

## Joseph Dennie and the Port Folio

One of the first American magazines launched in the 19th century, and one of the first American magazines to succeed in developing a large national audience was the weekly *Port Folio*, launched in Philadelphia by Asbury Dickins and Joseph Dennie on January 3, 1801. The *Port Folio* has been described as “superior in literary ability to any magazine or periodical ever before attempted in this country,” (in Smyth, 95f) an accomplishment due almost entirely to the efforts, talent, and reputation of Dennie, the founding editor. The magazine’s unique personality was a reflection of his own. (Chielens, 319)

As noted earlier, Dennie had proven to be an erudite and accomplished editor, first on Boston’s *Tablet* and subsequently on the Walpole, NH *New Hampshire Journal and Farmer’s Weekly Museum*, which he joined when the *Tablet* closed in August, 1795 after its unlucky 13th issue.

Dennie came from a Loyalist family and throughout his life his political outlook fell on the right hand side of Federalism. He remained a committed Anglophile, occasionally expressing regret at the separation of the former colonies from Britain. Magazine historian Frank Luther Mott wrote that he “sincerely admired English literature, English politics, and English culture.” (I, 229) This led Dennie to make frequent denunciations of American politics and letters, including this specimen from 1803 which earned him an indictment for inflammatory and seditious libel:

A democracy is scarcely tolerable at any period of national history. Its omens are always sinister, and its powers are unpropitious. With all the lights of experience blazing before our eyes, it is impossible not to discern the futility of this form of government. It was weak and wicked in Athens. It was bad in Sparta and worse in Rome. It has been tried in France, and has terminated in despotism. It was tried in England, and rejected with the utmost loathing and abhorrence. It is on its trial here, and the issue will be civil war, desolation, and anarchy. No wise man but discerns its imperfections, no good man but shudders at its miseries, no honest man but proclaims its fraud, and no brave man but draws his sword against its force. The institution of a scheme of polity, so radically contemptible and vicious, is a memorable example of what the villainy of some men can devise, the folly of others receive, and both establish, in despite of reason, reflection and sensation. (in Ellis, 184)

There are similar examples from Dennie’s political commentaries, such as:

The English character, abstractly considered, is the most honest, the most generous, the most frank and liberal, and foul is that day in our Calendar, and bitterly are those patriotic, selfish and Indian traitors to be cursed who instigated the wretched populace to declare the 4th day of July, 1776, a day of Independence. We are now tasting the bitter fruit of that baleful tree, which our “forefathers at Plymouth” planted, which Sam Adams and Deacon Newell watered, and to which the natural malignity of our rascal populace has given the increase. Our government is so weak that it is powerless to hold out much longer against the assaults of Faction; and another war with Great Britain, and civil commotions are now near at hand. To your deluded True Americans, to your Picarooning pedlers, and to the simpletons, who believe that a republican government can subsist in this extensive region, a political Paul might indeed stretch forth his expostulating hand, and again rear his warning voice, with a “Sirs, ye should have listened to me, and not have loosed from Crete, and gained all this harm and loss.” (in Ellis, 118)

It may be worth noting that Dennie’s indictment was issued on July 4, 1803. He was successfully defended by C. J. Ingersoll and Joseph Hopkinson and found not guilty in November, 1805. (Smyth, 98)

Historian Algernon Tassin (87) said that the *Port Folio* attracted an upper class audience, more intellectually tolerant and more inclined to Dennie’s conservative political viewpoint. It was “an urbane magazine for an urbane and literate audience.” (Wood, 30) Dennie offended middle class sensibilities and the feeling was mutual: writing that pandered to the middle class often offended him. (Ellis, 126f)

But Dennie's Tory politics (like his sartorial flamboyance<sup>1</sup>) are now an insignificant portion of his legacy, while his intelligence, wit, and excellent editing, which made the *Port Folio* the finest publication of its day, are better remembered. The *Port Folio* was certainly the best magazine America had produced up to that point, and by demonstrating that circulation growth was achievable well beyond levels that had been typical in the 18th century, the *Port Folio* acted as a kind of role model for later magazines.

