

An Historic Mansion

BEING AN ACCOUNT OF

The Thaddeus Burr Homestead

FAIRFIELD
CONNECTICUT

1654

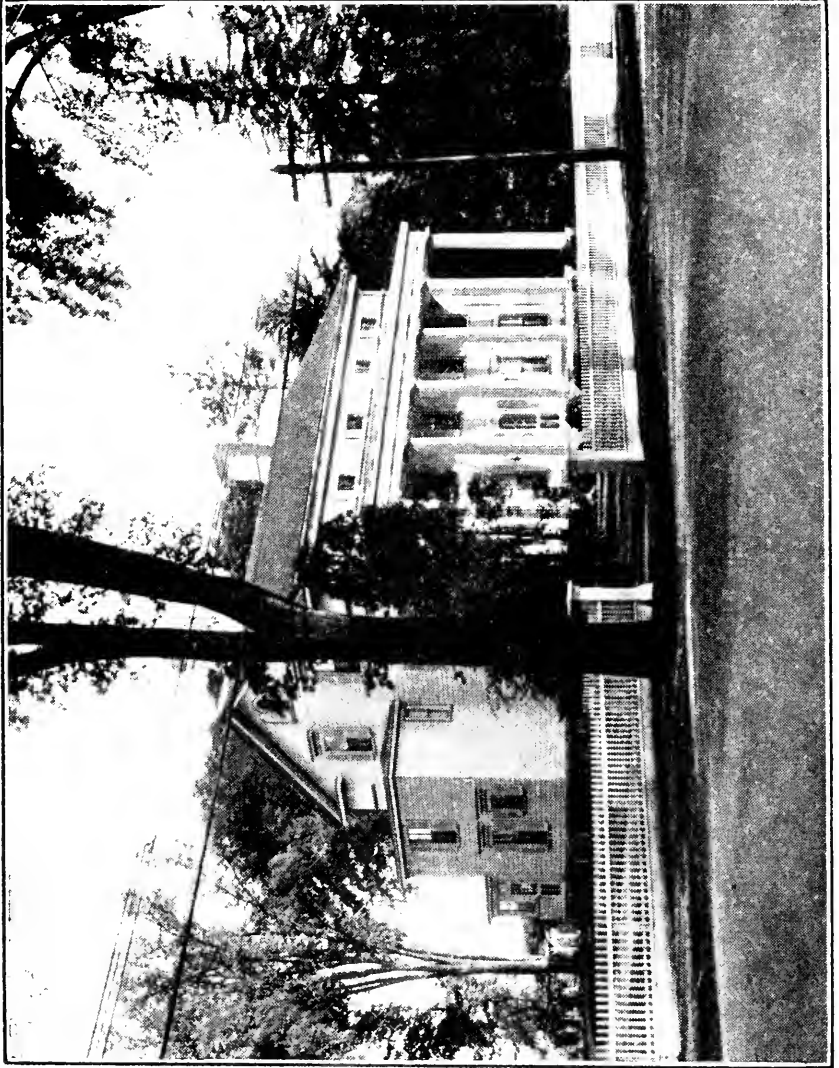
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The Burr Homestead

AN HISTORIC MANSION

It was about eight o'clock on the morning of April 22nd 1775 that a messenger brought the news of Lexington to Fairfield. The Honorable Thaddeus Burr, High Sheriff of the County, was standing on the porch of his mansion, discussing with Colonel Silliman and Mr. Jonathan Sturges the prospects of war. A horseman galloping down the street, came to a sudden halt in front of the three members of the Town Committee of Correspondence. A packet was thrust into the hands of Colonel Silliman. Breaking the seal he read as follows:

“To All Friends of American Liberty: Be it known that this morning (April 19th) before break of day a brigade consisting of about one thousand or

two thousand men landed at Phipp's farm Cambridge, & marched to Lexington, where they found a company of our Colonial Militia in arms, upon whom they fired without provocation, & killed six men & wounded four others. By an express from Boston we find another brigade are on the march from Boston, supposed to be about one thousand. The bearer Trail Bissell is charged to alarm the country quite to Connecticut & all persons are desired to furnish him with fresh horses as they may be needed. I have spoken with several who have seen the dead & the wounded.

J. PALMER,

One of the Committee of S'y."

This document—a postscript signed by the Fairfield Committee being added—was forwarded immediately to New York and Philadelphia. The session of the Town Committee of War ended by sending out a call to arms. From this time forth the Burr mansion was a center of vigorous, patriotic propaganda for the Independence of the Colonies.

Meanwhile certain Boston friends were hurriedly planning to visit Mr. and Mrs. Burr. For the night

that Paul Revere brought the news of General Gage's march Concordward,—

“It was one by the village clock”

“When he galloped into Lexington—”

John Hancock and Samuel Adams, tarrying in the parsonage, were routed from their sleep and told to escape, since they were special objects of enmity. They hastened on to Concord. Aunt Lydia Hancock and Dorothy Quincy watched the fray on Lexington Green, then fled to the adjoining town when the “embattled farmer” had discharged his duty—and later in the company of Hancock and Adams pursued their way to Fairfield.

