

LIVES
OF THE
GOVERNORS
OF
PENNSYLVANIA,

WITH THE
INCIDENTAL HISTORY OF THE STATE,

FROM
1609 TO 1873.

BY
WILLIAM C. ARMOR.

New Edition, Revised and Enlarged.



PHILADELPHIA:
JAMES K. SIMON,
No. 29 SOUTH SIXTH STREET.
1873.

JOSEPH HIESTER,

GOVERNOR UNDER THE CONSTITUTION OF 1790,

December 19, 1820, to December 16, 1823.

THE remote ancestors of the Hiester family in this country were of Silesian origin, and in process of time the descendants spread through the countries bordering on the Rhine. Three brothers of that name, Daniel, John, and Joseph, emigrated to America in the year 1737, and settled at Goshenhoppen, then Philadelphia County, now Montgomery. They soon afterwards purchased of the Proprietary Government a tract of several thousand acres in Bern township, now Berks County. Here John and Joseph settled, and on the 18th of November, 1752, the subject of this sketch was born. He was the son of John Hiester, and at an early age was put to the lighter labors of the farm with his father. Subduing the forest, and bringing the soil under cultivation with the imperfect farm implements then in use was a herculean task, and required a strong will and stout hands. He was himself accustomed to relate, that he was put to the plough so young that when it struck a stump or stone and was thrown from the furrow, he had not strength sufficient to right it till it had run a considerable distance, and when caught in a root the rebound would sometimes throw him prostrate.

The father often recounted to the son the considerations which induced him to leave the old country, and to contrast the freedom and independence that was here enjoyed with the vassalage in which the peasantry were there held. They were kept perpetually poor and dependent by the burdens and

taxation imposed by the government and the nobility, with no prospect of any means of improvement. The accounts which reached them of prosperous settlements in the New World, where the hand of power was scarcely felt, gave them hope; and thither the brothers turned their faces, seeking in the then wilds of Pennsylvania a habitation, where in process of time one of their offspring came to rule a State more powerful, prosperous, and happy than the ancient dynasty which they left behind.

In the intervals of farm labor which the winter season afforded, the son received the rudiments of an English and German education. In 1771, in his nineteenth year, he married Elizabeth Whitman, daughter of Adam Whitman, a highly respectable citizen of Reading, then an insignificant village. Thither shortly after his marriage he removed, and went into mercantile business in company with his father-in-law. In politics he was a Whig,—a party which had been formed in Pennsylvania to oppose the policy of the Proprietary Government, and which afterwards warmly espoused the cause of the Revolution. As a representative of that party he was chosen a member of the State Conference which met in Philadelphia on the 18th of June, 1776, and which in reality assumed the government of the Colony, called a convention to frame a new constitution, gave instructions for the guidance of its representatives in Congress, and authorized the calling out of troops for the Continental army. In all these proceedings he was a warm supporter of the popular cause.

He was then a captain of militia, and no sooner had the Conference in Philadelphia adjourned, than he hastened home to arouse the young men of his section to the importance of joining the national standard, at that time but feebly supported. A biographical sketch of this period of his life, published in the *United States Gazette*, furnishes the following graphic account of this summoning to arms: "It was in the twenty-third or twenty-fourth year of his age that General Joseph Hiester first rallied under the standard of his country, and took up arms in defence of her independence. It was a

gloomy period, at which many hearts, that had beaten high, were sickened and sad in the bosoms of those who now had melancholy forebodings of the issue of the contest in which they had cheerfully embarked — at a time when the great, the good, the peerless Washington had much cause to complain of the want of men and means to meet the enemies of his country. It was late in the year 1775, or early in 1776, that he, then a vigorous, powerful, influential young man, called together by beat of drum his fellow-townsmen of Reading, to take into consideration the alarming state and gloomy prospects of their country. Reading was then an inconsiderable town with a small population. Having convened about twenty-five or thirty, he explained to them the necessity there was, that they also should be up and doing in the cause of their common country. He stated that their beloved General was then believed to be in a most perilous situation in New Jersey; that his friends and fellow-soldiers were but few, while his foes and the foes of America were thickening and multiplying on every side. Having, so far as in his power, embarked the sympathies and aroused the patriotism of his hearers, he expressed his anxious desire to raise a company of volunteers, and march to the assistance of Washington. He was heard with attention and respect, and his proposition was kindly received. He then laid forty dollars on the drum-head, and said: ‘I will give this sum as a bounty, and the appointment of a sergeant to the first man who will subscribe to the articles of association to form a volunteer company to march forthwith and join the Commander-in-chief; and I also pledge myself to furnish the company with blankets and necessary funds for their equipment, and on the march!’ This promise he honorably and faithfully fulfilled. After our young captain had thus addressed his neighbors, they consulted together, and Matthias Babb stepped forward from among them, signed the articles and took the money from the drum-head. This example, and further advancements of smaller sums of money, induced twenty men on that evening to subscribe to the articles of association. Notices and invi-

tations were sent through the neighborhood; other meetings were held, and in ten days from the first meeting Captain Hiester had eighty men enrolled. They were promptly organized and ready to march to join the Commander-in-Chief."

