

WRITINGS IN MAINE HISTORY
Books

Alberts, Robert C. *The Golden Voyage, the Life and Times of William Bingham (1752-1804)*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969.

Among the many biographies which appeared last year, two emerged that stand out as worthy examples. The best by far is Samuel Eliot Morison's life of *Harrison Gray Otis*, but Mr. Alberts' biography of William Bingham, Philadelphia merchant, banker, congressman and philanthropist provides us with an account of a man, who heretofore has been neglected by biographers, perhaps with a conviction that bankers lives are unadventurous, passionless, and unglorious mortals. Mr. Alberts' book reveals that Bingham, although a conservative, aristocratic, and pompous man, led a life filled with drama. Thus it is borne out with Bingham, who at his elegant house in Philadelphia entertained the greatest figures of his time, including Washington, Franklin, Gallatin, Adams, Hamilton, and a host of foreign personages. Here policies and affairs of government were discussed, and Bingham, an ardent Federalist helped in advising and directing the affairs of the nation.

William Bingham completed his formal education at the age of nineteen with a master of arts degree from the College of Philadelphia; then briefly he entered Mr. Wharton's counting house but was soon sent abroad on a Grand Tour, returning a sophisticated young man. As soon as the American Revolution broke out, Bingham indicated that his sympathies lay with the colonists, and Robert Morris singled him out as a promising and trustworthy to handle American business in the West Indies, to negotiate with the French in Martinique, to obtain aid, and to look over American shipping interests. Bingham remained in Martinique until 1779 handling matters there with tact, patience, and discretion. Part of his job was to seek out arms and supplies for Washington's army. Bingham, largely left on his own, investing his own money in joint ownership of privateers, and engaging in trade with the French, and making a substantial profit; however his risks were great. Such transactions today might have brought censure by a less sympathetic Congress.

In 1780 Bingham made an alliance with one of Philadelphia's prominent families, by marrying Anne Willing, a beautiful bride, sixteen years his junior. She became a charming hostess and one of the ornaments of the Republican Court.

From 1781, when Bingham helped form the Bank of North America, until his death in 1804, Bingham plunged into the maelstrom of international banking and speculation in land. With two partners he formed a mercantile house with ties in Europe. Because he had an unusual astuteness in economics, financial matters, and had wide sources of information, Bingham's ventures brought him great wealth. "He had an intuitive sense where money was to be made, cool self-assurance required to gamble and win." His bank aided in providing stability to American finance. In fact, a good case may be made that Bingham's ideas on fiscal policy were incorporated into Hamilton's plans for federal banking.

In May, 1783, the Binghams went abroad where they lived ostentatiously, meeting or entertaining the right people. He wrote a pamphlet showing that it was to Great Britain's interest to relax trade restrictions with American commerce. He made friends with Lord Shelburne, who was in sympathy with the American cause. From England the Binghams traveled to the Hague, then on to Paris, where they hobnobbed with royalty, enjoying the pleasures of the theater and the Parisian salons.

While in Europe the Binghams made heavy purchases of furniture, art works, and household goods for decorating and furnishing their great home which Mr. Bingham had ordered built upon his return to Philadelphia. Mansion House was completed in 1786, and here Anne Bingham reigned as the Queen of American Society.

Bingham served in the Continental Congress between 1786 to its demise, and entered state politics, serving in the Pennsylvania Assembly from 1790 to 1795, when he was elected to the United States Senate, on the Federalist ticket. As a Senator, Bingham pushed through a bill to construct a turnpike from Philadelphia to Lancaster, which became a model of its kind in modern construction being one of the first built in the United States on the plan of MacAdam.

At the apex of his career Bingham became one of the largest land owners in the United States. He bought vast tracts of land in western Pennsylvania, with the realization that values would rise in the expanding new republic.

When Col. William Duer's plans for Maine land speculation collapsed, Henry Knox, who had grandiose schemes, but less capital, turned to Bingham to invest in these wild tracts which belonged to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In early 1793 Bingham secured title to 2,000,000 acres with a down payment of \$25,983 and was obliged to pay another \$311,000 with the understanding that had to interest 2500 persons to settle in the District of Maine by 1803. In order to induce buyers,

Bingham furnished a pamphlet, "A Description of the Situation, Climate, Soil and Production of Certain Tracts of Land in the District of Maine." Bingham dispatched an agent laden with maps and descriptions to England to attract buyers for at least half of this immense tract, but his attempts proved futile, even after offering a reduction in price, to the House of Baring.

Incidentally, the map on p. 233 showing the Bingham Maine lands leaves much to be desired, it is lacking preciseness, and it seems rather crude in delineating its boundaries except in a general way.

