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The Gift of Louis XVI (Part I)

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THE GIFT OF LOUIS XVI

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In 1784 the University of Pennsylvania received from Louis XVI a gift of books for its library, comprising 36 titles in 100 volumes.¹ A similar gift was sent by the King at the same time to the College of William and Mary. Until recently little has been known concerning the gift to Pennsylvania beyond a few brief entries in the minutes of the Trustees, but in 1932, through the kindness of Mr. Warrington Dawson, then engaged in research at Paris, we received transcripts of several documents pertaining to it which he had found in the French archives. These were so interesting that it seemed desirable to publish them, in a translation by Dr. Edwin B. Williams, professor of Romanic languages, and in connection with them to tell the complete story of the gift so far as it can now be discovered.

In the search for further information we have received invaluable assistance from a doctoral thesis by Dr. Allen J. Barthold (Yale, 1931, as yet unpublished), entitled *History of the French newspaper press in America, 1780-1790*. The King's gift to the University Library, our most notable acquisition of the eighteenth century, was one of the causes of a bitter controversy between some of the most prominent men in Philadelphia and the editors of *Courier de l'Amérique*, a paper recently established in this city. Dr. Barthold's excellent dissertation has facilitated location of some of the articles which appeared in various papers, and to it alone we are indebted for the information concerning the end of the controversy in the forced discontinuance of the French gazette. It is a pleasure to make this acknowledgment of Dr. Barthold's courtesy in permitting us to draw upon his work for some of the essential facts.

Credit for inspiring the King's benefaction has often been erroneously attributed to Lafayette. One writer has said that this good friend brought the books with him from France when he re-visited America in 1784.² An earlier account states that "Lafayette, while in America, was greatly

¹ Incorrectly stated in the *Library Chronicle* of December, 1933, as 35 titles in 101 volumes. In the original list several of the titles are entered so vaguely or inaccurately that the correct numbers could be established only by careful collation of the list with the books and with various catalogs.

² Julia Post Mitchell, *St. Jean de Crevecoeur* (1916), pp. 146, 215.

interested in the University [of Pennsylvania], and on his return solicited a gift of books from the King."³ Since the books were received in July, and Lafayette did not arrive in this country in 1784 until August 4,⁴ it is clear that he did not bring the books with him, and there seems to be no evidence that he was in any way connected with the gift.

The books were sent by the King at the request of the Comte de Vergennes, French minister of foreign affairs, and the Marquis de Chastellux. Probably it was Chastellux, who had but recently returned to France from America, who first suggested the gift and enlisted the interest and aid of Vergennes in procuring it. The Marquis de Barbé-Marbois, French consul-general in the United States, may also have been instrumental to some extent in securing this token of the King's friendliness, but we have no evidence that he was active in the matter except as consignee of the shipment. Both Chastellux and Barbé-Marbois had won distinction and favor in America. Chastellux had come here in 1780, served as major-general in Rochambeau's army, and returned to France in 1783. Barbé-Marbois had come in 1779 as secretary to the embassy, and in 1783 was appointed consul-general. Both he and Chastellux were elected members of the American Philosophical Society. In 1782 both were given the degree LL. D. by the University, and it is reasonable to assume that there was some connection between this honor and the gift of 1784.

Barbé-Marbois was described by Chastellux as a man who united "to all political and social qualities a great deal of literature, and a perfect knowledge of the English language."⁵ That he was highly esteemed in Philadelphia and at the University is evident, not only from the degree conferred upon him and his prominence in the American Philosophical Society, but from his marriage to Elizabeth Moore,⁶ whose father, William Moore, was president of the state of Pennsylvania in 1781-82 and a trustee of the University from 1784 to 1789. That he became deeply interested in the Univer-

³ U. S. Bureau of Education, *Public libraries in the United States of America* (1876), p. 117. This statement was repeated by Robert Ellis Thompson in 1877 in an article, "The Library of the University of Pennsylvania," in *The Penn Monthly*, 8: 65.

