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A Letter to the Rev. Jedidiah Morse

St. George Tucker

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A

L E T T E R,

To the Rev. JEDEDIAH MORSE, A. M.

AUTHOR OF THE

' American Universal Geography.'

By a citizen of Williamsburg.

*' Who steals my purse, steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
' Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
' But he that filches from me my good name,
' Robs me of that which not enriches him,
' And makes me poor indeed.'*

SHAKESPEARE.

R I C H M O N D.

Printed by THOMAS NICOLSON, 1795.

A

L E T T E R,

To the Rev. JEDEDIAH MORSE, A. M.

A FEW days past I saw, for the first time, that compilation, which has been offered to the public under the splendid title of the 'American Universal Geography:' a title, which, however luminous it may have appeared to its author, I had some difficulty in understanding; not being sufficiently versed in Philology to comprehend that *American* Geography could be *universal*, or *Universal* Geography confined to one of the four quarters of the globe. Observing, however, that the copy right was secured according to act of Congress, and recollecting, that by that act every book claiming its protection must have a title to distinguish it from all others, I was no longer at a loss to conjecture the reasons, which might have operated with the author, in selecting one, which was not likely to be appropriated by any other person. In conformity to his example, and with nearly the same propriety, I have bestowed the title of a LETTER, upon the following lines, although I have very little intention of adopting the epistolary stile in the remarks which I am about to make upon his work.

From the title page I turned to the preface, and finding there, that one of the reasons which

had stimulated the author to undertake his work, was the *deficiency* and *falsity* in *Guthrie's Geographical Grammar*, in describing the United States, I felt uncommon pleasure in the hope of seeing those parts of the 'American Universal Geography,' which were neither *copied* nor *abridged* from the *Geographical Grammar*,† and more especially such as relate to the United States, appear in their full proportions, divested of the false colouring of prejudice, and exhibiting truth in all its genuine simplicity and lustre. I feared, indeed, that like the famous Voyager to Brobdignag, the author might sometimes have suffered the love of his country 'to give to some points a more favourable turn than the strictness of truth would allow;' and with a view of judging, as well as the few moments, allowed me to look into his book, would permit, I turned over the leaves to a part, where I could best judge of the accuracy of his information, as well as of his candour and impartiality; namely to the article VIRGINIA; where I was apprised by a note, that the author had made free use of Mr. Jefferson's notes on Virginia; and this a single glance of the eye assured me was very literally true. Indeed the author's veneration for Mr. Jefferson's taste, appears, in one instance, to have made him forego the use of his own optics, since in describing certain edifices he pronounces them (upon Mr. J--'s authority no doubt,) to be 'rude, mis-shapen piles,

† If I well recollect, Mr. Morse acknowledges his second volume to have been chiefly compiled in that manner, from *Guthrie's Grammar*.

‘ which, but that they have roofs would be taken ‘ for common brick-kilns.’ It is confessed that neither of them appears to have been designed by Palladio, or Inigo Jones; † it is however not impossible that a less refined architect might discover some other characteristic distinctions from ordinary brick-kilns; such as doors, windows, a pediment and a cupola, surmounted with a spire and weathercock, to each. These circumstances, even in the absence of lofty columns, noble porticos, superb capitals, and rich cornices, might in general serve to discriminate a modern edifice, from a common brick-kiln.—But the reverend Geographer having caught the infection of taste, was determined to see nothing, but with the eyes of a Virtuoso.

Had the author of the ‘ American Universal Geography,’ confined his representations of Virginia to extracts from Mr. Jefferson’s notes, I should by no means have been offended with him, even if he had selected such passages only as Mr. Jefferson may be supposed to have inserted, in order to avoid the imputation of that weakness, which Mr. Lemuel Gulliver confesses had some influence over him during his interview with the monarch of Brobdignag.—But the author of the American Universal Geography having interspersed his extracts from Mr. Jefferson’s notes, with some observations of his own, it is but justice to that gentleman, that the tares should be separated

† *The plan of the College was drawn by Sir Christopher Wren.*

from the wheat. †—The following passage is *not* copied from the notes on Virginia; it appears to have been the genuine production of the author of the American Universal Geography; to be the result of his own observation, or the illusion of his own fancy: not to bestow upon it a harsher epithet.

