

FRENEAU'S "VIEW" OF PRINCETON

By RUDOLF KIRK

PINE HILL, the highest point in Monmouth County, New Jersey, has long been noted for the fine view it commands of the surrounding country. Early in the nineteenth century a telescope, still remembered by old inhabitants, was set up on top of the hill. Today, however, no sign remains of this effort of our forefathers to get a bird's-eye-view of their native farms, though, as Mr. John Forman, who guided me up to the top of the hill, pointed out, the United States Geodetic Survey thinks the spot worthy of a bench mark.

Sometime on or before September 25, 1822, an old man filled with the poetry of the eighteenth century, ascended this hill to gaze through the telescope. In the distance he saw Nassau Hall and was reminded of the days when he had been an undergraduate at Princeton. Moved by these thoughts, he wrote an *Ode on a Remote Perspective View of Princeton College*. This poem he sent to the Trenton *True American*, where it appeared on October 26, 1822, over the initial "R," and also to the New Brunswick *Fredonian*, where it was printed on October 31, over the initials "N. R." In these now very rare newspapers it has lain neglected ever since that time.

The question at once arises, who was the author? Apparently he was a poet of some distinction, for his poem, though at times rhetorical and rather crude, is better than could have been written by most American poets of the period. Since the poet mentions the fact that he studied under President Witherspoon, who went to Princeton in 1768, and since he speaks of having known the College before Independence was declared, the possible period of his attendance there can be narrowed down to a span of eight years, 1768 to 1776. As is clear from the date at the end of the long title of the *Ode*, September 25, 1822—presumably the day on which he looked through the telescope on Pine Hill—the poet was living half a century after he left college. Of all the students who graduated from Princeton within those eight years, fewer than thirty were still alive in 1822. Of these Philip Freneau, of the Class of 1771, is the

only one known to have been a poet. At the time the poem was written he was living in a house on the family estate in Monmouth County, near Pine Hill—the ancestral home, Mount Pleasant, having been burnt to the ground in 1818. His great days as a poet had passed; plans for publishing a “new, correct, and elegant edition of the Poems and Miscellanies of Philip Freneau” had come to nothing. As an impoverished and rather disappointed old man of seventy, he still continued to write occasional poems, a number of which he contributed to the *Fredonian* during this very year 1822 over the initial “F.”¹ From these various bits of evidence, we may be fairly sure that Freneau was the author of the *Ode*, in spite of the initials signed at the end. Further assurance as to the correctness of this supposition comes from Professor Lewis Leary, now engaged in a comprehensive study of Freneau. He writes me that the poem is Freneau’s and that in his forthcoming book he will explain why the author signed it as he did.

The literary form of the *Ode on a Remote Perspective View of Princeton College* was clearly inspired by Thomas Gray’s *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, which Freneau doubtless memorized as a boy in his father’s extensive library at Mount Pleasant. Not only is the subject similar to that of the English poem and the title a paraphrase of Gray’s, but the form of Freneau’s stanzas is adapted from the *Distant Prospect of Eton College*. It is worth noting that though Freneau takes over Gray’s form, he does so without slavish imitation, and in the *Ode* he describes the New Jersey scenery from his own direct observation. When looking back to the days of his youth, he adds to the eighteenth-century tradition which he inherited a fresh and personal view of the Princeton of his college days.

The text of the *Ode* here printed follows in most cases the spelling, punctuation, and italics of the text in the New Brunswick *Fredonian* of October 31, 1822, in the Rutgers Library. Misprints have been corrected and a few variant readings adopted from the text as given in the Trenton *True American* of October 26, 1822, in the New Jersey State Library at Trenton. Professor Lawrance Thompson of Princeton has made several helpful suggestions concerning the text.

¹ See “Philip Freneau at Seventy,” by Lewis Leary, *The Journal of the Rutgers University Library*, I, 2 (June, 1938).

ODE

On a remote *Perspective* view of Princeton College, or Nassau Hall, from a remarkable woody Eminence in Monmouth county, called by the neighborhood, Pine Hill.—Sept. 25th 1822.

*The expanse above no cloud deforms,
 No mists obscure the day;
 So, mounting to this bill of storms,
 We take our social way.
 Amanda shall partake the Glass
 To observe the seniors as they pass,
 Who toiling for the first degree
 The time is come that sets them free,
 Dispersive of the class.*

Where *Millstone's* stream, in swampy Groves 10
 Collects its limpid rills,
 And where the infant current roves
 Amidst its parent hills,
 The *Hill of pines* exalts its head,
 And towering near the River's bed,
 Gives many a distant sky-topt view
 In coloured heights of misty blue
 In wild disorder spread.

Among the rest, but far remote, 20
 We *Princeton's* summit scan,
 And verdent plains which there denote
 The energies of man:
 By aid of art's *Perspective Glass*
 O'er many a woody vale we pass;
 The *glass* attracts, and brings more near
 What first, to naked vision here,
 Seem'd a chaotic mass.

Line 5. Freneau wrote many poems to Amanda.

10. The Millstone River flows in a northwesterly direction toward Princeton and nowadays runs through Lake Carnegie. Freneau's view toward Princeton from Pine Hill was almost exactly along its course.

12. *Fredonian* reads *flows* for *roves*.

