

CENTENNIAL BIOGRAPHY.

MEN OF MARK

OF

CUMBERLAND VALLEY, PA.

1776—1876.

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## GEORGE CHAMBERS, LL. D.



HE father of the subject of this sketch, Benjamin Chambers, was born in the year 1775, and was a son of Col. Benjamin Chambers, the founder of Chambersburg. When a youth of but twenty years, he enlisted in the company of his brother, Captain James Chambers, and marched with it to Boston. Soon after he joined the army he was commissioned a captain, and in that rank fought at the battles of Long Island, Brandywine, and Germantown, with credit and gallantry. During the retreat of the army from Long Island, the Pennsylvania troops were assigned to the distinguished but hazardous honour of covering the movement. While assisting in this delicate and perilous manœuvre, Captain Chambers had the great good fortune to arrest the attention of General Washington, win his commendation and receive from him, as a signal token of his approbation, a handsome pair of silver-mounted pistols, which have always been treasured as a precious heir-loom in the family, having recently been bequeathed to Benjamin Chambers Bryan, a great-grandson of the original donee.

But the diseases of camp and the rigours of military life compelled Captain Chambers to retire from the army; just at what period of the struggle is not definitely known. Although no longer engaged in regular military service, his skill and experience and great personal courage made him the captain and leader in many expeditions against the Indians, whose savage and bloody forays upon the settlements of Bedford and Huntingdon counties were constantly creating great consternation and alarm.

At the conclusion of the treaty of peace with England he became extensively engaged in the manufacture of iron, and was the first to make iron castings in the country.

Influenced by the same enlightened liberality which characterized his father, he donated, in the year 1796, two lots of ground in Chambersburg as a site for an academy. A charter was procured in 1797, and shortly afterwards a suitable building was erected, and a select school organized and opened under the tuition of James Ross, whose Latin Grammar for many years maintained its distinguished position, without a rival, in the colleges and seminaries of our land.

Captain Chambers left upon record, among the last business acts of his life, his solemn testimony to the importance and value of education,

by earnestly enjoining upon his executors, in his will, that they should have all his minor children liberally educated. This betokened a zeal for learning that was certainly very rare in that day. He died in 1813, crowned with the esteem, respect, and love of the community for whose welfare and prosperity he had taxed his best energies, and to whose development he had devoted the labour of a lifetime.

George Chambers, his oldest son, was born in Chambersburg, on the 24th day of February, A. D., 1786. It was not unlikely that such a father would put George to his books while very young. This seems to have been so. He must have been taught to read and write, and have acquired the other rudiments of a common English education, at a very early age; for when he was but ten he began the study of Latin and Greek in the classical school of James Ross. He subsequently entered the Chambersburg Academy and became the pupil of Rev. David Denny, an eloquent, learned, and much revered Presbyterian clergyman. He was ambitious and studious, and had made such progress in the ancient languages and mathematics that in October, 1802; he was able to pass from the academy into the Junior Class at Princeton College. He graduated from that institution in 1804, with high honour, in a class of forty-five, among whom were Thomas Hartley Crawford, Theodore Frelinghuysen, Joseph R. Ingersoll, Samuel L. Southard, and others who rose to distinguished eminence at the bar, in the pulpit, and in the councils of the nation.

He chose the law as his profession, and entered upon its study with William M. Brown, Esq., in Chambersburg. Having spent a year with him, he became a student in the office of Judge Duncan, in Carlisle, then in the zenith of his great fame. Having passed through the customary *curriculum*, he was admitted to the bar and sworn as a counsellor in the courts of Cumberland county, in the year 1807.

Shortly afterwards, he returned to Chambersburg and commenced the practice of his profession. When he entered the arena, he found the bar crowded with eminent and learned lawyers. Duncan, Tod, Riddle, and the elder Watts practiced there and monopolized the business. With such professional *athletes*, already crowned with the laurels of the profession, and clad in armor that had been tempered and polished by the lucubrations of more than twenty years, it seemed a hard, indeed an almost impossible, task for a young and inexperienced man to compete.

Mr. Chambers, however, courted notoriety by no adventitious aids. Indeed, he thought so little of all the usual methods of inviting public attention, that it is related of him that he dispensed with "*the shingle*,"

that ornament of the office-shutter which the newly-fledged lawyer is so apt to regard as an indispensable beacon to guide the footsteps of anxious clients. Nor did he advertise his professional pretensions in either card or newspaper. He was quite content to recognize in the law a jealous mistress, who would be satisfied with nothing less than the undivided homage of heart and mind.

