

# ROBERT COLEMAN, MILLIONAIRE IRONMASTER

*The prototype of late 19th century moguls, Robert Coleman and his amazing character are examined by Professor Frederic S. Kleiu.*

There has always been something fascinating about people who have become millionaires. For more than a century, the acquisition of great wealth has been a significant part of what is usually called the American Dream, memorialized by Horatio Alger, typified by Carnegie and Vanderbilt and Rockefeller, and denounced by socialists who cannot understand how one person can have so much when so many have so little.

Sometimes the process of becoming a millionaire is considered to be merely a matter of luck, like the magic touch of the sparkling wand of the Goddess of Fortune; sometimes it is believed to be an undeserved or unfair freak of Fate, which must somehow be accompanied by an unpleasant compensating factor, such as permanent affliction with the gout, or having a sword of Damocles dangling overhead, like an ubiquitous mobile; but more frequently it is reluctantly admitted that the million dollars may have resulted from long and dull hours of energetic work, always accompanied by driving ambition and the vision to recognize an opportunity and to take advantage of it.

Robert Coleman was probably Pennsylvania's first millionaire, and it should be interesting to trace the particular chain of circumstances which led an immigrant boy from Ireland to become a millionaire, and which led the millionaire to Lancaster.

Coleman was well-known in post-Revolutionary Pennsylvania, but his career has been submerged by the rushing stream of history during the past century and a half. Since, after all, history is simply a composite of the experiences and actions of individual human beings, the story of Robert Coleman should lead us to a better understanding of an era which is now long past, but still fundamental in our American heritage.

Robert Coleman's native land was Ireland, and his place of birth was known as CastleFinn, near Strabane in County Donegal, not far from the ancestral home of James Buchanan. He was more English than Irish, for

his family had been persuaded to leave England and take up lands in Ireland by Charles I. His father, Thomas, was married twice, with a family of two sons from his first marriage and six daughters by his second marriage. Robert was born on November 4th, 1748. Perhaps this was too large a family for father Thomas, but in any case a brother-in-law, who was an Anglican clergyman, persuaded the two boys to consider emigration to the new world. Brother William took passage to Canada, and a short time afterwards, in 1764, Robert Coleman, at the age of 16, took the long passage to Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup>

A generation before, another teen-age boy named Benjamin Franklin had arrived on these same Philadelphia streets, but Coleman had a slightly better start. Franklin had only one Dutch dollar in his pocket, but Bob Coleman had three guineas, and two letters of introduction. Friends in England had supplied him with a note to Mark Biddle, a Philadelphia merchant, and friends in Ireland had directed him to Blair McClenahan, banker, merchant and politician.

For a few months he was employed in Biddle's store, where it became apparent that he could write very neatly and legibly. When it was learned that Mr. Read, the prothonotary in Reading, needed a clerk, young Bob Coleman was recommended. There he worked copying wills, legal records, mortgages, deeds and agreements for two years, acquiring useful first-hand knowledge of the complications and devices for owning and transferring property.

Then, at nearby Hopewell Furnace, Curtis and Peter Grubb, two of Pennsylvania's most famous ironmasters, needed a book-keeper, and, having seen some of Coleman's careful attention to legal details and having witnessed his precise work, employed him at one hundred pounds a year at Hopewell.<sup>2</sup> This was in 1766, he was now eighteen years old, and this was his first experience with the iron industry.

As he kept the records of the eighteenth century charcoal iron furnace, he learned much about the routine of the ironmaster's business. He recorded the names and hours of the charcoal-burners, who lived in huts in the Furnace Hills, cutting and charring huge heaps of wood. He listed the wagons and waggoners who brought the charcoal and ore and limestone to the furnace. He learned that it took almost an acre of woodland every day to produce the charcoal for two tons of iron daily. He learned that mining in Pennsylvania required no special skill, since most of the ore deposits lay on the surface and could be quarried without excavation or tunnelling or shafts. He learned how a simple charcoal blast furnace could be built against the side of a hill, so that the charge could be wheeled in to the top, and the molten iron drawn off at the bottom. He found out that the location of a furnace depended mostly on ore deposits, wood and water power to drive the huge bellows for the air blast. He learned the difference between a furnace which produced pig-iron and castings, and a forge, which hammered masses of hot iron into iron bars. Above all, as he kept his books, he learned that relatively small amounts of cash were needed for the iron-master's enterprise — hours of labor credited to the

workmen every day were often balanced by commodities purchased at the iron-master's store; supplies and equipment needed on the manor were often balanced by shipments of pig-iron or bar-iron or cast-iron products to merchants in Philadelphia. Extension of longterm credits was common to the business. The most essential attributes seemed to be plenty of woodland near the orefields, and an understanding of the complex relationships which made the ironmaster's manor a self-supporting community. To have learned all this at the age of eighteen gave Coleman a good start.

