

STEPHEN GIRARD, PIONEER MILLIONAIRE  
PHILANTHROPIST

BY J. V. NASH

A VISITOR to the city of Philadelphia one hundred years ago might have noticed among the persons whom he passed daily on the streets an individual of singular appearance. He was short and thickset in build, yet apparently of a rugged constitution, garbed in clothing of the plainest material, and looking out on the world through a single shrewd though kindly gray eye. He had some of the earmarks of a foreigner, but he seemed to possess a wide acquaintance, for many passers-by saluted him, and always with a certain air of deference.

If the visitor accosted a native and inquired the identity of this unusual personage, he would have been informed that this was no other than Stephen Girard. Further inquiry might have elicited the information that the said Girard was the owner of a great bank, of a fleet of sailing vessels which carried on a vast foreign trade, and of many blocks of real estate in Philadelphia and large tracts of Pennsylvania coal land; that though the man's manner of life was somewhat eccentric, he was regarded with much reverence by the people, for his private benevolences were many, and it was recalled how, during the fearful epidemic of yellow fever many years before, he had remained in the stricken city and had personally nursed the sick and dying in the crowded hospitals.

The story of Stephen Girard is in some of its aspects so extraordinary that, were it not a well authenticated fact, intimately bound up with the history of the United States during the early years of the Republic, and attested by the existence in Philadelphia of Girard College, it might seem mythical.

It is the story of an obscure young Frenchman, blown into Philadelphia by the winds of chance early in 1776, just as the

American Revolution was breaking. There he established himself in business, and so successful were his ventures that it was said of him that, like the legendary Midas, everything he touched turned to gold.

The time came at last when Stephen Girard possessed the largest fortune in the United States. During the War of 1812, when the great Government Loan went begging, his personal subscription of over a million dollars restored the national credit. And when death bore away the simple-living old man, it was found that he had willed his great fortune to the people. "Never before," says MacMaster, "had a citizen of the United States bequeathed so vast a sum for the public good."

It is a curious coincidence that, during the course of the eighteenth century, there came to Philadelphia three impecunious young strangers, unknown to fame, who were later to be numbered among the greatest of public benefactors. Early in the century the boy Benjamin Franklin, fleeing from inhospitable Boston, found a haven there. Later, when the clouds of the Revolution were gathering, an obscure young Englishman named Thomas Paine, and, two years later, an equally obscure young Frenchman, Stephen Girard, arrived in the city of Brotherly Love.

What brought Stephen Girard, a 26-year-old trader, to America at this critical period? To answer the question, we must retrace briefly the career of the young man up to this point.

In the ancient city of Bordeaux, on February 15, 1748, the curé of the parish of St. Seurin was called upon to solemnize the marriage of two respectable members of the local bourgeoisie. The bridegroom was one Pierre Girard, port captain, merchant, and later burgess; the bride was Odette Lafargue, a daughter of the parish of St. Remy. The union proved to be extremely fertile; ten children were born of it in the course of fourteen years. The first was a daughter. On May 20, 1750, the second child and eldest son was born. When, the following day, he was baptized in the parish church and given the name Etienne (Stephen) in honor of a worthy burgess who acted as his godfather, none of those present at the ceremony could have dreamed that the tiny infant whom they were launching upon the sea of life was destined to write his name indelibly in the annals of an overseas republic, the birth of which was still more than a quarter century distant.

Mme. Girard, her vitality doubtless sapped by almost annual confinements, died when Stephen was only twelve years old. Girard père, however, was still going strong, for he soon remarried and begot four more children.

The most notable physical peculiarity in Stephen Girard was the loss of his right eye. McMaster thinks that he was born with this disfigurement, adding that Girard could never remember having had the use of that eye. But Ingram, a biographer of nearly half a century ago, whose manuscript was approved as to facts by an aged surviving business associate of Girard, informs us that the loss of the eye was "the result of throwing wet oyster shells upon a bonfire, the heat of which splintering the shells, a fragment entered Stephen's right eye, destroying the sight in it beyond the hope of restoration." He tells us further that "the grief and pain attending the catastrophe was heightened by his playmates' subsequent thoughtless ridicule of his altered face, leaving so great an impression upon the sensitive young lad's mind that he vividly remembered it to the day of his death."