The master and mistress of Burr homestead gave a cordial welcome to the refugees. Mr. Hancock and Mr. Adams pushed forward speedily to Philadelphia. The ladies remained in the grateful security of their friends' home. We can easily fancy the reluctance with which the lover of the fascinating Dorothy Q. parted from his lady love. For it must be frankly confessed that her devoted John spent many disquieting hours in thought of his fiancée and occasionally gave way to mournful plaints.

Young Aaron Burr, law student in the School of Judge Gould at Litchfield, passed this way during the season. Fairfield native town of his father Dr. Burr had delightful associations for the family. What more natural than that this famous gallant visit his cousin Thaddeus and pay homage to the gay charmer tarrying in the old homestead? So we are told that he hied him down from the hill country and lingered long in the radiance of her company. But happily for the Honorable John in the Quaker City Aunt Lydia Hancock kept a close watch on the flirtatious Boston belle. The ever present duenna showed a solicitous vigilance so that our young law student made no startling advances. Aunt Lydia had set her heart on the union of the Quincy and Hancock families. John was to inherit her fortune and Dorothy must share it. The wit and beauty of Miss Quincy, her grace of manner, matched the brilliancy and witching power of Burr, scion of a remarkable stock. Nevertheless it was only the surface of the Hancock Quincy courtship which became slightly ruffled. Young Burr heard the call of country and plunged into the stern warfare of the colonies.

On the 28th of June 1775 General Washington passed through Fairfield *en route* for Cambridge, where he was to take command of the Continental Army. Tradition has it that he paid his respects to the people of the Burr mansion, having learned that the daughter of the patriot Edmund Quincy, engaged to marry the President of the Continental Congress, was a guest in the house. And when General Washington, returning from Cambridge the following April, passed through the town, Aunt Lydia Hancock was there, not able to go back to the Boston house. Three days later the good lady breathed her last, the victim of apoplexy, and her body was borne from the homestead across the Green down Beach Lane to the ancient God's Acre. Strange to say it was Mr. and Mrs. Burr who erected the stone marking her final resting place—a service which one might think should have been rendered by her nephew and heir, the opulent Boston merchant.

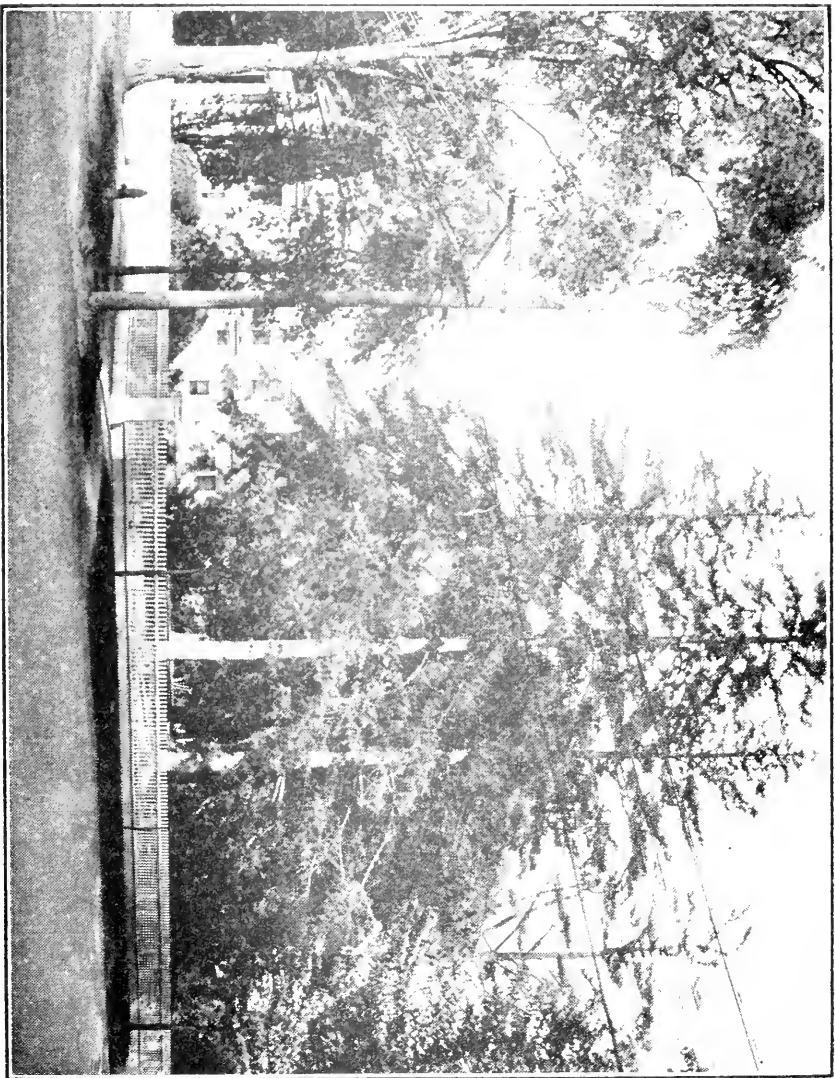
The season which followed the advent of Mrs. Hancock and Dorothy Q. in Fairfield was a gay one in spite of war and trouble. There were many guests entertained in the Burr mansion—the statesmen

