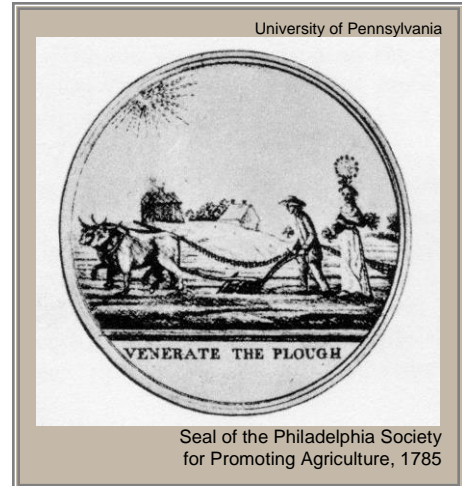


“having assumed the station of an independent government”

American Societies in the New Nation for National Progress and Reform, 1780-1791

Indicative of Americans' commitment to nationhood in the 1780s was their creation of numerous societies to promote learning, agriculture, and manufactures; to address social ills and injustices; and to protect the newly formed state and national governments from discord and dissolution. In the societies' charters and constitutions, the founders pledged coordinated effort (and money) for the good of the new nation and the creation of uniquely “American” innovations that would mark the new nation as a global contender. As described by historian Edmund S. Morgan, “the Americans were already embarked on their tireless, and to many Europeans tiresome, campaign to improve themselves and the world.”¹ How do the societies' founding documents reflect the American ideals of independence, virtue, progress, self-sufficiency, and youthful vigor? In what ways do they reveal Americans' anxiety about sustaining their new nation?



■ American Academy of Arts & Sciences Boston, 1780

Formed by John Adams, John Hancock, and other Patriot leaders.

As the Arts and Sciences are the Foundation and Support of Agriculture, Manufactures, and Commerce; as they are necessary to the Wealth, Peace, Independence, and Happiness of a People; as they essentially promote the Honor and Dignity of the Government which Patronizes them, and as they are most effectually cultivated and diffused through a State by the forming and incorporating of Men of Genius and Learning into Public Societies: For these beneficial Purposes:

Be it therefore enacted [by the Massachusetts legislature] that the Honorable Samuel Adams, Esq.,² Hon. John Adams, Esq., . . . are formed into, constituted, and made a Body Politic and Corporate by the Name of *The American Academy of Arts and Sciences* . . .

And be it further enacted . . . that the End and Design of the Institution of the said Academy is to promote and encourage the Knowledge of the Antiquities of *America* and of the Natural History of the Country, and to determine the Uses to which the various Natural Productions of the Country may be applied to promote and encourage Medical Discoveries, Mathematical Disquisitions, Philosophical Inquiries and Experiments, Astronomical Meteorological and Geographical Observations, and Improvements in Agriculture, Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce; and, in fine [in the end] to cultivate every Art and Science which may tend to advance the Interest, Honor, Dignity, and Happiness of a free, independent and virtuous People. . . .

An Act to Incorporate and Establish a Society for the Cultivation and Promotion of Arts and Sciences, 1780

■ Constitutional Society Virginia, 1784

Formed by James Madison, Patrick Henry, James Monroe, and other state leaders.³

WE, the underwritten, having associated for the purpose of preserving and handing down to posterity those pure and sacred principles of liberty which have been derived to us from the happy event of the late glorious revolution, and being convinced that the surest mode to secure republican systems of government from lapsing into tyranny is by giving free and frequent information to the mass of people, both of the nature of them and of the measures which may be adopted by their several component parts, have determined and do hereby most solemnly pledge ourselves to each other by every holy tie and obligation, which freemen ought to hold inestimably dear, that every one in his respective station will keep a watchful eye over the great fundamental rights of the people.

¹ Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic, 1763-89* (University of Chicago Press, 3d. ed., 1992), p. 121.

² *Esq.*: Esquire, denoting a gentleman, an influential man of means, usually a landowner.

