A Federalist's allegory & poem on the U.S. Constitution

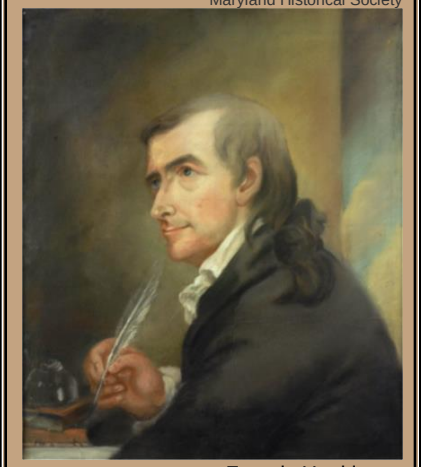
__Francis Hopkinson__

THE NEW ROOF

Allegory (1787) & Poem (1788)

Revered for his witty satiric poems published during the Revolution, Francis Hopkinson penned two works titled "The New Roof" to promote ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Widely read and reprinted, both works—an allegory and a poem—portrayed the Constitution as a "new roof" for the nation struggling under a roof "in very bad condition" (the Articles of Confederation) for which simple repairs would not suffice. Concerning Hopkinson's impact, his fellow Patriot Benjamin Rush concluded that "the various causes which contributed to the establishment of the Independence and federal government of the United States will not be fully traced unless much is ascribed to the irresistible influence of the ridicule which he poured forth, from time to time, upon the enemies of those great political events."[1] Follow the ingenious ways in which Hopkinson applied the "new roof" analogy in his allegory (pp. 1-5) and his poem (p. 6) during the ratification debates.

Maryland Historical Society



Francis Hopkinson
self-portrait after 1785 portrait by Robert Edge Pine

THE roof of a certain mansion house was observed to be in a very bad condition,[2] and quite insufficient for the purpose of protection from the inclemencies of the weather. This was matter of surprise and speculation, as it was well known the roof was not more than 12 years old, and therefore, its defects could not be ascribed to a natural decay by time.

Altho' there were many different opinions as to the cause of this deficiency, yet all agreed that the family could not sleep in comfort or safety under it. It was at last determined to appoint some skillful architects to survey and examine the defective roof, to make report of its condition, and to point out such alterations and repairs as might be found necessary. These skillful architects accordingly went into a thorough examination of the faulty roof, and found

1st. That the whole frame was too weak.

2d. That there were indeed 13 rafters, but that these rafters were not connected by any braces or ties so as to form a union of strength.

3d. That some of these rafters were thick and heavy, and others very slight, and as the whole had been put together whilst the timber was yet green, some had warped outwards and of course sustained an undue weight, whilst others, warping inwards, had shrunk from bearing any weight at all.

4th. That the lathing and shingling[3] had not been secured with iron nails but only wooden pegs,[4] which shrinking and swelling by successions of wet and dry weather, had left the shingles so loose that many of them had been blown away by the winds, and that before long the whole would probably, in like manner, be blown away.

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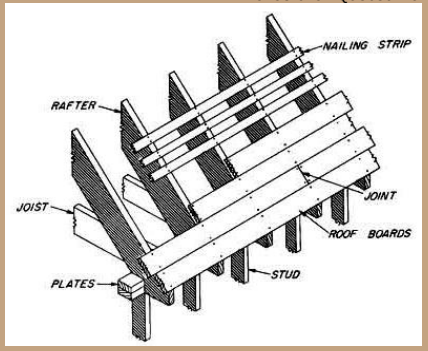


basic roof framing

 Allegory first published in the *Pennsylvania Packet*, 29 December 1787; poem first published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 6 February 1788. Hopkinson's notes in 1792 collection of his writings presented in italics. Some spelling and punctuation modernized by NHC for clarity. Text accessed through America's Historical Newspapers, courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society with Readex/NewsBank. Complete image credits at americainclass.org/sources/makingrevolution/imagecredits.htm.

