

Introduction to William Barton's Essay on Heraldry in America

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Anyone interested in American heraldry will sooner or later come upon the oft quoted statement from George Washington regarding heraldry in America, namely:

Imperfectly, acquainted with the subject, as I profess myself to be; and persuaded of your skill, as I am; it is far from my design to intimate an opinion, that Heraldry, Coat-Armour, etc., might not be rendered conducive to public and private uses, with us,—or, that they can have any tendency unfriendly to the purest spirit of Republicanism: the States; all of which have established some kind of *Armorial Devices*, to authenticate their official instruments.¹

This quote comes from a kind and gently worded rejection letter of 1788 to William Barton who had asked Washington to accept his dedication to an essay on heraldry in America. Washington declined to endorse the essay because he was concerned over the reception the Society of the Cincinnati had received from the public. Many in the early days of the republic feared that this hereditary society would become a mark of nobility. Washington was concerned that the public would be suspicious of any effort to recognize an official role for heraldry. Barton accepted the politics of the situation and put the essay away. It eventually ended up at the Boston Athenæum, which has kindly shared a photocopy of the essay and granted permission for its publication.² The essay presented here does not include the Appendix, which apparently lists the contents of the notes referenced by the bold capital letters in parentheses in the text.³

In 1778, Sir Isaac Heard, an officer in the College of Arms and subsequently the Garter King of Arms, befriended Barton when he was on a visit to England.⁴ Heard was interested in collecting colonial pedigrees as his wife was an American.⁵ On this visit Barton recorded his paternal pedigree with the College of Arms. It was perhaps during this trip that Barton acquired his interest in coats-of-arms and learned the essentials of heraldry. When the seal of the newly created United States of America was being designed, the responsible committee called on Barton in 1782 for his expertise in heraldic matters. He had a major influence on the final design of the seal.⁶

The essay presented here is not Barton's sole paper on the subject of heraldry. He wrote a manuscript entitled "Observations on the Advantages to be derived from a proper use of Coats of Arms, in the United States"⁷ In this second essay, Barton proposed the establishment of the American Heraldic Institution or the Office for Recording Historical and Genealogical Accounts of American Families. This office would offer a service "for examining, adjusting, registering, and also for duly certifying, the Armorial Ensigns to which such Families may be severally entitled."⁸ Barton envisioned being in charge of this office for at least fourteen years, after which he would turn over the collected materials to the Library Company of Philadelphia so they would be available to the public. It was his intention to make a living from the fees that would be charged. This

project was still born. Barton would never make a successful living based on his heraldry expertise.

In the essay presented here Barton lays out a justification for using coats-of-arms in America based on rewarding merit. He finds that coats-of-arms are consistent with Republican principles. And lastly, he proposes an official position, the Herald-Marshall, to regulate heraldry. As one of the first scholarly works on the role of heraldry in America, written soon after we achieved our independence, this work is of interest to any heraldist concerned with heraldry in republics.

In this transcription some punctuation, capitalization, and grammar improvements have been made, but original spellings and style have been retained in order to preserve the eighteenth century flavor of the manuscript.

**A
Concise Account
of the Origin and Use of
Coat Armour;
with Some Observations
on the Beneficial Purposes by which
Heraldry
May be Applied,
in the United States of America.**

1788

By William Barton, Esq. A. M.
Member of the American Philos. Society, Philadelphia.

Virtus Sola Nobilitas.
[Virtue is the only nobility.]

To
His Excellency
George Washington, Esquire, L.L.D.
Member of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia,
and of the Am: Academy of Arts & Sciences, Boston;
President General of the Cincinnati;
Late
General & Commander in Chief of the Armies
of the United States of America, etc.

Delegate in Congress for the Commonwealth of Virginia 1774,
and President of the Federal Convention, in 1787
Etc. Etc. Etc.

A man, whose eminent services to his Country would reflect a luster on the most splendid Titles; but whom Fame has rendered Illustrious for those exalted virtues, which, only, can bestow true Dignity of Character, and constitute that real greatness, which mere titular Patrician rank can never confer;

The following little Tract is, with the highest Sentiments of Respect,
Inscribed
By his most Obedient & Most humble Servant,

Philadelphia,
Sept^r 1st 1788

The Author.

The honor almost universally acquired by Merit, has ever been considered, among civilized Nations, as one of the greatest incentives to Public virtue. It is the source of fame; that darling object of the human mind, whose firmest basis is patriotism; and, the pursuit of which, has produced an illustrious series of Statesmen, Heroes, Sages & Philosophers, through all ages of the world.

