

LIVES
OF THE
GOVERNORS
OF
PENNSYLVANIA,

WITH THE
INCIDENTAL HISTORY OF THE STATE,

FROM
1609 TO 1873.

BY
WILLIAM C. ARMOR.

New Edition, Revised and Enlarged.



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

JOSEPH RITNER,

GOVERNOR UNDER THE CONSTITUTION OF 1790.

December 15, 1835, to January 15, 1839.

IF to Governor Wolf belongs the honor of having inaugurated the School System, to Governor Ritner should be accorded the credit of preserving it at a crisis when in imminent danger of being overthrown. Graced with less school education than any other Governor who ever occupied the chair of state, he yet manifested a zeal in its defence unsurpassed by any, and when the fair fabric won by his predecessor with great labor and tribulation was rent and torn by ignorance and malice, and it was likely to be given up to utter destruction, Ritner bared his arm for the conflict, and came forth triumphant, winning laurels which shall never fade.

Joseph Ritner, the eighth and last Governor under the Constitution of 1790, was born in Berks County, Pennsylvania, on the 25th of March, 1780. His father was John Ritner, who emigrated from Alsace, on the Rhine. During his early years Joseph was employed upon his father's farm. The only school advantage which he ever enjoyed was during a period of six months in a primary school at the early age of six years. At the age of sixteen he removed to Cumberland County, and was employed as a laborer upon the farm of Jacob Myers, near Newville. In the year 1800, he married Susan Alter, of Cumberland County. Their offspring were six sons and three daughters. Soon after their marriage they removed to Westmoreland County, and finally became settled upon a farm belonging to the wife's uncle, David Alter, in Washington County. What was unusual for farmers of that day, the uncle possessed a good library. The books

were principally German works of a substantial character. Gifted with strong native sense, and a wonderfully retentive memory, this library proved to him a mine of wealth. Here, during his leisure hours, he delved, and what was wanting of privilege in school instruction, he, by diligence, himself supplied, affording a perpetual example to the young, of the fruits of industry and perseverance.

In 1820 Mr. Ritner was elected a member of the House of Representatives, from Washington County, and served in that capacity for a period of six years. In 1824 he was elected speaker of that body, and was re-elected in the following year. In 1829 he received the nomination for Governor in opposition to George Wolf. It was a period of much excitement respecting secret societies, and great antipathy was exhibited towards them, especially the Masonic fraternity. So strong was this feeling that a political party was built upon it, known as the Anti-Masonic, and by this party Ritner was supported. He received a handsome vote, but was defeated. In 1832 he was again put in nomination, and though again defeated, made a great gain over his former vote. He was for a third time nominated in 1835, and was elected.

At the session of the Legislature of 1834, the law for the establishment of a common-school system was passed. It met little opposition in either branch of the Legislature, being enacted with a unanimity rarely equalled upon any important question. So much had been said upon the subject, and so thoroughly had the necessities of the State been presented, that a readiness for its adoption seemed to be felt. But, unfortunately, though the field was white for the harvest, the law which with great labor and care had been prepared, proved signally unsuited to the wants of the State. If the thing were possible, it may be said to have been too perfect. It was so elaborately drawn, and the minutest particulars were so carefully provided for, that little discretion was allowed in adapting its operation to the wants of the diversified populations it was designed to affect. It was like the

