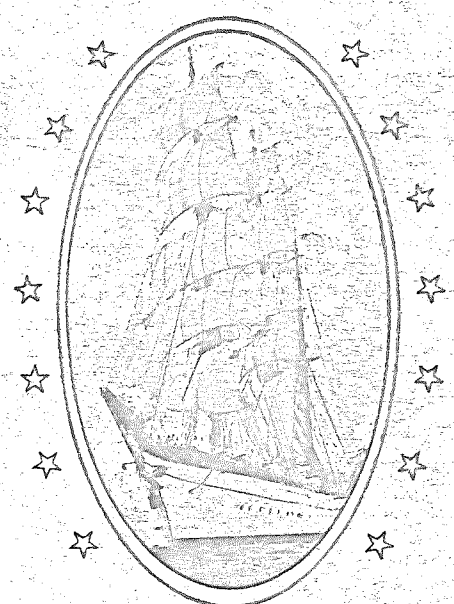


PART ONE

REFLECTIONS ON THE BICENTENNIAL

As a celebration, it delighted millions, disappointed others. Now that the party is over, Thomas Fleming—noted author of numerous books and articles on the American Revolution, a Fellow of the Society of American Historians, and Chairman of the American Revolution Round Table of New York — gives considered thought to what we did right, what we did wrong, what it meant... and where we go from here.



As part of Operation Sail, the Gorch Fock departs Newport, Rhode Island, July 1, 1976. "The ships seemed to be sailing out of history into our turbulent present."

□ A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE way to the Bicentennial. America had a wonderful time.

It was just this fact that surprised Bicentennial watchers and planners who had been working and fretting over the celebration for five precious years. These were the people who were surprised by the emotional power of the birthday party our citizens threw for themselves.

In January 1976 most Bicentennial watchers and planners were engulfed in gloom. The editors of *USA 200*, the newsletter which described itself as the monthly chronicle of the Bicentennial, called it "an abandoned dream." The Bicentennial seemed on its way to becoming "a confusing non-event."

Some pundits predicted it would be worse than a non-event. It would be a disgusting orgy of commercialism. Other observers feared a violent upheaval. Mayor Frank Rizzo of Philadelphia called for 15,000 regular army troops to guarantee the security of his city. But the biggest threat seemed more likely to be apathy. Vietnam and Watergate, went this prophecy, had eroded patriotism and destroyed the pride Americans once had in their country.

Numerous ambitious Bicentennial plans had in fact expired. The biggest corpse was the Philadelphia Exposition, a world's fair that was going to excel the historic 1876 Centennial Exposition, which attracted one out of every five Americans of that day through its gates. Bureaucratic hostility in Washington, D.C., racial bickering in Philadelphia and jealousy in other cities had combined to kill the idea.

In Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere, radical groups were talk-

ing about counterdemonstrations and disruptions of the official celebration. The most potent of these seemed to be the Peoples Bicentennial Commission, which was, in the opinion of the Senate Internal Security subcommittee, "trying to steal the Bicentennial."

All these portents inclined the experts to look toward the Bicentennial with apprehension and even with despair. But when July 4, 1976, finally arrived, the prophets of gloom could only stare in amazement. The celebration began in New England with 4:30 A.M. ceremonies atop Mars Hill Mountain in Maine, where dawn first reached the continent. At 5:13 Robert W. Gollidge, Vicar of Boston's Old North Church, used a ray of starlight that had been traveling since 1776 to kindle two copies of the lanterns used to signal Paul Revere. The light came from the star Epsilon Lyrae via telephone from the observatory on Mauna Kea, Hawaii, where the star had been detected. Next came the glare of rockets and the blare of the national anthem at Fort McHenry, Maryland. Almost 24 hours later, the final firecrackers banged in American Samoa. In between was the biggest and best national birthday party in history.

More than a million people gathered on the mall between Washington and Lincoln Memorials for ceremonies that included prayers and speeches. Another million people jammed Philadelphia's sidewalks to watch a spectacular parade. The largest crowd in the history of Boston assembled along the Charles River to hear Arthur Fiedler conduct the *1812 Overture*.