Coleman spent about six months at Hopewell, and then went to work for a new employer, an event which was to have great influence on his coming career. He took a position as a clerk at Quitapahilla Forge, later known as New Market Forge, under James Old, another of Pennsylvania's great ironmasters.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it may be true that they had met before, when Coleman was a young clerk in Biddle's store in Philadelphia, but it seems evident that James Old was impressed by the young man's appearance and his qualifications as a careful book-keeper and clerk. Coleman lived with his employer's family, moving from time to time to Speedwell Forge and to Reading Furnace in Chester County.

Having accomplished his first two steps on the road to success — beautiful and legible penmanship and a knowledge of the inner workings of industrial finance, Coleman now took his third step, and one which all would-be millionaires would do well to consider. After three years in James Old's employ, he married his employer's lovely daughter, Ann Old, on October 4th, 1773, at Reading Furnace. This was the end of his career as an employee, and the beginning of his experience as an ironmaster, for in the same year he rented Salford Furnace, near Norristown, for a term of three years. He now had his own iron furnace, a wealthy ironmaster for a father-in-law, a charming wife, and a Revolutionary War coming up in the near future, as ingredients for his success formula.

About the time that this 25-year-old ironmaster was beginning his married life, a middle-aged German named Henry William Stiegel was being sent to a debtor's prison in Philadelphia. Since it was through Stiegel's Elizabeth Furnace estate, near Manheim, that Coleman was to become connected with the vast property holdings which he later acquired, we should pay some attention to Stiegel's career and his problems.

There are some interesting similarities between these two men. Stiegel had begun his employment as a young immigrant, working as clerk and book-keeper for ironmaster Jacob Huber, at Elizabeth Furnace. Ironmaster Huber had an eighteen-year-old daughter named Elizabeth, and Henry Stiegel promptly married his employer's daughter the first year he worked there. To this stage, his career began very much like that of Coleman.

In 1758, ironmaster Huber's modest enterprise of 400 acres was bought by a partnership including Stiegel and the Stedmans of Philadelphia, forming an ambitious group which in the next two years increased the 400 acres to 10,454.<sup>4</sup> Stiegel seems to have been bubbling over with enthusiasm, for within a few years he had expanded his activities at a tremendous rate. He bought the 88-acre Charming Forge and expanded it to 3,100 acres.<sup>5</sup> Instead of confining his furnaces to the casting of pigs, he began to cast



**Elizabeth Furnace Mansion. Portion at extreme left built by Robert Coleman. Center part erected by Henry William Stiegel.**

a wide variety of cannon stoves, six and ten plate stoves, kettles and plates for jamb stoves. He laid out and built the town of Manheim, rebuilt Elizabeth Furnace and erected a handsome stone mansion for himself, surrounded by stone houses for the workmen, and with all the shops and appurtenances belonging to an iron community manor. Here was where he must have dreamed his dreams of really becoming a baron in America. Here was where tradition still maintains that his Manheim mansion boasted an orchestra on the roof to greet his arrival, or that the boom of a cannon announced that the patron was in residence, or was departing in the magnificent coach that contributed to his fictitious title of "Baron" Stiegel. But no matter what Stiegel may have dreamed, he could not have imagined that he was really building all this for young Robert Coleman, at this time a ten-year-old boy in Ireland.

About the time that young Coleman was arriving in Philadelphia, Stiegel was branching out into a new venture and the Stiegel Glass Manufactory was built in a flurry of enthusiastic excitement. However, the uncertain business conditions of the 1760's did not bring in the anticipated profits from glass manufacturing, and Stiegel's debts grew at an alarming rate. The Stedmans, justifiably alarmed by the growth of Revolutionary activity and the financial uncertainties of their enterprise, abandoned the

partnership. Stiegel, obsessed with the future potentialities of the glass industry, mortgaged much of his share of the iron industry to promote his new and more fascinating project.

Now another person becomes involved in the iron industry, to become the third member of an Elizabeth Furnace trio, and in much the same way that Stiegel and Coleman became involved — through a marriage. John Dickinson comes upon the scene, first as a close friend of Isaac Norris, Speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, whose political views were identical with those of Dickinson. Dickinson was a frequent and welcome visitor to Fairhill, the magnificent colonial estate of the Norris's. When Norris died in 1766, he left his estate to his two daughters. The Stedman's one-third interest in Elizabeth Furnace was mortgaged to these two daughters, and after the death of one daughter, her elder sister Mary inherited the Elizabeth Furnace property. John Dickinson married Mary Norris in the same year, on July 19, 1770.<sup>6</sup>

