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# HISTORY

OF THE

## Presbyterian Church in America,

FROM ITS ORIGIN UNTIL THE YEAR 1760.

WITH

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF ITS EARLY MINISTERS.

BY THE

REV. RICHARD WEBSTER,

LATE PASTOR OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, MAUCH CHUNK, PA.

WITH

*A Memoir of the Author,*

BY THE REV. C. VAN RENSSELAER, D.D.

AND

*An Historical Introduction,*

BY THE REV. WILLIAM BLACKWOOD, D.D.

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PUBLISHED BY AUTHORITY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

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whom he laboured as a pastor and evangelist. His words were always full of comfort to the bereaved and afflicted. Although seemingly frail in body and of little physical strength, he yet possessed great hardihood, and was in the habit of walking distances of miles, in all weather, to fulfil his frequent missionary engagements. Wherever he went, on these errands of love, preaching formed but a small part of his work: 'in season and out of season,' from house to house, he laboured,—instructing, warning, and tenderly admonishing and beseeching, with all meekness, patience, and fidelity. His pastoral visits were very edifying. On account of defective hearing, the burden of conversation fell upon himself; but he possessed a rare facility in discerning, or learning in some way, the true character and circumstances of persons and families, and in adapting his discourse to them. I have sometimes seen him plead with tears; and his manner, tone of voice, and expression of countenance, at such times, were very affecting. Unfeigned humility, springing from a deep, abiding sense of his unworthiness and unprofitableness, was, as all who knew him intimately will testify, one of the most marked and beautiful features of our departed brother's character. Although gifted with a rare fund of humour and pleasantry, which he freely disbursed among others, the habitual seriousness and even sorrowfulness of his countenance clearly shadowed the depth and intensity of his heart-struggles and experiences. More than once, in confidential Christian interchanges with him, he would speak with tears of the unfruitfulness of his ministry and the unprofitableness of his life.

“Mr. Webster's *preaching*—as all know who have heard him—was singularly earnest, affectionate, and evangelical.

“Yours, in the gospel,

“JOHN F. BAKER.”

The Rev. ANDREW B. CROSS, the brother-in-law and intimate friend of Mr. Webster, was called upon, in providence, to preach his funeral sermon. This excellent discourse has been printed in pamphlet form; and, had there been room, the whole of it would have been published in this Preface to the History. The delineations of character are remarkably well drawn, and are not *overdrawn*. The account of the last hours of our beloved brother in the Lord is particularly interesting and edifying. The reader will find the whole worthy of his attentive perusal:—

“The knowledge I have of your late pastor commenced twenty-four years since, when we entered together upon our theological studies, and has continued until his death, in an intimacy and familiarity which rarely happen. During all this period

nothing ever interrupted our friendship. To his life I could bear witness. But I am forbidden by his dying direction; and you know, from his humble, modest, diffident life, he would not allow me to say any thing which might appear flattery concerning him. If he were present he would say, Preach plainly and practically to the people.

“What can be more practical than to call upon you to bear witness to his ministry?—to call up to your recollection his life, his labours, his prayers among you and for you, and to remind you that you are witnesses to these? Not only you who were the members of his church, but the people of this town, of the country around, the many congregations to which he so often and so earnestly preached the gospel,—*ye all are witnesses.*

“He strove to preach the gospel to *every one* of you. Instant in season and out of season, he warned, exhorted, charged, and comforted you in the spirit and with the love of a father. On his death-bed he expressed his anxiety to live to a certain hour, that he might see a man who had neglected attending the sanctuary, and to beg him to attend, that, if any thing in him had hindered, that cause would now be removed. God spared him to see him, and from his dying lips did speak to him. Could any thing but the sincerest love for the soul of a man move him at such an hour? And yet this was only an exhibition of the tender and faithful spirit which, during his ministry, sought thus to deal faithfully with the souls of his flock, and any whom the providence of God placed in his way.

