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**Astrology In The United States of America
Prior to 1870**

By Robert Zoller

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Astrology In The United States of America Prior to 1870

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The origins and history of astrology in the United States of America prior the Civil War are even more obscure than those of ancient astrology. Nevertheless, this subject is of importance as it forms the backdrop against which the late 19th century revival of astrology in the United States and the 20th century creation of “New Age” astrology is to be understood. This study is only a preliminary investigation as much work remains to be done, especially in the German language. Thus, the statements that follow must, for the time being, be regarded as tentative.

Astrology in the pre-Revolution United States of America

Jim Baker, Vice President of the Plymouth Plantation Museum informed me that in 17th century there was a woman in the Connecticut colony who had been trained by the English astrologer William Lilly in what is now termed Classical Astrology i.e. predictive, non-psychological 17th century English astrology.

At the same time, in what was to become Ephrata, Pennsylvania, there was a German Rosicrucian settlement under the direction of Zimmermann. This settlement was composed of religious messianic millenialists, followers of Jacob Boehme, Pietists, and German Seventh Day Baptists, all of whom practised alchemy and astrology with a celibate mysticism. This movement also seems to have been important in regard to the origins of Unitarianism in the US colonies¹. Though I have not seen any documentation, it is likely that its astrology was a continuation of the Medieval Astrology of Regiomontanus. There may have been some adaptations from Kepler and to the extent it was influenced by Boehme, it is likely to have been heliocentric.

¹ The first known advocates of Universalism in America were the Dunkers or German Baptists in Germantown, Pa. circa 1719. The key text involved seems to have been The Everlasting Gospel, of Paul Siegvolk. This was translated and published in English by G.de Benneville who settled in Pennsylvania from France in 1741.

Meanwhile, English colonists were exploring astrology as well. Herbert Leventhal's *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in 18th Century America* indicates that Harvard was a centre for Natural Astrology (as opposed to Judicial Astrology) in the 17th and 18th centuries.² Charles Morton, an Englishman who came to the US colonies for religious freedom, leaving England in 1686, relocated in Charlestown, Massachusetts where he became a minister.

His *Compendium Physicae* written in England was adopted by Harvard in its curriculum largely because nothing else was available. It remained influential until the 1720's. In this work, Morton accepts the distinction between natural and judicial astrology, condemns astrological fortune telling, and discusses how the planets affect weather and the human body as well as aspects of astrological medicine. In particular, he asserts that the planets influence both body and mind. He permits the use of astrology in weather forecasting and in charting the mutation of man's "temperature" by the alteration of qualities brought about by celestial motion. It is interesting to note that when this work was edited in 1720³ all reference to the power of astrological influence was deleted.

Harvard students may also have received astrological ideas from two other important sources: Samuel Willard and John Leverett.⁴ Willard of the class of 1659 was later Vice President of Harvard (1701-1707) while the school had no president. His sermons to students, collected and published posthumously (1726) in *A Compleat Body of Divinity*, Boston 1726 at page 119, cites Gen.1:14 and expounds it as "Prognosticating several natural effects, likely to ensue". "Seasons" he explains as meaning "times of the year, made by the motion of the Sun especially." He noted that, "Astrologers have had their predictions that do sometimes fall out right ... though Satan, that great naturalist," could foretell many things.

Leverett, of the class of 1680 was President of Harvard

² [In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in 18th Century America](#), Herbert Leventhal, NYU Press, 1976.

³ [In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in 18th Century America](#), Herbert Leventhal, NYU Press, 1976: p. 15.

⁴ [In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in 18th Century America](#), Herbert Leventhal, NYU Press, 1976:P.16.

