

HISTORY  
OF  
BERKS COUNTY  
IN  
PENNSYLVANIA.

BY  
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ILLUSTRATED.

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PHILADELPHIA:  
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bold eminences in the surrounding country. And as we have men in the departments named, so have we in internal improvements. The most prominent in the railway system is G. A. Nicolls, he having come here when the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad was projected through the Schuylkill Valley, in 1836, and remained here ever since, a period covering fifty years. His entrance here was with the dawn of our substantial development through

the combination of iron, coal and steam, and he has been continuously connected with it in all its greatness from decade to decade till now.

Gustavus Anthony Nicolls was born April 3, 1817, at Abbey View, Thomastown, county of Kilkenny, Ireland. His father was Colonel William Dann Nicolls, of the English Royal Artillery, and his mother was Maria Graves, daughter of Anthony Graves, a landed proprietor in the county of Kilkenny, and they had issue three children,—the subject of this sketch; a son, William Jasper, born at Exeter, England, in 1824; and a daughter, Maria Anne, born at Woolwich in 1825. The Nicolls family is descended from John Nicolls, of Arran, in Strathmore, near Inverness, Scotland.

Mr. Nicolls was named after his uncle, General Gustavus Nicolls, of the Royal Engineers, and also intended for the military profession. With this end in view, he, during the early years of his boyhood, was educated under the personal supervision of his father, and then sent for some years to the Waterford Classical and Mathematical Academy, an institution distinguished for the scholarship of its pupils; after which he finished his education at

G. A. NICOLLS.—In the several departments of the business life of Reading, we have had and still have men who were or still are identified in the respective vocations in which they were or are now engaged on account of long continuous service. In banking, in merchandise, in manufactures and in newspaper publications their names stand out prominently like

the Wanstead Military College, near London. His proficiency in mathematics in all its various branches has been well attested by his successful career in later life as a civil engineer. Having been educated for the English military service, his father, immediately after the completion of his course of study, desired him to be sent to the East Indies, and in this behalf his uncle, Sir Jasper Nicolls, then commander-in-chief in India, promised to appoint him an aid-de-camp on his own personal staff. But, believing that the United States offered a better field for his talents and energy, he chose to emigrate to this country, and, accordingly, sailed from England in September, 1834. Upon arriving in Philadelphia, he studied law for a while in the office of Henry M. Phillips, Esq.

In April, 1835, Mr. Nicolls, then in his eighteenth year, received the appointment of rodman in the engineer corps of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad Company, and, in 1836, he was promoted to the position of assistant engineer, and given charge of finishing a section of railroad which lay between Douglassville and Exeter. In 1837 he was made principal assistant and stationed at Reading, and, in the year following, superintendent of transportation, which he held for eight years, till 1846. He was then appointed chief engineer and general superintendent of the company, and continued to discharge the duties of these two positions for thirteen years. The business of the road had by this time increased to such an extent that the two offices had to be separated, and Mr. Nicolls selected the latter. He served as general superintendent till February, 1871, when he was appointed to act also as president's assistant. This order obliged him to remove his residence from Reading to Philadelphia, where he continued to reside till May, 1877, when he returned to Reading. In 1873 he was elected second vice-president of the company, and, in 1875 and 1876, he was unanimously re-elected to that position. In 1877 the positions of first and second vice-presidents were abolished, and then Mr. Nicolls was elected president of the following branch-roads of this company: Reading and Columbia, East Pennsylvania, East Mahanoy, Allentown,

and Chester and Delaware River. In 1876 he was chosen president of the Susquehanna and Tide-Water Canal Company. These several positions he has since retained by annual re-election. His retention in them is undoubted evidence of his marked ability, energy and integrity in the discharge of his duties. During his long and unusual term of service, now covering a period of more than fifty years, he has seen the company advance from its very beginning into its present wonderful proportions. And he has ever been devoted to its interests and progress. His constancy is particularly prominent as a characteristic during his entire career as an official. And his system in the management of railroad affairs is equally recognizable, resulting in many great advantages to the company, and in safety to the people. During the destructive riots of July, 1877, at Reading, when the whole community was alarmed for its safety, and railroad employees were excited, dissatisfied and rebellious, he was fearless in occupying his prominent position at the passenger station and in giving valuable suggestions for the preservation of the company's property and for the movement of regular trains.

Besides the positions named, Mr. Nicolls was a director of the Reading Fire Insurance and Trust Company from the time of its organization in 1868 till 1875. In 1862 he was elected a trustee of the Charles Evans Cemetery Company, and he has continued to fill that office till the present time. He is also a director of the Schuylkill and Lehigh Railroad Company. During the year 1882 the "Reading, Marietta and Hanover Railroad"—a branch line of the Pennsylvania and Reading Railroad Company system—was completed mainly under his supervision. Mr. Nicolls was a charter member of the Philadelphia, Reading and Pottsville Telegraph Company. In the organization of the company in 1847 he was elected one of the board of managers and he has been re-elected annually till now. As a citizen of Reading he has always shown a strong interest in its material development and prosperity. Enterprises of various kinds have received his active encouragement. He assisted in erecting

here the cotton-factory and the steam-forge shortly after 1850. These two large and costly manufacturing establishments have been largely instrumental in building up the respective sections of Reading in which they are situated and have afforded almost constant employment to many working-people for the past thirty years.