[1] Charles R. Hildeburn, "Francis Hopkinson," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. II (1878), p. 320.

[2] *The Old Confederation* (author's note in *The Miscellaneous Essays and Occasional Writings of Francis Hopkinson*, 3 vols. [Philadelphia, T. Dobson, 1792], Vol. II. p. 282).

[3] Roof shingles were applied over lath boards (narrow strips of wood connected to form a lattice structure).

[4] *Paper currency* (author's note in *Essays*, 1792).

5th. That the cornice[5] was so ill proportioned and so badly put up as to be neither of use nor an ornament. And

6th. That the roof was so flat as to admit the most idle servants in the family, their playmates and acquaintance, to trample upon and abuse it.[6]

Having made these observations, these judicious architects gave it as their opinion that it would be altogether vain and fruitless to attempt any alterations or amendments [repairs] in a roof so defective in all points, and therefore proposed to have it entirely removed, and that a new roof of a better construction should be erected over the mansion house. And they also prepared and offered a drawing or plan of a new roof, such as they thought most excellent for security, duration, and ornament. In forming this plan, they consulted the most celebrated authors in ancient and modern architecture, and brought into their plan the most approved parts according to their judgments, selected from the models before them; and finally endeavored to proportion the whole to the size of the building and strength of the walls.

This proposal of a new roof, it may well be supposed, became the principal subject of conversation in the family, and the opinions upon it were various according to the judgment, interest, or ignorance of the disputants.

On a certain day, the servants of the family had assembled in the great hall to discuss this important point.[7] Amongst these was James,[8] the architect, who had been one of the surveyors of the old roof and had a principal hand in forming the plan of the new one. A great number of tenants had also gathered out of doors and crowded the windows and avenues to the hall, which were left open for them that they might hear the arguments for and against the new roof.[9]

Now, there was an old woman known by the name of Margery[10] who had got a comfortable apartment in the mansion house. This woman was of an intriguing spirit, of a restless and inveterate temper, fond of tattle, and a great mischief maker. In this situation, and with these talents, she unavoidably acquired an influence in the family, by the exercise of which, according to her natural propensity, she had long kept the house in confusion and sown discord and discontent amongst the servants. Margery was, for many reasons, an irreconcilable enemy to the new roof and to the architects who had planned it. Amongst these, two reasons were very obvious—

1st. The mantelpiece on which her cups and platters were placed was made of a portion of the great cornice, and she boiled her pot with the shingles that blew off from the defective roof; and,

2d. It so happened that in the construction of the new roof, her apartment would be considerably lessened.

Smithsonian American Art Museum

"James, the architect"
James Wilson, ca.1792
portrait by Jean Pierre Henri Elouis

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

"Margery," the "old woman"
Mercy Otis Warren, ca. 1763
portrait by John Singleton Copley
titled *Mrs. James Warren*

[5] Overhanging edge of a sloping roof, often decorative molding, that directs rain away from the roof.

[6] *Want* [lack] *of dignity in government* (author's note in *Essays*, 1792).

[7] Hopkinson published the allegory soon after Pennsylvania had ratified the Constitution, the second state to do so, on December 12, 1787. In his 1792 *Essays*, Hopkinson preceded the allegory with this comment: "In December 1787 the convention of Pennsylvania assembled to consider the constitution or frame of government for the United States . . . After three weeks deliberation, the proposed constitution was adopted by the convention . . . the following allegory contains in substance the principal arguments used in that important debate."

[8] *J—. W—.* (author's note in *Essays*, 1792). James Wilson was the leading Federalist voice in the Pennsylvania ratifying convention.

[9] Analogous to the crowds of spectators and demonstrators during the Pennsylvania ratification convention.

[10] *Margery the midwife* (author's note in *Essays*, 1792). "Margery" in all likelihood was Mercy Otis Warren, the Boston writer and intellectual who penned numerous anti-Federalist pieces, some directed to the Pennsylvania ratification debate, under the pseudonyms "The Columbian Patriot," "The Republican Federalist," and "Helvidius Priscus." For a discussion of the identity of "Margery" as Mercy Otis Warren, see Hugh J. Schwartzberg, "Mercy's Revenge," paper delivered to the Chicago Literary Club, 19 March 2001, at www.chilit.org/SCHWZBG.HTM.