So Stiegel, Coleman and Dickinson had all married wives who brought them iron furnaces as dowries. The circumstances by which this triumvirate of astute young husbands became associated is something like the complicated marriages of the House of Hapsburg, by which an empire was held together for centuries. This practice of uniting iron furnace enterprises by a maze of marriages was a common characteristic of eighteenth and nineteenth century life. It produced a sort of feudal empire, which combined capital, preserved property holdings in the event of the death of a partner or associate, and enabled vast estates to remain in the family and to grow as the families grew. Undoubtedly it helped to keep the families together, and was almost as efficient as the modern corporation. At any rate, every director's meeting was a family reunion. It also led to some of the most complicated litigation in legal history, when estates had to be divided or settled. It is almost impossible to trace some of these complex relationships, but they can be illustrated by one brief venture into genealogical explanation: Robert Coleman married Ann Old, daughter of ironmaster James Old; Cyrus Jacobs, also a clerk, married Old's other daughter Margaret, and also became an ironmaster; a son of James Old married Stiegel's daughter; a grandson of James Old married Rebecca Ege, daughter of Stiegel's nephew and owner of Charming Forge! It can easily be seen how a relationship like this could unite as many as a dozen forge and furnace operations into a family enterprise.

Thus, through marriages, the glassmaker, the book-keeper and the statesman all became involved in the iron industry. Of the three, Stiegel's relations with his father-in-law were least successful. Elizabeth, his wife, died after a brief marriage of six years, and Stiegel married another Elizabeth the following year, which must have seemed like undue haste to his first father-in-law, who indignantly wrote a will stating: "I give and bequeath to my son-in-law Henry William Stiegel, the sum of one shilling sterling and I exclude him and his heirs forever from all farther claim to my estate either real or personal."<sup>7</sup>

John Dickinson was a leading statesman of Pennsylvania when he acquired his share of Elizabeth Furnace. His "Letters of a Pennsylvania

Farmer," published a few years before, had marked him as an eloquent spokesman and acknowledged leader of the conservatives. Stiegel must have looked upon him as an influential patron, whose prestige, political influence and reputation would certainly insure success to a business which was now in precarious condition and burdened with debts. With renewed confidence he expanded his operations even further, and when he found he could not cover his new debts by the sale of his real estate, he asked Dickinson for a loan of two thousand pounds. Dickinson helped him to some extent, and from then on Stiegel fawned on him with eager and persuasive gratitude. For a while Stiegel had hopes that the Pennsylvania legislature would take some official action to promote his American glass factory, but the times were not propitious for new ventures. In 1773, just about the time young Coleman was planning to take unto himself a bride and an iron furnace, Stiegel wrote frantically to Dickinson, "Last night I was informed that the Sheriff hath been at my house and levied all my effects . . . If I obtain no assistance I shall be in danger of being ruined . . . The satisfaction that will arise in your heart will be great when you reflect that by assisting a man struggling with difficulties and one who is doing all in his power to pay his debts with the strictest honor, you may prevent the ruin of a family."<sup>8</sup>

However, by 1774 Stiegel had been sold out by the sheriff, his glass works was gone, and he had only one property left — Elizabeth Furnace, preserved through the goodwill of creditors John Dickinson and Daniel Benezet. When he was released shortly afterwards, his properties had been sold and he was landless and penniless. The furnace at Elizabeth had shut down, the mansion was empty, and Stiegel simply moved into his former homestead, illegally and unnoticed. The spring of 1775 was too turbulent a period for any of his former associates to pay much attention to where he was or what he was doing.

Now we can return to Robert Coleman, whom we left in 1773 beginning his honeymoon and his first venture as an ironmaster at Salford. He wrote in a brief autobiography, "In the year 1776, possessed of but a small capital and recently married, I took a lease on the Elizabeth Furnace estate for the term of seven years, not anticipating at that time that before the expiration of the lease I should have it in my power to become owner in fee simple of the whole or a greater part of the estate. Success, however, crowned my endeavors."<sup>9</sup>

Never was a simple truth more modestly stated, for Coleman began his career at Elizabeth Furnace at the start of the Revolutionary War and wars take both blood and iron. At Salford he had learned to cast cannon and shot, and had manufactured great iron chain links to bar the Delaware River against British warships.<sup>10</sup> At Elizabeth almost the entire output of the furnace was devoted to munitions and war supplies for the Continental Army. Coleman rapidly reorganized the operation of the furnaces which Stiegel had neglected when his interest in glass making had developed. He wrote, "A new and regular system was adopted by which the business of the iron works was made to resemble more a well conducted manufactory than the scenes of confusion and disorder which had before prevailed in

that business.”<sup>11</sup> Stiegel, who had formerly moved about in baronial splendor at Elizabeth Furnace, was glad to see the cold furnace go into blast again, and became clerk and part-time superintendent for Coleman. The ironmaster was now the clerk, and the clerk had become the ironmaster, and here he was to live with his family for thirty years as lord of the iron manor.

