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CORTLANDT VAN RENSSELAER, D. D., FOUNDER OF
THE PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Cortlandt Van Rensselaer was born May 26, 1808, in the Manor House of the Van Rensselaer family, in the city of Albany, N. Y. This mansion was built by his grandfather on the bank of the Hudson river, in 1765. It was a stately and attractive edifice in its day, but the erection of business houses all around it in recent years made it at last altogether undesirable as a place of residence. It was accordingly taken down, in 1893, and transported to the campus of Williams College, Williamstown, Mass., where it is now occupied by the Sigma Phi Society as their home.

The first Manor House of the family in this country was erected in 1660 and remained standing until 1839.

Cortlandt was the seventh child of the Hon. Stephen Van Rensselaer, known as the "Patroon." This gentleman is described by the Rev. Dr. Sprague, of Albany, as "a very patriarch in simplicity and dignity, a man of the noblest qualities, of the finest accomplishments, of elevated civil position, of the highest social consideration, and not only shedding a general lustre on every relation he sustained, but forming one of the chief attractions of the community in which he lived."

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He was descended from a family of great consequence in Holland. Old paintings represent members of this family dressed in the distinguishing garb of Jonkheers, or noblemen. In one old picture, painted by Breecker in 1745, Jan, or Johannes, Van Rensselaer appears thus attired, while over his head is suspended a small shield with the family coat-of-arms; the crest being a basket of flame.

The original Manor from which the family derived their name is situated about three miles southeast from Nykerk, in Holland, and still bears the name of Rensselaer. It belonged to that class of properties known as Reddergoed, the possession of which conferred nobility. The founder of the colony of Rensselaerswyck in America was Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, a merchant of Amsterdam, a proprietor of large estates and a director in the Dutch West India Company. He was also a member of a College of nine Commissioners, instituted to take the direction of affairs in the New Netherlands. He purchased from the Indians, at various times from early in 1630 to 1637, parcels of land constituting finally a tract twenty-four miles in breadth and forty-eight miles in length, and comprising over 700,000 acres, in that part of the State of New York where the counties of Albany, Rensselaer and Columbia are situated. The purchase was made through his agent, and it is said that, in 1637, he visited in person the colonists whom, to the number of one hundred and fifty adults, he had sent out at his own cost. To him and to his successors was given the title of Patroon, with baronial powers, by virtue of which he built his own fortresses, planted them with his own cannon and manned them with his own soldiers under his own flag. He had magisterial powers also, held his own courts, administered justice in his own name and took cognizance even of the highest crimes. The colonists were his own subjects and took an oath of fealty to him.

In 1664, when the English secured control of the Dutch province, known under the name of the New Netherlands, the claims and privileges of Rensselaerswyck were by them confirmed, and twenty-one years later the Dutch Colony of that name was converted into a lordship, or manor, with the authority and privileges of an English manorial estate. The Patroon,

or Lord of the Manor, had full power to administer justice "in both kinds in his own court-leet and court-baron," and, with the freeholders of the manor, was entitled to a separate representation in the Colonial Assembly. These rights and privileges remained unimpaired to the time of the war of the revolution.

The grandfather of Cortlandt Van Rensselaer was Stephen Van Rensselaer II, who married, in January, 1764, Catherine, daughter of Philip Livingston, one of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence. His oldest son, by his wife Catherine, was Stephen Van Rensselaer III, whose first wife was Margaret, daughter of General Philip Schuyler, by whom he had three children. His second wife was Cornelia, daughter of William Patterson, a judge of the Supreme Court of the United States and the second governor of the State of New Jersey. By this second wife he had nine children, of whom the subject of this sketch was the fourth. She is said to have been a woman of extraordinary beauty and accomplishments.

Cortlandt's early days were spent under circumstances of peculiar privilege; while, at the same time, the possession of an independent fortune, and the atmosphere of abundance and wealth which he breathed from his birth, necessarily involved a subjection to some very strong temptations. Happily his father was a man, not only of high character in general, but of distinct and decided religious convictions, having made a public expression of personal faith in Christ when he was not quite twenty-three years of age, and remaining a consistent communicant in the North Dutch Church of Albany to the end of life. The purity and unostentatious simplicity of the father and the piety and consistent religious life of the mother united to keep the son from many of the dangers to which he might otherwise have fallen a prey.

