

HISTORY
OF
CHESTER COUNTY,
PENNSYLVANIA,
WITH
GENEALOGICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES.

BY
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HON. JOHN HICKMAN was born in what was then part of West Bradford township, but is now in Pocopson, Chester Co., Pa., on the anniversary of the battle of Brandywine, Sept. 11, 1810. His father was a farmer, whose sturdy stories of the doings of his farm won for it the name of "Brag Hill." His parents were well known for their practical common sense, and having observed the evidences of uncommon intellectual ability in their son, they endeavored to secure the best education that could be afforded him. His teacher was an inmate of the family,—a graduate of the University of Edinburgh,—and his pupil rapidly acquired considerable familiarity with the classics, and became well grounded in mathematical acquirements.

He first entered on the study of medicine, but ill health, which rendered him unable to attend the dissecting-room,



HON. JOHN HICKMAN.

soon compelled him to abandon that pursuit, and he then read law in the office of Hon. Townsend Haines, and was admitted to the bar in 1832. He became devoted to his profession, and his career as a lawyer was one of eminent success. Naturally a good speaker, he cultivated the art of oratory, until in later years, when he was in his prime, he was a most charming and winning speaker. His powers as a stump-speaker caused him to rise at once to a prominent position in the Democratic party of Chester County, and in 1844 he was one of the delegates to the National Convention that nominated James K. Polk for President. Half-way or compromise men or measures were never to his taste, and thus we find the report says "that a young man named Hickman, from Pennsylvania, nominated Andrew Jackson." Believing firmly in the principles of the old Jacksonian Democracy, young Hickman thought the best leader of the party must be Old Hickory himself. In 1844 he received the Democratic nomination for Congress, but was defeated by Hon. Abraham R. McIlvaine. In 1845 he was appointed district attorney, under Governor Shunk's administration, by Attorney-General Kane. June 23, 1846, Hon. John M. Read was appointed attorney-general, and appointed Hon. Joseph J. Lewis to succeed Mr. Hickman. Judge Read was succeeded, on Dec. 18, 1846, by Hon. Benjamin Champneys, who reappointed Mr. Hickman. After holding the office a term or two Mr. Hickman resigned, and was succeeded by John H. Brinton, Esq.

In 1854, Mr. Hickman was again nominated for Congress by the Democracy. His opponent was Hon. John M. Broomall. Know-Nothingism was at its height at that time, and through some influences which have never been satisfactorily explained, Mr. Hickman secured the vote of the order, and was elected by a majority of 2656 in the district.

He took his seat in the Thirty-fourth Congress Dec. 3, 1855, where a long contest for the organization terminated Feb. 3, 1856, by the election of Hon. N. P. Banks as Speaker, the first time for many years that this important position was awarded to a man not thoroughly acceptable to the South. Mr. Hickman took sides against the pro-slavery faction.

His sentiments seem to have undergone considerable change soon after being brought in personal contact with the slave-owners in Congress. The Kansas and Nebraska troubles commenced during his term, and his votes were generally on the side of the Free-State men. He was again renominated by the Democracy in 1856. His opponent was John S. Bowen, of Chester County. Owing to some dissatisfaction a division occurred in the party in Delaware County, which again gave success to Mr. Hickman by a small majority. This was the year in which the celebrated campaign between James Buchanan and John C. Fremont occurred. Mr. Hickman warmly supported Mr. Buchanan. But the Kansas and Nebraska troubles increased in importance and bitterness, and Mr. Hickman, throwing his old slavery convictions overboard, marshaled squarely under the banners of Free Soil, and at once became a leader of its advocates.

In a speech delivered in the House Jan. 28, 1858, Mr. Hickman declared that the President had broken faith with the Democratic party in his Kansas policy, and he could not support him. On the vote to admit Kansas as a State under the Leecompton constitution, April 1, 1858, Mr. Hickman voted no. In the fall of 1858 he was re-elected to Congress by a large majority over the regular Republican and Democratic nominees, and took his seat in the XXXVth Congress, where the long contest for Speaker

terminated in the election of Pennington, Mr. Hickman voting with the Republicans to break the dead-lock. During the stormy two years that followed, Mr. Hickman was at the zenith of his power. Under his scathing taunts the slave-holders grew furious, and his reputation became national. His readiness in debate and his capabilities in the way of biting, withering sarcasm made him both hated and feared by the Southerners. A man of slight physique, he yet never quailed in debate. No man was better qualified by nature to lead the opposition to the pro-slavery men in Congress. His speeches attracted attention throughout the civilized world for their force and keenness of satire. His independence and dash were a match for any of the Southern fire-eaters, and he at once became a shining mark for their contumely and denunciations.

