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## The Land Speculations of a Great Patriot

A PAMPHLET\* in which is contained one of the schemes of land speculation which wrecked the fortune and credit of Robert Morris, the financier of the American Revolution, has lately come to the Society as the gift of Charles E. Tuttle of Rutland, Vt. The *Plan of Association of the North American Land Company* represents an earlier chapter in the same story in which some letters, which have been in the possession of the Society for two years, belong to the last.

Morris, whose ability, determination and patriotism made it possible for Washington's generalship to carry the colonies to independence, spent three and a half years in a debtors' prison in Philadelphia and died a bankrupt, in consequence of the failure of land speculations which he had undertaken on a gigantic scale. The same courage of his convictions and dauntless enthusiasm which had, perhaps more than anything else, made Morris the only man for the thankless and wellnigh hopeless task of raising the necessary funds for the War from indifferent state governments and skeptical foreign powers, led to his later undoing.

At the outbreak of the trouble between Great Britain and her American colonies, he was a leading merchant in Philadelphia. Although at first he opposed the Declaration of Independence as untimely, and hoped for a reconciliation with England, when it appeared that a break with the mother country was inevitable, he threw himself into the cause with characteristic zeal.

\* *Plan of Association of the North American Land Company. Established February, 1795.*—Philadelphia, Printed: London, Reprinted for C. Barrell and H. Ser-vante, No. 24, Threadneedle Street, 1795. 25 p. +

In the Continental Congress, he was for several months its sole representative in Philadelphia at the time that it moved its headquarters to Baltimore, in 1776, transacting its business by means of his own credit, superintending the navy, and keeping the absent members in touch with the state of affairs at the old headquarters. In this position, later as the moving spirit in the Committee of Commerce, and finally in the Office of Finance, Morris' boundless enthusiasm for and belief in the country, added to his business experience and reputation, his clear judgment, broad vision, patience and determination enabled him to gather figs from thistles, and raise the necessary money where there was apparently none to be had.

It was this same faith in the United States that led him to buy immense tracts of land in every unsettled part of the Union.

"He foresaw, he thought, as did many other Americans," says Ellis Paxon Oberholtzer in his biography, "the rapid material development of the whole continent. It was argued that half Europe would promptly remove to the United States to enjoy the blessings of liberty and independence. . . . By immigration and natural increase the population would grow at an unexampled rate, the wealth and resources of the country would rapidly unfold, civilization would seek outlets in the West and South, and in a little while values would double and triple to the amazement of every beholder."

Some of the great men of the time, Morris' fast friends, were involved to some extent in his land transactions, but his two partners in the venture were two relatively obscure men, John Nicholson of Philadelphia, who had at one time been Comptroller General of Pennsylvania, and James Greenleaf of New York, a former American consul at Amsterdam. The latter was let into the adventure, to the great cost of the other two partners, as it turned out, by reason of his lavish promises to secure money in Holland with which to finance the undertaking.

"The magnitude of his transactions is not easily comprehended," says Oberholtzer. "Land was freely offered at one dollar, two-thirds, one-half, and even one-fourth of a dollar an acre. In large lots it could be procured at a still lower rate, and while it was far out of reach where it was not easily inspected, it was fair to assume that it must sometime, and at no very distant day, acquire sufficient value to make the investment very profitable. Mr. Morris was most attracted to New York State. He owned at different

times, in tracts which he bought and rapidly sold again, almost the entire western half of that commonwealth."

He purchased from Gorham and Phelps, in 1790, a tract containing upwards of one million acres in the Genesee country, on the recommendation of Adam Hoops, a man who had once served on