The father had been a pupil of the great Dr. Witherspoon at Princeton, and, when the war of the Revolution made a change necessary, he went to Harvard to get his degree. The son, however, was sent to Yale, where he was the companion and intimate friend of Henry A. Boardman, afterwards, for a long period of years, the distinguished pastor of the Tenth Presby-

terian church of Philadelphia. Young Mr. Van Rensselaer appears to have lived an entirely exemplary life while a student at Yale College, but did not at that time make any public acknowledgment of Christ as his Saviour. He made choice of the Law for a profession, and, after three years of study, was admitted to the bar. The prospect before him seemed unusually promising. "He would no doubt," said Dr. Boardman, "have placed himself in the front rank of his profession and attained the honors which usually crown the successful advocate or jurist." He could not thus be satisfied, however, and, having abandoned the Law, he turned his attention with enthusiasm to the Holy Ministry; and Dr. Boardman, comparing what he might have been as a lawyer with what he proved to be as a minister of the gospel, well said, "How much higher the ends for which he lived, how much purer and broader his influence upon our country and the world, how much more enduring the benefits he conferred upon his fellow-creatures, how much sweeter and holier the memories which cluster around his grave!"

His reasons for the change which he was resolved to make from Law to Theology were set forth in a letter to his mother, dated September 10, 1830, as follows:

"This is not a sudden thought, nor the result of a capricious and unreflecting moment. I have deliberated much and weighed the consequences. I can't reconcile my present course and profession with my views of duty. It is in vain that I imagine to myself that I am better qualified for public life and the contests of the political world. I feel their vanity and unsatisfying pleasures, and my mind is only at ease when I contemplate my future course as a course of usefulness in the immediate service of God. Who would have thought that I, the most unworthy of all your offspring, would ever have entertained serious thoughts of dedicating himself to his Maker? But my past life, foolish as it has been, ought not surely—nor will it—deter me from aiming at higher things. It is by the grace of God alone that I am what I am; and it is upon the same grace that I rely to bless and prosper my good intentions. The reasons which have influenced my mind in inducing me to abandon my present profession are these:

"1. I consider that every man is under obligations to his Maker to pursue that course in life in which he thinks he can be most useful.

"2. A man of property, who has not the troubles and anxieties of business to divert his mind, is under *peculiar* obligations to make himself useful.

"3. I consider and firmly believe that those men are the *happiest* who devote themselves most to God.

"4. My experience leads me to believe that it is almost impossible for me to retain proper religious feelings if I am occupied with the ordinary vanities and pursuits of the world."

The result of all was that he joined his friend, Dr. Boardman, at the Theological Seminary at Princeton, and spent two years at that institution preparing for the ministry. He would no doubt have loved to stay at Princeton for graduation, but he had set his heart on accomplishing something for the slaves in the South, and felt that it would be the part of wisdom to spend at least one year of study in a seminary situated in a slaveholding state. He accordingly went to Union Theological Seminary, in the State of Virginia, and completed his course at that institution. In the spring of 1833, he made quite an extensive tour through the Carolinas and the southwestern states, and wrote during the journey a long letter to Dr. Boardman, urging him to go south and take charge of an important church in a capital city. The letter was, in part, as follows :

"The existence of slavery at the South constitutes one of the strongest reasons, though an incidental one, which makes me hope you will come. Not because it is not unpleasant in some respects, but because I believe the time is coming when something can be done for the negroes—provided men of the proper stamp are on the ground to co-operate. An effectual door is opening to preach the Gospel to them, and if there are proper men here to lead public opinion, to watch its favorable changes, and to take prudent advantage of the opportunities which may offer, I have no doubt that, in the providence of God, a really mighty effort may soon be made for this benighted, unevangelized race. Aside from this, slavery is no true objection. How much would it have weighed upon the mind of Paul?"

