

HISTORY  
OF  
BERKS COUNTY  
IN  
PENNSYLVANIA.

BY  
MORTON L. MONTGOMERY,  
MEMBER OF THE BERKS COUNTY BAR.

ILLUSTRATED.

PHILADELPHIA:  
EVERTS, PECK & RICHARDS.  
1886.

## STATE OFFICIALS.

JOSEPH HIESTER was born in Bern township, Berks County, on November 18, 1752. His father, John Heister, emigrated to this country in 1732 in the twenty-fifth year of his age, from the village of Elsoff, in the province of Westphalia, Germany. Some years afterward, he settled in Bern township, where he was then married to Mary Barbara Epler, a daughter of one of the first settlers in that section of the county. He and his two brothers, Joseph and Daniel (who emigrated in 1738), took up large tracts of land comprising several thousand acres and extending from the Bern church to the Tulpehocken Creek, and there they carried on farming. He died in 1757, aged fifty years. His wife was born in 1732; and she died in 1809. The remains of both were buried in the graveyard appurtenant to the Bern church.

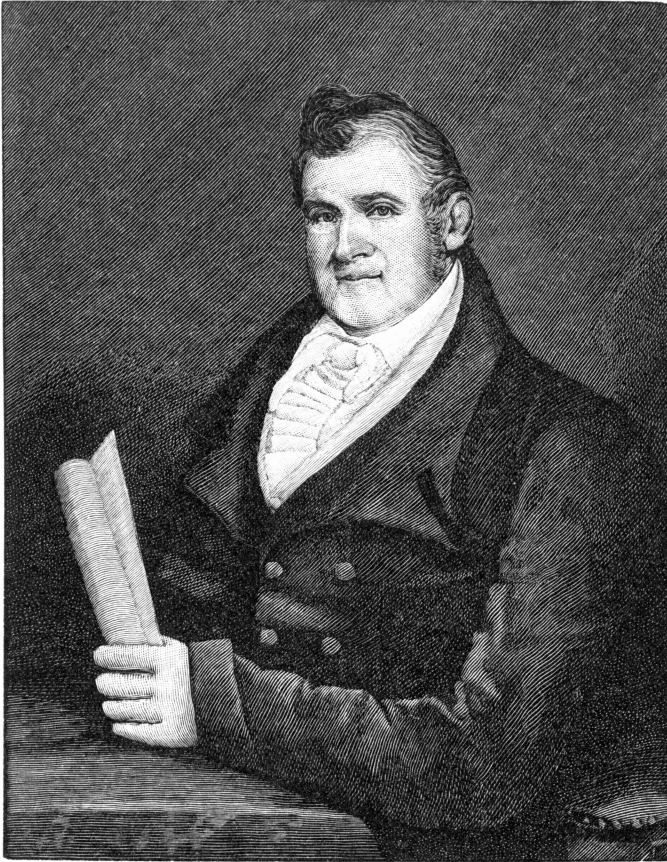
Joseph Hiester was brought up on the farm till

he was a young man. It is said that he at times related his early experience at plowing—how he was put to the plow so young that when it struck a stump or stone, and was thereby thrown from the furrow, he was not able to replace it till it had run a considerable distance; and when caught in a root its rebound would occasionally throw him prostrate. In the inter-

vals of farm labor he attended the school which was conducted at the Bern church, and there acquired the rudiments of an English and also a German education. The homestead was situated about a mile northwardly from the church.

He removed to Reading before he was of age, and entered the general store of Adam Witman. Whilst in the employ of Mr. Witman he became acquainted with his daughter Elizabeth,

and he was married to her in 1771. He continued with his father-in-law till the breaking out of the Revolution. Then appreciating the spirit of the people for independence, he took an active part in discussing the principles of the Federalist party, and in encouraging the enlistment of men for military service. He raised a company of eighty men in July, 1776 which became a part of the "Flying Camp" and participated in the battle of Long Island.<sup>1</sup> He was taken prisoner in this engagement and confined on



*Joseph Hiester*

the notorious prison-ship "Jersey" for a time, and was afterward imprisoned in New York. Whilst a prisoner in the latter place he was taken sick with a low fever, and became so feeble that in passing up and down-stairs he was obliged to creep on his hands and knees.

<sup>1</sup>See Chap. ix. Revolution.

He and the other men imprisoned endured many hardships and much suffering. After having been held in prison several months he was exchanged. He proceeded immediately to Reading, and remained at home only a short time, sufficient to regain his health and strength, when he again joined the army, which lay towards Philadelphia. He returned in time to participate in the battle of Germantown. In this engagement he received a wound on his head. He continued in active service till the close of the war. A record of his services, or of his company, unfortunately, has not been preserved.

