HISTORY

OF

FAYETTE COUNTY,

PENNSYLVANIA,

WITH

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

OF MANY OF ITS

PIONEERS AND PROMINENT MEN.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES.

F. H. OLIPHANT.[1]

"It is in men as in soils, where sometimes there is a vein of gold which the owner knows not of."—DEAN SWIFT.

Fideleo Hughes Oliphant was the third son and fourth in the order of birth of a family of ten children

[1] The steel-plate engraving accompanying this sketch is from a daguerreotype taken when he was between forty-five and fifty years of age, and is an excellent likeness of the original at that period of his life.

—four sons and six daughters—of John and Sarah Oliphant. Hughes, the subject of this sketch, was born on the 4th of January, 1800, at Old Fairfield Furnace, on Georges Creek, in Georges township, Fayette Co., Pa. Of this old furnace, the rival of another on Jacob's Creek, Westmoreland County, Pa., for the distinction of being the first at which pig iron was made west of the Allegheny Mountains, in which both localities have zealous advocates, nothing but the cinder pile and some of the larger stones of the stack remain to mark the spot where its proprietors, pioneers in what has grown to be the great industry of Western Pennsylvania, saw and heard their first bantling heave and sigh.

His father, Col. John Oliphant, was born in Chester County, Pa., and his mother, Sarah McGinnes, born in Philadelphia, Pa., was the only child of a sea-captain, who was lost in shipwreck. Left an orphan at an early age, she was adopted by her uncle, the Rev. Samuel Woodbridge, of the Seventh-Day Baptist persuasion, with whom she crossed the mountains on horseback in 1778 or 1779, mounted on bales of goods strapped upon a pack-saddle.

Her uncle Woodbridge settled in Springhill township, founded the village which bears his name, built a church in which he preached every seventh day, and erected a dwelling-house, which in its day and locality was considered stylish and commodious. He preached without money and without price there until his lips were sealed in death. His remains rest in the old graveyard adjoining the church, and by his last will and testament he left some of these village lots for the perpetual maintenance of the church and graveyard in good order, which benevolent intention has been sadly neglected. Squatters and trespassers profane the sacred soil with which pious faith meant to cherish and protect "God's half-acre." Church and churchyard both feel the cold hand of time heavy upon them, and the colder charity of neglect chills every pilgrim to this sacred shrine.

Tradition says that Col. Oliphant and Sarah Woodbridge (she took her uncle's name) "made a remarkably fine couple" when they stood up before the venerable uncle of the bride to be united in marriage, some time in the year 1790. Their remains rest in the old churchyard at Woodbridgetown.

Andrew, the grandfather of Hughes Oliphant, had his home in Chester County, Pa., previously to the war of the Revolution. He was a trader, and transported goods over the mountains on pack-horses, exchanging them with the Indians and settlers for furs and land, for there was no money there at that time. Gen. Braddock, in his campaign against Fort Du Quesne in 1755, pressed him and his pack-horses into his service. When Braddock fell, mortally wounded, at the battle of the Monongahela, on July 9, 1755, he was carried on a litter swung between two of these horses, under the direction of Andrew Oliphant, in the retreat to Dunbar's camp, the rear-guard of the army, where he died on the fourth day after the battle, and was buried in the road, near the site of Fort Necessity, where Washington fought his first battle, on the 3d of July, 1754. Tradition says Andrew Oliphant assisted in the construction and defense of Fort Necessity.

After the war he moved out to Fayette County, and settled on land near to Merrittstown. His remains rest in the graveyard of the Dunlap's Creek Presbyterian congregation.

John Oliphant and Andrew, his younger brother, commenced the iron business at Old Fairfield Furnace, and soon added Fairchance, on the same stream, to it. Subsequently to this they built "Sylvan Forges," on the lower waters of Georges Creek, near the village of New Geneva. They made pigs at Fairchance, and converted them into bar iron at Sylvan Forges; built boats, launched them on the Monongahela at Geneva, and floated their iron down the river to Pittsburgh and points below on the Ohio to market.

They continued as partners in business until 1816, when they dissolved and divided the property. Fairchance and Sylvan Forges being considered about equal in value, John gave his younger brother, Andrew, the first choice. He took Sylvan Forges, and the property was partitioned on that basis, without invoking the aid of the courts.

F. H. Oliphant's first schooling was in a log house, still standing in the back-yard at "Liberty Hall," where his father then lived, two miles from Fairfield and half a mile from Fairchance. The teacher was Thomas, father of Gen. A. G. Porter, lately elected Governor of Indiana.

