MASSACHUSETTS IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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AMERICAN REVOLUTION

BY

AINSWORTH R. SPOFFORD

AN ESSAY READ BEFORE THE
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MASSACHUSETTS

IN

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

HONORED by the invitation to address you upon the part borne by Massachusetts in the War of Independence, I deem it not inappropriate to preface my remarks by a rapid sketch of some of the conditions prevailing in all the colonies in the years immediately preceding the epoch of the American Revolution.

If we look through that most interesting historical period—the last quarter of the eighteenth century—we shall find in America an abundance of intellectual activity. By a long series of events and experiences, in the colonies and in the mother country,

the minds of men had been prepared for independence. Many of the emigrants to America were exiles from political or ecclesiastical tyranny, whose decendants inherited those principles of strong self-reliance and hatred of arbitrary power which bore fruit in the revolutionary epoch. The isolation of the colonies, in an age before steam navigation had brought America near to Europe, contributed to weaken the influence of foreign ideas and associations, and to develop the power of domestic ones. By its own inherent energies, no less than by maternal unkindness, the child America was being gradually weaned from England. The democracy of the town-meeting, the union of neighborhoods against the Indians, the broad freedom of a virgin land, with its illimitable forests, the organized colonial legislatures, the birth of the newspaper, the wide diffusion of education, the liberty of the press—all conspired with their remoteness from the mother country to sow the seeds of independence. It is a notable fact, in our estimate of the complex influences which wrought out this great result, that the growing intellectual life of the colonies had gradually diminished

the once overshadowing prevalence of British books and British thought in America. From the first printing press, in 1639, at Cambridge, Massachusetts, to the end of the first year of the Revolution, in 1775, there were printed in the colonies more than 8,000 books and pamphlets. Out of this number, surprisingly few were of trans-Atlantic origin. Allowing for cases of doubtful authorship, and counting as American only the works actually written by residents in the colonies, I have found that about 7,350 of the total publications of the American press before the Revolution were of American origin, and only about 650 of foreign origin, or less than one in thirteen. This too, leaves out of account the writings of Americans actually published in London during that long period of pre-revolutionary activity. These would swell the lists of purely American books to a very considerable extent. In view of so pregnant a fact of literary history, the widely diffused notion that American ideas and their expression were all formed upon foreign standards, and that the colonies had no native literature, must be relinquished.

It would, indeed, be unreasonable to ex-

pect from a people engrossed in the questions and agitated by the passions of a revolution, literary works which could claim admiration as literature. Works of fancy and imagination are rarely born amid the rude campaign, or the shock of battle, and great political controversies afford no place for the refinements of speech. The principal writers of the period under review were engaged, not in creating a literature, but in founding a nation. The serious problems, political and social, which confronted them, not only controlled their choice of subjects, but to a great degree influenced their style.

While the outbreak and progress of the revolution incontestably led to a great expansion of the human mind, that movement was felt rather in the field and the council, than in the closet or the schools. The war against England, which required for its successful prosecution great powers and distinguished talents, happily appeared to create and to foster both. Whenever the occasion arose, there were always found men worthy of the occasion. Those who had manifested no special commanding faculties in the piping times of peace, were found, under the rousing stimulus of war,

to possess a genius for action and for utterance which did signal service to their country's cause. Fired with the love of freedom, and animated by a lofty patriotism, men wrote with an energy and persuasive force hitherto unexampled in colonial literature. A certain magnanimity took the place of those narrow and sectional feelings which had too much prevailed before the Revolution. The people of the different colonies had known but little of each other, and unreasonable jealousies and discords were the fruit of this want of intercourse. The raising of the first Continental army was a great step toward union. Men organized to fight for a common cause, with a common leader, and against a common foe, came to look upon one another as brethren. But more powerful, doubtless, than this sentiment born of military union, was the feeling of the necessity of political union, urged upon the people with consummate power by writers and speakers who represented the best intellects and the ripest thought of the time. Indeed, in the contests of the American Revolution, as of so many other revolutions, there is little room to doubt that the pen was mightier than the sword.

Great was the intellectual stimulus which the agitation of these momentous events contributed to the life of the people. They were not the listless consumers of a foreign literature, born in the dull age of the Hanoverian dynasty, but the Americans began to be independent of British thought, as of British institutions. The best writing of the time, rude but strong, had in it the free breath of the woods, and the flavor of the soil. The pens which championed the cause of the people against the monarchy were at their best when they forgot to quote. The energies of a hitherto divided and scattered people, now fast becoming nationalized, poured themselves forth in vigorous protests and appeals. The newspapers became energized with a new life, and the conspicuous idea of that life was the principle of self-government. The press became prolific in pamphlets, and instead of that great redundancy of sermons which characterized the printed literature of the century before the Revolution, there were more and more of political essays and discussions. The people read eagerly what was written earnestly, and published cheaply. More than 100,000 copies of Thomas Paine's