

STORIES of New Jersey

He contributed many prose pieces to the *Freeman's Journal* during these years, and these show him as an opponent not only of British tyranny but of all oppression. In a day when slavery was accepted as a normal pattern in society, when women were deprived of equality and when the conservation of natural resources was hardly considered, Freneau roared his disapproval of enslaving the Negro, hailed the rights of women and attacked the wanton destruction of trees.

Despite the fire of his attacks, Freneau was the most sensitive of men. In three disputes with editors of rival papers critical attacks not only on his politics but also on his literary efforts stung him deeply and were instrumental, it is thought, in determining his resolution to leave the newspaper field. The same cry that had hailed his taking to the sea nine years before was heard again. The taste for literature in America was too low to encourage the native poet, who must "bear the curse to be forgot."

He sailed as a sea captain once again on June 24, 1784. Jamaica, New York, Charleston and Savannah saw him often; many times he limped into their harbors with a crippled ship that had fought the coastal and West Indian hurricanes. While the poet was engaged as skipper of freight vessels, Bailey, the publisher of the *Freeman's Journal*, brought out the first collection of his poems in 1786. The volume was an immediate success, and five months later Bailey issued an advertisement for another collection. The second book, however, did not appear until 1788.

Most of Freneau's reputation as a poet rests on the lyric verses he composed during this period (1784-90). They are of far wider appeal than his historical or abusive poems and have found a place in every important American anthology. Earlier poets in this country had used the English or classical form and subject matter. Freneau gave Americans what they had never had before--poetry which reflected the sights and sounds of their own countryside.

The Wild Honey Suckle is perhaps his most often quoted nature poem:

From morning suns and evening dews
At first thy little being came:
If nothing once, you nothing lost,
For when you die you are the same;
The space between is but an hour,
The frail duration of a flower.

In the 1788 edition are included *The Indian Student* and *The Indian Burying Ground*, which is generally considered the poet's masterpiece. Both are in the spirit of simplicity that the Indian represented for Freneau and are based on the tradition and attitude of the Indians. *The Indian Student* tells of a young Indian who was sent to Harvard College and who, after studying there awhile, was impelled to return "where nature's ancient forests grow." *The Indian Burying Ground* describes the native practice of burying the dead in a sitting posture with

His bow, for action ready bent,
And arrows, with a head of stone...

During 1789, whenever Freneau's ship touched New York, he contributed to the *New York Daily Advertiser* a batch of poems that had been written during the course of the voyage. These were the outward record of his negotiations with the publishers of the paper to become its editor. In 1790 he quit shipping to assume this post, but it was not weariness of the sea that influenced his decision.