

CHESTNUT LEVEL ACADEMY

Chestnut Level was recognized as the head centre of Presbyterianism in lower Lancaster county back in the 30's, 40's and 50's. In this village stood one of the largest Presbyterian church edifices within the bounds of Donegal (now Westminster) Presbytery, the church having a membership exceeded by no other country church in the Presbytery.

To the north and the south, the east, and to the west, of this village, resided a sturdy people, of Scotch-Irish descent, who had long since passed the period of land-getting and had also passed the period of land-sub-division, when it was no longer practicable nor profitable to make further sub-divisions, and were well on in the period when, in lieu of a fractional part of the paternal tract, a mental equivalent had to be provided, and skirting these, on the south and west, was another sturdy people, the Quakers, who had also passed through these various periods in like manner with the Presbyterians, all being friends of education, yet, up to 1852, no effort had been made to establish a permanent institution of learning in this large, wealthy and intelligent community.

Originator of Academy.

It is a well-established fact that the idea of erecting an academy at this place originated with Dr. George Junkin, president of Lafayette College, who on one occasion visited the Rev. L. C. Rutter, then pastor of the

church, and interested that great divine in the project, who called into council with him the leaders of the church and community, and the result was the formation of a corporation under the name, or title, of "The Chestnut Level Academy."

Among the stockholders are found the names of such noted families as Shippen, Morrison, Watson, McConkey, McCollough, Evans, Clark, Grider, Maxwell, Long, Ralston, Gardner, Barnes, Collins, Eckman, McPherson, Boyd, Brown, Steel, Harner, Reed, Irwin, Hutton, Russell, Gibson, Penny, Parke, Black, Neiper, Deaver, Ritchie, Crawford, Showalter, McCreary, Ewing, Housekeeper, Pennock, Hopkins, Caldwell, King, Ankrim, Reynolds, McCrabb, Williamson, Stevenson, Scott, Rodgers, Kirk, in all one hundred and six, showing that the proposition met with a hearty response.

Lancaster city gave her assistance through James Buchanan, Thaddeus Stevens, David Bair Lane and nephews, Isaac E. Heister, Thos E. Franklin, A. C. Locher, Geo. M. Steinman, George Mayor, Reah Frazer and Jesse Landis, all of whom were stockholders. A few, instead of taking stock, donated money, and among these we find the names of Lovett, Gregg, Hess Ailes, Worrell, Wright, and others of less prominence.

P. W. Housekeeper, a large landowner and resident of the village, donated the land, one acre, and was also the largest stockholder. Other large holders of stock were George Morrison, W. W. Watson, L. C. Rutter, Sanders McCollough, George Evans, Thomas A. Clark, M. R. Grider, Wm. C. Clark, James McConkey, Wm. T. Boyd, James M. Steele, John McSparran, John N. Russel, James and Wm. Penny, Joseph Showalter,

Samuel R. Boyd and James M. Hopkins.

First Meeting of Stockholders.

The first meeting of stockholders was held April 24, 1852, at which time a charter for the proposed corporation, which had been prepared beforehand, was submitted and adopted, and, later, forwarded to the Legislature, then in session at Harrisburg, for approval; but, owing to an early adjournment of that body, the matter was not acted upon.

In June of that year an application for a charter was made to the Common Pleas Court of this county, and a copy of the proposed charter filed, and on August 23, 1852, the Court issued a decree granting the charter, all of which may be found on record in the Recorder's office. In the charter P. W. Housekeeper, L. C. Rutter, John McSparran, John Long (Conowingo) and James M. Steele were named as trustees. On June 12, 1852, a joint meeting of stockholders and trustees-elect was held, and it was resolved to have the proposed academy building erected by contract, and the trustees were authorized to prepare specifications and receive bids for the erection of the same.

Contract For Building.

On September 4, 1852, the trustees held their first official meeting and organized by electing P. W. Housekeeper, President; L. C. Rutter, Secretary, and John McSparran, Treasurer. At this meeting the bids for the erection of the Academy were opened, and James Cain, a resident of Fairfield, a nearby village, was found to be the lowest bidder, and a contract was entered into with him for the erection of the building, for the sum of \$2,350, this being the amount of his bid. The specifications

called for a brick building, 30x40 feet, basement story to be seven feet in the clear, and first and second stories to be nine feet in the clear, to be covered by slate and surmounted by a belfry. Mr. John C. Boyd, of Ailston, York county, who was one of the carpenters, informed the writer recently that the erection of the building began about October 1, 1852, and it was finished in the early part of 1853. Mr. Samuel Rodgers, an old resident of Chestnut Level, substantiates Mr. Boyd's statement, for he distinctly remembers that on New Year's Day, 1853, the carpenters were putting up the rafters. The writer mentions this merely to establish the time when the building was erected, namely, in the latter part of 1852 and the early part of 1853, as there has been some doubt as to whether 1852 or 1853 was the correct date.