Dennie had always been drawn to letters, but after moving to New Hampshire he gave law practice a half-hearted try. Once a prospective client strayed into his office, "but the interruption he caused to the leisure and favorite occupations of his counsel learned in law was so great that a repetition of the annoyance was carefully guarded against. Mr. Dennie thenceforth kept his office-door locked on the inside." (in Ellis, 87) He must have cut a unique figure among rural jurists. At his first courtroom appearance Dennie requested a continuance, speaking eloquently and at length. When he had finished the judge asked why Dennie couldn't use "a few words, pat to the purpose, without all this Larry cum lurry?" (in Ellis, 61) As his editorial duties at the *Farmer's Museum* expanded, Dennie gave up the law altogether and became full-time editor of the *Farmer's Museum* in 1796. (Smyth, 92)

Dennie left the *Farmer's Museum* when the publisher declared bankruptcy in 1799 (Smyth, 92) and moved to Philadelphia, then the U.S. capital, becoming personal assistant to the Secretary of State, Thomas Pickering, and an editor at the *Gazette of the United States*, the Federalist newspaper. The change of scene had no immediate effect on Dennie's finances: his \$1,000 annual salary at the State Department equaled his salary at Walpole, which had allowed him to be one of the few Americans earning a living exclusively from literature. But Jefferson's victory in 1800 cost him his sinecure and set him temporarily adrift and in need of an income. (Ellis, 107f)

Dennie had considered starting a "Lay Preacher" magazine, built around his popular column from the *Farmer's Museum*. He envisioned the new magazine as "a series of essays, modelled after the designs of Addison and the harmless and playful levity of Oliver Goldsmith." (in Ellis, 217) But when he began working with Dickins, son of the editor of the *Methodist Magazine* (1797), the idea took on a more eclectic character. By the summer of 1800 the two partners developed a prospectus for the *Port Folio*, "submitted to Men of Affluence, Men of Liberality, and Men of Letters." (Mott I, 225f)

Dennie defined a port folio as "a portable repository for fugitive papers." (in Smyth, 94), and with less tongue-in-cheek summed up his editorial goals: "To relieve the dryness of news, and the severity of political argument, with wholesome morals and gay miscellany—to insert interesting articles of biography, criticism, poetry, and merriment, and 'bind the rod of the moralist with the roses of the Muse' ...It is the object of this undertaking, to combine literature with politics, and attempt something of a more honorable destiny, than a meagre journal." (in Ellis, 139)

In an age when 400 or 500 subscribers made a respectable circulation, the *Port Folio* launched with 1,500 readers, and grew to 2,000 within four months, making it one of the largest American magazines up to that time—if not the largest—despite its hefty \$5.00 annual subscription rate, which was later increased to \$6.00. (Mott I, 227)

In form, the *Port Folio* resembled the newspapers of its time: it measured 12 x 14 inches and contained four pages per issue. Dennie solicited and accepted advertisements, but they were run separately from the magazine itself:

No advertisements to be inserted in the body of the work ; but as they principally contribute both to the profit and the circulation of every city paper, the Editor hopes that Merchants and Booksellers will not forget this circumstance. Their advertisements shall be conspicuously printed on a separate sheet, which will serve as a useful envelope to the *Port Folio*. (in Ellis, 140)

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<sup>1</sup> Tassin (87) referred to Dennie as the "brilliant centre" of Philadelphia's coterie of fashion, and Smyth said there was "scarcely a more picturesque figure in Philadelphia." (93) Joseph Buckingham, a former associate, described Dennie's attire: "Pea green coat, white vest, nankin small-clothes, white silk stockings, and shoes, or *pumps*, fastened with silver buckles...ribbons of the same color, in double bows...his natural hair augmented by the addition of a large *queue*... which, enrolled in some yards of black ribbon, reached half-way down his back..." (in Mott I, 224).

In his masthead Dennie adopted the nom de plume of "Oliver Oldschool, Esquire, Editor," reflecting, as Mott said, "his moral, political, and literary creed." (Mott I, 226) Dennie searched for the best writers, and once published an advertisement:

Wanted: A few sensible correspondents who will condescend to clothe their ideas in plain prose.

Although Dennie approved of Noah Webster's Federalist political views, he mocked Webster's advocacy of American English, and retained British spellings—to the extent of making them up. His spelling of *outhour* is one example. He referred to Webster's proposed dictionary as "Noah's Ark, full of foul and unclean things." (in Tassin, 89)

Contents of the *Port Folio* were far-ranging, covering everything from the latest in women's fashions, to travel tales from foreign countries, political commentary (much in the vein that earned him his indictment for seditious libel), literary criticism, poetry, and essays—in other words, the epitome of the original 18th-century concept of a magazine: an assortment of thought-provoking pieces on a wide range of topics. And of course, as Mott observed, Dennie also believed that a "spoonful of invective and a dash of scurrility were the proper seasoning." (I, 227)

