

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

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OF THE

FOUNDER, AND PRINCIPAL ALUMNI

OF THE

LOG COLLEGE.

TOGETHER WITH AN ACCOUNT OF THE REVIVALS
OF RELIGION, UNDER THEIR MINISTRY.

COLLECTED AND EDITED

BY

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CHAPTER XV.

THE REV. JOHN BLAIR.

Education—First settlement—Driven away by the Indians—Is called to Fagg's Manor—Continues the school—Elected Professor of Theology in Nassau Hall—Resigns on the arrival of Dr. Witherspoon—Removes to Orange County, N. Y.—His end—The family of the Blairs.

THE REV. JOHN BLAIR, was a younger brother of the person, whose memoir is given in the preceding chapter. He was also an alumnus of the Log College, and as a theologian was not inferior to any man in the Presbyterian church, in his day. He was first settled in Pennsylvania, at Big Spring (now Newville) in the Cumberland Valley, in the vicinity of Carlisle. But by reason of the hostile incursion of the Indians, his people were obliged to leave their rude habitations, on the frontier, and to retreat into the more densely populated part of the colony. Mr. Blair, it would seem, never returned to the place whence he had been driven by the invasion of the savages, but upon the decease of his brother Samuel, he received and accepted a call to be his successor, at Fagg's Manor; and that not

only as pastor of the church, but also as the teacher of the school which his brother had instituted in that place. In this important station he continued for nine years; and though not equal to his brother as an impressive preacher, as a scholar and as a theologian, he was not inferior.

New Jersey Collège having been founded for the very purpose of giving a complete education to candidates for the ministry, these academies, which had done so much for the church, no longer had the same importance, as when no such institution existed. Accordingly, not only did the Log College, at Neshaminy, which was the mother institution, cease, as soon as the college was erected, but the celebrated school at Nottingham, was not continued after Dr. Finley was chosen president of Nassau Hall. And when Dr. Finley died, a sum of money having been left for the support of a professor of divinity; Mr. John Blair was elected, professor of theology, in the College of New Jersey. This invitation he accepted, and removed to Princeton. He was also appointed vice president of the college, and until the arrival of Dr. Witherspoon, performed all the duties of president.

The funds of the college not being adequate to support a professor of theology, distinct from the president; and it being known that Dr. Witherspoon was an orthodox and eminent theologian, who could consistently with his other duties teach

theology, Mr. Blair judged it would be expedient for him to resign. Upon this he received a call to settle as pastor of a Presbyterian congregation in Wallkill, Orange county, New York. Here he continued to labour in the duties of the ministry, until he was called away from the field, by death, which occurred, Dec. 8, 1771, when he was not more than fifty-one, or fifty-two years of age.

The character of Mr. John Blair is thus drawn, by a writer of a sketch of his life, in the "Assembly's Magazine."

"John Blair, an eminent minister of Pennsylvania, was ordained to the pastoral charge of three congregations in Cumberland county, as early as 1742. These were frontier settlements, and exposed to the depredation of the Indians, with whom a state of war then existed; and he was obliged to remove. He accepted a call from Fagg's Manor, in 1757. The congregation had been favoured with the ministry of his brother, Samuel Blair. And here he continued about nine years; and besides discharging the duties of the ministry, he superintended also a flourishing grammar-school, and prepared many young men for the ministry. When the presidency of New Jersey college became vacant, by the death of Dr. Finley, he was chosen professor of divinity, and had for some time, the charge of that seminary before the arrival of Dr. Witherspoon.

“He was a judicious and persuasive preacher, and through his exertions sinners were converted, and the children of God edified. Fully convinced of the truth of the doctrines of grace, he addressed immortal souls with that warmth and power, which left a witness in every bosom. Though he sometimes wrote his sermons in full, yet his common mode of preaching was by short notes, comprising the general outlines. His labours were too abundant to admit of more; and no more was necessary to a mind so richly stored with the great truths of religion. For his large family he amassed no fortune, but he left them what was infinitely better, a religious education, a holy example, and prayers which have been remarkably answered. His disposition was uncommonly patient, placid, benevolent, disinterested, and cheerful. He was too mild to indulge bitterness or severity; and he thought that the truth required little else but to be fairly stated and properly understood. Those who could not relish the savour of his piety, loved him as an amiable, and revered him as a great man. Though no bigot, he firmly believed that the presbyterian form of government is most scriptural, and the most favourable to religion and happiness.

“In his last sickness, he imparted his advice to the congregation, and represented to his family the necessity of an interest in Christ. A few nights before he died, he said, ‘Directly, I am going to glory—my Master calls me, I must be gone.’”

Mr. John Blair left behind him a treatise on Regeneration, which is ably written and entirely orthodox. He also published a treatise on the Scriptural Terms of admission to the Lord's Supper, in which he maintains that ministers and church officers, have no more authority to debar those who desire to attend, from the Lord's table, than from any other duty of God's worship. This piece, the late Rev. J. P. Wilson, D. D., pastor of the First Presbyterian church, Philadelphia, had republished in a small selection of treatises on the Lord's Supper; from which it may be inferred, that he approved the sentiments which it contains.

