

LOUIS F. POST, 1849-1928: THE EARLY YEARS

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Louis F. Post spent his boyhood on a relatively large farm outside the hamlet of Vienna in Independence Township, Warren County, New Jersey. Sussex County had been formed in 1753 to bring the Royal Court, which met in Trenton, closer to the growing population of the colony's northwestern corner, the part that lies across the Delaware River from Pennsylvania and abuts New York in the north. For the same reason, the state of New Jersey in 1824 reconstituted the southern portion of Sussex as Warren and chose Belvidere on the Delaware for the county seat.¹

Spread across the Appalachian foothills with their abundant forests, northwestern New Jersey also had deposits of iron ore and coal that were relatively easy to extract, if men could get to them. The "Old Mine Road," a 100-mile trail that the Dutch had improved after 1640 to open the area along and between the Hudson and Delaware Rivers, was the only "road" in the New Jersey area until after 1675. Although it was not fit for much more than a single horse and rider, it did enable farmers to follow loggers and miners into the western side of what would later become Sussex and Warren counties.²

Looie Post and other inhabitants passed on to their children and grandchildren a proud heritage based on accounts of heroic action in the face of danger from hostile Indians, as well as from the British, and of extraordinary hardships endured while taming the backcountry. Settlers reached Independence Township on the eastern fringe of Warren County some years before the Revolution. During the war, armed bands of Tories rode in from the east, usually at night, and forced all they encountered to swear allegiance to King George. Similarly, the Continental Congress authorized local authorities to require suspected Tories, under threat of

¹ James P. Snell, *History of Sussex and Warren Counties, New Jersey* (Philadelphia: Everts and Peck, 1881), 16-17; Stuart Portner, "Louis F. Post: His Life and Times," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1940), 3-10.

² C. G. Hine, *The Old Mine Road* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 1-21; John W. Barber, *Historical Collections of New Jersey* (Spartanburg SC: The Reprint Co., 1975), 6.

exile, to confirm before a magistrate their support of the American cause. One historian of northwestern New Jersey estimated not quite one hundred lost their property in Sussex, because they “joined the King.” Reflecting the sentiment of the vast majority, nearly a thousand volunteered, including at least one of Post’s favorite ancestors, to serve for a time in the militia or the Continental Army. First called “Lower Hardwick,” Independence was separated in 1782 from Hardwick Township and named in honor of the preliminary treaty of peace signed in that year.³

The Vienna area was once known as “Cumminstown” after the three brothers who had built, probably around 1770, a scattering of log cabins on hilly lands purchased by their father. With the establishment of a post office there, a member of the Cummins family who had lived in Austria suggested the more elegant name. In keeping with the terrain and that theme, some of the homes and other buildings constructed years later in Vienna would affect the alpine style.⁴

Early settlers in Vienna built their houses along the main road to Belvidere near a ford on the Pequest River in eastern Warren County. It was a convenient stopping place for travelers who had to wait out high water. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Vienna had a stone bridge over the river, more than a dozen dwellings, and a few small-scale industries, including two sawmills on the Pequest. One of these produced parts for wagon wheels, a foundry manufactured a popular version of a corn plow, and another workshop built chairs. Vienna also had a tavern (hotel) on higher ground near the river, a Presbyterian church, and a one-room school.⁵

Although they were located in one of the best farming areas in the state, Vienna and similar villages in Post’s time were in decline. They were too far from the canal and railroad, which had replaced the highway as the main commercial route to the mines, mills, and agricultural centers. In the decades after the Civil War, all of Vienna’s buildings except the residences and school would either burn or fall into disuse as young people moved to larger hubs of business activity.⁶

³ Snell, *Sussex and Warren*, 58, 68; Michael Kent Curtis, *Free Speech, “The People’s Darling Privilege”*: *Struggles for Freedom of Expression in American History* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 47.

⁴ Snell, *Sussex and Warren*, 736-37; Henry C. Beck, *Tales and Towns of Northern New Jersey* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964), 49-63.

⁵ Snell, *Sussex and Warren*, 486, 524, 738-743; A. Van Doren Honeyman, ed., *Northwestern New Jersey: A History of Somerset, Morris, Hunterdon, Warren, and Sussex Counties* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1927), II, 708-09; Barber, *Historical Collections*, 498-99.

⁶ Barber, *Historical Collections*, 488.