The taste for a sea-faring life must have been bred in Stephen, for his father as well as his uncles had inherited ships from their father, and were engaged in overseas trade. Pierre Girard seems to have prospered as a merchant. In 1767 he was honored by being appointed a burgess of Bordeaux. Some years earlier, Louis XV had conferred upon him the Royal and Military Order of St. Louis and his name had, by royal command, been enrolled in the register of the Admiralty at Paris.

This honor was bestowed in recognition of an act of personal bravery in the War of the Austrian Succession. It appears that the elder Girard was serving with the French squadron at Brest when the British, having blockaded the port, sent a fire-ship into the midst of the French fleet. Girard's vessel having caught fire, the younger man—he was then about thirty years old—at the risk of his life extinguished the flames and saved the ship.

The French are not, like the English, a people who take naturally to a nautical life. Stephen's family seems to have been an exception to this rule. At fourteen Stephen himself went to sea. As to the circumstances of his leaving home at so early an age, McMaster is silent, but Ingram furnishes us with an explanation that seems altogether probable. It appears that the step-mother, a woman of West

Indian or French-American origin, brought several children of her own into the already numerous Girard family. Stephen was a high-spirited boy, and while there is no evidence to show that the step-mother was intentionally harsh, friction inevitably developed.

Matters came to a head one day at the dinner table. A reproof from the step-mother caused Stephen's long pent up resentment to explode. The father demanded that Stephen apologize to Mme. Girard. But the boy, feeling himself in the right, obdurately refused any *amende*.

Stephen now proposed, as a means of ending an intolerable situation, that he be allowed to go to sea and learn the business of a trader. It appears that the father had originally intended his eldest son for a professional career, but he was now glad enough to fall in with the boy's suggestion. So he secured for him a "venture" in the good ship *Pèlerin* (Pilgrim), under Capt. Jean Courteau, which was about to sail for Santo Domingo, at that time an important French West Indian colony.

Thus it was that in 1764, aged fourteen, Stephen Girard sailed away from France, with a cargo valued at more than \$3000, furnished him by his father. On this first voyage he occupied the strange position of cabin boy and part owner.

The voyage lasted ten months and was highly successfully financially. Stephen now definitely embarked on a sea-faring career. After making five more voyages he was raised to the rank of lieutenant. He was anxious to become a captain on his own account. Under the French law an applicant for a license had to be at least twenty-five years old and to have served two years on ships of the Royal Navy before being admitted to the examination. Influence at home, however, secured a dispensation for Stephen, and in 1773 he received his license, authorizing him to act as captain, master, or pilot of a merchant ship.

The next year Stephen set sail from Bordeaux on the good ship *Julie* for Port-au-Prince. He was destined never again to see the wharves and spires of the old town of his birth, nor his father, nor any of his brothers or sisters, save only Jean, who later joined him in America. It is known, however, that years afterwards he extended liberal financial assistance to members of the family who had fallen into want.

In February, 1774, Stephen Girard arrived in Santo Domingo,

and then sailed with a cargo for New York. Here, for the first time, he set foot on the soil of North America. This was in July, 1775. In disposing of his merchandise at New York, he made the acquaintance of a prosperous merchant of the place, one Thomas Randall. The latter was impressed by the business ability of the young Frenchman and a friendship rapidly developed between the two.

Randall owned a vessel which made trading voyages between New York and New Orleans and among the West Indian islands. Young Girard accepted Randall's offer of a position as first officer on the ship and, at the conclusion of his first voyage, purchased a part interest in the vessel. This was followed by the formation of a partnership between the two.

It happened that in May, 1776, on a voyage to New York, Stephen Girard, after battling storm and fog for several days, found himself at the mouth of a large bay on the Atlantic Coast. Unaware of his exact location, he ordered that a small cannon, which was carried for emergencies, should be discharged several times as a call for a pilot.

The American Revolution was now beginning in earnest and the British Navy was already blockading the American coast. Naturally, the firing of a cannon by an unknown vessel caused much excitement on shore. In due time, however, a pilot came on board. From him Girard learned that he was at the mouth of Delaware Bay. The pilot also warned him of the presence of British cruisers outside the bay. Girard realized that, with the lifting of the fog, an attempt to go to New York would result in certain capture by the enemy.

