NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

BENJAMIN THAW—A MEMORIAL

ON THE nineteenth day of August, 1933, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania met with a great loss in the death of Benjamin Thaw, one of its most prominent members. It is our present desire to try to draw a picture of this remarkable man as we knew him and loved him, and to place it among our records.

From 1917 until his death Mr. Thaw was a member of the governing body of the society and from 1919 to 1927 he was a vice president. For the last three years of his life he was on the board of control of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey, representing the University of Pittsburgh, of which institution he was a trustee. Through his gifts of books, pamphlets, and newspapers he did much to increase the number of historic items possessed by the society, as well as enriching it with a valuable collection of papers of his father, William Thaw, and of his grandfather, John Thaw.

Mr. Thaw belonged to one of the most prominent families of Pittsburgh, being the son of William Thaw, who was born in Pittsburgh on October 12, 1818, and of Eliza Burd Blair Thaw, a native of Washington, Pennsylvania, who married William Thaw in 1841. She died in 1863, and among her kin were Benjamin West and Robert Fulton.

In a carefully written article published in the Pittsburgh Post of August 19, 1889, it is stated that "William Thaw was a representative of what is best in Pittsburgh's conservativeism . . . It is no idle talk, but the soberest of truth to say that Pittsburgh never had a citizen who did such noble, practical and liberal work in aiding scientific and educational enterprises, and in promoting business prosperity, and maintaining business and municipal integrity, and in furthering charities and benevolence, irrespective of race or creed, as William Thaw."

It was with this background that Benjamin Thaw was born and reared, and the story of his life bears a close resemblance to those of

1 Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on October 24, 1933. Ed.
America's great men. After attending the Fourth Ward Public School, he entered the Western University of Pennsylvania, now the University of Pittsburgh, from which he was graduated in 1878. Afterwards he spent a year at Yale University in graduate study.

His college years completed, he at once took up his business career, beginning as a railroad clerk. He entered the coke business with his elder brother, William Thaw, Jr., and after his father's death in Paris on August 17, 1889, he spent much of his time in managing his father's estate. He was officially identified with various leading concerns in Pittsburgh, and served as a director of the First National Bank at Pittsburgh and of the Peoples-Pittsburgh Trust Company. For many years he served as treasurer of the board of trustees of the Young Men's Christian Association of Pittsburgh, and he was instrumental in the purchase of the property on Wood Street now occupied by that organization. This site belonged to the Thaw family, and a bronze tablet now marks the spot where Mr. Thaw's father was born, at a time when Wood Street was scarcely more than a muddy lane.

In 1886 Mr. Thaw married Elma E. Dows of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, who died in Paris in 1931. They had five children—a daughter, Henrietta Thaw, now Mrs. Lawrence Slade of New York, and four sons—Stephen, the eldest; Lieutenant Alexander Blair Thaw, a member of the American Flying Forces, who was killed in France on August 18, 1918; Colonel William Thaw, who left Yale University to serve as a member of the Lafayette Escadrille in France during the World War and who obtained an outstanding record; and Benjamin Thaw, Jr., who is at present counsellor of the American legation at Oslo, Norway.

Never of a rugged physical constitution, Mr. Thaw was for many years deprived of sleep and rest because of asthma, which showed itself in his early manhood. He daily and courageously wrestled with the affliction and mustered his frail physical powers to meet the demands of his spiritual nature. To Mr. Thaw religion was a comfort and a refuge, and his leisure enabled him to devote long hours to golf and to his much-loved books. To his many friends and to those who knew Benjamin Thaw best, his death is a great personal loss, and the city of Pittsburgh is the poorer because the life of one of its best citizens has been brought to a close.

Pittsburgh

Charles W. Dahlinger
Benjamin Thaw

[From a photograph taken in 1929 in the possession of Colonel William Thaw]