(1708-1724) and a member of the FRS (*Frater Regii Societatis* - Brother of the Royal Society). He was a liberal and bitterly opposed to Cotton Mather. In one of his *Expositions of Scripture* to students, Leverett stated that God had not revealed the Flood to Noah by an astrological conjunction or by any natural means. This put Mather on the warpath. It seems someone was asserting other wise.⁵

Still further, Isaac Greenwood, Harvard's first Hollis Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy (1728-1738) accepted natural astrology. In 1731 in *A Philosophical Discourse Concerning the Mutability and Changes of the Material World*, Boston, 1731, at page 5 he states:

"In short, tides are produced in the Ocean, Winds in the atmosphere, many changes in Inanimate and Animate Bodies & in the human economy itself. Astrology seems to have a philosophical foundation, and we know not how many wonders and mysteries may be the genuine effects of this great Alternative in Nature."

Also, Ephraim Chamber's, *Cyclopedia or Universal Dictionary of the Arts*⁶ a popular 18th century reference work used in the colonies shows an acceptance of natural astrology.

Leventhal discusses almanacs (p 22-27).⁷ There being a great number of them, many including astrology. See for instance, Moses Coit Tyler's *A History of American Literature*, New York, 1881. Also, Nathaniel Low's *An Astronomical Diary or Almanac for 1772*, Joseph Stafford's *The Rhode Island Almanac for 1738*, (Newport, 1738) which has judicial astrology, *The Virginia Almanac for 1751* and the well known *Old Farmer's Almanac* which has had a continuous run from 1792.

Medicine was also a field where astrology was practised. Culpeper's works were popular. The *Pharmacopoeia Londoniensis* (London 1653, Boston 1720), and *The English Physician Enlarged*,

⁵ See Arthur Daniel Kaledin, "The Mind of John Leverett" unpub. diss. Harvard University, 1965, pp.44-45. Quoted in: *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in 18th Century America*, Herbert Leventhal, NYU Press, 1976.

⁶ 7th ed. 1751.

⁷ On the subject of Astrology and Almanacs, see also: *America and her Almanacs*, by Robb Sagendorph, Dublin, New Hampshire: Yankee, Inc & Boston: Little Brown and Co.

as well as the *Astrological Judgement of Diseases from the Decumbiture of the Sick*, were all available the American colonies. But, astrological medicine, Leventhal tells us, though popular, was considered low class.⁸ Unfortunately, he gives little indication of how widespread it was.

Judicial Astrology was not unknown. The *Diary of Col. Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752- 1778*,⁹ contains an astrological prediction for the coming year. Moreover, Leventhal states that, "One of the most intriguing evidences of the practical use of judicial astrology comes from Rhode Island"¹⁰.

Ezra Stiles (1727-1795) noted in his diary, after referring to the Biblical prohibitions against witches, wizards, and necromancers as well as to Indian 'Poways', that "Something of it subsists among Almanack Makers and Fortune Tellers, as Mr Stafford of Tiverton lately dead who was wont to tell where lost things might be found and what day, hour and minute was fortunate for vessels to sail etc."¹¹ Stiles was President of Yale (1778-1795). He taught Hebrew, Theology, Church History and the sciences.

Leventhal states¹² that the vigorous Rhode Island shipping business used astrology. "One local historian has told us, referring to the sailing of two Rhode Island privateers in 1745, that 'According to the custom of the time their horoscope [sic] was cast, and the figure had disclosed that they should sail on Friday, the 24th of December, 1745.' Unfortunately, a snowstorm was raging at that time and both vessels were lost. [Wm P. Sheffield, *An Address delivered by William P. Sheffield before the Rhode Island Historical Society in Providence, February 7, AD 1882* (Newport, 1883) p.18.] Another Rhode Island historian has stated that when ships were ready to sail, "an astrologer or conjurer, as they were frequently called, was sometimes employed to 'cast a figure', to ascertain the proper

⁸ p.38.

⁹ ed Jack P. Greene, Charlottesville, Va. UP of Va., 1965, II, 730

¹⁰ p 57. --from Ezra Stiles, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, ed by Franklin Bowditch Dexter (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1901),I: 385-86.

¹¹ Gadbury's *Nauticum Astrologicum, or the Astrologicl Seaman* (1691) may have been a key text among such conjurers and among the Seamen astrologers who plied the colonial New England Ports.