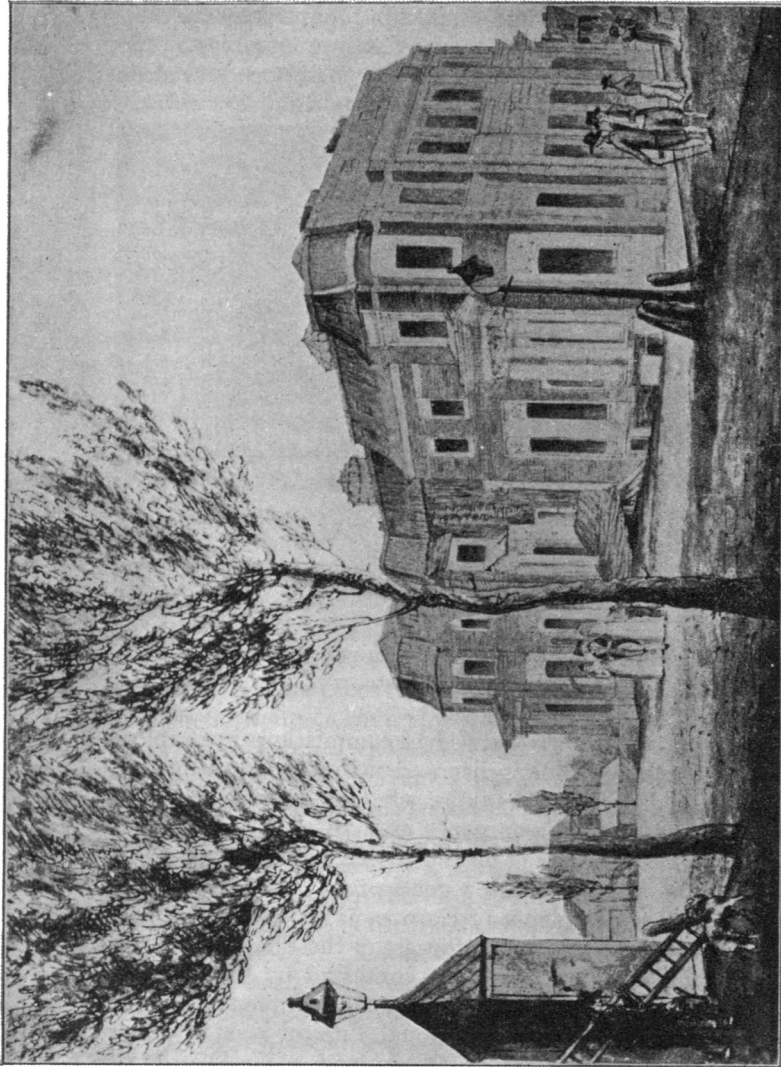
Mr Nicholson Esq<sup>r</sup>      May 28<sup>th</sup> 1799  
Dear Sir      I have been much occupied as  
you would have had an earlier acknowledgment of the  
receipt of yours of yesterday with fifty doll<sup>rs</sup> (which I paid  
to Ruth Dugless for rent of my room) and a deed  
which I have not yet had time to peruse but which  
I intend to read with attention and consider well  
of your opinion & advice. I am in pursuit of  
liberty therefore farewell for the present  
Your Obedt Serv<sup>t</sup>  
J<sup>o</sup> Morris

ONE OF THE LETTERS WRITTEN BY MORRIS FROM THE DEBTORS' PRISON,  
TO HIS PARTNER, JOHN NICHOLSON

Washington's staff, and whom Morris had commissioned to explore his prospective purchase. Morris disposed of this tract in England, through the son of Benjamin Franklin, who acted as his agent, to Sir William Pulteney at eighteen pence an acre. Sir William sent an agent to America who, acting on the advice of Morris, was able to sell a large part of the land at a good profit. This experience tended to increase the confidence of Europeans in American lands.

Morris still owned most of the state west of the Phelps and Gorham line, although his claim might be contested by the Indians. His plan was to establish towns and settle the surrounding farms.

When it was decided that the national Capitol was to be at Washington, Morris invested extensively in land in the District of Columbia. He and his partners purchased about six thousand building lots in Washington, and later added twelve hundred more



### “MORRIS' FOLLY”

Among his other adventures in real estate, Morris had begun, at the time when Philadelphia was selected as the temporary capital, the great marble palace which was known as “Morris' Folly.” His architect, Major L'Enfant, was even more ambitious to make this house the most magnificent in America, than was the prospective owner. The house and grounds were to occupy an entire block. At the time of Morris' bankruptcy, although ten times the originally estimated cost had been spent, there was a sheet iron roof covering only a part of the house from the rain, and not a floor was laid nor a wall plastered.

to their holdings. The state of the Capitol at the time is graphically described by Oberholtzer:

“The site of the future city was a primeval forest. There were no houses, barring some cabins for workmen and negroes, until Mr. Morris began his building operations. In the uncleared wood an Executive Mansion and a Capitol building were rising out of the ground, but progress was extremely slow. A young Englishman, Thomas Twining, who was travelling in America and visited Washington at about this time, relates how he entered a large wood ‘through which a very imperfect road had been made, principally by removing the trees, or the upper parts of them, in the usual manner. After a while more order was observed,’ the trees having been cut down in a straight line, although no habitation of any kind was visible. . . . I continued in this spacious avenue for a mile, and then came out upon a large spot cleared of wood, in the centre of which I saw two unfinished buildings, and men at work on one of them. Advancing and speaking to these workmen, they informed me that I was in the centre of the city, and that the building was the Capitol. Looking from where I stood I saw on every side a thick wood, pierced with avenues in a more or less perfect state.’”