The natural propensity of man to obtain glory and renown, has a powerful operation in producing such noble and beneficial actions, as are recorded in the annals of Nations; reflecting a luster on them, and transmitting [scratched out word] to posterity an honored remembrance of the worthies, by whom they were performed. Those virtues and talents which have rendered them the ornaments of their age or Country, exhibit them to the whole human race, as examples worthy of imitation.

The meritorious deeds and great achievements of others, naturally excite in us a laudable spirit of emulation, and kindle in our souls a generous love of virtue. Such actions and attainments, when dictated by a desire to promote the General good, besides [insert word] obtaining [end insert] the applause of others, ensures us the Approbation of our own Minds: for, without this, the Mens sibi conscia recti [a mind conscious of its rectitude]; hard would be the fate of such, as, having deserved well of their country, might not be rewarded according to their merit, by reason of the envy, prejudice, or Ingratitude of their contemporaries! It is, however, a pleasing reflection, that the clouds, which these gloomy passions sometimes cast over the virtuous characters of others, are, almost always, eventually dispelled; and real worth then appears, like the sun after an eclipse, with redoubled splendour.

Some of the noblest qualities of our nature, as wisdom, fortitude, and the like, unless employed for the benefit of Society, yield no honor to the possessor; and, when perverted to evil purposes, they serve only to disgrace him.

The love of glory and the dread of shame not only influence our conduct, as they regard ourselves, but as they may affect our **(A)** relatives and descendants for, how far soever a sense of our duty in a public station, or a desire of acquiring personal honor in the services of the commonwealth, might induce us to exert our talents and abilities; yet, neither the consciousness of having discharged the one, or the actual attainment of the other, would be esteemed by us as a recompense fully adequate to our deserts, did we not consider our kindred and descendants as entitled to some participation of our own honor & fame. Though the virtues of a father do not necessarily descend to his children; yet, mankind, by common consent, are disposed to transfer the respect they entertain for a virtuous character, to his posterity; provided they should not render themselves unworthy of it. This kind of prejudice, (for such, in strictness, it is) has a beneficial tendency: influenced by it, the **(B)** reputation obtained by a man, for his public services, will operate on his descendants as a powerful restraint from the commission of any act, that might sully that reputation, which they are supposed in some sort to inherit; It likewise serves to promote in them a commendable ambition, to increase the honor of their Name and Kindred.

It has been the uniform policy of all nations to bestow rewards on such of their citizens, whose services had administered to the public weal. And such remunerations, as appeared best adapted to (C) perpetuate the remembrance of services, were generally preferred to (D) pecuniary compensations: because these last could be considered only as personal recompenses, which a Man's descendants might never enjoy; and which carried with them no inherent evidence of the circumstances that occasioned the grant of them. Hence it is, that Paintings, Statues, Busts & Medals, have been decreed to commemorate great events and eminent worth; together with Academic degrees, public thanks, funeral trophies, triumphal edifices, and advancement to posts of honor & trust in the state. Titles and dignities have been conferred on similar occasions; some of them hereditary and others personal. Hereditary titles do not, as such, indicate Merit in those to whom they are derived from their ancestors for the title of Right Honorable may descend, to a Man that does not possess a spark of honor; and that of Most Noble fall to one, destitute of every great and manly sentiment. Personal titles, though not liable to this objection, and, notwithstanding, unless derived from a Man's (E) office or employment, inconsistent with the genius of a republic. The only title (strictly speaking) used in this country, is that of Esquire, which is an appendage of Office: but the epithetical titles, or rather address of dignity to official characters, of His Excellency, The Honorable, the Reverend, etc. are well known in the United States. The terms used to denote the different grades of Military rank may be considered as a species of official titles. In the Republic of letters, indeed, Academic Honors, and those conferred by societies instituted for the advancement of Science & Learning, may be denominated literary titles. But none of all these constitute any Order of Nobility.