J. Ross Ramsey First Principal.

A great majority of the stockholders were Presbyterians, and the Board of Trustees being of that faith, and denominational lines being pretty closely drawn in those days, it may be taken as a foregone conclusion that in seeking a suitable head for the institution preference would be given to one of the Presbyterian faith. J. Ross Ramsey, born in Harford county, Md., but reared in southern York county, a young Presbyterian minister, a graduate of Jefferson College in the class of 1846, and of Princeton Seminary in the class of 1849, who had been laboring as an evangelistic missionary at Kowetah mission, in the Creek Nation, Indian Territory, but who had returned to his Pennsylvania home on account of the ill-health of his family, was chosen as the first principal, and continued in that capacity until the autumn of

1855, when he resigned to resume his missionary labors. Rev. Ramsey is still living, residing at Bridgeton, N. J., having passed his eighty-seventh year. Rev. Ramsey's resignation was so unexpected, and tendered so late in the season, that the trustees were unable to find a successor in time to open the fall and winter term, and the school remained closed until the spring of 1856.

The Academy Leased.

Prof. James T. Doran, then principal of Hopewell Academy, Chester county, appeared before a joint meeting of the trustees and stockholders, December 12, 1855, and made certain propositions, which were favorably acted upon. The minute bearing upon this is as follows: "Mr. Doran, now principal of Hopewell Academy, Chester county, Pa., submitted proposals to take the academy for a term of years, paying 6 per cent. upon the cost of erecting a suitable boarding-house, together with other expenses incidental for repairs, etc., etc." At this meeting Thomas A. Clark and John McSparran were appointed a committee to secure a loan for the purpose of erecting a boarding-house, and to report at a joint meeting to be held December 22, 1855. This committee reported unfavorably, whereupon Sanders McCollough, one of the stockholders, being present, proffered a sufficient loan, to be secured by mortgage on the real estate of the corporation.

On January 5, 1856, a contract was made with John C. Walton for the erection of the boarding-house, for the sum of \$3,850, to be completed by the 15th of May following, "if practicable." These last two words, "if practicable," were inserted in the contract at the instance of Mr. Walton,

and proved to be a damaging concession on the part of the trustees and a convenient loophole for Mr. Walton, as will be learned further on.

Trouble Over Boarding-House.

May 15 came and went, and the building was nowhere near completion. An extension of two months was granted, with notice to Mr. Walton "that if not completed at that date, the board would expect, and require, a deduction for delay on the work." July 15 came, and the house was not completed. Following this date, the trustees may have had informal meetings and held interviews with Mr. Walton, and just what transpired meantime is not recorded, but on October 14 a regular meeting was held. The following is the entire minute of that date: "October 14, 1856, trustees met and received a report from the building committee, as far as completed. John McSparran and James M. Steele were appointed a committee to settle with Walton, contractor, for erecting the boarding-house."

The report of the committee, so far as the completion of the building was concerned, seems to have been very indefinite, though perhaps entirely satisfactory to the board, though old residents of Chestnut Level say that the building was nearly finished at that date, and that the trustees desired to settle with Mr. Walton and close the contract, so that they could finish the building at as early a date as possible, in order to give the lessees possession. The committee, having endeavored to settle with Mr. Walton, in accordance with the notice served on him respecting the deduction the board would expect and require for delay in the work, failed to make a settlement.

Prof. Doran, on taking hold of the school, or soon after, associated himself with Henry W. Sherer in its management. The lease, which was not signed until May 2, 1857, was signed by Doran & Sherer, and ran four and one-half years from April 1, 1857.

The contractor having failed to complete the boarding-house, according to contract, Prof. Doran and family were compelled to occupy a part of a house in the village then owned by P. W. Housekeeper (and which is still standing) during the spring and summer and early fall of 1856, and were able to furnish board for a small number of the students, while others boarded with other families in the village, and some with friends living near by, but in order to secure sufficient sleeping quarters the upper room of the Academy was, for the time being, fitted up as a dormitory, and some of the male students were thus accommodated with sleeping quarters, and, in lieu of this, the church session house was used for the primary department, and the academic department moved to the first floor.