and soldiers of New England making it their stopping place as they passed to and fro between Boston and Philadelphia. One of these visitors was Dr. Benjamin Church who had been appointed head of the Army Hospital. Poor man! He was found guilty of treason a little later, expelled from the Massachusetts legislature, confined in Norwich jail, and finally banished to the West Indies. He came from Philadelphia to Fairfield laden with nuptial treasures for the bride elect, and was therefore a most welcome guest. The delicate finery gave the house the appearance of vanity fair and drove away for the time being thoughts and fears concerning impending peril.

Here is a characteristic love letter which Dr. Church brought with him for the fair maiden:

“My Dr Dolly—

I am almost prevailed on to think that my letters to my Aunt & you are not read, for I cannot obtain a reply, I have ask'd a million questions & not an answer to one, I beg'd you to let me know what things my Aunt wanted & you & many other matters I wanted to



.. Their stopping place as they passed to and fro between Boston and Philadelphia ..

know, but not one answer. I really Take it extreme unkind, pray my Dr. use not so much Ceremony & Reservedness, why can't you use freedom in writing, be not afraid of me, I want Long Letters. I am glad the little things I sent you are agreeable. Why did you not write me of the top of the Umbrella. I am so sorry it was spoiled, but I will send you another by my Express wch will go in a few days. How did my Aunt like her gown & do let me know if the Stockings suited her: she had better send a pattern shoe and stocking, I warrant I will suit her. The Inclosed letter for your Father you will read & seal & forward him, you will observe I mention in it your writing your Sister Katy about a few necessaries for Katy Sewall, what you think Right let her have & Roy James, this only between you & I: do write your Father I should be glad to hear from him & I Beg, my Dear Dolly you will write me often & long Letters, I will forgive the past if you will mend in future. Do ask my Aunt to make me up & send me a Watch String, & do you send me another, I

wear them out fast. I want some little thing of your doing.

Remember to all Friends with you as if nam'd. I am called upon & must obey.

I have sent you by Doctr Church in a paper Box Directed to you, the following things for your acceptance, & which I do insist you wear, if you do not I shall think the Donor is the objection—

2 pair white silk stockings which

4 pr. white thread I think will fit you

1 pr. Black Satin shoes, the other

1 pr Black Calem Co. Shall be sent when done.

1 very pretty light Hat

1 neat Airy Summer Cloak, (I ask Doctr. Church)

2 caps

1 Fann

I wish these may please you. I shall be gratified if they do, please write me, I will attend to all your Commands.

Adieu, my Dr. Girl, & believe me to be with
great Esteem & Affection,

Yours without Reserve

John Hancock

Remember me to Katy Brackett."

Is not this an ardent epistle, revealing a devoted lover, pining for news, words of endearment and all the sweet confidences of courtship? And it mattered not to the anxious lover that he was "call'd upon & must obey." He would take time to search the stores and shops in Philadelphia, select stockings, caps, fans, laces, silks, shoes, hats and the innumerable articles pertaining to the bridal outfit. For Fairfield did not offer to the maiden any notable variety of these precious goods; and Boston was closed to trade these days so that it fell to the happy lot of the bridegroom to select and purchase a considerable portion of Dorothy Quincy's trousseau.