At 2 P.M. in Philadelphia, descendants of the Founding Fathers joined President Ford and laid their hands on the Liberty Bell. It was a signal for bells to ring in cities and towns throughout the 50 states. In Washington, D.C., some 10,000 visitors jammed into the Capitol, spontaneously bursting into "Happy Birthday."

The city that captured the most atten-

tion was New York, where the Bicentennial was supposed to be barely breathing. Some six million people filled the streets and dangled from trees and lampposts and leaned from skyscraper and apartment windows to watch a saltwater extravaganza called Operation Sail. The brainchild of a 59-year-old ship enthusiast named Frank Osborne Breynard, it was made to order for the age of television. Two hundred and twenty-five tall ships under 31 flags moved up the Hudson along the very path taken by early explorers and the British battle fleet in 1776. In the television's magic eye, the ships seemed to be sailing out of history into our turbulent present.

It was not simply the spectacles, the parades, the speeches, that made the birthday memorable. It was the mood of the American people. In city after city reporters were awed by the friendly relaxed way that everyone celebrated. There was not much chest-thumping patriotism. But there was a clearly visible sense of shared pride in America.

None of the disasters predicted by the gloomsters took place. In city after city startled police reported very little crime or violence. Only one purse was snatched from the million-plus visitors in Washington, D.C. A smiling New Yorker summed it up: "The hookers and the pickpockets seem to have taken the weekend off."

What had happened? The people had had their own celebration, not the one prescribed for them by the experts and pundits.

And perhaps the most remarkable thing about the celebration was its local nature. Very few people traveled to distant cities or regions. This made hotel and restaurant owners unhappy from New England to Virginia. Vermont's steam train, the state's biggest Bicentennial effort, ran at a deficit all summer. Some backward-lookers blame this on the lack of a national exposition, which had Americans streaming to Philadelphia a hundred years ago. (continued)

This is but one page in the history of the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission,

which is a virtual study in how not to run a national birthday party.

Some critics complain that the American people never got a chance to vote on whether they wanted such a national exposition. So far as I know, only one poll was taken on the subject, by *American Heritage* magazine. The results showed a surprisingly high percentage in favor of it. But the bureaucrats on the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission were stonily opposed to it, and they manipulated the commission into voting it down.

This is but one page in the history of the ARBC, which is a virtual study in how not to run a national birthday party.

As early as 1972, the highly respected consulting firm of Arthur D. Little, Inc., concluded from an internal management study that the organization was in a state of "incipient failure." Repeated reshufflings of the membership of the commission and changes in leadership seemed to have little impact. The commission remained an ineffective debating society. And after Nixon's resignation, President Ford allowed the commission to subside to a near moribund state. All it did was list Bicentennial events and projects in the most uncritical way.

The Peoples Bicentennial Commission stepped into the vacuum created by the collapse of the ARBC and proclaimed themselves and their program the alternative that America should heed. The PBC repeatedly attacked the official commission and, in the summer of 1972, gave the *Washington Post* hundreds of pages of internal ARBC memoranda and other documents "furnished voluntarily by sources inside" the ARBC. The head of the PBC, Jeremy Rifkin, claimed that the documents proved "the administration was embarked on a massive effort to exploit the Bicentennial on behalf of its own political interests and the commercial interests with which it is closely aligned."

Anyone reading the material was more likely to conclude that it proved the ARBC was primarily guilty of ineptitude. But the aura of revelation enabled PBC to look like a popular crusader.

New Englanders can take credit for being the first to frustrate the PBC's plans. April 19, 1975, was going to be their breakthrough day. They predicted 100,000 counterdemonstrators would upstage the official celebration. Instead, the day left a stain on the PBC's image from which it never recovered. Their troops — far fewer than they had predicted — behaved like undisciplined slobbers rather than serious critics of the American system. Nothing the PBC said or did that day compared with the beauty and dignity of the ceremonies at Old North Church and at Concord Bridge. The steadfastness with which the official celebrators ignored their heckling inclined the rest of the country to do pretty much the same thing.

