

ALLA CORRENTE

Filippo Mazzei: “All Men are Created Equal”

*Another edition of **Alla Corrente** dealt with Italian influences on Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, especially the role of Italian workers on the development of orchards. Filippo Mazzei was instrumental in helping Jefferson with his plantings and with his attempt to develop a vineyard at Monticello. This July **Alla Corrente** looks at another role that Mazzei played, as a close friend and confidant of Jefferson. Also, in keeping with a Fourth of July theme, we need to recognize the fact that Jefferson was influenced by Mazzei in the key statement of the Declaration of Independence (“All Men are Created Equal”):*

*According to Joint Resolution 175 of the 103rd Congress, “the phrase in the Declaration of Independence ‘All men are created equal’ was suggested by the Italian patriot and immigrant Mazzei. John F. Kennedy, in **A Nation of Immigrants** (pp. 15-16) also made note of this fact: “The great doctrine ‘All men are created equal’ incorporated into the Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson, was paraphrased from the writing of Philip Mazzei, an Italian-born patriot and pamphleteer, who was a close friend of Jefferson.”*

Filippo Mazzei (1730-1816) was a Florentine merchant, surgeon, and horticulturist, who befriended Thomas Jefferson through business connections several years before they actually met. After working as a wine merchant in London for about eighteen years, Mazzei sailed to Virginia in 1773 to indulge his interest in the political life of the Colonies and to conduct agricultural experiments. The Virginia Legislature had promised Mazzei some land in Augusta County, and on his way to the Shenandoah Valley, he stopped to see Jefferson at Monticello. When he discovered that the land he was to receive was divided into separate tracts, Jefferson persuaded him to settle in Albemarle County where Jefferson gave him 193 acres of land on the south side of Monticello. Mazzei purchased about 700 more acres by 1778 and named his farm Colle.

Mazzei brought many people with him, including the widow Maria Martin (whom he married in 1774), several workers, and a tailor, Carlo Bellini, whom Jefferson recommended for a position as professor of modern languages at the College of William and Mary. Mazzei and Jefferson worked on composing political tracts and electing “Independent Companies,” i.e. volunteers from each county to become representatives for a “Convention” rather than the Assembly. (When people elected the same men to the “Convention” who were already members of the Assembly, Lord Dunmore (the Royal Governor of Virginia) could not simply dissolve the “Convention” as he could legally dissolve the Assembly). Elected to the vestry after only six months of residence in the area, Mazzei began to speak in various churches about Jefferson’s ideas on religious freedom. When he announced his “Proposal for forming a Company or Partnership, for the Purpose of raising and making Wine, Oil, agruminous Plants, and Silk,” he had no trouble finding subscribers. In May 1774, however, a severe frost ruined the vines that had been planted, yet Mazzei felt that Virginia’s soil and climate were “better calculated” than any other for wine production.

Regardless of his prediction, the “Wine Company” failed to thrive. Instead, Mazzei began to establish his reputation as a patriot by joining the American Revolutionary War effort. He became a private in the “Independent Company” of Albemarle when the British first landed troops at Hampton, Virginia. Jefferson gave him a copy of the “Rough Draught” of the Declaration of Independence, while an excerpt of Mazzei’s “Instructions of the Freeholders of Albemarle County to their Delegates in Convention” was used by Jefferson in his attempt to institute a new state constitution. Mazzei also signed a petition for Jefferson’s Committee on Religion to abolish spiritual tyranny. By 1778 Jefferson, Patrick Henry, George Mason and others decided that Mazzei’s efforts would be most useful abroad; he was sent to try to borrow money from the Grand Duke of Tuscany for Virginia and to gather useful political and military information for Governor Jefferson. The State of Virginia paid him six hundred luigi a year between 1779 and 1784 for his services. Having become a naturalized citizen of Virginia, Mazzei returned to America in 1783 hoping to receive a consular post,

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but was disappointed when he was not given a position. He left Virginia for the last time in 1785. His wife stayed at Colle until she died in 1788; she was buried in the Jefferson family graveyard at Monticello. Mazzei eventually gave Colle to his wife’s daughter (Mazzei’s stepdaughter) Maria Margherita Martini, who married Justin Pierre Plumard, Comte de Rieux in Paris in 1780, and settled at Colle in 1783.

