

The Southern Workman

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THE SOUTHERN WORKMAN

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The Southern Workman

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WILLIAM ANTHONY AERY,
 For The Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute

Sworn and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1912.

[Seal]

HAMLIN NELSON, Notary Public,
 My commission expires July 4, 1915.

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THOMAS PUTNAM FENNER



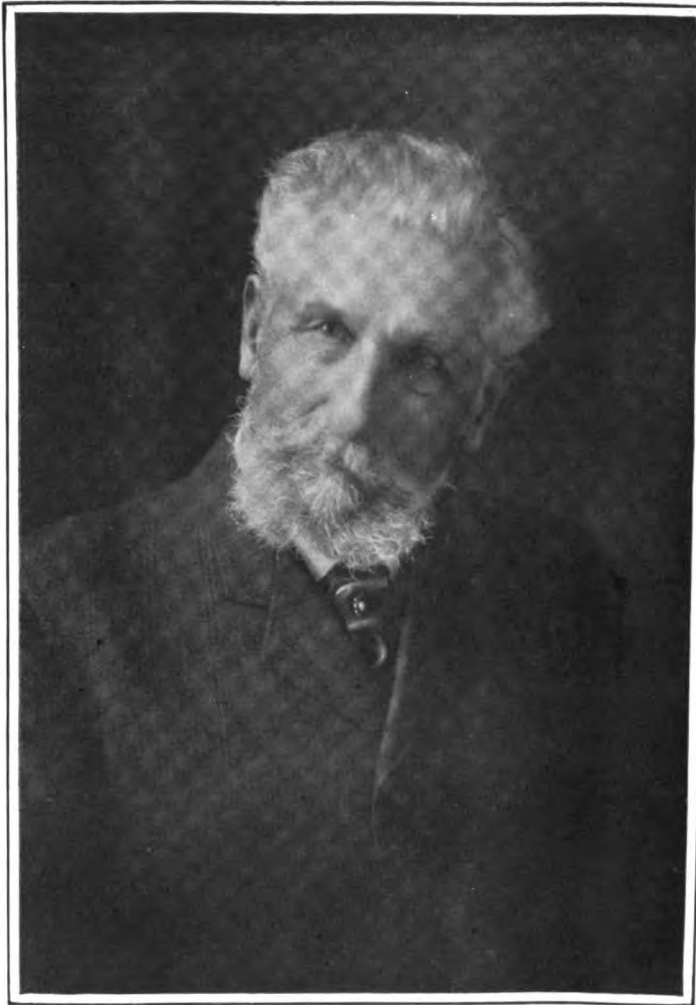
THE news of Professor Thomas P. Fenner's sudden illness and death on October 15 at the home of his son-in-law and daughter, Dr. and Mrs. James T. Boutelle in Hampton, startled and saddened many friends near and far. Not all who read the local journal's account of his long, full life, may have understood what especial reason Hampton Institute has to honor Professor Fenner's memory.

Forty years ago, in 1872, of all the great buildings which were to stand upon the Normal School grounds, only one—Academic Hall—existed outside the mind and purpose of the school's Founder. The second one—Virginia Hall—had been planned to take the place of the temporary "Barracks," put up four years before for the school's start, from the Union army hospital quarters of Camp Hamilton.

To aid in his arduous new campaign, General Armstrong decided to send a company of student singers—a dozen or more colored boys and girls—into the North. It was no small problem to find just the right trainer and captain for these "men behind the guns." He should be not merely a good music teacher in the ordinary sense, but one exceptionally able to appreciate and develop an exceptional race music, able to create enthusiasm in his pupils, to represent the school socially, and, if need be, speak for it on the platform or act as its business agent; withal a man of Christian faith and character and missionary spirit. To secure all these qualifications in one man was much to expect. Perhaps General Armstrong said of this as he did of other of his drafts upon divine providence, "What are Christians put into the world for but to do the 'impossible'?"

How fully the draft was honored was attested by the results and the daily details of the enterprise, through the years—1872-'75—in which the "band of Hampton Student Singers" was organized, drilled, and taken through eighteen states, from Virginia to Maine and from Maine to Iowa, and twice through Canada, "singing up the walls of Virginia Hall, spreading wide public knowledge of the school, and helping to create the public sentiment which has ever since been growing, for its ideas of practical education." Only those who have had inside experience of such a situation could fully understand its difficulties and appreciate the manner in which they were met by Mr. Fenner with a tact and patience, business ability and common sense, not often combined with the artistic temperament.