His professional career was not distinguished by rapid success at first. Like almost all who have attained the highest honours at the bar, his *novitiate* was severe. He found the first steps of his journey toward eminence beset with difficulties and full of discouragements. After weary years of waiting, success came at last—as it must always come to true merit. When it did come—and, perhaps, it came as soon as it was deserved—he was prepared to meet its imperious demands.

Mr. Chambers had a mind most admirably adapted to the law. It was acute, logical and comprehensive, of quick perception, with strong powers of discrimination, and possessed of rare ability to grasp and hold the true points of a case.

Added to these natural abilities was the discipline of a thorough education, supplemented by a varied fund of knowledge acquired by extensive reading, which ranged far beyond the confines of the literature of his profession.

Besides all this, he possessed, in a most eminent degree, that crowning ornament of all mental stature, *good common sense*—without which the most shining talents avail but little.

It is not surprising, therefore, when the opportune time came that was to give him the ear of the court, that he should attract attention. From this time his success was assured, and his progress to the head of the bar steady and unvarying. This ascendancy he easily maintained during his entire subsequent professional life. Not only was he the acknowledged chief of his own bar, but also the recognized peer of the first lawyers of the state.

From 1816 to 1851, when he retired from active practice, his business was immense and very lucrative. He was retained in every case of importance in his own county, and tried many cases in adjoining counties.

He was well read in all the branches of the law, but he especially excelled in the land law of Pennsylvania. He had completely mastered it, and could walk with sure and unfaltering step through all its intricate paths. His preparation was laborious and thorough. He trusted nothing to chance, and had no faith in lucky accidents, which constitute the sheet-anchor of hope to the sluggard. He identified

himself with his client, and made his cause his own, when it was just. He sought for truth by the application of the severest tests of logic, and spared no pains in the vindication of the rights of his clients. He was always listened to with attention and respect by the courts, and whenever he was overruled it was with a respectful dissent.

The writer of this tribute\* came to the bar after Mr. Chambers had retired from it, and cannot, therefore, speak of him as an advocate, from personal knowledge. But tradition, to whose generous care the reputation of even the greatest lawyers has too uniformly been committed, has fixed his standard high. His diction was pure and elegant; his statement of facts lucid; his reasoning, stripped of all false and vulgar ornaments, was severe and logical; his manner earnest and impressive, and, when inspired by some great occasion, his speech could rise upon steady pinions into the higher realms of oratory.

His influence with juries is said to have been immense. This arose in part, doubtless, from their unbounded confidence in his sincerity and integrity; for he was one of those old-fashioned professional gentlemen who stubbornly refused to acknowledge the obligation of the professional ethics which teach that a lawyer must gain his client's cause at all hazards and by any means. While he was distinguished for unfaltering devotion to his client, and an ardent zeal in the protection of his interest, he was not less loyal to truth and justice. When he had given all his learning and his best efforts to the preparation and presentation of his client's case, he felt that he had done his whole duty. He would as soon have thought of violating the Decalogue as of achieving victory by artifice and sinister means. His professional word was as sacred as his oath, and he would have esteemed its intentional breach as a personal dishonour. He despised professional charlatanism in all its forms, and had he come in contact with its modern representative, he would have been his abhorrence.

Washington College, Pennsylvania, manifested its appreciation of his legal learning and personal worth by conferring upon him the degree of LL. D. in the year 1861. This honour, entirely unsolicited and unexpected by him, was a spontaneous mark of distinction, as creditable to the distinguished literary institution that bestowed it as it was well earned by him who received it.

Mr. Chambers having determined, in early manhood, to devote himself with an undivided fidelity to the study and practice of the law, and to rely upon that profession as the chief architect of his fortune

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\* J. McDowell Sharpe, Esq.

and his fame, very seldom could be enticed to embark upon the turbulent sea of politics. His tastes and habits of thought ran in a different channel. Office-seeking and office-holding were uncongenial pursuits. The coarse vulgarity and bitter wranglings of the "*hustings*" shocked his sensitive nature. Indeed, no one could be less of a politician, in the popular acceptance of that term. He was as much superior to the tricks of the political intriguer as truth is superior to falsehood. His native dignity of character, robust integrity, and self respect, united to an unbounded contempt for meanness, lifted him so high above the atmosphere of the demagogue, that he knew absolutely nothing of its undercurrents of knavery and corruption.

But in 1832, at the earnest solicitation of his party, he became a candidate for Congress in the district composed of the counties of Adams and Franklin, and was elected by a majority of about eight hundred. He served through the Twenty-third Congress, the first session of which, commonly called "the Panic Session," commenced on the 2d of December, 1833. The most conspicuous and distinguished men of the nation were members, and the Congress itself the most eventful and exciting that had convened since the adoption of the Constitution.