‘ Every thing in Williamsburg appears dull, forsaken, and melancholy—no trade, no amusements, *but the infamous one of gaming*, no industry, and *very little appearance of religion*. The unprosperous state of the College, but principally the removal of the seat of government have contributed much to the decline of this city.’—||

Had the reverend author of the American Universal Geography attended to this precept,

————— ‘ only adu

‘ Deeds to thy knowledge answerable,’ when he was about to pen this paragraph, it would probably have appeared in a very different dress.—Or had he ever read the ‘deserted Village,’ by Doctor Goldsmith;—or had his heart ever vibrated with corresponding emotions of philanthropy, he might in viewing the tottering ruins of a beautiful Village, have lamented its fall. Rome, the mighty mistress of the world, fell as soon as her metropolitan honors were snatched from her, and transferred to Constantinople: and could Williamsburg expect a better

† *And behold an enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat.—St. Matthew.*

|| *Morse's Geography, vol. 1. p. 551.*

fate when the feeble prop of her existence was removed to Richmond? But surely the remnant of her inhabitants, whose property had been depreciated by that event, even before it crumbled into dust, might have expected compassion in the breast of a stranger, who saw

‘ That desolation sadden’d all the green,’ instead of being represented by him as the *outcasts* and *pests* of society, as they are described in the passage above quoted. That their once delightful residence had suffered, not only from the cause before mentioned, but from the ravages of war,* the devastations of fire, the lapse of time, the decrease of population, and the increase of poverty, was a melancholy truth ever present before their eyes, and such an one, as might have induced the amiable Goldsmith to feel again all the woes of his favorite *Auburn*.—But the reverend author of the *American Universal Geography* felt none of these emotions; like *Smellfungus* and *Mundungus* he seems to have ‘ set out with the spleen; and, travelling straight on † without one generous sentiment, was never seduced from his road by *love*, or *pity*:’ and sorry I am to add, that even the allurements of *truth* appear to have been equally ineffectual.

‘ No trade, says the reverend Geographer, no amusements but the infamous one of gaming, no

* The governor’s house was burnt to the ground, and the house of the president of the college shared the same fate, whilst occupied as barracks.

† Mr. Morse’s progress through Virginia was extremely rapid.

• industry, and but very little appearance of religion.'—Heavens, what a picture! A few more touches of the reverend Geographer's pen would have exhibited to us Sodom, or Gomorrah, on the eve of eternal wrath.—But had this teacher of the gospel of Christ participated of that *ebfarity* which his divine master taught was the first of virtues; or had he inherited any portion of the benevolence of that amiable Patriarch, whose intercessions in behalf of those devoted cities is recorded by the inspired author of the Pentateuch, he could have found at least *ten* righteous persons, whose virtues might have averted the thunders of his indignation from the place. Would the reader suppose that Williamsburg, at the moment when the author drew this horrid picture, was the residence of three † ministers of the gospel, a ‡ judge who now graces the bench of the supreme court of the United States, and of the chancellor ‡ of the state of Virginia, to whose *conscience* that of his country is confided without a partner! Figure to yourself, gentle reader, this groupe employed at the *infamous amusement of gaming*! Imagine them, if you can, occupied in cheating, sharpening, palming, swearing, and doing every other opprobrious act, which the *insa-*

† The present bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Virginia, and two other clergymen, who have more than once been deputies to the Episcopal conventions of the United States.