His next experience was with Alexander Clear at Morris X-Roads school-house, where Col. Samuel Evans, the Morris, Hardin, Tobin, Gans, and Griffin boys and others were among his schoolmates. Here he learned to "read, write, and cipher as far as the single rule of three," and acquired some knowledge of English grammar, geography, history, and book-keeping.

After leaving Mr. Clear's school he went to Brownsville, in the same county, to attend a school of Rev. James Johnson, and while there, in consideration of boarding and lodging, assisted Mr. James Brading in his store mornings and evenings. He then secured the life-long friendship and confidence of Mr. Brading, and by his industry and attention to the duty before him attracted the notice of George Hogg, Jacob Bowman, and Joseph Thornton, leading men of that part of the county, and made them his friends for life.

This, with one session of five months at Jefferson College, where his older brothers, Woodbridge and Orlando, and subsequently his younger brother, Ethelbert, graduated, finished the course of his education before he was seventeen years old.

About this period of his life, financial trouble, the

result of too much lending of his name, falling upon his father, with the accumulation of years, he entered his office at Fairchance, and at eighteen years of age the entire business devolved upon him. He paid just debts and resisted the payment of unjust claims until all were settled and the property relieved.

On the 8th day of November, 1821, he married Jane Creigh, the oldest daughter of Samuel Duncan, Esq., of the Fayette County bar, from which came a family of eleven children,—John, Duncan, Orlando, Henry, James and Ethelbert, Elizabeth, Mary Louise, Jane, Sallie Ann, and Ellen. On the 8th of November, 1871, they celebrated their golden wedding at the residence of the oldest daughter, Mrs. R. P. Nevin, Sewickley, Pa., at which all the children living and many grandchildren were present. June 5, 1876, his wife Jane died, and he afterwards married her younger sister, Mary E. Duncan, who survives him.

In 1820 or 1821 he purchased Franklin Forge, at the Little Falls of the Youghiogheny River, hauled pigs from Fairchance, hammered them into bar iron, and with the fall and spring freshets floated the iron down the Youghiogheny and Monongahela Rivers to Pittsburgh, and sometimes down the Ohio to Cincinnati, selling what he could for cash, and trading the balance for store goods and provisions for the furnace and forge.

In 1823–24, in connection with two other gentlemen of Pittsburgh, he built the Pennsylvania (now the Wayne) Rolling-Mill, and not agreeing cordially with his partners, he sold his interest to Messrs. Miltenburger & Brown, returned with his family to Franklin Forge, and conducted the business there in connection with Fairchance for a number of years without a dollar of money. It was all barter and trade. Franklin Forge was a centre of business. His iron was the currency of the country. Farmers brought in their produce to the mills, traded it for iron, taking what they wanted for present use, and a certificate of deposit for the balance. His office and iron-house became a bank of deposit. There was no money in the country, and so this system of trade went on for years, the iron not leaving the warehouse only at the semi-annual freshets, when all on hand went down the river, and a new stock would accumulate at the warehouse. The wagons that brought pigs from Fairchance returned loaded with flour and other supplies accumulated in the mill at the forge. He has often declared that this was the most satisfactory period of his business life. But he looked beyond the beautiful hills and wild, romantic surroundings of the "Little Falls" for wider fields and deeper mines. He saw the day of the forge-fire and the tilt-hammer passing away, and in 1832 sold Franklin Forge to Messrs. Miltenburger & Brown, of Pittsburgh.

Leaving his family in Uniontown he started for Tennessee, with a view of entering into the iron business there with Messrs. Yateman, but not being pleased with the situation, he returned to Cincinnati, purchased a steam-engine and the option of a lot of land in Covington, rented a house in Cincinnati, and made other arrangements for building a rolling-mill.

Coming home, he yielded to the eloquent pleadings of the gray hairs of his father and mother and the tears of his sisters, abandoned the Cincinnati scheme, brought the engine to Fairchance, and in the fall of 1832 commenced building a rolling-mill, nail-factory, etc., alongside the furnace, which in the spring and summer of 1833 were in full operation.

He made a superior article of iron and nails. They became popular as soon and as far as they were known, and these iron-works went on through good times and hard without a strike or stop, except for necessary repairs, until after the property was sold to a New York company in 1870–71.

In hard times dicker and trade was resorted to again, as in previous years at "Little Falls." Wagons were loaded at the works, started on the old National road, selling in the towns through which they passed, and the balance converted into store goods and groceries in Baltimore. These in turn were loaded into the wagons to "plod their weary way" back to the works.

He had coal and iron ore and limestone in the ground, and timber for charcoal in the mountains. He had only labor to pay for. The raw material went into the furnace, and came out bar iron and nails at the other end of the same building, almost without getting cold in the process. When times were hard and iron was dull, selling for cost, or less than cost, the store made a little profit, or made up the loss.