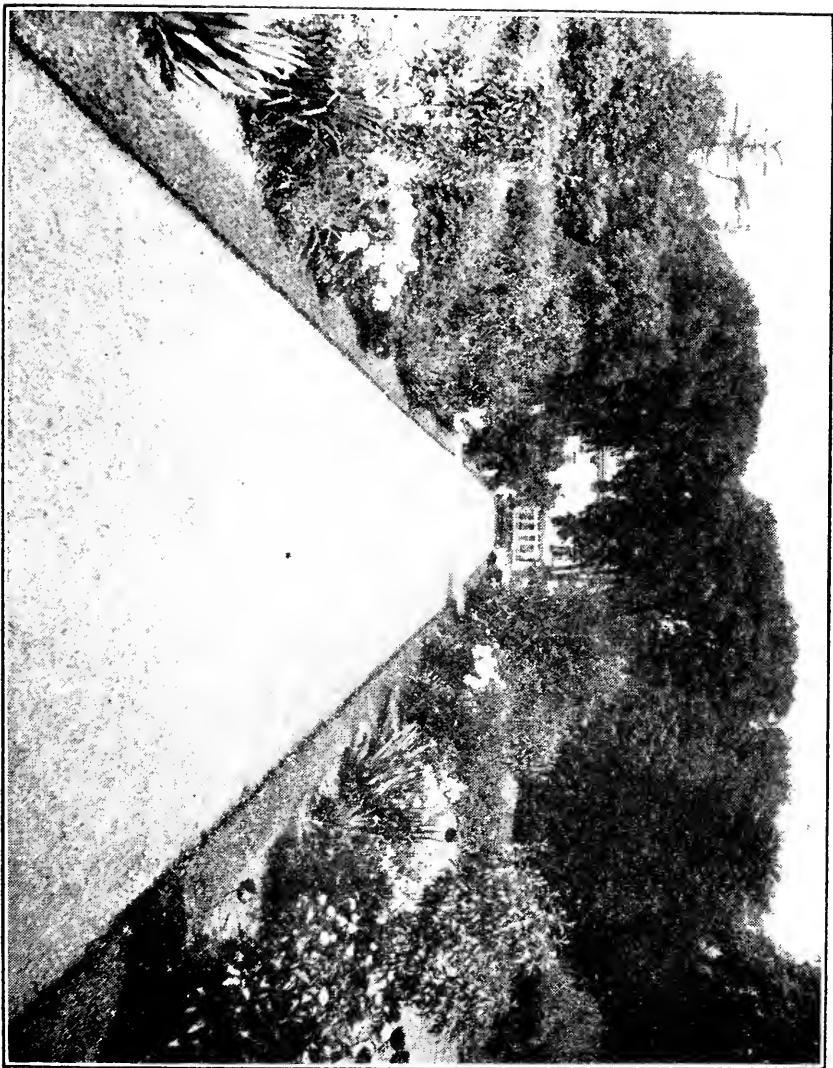
Let us hope that the lady spent more time in her bed-room composing newsy, romantic effusions for Mr. Hancock so that the strenuousness of service in the Continental Congress might be graciously mitiga-

ted. "I want some little thing of your doing." Was it possible that the social life of the Burr Homestead was so delightfully exacting and the beaux of the county capital so numerous that the Boston belle found only scraps of time for writing to her lover?

It was finally decided that the wedding must be in Fairfield. John Hancock had become impatient—no prospect of a speedy return to Boston appeared—the days grew darker and darker with war clouds. So the preparations were hurried forward by Aunt Lydia—the gowns all finished and the guests invited. Mr. and Mrs. Burr did the honors of the occasion.

It was late in August when all thing being ready the President of the Continental Congress with his coach and four drew up before the residence of Thaddeus Burr. In one of his letters to Dorothy Q, addressed care of Mr. Burr, Colonel Hancock had disclaimed his love of parade. It seems that when passing through New York, certain enthusiastic persons had unfastened his horses, formed two lines of gentlemen helpers and pulled the cumbrous vehicle and its honored occupant down along the crowded thoroughfares of the city. "The number of specta-

“It was finally decided that the wedding must be in Fairfield”



tors increased to perhaps seven thousand or more," writes the lover to his lady. Modestly he begs the young patriots to desist but they will honor him in spite of all diffidence and courteous opposition. The reader surmises that our Honorable John was not altogether averse to such pageantry since on numerous occasions considerable display and magnificence attended the gentleman. But Connecticut could not well give him such a reception on the wedding day. The gentry of the neighborhood gathered for the occasion and many of the elect families of the Colony were witnesses of the ceremony. Several New England statesmen contributed their dignity to the festivities. All that Mr. and Mrs. Burr could give by way of grace, courtesy and benediction was bestowed unstintedly upon the happy pair. The Rev. Andrew Eliot Jr. pastor of the village Church performed the ceremony. He was an old friend of both families, son of Dr. Andrew Eliot of the North Church Boston. Mrs. Eliot Sr. who had fled with her children to Fairfield was among the Boston friends present for the ceremony. The brief service was followed by the

usual felicitations while the young people crowding the mansion and overflowing into the yard remarked the elegance and brilliancy of toilets displayed both by the men and women of the company. Silver buckles, white silk stockings, knee breeches of varied hues, scarlet vests and velvet coats with ruffled shirts and broad fine neckgear adorned the masculine fraternity while the ladies were radiant in silks and laces, lofty head-dress, resplendent jewelry and the precious heir-looms of old families. The record of marriage in the Church Register, preceded by that of Jack negro servant to David Barlow and Mary negro servant to Deacon Hill, is as follows :

“1775

August 28th

The Honorable John Hancock Esqr. and
Miss Dorothy Quincy both of Boston
were married at Fairfield

Pr Andrew Eliot V.D.M.”

