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ANNALS

OF THE

AMERICAN PULPIT;

OR

COMMEMORATIVE NOTICES

OF

DISTINGUISHED AMERICAN CLERGYMEN

OF

VARIOUS DENOMINATIONS,

FROM THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE COUNTRY TO THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR  
EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE.

WITH HISTORICAL INTRODUCTIONS.

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BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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## WILLIAM STEPHENS POTTS, D. D.\*

1827—1852.

WILLIAM STEPHENS POTTS was born in Northumberland County, Pa., at a place called Fishing Creek, about ten miles West of the town of Berwick, on the Susquehanna, on the 13th of October, 1802. His grandfather was Stacy Potts, a distinguished member of the Society of Friends, who resided in Trenton, N. J., during the Revolutionary war, and afterwards removed to Harrisburg, Pa., and held various important offices in both States. William Potts, the eldest son of Stacy, accompanied his father to Pennsylvania, where he engaged with him in mercantile pursuits; and, during his residence there, he was married to Mary, the daughter of Theophilus Gardner, an eminent merchant of Philadelphia, of Scotch and Presbyterian descent. These were the parents of the subject of this notice, and in 1799 they removed to the place where he was born.

Here, in this then wild and comparatively frontier settlement, the boy spent several of his earliest years. There were, at that time, in the place where he lived, no schools, no church nor preachers. His mother was at once his teacher and his pastor; and though she was a frail and delicate woman, she possessed high intellectual and moral qualities, and was, in the language of one of her sons who survives her, "*an angel of a mother.*"

At the age of eight years, his family removed with him to Trenton; and by this time his father had become so reduced in his worldly circumstances, that the children, as they grew up, were cast upon their own resources. At the age of sixteen, with no other than a common English education, William was sent to Philadelphia to learn the printer's trade. Here he laboured with the utmost diligence for about three years, and during this time acquired some pecuniary means, which facilitated, in some degree, his entrance on a different course of life. He had now become a professor of religion, and had a strong desire to devote himself to the ministry; and, being encouraged by his employer and other friends, he at length resolved to enter upon a course of study with reference to that object.

Accordingly, early in 1822, he put himself under the care of the Rev. Dr. Ezra Stiles Ely, of Philadelphia, who had kindly offered to superintend his studies, and who, in various ways, acted towards him the part of a disinterested friend. Here he continued till the autumn of 1825, when, having completed his preparatory course, he entered the Theological Seminary at Princeton, being then, as a candidate for the ministry, under the care of the Presbytery of Philadelphia. In consequence of intense application to study, his health soon became enfeebled, and, in the hope of recovering it, he availed himself of the summer vacation of 1827, to make a missionary tour through the Pine region of New Jersey; but the result was that, instead of returning with invigorated health, he returned with his health still more impaired, and a slight hemorrhage took place, which awakened in both himself and his friends the most serious apprehensions. He remained in the Seminary until the autumn, but left it in November, by the advice of

\* MSS. from his family.

eminent physicians,—doubtful whether he would ever resume his connection with it.

He was immediately licensed by the Presbytery of Philadelphia; and, under the advice of the Rev. Dr. Green, who had received communications from St. Louis, urging the importance of that field of labour, he took a mission to the South, with instructions to make his way as far as that point. He set out at once on his journey alone, travelling leisurely on horseback, with all the property he had in the world in his saddlebags, and thus commenced the work of a missionary. He passed on labouring in various ways, as he had opportunity, through Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, (where he spent some time among the Creek Indians,) Tennessee, and up the Valley of the Mississippi, and reached Illinois town, opposite St. Louis, on the 14th of May, 1828. The appearance of St. Louis, at that time a small, scattered, smoky city, inhabited almost entirely by Roman Catholics, was any thing else than attractive to him; and he could not but regard it as a very unpromising field of labour. He was, however, contented to enter upon it; and having received and accepted a call to become the Pastor of a small Presbyterian Church, (the only one then in the city,) which had been gathered eleven years before by the Rev. Salmon Giddings, he was ordained and installed by the Presbytery of Missouri, October 26, 1828.