What should he do? Prudence dictated that he should proceed up the river to Philadelphia. Unfortunately, he found that he had no American money and payment of pilotage was demanded in advance. But a Captain King, evidently an officer of the American forces, who had come on board with the pilot, offered the loan of the small sum necessary to take him up the river.

It is said that years afterwards, when he had become the wealthiest citizen of Philadelphia, he often alluded jokingly to the fact that he had had to borrow \$5.00 in order to reach the city.

Hardly had Girard and his vessel got to a point of safety when a British man-of-war poked its nose into the bay. Less than an hour's delay would have made Girard a British prisoner and in all

probability he would never have seen Philadelphia. On such narrow margins do the fortunes of men and nations sometimes hang. Twenty minutes after the vessel bearing Thomas Paine cleared from Dover on the way to France, an order reached the port from the British government for his arrest.

The war having swept American commerce off the seas, Girard on arriving at Philadelphia sold his interest in the vessel and hired a store which he stocked with the cargo he had brought from the West Indies. Girard was always resourceful. So now, the British blockade having raised the price of wine and brandy in Philadelphia, he wrote to friends in Bordeaux suggesting that a handsome profit might be made by running the blockade with cargoes of this character. The plan was carried out with great success; Girard's commissions proved a welcome addition to his income and helped to tide him over until he could establish a permanent foothold in his new environment. For the war promised to be a long one and he must reconcile himself to a protracted stay in America.

Young Girard, notwithstanding his facial disfigurement, seems to have possessed an attractive personality. At any rate, he soon began to make friends in Philadelphia. It was his intention, as soon as the war was over, to build another vessel and resume his trading activities.

This interest brought him into contact with a shipbuilder named Lum. Girard paid many visits to the shipbuilder's home. At the Lum home he soon found that he had business of a more personal nature. In short, he was deeply smitten by the shipbuilder's daughter, Mary, a beautiful, dark-eyed girl of sixteen. While she had little formal education, she possessed a quick intelligence and much native charm.

Young Girard feared that the announcement of his engagement to this unsophisticated young American girl—a Protestant into the bargain—might arouse unpleasant opposition at home. So he decided to hasten the marriage and let his relatives face the accomplished fact as best they might.

Stephen Girard and Mary Lum were married on June 6, 1777, at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Philadelphia by the Rev. Mr. Stringer. The young couple made their home in Girard's residence on Water Street. Here they remained until the following September when, Lord Howe and the British forces threatening Philadelphia,

Girard took his bride to Mt. Holly, in New Jersey. There they settled on a small farm which Girard had bought.

Meanwhile, Philadelphia had been captured by the British. Girard had now turned farmer, but managed to make frequent trips into the city, to keep an eye on his property there and also to sell his wines from Bordeaux.

His enforced leisure at this time gave Girard an opportunity to study the causes of the struggle between the Colonies and England, and he soon became an ardent patriot. He seems to have acquired a good command of English with little difficulty, and it is quite probable that his advocacy of independence, his deep admiration for the republican form of government, and his unbounded faith in the future of the American nation were inspired by the writings of Thomas Paine.

Already, as early as 1778, but two years after settling in Philadelphia, Stephen Girard had taken the oath of allegiance to the State of Pennsylvania, which he repeated and confirmed in the following year. The certificate attesting this fact which was issued to him reads as follows:

"I do hereby certify that Stephen Girard, of the city of Philadelphia, hath voluntarily taken the oath of allegiance and fidelity as directed by act of the General Assembly, passed on the 13th day of June, 1777. Witness my hand and seal, the 27th day of October, A. D., 1778. (Signed) Jno. Ord."

But we must hurry on with our story, skipping over many interesting details in this most romantic of biographies.

The evacuation of Philadelphia by the British in 1779 enabled Stephen Girard to bring back his wife and re-establish himself in the shipping business. He now commissioned father-in-law Lum to build him a ship. This he named the *Water Witch*. The vessel brought him great profit until finally shipwrecked.

In the midst of rapidly expanding business interests and growing prosperity, Stephen Girard suffered an almost crushing misfortune of a personal nature. In 1785 his wife went insane. His brother Jean, to whom he confided the news of the tragedy, wrote him: "I have safely received your letter of the 12th of May last. It is impossible to express to you what I felt at such news. I do truly pity the frightful state I imagine you to be in; above all, knowing the regard and love you bear your wife."