¹² p58

moment for the vessel to depart.” This historian stated that he had seen hundreds of such horoscopes and reproducing one cast in 1752.¹³

Astrology in the United States after the American Revolution

In the 18th century, according to Leventhal, astrology (both natural and judicial) was in a state of decline. Its primary literature being the almanac, which was largely the literature of the semiliterate.

Immediately after the US War for Independence Bailey's Almanac for 1779¹⁴ carried an article in German illustrated by a horoscope celebrating the event. Generally, however, *Bailey's Miniature & Pocket Almanac* was in English and had no articles on astrology. It regularly depicted the signs of the Zodiac and the planets; the changes of the Moon; aspects; and dates of the Equinoxes and Solstices.¹⁵

Ebenezer Sibly, an astrologer with Masonic connections to lodges in Bristol and Edinburgh, published his *New and Complete Outline of the Occult Sciences* in 1790 & 1791. He gives what he calculated as the horoscope of US in plate 53. His brother, Manoah Sibly, a Swedenborgian minister, was also an astrologer. It is worth mentioning that Ebenezer mentions Swedenborg (whose teachings are regarded by some as the beginning of the Spiritualistic Movement) in his book and also includes a fairly lengthy chapter on spirits.

Leventhal seems to be right about the general state of astrology declining in the 18th century. A process that seems to have continued in the US until about 1850, although by the 1840's the situation was beginning to turn around. The popular mind of America during the 18th to mid-19th century seems to have been captured, for the most part by science and Enlightenment Philosophy. However, there was also some interest among the English speaking population in mesmerism, Swedenborgian Spiritualism¹⁶, and New England Transcendentalism.

¹³ George C. Mason, *The African Slave Trade in Colonial Times, The American Historical Record and Reperetory of Notes and Queries*, July 1872, 319.

¹⁴ cited in Clark Kinnaird, *George Washington: The Pictoral Biography*, NY: Hastings House, 1967, p.135.

¹⁵ *Bailey's Pocket Almanac* was probably written by Benjamin Workman.

¹⁶ As distinguished from the Spiritualism of the Fox Sisters and later advocates of what Emma Hardinge Britten termed, "Modern American Spiritualism."

Amongst the German speaking population there was a strong interest in German Pietism, the writings of Jacob Boehme and mystical subjects such as alchemy¹⁷ and magic¹⁸. Transcendentalism was strongly influenced by Oriental Philosophy and yoga and set the stage for the appearance of Blavatsky's Theosophy in 1875, a movement which both promoted and criticised astrology. Certainly, when the astrological literature of the mid to later 19th century is compared with that of the period prior to say, 1820, there is a marked difference.

Before 1820 astrology had decidedly mystical and religious overtones. Amongst the English speaking population Swedenborgianism provided this mystical and religious overtone. While, amongst the German speakers, it found expression through Boehmenism, Rosicrucianism, alchemy, magic and the kabbalah.

Prior to 1820 the astrology practised in the US was either Natural Astrology and Judicial Astrology. Natural Astrology, including astrometeorology, was acceptable to the increasingly scientific and Puritan intelligentsia of New England. This being a major reason why astrology was to survive at all in Yale and Harvard. We have seen that it was possible for Isaac Greenwood of Harvard to speculate that astrology had a philosophical foundation based on meteorological phenomena being linked to celestial mechanics. Though he comes close to accepting Judicial Astrology, he stops

¹⁷ Conrad Beissel's Ephrata Community practiced alchemy, had the elixir and reputedly made the Philosopher's Stone. Beissel & Co, though depicted as Dunkers and Pietists were ultra-orthodox Lutherans! The majority of Lutheran leaders in America subsequently were spiritual descendents of Ephrata (consciously, actively and organizationally in the tradition). This included Muhlenberg. The secret of the Elixir was passed down among a select lineage of clergy, the possessor handing it over to his chosen successor near his death. They used the secret to make money for the Lutheran Church and its missionary crusades. The secret was eventually for sale and sold on the steps of churches in Philadelphia until the mid-19th century. Cf The German Pietists of Provincial Pennsylvania by Julius Friedrich Sachse, AMS Press, NY 57 *et not.* 74 and 75.

