

# The Princeton Seminary Bulletin

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# "BUTTONWOOD" AND A GREAT ABOLITIONIST

CLARENCE EDWARD MACARTNEY

PRINCETON Theological Seminary has sent out into the world since its founding in 1812 not a few striking and engaging personalities, but none more so than Arthur B. Bradford, one of the most powerful of the old line Abolitionists, and the founder of the Free Presbyterian Church. His splendid old home is still standing, a little to the south of the main road leading from Darlington, Beaver County, Pa., to Enon. It derived its name, "Buttonwood," from a gigantic buttonwood tree which still stretches out its arms just back of the brick smoke house. At least I took it to be the smoke house, although the great-granddaughter of Bradford, who now lives on the farm, told me that the tradition was that the small, but high, brick building was used as a Prophet's Chamber for visiting clergymen. The fact that the building is divided by a floor into two parts would seem to uphold that tradition. Probably it was first a smoke house, and then altered to suit the needs of itinerant preachers, and especially visiting Abolitionists, for many a conference of noted Abolitionists was held at "Buttonwood."

The house, built in 1837, is a noble brick mansion with a southern outlook. A covered porch runs the whole length of the house on that side, and you can think of Bradford sitting on that porch as the sun was westering and discussing the burning question of the day with the leading Anti-Slavery agitators; Parker Pillsbury, Abby Kelley Foster, Joshua R. Giddings, the most

noted Anti-Slavery man in Congress, and, no doubt, Fred Douglass, the colored orator, Sojourner Truth, the Negro Deborah, and John Brown of Ossawatimie.

The country about Darlington and Enon was the center of the Abolition movement in Western Pennsylvania, and a much traveled division of the Underground Railroad ran through that part of Pennsylvania into Ohio and on to Canada. Because the Fugitive Slave Law provided a penalty of \$1,000 for assisting a slave to escape, Bradford, in order to protect his family, temporarily transferred his property to a friend. The friend proved worthy of the trust imposed on him, and Bradford continued to occupy his beautiful home until his death at the ripe age of 89 in 1899.

The house reflects the dignity, culture and good taste of not a few of the Western Pennsylvania and Eastern Ohio pioneers who settled in that part of the country and conquered the wilderness with axe, psalmbook and rifle. In one respect, however, the Bradford mansion differs from many of the country homes of that era, in that the inside walls and doors are thin and slight, in contrast with the massive walls and doors of other houses. Bradford evidently wanted to get away from the heaviness that characterized the homes about him.

In the kitchen is a tremendous stone rimmed fireplace, where in the first days, before stoves were available, the cooking was done. Not far from Brad-

ford's farm, beds of the famed Cannel coal were first opened in 1839, two years after the building of the house, and this coal, superior to the ordinary bituminous coal, cooked the food and heated the rooms in the Bradford home. The glory of the house is its walnut banister and stairway, finely traced at the side. At the top of the stairway, quite detached from the banister and railing, and to the left, as you ascend to the landing, is another exquisitely wrought railing, probably to guard against a fall when coming out of the room at the head of the stairs. One of the old woodcuts, after the fashion of Currier and Ives, displays the house, the large barn and the outbuildings when the home was in its glory.

Not far from the main entrance to the house stands an odd little frame building. This was Bradford's study. His study was first in the main house, but when the Lord "multiplied his mercies upon him" to the number of nine children, he thought it was time to move out and have a study remote from the clamor of his offspring. There it was that he wrote the sermons he delivered in the church at Darlington, and the editorials and leading articles in the *Free Church Portfolio*, the first number of which appeared in January, 1859, and was published at New Castle. Bradford was a powerful pamphleteer, and articles from his pen appeared in many of the religious periodicals and *Anti-Slavery* magazines of that day. He must have been an early riser, like Thomas Jefferson, who said in his old age that the "sun never caught him in bed," for the last paragraph in this first issue of the *Free Church Portfolio* is the following:

"The difference between rising every morning at six and eight, in the course

of forty years, amounts to 29,340 hours, or three years, one-hundred and twenty-one days and sixteen hours, which are equal to eight hours a day for exactly ten years; so that rising at six will be the same if ten years of life were added, wherein we may command eight hours every day for the cultivation of our minds and the dispatch of business."

