

“Thank God We Are Americans”: Yankees Abroad on the Fourth of July

*Robert Pettus Hay**

Sojourning Americans—May you all
be ready at your country's call.

Toast drunk at Montreal, Fourth of July, 1811.¹

The travelling spirit—if it takes
our countrymen from home for the
purpose of improvement or amusement,
it will always conduct them back in
search of liberty and happiness.

Toast drunk at Paris, Fourth of July, 1826.²

Most foreign travelers in the United States during the nineteenth century searched constantly for the distinctively American, and probably nothing was more truly American in that era than Fourth of July celebrations. The anniversary was a multifaceted occasion. Although a gala holiday filled with eating and drinking and singing, it was not all fire-crackers and fun because it had a serious, almost holy side. It was, explained a Kentuckian in 1813, “The political Sabbath of the American patriot; sacred to virtue, liberty and independence.”³

In 1819 William Faux, a British traveler, attended one such celebration of the nation's birthday in Philadelphia. The Fourth of July, he observed, “is brother Jonathan's immortal universal festival. Roaring cannon and merrily ringing bells salute the morn, and, until midnight, all is frolic and hilarity, from one end of this mighty empire to the other.”⁴ Faux was right as far as he went. He should have added, however, that throughout the nineteenth century the Fourth of July was also remembered with enthusiasm by

* Robert Pettus Hay is lecturer in history at the University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky.

¹ *Niles' Weekly Register*, I (October 12, 1811), 103.

² *Ibid.*, XXX (August 19, 1826), 432.

³ Lexington, Kentucky, *Reporter*, July 10, 1813.

⁴ William Faux, *Memorable Days in America: Being a Journal of a Tour of the United States, Principally Undertaken to Ascertain, by Postive Evidence, the Condition and Probable Prospects of British Emigrants . . .* (London, 1823), 95.

Yankees abroad. He might even have noted that those foreigners who considered themselves the well-wishers of the liberal experiment being conducted in the West sometimes eagerly participated in those holiday festivities which took place outside America's borders.

An early Fourth of July observance on foreign soil occurred at Montreal in 1811 where "A considerable body of Americans celebrated . . . with great glee." Their residence on British soil in that year of Anglo-American crisis turned the Americans' thoughts to "Our country—May she never doubt the fidelity of her absent sons in the hour of danger." There was also an energetic salute to "Brother Jonathan—May his great gun be loaded with true American principles, wadded with traitors, and pointed at the enemies of liberty. Yankee doodle." Nor did they forget to toast that old battle cry of freemen, "Yankee doodle—More powerful than the shouts of rams' horns, which brought down the walls of ancient Jericho."⁵

Americans in Paris were also adept at yankee-doodling on the Fourth of July. Year after year the glorious day was recalled in the French capital. On these occasions the banners of the United States and France "waved gracefully together,"⁶ but the toasts were "truly American."⁷ The Marquis de Lafayette usually joined the reveling Yankees on that day, for, as he said, he delighted in breathing with them "the American atmosphere."⁸ During the course of the ceremony the old general was normally the subject of a flamboyant toast. In 1828 James Brown, the minister to France, and his fellow Americans lifted their wine glasses high in honor of "Our venerable guest, general Lafayette, whose name, associated with that of our Washington, will descend with imperishable renown to the latest posterity."⁹ The marquis could always be counted on for an appropriate reply. In 1817 he saluted "The friends of liberty in both hemispheres—and may the doctrine of rights every where prevail over the doctrine of privileges."¹⁰ With the impressions gained on his grand

⁵ *Niles' Weekly Register*, I (October 12, 1811), 103.

⁶ *Ibid.*, XXX (August 19, 1826), 432.

⁷ *Ibid.*, XVII (September 4, 1819), 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, XXXVII (August 29, 1829), 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, XXXV (September 13, 1828), 36-37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, XII (September 27, 1817), 79.

tour of America still fresh in his mind, he responded to the 1826 toast in his honor by lavishing praise upon the "new social order, which has already pervaded the American hemisphere, and cannot fail more and more to enlighten and enfranchise the world." Lafayette was certain that anyone who lived for a time in each hemisphere, as he had, would be appalled by the contrast. Thus with complete assurance he predicted that the more Americans "see of Europe, the more they will be attached to the institutions of their own country."¹¹