⁴ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 11, 1784.

⁵ *Travels in North America*, 1: 321

⁶ The date of the marriage was June 17, 1784. (*Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 23, 1784, and other Philadelphia papers.) Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 220, cites the *Connecticut Gazette* of July 9 as reporting it to have occurred July 1.

sity is apparent from a letter which he wrote to Vergennes July 5, 1781:

"I was present at the annual opening of the University of Pennsylvania,⁷ which was founded last year. The literary exercises of the pupils, which lasted nearly six hours, have as their chief object to inspire in them the keenest devotion to the cause of independence and to the King and the French Nation, and to stir up their hatred against the English; they profess hatred for Tyranny and they pardon the Monarchy only because of the virtues of the King and his benefactions. The name of his Majesty was repeated over and over in these exercises, and the heads of the University said that an essential point in the training of youth was to foster these sentiments in a way to form a new generation free from all the prejudices of the old in favor of England, and to enkindle a spirit of gratitude for France. I witnessed last year and again this year the zeal with which the professors fulfil this task, and they succeed beyond what one could imagine."⁸

Although we can only conjecture that the consul-general may have participated in plans for securing a gift from the King, by this letter he must have given Vergennes a favorable impression of the University, and thereby, perhaps, made it easier to obtain his interest in that project. To do this was probably undertaken by Chastellux at the first opportunity after his return to France. That a similar gift was sent to the College of William and Mary was probably due likewise to Chastellux, for he and Madison, president of the College, had established a congenial friendship during the former's stay in Williamsburg in the campaigns of 1781,⁹ and he had received from the College the degree LL.D. The King's gift was undoubtedly not intended merely as a compliment and favor to the University, but had behind it a hope of strengthening good-will and cordial relations between the two countries, and it would naturally have seemed that this purpose would be better served by two gifts than by one.

The *Pennsylvania Gazette* of July 14, 1784, reported the arrival in New York, after a voyage of forty-six days from

⁷ The description of the exercises seems to indicate that this was the University commencement, held July 4, the day before this letter was written. The word used, however, is *ouverture*.

⁸ Extract from letter in the French archives, translated by Dr. Williams.

⁹ See the long letter to Madison, written by Chastellux in January, 1783, and published in his *Travels in North America*, 2: 333-385.

Lorient, of the *Courier de l'Amérique*, one of the packets with which efforts were being made to develop regular intercourse between France and the United States for passengers, mail, and freight.¹⁰ It was a peculiar coincidence that the packet which conveyed the books to America bore the same name as the newspaper which became so prominent in connection with them. The *Pennsylvania Journal* of July 17 printed what was probably the first public announcement of the gift: "A well chosen collection of books is arrived at New-York in the French Packet le Courier de l'Amérique; they are sent by order of the King of France to his Consul General, to be presented to the Universities of Philadelphia and Williamsburg. They have been given at the joint request of the Count de Vergennes, and of the Chevalier (and since his brother's death) Marquis de Chatellaux."¹¹

On May 8 Chastellux had written to the University,¹² notifying them of the shipment, and the Trustees' minutes of July 20 contain this entry: "A Letter from the Marquis Du Chataleau was read presenting to the Board a Collection of Authors from his Most Christian Majesty at the Instance of the Compt De Vergennes and the Marquis De Chataleau. Agreed that Mr. Moore be desired to enquire after and take charge of the said Books." Since the shipment was consigned to Barbé-Marbois Mr. Moore, his father-in-law, could most conveniently obtain them and see to their installation in the room which served as a library. At the next meeting of the Trustees, July 27, "Mr. Moore informed the Board that the Books presented by his Most Christian Majesty was arrived." This entry is followed by a list of the books. The Board, on receiving Mr. Moore's report, adopted the following resolution:

"Resolved that the president of this Board be requested to write to the Marquis De Chattalau acknowledging the Obligation of this Seminary to him for his polite Letter and very friendly Offices and requesting him to communicate to the Compte De Vergennes the grateful Sense with which the Trustees are impressed of his kind Zeal on behalf of this University and of the Honor His Most Christian Majesty

¹⁰ See the interesting chapter on "The Packet Service" in Mitchell, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-216.