The labor problem at the newly leased Furnace might have been serious, due to calls for militia service, but the misfortunes of war turned to Colesman's advantage. After the Battle of Trenton on Christmas in 1776, Hessian prisoners were sent to various prisons in Pennsylvania towns, and Coleman was able to secure seventy Germans as laborers at Elizabeth Furnace.<sup>12</sup> Since Congress charged Coleman an average of thirty-odd shillings monthly for each prisoner's labor — much less than the standard pay scale, it was a profitable labor arrangement. Besides, Coleman paid the Congress in munitions, so that little cash outlay was necessary for their wages. The Hessians, glad to be done with mercenary military service, fitted into the Pennsylvania German community readily, and many of them remained after the war to settle down with American wives. Cannon, shot and salt-pans poured from the furnace instead of stoveplates and kettles. The young ironmaster was doing very well.

Although the ironmasters were carrying out an essential part of the war effort, they were involved in military service as well. On the 4th of July, 1776, a meeting was held at Lancaster to organize the Pennsylvania militia into a Flying Camp to march to the defense of New York and New Jersey, and Coleman was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant of the 2nd Company of Col. Cunningham's First Battalion.<sup>13</sup> The militia were assigned to two month's duty, and marched to New Jersey in August for the Battle of Long Island. It appears that Coleman was called back to the furnace shortly afterwards, for on October 11th, the Pennsylvania Council of Safety “earnestly requested him to lay aside all other business, that he might dispatch the large chain bars which Mr. Peter Brown of this city has bespoken you. . . .”<sup>14</sup>

Most of the ironmasters were also called for military service, but some of them did not take their obligation too seriously. Both Curtis and Peter Grubb, of Cornwall Furnace, were officers, but Peter Grubb got in some difficulty for collecting advance pay for his battalion and then sending them home instead of marching to New Jersey. On another occasion he was charged officially with having publicly drunk a toast of “Success to King George,” to which he replied that he could not remember whether he was drinking to the King's success or to his health, but it was certainly one of them.<sup>15</sup> Some time later he came under suspicion when the French Creek powder factory blew up, since he had been at the powder mill a few days before, somewhat in drink, and had told the Colonel in charge, “Damn the powder mill — let us blow it to hell!” which was thought to be a very odd expression.<sup>16</sup> Some of the ironmasters were apparently very rugged individualists.

However, they were a privileged class because of the need for munitions, and so were the ironworkers, which had something to do with a plentiful supply of labor during the war. Exemptions for persons working in the iron industry were common. On July 31, 1776, the Council of Safety ordered all workers engaged at the iron works in casting cannon or shot not to leave their works or to march with the militia.<sup>17</sup> Workers at the Grubb Furnace at Cornwall were exempt from militia duty while they were casting salt pans.<sup>18</sup> James Old secured exemptions for his workers at Reading Furnace on the grounds that his contracts could not be filled if they were called to duty.<sup>19</sup>

Coleman and Stiegel made good use of their Hessian prisoner labor to make one important improvement at Elizabeth Furnace during the War. To insure a constant supply of water power for their blast even during dry spells, they had a long ditch dug from a nearby creek to Furnace Run, avoiding the inconvenient hazard of having the furnace shut down for lack of power.<sup>20</sup> Remains of the Hessian ditch are still easily identified.

These war years, with government contracts, plenty of labor, ample supplies of ore, wood and water, and experienced supervision, provided the capital for Coleman to expand his operations rapidly as soon as the war ended. By 1780 he was able to buy out John Dickinson's one-third interest in Elizabeth Furnace, thereby becoming part owner instead of lessor. By 1784, the Stedmans, who had suffered financial losses and some political persecution because of their loyalist sympathies, sold him another one-third interest. The next year, in 1785, he bought Speedwell Forge from his father-in-law, James Old, for 7000 pounds. A year later, in 1786, he was able to buy a one-sixth interest in the Cornwall Furnace property from the Grubbs, as well as a one-third interest in Upper and Lower Hopewell Forges, for 8500 pounds. Thus, in six years, he had purchased two-thirds of Elizabeth Furnace, one-sixth of Cornwall, all of Speedwell and one-third of Upper and Lower Hopewell. The acquisition of all these properties involved approximately 25,000 pounds, or almost \$100,000, which is some indication of the success with which he had conducted his business during the war.<sup>21</sup>

Even this was only the beginning rather than the end. In 1791 he built Colebrook Furnace and Colebrook mansion. Some few years later, in 1794, Coleman, still living at the Elizabeth Mansion, purchased the remaining one-third of the Elizabeth property from Daniel Benezet. In 1798 he was able to buy the remainder of Curtis Grubb's Cornwall property, and half of Henry Bates Grubbs's interest in that property, giving Coleman five-sixths of Cornwall. In 1801 he purchased a share of Martic Furnace in southern Lancaster County.