It is always gratifying to a laudable curiosity to learn something respecting the families and descendants of men once eminent in the church; although in the pursuit of this knowledge, we often meet with mortifying instances of a sad degeneracy. But when it is otherwise, it is always pleasing to the pious mind to be able to trace eminent piety and talents descending from generation to generation. Two of the sisters of Samuel and John Blair were married to distinguished ministers of the Presbyterian church: the one, to the Rev. John Carmichael, pastor of the church at the Forks of Brandywine; who was also an eminent patriot, in the struggle of this country for independence. The other, was married to the Rev. Robert Smith, D. D., of Pequea, the father of three ministers, who were eminent in the

Presbyterian church, and two of them distinguished presidents of literary institutions. The Rev. Doctor Samuel S. Smith, was the first president of Hampden Sidney College in Virginia, and then the immediate successor of Dr. Witherspoon, as president of New Jersey College: the other, the Rev. John B. Smith, D.D., who succeeded his brother as president of Hampden Sidney, and was afterwards, the first president of Union College in Schenectady. He was an eloquent, evangelical, and successful minister. Under his ministry, in Virginia, commenced a powerful and extensive revival, the influence of which extended far and wide through the state, and also to North Carolina, and Kentucky. Mr. William Smith, the third son, was a pious, judicious minister; less distinguished than either of his brothers; but his good old father was wont to say, that though William was inferior to his brothers in learning and eloquence, yet to comfort and edify the plain Christian, he was equal to either of them. The Rev. Samuel Blair, of Fagg's Manor, had a son of the same name, who was considered the most accomplished and promising young minister in the Presbyterian Church. He, at an early age, received a call to be colleague with the Rev. Mr. Sewall, in the old South Church, Boston. Before he was licensed, he had for some time acted as a tutor in his alma mater. The estimation in which he was held by the trustees of the college, may be learned from

the fact, that after Dr. Witherspoon had declined the first invitation of the board, young Mr. Blair was elected president, before he was thirty years of age. But soon after his election, intelligence was received from Scotland, that if the call were repeated, Dr. Witherspoon would, in all probability, accept the invitation. As soon as this was known to Mr. Blair, he immediately wrote to the president of the board, declining the office. This prompt and generous decision, freed the trustees from all the embarrassment in which otherwise they might have been involved. Of course, the election of Mr. Blair could not have been known to Dr. Witherspoon, when he signified his willingness to accept the appointment; and when he understood from what motives Mr. Blair had declined the office, he was much affected with the disinterestedness of the young man, and often spoke of it with admiration.

But though the morning of Mr. Blair's life was so bright, and promised so much to the church, the sanguine hopes of his friends were far from being realized in his future usefulness. By being shipwrecked on his way to Boston, he was much exposed; and to this was attributed the decline of his health and spirits. He also lost, at this time, the whole of his manuscript sermons; a loss which could not be suddenly repaired, and which affected his spirits not a little. He, therefore, did not remain long in Boston, but returned to Pennsylvania, where

he resided at the house of his father-in-law, Dr. Shippen, in Germantown, and was very little engaged in the duties of his office, afterwards; although his life was protracted to a good old age.

The writer having spent several summers in Germantown, before Dr. Blair's decease, had the opportunity of becoming well acquainted with him; and found him to be a man of great refinement of mind, mild and amiable in disposition, and friendly to evangelical doctrine and practical piety.

From the history of this popular young man, it may be inferred, that too much applause is a dangerous thing to a young minister. Another remark which may be made, is, that for a young man to form a connexion, by marriage, with a rich and fashionable family, seldom ever works well for his usefulness in the ministry; especially if his partner is of a gay and worldly disposition. And lastly, that speculation on deep points of theology, when the mind is not under a decided spiritual influence, is always attended with evil, even to those who at bottom are sincerely pious.

One of the daughters of Samuel Blair, Sen., was married to a young minister from Virginia, the Rev. David Rice, and became the mother of a numerous progeny, who are now scattered through Virginia and Kentucky, to which last mentioned place Mr. Rice removed, and on the rising population of which, his evangelical labours and holy example, left a lasting impression.

Mr. John Blair also had a son, educated at Princeton, New Jersey, who became a minister of the gospel. He graduated in the year 1775, soon after which, he went to the county of Hanover, in Virginia, and became the principal of an academy, which had been established by the Rev. Daniel Mc Calla. While in this office, he applied himself to the study of theology, without any instructor, and having passed the usual trials, to the approbation of the presbytery of Hanover, he was licensed to preach the gospel. The academy not prospering according to his wishes, Mr. Blair removed from Hanover to the city of Richmond, where he taught a classical school, at his own house, and preached alternately at Hanover meeting house, and in the Capitol, in Richmond. At this time, there was no Presbyterian church in Richmond; but before Mr. Blair's death, and after Dr. Rice had collected a congregation and erected a church in the lower part of the city, Mr. Blair's hearers made an exertion, and built a handsome church on Shockoe Hill. He was a sensible, pleasant man, and much respected by all the leading characters in the city of Richmond; but he possessed a moderate degree of religious zeal, and no considerable fruits attended his ministry, as far as has come to our knowledge.

Another son of the Rev. John Blair, also educated at Princeton, went to Kentucky, where it is understood that he was a respectable lawyer.