LIVES

OF THE

GOVERNORS

OF

PENNSYLVANIA,

WITH THE

INCIDENTAL HISTORY OF THE STATE,

FROM

1609 TO 1873.

BY

WILLIAM C. ARMOR.

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DAVID RITTENHOUSE PORTER,

GOVERNOR UNDER THE CONSTITUTION OF 1838.

January 15, 1839, *to January* 21, 1845.

DAVID RITTENHOUSE PORTER was born near Norristown, Montgomery County, Pa., on the 31st of October, 1788. His grandfather, Robert Porter, emigrated, early in the last century, from the north of Ireland. The farm where he lived is situated about nine miles north-west of Londonderry, near the sea-coast. The land, together with several adjoining farms, is yet owned, after the lapse of more than a century and a half, by those of his own name and blood. One of their number, the Rev. J. L. Porter, D. D., LL. D., Professor of Sacred Literature in the College at Belfast, has attained a high position as a preacher, an author, and a man of letters, especially in the Department of Oriental Literature. Andrew Porter, the father of David R., was born at the homestead in Montgomery County, in 1743, and attained distinction as a Revolutionary soldier. In boyhood he manifested much fondness for mathematics, and early attracted the notice of that profound scholar Dr. David Rittenhouse, under whose advice he opened an English and mathematical school in Philadelphia. The Institution had attained a widespread reputation for excellence when the Revolutionary War broke out, and its principal, obedient to the calls of patriotism, laid aside the robes of the master for the garb of the soldier. He was at first commissioned a Captain of Marines, but at his own request was soon afterwards transferred to the artillery. He subsequently became Colonel of the Fourth Regiment of Artillery, and was engaged in the battles of Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, and Germantown. At Ger-

mantown nearly his entire command was cut down at his side. He received on the field the thanks of Washington for his soldierly conduct at Princeton; and when Lafayette was wounded at Brandywine, Captain Porter was near him. At the special request of Washington, though reluctant to be withdrawn from active service, he was sent to Philadelphia to prepare the material for the siege of Yorktown. At the conclusion of the war he was offered the chair of Mathematics in the University of Pennsylvania, but declined it, humorously remarking to the committee who called on him, that, having so long commanded men, he could not go back to flogging boys. From 1784 to 1787, he was engaged by appointment of the Supreme Executive Council of the State, in conjunction with Dr. Rittenhouse, Dr. Ewing, Mr. Madison, and others, in determining the lines between Pennsylvania and the States of Virginia, Ohio, and New York. Some of the most difficult parts of this useful work were performed by him. In 1809, he was appointed, by Governor Snyder, Surveyor-General, an office which he held up to the day of his death in 1813, having in the meantime declined two appointments tendered him by President Madison, that of Brigadier General in the Army, and that of Secretary of War.

Several of the sons of Andrew Porter attained to eminence. Robert served in the Revolutionary War, practised law in Philadelphia, and became President Judge of the Berks, Lehigh, and Northampton District. William and Andrew, twin-brothers, became reputable merchants, one in Baltimore, and the other in New Orleans. John E. was a brilliant advocate, but resigned the law for medicine, which he practised with much success in North Carolina. George B. was a graduate of the Law School at Litchfield, and became the rival of James Buchanan and Judge Moulton C. Rogers at the Lancaster Bar. He was appointed by General Jackson Governor of the Territory of Michigan. James M. settled at Easton, and became an eminent lawyer; was a member of the Constitutional Convention of 1838, over which he presided during a part of its sittings, became

President Judge of the Dauphin, Lebanon, and Schuylkill District, was Secretary of War under President Tyler, and was subsequently elected President Judge of the Wayne, Pike, Monroe, and Carbon District.

The subject of this sketch, David R., received his early training at an academy in Norristown, where the branches of a good English education, mathematics, and the elementary classical studies were successfully taught. With his brothers George and James, he was here pursuing a course preparatory to entering Princeton College, when the buildings of that institution were destroyed by fire, and the purpose of a collegiate course was abandoned. When the father was appointed Surveyor-General, he took his son David with him to the seat of government as his assistant. He was accompanied by a young man from the same neighborhood, who likewise became Governor of the State, Francis R. Shunk. While thus employed, the son also studied law, with the intention of entering upon its practice at Harrisburg; but the labor and confinement of these double duties were too severe, and his health was so much impaired, as was thought, to preclude the possibility of his pursuing any sedentary employment. He decided, therefore, to seek more active occupation, and removed to the county of Huntingdon, where he engaged in the manufacture of iron.

