

Private Access & Public Power

Gentility and Lobbying in the Early Congress—An Excerpt

by Jeffrey L. Pasley

In the 1790s, a lobbyist whose manners, appearance, and knowledge seemed to mark him as a gentleman had virtually unlimited access to any member of Congress he chose. Gentility created a kind of imaginary club, and one of the key benefits of membership was the right to be treated hospitably, as a friend, an equal and honored guest, by other gentry wherever you happened to go. Once acknowledged as a fellow gentleman, a lobbyist could not only see congressmen but join fully in their social life at the seat of government, providing all sorts of nonofficial settings where contacts could be built and sensitive business matters could be discussed discreetly and effectively.

By all accounts, the Congresses of the 1790s were well integrated into polite Philadelphia society, considered the most sophisticated such scene anywhere in the United States. This was no small matter in a period when social refinement was almost a mania in the United States. George Washington and most of his colleagues among the early American elite were obsessed with perfecting and expressing their gentility. They studied, sweated, and spent to meet standards of behavior borrowed from the royal courts of Europe, standards that applied to every conceivable aspect of life: architecture, home furnishings, table manners, movement, cleanliness, conversation, penmanship, clothing, even bowel habits.

Americans who could afford it hired masters to teach their children not only the complex group dances they were expected to navigate, but also the genteel approach to the most basic movements of everyday life: how to stand, how to sit, how to walk, how to enter a room. Gentility involved living your whole life as if it

were a public performance. They greatly admired people who could perform well. Hence the impressive displays of gentility put on in Philadelphia seriously impressed the congressmen who served there

The most serious problem with this in terms of government was that the members of the American gentry did not know they were superficial. Their assumption was that the genteel mask really did reflect the inner person, or else that the beast within had been effectively repressed. Genteel standards of taste and beauty were all about imposing smoothness, order, and harmony on rough nature, about putting an overlay of beautiful serenity on the harsh, chaotic realities of human life, about valuing and believing in those exteriors rather than the things they covered. Richard Bushman writes that “the attempt to control nature and society for the sake of a beautiful appearance made denial and repression essential traits of gentility. . . . Gentility hid what it could not countenance and denied whatever caused discomfort.” Gentility assumed integrity but it did not necessarily teach honesty.

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