All this made an extremely complicated combination of ownerships, partnerships, shares and rights, which only an experienced administrator and accountant could have managed efficiently. (One wonders what his income tax problems would have been in modern times) ! It is easy to see how the rise of the corporation in later years would supplement and simplify the enterprise of a single industrialist like Coleman. Some idea



James Old - Robert Coleman Mansion at Speedwell Forge.

of how complex this estate became is shown by the fact that when Coleman's four sons divided the estate with the sons of Henry Bates Grubb, it had to be divided into ninety-six parts, with the Coleman's eventually receiving twenty-ninety-sixths, and the Grubbs receiving sixteen-ninety-sixths.

As to its accumulated value, we can estimate something of the Coleman fortune by the division of the estate in 1832, when one of his four sons received properties valued at \$280,000 and a second son received property valued at \$270,000 — well over a half million dollars in a partial settlement of the estate.

In any age or in any country, the possession of so much property was bound to bring about some political influence. Coleman became an active participant in Pennsylvania's political affairs soon after the Revolution, and continued his activity for some years. This was not due entirely to his wealth, but in part because of his associations during the war. General Edward Hand, close friend of Washington and his Adjutant-General, had lived in Lancaster since 1774, and in addition to constant military service, was active in the Pennsylvania legislature and the Continental Congress. Hand's daughter had married Edward Brien, ironmaster at Mar-tic Furnace, establishing another bond between ironmasters, but Coleman

and Hand were intimate friends anyway, and soon became political associates. In Manheim, Robert Morris, financier of the Revolution, was a close neighbor, having purchased Stiegel's town house, and Morris was the member of the Constitutional Convention who had urged that Senators should be elected for life, and that they should be "only men of great and established property."<sup>22</sup> In 1792 Washington is believed to have visited Coleman at Elizabeth Mansion, in company with Morris, Rittenhouse, William Smith and others. Clearly Coleman properly belonged to the Federalist clan, and could be expected to safeguard the principles which Hamilton had so prophetically proclaimed.

His first experience in politics came in 1783, when he was elected to the Pennsylvania legislature for a one-year term. When the Federal Constitution was being debated in 1787, Coleman was a member of the Pennsylvania Convention which ratified it.<sup>23</sup> In 1790, when the radical Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 was being revised, Coleman was elected to the State Constitutional Convention, and after the adoption of this new Constitution, he was commissioned as an Associate Judge in 1791, a position he occupied for the next twenty years, often presiding as senior judge.

While Coleman was thus recognized as a political leader of some prominence among Pennsylvania's Federalists, he apparently exercised more influence in informal activities than in public debate, because he does not figure prominently in legislative discussions. However, his staunch adherence to Federalist principles had appreciable influence in national affairs during the 1790's. During this first decade of our national history, when the Federalist party was under violent attack from the growing democratic forces of Jefferson, and when party loyalties were changing from year to year, Coleman remained a solid rock of Federalist philosophy.

He was almost elected to the United States Senate in 1793, when the Pennsylvania legislature had elected Republican Albert Gallatin only to find him ineligible because of a technicality. When Pennsylvania had to choose again, Coleman was chosen as the Federalist nominee, but James Ross, of Pittsburgh won by a vote of 45 to 35. It was one indication of the coming upsurge of republicanism and the growing influence of the west. A much closer battle took place in 1796. Pennsylvania was faced with a difficult problem because the complete returns for its fifteen presidential electors had not arrived in the governor's hand by the legal deadline period of fourteen days. Until the governor announced the electors, they could not vote, and if he proclaimed those who seemed to be elected on the basis of incomplete returns, Pennsylvania would be Federalist. If he waited for the western results, the vote would be Republican, and he would be accused of illegal delay to secure republican results.<sup>24</sup> He waited as long as he could and then announced the winning candidates, consisting of thirteen Republicans and two Federalists — Samuel Miles and Robert Coleman.<sup>25</sup> When the delayed election returns finally arrived, they showed that the vote would have been conclusively Republican. Despite protests, the electors met, cast their ballots for President and Vice-President, and produced results giving Jefferson 14 votes; Burr 12; Pinckney 3 and John Adams 1. Of the two Federalist electors, Samuel Miles felt he must vote for

Jefferson, but there was still one stubborn vote for Adams, from Robert Coleman. At the time, Coleman wrote to Jasper Yeates with apparent pride in his unpopular conviction. After observing that the election had just closed and listing the votes, he said, "You will observe that one of the electors only had the hardiness to vote for this monarchy man, Mr. Adams, and you will easily conjecture which of them was so daring."<sup>26</sup>

