

Dr. John S. Messersmith

By JUDGE BENJAMIN CHAMPNEYS ATLEE

The recent gift of three very valuable paintings to the Lancaster County Historical Society has caused me to remember, quite a little more vividly, some of the earlier residents in our community. The pictures are the gift of Mr. E. Turner Messersmith of Sienna, Italy, and come to us through the courtesy of Mrs. J. Edward Palmer, of Ventnor, New Jersey. Mrs. Palmer, whose name was Anna Key Messersmith, and her brother Mr. E. Turner Messersmith, were the children of Dr. John S. Messersmith and Mrs. Ellen Key Turner Messersmith, who long graced the social life of our community.

Dr. John Schaum Messersmith was born in Lancaster on May 26, 1810. He obtained his early education at Franklin College, then studied medicine under Dr. F. A. Muhlenberg, and graduated from Jefferson Medical College. Starting practice at Paradise, in 1835, he passed the examination for the medical corps of the United States Navy, the class to which he belonged being confirmed by the Senate on February 9, 1837. Going on active service he reached Rio de Janeiro, and there joined the sloop-of-war *Fairfield*. Most of the time at that station was spent by the naval forces in protecting American citizens at Buenos Ayres. Don Juan Manuel Rosas, governor of the Argentine provinces, was guilty of committing outrages on American citizens, and the presence of warships was necessary to protect the rights of our people. Nevertheless the American officers were entertained for three days at the ranch of Rosas. After several years the ship was ordered to New York. There Dr. Messersmith was detached and he returned to Lancaster. His next assignment was to the steamer *Fulton* engaged in gunnery practice. This service was not to the liking of Dr. Messersmith, and at his request he was detached and received orders for sea service on the brig *Dolphin*. For three years he cruised in the West Indies. Then to the brig *Pioneer* engaged in conveying stores to the coast of Brazil. After almost a year on this service he was ordered to the brig *Truxtun* which was ordered to duty in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Mexican war was on, and the *Truxtun* was engaged in blockading the fort of Truxpan when the ship was driven on a bar. High seas swept over the ship, the boats were crushed, and every effort to free the ship proved unsuccessful. Surrender to the Mexicans was the only thing to be done, and the Mexican authorities sent several large boats to rescue the officers and crew. As a prisoner of war Dr. Messersmith was well treated because of his medical skill. Finally at Vera Cruz he reported to General Brazo of the Mexican forces, and General Brazo secured Dr. Messersmith's return to the United States by sending him in a French boat to the Island of Sacrificio, whence an American vessel conveyed him to the flagship of the squadron. Dr. Messersmith saw much of Mexico on this cruise. On being detached from duty he returned to Lancaster in December, 1846. Early in 1847 he was ordered to the bomb brig *Aetna*. The *Aetna* proceeded to the Gulf of Mexico, and joined in capturing and holding several Mexican towns, among others Frontaro and

Tobasco. Under orders from Commodore Perry at Tobasco, Dr. Messersmith established a hospital. Here he remained until the close of the Mexican War.

On September 30, 1850, ordered to the Southampton, he proceeded in that ship to the Pacific touching at different ports on the east and west coasts of South America. Then at San Francisco Dr. Messersmith saw the early days of the gold rush, which had begun in 1849. The streets of the city were filled with men. No woman was ever seen on the streets. Returning to New York, he again sailed around Cape Horn and reached Yokohama, Japan. In Japan and China Dr. Messersmith had many adventures. While his ship was steaming up the Yangtsekiang River, several officers learned that they were prohibited by the Chinese from entering the City of Nankin. Nevertheless the officers, Dr. Messersmith among them, entered the city but were peremptorily put out. Dr. Messersmith managed to see the porcelain tower and surrounding josh houses, and reported that he considered them quite dilapidated.