Morris' expectations might have been realized in his own time if it had not been for the fact that he had left out of his calculations the train of events in Europe following the French Revolution, which were to hold back the tide of immigration and make European money inaccessible for peaceful purposes for years. The wars of Napoleon took the men who might, in times of peace, have sought their fortunes in the new country, and money could not be borrowed nor land sold.

Meanwhile, the surveys for the prospective towns were expensive, and there was trouble with the Indians. A great council had to be organized, rations provided for the expedition and for the conference, which lasted several weeks, presents given to the chiefs, and an indemnity of \$100,000 paid outright, while some of the Indians were promised annuities for the rest of their lives. The progress of Washington was slow. In 1800, there was no hotel in which visitors could find lodging nearer than Georgetown, three miles away, and the charges were four dollars a day, an exorbitant figure for that time. The Adamses took up their residence in an unfinished White House, with the plastering still damp on the walls, not a single apartment completed, and the stairways not up.

On wash days, the clothes of the Adams family were dried in the large audience room.

Morris, in desperation, turned to joint stock companies as the solution for his difficulties, in hopes that shares would sell more readily than land. The first attempt was the *Asylum Company*, based on a million acres of land in Pennsylvania. After a year, Morris sold his share in this enterprise to Nicholson, and the *North American Land Company* was formed, so that "all persons who had money might, if they pleased, participate in the advantages resulting from the purchase, sale and improvement of valuable estates," consisting of lands in Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Kentucky, and amounting to six million acres. The capital stock was to be three million dollars. The board of managers was authorized to "lay out and open roads, to lay out a town or towns and sell the lots therein and to improve upon such tracts of land belonging to the company as they shall think proper, one or two farms, of from five hundred to one thousand acres and thereon to erect a dwelling house, barn and other needful outhouses, a saw-mill and grist-mill at the expence and for the account of the company."

After this venture, he still retained real estate to the value of \$1,000,000 with which to organize the *Pennsylvania Property Company*, his final effort to avoid going into bankruptcy. Every fresh attempt to extricate himself seems to have involved Morris more hopelessly. Greenleaf, the third partner in the enterprise, turned out to be a rascal, who used the credit of the Company to cover his own doubtful operations, and Morris, as an endorser, was in honor bound to settle a debt of £30,000. He also failed to pay the Federal Government for his share of the Washington lots, and even kept some of Morris' money which had been entrusted to him for that purpose.

The end was inevitable. Morris and Nicholson began to be besieged by their creditors, and law suits were instituted. By 1797, the partners were practically prisoners at "The Hills," on the banks of the Schuylkill, one of Morris' many beautiful estates, to avoid the writs and the constables that were sent out against them. "The Hills" was a pleasant place in which to be confined, a stone mansion surrounded with broad acres over which grazed imported cattle and sheep; gardens and lawns laid out with all kinds of trees and shrubbery and flowering plants; the first hot-houses and ice-



*Philadelphia* 21 November 1794  
 Sixty days after date I promise to pay to Robert Morris  
 or order five thousand dollars for value received  
 Endorsed For Robt. Morris  
 Garrett Coltringer  
 Harrison & Strett  
 Tho: FitzSimons

ON THE Twenty fourth Day of January Anno  
 Domini 1795 at the Request of the Bank of Pennsylvania  
 I GAZEMER BAZZES, Notary and Tabellion Public for the Common-  
 wealth of Pennsylvania, duly commissioned and qualified, dwelling in  
 Philadelphia presented the Original Note  
 whereof the foregoing is a true Copy at the Countinghouse of  
 Thomas FitzSimons the Drawer and Demanding  
 payment & since for Assurance from a Clerk that the  
 same would be attended to Whereon I notified the  
 Endorsers thereof  
 WHEREUPON I the said Notary, at the Request  
 aforesaid, have and DO hereby solemnly protested against the Drawer  
 of the said Note and all others concerned for all Exchange,  
 Re-Exchange, Costs, Damages and Interest already suffered and to be suf-  
 fered, for Want of payment of the said Note  
 TITUS DONE and protested in Philadel-  
 phia aforesaid, in the Presence of Joseph Morris  
 and Alexander Murray Witnesses.  
 JEN TERTIUMQVUM VERITAS  
 Clement Bridle  
 Notary

THIS GENEROSITY OF ROBERT MORRIS BOTH TO COUNTRY AND FRIENDS  
 WAS PERHAPS A CONTRIBUTORY CAUSE OF HIS FINANCIAL RUIN. THE  
 ABOVE PLATE IS A FACSIMILE OF A NOTE ENDORSED  
 BY MORRIS FOR A FRIEND

houses connected with a private home in America; dairies; barns; a spring-house; a coach-house; and fine stables.