To be not only impressario but guide, philosopher, and friend, to



PROFESSOR THOMAS P. FENNER

his young singers, was his achievement; to keep them in good voice and good spirit through weeks and months of almost daily travel and nightly concert work; to be ready for emergencies, to speak or act for the school with all sorts and conditions of individuals and audiences, to carry Hampton's light artillery far afield, or join the General in besieging the great centers of public philanthropy. In addition to this field work and in the midst of it he found time for a great but congenial task for which he was especially fitted by artistic taste and ability—the delicate work of developing the characteristic Negro music in its own original lines. The distinguishing strength of the Hampton Singers became the faithful rendering of the plantation songs

enriched by harmonizing but preserving untouched the original melody and its spirit—the pathos and *wail* which those who had heard them on the old plantations recognized as the real thing—declared by Edward Everett Hale, as it has since been called by Dvorak, “the only American music.” The “Cabin and Plantation Songs” published with Mr. Fenner’s able exposition of his theory as to their arrangement, attracted at once the interest of musical experts. The book had a large sale at the concerts and is still in print. This was Mr. Fenner’s crowning work for the school and for the Negro race.

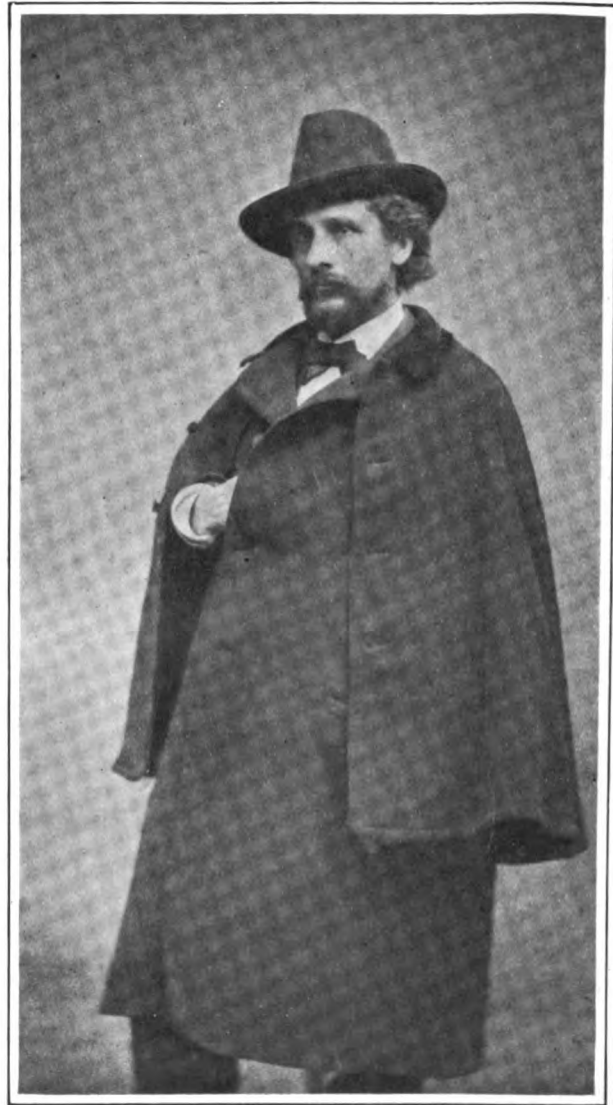
Three or four years are but few in the midst of fourscore, but, in view of their results, it is interesting to see how the previous circumstances of Mr. Fenner’s long life helped to fit him for his Hampton service. Mr. Fenner was born on November 22, 1829, in Providence, R. I., a namesake and lineal descendant of Major Thomas Fenner, one of the original founders of his native city, of a family that has given several governors to the state of Rhode Island.

When little more than a boy, young Fenner enlisted with youthful enthusiasm and served with credit in the U. S. Cavalry during the Mexican War. When the Civil War broke out he entered the Union army and served throughout the four years as musician, part of the time on the field and later stationed at the Naval Academy in Newport, R. I. The varied lessons and broadening experiences of his military training and army life were turned to good account in his service at Hampton Institute.