Marks as Badges of distinction, for those of different Professions, are [insert words] by no means [end insert] incompatible with the spirit of a Commonwealth. The soldier, the Lawyer and the Divine have each their peculiar Habit or Garb in the nature of professional Badges. (F) Almost all nations sensible of the attachment of mankind to signs and external Marks of Honor, have made use of them for the purpose of distinguishing men [insert word] of [end insert] merit. They have generally, in modern times, been annexed to Titles; and, when joined to personal ones, which are always supposed to be conferred on men of superior worth and distinguished service, and usually worn about the person. Such are the Badges of the several Orders of Knighthood in Europe; very few of which if any, are hereditary. In England, there are no hereditary order of Knighthood, and all knights wear some appendage to their dress designating their respective orders, except Knights Bachelors; though these had formerly a Belt, Target, Sword, or some such Martial token given to them at the time of their creation: at present, they have no other Mark or Badge of their title than the manner in which the Helmet is placed over their Arms; which belongs to them, in common with other Knights. Baronets are not properly Knights; but rather a distinct, hereditary degree of Honor, between the peerage & knighthood, created by patent, and having the precedence of all knights, except those of the Garter and Knights [word scratched out, word inserted] Banneret [insert ends]. Baronets of Great Britain or Ireland bear no Badge of their Order, about their person; but have the peculiar privilege of bearing, either in an Inescutcheon of Canton, the arms of Ulster, viz^t Argent, a sinister hand couped at the wrist Gules; alluding to the occasion which gave rise to the Order. The Baronets (or Knights, as they

are sometimes called) of Nova Scotia, wear an Orange tawney Ribbon, as the distinguishing mark of their order. The Roman Equites, or knights, were distinguished by gold rings on [word scratched out, word inserted] their [end insert] fingers. Hannibal observing, after the battle of Cannae, where great numbers of those Knights were slain, that their Rings were worn as tokens of military Honor, conferred the same mark of distinction on all his Captains. Mr. Webb, in his [sic] Treatise on Military Honors,⁹ proposed "to distinguish all those officers, who were present at the siege of Louisbourg, with a Cross half red & half blue, Representing the Union of the Fleet and Army; to be neatly embroidered & worn on the left side of the Coat, near the breast." The officers in the Dutch Navy, who highly distinguished themselves in the engagement with the English off the Dogger Bank, during the late war, were honored with white plumes in their hats, and other indications of Merit.

In every country of Europe, each family of any note is distinguished from every other, by various Symbolical Insignia, peculiarly appropriated thereto: and the several families of the same house, as well as the different branches or descendants of the same family, are all designated by their respective differences, or marks of Cadency, as they are termed by Heralds.

The Science which treats of these marks of distinction is termed Blazonry or Heraldry; and the objects are denominated Armoury, Armorial Achievements, or Coats of Arms.

The Origin of these honorary Insignia is very (**G**) antient: they were assumed at divers periods, under different modifications, and upon various occasions. It is, however, generally agreed, that they were of military original, and, in their present state, a feudal Institution; designed to discriminate the leaders & principal officers in Martial enterprises. They were borne either on their Shields and Banners; or embroidered on their Coats usually called Surcoats, which were worn over their Armour whence they were termed Coats of Arms. The Military Habiliments being properly stiled Arms or Armour.

It is most [insert next word] probable [end insert] that Lions, Leopards, Beavers, Horses, Eagles etc. were represented on Shields, Banners and other war like Apparatus, as emblematical of the Martial virtues of Valour, Intrepidity, Perseverance etc. Those who engaged in the Croisades, which were under taken with with [sic] a blind & frantick Zeal to extirpate the Infidels from the Holy Land, and to propagate the Christian Faith, frequently carried the sign of the Cross on on [sic] their armour and Ensigns; to indicate that they fought under the Banners of Christ. The use of other emblematical figures, and hieroglyphic Signs or Symbols, was also introduced into Coats of Arms, accordingly as there were supposed to represent certain qualities of Excellence possessed by the Bearer; or as they alluded to praiseworthy exploits or services performed by him.

Coat-Armour, therefore, was originally a mere personal mark or indication of honor and marital prowess; and was not designed to distinguish different families, 'til long after the use of it was first adopted.

It did not become hereditary in private families, as a regular Custom, 'till a considerable time after it was [insert word] an [end insert] established and uniform practice to continue the same Arms, unvaried, in the ensigns or banners of Nations, Cities, and tribes, and the families of Illustrious chiefs and princes. "At present" (says Mr. Coats, an Heraldic writer) "Arms follow the Nature of Titles, which being made hereditary, they are also become so; being the several marks to distinguish Families, as Names serve to know Man by."¹⁰

Coat-Armour, while it was considered only as a Military badge of Honor was (**H**) entirely personal; and different arms were assumed by persons of the same family, just as their fancy directed. But when Arms became marks of Honor, conferred on persons of distinguished Talents or Services, in the civil as well as the military departments of Government, by the command and direction of the Sovereign power; they then became hereditary: And the (**J**) assumption of Arms, without that Sanction was disused. From this time, assumed Arms were deemed contemptible; the persons by whom such were taken having no right to them.

