

PATRICK HENRY [Matthew Livingston Davis] to MVB, 6 September 1834

Letter III.

Albany

Sept. 6th, 1834.

Sir,-

Before proceeding to notice your official acts, I shall, very briefly, recur to two incidents which may be considered indicative of the cast of your mind. You well know, sir, that for a time you was employed in the office of the late Judge William P. Van Ness. You may remember, and if you do not, you ought, the circumstances under which you was first noticed by that gentleman. Whether he was, or was not entitled to your gratitude, it is unnecessary to enquire. Judge Van Ness was the friend of Col. Burr. He wrote a pamphlet, under the signature of *Aristides*, defending the then Vice President, and attacking, in a violent and libellous manner, several of his most distinguished opponents in the State of New York. You knew Mr. Van Ness to be the author. Shortly after the publication of this pamphlet, it was ascertained that the Judge had been betrayed. Upon you, sir, suspicion rested. Mr. Van Ness entertained no doubt, to the day of his death, that you had divulged the secret. You knew his impressions, but it is believed did not know the source from whence they were derived; nor was you able to eradicate them. After the lapse of years, it was asserted, most probably by a friend of yours, that you had made the communication to Judge Spencer. The Judge denied the allegation; and this denial, as to himself, has been considered, by some, evidence of the falsity of the charge.

But, sir, there is another version of this story. If it be true that you betrayed the confidence of your patron, it was done, directly or indirectly, to the late De Witt Clinton. This remark is not made hastily, nor unadvisedly. Judge Van Ness received this information from Governor Clinton; or he shamefully misrepresented Mr. Clinton. I will now state a fact. You or your friends may pursue the enquiry, if it is deemed discreet and prudent.

In the winter of 1822, Judge Van Ness was in this city. When here, he was in the habit of visiting me. One day he came to my house. As soon as he entered the room, it was perceptible that he was under an excitement. The question was put to him- "Judge, what ails you?" He paused a few moments, and then replied:-

"I have been conversing about Van Buren. I can never think of him, in connection with my pamphlet (*Aristides*,) without feeling indignant." After again pausing, he proceeded-"I met F.M. Beekman in State street. We had some conversation. I explained to him Van Buren's perfidy. I told him, that some time after the publication of *Aristides*, I met De Witt Clinton in the city of New York. He came up and gave me his hand; and while holding my hand in his, he stated that my confidence had been betrayed by Van Buren. The remark embarrassed me greatly. Mr. Clinton perceived it; and then added, 'Judge, do not give yourself any uneasiness: no advantage will be taken of it.'"

Now, sir, such was the statement made by Mr. Van Ness in 1822. With Mr. Beekman I have never spoken on the subject. I have never before repeated the conversation. Mr. Beekman is yet alive in Hudson. He can say whether such an interview took place between Judge Van Ness and himself, in this city, at the time specified. In 1822 the parties were all living. Among others, Phillip S. Parker. You will understand the allusion. If Mr. Van Ness made this statement to Mr. Beekman, about *twenty years* after the pamphlet was published, and while Mr. Clinton was yet in being, can there be any doubt of his having detailed to B. the interview with accuracy? And if true, who can be made to believe that Gov. Clinton misrepresented the facts to Mr. Van Ness? I do not intend to press this subject. I present the case without comment. It is evident, however, that Judge Spencer's denial does not meet it.

There is another circumstance, which I will now notice, tending to place your veracity, in early life, in a "questionable shape." You was instrumental in getting up a petition to the legislature, to enquire into the titles of what was termed the manors. You pretended to believe, that this property, belonging to the Van Rensselaers and the Livingstons, was escheated. You was charged with having written a letter to a gentleman, I think Abel Whallon, in which, it was said, you remarked, that although the titles could not be impaired, yet agitating the subject before the legislature, *would have a good political effect*. You denied ever having written a letter of such an import. Now, sir, I feel myself authorised to say, that such a letter was written by you, and that among other persons who read or possessed it, was the venerable Mr. Van Vechten, of this city. I do not, after a whole generation

have passed away, pretend to accuracy, as to the details; but in substance, the case is truly stated, and at the time of its occurrence, nearly thirty years ago, it added nothing to your fame for correctness, nor your character as a man of honor. Indeed, it was facetiously remarked, that you was born for a poet.

With such propensities, and such qualifications, you became a politician. You are sometimes spoken of as having taken a part in the revolution of 1798. Ridiculous! You was a student and a minor, long after the election of Mr. Jefferson in 1801. It is true, I formerly heard your friend Riel, now, I believe, a resident in the city of New York, tell the story, how in 1800, he frequently took you out to Coxsackie, for the purpose of training you up as an electioneerer.

Your political career, sir, commenced in 1812. It commenced as an opponent of the war, and the friends of the war; as an opponent of southern statesmen, and southern policy. My next letter shall be devoted to an examination of this part of your history.

PATRICK HENRY.

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