

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A GOOD WORD FOR THE SENECA

[The following is an excerpt from the manuscript autobiography of John Wrenshall, early Pittsburgh merchant, trader, and Methodist leader (vol. 4, pp. 129-139), in the Methodist Collection at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. The time referred to is 1803. —*Ed.*]

MY business continued very brisk, of which we had a considerable share; and being chiefly among the country farmers, we conceived it to be the most productive, because generally for cash. Of this article we received annually, about twenty two or twenty three thousand dollars; besides a great deal of barter, both with them, and the Seneca tribe of Indians. These Indians resided on the bank of the Alleghany river, partly on this, and partly on the other side of the line, which divides *this* state from the state of New York. They generally came down twice a year, with their canoes heavy loaded, with furs, peltry, mogasons, deer hams, tallow, Bear skins, and money which they receive from the U States government. They had formerly been much imposed on by persons in my line of business, and had justly become, very suspiciouse. But, having acquired so much of their language as would enable me to transact business with them, I took great pains to make all my transactions appear so plain to them, that they generally left me, fully satisfied that we had done right. I recollect one circumstance relative to my dealings with them, which was this. I had, on one of their visits, a great deal of business; and on settling with one of them, who could speak a little English; he discovered a mistake, of about twenty five cents, which I had made against him. This, he pointed out; at the same time, pointed with his finger in the direction where one of our citizens resided, and who he thought had, to use his own words, often cheated him. He said, mentioning his name, Such an one, *Big cheet*. Then pointing to me, said, You, *littil cheet*, meaning little cheat. Their being one in the store who was interpreter, he

explained the error to him, and was satisfied, which he expressed in his own language thus.

Sattan doo hee, scos a scos. The former part designated the name they gave me, among themselves, which *Joel Swain*, a quaker missionary, settled among them, often told me was the name I always went by, when talking about their transactions, and which signified, a *Friendly man*, and *scos a scos* signified, *very good*. I however, knew what he meant, and consequently, that he was satisfied. Another circumstance occurred, which I think not unworthy of notice. It was this. In my little parlour, behind the store, I was one time engaged in a theological discussion, with the Revd. W. W. a Presbyterian clergiman. In the course of which, he threw out some hints, as to the improbability of their final salvation, and in his usual tedious way, stated his reasons for so thinking. In reply to him, I observed, that they were equal to the white people by nature, in point of integrity, and possessed as many virtues, when their advantages of improvement were taken into view. Just then, as was customary with me, I stepped to the door which opened into the store, to see if I was wanted, and saw an Indian man enter, whose disposition I was well acquainted with. I turned round to Mr. W. and observed, if you will follow me into the store, I will shew you that they will, from principle, resist a temptation, which few of your elders would resist: accordingly I went into the store and he followed after, standing, or placing himself, at a convenient distance. After the usual interchange of salutation, partly in Indian, and partly English, I fetched a Decanter of old whisky, a pitcher of water and a tumbler—poured a very small portion of the former into the tumbler and then added some water to it, and drank of it myself. I then moved the whole over to him, and in a friendly way asked him to take some. But instead of this, he looked me full in the face, and emphatically said—*Whisky*—I replied yes John. At this, he shook his head, and said, May be—*good for white man—I don know. Not good for Indian*, and again shook his head, but would not tast it. Not being in the habit of giving them liquor, which had formerly been the case, and greatly to their injury, I had introduced the custom of giving them sugar and water, the former of which, they seemed very fond of, and therefore took in great plenty. Fearing too, that this temptation might have a bad effect, I told one of the Quaker missionaries the circumstance, by which

means the Indian became acquainted with my motive, and I was told, the affair pleased him. It ought to be observed, that the society of Friends have been of great service to the Seneca Tribe of Indians, by sending and supporting among them, Men of *steady habits*, of *geniouse* and economy. Not to teach the peculiarities of their religion, but to inculcate by example, virtue and many usefull arts. Their women, have been taught to raise flax, spin and weave. Two of their men are tolerable good carpinters, and another is a passable Blacksmith. This latter, had done some work for the missionaries, of which he render a bill. This bill, Joseph Harland, another of those young men sent out by the Quakers; took with him to Philadelphia, and shewed it to me, on his way thither. It was a strip of wood about three feet long, two inches wide and about half inch thick, with both sides and edges plained. On this was represented, that at first view, both the Indian and the missionarry knew what had been done, and a mark to designate the price. A line was then drawn across the stick, ready to receive an impression of the next Job. Sometimes, two or three Jobs would be done on one day, all of which were severally represented, and recounted with facility. It contained the making of axes, laying [?] them, upsetting—Likewise the making of hoes or mending them, with plow irons, chains & Shoeing of horses. It is also worthy of remark, that these were not done carelessly, but with neatness and uniformity and the sums carried forward from one space to another. It has escaped my recollection whether the impression was made with ink, or with a brand, but am inclined to think it was the latter. (Footnote: *Both sides of the stick, or strip of wood, was intirely filled and had an appearence of the hieroglyphicks of antiquity.) They have besides, a Sawmill; and being surrounded with lofty pine trees; they cut them up into boards or scantling and float them down to Pittsburg, at the time of high water. And on these rafts they bring their Peltry, furr, and good canoes, to push up their return cargos. On the tops of these, they also bring their wives and children, and sometimes Shingles, the latter of which I have bought for one dollar and fifty cents p thousand, and paid for them in merchandize.

