

AN EARLY EPISODE IN THE CAREER OF MASON AND DIXON

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THERE is no doubt that the work done by Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon under the direction of the Royal Society on the observation of the transit of Venus, June 6, 1761, was one of the reasons which prompted Lord Baltimore and the Penns to employ them in surveying the boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania, 1763-1767. For that reason, the following documents from the Royal Society Library possess human interest:

Articles of agreement between the Council of the Royal Society on one part; and Mr. Charles Mason and Mr. Jeremiah Dixon on the other Part for observing the Transit of Venus over the Sun on the 6th of June next, at Bencoolen on the Island of Sumatra.

Gratuity to each of the observers, to be paid on their return to England.....£200/0/0

For share of fresh provisions, Liquors, Teas, etc., to be laid in with the officers, in the voyage going out, this money to be paid now; to each.....£30/0/0

And whereas the East India Company have promised to accomodate the observers with Diet and apartments in a suitable manner, and also to provide them with a passage home, all at the expence of the said Company: notwithstanding which several unforeseen or incidental expences may be necessarily incurred, on the Island and in the return home, the amount of which cannot now be ascertained. The Council agrees to furnish each of them with Bills of Credit to the amount of one hundred pounds, for which they are to be accountable to the Society at their return home.

It is understood, that the £200 mentioned in the first article shall be paid to each of the Observers on their Representation, in case the Observation shall be completed by both observers, and returned to the Society, although they or either of them should happen to dye before their personal return to England.

By Order of the Council.

James Burrow, Vice-President
Charles Mason,

Jeremiah Dixon.

Oct.23, 1760.

But the ship they embarked on met with a French frigate, and the party returned to Plymouth.

To Dr. Morton, Sec'y to Royal Society, London,

Plymouth, 12th Jan. 1761.

I beg the favour you would please to acquaint the Council of the Royal Society that on Saturday last at Eleven in the Morning, 34 Leagues SW 2 W from the Start point we Engaged the *L'Grand a* thirty four Gun Frigate; when after an obstinate dispute of about one hour and a quarter, Monsieur thought proper to run as fast as possible; after chacing sometime in vain, the Captain steer'd for this port to refit.

In the action we had eleven men kill'd, and thirty seven wounded, many of whom I believe mortal. . . . It is allowed by all; Capt. Smith commanded with the greatest prudence and courage, and that his officers behaved deserving the Highest Notice. All our masts are wounded, and to refit the ship will take up so much time that in my opinion it will be impossible for me to arrive in India in time to make the obser-vation; and therefore must desire you will please by a line as soon as possible to acquaint me in what manner the council would please to have us proceed.

C. Mason.

P.S. The stands for our Instruments are tore very much, but the clock Quadrant, Telescopes, etc., are not damaged that I can find.

To Dr. Morton,

Plymouth, 25th Jan.
1761.

Sir: Yours of the 17th and 21st came safe to hand. Regarding the last we find the Council's general Instructions are, that, we do every thing in our Power to answer the Intention of our Expedition. It is our Opinion, as well as those of some sagacious Friends, that 'tis abso-lutely impossible for us to reach any part by way of the Cape proper for making the Observations that will have East Longitude sufficient to be of any use to com-pare with those made at Greenwich and St. Helena. We find no place on the Globe which we can reach to be of great consequence as one made at Scanderoon; to which place if the Council of the Royal Society will please to send us, we shall with the greatest Pleasure obey their commands; but shall not proceed from this to any other place, where it is impossible for us to perform what the world in general reasonably expect from us, and therefore shall wait for a Line to inform us of their further pleasure.

We, etc.

Chas. Mason.

Jere. Dixon.

P.S. According to the best Tables the Sun will have been some time above the Horizon at Scanderoon the Instant of the first Internal contact, and the place will have a sufficient degree of Diurnal Rotation, that the observation made there alone, would even be sufficient to determine the Sun's Parallax.

The ship will scarcely be ready for sea this week. Seeing our Expedition was from time to time disappointed gave me great uneasiness, which with a continual Sickness while at Spithead and at sea affected me very much, but thank God am pretty well recovered.

Chas. Mason.

Plymouth, Jan.25, 1761.

To Rev. Dr. Bradley, at the Royal Observatory, Green-wich.

... Perhaps the council of the Society may take it strange of me, but I see no reason why I should go upon impossibilities, and then perhaps at my return they will suppose the failure was owing to me. . . . I hope the Society will order us to this place [Scanderoon] or the Eastern part of the Black Sea, which will answer beyond those of the French. . . .

Chas. Mason.

They were impatiently awaiting instructions. On the 27th, they wrote to Thomas Birch, secretary of the Royal Society:

And as Scanderoon will make a third Point upon the Earth's Disk of very great advantage to those of St. Helena and Greenwich, we shall, be very sorry to proceed from this Place, to any other, where the Society (as time stands) can gain no Honour, or we any Reputation; and to go to India merely for the Premium is an Intention far from our first design.

Jere. Dixon.

Chas. Mason.

The rough sketch of a letter addressed to Messrs. Mason and Dixon, January 31, 1761, shows how close was the possibility that they might not have lived professionally to make the "Mason and Dixon Line!"

Resolved unanimously, That the Council are extremely surprised at their declining to pursue their Voyage to Bencoolen and which they have solemnly undertaken; and have actually received several sums of money upon account of their expences, and in earnest of performing their contract.

That their refusal to proceed upon this voyage after their having so publickly and notoriously ingaged in it, will be a Reproach to the Nation in General, to the Royal Society in particular, and more especially and fatally to themselves: And that, after the Crown has been graciously and generously pleased to encourage this undertaking by a grant of money towards carrying it on; and the Lords of Admiralty to fit out a ship of war, on purpose to carry these gentlemen to Bencoolen; and after the expectation of this and various other nations has been raised, to attend the event of their voyage; their declining it at this critical juncture, when it is too late to supply their Places, cannot fail to bring an indelible scandal upon their character and probably end in their utter Ruin. That in case they shall persist in their refusal, or voluntarily frustrate the end and disappoint the Intention of their Voyage, or take any steps to thwart it, they may assure themselves of being treated by the Council with the most inflexible Resentment, and prosecuted with the utmost Severity of Law.

In a postscript in another hand it was admitted that the winds may be uncertain, but they shall at least begin their voyage : "The Council do absolutely and expressly direct and require Mr. Mason and Mr. Dixon, to go on board and enter upon the voyage, be the event as it may fall out." They replied, Feb. 3, 1761, a bit hurt by the Council's letter of January 31 : "We hope to sail this evening." Their next letter was from the Cape of Good Hope, May 6, 1761, where they were preparing for the observations. In a postscript Mason says: "Pondicherry is taken by the English, and Bencoolen by the French."

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