¹¹ The same announcement is in the *Pennsylvania Packet*, July 20; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 21; and (abridged) the *Freeman's Journal*, July 28.

¹² This letter, unfortunately, does not seem to have been preserved. The date is established by MacKean's letter.

has done them by extending his Royal Attention to the Advancement of Science in the Institution under their Care and adorning their Library with so munificent a Donation."

Two days later a more formal presentation was apparently made, for the *Courier de l'Amérique* reported that the books were delivered to the Trustees by Barbé-Marbois July 29. The editors had evidently had opportunity to examine the books, presumably at a gathering which was open to the public, or at least to the press. This was probably the first occasion of the kind in the history of the Library, setting an early precedent for our recent meeting of the Friends of the Library at which the Franklin Manuscript was presented.

The letter conveying the Board's thanks was written, not by John Dickinson, then president of the state and *ex officio* president of the University Trustees, but by Thomas MacKean, chief justice of the state and *ex officio* a trustee. This is explained by an entry in the minutes of August 4, which seems to indicate that in the absence of the president the chief justice was regarded as president of the Trustees *pro tem*: "His Excellency the President of the State having not hitherto signed and forwarded the Letter to the Marquies De Chateleau and having requested that the same should be signed by the President for the time—Agreed that the Cheif Justice sign the same as President of this Board and forward it without Delay." This letter has been found only in the French version which Chastellux made and sent to the Comte de Vergennes. We therefore print it here as it has been translated back into English by Dr. Williams from the transcript made by Mr. Dawson:

"We have duly received your kind letter of May 8th last, as well as the beautiful and valuable collection of books of which his Very Christian Majesty has had the kindness to make a gift to the University of Pennsylvania, and I am charged by the Board of Trustees to express to you how sensible they are of the proofs they have of your interest and regard, and what satisfaction they have in seeing the name Chastellux placed in their annals, a name equally distinguished for literary merit and for military fame.

"The Trustees beg you to please offer their sincere thanks to the Comte de Vergennes for the zeal with which he is inspired in favor of this seminary of the sciences, and of which he has given the most flattering proofs by calling the atten-

tion of a great King to it and by using his good offices in order to bind still closer by a literary alliance two nations already bound together by the most cherished and most sacred political ties.

“Our Trustees desire, further, if this wish is not indiscreet, that their humble thanks be offered to His Majesty; they are overwhelmed with gratitude because of the honor which His Majesty has done the University of Pennsylvania, and they contemplate with great joy the character of a monarch whose power, spreading to the limits of the West to uphold the rights of humanity, seems to follow the sun in its course and to make resplendent to the very ends of the earth virtues which will add a new lustre to the most dazzling throne and will serve as an adornment to the history of Kings.

“You will find enclosed a copy of the action taken by the Board of Trustees.

“Signed by order of this Board,

“Thomas MacKean, President.”

The translation which Chastellux made of this letter and of the resolution of the Trustees he sent to Vergennes with the following letter, November 15, 1784:

“Your benefactions, my dear Count, have not failed to meet with a hearty response in America. Here is a resolution of the Board of Trustees to whom the care of the University of Pennsylvania is entrusted, and a letter which was written to me by the President of this University. M. de Marbois who has sent them both to me informs me that the President of the State of Pennsylvania and the President of the University¹³ wish that these two documents be inserted in the public papers. The reason for this request is doubtless that a writer in a French gazette printed in Philadelphia, a man hostile to France, had taken it upon himself to criticize the choice of books forming our little stock, as if it were not a collection of books belonging to the King, either by subscriptions or because he had them printed by his own press, but a collection of books in general use to be found everywhere. This journalist was severely rebuked in all the American gazettes, in which there was no stint of expressions of appreciation and gratitude. From this you can judge, my dear Count, if it is fitting to give some publicity to the papers enclosed herewith. The *resolution* is the only thing which

