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Written by **Charles Scaliger** on February 17, 2014
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Liberty's Language

One morning in the spring of 1778, a young Frenchman, Peter Stephen Du Ponceau, was strolling through the woods at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Only 17 years old, Du Ponceau had arrived in America the previous year and, along with many others in the Continental Army, had endured the almost impossible hardships of the winter of '77-'78 that had killed more than 2,000 soldiers in Washington's army. No doubt weighed down by the terrible setbacks of that winter of discontent, Du Ponceau was surprised to hear, amid the chorus of spring birdsong, a rich operatic voice singing an aria from a well-known French opera. As Du Ponceau later recalled in a letter to a friend

> I cannot describe to you how my feelings were affected by hearing those strains so pleasing and so familiar to me, sung by what seemed to me to be a supernatural voice, such as I had never heard before, and yet melodious and in perfect good taste. I thought myself for a moment at the Comédié Italienne, and was lost in astonishment, when I saw appear before me a tall Indian figure in American regimentals and two large epaulettes on his shoulders, my surprise was extreme

Du Ponceau approached the arresting figure, grateful to find someone able to speak his native French. The man informed him that he was an American Indian named Nia-man, of the Abenaki nation in French Canada. He had joined the American forces during the invasion of Canada early in the war, and had retreated with them to become a permanent enlistee of the Continental Army. Having received a Jesuit education, Nia-man was a cultured and literate man, and described himself as "bon Chrétien et bon Catholique." He had risen in the ranks of the army and was now a colonel. Regarding his extraordinary musical talent, Du Ponceau was "convinced that, with a little more teaching, he would have been a valuable acquisition to the French Opera, where I had never heard a voice of such extraordinary power, at the same time susceptible of modulation." Deeply impressed, Du Ponceau enjoyed breakfast with his new friend in the officer's quarters, but never saw him again. But this, his first meeting with an American Indian, had a profound influence on his life, prompting this multitalented French-born son of the American Revolution to become one of the first Europeans to take a scholarly interest in the people now known as Native Americans

French Anglophile

Born Pierre-Étienne Du Ponceau in June 1760 at Saint-Martin on the Île de Ré, a small island on the coast of southwestern France, Peter Stephen Du Ponceau displayed early in life an uncommon aptitude

for scholarship, especially linguistics. By the age of six, he had already learned Latin quite well, but the most important episode of his early childhood — one that would shape his destiny more than any other — was his discovery of an English grammar in a neighbor's house. In the years before the Revolutionary War, English was scarcely studied on the European continent. French, German, and Italian were far more widely spoken, and their respective literatures more appreciated among continentals than anything written in English. But the language of the exotic land across the English Channel had a magnetic attraction for young Du Ponceau. "Child-like, I was delighted with the letters K and W, which my eyes had not been accustomed to see," he wrote many years later. "I took the book home and began to study the English language. My progress was rapid.… I had a good ear and flexible organs. I soon spoke good English, and became a perfect *Anglomaine*." Du Ponceau found opportunities to improve his English by speaking with English and Welsh residents on the island, and devoured the works of Milton, Shakespeare, Pope, and other great English writers — even, as he later admitted, to the neglect of many of the great writers of his native French.

At 13, Du Ponceau was sent to a Benedictine school, where he enrolled in advanced courses in philosophy, which he found dull. Finding little of interest in the philosophy of the scholastics, Du Ponceau continued his personal study of English; by his own account, he was never without some English-language book to read, a circumstance his classmates found so unusual that they nicknamed him "l'Anglois" (the Englishman). After only 18 months, Du Ponceau withdrew from the school and, in conformity with his mother's wishes, "took the tonsure" and became a Catholic priest, although by his own admission he found himself somewhat in sympathy with some of the principles of the Protestant Reformation. Du Ponceau became at the tender age of 15 an instructor of Latin at an episcopal college, but soon found that his extreme youth and precocity provoked jealousy and suspicion among his fellow academics, most of whom were at least a decade his senior. Accordingly, he withdrew from his teaching post and, still only 15, went to Paris to seek his fortune.

Mentor: Antoine Court de Gébelin, a noted Parisian philologist, was very influential on the young Du Ponceau, sharing his vast erudition in languages. However, he failed to interest Du Ponceau in his quest for a perfect primordial language spoken during a long-ago Golden Age.