The Messrs. Dorsey then owned that magnificent estate known as the Barree Forges, which yet remains in possession of their descendants, and has continued for nearly three-quarters of a century to be the seat of a large and generous hospitality. Mr. Porter was first employed by them for a year as a clerk, and during the following year was made manager of their works. Having thus acquired an acquaintance with the business, he embarked in it on his own account, in partnership with Edward Patton, on Spruce Creek; but so great was the depression into which all branches of manufactures fell for some years succeeding the war of 1812, that their enterprise was not successful. He continued, however, through life to take a deep interest in all that related to

the business, and, at the period of his death, it is doubtful whether any man in the State so thoroughly and practically understood the subject of ores, the location of their deposit, the mode of combining them, and the species of fuel best adapted to reducing them, as did he.

He was, in 1819, elected a member of the Assembly from Huntingdon County, and was returned for the following year, having as a colleague John Scott, father of the present Senator of the United States. He here formed the acquaintance of some of the most eminent citizens of the Commonwealth, many of whom remained his warm personal friends through life.

On retiring from the Legislature, he was appointed by the Governor Prothonotary and Clerk of the several courts of Huntingdon County, and to these were afterwards added the offices of Recorder of Deeds and Register of Wills. There was then little business in these offices, and the pecuniary returns were meagre. He had in 1820 married Josephine, daughter of William McDermott, who had emigrated from Scotland for the purpose of manufacturing steel by a new process, and who was one of the pioneers in that art. Mrs. Porter for a few years acted as her husband's clerk, recording deeds and wills at home, while he transacted the business in public, and large volumes in her handwriting continue to be shown to strangers and visitors to the town, written so clearly and beautifully, and with such perfect accuracy, as to excite admiration.

During his residence in Huntingdon, Mr. Porter devoted much of his time to the public interests. He gave some attention to agriculture, and distributed among the farming classes such information as the best writers furnished. He introduced among his neighbors, without profit to himself, the once famous Durham cattle. From New York, Virginia, and Michigan, he brought the best horses which those States produced. His chief efforts, however, were directed to the public improvements of the State. Having carefully studied the plans which Governor Clinton had proposed for New York,

his pen was often employed in calling the attention of the people to the importance of executing similar works in Pennsylvania, in order to develop and carry to market its vast resources and preserve its relative importance in the Union.

In 1836 he was elected a member of the State Senate, from the district then composed of the counties of Huntingdon, Mifflin, Juniata, Perry, and Union. The soundness of his judgment and the readiness of his understanding made him an acknowledged leader. Few subjects were broached on which he did not either report or speak. Legislation upon the subject of the public works bore largely the impress of his views. As a writer he was concise, forcible, and even elegant, and as a speaker, he was clear, pointed, and eminently practical. His speeches were usually very brief, and in defence of this habit he was accustomed to plead the practice of Jefferson and Franklin. His advice to young lawyers and debaters was especially to study brevity. In this respect, he differed widely from his brothers, Governor Porter of Michigan, and Judge Porter of Easton, both of whom were more diffuse, and, it must be added, acquired higher reputations for forensic ability.

In 1838, Mr. Porter was elected Governor of Pennsylvania, and in 1841 was re-elected by a majority almost four times as great as that given at his first election. His inauguration as Governor occurred on the 15th of January, 1839. The opening paragraphs of his inaugural address present in an admirable manner the views by which he proposed to be guided, and the changed relations that the Executive was made to hold by the new Constitution then about to go into effect. "Deeply impressed," he says, "with a sense of gratitude to my fellow-citizens, for the distinguished mark of confidence reposed in me, I enter upon the arduous and responsible duties of Governor of Pennsylvania, with a full determination, according to the abilities given me, to do my duty faithfully.