³ Similar societies were formed by Patriot leaders in other states to counteract the disruptive and occasionally violent actions of “popular mobs” and backcountry farmers (as in Shay’s Rebellion) whose protests over their economic woes threatened the stability of the new state governments.

That we will without reserve communicate our thoughts to each other and to the people on every subject which may either tend to amend our government, or to preserve it from the innovations of ambition and the designs of faction.

To accomplish this desirable object, we do agree to commit to paper our sentiments in plain and intelligible language on every subject which concerns the general weal [welfare] and transmit the same to the Honorable John Blair, Esq., whom we hereby constitute President of the said Society, with powers to congregate the members thereof either at Richmond or Williamsburg, whenever he may suppose that he has a sufficient quantity of materials collected for publication.

Minutes of the Meetings of the Constitutional Society, Richmond, Virginia, 1784

■ Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture _____ 1785

The very imperfect state of AMERICAN Husbandry⁴ in general, compared with that of some countries in Europe, is too well known to be controverted.

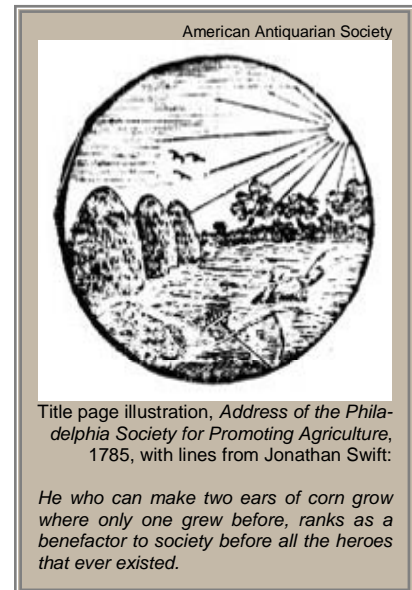
It was a conviction of our great inferiority in this respect which gave rise to the present Society, formed after the example of institutions in Europe whose laudable endeavors to promote the Agriculture of their several countries have been rewarded with the happiest effects. . . .

. . . [The Society] will annually propose prizes upon interesting subjects relative to actual experiments and improvements, and for the best pieces written on proposed subjects. . . .

PREMIUMS *proposed by the SOCIETY*

1. For the best experiment made of a course of crops, either large or small, or not less than four acres, agreeable to the principles of the English mode of farming . . . a piece of [silver]plate of the value of two hundred dollars, inscribed with the name and the occasion: . . .
2. The importance of complete farm or foldyards for sheltering and folding cattle—and of a preferable method of conducting the same for procuring great quantities of compost of mixed dung and manure with the husbandman's own farm, induces the Society to give, for the best design of such a yard and method of conducting it, suitable to this climate and circumstances of common farmers—a gold medal—and for the second best, a silver medal.⁵

An Address from the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, With a Summary of Its Laws and Premiums Offered, 1785



■ South Carolina Society for Promoting & Improving Agriculture & Other Rural Concerns _____ 1785

After having gloriously succeeded by the assistance of Divine Providence, and our own exertions, in terminating a war which for some years past has laid waste our country, it is incumbent upon us equally to endeavor to promote and enjoy the blessings of peace. This cannot be effected by any means more interesting and advantageous than by turning our attention to the cultivation and improvement of our fields. We ought not only to think of restoring their former appearance, which has been defaced by the horrors of war, but, as by the event of that war, the fruits of the labor we shall bestow upon them are now secured at our own, and not at a master's disposal,⁶ we are encouraged and should be induced to make farther exertions for rendering both their beauty and their produce greater. . . .

⁴ *Husbandry*: raising crops and livestock; farming.

⁵ Eleven other prizes were offered in this year.

⁶ I.e., Britain's control.

It is certain than in America in general the mode of planting and of managing rural concerns has been pretty much the same for fifty years past, except perhaps in the introduction of one or two new articles of produce in a few of the states. . . .