MARY BUTLER MEASON, 1785–1878

[The following is from the original manuscript of an unfinished memoir presented to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania a few years ago by Mrs. Gertrude Sowers McCalmont, a great granddaughter of Mary Butler Meason, who accounted for the document as follows: "When I was much younger and visiting in the old home in Uniontown, Pa., a gentleman, whose name I do not now know, brought this article to read to us, it having been written by a friend of his; and of course a close friend for years of the Butler family. He gave it to me, and expected to follow it up with a continuation of the history, but I have never heard of him since that time."—*Ed.*]

WHEN death takes from a community one of its aged members the event is commonly attended by light sorrow, and followed by short remembrance. This is especially true when the departed one has long been retired from the resorts and cares of active life. However large a space in society he or she may have filled in the past, it has become so lessened to the public eye by the haze of time that when the grave interposes its shadow the vacancy becomes no longer visible and its occupant is forgotten.

This apathy by outside survivors has in it no ground for reproach. It justly accords with the order of nature that the world will retire from those who have retired from it: and if there be no stronger tie than the bond of a common humanity its severance by death finds ready acquiescence.

And yet there are those who will mourn when the aged die—the loved ones at home, for whom they have cared, and who have watched and waited upon their decline. There a wound is inflicted which is slow to heal; even the care and kindnesses which helplessness demands will, when no longer required, create a vacuum which a thousand memories will rush in to fill—but not to supply. The staff, the shawl, the easy chair, even the likeness which hung on the wall may be put away, but the feeble step, the attenuated form, the whitened locks, and, it may be, the vagaries of thought and memory will still be recalled in visions by day and by night. No amount of consolations administered by kind assuring friends will give relief.

Almost an entire "season" has passed since on the gloomy inclement

afternoon of December 4, [1878], sorrowing descendants and a few friends, followed to the grave the mortal remains of the aged and venerable lady whose name stands at the head of this article.

So unobtrusively had she lived for many years—so long had she been confined to her own quiet home by the infirmities of age, and so far had she outlived nearly all who had known her in her active years, that she had come to have but few acquaintances. Doubtless some who paid her memory the homage of attendance upon her funeral rites, and many who will perchance read these lines, had never seen her. There may indeed be some such who had never before heard of her. And yet her whole life was a lesson—her character being a study and her personal history having in it events which are of almost romantic interest.

It is safe to say at the threshold of this memorial that Western Pennsylvania never had among its many worthy women, one in whom were combined in the highest degree so many of the virtues and graces which constitute female excellence: certainly no one of more illustrious parentage and one upon whom family fame sat in such luxuriance. Very just and appropriate tributes to her character and history accompanied the notices of her death by the press of the town in which she had dwelt. Necessarily they were prepared in haste, consequently inadequate, and not in all respects accurate in their statements. To give a more extended and better verified, and if successful a more impressive memorial, is the purpose of this article. The event which has called forth the effort will also be made available to gather up and embody whatever the writer can find scattered throughout numerous records and histories concerning her illustrious father and other family connections.

Mary Meason (nee Butler) was born in Carlisle, Penna. on the 10 of April 1785. She was the only daughter of Gen. Richard Butler—one of the bravest and best officers of the armies of the American Revolutionary War (of whom much more in the sequel) and of Maria Smith who was of a good Maryland family and who proved to be a woman of uncommon energy and excellence. To them were born also two sons, one—William, older than Mary: the other James Richard younger—of whom hereafter. Her father, who with a younger brother—William—had, as early as 1770, been in business in the town of Pittsburgh and in the western wilds as an Indian trader, was, upon the erection of Allegheny County

in 1788, appointed to important offices in the new county, removed with his family to Pittsburgh, probably in the fall of that year. What has grown to be the "Iron City" of some 150,000 inhabitants, was then a little frontier town of "thirty-six log houses, one stone," perhaps half a dozen more frame ones, inhabited by about 400 or 500 persons, many of them of very migratory habits, with perhaps two little log church buildings but without a steam engine or a single manufactory of higher grade than a wheelwright and breeches maker, what a change in one lifetime!

