

The Making of American Citizens

A Comprehensive Review of America's History and Political Institutions, of Particular Interest and Help to Those Who are Studying for Naturalization and to Those Who Have Become American Citizens and Are Anxious to Learn How They May Become Better Qualified to Protect and Defend the Country of Their Adoption.

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IV.

THE BUILDING OF THE AMERICAN IDEA OF GOVERNMENT

I CANNOT in these letters tell a complete story of how government in England and America came to rest upon self-control rather than upon control, came to depend upon the power of each citizen to govern himself rather than upon a power vested in some man or group of men placed over him. I can merely touch here and there in this fascinating tale. Any reader coming from a foreign country who wishes to learn better how this great change came about in order that he may better understand the duties of the citizenship in America he has assumed or is seeking should read carefully some good history of England. Larsen's History of England and the British Commonwealth will be found interesting and helpful. A careful reading of some good history of the United States such as Hart's or Muzzey's will also help to give him a better understanding of countries governed by people-made laws. In these letters I try to do no more than give a few brief hints about the importance to the American citizen of knowing something of this interesting story.

In my last letter, I wrote of the life the colonists lived in the New World and how this life tended to make them a self-reliant, self-governing people. I told how the colonists had in the most part left England because of a feeling that she was an unkind and arbitrary mother—hence, lacked a loyal interest in her government, and, how the life in America had tended to make them feel that they were themselves a separate and distinct nation, dependent on England for little. Yet we must bear in mind that these people, whether they came from England or from Sweden, from Ireland or from Germany, lived in a part of the British Empire, and felt themselves to be the subjects of that great nation. Hence, the development of government in England was a part of the development of the American government. So we shall go back to England again.

William of Orange was allowed to become king of England in 1688, only upon his agreement to respect the power of Parliament and the right of the people. Consequently, soon after he came to London, he called the Parliament together; and, by this body, there was prepared, according to the agreement, the third great bulwark of English liberty, the Bill of Rights. This statute the king at once signed and promised to respect. The parts of the English Constitution which preceded this document were the Magna Charta, wrung from King John in 1215, and the Petition of Right, which Parliament forced Charles I to agree to in 1629. This agreement became, however, a dead letter, in that the king paid no attention to it; in fact, the resentment of Parliament and the people, because of this

breach of faith, was one reason for his later execution.

The Bill of Rights restated the rights contained in the Petition of King Charles' time and told how James and the other Stuart kings in their assertions of divine right had abused their privileges as rulers. Following the Bill of Rights, were the Act of Settlement, making it law that the kings of England should be of Protestant faith, and the Act of Toleration, extending religious freedom to all, except Catholics and Unitarians. Comment upon the justice or injustice of these laws is not necessary; the important thing is that the people of England were coming to have greater and greater voice in their government.

I am sure that William III had no thought of ruling England unjustly or of failing to respect the rights of her people. Nevertheless, he was a Dutchman whose chief interest was in Holland; who was engaged in wars abroad during his entire reign; who was in ill health; who was naturally arbitrary and stern of rule, and who was a soldier used to the discipline of the army. Consequently, disputes arose between him and Parliament. The effort was made to restore the Stuarts, and his reign was a somewhat stormy one. Yet, his wars abroad made it necessary for him to depend upon his ministers and, although he was a strong, somewhat autocratic king, the influence of Parliament became greater during his rule.

William and Mary had no heirs, so upon William's sudden death by accident, Anne, Mary's sister, became queen. Anne was a weak ruler and the power of Parliament continued to grow. Anne, too, had no heirs, so the throne was offered by Parliament to George, elector of the German state, Hanover, who owed his claim to the place to the fact that James I was his great grand-father. Moreover, as a Protestant, he was acceptable to the powerful leaders of the country.

George was a rude, uncouth, indolent character, who had no knowledge of English language and customs, so had to depend a great deal upon his ministers. These he selected from the Whig party which, under the leadership of Sir Robert Walpole, became the real ruling force of England. For a half century this party continued in power, a fact of great importance to us for this reason: the ruling doctrine of the Whigs was that Parliament, and not the king, should be the controlling force of the nation. Neither George I nor George II made any effort to oppose Parliament in its efforts to build up its power. Yet, it was not a rule of the people. As many of the common people could not vote, Parliament during this long time was made up largely of the aristocratic families and great landowners, who as they gained power for themselves, were really

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