

GENEALOGICAL  
AND  
PERSONAL HISTORY  
OF  
Western Pennsylvania

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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At the age of sixteen he became a clerk in his father's bank, but early in the following year he entered the house of McKee, Clark & Company, forwarding and commission merchants, in a similar capacity. After a short time his independence asserted itself. He married in 1841, and within a year he and his brother-in-law had established themselves as transporters and owners of steam and canal boats. This connection, which continued until 1855, laid the foundation of his fortune. The canal system was then the great channel of communication between the east and the west. With the completion of the Philadelphia and Columbia road and the Allegheny Portage road in 1834 a direct line of communication between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh was established, which gave a wonderful impetus to the latter city. Transportation naturally became one of the most important lines of enterprise. Competition was rife, but Clarke & Thaw controlled the Pennsylvania & Ohio line and held their own. Their business developed until it comprised canal, portage railroad and steamboat lines, extending from Philadelphia to New Orleans.

The advent of the steam railway presented a new problem to the sagacity of Mr. Thaw, for it was destined soon to supersede the prevailing method of transportation. The original Pennsylvania railroad was completed in February, 1854. By the subsequent purchase of the Philadelphia and Columbia road from the state, its line was made continuous from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. With characteristic promptness Mr. Thaw set himself to the task of disposing, with the least possible loss, of his firm's properties, including the canal equipment and their large interests in the great packets, which formed the daily line between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. In 1856 he rejoined his former partner, who had in the meantime undertaken the conduct of the freight traffic of the Pennsylvania railroad west of Pittsburgh. New as the railroad was at that time, no real system of freight transportation had as yet been evolved. No through bills of lading, through cars or exchange between the different lines was known, each road working independently from the others. The transformation of this chaotic condition, entailing tremendous expense to shippers, into the splendid cheap freight system of the present day had no greater instrumentality than the genius of Mr. Thaw. In 1864 he first devised a system of through transportation over different lines, known as the Star Union Line, of which he had charge until 1873. Not only was he the originator of the system, though he modestly refused to take all the credit, but to the initiative, originality and energy of the true pioneer, which he brought to the task, its success must be ascribed.

He was also associated with the founding of the Pennsylvania Company, which was chartered in 1870 to manage in the interest of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company the various ramifications of that company west of Pittsburgh. Its control extends over the Pittsburgh, Ft. Wayne & Chicago, the Erie & Pittsburgh, the Cleveland & Pittsburgh and its branches,

the Pittsburgh, Cincinnati & St. Louis, the Chicago, Little Miami, the St. Louis, Vandalia & Terre Haute, the Grand Rapids & Indiana, and many others. Mr. Thaw became second vice-president of this corporation, besides holding the corresponding post in the Pittsburgh, Cincinnati & St. Louis railroad, and a directorship in the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. After 1873 he turned most of his attention from the transportation department to the internal and financial affairs of the company. He remained closely associated with the company to the end of his career, and the power of his intellect was felt as an adviser to three successive presidents—Thompson, Scott and Roberts—on all matters of projected enlargements, and the policy of that great system. But Mr. Thaw's activity did not end there; in connection with H. H. Houston, of Philadelphia, for the American end, and with Messrs. Van der Becke & Marsilly, of Antwerp, for the European, he established the first international steamship line between the United States and Europe—The Red Star Line, to which was later added the American Line.

Mentally Mr. Thaw was among the foremost men of his state, gifted with a high order of intelligence, strengthened by liberal culture and years of study and observation. His broad intellect was not devoted to business alone. Posterity owes a great debt to him as a philanthropist and a liberal patron of art, science and education. Endowed with great wealth, he realized its powers for good and his benefactions covering the period of an average lifetime recognized no distinction of race or religion.

When in 1881 Professor Samuel P. Langley organized an expedition to the top of Mount Whitney in California, for the purpose of continuing certain observations upon solar radiation, the expense was borne by Mr. Thaw jointly with the United States Signal Service. Professor Langley often declared his indebtedness to the friendship and support of this generous patron of science, as of every good work. The Allegheny Observatory, one of the finest in the country, is largely indebted to his liberality for the financial means to prosecute its work. Dr. John A. Brashear, the noted scientist, records an incident which vividly illustrates one side of his nature:

I shall never forget the last afternoon I spent an hour with him. It was the afternoon of the evening of his leaving the city for his trip abroad. He had sent for me to say good-bye. I was to stay but five minutes, but he began telling me of the researches of Dr. Janssen, President of the French Academy of Science, which had been of deep interest to both of us, because it was a continuation of Prof. Langley's special work on the selective absorption of the earth's atmosphere. Dr. Janssen's studies had been made with the spectroscope on the powerful electric light located upon the Eiffel Tower, and he had demonstrated that our evidence of oxygen in the sun was all negative, notwithstanding the opposite result obtained by Dr. Henry Draper. I shall never forget how he began to picture our sun, burning with such intense heat as to be capable of warming more than two billions of worlds like our own, and yet no evidence of oxygen—an anomalous condition contrary to all our ideas of combustion; yet one that he traced back to the origin of suns in nebulous state. Such was the conversation for the better part of an hour—the last I was ever permitted to enjoy with him on earth. The five minutes had grown apace, and yet I could have wished it had been hours instead of minutes \* \* \* The writer can safely say that few men in this country have contributed more, during their lifetime, for the advancement of human knowledge than William Thaw, not only in a monetary way, but by words of encouragement, the best advice and counsel, making it pos-

sible to carry on original research, and assisting in many ways institutions of learning that would surely have failed had it not been for his helping hand and his valuable advice and encouragement. No one knows this better than the writer, for when struggling to bring instruments of precision up to the highest status, this great-hearted man came unsolicited, and, appreciating the circumstances as not one man in ten thousand would, he lent a helping hand for the benefit of science.

Mr. Thaw was a member of the Presbyterian church, and in view of his close connection with it, a quotation from the *Presbyterian Banner* at the time of death is appropriate:

Mr. Thaw was a man of muscular frame, quick in movement and capable of great endurance. In intellect he was almost without superior. His countenance indicated the power of thought and the strength of will with which he was endowed. Notwithstanding his many and pressing business engagements, he was an untiring reader \* \* \* His memory of persons and things was something amazing \* \* \* The benefits of early education and habits are well illustrated in his successful career \* \* \* When he made anything the subject of investigation he thought most intensely, not permitting any interruption, and then decided quickly.

An important characteristic of Mr. Thaw was his judgment of men, his ability to detect sham and pretense. His reasonings, based upon convictions of right and duty, were never degraded to the service of expediency or mendacity. Impetuous and persistent, he was also prudent. Broad in his views, buoyant in disposition, honest, sincere, and self-reliant, strictly upright in all his transactions, he worthily won and held a high position in the esteem and affection of all who knew him.

In earliest manhood Mr. Thaw united with the Third Presbyterian Church under the pastorate of Rev. David Riddle, the first pastor of that church. After the first building was destroyed by fire, in 1863, under the supervision and largely through the generosity of Mr. Thaw there was erected the splendid building on Sixth avenue, since razed, together with the cathedral and other churches, in order to provide for expansion of the downtown business district. The life of that organization is continued in a third edifice, more beautiful than its predecessor, with a church life more vigorous than at any time in its existence. Thus the life of William Thaw is continued in church, business, science and all other interests that touch the life of humanity.

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