We recommend to the planters in general (and every one has it more or less in his power) to select a small part of his grounds in order to make experiments on it by various methods—in turning up and preparing the soil—in planting it in its natural state, and in adding manure—in trying the effects of different crops in succession to each other instead of continuing the same (as is commonly practiced here) in the same field for a series of years—in tending the crop on the ground by plowing, hoeing, weeding, and watering—in managing it after being removed into the barn and yard—in short, by attempting every new mode which fancy or judgment may direct. . . .

This society cannot, in its yet infant state, ascertain what prizes they can afford for the encouragement and reward of the experiments they recommend. Our number at present is not large, and our income by subscription, which is fixed at a low rate to induce others to join us, is in proportion. When both increase, we shall not be backward in proposing prizes of such value as may both excite and reward the merit of the candidates.

Address and Rules of the South Carolina Society for Promoting Agriculture and Other Rural Concerns, 1785

■ Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts _____ 1786

Formed by Gov. James Bowdoin, Benjamin Waterhouse, and other Boston leaders.⁷

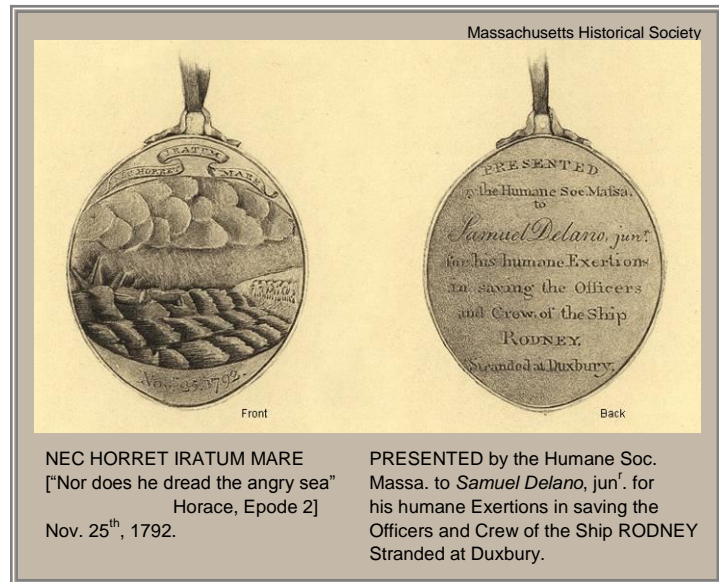
The exquisite feelings attendant on the unexpected restoration of an affectionate friend or an indulgent parent, a dutiful child, or an intimate companion of our bosoms, after having been suddenly torn from us, and in imagination numbered with the dead, may be more easily conceived than described. Nor is the acquisition of one deserving member of society an object unworthy of public attention.

Upon these considerations, societies have been formed in various parts of Europe for promoting attempts to recover persons from apparent death, especially in cases of suffocation and drowning. The Humane Society established in Great Britain in 1774 has been very successful. Within ten years from its institution, out of 1300 persons apparently dead from drowning, 790 have been restored to their friends and country. Many of them, no doubt, useful and valuable men.

A Society is now formed for these salutary [beneficial] purposes in this Commonwealth: And the following plan and arrangements are submitted to the inspection of the public.

RULES for the regulation of a Society instituted in the town of Boston for the recovery of persons who meet with such accidents as produce in them the appearance of death. . . .

VIII. That when any accident shall happen producing apparent death, the person who shall first discover and endeavor to recover the subject shall be entitled to receive from the Treasurer of the Society a sum not exceeding *forty-eight shillings* nor less than *six shillings*, . . .



⁷ Modeled on the British Royal Humane Society, the society organized lifesaving services for shipwrecked seamen and other victims of drowning and accidents (not to be confused with animal rescue humane societies).

- X. That the Trustees shall appoint some person to deliver a public discourse [lecture] on the second Tuesday of June every year upon some medical subject connected with the principal objects of this Society.