Mr. Van Rensselaer's views upon the subject of slavery are succinctly given in the course of his correspondence with the Rev. George D. Armstrong, D. D., of Virginia, which was published in 1858. What he held is summed up in these two sentences: "Slaveholding is not necessarily and in all circumstances sinful." "We regard the Christian instruction and elevation of the slaves as a means to an end, and that end is the recovery of the blessings of personal liberty, when Providence shall open the way for it. The higher end is the salvation of their souls." To these views Dr. Armstrong took exception, but Mr. Van Rensselaer's replies not only ably vindicated the

position which he assumed, but showed that it was strictly in accord with the deliverances of the General Assembly, repeatedly made, and with the action of Dr. Armstrong's own Synod of Virginia. Thus in 1787, the Synod of New York and Philadelphia, then the highest court of the Church, declared as follows :

"The Synod of New York and Philadelphia do highly approve of the general principles in favor of universal liberty that prevail in America. . . . They earnestly recommend it to all the members belonging to their communion to give those persons who are at present held in servitude such good education as to prepare them for the better enjoyment of freedom. . . . And finally, they recommend it to all their people to use the most prudent measures, consistent with the interests and the state of civil society, in the countries where they live, to procure eventually the final abolition of slavery in America."

These views were re-affirmed in 1793, in 1795, in 1815, in 1818, and in 1845. The deliverance of 1818 was drawn up by Dr. Ashbel Green with the concurrence of Dr. George A. Baxter, of Virginia. This was a notable and emphatic deliverance, as the following extracts will show :

"We rejoice that the Church to which we belong commenced as early as any other in this country the good work of endeavoring to put an end to slavery, and that in the same work many of its members have ever since been . . . vigorous laborers. At the same time we earnestly exhort them to continue and, if possible, to increase their exertions to effect a total abolition of slavery. . . . We warn all who belong to our denomination of Christians against unduly extending the (this) plea of necessity; against making it a cover for the love or practice of slavery, or a pretence for not using efforts that are lawful and practicable to extinguish this evil."

The deliverance of the Synod of Virginia is most interesting. We make the following extracts :

"That so many thousands of our fellow-creatures should, in this land of liberty and asylum for the oppressed, be held in chains, is a reflection painfully afflictive. And most earnestly do we wish that all the members of our communion would pay a proper attention to the recommendation of the late Synod of New York and Philadelphia upon this subject. We consider it the indispensable duty of all who hold slaves to prepare, by a suitable education, the young among them for a state of freedom, and to liberate them as soon as they shall appear to be duly qualified for that high privilege, and such as neglect a duty so evidently and so powerfully enforced by the common principles of justice, as well as by the dictates of humanity, and the benign genius of our holy

religion, ought, in our opinion, to be seriously dealt with and admonished on that account. . . . That it was wrong in the first instance to reduce so many of the helpless Africans to their present state of thralldom will be readily admitted, and that it is a duty to adopt proper measures for their emancipation will, it is presumed, be universally conceded."

It was with feelings concerning slavery such as have been thus indicated, and with an enthusiastic desire to be instrumental in preparing the way for that elevation and emancipation of the African race in America which he longed to see, that Mr. Van Rensselaer sought and obtained licensure and ordination at the hands of the Presbytery of West Hanover. The way seemed to be opened in an auspicious manner for his undertaking through the sympathy and assistance of a distinguished Virginia planter, General Cocke, who invited him to live in his family and to labor among "his people." The impression made by his presence may be best described by quoting from a letter written by General Cocke in his old age, when informed of the death of his friend of former years. In the letter he tells of the pain experienced by "the loss of one of the most delightful Christian, and nearest personal, friendships of his long life, which commenced with the beginning of his (Mr. V. R.'s) ministry in Virginia, when he entered upon the noble enterprise of giving religious instruction to the slave population of the South. Of this I have a monument to his name and enterprise upon my own estate in a chapel, the site of which was selected by himself, and consecrated by prayer upon the spot. . . . If this chapel was not the first, it was certainly among the first erected in Virginia for the avowed purpose of being devoted to the religious instruction of the colored population." *

