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 Witherpoon, 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.

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 hill 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
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,
We Princeton's summit scan,
And verdant 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
The Sons of science meet.

_Devotion_ to her altars calls
In plainly decorated halls—
Those walls engage the _Athenian_ 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—
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
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 _hive_ was on the wing
To taste his deep _Pierian_ spring,
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._
49. 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,
   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
   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
   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 nowa- days 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
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
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.