

CENTENNIAL BIOGRAPHY.

MEN OF MARK

OF

CUMBERLAND VALLEY, PA.

1776—1876.

ALFRED NEVIN, D. D., LL. D.

PHILADELPHIA:
FULTON PUBLISHING COMPANY.
1876.

GENERAL JOHN ARMSTRONG.



PROBABLY no one among the early settlers of Cumberland county had more influence in directing its institutions and destinies than John Armstrong. He and a brother, William, (of whom we have no further information,) and a sister, Margaret, came from the north of Ireland some time before 1748, when a family record proves that he had become permanently settled in Carlisle. He first appears as a surveyor under the Proprietary Government, and we are informed that a large portion of the lands in middle Pennsylvania were first surveyed by him. The town of Carlisle which had been laid out at an earlier period, (1750,) was, with its adjacent lands, resurveyed and mapped out in its present form by him in 1762. In 1755, he was a Colonel, and had a controlling part in directing the defense of the settlers against the Indians. A commission now in the possession of his descendants, subscribed by Thomas Penn, and bearing the seal of the British Government in the reign of George the Third, gave him the powers of a Justice of the Peace. These powers were much more extensive than those which belong to the office of that name now and for some time the county of Cumberland, over which his jurisdiction extended, included nearly all of Pennsylvania west of the Susquehanna. In the performance of these combined military and civil functions, when Indian ravages and border outrages were almost perpetual, he found sufficient occupation for most of his time, and for his utmost bodily and mental powers.

It soon became evident that a more aggressive policy was necessary in dealing with these Indians. In those merciless incursions in which the peaceable inhabitants were despoiled, captured and massacred, it was easy for their wily foe to elude opposition and punishment by retiring into the depths of the wilderness, there they had constructed a town called Kittanning, about twenty miles above Fort Duquesne, (Pittsburgh,) and about two hundred miles westward from Carlisle. This was known to be a rendezvous for their warriors, a depot for the stores with which the French liberally supplied them, and the fortress where their prisoners and plunder could be kept. It was there that Shingis and Captain Jacobs, two relentless and faithful leaders had their residences, from which they sallied forth at their will to desolate the frontier. About two hundred and eighty provincials were

mustered under the command of Col. Armstrong, and sent (1755,) to surprise and destroy this stronghold. They succeeded in their scheme, for they came upon the Indians engaged in their revels at night, and in the early dawn set fire to their buildings and put to death the chiefs and most of the warriors. It was a terrible vengeance but indispensable even in the interest of humanity. This brilliant success gained for the commander distinguished honours, and the corporation of Philadelphia showed their appreciation of his skill and bravery by presenting him with a piece of plate and a silver medal, with a medal for each of the officers under him and a sum of money for the widows and children of such as had been killed. The Colonel had himself been severely wounded in the action by a musket ball, in consequence of which his shoulder was for a while disabled. Three years afterwards, however, (1758,) he marched with the advanced division of 3000 Pennsylvanians under Col. Bouquet, belonging to the expedition under Brig. General Forbes against Fort Duquesne. It was during this campaign that he formed that acquaintance with Col. Washington, which subsequently ripened into intimacy and warm personal friendship.

The previous year (June 30, 1757,) we find him engaged with his fellow-citizens in the erection of a "meeting house on the north side of the square," and the civil authorities are appealed to for help in this work on what he calls "political as well as religious grounds."

He had himself, perhaps, become a member of a congregation recently founded by what was called the New Side, in Carlisle, but he appears to have entered into the labour of "hauling stones" "out of Col. Stanwix's entrenchments," with the utmost public spirit, and we have reason to believe that his intelligence and wealth were freely contributed to give the structure its admirable strength and proportion. On the 12th day of July, 1774, he attended a meeting of citizens in that building to protest against the Act of Parliament "by which the port of Boston was shut up; to contribute for the relief of their brethren who were suffering from the oppressions of the mother country; to recommend the immediate assembling of a Congress of deputies from all the colonies; and to unite in abstaining from all trade or use of articles imported from Great Britain while these oppressions continued;" and he was appointed on the committee to correspond with similar committees from other provinces to co-operate in measures conducing to the general welfare. We have reason to believe that it was from a public meeting under his influence, that resolutions were sent up to the Provincial Assembly, calling upon that body to instruct those who represented the state in the General Congress to vote for

an immediate declaration of independence of the mother country, and that here was the earliest voice raised in favour of such decisive action; and one which had no small influence-in bringing about the final result. His commission as a Brigadier General in the Continental Army bears date March 1, 1776, and is signed by John Hancock. In 1777, he appears as a Major General in command of the Pennsylvania troops during the battle of Brandywine and in the military operations of that year in the eastern part of the State. In consequence, however, of some grievance which he believed himself to be under, he left (April 4, 1777,) the regular army, and at the battle of Germantown he commanded the Pennsylvania militia. He was a member of Congress in 1778-80, and also in 1787-88, having been recommended for that position without solicitation by General Washington.

