

COMMEMORATIVE
BIOGRAPHICAL RECORD

—OF—

WASHINGTON COUNTY,
PENNSYLVANIA,

CONTAINING

Biographical Sketches of Prominent and Representative
Citizens, and of many of the Early
Settled Families.

ILLUSTRATED



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REV. JAMES IRWIN BROWNSON, D. D., LL. D. This gentleman, now in the seventy-seventh year of his age, and in the forty-fifth of his pastorate of the First Presbyterian Church of Washington, Penn., which was preceded, with an interval between them, by a residence of nearly four years as an undergraduate at Washington College, may well be regarded as identified with the history of Washington and Washington county.

He was born March 14, 1817, at Mercersburg, Franklin county, Penn., one of the most beautiful localities in the far-famed Cumberland Valley. His grandfather, Richard Brownson, M. D., one of the early settlers of that historic region, was a physician of great prominence, and served as surgeon of the Sixth Battalion of Pennsylvania troops in the war of the Revolution. His father, Maj. John Brownson, who left a fine reputation as a citizen and ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church, also rendered military services to his country, having been connected with the army of the southwest in the war of 1812-14. His mother, Sarah Smith, only daughter of William Smith, the proprietor who laid out the town of Mercersburg, belonged to a large family connection which furnished many civil and military leaders in that notable frontier line of defense against the savages, who from 1730 onward, for many years, by bloody incursions from the West, made life a terror

to the early inhabitants. Of this family was Col. James Smith, one of the most noted and familiar of all the historic characters of the early border warfare, and also a participant, with a number of his kinsmen, in the struggle for independence.

Dr. Brownson's early youth was spent amidst the best advantages of a Christian home, and in a community noted for social culture and piety. He has frequently given expression to the grateful feeling with which he ever thinks of the mental discipline and development he received at the academy in his native village, under the old-fashioned but thorough training of the Rev. Robert Kennedy, its able principal. But of all the men who have influenced his life, he is most closely bound to the memory of the Rev. David Elliott, D. D., LL. D., the revered pastor of his childhood, the confidential friend of his parents, and his own teacher, guide and friend. His estimate of Dr. Elliott's character and influence are recorded in a memorial address, published in 1874, after that gentleman's death.

The removal of his pastor from Mercersburg to Washington led to Mr. Brownson's coming to the latter place in January, 1833, for the purposes of collegiate education. Having been graduated in 1836, at the age of nineteen years, by Washington College, he spent a year in teaching the classics and mathematics in the Bucks County Academy, at Newtown, Penn., where he numbered among his pupils several who have since become men of prominence. He subsequently entered as a student the Western Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church, at Allegheny City, Penn., following thither his friend, Dr. Elliott, who had become one of the professors in that institution. Both in college and in the seminary Mr. Brownson was accounted a careful and successful student, ever striving to reap the best possible fruits from the opportunities then afforded by them, and ever finding a rich reward in the approving friendship of his professors and fellow students.

Having completed his theological studies, he was licensed to preach, as a "probationer," by the Presbytery of Carlisle, October 10, 1840, at Greencastle, Penn., after the usual course of "trials" and examinations. In March following he engaged to serve the churches of Greensburg and Mount Pleasant, in Westmoreland county, Penn., as a stated supply for six months, dividing his time between them, and thus entered on his life work as a minister. At the termination of this engagement he accepted unanimous calls from both churches to become their pastor, and accordingly was ordained and installed as such on November 25, 1841, by the Presbytery of Redstone. The relation proved alike happy and useful. Each of the churches, having previously been torn with dissensions, was brought to peace; the membership was greatly in-

creased, and soon after the transfer of their pastor, under a call to the church of Washington, each church arose, as the result of his labors, to the support of a pastor for itself. The new pastorate at Washington has already had a continuance of more than forty-four years. That it was entered upon under a very solemn sense of responsibility, and with great trepidation, Dr. Brownson declares in his memorial sermon, delivered and published upon the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his installation. In stating the considerations which caused these feelings to predominate when he was confronted with the question of accepting or declining the call, he says:

I must assume the responsibility of a pastor to many persons for whom I had, in my college life, acquired the profoundest respect, as my superiors in age and wisdom. Among these were my former professors, and especially the venerable president of the college, Dr. McConaughy. I must walk, too, in the footsteps of predecessors whose praise was in all the churches. The hesitation of fear, joined with the doubt of success, made me tremble lest I might go beyond the will of the Lord.