machinery of certain inventors, where all the motive power is expended in overcoming the friction of the parts. The consequence was that a sudden revulsion of feeling was experienced, and at the session of 1835 the sentiment was almost universal against it. A proposition was brought forward in the Senate for its abolition, and for substituting the system of 1809—educating the poor gratis,—which was carried with little opposition. It came up in the House, and but for the eloquent appeals of Thaddeus Stevens, would have been carried with a like unanimity there. The tide which was setting seemed likely to engulf all. “Why,” said Stevens, “shall Pennsylvania now repudiate a system which is calculated to elevate her to that rank in the intellectual, which, by the blessings of Providence, she holds in the natural world? To be the keystone of the arch, the ‘very first among her equals.’ I am aware, sir, how difficult it is for the great mass of the people, who have never seen this system in operation, to understand its advantages. But is it not wise to let it go into full operation and learn its results from experience? Then if it proves worthless or burdensome, how easy to repeal it. . . . But we are told that this law is unpopular; that the people desire its repeal. Has it not always been so with every reform in the condition of man? Old habits and old prejudices are hard to be removed from the mind. Every new improvement which has been gradually leading man from the savage, through the civilized, up to the highly cultivated state, has required the most strenuous, and often perilous, exertions of the wise and the good. But, sir, much of its unpopularity is chargeable upon the vile arts of unprincipled demagogues. Instead of attempting to remove the honest misapprehensions of the people, they cater to their prejudices, and take advantage of them to gain low, dirty, temporary local triumphs. I do not charge this on any particular party. Unfortunately, almost the only spot on which all parties meet in union is this ground of common infamy. I have seen the present Chief Magistrate of this Commonwealth [Wolf] violently assailed as the projector and father

of this law. ' I am not the eulogist of that gentleman; he has been guilty of many deep political sins; but he deserves the undying gratitude of the people for the steady, untiring zeal which he has manifested in favor of common schools. I will not say that his exertions in that cause have covered all, but they have atoned for many of his errors. I trust that the people of this State will never be called on to choose between a supporter and an opposer of free schools. But, if it should come to that; if that should be made the turning-point on which we are to cast our suffrages; if the opponent of education were my most intimate personal and political friend, and the free-school candidate my most obnoxious enemy, I should deem it my duty as a patriot, at this moment of our intellectual crisis, to forget all other considerations, and I should place myself unhesitatingly and cordially in the ranks of him whose banner streams in light."

Mr. Stevens was wrought up to a great pitch of excitement while delivering this speech. He took a position in the broad middle aisle leading up to the Speaker's desk, where he had full freedom for action, and his appearance is described by one who was then a member of that body, as lit up by an enthusiasm almost more than mortal. He was the bitter political opponent of Governor Wolf, to whom he alludes in the passage quoted; and when, after passing encomiums upon the Governor's advocacy of the common-school system, that startling and majestic declaration was made, "I should place myself unhesitatingly in the ranks of HIM WHOSE BANNER STREAMS IN LIGHT," it was received with the wildest expressions of delight. The magical sentence was caught up and passed current upon every lip, and whenever this era of the school system is the subject of conversation among those who were present on that occasion, the words "whose banner streams in light" are exultingly recalled.

The vote was taken, and it was found that the friends of common schools were largely in the ascendant. It is recorded by John W. Forney, in an elaborate article published in the

Washington Chronicle, upon the life and character of the Great Commoner, on the occasion of his death, that "Immediately after Mr. Stevens concluded this great effort, he received a message from George Wolf, then Democratic Governor of Pennsylvania, and a leading member of the Masonic fraternity. Governor Wolf was the firm friend of popular education. Of a different and more methodical character, he did not and could not bring to the movement the attributes with which God had clothed Thaddeus Stevens; but he was earnest and sincere. When Mr. Stevens, in response to his invitation, entered the Executive Chamber, he threw his arms about his neck, and, with tearful eyes and broken voice, thanked him for the great service he had rendered to our common humanity."

Fortunately for the cause of education, the law was preserved intact. But an unwieldy system, which in its operations was constantly provoking hostility, even among the friends of common schools, was still in force. At the following session, that of 1836, the whole subject would come up for action. In the meantime Governor Ritner had succeeded to the gubernatorial chair, and had selected for Secretary of the Commonwealth, Thomas H. Burrowes, a firm friend of education, and who, as its special advocate in after years, did signal service to the State. With his countenance and aid, George Smith, M. D., who, as chairman of the joint committee of education in the two Houses, had been intrusted with the subject, drew an entirely new bill, embodying the principles of the old law, but divesting it of objectionable features. In this new form it was presented at the session of 1836, and was carried triumphantly through. It went immediately into effect and forms the basis of the excellent system at present in operation — reaching out to every nook and corner of the Commonwealth; taking by the hand the child of wretchedness and poverty equally with the most favored and pampered of fortune's easy-going offspring, and leading them to the pure fountains of knowledge; and noiselessly and unheralded scattering open-handed the richest of earthly blessings.

