

President Buchanan—Misunderstood—Wrongly Judged

Address by Hon. J. Hay Brown, Ex Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, delivered at the unveiling of the statue of James Buchanan, 13th President of the United States, held June 1, 1928, in Buchanan Park, Lancaster, Pa.

A PROVISION in the will of the late Dulon F. Buchmiller, a most worthy member of this community, has brought us here to participate in a tribute about to be paid to the memory of Lancaster's first citizen, the State's first citizen, the Nation's first citizen as the Fifteenth President of the United States—James Buchanan.

A testamentary direction of Mr. Buchmiller was that his executors should purchase a suitable site in the city of Lancaster for the base of a monument to be erected by his estate to the memory of Mr. Buchanan. That monument is now completed and stands on grounds belonging to the city of Lancaster, known as Buchanan Park, through the good offices of our excellent Congressman W. W. Griest. In a few moments the statue will be unveiled and presented to the city of Lancaster by Mrs. Mary Buchmiller Ledwith, a daughter of Mr. Buchmiller. The time fixed by the committee having this ceremony in charge is most fit, for just sixty years ago today, Mr. Buchanan was gathered to his fathers; and the location of the monument is most appropriate, for it stands almost within the shadow of Wheatland, the stately home of the Ex-President and on grounds adjoining those of Franklin and Marshall College, of whose Board of Trustees, Mr. Buchanan was President from 1853 to 1865, when he resigned as President on account of ill health, but continued a member of the board up to the year of his death.

Born in Franklin County

Though Lancaster has claimed Mr. Buchanan as her own, he was not to the manor born. His birthplace on April 23, 1791, was Stony Batter, a settlement in Cumberland County, but later, on the formation of Franklin County, became part of that county and has been such ever since. He was the second of eleven children of James and Elizabeth Buchanan, Scotch-Irish parents of strict Presbyterian faith. After a preliminary academic training, he entered the Junior class of Dickinson College in 1807 and graduated from that institution in 1809. During his college course he clashed with the authorities of the institution and stated sometime after his graduation that he left his alma mater with but little affection for her. Be that as it may, it was then classed and has been ever since with the small colleges of the country, but two of her sons filled the highest positions of trust in the nation. The first was Roger B. Taney, who succeeded the great John Marshall as Chief Justice of the United Supreme Court and served as such for a full generation. The second was James Buchanan himself. Which of the greater colleges or universities of the State has such a record? The small college, as Mr. Webster once truthfully and most feelingly declared "is dear to the hearts of many."

After Mr. Buchanan's graduation, he came to the city of Lancaster and entered the law office of James Hopkins, a most distinguished member of the Bar, as a law student. He was admitted to the Bar of this county in 1812 and rapidly rose to high eminence as one of its practitioners. In 1814, he enlisted as a volunteer in the Army of the United States and marched to the defense of Baltimore, attacked by the British. He was honorably discharged from the service of the United States and in the same year, 1814, was elected from this county as a member of the Legislature. In 1820, he was elected a member of Congress from the district then composed of Lancaster, York and Dauphin counties, to which post he was several times reelected. A few years later when less than forty years of age, he practically retired from the practice of law, though then the acknowledged leader of the Bar in his county,

and entered upon a career of most distinguished statesmanship, replete with great and signal services to his country. Upon these I shall not dwell. I ask your indulgence while I briefly speak of the gross misunderstanding of Mr. Buchanan by many of his fellow countrymen as to his attitude on the gravest and most momentous crisis in the nation's history that confronted him as he was about to leave the presidency.

