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A Quaker Goes to Spain: The Diplomatic Mission of Anthony Morris, 1813-1816 (Studies in Eighteenth-Century America and the Atlantic World)

H. L. Dufour Woolfley

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In the summer of 1813, as war with Britain intensified, President James Madison secretly dispatched an envoy to the Regency government of Spain with the urgent goal of thwarting a feared British bid to use Spanish Florida as a base from which to attack the United States, and with the further hope of acquiring that territory for America. The man Madison sent to pursue those challenging tasks was Anthony Morris, a friend of Dolley's from their youth in Philadelphia and a devout Quaker lawyer who had never before journeyed abroad. Morris, a widower, had willingly accepted the president's call, despite the separation it would impose from his four teenage children.

The Morris mission did not proceed as intended, as developments in Spain conspired to alter its scope and prolong its duration. Long after the war had ended, Morris was compelled to persevere at his post as the only American link to an unfriendly Spanish monarchy. As he dutifully carried on, ill-founded accusations by two other frustrated American diplomats slurred his reputation. Meanwhile, he thirsted to rejoin his maturing children, whose lives were taking paths that would have been unlikely had he never left them. Throughout this ordeal, a steadfastly philosophical Anthony Morris strove to counter his distress by thoughtful exploration of a national culture and a religious faith so very different from his own.

The full story of this distinctive but little-remembered diplomatic endeavor has not previously been recounted. The telling of it here reveals much about the vexation and confusion endemic to American diplomacy in the age of sail, when events often moved faster than the mails. Interwoven with that historical account is the poignant revelation of the spiritual and cultural growth that Anthony Morris reaped from his odyssey, as displayed in a stream of intimate, charming letters to the daughters he had left at home.

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