Life of General Philip Schuyler

Chapter One.

The Province of New York; -The Hudson River Manors. -The Schuyler Family.

From the days when Philip Schuyler led his company of provincials in the forest fights of the French and Indian War, until he sat in the Senate of the United States as the representative of the State of New York, there elapsed about forty years. These years were replete with momentous changes for his country, and with patriotic thought and action on the part of Schuyler. The victory of Wolfe ended the long and bloody struggle between England and France for supremacy in North America.

Thenceforth the English Colonies, which yet only skirted the Atlantic coast, were free to carry westward their course of empire. And, what was even more important, the colonists, relieved from the threatening pressure of French aggression, were enabled to last off the paralyzing reliance on the protection of the mother country; they were inspired to determine rea­sonably and to assert courageously their rights as free men; finally to wring independence from the powerful England of Pitt, and to establish on enduring founda­tions a mighty nation.

Those stirring years called as much for high thinking as for gallant fighting, and a patriot in that time had many parts to play.

The province of New York, in the middle of the eighteenth century, was a fringe of settlements on the Hudson River, Manhattan Island and Long Island. The town of New York, marked by nature as the principal seaport of the Atlantic coast, contained the mass of the population.

Along the banks of the Hudson River, scattered here and there through the vast expanse of forest, wherever nature offered least resistance to man, rose the farmhouses of Dutch and English settlers. At the northern end of the great watery highway stood Albany, the headquarters of the fur trade, the gateway to Canada and the western lakes.

As the boy is father to the man, the town of New York in its infancy of fourteen thousand inhabitants presented features which were destined to characterize the city throughout its magnificent growth. While Boston and Philadelphia were English towns, New York was cosmopolitan from the first.

The Dutch predominated, followed by the English and French. While the English tongue was steadily making its way as the language of the province, forcing the domines to adopt it in their churches, Dutch and French were heard on every side. The same variety prevailed in religion. The Dutch Reformed, the Lutherans, the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians had their churches, and a synagogue was not wanting.

The different nationalities, still looking to Europe for their standards of life, kept up as they could the customs and ambitions of the fatherland. The Dutchman, grown rich through the fur trade or the brewery, built his new house of brick with gable end to the street and roofed it with tiles imported from Holland. The English merchant or landed proprietor adopted the style which we call colonial with its simple and beautiful front extended toward the street. Within these doorways were to be found the furniture and the customs of the land still regarded as home.

At the foot of Broadway stood Government House, the political and usually the social centre. There the English Governor lived in some state, and gath­ered about him was a little court composed of the provincial aristocracy, the proprietary families, the wealthier merchants, the lawyers, the clergymen and the officers of the garrison.

Among these people was no little social activity, and when, on Sundays and holidays, they gathered to take the air on the Battery or the Mall, the lesser sort were expected not to approach too near. From this aristocratic circle the social scale descended through the tradesmen, the mechanics, the shifting crowd of laborers and sailors to the negro slaves. As emigrants arrived, there was no lack of opportunity for employment, and the in­dustrious soon made their way forward to comfort.

On the west side of Broadway, the pretty English and Dutch gardens of the principal houses sloped to the shore of the Hudson River. The most thickly inhabited district lay on the east side, between the dwellings on Broadway and the warehouses on the East River.

But even here the buildings were detached, and the trees were so numerous that from the deck of the approaching vessel the town seemed built in a wood. Above Maiden Lane extended farms and orchards, watered by ponds and running streams.

It was for material advancement that the seas had been crossed, and the pursuit of gain was the absorb­ing thought of the population.

Nothing, as we are told by an intelligent contemporary, was more neg­lected than reading and education. While New England, with less wealth, had two colleges, it was not until 17 54 that New York saw the founding of King's College.

In the absence of mental cultiva­tion, as reached through books or the arts, the inhabitants had much to stimulate their intelligence. The problems presented by life in a new country enclosed between the wilderness and the sea, the contest against nature and the effort to establish trade in the face of artificial obstacles, all tended to develop industry, perseverance and ingenuity.