In 1795 the Barings sent, a junior son, Alexander, on a mission to the United States to inquire discreetly about these Maine lands. At this time Bingham was hard pressed for ready money, but he had no intention of allowing Baring to outmaneuver him. Weeks of bargaining, ensued with the wily Baring unhurried and assured. Finally they reached an agreement, whereby the London bankers got paid some two shillings an acre for half of each of the Penobscot tracts. In the following summer, Bingham and Baring and his party made a happy excursion to survey the remote Maine lands, which they had never seen.

The final years of Bingham's life were spent in politics and banking and travel. His lovely wife died in 1801 after receiving a chill during a sleighing party.

Bingham never recovered from the shock of her death, and he died in London in 1804.

Mr. Alberts' biography makes a fascinating study, particularly those chapters dealing with Bingham's connections with Alexander Baring, who later incidentally became his son-in-law and the diplomat who negotiated with Daniel Webster the treaty which settled the Maine boundary dispute. The author treats his subject with objectivity, depicting a balance of flaws and virtues. We find Bingham vain and somewhat arrogant, but a man thoroughly honest and forthright in his management of business affairs. He was a loving husband and indulgent father, yet scandal touched his family when one of his daughters eloped with a French nobleman. Bingham lived in a princely manner, unconcerned with lesser persons, yet he was a benefactor of two colleges and took a deep interest in the internal improvements of his state.

Mr. Alberts has written a scholarly biography with an excellent choice of detail and anecdote which lend color to it. Perhaps he has made minor slips now and then, as on page 424 he writes that Britain during the War of 1812 had *re-annexed* eastern Maine, and on the following page he writes

that the Webster-Ashburton Treaty "fixed the Maine's boundary on the St. Croix (Schoodic) River." This is a book published in an attractive format with a color photograph of William Bingham as a frontispiece and includes several pages of excellent photographs which enhance this engrossing study of William Bingham.

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Ashby, Thompson Eldridge. *The History of the First Parish Church in Brunswick, Maine*. Brunswick, Maine, J. H. French and Son, 1969.

The author explains that "the principal sources of this history are the ancient records of the Pejepscot Proprietors, the minutes of the General Court of Massachusetts, the records of the Town of Brunswick, the Church and Parish Records, Wheeler's *History of Brunswick, Topsham, and Harpswell*, the accounts of Winthrop Bailey, Augustus C. Robbins, and Alpheus S. Packard, family records, diaries, letters, newspapers, etc....The preparation of these records, to use what may have become a trite phrase, has nevertheless, been 'a labor of love' and in that spirit is hereby dedicated to the memory of all those faithful men and women who through the two centuries loved this Church, bore its burdens, sought its welfare, and served its purpose. 'They rest from their labors, and their works do follow them.'"

This history reflects the devotion of the author to his subject and his strong sense of the continuity of the Church and Parish for two hundred years. In his sermons over the years he reminded his congregation of the fact that they were a part of a great tradition. The history was originally published in a weekly church calendar over a period of about ten years from 1935 to 1945. This has necessitated some editing to eliminate duplication and some genealogical and biographical material. Other editorial changes have been kept to a minimum. Since costs of publication were a gift to the church, the entire receipts from the sale of the book will go toward the recent renovations of the church building.

The book is divided into five parts. Part I (1715-1803) deals with the beginning and settlement of Brunswick, the first three ministers, who were not "settled" but served only for brief terms, their three successors, the first meeting house, division in the church, and early religious customs.

Part II (1804-1829) includes an account of the influence of the establishment of Bowdoin College upon the First Parish,

necessitating the building of a new meeting house close to the campus. The influence of the faculty who joined the Church cannot be overestimated, and ever since has been an important factor in the life of the Church. This part also deals with the separation of Maine from Massachusetts in 1820.

Part III, Dr. Adams' Pastorate (1829-1870), is necessarily the longest section of the book, covering as it does a period of revival, the building of the present meeting house in 1846, the events of the pre-Civil War era (including the writing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe while a member of the church in Brunswick), and the critical Civil War years. It was a period of great development in the First Parish.

Part IV gives some brief biographical material about three college teachers and two townspeople who were significant figures in the development of the church during the nineteenth century.

Part V (1871-1917) brings the history of transitions and developments down to the pastorate of the author, Thompson E. Ashby, which began on May 1, 1917, and extended until September 30, 1951, a period not covered by the book.

To the historian who can evaluate the trials and tribulations, the poverty and hardship, the petty controversies, the problems of dissenting doctrines, jurisdictional and ecclesiastical disputes, with the background of the times it is all quite logical and inevitable. To the average reader living in the twentieth century some of the events described will seem mystifying and, perhaps, insignificant. But one can respect the high principles, the austerity, the devotion and selflessness with which members of the church established and maintained its heritage for the present generation.

Ten excellent illustrations add interest to the book, as do the six pages of appendices, two poems by Robert P. Tristram Coffin, and an index.

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