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## PHILIP FRENEAU, POET OF THE REVOLUTION



Philip Freneau

Philip Freneau was the poetic spirit of a nation's anger, a clear, stimulating cry in the precarious days of America's birth and growth. His timely verses encouraged the battle for liberty and won him the title, "Poet of the Revolution"; his simple treatment of native themes was the beginning of a genuine American poetry. Freneau was conscious of his mission to weld a strong opposition to the English tyranny and to glorify democracy. With characteristic single-mindedness he played on those themes until his death.

Freneau came of a prominent New York French Huguenot family. His father Pierre, a well-to-do merchant, married the beautiful Agnes Watson of Freehold in 1748, and Philip, their eldest child, was born in 1752. That same year Pierre Freneau purchased a thousand acres of ground in Monmouth County a-

bout a mile south of Matawan and built the stately country home which he called Mount Pleasant. Ten years later the family moved here permanently, though Philip remained at a boarding school in New York until 1765, when he began studying with the Reverend William Tennent, pastor of Old Tennent Church. He stayed at the Reverend Mr. Tennent's home just outside Freehold until February 1766 and then was sent to the Latin School at Penolopen, about seven miles west of Freehold, to prepare for college.

Soon after young Freneau entered Princeton as a sophomore in 1768, the Reverend John Witherspoon, president of the college, wrote to Mrs. Freneau congratulating her on her son's ability. The young student began writing verse during his first year at Princeton. *The History of the Prophet Jonah*, a poem about the Bible story of Jonah and the whale, is the earliest known. Several others, written while he was at college, gave promise of the excellent work that was to come.

Freneau and some of his friends at Princeton formed the American Whig Society in opposition to another already established literary group, the Cliosophic Society. The rivalry between the two organizations was expressed in satirical verses, the best of which were written by young Freneau. These poems have been