No sooner, therefore, did she hear of the plan proposed by the architects but she put on her old red cloak and was day and night trudging amongst the tenants and servants, and crying out against the new roof and the framers of it. Amongst these she had selected William, Jack, and Robert,[11] three of the servants, and instigated them to oppose the plan in agitation — she caused them to be sent to the great hall on the day of debate and furnished them with innumerable alarms and fears, cunning arguments, and specious objections.

Now, the principal argument and objections with which Margery had instructed William, Jack, and Robert, were:

1st. That the architects had not exhibited a bill of scantling[12] for the new roof as they ought to have done, and therefore the carpenters, under the pretense of providing timber for it, might lay waste whole forests to the ruin of the farm.

2d. That no provision was made in the plan for a trap door[13] for the servants to pass through with water if the chimney should take fire, and that in case of such an accident, it might hereafter be deemed penal [criminal] to break a hole in the roof for access to save the whole building from destruction.

3d. That this roof was to be guarded by battlements[14] which in stormy seasons would prove dangerous to the family, as the bricks might be blown down and fall on their heads.

4th. It was observed that the old roof was ornamented with 12 pedestals[15] ranged along the ridge, which were objects of universal admiration; whereas according to the new plan, these pedestals were only to be placed along the eaves of the roof over the walls, and that a cupola was to supply their place on the ridge or summit of the new roof. — As to the cupola itself, some of the objectors said it was too heavy and would become a dangerous burden to the building, whilst others alleged that it was too light and would certainly be blown away by the wind.

5th. It was insisted that the 13 rafters, being so strongly braced together, the individual and separate strength of each rafter would be lost in the compounded and united strength of the whole,[16] and so this roof might be considered as one solid mass of timber and not as composed of distinct rafters like the old roof.

6th. That according to the proposed plan, the several parts of the roof were so framed as to mutually strengthen and support each other; and therefore, there was great reason to fear that the whole might stand independent of the walls, and that in time the walls might molder away and the roof remain suspended in the air, threatening destruction to all who should come under it.[17]

To these objections, James the architect, in substance replied.

1st. As to the want [lack] of a bill of scantling, he observed, that if the timber for this roof was to be purchased from a stranger, it would have been quite necessary to have such a bill, lest the stranger should charge in account more than he was entitled to; but as the timber was to be cut from our own lands, a bill of scantling was both useless and improper — of no use, because the wood always was and always would be the property of the family, whether growing in the forest or fabricated into a roof for the mansion house — and improper, because the carpenters would be bound by the bill of scantling which, if it should not be perfectly accurate — a circumstance not to be expected — either the roof would be defective for want of sufficient materials or the

[11] Leading Anti-Federalist delegates to the Pennsylvania ratifying convention included William Findley, John Smilie, and Robert Whitehill, but it is not certain that Hopkinson was referring specifically to these men.
[12] *Bill of rights* (author's note in *Essays*, 1792). A bill of scantling is a detailed order for lumber for construction.
[13] *Liberty of the press* (author's note in *Essays*, 1792).
[14] *Standing army* (author's note in *Essays*, 1792).
[15] *Trial by jury* (author's note in *Essays*, 1792).
[16] *That the sovereignties [autonomy/power] of the several states would be absorbed in the general government* (author's note in *Essays*, 1792).
[17] *That it would be a consolidated government and might exist independent of the people or of the states* (author's note in *Essays*, 1792).

carpenters must cut from the forest, without authority, which is penal [criminal] by the laws of the house.

