

## FOREWORD

The New York State Historical Association, believing that the development of civilization and government in what has become the Empire State has been too meagerly examined, understood and presented, has instituted a program of publication, which, it hopes, will contribute to making clearer the human interest and significance that attach to what Americans of many origins have accomplished on this soil. Its ten-volume *History of the State of New York*, now proceeding, attempts a wide-sweeping summary of that story through three centuries and more. Its quarterly magazine, *New York History*, continues to present brief papers on phases, episodes and personalities more or less important in the evolution of the state. But to permit a longer and more searching play of light on some of these than is possible in a general work or in such a periodical, the Association begins with this volume a *Series* of studies to appear approximately once a year.

Dr. Spaulding's work is, we feel, a fortunate beginning, in its subject and its method. No other state, not even Virginia, underwent such striking and far-reaching social changes by reason of the Revolution as did New York. The term "Critical Period," as describing the years immediately afterward, was used as early as 1857; John Fiske, who could look back upon the strain of the Civil War, still thought that the name belonged with special propriety to the 1780's, observing that the "period of five years following the peace of 1783 was the most critical moment in the history of the American people," and in the title of his most famous work gave it classic and permanent standing. But if the times were critical for the American nation as a whole they were particularly so in the new state of New York. In what was legally one commonwealth there was the sharpest difference as to economic inter-

est between the rich and populous commercial region around New York harbor on the one hand and the agricultural and pioneering area spreading to the Saint Lawrence and the Great Lakes on the other. There was sectionalism in every state, but here it was especially aggravated. It was difficult indeed to recreate the normal life of New York City, which had been in possession of the enemy for seven years and had been wasted by disastrous fires. The population of the state, in many instances its neighborhoods and families, had been almost equally divided in allegiance as to the king and the republic; how to deal with the defeated Tories was a major problem for the legislature and the courts. A large and clamorous debtor element among the upstate farmers, counting on the profitable customs duties which the state collected at the port to ease their taxes, were in no mood to surrender the control of customs and the guaranty of contracts to a federal government which would have the further right to enforce the provisions of a treaty that protected Tories. Everyone well realized that New York, with its central position, could veto constitutional reform, and for a considerable time a majority was bent on doing so. These forces and factors Dr. Spaulding analyzes with penetrating search and sets forth with rare constructive skill. The final acceptance of the Constitution provides the climax, but the drama that he here rehearses is far broader and more complicated than the immediate contest at Poughkeepsie in 1788.

The discerning reader will recognize certain forces that still operate in the life of the state, illustrating the value of an historical approach to the problems of a given time. But the method which the author follows is in itself a better illustration. He clearly apprehends that the momentous contest of the eighties did not rest upon the surface of those years. He bores to deep foundations in the peculiar land system of New York, as old as the Freedoms and Exemptions of 1629. The two important legacies of New Netherland were arbitrary government and, more persisting, the ideal of the tenanted

estate. In few, if any, places can one find a clearer brief amount of the rise of class feeling from the claims of aristocratic landlords and the resentment of agricultural renters and their small-acred neighbors, expressing itself now and then in the threat or fact of armed conflict. Historians of politics often throw in lumps of social history as a sort of bonus to their readers, but writers from Macaulay to Beard have pointed out that there is a very real interpenetration in the two. Dr. Spaulding succeeds in showing how true this is in the history of New York. Ideas run through the mill of political procedure and come out laws and policies, but first there are ideas, ideas which themselves grow out of circumstances. In relating the political controversies of the critical period to the social conditions out of which they sprang, the author has assured the permanence of his work.

Neither special interest nor special training is needed to enjoy this book. Its dramatic theme, its vivid characterization, its lucidity of style, its logical and clean-cut organization, will hold attention in the subway or in an Adirondack cabin as well as in the scholar's study. But the scholar will find a special profit in the suggestions in the notes and bibliography. He will observe that the newspapers of the entire state, and some outside, have been finely combed, that new manuscript sources have been exploited, and that there has been laid under contribution a mass of treatises which as a whole will be found familiar by few indeed. Moreover, he will enjoy the author's ringing challenges to those pundits who have preceded him in various walks of his inquiry. Nobody's dictum has received respect without a rigorous test. Altogether the Association takes no little pride in presenting this first volume in the *New York State Historical Association Series*.

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