This idea the general repeated at almost every Fourth of July fete he attended.¹² According to the marquis, the American Revolution had inaugurated a new era in political history, and the natural rights of man which that revolution had upheld would eventually become the basis of all governments. Warning the Yankees not to admit any European elements or other "exotic materials" into their matchless constitution, the marquis noted that already the rest of the world was beginning to emulate the glorious example of the Western Republic. Lafayette, himself an honorary citizen of several cities and states of that Republic, was not being hyperbolic at the 1832 Fourth of July dinner when he declared that "we, as American citizens, take a pride in the endeavors in the several nations on this side of the Atlantic, to imitate, as far as their own circumstances can admit it, those institutions which have insured to the United States a greater share of practical liberty, legal order, public and individual security, and development of industry than has ever been known in the annals of mankind."¹³

Although Americans in other foreign cities could seldom boast of so distinguished a Fourth of July guest as Lafayette, a proper observance of the nation's birthday did not depend so much upon the presence of an illustrious personage as upon the zealous patriotism of the Yankees themselves. There seemed to be no dearth of this animating sentiment in the American residents of Havana in 1838. They gathered to pay

¹¹ *Ibid.*, XXX (August 19, 1826), 432.

¹² *Ibid.*, XXXV (September 13, 1828), 36-37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, XLIII (September 1, 1832), 6. Other information on Fourth of July celebrations in Paris may be found in the *Lexington Kentucky Reporter*, September 15, 1827; *Niles' Weekly Register*, XXXVI (August 22, 1829), 415; and *ibid.*, XXXIX (September 4, 1830), 23.

homage to their nation by listening to "a short, but pithy address" and to the reading of the Declaration of Independence; then they gorged themselves on all "the luxuries with which the boards were profusely loaded." And since nothing was so well calculated to bolster one's sagging spirits—patriotic or otherwise—as the wonderful sound of the wine corks popping, they drank the inevitable toasts, including one to "The signers of the Declaration of the Independence of the United States—Though no longer in the land of the living, the remembrance of their glorious deeds will ever teach the Americans what industry and perseverance can effect under the most desponding circumstances."¹⁴

Nor were the thousands who frequently clamored to the celebrations back home required for a remembrance of Brother Jonathan's birthday abroad. Two Americans studying in Germany conducted their own Fourth of July ceremony in 1820. George Bancroft, the future historian and already an ardent nationalist, delivered a fervid oration; and James Patton read an appropriate poem. "I am sure of it," wrote Bancroft, "never did two Americans deliver a more patriotic oration or more exalted poem, or think toasts more full of love of country than these two forlorn pilgrims at Göttingen." Especially did the young patriots want it understood that their exposure to European culture could not lessen their devotion to "the land where freedom has planted her standard." "My countrymen, we are Americans," Bancroft cried at the close of his oration. "The arts and sciences of Europe cannot make us forget it. Thank God we are Americans."¹⁵

More poignant was an observance by Americans abroad through no choice of their own. Yankees captured by the British in the War of 1812 and imprisoned on the *HMS Nassau* at Chatham, England, received permission to honor their nation's birthday in 1814. As part of the solemnities one of the captive seamen delivered an oration. Circumstances dictated that he begin with a salutation very different from the "My Fellow Citizens" or "My Fellow Freemen" with which orators usually greeted the holiday throngs. But perhaps no Fourth of July audience was ever hailed more

¹⁴ Charleston *Mercury*, quoted in *Niles' Weekly Register*, LIV (August 4, 1838), 355.

¹⁵ Orie William Long, *Literary Pioneers: Early American Explorers of European Culture* (Cambridge, 1935), 124, 126.

appropriately than were these Americans by the seaman's "MY FELLOW-PRISONERS, AND BELOVED COUNTRYMEN." In considering the current Anglo-American conflict, he railed against "the demagogues, the war-faction" in England who had learned none of the lessons taught by the American Revolution. Apparently this faction believed that British fleets and armies could crush the young Republic. "Strange infatuation! They have forgotten Bunker's Hill! They have forgotten Saratoga, and Yorktown, when the immortal WASHINGTON with his victorious army chased them through the Jerseys, under the muzzles of their ship's cannon for protection." No, the captive patriot concluded, American freemen would not be divested of their liberties by men-of-war or redcoats. If the British really believed this, they were in for a gigantic surprise, for "they will meet the lads who will play them the tune of yankee doodle, as well as they did at Lexington, or Bunker Hill."¹⁶