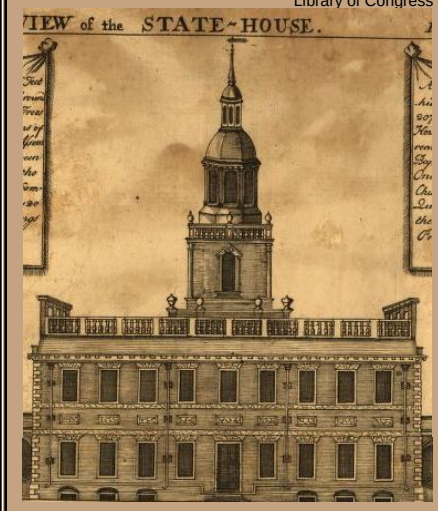
[2d.] To the second objection he said that a trap-door was not properly a part in the frame of a roof, but there could be no doubt but that the carpenters would take care to have such a door through the shingling for the family to carry water through, dirty or clean, to extinguish fire either in the chimney or on the roof; and that this was the only proper way of making such a door.

3d. As to the battlements, he insisted that they were absolutely necessary for the protection of the whole house. —

1st. In case of an attack by robbers, the family would defend themselves behind these battlements and annoy and disperse the enemy.

2d. If any of the adjoining buildings should take fire, the battlements would screen the roof from the destructive flames; And,

3d. They would retain the rafters in their respective places in case any of them should from rottenness or warping be in danger of falling from the general union and injuring other parts of the roof, observing that the battlements should always be ready for these purposes, as there would be neither time nor opportunity for building them after an assault was actually made or a conflagration begun. As to the bricks being blown down, he said the whole was in the power of the family to repair or remove any loose and dangerous parts, and there could be no doubt but that their vigilance would at all times be sufficient to prevent accidents of this kind.



Pennsylvania State House, Philadelphia (Independence Hall), topped with a cupola; detail of *A Map of Philadelphia and Parts Adjacent*, 1752

4th. With respect to the 12 pedestals, he acknowledged their use and elegance, but observed that these, like all other things, were only so in their proper places and under circumstances suited to their nature and design, and insisted that the ridge of a roof was not the place for pedestals, which should rest on the solid wall, being made of the same materials, and ought in propriety to be considered as so many projections or continuations of the wall itself, and not as component parts of the wooden roof. As to the cupola, he said that all agreed there should be one of some kind or other, as well for a proper finish to the building as for the purpose of indicating the winds and containing a bell to sound the alarm in cases of necessity. The objections to the proposed cupola, he said, were too contradictory to merit a reply.

[5th.] To the 5th objection he answered that the intention really was to make a firm and substantial roof by uniting the strength of the 13 rafters, and that this was so far from annihilating the several rafters and rendering them of no use individually, that it was manifest [obvious] from a bare inspection of the plan that the strength of each contributed to the strength of the whole, and that the existence of each and all were essentially necessary to the existence of the whole fabric as a roof.

[6th.] Lastly, he said that the roof was indeed so framed that the parts should mutually support and check each other, but it was most absurd and contrary to the known laws of nature to infer from thence that the whole frame should stand self-supported in air, for however its component parts might be combined with respect to each other, the whole must necessarily rest upon and be supported by the walls. That the walls might indeed stand for a few years in a ruinous and uninhabitable condition without any roof, but the roof could not for a moment stand without the

support of the walls; and finally, that of all dangers and apprehensions, this of the roof's remaining when the walls are gone, was the most absurd and impossible.

It was mentioned before that whilst this debate was carrying on in the great hall, the windows and doors were crowded with attendants [observers]. Amongst these was a half crazy fellow who was suffered [permitted] to go at large as a harmless lunatic.[18] Margery, however, thought he might be a serviceable engine in promoting opposition to the new roof. As people of deranged understandings are easily irritated, she exasperated this poor fellow against the architects and fill'd him with the most terrible apprehensions from the new roof, making him believe that the architects had provided a dark hole in the garret where he was to be chained for life. Having by these suggestions filled him with rage and terror, she let him loose among the crowd, where he roar'd and bawl'd to the annoyance of all bystanders. This circumstance would not have been mentioned but for the opportunity of exhibiting the style and manner in which a deranged and irritated mind will express itself — one of his rhapsodies shall conclude this narrative.