One member of the Ephrata Community, Johann Seelig, was commissioned to cast the horoscope for the Swedish Lutheran church at Wisaco, Pa.

¹⁸ The followers of these communities later became the first Pennsylvania Dutch hexenmeisters. Still later Penn Dutch practiced Pow Wow Magic. Witness George Henry Hohman's Long Lost Friend: Pow Wows for Man and Beast, Harrisburg, 1856. [Source: Don Yoder's article, "Hohman and Romanus: Origins and Diffusion of the Pennsylvania Powwow Manual," in American Folk Medicine A Symposium, ed by Wayland Hand., Univ of Cal. Press, Berkeley, 1976. Such practitioners used The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses.]

short of doing so, as did the majority of his colleagues, although Morton's *Compendium Physicae* did not hesitate to cross the line.

Judicial Astrology asserts that celestial forces determine the behaviour of human individuals and collectivities such as nations. Thus, it comes as no surprise to learn that the New England Puritan Establishment being staunch advocates of Free Will, could not accept such an assertion¹⁹. Judicial Astrology, while practised in New England and through out the US could not, under these circumstances find the same acceptance as Natural Astrology did. "Conjurers" cast charts for ships in the New England harbours, printed Almanacs, and helped find lost items, but they saw themselves (as indeed the establishment saw them) as practising an occult art.

Thus, astrology in the United States prior to 1820 can be said to have been divided into two categories: Natural Astrology, which was scientific and Judicial astrology which was occult. In England, at this time a similar distinction is also apparent. Ellic Howe identifies some English astrological writers as "scientific", others as "hermetic" or occult.

Natural Astrology was largely devoted to the predicting of weather conditions vital for agriculture and commodity speculation. Judicial, or Occult Astrology was involved with prediction, the fate of the individual, the finding of lost items and the times and dates for departure of ships as well as their safe arrival or whereabouts if lost.

This Occult Astrology of the "conjurers" was also connected to the mystical art of alchemy and to the black art of magic. It was thus very much more than a scientific endeavour. It had a mystical and magical dimension as well. Such mystical and magical interests were bound up with mystical Christian religious practices brought to the US by settlers mainly from Germany in the 1600's and 1700's,

¹⁹ Although the Puritans had reservations about astrology because of its determinism, they often embraced alchemy. C.f. *Ambix* X, Oct 1962 No 3. -"New England's last Alchemists" by Ronald Sterne Wilkinson pp128-138. Notes: cites Bernard Cohen, "The Beginning of Chemical Instruction in America: A Brief Account of the Teaching of Chemistry at Harvard prior to 1800. Most of New England's last alchemists went to Harvard and Yale but before regular chemical instruction came to either school. John Winthrop Jr. (1606-1676), the first governor of Connecticut was a practicing alchemist. The NY Academy of Medicine has his alchemical papers. Winthrop's papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society have been published. Cf Frances Yates The Rosicrucian Enlightenment, London, Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, p. 227, n.1.

during the pre-Revolutionary period. They were the result of a mixture of German Pietism, the teachings of Jacob Boehme and German Paracelsianism. Such mystical practices survived well into the 19th century in Pennsylvania where they gave rise to a peculiar form of Folk Magic called "Pow-wow." It is a feature of Mystical Astrology, epitomised in Jacob Boehme's writings, that it has strong religious affiliations.

Both of these types of astrology wane after 1820, or at least, it becomes very difficult to locate any new literature or reports published on them after 1820. On the other hand, from the 1840's are found references to practitioners of a "scientific" Judicial Astrology, as though the two categories of astrology had merged. The actual practice of horoscopy changes little, if at all and the switch from the earlier astrology to the "scientific" variety seems to entail merely a change of nomenclature and a re- conceptualisation of astrology's relation to Science²⁰. At the same time no mention of magical or alchemical related astrology is found in English.

Among the German speaking Americans the situation may have been different, but this is an area which requires further study. What is evident, however, is that from the 1840's the new Scientific Judicial Astrology (in English) is predominantly secular, although it does have mystical leanings deriving from the Swedenborgian influences alá Ebenezer Sibly.