After trying unsuccessfully to exploit his late father's connections among the Parisian aristocracy to find employment, Du Ponceau realized that his true calling was as an academic. His talent with English

turned out to be very valuable, with translators needed almost everywhere. “Very few Frenchmen at that time,” he recalled, “were familiar with this language.” He soon found steady work as a translator and secretary for various learned Parisians, none of whom had the slightest knowledge of English. He settled finally on a job as secretary for the celebrated philologist Antoine Court de Gébelin, whose immense knowledge of and fascination for ancient languages was driven by a peculiar fixation for uncovering the primordial language spoken by men during the mythical Golden Age, before humanity became corrupted. Gébelin was a Protestant minister who nonetheless was willing to risk staying in France, and doubtless had great influence over Du Ponceau during the months that they worked together. “He was to me as a father,” remembered Du Ponceau, “though … I did not agree with him in his philological opinions.”

It was in 1777 that Du Ponceau’s young life took a decisive turn. At one of the houses he frequented, owned by one Beaumarchais, he met a Prussian baron and military officer named Steuben, who was preparing to travel to America to lend his expertise to the young American army under General George Washington. Baron von Steuben had a serious problem, however; although he spoke fluent German and French, he knew not a word of English. Impressed by Du Ponceau the teen language prodigy, Steuben hired the English-speaking Frenchman as his personal secretary and translator. The two set sail from Marseilles for America near the end of the year, arriving in Portsmouth, New Hampshire on December 1.

American Adventure

Their arrival in America did not start off auspiciously. Having been told in France that the Americans had adopted the British colors for their Continental Army, Du Ponceau and Steuben donned scarlet regimental attire, and were detained briefly as enemies. Once the misunderstanding was cleared up, however, the two of them were enthusiastically received. Recounted Du Ponceau:

> I was in such spirits when I landed in my fine red coat, that I laid a wager with one of the passengers that I would kiss the first female that I should meet on the shore. It was a handsome young girl clad in a scarlet cloak: I marched up to her politely, told her the wager I had laid, expressing a hope that she would not suffer me to lose it. To my great astonishment she yielded with a good grace, and I triumphantly pocketed the money I had so agreeably won. Thus I was first wedded to this country.

Du Ponceau felt at home at once in the new country, overwhelmed for the first time to be in a milieu where English, and not French, was spoken everywhere. “I was only astonished,” he wrote, “to find the milkmaids as learned in [English] as I was. My astonishment would hardly have been greater if they had spoken Greek or Latin.” He accompanied Steuben everywhere he went, since the Prussian baron would have been completely helpless without Du Ponceau’s translation skills.

After recuperating from their long sea voyage in Portsmouth, the pair made their way to Boston, where they became well acquainted with all the leaders of the Revolution in that city. Du Ponceau, who was already well-versed in law and was a staunch supporter of republican principles, made a favorable impression on the likes of John Hancock and Samuel Adams. Decades later, he whimsically recalled a conversation with Samuel Adams:

> I shall never forget the compliment paid me by Samuel Adams on his discovering my Republican principles. "Where," said he to me, "did you learn all that?" "In France," replied I. "In France! That is impossible!" Then, recovering himself, he added, "Well, because a man was born in a stable, it is no reason why he should be a horse." I thought to myself, that in matters of compliment they ordered these things better in France.

Learning of the desperate condition of the Continental Army at Valley Forge, Steuben and Du Ponceau, along with the baron's small retinue, decided to make their way down to Pennsylvania. Because of the danger of being apprehended by Redcoats or Tory sympathizers along the coast, they took their course well inland, adding weeks to their journey. On one occasion, they found themselves in the midst of a snowstorm, with the only accommodation being an inn whose owner was a hostile Tory. When they presented themselves, the innkeeper at first refused them food or lodging. After some heated discussion, Steuben drew his pistols and forced the innkeeper at gunpoint to take them in. "In the morning after breakfast," Du Ponceau wrote wryly, "we politely took leave of our host, who, though a Tory, did not refuse the Continental money in which we liberally paid him."

Eventually, Du Ponceau, Steuben, and the rest of their small company made it to York, Pennsylvania, where the Continental Congress was attempting to govern the new country. Steuben, whose fame as a military commander had preceded him, was received with great honor, and Du Ponceau made several acquaintances among the members of the Continental Congress — such as the scholarly James Lowell from Massachusetts — who were to become lifelong friends and supporters. At the urging of Steuben, Du Ponceau was formally inducted into the Continental Army and given the rank of captain. The two then left the comparatively safe and comfortable confines of York and set out for Valley Forge.