Until that period, arms could not have been of any use to ascertain alliances and descents, or to discriminate families of the Same Name. Officers were then appointed to record the Genealogies of families; to register their Arms, and to appropriate Suitable Coat-Armour to such persons, as, having none, were deemed (**K**) worthy of it. A man entitled to a Coat of Arms by descent, was, for any extraordinary Services or merit of his own, usually rewarded with some additional charge, or (**L**) honorable augmentation, to his parental Coat.

These Insignia of honor, or Tesseræ gentilitiæ,¹¹ finally ceased to be the peculiar tokens of the Martial character; and, like knighthood, which was at it's commencement a Military Institution, were bestowed indiscriminately on Soldiers, (**M**) Statesmen, Philosophers, Lawyers, Physicians, Merchants, Artists and eminent Mechanics. Although these Insignia were designed to be honorable indicates of Merit, they conferred no title or privileges of Nobility, on the possessor: And a dignified Order of Men, in the State, is no [word crossed out and word inserted] further [end insert] created thereby, than is done by complimenting a Man with a Diploma, a Medal, a Gold box or a Sword; all of which may be transmitted, in the same manner, to his posterity, and are equally their right.

Hence it is evident, that a Republican Government may decree, to men of merit, honors of the Heraldic description, with the same propriety that it bestows those of the kind just mentioned; none of which are, in the least degree, inconsistent with the spirit of a free country.

The (**N**) Gentry of Republics value themselves as much on the reputation of their families, as the Nobility of Monarchies; and there is no reason why they should not be equally carefull in preserving their family Coat-Armour. It has been already observed that Mankind are Naturally ambitious of honor: And it is equally true, that, in a well-tempered Republic, neither inclining too much to Aristocratic or Democratic principles,

public Honors will Seldom be bestowed on improper objects (**O**) Merit of some kind is more necessary in a popular Government, than in any other, to enable a citizen to obtain Public testimoniaes of his worth: Consequently in a Government of this kind, those things which may serve as Evidence of Public honor, are deserving of the highest estimation.

From what has been premised, we may infer the policy of a Commonwealth bestowing on it's meritorious citizens such honors as are not derogatory from the genius of it's constitution. A species of honor that comes within this description is the Grant of Coats of Arms by direction of the Sovereign power. These marks of honor, which likewise serve the useful purpose of identifying and distinguishing families [insert starts] even of the same name [insert ends] and as (**P**) Clues to trace family alliances, are borne, as has been noticed, by the Nobility and Gentry of various Nations; in Republics as well as Monarchies.

An Institution for conferring honorary rewards of this Nature, upon Men of Superior Merit, might be formed by, and under the Sovereign Authority of the Country, with singular advantage and propriety. The United States of America forms a New and great Empire, holding a conspicuous rank among the nations of the Earth; it's citizens, an enlightened and free people. The inhabitants of this extensive Republic consists of Natives and descendants of divers countries; Now united in a Distinct nation, under the glorious Name of Americans, entirely independent of every other Country. The Native Europeans settled in America and the present representatives of original Colonists, presiding in each family of the United States, should now consider themselves as heads or chiefs of their respective families, in a genealogical sense; but such as have paternal arms belonging to them ought no more to abandon them, then to relinquish their family names; or, than we should disuse the English language, because we are not Englishmen.

Thus much has been advanced, with a view of briefly stating the publick utility and private advantages that, it is conceived, would result from an institution in the United States, upon the following plan—conformable to the principles already laid down—viz^t

I. That an officer be appointed whose duty it shall be, to proclaim war & peace, to conduct the Etiquette of certain State solemnities; to assign suitable Coat-Armour, and armorial augmentations of honor to [insert word] such [end insert] civil and military officers, and even private citizens of the American Republic, as they should be decreed to by Congress; and to devise proper Armorial ensigns, flags, seals etc. for Congress, and the various offices and departments of Government.

II. That this officer, who might be stiled Herald-Marshall, be invested with the sole & exclusive right of registering, Marshalling and Confirming family Coats-of-Arms, etc. of granting them to those individuals to whom they might be decreed by Authority; and of recording Genealogies. A Seal of Office would be requisite, in order to certify and authenticate Grants and confirmations of Arms, and other other [sic] official Documents.

