

**AN AMERICAN FOUNDER'S DREAM:
USING BENJAMIN RUSH'S SUBCONSCIOUS
AS AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF HISTORY**

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For a number of years my students in both the first half of the American history survey and in an upper-division course on the Early Republic have started their semesters by analyzing the subconscious of Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia physician and a prominent member of the American revolutionary generation. Rush's recounting of one of his dreams offers an excellent opportunity for introducing students to the craft of analyzing primary sources for what they reveal about a particular time period or place in the past. Moreover, Rush's dream allows for considerations regarding the nature of history itself.¹

Writing and reporting on dreams was nothing new for Benjamin Rush. He was fascinated with this facet of human existence and spent time studying and lecturing on the topic.² The vividness with which Rush was able to communicate his dreams was admired by John Adams who declared in 1805, upon reading Rush's account of a dream, "I admire the brilliancy of your invention when asleep." Four years later, in 1809, Adams wrote to his friend, "If I could dream as much wit as you, I think I should wish to go to sleep for the rest of my life, retaining, however, one of Swift's flappers

¹Benjamin Rush, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush: His "Travels Through Life" together with his Commonplace Book for 1789-1813*, ed. George W. Corner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 357-360. In the index for the autobiography, Corner puts the word "fictitious" in parentheses before the page numbers of this particular document. However, Corner never explains why he doubts that it was an actual dream. After reviewing the literature on Rush and his dreams as well as a number of the dreams Rush recorded, I believe this was an actual nocturnal dream. While this point is debatable (by historians and students alike), for the purposes suggested in this piece, it does not matter whether the dream was real or imagined. In fact, the disagreement on this point can be harnessed and put to work in a discussion centered on the problems encountered while studying and writing history. The author would like to thank Myriam Young, Stephen Kneeshaw, the anonymous readers for *Teaching History*, and students, Hilary Huguenard and Kristel Rey.

²Rush's title as "Father of American Psychiatry" stems not only from his writing on mental illness, but also his discussion of dreams in a scientific context. Even though Merle Curti says that it is "not improbable that Rush referred to his dreaming in a figurative sense" (he suggests Rush's dream of a reconciliation between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson was such a case, though he gives no evidence to support this assertion), he also says that Rush "was the most significant explorer of dreams." Merle Curti, "The American Exploration of Dreams and Dreamers," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 27 (July-September 1966), 391-416. The quotations appear on 398. See also, Eric T. Carlson, Jeffrey L. Wollock, and Patricia S. Noel, *Benjamin Rush's Lectures on the Mind* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1981), 385-402.

to awake me once in 24 hours to dinner, for you know without a dinner one can neither dream nor sleep."³

When Rush and his dreams are discussed, it is usually in the context of his extraordinary correspondence with John Adams, his fellow signer of the Declaration of Independence and good friend. Rush and Adams agreed to share their dreams with each other. The interchange of dreams by these two Founding Fathers reveals the depth of thought these two men gave to the experiment in American republicanism.⁴

Rush's most famous dream is the one in which he dreamed that his son's book on the history of the United States stated that the great event in 1809 was the renewed friendship between the second and third presidents of the United States, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Adams responded enthusiastically to Rush's dream. "A DREAM AGAIN! I wish you would dream all day and all night, for one of your dreams puts me in spirits for a month." He continued, "I have no other objection to your dream but that it is not history. It may be prophecy."⁵ And indeed it was, for Adams and Jefferson had a rapprochement, resulting in a remarkable philosophical and historical exchange that lasted over a decade.

Unlike the politically oriented dreams that Rush and Adams shared with each other, the dream that I use in class is religious in nature and is the last entry recorded in Rush's commonplace book. It is uncertain as to when the dream actually happened since it is undated. Moreover, Rush begins by saying he heard "the Revd. Dr. ---- preach some time ago...." Presumably the dream occurred between 1810 and 1813. The editor tried to put the commonplace book in chronological order, at times using the changing handwriting of an aging Dr. Rush as a guide.⁶

When Rush attended this particular service, the minister discussed the "general Resurrection" and suggested that "persons would rise from their graves ... with the

³John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair, eds., *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001, orig., San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1966), 25, 143.