During Warren County's wild early years, there had been "ten taverns for every schoolhouse and a dozen distilleries for every church." In 1881, Vienna still had only "one long, beautiful street" on either side of which lived about 150 citizens, all "very temperate, allowing no licensed saloons in their midst." Now Vienna had a Methodist as well as the Presbyterian Church, a store, the school, and one physician, a graduate of New York's College of Physicians and Surgeons. By the time of his death, the village of Post's youth was simply "a beautiful country town, where streets are lined with sugar maples, planted many years ago . . . with an eye to their future beauty." It was then strung along the "earliest and still the best route from New York City to the Water Gap," where the Delaware River emerges from the Appalachians in Pennsylvania. Only some of the ruins of its once-thriving industries survived, but the "new" Vienna school, built in 1883 and staffed by three teachers, was still in session.⁷

In the 1920s, Post described some exploits of his childhood in an unpublished memoir. It is, aside from the brief introductions which he supplied editors, the best source of detailed information about his early years in Vienna. He recalled that he was "a little boy of tender heart, of hardly more than ruminant thought, very self-conscious though generous in disposition, painfully bashful, indolent, amiably selfish . . . vain, [and] easy to lead but hard to drive." More important, he described himself as "a child who felt that the world . . . was, for some inscrutable reason, waiting impatiently to crown him king." He also "was profoundly impressed and influenced by that vague sense of inherited greatness and responsibility which the future seemed to hold in store" for him. For some years, he thought that he might be elected to the highest federal offices.⁸

Post was internalizing two elements of his intellectual environment, the prestige which his mother's family enjoyed within Warren County and the pride and optimism of upper middle-class Americans. Post's outlook derived from a precocious self-confidence, stable family, adherence to the Christian ethic, and a pervasive belief that the nation is in many ways unique.

The editor of *DeBow's Review* summarized in 1854 a theme most youngsters could not help but absorb:

⁷ Snell, *Sussex and Warren*, 739; Honeyman, *Northwestern New Jersey*, 709.

⁸ Louis F. Post, "Living a Long Life Over Again," 26, Post Papers, LC, and "Louis Freeland Post," *Single Tax Review*, II (Spring 1903), 31-33.

. . . The developments of American character are replete with instruction, and solve one of the most remarkable problems in the history of mankind. The untried scenes of a new world, cut off by trackless oceans from contact and communion with the civilization of unnumbered generations, were sufficient to introduce, what might have been predicted of them, results new, striking, and without a precedent. The indomitable will, the stern endurance, the inflexible and hardy spirit of independence, the high daring, the lofty patriotism, the adventurous, unlimited enterprise, the genius resolute, intrepid, inexhaustible in resources, elastic in vigor and in freshness, buoyant ever and hoping on, and executing, amid every trying scene, every danger, and difficulty, and disaster—triumphing everywhere and in all things.⁹

His early “life as a child among grown-ups” came about because the Posts lived with his mother’s parents, their German tenant farmer had no young children, and his first sibling was not born until Looie was five years old. He was not alone the whole time, since he exchanged visits with the children of the Cummins family and his many Vliet relatives in Warren County as well as with other chums once he started school. In summer, friends came from New York to enjoy the cooler weather of the highlands. He also fished and swam in Pequest Creek after he “found [his] place in a group of more or less independent boys.” While the Pequest was no Mississippi, there was still the possibility of horseplay and adventure in some ways like that described by Mark Twain. At times they “turned [their] attention to learning to smoke without getting sick.”¹⁰

In 1912, Post supplied information to a writer who described his grandmother's mark upon him: “. . . through her grandson, Louis F. Post, [Sarah Freeland] influenced the votes of thousands in behalf of fundamental democratic principles, for she not only transmitted to him a heritage of independence, but when he was a boy with receptive mind and plastic soul, she filled him up with democratic doctrine.” There is no other documentation of his grandmother’s influence, even in his autobiography. Perhaps the most important gift of his grandparents was a sense of history, the importance of family traditions and connections--especially in northwestern New Jersey among the Vliets, and the need to make the most of one’s abilities.¹¹

⁹ J. D. B. DeBow, “The Progress of the Republic,” *DeBow’s Review: A Monthly Journal of Commerce, Agriculture, Manufactures, Internal Improvements, Statistics, Etc.*, XVII (August 1854), 125.

¹⁰ Post, “Life,” 14, 22-23, 26-27, 31, 62 and *Social Service*, 178-80.

¹¹ Portner, *Post*, 6-7, cited H.F. Newcomb, “Louis F. Post, Democrat,” in *Backbone Monthly* (March 1912), 16.