In response to a serenade, he spoke of the John Brown raid, and said the whole State of Virginia was frightened by seventeen men and a cow. For this, on Feb. 10, 1860, he was assaulted on the Capitol grounds by Edmundson, of Virginia, but an affray was prevented by Vice-President Breckinridge. An encounter seemed also imminent on the floor of the House between Mr. Hickman and Keitt, of South Carolina, for words spoken by Mr. Hickman. On one occasion, during the fierce debates of this session, he said, in reference to the menaces of disunion, that if dissolution meant a dividing line of sentiment between the North and South, it existed already; that it was dangerous then for a Northern man to travel in the South; that any postmaster whose receipts did not amount to five dollars per annum could, if a letter bearing his frank came into his hands, "open it, examine it, and burn it, on the pretext that it is incendiary." "But if dissolution," he added, "means that there is to be a division of territory by Mason and Dixon's line, or any other line, I say no; the North will never tolerate a division of territory." To an interruption from a Georgian, inquiring how the North could prevent it, he replied that there was as much true courage at the North as at the South. "I always believed it," he said, "and therefore I will express it; and I believe that, with all the appliances of art to assist, eighteen millions reared in industry, with habits of the right kind, will always be able to cope successfully, if need be, with eight millions of men without these appliances." This dignified and well-expressed retort produced a profound impression, and was frequently referred to in the subsequent debates.

His course in Congress brought him so prominently before the nation that he was a leading candidate for the Vice-Presidency when Mr. Lincoln was nominated for President in 1860, Mr. Hickman himself being confident of the nomination.

In 1860 he was nominated and re-elected to Congress by the Republicans; after this term he declined re-election. His health had been badly shattered by the excitement he had been through, which was augmented by the "National Hotel poisoning."

During the civil war Mr. Hickman's views in regard to the measures and policy of the government were greatly in advance of his political contemporaries. He was, perhaps, the first prominent citizen to advocate the confiscation of the property of those in rebellion, "including slaves," and

to favor the employment of negro soldiers, since on March 20, 1862, as chairman of the Judiciary Committee, he introduced a "joint resolution in relation to the powers of the President of the United States," which received very little attention at the time, but was eventually received as settled law. It was in substance this: "The President of the United States, as commander-in-chief of the army and navy of the United States, should make use of all means not inconsistent with the laws of war which in his judgment may be necessary to crush the Rebellion, including the seizure and final disposition of all the property, real and personal, of those engaged in armed rebellion against the government of the United States, or aiding in such Rebellion, including slaves." Dec. 8, 1862, Mr. Hickman, on leave, also introduced a bill, which was referred to the Committee on Military Affairs, and which was never reported back to the House, providing for the provisioning, arming, and equipping of negro regiments not exceeding one hundred. This bill was never acted on. Here was the pioneer movement. Although in advance of both the President and Congress, his views were finally accepted and carried into effect.

In recording the incidents that occurred in our national history during the few years preceding the late Rebellion, the historian will have occasion to refer to the record of few men then in Congress more frequently than to that of Mr. Hickman. He gave this Congressional district a national reputation. But with all his powers as an orator, Mr. Hickman possessed none of those qualities that are essential to successful political leadership. Neither was he a statesman in the full sense of that term. His true position was in the minority, where his combative and aggressive qualities could have free and untrammelled play. In 1867 he was induced to allow himself to run for the Legislature, and was elected, taking his seat in January, 1868. He there offered an amendment to the State constitution making suffrage free to all that could read. He made a powerful speech in support of his proposed measure, closing, "Oh, Almighty God, Thou wilt record this great act of my life as a credit to offset my many shortcomings." He resigned his seat at the end of the term, and refused to run again.

The remainder of his life he spent at his home in West Chester, where he delighted to receive visits from his friends, who derived wisdom from his philosophical remarks, and enjoyment from his badinage and wit. He was in many respects a remarkable as well as a very singular man. Possessed of a strong, and even stubborn will, when he espoused a cause he adhered to it through good and through evil report, and from it no earthly power could divert him. But notwithstanding this marked feature of his character, coupled as it was with an unusually erratic disposition, he at the same time possessed high social qualities, pleasing manners, and attractive conversational powers, which endeared him to his personal friends. He was also a man of fine literary tastes, with a most retentive memory, and his mind was a perfect store-house of apt quotations, both sacred and profane. He died March 23, 1875, the remarkable mental power and brilliant scintillations of wit for which he was celebrated continuing almost to the close of his life.