Southern States in Frenzy

The election of Mr. Lincoln to the presidency in November, 1860, threw the Southern States, south of Maryland, into a state of frenzy. The wildest among them was South Carolina, then known as the Palmetto State. In the month following the election of Mr. Lincoln she passed an ordinance of secession declaring that she was no longer a part of the United States, but a separate and independent sovereignty. Within a few days after her attempt to secede from the Union, she sent three Commissioners to Washington to see President Buchanan and lay before him her imagined grievances. In the Charleston Harbor there were two forts, Moultrie and Sumter. Major Anderson of the United States Army with a small body of troops, occupied the first named fort until the cloud of rebellion began to hover over it, when he evacuated it and took possession of Fort Sumter, then regarded as one of the strongest, if not the strongest fortress of the United States along the Atlantic Coast. He took possession of that fort that he might more efficiently defend the Flag of the Union if assailed by the rebellious State in which it was located. President Buchanan refused to receive the Commissioners from South Carolina as representatives of an Independent State, but gave them an audience as citizens of the United States. The imagined grievance they laid before him and of which they bitterly complained was Major Anderson's occupation of Fort Sumter and they peremptorily demanded that he vacate the same. Mr. Buchanan not only instantly refused to consider such a proposition, but stated in unmistakable terms that he would do all in his power to protect Major Anderson as an officer of the Union in command of Fort Sumter. In a few days following this interview by his direct order, "The Star of the West" sailed from New York for Charleston with troops and provisions for the reinforcement and relief of Major Anderson and his troops. When it reached Charleston Harbor the horde of South Carolinians who had flocked there to serve their State, if any attempt should be made by the National Government to prevent her independence, fired upon the steamer by order of Governor Pickens, their Commander-in-Chief. As a result of this the relief intended by President Buchanan for Major Anderson never reached him. John B. Floyd, of Virginia, was Mr. Buchanan's Secretary of War. Upon the secession of South Carolina he became an avowed and outspoken advocate of secession and for this reason Mr. Buchanan drove him from the cabinet by demanding his resignation. Notwithstanding what I have just said, many persons in the North believed that Mr. Buchanan had been weak in his attitude towards threatening secession and that if he had been stern and loyal as Chief Magistrate that great calamity might have been avoided. I now ask your attention as I refer to an act of Mr. Buchanan which is incontestable evidence not only of his loyalty as an American citizen, but of his deep concern for the suppression of the rebellion and the maintenance of an unbroken Union.

Fate of Nation in Balance

In the beginning of 1863, the fate of the nation was hanging in the balance. Gettysburg had not been fought and Vicksburg had not surrendered. Volunteering had ceased and it became a necessity for the Government to fill the ranks of its army by conscription or draft or permit the Union to be overthrown. By an Act of Congress, passed March 3, 1863, it was provided

that men in the different States should be drafted into the army. Strange as it may now seem, the Supreme Court of this State was asked to declare this act of Congress unconstitutional and a Bill filed for that purpose was entertained by Justice Woodward. President Buchanan then did what was not then generally known and is not now. He had the keenest sense of the propriety of the conduct of a citizen and lawyer towards the State's highest tribunal, but he departed from this and wrote an earnest personal letter to Judge Woodward urging upon him the importance of sustaining the National Draft Act as the only means for the safety of the nation. The case was heard before a full bench and the validity of the Conscript Act was upheld. Justice Woodward dissenting. A full report of the case is to be found in 9th Wright of our Supreme Court reports.

Outstanding National Figure

During the last twenty-six years of Mr. Buchanan's life, he was one of two outstanding national figures who were residents of Lancaster county, the other being Thaddeus Stevens. In an exhaustible and most interesting account of the life and doings of Mr. Buchanan published in last Sunday's edition of Lancaster's "Sunday News," reference is made to the fact, but an inaccuracy is stated as to it, which I feel justified in now correcting. That misstatement is as follows: "It is curious indeed that two master minds should appear on the horizon and take up their residence in our city about the same time." Mr. Stevens did not become a resident of Lancaster until 1842. Shortly after the admission of Mr. Buchanan to the Bar of this county, Mr. Stevens was admitted to practice in Adams county. He lived in Gettysburg until he came to Lancaster and it was while he was a resident there that he made his great reputation as a lawyer and became in the early 30's the matchless champion of our free school system. It was through his efforts, and through them alone, that the Legislature in the face of most violent popular opposition laid the foundation of our present great free school system and the record of what Mr. Stevens, as a member of the Legislature wrought for popular education, is unmatched in legislative records. Dr. Henry Carpenter, formerly for many years an eminent physician of this city, had among his patients Mr. Buchanan and Mr. Stevens. He was not only their attending physician up to 1868 when both died, but was the close personal friend of each, and what I am now about to state I feel, will be interesting to you and I trust not out of place. Few, if anyone here, have ever heard what I am about to relate, as Dr. Carpenter, whose personal friendship I enjoyed, detailed it to me. Shortly before Mr. Buchanan retired from active practice, he and Mr. Stevens met in the neighboring town of York where each had gone in connection with professional business. They strolled to the outskirts of the town, on a certain evening and had a serious misunderstanding over some matter they were discussing. Each made his way alone back to the town and from that date neither ever spoke to the other, though there was never any exhibition of enmity between them. In 1865 Dr. Henry Carpenter was married a second time. Each of his distinguished patients was bidden to the wedding ceremony and both attended. While there, Mr. Stevens, as he reported to Dr. Carpenter, approached Mr. Buchanan and extended his hand to him, but the Ex-President turned his back upon him. Mr. Stevens related this incident to Dr. Carpenter sometime afterwards and he in turn reported it to Mr. Buchanan, who expressed great regret, with the assurance that he had no recollection of such an incident. Dr. Carpenter made a daily visit to his patients in a low carriage and Mr. Buchanan suggested to him that he ask Mr. Stevens to ride with him on one of his morning rounds and stop at the base of Wheatland lawn where the Ex-President would greet them both and ask them up to his house. Dr. Carpenter was to let him know in advance when he would do this and Mr. Buchanan assured him that he would

