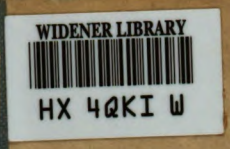
This is a reproduction of a library book that was digitized by Google as part of an ongoing effort to preserve the information in books and make it universally accessible.

Google™ books

https://books.google.com



US
15677
8.25



Stevens. George Gibbs. 1873

Digitized by Google

US 15677.8.25

Harvard College
Library



Gift of
The Author

Digitized by Google

1873.
The Library of Harvard University
with the regards of John Austin Stevens Jr.
of the Class of '46

A

MEMORIAL

OF

GEORGE GIBBS

BY

JOHN AUSTIN STEVENS, JR.

READ BEFORE THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY, OCT. 7, 1873.

WITH A NOTICE OF PROCEEDINGS.

NEW YORK:
PRINTED FOR THE SOCIETY.
1873.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

A

MEMORIAL

OF

GEORGE GIBBS

BY

JOHN AUSTIN STEVENS, JR.

READ BEFORE THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY, OCT. 7, 1873.

WITH A NOTICE OF PROCEEDINGS.

NEW YORK:
PRINTED FOR THE SOCIETY.
1873.

Digitized by Google

Ls 15277.8.25

HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY



1873: Dec. 24,
Gift of
The Author
of New York.
(H. N. 1846)

Digitized by Google

GEORGE GIBBS.

GEORGE GIBBS, so long familiar to the members of this Society as its unwavering and faithful friend, and for many years its Librarian and Custodian, has passed from the scenes of his busy and useful life to that sphere in which all histories of this finite existence find their sum and complement.

The son of Colonel George Gibbs, of the Newport, R. I., family of that name, and of Laura Wolcott, he was born on the 17th July, 1815, at Sunswick, Long Island, near the village of Hallett's Cove, now known as Astoria. His father was a man of singular culture and talent. Brilliant in conversation, polished in manners, and of large and various experience of men and life, Colonel Gibbs was one of the marked men of his day, and his large mansion at Sunswick was the seat of a broad and elegant hospitality rarely to be met with in this country at that time. As an instance of the extent of this hospitality, it may be stated that during the cholera summer of 1832, several families found refuge here and at the lodge during the whole time of the pestilence. The beautiful mansion, with its front upon the East River at one of its most picturesque

Digitized by Google

points, and its rear opening upon a broad inward landscape of fertile farm-fields, was then one of the landmarks of the river. And its stone descent from the terrace to the shore still marks the old house, which is now occupied as the convent of the Sacred Heart. In Col. Gibbs's day fine horses and dogs were always to be found about a gentleman's residence. Passionately fond of field sports, he was constantly at the south side of Long Island, where deer and small game were then the certain reward of the day's hunt, and his son was often his companion. For access to the city he had for years a small yacht which he styled the "Laura." His gardens were celebrated for the character and abundance of their splendid crops. To these, as to all that he touched, Colonel Gibbs brought the resources of his well-stored mind. Within was his fine library, abounding in the works of the best authors, and in many tongues; added to this a mineralogical collection. It may be here mentioned that the extensive and valuable collection now in the possession of Yale College was made by Colonel Gibbs himself while abroad. These incidents in the life of the father are alluded to here as having a direct bearing upon the career of the son.

The mother of George Gibbs was Laura Wolcott, daughter of Oliver Wolcott, the Secretary of the Treasury under Washington and the elder Adams, one of the fathers of the country. It is not

Digitized by Google

needful in this city, where her true, brave character, her well-stored and independent mind are still fresh in remembrance, to dwell upon the influence of such training upon her rising family. The original purpose of Col. Gibbs was to give his son a West Point education and to fit him for an army career ;—this and the navy were at that time considered as the only true occupations for the sons of gentlemen. As a preliminary step he was sent to the Round Hill school, at Northampton, Massachusetts, then kept by Mr. George Bancroft, the historian, and Mr. Cogswell, the late learned and distinguished Superintendent of the Astor Library. At seventeen, it having been found impossible to secure for the youth an appointment to the Military Academy—political favor then, as now, being indispensable to success—he was taken to Europe by his maiden aunt, Miss Sarah Gibbs, and for two years enjoyed the advantage of foreign travel, observation, and study, the influence of which upon his education and character was never lost. Though the family were disappointed in their wish to enter the eldest son as a military student, their efforts were not relaxed; as the one grew beyond the age at which alone the candidate is eligible, the claim for an appointment was transferred to the next son, and as persistently urged. Those who know the family on both sides of the house know of the unwavering determination with which they

Digitized by Google

press to the point in view. The second son, in turn, was compelled to give up his ambition, and entered Columbia College, to take high rank as a scholar, and is now well known as the Professor of Chemistry at Harvard College. Later, a third son, the late Major-General Alfred Gibbs, received the long-sought commission, and history has already inscribed his gallant deeds on her imperishable scroll.