During the heated political canvass which preceded his

election, an editor who allowed his zeal to get the better of his discretion, knowing that he had a class of readers who would be delighted with the sentiment, published a statement that Mr. Ritner was opposed to the whole catalogue of laws for common schools, thinking thereby to gain votes for him. The moment it came to the ears of Ritner, he started at once to find the reckless editor, and after a wearisome journey came upon him amid the agents of his art, soundly berated him for his duplicity, and would not leave him until he had penned an article denying the false statement he had made, and had promised to insert it in the next issue of his paper. It was not in the nature of Joseph Ritner to allow victory to be purchased at the sacrifice of truth, even by the swerving of a hair's breadth.

Down to the close of his life he manifested a lively interest in the success of the common-school system, attending Teachers' Institutes in the County where he lived, and acting as presiding officer when upon the verge of eighty. In 1861, the Normal School at Edinboro', Erie County, was recognized and adopted by the State. Dr. Burrowes, who was then Superintendent, appointed his old friend and associate of a preceding generation, as one of the inspectors. Though then at the age of eighty-three he accepted the appointment, and made that long journey of more than five hundred miles by rail and stage, with the alacrity and pleasure of a boy of sixteen. And when he appeared upon the platform of the great hall of the Institute, in the presence of a concourse of upturned faces, it could but excite tears of gratitude, that his life had been almost miraculously lengthened out to see the day when a great institution devoted to the preparation of common-school teachers, a crowning feature of that system, should be inaugurated upon a spot which was an unbroken wilderness when the law was originally passed in his administration. The following report of his remarks on that occasion is given in the Pennsylvania School Journal of that date: "Having referred briefly to his own course in relation to the cause of education, while Governor of the Common-

wealth, he spoke somewhat at length as to his friend, the present Superintendent. The present generation could not appreciate what had been done; nor indeed, could the complete result be revealed in one or two generations. He himself had seen the inauguration of the system of free common schools, and had witnessed some of its fruits; but he could not hope to live to behold the rich harvests which he had faith to believe were yet to be reaped from it. He commended the location of the buildings, — and of the grounds so beautifully adapted, both for ornamental and useful cultivation. He could well credit Mr. Taylor's statement, that this was a few years ago a wilderness, for we could still see the stumps on every side. A very few years would see this the most attractive spot in Western Pennsylvania."

Governor Ritner always regarded his connection with the school system with singular satisfaction, and viewed the consummation of its adoption as the crowning glory of his administration. Even the progress which was made during the three years in which he occupied the chair of state was a subject of congratulation, which he thus presents in his last Annual Message to the Legislature: "The condition of the means provided by the State for general education is so flourishing, that little is required to be done by the present Legislature. Within three years the permanent State appropriation to this object has been increased from \$75,000 annually to \$400,000. Nor will this large outlay have been without its fruits. Instead of seven hundred and sixty-two common schools in operation at the end of the year 1835, and about seventeen academies (the latter in a state of almost doubtful existence), with no female seminaries fostered by the State, she has now five thousand common schools, thirty-eight academies, and seven female seminaries in active and permanent operation, disseminating the principles of literature, science, and virtue over the land. In addition to these, there are many schools, academies, and female seminaries of a private character, equally useful and deserving in their proper sphere."

Secretary Burrowes, *ex-officio* Superintendent of Common Schools, in his report to the Legislature at the same time that this message was delivered, pays the following just tributes: "The undersigned cannot close this report without bearing testimony to one fact alike honorable to the State and advantageous to the system. In his whole experience the blighting touch of party politics has never been detected upon it. All seem to forget their every-day differences, and to meet unitedly on this, as on a Sabbath ground of devotion to the public good. In no station of life has this right feeling been more obvious than among those in power. When the agitating divisions of the day shall have sunk into comparative insignificance, and names be only repeated in connection with some great act of public benefaction, those of GEORGE WOLF and JOSEPH RITNER will be classed by Pennsylvania among the noblest on her long list; the one for his early and manly advocacy, and the other for his well-timed and determined support of the FREE SCHOOL."

