

HISTORY
OF
ARMSTRONG COUNTY,
PENNSYLVANIA.

BY
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ILLUSTRATED.

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JAMES E. BROWN, ESQ.

A history of Armstrong county would be radically incomplete without a sketch of James E. Brown, Esq., who, more than any other individual person, was identified and connected with its growth and development; nearly its entire history was compassed by his life and included within the period of his active business experiences.

Mr. Brown's ancestry has been traced back two hundred years. His remote progenitor was James Brown, a Scotchman and a soldier in the famous Enniskillen dragoons (according to an old song, composed entirely of men "six feet two without a shoe"), killed at the battle of the Boyne. He left a son James, who had two sons—John by his first wife and James by his second. John Brown had a son John, who married Margaret Eaton, and after her death an Irwin. His children were, by his first wife: Mrs. Betty Thompson, Jane Hughes, Nancy Montgomery, John, Joseph, Robert, George, James and William; by his second wife: Thomas, Frank, Irwin, Margaret and Mary. John Brown, who became the father of these children, was fourteen years of age when his uncle James Brown, son of Grazilla Kennedy, was born, and these two, uncle and nephew, were the grandfathers of James E. Brown, who was the fifth possessor of the name in the direct line of the family.* His father was Robert Brown, a true type of the Scotch-Irish, was born in Ireland in 1775, and came to this country about the year 1795. Soon thereafter he was mar-

*James E. Brown, Jr., is the sixth James Brown in regular succession from the one who fell at the battle of the Boyne.

ried to Rebecca, daughter of James Brown, a soldier of the revolutionary war, then living in Carlisle.

After his marriage he settled near Ebenezer, in the adjoining county of Indiana, where, on the 5th day of May, 1799, his first child, James E., was born.

About this period the eyes of the frontier settlers were directed to the valley of the Allegheny river, and to the new county of Armstrong, through which it extended, then recently organized.

The father, Robert Brown, after several visits to the new settlement, moved his family thither and took up his residence at the mouth of the Cowanshannock creek. The town of Kittanning was laid out in the year 1804, and at about that time he removed to it, becoming one of its earliest citizens. He soon acquired a large amount of property within and adjoining the village, and contributed very much to its improvement by the erection of many of the houses, the first tenements in the place. During life he occupied a prominent position as a citizen. For many years at the beginning of this century he held a commission as justice of the peace, and after a long and useful life died on Easter Sunday, April 4, 1858, at the advanced age of 83.

In the first years of the settlement of the new town, extremely few facilities for education existed; civilized life had then barely a foothold on this frontier soil, but the boy James E., already ambitious and restless even in childhood, availed himself of every attainable means to advance his education, totally ignoring the usual amusements and devoting the whole time of his juvenile years to the reading and study of such books as the scanty settlement could supply, at a very early period manifesting an aptitude for mathematics, in which he always excelled, as evidenced by the accuracy of the numerous and extensive surveys subsequently made by him throughout his own and the adjoining counties.

In the course of time a select school was established, over which the then accomplished teacher, Master Elliott, as he was called, presided. An unplastered room in the then unfinished jail was set apart for the purpose. In this place many of the future prominent citizens of the town received their first regular instruction. The youthful student was one of the first enrolled, and was soon recognized as the first in scholarship, retaining his precedence till the teacher had no longer a place or anything to teach his precocious pupil.

In those days penmanship was regarded an indispensable requisite to a good education, the

teachers themselves rating more by their handwriting and good spelling than by any other test of scholarship. In this the pupil also excelled, an accomplishment that early in life brought him into prominence as the village scribe, copyist and accountant, youthful employments tending to fit and prepare him for the active duties of his subsequent career.

At an early age he opened a store on his own account on the northeast corner of Market and Water streets. While thus engaged, on March 2, 1819, he was married to Miss Phebe Bratton, daughter of the late venerable Robert Parks, one of the original settlers of Armstrong county. Two years later he was appointed prothonotary of the county, a position in which he acquired considerable practical and legal knowledge, but was not admitted to the bar until 1860.

Before this he had secured the agency from some of the large landed proprietors living in the East, who were owners of many undivided tracts of land in this section of the state; the care, subdivision and sale of these tracts was committed to him. Many of these he afterward purchased or received in payment for his services.