The Freelands worshiped at the Presbyterian Church in Hackettstown until the congregation built in 1824 a graceful stone building for a mission in Danville. This settlement was named for Post's other grandfather, Daniel Vliet, and was located not quite two miles up the road from Vienna on the other side of the Pequest. By 1831, the fledgling church was strong enough to organize formally and Grandfather Freeland was elected one of three Ruling Elders. Later, David and Sarah helped establish a mission in Vienna, but they would choose to be buried with her parents in the old Danville cemetery. The family's long-standing reputation for dedicated service enabled the Posts to feel at home in all three congregations. Louis seemed to be somewhat more serious about religious matters than other boys his age.¹²

Local histories fill the gaps in Post's memoir. In 1831, the hundred mile-long Morris Canal opened and flourished until it was rendered obsolete in the 1850s by the Morris and Essex Railroad. The canal and rail line generally followed parallel routes from Easton, Pennsylvania and Phillipsburg, New Jersey, which are on opposite sides of the Delaware River, through Hackettstown and on to the New York City area. These marvels of engineering linked the carriage workshops in Hackettstown with the expanding industrial world outside northwestern New Jersey. Hackettstown in the 1840s had two taverns as well as both a Methodist and Presbyterian Church. Hackettstown National Bank, the first in Warren County, was founded in 1855 to serve the forty-seven businesses there. A Second Methodist Church was built in 1858 and St. Mary's Catholic Church in 1864.¹³

The number of people living in Warren County grew from about 18,500 in 1830 to over 31,500 in 1865. The population of Hackettstown, which started from a much smaller base, nearly doubled every ten years because of the economic development that took place there from the 1850s through the 1870s. Boosters claimed that, during the seventy-five years it dominated the industry, Hackettstown produced more carriages, sleighs, and other horse-drawn vehicles than any other place in the country. Its population stabilized around 2,500 after 1880 when its workshops gave way to newer, more efficient factories built in large cities. Not until the census of 1930 would the count exceed 3,000.¹⁴

¹² Snell, *Sussex and Warren*, 584, 740; *Historical Sites in Warren County* (Belvedere NJ: Warren County Board of Chosen Freeholders, 1965), 93.

¹³ Snell, *Sussex and Warren*, 486, 488.

¹⁴ J. Harold Nunn, *The Story of Hackettstown, New Jersey, 1754-1955* (Hackettstown: Hackettstown National Bank, 1955), 16, 18, 43, and *The People of Hackettstown, New Jersey* (Hackettstown: The J. H. Nunn Co., 1956), 21; A. Van Doren Honeyman, ed.,

Since young Post lived in Warren County during a period of remarkable growth, he likely had more contact with a variety of people than he would later acknowledge. The boats on the Morris Canal moved no faster than a weary driver and his team of mules could walk, a pace which facilitated verbal exchanges between passengers or workers on board and boys like Post who trotted along side. The boatmen observed the Sabbath, thus strolls along the towpath, canoeing, and swimming in the canal became popular social activities. Skating on frozen ponds and on the canal was the main diversion in winter.¹⁵

Post would later recall that he had “helped extend the Morris and Essex Railroad to Hackettstown” by sitting next to an Irishman, who was a friend of grandfather Freeland, while the teamster drove a cart which carried dirt for the right-of-way. The rail line, after it reached Phillipsburg in 1865, opened new markets and enabled residents of remote areas, once they had managed the journey to the station, to travel in some comfort for medical care that was not available locally. As late as 1925, trains carried the sick and injured to Phillipsburg, Morristown, or Dover because Belvidere and Hackettstown had no hospital. Post would later use the competition among hack (taxi) drivers at the depot in Hackettstown to illustrate the basic concept behind monopoly and the formation of trusts at the turn of the century.¹⁶

The Freeland and Post families were among those who lived in relative isolation. Their farm was bordered on the western side by Pequest Creek and was situated a fair distance upstream from Vienna and Danville. They were far from the tumult of New York City, about sixty miles to the east. A memorable first train ride in 1854 and trip across the Hudson on a ferry introduced Looie to the excitement of the circus and provided him with a glimpse of “city poverty” in the person of a “pathetic little girl who sold oranges in the circus vestibule.”¹⁷

Casual encounters with laborers from the farms, skilled workers from the shops, and white-collar employees in offices and stores of Hackettstown and Belvidere provided observant schoolboys like Post with the chance to reflect broadly upon the relative merits of these careers. He

Northwestern New Jersey, II, 708-09; Charles Francis Chidsey, *The Warren Foundry and Machine Company* (New York: Post & Davis, 1906), 106, Barber, *Historical Collections*, 488..