His earnest participation in the public meetings at Reading, which encouraged revolution, led to his selection as one of the ten delegates from Berks County to the conference held at Philadelphia on June 18, 1776, which decided that a Provincial Convention should be called on July 15, 1776, for the express purpose of "forming a new government in this province on the authority of the people only." His first cousin, Gabriel Hiester, was elected as one of the eight delegates to this convention, but he himself became engaged in the military service of his country.

Upon his return from the Revolution he entered into partnership with his father-in-law, Adam Witman, in the mercantile business, and some years afterward became the sole proprietor of the store. He conducted his business operations very successfully for a number of years. Public affairs also received much of his attention, not only relating to political government, but also to the development of Reading and the county by internal improvement. Four years after his return he was elected one of the members of the General Assembly from Berks County, and re-elected twice, continuing in this office for three years,—from 1787 to 1790. He was a member of the General Assembly when that body ratified the Constitution of the United States, which went into operation in March, 1789; and also when it decided that alterations and amendments to the Constitution of 1776 were necessary, and that a convention for that purpose should be called. He was chosen one of the delegates to the Constitution-

al Convention of 1789, having been the first on list of delegates from Berks County, and he assisted in framing the Constitution of 1790. After serving in this representative capacity, he was chosen the first State Senator from this district for one term of four years,—from 1790 to 1794. In 1797 he was elected to represent Berks County in Congress, succeeding his first cousin, Daniel Hiester, who had held this office for the first four terms, from 1789 to 1797, under the national Constitution, and he was continued as the representative for five terms, from 1797 to 1807. After an intermission of eight years—which he devoted entirely to business at Reading—he was again sent to Congress in 1815 and re-elected twice. Whilst holding this office he was prominently identified with the political affairs of Pennsylvania, so much so that in 1817 he became the nominee of the Federalist party for Governor. Though not elected then, his great popularity was shown in the flattering vote which he received.

He was the first candidate on the Federal ticket who received a majority of the votes in the county of Berks against the Democratic candidate, and also in the southeastern section of the State, which comprised eleven very populous and influential counties. The party naturally selected him in 1820 a second time as the most available candidate, and he was elected. This was a great victory for him, but especially for his party, inasmuch as he was the first successful candidate which the Federalists had placed in the field against the Democrats. The political returns show his increased popularity. The majority against him at the election of 1817 was 7005, but the majority for him at the election of 1820, notwithstanding that his opponent on the Democratic ticket had been Governor for the previous three years, was 1605. A careful study of the election returns reveals the fact, however, that the devotion of the people of Berks County to him caused his election. Theretofore the county had always been Democratic by a sure, if not a large, majority, and if it had continued steadfast to the Democratic party in 1820 he would certainly have been defeated. The county is therefore entitled to the greater part of the

credit for his election.<sup>1</sup> Having been elected to this position, he resigned his seat in Congress. He had been induced by his personal and political friends to become a candidate for this office upon the express condition that he would serve only one term, and notwithstanding his successful administration and a great pressure from partisans and many friends to be a candidate for re-election, he resolutely refused to permit the use of his name.

The administration of Governor Hiester was characterized by great activity in promoting the growth of the commonwealth, especially through internal improvements. Political contests were conducted in that period with great bitterness. Harsh criticisms were made against those who occupied prominent positions and directed public affairs. The administration of his immediate predecessor, Governor Findlay, was condemned without measure. The condemnation was so furious that it made a deep impression upon Governor Hiester, so deep, indeed, that he was led to refer to it in his inaugural address. Among other things, he said,—“But I trust, if any errors shall be committed, they will not be chargeable to intention. They will owe their origin to the imperfection of our nature and the narrow limits of human foresight. They will not proceed from a willful neglect of duty on my part, nor from any want of devotion to the best interests of our beloved country. Such errors, I may justly hope, will meet with indulgence from an enlightened and liberal people. Where censure shall, upon a full and impartial view of matters, be merited, let it not be withheld. It is the duty of freemen to examine closely into the conduct of those to whom they have delegated their power, or the guardianship of their rights and interests, to censure the abuse of the one, or the neglect or mismanagement of the other. Considering myself as elected by the people of this commonwealth, and not by any particular denomination of persons, I shall endeavor to deserve the name of chief magistrate of Pennsylvania, and to avoid the dis-

graceful appellation of the Governor of a party.”

The great patronage at the disposal of the executive had become very troublesome. This was particularly experienced by Governor Findlay, and Governor Hiester, knowing this, asked the Legislature to devise some method by which the Governor could be relieved. He also suggested that the annual sessions of the Legislature might be shortened without detriment to the public good, that public improvements could then be made advantageously and domestic manufactures encouraged with success, and that there existed an imperative duty to introduce and support a liberal system of education, connected with some general religious instruction.