Disciplinarian: Prussian General Baron von Steuben was largely responsible for instilling professional military discipline in the Continental Army, creating a tradition of top-notch professionalism that still characterizes the U.S. Armed Forces today. He also brought the young Du Ponceau to America as his aide and translator.

Arriving in Valley Forge on February 22, 1778, Du Ponceau and Steuben dined with George Washington himself the following day. The awestruck young French linguist left one of the most detailed descriptions of Washington ever written:

> I cannot describe the impression that the first sight of that great man made upon me. I could not keep my eyes from that imposing countenance, grave yet not severe: affable without familiarity. Its predominant expression was calm dignity through which you could trace the strong feelings of the patriot and discern the father, as well as the commander of his soldiers. I have never seen a picture that represents him to me as I saw him at Valley Forge, and during the campaigns in which I had the honor to follow him. Perhaps that expression was beyond the skill of the painter, but while I live it will remain impressed on my memory.

Du Ponceau soon became friends with Washington, as well as with future president James Monroe and two of Washington's aides-de-camp, Alexander Hamilton and the polyglot John Laurens, with whom he corresponded in Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, and English. It was also at Valley Forge that Du Ponceau became acquainted with the Marquis de Lafayette, with whom he became a close friend.

The setting at Valley Forge was grim, with food and warm clothing scarce (it was Steuben who, according to Du Ponceau, coined the term "sans culottes" — "trouserless men" — to describe the wretched soldiers of the Continental Army, a term that was unfortunately appropriated by the bloody French Revolutionary minions of Marat and Robespierre only a few years later). The atmosphere of near-despair persisted until May, when the news arrived of the alliance with France. "Then the public distress was forgotten amidst the universal joy," Du Ponceau recalled. "I shall never forget that glorious time. I was not yet an American; I was proud of being a Frenchman…. Wherever a French officer appeared, he was met with congratulations and with smiles. O that was a delightful time! It bound me forever to the country of my adoption." Before they left Valley Forge, Steuben was made inspector general of the Continental Army, and Du Ponceau became his aide-de-camp and was appointed a major.

The following June, Du Ponceau accompanied Steuben to Philadelphia on the very day that the British troops evacuated the city. They found the city full of trash left by the departing occupiers, but were for the most part received as liberators. Du Ponceau did not linger long in the City of Brotherly Love, however. He and Steuben went with General Washington and his army into New Jersey, where they participated on June 28 in the Battle of Monmouth. This, the first major engagement of against the British following the harrowing winter at Valley Forge, resulted in a stalemate, with both the British forces (commanded by generals Cornwallis and Clinton) and the Continental Army holding the field when night fell. The British chose to withdraw under cover of darkness; this was the first time Washington's army had fought a pitched, stand-up battle against the formidable core of the British army and held its own. The Battle of Monmouth was a testament to the improved discipline and resolve imparted to the Continental Army by the likes of Baron von Steuben, and prompted many doubters to begin taking Washington and his forces more seriously.

All through 1778 and 1779, Du Ponceau accompanied Steuben, returning frequently to Philadelphia, which soon became Du Ponceau's American home. But in late 1779, Du Ponceau became seriously ill with what appeared to be tuberculosis, losing weight and coughing up blood. A series of doctors pronounced his case hopeless, and for a time it appeared that the irrepressible young Frenchman would succumb to "pulmonary mischief." He took up residence in the country, hoping to improve his condition, and began drinking large quantities of milk on advice from a physician. Sure enough, his cough abated somewhat, and Du Ponceau began to feel frustrated at not being able to do the work he was being paid

to do. In 1781, Steuben suggested that he accompany him to Virginia, suggesting that, if Du Ponceau were to die, better to do so in the saddle than in a bed. Du Ponceau accepted the proposal, and headed down to then hotly contested Virginia to render whatever assistance he could to the harried American forces. Surprisingly, his health continued to improve, despite the rigors of travel and the occasional danger of capture by enemy forces. However, a severe fever that overcame him in southern Virginia while en route to North Carolina forced Du Ponceau to abandon his military adventures once and for all. Steuben gave him a glowing letter of recommendation to present to Congress, recommending him for employment in some civil capacity.

Man of Letters and Learning

On the 25th of July, 1781, Du Ponceau formalized his relationship with his adopted land, becoming a citizen of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. “Behold me then,” he recalled with pride many years later, “a citizen of the United States, having entered with them into a solemn compact, to which I have faithfully adhered, and which I have never repented.”