The Institution of the Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1786

■ Association of the Adopted Sons of Pennsylvania _____ 1786

Pennsylvania, in the number of whose citizens we are now enrolled, though not our country by birth, has become our country by election [choice], and surely no inconsiderable degree of affection and zeal for her welfare may reasonably be expected from those men who, foregoing the rights of citizenship in one country, are blessed with freedom in the bosom of another.

Impressed with the deepest reverence for the laws of this our country, and feeling a grateful sense of the inestimable blessing she has conferred, we should be wanting in duty to her, to ourselves, and to posterity, did we ingloriously remain the only inactive members of this free Commonwealth—reflecting, as we do, on the melancholy fate of those governments which have been sacrificed by faction or supineness,⁸ we think it most particularly incumbent on us, as new citizens, to testify the sincerity of our attachment by our union and activity as freemen. . . .

We, therefore, the Subscribers, do unite by the name of *The Association of the Adopted Sons of Pennsylvania*, under the above principles, and agree to the following Articles and Regulations, . . .

- I. THAT all men are born equally free and independent, and that government is instituted for the benefit, and demand, the care, of every class of citizens, without distinction
- II. THAT all national distinctions shall be forever abolished among us, and that we will carefully cherish a spirit of equality and friendly intercourse with each other, without which there is no true happiness.
- III. THAT we will strenuously exert our efforts to maintain the prosperity and *independence* of this Commonwealth [state of Pennsylvania]. . . .
- IV. THAT we will, upon every occasion, by an attentive and consistent conduct, testify our inviolable attachment to the cause of freedom, and, pursuing the same conduct, we will oppose every illegal innovation or infringement of our sacred rights under any cause or pretense whatsoever. . . .

Principles, Articles, and Regulations Agreed upon by the Association of the Adopted Sons of Pennsylvania, 1786

■ Pennsylvania Society for the Encouragement of Manufactures and the Useful Arts__ 1787

The wealth and prosperity of nations principally depend on a due attention to agriculture, manufactures, and commerce. In the various stages of her political existence, America has derived great advantages from the establishment of Manufactures and the useful Arts. Her present situation in the world calls her by new and weighty considerations to promote and extend them. The United States, having assumed the station of an independent government, require new resources to support their rank and influence both abroad and at home.

Our distance from the nations of Europe—our possessing within ourselves the materials of the useful arts, and articles of consumption and commerce—the profusion of wood and water (those powerful and necessary agents in all arts and manufactures)—the variety of natural productions with which this extensive country abounds, and the number of people in our towns and most ancient settlements whose education has qualified them for employments of this nature—all concur to point out the necessity of our promoting and establishing manufactures among ourselves.

From a conviction of the truth and importance of these facts, a number of persons have agreed to associate themselves under the name THE PENNSYLVANIA SOCIETY FOR THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF MANUFACTURES AND THE USEFUL ARTS. . . .

⁸ Partisan discord or citizen indifference.

VIII. For the better employment of the industrious poor, and in order to render the society as useful as possible, a subscription for sums not less than ten pounds from any one person or company shall be immediately opened to all persons whatever for the purpose of establishing factories in such places as shall be thought most suitable. These subscribers shall be entitled to all the profits attending the business and shall be the sole owners of all the lots of ground, buildings, implements, raw materials, and other things purchased or paid for out of their subscriptions, which shall be called THE MANUFACTURING FUND. . . .⁹

The Plan of the Pennsylvania Society for the Encouragement of Manufactures and the Useful Arts, 1787

■ Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons _____ 1787

Formed by Quaker leaders of the city.

"I was in prison and ye came unto me.

