

Armstrong County

PENNSYLVANIA

HER PEOPLE, PAST AND PRESENT

EMBRACING

A HISTORY OF THE COUNTY

AND

A Genealogical and Biographical Record of Representative Families

IN TWO VOLUMES

ILLUSTRATED

CHICAGO
J. H. BEERS & CO.
1914

WILLIAM THAW. It is appropriate that in this history of Armstrong county mention should be made of William Thaw, of Pittsburgh, son-in-law by his second marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Josiah Copley; not alone because of this alliance, but also because of singular circumstances connecting him with a bank in Pittsburgh, established before this second wife was born, by Emmet and John Sibbet, half-uncles of Mary Sibbet Copley, and cousins of Josiah Copley.

Mr. Thaw was born Oct. 12, 1818, in Pittsburgh, Pa. The family has been in this country over two centuries. John Thaw, his great-grandfather, was born in 1710, in Philadelphia, and lived there all his long life, dying in 1795. He is buried in Abington Churchyard, near that city. Benjamin Thaw, son of John, was born in Philadelphia in 1753, and died in 1811. His wife was Hannah, daughter of Joseph Engle and granddaughter of Benjamin and Deborah Engle, English Friends who settled in Philadelphia toward the close of the seventeenth century.

John Thaw, second son of Benjamin and Hannah Engle Thaw, was born in Philadelphia March 11, 1779, and died Sept. 3, 1866, in Pittsburgh. Early in life he was apprenticed to Paul Beck, a Philadelphia shipping merchant, and his association with seafaring men so excited his youthful love of adventure that he took the first opportunity which presented of going to sea, sailing as supercargo of a vessel. On its first voyage to the West Indies it was seized (under Napoleon's Milan decree) and taken in Guadeloupe, W. I. Upon his release young Thaw returned home from that port, and on the trip yellow fever broke out among the crew, he being about the only one on board who escaped. Later he engaged as a trader on his own account, sending a ship laden with merchandise to Senegal, Africa. The captain disposed of the cargo after reaching his destination, bought slaves on his own account and on his return sold them in the West Indies and decamped with the proceeds. A curious memorial of this affair was the policy of insurance issued to John Thaw in 1801 for the African voyage, which was preserved in the office of Mr. W. L. Jones, agent of the Insurance Company of North America in Pittsburgh. It was pre-

sented to Mr. Jones over sixty years afterward and valued by him as an interesting evidence of the venerable standing of his company. The loss ruined Mr. Thaw financially, and he took a position in the Bank of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia, which shortly afterward sent him and another man out to establish a branch at Pittsburgh, opened Jan. 1, 1804, the first bank in the city.

It is a singular coincidence or remarkable fact that William Thaw, son of John Thaw, the pioneer banker in that city, was connected with what is now the Union National Bank, from the time of its foundation, through the families of his two wives. In 1839 Emmet and John Sibbet, cousins of Josiah Copley (father-in-law of William Thaw by his second marriage), came from Philadelphia and established a banking house in Pittsburgh, under the name of Cook & Sibbet, the two younger men conducting the actual business. On the death, in 1845, of Emmet Sibbet, his brother took as partner Mr. John B. Jones, their brother-in-law. After some twenty years this bank changed hands again, and became the firm of Semple & Jones, Mr. Semple being a brother-in-law of William Thaw's first wife. Last of all it was Semple & Thompson, both related to Mr. Thaw, as nephew and son-in-law, respectively, and so remained until after his death, in 1889, when it was united with the banking house of Nathaniel Holmes' Sons, and so formed the Union National Bank, still occupying the same old business site.

John Sibbet, senior partner, retired in 1849, and builded for his mother and sister, with whom he resided, a Southern Colonial residence, adjacent to the country home of Mr. Copley, both overlooking the beautiful valley of the Allegheny, with its rich farms in full view for five miles up and down the river, between Kittanning and Rosston, and with high wooded hills rising abruptly on the other side. This beautiful region, known as Appleby Manor, was one of the Penn reserves. In recent years two or three manufacturing towns have wrought great changes in that section.

After Mr. John Sibbet retired, the brother-in-law of Mr. Thaw's first wife, John B. Semple, became partner with John B. Jones, uncle by marriage of his second wife. These curious combinations of kinship are less intricate than they seem on the surface; and might be still less so were it not for the additional fact that Mr. Copley had married the step-daughter of his own uncle, John Sibbet, the compatriot of Robert Emmet.

Emmet Sibbet, named for his father's asso-

ciate in the Irish uprising, displayed qualities of keen discernment when, prior to coming to Pittsburgh, he took an active interest in and largely financed *The New Yorker*, forerunner of the later party organ of the Whig party, *The Log Cabin*. Both these papers were edited by Horace Greeley, some years before that great editor became famous through founding and editing the *New York Tribune*. The quaint name *Log Cabin* was chosen by him because of the silly charge of unfitness for the presidency of William Henry Harrison, because, forsooth, his childhood home was like unto that of the immortal Lincoln!

