

NATIONAL HISTORICAL MAGAZINE

VOLUME LXXIII, No. 7

JULY, 1939

WHOLE NUMBER 552

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Cover design: VIEW OF NEW YORK IN 1775, from a painting by John Cleveley (1745-1786). Lent by Roscoe H. Keffler to the exhibition of paintings illustrating LIFE IN AMERICA FOR THREE HUNDRED YEARS, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art from April through October. Courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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Issued Monthly By

THE NATIONAL SOCIETY OF THE DAUGHTERS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Publication Office: MEMORIAL CONTINENTAL HALL, Washington, D. C.

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Editor

Memorial Continental Hall, Washington, D. C.

Single Copy, 25 Cents. Yearly Subscription, \$2.00, or Two Years for \$3.00

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Entered as second-class matter, December 8, 1924, at the Post Office at Washington, D. C., Under the Act of March 3, 1879

Dutch Fireworks—And Our Own!

HENRY K. PASMA

How many of us know the origins of our characteristic Fourth of July celebrations? Many of us will be surprised to learn that they began as a "Dutch treat"!



THE MEDAL DESIGNATED TO COMMEMORATE THE RECOGNITION OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE BY THE PROVINCE OF FRIESLAND ON THE 26TH OF FEBRUARY, 1782

IF one happens to pass the statue of General Lafayette, in the park named for the French patriot and across the street from the White House, the thought occurs that if it had not been for the pioneers in democracy in countries other than the United States our nation might very well not celebrate the Fourth of July each year.

Countries other than our own have monuments erected against the background of the struggle by the Thirteen American Colonies for national independence. One who has become rusty on history contemporaneous with the Revolutionary War might feel more than mildly surprised to learn that the first Fourth of July was not celebrated in the United States, but in Friesland, one of the Seven United Provinces of the Dutch Republic.

This had followed, during the eighteenth century, the way of all flesh. From the sixteenth and seventeenth century Mistress of the Seven Seas and past-mistress in building an enormous colonial empire, she had become satisfied to leave these and sundry other arduous tasks to other nations, notably England. Eighteenth-century Hol-

land was content to continue to milk her fat East and West Indian colonies. She not only aspired, but succeeded in her aspiration, of becoming the banker of Europe and of growing enormously rich. Hendrik Van Loon, in his "Fall of the Dutch Republic," mentions this fact. Amsterdam had become the money exchange of the world. England, especially, was heavily indebted to the Republic. Annually the Dutch received from their British neighbors in dividends the enormous sum of 25,000,000 guilders. It is well to know this, to be able to gauge correctly the risk the people of the Dutch Republic assumed when they cast their lot with the Thirteen American Colonies.

John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Laurens, and others attempted desperately to win the sympathy of the Dutch people for the American cause. They tried to float a loan in The Netherlands of five million florins, which the Colonists needed badly to be able to continue the war with England. It was no easy task. The rich merchants of the Dutch cities had too much at stake to become overly sentimental about such mat-



MEDAL MADE TO COMMEMORATE THE TREATY OF COMMERCE AND NAVIGATION, ENTERED INTO BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND THE NETHERLANDS, OCTOBER 7, 1782

ters as freedom and independence. These were things the rabble, who had not a sou invested anywhere, might rant about—not thrifty bankers and shopkeepers. It is no wonder that John Adams, in a letter to his friend, Karel Dumas, a go-between in Holland, complained: "I believe that Holland is nothing but a great shop; her principles and sentiments are no other than those of a shopkeeper."

To crystallize Dutch opinion in favor of the American Colonies, Adams was able to make considerable use of the lively Dutch press of that day. Moreover, pamphleteers among the common people, who delighted to take anonymous potshots at sympathizers with England, were numerous. Furthermore, the mind of the masses in the Low Countries was considerably imbued with the political writings of John Locke, Hume, and Thomas Paine. The *Nederlandsche Mercurius*, the *Post Van Den Neder-Rhyn* (the latter read in thousands of copies), and the *Gazette de Leyde*, ably edited by Etienne and Jean Luzac, sided strongly with the Americans. It was in the columns of these publications that, anonymously, Adams was able to explain and further the American Cause. Sentiment for the Colonies was molded to the extent that a beginning was made to float the desired loan. Also, in 1777, the shipbuilders of Amsterdam were persuaded to build a warship for the Ameri-

can Colonists, the *Indian*, "of thirty 24-pounders on one deck, and almost equalling a ship of the line in appearance." Later the frigate was renamed the *South Carolina*. It formed the only vessel of the navy of the state after which it was named. Its glory of being defender of the American Cause on the high seas was, however, short lived. Shortly after it reached the American shores, it was captured by an English squadron as it left the capes of the Delaware.

The man who really turned the tide of sentiment for America in the Low Countries was our colorful naval hero, John Paul Jones. His dramatic entry into the Texel Roads in October, 1779, and thence into the port of Den Helder, with the British frigates *Serapis* and *Comtesse de Scarborough* as prizes, and his other ship, the *Pallas*—after his own ship, the *Bonhomme Richard*, had sunk under his feet in the naval engagement with the British off Flamborough Head—fired the imagination of the common people in the Dutch Republic and of the citizenry of the port of Den Helder.

In a letter to Dr. Bancroft, John Paul Jones writes how he is able to dispense with the charity of Sir Joseph York, the British ambassador to Holland, who does everything in his power to have the Dutch authorities drive him from Den Helder and into the arms of the English squadron cruis-

ing off Texel Roads; but who also is sending medical supplies for the numerous wounded Britishers on board the captured *Serapis*.