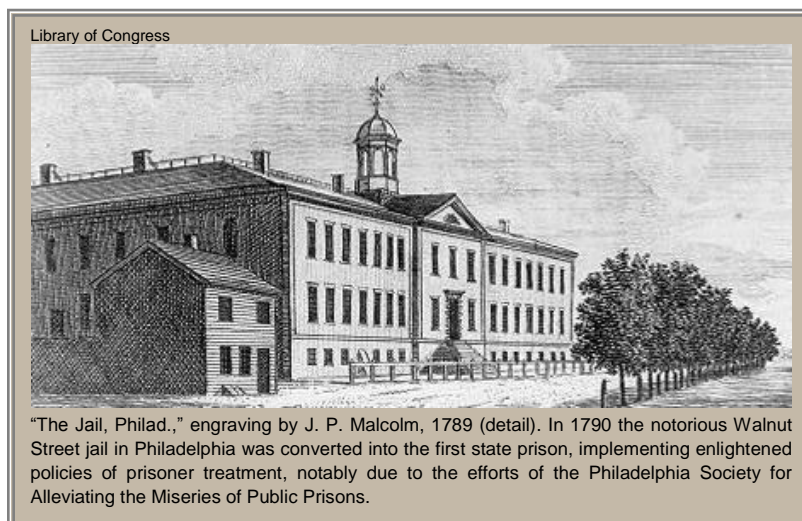
"And the King shall answer and say unto them. Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

MATTH. XXV. 36-40.

When we consider that the obligations of benevolence, which are founded on the precepts and example of the author of Christianity, are not cancelled by the follies or crimes of our fellow creatures; and when we reflect upon the miseries which penury, hunger, cold, unnecessary severity, unwholesome apartments, and guilt (the usual attendants of prisons) involve with them, it becomes us to extend our compassion to that part of mankind who are the subjects of these miseries. By the aids of humanity, their undue and illegal sufferings may be prevented—the links which should bind the whole family of mankind together under all circumstances be preserved unbroken, and such degrees and modes of punishment may be discovered and suggested as may, instead of continuing habits of vice, become the means of restoring our fellow creatures to virtue and happiness.

From a conviction of the truth and obligation of these principles, the subscribers have associated themselves under the title of "The Philadelphia Society for alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons." For effecting these purposes, they have adopted the following Constitution:— . . .

V. The business of the Physicians shall be to visit the prisons when called upon by, or to give advice to, the acting Committee respecting such matters as are connected with the preservation of the health of persons confined therein or subject to the government of the officers of the prisons.



"The Jail, Philad.," engraving by J. P. Malcolm, 1789 (detail). In 1790 the notorious Walnut Street jail in Philadelphia was converted into the first state prison, implementing enlightened policies of prisoner treatment, notably due to the efforts of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons.

VII. The acting committee shall visit the public prisons, or such other places of confinement or punishment as are ordained by law, at least once every week. They shall inquire into the circumstances of the persons confined; they shall report such abuses as they shall discover to the officers of government who are authorized to redress them; and shall examine the influence of confinement or punishment upon the morals of the persons who are the subjects of them.

Constitution of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, 1787

⁹ The Pennsylvania Society for the Encouragement of Manufactures and the Useful Arts also offered prizes for innovative work—including, in 1792, fifty-dollar prizes for pottery pieces that approached the quality of renowned British ceramics industries. (E. A. Barber, *Salt-Glazed Stoneware*, 1906)

■ **Philological Society of New York** _____ 1788

Initiated by Noah Webster.¹⁰

We the subscribers to the following constitution, impressed with the highest sense of the advantages to be derived from an accurate knowledge of our native tongue, and fully convinced that a society whose chief object is the investigation of the principles upon which Language is founded will be the most probably means of obtaining this end. Do agree to the following articles, viz. [namely]

- 1 That the object of this institution be to ascertain and improve the American tongue, . . .
- 9 That a committee of three members be chosen by a majority of ballots on the first meeting of May in every year, who shall lay out such sums as shall be appointed by the society for the purchase of books, visit and inspect the library, and make reports of their proceedings.

The Constitution of the Philological Society in New York, 1788

■ **Maryland Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and the Relief of Free Negroes and Others Unlawfully Held in Bondage** _____ 1789

Formed by Quaker leaders of the state.