⁴For the dreams that include these two Founders' thoughts regarding the American experiment, see Schutz and Adair, *The Spur of Fame*, 24-26, 127-129, 141-143, 170-171, 276. For a psychological interpretation of the Adams-Rush correspondence, see Miriam Elson, "John Adams and Benjamin Rush Exchange Dreams," *Progress in Self-Psychology*, 19 (2003), 269-286. See also, Carl A.L. Binger, "The Dreams of Benjamin Rush," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 125 (June 1969), 1653-1659.

⁵Schutz and Adair, *The Spur of Fame*, 173; Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987, orig., 1959); L.H. Butterfield, "The Dream of Benjamin Rush: The Reconciliation of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson," *The Yale Review*, 40, No. 2 (December 1950), 297-319.

⁶Rush, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush*, ed. George Corner, 12-13.

same habits of virtue and vice which they ... had laid down in them." Rush was "so much affected with this thought" that it stayed with him throughout the day. This idea regarding the resurrection was so compelling that once he was overtaken by sleep he had a dream that was so vivid and bizarre that he found it necessary to write it down when he awoke. And this is where Benjamin Rush's decision to record his dream leads to an introduction to history.

Because the idea held that people would rise from the dead as they were while alive, we get a chance to see how people were, in one man's estimation, in early nineteenth-century Philadelphia. We can consider how different they were from today, while at the same time so similar and familiar. It is an excellent opportunity to explore the social history of the early United States, while reflecting on our own time in the flow of American history.

When I use this piece in class, I begin with two points. One, the fact that Rush dreamed, and had a strange dream, is something to which we can all relate. It is easy to overlook the fact that people in the past also had weird and memorable dreams. This reminder helps to establish the humanity of the people we will discuss throughout the semester. I believe it is important to remind students that we are not only talking about ideas, but also people, who *really lived*. Two, this document introduces students to the reality that historians can only work with the remnants that have survived time and space. However, before something can survive and become a remnant from the past, it needs to exist. We can talk about Rush's strange dream because he wrote it down. If it is not written down or preserved in some other way, it is lost. I ask students how many of their conversations, observations, or even dreams they have written down. I also point out that what they wrote must then survive fire, water, mold, war, and relatives who are not packrats!

Benjamin Rush's description of his dream is short enough that students can read it as well as discuss it in one class session. There are a number of ways for instructors to approach an in-class analysis of Benjamin Rush's dream. One way is to encourage students to consider the document as if it is the *only* remnant from the past regarding this society. This might help them to become cognizant of the assumptions they bring to their reading of historical documents. Another approach is to supply students with different documents to read alongside or as background to the dream. It would be instructive for students to comment on how the document changes as Rush's dream is gradually contextualized by the other documents. Finally, since students come to the classroom from a number of educational backgrounds and experiences, and consequently enter the class with different levels of preparedness, it would no doubt be interesting and beneficial for all present if students are encouraged to use the historical knowledge that they bring to the class to comment on the document.

Certain aspects of Rush's dream are always noticed by students, while in other classes some students offer singular insights that had escaped all classes up to that point. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on some of the generalities that can

be discussed when exploring history, specifically early American history, via Benjamin Rush's subconscious.

One of the first things that students generally point out is the fact that Rush must have been a Christian because he attended a service and had his imagination stirred by the minister's interpretation of the resurrection. So, students first conclude, based on available evidence, that the Early Republic was a time when people took their Christianity seriously. This conclusion is reinforced by a scene in the dream in which "a little boy" reads the Bible to a man. Besides raising questions regarding literacy and education, the scene reinforces the idea that Christianity was important to early Americans.

Usually someone will ask if other religions were present in early America. The fact that only Christian ideas and imagery are available in this document encourages students to consider what we as historians can or cannot conclude from negative evidence. What does the absence of information mean? For many students, this is their first realization that historians contend with limitations when imagining the past.

At this moment students begin to get an understanding of how to analyze the document. They begin to identify certain aspects of the dream or of early Philadelphia that we can discuss in class. Students generally raise points about gender characterizations, domestic relationships, relationships between strangers, and, finally, class and immigration. These aspects of the dream resonate with students partially because the depictions seem so shockingly similar (for some, familiar) or different from today.