It is a legend connected with the event that when the guests paid their attention to the ample refreshments provided for them an alarm was sounded and the bridal party persuaded to leave in haste, since it

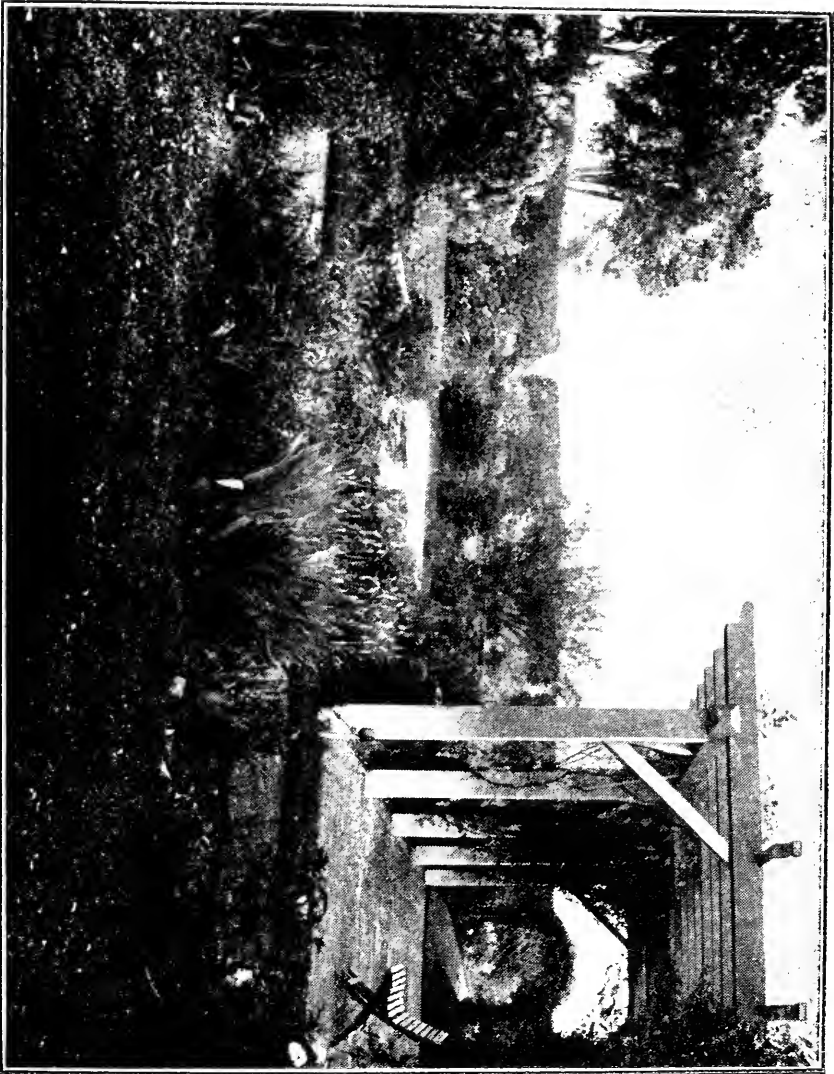
was a fact that the British continued their endeavors to kidnap the President of the Continental Congress. The party rode on to Philadelphia where Mrs. Hancock was soon "packing up commissions to be sent to officers appointed by Congress," or engaged with her scissors in "trimming off the rough edges of the bills of credit issued by Congress and signed by the President."

The months following this important event at the Burr mansion were by no means quiet or uneventful. A succession of guests—refugees, patriots, statesmen, soldiers—sat at the hospitable board of the High Sheriff. Lyman Hall, a signer of the Declaration of Independence from Georgia, who had married a sister of Thaddeus Burr's in the fifties, had come north to discharge his official duties. Governor Trumbull not infrequently sought advice and fellowship here for Mr. Burr became a member of the Governor's Council and shared the grave responsibilities of state. Both John Adams and Samuel made this house their stopping place. Amos Deane, Roger Sherman, Benjamin Franklin, Oliver Ellsworth, Samuel Otis, tarried now and again beneath the Burr

roof. Here there convened many a conference of local and colonial celebrities for purposes of devising patriotic measures. And meanwhile the social atmosphere grew more and more delightful as the circle of fellowship broadened and the hopes of the sons of liberty enlarged.

An interesting letter from Thaddeus Burr is preserved in the Emmett Collection of the New York Public Library. It is dated the last Sunday of August, 1778 and it marks the day when General LaFayette enjoyed the hospitality of the family :

“The latest accounts we have from Rhode Island are Friday evening last, by the Marquis De Lafayette, aid-de-camp, who arrived at my house on Sunday evening on the way to General Washington. He informed me that the determination there was to hold the ground we had got, that General Hancock had gone to Boston to make provision for marching the French troops from there to Rhode Island, that the Marquis was to set out for Boston on Friday to take command of the troops, that it was agreed that all the French fleet which were in



“Here there convened many a conference”

condition to put to sea were immediately to return to Rhode Island, that General Sullivan had imprudently given out in general orders some reflections upon the French nation & Count D'Estaing, of which I suppose even you will hear. . . . Last Sabbath at noon passed us a fleet of war a hundred sail with a fine wind, which I think, must arrive at Rhode Island before the French fleet: should that be the case I fear the consequences. But God hath great things for us. I hope for the best."