"A compliance with custom would seem to require of me, when assuming the duties of the Executive, in pursuance of

the choice of the people, to lay before them some of the leading principles upon which the administration of the Government will be conducted. I do this the more willingly, because, in a republic, the intercourse between the people and their public functionaries should be candid, frank, and unreserved.

"Educated with the highest veneration and greatest affection for the men and principles of the American Revolution, it will always give me pleasure to refer to the one as examples, and to the other as guides in the performance of duty. Admitting to its fullest extent the importance of preserving unsullied the inestimable and inalienable right of the people to govern themselves, I shall ever give my best efforts to prevent encroachments upon that right. So long as man continues the being he is, error must be expected both in his individual and collective conduct. He may be expected to err upon sudden impulses; but an intelligent community will rarely fall deliberately into error. Hence the deliberate expression of the people's will should always furnish the rule of conduct to those who represent them in public stations.

"A new era has arrived in our Commonwealth. Our first Constitution, formed amidst the storms and troubles of the revolutionary conflict, was found in practice not to answer the expectations under which it was framed. In fourteen years thereafter it was entirely new modelled by the Constitution of 1790, an instrument framed by men of great talents and eminent worth; but the plan of government was always considered by no small portion of the people as not sufficiently democratic in its details. After repeated attempts to procure revision, a majority of our citizens who voted on the question, in 1835, decided that a convention should be called, to revise, alter and amend the Constitution of the Commonwealth. In pursuance of this determination of the people, a convention assembled, and after a long and arduous session, closed their labors on the 22d of February last, and the amendments agreed upon by that body have been ratified and adopted by the people. It is under this amended Constitu-

tion that it has been my lot to be called upon to administer the duties of the Executive. This instrument gives to popular suffrage the decision of many appointments heretofore vested in the Executive, and changes the duration of the judicial tenure from that of good behavior to a term of years. It shortens the period of eligibility to the Executive chair, and reduces the senatorial term; enlarges the right of suffrage, and changes other provisions, all of which are important in the conduct of the government of the State. Approving as I did of the amendments in the aggregate, and having sanctioned them by my vote at the late election, it will afford me great pleasure to assist in carrying them out in practice by a strict adherence to their principles."

The subject of State interest, which at this period overshadowed every other, was the prosecution of the public works. Vast sums had been expended, and strong anxiety was felt to have the main lines completed at the earliest practicable moment. A considerable part of his first Annual Message to the Legislature was devoted to this subject. The concluding sentiments of that paper, considering the period at which they were written, are remarkable, and illustrate the comprehensiveness of his views. "I cannot," he says, "close this brief reference to our system of public improvements without inviting the attention of the Legislature to two subjects, which, though not immediately connected with the leading object of this communication, are yet so essentially necessary to the full fruition of the benefits to be derived from our main lines of canals and railroads between the eastern and western sections of the Commonwealth, as to awaken the earnest solicitude of every true Pennsylvanian. I allude to the removal of the obstructions to steamboat navigation in the Alleghany, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers from Pittsburg to the Gulf of Mexico, and from Pittsburg up the Alleghany as far as the same may be found practicable by the survey authorized under direction of the general Government, *and to the construction of a continuous railroad from the city of Pittsburg through or near the capitals of Ohio, Indiana,*

and Illinois to some point on the Mississippi River at or near St. Louis."

The sentiment of the words in italics was made, at the time of its delivery, the subject of wide-spread comment and no little ridicule; but the writer of it lived long enough to be able to travel in a railroad-car, without change, from the seaboard to the banks of the Mississippi.

The messages and other public documents of Governor Porter were generally written by an amanuensis. His habit was to pronounce the words aloud, slowly and deliberately, as he paced his apartment, and when thus taken down, they were ready for the press with scarcely a correction.