¹³ Dickinson and MacKean.

can be placed in the Gazette de France. The letter which the President of the University wrote me could be inserted in the Mercure together with a short notice. As this letter contains things that are far too flattering to me, I should not like to be charged with sending it to the Mercure; but it will be with great pleasure that I shall see homage rendered there to the ministers for whom I know they have the highest regard. It will be said that they are paid for it, but it is unusual to find a way like this to win support. It is not my connections with them, my dear Count, which make me share their opinions, but I am glad at this time to combine my character as American and as Frenchman in order to have an additional reason for the sincere and respectful devotion with which I have the honor of being, my dear Count, your very humble and obedient servant

“Marquis de Chastellux.”

“It may be that M. de Marbois has sent you a translation of the letter which was written to me, but as I believe that this one is better, I beg you, my dear Count, to use it rather than the other.”

Vergennes replied that in his opinion “the statement of the special favor which the King had the kindness to show to this University is not the sort of thing to be inserted in the Gazette de France, because it seems to me that it is not customary to announce in a work sponsored by the Government a gift of his Majesty of the kind in question; but I see no reason,” he said, “why you should not propose to the author of the Mercure to make it the subject of an article for this periodical.” Chastellux’ desire for publicity was at least partially gratified by the publication in the *Mercure de France*, November-December, 1784, of his translation of the Trustees’ resolution and of MacKean’s letter. Some belated publicity was given to the gift in England, too. The *Gentleman’s Magazine* of February, 1785, printed a brief communication from Philadelphia, announcing the gift and giving the substance of the resolution.

Naturally, however, the greatest publicity came in the Philadelphia press, and most of it was due to the French journalist who aroused the indignation of Chastellux. The *Courier de l’Amérique* was edited by Daniel Boinod and Alexandre Gaillard, two young Frenchmen who had come to America in 1783 and opened a bookstore in Philadelphia.

Their paper was "an organ of propaganda and . . . was immediately concerned in directing its venom against the existing régime in France." The first issue appeared July 27 and the last issue October 26, 1784; 26 semi-weekly numbers were published, and 14 weekly supplements. It has been formerly thought that lack of funds was responsible for the discontinuance of the paper, but "the underlying reasons . . . were political and not financial, and they form a very interesting commentary on the freedom of the press of that period."¹⁴

In the supplement of the second issue, August 3, either rashly or with deliberate trouble-making intent the editors printed the following paragraph:

"On the 29th of last month Monsieur de Marbois, French consul-general, delivered to the Trustees of the University of this city a collection of books which his Most Christian Majesty has presented to this institution. The book-lovers who have seen them find that the selection does not do much credit to the taste and to the literary knowledge of M. le Comte de Vergennes and of the Marquis de Chateaux, on whose recommendation the King has made this gift; still, these gentlemen, and especially the latter, are very well acquainted with this country. Among the thirty-six titles which compose this collection, one can find but little of interest other than the natural history of M. de Buffon, Réaumur's history of insects, and M. Bailly's history of astronomy, all in quarto, and the first two parts of the *Art de vérifier les dates*, in folio. All these books are in excellent condition, and we have no doubt that they will be preserved a long time in the same state. If this is not exactly the munificence of Louis XIV, it is at least the small civility of a kind friend who makes everything, even down to mere bagatelles, seem to have some worth."