Before the Civil War animosities between the two countries had lessened enough to permit the celebration of the Fourth of July in London.¹⁷ In 1861 Americans living in the British capital had gathered to pledge their allegiance anew to the nation now being bathed in brothers' blood. The patriotic toasts that year were received with "much enthusiasm," especially the one honoring "The stars and stripes now and forever." After the singing of *The Star-Spangled Banner*, several New Yorkers and Bostonians delivered orations, all of which "evinced strong feelings of patriotism."¹⁸ The Fourth of July was celebrated with even greater fervor in the British Isles in the years following the war. The anticipated arbitration of Anglo-American differences, provided for in the Treaty of Washington (1871), resulted in the observance of the holiday to an unprecedented extent in London in 1872; and there were special ceremonies at Edinburgh, Manchester, and Liverpool as well.¹⁹ Even at the

¹⁶ *An Oration, Delivered by Permission, on Board the Nassau Prison-Ship, at Chatham, England; On the Fourth July, 1814. By an American Seaman, Prisoner of War* (Boston, 1815), 5-6.

¹⁷ G. F. Train, *Speech, at the Dinner Given at the London Tavern, on the 5th July, 1858, by the American Association in London, in Commemoration of the Eighty Second Anniversary of American Independence* (London, [1858]).

¹⁸ Cumberland, Maryland, *Civilian & Telegraph*, July 25, 1861.

¹⁹ Indianapolis *Indiana State Sentinel*, July 9, 1872.

"brilliant celebration" in Geneva that year, the peaceful settlement of Anglo-American squabbles was the topic uppermost in the minds of the American revelers and their Swiss guests. Thus, after the usual flamboyant salutes to "Our Country," American diplomats Caleb Cushing and Charles Francis Adams also raised their glasses to honor "Her Majesty, Queen of England."²⁰ The Fourth of July had come a long way: having originated in the denunciation of "the tyrant," George III, it was now the occasion for honoring another British sovereign, Victoria. Little wonder, then, that Britons themselves were sometimes happy to join in these festivities.

Just as some American orators continued to unleash verbal assaults upon their nation's "cruel and tyrannical mother," however, so some Englishmen persisted in pointing out the "stupidity of the ungrateful colonies" which had left the British Empire in 1776. As late as the Fourth of July, 1875, this hard feeling was not yet entirely dead. Several Englishmen, including Henry Richard, a member of Parliament, participated in that year's ceremony in London which was attended by some two hundred Americans, among them Ulysses S. Grant, Jr., the President's son. The London *Standard* blasted the gathering, declaring that "none but Americans would venture upon such a display of bad taste and discourtesy as was shown in yesterday's celebration, and none but the English would tolerate it." Especially did the paper lambast those Britons who had joined in the noisy merrymaking, for "it is hardly decent for any loyal Englishman to participate in the celebration of English disasters. The American insurrection was about the most unprovoked rebellion in history." Indeed, the *Standard's* irate editor even suggested that among Americans themselves there were but "few not actually participating in the general system of public plunder in the country who would not joyfully exchange their institutions for the order, honesty and loyalty of this Empire, from which, a century ago, they made their insane revolt."²¹

²⁰ *Ibid.* For an account of an earlier observance of the holiday in Geneva, see *Celebration of the Ninetieth Anniversary of American Independence in Geneva (Suisse) July 4th, 1866* (Geneva, 1866).

²¹ New York *World*, July 7, 1875, quoting the London *Standard*, July 6, 1875.

If Fourth of July celebrations abroad were sometimes so boisterous as to provoke foreigners, Americans themselves could become incensed at the failure of foreigners to show proper respect for the birthday of their Republic. Yankees in Honolulu, Hawaii, were so irritated at the holiday conduct of local officials in 1847 that they accused the Hawaiians of blatant "anti-American prejudice." It seems that on the Fourth of July the American commissioner lowered the small United States flag which ordinarily flew over his residence, replacing it with "a large magnificent one" more suitable for the happy occasion. Immediately afterwards the large royal standard at the palace was lowered, and "the very smallest and meanest" Hawaiian banner was raised in its stead. Moreover, local officials failed to fire any Fourth of July salutes from the fort guns. When they recalled the respect accorded the British on their holidays, the Americans were even more provoked. On the anniversary of Queen Victoria's birth, there had been on the local flagpoles "a display of the largest and richest Hawaiian flags and royal standards that are ever seen to float." On the anniversary of her coronation, there had been "joyful demonstrations," including the firing of salutes in respect to the British ensign by order of the native government. To the patriotic Americans this was proof aplenty that Hawaii was suffering from a great "want of national courtesy."²²