During the first four years of his ministry, his church had a slow but steady growth; but in the early part of the year 1832, a revival of religion commenced, which continued till the autumn, and resulted in the addition of one hundred and twenty-eight new members.

Dr. Potts was an earnest advocate for church extension; and he thought the time had now come when Presbyterianism was strong enough in St. Louis to justify them in commencing the work. Accordingly, two colonies were at once detached from his congregation, to form new churches; one of which was located within the city, the other fourteen miles West of the city. In 1833 and 1834, both the city churches enjoyed partial revivals, in consequence of which they were not a little strengthened.

About this period, a project was matured for establishing a literary institution, which might meet the growing wants of the Great Valley. Its distinct object was the training of Western young men for the Christian ministry; at the same time making provision for them to sustain themselves, during their education, by manual labour. With a view to carry out this idea, several gentlemen formed the plan of Marion College. An Act of incorporation was procured in 1830, a large tract of land was purchased, buildings erected, and in 1835 the Trustees elected Dr. Potts President of the institution. He accepted the appointment, resigned his charge at St. Louis, and entered at once upon the duties of his new office. Here he spent the next four years in intense and exhausting labour, and during one season travelled from Missouri to Maine, endeavouring to collect funds in aid of the institution.

The success of the enterprise did not, however, equal his expectations; and in 1838, a small number of the members of the church to which he had ministered in St. Louis, proposed to him that if he would return to them, they would attempt the establishment of a new church. He consented to the proposal, a new church was organized, and he was unanimously called to it in 1839. He entered upon his new charge in July of that year,

and was installed in October following. And here he laboured with untiring assiduity, except when occasionally absent in search of health, till his decease. The church enjoyed, during his ministry, five seasons of revival, and received to its membership more than a thousand persons.

The hemorrhage from which he had suffered at Princeton, though it was not of the lungs, settled into a bronchial affection, from which he was never entirely relieved. In 1841, his health was so prostrated that a trip to Europe was recommended as the only probable means of restoring him. He, accordingly, in the latter part of April of that year, in company with his brother, the Hon. Stacy G. Potts, embarked for Europe; and, having passed several months on the Continent and in Great Britain, he returned in the ensuing October, considerably invigorated by his tour.

The same year, the degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred upon him by Marion College.

In 1850, his health obliged him to retire from his labours for a season, and he spent most of the summer with his brother at Trenton. Early in 1852, he took a cold, which was not a little aggravated by his travelling to a distant town to meet his Presbytery. On his return, he was obliged to discontinue his labours; and he never resumed them. He evinced an unqualified resignation in the prospect of his departure,—arranging all his concerns with the utmost composure and dignity. He died on Sabbath morning, March 27, 1852. He had rested quietly the preceding night, and when the sun arose, he roused up, and was told that it was Sabbath morning. He asked to be raised in his bed that he might once more look at the sun; but his sight was gone. He said quietly,—“I cannot see;” and sunk back on his pillow. He only spoke once afterwards, and his words were,—“Enduring the cross, despising the shame, He is set down at the Right Hand of the Throne of God.” His Funeral took place on the following Tuesday. The Courts in Session in the city were closed, and many suspended their business to do honour to his memory.

On the 18th of August, 1834, he was married to Ann, daughter of Samuel Benton of Missouri, and niece of the Hon. Thomas H. Benton, of the Senate of the United States,—a lady eminently qualified to render him happy. They had no living children.