The State authorities were engaged in forming what was known as a Flying Camp. The success which had attended the efforts of Captain Hiester in obtaining men made them desirous of inducing him to extend his efforts, and a regiment or battalion was shortly obtained. The men would have gladly made him their Colonel; but this he declined in favor of one who desired the position, as he did also that of Major, declaring that he would willingly serve in the ranks, if by such duty he could better aid their common country. He in good faith went among his men and urged the choice of the gentlemen who sought the positions, and by his magnanimous exertions in their behalf secured their election. Upon the arrival of the command at Elizabethtown, New Jersey, it was found that General Washington had moved to Long Island, whereupon considerable dissatisfaction was manifested, many of the men claiming that by the terms of enlistment they were not obliged to leave their own State. Hiester was determined to hasten forward to the support of Washington, whom he knew to be in sore need of help. "This," says the authority above cited, "was a critical and painful state of affairs. What was to be done? What could be done to induce the men to go forward? They were drawn up in a compact body, and Captain Hiester addressed them in such honest, suitable, and impassioned language, that they warmed as he warmed, they soon felt as he felt, and their hearts beat in unison with his. One who was present on that trying occasion, said to me, 'I wish to God, I could tell you what the Captain said, and how the men looked and felt; "You have marched thus far," said he, "resolved to fight your country's foes, and defend your homes and families: and will you now prove cowards and desert your country, when your country most wants your help? I would be ashamed to return home with you? I will go for-

ward, yes, if I go by myself, I will go and join General Washington as a volunteer, as a private. If you will not go I will go alone. But surely," said he, "you will not turn your backs upon the enemy, and leave your country at their mercy. I will try you once again — Fall in! Fall into your ranks, men! and those who are ready to fight for freedom and America, will, when the drum beats, and the word is given, march to join George Washington." The men fell in. They shouldered their muskets. The drums were beaten, and on the word "March!" the whole line, except three men, moved forward. Those three soon sprang into the ranks, three cheers were given, and they were forthwith on their march to Long Island.'"

That gallant Captain little knew the hard fate that was to await him in the fulfilment of his patriotic desires. His regiment joined the patriot army, and came often in conflict with the enemy, when many were wounded and killed. Finally Captain Hiester and most of his surviving men were taken prisoners, and he, with many other American officers, was confined on board the notorious prison-ship, the *Jersey*, where they were subjected to every indignity which refined cruelty could invent. British arms were dishonored, and the British name made hateful by the inhuman treatment here accorded. Jonathan Russell, one of the Commissioners on the part of the United States who concluded the treaty of Ghent, in an oration delivered on the 4th of July, 1800, at Providence, Rhode Island, delineated the horrors of that imprisonment in the following strain of patriotic frenzy: "But it was not," he says, "in the ardent conflicts of the field only that our countrymen fell; it was not the ordinary chances of war alone which they had to encounter. Happy indeed, and thrice happy were Warren, Montgomery, and Mercer; happy those other gallant spirits who fell with glory in the heat of battle distinguished by their country and covered with her applause. Every soul, sensible to honor, envies rather than compassionates their fate. It was in the dungeons of our inhuman invaders; it was in their loathsome and pestiferous

prison-ships, that the wretchedness of our countrymen still makes the heart bleed. It was there that hunger and thirst, and disease, and all the contumely cold-hearted cruelty could bestow, sharpened every pang of death. Misery there wrung every fibre that could feel before she gave the blow of grace which sent the sufferer to eternity. It is said that poison was employed. No — there was no such mercy there. There nothing was employed which could blunt the susceptibility to anguish, or which by hastening death could rob its agonies of a single pang. On board one only of these prison-ships above *eleven thousand* of our brave countrymen are said to have perished. She was called the *Jersey*. Her wreck still remains, and at low ebb presents to the world its accursed and blighted fragments. Twice in twenty-four hours the winds of heaven sigh through it, and repeat the groans of our expiring countrymen, and twice the ocean hides in her bosom those deadly and polluted ruins, which all her waters cannot purify. Every rain that descends washes from the unconsecrated bank the bones of those intrepid sufferers. They lie naked on the shore, accusing the neglect of their countrymen. How long shall gratitude and even piety deny them burial? They ought to be collected in one vast ossery, which shall stand a monument to future ages, of the two extremes of the human character; of that depravity which, trampling on the rights of misfortune, perpetrated cold and calculating murder on a wretched and defenceless prisoner, and that virtue which animated this prisoner to die a willing martyr for his country. Or rather, were it possible, there ought there to be raised a *colossal column* whose base, sinking to *hell*, should let the murderers read their *infamy* inscribed on it, and whose capital of *Corinthian* laurel ascending to *heaven* should show the sainted *Patriots* that they have triumphed. Deep and dreadful as the coloring of this picture may appear, it is but a faint and imperfect sketch of the original. You must remember a thousand unutterable calamities, a thousand instances of domestic as well as national anxiety and distress, which mock description. You ought to remember them,