* How sincerely and earnestly some at least of the Virginia planters of that period desired emancipation, and endeavored to make intelligent preparation for it, will appear from the following extract from a letter directed to Mr. Van Rensselaer by his friend, General Cocke, in the winter of 1848: "I was left to resume my annual journey to my plantation of candidates for citizenship in the New Republic. . . . They have sorely disappointed me thus far; but I shall not despond, or cease in such efforts as I verily believe, under Providence, may be finally successful, if perseveringly and faithfully pursued. I may not live to see the experiment through; but as long as I do live, I shall prosecute the plan, and if I die before its consummation, I shall endeavor to provide for its execution after I am gone."

Mr. Van Rensselaer had brought with him from New Haven those peculiarities with regard to doctrinal belief known as "Taylorism," and the teachings at Princeton, and at the Theological Seminary in Virginia, had not availed to break up his attachment to them. When he came, however, to the actual preaching of the gospel in the prosecution of his ministry, he promptly renounced the speculations to which he had persistently clung for years. He told his friend, Dr. Boardman, that, as soon as he got into the field, he found that the system was not a practical one, that he could not *work* with it, and he had to throw it all away.

The bright hopes which Mr. Van Rensselaer had cherished with regard to a successful work for the elevation of the slaves of the South were soon dissipated, and in the fall of 1835, he determined to ask for a letter of dismissal from the Presbytery by whom he had been ordained for this work. The reasons for this action will appear from a perusal of his letter to the Presbytery, which was in part as follows:

"I consider my usefulness in my particular vocation at the South to be almost entirely at an end. The Lord sent me amongst you, a stranger, to labor among the bondmen of the land of Virginia. I commenced the work in fear and trembling, and yet not without hope that the prejudices which exist between your land and ours would, after a time at least, cease to interrupt the plans and operations of Christianity. That hope was beginning to be realized; —*the times have changed*—and my hope is gone! A great excitement has sprung up. Prejudices, before violent, have received fresh and mighty impulses. Obstacles, scarcely visible a short time since, have now become mountains by the volcanic agitations of a rash and fiery fanaticism. Brethren, joyfully would I have labored among you, and gladly would I return, if my presence would be for good." *

Such an experience naturally raised grave doubts in his mind as to the prospects for the African race in America, and he turned his eyes with intense interest, as did many other devoted friends of the slave population, to the setting up of the Republic

*The intensely-excited and anxious state of mind, prevailing already in the South at the time of Mr. Van Rensselaer's earnest efforts, with the aid of Christian planters, to give the gospel to the slaves, is well illustrated by the suspicions excited by his journey of inquiry (alluded to above on page 223), in 1833, and the utter misconception of his motives in calling upon one or two colored ministers of the gospel in Savannah. This gentleman, who was almost

of Liberia on the west coast of Africa. His views were set forth at considerable length in an address which he delivered at the opening of "The Ashmun Institute," now "Lincoln University," December 31, 1856.

No attempt had been made up to that time by any of the nations for the colonization of Africa; the continent, with the exception of certain small portions occupied for military or commercial purposes by the French, English and Portuguese, being given up, as though by common consent, to be subdued, enlightened, consecrated to God, by her own children. As far as he could see, the providence of God had reserved and set apart Africa for the Africans, and his tongue grew eloquent as he discoursed upon the theme he selected for the occasion of his address, "GOD GLORIFIED BY AFRICA."

Things, however, have taken a very different turn from anything he dreamed of. Only a few years after his address was delivered, but not in his lifetime, the slaves of the United States were freed by a stroke of the pen as a matter of military necessity or expediency, and the great powers of Europe, that seemed at one time by common consent to be leaving Africa for the Africans, have lately been emulating one another in their zeal to divide up the great continent among themselves. The wealth, the intelligence, the experience, the vast power of the European nations, were evidently deemed necessary for the mighty task of Africa's redemption. The founding of "The Ashmun Institute," in which he took so great an interest, has met the hopes he fondly cherished. It is serving, at any rate, as he hoped it would, "to educate young men who expect to

a Quaker in his horror of war, was accused of being an agent of insurrection! It seems that gentlemen of respectability had given credit to the absurd story, and the civil authorities too appear to have taken alarm. The story was reported as follows: "We learn from a gentleman of Savannah, of high respectability, that this Van Rensselaer some time ago held secret meetings with the negroes in that city, and consulted with them on their means of revolt—their strength, arms, concert, etc.—and when they expected to be ready; of which notice was given to the civil authorities, and Van Rensselaer would have been arrested, but, when sought for, he had suddenly left the city." In reality, he had left without the least suspicion that anyone regarded his movements as of any special importance.