Colonel Tallmadge the secret service patriot serving General Washington these days had frequent occasion to visit Mr. Burr, while David Humphreys of Derby who sang the dirge over the burning of Fairfield and later became U. S. Minister to Portugal and Spain sojourned here in the atmosphere of culture and refinement, meeting Joel Barlow the young poet who composed patriotic songs, haunted the social circle in Burr mansion and finally went to war. These two young poets joined with Timothy Dwight in writing spirited lyrics which our soldiers sang with great gusto and the boys on Fairfield streets repeated

in a happy frenzy of patriotism. Joel Barlow's family gave the name to Barlow's plain. Joel was popular in the county capital. His poetry gave him great distinction and when later in life he lived abroad, representing the United States as Minister to France for a brief period, something of his fame and honor was shared by the friends who gathered beneath the roof of the Burr Homestead.

Among the eminent men who had enjoyed the friendship of these hospitable entertainers was Governor Tryon of New York. This English soldier and statesman was now engaged in harrassing the shores of Long Island Sound. He had passed up and down the waters looking vindictively upon certain towns and cities. Fairfield the county capital, center of provincial society, home of the Revolutionary leaders in western Connecticut was well known to Governor Tryon for he had been the guest of the Burrs and had enjoyed the fellowship of their delightful circle. As Fairfield was taking such prominent part in the war, he decided to punish the town. The story of the burning has been oft repeated. Mrs. Burr's own narrative of experience is that

which interests us at this time. Her affidavit is given in Hinman's book on Connecticut in the Revolution.

The men folks were with the Continental troops or attending to public affairs so that at the first this attack on Fairfield was unresisted. As soon as possible the local militia rallied but meanwhile the village was given over to the fire fiends and nearly every building went up in flames.

General Tryon, mindful of social obligations, had promised to save the Burr mansion. He called twice upon Mrs. Burr. Sentries were placed to guard the property. But the slave of a citizen living on main street fired a shot from one of the upper windows in the house and killed a British soldier. Immediately the maddened soldiers rushed into the place, dragged the negro down the stairs, through the hall, into the street, soaked a blanket in rum, wrapped it about the wretch and then fired it.

On his last call upon Mrs. Burr, General Tryon asked for pen, ink and paper and sitting down at her writing desk wrote a protection for her which on his withdrawal he put into her hands. But hardly was

he gone before ruffians entered the house and began their brutal annoyances.

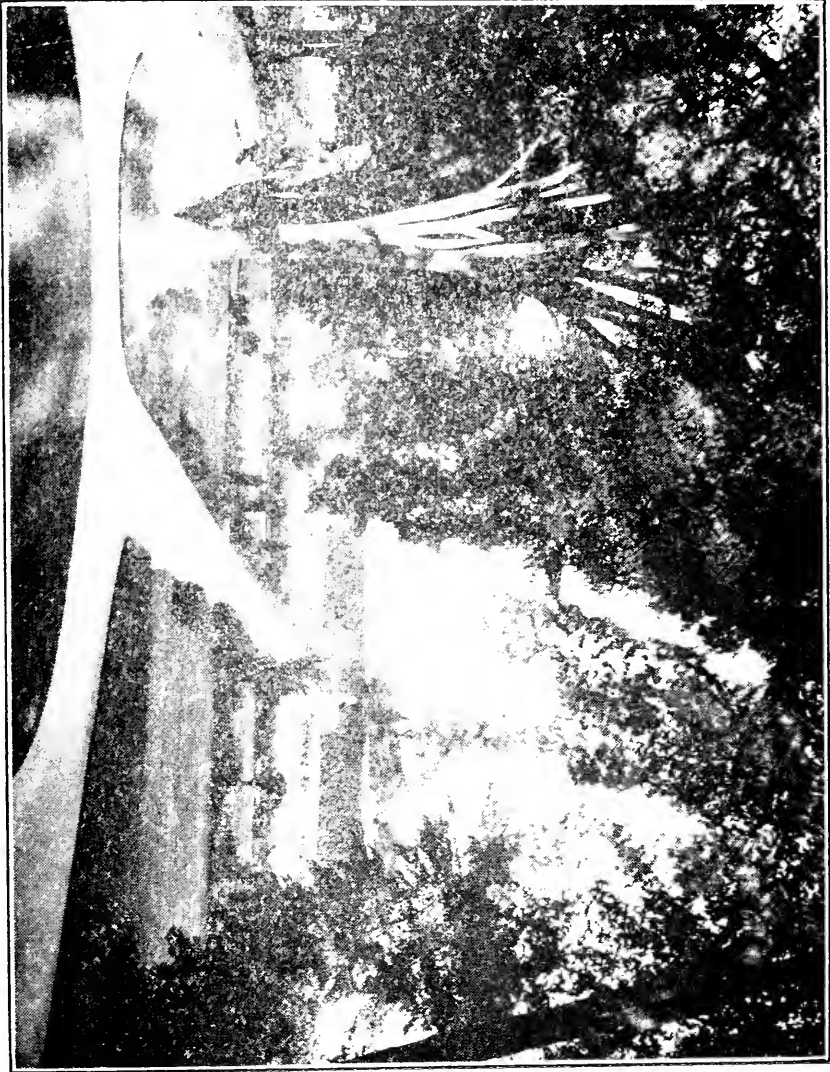
“I have a protection from General Tryon,” said Mrs. Burr as they attempted familiarity with her.

