



## NICHOLSON.

**B**IOGRAPHICAL items are meagre. In early years of manhood Nicholson was busied in important activities. His was a strenuous life. I presume he was a native of the province of Pennsylvania and his advent had the advantage of affluent environment.

The change from province to commonwealth, dependence to independence, the war exaction and the currency depreciation of this evolutionary and revolutionary period caused chaotic condition in the affairs, financial and otherwise. In 1780 a system of account and an office of comptroller-general was established. John Nicholson first served\* in this capacity "for the time being" and from 1785 on a fixed tenure of seven years. The scope of office was "to keep fair, distinct and clear accounts of all revenues and expenditures of the Commonwealth of every kind and nature;" to collect debts except taxes; to settle with soldiers; and to issue interest bearing negotiable certificates. The authority of the comptroller-general was executive and judicial subject to appeal to the Supreme Court.† Under the manipulation of Nicholson the knotty skein of tangled finance was gradually unraveled. He financiered the finances with skill. He disbursed an excess of twenty-seven millions of the public funds.

Federalist and republican had patriotic principle alike; and toward each other a cordial dislike. Partisanship in the republic's formative period was intensely acrimonious, more so, than at any subsequent.

Fair is foul, and foul is fair

was a motto not inscribed on banner yet appropriately might have been. Party spirit incited malevolence and a malevolent

\* Mr. Nicholson's service began 1782 according to Day's Pennsylvania Historical Collections.

† Pennsylvania, Province and State.—*Albert S. Bolles.*

feature was rude caricature. He of horns and hoofs and tail and the Financier were pictured in company; the former beckoning and calling "Come this way, Bobby." The City of Brotherly Love was the cauldron wherein seethed with fiercest heat the political rancors. And this is prefatory to the assertion an efficient official might be charged and censured and still be guiltless. Nicholson was accused in the House of Representatives and an impeachment trial ensued. A summary is in Jacob Hiltzheimer's Diary. It began February 26, 1794. Four Philadelphia lawyers represented the House and four the Comptroller-General. April 11, the Senate (the jury) gave favorable decision to Nicholson and thereupon to escape further political persecution he retired from office.

It is stated, unauthentically, that Nicholson was of the first board of direction of the Bank of North America organized, November 1, 1781, mainly through the means of Morris.

Transactions in Nicholson's private right are of amazing magnitude. At the time of his public service he owned in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania three million seven hundred thousand acres. In a report, 1806, to the Commonwealth it is alleged by a brother of Nicholson that he had indisputable title to one-seventh of its surface. Other possessions in the States were of enormous extent. After official retirement he became besides speculator, a manufacturer.

To provide for engagements incurred in the Pennsylvania land purchases he organized joint stock concerns to which he conveyed considerable of his holdings. Of this class are the conveyances of March 17 and 18, 1797, to the Pennsylvania Land Company.

The business association with Morris dates 1793. Upon Greenleaf's retirement from the Federal City enterprise and consequent relinquishment of the active management, Nicholson with Cranch for Morris succeeded thereto. When Mr. Nicholson had assistance at Washington it was that of Lewis Deblois, a resident merchant.

Mr. Nicholson was alert and aggressive. He mastered the details of all the operations at Washington notwithstanding his ramified interests elsewhere and neglected nothing. He sought those who had money to invest in lots and improvements and consummated the contracts; he found those who had cash to loan and persuaded an exchange for his paper;

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he looked well to the division lines and insisted on every square foot undoubtedly his or doubtfully his. And when the Commissioners' ideas did not conform to his he wrote in a straight style comporting with his characteristic vim and vigor.

One of Mr. Nicholson's characteristics can be guessed and needs not the confirmation of Mr. Morris, February 9, 1797:

I know that you are never idle, it is not in your nature or habits to be so, but I think you are too often employed in doing what ought to be done by others, correct this error and you will accomplish more real business in a short time than any other man living.

At the corner of Seventh and Race streets in Philadelphia, Mr. Nicholson lived in affluent style and subscribed to the projects that conduced to the pleasure and pride of the Quaker City.

Mr. Nicholson's handwriting was plain, straight up and down—vertical. And he did write—write—write. The river of his thought flowed on easily, ceaselessly. To Mr. Morris when at the Hills, "Castle Defiance," self-immured to escape the attentions of creditors, Mr. Nicholson, likewise so disposed in his city mansion, "Castle Defense," sent by messenger daily, his letters numbered 1 to 6 and sometimes 1 to 11. With Mr. Morris it was to

Read o'er this:

And after, this:

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I wish to God these notes would take up those which bear promises of payments

and makes allusion to copying presses and paper mills. Yet Mr. Morris waited longingly for the messenger with Mr. Nicholson's budget. From the one side of the epistolary dialogue accessible sometimes the other can be surmised. Nicholson writes a word badly; Morris suggests the necessity of the devil's decipherment. What Nicholson then replies is suggested by Morris's words, March 5, 1798:

In No. 3 you say "that I shall see you are a great *scrivener*" had you said a great scribbler I should have said *Ay* at once.

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stay with Mr. Morris, for, he, too, was a prisoner for debt. In "Prune Street" he to gain for his own and his daily bread turned his facility and published a paper with a truth and jest at the top—*The Supporter or Daily Repast*. Surely it served up a feast, spicy and sumptuous, to satisfy the most exacting. The journalistic enterprise survived until the editor's death in the debtor's apartment, the 5th day of December, 1800. This circumstance seems to discredit the representation he died insane.

Prophetic were the words of Mr. Morris:

But if the key is once turned on you by the hand under any authority but your own God only knows when that door shall be opened to you; perhaps never, until you shall be insensible to the affairs of the world.