Contributors to the *Port Folio* included Dennie's Harvard classmate John Quincy Adams, as well as Charles Brockden Brown, Thomas Fessenden, Royall Tyler, and members of Philadelphia's "Tuesday Club," a loose confederation of young doctors and lawyers who assembled at the home of Joseph Hopkinson (Wood, 32). Among the club's other members were Thomas Cadwallader, Josiah Quincy, Gouverneur Morris, and Alexander Hamilton's son, Philip. (Mott I, 243ff) The Club's members enjoyed intellectual stimulation. Historian Albert Smyth wrote that a favorite amusement was

...the translation of Mother Goose melodies and alliterative nursery rhymes into Latin, and especially into Greek. These curious translations, in which the object was to preserve in the Greek, as far as possible, the verbal eccentricities of "butter blue beans" and other intricate verses of infantile memory, are scattered up and down the pages of the *Port Folio*, together with fresh versions of Horace and dissertations upon classical rhetoric. (21)

Members enjoyed social pleasures, too. Smyth also noted, "Those were the days of hard drinking and of high thinking." (93)

Although he edited and annotated an 1807 edition of Shakespeare, making him Shakespeare's first American editor (Smyth, 107f), Dennie probably never wrote anything else for publication outside periodicals: his only books were collections of his magazine essays.

Dennie described his own writing habits by saying, "I write carelessly that I may write easily and with sprightliness... My talents to you I can freely confess are superficial, but they are showy, and the deficiencies of Judgment in the thought are in vulgar opinion compensated by the boldness and glitter of Fancy in the expression." (in Ellis, 42,47) But he sold himself short. As a writer, he was the equal of any of his contemporaries, including Charles Brockden Brown. Contemporaries called him the American Addison. Smyth said he won the title "by the easy grace and pleasing melody of his style." (90)

Dennie died in 1812 at the age of 44. He was succeeded by Nicholas Biddle, who was paid an annual salary of \$2,500—an enormous sum in those days. (Mott I, 239) Charles Caldwell succeeded Biddle in 1814, when Biddle left to become head of the United States Bank—its last head, as it turned out. John Elihu Hall took Caldwell's place when his brother Harrison Hall bought the magazine in 1816. (Mott I, 240)

Since his college days Dennie had never been entirely healthy for any extended period, and suffered frequent bouts of illness. He apparently contracted tuberculosis as a young man, and as he grew older the periods in which he was unable to work seem to have come more often and lasted longer. An early Colon and Spondee verse foretold his fate:

Spleen whisper'd lowly in my ear,  
"Consumptive Joe, gaunt death is near!" (in Ellis, 67)

The *Port Folio* was a product of Dennie's vision, and when poor health limited his involvement the magazine suffered along with him. In short, he was irreplaceable. Unfortunately, the *Port Folio* had never been as successful in yielding profit as it was in building circulation. It converted to monthly frequency in 1809 and became a quarterly in 1820. Momentum carried the *Port Folio* to 1827, and although it lived longer than any American magazine launched prior, the *Port Folio* couldn't stagger farther. A note in the final issue, dated December, 1827, said:

The last volume contains very few communications from any friend to us and to our cause. In the days of our first predecessors such was the number and zeal of contributors that the editor was obliged to exchange the labour of composition for that of selection. (in Tassin, 89)

Dennie's memorial, erected by his friends, carried an inscription written by John Quincy Adams. It read in part:

He devoted his life to the Literature of his Country...

He contributed to chasten the morals, and to refine the taste of the nation.  
To an imagination, lively, not licentious,  
A wit sportive, not wanton,  
And a heart without guile,  
He united a deep sensibility, which  
Endeared him to his  
Friends, and an ardent piety, which we humbly trust  
Recommended him to his God;

His friends remembered him more fondly than most modern critics do. Spiller, for example, wrote,

A critic rather than a creator, Dennie himself produced little that recommends him to our day. His essays seem prim, crotchety, sometimes sophomoric. His occasional easy familiarity is that of a well-informed superior who stoops self-righteously to instruct. (176)

But Dennie's passion for good literature and his drive to publish it made the *Port Folio* an archetype for many later American magazines, and provided proof that a popular magazine could be built on a foundation of varied content, edited to a high standard, and aimed at an audience that was educated, affluent, and conservative in manners. So if Buckingham's description of Dennie is vaguely reminiscent of the *New Yorker's* Eustace Tilley, it may be worth noting that the concept of a weekly magazine dedicated to a tasteful and educated audience and delivering a wide variety of good writing has proven to be timeless.

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