Anyone with a modicum of knowledge about the American Revolution recognized the PBC historical arguments as puerile. Their chief heroes, Samuel Adams and Benjamin Rush, were repudiated by the very revolution they helped to start. Samuel Adams could not even get elected to public office in Massachusetts after the Revolution, and as I pointed out in my *YANKEE* profile on John Hancock (July 1976), Benjamin Rush was kicked out of the Continental Congress by Pennsylvanians after one term.

Another reason for the failure of the PBC, beyond their sloppy behavior and shoddy scholarship, was the surprisingly good job done by the Bicentennial Commissions of our nation's various states and cities. Among those rating the highest marks were states which played prominent roles in the Revolution. Massachusetts' celebration, especially the thrilling evocation of April 19, 1775, must be rated one of the Bicentennial's highlights. Several of the exhibits prepared for Boston's visitors, particularly *The Revolution*, in which moderns could test themselves to find out if they would have been rebels, Tories, or moderates, were also excellent.

The newsletter *USA 200* named

Virginia "the undisputed front-runner in the low-keyed rivalry among the 13 original states to do the biggest and best job they can for the Bicentennial." Early in 1976, Virginia opened two lavish visitor centers, one at Yorktown which cost \$4.6 million, and the Western Virginia Bicentennial Center in Charlottesville, which cost \$676,000. A third complex, the George Washington Northern Virginia Bicentennial Center in Alexandria, was opened in 1974.

Two states with noteworthy publishing programs were New Jersey and Connecticut. Each published a series of well-written pamphlets examining in depth the Revolutionary history of the state. New York came up with an ingenious idea, ideally adapted to a state whose wealth was built on the Erie Canal and its other numerous waterways. At the cost of over a million dollars, their Bicentennial Commission built a festival barge as long as two football fields, and then turned it into a floating museum. It was crammed with lively exhibits and demonstrations of life in the Revolutionary Era. New Yorkers, particularly upstaters, responded with enthusiasm. Well over a million people visited the barge.

Not all the local Bicentennial commissions have been scrupulous about the history they are commemorating. There has been a reluctance to admit that the Americans ever lost a battle in the Revolution. The co-chairman of the Bicentennial Committee of the City of White Plains, for instance, insisted that this battle ended in an American victory, although the British drove the Americans in headlong retreat from the crucial position on the battlefield, forcing Washington to withdraw. "It's our hope that we'll get the historians to see it our way," said the chairman. "We're looking for a poet who will do what the poets did for Concord and Lexington."

More disturbing was the tendency for a wide variety of Bicentennial groups to celebrate numerous events which did not take place in the year 1776. The citizens of Jersey City, for instance,

reenacted the battle of Paulus Hook which took place in 1779. Vermont reenacted the signing of its constitution which took place in 1777. A climax in this department was the reenactment of the inauguration of George Washington as President in New York Federal Hall, which took place on April 30, 1789. The *New York Times* ran a picture under the caption stating that Washington was inaugurated "200 years yesterday."

Such mistakes have made some people fear that the Bicentennial has left the average American with the impression that the United States was created with a scratch of Thomas Jefferson's pen and a few rounds of gunfire at Lexington and Bunker Hill. Other Americans of the same mind have formed the National Committee for the Bicentennial. Backed by John D. Rockefeller, they are calling on the government and the people, the public and the private sector, to commit themselves to a 13-year effort to create a second American Revolution, "a revolution of violence but of fulfillment, of new purposes and of new directions."

The agonizing 13-year struggle to create the American Republic which began in 1776 is certainly worth remembering. But it is probably unrealistic to expect people to maintain the enthusiasm of July 4, 1976, for such a period. Anyone who wants to continue to study the Revolution in depth easily do so with like-minded friends and neighbors by forming a Round Table. The American Revolution Round Table, which has been operating in New York for almost 20 years, stands ready to give advice and counsel.

For most of us, the Bicentennial remains that single unforgettable July 4, 1976. That was the day when ordinary Americans taught the Bicentennial planners and watchers that their worries had been groundless. The Bicentennial had been alive and well in the minds and hearts of the people all the time.