HEZEKIAH NIXON: BUILDER, RELIGIONIST, POLITICIAN

Samuel Eckerberger Duff

In 1981, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania received a xerox copy of a thirty-page typewritten biography of Hezekiah Nixon. It was a gift of Charles H. Nixon, whose father, Judge Clarence B. Nixon, found it among old Nixon and Duff family materials. Samuel E. Duff, who was born in Allegheny City on November 1, 1867, was the son of Colonel Levi Bird Duff, who five years previously had married Harriet Howard Nixon, daughter of Hezekiah Nixon. After his graduation from the Western University of Pennsylvania, Duff worked for several western railroads before returning to Allegheny City to work for the Riter-Conley Manufacturing Company. Around 1908, he set up his own office in Pittsburgh as a consulting engineer. Duff died on November 22, 1942.

The Nixon biography is reprinted here exactly as it appears in the Society's collection, retaining the author's spelling and punctuation. Ellipses indicate deletions, while annotation has been supplied where Duff is mistaken about historical fact or where clarification and amplification are needed.

I never saw my maternal grandfather Hezekiah Nixon, because he died nine years before I was born. My grandmother Rosanna [sic] Frew Nixon, in whose household I lived from the time I was three until I was thirteen years old, told me that Hezekiah Nixon was a few inches over six feet tall, of slender, spare and bony figure, erect and vigorous until weakened, bent and blinded by the torturing rheumatism which caused his death at fifty-six years of age. After his death an oil portrait of my grandfather was made under my grandmother's direction from a daguerreotype taken when he was about forty-five years old. I have often seen this portrait, now in the possession of my brother,

grandfather Nixon's namesake, Hezekiah Nixon Duff. It portrays a vigorous man with long smooth-shaven face of pale complexion, and austere expression, dressed, as was the fashion in those times, in black clothes, with high stock and black drooping bow necktie. The eyes are blue-gray, the hair dark-brown, almost black, the nose long and straight. . . .

Hezekiah Nixon's life began on a farm not yet entirely cleared of the primeval forest, lying on the hillside and in the narrow valley of Chartiers Creek, in what is now Scott Township, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, in an air line about five miles South-west of "the forks of the Ohio", where at that time already existed the crude towns of Pittsburgh and Allegheny City, in which he was destined to spend most of his life. The first child of Thomas Nixon and Jane Lea (Nixon) the date of his birth is recorded as May 21st. 1802. Four other children of these parents reached adult age — William, Thomas, Dorothy (married McClellan), and the youngest, Samuel, who was born in 1811. Although his birthplace was a log house, his surroundings were not so uncivilized as might be supposed for a period now more than a century and a quarter past.

Some thirty years earlier his grandfather William Lea had settled on a nearby tract of 400 acres, of then unbroken forest land, obtained from the State of Pennsylvania for his services in the French and Indian War. In this humble home in the wilderness Hezekiah Nixon's mother, Jane Lea, was born in 1774. Thomas Nixon, scion of a New Jersey family of Scotch and English descent, came to the Chartiers Valley about 1790, acquired a farm of about 200 acres near that of William Lea, whose eldest child he married, and built on it a home and a blacksmith shop, in which to carry on his trade, at that time no doubt one of the most useful and successful in the community. . . . Jane Lea, who gave birth to Hezekiah Nixon when she was twenty-eight years old, was herself the first child of pure white blood born in the Chartiers Valley — so says her tombstone in the burying ground of St. Luke's Church.

In the Chartiers Valley at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century schools were few, and open only in Winter months, yet Hezekiah Nixon learned to "read, write and cypher" before he was eleven years old. At that age, by the death of his father, he became "the man of the house," and never thereafter went to school. The operation of his

2 Duff is mistaken here. Lea was probably a militia colonel who received the land from Pennsylvania in partial payment for his services in the Revolutionary War.
father's farm was taken over by his kinsmen of the Lea family, and Hezekiah Nixon went to work for a neighboring farmer named Robert Bell. When of sufficient age he was indentured to his uncle Robert Lea, from whom he learned the carpenter trade. As a journeyman carpenter he worked for a few years in Pittsburgh and engaged in the business of contracting builder. Although a frequent visitor to the home of his mother, and on intimate friendly footing with his relatives the Nixons and the Leas, as well as with the Frews, his wife's family, he never again resided in the Chartiers Valley. In the earlier [sic] years, Hezekiah Nixon's business associations were principally in Pittsburgh, but he soon made his home on the North side of the Allegheny River, so it is with that neighborhood that his life for the ensuing thirty years was most intimately connected.