The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad having made its way out to Cumberland, these tactics had to be and were changed to another direction. The surplus of iron accumulated at the works was shipped on steamboats at Brownsville, and bartered and traded down the river for anything that would be useful at the works, or for which there was a market in New Orleans. There the balance of the iron and such other freights as had been collected by the way were converted into sugar, coffee, tobacco, etc., one part being shipped up the river by steamboats for the works, another shipped by sea to Baltimore and sold or exchanged for dry-goods, which in turn found their way to Fairchance.

In 1848 he purchased "Springhill Furnace," and in 1870 sold two-thirds of both these properties to a New York company, and subsequently sold the other third to the same parties. He seemed then to be entirely out of active business, but in the mean time he had purchased the "Sunnie Brae" property, on the Southwest Branch, Pennsylvania Railroad, from the heirs of Moses W. Nixon, and the site being eligible, and the building of the railroad secured, visions of another furnace soon began to float through his brain.

In the summer of 1875 he commenced preparations, and in the fall and winter of 1875–76 built "Oliphant

Furnace," on the Sunnie Brae property, getting into operation early in the summer of 1876, but this venture did not prove a success. The times were too hard to make money on pig iron, and to add to other drawbacks, in the night of the 7th of November, 1878, the furnace buildings took fire and burned down, and on the 11th of the same month he sold the Sunnie Brae and Oliphant Furnace property to his son Duncan, who at once rebuilt the furnace, put it in operation again in the early spring, added numerous improvements in the way of dwelling-houses for hands, new hot-blast, etc. Under this management it was continued in blast until November, 1880, when it was again sold to the Fayette Coke and Coal Company.

While operating "Franklin Forge" Mr. Oliphant introduced a new process in making iron between the pig and the forge fire or puddling oven, which he called refining, blowing the iron in an open coke fire. It was a very simple and inexpensive addition, was an economy in the end, and improved the quality of the iron.

While in Tennessee he was the first to think of and suggest placing the engine boilers at the top of the furnace stack, instead of consuming and wasting large quantities of wood or other fuel under them on the ground below. Among other improvements he adopted this plan when he came into possession of "Springhill Furnace," where the stone coal was not of a very good quality or very plenty.

In 1836–37 he successfully experimented, and, as is claimed, was the first iron man in the United States who had a real and substantial success in making iron in any considerable quantity with coke. He was not well prepared for this experiment; the furnace stack was old, built for cold blast and charcoal, and but little alteration was made in the blast. The furnace ran a blast of about five months on coke, making a fair quality of iron, good enough for nails, but, although he rolled and piled the iron and then rolled it again, it was not "Oliphant's iron." Timber was still plenty for charcoal, and he went back to his first love.

In the spring of 1837 he deposited in "Franklin Institute" of Philadelphia specimens of the ore, coal, and limestone, and iron and nails made from these raw materials, where they still remained at last accounts, and although the managers conceded that he had substantially earned the medal offered in 1835 it was not awarded, on the technicality that the iron had not been made within the time limited in the offer.

The superior quality of Mr. Oliphant's iron was indisputable. L. W. Stockton, president of the "National Road Stage Company," used large quantities of it at their "stage-yard" in Uniontown, and although they were not on friendly terms, he often declared emphatically that "Oliphant made the best iron that ever went into a stage-coach." Through Mr. Stockton it was introduced to the notice of the War and Navy Departments, where it more than stood every test to which it was subjected, and he sold hundreds of tons to the government for gun-barrels and chain-cables.

In this connection his iron came under the observation of Asbury Kimble, a very ingenious and intelligent man, who believed from its quality that it would make good steel. He visited the works, and the result was the building of a steel furnace at Fairchance in the fall of 1837, in which a good quality of steel was made from this iron. But consumers would not believe it to be as good as the imported; there was little or no sale for it. The enterprise was abandoned, leaving Mr. Oliphant with a stock of steel on hand of his own make large enough to last him for the rest of his business life at Fairchance. He used none other,—the best proof of its good quality.