During the session of 1822 the city and county of Lancaster were erected into a school district, called the Second, the First having been the city and county of Philadelphia, erected in 1819. According to his sentiments, expressed to the Legislature, Governor Hiester in every possible way encouraged the system of free education; but a decade elapsed after his term before the system was perfected sufficiently by legislation to make it effective. And whilst Governor Hiester occupied the gubernatorial chair the State capital was removed from Lancaster to Harrisburg. The building was begun in 1819 and finished in 1821, and the General Assembly convened in it for the first time on January 3, 1822. The capital had been at Lancaster since 1799, and previously at Philadelphia.

In his last annual message to the Legislature Governor Hiester expressed many sentiments which indicated his strong love for the State and his zeal for her welfare and progress, concluding it as follows:

“Having been for nearly fifty years occasionally engaged in various highly responsible situations in the service of my country, and having witnessed its progress from colonial vassalage to independence and sovereignty, it is with most sincere pleasure that, on quitting the theatre of action, I can congratulate you and our fellow-citizens at large on the propitious situation in which it is now placed; and I avail myself of the occasion it affords me of repeating my fer-

<sup>1</sup> His election was celebrated by a grand festival at Reading. (See Chap. xix.—Politics.)

vent prayers to the Almighty Ruler of the Universe, under whose superintending influence it has attained its present eminence, that he may continue to cherish it with his fostering care, preserving its citizens in the free enjoyment of their just rights and republican institutions, until all earthly governments shall be terminated by the consummation of time.”

Upon the expiration of his term of office he lived in retirement at Reading. His residence was situated on the northern side of Penn Street, midway between Fourth and Fifth Streets.<sup>1</sup> The dwelling consisted of a two-story brick building, with a large frame stable on the rear of the lot. He owned a number of farms in Alsace (now Muhlenberg), Cumru and Bern townships, and also tracts of woodland on Mount Penn, altogether numbering nearly two thousand acres, seven prominent business stands and dwellings in Reading, valued at over fifty thousand dollars, and also out-lots. He occupied and farmed the out-lots for his own use, and kept horses and cows—a custom carried on by the more prominent inhabitants of Reading in order to supply their families with vegetables.

He frequently visited his farms. Upon one occasion, about 1825, he called to see John Sailor, who was farming the three hundred and twelve acre farm on the Kutztown road, at “Hiester’s Lane” (now in North Reading, and owned by the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad Company). Finding Mr. Sailor on the barn-floor, threshing grain with a flail, he pulled off his coat and handled the flail, not only vigorously but successfully. During his youth he was recognized as an accomplished workman at all kinds of farm labor. When Mr. Sailor reached an advanced age and lived in retirement, he narrated this circumstance with much pleasure.

Governor Hiester was a man of commanding presence and pleasing address. He was about six feet tall and weighed about two hundred pounds. His manners were simple and unassuming, so much so, indeed, for a man of his

high station and large means, that the people of this community were thereby most favorably impressed. The men of to-day, now old and gray, who then were boys at Reading, recall him with pleasure and speak of him in the highest terms of respect. And just as they speak of him so do they also speak of his wife. He was a member of the Reformed Church. His wife died June 11, 1825, aged seventy-five years, two months and nine days. He died seven years afterward, June 10, 1832, in the home which he had occupied for two-score of years, aged seventy-nine years, six months and twenty-two days. His remains were buried in the burying-ground of the Reformed Church. The funeral was conducted without display of any kind, according to the known wishes of the Governor; but though the occasion was not signalized by a great military parade and other demonstrations of respect, because they were declined by the family, a great many people nevertheless assembled to witness the simple ceremonies which were performed in carrying to the grave him who had occupied for over fifty years the most prominent positions before them. Some years afterward the remains of the Governor and his wife were removed to the Charles Evans Cemetery.

He left an estate which amounted to four hundred and sixty-eight thousand dollars. The greater part consisted of bonds and stocks—the latter having included, it is believed, fifty thousand dollars in the United States Bank. His surviving children and grandchildren were a son, John S. Hiester; two daughters, Catharine Spayd (widow of Hon. John Spayd) and Rebecca Muhlenberg (intermarried with Rev. Henry A. Muhlenberg); a granddaughter, Mary E. Muhlenberg (the daughter of Mary Heister, who was intermarried with Rev. Henry A. Muhlenberg); and seven grandchildren, the children of Elizabeth Hiester, who was intermarried with Levi Pauling, namely—Joseph Pauling, Henry Pauling, Elizabeth Pauling (intermarried with Thomas Ross), James Pauling, Rebecca Pauling, Ellen Pauling and Mary Pauling.

<sup>1</sup> On the western half of lot No. 80 in town plan, now occupied by Tobias Barto, No. 437.