

WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY

LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA

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# HISTORICAL PAPERS

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1. CONTINUATION OF THE HISTORY OF WASHINGTON COLLEGE, EMBRACING THE REGENCY OF REV. HENRY RUFFNER, D. D., 1829-30, WITH SKETCHES OF DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI.
  2. SKETCHES OF TRUSTEES, CONTINUED. COL. SAMUEL McDOWELL REID. HON. JAMES McDOWELL.
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THE  
HISTORY OF WASHINGTON COLLEGE,

NOW WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY

*DURING THE FIRST HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY:*

A CONTINUATION OF THE

“Early History of Washington College, by Rev. Henry Ruffner, D. D., LL. D.”

BY WILLIAM HENRY RUFFNER, LL. D.

# HISTORY OF WASHINGTON COLLEGE.

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## CHAPTER V.

### THE REGENCY OF HENRY RUFFNER.

1829-30.

In preparing for a new departure in the Autumn of 1829, the Board of Trustees required each member of the Faculty to confine himself to his official duties, instead of adding a pastoral charge or other employment, as had been customary—as had, in fact, been necessary in the earlier period of the College history. President Graham, President Baxter, Prof. Blain, Prof. Heron and Prof. Ruffner had all added the pastoral care of churches to their professorial work. Professor Ruffner, who had been re-appointed to the chair of languages, and had been entrusted with the temporary management of the College, promptly resigned his charge of the Timber Ridge and Fairfield churches. He bore the loss of income cheerfully because he approved of the action of the Board.

He and Colonel Reid having been appointed a committee to obtain the services of an assistant teacher, appointed Landon C. Garland, who here and then began that long and distinguished career which has only in this year (1893) been terminated by his voluntary resignation of the presidency of Vanderbilt University. Mr. Garland had shortly before graduated at Hampden-Sidney College, and, as soon as he took up his work in Washington College, he showed that he was made of no ordinary metal. I, then about seven years of age, had some experience of Mr. Garland's attractive manner. He was one of the founders of the Lexington Sunday-

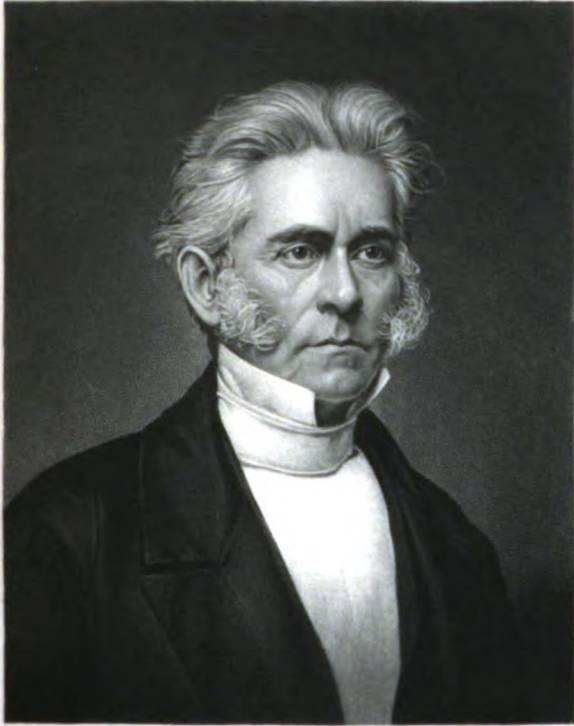
## REV. WILLIAM S. PLUMER, D. D.

Dr. Plumer's father was a substantial mercantile trader of excellent sense and character, and a church elder, who belonged to that wing of the Scotch-Irish immigration which settled in the western half of Pennsylvania. His home was on the Ohio river in Beaver county, the extreme western county of the State. Here his son, William Swan, was born in 1802. When William was five years old his father removed to Kentucky and afterward to Ohio. His business belonged chiefly to the river. He had a floating store which he removed from place to place, and took his son William with him. He occasionally brought his store-boat up the Kanawha river, where one of his stations was at the landing of Col. David Ruffner, among the salt-works. Both father and son found a friend in Colonel Ruffner, who was so impressed with the youth, that he induced the father to give him up for the experiment of a different mode of life.

Young Plumer had taught a primary school in Wood county, Va., and now, at seventeen, undertook a school in what is now Malden, six miles above Charleston, and showed himself not only to be well qualified for this service, but to possess abilities of a high order, though not without marked eccentricities.

Whilst sojourning in Colonel Ruffner's family he became a church-member, as stated by himself long afterward in his paper, *The Watchman of the South*, on the occasion of Colonel R.'s death. Dr. Plumer told me that he ascribed his conversion to the influence of Mrs. Colonel Ruffner, a lady of great piety and sweetness of character, whom he ever after called "Mother Ruffner." Colonel Ruffner himself shortly before had changed from a godless, defiant life, to that of an humble and most earnest Christian.