"The new Roof! the new Roof. Oh! the new Roof! — Shall demagogues, despising every sense of order and decency, frame a new roof? — If such barefaced presumption, arrogance, and tyrannical proceeding will not rouse you, the goad [pointed rod] and the whip — the goad and the whip should do it — but you are careless and insecure sinners, whom neither admonitions [warnings], entreaties [pleas], and threatenings can reclaim — sinners consigned to unutterable and endless woe. — Where is that pusillanimous [cowardly] wretch who can submit to such contumely [scornful words] — oh, the *ultima Ratio Regium*:[19] [He got these three Latin words from Margery.] oh the *ultima Ratio Regium!* — ah! the days of Nero! — ah! the days of Caligula![20] — ah ! the British tyrant and his infernal junto[21] — glorious revolution! — awful crisis — self-important nabobs [rich merchants] — diabolical plots and secret machinations [plots] — oh the architects! — they have seized the government, secured power, browbeat with insolence and assume majesty — oh the architects! they will treat you as conquered slaves — they will make you pass under the yoke and leave their gluttony and riot to attend the pleasing sport — oh that the glory of the Lord may be made perfect — that he would show strength with his arm and scatter the proud in the imaginations of their hearts — blow the trumpet — sound an alarm. I will cry day and night — behold, is not this my number five — attend to my words, ye women laboring of child — ye sick persons and young children — behold — behold — the lurking places, the despots, the infernal designs — lust of dominion and conspiracies — from battle and murder and from sudden death — good Lord deliver us.

Figure to yourselves, my good fellows, a man with a cow and a horse — oh the battlements, the battlements, they will fall upon his cow, they will fall upon his horse and wound them and bruise them and kill them, and the poor man will perish with hunger. Do I exaggerate? — no truly — Europe and Asia and Indostan [India/South Asia], deny it if you can —— oh God! what a monster is man! — A being possessed of knowledge, reason, judgment, and an immortal soul — what a monster is man! But the architects are said to be men of skill — then the more their shame — curse on the villains! — they are despots, sycophants [beggars], Jesuits,[22] Tories [Loyalists], lawyers — curse on the villains![23] We beseech thee to hear us — Lord have mercy on us — Oh! — Ah! — Ah! — oh!" ————————

[18] *A furious writer under the signature of Philadelphiensis* (author's note in *Essays*, 1792). Philadelphiensis was the pseudonym of anti-Federalist Benjamin Workman, whose essays appeared in the Philadelphia *Freeman's Journal* in February and April 1788. Hopkinson continued in a following note: "This fustian is a burlesque of a paper published under the signature of PHILADELPHIENSIS; the original is subjoined [copied below] taken from the *Independent Gazetteer* of Dec. 19, 1787. I had it in my power afterwards to detect and expose the real name of the author of these inflammatory publications, which put a stop to the productions of PHILADELPHIENSIS. He was an Irish schoolmaster, who had not been more than two years in the country, and who, without either property or reputation in America, endeavoured, under the cover of a fictitious signature, not only to enflame people against the plan of government proposed by America's best patriots and most able statesmen, but even ventured to abuse and vilify such characters as GENERAL WASHINGTON, Dr. Franklin, and the gentlemen who composed the general convention, calling them in the public papers *villains* and *conspirators*.

[19] *ultima ratio regium*: the final argument of kings (Latin). Mercy Otis Warren ("Margery") had used the phrase in her anti-Federalist writings.

[20] *Nero* and *Brutus*: notoriously despotic Roman leaders.