“Tryon be damned” they roughly shouted. And snatching the piece of paper from her hands one of the men tore it into many fragments and scattered the pieces to the winds.

“Mrs. Burr,” says Dr. Timothy Dwight in his story of the assault, “was adorned with all the qualities which give distinction to her sex: possessed of fine accomplishments and a dignity of character scarcely rivaled: and probably had never known what it was to be treated with disrespect or even with inattention.”

But the lady's appeals were in vain. General Tryon had marched away leaving a lot of miscreants to finish the work of destruction. They seized Mrs. Burr and stripped the silver buckles from her shoes. While some of the ruffians were rifling her desk and tearing down the damask curtains and smashing the huge mirrors and turning things topsy-turvy, others

“ They reached the garden in their effort to wrench from her grip a watch ”



chased the frightened mistress through her house, attempting to dispoil her of the very clothes which she wore, throwing her down upon the ground when they reached the garden in their efforts to wrench from her grip a watch which she prized highly as a precious heirloom. They stole her pocket-book, snatched the gold sleeve buttons from her wrists and drove her with frightened, struggling attendants into the meadow and thicket beyond the garden, where in the shelter of wild shrubbery and tangled vines enswathed by heavy clouds of smoke darkening the village, she and her friends escaped the brutality of the drunken mercenaries. But the mansion had been fired by the riotous crew while the mistress was struggling with the invaders. No time to save garments, furniture, works of art or library. All the accumulations of years—the treasures of wealth and refinement—were burned before their eyes, flames illuminating the black sky above them.

“Ye smoking ruins, marks of hostile ire,”

“Ye ashes warm, which drink the tears that
flow,”

“Ye desolated plains, my voice inspire,”

“ And give soft music to the song of woe.”

“ How pleasant Fairfield, on the enraptured
sight ”

“ Rose thy tall spires and oped thy social halls.”

“ How oft my bosom beat with pure delight ”

“ At yonder spot where stand thy darkened
walls.”

The lament of Colonel Humphreys pictures something of the desolation. Mrs. Burr however was not the woman to waste time in lamentation. Hiding in the thickets until the Hessians had left the place, she finally emerged and set herself and friends to the task of mitigating suffering and comforting the sorrowful.

There was an old storehouse on the estate which had withstood the attack of fire. This grateful shelter was immediately occupied and a goodly company of people invited to share the place. The militia under Colonel Tallmadge camped on the Green and people returning to their charred houses built temporary shelters along the street.

On the coming of Mr. Burr, now that the smoke of conflagration had lifted, there was the quickening of hope and energy. The old warehouse, speedily converted into what Prof. Silliman of Yale in reminiscences of Fairfield called a "neat, commodious mansion," became the center of renewed life for the town. Here for many months the old friends gathered, braving their numerous distresses and working tirelessly for the success of the American army.

When Governor Hancock again passed through town he stayed as usual with the Burrs and proposed that his host rebuild as quickly as possible, pledging his assistance in case Mr. Burr's new house was modelled after the Hancock house in Boston. The High Sheriff, agreeable to this suggestion, began his preparations for rebuilding and Governor Hancock supplied timber and glass. Daniel Dimon, the popular architect or carpenter of the period in Fairfield, was the builder of the new mansion.

A portion of the property had been in the possession of the Burr family for several generations dating back to the middle of the seventeenth century.

Peter Burr, Chief Justice of the Colony, who inherited it from the second Jehu, bequeathed it to son Thaddeus in 1725 who passed it on to Thaddeus of Revolutionary fame in 1755.

The new mansion patterned somewhat after the Hancock house was a dignified and handsome structure, three stories high with gambrel roof and dormer windows. The rooms were large and high between joints, a great hall making welcome the guests as they entered through the classic porch and ample doorway. Generous glass in the massive door and narrow windows on each side, gave light and cheer to the spacious interior.

There were no family keepsakes or antique pieces with which to adorn the new mansion, but with the better times came proper furniture. And during all the period guests came and went with the usual freedom. Dr. Dwight was accustomed to ride down from Greenfield nearly every Saturday afternoon and drink tea with the friends assembled. He was cultivating strawberries in his garden at this time. Perhaps in June he brought his friends a pailful. And

assuredly as he wrote his famous poem "Greenfield Hill," he must have brought some portions of the manuscript with him that Mr. and Mrs. Burr might give him their opinion of his muse. Can we not hear him reading his description of the village wrapped in flames?