"F. H. Oliphant inherited all the nobler traits of character which distinguished his father. He was particularly noted for kindness to those in his employ. In their temporal welfare he manifested a deep personal interest. He built comfortable homes for them, planted fruit-trees in their yards, and in every way sought to assist them in lightening the burdens of a toilsome life. He has made tens of thousands for others where he has made hundreds for himself."[1]

"The subject of this notice was no ordinary man; he was a remarkable man, and his entire business career, throughout a long life of untiring energy and unselfish and unflinching integrity of purpose, has shown it. In addition to his regular business at times he took hold of others, such as plying steamboats between Pittsburgh and Western and Southern ports. Before the railroads pierced the Allegheny Mountains he owned and ran a fast wagon line between Cumberland and Wheeling. This line carried only fast freight, and soldiers during the Mexican war. His wagons were lighter than the ordinary *regulars*, and were drawn by mule teams, which were changed at fixed points along the road.[1]

"Perhaps there was no wider known, or more generally respected gentleman in all his time in this county. Of active habits, he did much to develop the mineral wealth of this section of the State, and its people are largely indebted to him for the prominent part he has all the time taken in building up its interests and promoting its welfare."[1]

On the 16th of April, 1870, "about one hundred of his employés, men, women, and children, and a sprinkling of neighbors and friends, assembled in the rolling-mill, and sent for Mr. Oliphant. When he walked into the mill he was naturally very much surprised, and inquired what it all meant. This inquiry was hastily answered by the Rev. Peter T. Lashley, who mounted a store box, and after making a neat and appropriate address, presented him, for the

[1] *American Standard* of Feb. 24, 1870, and March 13, 1879.

people assembled, with a valuable gold-headed cane. When the speaker handed the old captain the cane in token of the donors' respect, the venerable gentleman of iron constitution, as well as manufacturer, read the inscription carefully, and while tears trickled down his cheeks he said, in words ever to be remembered, 'My friends, I have not words to express my sincere and heartfelt thanks and gratitude for this valuable expression of your regard.' The boys threw up their caps and cheered, while the old men and women went forward and grasped his honest hand with the expression, 'God bless you!' trembling on every tongue. After a few side remarks, they passed out, with tears of sorrow and affection flowing profusely down their cheeks. There were but few dry eyes in the crowd."[1]

In his private life and in his family he was kind and affectionate, consulting more the convenience and comfort of others than his own. With strangers and those who did not understand him he was supposed to be harsh and severe in his nature; but he was a man of deep and strong feelings, and in a way was very sensitive, though a proud reserve kept the secret of this quality so close that few suspected it was there. He was of strong physique, and of extraordinary powers of endurance, often surpassing those of young and vigorous men, working his brain and his body as unsparingly as if they had been machines made of his own iron, insensible to the pleasures or necessity of rest. His manner was sometimes brusque, and more decided than the occasion seemed to require. His words were outspoken frankness when he had anything to say, and sometimes gave offense when none was intended. Always ready to forgive an injury, he was a firm and constant friend, and, like his father before him, seriously damaged his fortune "by the too much lending of his name." Of great moral and physical strength and courage, he "dared do all that might become a man," feeling, with the great poet of nature, that "he who dared do more was none." Strong in his convictions, he was hard to move from them. Impressed by the precepts and the examples of his father and uncle, he naturally fell into political ranks adverse to the Democratic party, but not to Democratic ideas, and remained so through life. Of iron nerve, he seldom gave outward signs of emotion, and those who knew him best can recall but one or two instances in which he was known to have been unmanned. In his younger days he was fond of military parades and displays, loved poetry, and could to the last recite long passages from Scott and Burns. Especially fond of the old Scotch songs, when he was well stricken in years and had an evening at home his daughters charmed the hours away with the music and words of the same airs and lines with which his "Bonnie Jane" chained his heart and hand "in days o' auld lang syne."

[1] *Uniontown Democrat*, Dec. 11, 1879.

From the outbreak to the close of the war of the Rebellion he was intensely loyal to the Union, and nearly depleted his iron-works of hands to put men in the field; nor did he spare his own family. When taking leave of his son Duncan, starting with his company into service, he said, "Go, my son, and do your duty; I would rather see you in an honored grave than hear that you had faltered." There was no tear in his eye, only the faintest tremor on his lip; then added, "I once heard your grandfather say 'No one of the name ever turned his back on a friend or an enemy;' you will not be the first to break the chain. Farewell."

One of the instances in which he was known to have been unmanned was when the cane was presented to him on retiring from business. He was quite unnerved with emotion; sweet and sad memories seemed to crowd upon him, and the strong man, like Jacob of old, "lifted up his voice and wept" tears of joy and grief. And again when the death of his youngest son, "Bertie," at Yorktown, was announced to him, his head sank upon his wife's shoulder; they mingled their tears and sobbed aloud together for their "Benjamin" of eleven children.

It was no unusual thing for him to mount his horse (famous old Marmion, almost as well known through the county as his rider) in the evening after a hard day's work at the forge, ride to Pittsburgh, thirty-five miles away, for breakfast, be on foot all day long, and home again for breakfast next morning; and this often occurred with him in his business between the "Little Falls" and Fairchance. He said he could "sleep quite refreshingly a good part of the time on old Marmion."