The following is a list of Dr. Potts' publications:—A Masonic Discourse, delivered before the Missouri Lodge, No. 1, on St. John's Day, at St. Louis, 1828. An Annual Sermon for the Presbyterian Sunday School Society of St. Louis, 1831. An Address delivered before the Young Men's Temperance Society of St. Louis, on the Fourth of July, 1834. An Inaugural Address delivered before the Board of Trustees of Marion College, 1835. Obligations of Professors in Christian Colleges: an Address delivered by appointment before the Professors and Tutors of Marion College, 1836. Effects of Intemperance upon National Wealth: an Address delivered before the St. Louis Total Abstinence Society, 1839. A Review of a Declaration of Sentiments made by the Synod of Missouri, formed by a Convention of Presbyterian ministers and elders, held at Hannibal, Mo., 1841. Presbyterian Church Government Scriptural: a Sermon delivered by appointment before the Presbytery of St. Louis, 1842. The Episcopal doctrine of Apostolic Succession examined; being a reply to “An Episcopalian's Review of a Sermon by the Rev. William S. Potts, D. D., entitled ‘Presbyterian Church Government Scriptural.’” 1843. Sequel to Apos-



tolical Succession examined: being an Answer to "An Episcopalian's Comments" on the same, 1843. The path of Honour: an Address delivered before the Union Literary Society of the University of Missouri, 1845. Dangers of Jesuit Instruction: a Sermon preached in the Second Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, 1845. Reply to Brownson's "Review of the Sermon by Dr. Potts, on the 'dangers of Jesuit instruction,'" 1846. Ministers should live of the Gospel: a Sermon on the duty of the Presbyterian Church in Missouri in regard to Domestic Missions; preached by appointment before the Synod of Missouri, in Columbia, 1846. A Sermon on certain Popular Amusements of the day; delivered in the Second Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, 1847. The Bible the basis of American Liberty: a Tract. God in the Pestilence and the Fire: a Sermon preached in the Second Presbyterian Church of St. Louis, the Sabbath after the Great Fire, 1849. Sin, the bane of prosperity: a Sermon preached in the Second Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, on the day of the National Fast, 1849. The Sabbath: its original institution, &c.—the substance of two Discourses in the Second Presbyterian Church of St. Louis, 1849. The blessedness of dying in the Lord: a Sermon preached at the Funeral of Mrs. Angelina Charlotte Yeatman, in the Second Presbyterian Church of St. Louis, 1849.

FROM THE REV. H. P. GOODRICH, D. D.

St. Louis, Mo., August 18, 1852.

Dear Sir: I knew Dr. Potts in Princeton Seminary in 1825. I was with him one year, as Professor of Ancient Languages in Marion College, of which he was President. For four years after, I was his successor in the Presidency, was often in his company, and was in constant correspondence with him. While engaged in the ministry in this city, I was accustomed to meet him often, and regularly in our weekly clerical association, and in Presbytery and Synod.

In personal appearance, Dr. Potts was rather tall, but of a slight figure and pale countenance. He had a mild, determined, intellectual look, and a graceful and dignified bearing. He had a fine forehead, firmly compressed lips, dark brown glossy hair, and clear blue eyes, over which he always wore gold-rimmed concave glasses. All the physical strength he ever had was induced from the strength of his will; but *it* was iron; and hence he could endure and accomplish more than most men. His dress was always neat and genteel, but not extravagant. He never sought conversation or society for amusement, or because he loved it, for he was much happier in his library, or in his family, than any where else. Yet he was easily approached by any one, and children always loved him. He was disposed to do those little kindnesses which win the heart, and show a thoughtful friendship. A beautiful hymn-book is now before me, presented to my deceased daughter by Dr. Potts, bearing an affectionate inscription. In some one of his conversations with her during her last illness, he ate with her a double almond, and when she won the philopœna, he presented her this book. To many of his charge he gave similar mementos. He was also kind to the friendless stranger, in money, in time, and in counsel. Not long ago, a young man, elegantly dressed, called on him as a Presbyterian minister, because his father was an elder of that Church in some Northern State, and asked his influence in getting for him a clerkship, stating that he had been to Mobile and New Orleans, and had now been in St. Louis till his money was all gone, and he could get no employment. Dr. Potts verified his statements, and then told the young man that, at that moment, he could get no place for him, but that he would pay for

his board till something could be done, and that, in the mean time, the best advice he could give him was to engage in the first honest business that should present itself. This so impressed the mind of the young man that, as he passed along the street, and heard some one asking for a labourer to put a load of coal into the cellar, he offered to do it, and did it without soiling his black broadcloth or white linen. Thus he earned the first seventy-five cents since he left his father's house. This led to other employment; but he still followed the Doctor's advice, and after a few months returned to him to thank him for his kind attentions, and especially for that judicious counsel, which had led to his earning fifteen hundred dollars. Many young men have found a friend in need in Doctor Potts.