A large number of new students were registered for the fall and winter term, and the question of both board and sleeping apartments became quite serious, and something had to be done. The boarding-house, unfinished and still in possession of the contractor, who refused to surrender possession until his claim was satisfied, placed the trustees and the principal in a rather unpleasant predicament.

A Secret Divulged.

The fact has been kept a secret all these years, but an old resident of Chestnut Level permitted the writer to become the custodian of the secret

as to how the trustees got possession of the boarding-house, in spite of Mr. Walton, and it is now intrusted to the care of the Lancaster County Historical Society, although the writer is under obligations to mention no names in connection therewith. The story is as follows: One day, while the carpenters were at work, the wife of one of the trustees, unknown to her husband, or any member of the board, by some strategic move on her part, obtained the keys to the building, and after the workmen went home, compelled to leave the doors unlocked, having no keys wherewith to lock them, she locked every door, and barred every window, and turned the keys over to the trustees, who immediately took possession, and soon Prof. Doran and family and students and assistant teachers were comfortably quartered in the new and commodious boarding-house.

Trouble Gets Into Court.

Possession in this case did not prove to be "nine points in the law" to the trustees. Mr. Walton refused to settle on the terms offered by the trustees, and, a large sum being due him, he felt compelled to resort to the law, and accordingly, on November 27 following, he entered a mechanics' lien against the building for the sum of \$1,980.50. December 4, 1856, James Barnett and John Kennedy, trading as Barnett & Kennedy, dealers in lumber, who had furnished Walton with a large amount of lumber, also filed a furnisher's lien against the building for \$509.20. On December 16, 1856, Walton obtained a rule of Court to have arbitrators appointed before whom the suit should be tried, and on January 2, 1857, the parties with their attorneys, W. W. Brown for Walton, and Jesse Landis

for the trustees, met in the Court House to agree upon three persons for arbitrators. Joseph Ballance, a prominent Friend of Little Britain township; Joseph Penrose, a prominent Friend of Liberty Square, and David Gockley, known as the "Plowman," of Lancaster city, were chosen.

Unpleasant Ordeal Ended.

The arbitration was held January 20, 1857, in the Court House. February 4 the arbitrators filed their report, finding for the plaintiff in the sum of \$1,927.49, with costs of suit. February 19 L. C. Rutter, president of the board, entered an appeal, with Robert Henry Long, founder of Liberty Square, as bail in the sum of \$150. The case was set for the April term of Common Pleas, but meantime a settlement was made, and on April 21 John McSparran, one of the board, withdrew the appeal, and Mr. Walton entered satisfaction of the lien, and thus, to the relief of the board, the stockholders and the friends of the school, the unpleasant ordeal was at an end.

Some of the older people in and around Chestnut Level, who were familiar with the case, say that the whole thing hinged on the two words, "if practicable," in the contract, which seems to have operated in Mr. Walton's favor.

Season of Prosperity Follows.

Under the management of Messrs. Doran and Sherer the school enjoyed its largest patronage, having as high as 120 students enrolled, and was a school of the highest grade of its kind. The curriculum included languages, Latin, Greek and English, mathematics, history, United States and English; botany, physiology, penmanship, drawing, music, vocal and instrumental. The following were as-

sistant teachers: William Chandler, of New Jersey, but now residing in Chestnut Level; Jacob P. Brown, New London, Pa.; Mrs. Emily Peabody Burke, of New Hampshire; Miss Eliza McIntyre, of Oxford; Theodore Chaffee and Edward Chaffee, of Philadelphia; Miss Helen Rutherford, of Oxford, Pa., Miss Mary Miller.

Among the students were young men and women from Maryland, Delaware and New Jersey, and from different counties of this State. In trying to bring the academy up to the highest grade of efficiency the management seems to have miscalculated the financial side, and Messrs. Doran and Sherer were compelled to surrender their lease, after occupying property about two and a-half years. Prof. Doran died July 13, 1890, at Malvern, Pa.

A New Principal Elected.

In the autumn of 1858, Mr. John B. Sahler, of Chester county, became the principal. The financial embarrassment of his predecessors seems to have had an ill-effect on the school, as its patronage fell off considerably, and Mr. Sahler's school, although large, was not up to that of Prof. Doran in point of numbers, but the instruction given seems to have been quite thorough and satisfactory. Mr. Sahler remained at its head until the spring of 1861. Mr. Sahler procured as his assistants Mr. James P. Boyd, a young man fresh from Lafayette, a native of lower Lancaster county, born and reared near Fairfield; Mr. Jacob B. Lewis, of Downingtown; Miss Helen Rutherford, of Oxford, Pa.; Miss Harriet Sahler, Mr. Henry Slot-hoff, Flemington, N. J. Mr. Sahler died in West Chester, Pa., February 8, 1906.