“While he sought to preach the gospel to every one of you, he did not cease to remember every one of you in his prayers before God. I doubt if there be an individual among all his people, or among all his friends, whose particular case, with all its attendant difficulties, he has not made the subject of special prayer to God. Are there not among you, parents, many parents who do not pray for yourselves and your children, on whose behalf he has often wrestled with God, and who have been a burden on his heart so great that he has been ready to sink under it? (Read his sermon, ‘A Word to Fathers,’ preached in this church January 8, 1854.) He is here no more to preach or to pray. But if you perish, and if your children go down to hell, it will be against his warnings, entreaties, and *prayers*. I mention his prayers for you because they were remarkable for their earnestness, particularity, and tenderness. He seemed to make every case his own for which he was praying. In the house of mourning, amid the afflicted and bereaved, he will not soon be forgotten. His tender and sympathizing heart led him to seek out such, to minister to them the consolation of the gospel.

“The house of mourning and affliction were never passed when it was in his power to visit them. This was not confined to his own congregation, or this town, or the churches of your vicinity. His letters of condolence went far and wide, whenever the hand of God was laid upon one that he knew. The tenderness of his heart towards the afflicted I need not call up to you who have for many years known and



felt it. He came as the minister of Jesus, and brought you the consolation of the gospel,—the true balm of healing and consolation.

“You had his whole ministerial life. *Ye are witnesses.* God also made him a witness among you, and his testimony is on record in the high court of our King. Soon you will meet him to hear his testimony. I call upon you to-day to remember and profit by it. Take heed to it. His voice, which so often warned and testified, is now silent. Lay up his instructions in your memories; meditate upon them. May God quicken your consciences to apply them! Walk with God, and you shall meet him with joy before your Father in heaven.

“REV. RICHARD WEBSTER was born at Albany, New York, July 14, 1811; was the youngest child of Charles R. Webster and Cynthia Steele, of that place; died at Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania, Thursday morning, June 19, 1856, at a few minutes before twelve o'clock, leaving a wife and six children. At his death he wanted only twenty-five days of being forty-five years of age.

“He graduated at Union College in 1829, at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1834. On leaving the Seminary he designed entering the foreign missionary field, and was, on September 2, 1834, designated by the Committee of the American Board to the ‘Mahratta Mission.’ A difficulty delayed his sailing, which gave him pain at the time, but was cleared up satisfactorily and greatly to his honour. God had work for him in another field not less laborious or self-denying, in which he was to do much for his Master’s glory. He was ordained an evangelist, by the Presbytery of Albany, April 29, 1835. He was soon engaged as a missionary at South Easton, Pennsylvania, and there commenced a work, which, through many changes and difficulties, has grown into the Second Presbyterian Church. From this place he extended his labours to Mauch Chunk, thirty-six to forty miles north-west from Easton, on the Lehigh River. At this point, a few years before, coal-mines had been opened: there, and in the vicinity, had collected a population of about two thousand persons. He commenced, in 1835, preaching there once a month, and missionating in the vicinity. His labours were so successful that, by the spring of 1836, there had been a church organized, a lot secured, and part of the money promised towards building a church, which was afterwards erected, and dedicated February, 1837. He commenced, in April, to preach one-fourth of his time at Summit Hill, nine miles west; was installed pastor at Mauch Chunk in July, 1837. From January, 1843, he gave up the other places, and preached regularly at Mauch Chunk. But then, as before, he preached during the week in the adjacent villages, and visited the people. The amount of these labours and his self-denial cannot be well estimated by any one who is not familiar with the rapid growth and great necessity for preaching in the coal-regions, embracing parts of Berks, Lehigh, Northampton, Luzerne, Columbia, and Schuylkill counties, and the zeal with which he laboured to carry the gospel to them.