In the expression of his opinions in his messages upon national affairs, Governor Ritner was bold and outspoken, however unpalatable they might be to those whom he meant to reach. Upon the subject of slavery in any part of the National domain he uttered his condemnation in such clear and ringing tones that it arrested the attention of the philanthropist and the lover of freedom wherever it was read. His message of 1836 called forth from the Quaker poet Whittier the following spirit-stirring lyric:

Thank God for the token! — one lip is still free, —
 One spirit untrammelled, — unbending one knee!
 Like the oak of the mountain, deep-rooted and firm,
 Erect, when the multitude bends to the storm;
 When traitors to Freedom, and Honor, and God,
 Are bowed at an Idol polluted with blood;
 When the recreant North has forgotten her trust
 And the lip of her honor is low in the dust, —
 Thank God, that one arm from the shackle has broken!
 Thank God, that one man as a *freeman* has spoken!

O'er thy crags, Alleghany, a blast has been blown !
 Down thy tide, Susquehanna, the murmur has gone !
 To the land of the South, — of the charter and chain, —
 Of Liberty sweetened with slavery's pain ;
 Where the cant of Democracy dwells on the lips
 Of the forgers of fetters, and wielders of whips !
 Where " chivalric " honor means really no more
 Than scourging of women and robbing the poor !
 Where the Moloch of Slavery sitteth on high,
 And the words which he utters, are — WORSHIP, OR DIE !

Right onward, oh, speed it ! Wherever the blood
 Of the wronged and the guiltless is crying to God ;
 Wherever a slave in his fetters is pining ;
 Wherever the lash of the driver is twining ;
 Wherever from kindred, torn rudely apart,
 Comes the sorrowful wail of the broken of heart ;
 Wherever the shackles of tyranny bind,
 In silence and darkness the God-given mind ;
 There, God speed it onward ! — its truth will be felt, —
 The bonds shall be loosened, — the iron shall melt !

And oh, will the land where the free soul of PENN
 Still lingers and breathes over mountain and glen, —
 Will the land where a BENEZET's spirit went forth
 To the peeled, and the meted and outcast of Earth, —
 Where the words of the Charter of Liberty first
 From the soul of the sage and the patriot burst, —
 Where first for the wronged and the weak of their kind
 The Christian and statesman their efforts combined, —
 Will that land of the free and the good wear a chain ?
 Will the call to the rescue of Freedom be vain ?

No, RITNER ! — her " Friends " at thy warning shall stand
 Erect for the truth, like their ancestral band ;
 Forgetting the feuds and the strife of past time,
 Counting coldness injustice, and silence a crime ;
 Turning back from the cavils of creeds, to unite
 Once again for the poor in defence of the right ;
 Breasting calmly, but firmly, the full tide of wrong,
 Overwhelmed but not borne on its surges along ;
 Unappalled by the danger, the shame, and the pain,
 And counting each trial for truth as their gain !

And that bold-hearted yeomanry, honest and true,
 Who, haters of fraud, give to labor its due ;

Whose fathers of old, sang in concert with thine,
 On the banks of Swatara, the songs of the Rhine,—
 The German-born pilgrims, who first dared to brave
 The scorn of the proud in the cause of the slave:—
 Will the sons of such men yield the lords of the South
 One brow for the brand, — for the padlock one mouth?
 They cater to tyrants? — They rivet the chain,
 Which their fathers smote off, on the negro again?

No, never! — one voice, like the sound in the cloud,
 When the roar of the storm waxes loud and more loud,
 Wherever the foot of the freeman hath pressed
 From the Delaware's marge, to the Lake of the West,
 On the South-going breezes shall deepen and grow,
 Till the land it sweeps over shall tremble below!
 The voice of a PEOPLE, — uprisen, — awake, —
 Pennsylvania's watchword, with Freedom at stake,
 Thrilling up from each valley, flung down from each height,
 "OUR COUNTRY AND LIBERTY! — GOD FOR THE RIGHT!"