The above covers the rise of Chest-

nut Level Academy to the zenith of its glory, as well as a few years of its decline. Its rise was rapid; its decline was slow, but, nevertheless, sure.

Financial Condition Unsatisfactory.

The condition of the corporation's exchequer was never satisfactory, and, whilst the trustees never hoped to earn large dividends for the stockholders, and neither did the stockholders expect it of them, yet we can hardly imagine how the downward trend of the finances could be looked upon with indifference by those who were financially interested. The embarrassment of Messrs. Doran and Sherer brought no small loss to the trustees and came at a most inopportune time, when funds were needed to pay for various improvements, such as fencing, stabling, etc., which had been put on the property, together with interest, fire insurance, taxes, etc. The trustees were, therefore, compelled to borrow money from time to time, until their mortgage indebtedness on January 1, 1859, was almost \$5,000.

Proposition to Sell School.

As early as August, 1858, a meeting of stockholders was called "to take into consideration the affairs of the Academy generally" and so unpromising was the future outlook that a resolution was passed authorizing the trustees to sell the property either at public or private sale. To this resolution there was but one dissenting vote, that of P. W. Housekeeper, who requested that his vote be recorded on the minutes, which was done.

The charter of incorporation required the corporation to establish a seal, but this had been neglected until about the beginning of 1859, when,

by resolution, the trustees adopted a form which was simply a scroll or flourish of a pen surrounding the words, "The Chestnut Level Academy."

Soon after the formation of the corporation, and as the stock was paid for, each stockholder received a receipt for the same, but it was not for some time that regular stock certificates were issued. These certificates were quite unique in appearance, and on their face bore a cut of the buildings and grounds, with a four-horse stagecoach passing by at breakneck speed. Mr. George Steinman, of Lancaster city, has in his possession the certificate issued to his father, the late George M. Steinman, but the writer is inclined to believe that of the one hundred and six certificates issued Mr. Steinman possesses the only one known to exist.

Sheriff Sells Property.

At a meeting of the trustees held April 6, 1859, the president laid before the board a paper served by the Sheriff of the county, citing the board to appear at the April term of Court to show cause why execution should not issue against the corporation. It is, perhaps, unnecessary to trace the proceedings in this matter as they are on record in the various offices of the Court; suffice it to say that on August 5, 1859, B. I. Rowe, Sheriff of Lancaster county, sold the property to Sanders McCollough, the mortgagee, for \$3,200, and on August 15, 1859, gave Mr McCollough a deed for the same, and since that date the Chestnut Level Academy as a corporation ceased to exist.

Prof. Rawlins Takes Charge.

Returning again to the consideration of the school, we find that Mr

Sahler, having severed his connection with the school, Mr. McCollough the new owner, leased the property to James Morgan Rawlins, a nephew of John Rawlins, the founder of Rawlinsville, this county, a Lafayette man of the class of 1855, born and reared near Buck, this county, a place made famous and indeed somewhat notorious by "Observed and Noted" in the Lancaster Examiner. Prof. Rawlins took charge of the school, April, 1861, and continued at its head until November 1, 1863, a period of about two and one-half years, during which time the attendance reached into the seventies. His assistants were Mr. Jacob Person, Mr. James E. Young, Rev. Alfred Rickerts, Miss Mary Rickerts and Mr. and Mrs. Jeannie D. Neagle.

Other Principals.

In 1863 Prof. Jacob Titman, another Lafayette man, assumed charge of the Academy, and remained two years, having a small but very successful school, but having no assistant teachers.

From 1865 to 1866 John Boyd Grier and Alexander Russel, two young men from Danville, this State, conducted the school with fair success.

In 1866 Prof. H. P. Davidson, a native of Hookset, N. H., became principal, remaining in that capacity two years. The school under his management was a great success. Prof. Davidson was perhaps the most popular among the students of any of the long list of instructors in that institution. His assistants were Miss Lizzie E. Sharpless, of Philadelphia; Miss Ella J. Horton, of New Jersey; Miss Julia Wadsworth, of New York; State, Miss Ida Hartwell, of New Jersey, and Miss Rebecca Arthur, of York county. Prof. Davidson severed

his connection with the institution in 1868.

In 1868 Robert S. Maxwell became principal, remaining until 1870.