“At his instance the General Assembly was memorialized, and, in May, 1843,

constituted the Presbytery of Luzerne. The great object of this presbytery was to take charge of this missionary-field. By appointment of the Assembly he opened the presbytery with a sermon. He was considered not only the father of the presbytery, but was looked up to as a father by the ministry and churches in all that vicinity.

“In a letter from one of the oldest members of this presbytery, he remarks that, for information and counsel by his brethren, none of our ministers would be missed as much, excepting some of the older professors in our seminaries. ‘He was a model for a member of presbytery,’ said another member.

“His ministerial life was abundant in labours, not sparing himself. Gifted by God with great clearness of mind, a wonderful facility in acquiring knowledge, an exceedingly tenacious memory, a diligence and application which knew no cessation, he was familiar with almost every subject connected with the church: with a faculty for, and promptness in, communicating information, he was a most entertaining and instructive companion.

“Among the incidental labours of the years of his ministry was a constant contribution to the religious press. Few men who were not regularly in the editorial chair wrote more. But most of this period he gave the strength of a mind, which seemed to have been constituted by God for the work, to gathering up and preparing for publication what could be found of the early history of the Presbyterian church in the United States, and the lives of her early ministers. In the prosecution of this work he became the repository of almost every thing that could be collected in connection with them. Since the effort has commenced among the churches to prepare histories of their early settlement and organization, he has been called upon continually for a history of some church or preacher, and, from his generous disposition, he has been taxed with writing almost weekly such sketches and histories, many of which have appeared in the historical sermons preached and published by pastors. In the histories of the church in different States, published within a few years, large contributions have been furnished by him, in addition to the numerous articles contributed on this subject to the religious press of our own church.

“The ‘History of the Presbyterian Church,’ to which he had devoted so much time and attention, and which has been looked for with so much anxiety, happily for the church, had so far reached its completion as to be in readiness for publication, and, under the auspices of the Historical Society, was about being placed in the printer’s hands a few weeks before his decease.

“He prepared, at the request of the Board of Publication, ‘A Digest of the Acts of the Assembly,’ which is a most valuable book of reference in our church judicatories.

“The field to which he had given his regular labours for twenty-one years was the congregation collected at Mauch Chunk. There he had been greatly blessed in

collecting and gathering into the fold of the Great Shepherd many souls, who will hail him with joy before the throne as their father in the gospel of Christ. The congregation had gradually so increased, notwithstanding deaths and the numerous changes incident to such a population, that persons could not obtain sittings. During the past year another lot was procured, and a large, comfortable house, of fifty feet long by eighty-five feet wide, has been erected: in a few weeks the basement will be in readiness for preaching.

“He was a most laborious preacher and an indefatigable pastor. Such was his promptness and vigilance that no part of his field was neglected or escaped his oversight. With his delicate frame, and the heavy calamity of his deafness, it was always the wonder of his friends and people how he could perform the amount of service which he so regularly rendered. At the same time, while he suffered nothing to hinder his preaching to his own people, his labours among his brethren in the congregations around were abundant. In a letter, of December, he said, ‘Last week I preached five times for Brother Irwin at Catasauqua; last month three times for Brother Gaston, besides a Sabbath. In September, I preached ten times for my brethren in eight days.’ These are specimens of labour extra from his own people, and yet he did not seem to feel he was doing any thing. His labours were unto the last. After his first attack, which was severe, he preached twice to his own people. On the last Sabbath, he got out of his bed, and went into the church, and preached from the words, ‘Enoch walked with God, and he was not; for God took him.’ As he closed his sermon with the prayer that both pastor and people might so live that, when they came to die, it might be said of them with truth, they had walked with God, many of the congregation thought, and some of them remarked, that he seemed as if he was preaching his last sermon.

“He went from his pulpit back to his bed. A week after he had another attack, in which he suffered violent pains and was left greatly prostrate; but his physician hoped, under proper treatment, he might recover.