From numerous letters of his which are published in the Colonial Records and Archives, it is evident that he was well educated, was endowed with much practical wisdom, and was much consulted and trusted by the Proprietary Government, and subsequently by the authorities of the state and nation. Among those which remain in manuscript in the possession of his descendants and others, are many from General Washington, not only upon official and public affairs, but upon subjects of private friendship. His own letters are all written in a beautiful hand, and indicate an accurate scholarship according to the literature of the time. The Hon. George Chambers, who was familiar with his general reputation, says of him; "He was a man of intelligence, of integrity, and of high religious and moral character. He was resolute and brave, and though living habitually in the fear of the Lord, he feared not the face of man." The style of his piety partook much of the peculiar characteristics of the people and period in which he lived, and hence might have seemed somewhat stern when judged by men of other associations, but we discover beneath this occasional indications of an admirably humane and tender sensibility. As a specimen of the religious opinions and spirit of the man and of the time, we may here give a letter which he wrote to his son James, on the occasion of the death of a favourite son of the latter:

"CARLISLE, 12th April, 1794.

"DEAR JAMES:—I have seen your last to Polly, and see nothing wrong in it, only that it manifests an excess of grief, that for many important reasons ought to be moderated and suppressed; the various duties yet incumbent upon you and especially your own eternal concerns should take the place of that natural and paternal grief, which, in a certain degree, is rather laudable than sinful, but may readily become so by an undue indulgence and want of proper consideration; we must go to him (that is to the state of

the dead,) but he will not return to us; therefore preparation for that solemn event is our principal business.

“From the nature and circumstances of this remarkable affliction, you may but too plainly and justly suspect, as I see you do, that God has a controversy with the parents of that child, and perhaps with his grandparents too, for so I desire to take it to myself. Now the immediate business which I most earnestly recommend to you is, with a faithful scrutiny, giving conscience its free course, that you may find out and be convinced of the grounds of this controversy, for examination and reflection (the divine word being still the standard,) are the first steps toward reformation in any man. And to assist you in this duty, take a retrospective view of your practical life from the first of your remembrance, more especially in the following particulars: In infancy you were presented to God in the ordinance of baptism—solemn engagements were therein entered into for your instruction, &c., in the faith and practice of Christianity; these vows and promises were to devolve on yourself at the years of discretion—ask yourself whether you have endeavoured to study the nature of that initiating ordinance, voluntarily taking these solemn obligations upon yourself and beseeching the free mercy of God through Christ, the Mediator, to enable you to perform these vows by giving you the spiritual blessing signified in and by that ordinance. Again, take a general survey of your life, how you have improved or misimproved your time and talents, together with the innumerable privileges, opportunities and admonitions received therein; but especially examine what has been the general and prevailing inclination or disposition of your *mind and will*, for this indeed is the touchstone of the state of the heart, either towards God or against him. And here, there is great reason to fear, you may find but too much cause for the controversy in question, for if a general shyness, a cold indifference or negligence toward God, the state of the soul, the Mediator, his ordinances and institutions, hath been prevalent and habitual, this fully marks an unrenewed state of the soul, involving in it infidelity, aversion and contempt of the gospel and the revealed will of God, (hence are men in a state of nature called haters of God.) Nor is this spiritual and moral disease to be healed by a better education, a few externals and transient thoughts. It requires the hand of the great Physician, the Lord Jesus by his Holy Spirit, and belief of the truth renewing the state of the mind and disposition of the heart as well, thereby leading the soul from a sense or fear of the wrath of God, the penalty of his broken law, and helpless in itself to flee to the merits of Jesus, that only refuge or foundation that God hath laid in his church, and who was made sin for us, (that is, a sin offering,) that all “believers might be made the righteousness of God by him.” And this great salvation, though to be given freely, must be sought by adult persons, and earnestly too, only on the principles of pure mercy, because by nature we have neither title nor merit to procure it; at the pool of ordinances must we lie, if we expect to be saved, to which means, looking for a blessing upon them, I earnestly recommend your most serious attention. I conclude this letter by putting you in mind that although you have always had the call of God in his word, and perhaps often in his providence too, (though unobserved and therefore neglected,) God hath again condescended to add another providential call, much more sensible and alarming to us all, in removing a dear and promising child, but with double force to you, therefore, see that you endeavour to bear and improve it in the true sense in which it is designed, that is comparatively at least, that you weep not for him but for yourself and the rest of your family.

“I am your affectionate Father,

“JOHN ARMSTRONG.”

He was not only a member but an elder in the first church which was organized in the town of Carlisle, and to which the Rev. George Duffield, D. D., who married his sister, was called to be the first pastor. His name appears as a representative of that church in the Presbytery of Donegal, for the first time near that period, and frequently afterwards until the date of his death. He was much interested in opposing the infidelity which became prevalent in this country soon after the American and the French Revolutions, and we find that he corresponded freely with Dr. Cooper, an eminent divine in this vicinity, to induce him to compose and publish a treatise which was directed against that tendency but still remains only in manuscript. Although the congregation with which he was connected here was not formed until after the great schism which ruptured the Presbyterian Church was consummated, and although he exhibited no evidences of a partisan spirit, he was thrown by circumstances and by what seemed a hearty preference among those who sympathized strongly with the New York Synod. He appears, however, to have taken a prominent part in the building of the house of worship on the public square, which, for some considerable time, belonged exclusively to the rival congregation. The epitaph on his tombstone in the Old Cemetery of Carlisle, which he himself originally surveyed and laid out, informs us that he was "eminently distinguished for patriotism, valour and piety, and departed this life March 9th, 1795, aged 75 years."