Arthur Bullus Bradford, a descendant of William Bradford of the "Mayflower," was born at Reading, Pa., March 28, 1810, the son of Judge Ebenezer Bradford and Ruth Bullus. He attended the Academy at Milton, Pa., and then entered the United States Military Academy at West Point. In 1831, convinced that his place was in the army of the Lord, he entered Princeton Theological Seminary, where he was a student for more than two years. In 1833, about the time he left Princeton Seminary, Bradford received the honorary degree of A.B. from Union College, Schenectady, N.Y.

He was licensed by the Presbytery of Philadelphia April 16, 1834, and in the same year was ordained by that Presbytery and installed as minister of the Second Presbyterian Church of Southwark, Philadelphia, Pa. In 1835 he was married to Eliza Wickes, who died in 1891. From 1836 to 1838 he was pastor of the Church at Clinton, N.J. In 1839 he was installed as pastor of the Mt. Pleasant Presbyterian Church at Darlington, Beaver County, Pa.

When Bradford was a student at the Seminary at Princeton, there were many who were advocating the Africa Colonization Plan for the black man. Dr. Archibald Alexander, the first Professor of the Seminary, was active in this organization. But Bradford, even

as a student, thought the plan impracticable; and held that the question must be settled, not in Africa, but in America. During his seminary course Bradford preached frequently to colored congregations in Philadelphia. His vacations were spent on the Maryland plantation of an uncle, Moses Bradford, and there, too, he gave much thought to the question of slavery; and "whilst he was musing," the fire of indignation against that "peculiar institution" began to burn fiercely in his soul.

The Mt. Pleasant Church, and Darlington, too, has had a notable history. In 1799 the Rev. Thomas E. Hughes was ordained as pastor of the Mt. Pleasant Church and the church at New Salem. Hughes was also a schoolmaster of renown, and established the school known as the Old Stone Academy, so called because of the stone building which housed it. Some notable men were schooled in this old academy, among them John W. Geary, Governor of Pennsylvania, and commander of a division under Sherman in the Civil War; William McGuffey, author of the celebrated McGuffey's Readers which attained an extraordinary circulation of thirty million copies, one of the best "best sellers" of all time; and, according to the testimony of the sons of Thomas Hughes, pastor of the Mt. Pleasant Church, John Brown of Ossawatimie.

One of the elders of the Mt. Pleasant Church, William Plumer, was the father of the distinguished preacher and theologian, Dr. William Swan Plumer, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, professor at the Western Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, and pastor of churches in South Carolina, Maryland, Virginia

and Pennsylvania. Dr. Plumer followed a different line from the Abolitionists of Darlington and Enon, and was compelled to relinquish his post at the Western Theological Seminary because he would not pray publicly for President Lincoln! In this respect, he was at the opposite pole from Bradford.

In 1847, Bradford and a number of ministers renounced the authority of the Presbyterian Church, withdrew from it, and founded the Free Presbyterian Church. The declaration of this renunciation was made by Bradford and the Rev. S. A. McLean at the June meeting of the Presbytery of Beaver, held at North Sewickley. The reason for this secession was dissatisfaction with the stand of the Old School General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church on the question of slavery, particularly with the deliverance of the General Assembly of 1845, which declared that slave-holding was not a bar to Christian Communion. The Presbytery of Beaver answered the renunciation of Bradford and his associates as follows:

"Resolved 1: That the Stated Clerk be instructed to remove their names from the roll.

"Resolved 2: That in so doing, the Presbytery feels that a due regard for themselves, as well as fidelity to those estranged brethren, renders it proper for them to express their deep conviction that in the course they have pursued and the misrepresentations they have made reflecting on the character of the General Assembly of our Church, they have greatly erred and greatly sinned."

These resolutions are in keeping with many others which mar the records of Presbyterian Presbyteries, Synods and General Assemblies in their action to-

ward seceders and dissenters. But the truth marches on. How it was marching on them, in spite of the attitude of almost all the church towards slavery, the Quakers and the Covenanters excepted, is made clear by these prophetic words by Bradford in the November 1859 issue of his *Free Church Portfolio*: "The duty of the Free Presbyterian Church is plain. It is to stand in her lot bearing her testimony against the great sin of our country. Our principles are spreading all over the land, and, being right, must ultimately prevail." Three years later, after the battle of Antietam, which drove Lee out of Maryland and frustrated his invasion of Pennsylvania, Lincoln kept the "Covenant" he had made with God and issued the preliminary Proclamation of Emancipation.