By means of such an institution, the Science of Blazon might not only be restored to it's former use and importance, but would be rendered singularly advantageous in this

Country. And unless some such regulation as that proposed, be adopted by the Government of the United States, with respect to Coat-Armour it must sink into insignificance; Notwithstanding its aptitude to serve very valuable purposes. Those who are possessed of it by inheritance, cannot, without great difficulty if at all, have access to the records of far-distant Countries, for the Official testimonies of their family-Arms and descent: while the less certain, and the traditional, evidences of them are becoming, daily, more vague and more imperfect Authorities. Persons, also, not entitled to Coat-Armour by descent, will continue to usurp those Arms, which they may find in books, belonging to any of their name: while others, really entitled to family-arms, will probably assume any Coat they may meet with, borne by the Name of their family; —ignorant perhaps of the Subject,—and not knowing that Arms, which bear not the least resemblance to each other, appertain to different families of the same name. Mistakes and abuses of this kind are continually committed; owing, in some instance, to want of information, but often to ostentation and vanity. And this abuse of Coat-Armour has a direct tendency to defeat, totally, every useful purpose to which it might be applied.

It is presumed, that if this subject be candidly and attentively considered, it will be deemed by no means unimportant. If it should appear that real advantages might be derived from such an Institution as is here proposed; any objection that may be made to it, as an innovation, can have no weight in a new Empire whose recent establishment forms a glorious and unexampled Æra in the history of Mankind.

W. Barton

Appendix

[Pages 22-35, the Appendix, missing, probably containing the notes indicated in the text by the bold capital letters between parentheses.]

Notes

¹ Letter from George Washington, Mount Vernon, to William Barton, Philadelphia, 7 Sept. 1788, transcribed in Lundie W. Barlow, "Some Reasons Why There is No Governmental Granting Authority or Registry of Armorial Achievements in the United States" 49 (Sept. 1961):125-128. This article also contains the transcription of Barton's letter of 28 Aug. 1788 requesting Washington to accept the dedication of his heraldry in America essay.

² The full citation for this manuscript is William Barton, *A Concise Account of the Origin and Use of Coat Armour: With some Observations on the Beneficial Purposes to which Heraldry may be Applied in the United States of America*, 1788, ms., 35 p., in the George Washington Library of the Boston Athenæum, 10½ Beacon St., Boston, Massachusetts 02108-3777. The assistance of Stephen Z. Nonack, Curator of Manuscripts, in acquiring a photocopy of this document is much appreciated.

³ According to Nonack, this essay is now bound in a collection with other eighteenth century pamphlets and can not be photocopied. The photocopies he shared are from a set of photographs made in the 1970s. However, the pages from the appendix were not included with this set of photographs. Letter from Stephen Z. Nonack, Boston Athenæum, to John P. DuLong, Berkley, MI, Jan. 2006.

⁴ Richard S. Patterson and Richardson Dougall, *The Eagle and the Shield: A History of the Great Seal of the United States* (Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 50.

⁵ Had the American Revolution never occurred it is possible that Heard would have established a heraldic system for regulating practices in the American colony. Thomas Woodcock and John Martin Robinson, *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 161.

⁶ Patterson and Douball, *The Eagle and the Shield*, passim.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 52, n. 23, indicate that this undated manuscript can be found in the Misc. Ms. Collection of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia. It was written after 1788 as it refers to Washington's letter of that year. The publication of this manuscript would undoubtedly further contribute to the understanding of heraldry in America.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁹ Probably a reference to Thomas Webb, *A Military Treatise on the Appointments of the Army: Containing Many Useful Hints, Not Touched upon Before by Any Author; and Proposing Some New Regulations in the Army, which Will be Particularly Useful in Carrying on the War in North-America: Together with A Short Treatise on Military Honors* (Philadelphia: Printed by W. Dunlap, at the Newest-Printing-Office, 1759).

¹⁰ Probably a reference to James Coats, *A New Dictionary of Heraldry: Explaining All the Terms Us'd in That Science, with Their Etymology, and How Express'd in Latin: And Containing all the Rules of Blazoning Coat-Armour, with the Reasons for the Same; The Original Signification of all Bearings; An Account of the Most Noted Orders of Knighthood That are, or Have Been; and of Honours and Dignities Ecclesiastical, Civil, or Military: Adorn'd with Several Copper Plates: The Whole Design'd to Make that Science Familiar to Every Capacity* (London: Printed for Jer. Batley, 1725).

¹¹ *Tesseræ gentilitiæ* can be translated as coat-of-arms, but in this context it would be perhaps better translated as a token of recognition. This phrase is used in Catholic heraldry and is in the title of Silvester Petra-Sancta, S. J., *Tesseræ gentilitiæ ex legibus Fecialium descriptæ* (Rome, 1638). This is a work that Barton was perhaps familiar with in his heraldic studies. Several posters on rec.heraldry in Jan. 2006 helped clarify the meaning of this Latin phrase.