The historian Channing believed that Coleman's single vote in Pennsylvania had much to do with the defeat of Jefferson for the Presidency in 1796, and the election of Adams. Adams "owed his place in 1796 to three nameless electors — one in Pennsylvania (which was Coleman), another in Virginia and another in North Carolina. Why these electors or any one of them voted for Adams is unknown, but he plainly was President by accident."<sup>27</sup>

But this was no accident for Coleman, for this was his most active political campaign. William Hamilton's Lancaster Journal had been extremely critical of the Federalists, and during court week, when the town was filled, Coleman and one of his colleagues circulated a public petition trying to ruin the paper by binding signers to stop their subscriptions. It read in part, "Sir, from the date hereof you will please discontinue our subscription to your paper. Our respective accounts as soon as sent in will be paid."<sup>28</sup> The campaign was not too successful according to the indignant editor, who claimed that only twenty-seven subscribers were lost, but that he gained thirty-five new ones. Editorial comment shortly afterwards stated, "As soon as a man possesses wealth he is at liberty to abuse his fellow-citizens freely with impunity."<sup>29</sup>

A few years later Coleman had another brush with the press, when Editor Dickson of the *Intelligencer* was indicted for libel by a grand jury composed mostly of Federalists. With the legislature in session in Lancaster, the trial continued for three days with a jury equally divided, but Judges Coleman and Henry refused to let them out until they reached a verdict, and finally, suffering from cold and hunger, they emerged with a verdict of guilty, whereupon the judges sentenced the editor to three months in prison and a fine of \$500.<sup>30</sup> The Federalists were losing legislative and executive control, but like their eminent leader, John Marshall, they usually managed to retain control of the courts.

Coleman was active again in 1800, when a confused political situation required a special session of the legislature to choose presidential electors. After a bitter parliamentary battle, sixteen electors were nominated, of whom fifteen were to be chosen. Coleman was one of the nominees, but was sixteenth on the list,<sup>31</sup> so that eight Republicans and seven Federalists were elected, giving Jefferson and Burr the majority. Governor McKean was greatly concerned about the close margin and wrote to him, "Thirteen Senators had defied the general will. Henry Miller, General Hand, Robert Coleman, etc., have been in this borough almost constantly since the Legislature have been convened, keeping the thirteen firm to the party."<sup>32</sup> But the Federalists were on the way out, and Coleman was now out of politics.

His military career was over too, although in 1795 he had one last fling when, as Captain of the Lancaster Troop of Light Horse, he took his company of thirty-five cavalymen to Western Pennsylvania in the grand expedition to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion,<sup>33</sup> in which all good Federalists would certainly participate. Although his troop re-elected him Captain the following year, he finally declined, graciously announcing in the newspaper: "The pleasure which I experienced from the harmony prevailing among us and the promptitude and cheerfulness with which any duty assigned you was performed on the late Western expedition are circumstances which will ever be remembered by me."<sup>34</sup>

In 1809 he became a resident of Lancaster, moving from Elizabeth Mansion to a house on East King Street about one-half block from the square, on the north side. He had a family of nine children by this time, four sons and five daughters, and had sent two of his children to old Franklin College the first year it opened, in 1787.<sup>35</sup> Leaving some of the management of his estate to his sons, he became active in community affairs, as might be expected from one of his position. He became a bank director when the Bank of Pennsylvania established its branch in Lancaster.<sup>36</sup> He was a member of the Select Council of Lancaster when the town was first incorporated. He was one of the trustees of Franklin College. He was interested in St. James' Episcopal Church, and the Coleman family sat with the Hand family and the Yeates family on Sunday mornings.<sup>37</sup> He became a famous citizen of Lancaster, and when Lafayette visited Lancaster in 1825, he went out of his way to visit General Hand's daughter, and "the aged patriot and revolutionary officer, Robert Coleman."<sup>38</sup>

A Philadelphian who visited Lancaster in 1809, and had dinner at Slough's Tavern, on the square, wrote "Here I had the pleasure to see some friends — Judge Coleman, one of the most respectable men in Pennsylvania and one of the wealthiest in the United States. His fortune has been acquired in a few years altogether by iron works. He informs me that he makes annually 2000 tons of pig-iron and 1100 tons of bar-iron."<sup>39</sup>