Governor Ritner received the nomination in 1838, for re-election by the Anti-Masonic party; but was defeated by only about five thousand votes. The canvass was unusually spirited, and the election was contested with a resolution rarely witnessed. The Masons as an organization were of course pitted against Ritner, for he was leading a party bent on their humiliation. He was opposed by the Democrats, for they had been kept for a period of three years from power, and they were eager again to possess it. There was also an opposition to him from outside the State which made itself felt. Whether it originated from his outspoken opposition to slavery which the poem of Whittier had heralded to the world, it is not necessary now to inquire. Certain it was that the fight against him was well organized, conducted with a strong hand, and was successful.

The official returns made to the Secretary's office, gave the State to Porter. It was charged by the friends of Ritner that there was fraudulent voting and fraudulent returns. Thomas H. Burrowes, the Secretary of State, who was also Chairman of the State Executive Committee of the Anti-Masonic party, issued an address in behalf of the Committee

to the friends of the defeated candidate, in which he said: "The opponent of our candidate for the office of Governor appears to be elected by at least five thousand majority. This is an event to which, if it had been fairly produced, we, as good citizens, would quietly, if not cheerfully submit. But there is such a strong probability of malpractice and fraud in the whole transaction, that it is our duty peacefully to resist it and fully to expose it." After making a full statement of the reasons which led to the belief that fraud had been largely practised, he concludes: "Can there be any safety under republican institutions if such high-handed oppression be tolerated? No! We owe it to ourselves as free-men and good citizens to examine into this matter, and if fraud be detected to expose and resist it. We owe it to our country and to posterity. . . . *Now* is the time to make the examination, while the facts are fresh and the outrage recent. Let it be done then peacefully, determinedly and thoroughly. But let it be commenced with an honest resolution to submit to the result, whether it be favorable or unfavorable to our wishes. This is the duty of all who contend for equal rights and the supremacy of the laws. But, fellow-citizens, until this investigation be fully made and fairly determined, let us treat the election of the 9th inst. as if we had not been defeated, and in that attitude abide the result."

This exceedingly well written address seemed in the main to be very fair and just; but the startling declaration contained in the concluding sentence created intense excitement in the ranks of the opposing party, and to "treat the election as if we had not been defeated" became their rallying cry. It was a direct proclamation that the returns were not to be accepted until an investigation should prove them valid. The address was ill-advised and ill-timed. For the executive committee of a party had no legal authority to make an investigation; and if an investigation was to have been made, no declaration of the fact should have been uttered until the constituted authorities were ready to proceed with it. The returns bore on their face the evidence of regularity, and

those returns should have been accepted as veracious until proven false at a competent tribunal. It was perceived that on the political complexion of the Legislature would hang the question of investigation, and to secure the control of the two Houses was a primary object with both parties.

A majority of the Senate had been elected as anti-Masonic, but the control of the House depended upon the votes of certain members from Philadelphia, whose seats were contested. It appears that when the return-judges from Philadelphia County met, it was proposed to throw out the votes of the Northern Liberties entirely on account of alleged frauds. If these were counted the anti-Masonic delegation to Congress, and to both branches of the Legislature, would be elected. If they were rejected, the Democratic delegation would be elected. The majority of the return-judges were Democrats and the votes of that precinct were thrown out. Whereupon the anti-Masonic members of the Board withdrew, and both parties made out returns, each for a different delegation, and sent them to the Secretary of the Commonwealth. Technically, the returns of the Democrats were correct, and should have been received in the first instance without question.

When the Legislature met in December, the Senate promptly organized by the choice of anti-Masonic officers. But in the House a fierce struggle ensued, both delegations from Philadelphia claiming seats. The consequence was, that each party went into an election for speaker, each appointing tellers. Two speakers were elected and took their seats upon the platform; Thomas S. Cunningham being the choice of the anti-Masons, and William Hopkins of the Democrats. Technically, the Democrats supposed they were in the right, leaving out of view the rightfulness or wrongfulness of rejecting the votes of the Northern Liberties. But when the returns from the Secretary's office were opened, it was found that the certificate of the minority of the election Board from Philadelphia had been sent in, thus giving the advantage of technical right to the anti-Masonic party. It was a question now, which of these two Houses would be recognized by the Senate and the Governor.