you ought to hand them down in tradition to your posterity, that they may know the awful price their fathers paid for freedom."

From this prison-ship Captain Hiester was taken, and thrust into confinement in New York, where the want of food, and general harsh treatment of the captives, was scarcely a remove better than they had experienced on board the *Jersey*. He was here attacked with a low fever, and became so feeble and emaciated that he was obliged, in passing up and down stairs, to crawl on his hands and knees. After several months' imprisonment he was exchanged, and was set at liberty, having been plundered of his money and clothing. He immediately repaired to Reading, and after having regained his strength returned to the army. He arrived in time to participate in the battle of Germantown, and while engaged with a company of the enemy's horse, he received a wound in the head, but not of a dangerous nature. In the varied fortunes of the patriot army he continued to share until the close of the war, when, seeing the liberty of his country fully assured, he returned with joy to the bosom of his family.

He was chosen a member of the convention which assembled in Philadelphia in 1787 for the ratification of the Constitution of the United States, and in 1789 he was a member of the convention which framed the State Constitution of 1790. For several successive years, he was a member of the Legislature, where he was distinguished for his practical knowledge of affairs, and for his good sense in the duties of legislation. In 1799, after the removal of his uncle Daniel, who had previously represented the Berks district in Congress, to Maryland, he was elected a member of that body, to which he was regularly returned until 1805, and again from 1815 to 1821, a period of fourteen years. Before the expiration of his last term, he resigned to accept the nomination of Governor of Pennsylvania, tendered him by the Independent Republican party, supported by the Federalists. He was elected over his competitor, Governor Findlay, and served for one term of three years. "It is a fact well known," says

his biographer before quoted, "to the political and personal friends of General Hiester, that he was reluctantly induced to become a candidate for the office of Governor, and that he yielded his consent upon the express and well understood condition that he would serve but one period. It is equally well known that at the end of that period of service he resolutely refused again to permit the use of his name, although urged by partisans and by many friends to be a candidate."

His administration was characterized by great activity in promoting the growth and prosperity of the Commonwealth, and especially in pushing forward its internal improvements. The period was one of sharp political contest, and the disposition to attack those in power and call them in question for every offence, or conceived offence, had been exercised without license during the rule of his immediate predecessor. In alluding to this subject in his inaugural address he says: "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 wilful 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 and 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 disgraceful appellation of the Governor of a party."

As has already been noticed in the sketch of Governor Findlay, the enormous patronage at the disposal of the Executive had become very troublesome. Its dispensation had

actually become an object of dread to every one who approached it, and we find Governor Hiester calling the attention of the Legislature, among other subjects of reform, to the devising of some means of relief therefrom. "Permit me," he says, "to suggest to you, whether it would not be possible to devise some method of reducing the enormous power and patronage of the Governor, without impairing the other general features of our present excellent Constitution; and whether the annual sessions of the Legislature might not be shortened without detriment to the public good. . . . It also deserves serious consideration whether public improvements might not at this time be advantageously made, and domestic manufactures encouraged with success. *Above all it appears an imperative duty to introduce and support a liberal system of education connected with some general religious instruction.*"

At the expiration of his term of office he withdrew altogether from public employments, and sought that peace and quiet in private life to which a long period of public service had justly entitled him. He died on the 10th of June, 1832, in the eightieth year of his age, and was buried in the grounds of the German Reformed church at Reading. The attendance of the military, and other demonstrations of respect and attachment, which were promptly tendered, were declined, and he was followed to the grave by a great concourse of mourning relatives and fellow-citizens, without display or ostentation, in keeping with the republican simplicity which had marked the whole course of his long and useful life.

The last paragraph of his last annual message to the Legislature, that in which he took a final leave of all public employments, is so instinct with devotion and pathetic tenderness that it may properly form the conclusion to this memoir. "Having been," he says, "for nearly fifty years occasionally engaged in various highly responsible situations in the service of my country, 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 of repeating my fervent prayers to the Almighty Ruler of the Universe, under whose superintending influence it has attained to 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.”