Gen. Butler was killed in St. Clair's disastrous defeat Nov. 4, 1791, when Mary was in her seventh year. He being much from home on public service she had no distinct recollection of his appearance.

During his Indian trading and public career Gen. Butler had become acquainted with the Bishop and other clergy of the Moravian Church, who had missionary establishments on the Tuscarawas, in now Ohio, but having their central foundation at Bethlehem, Pa. on the Lehigh, where they had maintained, perhaps, the only female school of a high grade south of New England and where it yet sustains its excellence. The general had promised that when his daughter attained suitable age he would take her there to school: But, alas, he did not live to do it. However, the next Spring after his death, his widow, in fulfilment of the promise, and in exercise of the energy of her character, took her seven years old daughter on horseback to Bethlehem to the school, in full trust that the Brethren and kind Sisters of the establishment would do for her all that a kind mother wished. And she was not disappointed. The educational system there was, and it still is, substantial rather than showy—aiming to make their pupils useful, and fitted for the toils and trials of after life with just enough of the ornamental, or "accomplishments," to inspire them with confidence and give ease and dignity to their deportment in any, even the highest sphere of society. To this early training and to the example and guidance of her mother must be ascribed the basis and the elements of that superiority in the virtues and manners of womanhood which the daughter so signally sustained. She remained at the school in Bethlehem four years—and returned to her lovely home in Pittsburgh. She returned as she went—on horseback—possibly only from Carlisle, from which place to Philadelphia, by way of Harrisburgh and Reading, a line of stages began to run in May 1795.

The incidents of these journeys made vivid and lasting impressions upon her memory. Their "baggage" consisted of valises carried on the off sides of their saddles and in saddle-bags: and when it rained they would sometimes take refuge, with their equipments in a covered wagon, behind which their horses, tied, would follow. How horrified would be a modern schoolgirl at such a mode of travel.

Upon her return to Pittsburgh in 1796 she found it greatly advanced in population, wealth, refined society, churches and schools. Wayne's decisive victory over the Indians in Aug. 1794—the opening of the Mississippi to free navigation—the quelling of the "Whiskey Insurrection," and the settling in and around Pittsburgh of many of the officers of the army sent out to quell it—the rush of settlers into northwestern Pennsylvania, Ohio and Kentucky—some successful beginnings in the Iron manufacture, and in other enlarged operations, had given to the place an impetus and stability of growth which in those times of slow progress was almost a marvel. Even then its population did not exceed 1500: but that was a huge number for a western town; and in it were many of the "first families."

Happily, Genl. Butler left to his family not only the inheritance of a great name, but estates from which they derived an easy and comfortable living. The daughter was thereby enabled to extend at home and "finish" the education which had been so well begun and advanced at Bethlehem. Her mother had brought out for her from Philadelphia the first piano that had ever crossed the mountains. It was one of the most noted "relics" in the Allegheny Sanitary Fair of 1864, and is in existence—tho' not in tune—yet, of diminutive size compared with modern "grands."¹

Tradition has it that among the young ladies of Pittsburgh there was none of "finer form or lovelier face" than Mary Butler. Yet her own stability of mind, cultured and controlled by her mother's counsels, kept her from becoming vain or frivolous. As an acquaintance of her youth once said to the writer—she was a sober minded, pleasant, pretty girl. Among the elegant "accomplishments" of those days were the arts of cookery, embroidery, housekeeping and of entertaining at home. The ut-

¹ This piano and other articles once belonging to Mary Meason, including a memory book and daguerreotypes of her father, General Richard Butler, are in the museum of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.—*Ed.*

most limit of amusements was an occasional ball or amateur theatricals in the large upper room of the Courthouse, with excursions in season upon the rivers, or on horseback to a friend's in the country. Religious observances seldom extended beyond attendance at church on Sundays, and household instruction and devotions; while deeds of charity and benevolence to the poor and afflicted were inculcated as personal duties. In all these, and more, the widow Butler and her family were conspicuous. It could not be otherwise than that Mary's heart and hand should be sought by more than one of the aspiring young Lochinvars of the West. A bloodless duel, so far as tradition has associated her name with it, is wholly apocryphal.

The successful suitor was Isaac Meason jr. Esquire, some six years her senior, then a young lawyer of promise, of fine appearance, elegant manners, whose father Isaac Meason was an Associate Judge of Fayette County—a very large landholder and the pioneer of successful Iron manufacture in the West. To this son, of “large expectations,” she was married on the 17th of April 1805, when one week over 20 years of age. Her husband, abandoning the profession of the law, very soon engaged in the Iron manufacture,—in connection with or in subordination to his father, who had come to have more furnaces and forges than he could in person manage,—and took his residence in the stone house at the New Haven end of the bridge opposite Connellsville.