Allegheny Town, when Hezekiah Nixon settled there in 1824, had an area of less than a square mile and a population of about 2,500. Originally laid out in 1788 by direction of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania as the "townsite" of the 3,000 acre "Reserve Tract Opposite Pittsburgh" it was intended to be the seat of government of the new County of Allegheny to be formed out of Washington and Westmoreland Counties. The town laid out in 1788 consisted of thirty-six blocks 240 feet square, each containing four lots sixty feet by 240 feet, separated by straight streets mostly sixty feet wide. The blocks were arranged in six parallel rows of six, running North and South and East and West, so the townsite was a perfect square. Around the four sides of the square townsite an area of "commons" was provided for the pasturage of the horses, cows, sheep and hogs belonging to the "in-lot holders", who owned and lived on the 112 lots comprising the town. The slope of the ground and the location of small streams, as well as by land already occupied by original settlers along the Allegheny River, influenced the laying out of the "commons", so that on the South, or river side of the town, it was sixty feet wide, on the East and North 240 feet wide, and on the West 1,500 feet wide. The center of Allegheny Town was at what is now the intersection of Federal and Ohio Streets, because there was the crossing of the old Indian trails which later became the paths of the white men through the dense forests. The trail from the "Forks of the Ohio" to Lake Erie ran North and South where Federal Street now is, while the trail

from Kittanning Town on the Allegheny River to the mouth of the
Big Beaver ran East and West where Ohio Street now is. In laying
out Allegheny Town the four blocks at the center were reserved for
public use, and are now occupied by the Carnegie Library, Northside
Police Station[,] Ober Park, and the Market House. The “common”
have become the present parks. In 1824 very little improvement
existed outside of the original townsite except between the Southern
side, which was at present Stockton Avenue, and the Allegheny River.
On “the bottoms” along the river there had been for many years a few
settlers, notably the Robinson family West of Federal Street. The
ferry from the foot of Federal Street to the foot of St. Clair (now
Sixth) Street in Pittsburgh, replaced in 1820 by a wooden bridge,
stimulated development in that neighborhood. The original purchasers
of the “in-lots” of Allegheny Town, and their successors in title,
suffered the fate common to many investors in real estate. Political
influence brought about the location of the “County Seat” on top of
“Grant’s Hill” in Pittsburgh, where it is today, and the area between
the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers became the center of power,
wealth and high real estate values — the famous “Golden Triangle.”

For forty years after the ambitious beginning Allegheny Town
grew very slowly, but the original settlers, mostly Irish and Scotch,
independent yet clannish by nature, stubborn and patient, clung to
the homes they had chosen, and maintained a separate local government.
It was not until 1829 that the community reached the dignity of incor-
poration into a Borough, to which the Census of 1830 assigns a
population of 2,800. Not much of a town according to modern stand-
ards, but nevertheless, even in those days, the home of many people
of importance and influence on the State and Nation.

The buildings in the Borough of Allegheny were nearly all of
wooden construction, many of them the log-cabins of the original
settlers; and the streets were nothing but mudholes, so crude that in
1833 the Borough Council ordered wooden posts to be set up to indi-
cate street boundaries, and prevent trespass of traffic on private
property, and especially on the four blocks of public property in the
center of the Borough. Until 1849, when the first City Water Works

4 James Robinson, formerly of Pittsburgh, probably moved north of the
Allegheny River in 1785. His son, William Robinson, Jr., became the first

5 The first courthouse in Pittsburgh was not located on Grant’s Hill, as
Duff implies, but in the Market Square area. It was completed in 1799.

6 Allegheny achieved borough status in 1828, not 1829. Dahlinger, “Old
Allegheny,” 186.
was built, domestic water supply was obtained only from wells or cisterns on each householder’s premises or from “water-carriers” who sold water hauled from the river in barrels on hand trucks. These water-carriers were so numerous that they protested by street rioting against the establishing of the Water Works. Candles were the only means of lighting until coal gas was supplied to the thickly built-up areas of the town about 1850.  

