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GABRIEL FURMAN: HISTORIAN AND CIVIC LEADER

Dissertation Proposal

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The emergence of Brooklyn as a discrete urban area paralleled the public life and writings of antebellum, Long Island historian Gabriel Furman. As a civil leader during the urbanization of Brooklyn, Furman was in the vanguard of the developing social consciousness of a community still in flux. A pioneering advocate of the city as a viable social unit, Furman directed his energies to the socializing processes at work in the creation of a major metropolitan area. His experience, recorded in a massive collection of manuscript chronicles, may be viewed as a microcosm of early nineteenth century urbanization. An avid historian and an indefatigable diarist, he recorded the events, passions, fears, and expectations relevant to a socially aware citizen of an early national city. Over a dozen manuscript volumes of his personal journal survive, affording the twentieth century reader innumerable first hand impressions and descriptions.

Credited by a contemporary with "intuitive and prophetic sagacity," Furman helped foster the development of community self-consciousness in Brooklyn Village. He played an active role in the political and institutional growth of the nascent city. A noted authority on the

period, Ralph Foster Weld, cites Furman's work as being ". . . of the foremost importance; and it is especially interesting and significant to note the presence, among so many villagers of strong individualistic bent, of one to whom the idea of Brooklyn as a community was singularly vivid."

The Brooklyn of Gabriel Furman was transformed from a prosperous agricultural hinterland into a thriving city, the third largest in the nation at mid-century, the time of his death. While its geographical proximity to New York at times prompted a suburban, imitative type development, Brooklyn embarked upon a substantially independent course during the Jacksonian period. Both institutional evolution and the appearance of a cadre of citizens concerned with village betterment led the Brooklyn of the 1830's to incorporate as a city, independent of neighboring New York.

The first historian of Brooklyn, Gabriel Furman compiled a mass of factual and anecdotal information on pre- and post-Revolutionary Long Island resulting in several publications, notably Notes geographical and historical, relating to the town of Brooklyn and Antiquities of Long Island. His extraordinary accomplishment, however, rests in his manuscript journals, assiduously amassed into specially bound volumes. In these "notes" and diaries, he

functions as both an irrepressible historian and a keen social observer of his own time. Five thousand pages of his journal are preserved in the Brooklyn collection of the Long Island Historical Society. Not always in strict chronological order, his chronicle is neither topically arranged, nor indexed. My preliminary indexing reveals extensive notes on early Long Island and observations on a wide range of contemporary issues--from Fanny Wright's lectures to immigration and foreign affairs. Furman's descriptions of American customs rival those of Mrs. Trollope, yet his Whig proclivities are mellowed by an apparent empathy for the "have-nots" of his era. He published two book length histories and may well have authored Redfield: A Long Island Tale of the Seventeenth Century, an almost unknown novel in the tradition of Cooper and Irving. He also wrote for the publications of his friend, Alden Spooner, pioneer Brooklyn journalist and publisher. In addition, Furman helped Spooner compile the first Directory of Brooklyn Village.

Furman's insights into the evolving community life of a Jacksonian era town are made particularly telling by virtue of his close association with his subject. As a well-connected young lawyer, Furman became a judge and an alderman of the burgeoning community. Serving on various

Political involvement

municipal commissions, he gained a particularly intimate knowledge of the workings of his community. A civic innovator, Furman promoted initial attempts to establish an independent Brooklyn culture, separate from that of New York. He encouraged educational projects, among them, various library and lyceum movements. His social concern led him to an activist role. As Inspector of Common Schools, Health Warden, and member of Water, Ferry, and Courthouse Commissions, Furman demonstrated an appreciation of Brooklyn's ever-increasing sense of community. Through his father's interests, Furman became associated with the Brooklyn-New York Ferry and the establishment of the first bank on Long Island, as well as with the creation of a pioneering fire insurance company, institutions which reflected the maturation of a cohesive community.

*municipal
infrastructure*

Social consciousness was ever being raised by the press, religious leaders, and social reformers. Young professionals of the village responded by grouping into associations, which acted as positive influences for reform and collective responsibility. Acquiring a substantial local reputation as a scholar and intellectual, Furman lectured statewide to audiences stimulated by the current popular movement for self-improvement. Elected to the New York State Senate in 1838, Furman amassed a solid record which earned him the

Whig nomination for Lieutenant-Governor in 1842.

Furman's life was transformed, however, when, as village Health Warden, he was exposed to the horrors of the cholera epidemic of 1832. Succumbing, not to the disease, but to opium, its presumed preventative, Furman began an addiction that was to last the rest of his life. As his addiction grew, his interest in the practical aspect of civil government gradually lessened, and perhaps fortuitously, he became more immersed than ever in his avocation-- his personal library and his journal.

In a gothic manner, reminiscent of the mystical pre-occupation so characteristic of his contemporary, Edgar Allan Poe, Furman's natural scientific curiosity increasingly focused on the supernatural, astrology, and quasi-scientific matters. Taking refuge in his journal, he recorded comments on the supernatural, contemporary lifestyles, internal improvements, ethnic minorities, and civic affairs. Recurrent themes abound--technology, British-American rivalry, the west, economics, slavery, publishing, Shakespeare, as well as his deep-seated fascination with the history of Long Island. As his introversion deepened, Furman neglected his law practice and his friends. In a tragic denouement, he was forced to auction off his library, the product of a lifetime of book collecting. He died, almost forgotten, on the eve of Brooklyn's consolidation

with Williamsburg and emergence as a major city.

Furman witnessed an incredible metamorphosis during his lifetime. The hamlet, Brooklyn Ferry, became a town which, in turn, spawned a city. He not only chronicled the transformation, but operated at the center of the social, economic, and intellectual forces that shaped the change. A demographic pioneer, Furman painstakingly catalogued and indexed the Brooklyn of his times. His accounts provided the framework for subsequent nineteenth century historical treatments of early Brooklyn. His now virtually unstudied journals provide rare insight into the attitudes and concerns of early national urbanites. His experiences as a civic leader mirror the urbanization process at work during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The collective acquisition of a sense of civic responsibility was a long time in coming to Brooklyn. Furman's participatory role in the establishment of viable mechanisms of urban government, both administrative and social, is representative of the civic maturity requisite for community betterment. Gabriel Furman and his colleagues played an indispensable role in this development of an awareness of community. Furman's life, therefore, assumes special significance--not only for his invaluable compendium of local history, but for his influential position in the general process of civilizing and socializing an urban area

in the early national period.