The charitable work in Reading carried on by the "Reading Benevolent Society," has always received the aid of Mr. Nicolls. He served as president of the society for eleven years, from 1860 till the close of 1871. The Young Men's Christian Association has found in him a generous and constant contributor in its noble purpose of laboring for the improvement of young men. He filled the office of president of the association for over two years, from 1880 to 1882. Mr. Nicolls also acted as a manager of the Reading Dispensary and of the Reading Hospital for a number of years. He is now serving the "Home for Widows and Single Women of Reading," as chairman of its building committee in the erection of its handsome and commodious stone structure; and the "Reading Society of Natural Sciences," from the time of its organization in 1869 till its dissolution in 1884, received his earnest attention. During this time, one of its most active members—Mr. Hiram Hollenbush—a few years before his death, made for Mr. Nicolls a cabinet containing a beautiful and complete collection of all the various kinds of wood found in Berks County.

During the Civil War, Mr. Nicolls was thoroughly patriotic. He attended a number of public meetings, which were composed of prominent citizens without regard to political affiliations, and held in this critical period for the purpose of expressing sentiments favorable to the preservation of the Union; and he was constantly liberal in the encouragement of voluntary enlistment. When the State was threatened with an invasion in 1862, he enlisted in Company E, Eleventh Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia, commanded by Captain Charles H. Hunter and served as a corporal. This company was named after him, and known as "Nicolls Guards." A movement to signalize

the distinguished part which our county took in the late war has been a cherished object with him since its termination. In 1883 he prepared a suitable and superior design and suggested the centre of "Penn Square" as a proper place upon which to locate the monument, believing that patriotism should be grandly typified in the form of a "Soldiers' Monument" and be placed permanently in the most prominent place of our community so that the eyes of future generations could behold what this generation had done to commemorate the services and sacrifices of our people in behalf of preserving and perpetuating the Constitution and Union of our country. In political belief he has been identified with the Whig and the Republican parties. In 1864 the nomination for Congress was offered to him by the Republican party of the county, but he was obliged to decline it on account of his prominent business connections with the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad Company.

During the last forty years Mr. Nicolls has been a great traveler. In 1848 he made a journey of three months to and through the British Islands, having then visited all the places of importance. In 1856 he traveled with a party of friends through the southern portions of the United States, and also the Island of Cuba. Whilst sojourning in Cuba he addressed a series of interesting letters to the *Reading Times*, in which they were published, narrating the experiences of his party in that country, the sights observed, the impressions received, etc. In 1872 he visited all the countries in Continental Europe. In 1878 he again made an excursion to Europe, visiting, particularly, the Paris Exposition, England, Sweden and Russia. Some of his letters home were then published on account of their general interest and information. And in 1884 he crossed the ocean for a fourth time and spent several months in the British Islands.

Mr. Nicolls resided for a number of years at the southeast corner of Penn and Fourth Streets, Reading. In 1870 he began the erection of a handsome and commodious double two-story sand-stone residence, at the northwest corner of Walnut and Fourth Streets, being the

first costly improvement of this kind in that section of the city. The plans were prepared by him and the building was erected under his personal supervision. It was finished in 1871, and is even now, though fifteen years have elapsed, one of the finest and most tasteful homes in Reading.

For many years Mr. Nicolls was a vestryman of Christ Episcopal Church of Reading. He served as a member of the building committee which conducted the alterations of the edifice of this denomination from a brick building to the present beautiful and costly structure, the appearance of which, with its towering and graceful spire, is the most imposing of any church in the city of Reading. He ceased to be a vestryman in 1871. Throughout the course of his life he has been a consistent and devoted member of that branch of the Christian Church known as the Protestant Episcopal Communion of America and England.

In May, 1846, Mr. Nicolls was married to Rosa Catharine Muhlenberg, daughter of Hon. Henry A. Muhlenberg, who was for a number of years member of Congress from this district, also the first minister to Austria, and, at the time of his decease, in 1844, the candidate of the Democratic party for Governor of Pennsylvania. She died May 15, 1867. During her life she was highly esteemed for her intellectual superiority. She was distinguished for charity to the poor people of Reading. The Civil War awakened her patriotism; and her zeal for the soldiers who went from her native city placed her foremost in the movement which resulted in the creation of the first Ladies' Aid Society in the entire country. She was the president of this society from the beginning to the close of the war, and, as such, was particularly active in performing valuable services in behalf of our men who were away from their homes, by collecting useful materials and forwarding the same to them on the field of battle. Her kindness and devotion were highly appreciated by them, and many of the survivors of that great struggle, who returned and resided in this community, still speak of her in terms expressive of their highest regard.

In January, 1869, Mr. Nicolls was married to Annie Hall Muhlenberg, daughter of Dr. F. A. Muhlenberg, of Lancaster, Pa. They have issue one son, Frederick William Nicolls, who was born on February 7, 1870.

The motto of the Nicolls family is "Fide et Industria." Mr. Nicolls has ever kept it as the guiding rule of his life; and to it he attributes the success which he has realized on the one hand, and the confidence and esteem which he has received on the other.