On his return from Europe, George Gibbs commenced the reading of law, and in 1838 took his degree of Bachelor of Law at Harvard University. His first essay in literature was here made. In 1834, the very year of his entrance, he published, at Cambridge, a work entitled "The Judicial Chronicle, being a List of the Judges of the Courts of Common Law and Chancery in England and America, and of the Contemporary Reports from the earliest Period of the Reports to the present time," in octavo. On his return to New York he entered the law office of the late Prescott Hall, and by degrees attached himself to his profession and engaged in such practice as he could obtain. With this agreeable and genial gentleman he continued the most friendly and intimate relations until his death. A great part of his time, however, he passed in the country. His early taste for an out-door life always clung to him. Shooting and fishing were his favorite amusements, diversi-

Digitized by Google

fied with a practical and useful attention to geology and natural history. When the family removed to the city from Sunswick, in 1835, he had already made and mounted with his own hands a large collection of birds, and he had also gathered together a considerable mineralogical cabinet. The latter he sent to New Haven, as a gift to be added to his father's collection. These early tastes mark the natural tendency of his mind, and his whole career shows how strongly they were implanted in his nature; how foreign to his general intellectual bias must have been the plodding and confinement of the study of the law. Early he seems to have made his election as between science and law, although the crippled condition in which his father's death left the family estates did not allow of his deserting that profession which he had adopted and to which he looked for his own support. Nor could he ever have contented himself with the dry study of Blackstone and Chitty, or any other of the law worthies. His taste for literature was too catholic for this, and his intellectual rambles about his father's library had opened too many a vista of charming pasturage for him to stay his appetite with the dry food of legal disquisition. He shewed this taste even in the practice of his profession. He gave himself up with hearty zeal to the historical branch of conveyancing, and made valuable col-

Digitized by Google

lections of titles and abstracts in this department of law.

George Gibbs loved literature. He was familiar with all the good old books which our fathers were wont to read. He loved the strong and Saxon language of the earlier day—of Latimer and Hall, of Swift and Sterne, of Bolingbroke and Shaftesbury. The cast of his mind was puritanic in its stern hatred of new-fangled notions and new-fashioned phrases. He loved with his grand sonorous voice to roll out the verses of the old covenanter hymns or the paraphrases of the psalms of Sir Philip Sydney, a "pure well of English undefiled." He loved politics also. Ardent in all that he engaged in, he soon found himself occupied in a history of the times of Washington and Adams, and a vindication of the policy of his grandfather as Secretary of the Treasury and a member of the cabinet of John Adams. The hot feud between the Federalists and the Republicans had not died out, and the young polemic took up the "burning brand," which in those days was indeed passed on from sire to son as thoroughly as ever by Scottish partisan in Scottish feud. To use his own words, Mr. Gibbs "felt himself not only the vindicator, but in some sort the avenger of a bygone party and a buried race."

This work occupied a great part of his time. He embraced in it the correspondence of Oliver

Digitized by Google

Wolcott, and it stands to-day as a text-book of the history of the day—as an unquestioned authority upon the personages and the politics of that stirring period. It is written in strong nervous style, with great clearness and simplicity. It is questionable whether at the time the publication of these volumes was of benefit to the young lawyer. The law in those days was supposed to allow of no divided suit for her favor, and literary lawyers received few briefs. This publication, under the title of "The Memoirs of the Administration of Washington and Adams, edited from the papers of Oliver Wolcott, Secretary of the Treasury," was printed in 1846, in two volumes octavo.

In 1848 an event occurred which strangely affected the minds of all those restless spirits who chafed under the confinement of city life, and yearned for the freedom of nature. Gold fields were discovered in California. The wonders of the fifteenth century were renewed in the very current of our daily life, and a new El Dorado opened an inviting field for adventurous character. Dissatisfied with the dull routine of a sluggish practice, and urged on by his unwearied taste for practical scientific research, Mr. Gibbs took advantage of an occasion which the march of the Mounted Rifles overland from St. Louis to California afforded him, and accompanied them to Oregon, where he established himself at Columbia.