remain in our own country." His anticipations have not yet been fulfilled that "the wave of African colonization will bear onward masses to Africa, and the wave of southwestern emigration press downward many towards Mexico and Central America," and only a few of the graduates of the institution have as yet gone as missionaries to the land of their ancestors; but there are indications that, in the near future, the number will be multiplied; and, at the present moment, there are students who have come over from South Africa to get their education at "Lincoln University," with the expectation of returning to labor for the intellectual and spiritual advancement of their countrymen.

Mr. Van Rensselaer, on his return from Virginia, chose for his home the old city of Burlington, in the State of New Jersey, founded by London and Yorkshire Quakers in 1677. The historical associations of the place were dear to him. On High Street was the residence of Gov. Bloomfield, governor of the state in colonial days, and close to it, the residence of that true Christian philanthropist, Stephen Grellet, a French nobleman who had become a member of Friends' Meeting in Burlington. On the same street was the house in which Cooper, the novelist, was born, and, adjoining it, the birthplace of Captain James Lawrence of the United States Navy. On Broad Street was the residence of Elias Boudinot, the distinguished American patriot, and friend of Education. On the river bank, near to "Stone Cottage" which Mr. Van Rensselaer built for his home, stood the summer residence of Horace Binney, the famous Philadelphia lawyer; and, nearer still, the residence of Mr. Binney's companion at the Bar, Charles Chauncey, a famous house which was, in early days, the home of Governor Franklin. On the same "Green Bank" of the Delaware River dwelt that noted prelate of the Protestant Episcopal Church, Bishop George W. Doane.

Mr. Van Rensselaer was married, on the 13th of September, 1836, to Catharine Ledyard Cogswell, of Hartford, Conn., a young lady of great beauty, trained intellect, and devoted piety, a daughter of Mason Fitch Cogswell, M. D., and Mary Ledyard, his wife. He promptly interested himself in the

organization of a Presbyterian Church in Burlington with the co-operation of such people as the Rev. William Chester, D. D., who was destined to be closely associated with him in later days in extensive educational labors, and the family of the Rev. John Chester, D. D., of Albany, N. Y., who, after his death, made their home for a time in Burlington. He was installed as the first pastor of the new church in 1837, and continued in this relation until 1840, when he committed the care of the little flock to other hands that he might take up labors in a wider sphere. He was the stated supply of the Second Church in the city of Washington, D. C., in the winter of 1841-42. William Henry Harrison was then President of the United States. Mr. Van Rensselaer entertained for this distinguished official a very high regard; and when the President was taken ill, in the latter part of March, 1841, he felt it to be a duty and a privilege to pay frequent visits to the White House. When the death of Mr. Harrison occurred, he repaired, shortly afterwards, by appointment to the Mansion, and held a service for the instruction and consolation of the family. Fifteen or twenty persons were assembled for the service, and he found them ready with a cordial welcome for the faithful minister of Christ who brought to them in his Master's name "the peace and comforts of the gospel."

The next important task to which, in 1843, Mr. Van Rensselaer devoted his energies, was the raising of a considerable sum of money as an endowment fund for the relief of the theological seminary at Princeton, New Jersey, which had been brought into serious financial embarrassment on account of the severe commercial crisis through which the country passed about that time. This was a great task under the circumstances of the case. He accomplished it by making a generous contribution of \$2500 himself, and then canvassing the country from north to south, entirely at his own charges, to secure the rest. No words can adequately express the value of the service thus rendered. The power and influence of this seat of learning, so widely felt, were made secure by this gift. Mr. Van Rensselaer was elected a Director of the seminary in 1848, and in the following year was made a member of the Board of

Trustees. In 1845 New York University had conferred upon him the title of Doctor of Divinity.