This affront could not be allowed to pass unnoticed. The editors must be taught to observe a proper discretion. The campaign was begun by Francis Hopkinson, who presented to M. Boinod the following notice for publication in the *Courier de l'Amérique*:

"His Most Christian Majesty, willing to promote a *literary* as well as a political connection with the United States, hath been pleased to present to the University of Pennsylvania, a valuable and elegant collection of books in philoso-

¹⁴ Barthold, *History of the French newspaper press in America*.

phy, history, arts, &c. by the most eminent French authors and of the most approved editions, amounting to more than one hundred volumes; these have been respectfully received by the Board of Trustees, and are now lodged in the Library of the University, where it is hoped they will answer his Majesty's good intention, by increasing the avenues to knowledge, and encouraging the study of the French language in America."

Boinod refused to publish this paragraph unless it was signed. Hopkinson would not consent to this, and sent the statement to the other papers of the city, supplemented by an account of his interview with the editor, signed "A. B."

"Messieurs *Boinod* and *Gaillard* having been pleased," he wrote, "in their paper of the 3d instant, to mention the circumstance noticed in the above paragraph with a malicious sneer, equally unprovoked and misapplied, a member of the Board of Trustees thought proper to place this article of intelligence in the foregoing form, which being translated into the French language was presented to Mr. Boinod for publication. This, however, Mr. Boinod refused to do, alledging that his paper was not intended for this country, but for France; that this paragraph contradicted what he had said in his *Courier* of the 3d, and if he should insert it now, it might be thought that he had been intimidated by the French Minister, and compelled to publish against his will and judgment; and lastly, that his paper was a paper of truth, and the article offered was not true, the books being in his opinion neither valuable nor elegant. Astonished at this refusal, and much more so at the absurd reasons of Mr. *Boinod*, the author demanded the publication of the article, not as a matter of favor, but of right, offering to leave his name and pay for the printing. This did not satisfy the editor of the *Courier de l'Amérique*, he insisted that the paragraph should be announced as coming from the Board of Trustees, or that the author should subscribe his name to it. Both these requisitions were declined; the first, because only the consent, and not the authority of the Board had been obtained for such a publication; and the second, because the paragraph in its present form would not with propriety admit of such a signature. Whereupon Mr. Boinod absolutely refused to give it a place in his paper."¹⁵

¹⁵ Published in *Pennsylvania Packet*, August 10; *Pennsylvania Gazette* and *Pennsylvania Journal*, August 11.

Boinod was prompt in replying, through a communication which appeared in the next issue of the leading papers."¹⁶ He emphatically denied having said that the *Courier* was published only for France, and gave his version of his interview with Hopkinson. He had been requested, he said, to make "a recantation, if not formal, at least tending to bring into question the honor and firmness which belong to every gentleman." He had therefore refused to "degrade" himself by publishing an article which was contrary to his sentiments. "I cannot insert your complimentary paragraph, unless it be signed. . . . I do not know what opinion would be conceived in America of such a paragraph, but in Europe it would be considered as a forced and ignominious recantation, and never shall we expose ourselves to such an infamy. . . . If we are mistaken, and the error be shewn to us, we will hasten to confess it; but I see nothing in this case which can alter my opinion. As a matter of taste and literature you find this collection *rich* and *precious*; our opinion is different. Let the catalogue be printed, and the public will decide whether you or we are the best judges of French books."

Hopkinson had closed his communication with the following attack, going far beyond the question of the excellence of the books which had been presented to the University:

"The foregoing narrative seems to give some insight into the views of Messrs. Boinod and Gaillard in the publication of the *Courier de l'Amérique*, which they say is not designed for this country, but for France. Their paper of the 6th instant is a further manifestation of those views, and it is more than probable, that an attention to their future publications will discover a direct tendency to *one important object*.

"Queries"

"1st. Could the views of our enemies be better served, as things now stand, than by introducing persons on whom they can depend, to set up presses in each of the United States, who might, by reviving old prejudices and insinuating new ones, secretly undermine the foundations of our peace and political interest?

