

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers I*, 1885 – 1886 Oct 3, '85 to May 29, '86)

Town and Parish

In two only of the colonial settlements were their distinctive forms of government, – in New England and in Virginia.

In both these colonies, their earliest local laws and customs were imported from the Mother Country, and were the same.

In England in 1600 the words “town” and “parish” were interchangeable, and in the records of the laws of that day they were particularly synonymous. The civil officers and church officers had practically the same functions in local administration.

Although the two colonies started in about the same way, the peculiarities of their respective situations cause them soon to begin to diverge, and in the course of the century they became so wide apart, as to seem to represent different civilizations. In New England, “the nature and constitution of the place were favorable to concentrated settlement for purposes of trading, fishing, and manufacturing, and not for an extended cultivation of the soil.” Hence the people gathered into towns on the coast, and on the banks of the two navigable streams.

In Virginia the soil was rich and the country cut up by many rivers “forming harbors far in the interior and the climate invited to a rural life, and farming, particularly tobacco growing, was very profitable.

This caused the people to scatter out and spread themselves pretty well over the country.

“The early settlers of New England belonged to the great “middle-class of old England,” while the early colonists of Virginia belonged to the upper and middle classes together with a large body of “servants” sprung from the lower class of London; all being however, purely English.

There was more homogeneity (*sic*) in New England than in Virginia, and it is easy to see how, that in the northern settlements the “town” organization became so strong. The people were of the same level, had the same creed

substantially, had the same motives for leaving the old country, and the same hopes and aspirations; of course, they knew that “organization” was their strength. They voluntarily surrendered to the “town” what they had crossed the ocean to win – their individual liberty. And they regarded as the highest enjoyment of liberty the right to give it up as they pleased.

It was an unanimous concession to a power that was as despotic as the worst they had fled from. No man could locate his house outside the shadow of the church, and when the little circle was full, no one could build a house at all until another church had been set up for a hub.

The minister was a veritable tyrant, knowing no master but his still more tyrannical creed; and it was only because all subscribed to the same creed, that the minister was not felt to be a hard master. While the form of government was democratic, nothing at all was reserved to the individual save the right to vote; and then obeyed the majority. In petty matters there was no liberty in graver matters there was despotism, “it must be remembered that there was often a fine incurred by not being present at town meeting, and worse than a fine for absence from divine worship.”

Among such a people where there was such a homogeneity such uniformity of thought and feeling, such discipline, such surrender of the individual to the organization, when the crisis of the Revolution came it was the most natural of all things that they should furnish the greatest number of good soldiers. It is well known that New England furnished more soldiers in proportion than any other section of the country. And they were good soldiers, too; their home training made them such. Each man's thoughts and will were subordinated to what was above him, and the best soldier is, in so far as his individuality goes, an unthinking machine.

This was the natural result of the inexorable leveling brought about or at least greatly intensified by the “town” organizations. These organizations did not rock the only cradle in which American liberty first stretched its Herculean limbs; but they put into the field the first and best rank and file of an army to fight the battles of that famous infant. And when that army was mustered New England's next step was as wise as her whole spirit was patriotic, she looked South for a leader.

In Virginia the early settlers kept more closely to the imported customs. Power descended from the head downwards. The local officers were

appointed, not in every case, but in all the important offices. Virginia early lost its character, and became a royal province, and the governors kept up the monarchical forms. "In each country which contained but one parish, the local government was in the hands of eight men appointed by the governor who administered justice." of twelve men elected by their predecessors (a close corporation) who took charge of the poor and had charge of all matters pertaining to religion, and of one man, appointed by the governor, who was the head of the military."

These appointments naturally fell to the men who were prominent in their respective counties, and they thus became more prominent, and they became petty rulers. This did not tend to train the people to habits of local self-government, and some of the statesman of the colonies tried to counteract its effect by passing a law, giving each county liberty to make laws for itself, concerning its local affairs "to regulate such small inconveniences as could not be well concluded under a general law," but it did not result in establishing much of a democratic spirit; probably because of the absence of that homogeneity which characterized New England.

The plane effect of the Virginian system was to give those who could reach it an opportunity for improvement and development in leading and guiding public affairs and in expanding to the full limit of each one's capacity. They lived on large plantations widely separated from each other, where each man of that class had every inducement to develop his own individual judgment, ambition and will.

They attended church as profitably as the Puritans did, but they did not allow themselves to be fined or in any way punished if they occasionally they stopped away. They were relieved of the burden and hindrance of having to do servile work, by the ownership of the black slaves, and they were able to cultivate and practice a hospitality more generous than that of the Arabs, under whose genial influence all the better instincts of the human heart and all of the loftier aspirations of the intellect were brought out and cultivated.

The laws were impartial as regards the rich and the poor and every man was free to follow his own bent. Many were lazy and unambitious; these lived and died in ignoble obscurity. Many enjoyed life as plain country gentlemen, a great proportion of whom were well read in the English classics. Their libraries were small, but they knew the standard authors like the alphabet.

Others gave themselves to public affairs and the science of politics, and all the richer class affected a degree of grandeur of living which gave a standard to style to the whole colony. It happened there is everywhere else under a similar regime that the obscure people aping the manners of those whom those manners adorned, pretended to a gentility which only made them ridiculous, just as many a Puritan affected an austere piety which he did not rightly possess, because his betters were respected on account of their piety.

The counterfeit has come down to our time; but the noble reality of that phase of social life lives now mostly in memory. Its influence however is more potent in Virginia today than is the influence of the ancient Puritanism in New England.

The noblest product of the Southern civilization was Washington, and if we take Mr. Everett's characterization of him as being just and well expressed, it is morally certain that such a man could never have come from a New England town.

The race which brought forth a Webster, to whose intellectual power that of Washington was a wax-burner to an Edison burner, could never have furnished the world with that "genius of the consummate manhood" who was only the best specimen of a Virginian gentleman.

Neither was the rank and file of the patriot army from the Southern plantations to be despised. From the earliest times the militia was enrolled, and they were compelled to muster four times a year. They did some very wicked fighting when they were let loose; and Daniel Morgan with his mountaineers worried the enemy considerably.

As to the rocking of that historic cradle and the bottle nursing of that tender suckling, New England is entitled first to the thanks and reverence of a happy posterity; but there came along one from Virginia named Patrick Henry who sang a stirring ballad in the baby's ear, and he was a baby no longer. He grew and grew, and still grows; and the danger is that he will yet outgrow his natural limitations, and finally suffer asphyxiation for want of space.

Theo Kemper

Budget

G. H. Wald Editor

December 26, 1885