Two great causes of division existed, provocative of much debate and tending to prepare the minds of men for the greater questions of public policy soon to be forced upon them.

These were the struggle for supremacy between aristocratic and democratic sentiments, and, akin to it, the contest between episcopacy and the other Protes­tant bodies. The aristocratic traditions of the old world were adhered to by a majority of the upper classes, but some powerful families, like the Delanceys, and the mass of the people were becoming yearly more democratic.

The effort to make the Episcopal church the established religion of the province aroused the strenuous opposition of other religious denominations. The party lines drawn on these subjects were not wholly decided by wealth.

The proprietor of land, whose ambition was to found a family of which the property and dignity should be entailed, might be a Presbyterian fighting the pretensions of episcopacy. The Episcopal merchant, maintaining the desirability of a state church, might oppose the aristocratic tendencies of a lord of the manor.

The relations of the province to England contained much that was irritating, and the mental attitude of the people was constantly becoming more independent and self­reliant.

Even in the cabinet at Versailles it was fore­seen that England would find it difficult to keep her colonies in subjection when the fall of New France removed the need of protection.

While the busy streets, fine houses and social amuse .. ments of New York made it seem a great capital to the country dweller, and a very seat of luxury to the trader emerging from the fore st, Albany was a primi­tive Dutch town, in which homely labors and simple amusements were varied only by the excitements incidental to its frontier position.

The town stood on the side of the hill which formed the west bank of the Hudson, its few streets lined by gabled Dutch houses, some built with great solidity and no little beauty, all neatly kept. From each roof extended a spout, which in rainy weather cast a small cascade upon the pedestrian.

Each house had the traditional stoop upon which the family sat in the evening exchanging salutations with the passers-by. A crumbling fort, useless except against Indians, represented the military power.

The church stood prominent as the most important edifice, its windows adorned by the coats of arms of the principal families. Christenings, marriages and funerals were the chief causes of social reunion or excitement. The women were absorbed in the ceaseless round of household duties in which they maintained the hereditary standard of Dutch neatness. Even in the wealthy families, there were no servants except the negro slaves, who were unequal to relieving their mistresses of more than the drudgery.

An ambitious young man took up the career which contained the greatest promise of reward, the fur trade. For success, he needed all his hardihood and endurance. It was his perilous task to paddle a canoe, laden with hatchets, blankets, gunpowder, and rum, through the watery highways and byways of the forest; to seek his trade among the distant and roving savages; to paddle homeward his load of peltries, never secure until the canoe floated again upon the safe waters of the Hudson. When he did not return, his friends could only conjecture, whether the tomahawk of a covetous savage, or the whirling rapids, or the privations of the forest, had caused his end.

Success meant the building of a sloop, the extension of trade to New York, even to the West Indies, the investment of gains in tracts of wild land, which had to be cleared, settled and made a source of income to the now wealthy father of a family. On the part of both women and men, the circumstances of life called for the cultivation of the qualities of industry and courage, while the intellectual and social side was of necessity neglected.

This was true, only in a less degree, of the aristocracy of the town, the Van Rensselaers, the Schuylers, the Ten Broecks, the Cuylers and other allied families.

It was a virtuous and orderly community, in which the domine had little to do but to expound the Gospel and comfort the sick.

The calm routine of Albany was rudely broken by the French and Indian War. As the headquarters for northern operations, the town became the rendezvous of scarlet-coated regiments, of boat-builders and militia.

At times, the regular inhabitants seemed lost in the crowd, and the influx of rough men caused such disorders that the Mayor told the English commander that if he would take his men back to New York the Dutch would defend their frontiers themselves.

The dances and plays introduced into the staid society of the place by the officers in garrison upset all the preconceived ideas of propriety, and fears for the spiritual welfare of his flock hastened the death of old domine Frelinghuysen.