At the close of the Mexican War, Mr. Fenner had chosen music for his profession and life work. Possessing a fine tenor voice and becoming a master of the violin and several other instruments, he was a member, and at times leader, of various noted bands and orchestras, choirs and choral associations, in Providence, Newport, and Boston. He was closely associated with his friend Dr. Eben Tourjee in establishing the New England Conservatory of Music in Providence, where it was first located. After its removal to Boston, General Armstrong, applying to the Conservatory for a leader for the Hampton Singers, was directed by Dr. Tourjee to Mr. Fenner as “just the man for the place.” After finishing his work for Hampton, Professor Fenner had charge for many years of the music department in Temple Grove Seminary in Saratoga, N. Y., going thence to Boston to be again an instructor in the New England Conservatory where he taught or ten years.

In 1842, Professor Fenner married Miss Sabra H. Dyer, a very attractive young girl in Providence, a member of one of the leading families of Rhode Island. Accompanying Mr. Fenner to Hampton, his wife and their two daughters became very helpful and valued

members of the Hampton corps, Mrs. Fenner taking charge of the girls' sewing department and making a pleasant home for the band of student singers in their summer quarters in Stockbridge, Mass. Of their daughters, the elder became Mrs. Daniel S. Shaurman and



MR. FENNER WHEN IN BOSTON WITH THE HAMPTON SINGERS

resides in Brooklyn, N. Y.; the younger remained in the town of Hampton as wife of the eminent Dr. James T. Boutelle, who for many years rendered valuable service to Hampton Institute as its attending

or consulting physician, and is still its loyal and honored friend.

After the death of Mrs. Fenner, in 1898, Professor Fenner returned to Hampton to make his home with his children. In the fourteen years of his residence in the town, Mr. Fenner became one of its most esteemed citizens. Entering heartily into the interests of the community, especially of its musical circles, his genial manner and fine qualities of character made him many friends, in the practice of his profession and in all social relations. Vigorous, alert, and youthful in spirit, any who met him on the street two days before his death, might have taken him for a man of fifty rather than an octogenarian.

Professor Fenner's interest in Hampton Institute never abated. After his return to the town he was a frequent and welcome visitor at the school, often attending its exercises, watching the Sunday inspection of the boys' battalion, and lending professional aid to its musical entertainments. His presence could always be counted upon at the meetings of the Armstrong League of Hampton Workers, which was formed after General Armstrong's death to unite past and present members of the school's staff. On the sixth of last month, at its first general meeting after Professor Fenner's departure, the League passed the following resolutions in his honor.

"Resolved: That we, the members of the Armstrong League of Hampton Workers, heartily unite with the community about us, and with many friends beyond it, in deep regret for the death of Professor Thomas P. Fenner, which occurred on October 15 after but a few days of illness, closing eighty-three years of unabated vigor, taking from the town a good man and valued citizen, a man of genius and prominence in his profession, a composer and master of music who used the "divine art" in the divine way, to benefit, to cheer, and uplift; a man whose genial personality has left its impression in imperishable records of memory and friendship.

"Resolved: That, while Professor Fenner's death arouses our earnest sympathy for his family and outside friends, his pupils, and his fellow citizens, we feel, as members of the Armstrong League, our personal loss in the passing of a veteran Hampton worker, who has been a faithful and honored member of the League ever since its beginning, and for many more years a valued friend of Hampton Institute and of many of its teachers and students. Mr. Fenner's official connection with the Hampton staff was comprised within the years of 1872-'75, in which he trained and took through the North the first band of Hampton student singers and arranged their songs for publication. In that early and critical period of the school's history, Mr. Fenner's work was of important assistance, and still, at least three great results of it remain his enduring monuments here. One of these monuments is beautiful Virginia Hall, whose walls his Hampton student singers helped by their songs to raise; another, the heart-moving plantation melodies, which he was the first composer to develop in harmony, leaving their weird originality unchanged. Still another monument, not the less lasting that it belongs to the things which are not material but spiritual, is the students' appreciation of the music of their race, a sentiment which Mr. Fenner did very much to impress upon the school, and one which, we hope, will always continue to be one of its distinguishing characteristics."