On March 17, 1855, Dr. Messersmith returned to Lancaster, bringing with him a Chinese young man named Un Hong Woo, who made his home with Dr. Messersmith for seven years and was naturalized here, becoming the first Chinese naturalized at Lancaster. Un Hong Woo became a convert to Christianity, was ordained into the Episcopal ministry, and rendered many years of faithful service as a missionary in China, located at Shanghai.*

On November 5, 1856, Dr. Messersmith was ordered to the Navy Yard at Mare Island, where he served almost four years. After a short leave in Lancaster, he was ordered to Africa, via U. S. Ship Relief, for duty on the Steamer San Jacinto cruising off the coast of Africa. This service was most arduous due to the climate. The country was most unhealthful, and stops at ports were made only when necessary to obtain supplies. Detached from the San Jacinto he was ordered to the flagship Constellation, where almost another year's service was spent. The arrival of a British ship brought news of the firing on Fort Sumter, as well as orders to sail for home. August 11, 1861, the squadron sailed, reaching Portsmouth, New Hampshire, September 29, 1861.

Then ordered to the Constellation for duty in European waters, there began one of the most interesting periods of Dr. Messersmith's service. At Gibraltar was seen the confederate steamer Sumter watched by United States vessels, the Constellation joining in the watch. The force was already sufficient so the Constellation proceeded on her way, visiting almost every port north and south of the Mediterranean. Four months were spent at Naples. Every point of interest that could be visited was visited. Then on to Egypt, where the officers attached to the Constellation were guests, with other foreigners, at a great ball given by the Khedive. Here again every point of interest was visited. Then on to Athens. Here Dr. Messersmith found an acquaintance in Dr. Koeppen, tutor to the young King of Greece. Dr. Koeppen had been a

* A sketch of the Life of Hong Neok Woo is found in William Frederic Worner's book, "Old Lancaster, Tales and Traditions," pp. 208-213. Also Vol. XXV, p. 52, Publications of Lancaster County Historical Society.

professor at Franklin and Marshall College, and presented Dr. Messersmith to the King. Finally orders came to proceed home, and via Mobile, Pensacola, and Havana, the Constellation reached Norfolk, December 24, 1864. It must be remembered that while ships on foreign service from 1861 to 1865 could not, of course, take part in the war, nevertheless it was necessary to show the flag of the United States in every port where that flag could be flown. While not engaged in combat, the officers of our ships in foreign waters performed a diplomatic service of the greatest value and usefulness. January 10, 1865 Dr. Messersmith was detached and, after an absence of three and one-half years, came home to Lancaster. The rest of his active service in the navy was spent in service at navy yards, as president and member of boards for examination of midshipmen, for examination of applicants for membership in the medical corps for the navy, and at various other posts of shore duty. Then retired from active duty, he returned to Lancaster where he died February 16, 1891. His final rank was that of medical director.

Dr. Messersmith in Lancaster held an honored place. His wide experience of life, his recollection of many places of interest, his contact with famous people, all equipped him for a place in the intellectual life of our community. He was a ready talker, at home in Italian and Spanish. His English was polished—he had an extensive vocabulary—he was a scholar of the world, a student of men.

At the Mare Island Navy Yard, Dr. Messersmith married Miss Ellen Key Turner, daughter of Daniel and Anna Turner. Daniel Turner, first civil engineer at Mare Island, was a son of Governor Turner of North Carolina, who also was in the United States Senate for fourteen years. Daniel Turner was an early graduate of West Point and at the age of seventeen was an officer in the War of 1812. Anna Turner was born Anna Key, third daughter of Francis Scott Key, and also was a niece of Chief Justice Taney. Mrs. Messersmith died at Pittsburgh, June 22, 1907. Thus the generous donors of these pictures are the great grandchildren of the author of our National Anthem.

I remember that, as a boy, I watched with awe the parades which marked the early commemorations of Memorial Day. Not twenty years after the close of the Civil War the ranks of the Grand Army of the Republic were full, and the veterans marched erect and with snap and precision. At the end of the procession always came carriages, in which rode disabled veterans and those whose age made it hard for them to march. Dr. Messersmith always faithfully observed Memorial Day, and in full naval uniform rode in the parades. His keen and intellectual face, with his kindly ways, made him a man of notable appearance.

A few years ago I saw the last street parade of the Grand Army of the Republic—bent with years, stooped with the burdens of later life, the survivors of a once active group walked with slow and shuffling step to a drum-beat whose time was set to their slow gait. Thus they passed on. The service they rendered endures.