The Swedenborgian Movement, which originated in the 1790's in England, was characterised from the beginning by two elements: the church and the non-church Swedenborgians.

The church element believed that the best way to promulgate the writings and doctrines of the movement's founder Immanuel Swedenborg (an 18th century mystic) was to found a New Church - which was done. Alternatively, they sort to introduce Swedenborg's interpretation of the Scripture into the existing churches. This ultimately proved a lost cause as the established churches refused to alter their catechism.

The non-church element were those who liked Swedenborg's ideas but who, for one reason or another, refused to affiliate with a particular church. This group supported by some from the church Swedenborgians were frequently mystically inclined and given to

²⁰ I have not attempted it, but it would be interesting to see what, if any relation exists between astrology's secularization and any parallel developments in contemporary religion.

spiritualism. Many Transcendentalists belonged to this element. They, as well as the church "New Churchers", were often progressive in their thinking or even radically political and spiritual.

Astrology seems to have found allies in this constituency and to have been absorbed into a milieu of universalistic, non-sectarian, secular congregationalism which was rather Deist in conception. Such a point of view could accept a Scientific Astrology which dealt with "cosmic forces" rather than traditional angels. Ebenezer Sibly's astrology seems to represent a step in that direction. It is significant that he was both a Freemason and a Swedenborgian.

Howe contends that the US astrologers were dependent on English astrological literature until after World War One. He cites²¹ Thomas Hague of Philadelphia, who published the periodical *The Horoscope* from 1840-4 and *Hague's Horoscope and Scientific Prophetic Messenger* (1845-8).

According to Nick Campion,²² the first truly American astrological literature was produced in the 1840's by the English born Luke Broughton (1828-1899) who is considered as the first major US astrologer. One of his more well known students was W. H. Chaney (b. 1821), father of Jack London (1876-1916) whose mother (Fora Wellman) was musician/spiritualist.

Howe,²³ further states that the three Broughton brothers (Matthew, Mark and Luke) were all in the United States by the 1860's. They resided in Philadelphia. Luke produced *Broughton's Monthly Planet Reader and Astrological Journal*.²⁴ He moved to New York in 1863 and where he continued publishing. The Journal only had Broughton's articles. At the end of Broughton's *Monthly Planet Reader*, he offers to teach astrology.

Broughton also published *Elements of Astrology* (1869, 1898). It includes the essay *Why am I an astrologer? A Reply to Richard A. Proctor. The Humbug of Astrology. Feb. 6, 1887*. Broughton's astrology was serious, though unadorned. The "nuts and bolts"

²¹ P.66

²² [An Introduction to the History of Astrology](#), p72.

²³ [Astrology](#), p.63:

²⁴ No 1, 1860.

astrology of the "Scientific" type practised in England during the mid-nineteenth century. He clearly introduces this kind of astrology into the US. Broughton, and his daughter, who was also a practising astrologer, had many students and spawned a school of astrology which was to dominate US astrology for a considerable period.

The mid-nineteenth century is the critical period for the development of what later develops into contemporary "New Age" US Astrology. Much was going on in both the occult and non-occult areas which resulted in major movements with clearly "New Age" overtones. The networks of Spiritualism and other occult arts were used to disseminate liberal and extreme left wing political ideas perhaps because their advocates could not get a hearing otherwise.

From the mid-nineteenth century, with a considerable frequency, the researcher finds a number of subjects closely linked. Often the same lecturer or writer expounds two or more of the following subjects: astrology, psychology, Women's Rights, spiritualism and Political Reform (frequently a euphemism for Socialism).

A good example of this is found in Olney Richmond's *Mystic Test Book*, Chicago, 1893 which openly advocates socialist political reform as being inevitable due to the combined forces of evolution, mathematics and Heliocentric Astrology.