Connecting the frontier town of the province with its capital and seaport, flowed the majestic Hudson, the great, almost the only highway for transportation and travel, and the natural feature of the country of the highest interest to the inhabitants.

The sloops which tacked up and down its beautiful course fulfilled all the objects of railway, steamboat and telegraph.

The movement of lumber and produce between the settlements, the exchange of business or social visits sought the pathway of the great river. It was with a sense of isolation that the inhabitants saw their road to market and to friends closed by the hand of winter; and in the spring, the distant boom which announced the breaking up of the ice was welcomed alike by the trader, the farmer and the inmates of the manor house, who sought a view of the frozen river to watch with pleasurable anticipations the cracking and motion of its surface.

In the cabinets of Versailles and of London, where ministers of state bent over the map of America, the Hudson River, how to use, to gain or to defend it, was the absorbing consideration.

The changes of time have altered the uses and the meaning of the Hudson. Its beauties and its romance enshrined in the immortal words of Irving, its shores adorned by fruitful farms and noble country seats, the river flows on as of old, a source of pride and pleasure to the living, and a bond of association with the generations of the past who loved to live along its wooded slopes.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, there were four families in the province of New York whose intimate connection with each other and whose common interests on the Hudson River make them a part of the time and events which we are considering.

These were the Van Rensselaers, the Schuylers, the Van Cortlandts and the Livingstons.

The first three were Dutch; the ancestor of the fourth was Scotch, but his descendants had more Dutch than Scotch blood. All were proprietary families, so connected by marriage, intimacy and business interests that their influence was usually exerted in harmony and was considerable in a community still dominated New York aristocratic ideas.

Of these families, the first to be established in New York, and the only one which had the advantage of any wealth in the beginning, was that of Van Rensselaer.

In 1629, the Dutch West India Company, which had planted the colony called New Netherland, realized its inability as a purely trading company to settle its territory with agricultural colonists whose presence would give value to the land.

As the population of Holland was not so exuberant as to cause a natural overflow, it was necessary to offer special inducements to emigrants. The company hoped to shift upon individuals the expenses and risks involved, and in pursuance of that policy, invented the system of patroonships, founded on a national prejudice.

The wealthy Dutch burgher nourished the ambition to rise in the social scale by becoming a proprietor of land and attaining the dignity thereto associated. In thickly settled Holland, the possibilities in this direction were exceedingly limited. To this ambition the West India Company offered a feudal lordship in New Netherland on condition of planting and maintaining there a colony of actual settlers.

The offer was accepted in several cases, but in all, except in that of Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, the attempt was unsuccessful; the system was soon disavowed by the company, who bought up or abolished the rights already granted to patroons.

They endeavored also to obtain possession of Rennselaerwyck, but were balked by the persistency of that family, who made the sole permanent establishment of a patroonship.

Rennselaerwyck was a tract of land beginning at the mouth of the Mohawk River, extending south-ward twenty-four miles along the banks of the Hud­son, and on either side of that river twenty-four miles east and west. It contained about seven hundred thousand acres; the present cities of Albany and Troy are within its limits. The family afterwards became possessed of Claverack, sometimes called the Lower lvlanor, containing sixty-two thousand acres, the land­ing place of which is now the town of Hudson.

The territory of Rensselaerwyck was diminished from time to time from various causes, but it remained the largest estate in the province.

Kiliaen Van Rensselaer was a director in the West India Company and a merchant of Amsterdam whose family had formerly possessed a manorial estate in Gelderland, adjoining that of John of Barneveld's family. He died in 1646 and never visited America.

Nor did his son Johannes, the second patroon, who died young, leaving a son Kiliaen, the third patroon, who came to Albany and received from the English government the patent which changed the patroonship in New Netherland into a manor in the province of New York.

Two years later, in 1687, he died with­out children.

During the life of the first patroon, the colony was managed by his cousin, Arent Van Corlear, whose dealings with the Indians were so tactful and just that for more than a century afterwards the inhabit­ants of Albany were personified in their language by the word "Corlear." He was succeeded by Van