

ISAAC WILSON, HEAD-MASTER.

BY CHARLES H. BROWNING.

It may not be generally known, but the University of Pennsylvania, indirectly, was the pioneer of "higher education" west of the Alleghenys, as may be seen from the following items concerning one of her sons, Isaac Wilson, who matriculated at the Philadelphia College in 1768, and graduated in 1771.

Twelve years before the "Dark and Bloody Ground" became the State of Kentucky (in 1792), the settlers at Lexington petitioned the Virginia Legislature, in 1780, for a charter for an "advanced school" in their town. They had only a primary, "three R," school at that time at Fort Lexington, the teacher being a Pennsylvania man, John McKinney, who, by the way, was the original "John Gray" of Allen's "The Choir Invisible," and the hero of the alleged encounter with the wildcat in the school room. The petition was granted, and the school, endowed by Virginia, was incorporated, in 1783, as the Transylvania Seminary, but was not formally opened, in a double log cabin, until 1788.

"The first teachers of the town (Lexington) took early opportunity to lay off and reserve ground for a Latin and English school, and this encouragement brought to Lexington, in 1786, Mr. Isaac Wilson, of the Philadelphia College, who established the Lexington Grammar School. He informed the citizens, in his advertisement, in the *Lexington Gazette*, that 'Latin, Greek, and difficult branches of science, will be carefully taught.' 'Price of tuition four pounds, payable in cash, or produce, and boarding on as reasonable terms as any in the district.'"¹

¹ Ranek's History of Lexington, p. 40. Also see Filson Pub. No. 11, p. 37.

“In 1787, [1786] Isaac Wilson from Philadelphia, established the Lexington Grammar School.”²

“In 1788, Transylvania Seminary was opened in Lexington, and from this day forward schools accumulated, gaining for the city an enviable fame throughout the country. Mr Wilson’s Grammar School was merged, in 1789, into the Transylvania Seminary * * * * The scope of the grammar school of the Transylvania Seminary was enlarged on 6th June, 1789, with Isaac Wilson as Master, at a salary of one hundred pounds sterling per annum, settled upon at this date.”³

1786. It seems that a Mr Michael was the first appointed “Grammar Master” of the Seminary, but only temporarily.

1788, Oct. 15. He was succeeded by Mr Elias Jones.

1789, April 15. Mr Isaac Wilson was appointed “Grammar Master,” in place of Mr Jones, removed, and taught for two years, or till

1791, Oct. 12, when a Mr Moore succeeded him, who lasted till

1794, when he was succeeded by a Mr Toolmin.

“When the Transylvania Seminary opened, it had a Mr Michael as ‘Grammar Master.’ But he did not attract students, and was replaced by a Mr Elias Jones, and he was no more attractive, and the trustees saw it was a mistake to compete with Mr Wilson’s Lexington Grammar School, which was flourishing. Therefore, on the 15th of April, 1789, Mr Isaac Wilson was appointed ‘Grammar Master,’ the second who was honored with that position, after the departure of Mr Michael, in 1786. Mr Wilson had come to Lexington from Philadelphia in 178—, and had already established there what he called the ‘Lexington Grammar School.’ The gentlemen who had in their keeping the welfare of the Seminary, must have perceived it was a mistake by employing Mr Elias Jones, in 1788, to

² Collins’ *History of Kentucky*, p. 183.

³ *History of Fayette County (Ky.)*, p. 291.

place it in rivalry with M^r Wilson and his enterprise, it was therefore resolved to employ M^r Wilson's services, and in that way unite the two schools of learning. They paid him £100 a year. [He was the only instructor who was paid a salary.] He was a man of consequence in his calling, and is believed to have been at a later period one of the teachers of the Rev. R. J. Breckenridge, D.D. Affairs fell out favorably during the second session of the Seminary at Lexington. Finances were moderately easy, and the favor of the public bestowed."

It was during Prof. Isaac Wilson's mastership of the Seminary, at the close of his first session, that the novel commencement exercises took place, which are thus described in the *Kentucky Gazette*, 26th April, 1790 :

"Friday [Saturday?] the 10th inst., was appointed for the examination of the students of Transylvania Seminary by the Trustees in the presence of a very reputable audience. Several eloquent speeches were delivered by the boys, and, in the evening, a tragedy was acted, and the whole concluded with a farce. The several masterly strokes of eloquence throughout the performance obtained general applause. The good order and decorum observed throughout the whole, together with the rapid progress of the school in literature, reflects great honor on the President." ⁴

In the same year, 1789, that this Philadelphia school boy took charge of the Seminary, another Philadelphian, John Bradford, assisted in opening Lexington's first public library, with about 400 books, which he brought from Philadelphia, by the Wilderness Road. He had been here several years, and established the first job printing office, the first bookstore, and the first newspaper, the *Kentucky Gazette*, west of the Alleghenies, in Lexington, Kentucky.

"At the close of the [next] session, it was unhappily discovered that M^r Wilson had no scholars,"—in the Grammar Department of the Seminary. "This is attributed to

⁴ Life of Judge Caleb Wallace, Filson Pub. No. 4.

Indian incursions into Kentucky which kept the pupils at home.”⁵ This might have been true of the year before, when 1500 persons were either killed or carried off by Indians, 20,000 horses stolen and £15,000 in property destroyed in Kentucky, here and nearby; but peace with the Indians was fairly well assured in 1790-1.

