

ANNALS

OF THE

AMERICAN PULPIT;

OR

COMMEMORATIVE NOTICES

OF

DISTINGUISHED AMERICAN CLERGYMEN

OF

VARIOUS DENOMINATIONS,

FROM THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE COUNTRY TO THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR
EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE.

WITH HISTORICAL INTRODUCTIONS.

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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scheme of redemption, as revealed in God's Word,—adding with emphasis—“No other way—nothing will do but this.” During his illness, he spent much of his time in prayer for himself and others. His desire to depart was so strong that he greatly feared he did wrong in indulging it; but remarked that he strove and prayed against an improper solicitude, wishing to wait the Lord's time.

For some time after his disease had assumed a more threatening and dangerous character, his slumbers were almost constantly disturbed by frightful and distressing dreams. Being much perplexed on account of them, he prayed earnestly to God for deliverance, and it was not long until he found relief. And what led him to remark the special goodness of God in the case was, that he continued to enjoy tranquillity in sleep, although the fever, which might be supposed to have been the occasion of his dreams, remained in unabated force until a very short time before his death. “For so He giveth his beloved sleep.”

About ten days before his death, I was present at his bedside, and upon his remarking that he suffered much, I observed that I hoped he received abundant support from above. “Oh, yes,” said he, “I am greatly supported.” He then went on to say that he had been strongly tempted to doubt with respect to the foundation of his hopes, and whether that system on which he had been accustomed to rely, was agreeable to the word of God; but, convinced that he had long before examined carefully into the grounds of his belief, he sought comfort in prayer to God, and it was but a short time until he found it. “I have now,” said he, with a tear of joy sparkling in his eye,—“I have now no doubt of my love to God. He is the most glorious of all objects—no other can be compared to Him.” For several days before his departure, he was able to converse but little; but, by detached expressions and significant gestures, he gave pleasing indications of the presence and sustaining power of religion in his soul. His latter end was peace; and in his death, as well as in his life, we have the most satisfactory evidence that though now “absent from the body,” he is “present with the Lord.”

I am, dear Sir, with great respect,
Yours in Christian bonds,

DAVID ELLIOTT.

CHARLES CUMMINGS.

1767—1812.

FROM THE HON. DAVID CAMPBELL,
GOVERNOR OF VIRGINIA.

MONTCALM, March 25, 1850.

My dear Sir: I have received your letter of the 11th inst., and will, with much pleasure, comply with the request contained in it, so far as I am able.

My father was among the first settlers on the waters of Holston, and I was born on the banks of that river, thirty miles East of Abingdon. In 1782, my father removed to Abingdon, and I have resided within the bounds of the Sinking Spring Congregation ever since. I was baptized by the Rev. Charles Cummings, the first Pastor of this Congregation, attended his preaching from early life, and was intimately acquainted with him for more than twenty years previous to his death, and with all his family. Since his death, I have had access to his papers and family records.

In early life, I was intimately acquainted with many of the old members of his congregation, who were living when he took charge of it in 1772. From them I learned some of the facts which you will find in the following sketch; but most of them were either within my own knowledge, or obtained from authentic records within my reach.

CHARLES CUMMINGS was an Irishman by birth, and came to America in early manhood. It is believed that he obtained his education chiefly in this country. On coming to Virginia, he took up his residence in one of the counties in the Northern Neck. Here, on the 13th of February, 1766, he married Miss Milley Carter, daughter of John Carter, Esq., of Lancaster County. He was now studying Divinity, and was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Hanover, on the 18th of April, 1767. He was thoroughly educated,—well acquainted with Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and possessed, for his day, a very large and valuable library. A call was presented for his services from the Congregation of North Mountain, in Augusta County, and he was ordained the 14th of May, 1767. Here he laboured in the ministry five years.

In 1772, he received a call from the people of Holston, forming the Sinking Spring and Ebbing Spring Congregations, and including all the Presbyterians of the Holston Valley, from the head of Holston to the Tennessee line, or as it then was,—the line of North Carolina. I have seen the original call. It was a most admirably drawn document of the kind, and was signed by about one hundred and thirty heads of families,—all members, I believe, of the church, and all men of highly respectable standing in society; many of whom afterwards became much distinguished. This call he immediately accepted, removed with his family, purchased land in the neighbourhood of where Abingdon now stands, and settled upon it. His first meeting-house at Sinking Spring was a very large cabin of unhewn logs, from eighty to one hundred feet long by about forty wide, and it stood near the middle of the present grave yard. It was there for some years after the second meeting-house was built, and had a very venerable appearance.

Mr. Cummings was of middle stature, about five feet, ten inches high, well set and formed, possessing great personal firmness and dignity of character. His voice was strong and had great compass; his articulation was deliberate and distinct. Without apparent effort, he could speak so as to be heard by ten thousand people. His mind was good, but not brilliant. He understood his own system well; spoke always with great gravity, and required it from all who sat under the sound of his voice. He would not tolerate any movement among the congregation after preaching commenced. He uniformly spoke like one having authority, and laid down the Law and the Gospel, as he understood them, with great distinctness.