Under the tender care of her husband, who provided her with the best available medical treatment, Mrs. Girard showed marked improvement in her mental condition and her husband began to hope that the cure might be permanent.

In September, 1787, Stephen and his brother Jean made arrangements to take a ship with a valuable cargo of tobacco, rice, and indigo from Charleston, South Carolina, to Marseilles. This undertaking led to an important incident in Girard's life. He had to remain five weeks in Charleston while the ship was being loaded. During his stay there he was initiated into the Masonic Fraternity, as a Master Mason of Union Blue Lodge No. 8, a chapter of the Grand Lodge of Ancient York Masons in Charleston.

Like Voltaire, of whose works Girard was a close reader, (he named one of his vessels the *Voltaire* and another the *Rousseau*.) Girard was nominally a Catholic, and occasionally attended Catholic services. But when he died, forty four years later, it was the Masonic Order that conducted his funeral. This led to a clash with the clergy, which Ingram describes as follows: "Owing to the presence of the Masonic Fraternity, the necessary permission to do this (enter the churchyard) was only obtained from the clergy of the parish under threat of legal proceedings on the part of the executors, the priests refusing to officiate, and leaving the churchyard when the Society entered."

Mrs. Girard's cure, unfortunately, was not destined to be permanent. In the course of time she suffered a final relapse. Jean Girard attributes her breakdown to disappointment in having no children, and continual brooding on the subject. On the advice of the best physicians in Philadelphia, Stephen Girard reluctantly consented to his wife's removal to an asylum, to which she was committed August 31, 1790. Never recovering her mind, she remained an inmate of the hospital until her death in 1815.

The horror of this tragedy was deepened by the fact that the unfortunate woman, some months after her commitment to the asylum, gave birth to a daughter. Ingram quotes as his authority for this statement William G. Malin, ex-steward of the Pennsylvania Hospital. The child was taken to the country and tenderly nursed, but its life was brief.

Stephen Girard now sought forgetfulness by immersing himself in business. Years later he wrote in a letter: "When I rise in the



morning, my only effort is to labor so hard during the day that when night comes I may be enabled to sleep soundly." But he was not a mere slave to money-getting. There is a pathetic touch in this extract from a letter to his friend Duplessis, of New Orleans, written in 1804:

"I observe with pleasure that you have a numerous family, that you are happy, and in the possession of an honest fortune. This is all that a wise man has the right to wish for. As to myself, I live like a galley slave, constantly occupied, and often passing the night without sleeping. I am wrapped up in a labyrinth of affairs, and worn out with care. I do not value fortune. The love of labor is my highest ambition. You perceive that your situation is a thousand times preferable to mine."

With wealth piling up in mountains all about him, Stephen Girard lived to the end a life of Jeffersonian simplicity. Many little anecdotes reveal his personal kindness to and forbearance with humble employes in his counting-house. A clerk through carelessness had sent out a check overpaying an account to the amount of \$300. The recipient of the check was an honest man and returned it with a letter to Girard. The latter quietly placed the letter and the check on the clerk's desk, where he found them the following morning and realized his serious error. His employer contented himself with this silent reproach.

"On another occasion," we are told, "small sums of money having been missed from the counting-house, the errand boy was suspected of the thefts and, being watched, was at last caught in the act. Instead of the severe punishment which might naturally have been expected to follow, Girard merely directed that a new and more intricate lock should be obtained for the money drawer, and this being accordingly done, the matter was passed by without further comment. Girard probably felt that the remorse shown by the lad was sufficient token of his repentance, but it was such acts of judicious forbearance toward his employes, at times when they were undoubtedly derelict, that implanted in the bosoms of the better of them such personal admiration and regard as grew in time almost to veneration."

When, in 1793, Philadelphia was visited by a frightful epidemic of yellow fever, of which thousands perished, Stephen Girard exhausted himself to the utmost in the work of relieving suffering.