Of the success which crowned the labors thus undertaken with fear and trembling, the Rev. Dr. Henry Woods, in a sketch published in "The Annual of Washington and Jefferson College" for 1886, gives the following account:

He was cordially received by the congregation, and the Head of the Church added His benediction in the form of a plentiful outpouring of the Holy Spirit during the first weeks of his ministry. About sixty members were added to the church by profession of their faith; the union between the new pastor and his people was sealed by the baptism from on high, and increased vigor was infused into every department of the work of the church. The revival seemed to be prophetic of what God had in store for this people. Many times during the . . . years of this pastoral relation has the Lord made the heart of His servant to sing, as the showers of divine grace have fallen upon the field in which he has toiled so faithfully.

Throughout the course of this pastorate the ties which bound pastor and people together have been closely and strongly knit. The affectionate regard of his people has often been manifested, notably in connection with the celebrations they held, in 1874 and 1889, on the completion of the twenty-five and forty year periods of its existence, and that of 1891 upon the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination. Perhaps nothing better indicates his power and fidelity, as a pastor, than the changes in the *personnel* of the congregation which the revolutions of time have wrought, considered in connection with his successful continuance of pastoral work through all these years. Of the communicants, who greeted him when he came to Washington, less than a score remain. The men and women who were his early parishioners have nearly all gone, and the congregation of the present day is made up principally of their children and grandchildren, and of others who have come in as stran-

gers to identify themselves with it. But throughout all these changes he has remained the beloved pastor, and successive generations have yielded to him the same homage of affection which he won from the men and women of forty years ago, while with the survivors of the generation upon whose call he took charge of the church, this feeling has only grown with their growth and strengthened with the passage of years.

During his pastorate the church has grown and prospered, and Presbyterianism has experienced great advancement and development in the community, the adherents of that denomination having multiplied, along with the growth of population in the town, to such an extent that there are now two other vigorous churches in existence. These, of course, contain many persons who went out from the parent church to found and build up the new enterprises, carrying with them their regard and esteem for their former pastor. But his influence has not been limited to the Presbyterian portion of his community. People of all denominations hold him in respect and veneration.

Dr. Brownson's usefulness as a pastor has been greatly extended by reason of the attendance upon his ministry of successive generations of college students, who, after graduation, have gone forth to scatter themselves all over this country, as well as over foreign mission fields, to bear their part in the work of the church and society. That his influence upon them has been potent, is often testified by such men on their return, after years of absence, to attend reunions of college classes and revisit the scenes of their college days. The same remark may be made with respect to the students of the Washington Female Seminary, many of whom came to their spiritual birth under his ministry. As an ecclesiastic, Dr. Brownson has occupied a high position and exerted great influence. The estimate in which he is held by his brethren of the ministry is evidenced by the following characterization of him, recorded on the minutes of the Presbytery of Washington at the time of the celebration last above mentioned:

... An able preacher of the everlasting Gospel, a chaste writer, through whose vigorous and thoughtful sentences the truth is beautifully set forth; a wise and judicious presbyter, a genial and companionable friend, having always the felicitous word upon his tongue; an able organizer and executor, carrying plan and detail to its happy and successful issue, ready for any task that can bring help or comfort to the burdened; a sympathetic friend of old and young, of the eminent and the obscure. ... Dr. Brownson has been in our midst the symbol, the embodiment of all that is strong, hopeful, energetic and progressive in Christian faith and life. His earnest and nervous energy had the fine kindling gift of touching others around him with his own fire. The force of that earnestness was all the more potent that it was, at all times, constrained and held in check by an intellect singularly keen, penetrating and clear.