‡ These gentlemen are not less distinguished by their private virtues than by the importance of their public functions.

mous vice of *gambling* is generally supposed to give birth to; contrast with this, that piety, morality, inflexible integrity, and purity of conscience, which ought to shine through the life and conversation of a christian bishop, or minister, a judge of the supreme court of the United States; and a chancellor whose jurisdiction extends over more than half a million of people;—And if thou hast not less charity than *Smeltungus* and *Mundungus*, thou wilt not believe that any thing *injurious* ought to be ascribed to them, unless thou hast the evidence of a credible witness sanctioned by an oath — And if such men be comprehended among those to whom *intamy* is ascribed, wonder not that *less distinguished* characters, though *not less innocent of intamy*, have been involved in the same general obliquity, by the author of the American Universal Geography §

Had the reverend author of the American Universal Geography proposed to write a treatise on Gymnastics, and visited the different parts of the United States in order to collect materials for such a work, one might not have been surpris'd to find him so much out of humour with a poor ruined village, for not exhibiting any uncommon amusements for his observation. Whether the reverend Geographer expected to have been entertained with an exhibition similar to those of the ancient *Arena*,

§ The writer of this letter hath spent more than ten years of his life in Williamsburg—Four of them between the age of nineteen and twenty five, a period of life when prudence rarely guides our footsteps—His acquaintance at that time (from 1771, to 1775,) was pretty general among the inhabitants; yet he cannot recollect that he was ever present where the company amused themselves with

or with the more modern refinements of bear-bating, cudgel-playing, or boxing, I am equally happy at his disappointment, and can assure him that had he resided twenty years in Williamsburg in expectation of such a *gala* fight, he would probably never have been gratified. There is however one amusement to which the inhabitants of Williamsburg are not a little addicted, and as it is not very common elsewhere, I shall take the liberty to mention it.—Among the edifices which have hitherto withstood the shock of desolation, there is one, which the reader who relies upon the justice and candour of the author of the American Universal Geography, would probably not expect to hear of, namely, a church dedicated to the service of Almighty God: in this church there is a well toned Organ; and among the ancient inhabitants of the place, who have neither migrated to more prosperous places in the union, nor yet set out for ‘ that undiscovered country from whose

gaming, unless playing for a few pence, or at most, shillings, deserve that epithet; nor does he suppose that in all that period he ever saw a pack of cards, or any other implement of gaming introduced a dozen times.—He removed to Williamsburg in 1789, and has resided there ever since; and during that period he is well persuaded that he has not seen a pack of cards three times in any company: nor does he believe that any civilized part of the globe is not especially exempt from the vice of gaming. That transient parties may sometimes game at taverns is very possible, though he has rarely heard of an instance of it. But to draw the character of a people from such instances, would be almost as illiberal, as to suppose that all clergymen were uncharitable and censorious, because Mr. Morje has in the present instance so far deviated from the injunctions of candour and benevolence.—Mr. Morje visited Williamsburg about the year 1787, and spent one, or at most two days, there, as I am informed. It seems wonderful that the manners of a people should have totally changed in less than two years!

'bourne no traveller returns,' is the organist; whose skill in his profession still secures him a small subscription from his fellow villagers, as well as a competent number of pupils for his support. A week rarely passes in which a number of the inhabitants do not assemble for the purpose of passing an hour or two at church, whilst the ancient organist, or some of his pupils perform upon this instrument; and often is the passenger invited into the place, in a fine evening, by hearing

'The pealing anthem swell the note of praise.'

about the time when our first parents

'Under open sky ador'd

'The God that made the sky, air, earth and Heaven

'Which they beheld.'