“He was down-stairs two or three times on Monday, June 16, walked about the yard, and wanted to fix a number of little things; took tea with his family. Tuesday, he was not so well, lay in bed, but read the newspapers and letters of correspondents, and wrote. On Wednesday afternoon, (18th,) when the papers were brought, he felt so weak that he told them he did not wish them, and only glanced over a letter which had come. The doctor observed his pulse was very rapid and weak, and concluded to spend the night with him. About twelve o’clock, he felt his pulse; on noticing which, he asked the doctor if there was any prospect of immediate death. ‘I should like to know if there is.’ The slate was handed, and on it was written, he ‘might live a few hours, perhaps less.’ On reading it he remarked, ‘This is sudden; I did not expect it: but, blessed be God! I have no preparation to make. That was made long ago. I have renewed it daily; I am a sinner, I have had my faults; but I have trusted in the righteousness of my blessed



Saviour; I throw myself upon him: I trust I have the forgiveness of my God.' 'I wish heartily to forgive every one;' 'give my love to all.' 'I have often admired the dying sayings of Samuel Blair and Jonathan Edwards,' repeating them, 'and that of John Breckenridge,—God is with me.' 'And it is mine: not a cloud, not a fear,—entire trust in my Saviour. I did not expect this; but thanks be to God for such a death! Can it be that it is death? Is not the doctor mistaken? I had no such thought.' On the head being shaken to say that there was no mistake, he said, 'It is such a death as I never knew of:' 'not a pain, no weakness; my faculties are all as usual.' 'Thank God, no one could be more kindly dealt with; it is not only without a terror it comes, but it is sweet: can it be death? I thank God my body is not racked with pain, that I have the perfect use of my senses, that I was early called to the knowledge of the Saviour, that he permitted me the honour of preaching his name. Oh, how I have loved to preach it! I can bless God, my times are in thy hand.'

"About half-past one o'clock in the morning, he requested that his children should be awakened, to see him and bid him farewell, as he might not live until daylight. When they came he embraced them, kissed each of them, prayed for them, which he did several times. He gave directions about things of his house and family, his funeral, who should preach, his burial, avoiding all show, and mentioned friends to whom he wished letters to be written. He said he would like to live for his family and the church; lamented the vacancies, need of ministers for the missionary-fields. 'Oh, how I love the cause of missions!' 'I am comfortable It seems impossible that I am drawing near to death. I can well pity the poor sinner, drawing near his end, and so little in the circumstances to aid in his preparation. My voice and words fail me to express the trust I have in God.' 'I would like to say to the impenitent, sickness is no time to prepare to meet God; when there is a sinking of all the faculties, it is hard to do any thing, hard to enter in at the strait gate, hard to find the narrow way.' 'If this be death, it approaches with tender, gentle, loving embrace; I feel no pain, no apprehension. I look forward with joy to meeting my Saviour, with perfect calmness of mind, and assurance of the blessing of the Lord upon myself, my wife, my family, my friends, and the church of God.' 'If I have been deceived all my life, I now come, at the eleventh hour, and put my trust in the Saviour, hoping in his mercy, confessing my sins, and acknowledging his mercy, which has been with me always. Into thy hands I commend my spirit: thou hast redeemed me. His I am, and him I serve.' He repeated the hymn, 'Lord, I am thine, entirely thine,' to the line, 'And consecrate to thee my all:' then added, 'Blessed be God, this is not a new work, not a thing taken up to-day or yesterday!'

"Speaking of his people, he said, 'May God be with them! I loved to preach the gospel to them; I thank God for permitting me to preach it to one people.' He had a horror of pastoral changes. 'He thought he had not been altogether un-

faithful, but had come very short.' 'How strange the deceitfulness of things! I feel that I might get up in a few minutes as well as any of the children.' 'Truly, man walketh in a vain show.'

