HON. JAMES WILSON AT READING, PENNA.

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With relation to James Wilson, signer of the Declaration of Independence, I have noted a few facts concerning his temporary residence in Reading, prior to the Revolutionary War, he having been at that period a practitioner for several years at the Berks County Bar. The date of Mr. Wilson's admission to the Philadelphia Bar is set down as 1767. There were at that time but eight counties in Pennsylvania, and the members of the Colonial Bar practiced in most of them, locating permanently in one or the other from time to time as circumstances warranted. Wilson came to Berks County probably soon after his entrance upon the profession. The date of his admission here is not now ascertainable. The records show that in 1772 he moved for the admission of Peter Zachary Lloyd. He married Rachel, daughter of William Bird of Berks County, the latter having died in 1762, intestate, leaving a very large estate, consisting principally of mills, forges, and extensive tracts of land in Amity, Union, Robeson, and Heidelberg townships, including the seats of iron industry subsequently known as Birdsboro and Hopewell. Bird's widow, Bridget (daughter of Marcus and Margaret Hulings), married John Patton, also a considerable landowner and pioneer iron manufacturer. In the proceedings in partition upon William Bird's estate in 1763, the names of his children are given as Mark, Rebecca (wife of Peter Turner, Jr., merchant of Philadelphia), Rachel, Mary, William, and James. The four last mentioned were then minors under the age of fourteen years, for whom Thomas Rutter and William Maybury were appointed guardians. The real estate of Mr. Bird was valued at £12,939, 10 shillings, at which sum it was accepted by Mark the eldest son and co-administrator
with his mother Bridget Patton. The net balance of the personal estate was £8574, 7 shillings, 11 pence. In 1764, George Ross, Jr., having married Mary Bird, was appointed her guardian. James Bird died in 1780, in his twenty-first year. William Bird married, 1778, Juliana Wood.

How long Mr. Wilson remained a resident of Berks County is not known; eventually he removed to Carlisle, where he had attained professional eminence at the outbreak of the Revolution, with the events of which his name is so conspicuously connected. By his wife Rachel he had six children. Mrs. Wilson died in 1786 in Philadelphia, where the family then permanently resided, and it was beside her remains in Christ Church yard that those of her distinguished husband were reinterred, at the conclusion of the deeply interesting public ceremonies, on November 22nd last. Mr. Wilson's second wife Hannah, a daughter of Ellis Gray of Boston, surviving him, married Dr. Thomas Bartlett and died in England in 1807.

Mark Bird married, 1763, Mary Ross. He continued on an extensive scale the iron industry founded by his father, but failure in his enterprises resulted in the forced sale of his estate, and in the course of successive changes in title his brother-in-law, James Wilson, became in 1794 its possessor. He held it but two years, disposing of it in 1796. During this period he was a resident of Philadelphia and a Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, and it is not presumable that he was actively engaged in the pursuits of an iron manufacturer. It is probable that his ownership was but an expedient to preserve the pecuniary interests of his wife and brother-in-law. That the investment was unfortunate to Mr. Wilson financially is matter of record, his estate being involved in litigation on account of it for some years after his death, which occurred in 1798.

Of Mr. Wilson's professional career in Berks County there are no traditions whatever. Meagre indeed at this day are the tracings of the professional lives and work of any of the great lawyers of the Colonial period. Of the...
breadth of his legal attainments, the volumes of his lectures before the law students of the college of Philadelphia constitute, independently of his judicial opinions, an enduring monument.

An incident of the introductory lecture of this course delivered on December 15, 1790, comes unexpectedly into my view among the manuscripts of Mr. Charles Evans, long a leading lawyer of Reading, who died in 1847, leaving his adopted city under an enduring debt of gratitude by his beneficence in the foundation and endowment of the beautiful cemetery which bears his name. Mr. Evans was a native of Philadelphia, of Quaker ancestry; studied law with Benjamin Chew, Attorney General and Chief Justice under the provincial government, was admitted to the Philadelphia Bar in 1791, and the same year began the practice of the law at Reading, where he continued to reside until his death. In the course of a public address delivered here about 1840, upon the anniversary of the birthday of Washington, he made reference to the introductory lecture of Mr. Wilson, at which he was present as one of the law students, in the following terms:

"In the winter of 1790, and while the President of the United States resided in Philadelphia, the distinguished professor (Wilson) and his class were honored with the presence of General Washington. On that memorable occasion our learned preceptor, after passing a well merited eulogium upon the ladies, paid the General a highly wrought and elegant compliment, which I hope it will not be deemed amiss to recite in this connection:

'In the European Temple of Fame,' said he, 'William Penn is placed by the side of Lycurgus. Will America refuse a Temple to her patriots and her heroes? No, she will not. The glorious dome already rises; the architecture is of the neatest and chastest order. Its dimensions are spacious; its proportions elegant and correct. In its front a number of niches are formed. In some of them Statues are placed. On the left hand of the portal are the names and figures of
Warren, Montgomery, Mercer. On the right hand are the names and figures of Calvert, Penn, Franklin. In the middle is a niche of larger size, and decorated with peculiar ornament. On the left side of it are sculptured the trophies of War; on the right the more precious emblems of Peace. Above is represented the rising glory of the United States. It is without a statue and without a name. Beneath it in letters very legible are the words: For the most worthy. By the enraptured voice of grateful America, with the consenting plaudits of an admiring world, the designation is unanimously made. Late—very late may the niche be filled!

"The feelings of sensibility with which this graceful and eloquent compliment was received by the audience—the high sense of the exalted services—the aptitude of the well-merited eulogium—the presence of the great Patriot, Soldier and Statesman—his acknowledged elevation of mind—his distinguished military and civic talent and private worth—excited and electrified the audience, and created emotions on the well-remembered occasion which it is much easier to conceive than describe. The large and brilliant assemblage of Fashion and Beauty—the august figure of the Venerable Patriot—the appropriate and well-timed compliment, and the strong and vivid impression of his exalted and matchless character animated every individual present with enthusiastic feelings of admiration, regard and affection for the tried Friend and Father of his Country."

In reading these heroic outbursts of patriotic fervor, so characteristic in their tenor of the orators of a by-gone time, it would be difficult to decide between the relative eulogistic gifts of the lecturer of 1790, and those of his admiring student at the interval of half a century later. As the panegyric was pronounced in the presence of both Houses of Congress, and of the Governor and members of the Pennsylvania Legislature, together with many other personages of distinction, it may well be imagined that the occasion was a more trying one to the Father of his Country than many of
the battles he had waged in her cause. Judge Wilson had but the year previous been appointed by him to the Federal Supreme Bench. I hope it will not be invidious merely to suggest that the eulogium probably lost nothing of the warmth of its coloring from that fact.