The gender characterizations in Rush's dream are revealing for what they tell us about roles and expectations of gender in the Early Republic. In Rush's dream of the resurrection, we can see men discussing books or making inquiries regarding "the price of the stock of the Bank of the United States." Meanwhile, women are either gossiping about the looks of another woman or comparing the material that was used to make their shrouds. Rush recalled, "Upon turning I saw a woman lifting up her shroud, for it cost 5/ a yard, and yours ain't worth 2/ more it ain't." So, while this document is telling of gender in early America, it also provides an opportunity to examine our own expectations and images of each gender and to consider how far and in what respects we have departed from these supposed gender norms since the early nineteenth century.

Students are struck by two marital scenes depicted in the dream. One is of a husband who "meekly bowed and made no reply" to his verbally abusive wife. In the other a husband physically abuses his wife. The man in Rush's dream is seen "kicking his wife and dragging her by the hair of her head along the ground." He then leaves her lying there, but before he walks away he says to his wife, "There, take that, you bitch." The violence of this scene is stunning. This image of domestic violence in early America easily leads to a discussion of the contemporary problem of domestic violence. Sadly, by the silent nodding of heads, it becomes clear that statistics of household violence are disturbing realities for some students.

Rush leaves "these miserable couples" and tells his readers about a scene between a "young lady" and a "little girl." The lady asks the girl to pick up some novels from the "circulating library" and to purchase a pack of cards for her at the stationery store. Students are often impressed with the respect between generations and the trust between strangers. This stands in stark contrast to our own time when we believe that it is never too early for parents and "officer friendly" to teach children about "stranger danger." The friendliness and neighborliness that this image conveys is found in a number of other scenes in the text. Perhaps scenes of people caring for each other are not so surprising since we are peeking into the mind of a conscientious and compassionate physician in early Philadelphia.

When students are finished reading Rush's dream, it becomes clear that a social network of people cared for one another. For many, this network served as the only available safety net in times of crisis. In his dream, some of the resurrected are looking for the people they had been taking care of before they died. They worried and cared for others before they died and rose again as they were when they had lived. For instance, Rush asks a "young man walking with a quick step" why he was in such a hurry. The man told Rush that he wanted "to know what has become of my father and mother." He continued, "They were old and poor when I died, and subsisted only by my labor." Not long afterwards, Rush encountered in his dream a young woman whose eyes were "red [and] watery as if she had been crying." Rush asked the young woman what was wrong. She replied that she was "in search of a poor widow and five children who I had supported with the aid of a few friends for several years." The young lady recounted how the widow stood by her while she took her last breath and looked "to heaven, and cried out, 'Ah! My only friend will soon be gone.'"

If anything, Rush's dream gives us a window into the social history of early nineteenth-century Philadelphia. We can see that class issues stemming from immigration and social mobility in America have always been with us. Rush comes across two young men. One man was "venting his rage against a person apparently his own age and figure." Rush approaches them and asks what was the problem. He soon discovers that one man is angry because the other had the "impudence" to speak to him. Rush tells the man that that should not matter since "You are all upon equal footing here." The angry young man replies to Rush by declaring, "An equal footing here! No, no, I deny it. Why that fellow's father was a porter." Soon we get a brief family history from the abused young man who states that both of their grandfathers came to America on the same ship from Ireland and had been sold as indentured servants—a history the haughty young man did not know. This scene yields rich information regarding class, immigration, and even the transition from a hierarchical eighteenth-century America to a more egalitarian nineteenth-century United States.

This essay has emphasized a social and gender reading of Benjamin Rush's dream. The comments that students have made most often in class over the years dictated that direction. One reason for the students' social and gender analysis of the dream might be that the document lends itself to this type of interpretation. For

instance, one student suggested that the dream contains "a great deal about women in society." Another reason, perhaps, is that students are revealing their own interests.

Student interest in social and gender history might stem from the fact that they are invariably impressed that Rush's dream features a number of characteristics that remind them of their own society—and perhaps even their own lived experience. One student noted with surprise that "many situations that came up in the dream still occur in today's time period." Students are able to connect with these familiarities, and, in some cases, the discovery of recognizing certain aspects of life in what they thought was an unfamiliar past has the potential to open the doors of curiosity.

In closing, Benjamin Rush's dream is a way to draw students in on the first day of class. It is a vehicle to introduce students to the historian's craft while at the same time serving as an inaugural use of primary documents. Following the in-class reading there is invariably a discussion. An active first class, like an active subconscious, is always fascinating.