Stephen Girard (1750–1831): a one-eyed American patriot *

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Abstract. Stephen Girard trader, banker, millionaire, and patriot lived 81 full and exciting years. Apparently born with a blind or amblyopic right eye, he emigrated from Bordeaux, France, via Santa Domingo to the United States, and finally settled in Philadelphia, where he developed a successful maritime trade. Ultimately, Girard became the first multimillionaire in the United States. Extremely generous, he often walked from his home in the center of Philadelphia to his farm in what is now South Philadelphia distributing shoes to needy children. Probably Girard’s most heroic gestures were his gallant fight against the yellow fever epidemic in 1793 and his loan to the U.S. government during the War of 1812, which allowed the bankrupt country to continue the conflict and ultimately to win the war.

Key words: American revolution, Bordeaux, France, Albert Gallatin, Girard College, President Monroe, Philadelphia, sight, War of 1812, yellow fever

Introduction

Stephen Girard, who began his long, prosperous life in Bordeaux, France, on May 20, 1750, apparently was born with a blind right eye or suffered a blinding injury at a young age. The sunken orbit (Figure 1) and the normal left eye would suggest a diagnosis of posterior hyperplastic primary vitreous. That the eye was small and that he lived 81 years without any residual effects help to dismiss diagnoses such as retinoblastoma. However, congenital cataract, Coats’ disease, birth injury, and even a forgotten childhood injury cannot necessarily be ruled out. The diagnosis is confounded by depictions of the adult Girard with a sunken eye and reports stating that his blind eye was grotesque and perhaps exotropic.

As a boy, Girard was ridiculed and often referred to as ‘fish eyed’ hurtful taunts that caused him to become somewhat of an introvert and a loner [1]. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the blind eye was further damaged when Girard was struck by a snowball [1]. In a 19th-century biography of Girard, with little documentation, still another story suggests that the right eye was
injured in an accident when he was 7 years old [2]. Purportedly, someone threw wet oyster shells into a bonfire and the heat splintered them, directing a fragment into Girard’s right eye. Contradicting this theory, of course, is that an accident at the age of 7 years would have been hard to forget.

As an adult, Girard mentioned several times that he could not recall ever having had sight in the eye and that he certainly had no recollection of any accident or illness. In a letter to an oculist in Paris, the nearly 80-year-old Girard stated, ‘I do not remember when I lost sight in that eye indeed if it is since I was born, and I must have been very young’ [3].

The seafaring life

Bordeaux, the largest seaport in southwestern France, instilled in young Girard a love of the sea. His father, Pierre, had gone to sea at age 13 and had

Figure 1. Painting of Stephen Girard by Bass Otis. Even though the left profile is presented, the sunken right eye is apparent.