This naturally leads me to notice the reverend Geographer's observation that there is *very little appearance of religion in Williamburg*. Did he expect to see a procession like the triumphal entry of St. Rosalia at Palermo; or the elevation of the host at Rome; or the celebration of an Auto de Fe at Madrid! Or did he expect to hear the ministers of Christ 'calling out aloud, like the prophets of Baal, cutting themselves with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out, and leaping upon the Altars!' If any of the followers of Christ have proposed to themselves such examples for imitation, I pity them; and rejoice that the congregation which I frequent can listen with respectful silence to the admonitions of their teacher, or join him in prayer with inward fervor, instead of such extravagant manifestations of zeal. ||

|| The inhabitants of Williamburg are, generally, members of the Protestant Episcopal Church: the minister of the church is a very respectable clergyman of that denomination, who hath been

What apology the author of the American Universal Geography can make to his subscribers, to whom he held out the promise of correcting *falsities*, for thus grossly, and inhumanly encreasing their number; or what atonement for thus wantonly aspersing the moral character of a set of people, few of whom recollect to have seen him, and none, to have given him cause of offence, I can not conjecture — A more unprovoked attack, I believe, has rarely been made. One more groundless I am persuaded never was made, by a person claiming the smallest pretensions to credibility. If Mr. Morse in any future edition of his American Universal Geography, should think proper to bestow a paragraph upon Williamsburg, it is to be hoped, that he will at least expunge all that he has said respecting the moral and religious character of its inhabitants: they will be content that the place of their residence be represented as *dull*, *forsaken*, and *melancholy*; they will submit to be bereft of *all* amusements, whatsoever, rather than retain *one, only*, that is *intemperate*. They will acquiesce in the loss of *trade* and *industry*, but they beg that their *good name may not be sashed from them*, and that they may be permitted to retain the *religion* and *mode of worship* which they prefer, and not compelled to adopt forms

twenty years in that office: divine service is performed by him every week, and his congregations are generally as large as the village may be expected to afford. I could never discover any difference between their deportment, and that of episcopal congregations in other parts of the United States; and it is uncharitable to suppose that the devotions of that denomination of christians are not as sincere, as those of any other.

and ceremonies to which they are strangers, and which they probably could not approve. ¶

After copying the extract which I have quoted from the American Universal Geography, I had only time to glance my eye over the general character given of the people of Virginia; of which, as I did not copy it, I shall only observe, that it

¶ Should the reader's curiosity prompt a wish to know something of a place which has excited such indignation in the breast of the author of the American Universal Geography, I will endeavour to give him an impartial sketch of it.

Williamsburg, formerly the seat of government in Virginia, stands upon an elevated, but level spot, between York and James river. Queen's creek on one side, and Archer's hode creek on the other are navigable for small vessels within a mile of the town: during the regal government it was proposed to unite them by a canal passing through the center of the town; but the removal of the seat of government rendered it no longer an object of importance: the town is nearly a mile in length, yet I believe it never could boast of more than two hundred houses, or, eighteen hundred inhabitants. Many of the houses were pleasantly situated, and though neither elegant, nor in general built of durable materials, were neat and comfortable; most of them had gardens; the main street running from east to west is terminated by the capitol, and the college; neither of them very elegant structures, though perhaps easily distinguishable from 'common brick-kilns.'—Near the center of the town there is a pleasant square of about ten acres, which is generally covered with a delightful verdure; not far from this at the extremity of a small plain stretching to the north, stood the governor's house, or palace, as it was called: though not very handsome it was spacious and commodious; and in every respect pleasantly situated: it was burnt to the ground during the war, whilst it was occupied as an hospital for the American army. The house of the president of the College shared the same fate, being also occupied as an hospital by the French army. The latter has been rebuilt at the expence of the French government. The capitol has hastened to decay from the moment of removing the seat of government. A late act of assembly authorises the pulling down one half of it, to defray the charge of keeping the other half (which is still occupied as a district court house, both for the state, and the United States) in re-

appeared to me from the cursory view I had of it, (though perhaps I am mistaken) to have been borrowed from a traveller of great note, and respectability, without doubt; one *Smith*, I think,