The abolition of slavery by the stern arbitrament of war, and thus fulfilling the prophetic words of John Brown when he was hanged at Charlestown, Virginia, in 1859, that the "sins of this guilty nation will never be washed away except in blood," brought to a conclusion the history of the Free Presbyterian Church, which by that time had numerous congregations in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Many of the Free Presbyterians became members of the Covenanter Church and the recently organized United Presbyterian Church, for the Free Presbyterians not only were against slavery, but against secret societies, and they liked to worship God with singing of the Psalms of David, as did the Covenanters and the United Presbyterians.

From 1853 to 1868, save for one year during the Civil War, when by the appointment of President Lincoln he served as United States Consul at Amoy, China, Bradford was the min-

ister of the Free Presbyterian Church of New Castle, Lawrence County, Pa.

I regret to conclude the story of this extraordinary man by saying that he renounced and demitted the ministry and became an ardent and belligerent Freethinker. Among his books and papers at "Buttonwood" I found copies of the *Freethinkers' Magazine* and numerous articles from his pen, praising Naturalism and denouncing the churches and the great doctrines of the Christian faith. Much of this, no doubt, stemmed from his intense and righteous indignation over the attitude of the orthodox churches on the question of slavery.

In 1892, when he was eighty-two years of age, Bradford wrote an article for the *Freethinkers' Magazine*, entitled, "The Christian Religion—What Is To Be Its Final Outcome? By an Old Farmer." This article shows that his eye was not dim nor his mental force abated. In it he outdoes Thomas Paine and Ingersoll, not only in their assaults upon revealed religion, but also in the vigor of his diction and argument. He repudiates and renounces the whole redemptive plan of Christianity, and endeavors to establish that the Christian religion, as invented by St. Paul, and attached to the simple teachings of Jesus, has been the fountain of woe and misery for mankind. He cites Marcus Aurelius as a man of exemplary virtue, whose character has been the "theme of wonder and of praise for more than a thousand years. The question is: Where did he get that constellation of virtues which have made his name immortal? From religion? If so, then it was the Pagan religion, and not the Christian. And if the Pagan religion could form such character, wherein consists its inferiority to the Christian religion? Things which are

equal to the same thing are equal to each other."

Martin Luther he praises as a great man by nature, but says that religion made him the sort of man who offered the Christian public in Germany "Seven Propositions" for the destruction of the Jews by fire and sword. Calvin, too, he eulogizes for his great ability and his unselfish and laborious life; but a man whose "magnificent intellect was darkened and led astray," and his naturally noble heart "perverted from its proper mission of love to his race, by that universal mischief-maker," religion. He was "eminently religious," and proved it by having Servetus burned at the stake.

The old Paganism, Bradford says, was founded on myths and not facts, and had to go. Likewise Christianity was founded on myths, and it too must go. When he comes to the Virgin Birth, he relates the Pagan myth about Minerva, how she sprang up from the head of Jupiter, laid open by Vulcan's axe, and contrasts this pleasing tale of the beneficent Minerva with the Christian myth of the Virgin Birth, "which has been the occasion and the theme of unutterable foulness of thought and speech, in the Church and out of it, through all the centuries since the myth was originated." And so on to the end of the sad chapter. It took 400 years, he says, to "Paganize the Christian Church," but he thinks that one hundred years will see the end of Christianity, and that "the twentieth century will sound the death-knell of superstition and convert its temples

of worship into halls of science."

Fifty-eight of those one hundred years which Bradford set for the end of the Christian religion have passed away. Yet, on a recent Sabbath, in a Covenanter Church on the banks of the softly flowing Little Beaver River, and not far from "Buttonwood" where Bradford wrote his prediction of the end of Christian faith, I worshipped with a company of believers, some of whose ancestors had been members of the Free Presbyterian Church founded by Bradford, and there heard the old, old story of Christ and His redeeming love. No, Arthur Bradford, you were greatly mistaken! You apparently failed to note that the Pagan religion, and what you called "Natural" religion, did nothing for the outcast and the slave. Had you forgotten what Paul wrote when he sent the runaway slave, Onesimus, back to his master, Philemon, at Colosse, and told him to receive him back, "not now as a slave, but above a slave, a brother beloved"? There the axe was laid to the root of the tree of human slavery; and it was the Gospel of Jesus Christ which, in your hands, and in the hands of your fellow Abolitionists, was the weapon of truth and justice and love for man which destroyed slavery in America. Yes, eloquent Boanerges, thou wast sadly in error in renouncing the faith whose Christ thou didst once proclaim. Yet we honor thee for thy courage, thy love for the human race, thy burning words and thy mighty blows in behalf of the oppressed and the enslaved.