At first the partners had the solace of each other's company. But in August of 1797, Nicholson was forced to flee to his own house as the sheriff's men had laid their plan to come and take him at "The Hills." After that, the partners wrote to each other from their respective houses, which they named "Castle Defence" and "Castle Defiance." Toward the last, Morris was in danger of being ambushed every time he stepped out of doors. At one time, two creditors came with the necessary officers and writs, and lay in wait for him all night in a quarry called "Blackbeard's Hole," on a bed of leaves, but he was warned in time by the gardener. Finally, he rigged up a peep hole for reconnoitring purposes.

At length, on February 14, 1798, he was taken to the debtors' prison, known as "Prune Street," at the instance of a particularly persistent creditor. To add to his hardships, a room could not at once be found for the new prisoner, and he had at first to occupy the apartments of other prisoners. A cell was at last procured, and one of the letters in possession of the Society, written in May, 1799, acknowledges the receipt of fifty dollars from his partner, John Nicholson, "which I paid to Rich<sup>d</sup> Douglass for rent of my room." He ends this short note, "I am in pursuit of liberty, so farewell for the present."

Nicholson did not go to prison until a little later, when both men passed their time by publishing a newspaper. Many of Morris' letters show that his philosophy and sense of humor did not desert him even in jail. Before his partner had joined him there, he invited him to dine at the "hotel with grated doors," so that Nicholson might see what to expect in case it was decided that he should become a boarder there.

Hopeless as it was to try to liquidate such debt: as his, Morris did not give over the attempt to straighten out his affairs. Several of the letters to Nicholson refer to some new hope of disentangling the situation in some degree, or to the failure of one. In one letter, he makes rueful mention of the fact that their old partner, Greenleaf, who had gone to prison before he himself had, would "get out the first of next month and go to the City for mischievous purposes."

In spite of any efforts of his own and his friends, however, Morris would have spent the remaining years at "Prune Street," had not



Congress, perhaps with his case in mind, passed an act, on April 4, 1800, by which, on the petition of his creditors, a man might be adjudicated a bankrupt and released from prison. After various disagreeable scenes Morris was released, with unpaid debts amounting to three million dollars. He spent the last five years of his life in a small house which Mrs. Morris was able to maintain from a small income which had been settled upon her through the efforts of her husband's friend, Gouverneur Morris. So ended in obscurity the career of "the patriot, upon whom all the other patriots of the Revolution had depended," a victim equally to his own sanguine temperament and a freak of fortune.

## The Story of Asphalt

A PAMPHLET published by Warren Brothers Company which tells the story of the past eighty years' development of a very old industry, has been presented to the Society by Mr. George C. Warren. Although the use of asphalt for paving purposes is generally thought of as a nineteenth-century invention, it is, as a matter of fact, older than Nebuchadnezzar. An inscription on a brick found on "Procession Street," which led from the palace to the North wall, states that Nebuchadnezzar's father, Nabopolassar, King of Babylon, "had made a road glistening with asphalt and burnt bricks," and that he, "Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, he who made Esaglia and Ezida glorious, placed above the bitumen and burnt bricks, a mighty superstructure of shining dust, made them strong within with bitumen and burnt bricks as a high-lying road."

"This," observes Herbert Abraham, in his *Asphalt and Allied Substances*, "would seem to be the forerunner of the present-day pavement composed of stone blocks set in asphalt."

Nebuchadnezzar reigned from 604 to 561 B.C. Asphalt appears in relics of a much earlier age. The first recorded use of it was by the Sumerians, the pre-Babylonian inhabitants of the Euphrates Valley. These people seem to have been skillful in stone carving, and their pottery and statuary is sometimes decorated with shells or bits of stone cemented with asphalt as a sort of mortar.

Dr. E. J. Banks, excavating in 1903-4 at Adab (sometimes known as Bismya), in Syria, between the Rivers Euphrates and Tigris, found, among other things, a marble statue of Lugal-daudu, King