philadelphia but should announce his arrival at once to Congress. In view of his ruffled feelings, Congress went out of its way to do him honor. After much fret and delay, an audience was set for October 31st. On that day shortly before noon Robert Morris, the financier, and General Lincoln, the Secretary at War, rode out to Tusculum, Dr. Witherspoon's country home, whither Van Berckel had gone on reaching Princeton the night before, and informed him that Congress was ready to receive him, and he at once started for the village in his private coach. Just before he arrived, a horseman came dashing up the highroad from the eastward and drew rein at the campus gate. It proved to be Colonel Mathias Ogden of the First New Jersey, who had landed at New York the previous afternoon from England. Learning that the packet boat carrying the definitive treaty of peace between Great Britain and the United States had not been sighted, he found that he was the bearer of the first authentic news that the treaty had been signed, and he had therefore set off post haste for Princeton to inform Congress. And so the Dutch Minister was welcomed by a peculiarly happy gathering of ladies and gentlemen —for the interest of the occasion had attracted a number of visitors—when promptly at noon he was ushered in by Robert Morris and General Lincoln. Once more in this chamber the members of Congress were seated as usual by states. Mr. Boudinot sat facing them and wearing his hat. In front of him—not by his side this time—was an empty chair. Van Berckel, on being introduced, read in French (hat in hand) the letter of congratulation and greeting from the Netherlands, of which he was the bearer. Then taking his seat in the empty chair, he handed his credentials to his secretary, who in turn passed them to Charles Thomson, Secretary of Congress. The latter gave them to Colonel Frelinghuysen, whose Dutch ancestry had made him official interpreter for the occasion, and he read them in the original. Charles

Thomson then read the Colonel's polished translation. President Boudinot now rose and, taking off his hat, read the response of Congress. Then he handed the document to Mr. Thomson, who presented it to the Dutch Minister, the latter rising to receive it. This was the signal for the approach of Mr. Morris and General Lincoln, who then conducted His Excellency back to his coach, while Congress resumed business with a sigh of relief that no hitch had marred the punctilious formality of the occasion.

A curious list could be made of the men who trod the corridors of Nassau Hall that summer of 1783. It would contain Italian counts, Polish noblemen, English promoters, soldiers innumerable, sanguine inventors, impecunious authors, besides nearly all the prominent characters of the day—men like Thomas Paine and Captain Paul Jones, Baron Steuben, Kosciusko and General Nathaniel Greene. Oliver Ellsworth, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison were among the legislators, and on the last day of the session Thomas Jefferson put in his appearance and took his seat.

But the eighteenth century had closed and nearly a quarter of the nineteenth had passed before the most romantic figure in the Revolutionary Army honored Princeton with his presence. In September, 1824, Lafayette visited this village on his triumphal tour through America, after the lapse of forty years. The flags of the United States and France were flying over Nassau Hall, and halfway between the steps and the street a strange and wonderful temple of white columns had been erected, in which the central decoration was the Peale portrait of Washington. At the campus gate a speech of welcome was delivered by Richard Stockton, son of the Signer; and when the distinguished knight errant reached the temple he received a Latin address from President Carnahan, together with the diploma signed by President Witherspoon in 1790, conferring on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws from the College of New Jersey.

Twelve years after, in September, 1836, another revolutionary hero—this time a son of Nassau Hall—returned to his alma mater. In 1757, while he was yet a baby in his cradle in the president's house at the corner of the campus, his father had been carried out of this hall to his long home in the village graveyard. A little later these walls had echoed more than once to his own boyish oratory, and now almost eighty years after, a man without a country, he at last was brought back to Princeton. Ambitious, brave, eloquent, magnetic, a colonel in the Continental Army, Vice-President of the United States, once within a single vote of the presidency itself, and once dragged before the bar charged with treason, then as an old man wistfully visiting the scene of his boyhood, and at last carried here to be buried—think what you will of Aaron Burr, I know of no incident in the history of this spot to me more deeply moving than his final homecoming, his funeral in this quiet place. The hall was filled by the military escort, the honorary pallbearers, and the students of the college and seminary. The Ninetieth Psalm was read, prayer was offered, and President Carnahan preached the sermon; and then the body was taken to the grave at the foot of President Burr's tomb, the soldiers leading the way, followed by the whole assemblage, the Cliosophic Society, of which he had been one of the early members, forming a special guard of honor.

And the same hold that Nassau Hall had on the strange heart of Colonel Burr she has on ours. To us who love her and know her history, who have seen her in all her lights and shadows, by summer and winter, by day and by night,—is it too much to say that she seems to stand for all the best that Princeton has been and in our dreams shall be, her gray walls cool and strong against fire and storm, ready to bear her burden for God and country as becometh a home of pure religion and liberal learning, gravely beautiful as befits the sweet dignity of academic life, and covered latterly with ivy planted by men who in tolerant strength have gone forth from her sheltering elms yet holding fast some sort of anchorage here.

Sweet Mother, in what marvelous dear ways,
  Close to thine heart thou keepest all thine own,—
Far off they yet can consecrate their days
  To thee, and on the swift winds homeward blown,
Send thee the homage of their hearts, their vow
  Of one most sacred care!