The first important contract carried out by Hezekiah Nixon was the construction of the buildings for the Cowan & Brown iron-rolling mill located on the South bank of the Allegheny River West of 10th Street, Pittsburgh. The mill was operated by the original owners, or their heirs, for about 100 years — famous locally as “Brown’s Mill”. Young Nixon’s next important work was the construction of buildings for the Blake & Anderson Rolling Mill located on the North bank of the Allegheny River West of Federal Street. This was the first iron-mill built on the North side of the river, and was completed in 1827. In this mill a few years later was built the first “boiling” or “puddling” furnace used in Allegheny County, and the “coffee-mill squeezer”, installed under the personal direction of the patentee Theodore Burden of New York. About five years later Hezekiah Nixon obtained the contract for the construction of the Hind & Howard Paper Mill, located on the bank of the Ohio River near the foot of present Western Avenue, which he completed in the spring of 1832, although the buildings were so greatly injured by the famous “flood” of February 1832 that they had to be largely rebuilt. It may be interesting to note that all the ill fortune which attended the beginning of this paper manufacturing enterprise continued in various forms for forty years, resulting in great loss to successive owners, and its entire abandonment in 1871. On account of the impurities in the water used the machinery and methods first intended for the production of high-grade paper were after a few years operation abandoned and new machinery installed for the production of wall and wrapping paper. In 1854 the plant was destroyed by fire, and after rebuilding, again partially burned in 1857. Again repaired it was operated with indifferent success for about ten years. Totally destroyed by fire in 1871 it was never rebuilt. Throughout his life Hezekiah Nixon was busy as a contractor and builder. Many manufacturing plants, public buildings and churches

7 According to Dahlinger, “Old Allegheny,” 205, the Allegheny Gas Company was incorporated in 1852, and a year later began supplying illuminating gas to the city.
8 This was better known as the Juniata Rolling Mill.
of both Pittsburgh and Allegheny were erected by him. For a time he was associated in his building business with Richard Dewhurst, under the name and style of Nixon & Dewhurst. I find in the records of the First Associate Reformed Church of Allegheny Town that the carpenter work for its first building, located on the corner of East & South Diamond Sts. was completed by Nixon & Dewhurst, and that their contract price was $1,866.09. It is interesting to note that this building remains useful to this day (September 11th, 1934), being occupied by a wholesale grocery and produce store. The rear wall fronting on the alley contains the original circle-head wood sash installed by my grandfather.

Later in partnership with Neville B. Craig he operated the “Outlet Sawmill” located on the North bank of the Allegheny River West of the outlet of the Canal, about where the locomotive house of the Pittsburgh & Western Division of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad is. The Directory of Pittsburgh and Allegheny for the year 1839 lists “Hezekiah Nixon & Co., Steam Sawmill, Craig Street and Canal”. This sawmill was destroyed by fire about 1855. For a time Hezekiah Nixon was engaged in the steamboat business on the Ohio River. One of the last building contracts completed by Hezekiah Nixon was the construction of the building for the Third United Presbyterian Church on Ridge Avenue, Allegheny City, near the Pennsylvania Railroad, of which congregation he was an organizer and first Ruling Elder. The corner stone of this structure he laid with his own hands. For much information about the business career of Hezekiah Nixon I rely on his biography contained in “Recollections of Seventy Years and Historical Gleanings of Allegheny, Pennsylvania”, written by Judge John E. Parke, and published by Rand, Avery & Co., Boston, 1886. Judge Parke was a neighbor and personal acquaintance of Hezekiah Nixon throughout his life in Allegheny City, and concludes his recital of Nixon’s business career in these words (Page 344) “In all the varied operations in which he was engaged he rendered entire satisfaction to all, both as to kind of workmanship and the quality of the material furnished”.

On March 3d. 1831 Hezekiah Nixon married Roseanna Frew, the daughter of Charles Frew (born March 14th. 1774) and Sarah

9 Among the structures in the area, this building, if it still stood, was razed to make way for Allegheny Center in the 1960s.
10 The sawmill was not far west of the present-day Sixth Street Bridge, between River Avenue and Roberto Clemente Memorial Park. G. M. Hopkins, comp., *Atlas of the Cities of Pittsburgh and Allegheny* . . . (Philadelphia, 1872), 72-73.
Carnahan (Frew) born 1776. Charles Frew had a large farm, as well as a blacksmith and wagonmaking shop, in Union Township, Allegheny County, a few miles West of the boyhood home of Hezekiah Nixon.