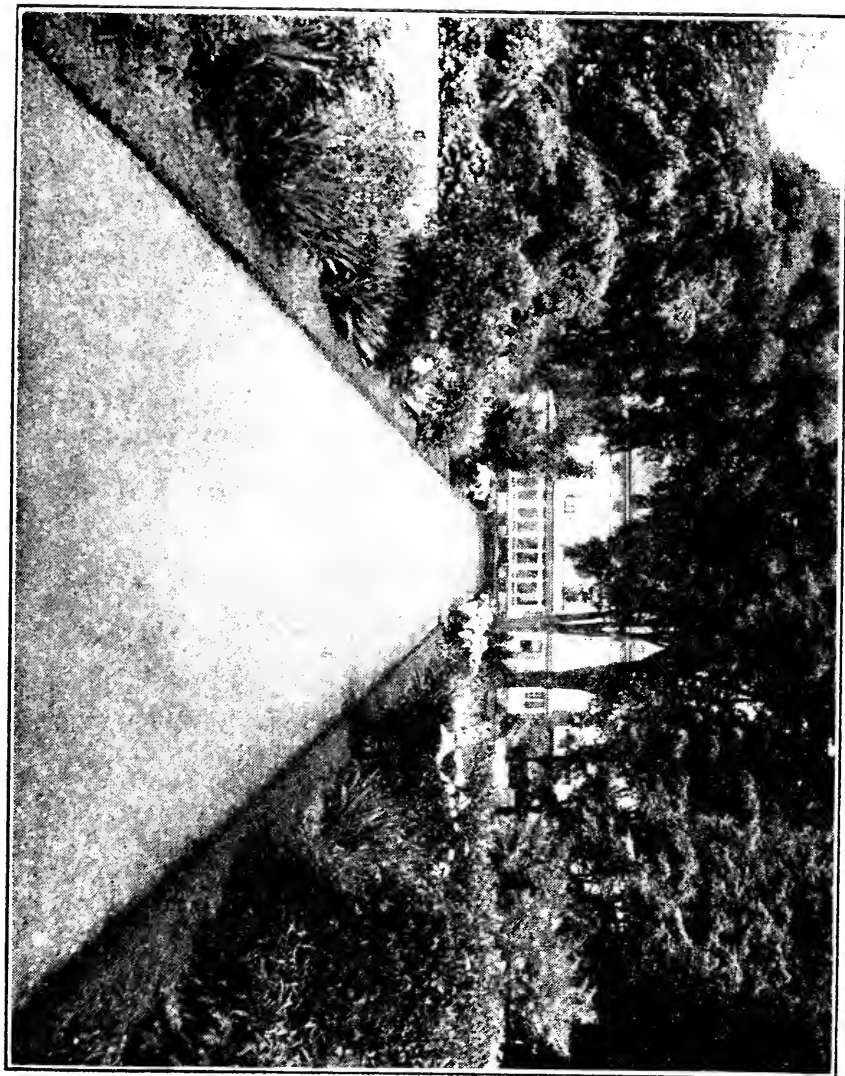
"On yon bright plain, with beauty gay,"
"Where waters, wind & cattle play,"
"Where gardens, groves & orchards bloom,"
"Unconscious of her coming doom"
"Once Fairfield smiled."

The artist Trumbull was one of the elect company who tarried now and again beneath the roof-tree and brought to his friends the gossip of the art fraternity which numbered the Burrs among their patrons. Copley came to Fairfield and endeared himself to these gracious entertainers for he painted the notable portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Burr—reckoned as fine work as his genius affords. The portraits are now in New York—owned by the descendants of Thaddeus Burr's brother. They were exhibited in the Academy of Design a few years ago and won

great praise. The pictures of Mr. and Mrs. Burr in the Historical Society were taken from these oil paintings.

The mansion passed to General Gershom Burr on the death of his uncle and aunt. General Burr sold the property to Mr. O. W. Jones who repaired and enlarged it, taking out the dormer windows and lifting the roof, taking away the porch and building the broad veranda with its lofty massive fluted columns. Other changes have recently been made, but it remains a noble, stately mansion, transmitting a wealth of history and tradition to the latest generation. For two hundred years The Homestead was identified with the Burr name and during that long period it spake eloquently for faith, culture, patriotism, social worth and progressive life.

Quite fitting was it that the Daughters of the American Revolution in Fairfield should choose for their name the Eunice Dennie Burr Chapter—thus honoring the lady who for so many years kept open house for soldiers, statesmen and leaders in colony and nation.



The mansion stands in the midst of spacious grounds, shaded by magnificent old trees, the box-bordered walk leading from the street gate to the pillared veranda. At the rear where Mrs. Burr fondly tended her marigolds and roses, her pinks, hollyhocks and peonies, there now spreads before the eye an old fashioned garden, sweet and bright with flowers which remind us of days when cocked hats and powdered wigs and lofty coiffures and quilted silk bonnets were in vogue. The massive arba vitae hedge which shields the garden from the east wind dates back generations. Varied vistas of the sea are framed by masses of shrubbery and the graceful foliage of stalwart elms. The old charm of the Burr Homestead still lingers about the place. Art, nature, history vie with each other in their generous gifts and interesting associations.

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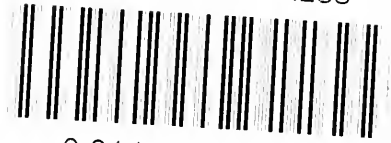
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