¹⁵ James Lee, *The Morris Canal: A Photographic Journey* (Easton PA: Delaware Press, 1988), 62-63, 74, 84, 86, 88, 107, 112, 118, 131-33.

¹⁶ Post, "The Trust and the Single Tax," *Arena*, 33 (October 1901), 362-66; Richard E. Harpster, *Your Fabulous Volunteers* (Phillipsburg NJ: Harmony Press, 1980), 21-29.

¹⁷ Post, "Life," 39-40.

never considered working on a farm or, like his youngest brother, in manufacturing.¹⁸

The war for the Union aroused a new sense of nationalism in Warren County. Louis remembered that in his part of New Jersey, the Stars and Stripes replaced the tri-cornered liberty cap as a symbol of freedom. In 1860, the flag's sudden popularity caused the demand to exceed the supply. About forty women worked together for several days and produced a huge specimen for a community pole. Most women wore Union badges on their dresses and two hundred men from the Hackettstown area joined the New Jersey Volunteers. During the first year of the war, Post led a dozen Vienna schoolboys who, like those in other towns, displayed their enthusiasm by forming a drill team. The Vienna group outdid the others by prancing about in a sometimes ill-fitting version of the exotic Zuoave uniform.¹⁹

For eight years, Post attended his mother's old school in Vienna. After a fire there, the scholars doubled up with their compatriots in Danville, but returned once the damage had been repaired. At the time, many thought that the instruction offered by the larger but more distant facility in Hackettstown was superior to that available in Vienna and Danville.²⁰

In 1863, Post enrolled "at the old Twentieth Street" high school in New York City. He lived with friends while he struggled with the rigorous preparatory curriculum, which emphasized the classics and mathematics. David B. Scott, the well-regarded principal who would later serve on the faculty of the College of the City of New York, at first assigned Post to one of the lower groups when the new student seemed baffled by problems involving common fractions that his examiner wrote on the slate. His new teacher quickly observed that Post excelled in spelling, English, and geography, and recommended that he skip ahead two classes.

Post would later believe that he missed too much by moving so fast and that this gap in his education caused him to become discouraged and to simply give up. Post ended his formal education in February 1864 after the first semester and looked for something that interested him more.²¹

The Civil War gave a boy who was too young to enlist an opportunity to fill a man's role in New York. Post quickly found a job,

¹⁸ Post, "Life," 38.

¹⁹ Portner, *Post*, 11-13; Post, "Life," 56, 58 and "Post," *Single Tax Review*, II (Spring 1903), 31-32; Nunn, *Story*, 23, and *People*, 25-27.

²⁰ Snell, *Sussex and Warren*, 740, Portner, *Post*, 10.

²¹ Post, "Life," 62-63.

which paid a dollar a week plus room and board, as a clerk in a pawnshop. One dollar a week was the going wage for those without experience, but adding room and board seems unusual. Post may have had duties after store hours, much like those of a night watchman.

Perhaps he was not fully aware of the pawnshop industry's reputation or, more likely, he wished to move out of family quarters and did not believe that such employment would affect his social relations. Post would later omit this experience when furnishing biographical information to editors.²²

For the next four months, Post manned the counter and collected interest and principal on loans that seldom exceeded five dollars. In school, there had been some question as to his mastery of the use of fractions. Owners of pawnshops anticipated such a deficiency among employees, for the pawnbroker taught him to simplify calculations by rounding in favor of the house. Most customers were wives who used the "poor man's bank" to stretch the family income between paydays. Items of clothing, furniture, and such valuables as jewelry usually served as collateral, although a coffin was occasionally offered and accepted. In between transactions, he swept the floors and otherwise kept the place in good order.²³

Post would later utilize some of what he learned to illustrate fallacies related to such topics as interest and risk: "Premiums for loan risks, also differing distinctly from interest for deferred payments, are often confused with it. Very well do both you and I know that poor people borrowing money have to pay enormous—well, we will call it interest, since that is what they call it. Pawnshops get twenty-five percent and 'loan sharks' get fabulous rates." The pawnbroker borrows at the bank for six percent, but in order to earn a profit must charge his customer much more because of other overhead. "Why don't they go to the bank the same as he has done and get the money at six per cent as he does? . . . The high rates that people pay pawnbrokers and 'loan sharks'" are not for interest alone but "are for the most part for rent, wages, and risk of loss."²⁴

Among the middle and upper classes, pawnshops had a poorer reputation than saloons and one not much better than brothels. A business directory in 1873 for the city of Brooklyn, for instance, listed several beer gardens, saloons, and liquor dealers, but did not contain the word "pawn" in any form. Most real estate and insurance brokers discretely offered to

²² Post, "Life," 64-65.