be at the spring to meet them. Not long after this Mr. Stevens was summoned to Washington in some reconstruction crisis and never returned to Lancaster alive. He died within less than three months after the death of Mr. Buchanan and neither of them ever became outwardly reconciled to the other in this world.

His Crowning Glory

And now may I speak a word on the crowning glory of Mr. Buchanan's life. Though a good and pious man through all his years he never identified himself with any church until he was more than 74 years of age. On a September Sabbath in 1865 he presented himself with the humility of a little child to the session of the First Presbyterian Church of this city and asked to become a member of it, for it was of the faith of his godly parents. By formal action of the session, he was admitted to membership in that church. The late gifted W. U. Hensel, in his time, one of Lancaster's and the State's first citizens, in referring to this incident thus feelingly and beautifully wrote:

"An hour later, the same Lord's Day, in the sight of a then not numerous congregation, he who had risen from the humble home at "Stony Batter" to the first seat in the land, who had shone resplendent at foreign courts and had stood unabashed in the presence of earthly monarchs, with bowed head and before all the people, answered the soul-searching questions in terms that sealed him to the church on earth.

As he received from the sanctified hands of his humble townsmen that first communion of the broken and bleeding elements, I doubt not that he, far more than any other of them, recognized and realized that no principle of constitutional government he had ever argued, as counsellor or congressman, was so vital as the question he then decided. No pageant he had ever witnessed as ambassador was so splendid as that simple ritual. No treaty he had ever negotiated was so far-reaching as that solemn compact with his Maker. No mandate he had ever issued as Chief Executive was so tremendous in its personal importance to him as the message he that day sent to the throne of the living God.

Unites With Church

From the time Mr. Buchanan formally associated himself with the church on earth and made public confession of the faith he had cherished from his youth up, for nearly three years, he publicly worshiped and communed. When the end came, he fell away into a gentle sleep, from which he barely woke to whisper the short Christian prayer "O! Lord, God Almighty, as Thou wilt." "Altogether, it was a deathbed experience full of tranquil light and peace, the calm evening sunset of a long life, which seemed to be itself but the brightening promise of a new and far better life beyond the grave." He had lived as a statesman should live; and he died as a Christian should die. "And so he passed to where beyond these voices there is peace."

Unjustly and cruelly as Mr. Buchanan was misjudged during the closing months of his administration as President and during the first years of the Civil War, he declared shortly before his death that he had no fear of the future and that posterity would do him justice. He was as loyal to the Union as Lincoln and was an outspoken and consistent foe of secession. Posterity has done and is now doing him justice. In no place was the feeling more unfriendly towards him than here in Lancaster, but now, as witness today's ceremony, its people revere his memory. Upon his death no such funeral tribute was ever paid to another here as was paid to him by his fellow citizens without regard to their political faith. In the funeral sermon, preached by the Great Dr. John W. Nevin, he declared "whether absolutely wise or not in all his counsels, he was, in this time that tried men's souls, honest, at least,

conscientious and patriotically true to what he conceived to be the highest interests of his country." To this may be added the following words of the great Jeremiah S. Black, "the incorruptible statesman whose walk was upon the mountain ranges of the law." And so let posterity continue to think of him as a great lawyer, a statesman of the highest and most patriotic order, the foe of all who attempted to break the bonds that bind the States of the Union together.

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