Mr. Chambers was again a candidate and elected to the Twenty-fourth Congress by a greatly increased majority, and at its termination peremptorily declined a re-election.

During his congressional career he maintained a high and respectable position among his compeers. He was not a frequent speaker, but his speeches, carefully prepared, closely confined to the question under discussion, and full of information, always commanded the attention of the House.

He served on the Committee on the Expenditures in the Department of War, on the Committee on Naval Affairs, on the Committee on Private Land Claims, and on the Committee on Rules and Orders in the House. To the discharge of these public duties he gave the same industry, care and ability which always characterized the management of his affairs in private life. He was a conscientious public servant, zealous for the interests of his immediate constituents, and careful about the welfare and honour of the nation.

In 1836, Mr. Chambers was elected a delegate from Franklin county to the Convention to revise and amend the Constitution of Pennsylvania. This body convened in Harrisburg on the 2d day of May, 1837, and its membership was largely composed of the foremost lawyers and best intellects of the State.

Mr. Chambers was appointed a member of the committee to which

was referred the Fifth Article of the Constitution, relative to the judiciary—by all odds the most important question before the Convention.

The controversy over this article was bitter and protracted, between the advocates of a tenure during good behaviour and the advocates of a short tenure for the judges. Mr. Chambers opposed any change in this respect of the old Constitution, and throughout the various phases of the angry discussion stood firmly by his convictions.

On the 12th of April, 1851, Governor Johnston commissioned Mr. Chambers as a Justice of the Supreme Court, to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Judge Burnside. He sat upon the Bench from this time until the first Monday of the following December, when under the amended Constitution, the new judges received their commissions. He was nominated by the Whig State Convention in 1851 for this office, but was defeated along with his colleagues on the same ticket, having received, however, from the voters of his native county, and of the adjoining counties, a very complimentary endorsement.

During the time Mr. Chambers was a member of the Supreme Court, he prepared and delivered quite a number of opinions, written in a perspicuous and agreeable style, and exhibiting his usual exhaustive research and extensive legal knowledge. Some of these opinions are interesting to the professional reader, and can be found in the fourth volume of Harris's State Reports. The most notable among them are the cases of *Baxby v. Linah*, in which the effect of a judgment of a sister State in the tribunals of this State is elaborately discussed; *Louden v. Blythe*, involving the question of the conclusiveness of a magistrate's certificate of the acknowledgment by *femes covert* of deeds and mortgages; and *Wilt against Snyder*, in which the doctrine of negotiable paper is learnedly examined.

Mr. Chambers never occupied any other public official stations; but in private life he held many places of trust and responsibility, giving to the faithful discharge of the duties they imposed upon him his best services, and to all enterprises for the advancement of the public good, and the promotion of education and morality, liberally of his substance.

In 1814 he was elected a Manager of the Chambersburg Turnpike Road Company, and afterwards its President, which positions he filled for half a century.

In the same year he was actively employed in organizing and establishing the Franklin County Bible Society, was elected one of its officers, and served as such for many years.

He was always a steadfast and consistent friend of the cause of

temperance. By precept, by example, and by strong and eloquent advocacy of its principles, he strove to correct public sentiment on this subject, and to arouse it to a proper appreciation of the horrors of intemperance. He assisted in the organization of a number of societies throughout the country, to which he gave freely such pecuniary aid as they required, and before which he was a frequent speaker. The seed which he thus so diligently planted ripened into a rich harvest of blessed results, the influence of which remains until this day.

In 1815 Mr. Chambers was elected a Trustee of the Chambersburg Academy, and afterwards President of the Board, resigning the trust after a tenure of forty-five years, because of the increasing infirmities of age.

In the same year he was chosen one of the Trustees of the Presbyterian Church of Chambersburg, and in due time became President of the Board, from which he retired in July, 1864.

He was also for many years a Director of the Bank of Chambersburg, in 1836 was chosen its President, and annually re-elected until pressing business engagements compelled him to decline re-election.

The mention of these unostentatious but useful and responsible employments is not improper here, for it serves to illustrate how Mr. Chambers was esteemed in the community where he passed his entire life.