About the year 1820–21, in company with other young men of the locality, he raised and organized the "Fayette Cavalry," of which he was elected captain; commanded the company until he moved to Pittsburgh, and after two years' absence, returning to Fayette, he was again elected captain, and continued in command until 1836. Nor had his military proclivities entirely forsaken him when the war broke out in the spring of 1861. He raised and organized a company of mounted men for any service that might fall to it at home or in the field, in which some of his old comrades of the Fayette cavalry joined him.

Hearing that the "Black Horse Cavalry" was plundering Northwestern Virginia and threatening Morgantown, he loaded wagons with provisions, mustered his troop, and started for them. "By the time they reached the Cheat River the command had swelled to two hundred. This advent into West Virginia was greeted with the greatest enthusiasm. The women rushed into the roads, throwing up their hands, and shouting, 'The Pennsylvanians have come! the Pennsylvanians have come!' When he reached Grafton the accession to his force had augmented it to five hundred. There was but little

military discipline among the men, but they were all well armed and good marksmen, and to a body of irregulars, like themselves, would have proved no insignificant foe. The rebels abandoned Grafton as they entered it, and there seeming no further use for them they returned home."[1] It is believed this unauthorized raid saved West Virginia to the Union. This troop maintained its organization throughout the war.

There were four things he disliked with a cordial hatred,—whisky, tobacco, a lawsuit, and Gen. Jackson. Once, and only once, a candidate before the people for office, he ran as the Whig candidate for Congress in 1838 against Enos Hook, Esq., a lawyer of Waynesburg, Greene Co., and, as he expected, was badly beaten, but his candidature well illustrates one of these three traits of his character. Being accosted one day by a man who was drunk, he said, "Go 'way, Jack, you are drunk; I won't shake hands with you." A friend suggested "that was no way to be a candidate." He answered, "I can't help it; I won't be seen shaking hands with a drunken man, and if I can't be elected except at the expense of my self-respect I shall stay at home."[1]

He banished whisky from the furnace and works, so far as he could control it, from the start. Tobacco was a necessary of life with furnace men, almost as urgent as bread itself, and he had to endure it. His dislike of lawsuits resulted in part from the fact that they would not always go his way, and then the law, the court, the jury, and the lawyers would be all wrong, and he never could get it through his head, although he had a brother and a son at the bar, that lawyers half earned their fees.

His dislike of Gen. Jackson commenced with the high hand with which he carried things in Florida, —hanging Arbuthnot and Ambruster, and imprisoning the Spanish commissioner, Callava, in Monroe's administration, and for some irregularity or failure of memory on the general's part in regard to an order for a number of large iron salt-pans, evaporators, which he ordered while stopping over night in Uniontown, on his way to Washington, as a member of Congress, to be made at Fairchance, to be boated down the river to the mouth of the Tennessee, on the Ohio. He also disliked him later on account of his war on the tariff and the Bank, which he firmly believed would ruin the business prosperity of the country.

When Jackson was a candidate for President there were frequent animated tilts between him and his sister Juliet, who, in sympathy with her husband, Capt. James A. McClelland, was a stalwart Jackson *man*, and on one occasion, when words were running higher between them than she liked, their mother laid her command upon them to stop, and said, "Hughes, you are a good deal of a Gen. Jackson yourself when you have the power, and Juliet you are entirely too much of a politician for a woman."

Growing warm in a discussion during the war, he declared a wish "that old Jackson was back to shoot down rebels and hang up traitors to the Union." "What!" said some one present, "would you bring old Jackson back?" "Yes, to save the Union," was the answer. "Forgive him his war on the tariff and the Bank?" "Yes; and the salt-pans too; anything to punish Rebellion and save the Union," was his reply.

Within a year after the sale of the "Oliphant Furnace" property he began to fail in physical health, and the decline continued until his lamp of life went out on the morning of the 10th of November, 1879, at the residence of his oldest son, John, on the Sunnie Brae farm, within two miles of Fairfield, where he was born, within two miles of Fairchance, where he toiled, and within the sight of his last lingering look upon earth he could see over the intervening woods and vales the "old Tent Church" in which he and his wife together, in 1825, professed the faith in which they lived and died, and in which he became a ruling elder in 1838.

On the 12th of November, 1879, he was borne from the Presbyterian Church in Uniontown, where the funeral services were conducted by the Revs. S. S. Bergen and Isaac Wynn, by six of his grandsons, and buried in Oak Grove Cemetery.

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[1] *American Standard*, Nov. 13, 1879.