

HISTORY
OF
FAYETTE COUNTY,
PENNSYLVANIA,
WITH
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES
OF MANY OF ITS
PIONEERS AND PROMINENT MEN.

EDITED BY
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ILLUSTRATED.

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BASIL BROWNFIELD.

Basil Brownfield, one of the most remarkable men who ever lived in Fayette County, or any other part of the world, died at his residence in South Union township, Aug. 21, 1881, in the eighty-sixth year of his age. It is a matter of but little importance from what stock was descended, or where was born and reared, or what special business in life was followed by such a man as he ; for nature gave him stature and intellect of such large proportions as to derelate or distinguish him from almost any special race of men, —made him a giant, a symmetrical anomaly, who might properly look with contempt down upon whatever ancestral line led up to him, as well as upon his fellow-beings generally. But since Mr. Brownfield left a brief record of what he was pleased to declare his lineage, it is well enough to say here that according to that record he was of Brito-Scotch-Irish stock, and was the great-grandson of Charles Brownfield, who emigrated to America from Ireland before the Revolutionary war, but whose parents were Scotch Presbyterians, who left their native land and settled in Ireland, and who traced their line back to one George Brownfield, a native Briton, who belonged to Cromwell's horse, and went over to Scotland with the great Protector and his army.

Charles, with other members of his family, settled near Winchester, Va., and finally came into Fayette County through the persuasion of the husband of a sister of his, Col. Burd, the builder of Redstone Old Fort, at the mouth of Redstone Creek. Charles remained in the region now known as Fayette County, built a cabin near where stands the present Brownfield Station, on the Southwest Pennsylvania Railroad ; was several times dislodged and driven away by the Indians, but at last succeeded in fixing his abode. The first fee simple deed on the records of Fayette County is that of Charles Brownfield, granted to George Troutman, and dated Nov. 29, 1783.

Charles married and became the father of Robert Brownfield, who in his turn had a son, Robert Brownfield, Jr., and this latter Robert was the father of Basil Brownfield, our hero, who was born March 2, 1796, on the Brownfield homestead farm, near Smithfield, Georges township. At the age of twenty-four, March 2, 1820, he married Sarah Collins, daughter of Joseph and Margaret Collins, of Union township. She died Oct. 1, 1870, aged sixty-eight years. They had eleven children,—Joseph C., Robert, Margaret C., who married Jehu, son of Col. Benjamin Brown-

field; Mary, who married Isaac Hutchinson, a son of Isaac H., of Union township, but a native of Trenton, N. J., and died Feb. 3, 1857; Eliza, who died unmarried July 20, 1853, in the twenty-fourth year of her age; Sarah N., who married Wm. F. Core; Ruth, who married Joseph Barton, son of the late William Barton, Esq.; William N., who for his first wife married Elizabeth James, and after her death married Elizabeth Sackett; Isaac Allen, who married Sarah Burchfield, of Pittsburgh; Lydia C., wife of Thomas McClelland; and Harriet Helen, who died March 22, 1870, in her twenty-fourth year.

Basil Brownfield enjoyed some, but little, opportunities of early education in the subscription schools, and though quite generally understood by his acquaintances throughout life to be, as they expressed it, "unlettered," in the sense of ignorant of books, investigation discovers that he read books extensively, was particularly well versed in ancient history and in the history of his country, and read the Bible so carefully and appreciatively as to be able to quote it fluently and pertinently upon occasion of warm discussion.

Mr. Brownfield commenced his active business life (dating from about twenty years of age) equipped with little "book-learning," but with extraordinary native intellect, a marvelously retentive memory, and an herculean body. By industry, rare tact, with which from the beginning he was gifted, and by economy, he made his way steadily on to fortune, so that at the age of about thirty-five he was accounted wealthy in the local sense. But at about forty or forty-five years of age, burdened through unfortunate free-hand indorsements and universal bail-giving for others, prompted by his great benevolence, he became financially embarrassed, and mortgaged much of his real estate, but finally managed to lift his burdens. But during this period of financial difficulty his business complications became numerous and vexatious, and a career of litigation in his history was inaugurated which won for him a remarkable distinction in the courts, and which continued till the day of his death,—a career in which he was for the most part the victor, by one means and another. Litigation became a recreation to him, obviously a necessity to his happiness. Strong-willed, aggressive, evidently feeling that great intellect, massive muscles, and tireless endurance are "gifts of God" to men with which to fight the battles of life, and the assertion of a powerful manhood a very duty, Mr. Brownfield made of course hosts of enemies to himself, but he had an army of friends; and there was another body of people, neither friends nor foes, who stood aloof, admired the prowess and diplomacy of the man, however much they might have questioned the propriety of some of the weapons with which he fought. These were wont to descant about what a throne this provincial demi-god might have occupied in the world if his education in literature and the sciences had only been

fitting to his superb natural gifts. He was doubtless much misunderstood by even those who thought they knew him best; for underlings and the commonality possess no means of measuring the mental capacity or weighing the moral worth, or, for this matter, touching the bottom of the ingenious diabolism, it may be, of the giants about the outskirts of whose being they hang.

But want of space forbids our enlarging on this head. Many legends and stories of more or less truth and some fancy are current regarding Mr. Brownfield's peculiarities, his methods of operation, his eccentricities, his heroic struggles against his foes, his victories, his sagacious demeanor under defeat, turning it often into victory, etc.;—such tales, as everywhere, cluster about the memory of extraordinary men; but they mostly lack verity in details, and can hardly be crystallized into permanent history.