It was about this time that Dr. Van Rensselaer was called upon to undertake what his friends regarded as the great work of his life; although it may well be doubted whether what he subsequently accomplished with so much toil in the cause of Ministerial Education proved to be of more enduring usefulness than that which he accomplished for the same general purpose, when he secured the money which provided for the permanent maintenance of theological education at Princeton Seminary.

The work to which he thus devoted his remaining years was in connection with the Board of Education of the Presbyterian Church, of which he was elected Corresponding Secretary on the 12th day of February, 1846. The Board had entered already upon a new career of enlarged usefulness and efficiency under his distinguished predecessors, Dr. John Breckenridge, Dr. Francis McFarland, and Dr. Matthew B. Hope, so that it "never stood" (to quote the language of Dr. Hope) "on firmer ground, or enjoyed such prospects of extensive and important results."

The distinguishing feature of Dr. Van Rensselaer's administration was an heroic effort on his part to put into practical operation a general scheme of education, for which the approval of the General Assembly (Old School) was secured under the influence of such leaders as Dr. Charles Hodge of Princeton and Dr. John C. Young of Kentucky. The intention was to promote the establishment of a system of parochial and presbyterial schools, with as many synodical colleges as might be found advisable. The three great characteristics of the plan were these: A. The inculcation of the truths and duties of religion in connection with secular knowledge; B. The impartation of instruction through Christian teachers; C. The placing of the institutions of education under the supervision of the Church. The Board of Education had been previously limited in its scope to the assisting of poor and pious candidates for the ministry to get the long and costly education which the Church exacted as the condition of ordination. That scope was at this time enlarged so as to authorize the acceptance of gifts for

the setting up and maintaining of schools of the character just described. Dr. Van Rensselaer may be regarded as having sacrificed his life for the promotion of the scheme. The result was the establishment of about 150 parochial schools, about fifty academies, besides a few colleges, almost all of ephemeral existence. The obstacles in the way appeared to be innumerable and apparently insuperable, and in 1872, twelve years after the death of Dr. Van Rensselaer, the scheme was definitely abandoned.* But the time and toil and money expended by the devoted secretary, aided by his co-laborers, Dr. William Chester and Dr. James Wood, were by no means in vain. His busy pen produced a large number of educational papers of permanent value. In these he ably controverted what he considered false principles with regard to education, and pressed upon the conscience of the Church with telling power her duty with regard to the education of her children under suitable religious influences. He established the "Home, School and Church," a magazine devoted to the cause of Christian education. Ten volumes were issued beginning with the year 1850.

In addition, beginning with 1851, he issued ten volumes of the "Presbyterian Magazine," persevering in the publication almost to the time of his death, which occurred on the 25th of July, 1860. These twenty volumes indicate but partially the extent of his literary activity. He assures us that he had no love for controversy, and yet the ardor of his nature and his zeal for truth led him on more than one occasion to buckle on his armor and engage in determined conflict. The terrible Heineken accident by which 21 persons were killed and 75 wounded on the Camden and Amboy Railroad at Burlington, N. J., Aug. 29, 1855, and for which he believed the unsatisfactory methods of the company were responsible, led him into a pretty sharp correspondence with the officials, which was published in a very interesting pamphlet.

Moreover, when his neighbor and fellow-citizen, Bishop

* The General Assembly in 1883 took up again in part the work which it had thus temporarily abandoned, and put it into the charge of a separate and independent Board called "The Presbyterian Board of Aid for Colleges and Academies."