It was through the efforts of Mr. Thaw that the handling of freight was first conducted under a systematic arrangement convenient alike for the railroads and their patrons. Step by step he solved the problem. It was a great step forward when the point was reached where a car was unloaded and its contents kept together, to be sent forward as a designated carload on the next line. The Pennsylvania was the first road to devise a method for supplying through cars to avoid transfer and furnish equipment to the roads west of Pittsburgh. This was accomplished by 1864, through the formation of the Star Union Line, of which Mr. Thaw was the originator, retaining its supervision until 1873. At that time he was relieved of most of his duties in the transportation department, subsequently giving his attention to the internal and financial affairs of the company. He modestly disclaimed any special credit for working up the transportation system, but it was due to him, though he averred it worked itself out of the demands of the situation and was as much the result of his assistants' ingenuity as of his own. To the end of his life he was active in directing the policy of the Pennsylvania system, three presidents; Thompson, Scott and Roberts, relying upon his advice and assistance in all matters of projected enlargement and other important features.

On April 7, 1870, the Pennsylvania Company was chartered, for the purpose of managing, in the interest of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, the roads conducted by the latter west of Pittsburgh, including the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne & Chicago, the Erie & Pittsburgh, the Cleveland & Pittsburgh, and its branches, the Pan Handle (Pittsburgh, Cincinnati & St. Louis), the Chicago, St. Louis & Pittsburgh, the Cincinnati & Muskingum Valley, the Little Miami, the St. Louis, Vandalia & Terre Haute, and the Grand Rapids & Indiana. Before the organization

of the Pennsylvania Company, Mr. Thaw had been one of the promoters of the Union and National Lines, the first freight organizations to furnish through service to shippers, and facilitate and render effective the movement by rail of interstate commerce. On June 1, 1870, at the first meeting of the directors of the Pennsylvania Company, Mr. Thaw was elected as the first president of that board.

The American Steamship Company is another great corporation with which Mr. Thaw was associated from the beginning. When the Red Star Line of ocean steamships was formed he was among the chief promoters, being associated with Mr. H. H. Houston, of Philadelphia, for the American end, with Messrs. Von der Becke and Marsilly, of Antwerp, for the European. This was the first international steamship line established between the United States and Europe. Later the American line was added, the new organization being known as the American Steamship Company. Its two great steamers, "City of New York" and "City of Paris," were completed but a short time before his death. He was connected with the International Navigation Company from the time of its organization in May, 1871, was a charter member of its board of directors, and was still serving at the time of his death.

Mr. Thaw's intellectual gifts placed him among the foremost men in the State and nation. Though he had business cares which would have required the engrossing attention of almost any other man, he never lost his interest in the other important things of life, and his principal pleasure in financial success was the privilege it allowed him of contributing to the support of educational and charitable institutions and purposes. A former pastor of the Third Presbyterian Church, one who knew him most intimately, said: "No commercial transactions, however vast, could confine him. He went out into literature, into science, into mechanics, and fine arts, into philosophy and history, and enriched his mind with much spoil from these varied fields. Of course they were the asides of his busy life. But he traversed these paths so often, and with so ready and so keen eye, that he could talk with a rare engagedness and interest on any one of them. What a scientist he would have made if he had given himself to science! And those who were admitted to the inner chamber of his friendship, when he conversed upon the deeper topics of his heart, will recall the chaste precision and felicity of his speech, and the originality and vigor of his thought. With-

out doubt, if he had become a man of letters instead of a man of affairs, he would have risen to distinguished literary eminence. Tie now this intensity and comprehensiveness of purpose to a strong will that made him resolute and of fixed purpose, grip that will with a conscience enlightened by the Word of God, and you have the combination that made Mr. Thaw one of the most remarkable men that I have ever known.

"Perhaps Mr. Thaw is most widely known for his benevolence; but this general reputation is inadequate to the quantity or the quality of his giving. He grew rich, but he was not enslaved by his riches. He held them as from his Lord in trust and therefore for service. When he began his business career he scrupulously set aside one tenth of his then slender income for God's service. Just what figures it mounted up to in after years no one can tell, but there is not the shadow of doubt that his gifts more than kept pace with the income. He gave widely, quietly, multiplied, and it may well be believed a hundred thousand hearts thank God this day for the direct proofs of his generous liberality, while institutions by the score have been the recipients of his bounty. But the spirit with which he gave transcended by all odds the amount. It was so genial, so tender of sensitive need, so royal natured, so heartily cordial, so set about with pleasantness, that one often felt in going from his presence, after successful appeal to his liberality, that he had been conferring instead of receiving a favor."