Digitized by Google

Before he left New York he had taken a lively interest in politics, and was an active member of the Whig party. Not a man to remain quiet when his feelings were aroused, he soon became prominent among men of the Whig opinion, and was a leader in the councils of the young men's committee. When Mr. Fillmore succeeded to the Presidency of the United States, Mr. Gibbs received, in 1854, the appointment of Collector of the port of Astoria, which he held during his administration. Later he removed from Oregon to Washington Territory, and settled upon a ranch a few miles from Fort Steilacoom, at a small settlement called by the same name. Here he had his headquarters for several years, devoting himself to the study of the Indian languages, and to the collection of vocabularies and traditions of the northwestern tribes. During a great part of the time he was attached to the United States Government Commission in laying the boundary as the geologist or botanist of the expedition. Each Commission in turn sought eagerly for the aid of his practical experience, his varied and extensive acquirements, and the comfort of his brave, cheerful, genial nature. He was specially attached as geologist to the survey of a railroad route to the Pacific under Major, afterwards General, Stevens. His associates on this expedition were Drs. George Suckley and

Digitized by Google

S. G. Cooper, as naturalists, to whose reports Mr. Gibbs made large contributions.

In 1857 he was appointed to the north-west boundary survey, under Mr. Archibald Campbell as commissioner, with General J. G. Parke as chief engineer, and after the close of the survey prepared an elaborate report on the geology and natural history of the country.

It must not be supposed that the life in Oregon in those days was a life of ease or leisure—rather a rude struggle with nature for even existence,—weeks and months in the cold and heat, amid snows and rain, surrounded by the savage beasts of the forest, and exposed at times to the treacherous attacks of the wild Indian or the more dangerous whites, who, breaking loose from their frail attachment to society, spread over the Territories, and returned practically to the original state of man. Yet with all this there was a charm which none who have experienced it have ever forgotten; not alone "the pleasure in the pathless woods," nor yet the "society where none intrudes," but that intimate relation of man with man, of mind with mind, that fellowship, in the midst of solitude and danger, of a body of cultivated and intellectual men, all serving one common cause, and all impelled by one common impulse—that cause the prosperity of their native country—that impulse the love of science. He who has witnessed the meeting of those friends,

Digitized by Google

most of them of West Point education—army men all—has not failed to note with admiration—with which even regret mingled, that such was not his lot—the affectionate relations which neither time nor distance, nor the natural separation which life always brings, seemed sensibly to affect or weaken.

Many a one fell face to the foe in the dreadful struggle which brought every man home from his distant post. One by one they drop away and join the increasing column in that undiscovered country whose boundaries no human eye shall ever survey, and whose wonders no human tongue shall ever tell; where the pale-face and the red-man shall meet in brotherhood, and speak one common language. To the close of his life Mr. Gibbs continued the warm friendships contracted amid these wild scenes. His intimacies were to a great extent with army men, but his friends were in all ranks of society. Few men had such a large acquaintance as he, and few lived more loved and died more mourned. During his whole life at the West, he never failed to write once or twice a week to his family. His letters are full of graphic description of life and nature, and should be published. No better contribution could be made to the history of the early days of these settlements.

In 1860 Mr. Gibbs returned to New York, not intending to remain permanently. Nature still whispered her tender song in his ear, and would

Digitized by Google

no doubt have charmed him to her bidding but for the outbreak of the war. This brought with it other occupations and other duties. Too uncertain in health for continuous service, and even then laboring under the painful disease which finally brought him down, he threw himself with his strong character, his great perseverance, and his abundant energy, into the service of the Union in another form. He was an early and active member of the Loyal National League, which did so much to crystallize public opinion in the second year of the war, and also of the Loyal Publication Society, which distributed such masses of tracts and healthy patriotic literature over the whole country. Of great personal bravery, he was always ready to expose life in defence of principle. In Washington, during the dark hours of March and April, 1861, he took his musket and went upon duty to guard the Capitol at the first sign of danger. And in the New York riots he sought the place of greatest peril, and volunteered for the defence of the house of General Fremont, when a night attack was threatened. He was not a man to ask another to do that which he was not ready to do himself.

Later he resided in Washington, and was mainly employed in the Hudson Bay Claims Commission, to which he was secretary. He was also engaged in the arrangement of a large mass of manuscript bearing upon the ethnology and philo-

Digitized by Google

logy of the American Indians. His services were availed of by the Smithsonian Institution to superintend its labors in this field, and to his energy and complete knowledge of the subject it greatly owes its success in this branch of service.

He published, some years since, a series of the vocabularies of the Clammal, and Lummi, and Chinook languages, and of the Chinook jargon, besides other tracts of a similar kind; and at the time of his death was engaged in superintending the printing for the Smithsonian Institution of a quarto volume of American Indian vocabularies, and had fortunately arranged and carefully criticised many hundred series before his death. This publication will continue under the aid of Doctor Roehrig of Cornell University. His large collection of papers on the Indian languages, of translations of many and curious legends, all of incalculable value to science, has been bequeathed to the Smithsonian Institute; his numerous maps and charts to the Geographical Society, and such of his books as were suitable for the purpose, to this Society.