It was determined that William S. Plumer should have a liberal education, and his next move was to Lewisburg, where he joined the privileged band of Dr. McElhenney's pupils; and, like all the rest, he became a devoted admirer for life of this mountain apostle. From Lewisburg he came to Washington College, and was graduated in 1825. The same year he entered Princeton Theological Seminary. The main facts of his public life are so succinctly given in the *Presbyterian Encyclopædia*, that I quote the statement almost entire :



Engr. by A. S. Perkins

Wm S. Plumer,

“He was licensed by the Presbytery of New Brunswick June 14, 1826, and was ordained an evangelist by the Presbytery of Orange May 19, 1827. From September, 1826, to June, 1829, he was employed as an evangelist in Southern Virginia and North Carolina. During this time he spent ten months and a half at Danville, and organized the Presbyterian Church there, and eleven months in Warrenton, N. C., where he also organized a church. In June, 1829, he became Stated Supply of Briery Church, Virginia, where he labored sixteen months. He was pastor of the Tabb Street Church, Petersburg, Va., from July 10, 1831, until September 19, 1834; pastor of the First Church, Richmond, Va., from October 19, 1834, until November 3, 1846; and pastor of the Franklin Street Church, Baltimore, Md., from April 28, 1847, until September 10, 1854. His next pastoral charge was that of Central Church, at Allegheny, Pa., which continued from January 17, 1855, until September 19, 1862. After an interval of three years he was installed pastor of the Second Church of Pottsville, Pa., November 19, 1865, and continued in this relation until January 2, 1867. In January, 1867, he began to reside at Columbia, S. C., preaching, while a professor in the Seminary, extensively in that and adjacent States.

“In 1837 Dr. Plumer founded, and for eight years was sole editor and proprietor of *The Watchman of the South*, in Richmond, Va. In 1838 he was largely instrumental in founding the Institution for the Blind, and Deaf and Dumb, in Staunton, Va. In 1854 he was elected Professor of Didactic and Pastoral Theology in the Western Theological Seminary, at Allegheny, Pa., which post he filled until 1862. In 1867 he was elected Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology in the Theological Seminary at Columbia, S. C., and filled that chair until 1875, when, at his own suggestion, he was transferred to the chair of Historic, Casuistic and Pastoral Theology in the same institution, and retained that position until 1880, when, a few months before his death, the Seminary was closed from lack of funds.

“Dr. Plumer was a very voluminous author. His works amounted to over twenty-five volumes, besides a very large number of tracts, sermons, leaflets, etc. In 1838 he was Moderator of the General Assembly (O. S.), and in 1871 Moderator of the General Assembly (Southern).

“His life was one of great earnestness and usefulness. As a pastor, preacher, professor, author and Christian, he was eminent. His tall and erect form, white hair, beaming eye, expressive countenance and deep, sonorous voice, added greatly to the impressiveness of his Scriptural, instructive, experimental, searching, and at times impassioned preaching. As he advanced in years his mental powers seemed to brighten and mellow, and he never ceased his varied and active labors until he was called to bid farewell to earth. He died in Baltimore, Md., October 22, 1880, in the seventy-ninth year of his age.”

This article does not convey to the uninformed reader a full impression of Dr. Plumer's impressive appearance and prodigious power as a speaker when he was in full strength; nor would his power be imagined by those who heard him only in the latter years of his life. When he was pastor of the church in Richmond no one would, I think, have hesitated to place him at the head of the Virginia pulpit, and at the head of popular orators. His power of terse, pithy statement was unequalled. Some of his sentences were electric, and he could hurl them with Olympic force. He had two grades of voice that were as different as though they belonged to different men; one was low, musical, sympathetic; the other stentorian, explosive, overwhelming. His presence was the most commanding I ever saw standing before an audience. His aspect was that of a great commander—tall, muscular, majestic; his eyes large, intelligent, penetrating; his mouth beautiful, and full of strong expression; hair raised from his head in copious waves, and nodding with his pulpit action, like the locks of Jupiter.

When he was in his prime some of his sermons, considered as to matter, style of delivery, and the speaker himself, were the grandest exhibition of human power I have ever seen displayed before an audience—at least so they affected me, then a comparatively young man. This could not be said of his writings, which, although excellent, are but the sibyl's sayings, without the sibyl. Dr. Plumer was equally strong before an audience when speaking on ordinary subjects; an illustration of which we once had in Lexington. It was at the College Commencement, in 1841, when it was held in the old church at the head of town. There he gave full scope to his characteristic wit and drollery. “Ran Tucker,” on the stump



in his best days, never crazed an audience with laughter more than Plumer did on that occasion. It was a strange sight to see the elderly trustees, the faculty and distinguished strangers, sitting on the ample stage, pounding the floor with their boots, their canes and their umbrellas, clapping their hands and laughing uproariously with the great audience, until at times the whole house was a bedlam.