George W. Doane, after his return from England exhibited an inclination to a ritualistic mode of worship, and an observance of ecclesiastical feast days and fast days, and an assumption of apostolic dignity and authority for himself, which Dr. Van Rensselaer believed to be utterly without the warrant of Holy Scripture and of a very dangerous character, he considered it his duty to lift up a testimony against the position and the published opinions of the bishop, and he used no uncertain language in the performance of this duty. Yet, upon the death of Bishop Doane in 1859, he preached a funeral sermon in his memory which made a deep impression on account of the high estimate which it placed upon the ability and worth of the departed prelate. He appears to have prepared it under the stress of strong emotions, and he concludes with the following paragraph: "My offering of May-flowers, fragrant with the freshness of their gathering, has been laid upon the new-made grave;—flowers plucked by a Puritan's hand and placed in *memoriam* over the dust of a great Episcopal Bishop."

His interest also in the American negro, and in the perplexing questions which arose in connection with the existence of negro slavery in the United States, led him to set forth in the "Presbyterian Magazine" what he considered to be the Scripture doctrine upon the subject of slavery, and he was thus led into a controversy, as indicated above, with the Rev. George D. Armstrong, of the Synod of Virginia; the letters interchanged being published in Philadelphia in 1858.

He wrote quite at length also upon the subject of the controversies which resulted in the division of the Presbyterian Church in 1838 into the Old School and the New School; his essays on this theme being in the nature of a reply to an article which appeared in the New School Presbyterian Quarterly Review entitled "The Spirit of American Presbyterianism." He believed it profitable, moreover, to apply to the public conscience the lessons of important events which attracted particular attention. Thus he preached a sermon upon the death of President Harrison in 1841, and in 1852 he delivered a eulogy on the occasion of the death of Daniel Webster. The loss of the steamship "Arctic" in 1854, furnished the occasion for another discourse

of this character; and again, in 1856, he felt moved by the death of the Quaker philanthropist, Stephen Grellet, of Burlington, N. J., to prepare an extended memorial and funeral discourse to commemorate the event.

His interest in historical matters is illustrated by the discourse which he delivered in 1855, at the Court House, Caldwell, N. Y., on the occasion of the Centennial Celebration of the Battle of Lake George, and which was published in 1856, with many pages of added notes. More than this, Dr. Van Rensselaer used his influence successfully for the founding of "The Presbyterian Historical Society," now occupying spacious and beautiful rooms in the Witherspoon Building, Philadelphia. This was undoubtedly his most important contribution of an historical character. Its results have proved to be of far-reaching influence. The steps taken were as follows: In August, 1851, there appeared in Dr. Van Rensselaer's "Presbyterian Magazine" an article in which he discussed the question how the treasures of our Church history could be saved from the danger of being irrecoverably lost. Experience had already made it clear that the efforts of the General Assembly as a body could not be depended upon to accomplish the object. They had begun, it is true, to gather historical materials in 1791, and in 1804 appointed a committee "to write the history of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America;" and, when this committee asked to be discharged in 1813, the matter was committed to Dr. Miller, with whom Dr. Green was associated in 1819. The net result of all appears to have been two chapters of a Church History published in the Christian Advocate of 1825 and 1830 by Dr. Green. It seemed equally clear that reliance could not be placed, except "in a very precarious and imperfect manner," upon the "random efforts of individuals." Dr. Van Rensselaer, in his systematic manner, set forth, under nine heads, the advantages of an association to perform the work required. The article ends with the following sentences: "Considerations of this nature induce us to throw out in this public manner the suggestion whether there ought not to be a PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY. If the suggestion meets with suitable favor, measures will be taken to call a

meeting of all those interested in the subject at some convenient place, and at as early a day in the autumn as may be practicable." A preliminary meeting may have been held, as proposed, in the autumn; but the actual formation of the Historical Society took place during the sessions of the General Assembly in the City of Charleston, S. C., in the year 1852. A call for a meeting to be held on the evening of the 20th of May was issued by Dr. Van Rensselaer in association with Drs. John C. Backus, Charles Hodge, Nathan L. Rice, Thomas Smyth, and Mr. Richard Webster. At the meeting the Rev. Dr. John McLean of Princeton occupied the chair, and Dr. Van Rensselaer made an address explaining the object in view, its importance, and the means by which it might be attained. He then offered suitable resolutions looking towards the establishment of an historical society, and the appointment of a committee to draw up a constitution. His resolutions were adopted, and he himself served as chairman of the committee which brought in the draft of a constitution; and he was made Chairman also of the Executive Committee of the newly organized society, to the interests of which he remained always devoted.

