



Stephen Girard: America's Colonial Olympian, 1750-1831

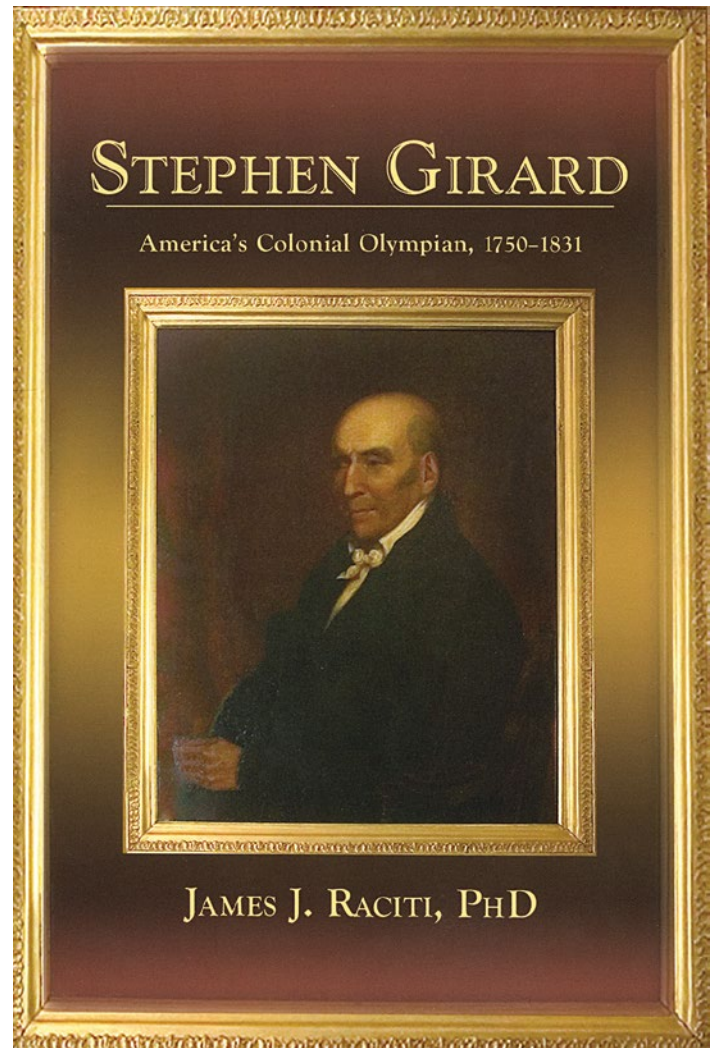
– a new biography reviewed by Hugh F. Cline –

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This new biography by James J. Raciti gives a unique look into the life of Stephen Girard. It is a must read for all those who have any interest in Girard, or any affiliation with Girard College, for it provides invaluable insight into the motivations of the first major philanthropist in the United States. James J. Raciti, a graduate of Girard College class of 1951, has produced a fascinating and informative biography; he employs a Socratic dialogue for 75% of the text. This format is similar to the dialogues of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates with his students. Each of 18 chapters consists of a series of specific questions and answers relevant to the life and times of Stephen Girard. They reveal new and fascinating details of all stages of Girard's life including his unhappy childhood in Southern France; his financial successes as a mariner, merchant, banker, and eventually a farmer; his community services during the Yellow Fever epidemic; his financing of the federal government during War of 1812; his death in Philadelphia at age 81.

The dialogues are most engaging, for they inform the reader of Girard's activities and motivations as he dealt with his family members, employees, business colleagues, and local and federal government officials in both France and a newly established United States of America. Perhaps most salient for all those affiliated with Girard College in the past and today are the descriptions of Girard's emerging views over a three decade period that led to the specification of the educational philosophy, the effective management strategies of a 24/7 boarding school environment, the comprehensive academic curriculum, and even the physical plant of the school enabled by his generous entitlements.

By examining the source materials in both the extensive archives at Girard College and in southern France, Raciti is able to provide backgrounds that have not been included in earlier biographies of Stephen Girard. For example, he discusses in several chapters the relationship between Stephen and his siblings. Many family members attempted to convince him that he should share his accumulating wealth with relatives. Girard steadfastly refused, feeling that each person should strive, as did he, to become self-sufficient and support their immediate family members.



However, when the children of several siblings were left destitute, Girard provided funds for their support, including their education in France and Philadelphia. Furthermore, Girard took into his residence the children of colleagues and employees and provided them both a supportive home and an appropriate education. Raciti reports that Girard enjoyed having young people in his home environment.

In other sections of this biography Raciti reveals Girard's philanthropic spirit in voluntarily managing the hospital for victims during the Yellow Fever in 1793, negotiating the major loan that financed the War of 182,

and providing care and a comfortable apartment in the Pennsylvania Hospital for his mentally ill wife, Mary, over a 25 year period. Raciti reports that Girard privately shed tears at Mary's funeral.

Perhaps the most engaging section of this book is Appendix 1, entitled Stephen's Twilight Visitors: A Fictional Dramatization of Stephen Girard's Last Evening. In a radical departure from the standard format for an academic biography, Raciti provides in this appendix a series of hypothetical interactions between Stephen Girard on his deathbed and the spirits of several of his contemporaries, including his parents, his siblings, his wife, Mary, and such luminaries as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington.

Finally, all these hypothetical and biographical materials are preceded in this book by a letter from Raciti to Stephen Girard in which he writes about his experiences as a student at Girard College from elementary through high school graduation. He briefly describes the staff, the curriculum and the physical plant. Throughout the letter Raciti repeats his gratitude to Stephen Girard for his donation of the bulk of his substantial financial resources to creating the educational opportunities that have now benefited thousands of students over more than 150 years.

Stephen Girard: America's Colonial Olympian, 1750-1831 by James J. Raciti, PhD. Sunstone Press, 2015; 272 pages, \$24.95.



About the reviewer. Hugh F. (Tony) Cline is a contemporary and schoolmate of James Raciti, having graduated from Girard College one year after the author in the class of 1952. Cline holds a BA from Pennsylvania State University, an MS from Stockholm University, and a PhD from Harvard University. He made his career as a professor at Columbia University, and is currently an adjunct professor of sociology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University. He resides in Princeton, NJ.