At the time of his death he was the largest land owner in Franklin county. He had a passion for agriculture, studied it as a science, and gave much of his leisure to the direction of its practical operations. His knowledge of soils, and of the fertilizers best adapted to them, was extensive and accurate. His familiarity with the boundaries of his farms, and the varieties of timber trees growing upon them, and exactly upon what part of the land they could be found, was so remarkable as to astonish his tenants frequently, and to put them at fault. He was not churlish in imparting all his knowledge about agricultural affairs to his neighbours, and he was ever ready at his own expense to lead the van in every experiment or enterprise which gave a reasonable promise of increasing the knowledge or lightening the labours of the farmer. For the purpose of exciting a generous emulation among the farmers, and facilitating their opportunity for gaining increased knowledge of their business, although at quite an advanced age, he expended much time and labour in organizing and putting into successful operation the first Agricultural Society of Franklin county, which he served as president for one year.

Mr. Chambers was proud of his native state, and a devout wor-



shipper of the race whose blood flowed in his veins. These sentiments were deepened and strengthened by a diligent study of provincial history and an extensive personal acquaintance with the illustrious men whose lives adorned the first years of the Commonwealth. The knowledge which he thus acquired brought to him the sting of disappointment; for his sense of justice was wounded by the almost contemptuous historical treatment of the claims and deeds of that race which, more than all others, had helped to lay the broad foundation of state prosperity, to build churches and school houses, and to advance everywhere the sacred standard of religious liberty, which had loved freedom and hated the king, and had carried with it into every quarter the blessings of civilization, and the hallowed influences of the Gospel.

The spirit of his ancestry called him to the vindication of their race, and he determined—although the sand of his time-glass was running low—to round off, and crown the industry of a long life by a labour of love.

During the brief periods of leisure, which the almost constant demands of his business only occasionally afforded him, he prepared and had published, in 1856, a volume, which, with characteristic modesty, he entitled, "*A Tribute to the Principles, Virtues, Habits and Public Usefulness of the Irish and Scotch Early Settlers of Pennsylvania; by a Descendant.*"

This production discloses such a thorough knowledge of the subject, and withal breathes so great a filial reverence for those whose merits it commemorates, that it will doubtless long be read with increasing interest by their descendants.

Mr. Chambers was an ardent friend of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and impressed with the importance of the noble work, for the sake of truth, which it is now performing. The value of his efforts for the elucidation of the early history of the province and state, and his moral worth, were generously recognized by the Society in his selection to be one of its vice-presidents, which honourable office he held at the time of his decease.

By the request of the Society, Mr. Chambers undertook the preparation of an extended history of a considerable portion of the State of Pennsylvania, including the Cumberland Valley. It was also intended to embrace a compilation and analysis of the various laws and usages governing the acquisition of titles to land in the state, to be supplemented by an annotation of the changes caused therein by statutory law, and the decisions of the courts from time to time.

The manuscript of this work, which had cost much research and

labour, was finished and ready for the press on the 30th of July, 1864, when the Rebels, under General McCausland, made their cruel foray into Chambersburg, to give the doomed town over to its baptism of fire.

It perished in the conflagration of that fearful day—which still haunts, and ever will, the memory of those who witnessed it, like the hideous spectre of a dream. Along with that manuscript perished also a biographical sketch, which was almost ready for publication, of Dr. John McDowell, a native of Franklin county, distinguished for his learning, usefulness, and devoted piety.

Mr. Chambers lost heavily in property by the burning of Chambersburg. The large stone dwelling-house built by his father in 1787, the house which he had himself erected in 1812, and in which he had lived with his family since 1813, together with four other houses, were totally destroyed.

But this pecuniary loss caused him, comparatively, but little regret. His private papers, an extensive correspondence, valuable manuscripts, hallowed relics of the loved and lost ones, many cherished mementoes of friendship, his books so familiar and so prized from constant study and use, the old-fashioned stately furniture, and the precious heirlooms that had come down to him from his ancestry, all shared the same common ruin. Such things are incapable of monetary valuation, and their loss was irreparable. In one half hour the red hand of fire had ruthlessly severed all the links that bound him to his former life, and thenceforth he walked to the verge of his time isolated and disassociated from the past. This calamity he keenly felt, although he nerved himself against its depressing influences with his characteristic cheerfulness and fortitude.

To this cause, also, must be attributed the great lack of present materials for a proper biographical sketch of Mr. Chambers, and the difficulties and discouragements which the writer of this tribute has encountered in its preparation.

Mr. Chambers was deeply moved by the news of the bombardment of Fort Sumter. When he heard the startling intelligence, although in firm health, it seemed to stir a fever in his blood. He urged the calling of the citizens of Chambersburg together immediately, to take proper measures for assisting in the defence of the Government. He presided at the meeting, and made a touching and eloquent speech, which was responded to on the spot by the enlistment of a full company for the three months' service. A few years before he had presented a flag to a military company called in his honour *The Chambers Infantry*.