The home of Hezekiah Nixon was the center of a large circle of relatives and friends of high standing in the fast-growing city. When my grandfather was only a little more than fifty years old shadows began to fall on this happy and prosperous family. Hezekiah Nixon’s eyesight began to fail, greatly cutting down his activity and capacity to manage his business affairs. Soon he was weakened and tortured by “rheumatism” as it was called in those days, no doubt the corroding effect of some infection which had entered his system, and which the medical science of that time little understood, and of which there was little means of control. Upon his eldest daughter Harriet fell the duty of guiding her blind father from his home to his office, not far away, and there, in the hours not occupied by teaching in the First Ward Public School (Allegheny) hardby, she kept her father’s books, wrote his letters etc. Soon his infirmities and sufferings confined him to his home, where he received the ministration of friends, and especially of his associates in religious work. My Mother’s Journal, and many of her letters, describe the scene of strong faith and spiritual exhaltation [sic], the solemn prayer meetings which marked his last days. Hezekiah Nixon died at his home, #40 Craig Street, on December 12th. 1858, and was buried in Lot #31, Range 5, Section A, Division No. 1 of Uniondale Cemetery, Pittsburgh, where his grave, the only one in the lot, is still marked by a marble headstone.

The first record I have of the public religious activity of Hezekiah Nixon is in connection with the founding of the Associate Reformed (now First United Presbyterian) Church of Allegheny Town in the year 1831, when he was twenty-nine years old. It is certain that he had been a member of, and prominent in, some church of this communion for several years, probably of the Associate Reformed Church of Pittsburgh. How it came about that Hezekiah Nixon so early in life became a member of a religious sect differing so greatly from that of his mother Jane Lea (Nixon), his father Thomas Nixon, as well as his grandfather William Lea, all of whom were lifelong members of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church on Chartiers Creek, and now lie in its “burying ground”, is a mystery I cannot solve, except to infer that it was through early association with the Frew and Carnahan families (Scotch-Irish Covenanters) with whom he afterward became connected by marriage. . . .
During the Decade 1830 to 1840 a large number of immigrants from Scotland and Ireland came to Allegheny Town. The majority were of the Covenanter sect, represented in America by the Associated Reformed Church, so the church of that Communion in Allegheny Town became overcrowded, and was an inconvenient meeting place for residents of the suburbs. The Church on the Allegheny Diamond was rich for those days, and “strong in the faith of the fathers,” so it decided to build at its own expense a new church in the Manchester District along the Ohio River, to be used and ultimately owned by communicants of that neighborhood. This project was accomplished about 1848.

The official political life of Hezekiah Nixon began, as far as I am able to learn, with his appointment by the Council of Allegheny Borough as one of the three “Borough Measurers” for the year 1833, when he was thirty-one years old. His associates were John Downing and J. B. McKeown. Whether designed as a means of revenue for the Borough (or for the politicians who were appointed to the office) or perhaps enforcing the rule of “caveat vendor” by which Franklin Roosevelt now proposes to regulate the Stock Market, or in a practical manner to prevent riot and disorder between the rough “raftsmen” of the upper Allegheny River and the sharp Scotch-Irish traders of Allegheny Town — whatever its origin this was an important office in those days.

After serving as Board Measurer for the years 1833 and 1834 Hezekiah Nixon was appointed by the Councils of Allegheny Borough to be one of the three “Recording Regulators” for the year 1835, his associates being James Sterritt and Thomas Barnett. The duties of a Recording Regulator required practical knowledge, firm judgment guided by fairness and a spirit of co-operation, for they included the settlement of all questions concerning street lines and grades, sewers and drains — subjects no doubt of almost daily dispute in the crude and fast-growing frontier town. Hezekiah Nixon’s long service as apprentice and journeyman carpenter qualified him to measure and inspect boards, scantling, joists and shingles, and his experience as a contracting builder made him expert in the exact location and measurement of land lines, for which at that time and place no tools were available except the sixteen and one-half foot wooden rod, the steel square, and a level made by combining a square and a plumb-bob. It was also the duty of the Recording Regulators to keep a public record of all their decisions, thereby publicly recording the respective rights of the land owners and the Borough.
After serving the Borough of Allegheny two years as Board Measurer and two years as Recording Regulator, Hezekiah Nixon was elected by the votes of the free-holders, at an election held at the home of William Lightner January 17th. 1837, to serve as a member of Borough Council for the years 1837, 1838 and 1839. In this office his duties were legislative, similar to those of Borough Councilmen serving at the present time.