For many years after 1791, and until after the war of 1812-15, the Iron business was not only attractive because of its prosperity, but was regarded as the highest style of pursuit in which a “gentleman” could engage. Its rapid decline from about 1816 wrought numerous disasters. Just as this decline had begun to culminate in disaster—in January 1818—Judge Meason died; several years before his death he had built the imposing stone mansion on the Mount Braddock eminence of the Gist estate of which he had become the owner in the last decade of the last century, and on part of which he had in 1790-1, founded the Union Furnace, of which the now Dunbar Furnace is the lineal successor.

In the distribution by his will of his vast estates to his sons and daughters, the son Isaac, who was esteemed to have got the lion's share, acquired the Mt. Braddock and Union Furnace property, with other lands &c on Jacob's creek and opposite Connellsville, but encumbered with a

large indebtedness. To this was added an accretion of debt by the son, incurred by too long and eager a pursuit of the business which had so long been successful.

Precisely when Mr. Meason removed with his family to Mt. Braddock is not known—somewhere between 1819 and 1824 or '25. There Judge Meason's widow died in March 1824; and Mrs. Meason's mother in Pittsburgh in the same year.

It was a princely possession and might well have inspired its possessors with lofty pretensions; but it had no such effect. It was no place for pomp, pride or extravagance. It was more: Mr. Meason was a man of generous impulses—a gentleman of the old school—and he and his good wife took delight in dispensing quiet and elegant hospitality.

The early years of the family residence at Mt. Braddock were perhaps the happiest, certainly the palmiest period of Mrs. Meason's long life. When established there, surrounded by a healthy and growing family, she found herself in the full enjoyment of the means for displaying those high gifts of her nature—hospitality to friends and kindness to the poor and afflicted. Whilst realizing that she was the mistress of the most elegant mansion in the County, its doors were never closed to the poor and needy. Within the direct sphere of her influence was a broad domain, skirted with slopes and valleys reaching far into the adjoining mountain, inhabited by a numerous tenantry, many of whom were "to the manner born" and some of whose ancestry had been there almost from the first settlement of the country.

It could not be otherwise than that in such a community there would be constantly arising occasions for supplying wants variously incurred, and of dispensing the many benignant and consoling charities for which in early life she had been so well trained and which were so congenial with her natural character. The tradition still lingers in the vicinage that Mr. Meason was an indulgent landlord and his wife the kindest of women. The very worthy and intelligent present proprietor of Mt. Braddock remarked to the writer on the day of Mrs. Meason's burial that there were yet living in its vicinity some who spoke of her as belonging to a race of beings of a higher order than common humanity—and this after an absence from it of more than an average lifetime. Mr. Meason struggled along for many years in alternate hope and desponding under

the crushing load of debt which bore upon him and his estates with undiminished weight. It not only repressed the energies but became an incubus upon the enjoyments of himself and his family. To retain the ancestral home of Mt. Braddock, around which clustered so many associations of historic interest, from the grasp of creditors who had been long indulgent, was an object demanding any sacrifice within his own and Mrs. Meason's power to make. All hope of extrication having vanished, the crisis came in 1834-5, when all his real estates were not reluctantly, indeed rather cheerfully—submitted to Sheriff's sales.

Mrs. Meason had inherited from her father and mother considerable real property in Pittsburgh and elsewhere in the County of Allegheny—all of which she sold and thereby raised means adequate to enable Mt. Braddock, Union Furnace and lands adjoining, with one half of the Connellsville Bridge to be bought in by a son-in-law for her use. The property thus parted with has since increased in value a hundred fold. But she was never known to express any regret at the sacrifice. It accomplished its purpose, and preserved to her and her family for many years, the home in which she and they had had their finest earthly enjoyments, and to which their affections clung with the tenacity of the vine to the oak.

On it were the graves of more than one of her children, and of the parents of her husband. To these, alas! *his* were soon to be added. As if the rebound from the removal of the incumbrances under which he had so long struggled was too violent for an organization unused to their weight, he died suddenly at Ross Furnace (of which he had been a part owner) in Westmoreland County February 18, 1836. This was a staggering blow to Mrs. Meason and her dependent family: and to a woman of less fortitude and christian submission would have had a crushing effect. To be so soon bereft of the father of her children after his and their highest earthly wish had been consummated—to see a deeper gloom than debt settling down upon a beloved home, called for the exercise of virtues and graces which only a woman of heroic lineage and piety could possess.

Ere this sorrow had been assuaged, she and her daughters were in quick succession bereaved of her two surviving sons.