Mr. Brownfield's great experience as a litigant made him conversant with the arts of the practice of the law, and gave him very considerable knowledge of common law principles and of the statutes of the State, and his fine intellect was not slow to take the measure of the attorneys who swarmed about the Fayette County courts. He held the most of them in royal contempt. To his mind they were pigmies, and he was wont to say, among other things, of those attorneys and pettifoggers that they were "not fit to feed stock," a declaration which had its great weight with his acquaintances, and probably its effect upon the career of the luckless attorneys, for such men as Brownfield make "public opinion," and, it may be said, the law too. And here a well-authenticated tale regarding him, a peculiar fact in his history, such as possibly never had place in the history of any other man, may be pertinently narrated. The gist of it is this, that Brownfield, in his large-hearted good nature and consummate adroitness, as well as dominating wisdom, was accustomed to freely feed and shelter in his own house his most active, belligerent foes, harboring and nursing them while they were bitterly "lawing" him (to use the provincialism of the county) in the courts. These men were mostly "savages," too, from the mountains, who not only accepted his courtesies when extended, but, knowing his good nature, often quartered themselves unceremoniously upon him, turning their horses into his pastures, and betaking themselves to his table and fireside, when they came down to town to wage legal war upon him. He at one time owned many thousands of acres of land in the mountains, and here and there made clearings therein, put up cabins, and got tenants to occupy them. Almost invariably these fellows quarreled with him, launched suits at law for one cause or other against him, and in the midst of their bitterest legal fights camped at his fireside, as above related.

The reader who admires the tender Christian kindness, the forbearance, the benevolence, and other virtues which Mr. Brownfield surely evinced under such

extraordinary circumstances must not suspect him of having indulged in childlike simplicity and imbecility in all this. He knew not only how, with the Christian graces, to draw the temper and dull the edge of his adversary's sword or turn the point of his stiletto, but how as well to catch him at fault, put him in repose, and woo from him the details of his plot and circumvent him. He understood, in short, that it is better to have a legal foe at your fireside and quietly study his weapons than to keep him at bay and be unconscious all the while whether or not he carries dynamite torpedoes in the shape of "testimony" of peculiar coinage, etc., which he may cast and explode under your feet at any time. Mr. Brownfield's great benevolence was not of the crude, undisciplined, indiscriminating kind, though it was often spontaneous and hearty; but his great brain was ever supreme, and probably even his occasional religious zeal was never so hot-tempered as to set his good sense agog.

If Mr. Brownfield at times forgot his great virtues of benevolence, great social virtues, and rigid sense of justice and stooped to the use of questionable arts in his life warfare, it must be said in his defense that he was surrounded by a corrupt set of men, some of them, too, men of comparatively good education, able jurists, for example, who when off the bench kept the ermine spotless by hanging it away out of sight while they systematically wallowed in the mire of business hypocrisies, and attempted to, and sometimes did, plunder Brownfield himself,—in short, surrounded by pious knaves of all kinds, and of a high degree of "respectability," and who, like Basil himself, belonged to churches which were for the most part cages for unclean birds; and Brownfield was, in a sense, compelled to fight these wretches with their own weapons, and learned of them what may have been bad in his life and ways. It is safe to say that with his large nature he was always better than his surroundings.

That the poor, who through his whole life enjoyed his largesses, sorely felt his loss and tenderly mourned him dead, speaks volumes for the man. And it should be added regarding him that he so profited by the iniquities which he discovered hidden under the cloaks of his fellow church-members and members of communions other than his as to be aroused to strong suspicion that church membership is not necessarily a sure road to "glory." Indeed, he was bitter in denunciation of some church-members, and as he had doubts at last about the existence of an orthodox "hell," he seemed to think that there could be no suitable home for them in the future.

But even Basil Brownfield, who potently "lives after he is dead," the favorite public sobriquet of whom, "Black Hawk," a name which when associated with his will and brawn bore terror to evil-doers, living and to live on forever in history, even this "Black Hawk" Basil must not be allowed too much space in this history, though eventful and wonderful

was his life, and this sketch must come to a close. Perhaps nothing more fitting in its ending could be added than the following extract from an obituary notice of him, published editorially in the *Genius of Liberty* of Uniontown, Aug. 25, 1881, four days after Mr. Brownfield's death:

"His neighbors bear testimony that he was a man of good impulses, and was always ready to forgive an injury when he was approached in a proper way.

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"His physiognomy had the impress of greatness strongly marked in every lineament, and we venture to say that no man ever lived and died in Fayette County with a stronger cast of expression. Mr. Brownfield was a pleasant and agreeable gentleman, and his home was always open for the reception of his friends and neighbors, and whilst he was always able to impart correct knowledge of the secular things that had transpired around and about him for more than threescore and ten years, he was notable as a good listener, which is a sure indication of a well-balanced mind."

This was written of the wonderful man when near the close of a life of eighty-six years, in far-lengthened old age, when most men of like years would be passing through second childhood into the nursed infancy of drivelling dotage. Brownfield had no peer in his domain, and nature's monarchs, unclassified, spring from and found no races. Their histories, like their lives, are grandly individuate, and other men record but cannot imitate them.