20. In clear frosty weather the College and Theological Hall are plainly discernible from this hill, particularly at Sunrising by the reflection of the Sun's rays from the Glass windows. *Freneau's note*.—This note is omitted in the *True American*.

And there we trace, from far displayed,
 The muses favorite seat,
 And groves, within whose bowery shade 30
 The Sons of science meet.
Devotion to her altars calls
 In plainly decorated halls—
 Those walls engage the *Atbenian* muse
 Where Science, still, her course pursues—
 Those venerated walls!

In *Galen's* art, who took the lead,
That Pile was seen to rear,
 And some who *preach* and some who *plead*,
 First courted *Science* there— 40
 To meliorate the human soul,
 The fiercest passions to control,
 Is the great purpose *there* designed,
 Where *Merit* never failed to find
 The *diplomatic Roll*.

Departed days shall we recall
 Or cancel half an age
 When governed, once, at Nassau Hall
 The *Caledonian Sage*
 His words still vibrate on my ear 50
 His precepts, solemn and severe,
 Alarmed the vicious, and the base,
 To virtue gave the loveliest face
 That human-kind can wear.

From distant soils, and towns remote,
 Attracted by his name,
 And some by land, and some afloat,
 The eager Students came.
 Each swarming *bive* was on the wing
 To taste his deep *Pierian* spring, 60
 And round the LAMP, that near it hung,
 While sense and reason yet were young
 They strove to merit fame.

32. *True American* reads *Religion* for *Devotion*.

38. Nassau Hall, the oldest building at Princeton.

42. *T. A.* reads *fiercer* or *fiercest*.

45. *Fredonian* reads *His* for *The*.

45. The Degree of Bachelor, or Master of Arts. *Freneau's note*.

49. The late President Witherspoon, who was invited over from Scotland in 1766. *F.'s note*.

49. *T. A.* reads *sober but severe* for *solemn and severe*.

55-63. This entire stanza is omitted in the *T. A.*

What years on years have stole away
 Since, mirthful, there were seen
 The Students of a former day
 Diverting on the Green!—
 Before *Columbia* struck the blow
 That humbled *Britain's* legions low;
 When *Washington* was scarcely named, 70
 Nor *Independence*, yet, proclaimed
 To mark her for a foe.

When *Christmas* came, and floods congeal
 And keen northwesterns blew,
 Adown the ice on springs of steel
 The sprightly Juniors flew:
 They left the page of Grecian lore,
 Ceased Nature's wonders to explore,
 And gliding on the glassy plain,
 At *Morven's* grove they paused—again 80
 Lost vigour to restore.

Ah, years elapsed, and seasons gone;
 And days forever fled,
 When hymns were sung at early dawn,
 And sacred Lectures read!
 Still Fancy hears the midnight prayer,
 Monitions mild—when, free from care,
 When smit with awe, the attentive train
 Renounced the world, or owned it vain 90
 With penitential tear.

With pensive step, amidst those hills
Who, now, are seen to stray,
 Where *Stony Brook* or *Scudder's Mills*
 Engaged some vacant day?

74. *T. A.* reads *fierce* for *keen*.

77. *T. A.* reads *learned* for *Grecian*.

80. *Morven's*. A pleasant summer house retreat on the Western bank of *Stony River*, belonging to the late Hon. Richard Stockton Esq. *Freneau's note*.—This house is still standing.

91. *T. A.* reads *lonely* for *pensive*.

91. *T. A.* reads *amid* for *amidst*.

93. *Stony Brook* meanders around the west and south of the town of Princeton and nowadays flows into Lake Carnegie.

93. *Scudder's Mills*, later known as *Aqueduct Mills*, were situated at the junction of the *Millstone River* and *Stony Brook*. *Lake Carnegie* now covers the site.

94. *Fredonian* reads *the* for *some*.

What favourite *Laura* trips the lawn,
 Enamoured of the classic gown,
 Now claims acquaintance with the Muse,
 And half avoids, or half pursues
 Some *Petrarch* from the town?

Farewell ye shades, farewell ye streams 100
 That will for ages flow,
 Where *other minds* plan *other schemes*
 For *consequence* below!
 This *tube* displays where, with the rest,
 On *Euclid's* page not over blest,
 We closed our Books, forgot our cares,
 To stray where *Rocky Mountain* rears
 His weather-beaten crest.

Rude Cliff's adieu! that *craggy height* 110
 Too long our view confines;
 We tread with more serene delight
 This pleasant *Hill of Pines*,
 Where *they*, who, near its shaded base,
 For years have had their dwelling place,
 Contented to retire,
 Yet rarely climb its lofty brow
 Or leave the axe, or quit the plough
 To adore the sacred *Spire!*

N. R.

95. *Fredonian* reads *where* for *what*.
 95. *Fredonian* reads *of* for *trips*.
 96. *Fredonian* reads *with* for *of*.
 104. *Fredonian* omits *the*.
 105. *Fredonian* reads *the blest*.
 106. *T. A.* reads *left* for *closed*.
 107. The name of a range of hills about two miles north of Princeton.
 112. The ancient Pines, however, are now almost totally decayed, and fallen down; and a grove of Oak has taken their place. *Freneau's note*.
 118. The spire of Nassau Hall.