²³ Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 42-49.

²⁴ Post, *Social Service* (New York: A. Wessels, 1909), 65-66.

“negotiate” personal loans and mortgages for their best customers, while banks usually limited their business to commercial loans.²⁵

Pawnshops, saloons, and brothels served the working poor, a group that included a high proportion of recent immigrants. Owners usually rented space in the worst neighborhoods in order to be near their customers. These businesses were not welcome in other sections of town, because debt, drunkenness, and licentious behavior were usually taken by the better sort to be evidence of moral depravity.

Post’s Sunday school teacher inquired about his place of employment when the young man talked of coming forward and joining the Presbyterian Church. Aware the truth might shock, Post responded that he was “working in a broker’s office.” When asked if the broker’s address were on Wall Street, Post “replied innocently enough, it’s a pawnbroker’s on Seventh Avenue.” A few days later, Rev. Dr. Howard Crosby, his minister, visited the business. Seeing Post at an open window, Crosby motioned for him to come outside. A proper churchman would never enter such an establishment. Beneath the window and in a loud voice, Crosby asked Post if a pawnshop were a “good place” for a young man. Post recalled a laconic comment that his father had made, when Louis had told him about the job opening, and replied that working there “helped him study human nature.” His employer, as the pastor intended, heard the exchange and offered Post ample time to pursue his religious interests. The perk reflected the owner’s judgment as to both the labor shortage and the influence of the ministry during the Civil War.²⁶

Post must have expected to stay in New York, for he did join Crosby’s church. It was not long, however, before the dull routine of the business world convinced him that he would be happier if he had a greater intellectual challenge. He returned to Vienna to talk to his parents. His father obtained an apprenticeship for him at the *Gazette*, where he had the opportunity to learn typesetting by hand and to observe most aspects of the country newspaper business.²⁷

The weekly was first issued as the Warren *Democrat* in 1853, the year that Hackettstown was incorporated. Its circulation grew with the town and, during its first ten years of publication, there were four owners. The *Democrat* became, in this period of instability, the Warren *Gazette* and, when Post worked there in 1864, the Hackettstown *Gazette*.²⁸

²⁵ Brooklyn City Business Directory for 1873.

²⁶ Post, “Life,” 65-66.

²⁷ Portner, *Post*, 14-16; Post, “Life,” 68.

²⁸ Nunn, *Story*, 106.

Post stayed just over a year and gained a variety of experience, even though the equipment was not much improved over that used by Ben Franklin. On occasion, he was encouraged to submit without bylines short articles that described local events. His first, "Burglars in Town" appeared November 24, 1864. Besides the usual commercial job printing, the shop also set type for a number of small periodicals. To some extent, Post was able to study and learn from the work of other editors. None of these men were as eminent as the two that would later edit one customer's paper, the *Church Union*. After Post's tenure, it became the *Christian Union* under Henry Ward Beecher. Much later, it was renamed the *Outlook* and edited by Lawrence F. Abbot, who would publish during the World War an article by Post. In his free time, he joined the Hackettstown Literary Club, reported its meetings in the *Gazette*, and over the next couple of years edited the "Guardian," the club's newsletter. He also began to keep a scrapbook of his published articles and to accumulate unpublished manuscripts.²⁹

Instead of seeking employment at a larger paper in a county seat, Post moved on to a greater challenge in New York at Bradstreet's "printing office," as print shops were called in those days. After a couple of months, he obtained an even better assignment in the job printing office of the Brooklyn *Union*. Reflecting his expectation of notable achievement, Post believed that his abilities were equal to those of the older men. He left the *Union* in the fall of 1866 when his employer refused to pay a lad of seventeen a journeyman's rate. Post could not compete with those who had spent years in a print shop and, unlike his elders, he was not willing to hang on until he perfected his skills.

At the time, it seemed as though Post had also put aside his literary aspirations, for he published between January 1865 and August 1868 only two innocuous articles, both on stale Civil War topics, in Warren County weeklies. In 1867, Post began a new vocation by reading law at a New York firm.³⁰

²⁹ Post, "Life," 68-69, and five clippings in scrapbook, Post Papers; Hackettstown NJ *Gazette*, November 24, 1864; Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1865-1885* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 422-423.

³⁰ Portner, *Post*, 14-16; Post, "Life," 70-74, "Great Men," Hackettstown NJ *Gazette*, May 18, 1865, and "Treason," Belvidere NJ *Intelligencer*, July 20, 1865.