I have examined the original Minutes of the Council of the Borough of Allegheny, written longhand in two leather-bound books now preserved in the Allegheny Carnegie Library. During his first year of service as a Councilman Hezekiah Nixon was recorded as present at nearly all meetings, but otherwise seldom mentioned, although at a meeting held in February 1837 he seconded the Resolution offered by Mr. Campbell for the approval of “A Supplement to the Act erecting the Town of Allegheny”, wherein the exact boundaries of the Borough were defined. During the year 1838 he is frequently recorded as making or seconding important motions. At the meeting on June 18th. 1838 he presented a Resolution appointing three members “to ascertain the cost of different kinds of paving per yard, and report to the next meeting, to enable Council to decide which description of paving it will be most prudent to adopt”. This Resolution was approved and the committee appointed, consisting of Hezekiah Nixon, H. Irwin, Jr. and W. A. Irwin.

During [the] meeting held in July 1839 the question of the incorporation of the Borough of Allegheny as a city was under discussion. An Act for that purpose passed the Legislature, but Council learned of this only one day before the day fixed in the Act for the holding of an election for City officers. This short notice was very disturbing to the politicians so the Borough Solicitor ruled that it was within the power of Council to set the election for a later date. A motion to hold the election on the day set by the Legislature was lost, and on the Ayes and Noes being called for[,] the vote was three to four, Hezekiah Nixon voting in the affirmative. A motion to set the election for a day one week later was carried, and on the Ayes and Noes being called for the vote was 6 to 1, Hezekiah Nixon being the only one voting No. Three days later word reached Council that the Governor had refused to sign the Bill, so the incorporation into a city could not be made that year, and no election was required. In this matter Hezekiah Nixon had the laugh on his colleagues. Whether or not Hezekiah Nixon was a candidate for election to Council for the year 1840 I do not know, but he was not elected, and his name does not
appear in the Minutes of Council after January 1840.

By a Special Act of the General Assembly of Pennsylvania passed April 13th. 1840 the Borough of Allegheny became a city under the style and title of “The Mayor, Aldermen and Citizens of Allegheny”. At an election held on the second Tuesday of July 1840 Hezekiah Nixon was elected a Select Councilman of the newly incorporated City. He served continuously for the ensuing fourteen years, except in 1844 and 1845, as a Member of Select Council, being President of that body in 1842. For a period of about twenty years, therefore, between the ages of 31 and 52, Hezekiah Nixon took a prominent part in the government and politics of the town, during which time it increased manyfold in population and wealth, bridges, canals and railroads connecting it with the outside world were constructed, and the crudeness of the frontier disappeared.

In January 1844 and again in January 1845 Hezekiah Nixon was elected Mayor of Allegheny City. In the PITTSBURGH DAILY GAZETTE & ADVERTISER of January 12th. 1845 I find the following record of his election for that year.

**ALLEGHENY ELECTION.**

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<td>Hezekiah Nixon, Whig</td>
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<td>127</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>228</td>
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<td>M. McGonnigle, Abolitionist</td>
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<td>100</td>
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After finishing his term as Mayor of Allegheny City for the year 1845 Hezekiah Nixon again was elected a Member of Select Council, and, according to Judge Parke, remained a member of that body until 1854. It is evident that Hezekiah Nixon was an important member of the political organization then controlling Allegheny County, and the cities of Pittsburgh and Allegheny, because in 1848 he was elected Recorder of Allegheny County. In the PITTSBURGH DAILY GAZETTE of June 15th. 1848 I find the following account of the “Anti-Masonic and Whig Convention,” from which I will quote. . . .