When he came to Holston, he was about forty years of age. At this time the Indians were very troublesome, and continued to be so for several years; and, generally, during the summer months, the families were obliged, for safety, to collect together in forts. The one to which he always carried his family, was on the land of Captain Joseph Black, and stood on the first knoll on the Knob road South of Abingdon, and on the spot where my own gate now stands. In the month of July, 1776, when his family were in the fort, and he, with a servant, and waggon, and three neighbours, was going to his farm, the party were attacked by Indians a few hundred yards

from the meeting-house. Creswell, who was driving the waggon, was killed at the first fire of the Indians, and, during the skirmish, the two other neighbours were wounded. Mr. Cummings and his servant man, both of whom were well armed, drove the Indians from their ambush, and, with the aid of some men from the fort, who, hearing the firing, came to their relief, brought in the dead and wounded. A statement has been published in a respectable historical work, that, on this occasion, Mr. Cummings lost his wig. I am able, from the testimony of one who was present when Mr. Cummings came into the fort, to say that the story has no foundation.

From the year Mr. Cummings commenced preaching at Sinking Spring, up to about the year 1776, the men never went to church, without being armed, and taking their families with them. On Sabbath morning, during most of this period, it was Mr. Cummings' custom—for he was always very neat in his personal appearance—to dress himself, then put on his shot pouch, shoulder his rifle, mount his dun horse, and ride off to church. There he met his gallant and intelligent congregation,—each man with his rifle in his hand. When seated in the meeting-house, they presented altogether a most solemn and singular spectacle.

Mr. Cummings' uniform habit, before entering the house, was to take a short walk alone, whilst the congregation were seating themselves. He would then return, hold a few words of conversation at the door with some one of the elders of the church, then would walk gravely through this crowd, mount the steps of the pulpit, deposit his rifle in a corner near him, lay off his shot pouch, and commence the solemn services of the day. He would preach two sermons,—having a short intermission between them, and then go home.

The congregation was very large, and preaching was always well attended. On sacramental occasions, which were generally twice a year, the table was spread in a grove near the church. Here he preached for many years, and until far advanced in life, to one of the largest, most respectable, and most intelligent, congregations ever assembled in Western Virginia. His Congregation at the Ebbing Spring was equally respectable and intelligent, but not so numerous. What portion of his time he devoted to this congregation is not known. It included the families at the Royal Oak, and for twenty miles in that direction. The meeting-house was built in the same manner as that at Sinking Spring, but not so large.

Mr. Cummings was a zealous Whig of '76, and contributed much to kindle the patriotic fire which blazed forth so brilliantly among the people of Holston in the war of the Revolution. He was the first named on the list of the Committee, appointed by the freeholders of Fincastle County, to prepare an Address to the Continental Congress, setting forth the wrongs and oppression of the British government. After the formation of Washington County, he was chairman of the Committee of Safety for that county, and took an active part in all its measures. He was also Chaplain of the first army that penetrated Tennessee against the Cherokee Indians.

Mr. Cummings was a leading minister of the Presbyterian Church in South-western Virginia, and that part of North Carolina which is now East Tennessee, and was, for many years, the Moderator of the Presbytery. The Rev. Samuel Doak and he might be called the fathers of that part of the Church in their day.

Mr. Cummings died in March, 1812, in about the eightieth year of his age, leaving many and most respectable descendants. He was a sincere and exemplary Christian, and a John Knox in his energy and zeal in support of his own particular Church. He never lost sight of his object, and always marched directly up to it, with a full front and determined will. He performed a great deal of missionary labour, through an extensive district of the country, beyond his immediate field, which was of itself large,—once, at least, going into Kentucky. The fruits of his labours still remain. He was a Presbyterian of the old stamp, rigid in his faith, strict in the observance of the Sabbath, and faithful in teaching his children and servants the Catechism.

With great respect,

I am your obedient servant.

DAVID CAMPBELL.

JOHN WITHERSPOON, D. D.*

1768—1794.

JOHN WITHERSPOON was a son of the Rev. James Witherspoon, minister of the parish of Yester in Scotland, fourteen miles East of Edinburgh. He was probably the youngest child of his parents, and was born on the 5th of February, 1722. His parentage and family connections were highly respectable. His father was an uncommonly able and faithful minister, and was especially distinguished for the accuracy which marked his public discourses. On the mother's side, he traced an unbroken line of ministerial ancestry, through a period of more than two hundred years, to the great Reformer, John Knox. The father lived several years after the son was settled in the ministry,—probably till sometime after his removal to Paisley, and had the happiness of seeing him one of the ablest and most influential ministers of the Church with which he was connected.

There is reason to believe that the subject of this sketch experienced the power of religion upon his heart at a very early period; and that this was to be attributed mainly to the faithful instrumentality of a devoted Christian mother. At an early age, he was sent to the public school at Haddington, where he soon evinced remarkable powers; and so rapid was his progress in the various branches of study, that, at the age of fourteen, he was transferred to the University of Edinburgh, where he continued till he had reached his twenty-first year, when he was licensed to preach the Gospel. He was associated, at the University, with several persons, as fellow-students, who afterwards had a splendid career in life,—such as Blair, Robertson, John Erskine, &c., in the ministry, and many others distinguished in the other liberal professions. His collegiate course fully answered the expectations which had been awakened by his earlier developments; and, at the Divinity Hall particularly, he stood unrivalled for perspicuity of style, logical accuracy of thought, taste in sacred criticism, and

* Sketch of his Life by Rev. Dr. Samuel Stanhope Smith.—Dr. Rodgers' Sermon occasioned by his death.—MS. Memoir by Dr. Green.