"Everything that charity could do in that way," writes Jones, "was already done by the lovely Holland dames and daughters of Den Helder, who every day thronged the decks of the *Serapis* and the *Pallas* with all the delicacies that only the good hearts of women can contrive for the comfort and succor of brave men who have been wounded in battle. Every day these blessed women came to the ships in great numbers—mothers, daughters, even little girls—bringing with them for our wounded sailors all the numberless little comforts of Dutch homes; a tribute which came from the hearts of the people, and therefore far overlaid in effect all statecraft and all diplomacy for or against us."

The doughty American captain travelled twice to Amsterdam. At the Bourse and in the City Theater he was given a tremendous ovation. Poetasters sharpened their quills. Street arabs sang his praises in a nine-stanza doggerel which the Amsterdam ballad mongers, in their patriotic ardor, had dashed off:

"Here comes Paul Jones,
A queer little man;
His ship went down,
He jumped the Englishman.

"He carries his sword
In a funny way,
Like a student or young lord . . ."

The opposition press in the Dutch Republic was less complimentary to the American naval hero. The *Leydse Vrydagse Courant*, issue October 8, 1779, reporting the naval battle off Flamborough Head, pictures Paul Jones thus:

"The intrepid corsair, who in the sea fight wore a reefer and canvas trousers, and a belt in which he carried 12 pistols, brandished his sword and cried he'd rather surrender to the devil than to the captain of the *Serapis*. With his own hand he shot and killed seven of his own crew when they left their posts. He cursed his own nephew, a lieutenant on board his vessel, threatening to shoot him through the legs instead of the head, because the young man appeared discouraged."

However, this piece of journalistic skulduggery did not prevent the enthusiasm, caused by the dramatic appearance of Paul

Jones at Texel Roads, from sweeping the Low Countries. Sentiment in favor of the Americans' Cause grew by leaps and bounds. The year following, when war with England threatened, the minister of the Presbyterian Church at Amsterdam was forbidden to pray in public for the English ruler. Pressure was brought to bear upon the Scotch regiment, stationed at Amsterdam since the Eighty Years War and in the pay of the city of Amsterdam, to forswear their allegiance to the British monarch. When the Scotch soldiers refused, their regiment was disbanded.

The Frisians had the reputation of carrying through everything they undertook. The Estates of Friesland were the first—February 26, 1782—to recognize American Independence and the admission of John Adams as American minister. The faculty and students of the Academy of Franeker in Friesland held a grand celebration—fireworks, parades, banners, what-not—the forerunner of a typically noisy, flamboyant American Fourth of July. One may judge of the fervor injected into the occasion and the degree of enthusiasm of the celebrants, if one considers the motto appearing upon the banners the collegians carried in their march through the quaint city:

"Plus valet una dies, quae libera ducitur, acta
Quam mali sub domini seacula mille jugo."

which, translated, enables one to realize how closely akin was the spirit of these people of one of the oldest democracies in Europe to that of the American sister republic:

"One day spent in freedom is worth more
Than a thousand centuries under the yoke of
a master."

At Leeuwarden, the Frisian capital, the citizens' club, "Liberty and Zeal," did more than indulge in the hilarity of a pre-Fourth. They made the occasion permanent; had medals struck to commemorate the joyous occasion of recognition by their commonwealth of the independence of the American Republic. The medals were discovered by Samuel Thayer, American Minister at The Hague. In a letter, written August 31, 1891, to James G. Blaine, Secretary of State, he wrote:



MEDAL STRUCK OFF BY ORDER OF THE STATES GENERAL IN COMMEMORATION OF ITS RECOGNITION OF THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE UNITED STATES

"SIR:

"I have the honor to state that, on a recent occasion, while paying a visit to the Royal Museum at The Hague, I discovered three medals which by reason of their relation to prominent events in our early history, and other considerations hereafter alluded to, render it proper that I should bring them to the notice of the Department.

"The first medal in the series referred to was designated to commemorate the recognition of American Independence by the Province of Friesland, on the 26th of February, a description of which is as follows:

"On the obverse side is a male figure personating a Frisian in ancient costume, joining right hands with an American, represented by a maiden in aboriginal dress, standing on a scepter, with her left hand resting on a shield bearing the inscription, 'The United States of North America'; while with his left hand the Frisian signals his rejection of an olive branch offered by Britain, represented by a maiden resting on a shield, having the inscription, 'Great Britain.'

"On the reverse side is the figure of an arm projecting from the clouds, holding the coat of arms of the Province of Friesland, under which is the inscription, 'To the State of Friesland in grateful recognition of the Acts of the Assemblies in February and April, 1782, by the Burghers Club of Leeuwarden, Liberty and Zeal.'

"The second medal in this series was struck off by order of the States General in commemoration of its recognition of the Independence of the United States.

"On the obverse side of the medals will be found the United States and the Netherlands represented by two maidens equipped for war, with right hands joined over a burning altar. The Dutch maiden is placing an emblem of freedom on the head of the American, whose right foot, attached to a broken chain, rests on England, represented by a tiger. In the field of the medal are the words, 'Libera Soror Sollemni Decr. Agn.'

"On the reverse side is the figure of a unicorn lying prostrate before a steep rock, against which he has broken his horn; over the figure are the words: 'Tyrannis Virtute Repulsa'; and underneath the same words, 'sub Gallie auspiciis.'

"The third medal in the series was made to commemorate the treaty of Commerce and Navigation entered into between the United States and the Netherlands, October 7, 1782.

"The States General oppressed by the magnitude of the responsibility—which the recognition of the independence of the United States entailed—refused to pass upon the question, until it had been submitted to each of the Provinces for individual action.

"Friesland, impelled by the Germanic love of freedom, which had long characterized its people, took the initiative in the movement for recognition . . .

"It will also be borne in mind that while a Dutch man-o'-war first saluted the American flag, Holland stands second in the role of foreign nations which formally recognized our independence."