When others were fleeing from the plague-ridden city, he stayed at the post of danger. Ingram, quoting a contemporary authority, relates that Stephen Girard "remained six, seven, or eight hours daily in the hospital, leaving only to visit the infected districts and assist in removing the sick from the houses in which they were dying without help. He had to encourage and comfort the sick, to hand them necessaries and medicines, to wipe the sweat from their brows, and to perform many disgusting offices of kindness which nothing could render tolerable but the exalted motives that impelled him to this heroic conduct."

A personal witness gives us the following vivid picture of Stephen Girard among the plague sufferers:

"A carriage, rapidly driven by a black servant, broke the silence of the deserted and grass-grown street. It stopped before a frame house in 'Farmer's Row,' the very hotbed of the pestilence, and the driver, first having bound a handkerchief over his mouth, opened the door of the carriage and quickly remounted to the box. A short, thick-set man stepped from the coach and entered the house. In a minute or two the observer, who stood at a safe distance watching the proceedings, heard a shuffling noise in the entry, and soon saw the visitor emerge, supporting with extreme difficulty a tall, gaunt, yellow-visaged victim of the pestilence. His arm was around the waist of the sick man, whose yellow face rested against his own, his long, damp, tangled hair mingling with his benefactor's, his feet dragging helpless upon the pavement. Thus, partly dragging, partly lifted, he was drawn to the carriage door, the driver averting his face from the spectacle, far from offering to assist. After a long and severe exertion the well man succeeded in getting the fever-stricken patient into the vehicle, and then entering it himself, the door was closed and the carriage drove away to the hospital, the merchant having recognized in the man who thus risked his life for another the foreigner, Stephen Girard!" (*United States Gazette*, Jan. 13, 1832.)

Girard's shipping business grew to enormous proportions. During the Napoleonic wars, this department of his business suffered many vicissitudes. As a result of the rival embargoes imposed by the warring European nations, some of his ships were seized and their cargoes confiscated. But he had other business interests which

claimed much of his attention. One of the important sources of his wealth was real estate.

"Year after year," says McMaster, "as his wealth increased, farm was added to farm in Passyunk, land was acquired in Moyamensing, houses and lots were purchased in the city until by the close of 1812 he had expended \$367,000. For one hundred and forty-three acres in Passyunk he paid \$49,222; forty acres in Moyamensing cost \$4,000; houses on Spruce Street, \$20,000; on Second Street, \$20,000; on Front Street, \$57,000. His banking house on Third Street cost \$115,000; for the square between Market and Chestnut, Eleventh and Twelfth Streets, bought in 1807, he paid \$101,820."

When, early in 1812, Congress allowed the charter of the first Bank of the United States to lapse, Girard, who had invested heavily in its shares, purchased the bank, its equipment, outstanding paper, and good-will outright. He re-opened the institution as "The Bank of Stephen Girard." Its capital on beginning business was \$1,200,000, an amount increased on the first of January, 1813, to \$1,300,000.

During the War of 1812, as we have already noticed, Stephen Girard rendered invaluable assistance financially to the United States Government. Without his timely aid—which was followed by a series of brilliant victories over the enemy—the country might have lost its independence and sunk back into the status of a British dependency.

Stephen Girard, as the years went on, became a sort of living institution in Philadelphia. He passed his sixtieth milestone, then his seventieth, and in 1830 his eightieth. The span of his life in Philadelphia stretched from just before the signing of the Declaration of Independence to the beginning of railroad construction.

In 1829, when the State of Pennsylvania was facing bankruptcy through the extravagance and incompetence of legislators and State officials, when the treasury was empty and there was no money available to carry on the business of government, the Governor in despair hurried to Philadelphia to seek the aid of Stephen Girard. The aged merchant—he was now seventy-nine—received the excited Executive in a kindly fashion and without hesitation advanced to the Commonwealth \$100,000 on the sole credit of the Governor, risking the possible repudiation of the latter's act by the Legislature.

While walking home from his bank early in 1830, Stephen Girard was run down by a horse and wagon. A wheel passed over his head, inflicting serious and painful injury. But he recovered sufficiently to resume his business activities. In the following April we find him buying thousands of acres of coal lands, and in July, 1831, accepting election as a trustee of the new Merchants' Exchange of Philadelphia.

Stephen Girard now knew that death was near, but he wished to be active to the last. Of death itself he had no fear. A month before the end he remarked: "When Death comes for me he will find me busy, unless I am asleep in bed. If I thought I was going to die tomorrow, I should plant a tree, nevertheless, today."