In 1871 Mr. Gibbs married his cousin, Miss Mary Kane Gibbs, of Newport, Rhode Island, and removed to New Haven, where he died on the 9th of April, 1873. Though a great sufferer at times from a chronic disease of the most pain-

Digitized by Google

ful character, his last years were happy beyond the common lot. His house was celebrated for its simple, unaffected hospitality, and was the resort of a charming circle of refined and cultivated people.

To whatever work Mr. Gibbs was engaged he devoted his whole heart and every energy he possessed. This Historical Society owes its present prosperity as much to his aids as to those of any person. Its revival, in 1840, was largely owing to his determined efforts;—its Librarian for six years, from 1842 to 1848, and long a leading member of the Executive Committee and Library Committees, he never wearied in his efforts to promote its prosperity. Its frequenters have not forgotten his hale and hearty presence, his genial manner, his cheerful temper. Honest to the requirement of the ancient philosopher, generous to a fault, though in his varied life he had received but small aid from fortune, he was one of the warmest-hearted, most charitable of men. Who will soon forget his plain, outspoken, manly and unvarnished speech, his indignant denunciation of wrong, his hatred of oppression; the edge of his speech did not always carry the polish of the scimitar, but its blow fell heavy as that of the battle-axe.

He was a man; truth was his element; no fraud or humbug throve in his society. He

Digitized by Google

was as bold to expose as he was quick to see through false pretence. For this he was thought by some as uncompromising beyond reason. He had no enemies. He bore no malice. His was not a nature to see faults in others which were foreign to itself. His friendships were always warm; his antipathies were rarely personal. His faults were all those of a large, generous nature, such as one may look to find in the broad, deep-chested, short-statured man, whose large play of vital functions keeps him forever harshly busy until the whole machine breaks down in one crash.

How to speak of his domestic character! A more lovely nature never breathed. Many an eye moistened as it met the mournful notice of his death. Many a one felt that one of those true friends on whom absolute, entire reliance might always be placed, had gone and left a void there is no filling. One mourned him as a brother. Brotherless himself, he had been wont from early years to attach himself to this frank, noble nature. The attachment of the child for the youth strengthened into friendship as manhood found both on the same level, and through long years of personal intimacy when together and of correspondence when separated, that friendship remained unbroken by a word of quarrel, unshadowed by a look of unkindness. The survivor may be forgiven that, deprived by an ocean's breadth from the fulfilment

Digitized by Google

of the last office of friendship to his more than kin, he pours out here an offering of memory and affection to his silent shade.

Resolved: That in grateful memory of the long service of Mr. George Gibbs as Librarian of this Society, and of his constant and unwearied devotion to its interests, this record of his life and public services be inscribed at length upon its minutes, and the sympathy of this Society be respectfully tendered to his family.

Digitized by Google

Proceedings of the Society.

At a Stated Meeting of the New York Historical Society, held in its Hall on Tuesday evening, October 7th, 1873 :

Mr. Kirkland, on behalf of the Executive Committee, reported that a *Memorial of the late George Gibbs* had been prepared and would be presented to the Society by Mr. John Austin Stevens, Jr.

Mr. Stevens thereupon presented and read the Memorial and the accompanying resolution, which was adopted unanimously.

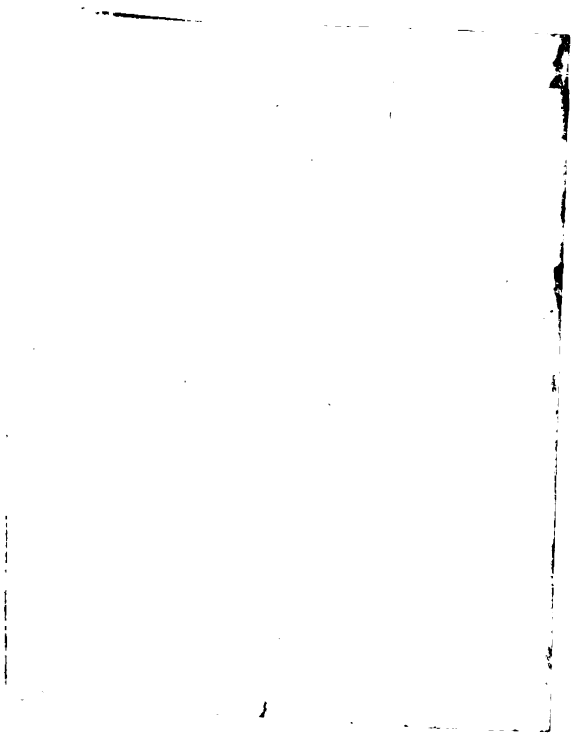
Extract from the Minutes :

Andrew Warner,
Recording Secretary.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google



Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google





Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google