Like all prominent citizens, Coleman was always on the contributor's lists, although not with extravagant amounts. When everybody else contributed \$10.00 to the Female Benevolent Society (antecedent of the Community Chest movement) Coleman contributed \$20.00. When everybody in the community subscribed to one share of the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike Company, Coleman subscribed for two shares. But even though he was withdrawing from active business enterprise, his financial and commercial interests seemed to grow as if he had the golden touch of Midas. He kept buying small shares or investing funds in many enterprises which seemed to be on the verge of failure, and then, through careful accounting and judicious opportunism, raised them to a successful and profitable status. On one occasion he purchased a small share of an almost defunct shipping enterprise, which operated a trading ship, the General Hand, between Baltimore and the West Indies. The ship was about to be sold, but Coleman found a way to combine the products of Martic and Speedwell Forge with river routes along the Susquehanna to Port Deposit

and Baltimore, and within a short time, the first shipment of American iron to go to the East Indies was on its way, and the General Hand departed on a two-year venture around the world with a cargo valued at \$9000.<sup>40</sup>

In the same year that Coleman moved to Lancaster, a young man graduated from Dickinson College, not without some difficulty. James Buchanan, after having been expelled for disorderly conduct, was finally permitted to graduate after some mild wire-pulling, and moved to Lancaster to study law, at the age of eighteen. Coleman's three youngest daughters were Harriet, who died the following year at the age of ten; Ann, who was thirteen; and Sarah, who was seven.

Some years later double tragedy was to strike the Coleman household in connection with these two girls. Young James Buchanan had met and courted lovely Ann Coleman, the judge's daughter and heiress to the largest fortune in Pennsylvania. What father Coleman thought of the intended match is not known, but it is quite possible that he might have preferred his daughter to have married someone in business or industry, rather than in the somewhat impecunious profession of law.

In December, 1819, one of Ann's girl friends, perhaps slightly jealous, started the rumor which began a hasty quarrel between the two young lovers. Ann refused to see Buchanan and went angrily to Philadelphia. A week from the day she left Lancaster, her remains were brought back in a coffin, for she had died suddenly and almost mysteriously. King Street society buzzed with gossip, inventing stories of suicide, broken hearts, and somehow blaming Buchanan for her death. The Coleman family may have felt the same way, for Mr. Coleman would not allow Buchanan to view the body, nor to join the mourners at the funeral.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the shock of her unexpected death led the family to place the blame on Buchanan, through that easy but illogical form of reasoning which argued that if there had been no lover there would have been no lovers' quarrel, and if there had been no quarrel there would have been no emotional upset and consequently no fatality. It was not scientific reasoning, but in the absence of a definite medical report, it seemed to serve the purpose. Buchanan left Lancaster shortly thereafter, to enter a career in politics, but he kept a portrait of Ann Coleman with him, and it hung over the mantel in his bedroom at Wheatland during his life there, and still remains in the same place at Wheatland today. Buchanan himself always believed that the family had opposed the match, and many years after, while Minister to England, he wrote, "I found the most wealthy and influential family in that part of the state hostile and desirous of breaking me down."<sup>42</sup>

Strangely enough, a few years later a tragedy of remarkable similarity occurred in the Coleman household, involving younger daughter Sarah Hand Coleman, and a young minister, William Augustus Muhlenberg. Coleman had been active in planning and building the new St. James' Church, and had even collected a subscription of \$100 to the building fund from James Buchanan, who was not a member of the church, but had little choice in the matter.<sup>43</sup> The young minister, twenty-four years

old, became a close friend of Sarah Coleman. How the match might have progressed is not known, but when Muhlenberg proposed the innovation of evening services in the church, Coleman opposed it vigorously.<sup>44</sup> A division in the church took place, with Muhlenberg insisting on his plans for the evening service. Coleman forbade the young rector to enter his house, and when Coleman died in 1825, the dispute was still unsettled, but had affected the whole family. Edward Coleman, one of Robert's sons, resigned as registrar of the vestry when they decided to go ahead with the evening service.<sup>45</sup>

Two months after Robert Coleman's death, at almost the same age as her sister Ann, Sarah went to Philadelphia and died just as suddenly and unexpectedly as her sister had done six years earlier.<sup>46</sup> Young Muhlenberg found himself in much the same position as James Buchanan, bereft of his love. A considerable amount of romantic gossip circulated again in Lancaster society, to the effect that Muhlenberg stood by the coffin and placed a ring, and a copy of his famous hymn "I would not live away," with the remains, but this seems very unlikely. Muhlenberg left Lancaster shortly afterwards, but not of his own volition. Edward Coleman gave the vestry a simple but definite alternative: He would give \$5000 to the church, if all connection between Muhlenberg and the church were dissolved. The vestry took the \$5000, evening services were ended for a while, and Muhlenberg, like Buchanan, never married.

Coleman was seventy-seven at the time of his death, on August 14th, 1825. The Lancaster Journal stated, "Thus has departed from us, full of age and honor, a man who stood first among those who must ever rank as the most valuable members of society, and the most revered examples to mankind . . . He has long retired from public business, finding sufficient employment in the management of his immense estates, and spreading the wealth which an age of enterprise and industry had acquired in promoting the improvement of his country and dispensing comfort and happiness around him."<sup>47</sup> Whether Buchanan and Muhlenberg would have agreed with the latter statement is problematical.