After his departure, Mazzei maintained a close relationship with many of his former compatriots, including Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe. Mazzei published a four-volume history of the colonies, *Recherches Historiques et Politiques sur les États-Unis de l’Amérique Septentrionale* (1788), and he relied on his Virginia connections for material for the book. This was the first history of the American Revolution to be published in French, and the book served as a source of fact about the American Revolution, and as a counterweight to British propaganda and French misinformation. The success of the book led to Mazzei’s appointment as the Polish chargé d’affaires in Paris. He furthered his career by moving to Warsaw to work as an agent for the enlightened King Stanislaus Augustus of Poland. The King had admired Mazzei’s efforts during the American and French revolutions, and Mazzei eventually helped to reestablish relations between France and Poland. He remained in Warsaw as the King’s privy councilor until the second division of Poland forced his retirement. Mazzei and Jefferson continued to correspond. Mazzei helped Jefferson obtain portraits of Vespucci, Columbus, Magellan, and Cortez from the grand duke of Florence, and virtually all later copies that found their way into other American collections (including Madison’s) were taken from the same Florentine originals. To kindle interest in the American cause in Italy, he translated many of Jefferson’s public speeches and letters, and he worked to improve provisions for U.S. merchants in Italian ports. Horticultural topics never ceased to be of interest to Mazzei and Jefferson. Jefferson sent him a description of his newly invented plow, and Mazzei sent him many seeds and plants. Mazzei wrote of his trip to Florence to find sculptors for the U.S. Capitol and of his appeals on behalf of Ceracchi’s widow. Jefferson also kept Mazzei apprised of political events. He sent Mazzei one of his most controversial letters, in which he wrote: “In place of that noble love of liberty and republican government which carried us triumphantly thro’ the war, an Anglican, monarchical and aristocratical party has sprung up Against us are the Executive, the Judiciary, two out of three branches of the legislature, all the officers of the government, all who want to be officers, all timid men who prefer the calm of despotism to the boisterous sea of liberty.”

Mazzei’s American investments were a continuous source of strife. His farm at Colle had deteriorated; it had been rented to officers of the British Army who were detained at The Barracks prison compound in Albemarle County. Jefferson explained that Mazzei “had rented his place to General Riedesel, whose horses in one week destroyed the whole labor of three or four years, and thus ended an experiment [i.e. the vineyards], which, from every appearance, would in a year or two more have established the practicability of that branch of culture in America.” When Jefferson returned from France in 1789, he acted with Mazzei’s lawyers and sold Colle in 1796 and other plots that Mazzei owned in Richmond in 1813. Jefferson discovered, however, that he could not remit the proceeds to Mazzei because of the War with England [i.e. War of 1812]. He loaned the money to himself. He managed to pay off the interest to Mazzei’s heirs, but the debt on the \$7,000 principal was not settled until 1836 when the heirs instituted a suit against Jefferson’s estate.

Mazzei retired to Pisa, Italy, in 1792. He married Antonina Tonini in 1796, and had a daughter Elisabetta in 1798. In 1802 he began to enjoy the pension paid by Alexander I of Russia, who had assumed the King of Poland’s debts after the final partition of Poland (Mazzei had also become a citizen of Poland). Mazzei often contemplated returning to America, and not surprisingly, Jefferson recommended the Monticello neighborhood. Even if Mazzei at times tried Jefferson’s patience (Jefferson had written to Madison in 1784 that Mazzei’s arrival in Annapolis would be worse than a return of his “double quotidian headache”), he wrote

that Mazzei could find cheap land near Monticello; he nevertheless warned that in general the cost of living had doubled and that much of the “amiable hospitality” which had prevailed in Virginia had disappeared as a result. Mazzei never did return to America. He established himself as a gardener and died in 1816, three years after completing his memoirs.

Some quotes from Thomas Jefferson dealing with Mazzei:

1778 October 19. (Jefferson to John Hancock) *“Philip Mazzei possesses first rate ability...He has been a zealous whig from the beginning and I think may be relied on perfectly in point of integrity. He is very sanguine in his expectations of the services he could render us on this occasion and would undertake it on a very moderate appointment...”*

1784 March 16. (Jefferson to James Madison, Annapolis) *“An alarming paragraph in your letter says Mazzei is coming to Annapolis. I tremble at the idea. I know he will be worse to me than a return of my double quotidian headache.”*

1816 July 18. (Jefferson to Giovanni Carmignani) *“An intimacy of 40 years had proved to me his great worth; and a friendship, which had begun in personal acquaintance, was maintained after separation, without abatement by a constant interchange of letters. His esteem too in this country was very general; his early and zealous cooperation in the establishment of our independence having acquired for him here a great degree of favor.”*

1816 July 18. (Jefferson to Thomas Appleton) *“Your letter brought me the first information of the death of my ancient friend Mazzei, which I learn with sincere regret. He had some peculiarities (and who of us has not?), but he was of solid worth; honest, able, zealous in sound principles, moral and political, constant in friendship, and punctual in all his undertakings. He was greatly esteemed in this country...”*

-Dr. James J. Boitano

(Adapted from *The Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia*,
<http://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/philip-mazzei>)