Succeeding him, Miss Sue Landon took charge, but remained only a few months, leaving a break in the school until 1872, when James A. Menaul, a divinity student from Princeton, took charge and remained one year, after which he took up work under the Presbyterian Home Mission Board at Albuquerque, N. M., and established there what is known as the Menaul Mission School.

From 1873 to 1875 the school was presided over by Prof. Wm. F. Overholt, with good success.

During 1875 to 1877 Rev. W. O. Owens, a Baptist minister, had charge and during his principalship preached in the Coleraine Baptist Church. His nephew, Wm. B. Owens, who afterwards taught in the public schools in different parts of the county, was his assistant.

Prof. Thomas Nicholson, a native of Chester county, had the school from 1877 to 1879.

Edwin Walker, of Strasburg, was principal in 1883, the school being without a teacher from 1879 to that year.

Others who had charge of the school were as follows:

Prof. James Alexander Clark, from 1884 to 1886.

No school from 1886 to 1888.

Prof. James B. White, from 1888 to 1889.

Prof. George S. West, from 1890 to 1891.

Prof. James B. White, returned, from 1892 to 1893.

Miss Lillie Long, from 1894 to 1896.

Edward McHarg, from 1897 to 1898.

Prof. Fred. F. Shaeffer, from 1898 to 1900.

Prof. W. H. Kretchman, 1901.

Prof. Fred F. Shaeffer, returned, 1902.

Kersey Carrigan, assistant to Prof. Shaeffer, 1902.

Prof. Hutton, remaining, only a few weeks, 1903.

Clyde Hoover, 1904.

May Never Be Used Again as a School.

Since that time there has been no school, and, in all probability, the old Academy will never again be used for school purposes, as the probability is that in the near future the present owner, the Chestnut Level Presbyterian congregation, will erect upon its site a more commodious structure to be used for Sabbath-school and chapel purposes.

Property Deeded to Church.

Mr. McCollough, the purchaser at the Sheriff's sale, deeded the property to the Chestnut Level Presbyterian congregation May 9, 1863, the consideration being only ten dollars. In the deed he created a trust which provided that so much of the income from the property as was necessary was to be used to keep the property in repair, after which Rev. L. C. Rutter, pastor of the church, was to be paid annually the sum of \$100 as long as he continued pastor, and the remainder to be used in assisting poor, pious young men into the ministry, as the session of the church may select, giving preference to those in said congregation, and after Rev. L. C. Rutter ceased to be pastor the sum to be paid to him was to be used in keeping the cemetery at the east end of the church grounds in good order, and upon the failure of the parties of the second part to comply with the object of the trust, the prop-

erty was to revert to the grantor or his heirs. The trustees of the church were unable to comply with these conditions, and on December 5, 1870, they gave Mr. McCollough a quit claim of the property.

On Feb. 20, 1872, Mr. McCollough again deeded the property to the church, giving the trustees full power and authority to sell and dispose of the property, discharging the property from all former trusts created by him but requiring them to place the proceeds of such sale on interest, with good security, the interest to be used, or as much as was necessary, to keep the cemetery in good condition, and the balance to be applied to necessary repairs on the church.

Thus, barring a period of less than two years, the school property has been under direct control of the church for more than thirty-seven years, and it may be said, to the credit of the church, that the buildings and grounds have been kept in good repair, and, while the property has never paid its way financially, yet the church and community have found it a good investment in the uses to which they have been able to appropriate it.

On September 11, 1902, the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the institution was held on the old Academy grounds, and was participated in by some of the old teachers, notably Rev. J. Ross Ramsey, the first principal, and many of the old students.

Note. Mrs. Mary N. Robinson, of this Society, has called attention to the following interesting article in Egle's "Notes and Queries," Vol. 3, Third Series, page 259, which recalls the seemingly forgotten fact that there was an earlier Chestnut Level Academy than the one whose history is so well told by Mr. Moore. This brief notice fittingly supplements his article:

"The Rev. James Latta established a classical school at or near Chestnut Level in 1771. He was also the pastor of that church. His school ranked with that of the Rev. Robert Smith, at Pequea Church, and Dr. Alison, at New London Cross Roads. He had a large school, made up chiefly from families in his congregation and the congregation in Little Britain. When the news reached the school that the British army was defeated at Concord, many of the scholars ran away from school and enlisted in the Revolutionary army, and a number became distinguished officers in the war. Dr. Latta must have been amazed at the rapid and unceremonious depletion of his list of scholars. After the war his school regained its prosperity, but after his decease, in 1800, it gradually went down."

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