REMINISCENCES OF HON. JAMES ROSS.

BY

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My personal knowledge of the Hon. James Ross commenced in 1834, when I entered as a student at the Western University of Pennsylvania, then located in the large stone building at the corner of Third and Smithfield streets. It was erected by the state for the purpose, and was destroyed by the great fire of 1845.

Mr. Ross' private residence was an unpretentious frame building which stood in an orchard on a lot of six or seven acres, situated between Grant and Ross streets, and extended from Fourth Street up over Grant's Hill to near High Street. Fifth Avenue and Diamond Street have since been located across the upper end of these grounds, and the Court House and jail are built on part of it. The distributing reservoir of the city water works was then immediately opposite the Court House.

Mr. Ross' dwelling was but a short distance from the University, and he was a conspicuous figure while on his way to and from the Court House, which was then located on the west side of the Diamond on Market Street. I should judge that Mr. Ross was some inches over six feet in height, well proportioned and of imposing presence, although the infirmities of age had already begun to manifest themselves when I first knew him.

He was rightly regarded among the students as one of the greatest men of the country, and more especially on account of his high reputation for scholarly attainments.

When a young man, before he studied law, he had filled the position of Latin and Greek professor in the Canonsburg Academy, in Washington County, which afterwards became Jefferson College, the alma mater of great numbers of professional men scattered throughout the United States. Jefferson and Washington Colleges have since been consolidated into Washington and Jefferson College, located at Washington, Pennsylvania.

*Written in 1896.
But my opportunities of seeing and knowing Mr. Ross and his character and reputation were increased after I had entered the law office of ex-Judge Shaler as a student in 1837. Mr. Ross and Judge Shaler were intimate friends. Mr. Ross had then retired from the practice of the law, but was often personally interested in law questions and cases, as he possessed considerable wealth in mortgages and real estate.

One of his peculiarities was that in any case in which he was interested he acted as his own lawyer, not so much to avoid expense, as that it saved him the trouble of stating and explaining the case to others as fully as he understood it himself.

I happened into the District Court one day when he was arguing an important question regarding the lien of a mortgage before Judge Grier, who was afterwards elevated to the bench of the Supreme Court of the United States, and is still regarded here as one of the most eminent judges whom Allegheny County has ever had. I was interested to hear Mr. Ross' argument on account of his great reputation and the importance of the question involved. He then seldom appeared in Court. I expected quite a formal argument, but was disappointed in that respect. He stood carelessly with one hand resting on the railing in front of the judge and in a quiet way talked the matter over, as it were. But the close attention with which Judge Grier listened indicated that Mr. Ross was making an able argument, and although he spoke in a conversational way, he presented a chain of strong links logically connected.

His reputation among the lawyers was of the highest order. At the time I speak of he was considered the nestor of the bar, and the regard and esteem for him approached veneration. In his prime, which was before I knew him, his influence over a jury was considered invincible, not so much from any display of eloquence, for he always avoided this both in private and professional life, but his power was said to result from his peculiar method and his persuasiveness and keen knowledge of human nature.

His practice had always been confined to important cases, mostly questions of land titles or where large sums of money were involved. His clients were of the wealthier class of business men and manufacturers and real estate owners of the city and throughout the western end of the
state. Several years after the time referred to some of the law business of the heirs and the legal representatives of his former clients fell into my hands, and I occasionally came across Mr. Ross’ bills for legal services, invariably in his own hand writing, and I was surprised at the moderation of his fees and charges.

Although in those days no extortionate fees were obtained by the lawyers, yet Mr. Ross’ charges were made on a scale even lower than ordinary, while his clients were of the wealthiest class, and the matters in which the services were rendered were always important. It led me to wonder how he had accumulated so large an estate because he was quite rich, although not among the wealthiest citizens, and he never speculated. He lived in a plain economical way without ostentation. What surplus he could spare from his professional income, he invested in farm lands or unimproved property in the suburbs of the city, which was worth but little at the time but increased rapidly in value as time went on and the city increased in size and wealth. Such was the secret of his leaving a very considerable estate.

I knew of but three of his children, but he may have had others. One son, the most promising in ability and energy, was drowned while crossing a creek on horseback about twelve miles from the city. He was only twenty years of age. The creek was in flood, and the horse floundered and young Ross became entangled in the stirrups. The father took his loss greatly to heart. Another son, James, was highly educated, and a polished gentleman, but lacked energy and never attended to business of any kind. He survived his father many years.

Mrs. Aspinwall was the only one of his daughters whom I remember. Her husband was the well-known ship owner in the Aspinwall lines whose route was between New York and Liverpool. I think she was without children, and after her husband’s death she returned to Pittsburgh, and had a quaint-shaped house built in a secluded piece of woodland, part of her father's estate, where she resided as a recluse for the remainder of her life.