One of his apprehensions in regard to the working of our State Constitution arose from the frequent encroachments made by the Legislative power on the other branches of the Government. The Judiciary has frequently experienced this in Acts of Assembly granting new trials, or giving a construction to written documents, or changing the effect of liens of record; and there are few better specimens of judicial writing than that in which it was rebuked in the case of De Chastellux *vs.* Fairchild.* Governor Porter resisted with a firm hand the encroachments made on his own prerogatives, and the reader will not go far for evidence of this in turning over the pages of any of the Legislative journals from 1839 to 1845. As an example, the following reply to the Senate, which had made an inquiry into his motives for certain official conduct, may be adduced:

"In reply to your resolution of the 6th instant, I have to inform the Senate, that, in compliance with the 'resolution to suspend the work on the Gettysburg Railroad,' prompt measures were taken to ascertain 'the whole amount of claims on the line, on estimates, or for retained percentage; also for salaries of officers and agents, for labor, or for any other purpose;' and that during the present week the reports of the officers charged with that duty have been received.

* 3 Harris's Reports, page 18.

"These are all the material facts touching the subject of your inquiry, which it is within the power of the Executive to communicate to the Senate. They fully answer the call made on me by the resolution, unless in requiring me to state 'why the delay in procuring the money and paying the contractors has taken place,' the Senate intended to require me to communicate the reasons or motives by which I have been governed in relation to this business. If such was the design of the Senate, I must decline to comply with its requisition. Being an independent and co-ordinate branch of the Government, I do not recognize its right to make such a demand, and also because the time and manner of advertising for, and procuring loans are duties belonging exclusively to the Executive, in which the two Houses of the Legislature have neither responsibility nor share. Claiming to understand and respect the rights of the Senate, I shall studiously avoid any infringement upon them; and claiming also to understand the rights and duties of the Executive, under the Constitution, I shall take especial care that they shall not be invaded, and will maintain them to the utmost of my abilities. Independence and harmony of action only can be preserved by strictly observing the rights of all departments of the Government. This course I shall pursue, at all times, without deviation."

The courage, energy, and strong will thus displayed gave great vigor to his administration, and compelled respect even from his opponents. In his appointment of judges, then one of the most responsible duties of the Executive, he exhibited much discrimination, as the reader will discover, who reflects on the names of Burnside, Rogers, King, Bell, Lewis, Thompson, Black, Woodward, Campbell, Conyngham, Parsons, Eldred, Church, and others,— many of whom were little known to the public when they received commissions at his hands, and some of whom have since exerted strong influence in our national affairs.

Governor Porter took much interest in the success of the system of Common Schools, then in its infancy, and having

appointed Francis R. Shunk superintendent, devoted with him much time in resolving the numerous and difficult questions which then came up from the County officers for decision.

His efforts to sustain the credit of the State and to secure the payment of interest on the public debt drew upon him national attention, and were frequently noticed in Europe, where many of the obligations of the State were held. By his recommendation the Act of 1840 was passed, requiring the interest on the State debt to be paid in specie or its equivalent. One of his last acts, as Governor, was the suppression of the riots which occurred in Philadelphia in 1844, and the courage and decision displayed on his taking command of the military in person were generally commended and long remembered by men of all parties. Both branches of the City Council, then opposed to his administration, honored him with an expression of their thanks, and a resolution unanimously passed by those bodies was presented to him in person, accompanied with an address by the Mayor of the City.

Having completed, in 1845, the longest term as Governor allowed by the new Constitution, he retired from public life, and returned to his favorite pursuit of making iron. The adaptation of anthracite coal to the manufacture of this metal was then almost unknown, and having given much reflection to the subject, and made many practical experiments, he erected at Harrisburg, at a large cost, the first anthracite furnace built in that portion of the State. The experiment was successful, and it was followed by numerous others in various sections, much to the profit of their owners and to the advantage of the public revenues. He took pleasure in conducting the affairs of this establishment, and in advancing the art, by explaining and illustrating to visitors the improvements which he had introduced.

Few men ever had more ardent friends or returned their friendship with more cordial warmth than did David R. Porter. It was a common remark that he had never turned his back on a friend or forgotten him in a difficulty. With

those whom he distrusted, he maintained no intercourse whatever, and this sometimes obtained for him the character of a resentful man; but the truth was far otherwise, for no man ever possessed a more forgiving temper; and though his abhorrence of insincerity frequently tinged his manner with reserve and coldness, thousands of men in all parts of the State had sounded the depths of his large and generous heart and knew well its warm attachments and generous sympathies. The greatest errors of his life were lending pecuniary credit to those who had been unfortunate, and in being influenced by the tear of sorrow to pardon some offender against the law, whom other men would have sternly punished.

