

CHARLES AVERY

Early Pittsburgh Philanthropist

STANTON BELFOUR

DURING the 1840's, the age of irredentist democracy and awkwardness was passing. Utopian contests for escape gave creative joy and friendship to thousands of generous and sanguine souls from Brook Farm to New Harmony, but acquisitive society sucked them all back into its vortex. Only the Mormons achieved success. Emerson wrote Carlisle that anyone you meet in the street might produce a new community project from his waistcoat pocket. Horace Greeley kept *The New York Tribune* columns open to all these movements; but his best advice to the workers of America was to go to Pittsburgh and beyond.

But the greatest reform movement of the 1840's was abolition. Jefferson's "fire bell" rang through the Pittsburgh night as the name of the American Colonization Society began to appear in the testamentary giving of Pittsburghers.

"Reverend" Charles Avery, a Methodist lay preacher, who accumulated wealth before he got religion, was one of the first abolitionists in Pittsburgh. He became a distinguished philanthropist and the real pioneer in interracial relations in Pittsburgh.

Mr. Avery was born in Westchester County, New York, on 10 December 1784. As a youth he was determined to seek his fortune in the metropolis of his native state. He left his rural home and arrived in New York City as a stranger. In time he served as an apprentice in the drug business and rapidly gave evidence of strong abilities. He acquired friends, attended night school, and advanced steadily in his work.

At age 28, Mr. Avery determined to seek his fortune in the West. Accordingly, he arrived in Pittsburgh on 28 August 1812 and

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engaged in a partnership in the drug business. One of his partners was Congressman James S. Stevenson, who was involved in the manufacture of white and red lead, a business in which Mr. Avery subsequently became interested.

For a number of years Mr. Avery was a partner in the Eagle Cotton Mill in connection with John and Thomas Arbuckle and others. Ultimately, it was the cotton business that was the foundation of his wealth, along with heavy investments in copper and drugs. In time he prospered in all his undertakings and soon was classed as a solid citizen among the enterprising leaders of Pittsburgh. He was a prudent man, careful in business transactions, and always reluctant to run into debt.

Early in his life he espoused the cause of religion and connected himself with the Methodist Episcopal Church. He had grave doubts as to his duty and the best interests of the church, whether he should enter it as a regularly ordained minister, or serve it to the best of his ability, in connection with his business vocations, in the capacity of "local preacher." After counselling with his friends and his own heart, he determined to adopt the latter course.

So, Mr. Avery began to accumulate his own fortune and proceeded to dispense it with a liberal hand. All the while he was proclaiming the doctrine of salvation and pointing the way to attain it. The leading and ruling idea of his life was that he was only the steward of God's bounty, and, as a faithful trustee, he was accountable to Him for the welfare of his fellow-man and the glory of God. He soon became the dispenser of his own charities. Always frugal, temperate, and unselfish, Charles Avery practiced his benevolences, stewardships, and religion as a part of his daily life. He was a liberal and constant giver to the poor and needy—always without regard to color, nationality, or denomination. His contemporaries describe him as modest and retiring in his habits and disposition. He was devoted to the doctrine of free grace to all and was an advocate of the rights of the laity in church government. His views in regard to the latter induced him to withdraw from the Methodist Episcopal Church and become prominently identified with the movement to establish the Methodist Protestant Church. This association abided up to the time of his death.

But it was with the question of slavery that he achieved his chief claim to fame and for which he is most remembered in Pitts-

burgh a century after his death. Early, he espoused the cause of the oppressed and much abused black race. He became thoroughly anti-slavery in sentiment and practice. He was intuitively the defender of the cause of the despised and friendless Negroes. It was sufficient for him to know they were poor, uneducated, degraded, and socially ostracized. His sympathy was excited as he made earnest efforts in their behalf. The Negroes of Pittsburgh soon found a benefactor in Charles Avery. He acknowledged Negroes as men socially equal in all respects and at a time when it was unsafe so to do.

To test his own convictions by actual experiment, he founded, in 1849, a college for Negroes, the Allegheny Institute and Mission Church, on his own property. The design of the institution was to afford Negro youth the opportunity of obtaining a classical education. Mr. Avery died before the college went into actual operation, but he bequeathed \$25,000 to aid in its maintenance.

Charles Avery died on 17 January 1858. His fortune was estimated at \$800,000, a large portion of which was given to charitable objects. In life he gave large sums for public and private benefactions. After providing liberally for his wife (there were no Avery children), his own and his wife's relatives, the residue of the Avery estate was left for the good of his fellow-men. In addition to the "colored institute," there were bequests of \$20,000 each for aging Methodist clergymen and Oberlin College, first college in the United States to admit Negroes. Also, bequests of \$5,000 each were left to Passavant Infirmary (now Passavant Hospital) and the Insane Asylum of Western Pennsylvania Hospital (now Dixmont). The residue of the estate, estimated at \$150,000, was assigned by his executors for the "dissemination of the gospel of Christ among the tribes of Africa" and also for ". . . the education and elevation of the colored people of the United States and Canada."

In time the faithful and efficient management of the Avery Trust has accounted for more than double the maximum estimate of the testator. Grants have endowed normal and other schools in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, North Carolina, and Canada for the education of Negroes.

Today in Pittsburgh, Charles Avery is remembered chiefly for the Avery African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church on his former property on the present North Side; Avery Street, which is contiguous to the Avery Church buildings, formerly his residence and

the Negro college he founded; his portrait at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, his monument (see below) in Allegheny Cemetery; and the Avery scholarships at the University of Pittsburgh, which is the present use of his endowment for the education of Negroes. Several leading Negro citizens of Pittsburgh have received their education at the University of Pittsburgh on Avery Scholarships. The Avery Church has given to the Zion connection a total of five bishops and has had 46 ministers.

After Charles Avery died in Old Allegheny, he was buried in the beautiful "God's Acre" of Allegheny Cemetery. His executors erected a stately and costly mausoleum, surmounted by a colossal marble statue of Mr. Avery. Today it is the tallest and one of the most impressive monuments in a cemetery famous for elaborate memorials and prominent people.

The Avery monument has on one side the figure of *Charity*, on another the figure of *Justice*, and on the opposite sides the following appropriate passages from Scripture:

"The tree is known by its fruit."

(Matthew VII: 33)

"He hath dispersed abroad; he hath given to the poor; his righteousness remaineth forever."

(2 Corinthians IX: 9)

"Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

(Acts XXI: 35)

"The memory of the just is blessed."

(Proverbs X: 7)

As we contemplate the problems of interracial relations and the ordeal of segregation at mid-century, let us not forget the grapes of wrath have not yet yielded all their bitter vintage.

Charles Avery belongs to the philanthropic tradition in Pittsburgh, beginning with James O'Hara before 1800 and progressing through the nineteenth century to the current scene when prominent citizens continue to make lasting gifts to the community.