The present Attention to Europe and America to Slavery seems to constitute that Crisis in the Minds of men when the united Endeavors of a few may greatly influence the Public Opinion and produce, from the transient Sentiment of the Times, Effects extensive, lasting and useful.

The common Father of Mankind created all Men free and equal, and his great Command is that we love our Neighbor as ourselves, doing unto all men as we would they should do unto us.

The human Race, however varied in Color or Intellects, are all justly entitled to Liberty, and it is the Duty and the Interest of Nations and Individuals, enjoying every Blessing of Freedom, to remove this Dishonor of the Christian Character from amongst them—From the fullest Impression of the Truth of these Principles, from an earnest Wish to bear our Testimony against Slavery in all its Forms, to spread it abroad as far as the Sphere of our Influence may extend, and to afford our friendly Assistance to those who may be engaged in the same Undertaking, and in the humblest hope of Support from that being who takes as an offering to himself what we do for each other,

WE, the Subscribers, have formed ourselves into The MARYLAND SOCIETY for promoting the ABOLITION of SLAVERY, and for the RELIEF of FREE NEGROES and OTHERS unlawfully held in BONDAGE. . . .

- VII. The Duty of the Counsellors [lawyers] shall be to explain the Laws and Constitutions of the States which relate to the Emancipation of Slaves, and to urge their Claims to Freedom, when legal, before such Persons or Courts as are authorized to decide upon them. . . .
- XII. No Person holding a Slave as his Property shall be admitted a Member of this Society. Nevertheless, the Society may appoint Persons of legal Knowledge [who are] Owners of Slaves as Honorary Counsellors.

Constitution of the Maryland Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery . . . , 1789

■ **Germantown Society for Promoting Domestic Manufactures** _____ Pennsylvania, 1790

We, the inhabitants of Germantown, desirous of doing everything in our power to promote the prosperity and happiness of our neighbors and of ourselves, do establish this Society to countenance and support every kind of Domestic Manufacture consistent with our situation, ability, and interest. We are induced to adopt this measure from a firm belief that it is the real interest of our country, as much as possible, to be supplied within itself with all things convenient or necessary to render life comfortable. And as we expect the assistance of our neighbors, with whom we are united in civil society, in times of public calamity, we should at all times endeavor to render their lives comfortable and happy by

¹⁰ The society was one manifestation of a “linguistic patriotism” among Americans who promoted the creation of a “federal language” to supplant British English in the new nation. [Alvin W. Reed, “The Philological Society of New York, 1788,” *American Speech*, 9:2 (April 1934), 131-136]

encouraging them in some useful occupation and not by a destructive foreign commerce give employ to the manufacturers of Europe and India, whilst our fellow citizens are in want of bread. . . .

VIII. As the most unequivocal manner of encouraging American manufactures consists in making use of them, and by that means creating a demand for them, it is expected that every Member, at the annual meeting of the Society, shall be clothed in the manufactures of his country [state/region] if not inconvenient to himself. . . .

XI. The Society shall engage a storekeeper to receive and sell, on a low commission, any thread, woolen, linen, or any other domestic manufacture brought to him, by which every industrious member of society may have a safe deposit for the produce of his ingenuity and industry, and persons wishing to be supplied with American manufactures may know where to apply.

The Constitution of the Germantown Society for Promoting Domestic Manufactures, 1790

■ Massachusetts Historical Society _____ 1791

A SOCIETY has lately been instituted in this town, called the HISTORICAL SOCIETY, the professed design of which is, to collect, preserve, and communicate materials for a complete history of this country, and accounts of all valuable efforts of human ingenuity and industry from the beginning of its settlement. In pursuance of this plan, they have already amassed a large quantity of books, pamphlets and manuscripts, and are still in search of more: A catalogue of which will be printed for the information of the public.

THEY have also given encouragement to the publication of a weekly paper, to be called THE AMERICAN APOLLO, in which will be given the result of their inquiries into the natural, political and ecclesiastical history of this country.

Circular Letter of the Historical Society, 1 November 1791

