

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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BY ROBERT CARTER & BROTHERS,

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District of New York.

During the ministry of Dr. Read, there were several churches in the Newcastle Presbytery without a pastor. Over these he exercised a very watchful and tender care. He frequently visited them, administered to them the ordinance of the Supper, baptized their children, and encouraged and assisted their respective Sessions in the exercise of discipline. These churches reposed great confidence in him, and looked up to him with a sort of filial interest and affection. And his own church, though they regarded him with great esteem and reverence, and placed a very high estimate upon his labours, both in public and private, yet consented cheerfully that other less favoured churches in the region should share with them, to some extent, the benefit of his services. I will only add that Dr. Read was greatly respected throughout the region in which he lived, and the few who still remember him are ready to bear a grateful testimony to his substantial and enduring worth.

Yours very respectfully and affectionately,

JAMES LATTA.

JOHN WOODHULL, D. D.*

1768—1824.

JOHN WOODHULL was born in Suffolk County, L. I., January 26, 1744. His father was John Woodhull,—a man of great respectability and influence in the part of the country where he lived; and his mother was Elizabeth Smith, daughter of William Smith, of St. George's Manor, L. I. The Woodhull family emigrated from Great Britain to Long Island, at an early period, and are descended from illustrious ancestors through a long line which is traced back to the Norman conquest.

The subject of this notice was fitted for College in a grammar school, under the care of the Rev. Caleb Smith,—his maternal uncle, minister at Newark Mountains, (now Orange,) N. J. In the year 1762, he entered the Freshman class in the College of New Jersey. At the age of about sixteen, just as he was commencing his preparation for College, his mind was directed with some degree of earnestness to the subject of religion; but it was not till a powerful revival occurred in College, while he was an undergraduate, that he believed himself the subject of a spiritual renovation. His exercises then, and for some time afterwards, are represented as having been of a strongly marked, even extraordinary, character; and when he went to converse with President Finley with reference to making a public profession of his faith, the President is said to have regarded his case with uncommon interest, as furnishing a remarkable illustration of the power of the Gospel.

He graduated in 1766, and almost immediately after proceeded to Fagg's Manor, for the purpose of pursuing his theological studies under the direction of the Rev. John Blair. Here he continued till the summer of 1768, when he was licensed, (August 10th,) by the Presbytery of Newcastle, to preach the Gospel. He commenced his career as a preacher with much more than usual popularity; and on one occasion about sixty people became hopefully pious, in consequence of hearing him preach at a private house.

* MS. from his son, Rev. G. S. Woodhull.—Timlow's Hist. Sermon.

He soon received several calls to settle in the ministry; but the one which he felt it his duty to accept was from the Leacock Congregation, Lancaster County, Pa. Here he was ordained and installed on the 1st of August, 1770.

In 1779, the large and respectable Congregation of Freehold, N. J. having become vacant by the death of the Rev. William Tennent,—Mr. Woodhull was called to be his successor. He accepted the call, and in due time was installed over his new charge. This connection was terminated only by his death.

In 1780, he was elected a Trustee of the College of New Jersey, and, during a few of the latter years of his life, was the oldest member of the Board.

In 1798, he was honoured with the degree of Doctor of Divinity from Yale College.

Dr. Woodhull, for many years, in connection with the duties of the ministry, conducted a grammar-school, near his residence, which produced many excellent scholars, some of whom have since risen to distinction. He was also, for a long time, in the habit of superintending the studies of young men in their immediate preparation for the ministry; but, after the establishment of the Theological Seminary at Princeton, in which he took a deep interest, he declined all service of this sort.

Dr. Woodhull enjoyed vigorous health, and continued his labours without interruption till near the close of life. He died suddenly at Freehold, November 22, 1824, in the eighty-first year of his age.

In 1772, he was married to Sarah Spafford of Philadelphia,—a step-daughter of the Rev. Gilbert Tennent. She was a lady of great excellence, and well fitted for the station she occupied. They lived together more than half a century. They had six children,—three of whom were in the liberal professions.

Dr. Woodhull published a Sermon in the New Jersey Preacher, in 1813.

In the winter of 1818–19, while I was yet a student at Princeton, though licensed to preach, I went, at the suggestion of Dr. Miller, to Freehold, to pass a Sabbath with Dr. Woodhull. It was my first acquaintance with him, and a letter from Dr. Miller was my introduction. I reached his hospitable but rather humble dwelling, on Saturday evening. He and his wife gave me a cordial welcome, and I soon found that I was to be amply rewarded for my journey. The house which he occupied, stood, I think, in an open field; and he quickly told me that it was on or near the spot on which was fought the famous battle of Monmouth. It was the house in which William Tennent had lived before him, and where Whitefield had often been a guest; and I remember his saying that when something of which he was speaking occurred, “Whitefield sat there, and Tennent sat there.” His reminiscences of the olden time, and especially of the events of the Revolution, seemed inexhaustible; and what rendered them the more interesting was, that he scarcely spoke of any thing of which he was not himself a sharer or a witness.

I remember an interesting circumstance that he related to me in connection with his own personal history. He stated that, after he went to Fagg's Manor to study Theology with Mr. Blair, he was strongly urged by some pious young men from New England, who had been his classmates in College, to come and study with them under the direction of the celebrated Dr.