His will was fairly simple, although the eventual settlement of the great estate led to years and years of litigation. He provided his wife with an annuity, and left her his town house, his furniture, his library, his gold watch, his carriage and his cows. His sons received all the iron furnace estates. His two married daughters received considerable real estate and bequests in excess of \$50,000 each. His unmarried daughter Sarah was very carefully provided for, receiving, in addition to a house and half of a well and half of a pump located on the boundary line, the sum of \$50,000, carefully guarded against a possible fortune-seeking husband. His will stated, "With an anxious view to the future interest, benefit and support of my dear daughter Sarah, and to guard against possible difficulties from which none can flatter themselves that they will be exempted, she now being unmarried," her brothers were entrusted with the \$50,000 for her, with the provision that if she married, her husband would have no power to assign the money, that if she had children, the money would go to her children, and that if there were no issue, the money would go to her sisters

after her death.<sup>48</sup> Nobody was going to marry Sarah for her money, or if he did, he would have a hard time getting it.

As we look back over the long and active life of this early American industrialist, we can see a pattern of purpose and interest which has become more characteristic of our American life than we may realize. Coleman might be called the Hamiltonian ideal, in many respects. Hamilton had written, in his report on Manufactures, "When all the different kinds of industry obtain in a community, each individual can find his proper element, and can call into activity the whole vigor of his nature."<sup>49</sup> Coleman certainly represented vigorous activity in diversified pursuits — iron manufacturing, transportation, banking, politics, and leadership in community projects. His adherence to Federalism was certainly not blind party allegiance — it was the normal and natural result of his career. His early contacts with the Continental Congress had given him some idea of the national aspects of industrial production. His experience with the formation of the conservative Pennsylvania Constitution of 1790 must have made him distrustful of the radical element that had tied Pennsylvania's state government into a knot of helpless futility. The competition from a superior quality of Swedish and Russian wrought iron made him sympathetic to tariff programs which would protect American manufacturers. As a banker himself he had no qualms about extending credit to commercial or business enterprises which promised a reasonable chance of growth or recuperation. As the feudal lord of an ironmaster's manor, he would certainly have had more confidence in his own ability, and that of his fellow-ironmasters, to provide for the welfare of the mass of workers and artisans under his benevolent supervision than to have trusted political or economic developments to their proletarian judgment. He was the forerunner of an important and distinctive American type which was to represent a characteristic ideal of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Here was the tradition of the self-made man (if we ignore the matter of an appropriate marriage for the moment.) Here was the comfortable security of vast wealth, and because of it a somewhat stubborn conviction that when a decision had to be made, it would be the correct decision, and would be regarded with proper respect and obedience. Here was a solid and sincere sense of moral integrity, and a recognition of spiritual responsibilities.

These three men, Stiegel, Dickinson and Coleman, whose careers were so strangely inter-locked at one time, represent three significant American types — all very different, but all part of the American scene. Dickinson was the conservative statesman and politician, whose words and ideas provided a standard that led many of his fellow-Americans through the confused maze of revolutionary and post-revolutionary complications, with a confident vision of the future; Stiegel was the adventurer, whose reckless optimism and enthusiastic pioneering refused to recognize defeat as long as there was the slightest possibility of success; and Coleman was the methodical and ambitious accountant, who quietly and confidently calculated every risk and every opportunity, and built an industrial empire step by step, trusting to his own good judgment.

Historical immortality has preserved Dickinson's words because they provided a goal for Americans to follow; Stiegel lives forever because of his picturesque behavior and his dramatic rise to fame and his fall to disaster. But people like Peter Cooper, James Old, Abram Hewitt and Robert Coleman never secured the same kind of immortality, although their contributions were equally important. They have been treated as a mysterious aristocracy, usually envied, sometimes denounced, but normally respected and seldom glorified for their independent achievements. They are always called important, but rarely famous. But there is much in the career of a man like Coleman to inspire respect rather than envy. His empire was built by his ventures and his own capital, rather than by the manipulation of stockholder's contributions. He had opportunities for exercising political control, and had staunch political convictions, but confined his political activity to the major responsibilities of his office, without using his wealth for political control. He accomplished his success in a pioneer's frontier of manufacturing, rather than in the lush years of the industrial boom of the nineteenth century, when the making of a million was often a combination of gambler's luck, political graft and highway robbery.

In later years, many captains of industry and barons of business were to shape some of the pattern of American life as Coleman had done. They were supremely confident, but not boastful; they were venturesome but not reckless; they were generous but not spendthrift; they were strict because it was a moral obligation to demand what was right, as they saw it. They were really the successful Americans, and they knew it.

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