His name now stands at the head of the roll of

the Presbytery, as the oldest, in point of membership, of the ministers composing it. His services as a presbyter have been manifold and fruitful of results for good. He was a moderator of the Synod of Wheeling in 1859. The reunion of the Old and New School branches of the Presbyterian Church having led to a reorganization of synods, in which the Presbytery of Washington became connected with the Synod of Pittsburgh, he was chosen and served as the moderator of that body at its session in 1871. He has been a member of the general assembly, the highest ecclesiastical court of the denomination to which he belongs, seven times, viz.: in 1848, 1854, 1863, 1867, 1875, 1885 and 1888. In the year first named he represented the Presbytery of Redstone, of which he was then a member. In the others he went as a commissioner from the Presbytery of Washington. Besides taking a leading part in debates on the floor, he has, on these occasions, as well as at various synods which he has attended, served as a member, and often as chairman, of important committees and judicial commissions, and in these positions his opinions have always commanded respect and been accorded great weight. His eminent fitness for such duties has always been recognized. A prominent lawyer of the Washington bar once remarked: "I have a profound respect for Dr. Brownson's legal judgment." The clearness of his intellect, the calmness of his judgment and the breadth and comprehensiveness of his views, increasing rather than diminishing with age, have been the objects of admiration to those who have had opportunity to measure them. He was appointed a delegate from the Presbyterian Church in the United States to the first council of the Pan-Presbyterian Alliance, held at Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1877, but was unable to serve in that capacity. He was a member of the council of the same alliance which sat at Philadelphia in 1880, and also of the council which convened at Toronto, Canada, in September, 1892.

Dr. Brownson has been closely identified with the interests of education. His loyal devotion to his *almae matres*, Washington College and the Western Theological Seminary, has made him regard as a privilege and a joy the service which he has rendered as a member of their boards of supervision, for forty-four years in the one case, and thirty-nine in the other. From the union of Jefferson and Washington Colleges, in 1865, until 1882, he was vice-president of the board of trustees of the united College of Washington and Jefferson. In the latter year he was advanced to the presidency as the successor of Rev. Charles C. Beatty, D. D., LL. D., of Steubenville, Ohio, deceased, and this position he still fills. He has been vice-president of the board of directors of the Theological Seminary since 1883. In 1852

and 1853 he acted as president *pro tem.* of the faculty of Washington College, and in 1869-70 rendered a similar service to Washington and Jefferson College. For thirty-five years he has been president of the board of trustees of the Washington Female Seminary. He has taken a leading part in the management and direction of all the institutions with which he has been connected, especially in matters directly pertaining to their educational policies. In 1871, upon the nomination of the senators from Pennsylvania, Hon. Simon Cameron and Hon. John Scott, he was appointed, by President Grant, a member of the board of visitors, to attend the annual examinations at the United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md., inquire into the state of the discipline and general management of that institution, and report the result to the Secretary of the Navy. He discharged the duties of this appointment with his customary fidelity and ability.

Having by long practice acquired very considerable facility of composition, while, at the same time, cultivating habits of close and discriminating thought, and developing a style clear, concise and cogent, Dr. Brownson has great aptitude for literary work, and he has not neglected to exercise his powers in this direction. He has been a frequent contributor to the newspaper press. Mention may be made of two series of communications as having attracted special attention: The first consisted of letters written during the last year of the Civil war, while he was serving as a member of the Christian Commission, with the armies of the James and Potomac, then entrenched before Petersburg and Richmond, giving an account of the work of the Commission, and replete with information concerning the army life of the "boys in blue." These were published in the *Washington Reporter*, and were read with avidity. The other series, published in the same paper, and also in the *Washington Review and Examiner*, were written from Annapolis, Md., during his service, above mentioned, on the board of visitors of the Naval Academy. They were noticed and quoted from by many other papers, both east and west. Numerous addresses and sermons, delivered on special occasions, have been published in newspapers or as pamphlets. The publications of Dr. Brownson, in more permanent form, have been chiefly in the line of history and biography. Among these is the memorial address, already alluded to, commemorative of the life and character of the Rev. Dr. Elliott, which was originally delivered, at the request of the directors and faculty of the Western Theological Seminary, in the Third Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, and was afterward printed in a handsome book of eighty-five pages. The warm friendship and loving admiration cherished for that venerable man during half a century

gave an inspiration, in the preparation of this discourse, whose results appear in the eloquence and force with which his eminent and useful career are sketched.

