

# A BUCHANAN MYTH.

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A very good illustration of "history as it is written," especially the biographical branch of it, is found in a story sketch by the Louisville Herald, and being widely republished as authentic, telling how Ben Hardin's ill-fitting suit of tow linen worn at the Bar of Hardin county, Ky., in 1813, "changed the whole course of American history." Briefly stated, the narrative goes, in that year the late James Buchanan, afterwards President, located at Elizabethtown, Hardin county, Ky., to practice law, his choice being directed by the fact that his father owned a tract of land near there—the county, by the way, in which Lincoln was born, and where he then lived, a five-year-old lad. The story proceeds thus: Buchanan, then three and twenty, a college graduate and a lawyer, had little fitness for the rough-and-ready sides of frontier life. Attending the first term of Court after his arrival, he noticed, among the visiting lawyers, the celebrated Ben Hardin, in a suit of unbleached tow linen, ill-fitting and badly built, giving its gifted wearer a clownish appearance. Buchanan felt surprised to see this ungainly looking person take a seat among the lawyers.

A case was called the third day of the term, in which the pleadings were very intricate, and after the strictest English forms before the days of Chitty. The future President's wonder was inexpressible when he saw Hardin take hold of this case with the astonishing skill and force. The



WHEATLAND, THE RESIDENCE OF PRESIDENT BUCHANAN, NEAR LANCASTER.

arguments of the rough-looking Kentucky lawyer were masterpieces of learning, logic and clearness. Before he left the court room that day young Buchanan resolved that where such ill-favored looking lawyers possessed so much learning and power there was small show for a budding Pennsylvania tender-foot. Rather than struggle for success at the Bar with such giants as Hardin and his colleagues, he would go back to his native Keystone Commonwealth. Meeting Mr. Hardin afterwards in Congress, 1821-1823, Mr. Buchanan declared that he went to Kentucky expecting to be a great man there, that so many lawyers he came in contact with there were his equals and so many again his superiors that he gave it up.

Of all this we may fairly say: "Important—if true." The facts, however, will scarcely bear it out. Mr. Buchanan was born April 23, 1791. He was educated in a classical school at Mercersburg; entered the junior class of Dickinson College in the fall of 1807; was well-nigh expelled for disorder in the fall of 1808; missed honors only for misconduct; came to Lancaster to study law with James Hopkins in December, 1809; was admitted to practice in November, 1812; he made his first public address at a popular meeting held in this city in 1814 for the purpose of obtaining volunteers to march to the defense of Baltimore soon after the British had captured Washington and burned the capitol. He was one of the first to register his name as a volunteer and marched to Baltimore as a dragoon under Captain Henry Shippen. About the same time, in October, 1814, he was elected to the House of Representatives; he was sent to Congress when

twenty-nine years of age; and exactly forty when Jackson made him Minister to Russia, and at forty-two was elected to the United States Senate.

That during this period he made a professional incursion into Kentucky or was a party to any of the incidents above related is certainly apocryphal. We have no diary of his movements in 1813; but there is little probability and no trace in his biographical papers or autobiographical notes that he ever entertained any notion of leaving Lancaster or that there was any such incident between his admission to the Bar and his early entry into public life. Moreover, on September 13, 1813, we find his father, writing to James, then at Lancaster, giving an account of how a Federalist preacher in Mercersburg on a first day had deprecated the war with England as a judgment and calamity.

Whatever glory attached to Mr. Buchanan's early career—and it was certainly an illustrious one—belongs wholly to Lancaster county. None of it, we are confident, is to be shared by the "dark and bloody" soil of old Kentucky.

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