pair. The hospital for lunatics, a church, the town and county court house, and a magazine, now occupied as a market house, complete the list of public edifices: neither of them appears to have been constructed with any view to architectural fame.—The hospital for lunatics is calculated to accommodate between twenty and thirty patients in separate rooms, or cells. They have, I believe, never been all filled at the same time; the house is neatly kept, and the patients well attended; but convalescents have not sufficient room for free air, and exercise, without danger of making their escape. The college, though divested of three fourths of its revenues at the revolution, and wholly disorganized, at that period, by the removal or resignation of most of the professors, has, since the peace, been successfully revived and generally the resort of from thirty to forty students, in philosophy, or in law. Their number appears to be increasing at present, and as the students of law are by no means so numerous as formerly, it creates a presumption that science begins to be more generally cultivated among the citizens at large. The grammar school, which was for a time discontinued, has been revived in the college; there are about fifty or sixty boys in this school, who are instructed by two professors, and an usher. The students in philosophy, and law, board and lodge in the town. Grammar scholars, if their parents choose it, are boarded and lodged in college, the expence of which, including washing and tuition is 2*l.* per ann. or twenty guineas.—There are six professorships—One of moral philosophy, natural philosophy, and the belles lettres; one of mathematics; one of law; one of modern languages; and two of humanity. To the college belongs an extensive library, and an apparatus which is probably not exceeded by any upon the continent: the course of natural philosophy is much more comprehensive than is usual in most colleges. In moral philosophy the students are examined from the ablest writers on logic, the belles lettres, ethics, natural law, the law of nations and politics. In mathematics a regular course both elementary and practical is pursued.—In law a course of lectures is annually delivered on the principles of civil government; and on the constitutions and laws of the federal government of the United States, and of the state of Virginia. In the modern languages, French, Italian, Spanish, and German may be acquired; most of the students acquire the two former. In the Grammar school the latin and greek languages are taught as usual in other places. The college is so far from being in a declining state, that the number of students is now considerably greater than before the revolution. At the end of the last term, viz. about the beginning of the present month their numbers were between forty and fifty.

who made his observations on the character, customs, and manners of the Virginians, whilst he officiated as a groom to a gentleman near Fredericksburg. Whether this person was some eminent character in disguise (for I am told that in England even nobleman will condescend to play the groom) I can not pretend to say. But if he appeared in his proper character in Virginia, the author of the American Universal Geography is not likely to improve much upon Guthrie's Grammar, either in supplying *deficiencies*, or correcting *falsities*, from the information of such a Visitor. Indeed if his deviations from Guthrie's work are not more successful in correcting *falsities*, than either his own observations above quoted, or those of Mr Smith, the possessors of the *original* with the humble title of a *Grammar*,

This college has probably produced its full quota of men of eminence on the political theatre of the United States. Men of high professional character in law, physic, and divinity, have there also imbibed the elements of science; and not a few of them have been indebted to it, for their whole education.

Not a few private houses have tumbled down; others are daily crumbling into ruins: there are, however, many very comfortable houses left, which having undergone some repairs, contribute to vary the scene, and there are still some neat gardens and pleasant situations; it seems to be the general idea of the inhabitants, that Williamsburg has seen its worst days. The market though not very regular, nor well supplied, yet furnishes excellent meats and poultry in their seasons. They have also fish, crabs, oysters, wild fowl, and excellent butter, vegetables, and fruits. There never was much trade in Williamsburg; probably little more than at present; the situation not being very favourable either for external, or an extensive internal commerce: the evidence of its present trade is to be found in about a dozen stores of European, and West-India goods. A few mechanics, such as blacksmiths, chair makers, wheelwrights, saddlers and harnessmakers, boot and shoemakers, and tailors find employment, and a comfortable livelihood there. There are also some genteel families which form a very agreeable society; their number is considerably greater than a traveller, passing through the place, would suppose. In short, how contemptible forever, Williamsburg, arrogating to herself the rank and honors of a metropolitan city, might have appeared in the eyes of a traveller, few villages can boast a more pleasant situation, more respectable inhabitants, or a more agreeable and friendly society.

will not readily exchange it for an *interpolated abridgement*, though decorated with the pompous title of the ' AMERICAN UNIVERSAL GEOGRAPHY.

Williamsburg, May 28th, 1795.

T H E E N D.