In the ordinary intercourse of life, his manner was calm and self-possessed, and his words were notably few; but his conversation was frequently pervaded by a quiet humor which made it attractive, especially to the young. His remarks were so pointed, his memory so clear, and his information so accurate and comprehensive, as to make his conversation especially instructive on many topics least treated in books: such as the courses of streams and mountain chains, and the nature of mineral deposits; the progress of legislation, the changes of political parties, and the characteristics of the different races by whom the country was settled. Respecting the history of the constitutions, both State and National, he was profoundly informed. There was scarcely a clause in any of those instruments which he had not thoroughly investigated with the eye both of a lawyer and a man of business. For this reason he was much consulted on important State legislation even after his retirement to private life.

He was for many years the friend of the late President Buchanan, and the correspondence which they maintained for a long period shows how frequently that statesman consulted him on questions of national interest, and how greatly he relied upon his judgment.

There was another public man with whom his intimacy was even closer, — Gen. Sam. Houston of Texas, whose career as a military commander, an executive officer, and effective ora-

tor, is yet fresh in the public recollection. It appears to have commenced on the election of General Houston to the Senate of the United States, and to have grown stronger as age advanced, until death cut it short. On going to, or returning from Washington, the General frequently spent a few days with his friend at Harrisburg, and for a long period scarcely a week elapsed without a letter passing between them. When Gen. Houston was nominated as an independent candidate for Governor of Texas, Mr. Porter strongly urged him to accept the nomination, for the purpose of strengthening the hands of the Union men of the South, and, in opposition to the belief of most persons, predicted his election. The prediction was realized and the aged hero stood manfully by his patriotic principles as a friend of the Union until overpowered by a rebel legislature and driven from office. On his election as Governor, Gen. Houston invited Mr. Porter to visit him in Texas, that he might have the advantage of the practical knowledge and judgment of the latter respecting the most favorable route for a railroad through Texas to the Pacific coast, the Texas route being regarded by both as the best for the great national thoroughfare. The invitation was accepted, and several months were spent determining the most feasible direction for locating it, and in organizing a company for its construction. These efforts, it is believed, would have been successful had they not been brought to a sudden termination in the fall of 1860, by the secession of the Southern States.

Mr. Porter returned to his home in Harrisburg, and contributed his influence to sustain the Government in the fierce conflict which had commenced. He scouted the doctrine of secession, and maintained, as he had long done, in its fullest extent, the maxim of Jackson, "The Union must and shall be preserved." To encourage others, he shouldered his musket at the age of more than seventy years, and with the young men of the town joined in military drill. He rejoiced greatly over the success of the Union arms, and was much gratified that one of his sons, General Horace Porter, had borne an

honorable part in many battles. When, however, the course of the national administration failed to meet his approval, he was decided in expressing his condemnation, and in maintaining that the South must be brought back to a whole Constitution and not to a broken one — a distinction likely to be misunderstood, in a time of popular excitement, but to the danger of being so misunderstood he was entirely indifferent.

During the winter of 1867, while attending at night a meeting of his church, he contracted a severe cold. While others regarded the attack as light, he believed that it would prove fatal, and began to prepare for the approaching change. During the succeeding summer he was able to walk out, but in the beginning of August his strength declined. With great composure and even cheerfulness, he arranged several matters of business and conversed calmly of his approaching end. On being asked how he felt on the near prospect of death, he said: "I have obtained perfect peace. I am not conscious of a doubt or a fear." On the 6th of August, surrounded by several children and a devoted wife, his hands having been folded on his breast, he thanked those about him for their kindness and dutifulness, and composed himself as if to fall asleep. As one and another passage of Scripture was repeated, he expressed his assent, until the pulse became still, and the aged heart ceased to beat. He had passed away as gently as a child falls to sleep in its mother's arms. The public business was, at the request of the Governor of the Commonwealth, generally suspended. Large numbers of citizens came from every section of the State to pay to his memory the last sad tribute of their respect. His remains were deposited in the beautiful cemetery which lies within sight of the scenes of his most useful labors, where a simple monument truthfully records that he was a man of large influence for many years in the affairs of his native State.