In society, he was courteous and polite, but most persons stood in awe of him, and in conversation with him rather expected instruction than a mutual interchange of thoughts and feelings. His colloquial speech was slow and deliberate, usually indicating reflection. In the study, his labour was mostly that of thought. He never used the language of others, never adopted their arrangement of ideas, and seldom quoted either prose or poetry. He used books mainly to discover facts and arguments, and to learn what the world was writing and reading. In reading, if he wished to remember a page, as he would not trust a loose book-mark, and would not turn a leaf, he was wont to put his finger on the paging, and repeat the number aloud, and would then never forget it. So, in remembering numbers in a city of a hundred thousand inhabitants, and in a church of five hundred members,—he never forgot the number of a house, and usually associated the number with money. If asked to call, for instance, at No. 18, he would say to himself,—“that is three picayunes;” or 110,—“that is one dollar and a dime;” or 233,—“that is two dollars and two shillings;” and he would then never forget it. His knowledge was usually remarkably accurate, and of course there were many subjects on which he knew nothing; for if he had not time or opportunity to master the subject, he did not care to know any thing about it. His library was composed of standard works. Every book and every paper was always in its place, and the place was rarely ever changed. The same Bible lay upon his table for twenty years. His discourses were usually prepared with full analysis, and written, as they were prepared, in a series of blank books of pocket size. He seldom wrote out a discourse, and seldom, when he did write, read the manuscript, or committed it to memory, or carried the fragment of a note into the pulpit. His sermons were extempore—in the sense not of being unstudied, but unwritten.

In pulpit labours he never varied much. No man ever saw him try to be eloquent, or to win any external sign of approbation or feeling. If a sermon was praised, it never seemed to gratify him; and if criticised and censured, it did not disturb him. His sole aim in preaching was manifestly to make men better, and the weapon he wielded most, was strong, unanswerable logic. With him, the tone of voice, the gesture, the garniture of flowers and figures, were nothing—simple truth and sound argument were every thing. He ever seemed to rely much on the power of prayer, and in social meetings, urged all the male members of his church to take a part.

In building up his church and congregation, Dr. Potts was unusually wise and politic. All measures not decidedly wrong, he would use for the benefit of the church, or of any cause in which he was engaged, and in seasons of revival he adopted any measures which seemed to him likely, on the whole, to produce good results. In public labours and in private intercourse, in counsel and rebuke, he was ever faithful to the souls of men, whether they were high or low according to the world's standard.

In the judicatories of the Church, he was always prominent, though not forward; for he felt an interest in every subject, and had always something to say

that was worthy of being heard. As Chairman of a Committee, or as Stated Clerk, he was a pattern of excellence. All business committed to him was sure to be done, and done right, and all papers drafted by him were always in right form, rightly folded and endorsed, beautifully written, and seldom interlined or copied. I may here mention an incident which controlled his handwriting in all after-life, and which shows how his mind turned to good account little things. When a boy, he was a clerk of some sort in Philadelphia, and went to collect a bill from a Quaker gentleman. When paid, he signed the receipt with one of those hieroglyphic cartouches, which we sometimes see as a signature on bank-notes. The Quaker took up the bill and said very blandly,—“Friend, what is this at the bottom?” “That, Sir, is my name.” “What is thy name?” “William S. Potts.” “Well, William, will thee please to write it down under here plain, so that a witness in Court could know it.” Ever after, Dr. Potts wrote to be read, and no man could mistake a word or letter.

I remain your brother in the Lord,

HIRAM P. GOODRICH.

FROM THE HON. STACY G. POTTS,

JUDGE OF THE SUPREME COURT OF NEW JERSEY.

TRENTON, N. J., September 4, 1852.