Because of his broad expertise in foreign affairs, law, and languages, Du Ponceau was soon recommended as an assistant to Robert R. Livingston, the chancellor of New York, who had just been appointed secretary of foreign affairs of the United States. A letter of recommendation on his behalf, written by one Judge Richard Peters, gives some idea of the range of Du Ponceau’s qualifications:

> I have been acquainted with [Du Ponceau] ever since his arrival in this country, and … I have no doubt of his attachment to our cause, and am convinced of his abilities and unblemished character…. He has an exceeding industrious turn, and has a most remarkable facility of acquiring languages. French is his native tongue. English he has acquired perfectly, and he understands German, Italian, and Spanish. He can translate Danish and Low Dutch with the help of a dictionary, but a little application will make him master of these

Du Ponceau was made Livingston’s secretary in October 1781, and worked with him until the end of the war. In 1783, Du Ponceau resolved to make a formal study of law, and began two years of study under William Lewis, then regarded as the best lawyer in Philadelphia and possibly in all of America. In 1785, he was admitted as an attorney to the Court of Common Pleas; in 1786, became an attorney to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania; and in 1791, unsurprisingly, was certified as an interpreter of foreign languages. In the meanwhile, Du Ponceau was married in 1788, and sought thereafter to lead as retiring and unassuming a life as possible.

To the field of law Du Ponceau applied himself with characteristic energy, becoming one of early America’s foremost experts on European and international law. He published widely in jurisprudential studies, including several English translations of treatises on law in European languages. He was even, later in life, offered the position of chief judge of Louisiana by Thomas Jefferson, but did not wish to leave his adopted home of Philadelphia.

But law was not Du Ponceau’s all-consuming passion; as he once noted, “the life of a lawyer, in the full practice of his profession, offers very little but the dull and dismal round of attendance upon courts, hard studies at night, and, in the day, fatiguing exertions, which, however brilliant, are confined to a

narrow theatre, and leave nothing behind but a blaze of reputation and the echo of a name."

Battle of Monmouth: This was one of the Revolutionary War engagements in which Du Ponceau took part, in his capacity as advisor to Baron von Steuben. The battle was the first occasion in which Washington's Continental Army held its own against British and Hessian forces, and did much to enhance the reputation of America's young fighting forces.

His exertions as a lawyer notwithstanding, it was as a linguist and philologist that Du Ponceau is best remembered. Perhaps in no small measure because of his first stirring encounter with an American Indian at Valley Forge, Du Ponceau became one of the first Western scholars to devote himself to the documentation and study of Native American languages, from the far northern reaches of the Canadian Arctic to southern South America. In 1815, the venerable American Philosophical Society, founded by Benjamin Franklin and John Bartram in 1743, formed a Committee of History, Moral Science, and General Literature, providing a venue for Du Ponceau's pioneering linguistic research. In 1819, Du Ponceau presented to the committee the first of many minutely researched works on the structure of the Indian languages. In 1835, he published another extensive treatise on the same subject in France, *Mémoire sur le systeme grammatical des langues de quelques nations Indiennes de l'Amérique du Nord* ("Memoir on the Grammar System of the Languages of Some Indian Nations of North America"), for which he received high scholarly honors in his native land. In these and other works, Du Ponceau became the first to point out to European linguists certain distinctive and previously unknown traits typical of many American Indian languages, which were unknown among the languages of the Old World that had been documented up to that point.

In particular, Du Ponceau is credited with both discovering and naming the phenomenon of polysynthesis, whereby certain languages are capable of forming compound words of extraordinary length and complexity that can have the semantic value of an entire sentence. A large number of Native American languages are polysynthetic, including Inuktitut and related languages spoken by "Eskimos" in the far north, the Cree language, most of the Plains Indian languages, Navajo, Apache, and related languages of the Southwest, and the Mayan languages of Mesoamerica. It is this organizing feature of morphosyntax that makes so many Native American languages almost unlearnable to those not born as native speakers. Du Ponceau, with insight that still holds up two centuries later, described such exotic languages in his 1819 treatise as follows

> Three principal results have forcibly struck my mind.... They are the following:
>
> That the American languages in general are rich in grammatical forms, and that in their complicated construction, the greatest order, method and regularity prevail.
>
> That these complicated forms, which I call *polysynthesis*, appear to exist in all those languages, from Greenland to Cape Horn.
>
> That these forms appear to differ essentially from those of the ancient and modern languages of the old hemisphere....
>
> I have explained elsewhere what I mean by a *polysynthetic* or *syntactic* construction of language.... It is that in which the greatest number of ideas are comprised in the least number of words. This is done ... by interweaving together the most significant sounds or syllables of each simple word, so as to form a compound that will awaken in the mind at once all the ideas singly expressed by the words from which they are taken

For example, in the Mexican language Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs), one may say *nimitztētlamaquiltīz*, a single word with the force of an entire sentence, meaning approximately, "I shall make somebody give something to you." Subsequent research has found polysynthesis to be prevalent in other language groups outside the Americas — in eastern Siberia, in New Guinea, and among the Australian aborigines, for example — but all subsequent study of this perplexing language trait is premised on the pioneering work of Du Ponceau.