"At One o'clock the President called the Convention to order. . . . On motion the Convention agreed to mark for Recorder. . . . After the first ballot the Convention resolved to mark for Clerk of Courts in connection with the office of Recorder — on the result of the second ballot for Recorder being announced the names of John McDowell and John McGill were withdrawn, and the third ballot for Recorder and the second ballot for Clerk of Courts were proceeded with, and the
result being announced the Chair declared Hezekiah Nixon of Lower St. Clair Township the candidate of the Party for Recorder."

Out of this dry record of the election of my grandfather Hezekiah Nixon to the last important elective office he held there are inescapable and interesting conclusions to be drawn as to his political philosophy, and the politics of Allegheny County in those days. For instance I call attention to the fact that Hezekiah Nixon was proclaimed by his Party as "of Lower St. Clair Township", while he was in fact a resident of the First Ward of Allegheny City, and a Member of Select Council of that City. This was evidently some kind of a successful political dodge of those days, winked at by the "bosses". It is true that Grandfather owned property and paid taxes in Lower St. Clair Township, but he had not lived there for more than twenty years. Neville B. Craig, one of his bondsmen was a partner in the lumber and contracting business Grandfather carried on under the title of Hezekiah Nixon & Company. This same Neville B. Craig, the editor of the PITTSBURGH GAZETTE, was one of the "Democratic Anti-Masons" who proposed to nominate Daniel Webster for the Presidency of the United States, in their letter to him November 11th 1835, but in 1848 Craig was evidently one of the bosses of the "Anti-Masonic Whig Party" of Allegheny County. This persistence of the Anti-Masonic movement in the political affairs of Allegheny County is astonishing in view of the total collapse of the National Anti-Masonic Party following the campaign of 1832.11 While the Freemasons of Allegheny County had been so relentlessly persecuted between 1830 and 1840 that all Lodges except one ceased to meet, by 1849 they had evidently again secured favorable public recognition, because I find in the PITTSBURGH GAZETTE of that year an account of a large parade held in honor of the veterans returning from the Mexican War in which a whole Division is assigned to the "Masonic Fraternity."

The dour Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who thrived in the smoke and fog which obscured the rugged hills at "the Forks of the Ohio" for many years successfully used the political war-cry "down with the treasonable and murderous Masons". I also call attention to the fact that the Whigs and Anti-Masons of Allegheny County were careful in their convention of 1848 to publically [sic] endorse the Wilmot Proviso, and thereby lay a foundation for the movement to abolish negro slavery, which resulted in the war of "The Slaveholder's Re-

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bellion 1861-1865". During the twelve years 1848 to 1860 the Whigs of Pennsylvania became Free-Soilers, then Abolitionists and finally Republicans, giving powerful military and political support to the Federal Government, which, under the leadership of Abraham Lincoln, settled the questions of the right of State secession and negro slavery. . . . The stiffnecked Scotch and Irish Covenanters . . . maintained for centuries their enmity to Freemasonry, and at the present time, in Twentieth Century North America, the strict adherants [sic] to that Protestant Communion despise and criticize the fraternity and avoid association with its members.

From religious conviction, therefore, as well as political philosophy my grandfather Hezekiah Nixon was an Anti-Mason. . . .

The popular feeling against Freemasons was intense in Allegheny County, and the social, economic and political pressure on them so great, that out of six active Lodges only one, Lodge 45, of which my uncle Samuel O. McKee was afterwards a Member, continued to work, but no meetings of it were held from April to November 1835. All the other Lodges in the Pittsburgh District surrendered their charters, and their work was not renewed for many years afterward.

Adhering to the principles established and maintained throughout the entire social history of mankind Freemasonry as an organization, as well as individual Freemasons almost without exception throughout the World, have treated the Anti-Masonic agitation in the United States 1828 to 1850 with silence.

In regard to the personality of Hezekiah Nixon his friend Judge Parke has this to say; — "Although Mr. Nixon possessed considerable natural ability, and was intelligent to a remarkable degree, he was a wholly self-educated man. The world was his school, and time his tutor."

To those whose patience has carried them through this dry recital of the historical background in the light of which Hezekiah's life and labors must be appraised I repeat . . . that to my comparatively cold and unemotional disposition he appears like a character of fiction rather than a real man. . . .