Dear Sir: I avail myself of the first leisure moment I have had since your letter was received, to furnish some reminiscences of my deceased brother, the late Rev. Dr. Potts of St. Louis.

The only very prominent trait of character which he exhibited in his earliest years, was that of dogged, invincible obstinacy. He was the most utterly “impracticable” boy I ever knew—not vicious, not unkind, but self-willed, and in his self-will unconquerable. As this trait came, in time and through after years, to be softened and controlled by the exercise of an intellect of great vigour, it took that form of firmness, fearlessness, and uncompromising devotion to duty, which was one of the most remarkable characteristics of the man. For where his convictions of duty were clear, I believe he would, at any time, have faced a cannon’s mouth, as calmly as eat his breakfast. It was this character which soon came to be understood when he went to the West, that made many things easy of accomplishment in his ministerial labour, which a timid man would have found impossible.

It was during his course of study preparatory to entering the Seminary, that his firm and decided Christian character took its shape, and commenced its development. His eye, his thoughts, his efforts, were directed steadily and singly to the field he was about to occupy. He was not a man of impulses, of heated zeal, of overwrought imaginations, or sanguine hopes. With him opinions were the sober convictions of a cool, dispassionate judgment,—the result of full investigation and deep thought. He was in one sense a man of one idea; but that was an idea which expanded over the whole circle of his anticipated duties. His system of study was thoroughly to master one thing at a time, no matter how slow the process. This made him rather a sure than a rapid learner. What he knew once, he knew for his lifetime. It was this habit of patient, thoughtful investigation, of *daguerreotyping* one thing after another on the memory and in the heart, instead of *glancing* at things in their combinations, as one looking into a kaleidoscope, that made him eventually what he was. But though now leading the life of a severe student, he considered himself responsible for the manner in which his short intervals of recreation were employed; and in social or private conversation, at home, in his walks, in company, at the prayer meeting and the Sunday School, in every field open to him for speaking boldly the simple truths



of the Gospel, he commenced the work that occupied him all the remainder of his life.

It is difficult for us in this part of the country to conceive of the amount of labour which devolved upon my brother after he went to St. Louis. He was one of the early pioneers of Presbyterianism in the Great Valley. St. Louis was, in 1827, a small town of less than six thousand inhabitants. Its commerce was then managed, I believe, in a few flat-bottomed boats. The Catholics formed the substrata of the community—only a few Methodists and Presbyterians had preceded him. He lived to see St. Louis a city of nearly a hundred thousand souls, with hundreds of steamboats at her levee, the great emporium of the trade of the upper country, the Queen of the cities of the Valley, the great centre of wealth, intelligence, talent, and influence. He lived to see the Presbyterian Church as powerful and influential as any other denomination, if not more so. He had grown up with this great progress, and been a part of it, and but comparatively few are now to be found in St. Louis, who were there when he first came. He had been consulted and active in the formation of churches, and the settlement of pastors, all through the Valley, for nearly a quarter of a century. Every body knew where he was, and who he was.

As a specimen of his system in labour, I may mention that he kept, from the commencement of his ministry, a sort of historical record of all persons who joined his Church; and it was printed, and re-printed every four years, and distributed through the Church. In this the brief history of every member was kept before his eye, and continued down year after year, and kept too before all his people. He considered a person who once joined his Church, thenceforth a member of his family—to be visited, written to, watched over, and followed with the solicitude of parental affection, while he lived. Hence he knew intimately every one of his members, and seldom failed to keep his eye upon them wherever they might wander.

It was his constant object to find work for every one of his people, and he kept them, as far as possible, *at* work. His maxim was,—“to grow in grace, you must do your duty.” He was a man of practical ideas, and but little of a theorist. His test of Christian character was not so much “How do you feel, as how do you perform your duty. If you want me to tell you whether or no you love the Saviour, tell me first how you serve and obey Him.”

I might extend these reminiscences indefinitely, but what I have written is probably sufficient for your purpose.

Yours truly,  
STACY G. POTTS.