In December, 1875, a convention was held in Pittsburgh for the purpose of celebrating the centenary of the planting of Presbyterianism in "Western Pennsylvania and parts adjacent." This resulted in the publication of the "Centenary Memorial," a book of about 450 pages, which is held in high estimation as a work of great historical value. Dr. Brownson's contributions to this consisted of papers portraying the educational history of the regions above referred to. One of these, relating to education in general, and the histories of colleges, academies and seminaries, was an address prepared for and delivered at the convention. The other was a history of the Western Theological Seminary, which had been read at a reunion of the alumni of the seminary in 1872, and was incorporated in the memorial volume at the request of its faculty. In the same general line of writing, relative to education, important contributions were made by him to the "History of Washington County," published in 1882.

When the decease of that eminent friend of education, the Rev. Charles C. Beatty, D. D., LL. D., called for some suitable memorial of his life and distinguished services, Dr. Brownson, who had long been associated with him in much of his work, was at once selected to take the leading part in its preparation. The sketch thus furnished is a rare model of excellence in this department of literature, and with the other papers prepared was published in 1883 in a costly and elegant volume which was much sought after by the many pupils and other friends of Dr. Beatty.

The Presbytery of Washington, having resolved, in compliance with a recommendation of the General Assembly, to hold a special memorial and historical service, in connection with the centenary of the Assembly in 1888, assigned to Dr. Brownson, in the arrangements for this celebration, the preparation of memorial sketches of deceased ministers who had belonged to the former body. His paper, read at the meeting of the Presbytery in Buffalo, Penn., on September 26, 1888, in pursuance of that appointment, now forms a part of the "History of the Presbytery of Washington," the publication of which, under the direction of the Presbytery, grew out of these commemorative services. These and other efforts in the department of historical research and writing have shown him to be a careful and laborious investigator, besides enhancing and widening his reputation from a literary point of view. In recognition of his literary attainments, and his ability and services as a preacher, ecclesiastic and promoter of education, he was given the degree of D. D. by Lafayette

College, Easton, Penn., in 1858, and that of LL. D. by Hanover College, Hanover, Ind., in 1891.

Dr. Brownson was married, March 14, 1843, to Sarah Ellen, daughter of John Maclay, of Shipensburg, Penn. She died April 14, 1853. On January 9, 1855, he was married to Eleanor, daughter of David Acheson (deceased), of Washington, who is still his companion and helpmeet. He has nine living children, four sons and five daughters. Of the sons, the eldest and youngest, John Maclay and Robert McKennan, are engaged in business pursuits, the one in Pittsburgh and the other in Detroit, Mich. Another son, James I. Brownson, Jr., is a practitioner of law at Washington. The remaining one, Rev. Marcus A. Brownson, D. D., of Detroit, Mich., has followed in the footsteps of his father as a preacher of the Gospel, and is pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Detroit. The daughters are Sarah, wife of Henry R. Whitehill, formerly State mineralogist of Nevada, and now practicing law at Deer Lodge, Mont.; Ellen Maclay; Mary Wilson; Margaret, wife of Prof. Edwin Linton, Ph. D., of Washington and Jefferson College; and Laurretta Morgan. Of the unmarried daughters, Mary resides with her brother Marcus at Detroit, while Ellen and Laurretta remain in the household of their father.

In view of his advancing age, Dr. Brownson's congregation, at the completion of his fiftieth year as an ordained minister, provided him with an assistant in the person of Rev. Thomas R. Alexander, who had been, for the preceding eighteen years, pastor of the Mt. Prospect Presbyterian Church, Hickory, Penn., thus relieving him from a portion of the arduous labors which are incident to the pastorate of a large church, and enabling him to husband his vital forces. He continues to preach one-half of the time; and while his physical powers are, of course, not equal, at three score and sixteen, to what they used to be, his mental vigor is unabated, and his preaching has been pronounced by competent judges brighter and better than it was ten years ago. Still finding joy in activity, as he has ever done throughout the busy years of the past, he looks with serene gaze toward the sunset of life, having no other anxiety than that he may be enabled to labor on for his Master till the evening shadows fall.