Du Ponceau also became well known late in life for his study of the Chinese writing system, which at that time was *terra incognita* for Western scholars. Prevailing (and poorly informed) scholarly opinion in Europe at that time held that the Chinese characters were "ideographs," nothing more than stylized pictures with no phonetic or morphological significance. Du Ponceau, however, was able to show his colleagues on both continents that, in fact, the Chinese writing system was far more sophisticated than just little pictures; it also represented aspects of both sound and morphology in a system that Du Ponceau styled "lexicographic," a characterization that anyone familiar with Chinese will appreciate as far more accurate than mere "picture writing." This and more was the subject of Du Ponceau's *Dissertation on the Chinese Language*, which, published when he was 78 years old, was his last contribution to language studies.

Du Ponceau's vigorous scholarship earned him international recognition. He was one of the first American men of letters whose scholarship was acknowledged as world-class. He believed that science, art, and scholarship were far more important to the well-being of a civilization than more practical concerns, because they embodied the entire *raison d'être* of advanced society. Commerce and agriculture, after all, were the mainstays of cultures great and primitive, whereas the refinements of art and higher learning were among the luxuries that motivated men to improve the state. "The noble aqueducts, temples, roads, of the Greeks and Romans, have perished, but their literary fame will last forever," Du Ponceau wrote. "If England were sunken into the ocean, her fame would be perpetuated by the works of her admirable historians, philosophers, and poets. Let those, whose minds are impressed with [such] feelings, exert themselves and act."

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Strange characters: The Chinese writing system was not yet well understood by Western scholars when Du Ponceau undertook to study it late in his scholarly career. It was Du Ponceau who first recognized that the characters were more than just “picture writing,” but rather that they had phonological as well as pictorial characteristics, and constituted a writing system every bit as sophisticated as Western alphabets.

By his own admission, Du Ponceau was not at first an ardent American patriot, although he was already a republican when he met Baron von Steuben. He was in love with the English language and culture, and animated — as so many young men are — by the prospect of overseas travel. But once in America, he became an American, wholeheartedly and irrevocably, and withal an American with a vision of what liberty could confer: a new type of civilization, where men could develop whatever talents they were blessed with, rather than being consigned to the brutish and impoverished lives of serfdom that were the lot of most of our ancestors. In this, Du Ponceau’s life was an early instance of the full menu of civilized pursuits that liberty would eventually make possible, and which John Adams famously foresaw:

> I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.

Du Ponceau died in April 1844 at the age of 84, having lived to see the republic that he helped to found begin to reach its full potential. No biography of him has ever been written, perhaps because of his modesty and disinterest in seeking public office. But he was no less a son of the republic than his many flashier, more conspicuous contemporaries. With other early American scholars — Benjamin Franklin, John Bartram, John James Audubon, and Benjamin Peirce, among many others — he helped to pioneer a tradition of scientific inquiry and higher learning in America that would one day make this country the world center for science and scholarship.

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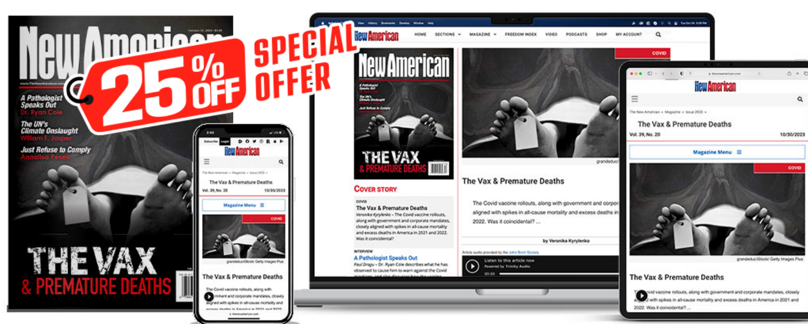

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