However, Mr Bradford records in the *Gazette*, 12 April, 1791, that “the number of students in the grammar school, had in the course of the year, been reduced from thirteen to five. Mr Wilson was therefore dismissed,” and “on the 12th of the succeeding October [1791], the Rev. James Moore was appointed the Grammar Master.”

Mr Wilson apparently did not take this as a reflection on his management, as his name continues for several years as one of the trustees of the Seminary.

In Oct., 1790, “a committee was appointed to examine into the state of the Grammar School now taught by Mr Isaac Wilson.” Reported: “Under the charge of Mr Wilson, the young college appears to have been somewhat resuscitated.”⁶

It is possible that Mr Wilson was not in accord with the religious belief of the majority of the Board of Trustees, and for this reason he was superseded as Headmaster, for it was not long before the Board became publicly divided on doctrinal matters. In 1794, “while Isaac Wilson was a member of the Board of the Trustees of the Seminary, at a meeting the vote was taken to put Mr Toolmin in place of Mr Moore, as Headmaster, when Mr Wilson was one of the nine members voting against seven, whereupon, the Presbyterians, greatly dissatisfied, withdrew from the Seminary Board, and at once began the organization of an opposition concern, called the Kentucky Academy.”⁷

This is the last “documentary evidence” I have found concerning this Philadelphian, and the Fayette Co. (Ky.)

⁵ Life of Judge Caleb Wallace, Filson Pub. No. 4.

⁶ Filson Publication No. 11, p. 41.

⁷ Filson Pub. No. 4, p. 125.

records, prior to 1812, were accidentally destroyed by fire and I have been unable to follow his career further.

In aid of the new Kentucky Academy⁸ a subscription was taken in the East, and on 2 June, 1795, the following were among the contributors:—

George Washington, president, \$100.

John Adams, vice-president, \$100.

James Wilson, Judge, &c. \$300.

As Judge Wilson was the largest subscriber in Philadelphia, it may be, presuming that Isaac Wilson became interested in the Kentucky Academy, and that the Judge was moved to this, either by kinship to Isaac, or because Isaac was educated at the College of Philadelphia, where Judge Wilson had been a tutor and lecturer.

Nor have I been able to identify this Isaac Wilson on the pedigrees of several more or less prominent Wilson families in and about Philadelphia, in Bucks and Chester Counties, wherein there are several Isaac Wilsons. Nor does it appear on the extant records of the University of Pennsylvania who his father was, and it is not known if he married, or had issue. Nor is it known to me where he was, or how employed after he left the Philadelphia college in 1771, till he came to Lexington, about 1785–6. It may be he was originally attracted to Lexington⁹ as a place to make a living by the fact that the chief man of the town was another Pennsylvanian, Robert Patterson, who settled there in 1775, and owned nearly all the land upon which the city has grown, and was the founder, it is claimed, of the city of Cincinnati.⁹

Mr Patterson, like Mr Wilson, also had an unpleasant experience with “religion” in Lexington. He was the first promoter, or founder of the first church (Presbyterian) in Lexington, 1784, and induced a minister to come from

⁸ Joanna Peter's *His. Transylvania University*, Filson Pub. No. 11, p. 62.

⁹ See “Our Forefathers,” by John H. Patterson.

Virginia. But the reverend gentleman and the trustees, (Mr Patterson at their head), soon quarrelled. He wanted only David's Psalms sung by the congregation, and Patterson insisted on Watt's Hymns, so the minister departed, and the little congregation was long without a pastor.

Major Bluford Wilson, Springfield, Ill., and Maj. Gen' James H. Wilson, U. S. Army, taking interest in this Isaac Wilson, send me the following items which may, or may not, have concerned the founder of the first Latin school west of the mountains.

Isaac Wilson, sergeant in Capt. Augustine Tabb's company, in 2^d V^a Reg. Col. W^m Brent, enlisted for three years. He was on the pay rolls March–Nov. 1779.

From Land Office Records, Richmond:—1783, June 24. (Council Chamber, Doc. No. 2287), "I do certify that Isaac Wilson is entitled to the proportion of Land allowed a Sergeant of the V^a Line for three years' service.

Tho. Merriwether."

Frankfort (Ky.) Land office records:—Virginia Grants Book, No. 13, fo. 216. "Patentee:—Isaac Wilson, 416 acres. Surveyed to him 24 March, 1785, in Lincoln Co. (Ky.) on Rockcastle River. Patent dated 18 Sep. 1787."

In same, Book Virginia Grants, No. 13, fo. 226:—"Patentee: Isaac Wilson, 300 acres in Lincoln Co. (Ky.), on the Rockcastle. Surveyed 29 March, 1785. Patent dated 18 Sep. 1787."

Virginia Land office, Military Land Warrant:—"To lay off in the Military Land, Kentucky county, for Isaac Wilson, 200 acres, in consideration of his three years service as a Sergeant in the Virginia State Line. Dated 26 Jan. 1784."

Frankfort (Ky.) Land office:—"Above Warrant for 200 acres, Ky. Co. was satisfied in a grant to William Reynolds for 1,000 acres, to whom Isaac sold & assigned his Warrant."

It is possible that these Land grants were to one of the Isaac Wilsons of Culpeper Co., Virginia, as there were several of this name in Virginia at these dates.