'Speaking to his family, he said, 'I love you, my wife and children; I have no breath, or I would tell you—but words cannot tell you—how much I love you. This is a great trial. How little we expected it yesterday! How differently we would have spent yesterday and last night if we had known it!' 'The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it? Thy will be done. Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.' 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; thy rod and staff comfort me.' 'I have not been faithful enough with my children, and yet I have tried in some measure to bring them up for God.' 'He has promised to be a Father to the fatherless, a God to the widow. How dear is every one of you to me! Oh, how hard to part!' 'I would like, when death approaches, for all to leave me but my own family, that we may have a calm, quiet, pleasant committing of ourselves into God's hands.'

'He continued to read what was written on the slate until within a few minutes before he died, when he told them to put it away,—that he was so weak it was too great exertion for him to read. At that time his pulse had ceased in one of his wrists, and nearly in the other. A very short time before this he said to his wife that his hands were cold, and asked her to rub them; and, while she and his oldest child were rubbing them, he remarked about his mistake of the coldness. 'He did not think.' 'It was death.' And so quietly and gently did he pass away, that those around did not perceive it until the doctor said, 'He is gone.'

'These gathered thoughts from his death-bed have been saved from the many things said by him during that period, through the recollection of some that stood by him. Very much that he said has escaped. During the morning, when it was known that he was dying, his room was filled with friends and members of the congregation, who wanted to hear the last word or take the last look at one who had so long been identified with them. All his sayings bore the correct, concise, and pointed marks of his mind. Without wandering, or wavering, or hesitating, he continued his utterances as long as his strength permitted. His tongue had scarcely ceased to utter the thoughts of his heart to his people and family until it was animated with new energy in the presence of his Saviour.

'How glorious and blessed the change! He—who for years had not heard the sound of his own voice, or of one of his own children, or the voice of the congregation to whom he preached, when they sang praise to God—has awaked amid the company of the redeemed, to tune his harp and lift up his voice, and hear the songs of the redeemed, as they give glory and honour to the Saviour whom he so loved and sought to honour on earth.

“ Oh for the death of those  
 Who slumber in the Lord!  
 Oh be like theirs my last repose,  
 Like theirs my last reward!”

“ Added to the life and labours, you have had the death, of your pastor. A life of devotedness to God,—ripened and completed in your midst,—with a calm, quiet, peaceful, hopeful, and blessed death.

“ May his death be more blessed to all of you than the labours and example of his life have been! May you, who have been the objects of his prayers, and warnings, and entreaties, flee to that Saviour whom he so often, so earnestly, and so tenderly besought you to embrace! Make him the end of your conversation. May God, in his great mercy and grace, give each one of us the wisdom and the grace to live the remainder of our days in his service, and, when they are ended, may we in peace enter into our rest!”

The following interesting letter from MRS. WEBSTER, the respected widow of the departed servant of Christ whose life it is my aim to illustrate as fully as possible in a brief space, is here introduced, with the advice of some of my personal friends whom I consulted. Although the letter was written simply to furnish *materials* for the compilation of a biographical sketch, and not for publication by itself, yet I have assumed the responsibility of inserting it entire, for reasons which, I trust, the reader will appreciate on a perusal. It was a point of great delicacy; and, if I have offended propriety by the course adopted, I throw myself upon the indulgence of the public:—

“ MAUCH CHUNK, July 28, 1856.

“ REV. C. VAN RENSSELAER, D.D.:—

“ DEAR SIR:—I feel very grateful for your kind letter, and far more indebted to you for the interest manifested in regard to my dear husband’s book than words can express: if there were any way to lessen your care and trouble with it I should be very glad to know of it, and would cheerfully incur the additional expense; and may I hope that you will do no more personally than is absolutely indispensable? The terms of the agreement appear to me fair and liberal: profit I do not expect, though I should deeply regret Mr. Wilson losing in any way by it.

“ There appears to be something of an impression that Mr. Webster’s great antiquarian tastes, &c., combined with his deafness, rendered him almost unfit for other labours. But it is a very great mistake indeed: the business of his life was to labour faithfully, earnestly, and amid much fatigue and discouragements, in the