

**THE KEY OF LIBBERTY: SHEWING
THE CAUSES WHY A FREE
GOVERNMENT HAS ALWAYS
FAILED, AND A REMIDY AGAINST
IT; PP. 1-69**

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The Key of Liberty: Shewing the Causes why a Free Government Has Always Failed, and a Remedy against it; pp. 1-69 by William Manning & Samuel Eliot Morison

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WILLIAM MANNING & SAMUEL ELIOT MORISON

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THE
KEY OF LIBERTY

*SHEWING THE CAUSES WHY A FREE
GOVERNMENT HAS ALWAYS FAILED,
AND A REMIDY AGAINST IT*

Written in the year 1798 by
WILLIAM MANNING
of Billerica, Massachusetts

With notes and a foreword by
SAMUEL ELIOT MORISON
Lecturer on History, Harvard University

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Foreword

William Manning was a New England farmer, with little in his outward life to distinguish him from the rest of the Yankee yeomanry. His paternal ancestors came to Massachusetts from England, in the great Puritan migration. He was born in North Billerica in 1747, on the same farm that his great-grandfather had hewed out of the wilderness; and there he lived and died.

It was a level, fertile farmstead near the Concord River, about four miles from its junction with the Merrimac. The house, now known as the Old Manse, was built by the same pioneer ancestor in 1696. During the Indian wars it served the community as a garrison house.¹ Framed in massive oak, boarded with weather-rusted pine clapboards, covered with a shingled roof which sloped almost to the ground on the north side, the house was already old-fashioned in 1797, when its owner was suffering the growing pains of authorship. Its few, small rooms, huddled about a great central chimney, sheltered not only William and Sarah Manning and ten or eleven of their thirteen children, but an occasional traveller. For, situated as it was on the main road between the seacoast and the upper Merrimac Valley, the Old Manse had been used as a tavern since the time of William's father. The tavern books, kept in his hand, are still in existence, recording sundry gills of rum, mugs of flip, suppers, nights'

¹ William H. Manning, "The Manning Families of New England," Salem, 1902.

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lodging, and baiting of horses. Likewise are noted many days' work, with man and team, on the Middlesex Canal, which passed within half a mile of the Old Manse on its way to Boston.

Our village Hampden, then, was fairly well-off, by the frugal standards of his day. But his inner life was a turmoil. The fire of liberty kindled in his soul by the flaming words of Otis and Adams, had never died down. His mind was not stagnant, as the waters of the canal that ran hard by, nor placid as the Concord River which bordered his east meadow. It was more like the Merrimac, the roaring of whose rapids rang in his ears during the sleepless nights when he pondered how that liberty he had fought to win, might be preserved.

When the year 1775 opened, William Manning was twenty-seven years old, and the father of four children. As sergeant in Captain Solomon Pollard's company of minute-men, he responded to the alarm of the nineteenth of April, and marched to Concord, arriving just too late to take part in the famous fight at the bridge. Shortly after, he received a commission as second lieutenant, but seems to have performed no military service after 1776. Ten years later he was chosen for two terms a selectman of the town of Billerica. No other facts of his outward life have been preserved.

From his "Key of Libberty," however, it is easy to deduce Manning's attitude on the political questions of the day. He was an out-and-out Jeffersonian Republican. Like the average American farmer, he had a profound distrust of governors and government.

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The political reaction that set in shortly after the War of Independence, he viewed with dismay. Understanding neither the necessity of Hamilton's financial policy,¹ nor the wisdom of Washington's foreign policy, he feared, with Jefferson, that they portended militarism, a British alliance, and monarchy. The French Revolution, which the clergy, the merchants and the gentry of New England viewed with horror, William Manning regarded as the greatest blessing in human history; a beneficent spreading of that bonfire of tyranny he had helped to kindle at Concord Fight. Yet the country as a whole was slowly going over to the Federal party, the instrument of Hamilton's genius. Massachusetts, owing to the interested efforts of the merchants, and the influence of the clergy, had become a stronghold of Federalism. But Manning was not converted. It used to be said of him by his friends that if William Manning were drowned, they would seek his body up-stream, for he would surely not float down with the current like other people!

William Manning was "teased in his mind with these things," as he writes "for many years." How could Americans, who had fought for freedom and liberty in 1776, vote for autocracy and slavery in 1796? Evidently, because they were misled by interested persons. What was the remedy? Correct information, and a union of the plain people against the interested few.

¹ Manning, in fact, had a financial policy of his own. In the family archives is an essay in his hand entitled, "Some proposals for Making Restitution to the Original Creditors of Government & to help the Continent to a Medium of trade. Submitted to the Consideration of the Members of the State Legislature of Massachusetts February the 6^t 1790."

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It must have been difficult for this untutored farmer to reduce his thoughts to order, and still more to put them on paper. His spelling lends color to his statement that he never had six months' schooling in his life. But in the latter part of 1797 the situation became so alarming, from his point of view, that he could no longer confine his thoughts to neighbors, and the unwilling ears of tired travellers.

Following the ratification of Jay's Anglo-American treaty, which the Jeffersonians regarded as shameful, the French Republic took umbrage, and loosed its corsairs at the new American merchant marine. Here was the opportunity of the high Federalists to turn American patriotism against its former ally, to enter the monarchical alliance that was seeking to crush the French Republic, to discredit American democracy, and to militarize the United States. President Adams had sent a mission to France to demand reparation. Nothing as yet had been heard from it. But military and naval preparations were being pushed at Philadelphia. There was talk of passing laws to banish the republican refugees who had sought our shores, and to silence the Republican press and politicians who dared to oppose. So, with goose-quill and ink-horn, forming the letters one by one like a child, William Manning wrote his "Key of Libberty," made a fair copy, and sent it to the editor of the *Independent Chronicle*, the only Jeffersonian newspaper in Boston.

It is not difficult to see why the "Key of Libberty" was never published, at least by the *Chronicle*. The "remidy" that William Manning prescribed, would

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have put the Republican doctors out of business. A nation-wide association of laborers and farmers, publishing a monthly magazine to supersede the newspaper press, would hardly appeal to a newspaper publisher. And the threatened storm broke in April, 1798, the very month that the manuscript was submitted. Our envoys at Paris reported their famous negotiations with messieurs X, Y and Z, whose insolent demands seemed completely to justify the Federalist policy. Presently the continent was resounding with "Adams and Liberty," "Millions for defense and not one cent for tribute," and the like. Military preparations were hastened. What amounted to a naval war with France began. Jeffersonian Republicans were regarded as little better than traitors. A sedition Act was passed, and several Republican editors spent a term in jail for writing against the war, and warning the American people that they were being deceived.

Among the victims of this persecution was the very editor to whom Manning had sent his "Key." Thomas Adams, proprietor and editor of the *Chronicle*, and Abijah Adams, his brother and clerk, were arraigned for seditious libel, on account of some favorable remarks on the Virginia Resolves of '98 which denounced the Sedition Act. Thomas Adams died before his trial came on, but Abijah served a term of thirty days in jail for his newspaper's temerity. Altogether this "Federalist Reign of Terror," as the Republicans called it, was the worst period of reaction in American history, previous to the World War.