As a public debater Dr. Plumer had few equals. His own wariness and self-poise were always perfect, thus giving him an advantage even over "Bob Breckinridge," who could be rowelled until he would lose his temper. Plumer could draw a javelin out of his own flesh and hurl it back to the heart of his adversary, whilst he stood with statuesque coolness, inwardly chuckling.

In the great church war of 1836, he was the Ajax Telamon of his party. His debate with Lyons and McFarland, on church endowments, has become historic. It was perhaps his greatest triumph in secular debate.

He was fond, perhaps too fond, of these tilts. He tried for years to get the Catholics to "knock the chip off his shoulders," and how we boys wanted them to do it; just that we might see the fight!

Whilst he had severe critics, he was a devoted Christian, and one of the most useful men of his generation. His speaking for fifteen years before his death was entirely changed owing to an apparent loss of voice.

In his later years he wore a magnificent white beard, to which Colonel Preston, in a public speech, compared Niagara Falls. He said that Niagara Falls was equal to Dr. Plumer's beard. Dr. Plumer was present, as were many other members of the Presbyterian General Assembly, who had just come from looking at the falls. But his features were so fine, especially his mouth and chin, that I preferred the short side-whiskers of his earlier days.

Dr. Plumer was full of human sympathies, and he never forgot services rendered to him, often showing his feeling by thoughtful kindness to the third generation. As a pastor he was unsurpassed. In fireside and lecture-room talks he had no superior. In a word, he was a complete pastor, as well as a heroic defender of the faith.

The scene at his death-bed was a grand exhibition of triumphant faith.

Since writing the above I have seen the manuscript of the address which Dr. Plumer delivered in 1841 to the Alumni of Washington College. I find what I would have expected that, although it is full of shrewd, sententious comments on public topics, and should be printed, it can convey no idea of the effect produced at its delivery by the suggestive mimicry of the speaker; especially as much of the effect was dependant on the familiarity of the auditors with the topics which were current at that period, over fifty years ago, but which are scarcely known to the present generation. He was asked at the time for a copy of the speech for publication, but he declined. Whilst considering the question of publishing he consulted Col. J. T. L. Preston (an old college mate) on the subject. Preston intimated to him that the printed address could never reproduce the remarkable impression made by its delivery; and this, no doubt, determined Dr. Plumer not to print. Besides, the written address is incomplete. Some of the speaker's telling strokes were in connection with topics which were only mentioned by name in the manuscript, and there were many remarks interjected which do not appear in the manuscript. I will give one from memory. In satirizing the shallow oratory, which was even more common then than it is now, he writes:—"Some twenty years ago [!] every orator whose lack of ideas shut him up to commonplaces, felt bound, at least once in each speech, to tell us of that capacious place 'the tomb of all the Capulets.' This phrase is now worn out." Instead of the last sentence, I remember that Dr. Plumer said:—"The tomb of all the Capulets *must* have been a capacious place, or, considering how many things have been consigned to it, it would have been full long ago!"

When he alluded to a certain grade of politicians courting the churches, he impersonated the hypocritical demagogue to perfection. And so he pictured the Eastern-born "buckeye," looking across the Ohio River into Virginia, and exclaiming:—"Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" And when he spoke of the demagogical cant about Mason and Dixon's Line, he repeated at least three times the words—"Mason and Dixon's Line," "Mason and Dixon's Line," with a variety of attitudes and intonations that were ludicrous in the extreme. Presently he introduced with solemn tone and manner the menace to the liberties of the country from the great *standing army*; and the audience looked serious and concerned,

but when in the next sentence he said in a droll way—"I mean the standing army of *office-seekers*," the revulsion was so great that everybody found relief in an involuntary burst of laughter. But the climax was reached when he told the story of how William Pitt (who looked like a mere stripling when made prime minister), pursued by a crowd of office-seekers, entered the church at Cambridge, and how the preacher, a droll fellow too, took his text John, vi: 9, "There is a lad here that hath five barley loaves and two small fishes; but *what are they among so many!*" The story and the speaker's manner of telling it were so irresistible, that the audience went into an uproar. Major Alexander sat conspicuously on the stage, and if his big umbrella had been a crowbar, he would have split the platform. And the effect was not lessened when the speaker went on to compare the office-seekers to dogs watching around the master's table, and how little they got! For there is not even a crumb of executive patronage for each "surly mastiff, and cringing spaniel, and barking fice, and yelping hound that gathers around the ballot-box and the White House."

Mrs. Trollope had not long before gone through the country and had written a disagreeable book, and when he alluded to "the woman who had lately *trolloped* through our country," everybody saw the point instantly. Then he took up the stock jobbers, and said, "Even the fur on the otter and the beaver on the head-waters of the Missouri, is often sold ten times before it is taken off his back." And so he touched on the "renowned *Morus Multicaulis*," which he spoke of as "a wild and furious speculation in brush and switches." And in like manner all the leading "booms" of that day were sketched with a few master touches to the uncontrollable amusement of his audience. Many have tried to imitate him, but there has been only one Wm. S. Plumer.

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