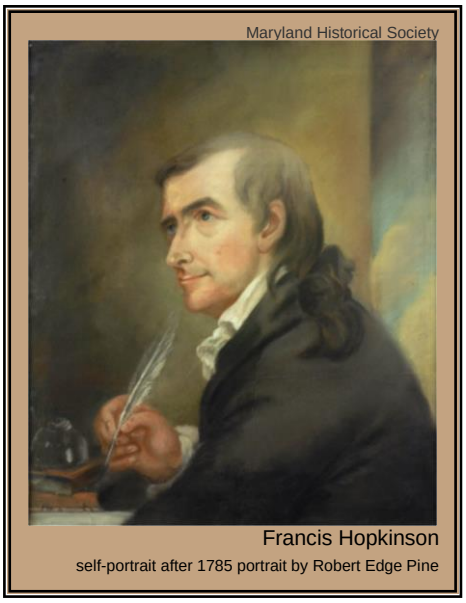
[21] *Junto*: political clique, usually referring to supporters of an autocratic leader or ruler; here referring to the British prime ministers and cabinet officials under King George III.

[22] Roman Catholic order of priests. The "madman's" comment reflects the anti-Catholic sentiment prevalent among Protestant Americans at the time.

[23] The clause "they are despots, sycophants, Jesuits, Tories, lawyers — curse on the villains!" was omitted from *Essays*, 1792.

___Francis Hopkinson___

The New Roof:
A Song for Federal Mechanics[1]
1787



Francis Hopkinson
self-portrait after 1785 portrait by Robert Edge Pine

I.

Come muster, my lads, your mechanical tools,
Your saws and your axes, your hammers and rules;
Bring your mallets and planes, your level and line,
And plenty of pins [nails] of American pine:
For our roof we will raise, and our song still shall be,
Our government firm, and our citizens free.

II.

COME, up with *the plates*, lay them firm on the wall,
Like the people at large, they're the ground work of all;
Examine them well, and see that they're sound,
Let no rotten parts in our building be found:
For our roof we will raise, and our song still shall be,
A government firm, and our citizens free.

III.

Now hand up the *girders*; lay each in his place,
Between them the *joists*, must divide all the space;
Like assemblymen, *these* should lie level along,
Like *girders*, our senate prove loyal and strong:
For our roof we will raise, and our song still shall be,
A government firm, over citizens free.

IV.

THE *rafters* now frame—your *king-posts* and *braces*,
And drive your pins home, to keep all in their places;
Let wisdom and strength in the fabric combine,
And your pins be all made of American pine:
For our roof we will raise, and our song still shall be,
A government firm, over citizens free.

V.

OUR *king-posts* are *judges*—how upright they stand,
Supporting the *braces*, the laws of the land;
The laws of the land, which divide right from wrong,
And strengthen the weak, by weak'ning the strong:
For our roof we will raise, and our song still shall be,
Laws equal and just, for a people that's free.

VI.

UP! Up with the *rafters*—each frame is a state;
How nobly they rise! their span, too, how great!
From the north to the south, o'er the whole they extend,
And rest on the walls, whilst the walls they defend:
For our roof we will raise, and our song still shall be
Combined in strength, yet as citizens free.

VII.

Now enter the *purlins*,[2] and drive your pins through,
And see that your joints are drawn home, and all true.
The *purlins* will bind all the rafters together;
The strength of the whole shall defy wind and weather:
For our roof we will raise, and our song still shall be,
United as states, but as citizens free.

VIII.

COME, raise up the *turret*[3]—our glory and pride;
In the center it stands, o'er the whole to preside:
The sons of *Columbia* [U.S.] shall view with delight
Its pillars and arches, and towering height:
Our roof is now rais'd, and our song still shall be,
A federal head, o'er a people still free.

IX.

HUZZA! my brave boys, our work is complete,
The world shall admire *Columbia*'s fair seat;
Its strength against tempest and time shall be proof,
And thousands shall come to dwell under our ROOF.
Whilst we drain the deep bowl, our toast still shall be
Our government firm, and our citizens free.

[1] Originally titled "The Raising: A New Song for Federal Mechanics" in its first appearance in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. In his 1792 collection of works, Hopkinson titled the poem "The New Roof."

[2] Support for rafters.

[3] Tower.