After his term of office expired he was commissioned as a justice of the peace. He also formed a mercantile partnership with the late Alexander Colwell, a gentleman of large means and excellent business judgment. In a few years this firm was dissolved, and he then became associated with the late Andrew Arnold, and with him and others undertook several experiments in boring wells for salt, which, however, were unsuccessful.

In the year 1841 he formed another partnership with Thomas McConnell and the late David Patterson, under the firm name of Brown, McConnell & Patterson. Retiring from this firm, his attention was next directed to the development of the rich mineral resources of the county.

In 1845, in conjunction with his brother, John P., and brother-in-law, James Mosgrove, he erected and put into operation the well known Pine Creek Furnace, which proved throughout many subsequent years a most successful and profitable enterprise.

In 1847 he organized the Kittanning Iron Company, and erected the rolling-mill and factory at Kittanning, which, under various partnership changes, he continued to superintend and control till the year 1858.

In 1856 the first bank in Kittanning was established, known as the Kittanning Bank. He was its principal stockholder and continued to be its president during its chartered existence. Imme-

diately after the passage of the national banking act he organized the First National Bank of Kittanning, only fifty-five preceding it. Of this he was also nearly the exclusive owner, and his recognized financial experience and large means contributed to establish it as one of the most undoubted and secure institutions in the country. During the later years of his life his attention was chiefly directed to its management, and he continued its president till his death.

His business judgment was unsurpassed and enabled him to discern successful results from the very inception of his multifarious enterprises, and so strong was his own confidence in this discernment that he did not hesitate to engage in projects from which the more timid would cautiously shrink, so that in the course of his tireless and busy life he had become identified directly or indirectly with an almost inconceivable variety of enterprises and duties. He had delved into the hills for their hidden minerals and made them largely contribute to his wealth. He had bored into the depths of the earth years ago to tap the undercurrents of salt water, wholly unconscious then that from a lower stratum he would subsequently be largely engaged in extracting a much more valuable deposit of petroleum. He was the projector and principal owner of the bridge spanning the Allegheny river at Kittanning and the chief owner of the one at Parker. He was largely interested in the railroad from Parker to Butler, a stockholder and director in several pipe line and transporting companies, and more recently in a refining company, and in the year preceding his death reorganized a company to erect a large blast furnace and rebuild the long dismantled rolling-mill at Kittanning, all now in successful operation.

Energy, enterprise and a fearless and indomitable will were the predominant traits of his character. To these qualities, in a life commenced in unpropitious poverty and beset throughout with many obstacles, may be attributed the ultimate financial success that crowned its close.

His first wife and most faithful partner throughout many years of his ceaseless toil died November 1, 1864, leaving surviving her an only daughter, Mrs. Jane B. Finlay, who also died on December 30, 1876. Afterward, on November 27, 1865, he was married to Miss Kate L. Hughes, who with one son, James E. Brown, their only offspring, still survives. His own unexpected death, after a brief illness, occurred on November 27, 1880.

Mr. Brown was throughout the greater part of his life a member of the Presbyterian church, and always took a deep interest in all that tended to

its success. From its earliest organization he was connected with the Sunday-school work of his church, and for upward of forty years preceding his death had been its constant superintendent and head. He contributed very largely to the mission work of his church, and gave largely and always unostentatiously to many charities. In social intercourse Mr. Brown was always kind, considerate, courteous, unassuming in manner, and as free from display as the plainest citizen.

The Rev. A. Donaldson, in his remarks at the funeral of Mr. Brown, thus spoke of the religious element in his life: "Whilst unremitting in attention to his vast and complicated business concerns during six days of the week, on the Sabbath of the Lord he was a diligent, devoted and successful student of his Bible. * * * As an elder, beyond most others, he was determined to uphold his pastor's hands." He was further spoken of as "an elder whose place can never be supplied." Dr. Donaldson further said: "In the Presbytery often, in the synod several times, and in the general assembly his presence was prized and his influence was great and good."

In personal appearance Mr. Brown united characteristics of form and feature that would attract attention from every observer. He was very erect, upward of six feet in height, of symmetrical proportion, quick and active in his movements, and physically a perfect specimen of that sturdy manhood that can assert its power by merely external influences. His features were of the true Scotch-Irish type, regular and at the same time prominent, with a florid complexion, clean blue eyes and light-brown hair.