Besides Mr. Ross’ professional fame, he possessed other qualities of heart and mind which endeared him to his clients and the general public. He was reputed never to have accepted a retainer in a case unless he was reasonably
well satisfied of the honesty of both the case and the client, and from that time on he became the personal friend and faithful adviser of his client in all matters of importance, personal as well as legal.

One instance, among many others of his noble character, happened to fall within my own knowledge.

In 1820, Jacob Negley, who had long been a favorite client of his, was one of the wealthiest land owners in the vicinity of the city. He owned 1700 acres of land situated five miles east of the city limits, now the chief residence section of the city, and known as the East End. Mr. Negley was an enterprising man and one of the commissioners appointed to locate and macadamize the turnpike road running eastward from the city to Greensburg and Stoyestown on the way to Philadelphia, within the city now known as Penn Avenue. As soon as this road was located and opened through his lands, Mr. Negley built the first steam flouring mill in the western end of the state and laid out the town of East Liberty, since absorbed in the East End district. As the machinery for the mill was unfamiliar to the machinists of the time, the cost of its construction was very great and ran him into debt beyond his expectation and his ability to pay. He would have had no difficulty in meeting all demands, however, had it not been for the memorable panic of 1818, which set in just after the mill was in running order. Several memorable panics have occurred since that time, but history shows this one to have been the most disastrous to property values and to have caused the greatest stringency in money which ever happened in this section. The panic found Mr. Negley some thirty thousand dollars in debt, being half the cost of the mill, and it crushed him, not only financially, but in health and spirits. Money was not obtainable at any sacrifice, and his extensive estate in lands as well as the mill and numerous other buildings were seized by the sheriff, but the owner did not survive to see them sold under the executions. He died during the year of his worst financial difficulties, leaving a widow and eight children, the oldest of the boys not having reached his majority. Mr. Ross had been Mr. Negley's friend and legal advisor throughout his business career and during his financial difficulties, but neither Mr. Ross nor any other friend was in condition financially to stem the tide. Most of the wealthy business men of
the city went down at the same time. The wealthiest among those who succumbed was James O'Hara, who nevertheless survived the storm and left an immense estate to his family. It is said of Mr. Ross that he never forgot a client whom he respected, and although he could not at first avert the financial disaster which overwhelmed Mr. Negley, he did not forget the widow and children. Being in a better condition pecuniarily when the sheriff's sales of the properties came off, Mr. Ross purchased them as they were sold from time to time, including the mill, and became the sole owner without any pre-arrangement or consultation with the widow or children, who expected nothing less than to vacate the premises. And to make arrangements for this purpose the widow sent her eldest son to Mr. Ross, who appeared very friendly and more concerned to know how they were getting on than to obtain possession of the properties purchased by him.

After learning that the mother and the younger boys attended to the farm and that the two older boys were still running the mill and marketing the product, he advised them to keep on working as before and he would be better able to tell what might be done on his part after seeing what they could do for themselves. Affairs remained in this condition for a year or two, the mill was doing well, times were improving, and real estate values were rising again. Mr. Ross then directed that all the money they could spare beyond the expense of running the business should be deposited with him, and if times continued to improve until part of the lands could be sold without too much sacrifice, enough might be saved to compensate them for their labor and perhaps more, as he would be satisfied if he received his money back with six per cent. interest. No written contracts or obligations were entered into between him and the family at any time.

It required about ten years to refund the money that Mr. Ross had expended in the purchases with the interest. When that had been accomplished he called in James Hi-lands, at the time the land surveyor of the county, and directed him to make a careful survey of all the real estate that was left, and to divide it into eight shares of equal value, or as nearly that as he and such of the neighbors on whose judgment he could rely might agree upon. A fifteen-acre tract of the most valuable part of the land was in addi-
tion set aside for the two older sons as a reward for their extra services. When the land was plotted in this way Mr. Ross made a deed to each child for his or her share, declining any compensation for his services, declaring that his compensation lay in the success that their good management had achieved. The widow relinquished all claim in the estate, as she had ample property in her own right, received from her father's estate. When Mr. Ross' connection with the transaction ended land values had advanced to such an extent that the share which each child received was worth about one hundred thousand dollars; and this land has been increasing in value ever since.

In making this division the surveyor found it necessary to lay out a road or street through the main part of the property for common use, which still bears his name, Highland Avenue. Mr. Ross had also come to the rescue of James O'Hara, another of his wealthy clients, whom the panic had driven to the wall. And by his aid and generosity and good advice the greater part of the vast O'Hara estate was saved to the O'Hara and Denny families.

I give the facts and particulars contained in the above narrative as I have heard them often from Mrs. Negley, the widow, who in 1843 became my mother-in-law. But I have never been made aware that Mr. Ross ever resided in Ohio, or that a county in that state was named for him.

Mr. Ross was not only an able and learned and exceedingly industrious lawyer, but a wise and able statesman, and although not of the then dominant political party, frequently had honors thrust upon him. He was one of the high-toned and honorable class of statesmen who were more numerous in his day than now.