Bellamy. So urgent were they in their request, that he had concluded to make the change, provided it should meet the approbation of his father. He accordingly went home, obtained his father's consent, and made all his arrangements to set out on a particular day for Bethlem,—the residence of Dr. Bellamy. When the morning of the day came, he awoke, as he supposed, in his usual health, but, on attempting to dress himself, found that he was so ill that he could only fall back into his bed. It was the commencement of a severe and protracted illness, which prevented him from fulfilling his purpose to go to New England. When he recovered, he returned and finished his preparatory studies under Mr. Blair. He considered this circumstance as having given, in a great degree, the complexion to his subsequent life.

He told me that he had the story of Tennent's trance from his own lips. While he was an undergraduate at Princeton College, he said that a rebellion occurred among the students, and as it was thought desirable that there should be a meeting of the Trustees in reference to it, he was sent out to Monmouth to request Mr. Tennent's attendance. They started together just at evening to come to Princeton; and, shortly after they set out, Dr. Woodhull said that he ventured to say to Mr. Tennent, that he had heard that he had at some time been the subject of a remarkable trance, and, if he did not object, he should be much gratified, if he would give him some account of it. Mr. Tennent paused, and said that it was a subject on which he was always reluctant to speak; but still he was willing to state to him some of the particulars. He then went on and told the story at length; but it is not necessary that I should record it here, as it will be found in a letter from Dr. Woodhull, in connection with the notice of Mr. Tennent, in this work.

I attended church on the Sabbath with Dr. Woodhull, and stood over the spot where Tennent's remains rest. The old gentleman seemed as much awake to all the hallowed associations of the place, as I was, who had never been there before. My visit was altogether one of great interest, and on various accounts, never to be forgotten.

One of Dr. Woodhull's sons, *George Spafford*, entered the ministry. He was born at Leacock, Pa., on the 31st of March, 1773. Having received the elements of his classical education under the instruction of his father, he entered the Junior class of the College of New Jersey in the autumn of 1788, and graduated in 1790. After studying Law two years, and Medicine one year, he became hopefully pious, and immediately after resolved to enter the ministry. He commenced the study of Theology under the direction of his father, in the summer of 1794, and was licensed to preach the Gospel on the 14th of November, 1797. On the 6th of June, 1798, he was ordained to the work of the ministry, and installed Pastor of the Church at Cranberry, N. J. In the spring of 1820, he received a call to take the pastoral charge of the Church in Princeton, and having accepted it, was installed on the 5th of July of that year. Here he remained twelve years, and had an uncommonly successful ministry. In 1832, he resigned his charge, and shortly after accepted a call from Middletown Point, N. J., where he spent the last two years of his life. He died of scarlet fever on the 25th of December, in the sixty-second year of his age, and in the thirty-seventh of his ministry. He was eminently blameless and exemplary in his life—eminently peaceful and happy in his death.

FROM THE REV. JOHN McDOWELL, D. D.

PHILADELPHIA, June 10, 1852.

Dear Sir : My acquaintance with the Rev. Dr. John Woodhull commenced in the spring of 1802, when I began my course of theological studies under his direction. From that time I resided in his family for two years, and had an opportunity of knowing him intimately in his private as well as his public relations. After I entered the ministry, I had often the privilege of meeting him, and our intimacy continued unabated to the time of his death.

Dr. Woodhull had the advantage of most men in his personal appearance. He had a fine, tall, well proportioned frame, and his motions were easy and graceful. His countenance was expressive of vigour and intelligence, as well as honesty and strength of purpose. His manners were free and agreeable, but never lacking in dignity. He had fine powers of conversation, and could accommodate himself with great facility to any circle into which he might be thrown. You could not have been in his company, without feeling that you were in the presence of a well bred gentleman of the old school.

As a theologian, Dr. Woodhull was thoroughly Calvinistic. I do not think he was very extensively read in Theology—certainly his library was very limited; and yet he seemed to understand well the doctrines and the relations of his own system. As a teacher, he moved pretty much in the beaten track, and had a set of written questions from which he rarely departed in the examination of his students. Still, his remarks were always sensible and weighty, and were rather indicative of a naturally vigorous mind, than of a habit of close application. He generally had with him theological students, and among them were some who have since attained to eminence in their profession.

As a preacher, Dr. Woodhull was popular and useful, but it may reasonably be doubted whether he ever came up to the full measure of popularity or usefulness of which he was capable. He preached without very mature preparation, and there was less variety in his sermons than could have been desired; but there was always method, and appropriate scriptural illustration; while his style of elocution was free and attractive. The probability is that if he had been a more laborious student, his preaching would have commanded more attention, at least from the more intelligent part of the community; and yet his sermons were never otherwise than highly respectable.

Dr. Woodhull was distinguished for his skill and tact in ecclesiastical bodies. Here he exercised great influence, and his judgment was always highly respected. Indeed, his general influence in the Church, and in society at large, was exceeded by that of few of his contemporaries. He had a weight of personal character that made him felt wherever he was known.

He retained his vigour in an uncommon degree to old age. I remember hearing him deliver an Address, when he had reached fourscore, before the American Bible Society. I heard some person sitting near me remark, as the Doctor was about to speak, that he wondered they should have brought forward such an old man to speak on such an occasion; but I heard the same person say, at the close of the meeting, that the old man had proved to be the very best speaker of the day. He really put forth uncommon energy on the occasion, and acquitted himself with great credit.

Dr. Woodhull was not more remarkable for any thing than a habit of punctuality. He made it a matter of conscience to fulfil every engagement, even in respect to the least important concerns, and at the time appointed. It was this habit undoubtedly that formed a material element of his usefulness, and helped to give a complexion to his character.

With much respect, yours,

JOHN McDOWELL.