From the first part of this quotation it will be gathered that Mr. Thaw was not interested in the arts and sciences merely as a patron. He followed their advances in his reading and studies, to such an extent that scientific men were amazed at the actual knowledge he acquired in their field. He kept abreast of their work with the zeal and enthusiasm of a specialist. To quote again: "His life was a testimony to the fact that it is not necessary that a man who accumulates wealth should forget to cultivate himself. Of keen intellectual perceptions, excellent judgment, of rare facility and also felicity in speech, . . . to hear him talk, when he was free from ordinary cares, and allowed himself to speak of the thoughts that lay deepest in his mind, and nearer to his heart, was a great privilege. His sentences came out with the precision that belonged to a master workman in the use of human speech. His letters are fit to preserve as literary productions. . . . A man of marked individuality, commanding intellect

and rare versatility, a man who would hear the tale of distress any one brought him, and, turning from the act of supplying the needy, would begin to talk about the latest theory of the origin of matter, the last discussion in regard to some profound philosophical or theological question; whose taste never was obliterated by all his contact with this busy world, or by all his success."

To his alma mater, the Western University of Pennsylvania (now the University of Pittsburgh), of which he was a trustee for the twenty-eight years preceding his death, he bequeathed in his will four hundred thousand dollars, and its reorganization in the early eighties was largely along lines suggested by him, or to which he gave his sanction and influence.

Few men have comprehended more fully than Mr. Thaw the great value of scientific investigations, and a large proportion of his gifts for educational purposes was given to enable men of the right kind to pursue their work unhampered by financial limitations. "Pushing forward the frontier of human knowledge," as he himself once expressed it, seemed to him the worthiest of achievements. His crowning gift for the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge would seem to most people to be his contributions to the Allegheny Observatory, one of the finest in the country, and it was through his aid that the expedition of Prof. S. P. Langley, for so many years director of that observatory, to the top of Mount Whitney, in southern California, in 1881, for the purpose of continuing certain observations upon solar radiation was made possible, Mr. Thaw bearing the expense jointly with the United States Signal Service Department. Professor Langley's efforts, backed by Mr. Thaw's means, lifted the observatory from a condition of mere existence into the foremost position it has since occupied.

Along the same line was the support Mr. Thaw gave to the work of Prof. John A. Brashear, a leading man in his line, and which marked an era in the development, in Pittsburgh, of the manufacture of instruments of precision for use in astronomical and physical research, second to none in the world. Dr. Brashear said of him: "Few men in this country have contributed more in their lifetime for the advancement of human knowledge than William Thaw, not only in a monetary way, but by words of encouragement. By the best advice and counsel he made it possible to carry on original research. No one knows this better than the writer, for when

struggling against what seemed insuperable difficulties, to bring instruments of precision up to the highest status, this great-hearted man came unsolicited, and, appreciating the circumstances as not one in ten thousand would, lent a willing, helping hand for the benefit of science. . . . I could point out some of the brightest lights in our scientific world who have received help of this grand, good man. The special work of our own Professor Langley (now director of the Smithsonian) he fostered and encouraged in the same spirit with which he gave so much to the Western University and the Allegheny Observatory. The world knows it well, for when we open the splendid publication of Professor Langley, we read, 'The expedition needed for this special research was provided by the liberality of a citizen of Pittsburgh.' No man held Mr. Thaw in higher regard than Professor Langley, and no man felt a deeper interest in the researches of Professor Langley than Mr. Thaw. Had his calling been that of a student of science, his success would no doubt have been equal to that which he achieved in business.

"To attempt to outline such a life or picture the loss to his family, city, country, or the world at large, would be an impossible task, nor are words of eulogy needed. Generations must pass away ere the name of Pittsburgh's cherished and most noble son, William Thaw, can be forgotten. He was entrusted with large means, and grandly did he administer the trust."

Lavish tributes in praise of Mr. Thaw's character and generosity poured in from all sides, when the news of his death spread over the country. Most significant was the fact that they came from so many different sources. Nothing could afford a better indication of the breadth of his interests and sympathies. Indeed it is likely no one besides himself had until then known how far-reaching they were. Friends, business associates, fellow workers in all the lines of art and philanthropy through which his bounty flowed, beneficiaries, expressed their grief at the loss of a good man, one who was a true friend to all mankind. The personal admiration and esteem he aroused in those with whom he came in contact is beautifully set forth in some remarks made by Rev. Dr. Purves, of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, in his address at Mr. Thaw's funeral.

"Through all these years you have learned to love him, and the crowded audience gathered in this church this afternoon testifies

how strong are the bonds of gratitude and affection which hold you to his memory. The stream of his influence has gone forth, not only through this city, but throughout the whole land there are those who are thanking God today for his servant's character and deeds. Dear friends, it is worth while to live, if we can live thus. It is not worth while to live, if we merely win this world's gain. It is not worth while to live if we merely win this world's applause. But to win the love, to merit the affection, and to lift heavenward the lives of our fellow men, that indeed is to make life worth living."

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.