Yankees also "kept the day" aboard ship. Henry Bradshaw Fearon, an Englishman, noted that the anniversary was observed in 1817 on board the *Washington* with "its usual sanctity—by good eating and drinking" and by the singing of several songs of 1776 vintage. The Briton reported that John Quincy Adams and his family, returning home from London, joined in the merrymaking. Even Fearon was not immune to the Fourth of July fever. "I felt warm in the cause," he candidly confessed, "viewing that declaration as the common property of every friend of freedom."²³ According to another sojourning Briton, James Flint, Brother Jonathan's birthday was not forgotten by the passengers on

²² Honolulu *Sandwich Islands News*, July 7, 14, 1847.

²³ Henry Bradshaw Fearon, *Sketches of America: A Narrative of a Journey of Five Thousand Miles Through the Eastern and Western States of America . . .* (London, 1818), 3.

the *Glenthorn* in 1818. The captain and seamen "were disposed to be joyful in commemoration of this great event," and they indulged their patriotic inclinations by displaying "the striped flag," by firing pistols, and by cheering for liberty to the top of their voices. The passengers, most of whom were immigrants bound for the young nation in the West, were no less enthusiastic and "joined in the strongest expressions of their devotedness to the democratic form of government . . . and their avowed satisfaction at the near prospect of becoming people of the Republic."²⁴

A most elaborate Fourth of July celebration was organized by Yankees aboard the mail steamer *USS Hermann* in 1853. When the bells began ringing and the guns began firing at midnight on July 3, many of the startled passengers believed that the boiler had burst or that the ship had sprung a leak. Chuckling at the consternation of their sleepy fellows, a few of "the initiated" assembled in the smoking room "and drank the health of the seventy-seven years old child in a bumper of champagne." At sunrise the cannon were fired again, and at noon there was a thirteen-gun salute. Then followed a markedly cosmopolitan observance of "the birthday of Freedom." "There were representatives of almost every nation; but all alike, Americans and foreigners, joined heart and hand in doing honor to the occasion." To be sure, the ceremony began with the singing of *Hail Columbia*, the reading of the Declaration of Independence, and the delivery of an oration in English. It soon took an international turn, however: a German song was followed by an oration in German given by a Russian. After another German song, there was "a most appropriate and eloquent address in French." Given the occasion, the solemnities had to end on an American note, and so Americans, Germans, Russians, and Frenchmen blended their not so melodious voices and tried valiantly to sing *The Star-Spangled Banner*. That evening a piano was hoisted on deck, a violinist was summoned, and the ball began. After intermissions for "a magnificent display of fireworks" and for "a cold collation in the saloon," the crew joined in; and the revelers danced

²⁴ James Flint, *Letters from America, Containing Observations On the Climate and Agriculture of the Western States, the Manners of the People, the Prospects of Emigrants, &c. &c.* (Edinburgh, 1822), 3.

away the glorious night to the tune of piano and violin music, cannon fire, and "continuous salvos from champagne corks."²⁵ It was a distinctively American sound for the most distinctively American of days.

Thus, while Americans at home were huzzahing for their liberties on the day "set apart, by the unanimous sentiment of the people, as the political sabbath of America,"²⁶ their countrymen abroad were not forgetting the glorious Fourth of July. To nineteenth-century Americans a flamboyant patriotism was a positive virtue, and the birthday of the nation was an occasion calling for manifestation of this ardor. Whether on land or on sea, Yankees met to revel in the sheer joy of being citizens of "the world's only Republic," and could well shout with George Bancroft, "Thank God we are Americans."²⁷

²⁵ *Commemoration on Board U.S. Mail Steamer Hermann, Lieut. Edward Higgins, U.S.N., Commander, on Her Passage from Bremen to New York, July Fourth, 1853. Published by Subscription of the Passengers* (New York, 1853), 4-5.

²⁶ *Lexington Kentucky Gazette*, July 10, 1815; *Lexington, Kentucky, Reporter*, July 19, 1815.

²⁷ Long, *Literary Pioneers*, 126.