At this stage of the contest a new element came into the arena. A daring lobby, collected from Philadelphia and neighboring cities, appeared in the capitol, and when the Senate, after duly organizing, attempted to proceed to business, interrupted the course of legislation and threatened the lives of its members. Proceedings in the other branch of the Legislature were in like manner disturbed, and finally, both houses being compelled to disperse by this lawless demonstration, the crowd took possession of the chambers, the leaders indulging in noisy harangues. From the capitol, the lobby proceeded to the Court-House, where impassioned speeches were made and a "Committee of Safety" was appointed. So determined a front did this body present that for several days the Senate was prevented from meeting, and when one of the parties of the House attempted to assemble, the person who had been deputed to act as speaker was violently ejected from the hall. All business was at an end, and the Executive and State Departments were closed.

Seeing no other alternative, and as was his plain duty to do, Governor Ritner promptly ordered out the militia; and lest this should be insufficient, — for the lobby was constantly receiving accessions of strength, — he called on the United States authorities for help. The militia under Major-Generals Patterson and Alexander came promptly in response; but the United States authorities refused to send troops, though the storekeeper at the Frankford arsenal in Philadelphia turned over an ample supply of fixed ammunition for all arms, and an especially liberal supply of ball and BUCKSHOT cartridges, though, as it subsequently appeared, the ammunition was delivered without orders from the War Department. Seeing troops arrive at the call of the Governor, the lobby made preparations to resist them, and were by their leaders drilled in military evolutions. By the efforts of the militia authorities, order was, however, restored, and the two Houses of the Legislature were again permitted to meet. A majority of the Senate finally voted to recognize the session of the House presided over by Mr. Hopkins, which virtually ended the con-

test, the other branch of the House returning to their places, and the Governor elect being inaugurated at the proper time without opposition.

For several days during this contest the danger of a collision was imminent, and it seemed impossible to avert bloodshed. Great interest was felt in the result of the struggle throughout the entire Union, and especially by the national administration. It was even viewed with serious apprehensions in Europe. Lewis Cass, who was at the time Minister to France, relates a conversation which he had with Louis Philippe, in which that monarch, mindful of similar complications in Paris, expressed the belief that Pennsylvania would become the scene of a protracted and bloody partisan or revolutionary conflict. Fortunately, wiser counsels prevailed, and what seemed on the point of being left to the arbitrament of the sword, was finally settled by an appeal to reason.

At the expiration of his term of office Governor Ritner returned to private life, taking up his residence near Mount Rock, in the County of Cumberland. Possessed of a strong constitution and a powerful frame, he rarely complained of sickness, his system seeming to be proof against the ordinary inroads of disease. In 1840, however, he was attacked by cataract in both eyes, from the effect of which he was for some time entirely blind. By an operation performed upon the right eye, sight was completely restored so that he was able to read with ease the finest print. So painful was the operation that no consideration could induce him to submit to one upon the left, and that remained sightless to the day of his death.

He continued to take a lively interest in politics, and rarely failed to deposit his vote in the ballot-box in every important election. In 1848, he was nominated by President Taylor, Director of the Mint at Philadelphia, in which capacity he served for a short time; but before his nomination was acted on by the Senate, President Taylor died, and he retired, to make room for the favorites of President Fillmore. He was a delegate from Pennsylvania to the National Convention

which nominated John C. Fremont for President, and to the close of his life continued an active and ardent Republican.

Governor Ritner was endowed with a mind of great native strength. The faculty of memory was almost miraculous, for he seemed never to forget a name, an event, a date, or a fact. The impressions of his early and active life were retained with remarkable clearness, and he could recall occurrences in his official life, and repeat debates with surprising accuracy. He was remarkably temperate in all his habits, never using in any form tobacco or spirituous liquors. He was a man of strong convictions, and his opinions when once formed were rarely changed. His conscientiousness naturally inclined him to caution, and every subject requiring his decision received mature deliberation. He fortunately lived long enough to see many of the cardinal principles which he had advocated become the fundamental law of the land, and time, which "at last sets all things even," vindicated the soundness of his judgment. He died on the 16th day of October, 1869, in the ninetieth year of his age. His life was prolonged beyond that of any other Governor of Pennsylvania, though associated in this office with men wonderfully long-lived.