The end came peacefully. On the afternoon of December 26, 1831, the news spread over Philadelphia that the old town's foremost citizen was no more. The passing of Stephen Girard was marked by demonstrations of sorrow and respect on all sides. Flags on public buildings and on the shipping in the harbor flew at half-mast in honor of this modest private citizen who had held no public office, and resolutions of regret were adopted by the municipal bodies.

The funeral procession was probably the largest that the city of Philadelphia had ever witnessed. The Mayor, alderman, and other officials, officers of Masonic lodges, and trustees of the many benevolent institutions of which Stephen Girard had been a benefactor, marched in the funeral procession through crowds of mourning citizens. The honor of a civic funeral had been decreed by the municipality. No services of a religious character were held; the interment was under Masonic auspices.

Twenty years later the body of Stephen Girard was removed from the churchyard in which it had been buried despite the protests of the clergy, and transferred to a marble sarcophagus in the main building of Girard College. This second funeral was conducted by the Pennsylvania Grand Lodge of Masons; over 1500 members of the craft in full regalia participated in the imposing ceremonies, twelve Past Masters acting as pall-bearers.

Stephen Girard's estate at the time of his death amounted to about \$7,500,000. When his will was opened, it was found that he had bequeathed to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania \$300,000 for internal improvements, and to the city of Philadelphia cash and

real estate totaling over \$6,000,000. The sum of \$2,000,000 was set aside for the establishment of a school to be devoted to training orphan boys in useful occupations.

Girard College, after some litigation, was organized and officially opened on January 1, 1848, and has continued, down to our own day, to fulfill the benevolent purposes of its founder. To the original single building some twenty others have since been added, its financial resources have, by wise management, been increased by many millions, and its present enrollment is about 1500 students.

A furore arose when it became known that Stephen Girard, when laying down in his will the rules for the government of the institution created by his bounty, had inserted the following extraordinary provision:

“I enjoin and require that no ecclesiastic, missionary, or minister of any sect whatsoever shall ever hold or exercise any station or duty whatever in the said college; nor shall any such person ever be admitted for any purpose, or as a visitor, within the premises appropriated to the purposes of the said College. In making this restriction, I do not mean to cast any reflection upon any sect or person whatever; but, as there is such a multitude of sects, and such diversity of opinion amongst them, I desire to keep the tender minds of the orphans, who are to derive advantage from this bequest, free from the excitements, which clashing doctrines and sectarian controversy are apt to produce; my desire is, that all the instructors and teachers in the College shall take pains to instill into the minds of the scholars the purest principles of morality, so that, on their entrance into active life, they may, from inclination and habit, evince benevolence towards their fellow creatures, and a love of truth, sobriety and industry, adopting at the same time such religious tenets as their matured reason may enable them to prefer.”

This remarkable provision does not seem to have been inspired by any spirit of revenge upon or prejudice against the churches as such. During his lifetime Stephen Girard never set himself up as an avowed anti-clerical. He treated all denominations with impartiality, and even extended financial aid to religious groups when circumstances appeared to him to justify such benevolence. It is reported, indeed, that he required his bank employes to attend the services of their respective communions.

Even after his affiliation with Freemasonry, Girard evidently

continued to regard himself as a nominal Catholic. He maintained a pew in a local Catholic church, and until the later years of his life he sometimes went to mass. But it would appear that he had long since lost any interest in dogma. It is surmised that the Quakers, whose philosophy of life he greatly admired, strongly influenced his religious development, until at last he found content in a simple Deism.

Stephen Girard, although a vague and almost forgotten figure in the memory of Americans today, was an important factor in our social evolution. The magnitude of private philanthropy in the United States is one of the elements of American life which never fail to create astonishment in the minds of visiting Europeans. Girard was the first American millionaire philanthropist. He made fashionable the giving away of private fortunes for educational and other benevolent purposes. Since his death billions of dollars have been diverted from private ownership in this manner. And paradoxically enough, the man who established this practice, which today is regarded as peculiarly American, was himself a European, a product of the French bourgeoisie, whose parsimonious habits are proverbial and whose altruism seldom strays beyond the immediate family circle.