The personal appearance of Dr. Van Rensselaer in figure, complexion and action, indicated a man of strength and endurance. He was perhaps rather inert in natural disposition, but he could be roused even to over-exertion under a sense of obligation and duty. Indeed his early death must be ascribed to an overtaxing of his great powers. He was not regarded as a man of deep learning or of brilliant intellect, and yet he read widely and on a great variety of subjects. He had excellent judgment, good sense, strong convictions, and an indomitable will. He reached his conclusions with care, and then moved forward to the execution of his plans with a zeal and determination which no obstacle seemed able to thwart. His prudence, on the other hand, is said to have been a marked feature of his character, and part of his success in carrying his measures in the face of objection and opposition came from his disposition and ability to conciliate his opponents. His modesty and humility may be illustrated by a passage in a letter which he wrote but three weeks before his death to his friend, Dr. H. A. Boardman, in which he said:

“When I was elected moderator of the General Assembly (at Lexington, Ky., in 1857), I trembled. I was doubtful whether God designed to lift me up in order that my fall might be the more conspicuous, or whether it was meant as a token of his approval of my unworthy labors.”

We cannot doubt that God intended by this election to honor a devoted and laborious servant whom he loved; and, as though this honor were not enough, he added another yet more distinguished. The death of Dr. Van Rensselaer occurred July 25, 1860. The General Assembly of that year held their sessions at Rochester, New York, in the month of May. When the news came to them of the probably fatal illness which had attacked their distinguished co-laborer, they addressed a letter to him in which they express the deep solicitude with which they have learned of the afflictive dispensation which kept him from the Assembly, and assure him of their cordial and united sympathy. With devout thankfulness to God, they put upon record their sense of the eminent wisdom, fidelity and efficiency, and the noble, disinterested liberality with which he had for fourteen years conducted the affairs of the Board of Education, while with his luminous pen he had vindicated the principles which lie at the basis of true Christian education, and by his numerous publications, his sermons and addresses, his extended correspondence, and his self-denying activity in visiting every part of the Church, had by God's blessing accomplished a great work in elevating this sacred cause to its just position, and gathering around it the sympathies of the whole Presbyterian communion. They spoke of him as the workman who had done so much to prepare the ground and sow the seed, but is seen falling exhausted in the furrows, while the Church is reaping the harvest; and, on behalf of the Church which they represent, they sincerely and gratefully thank him for all his labors and sacrifices. The letter was signed by the officers of the Assembly, by the individual members, and by many others, not members, who were present at the session. Dr. Charles Hodge, who was there, tells us that the letter, when prepared, was read to the Assembly in the midst of tears and sighs, and was adopted by the whole Assembly rising to their feet, when the oldest minister present gave utterance in prayer

to the feelings which swelled every heart. He adds, "This is an incident unprecedented in our history."

The picture of Dr. Van Rensselaer would not be complete without an allusion to the cheerfulness, and almost boyish mirthfulness, of his domestic life, his abounding humor, his overflowing hospitality. He was the father of seven children, five sons and two daughters, all of whom survived him but one, who died in childhood.

His death occurred after an illness protracted through many months, all of which were spent in uninterrupted peace. "Blessed be God," he said to his intimate friend, "I do feel assured of pardon and acceptance. In the early part of my sickness, I was in the habit of saying, 'I hope I have an interest in Christ.' But I find I must give that up and say, 'I *know* whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.'"

The funeral services took place at Burlington, N. J., where he had lived for a quarter of a century. "A large concourse of clergymen of different denominations were present. The funeral discourse was preached in the Presbyterian Church by Dr. Charles Hodge, of Princeton, Drs. Plumer, Boardman and Chester participating in the services. The bells of the City Hall and of all the various churches were tolled; and, during the passing of the honored remains from his late residence to the church, and thence to the railroad station, the hotels, stores, banks and private dwellings were closed. The remains were taken to Albany for interment in the family vault."

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