Willis Whitehead works are further example of this interlocking of various themes. He was the Past Supreme Grand Vizier of the Ancient Order of Oriental Magi, when he published his *Occultism Simplified or the Mystic Thesaurus* in 1899. Also, compounding ideas are found in his *Occult Philosophy*, New York 1897. As an aside it should be noted that this edition of Agrippa's First Book of *Occult Philosophy* is wrongly identified as being all three books of the work. This error being repeated by Weiser with their edition in 1971.

After the Agrippa text we find a number of essays including an essay by the publisher Loomis (dated 1900) entitled *Our Near Future*. It is in keeping with the Order of the Oriental Magi's socialist vision. Loomis claims to have a method of prophesy based on the Bible which foretells great political and world changes between 1896 & 1916.

He states that a new nation is being formed in the centre of the world, which will overcome other nations and rule with a rod of iron. This is possibly a reference to the attempt to create a socialistic regime in Russia in 1905. Though this attempt failed it did set the

stage for the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Loomis claimed that people were working toward this new state at the time he wrote. His writings further says he is initiating people and giving courses in practical occultism and prophesy presumably through his Inwood School of Philosophy in New York City.

Also note Frank Theodore's *Astrology and the Socialism, or the New Era: a review and forecast by Frank T. Allen*, New York, 1902. which predicted that socialism would begin in the US in 1942, with Uranus in Gemini. This book is full of socialist rhetoric. By 1902 there was no doubt about this astrologer's political sympathies. Later he contributed to the magazine *Azoth* circa 1917-21 and is identified in *Mercury* (9/1928 vol 13, no. 3, p 137) as one of four founders of John Astor Hazelrigg's American Academy of Astrologians .

Also connected to Olney Richmond's Magi was Milton A. Pottenger whose *Symbolism*, Sacramento ,1905 is replete with Socialist rhetoric.

And so we find that by the early 20th century astrology had become for some, the harbinger of a new social order.

Concluding Observations

As was said in the Introduction to this study, firm conclusions can not be drawn until further research is conducted into this subject. In particular, the German language sources must be examined in more detail. Notwithstanding this, some general observations can be made.

During the 17th century and extending into the early 20th century, European astrology was transplanted firstly into the New England colony before taking root throughout the whole of the United States. In the dual form of Natural and Judicial Astrology it was practised until about 1820. Its tradition may be traced back through Britain and Continental Europe to Medieval Astrology.

By 1820 or so, this tradition had largely spent itself. Indeed, an examination of the astrological publication history suggests a brief hiatus occurred. This lasted until 1840-50.

In the 1860s Scientific Astrology (this being what traditional English astrology had become by this time) was introduced into the United States by the Broughtons and Hague. This was adopted by the more radical political reformers and utopians. A major network by which this new socially-aware astrology was spread appears to have been the more progressive elements of the non-church Swedenborgian, Universalist, and early Socialist circles.

Astrology moved from being closely associated with unconventional religious mysticism to being almost entirely secular. This transformation set the stage, as it were for the advent of an universalistic, secular "New Age" astrology.

That Judicial Astrology in the United States (and possibly in England) should have been recast as "Scientific Astrology" after the mid-nineteenth century is probably due, at least in part, to the relative acceptability, well into the nineteenth century of Natural Astrology.

1870 seems to be a watershed. The American Civil War 1861-1865 disrupted life in the United States sufficiently to largely impede the spread of astrology while the war was raging. After the war, people were naturally more interested in the future and this may have contributed to an increased interest in a new re-conceptualised astrology. Certainly, the war forms an important reference point which, for some, was seen as the harbinger of a "New Age". Amongst these were men such as Olney Richmond who years later related in his *Temple Lectures* (Chicago 1891, p.71-72) that his astrological involvement had originated during the Civil War.

Finally, the role of the Occult Fraternities should not be overlooked. These include such organisations as Olney Richmond's Order of the Magi and Willis Whitehead's spin off organisation, the Ancient Order of Oriental Magi. Their promulgating astrological doctrine and practice in conjunction with visions of social and political reform provide a rich vein for further research. In particular, their impact on the history of astrology in the United States and on the history of political reform in nineteenth century America needs to be thoroughly addressed.

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