

The Spirit of Liberty and the Right to Self-Expression

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The Bicentennial in Stafford compels us to think about the origins of Stafford within the context of the beginnings of the American republic. In 1820, the year of Stafford's formation, a number of our nation's founders were still alive. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, and Richard Henry Lee, among others, had all strongly advocated toleration; indeed, the encouragement of, different ideas and the necessity of expressing them. For the founders, the development of a marketplace of ideas translated into a value both fought for in the American Revolution and one that was destined to become a fundamental American belief. This translated into one's right to develop the habits of freedom of speech and of the press, along with an absence of religious discrimination and the custom of tolerance. Echoes of this emanated throughout Genesee County and Stafford in particular early on, as the following newspaper account from the *Republican Advocate* of September 27, 1822 reminds us. Individual liberty – the right of self-expression – is an American belief resulting from the terrible sacrifice of the revolutionary generation, one that included the most noteworthy founder of all, George Washington:

On a time during the revolutionary war, when the most ardent friends of liberty were apprehensive of the result, when the American army was reduced to a few hundred men; when this little band of patriots were suffering for want of clothing and of food; when the national credit was so low that the continental bills had depreciated 99 *per cent* and when discontent prevailed, and mutinous threats were heard, it was principally owing to the patriotism of one man, that our difficulties were removed . . . so as to restore the hopes of that portion of America who had espoused the cause of liberty and republican independence.

As this 1822 article from a Batavia publication reminds us, the right of self-expression – so solidly a part of the American notion of liberty – was one that was earned at great sacrifice not long before Stafford’s formation. Stafford, like the young nation as a whole, was an enlightened world that had successfully confronted – and defeated – a monarchical society where aristocratic authority stood powerful and essentially unchallenged. Not only had the Revolution been about political change, it had also been about creating a new culture in which the nature of authority itself would be in so many ways unprecedented. The founders – and then those whose energy built Stafford and countless other American villages at the time – were visionaries who openly espoused a utopian dream predicated upon a widening of democracy through an enlargement of one’s right – indeed duty – to openly express views and to take into account the differing views of others.

The same optimism and confidence that the founders had in their ability to shape the future as they saw fit was discernible in such places as Stafford. Be it William Rumsey from Vermont, who arrived in what became Stafford in 1802, or Amos Stow, who arrived in 1811 to build a saw mill, or even subsequent families who arrived in the decade leading up to 1820 as more land was cleared, all of these early residents of Stafford exhibited the same confidence in the future – and their ability to control it – as the founders themselves. At the root of this confidence was what the famous federal judge, Billings Learned Hand, once called “the spirit of liberty.”

In this famous 1944 speech given in the midst of World War Two on “I Am an American Day” in Central Park in New York City, a judge known for his belief in the right to self-expression set forth one of the most cogent definitions of the American value of liberty and its significance for the individual. Hand’s ancestors, who could be traced back to the *Mayflower* generation, were English – just as the early settlers of Stafford were. Judge Hand thus made it a point to say that he was descended from

. . . a group of those (people) who had the courage to break from the past and brave the dangers and the loneliness of a strange land.

Why did they do this? Hand offered this answer:

We sought liberty; freedom from oppression,
freedom from want, freedom to be ourselves.

“To be ourselves” was inextricably tied to the maintenance of liberty. For Judge Hand, liberty was rooted in

. . . The spirit which is not too sure that it is
right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to
understand the minds of other men and women;
the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their
interests alongside its own without bias . . .

Like their counterparts in the American Revolution, it is

. . . the spirit of that America for which our young
men are at this moment fighting and dying; in that
spirit of liberty and of America I ask you to rise and
with me pledge our faith in the glorious destiny of
our beloved country.

Ultimately, then, the Bicentennial in Stafford is an affirmation of a core American value – the idea that liberty means, as much as anything else, the right to one’s views and the freedom of our neighbor to express contrary views. All of this, of course, should be conducted with civility and a shared intention of pushing back the frontiers of barbarism and darkness – all in an effort to replace those borders with knowledge and enlightenment. Like the early republic at large, the settlement of Stafford was a design for freedom for those seeking emancipation from arbitrary authority. A settlement such as Stafford was more than a place to live and to work. Instead, it was an American outpost designed to discard most of the prejudices of the world Americans fled. The Bicentennial therefore offers the hope that contemporary Americans, in Stafford and elsewhere, can continue down a path offering optimism and illumination in lieu of pessimism and darkness.