This organization formed the nucleus of the company now enlisted for the stern duties of war, and was among the first in the state to report for service at the headquarters at Harrisburg. From that hour, until the last Confederate soldier laid down his arms, Mr. Chambers stood steadfastly by the Union. The darkest hours of the war found him always the same unflinching supporter of the Government, the same staunch patriot, the same irreconcilable opponent of all compromise with treason, and the same defiant and implacable foe of traitors.

On the 6th day of March, 1810, Mr. Chambers married Alice A. Lyon, of Carlisle, daughter of William Lyon, Esq., Prothonotary and Clerk of the Courts of Cumberland county—a lady whose virtues and accomplishments cheered and solaced thirty-eight years of his life. Two sons and one daughter, the fruits of this marriage, still survive, and are residents of Chambersburg.

Mr. Chambers was of medium stature, of slender frame and delicate constitution. He was indebted for the physical strength which enabled him to sustain for so many years the burden of excessive professional labour, solely to his abstemious life, regular habits, and almost daily exercise upon horseback.

His classical training was excellent, and his knowledge of the Roman authors quite extensive. He was a well-read man, and familiar with the best literature of his own and past times—an acquaintance which he sedulously cultivated until a late period of his life. His library was large and well selected, and open at all times to the deserving, however humble might be their station.

Mr. Chambers cared for none of the arts of popularity. He was not one "to split the ears of the groundlings." He had no ambition at all for this. His bearing was dignified and his manners reserved. With the world he doubtless was accredited a cold and proud man; but to those who were admitted to the privileges of an intimate acquaintance, he was a sociable, kind, courteous and affable gentleman, and a genial and captivating companion. Having acquired a varied fund of knowledge from books, as well as from a close and intelligent observation of men, his conversation was exceedingly entertaining and instructive. His memory, going back into the last century, had garnered up many interesting reminiscences of the events of that age, and personal recollections of its illustrious men; and when in the unrestrained freedom of social intercourse he opened its treasures, they furnished, indeed, a rare intellectual entertainment to his charmed auditors. But so great was the elevation of his character and the purity of his nature, so intense his self respect, that I venture to assert

that never at any time, under the temptations of the most unreserved conversation, did he utter a word or sentiment that might not with perfect propriety have been repeated in the most refined society.

He was a sincere and steadfast friend, a kind neighbour, and a good and useful citizen. His advice to all who sought it—and they were many, in every walk of life—proved him to be a willing, judicious and sympathizing counsellor.

In the management of his private affairs he was scrupulously honest and punctual. He required all that was his own, and paid to the uttermost farthing that which was another's. He scorned alike the pusillanimity which would defraud one's self, and the meanness which would rob another. But withal he was a generous man. His house was the abode of a most liberal hospitality. His benevolence was large and catholic, manifesting itself in frequent and liberal contributions for the advancement of education and religion. He was kind to the poor and deserving, and more than one child of poverty received a good education at his expense. But he did not publish his charities on the streets, nor give his alms before men. He reverently obeyed in this respect the scriptural injunction, "*Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.*"

It would be improper for us, by dwelling longer on his domestic virtues, to invade the sanctity of his home, where they grew into such eminent development. We know that he was a good husband, a devoted father, and an exemplar to his household worthy of the closest imitation.

Mr. Chambers was a devout man from his youth, and a sincere and unflinching believer in the cardinal doctrines of the Christian religion. From childhood he was carefully trained in the tenets of the Westminster Confession and the Shorter Catechism. He drank in a reverence for the Sabbath day with his mother's milk, which so engrafted itself into his being that no earthly inducement could tempt him to profane it. In 1842, he made a public profession of his faith, and was received into the communion of the Presbyterian Church at Chambersburg. Thenceforth religion grew from a mere sentiment, or a cold intellectual belief, into the guiding principle of his life. It influenced his conduct towards others and governed his own heart. It kept him untainted from the world in prosperity, and solaced him in adversity. And when the twilight of his last days began to descend upon him, his pathway was illumined by the light of the Gospel, and he walked down to the dark river with a firm step, unclouded by doubts

or fears, and with the eye of faith steadily fixed upon the Star of Bethlehem. He died on the 25th of March, 1866, in his eighty-first year, bequeathing to his children the heritage of an unspotted name, to posterity an enduring reputation, earned by a life full of good and virtuous deeds, and to the aspiring and ambitious youth an example worthy of the highest emulation.