The bankrupt law of April 4, 1800, was effective July 1st, that year, and these brother unfortunates could have promptly availed themselves of it yet neither for some cause, not apparent, seemed disposed to act with promptitude. Mr. Nicholson's debts are said to have totalled twelve million dollars. Multiply for the relative value of money, then and now, and exclaim!

Mr. Morris writes:

John Nicholson, deceased. A heavy balance will be found due to me on the accounts depending between this my fellow-sufferer and myself, probably upward of \$600,000 specie, when all entries are made that the transactions require. With the purest intentions, he unfortunately laid a train that ended as it hath done. I here say he laid the train, because there are living witnesses that I opposed as soon as I knew it, although from infatuation, madness or weakness, I gave away afterward.

It would be a mistaken inference to take this large sum as money advanced. It includes land purchases with one hundred per cent. profit.

The absence of Nicholson's masterly manipulation, the condition of his affairs, and the growth and spread of population resulted in endless confusion and litigation. Tracts, throughout the thirty-nine counties, for unsettled land warrants and other accounts in liquidation reverted to the Commonwealth and by it were re-sold. Pre-existent claims to that of the Commonwealth had the effect of creating uncertain titles. "Nicholson Courts," special courts, to afford relief from embarrassment of title, have been authorized by legislative enactment and these have been re-opened time after time. So it is said,

in more recent years the Nicholsons have appeared and presented sweeping claims to about all to which there is a grant that bears an impress of their ancestral name. The annalist exclaims :\*

Thus, at the end of forty years, does the all-grasping cupidity of one man disturb the peace and welfare of whole communities.

The annalist's indignation is hardly founded on a just conception. Nicholson's investments were legitimate and proper and the complications which followed were not suspected or foreseen. And, if true, that Nicholson's descendants do seek that which seems rightfully theirs it is reasonable and not condemnable. The annalist himself stands accused of writing besides truth—tattle.

Not all speak ill of Mr. Nicholson :

DR. BENJAMIN RUSH TO JOHN NICHOLSON.

DEAR SIR,

Nothing could be more opportune than your kind offer to the poor Africans. They had nearly despaired of being able to complete their church. The person who once offered to lend them money was Col. Cox. Finding that you anticipated him in that benevolent act, he followed your kindness by bequeathing to them one hundred pounds. From their numbers, their increasing prosperity, and their punctuality in all their engagements, I have no doubt but your interest will be paid to a day every quarter. The lot and building amply secure the principal. In all my intercourse with the blacks, I have found them affectionate and grateful. You will find them more so,—for you have greater demands than I have ever had, upon their gratitude and affections. I find they have alloted a pew for each of us, on different sides of the pulpit of their church. On Saturday next they purpose to raise their roof, after which they are to have a dinner under a tree at a private house in the Neck, about a mile from town, I hope I shall have the pleasure of meeting you there, for they intend to invite you with two or three more of their white benefactors. I wish to suggest to you an idea of offering 10,000, or more acres for sale on moderate terms, and on a credit for a few years, to *Africans only* who have been brought up as farmers. The attraction of color and country is such that I think the offer would succeed, and thereby a *precedent* be established for colonizing in time, all the Africans.

Adieu—my dear friend—May Heaven prosper you in all your great and extensive pursuits, and may you long continue to enjoy the highest and only rational pleasure that wealth can confer—I mean the luxury of doing good.

From yours

Sincerely

BENJ'N RUSH.

August 12th 1793

\* Watson's Annals of Philadelphia.

*Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, Monday, December 8, 1800.

DIED, on Friday last, John Nicholson, esquire, formerly Comptroller General of this state, and lately editor of a newspaper, emphatically stiled "*The Supporter, or Daily Repast*," in allusion to his, then, situation and circumstances. This gentleman by the attention of his parents had received in his youth a liberal education, was trained in the paths of piety, industry, and application to business; nature had bestowed talents, and he acquired by practice a facility in adjusting and settling the most intricate affairs with dispatch unequalled. Fortune smiled on his industry for a time and he acquired wealth; *wealth* afforded the opportunity (which he embraced) to gratify the qualities and propensities of his mind; generous without ostentation his donations altho' numerous were little known to any but the immediate objects of them; sympathy for the distressed led him to visit the sick and necessitous within his circle, and upon every such occasion he administered the aid or comfort which the case required, insomuch that by the indigent he was called the father of his neighborhood. Modest, unassuming and good tempered, he was a kind and affectionate husband and parent, a sincere friend and useful citizen. Without being stimulated to avarice or ambition, he became too ardent (from habit) to the pursuit of wealth, and as many have done before by outstepping the bounds prescribed by prudence, he lost a fortune that ought to have contented him. He bore the reverse with fortitude, and had it been his fate to continue in this world, there is little room to doubt, that industry like his, aided by past experience would have repaired the ravages of misfortune. A short sickness has snatched him from all possibility of exertion, leaving an amiable and affectionate wife with eight infant children, (unaccustomed until of late to know any ungratified wants) to struggle with the difficulties of their situation.—May the author of all good, continue them in his holy protection and shed his divine influence in the minds of their fellow citizens so as to dispose of them to administer to their relief and comfort.

*A Friend of the Deceased.*

A lineal descendant of Nicholson says she is credibly advised that he was only in his twenty-second year when honored with the comptrollership; if correctly, he was but forty at time of decease. I approximate his years at two score; he may have been slightly more advanced. Morris mentions many times the lease of life that Nicholson has in which to rebuild his fortune.

"You are young enough to bury the Acorn and see the Tree grow up again."

It is sad that a life of such executive efficiency and variant utility should so soon be closed, though freed from the corporeal prison for the better state.

The picture of Mr. Nicholson is a reproduction of a painting by Charles Wilson Peale and is presented through the courtesy of Mrs. M. Nicholson Collins of New Orleans, La.