"2d. Whatever unrestrained liberties may be allowed to the presses of our own citizens, whose allegiance to government and zeal for the independence of these United States

¹⁶ *Pennsylvania Packet*, August 12; *Pennsylvania Gazette* and *Pennsylvania Journal*, August 18.

cannot be doubted, does not common prudence dictate that a jealous eye ought to be kept upon strangers publishing *Couriers* and *Gazettes* amongst us, as these afford the most direct access to the minds of the people at large?

“3d. Could those, who envy the freedom we enjoy, contrive any means for subverting our peace and happiness more effectual, than by endeavoring to prejudice us against our friends, or to prejudice our friends against us?”

To this Boinod replied: “France, all powerful as she is, has not yet arrived at universal monarchy; she does not yet comprehend all Europe or America; and is it our fault if the earnestness of your good wishes makes you mistake them for the reality? Still less do we rest our hopes chiefly upon France. The firm language of truth, from which we will never depart, may not always be found agreeable to its government, and by this means may expose us to lose every advantage which might be procured from that kingdom; but as we have already said, the love of truth and liberty will be our sole guide; and if a citizen of Philadelphia can deprive us of the precious and sacred privilege of speaking agreeably to our sentiments, he never shall oblige us to be the tool of individuals, and meanly sacrifice truth to personal considerations.

“With regard to the Queries which the author proposes, on the means to be taken for restraining the liberty of the press, we leave them to be solved by those to whom they are addressed: the citizens of Pennsylvania can judge for themselves as well as any other people on earth; let them read and determine.”

Dr. Barthold is probably correct in his opinion that the editors of the *Courier* were “desirous . . . of trying to provoke an extensive public discussion on the liberty of the press.” No further comment was drawn from Hopkinson or any other friend of the University. An anonymous rhymester sought to prolong the dispute by contributing some lines to the *Freeman's Journal*¹⁷ in which he echoed Boinod's challenge:

“Your catalogue then, *Master Francis*, produce,
That each man may judge of their merit and use,”
and touched on the issue of the freedom of the press:

“A *secret newspaper*, were sure a strange thing,
Undermining the interests of country or king,”

¹⁷ August 11.

and Boinod returned to the attack in the *Courier* of August 13, without, however, adding anything new to the presentation of his case. His hope of drawing further fire from his opponents is evident in his closing words: "We shall cheerfully receive, and publish in our paper, every thing Mr. Hopkinson could wish to insert, relative to our literary dispute."¹⁸

The controversy, however, had gone beyond Mr. Hopkinson and the Trustees of the University. Boinod and Gaillard had made themselves unpopular with Barbé-Marbois and other prominent men because of certain articles which they had published in the first number of the *Courier*, and both they and their paper had come to be generally considered a public menace. The consul-general made a full report of the matter to Vergennes. That minister did not think it necessary or desirable that the French government should take notice of the case, for he considered the paper and its editors worthy only of contempt;¹⁹ but before his letter was received Barbé-Marbois was able to write him that the offending gazette had ceased publication. Tersely he stated the cause: "One of the most effective means of putting a stop to the publication was the refusal of the postmaster-general to give him a contract except at a very high rate."²⁰

So far as we are aware a complete list of the books which constituted the King's gift has never been published, and all of the partial lists which we have seen have given the titles in the incomplete and inaccurate form in which both the titles and the authors' names were recorded in the Trustees' minutes. One hundred and fifty years have passed since Boinod delivered his challenge: "Let the catalogue be printed, and the public will decide whether you or we are the best judges of French books." Feeling that it is time that this challenge were accepted, on behalf of the University and of his Majesty the late Louis XVI, we had intended to print here a complete "catalogue" of the thirty-six titles, and leave it to our readers to determine their excellence. Lack of space necessitates its postponement and it will be printed in our December issue.

¹⁸ As translated in *Freeman's Journal*, August 18.

¹⁹ Faÿ, *Bibliographie critique des ouvrages français relatifs aux Etats-Unis, 1770-1800*, p. 101.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 100, 101.