

SKETCHES

OF

V I R G I N I A .

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HISTORICAL

AND

B I O G R A P H I C A L .

BY THE

REV. WILLIAM HENRY FOOTE, D.D.

Pastor of Presbyterian Church, Romney, Virginia.

PHILADELPHIA:

WILLIAM S. MARTIEN, 142 CHESTNUT STREET.

1850.

bly of Virginia, that the shares in the James River Company should be reserved for a similar object in some part of that State, I intend to allot them for a Seminary, to be erected at such place as they shall deem most proper. I am disposed to believe, that a seminary of learning upon an enlarged plan, but not yet coming up to the full idea of a University, is an institution to be preferred for the position which is to be chosen. The students, who wish to pursue the whole range of science, may pass with advantage from the Seminary to the University, and the former by a due relation may be rendered co-operative with the latter."—To this the Legislature replied December 1, 1795, with many expressions of respect, commending the erection of a University in the Federal City, and approving of the endowment of it with the fifty shares of Potomac stock—and—“Resolved also, that he be requested to appropriate the aforesaid shares in the James River Company to a Seminary in such place in the upper country as he may deem most convenient to a majority of the inhabitants thereof.”

The following extracts from the records of the Board of Trustees of Washington College give the doings of the Rector and Trustees on this important business, of obtaining the proposed endowment.

“January 5, 1796.—The Rector informed the Board that he [had] called them together, to take under consideration some direct information he had received, of the Legislature of this State having resolved there shall be a public Seminary in the upper part of this State, and that the President of the United States was about to bestow his hundred shares in the James River Company, to aid in endowing the same.

“The Board maturely considered the information of the Rector, and agreed to address the President in such a manner as might give him a true view of the state of this Academy, and of the propriety of the donation being conferred upon it.

“On motion the Board appointed the Rector and Messrs. Samuel L. Campbell and Samuel Houston, or any two of them, a committee on behalf of the Board, to send forward such an address to the President, as will contain the things signified by the Board, as proper to be communicated, and that they report a copy as soon as convenient.” [Records, Vol. I. p. 144.]

The committee reported the following, viz:—

“The Trustees of Liberty Hall Academy, in Rockbridge county and State of Virginia, to his Excellency George Washington, President of the United States of America.

“*Sir*:—We have lately heard of your generous and disinterested conduct, in refusing as private emolument, the shares in the Potomack and James River Companies, presented to you by

the Legislature of Virginia, as a testimony of their approbation and gratitude.

“We have also heard of the wise and beneficent purposes to which you wished to have the profits arising from these shares applied,—the endowment of a Seminary on the waters of each these rivers for the education of youth, and that you referred the appropriation of the hundred shares in the James River Company to the wisdom of the Legislature of Virginia; who after deliberating on the important subject, agreed that the whole should be applied to one Seminary up the country,—but some differences of opinion arising respecting the particular place to which it should be applied, referred the ultimate decision to your Excellency.

“Supposing our information just, we are constrained by the duty we owe the public, as well as the Seminary we have long had the honour to patronise, to address you on this very interesting subject.

“And here we cannot allow ourselves to think it proper to pray you to grant the donation for the support of education in this Seminary, as a matter of honour or emolument to ourselves, or emolument to the neighbourhood where it stands. This would be selfish and invidious and inconsistent with the feelings of that mind, which always overlooks private interest to embrace and secure the public good. We beg leave only to state a few facts for your Excellency’s information, that you may be enabled to decide the important question with greater precision.

“From a conviction of the necessity and utility of a public Seminary to complete the education of youth in this upper part of the State; as early as the year 1776, a Seminary before conducted in these parts under the form of a grammar school, received the nominal title of an Academy, and money was collected to purchase the beginnings of a library, and some of the most essential parts of a philosophical and mathematical apparatus.

“The question then was, where should the Seminary be fixed? Staunton was proposed by some, to be the proper place, as the most ancient and populous town, and nearest the centre of population in the upper part of the State as it then stood. But considering that a public Seminary, which was to be of permanent duration and general utility, ought not to be affected by local circumstances arising from temporary causes;—and viewing the extensive lands upon the drains of [the] Holstein to the south-west, and of the Kanawha to the west, we were of opinion that the time was not very far distant when the population upon these lands must equal, if not exceed the population upon the

drains of the Potomac to the northeast, upon one of which drains Staunton stands. We therefore considered the waters of James River as forming a kind of natural and common centre. We also felt a conviction, that the extensive and fertile lands upon James River, would at a period not far remote, point out the necessity and practicability of rendering its streams navigable above the mountains, and we have been happy in seeing our expectations realizing every day.

“We therefore concluded that some spot in the tract of country now known as Rockbridge county, would be the proper place. We therefore organized the Seminary, and set it in motion, hoping that the public would one day aid our exertions and enable us to perfect what had been honestly begun.

“Through the calamities of a long and dangerous war, and the deceptions of a paper currency, together with other misfortunes, great obstructions were experienced, but being happy in able and diligent teachers, we were enabled to preserve the Academy in a state of considerable reputation and usefulness until the year 1782, when we were aided by an act of incorporation from the Legislature of Virginia, which was the first granted after the Revolution.

“In 1793 we found it necessary to fix the spot where the building should finally stand, which was determined to be in that fine tract of country formerly known by the name of the Woods’ Creek lands, in the Forks of James River, one mile from the navigation of the North Branch, and on an eminence about three-quarters of a mile from Lexington,—so that whilst it enjoys an extensive prospect of the circumjacent country, and a view of the town, it has agreeably to its great design, an undisturbed retirement for study.

“The situation of the neighbourhood for health and fertility as well as pleasantness, yields to no lands in the upper part of the State.

“If our information of the state of the dispute respecting the place, as it existed before the Legislature, be accurate, it went a great way to determine the propriety of our original opinion. It is said that Fincastle on the one side, and Staunton on the other, were the extremes which made any vigorous claims. Fincastle is situated thirty-seven miles south west from Liberty Hall, and Staunton thirty-five miles to the north east. Therefore Liberty Hall is as near the centre as local situation would admit.

“There is one more fact which we would beg leave to state. In 1793, by voluntary contributions, and some sacrifices of private property, we were enabled to erect and finish plain but neat buildings, sufficiently capacious to accommodate between forty and fifty students, and the business of education is now

in full train, and the Seminary in as high reputation as could be expected without funds. Many young gentlemen have finished their education here, who are now serving their country with reputation and usefulness, in different professional departments, and a number are now collected from different parts of the country for the same end.

“The buildings and other furniture of the Academy could not be estimated at much less than two thousand pounds. If the seat of the academy is changed, the young gentlemen must be interrupted for some time in their studies, and the buildings totally lost, as they can be applied to no other purpose. The destruction of so much property, procured with considerable difficulty, unless a much greater preponderating good can be secured to the public, will doubtless be seriously weighed. And as the public good is the only object which can influence your determination, it is unnecessary to add any thing further, but fully confiding in your wisdom, we shall entirely acquiesce in your decision.

“That all possible happiness, present and future, may attend your person, and every public blessing your administration, is the desire and prayer of your Excellency's humble servants, the Trustees of Liberty Hall. By order and in behalf of the Board,

WILLIAM GRAHAM, *C. M.*

SAMUEL HOUSTON, *C. B. T.*

January, 1796.”

WASHINGTON'S LETTER TO GOVERNOR BROOKE.

“Philadelphia, 15th September, 1796.

“*Sir*:—The Commonwealth of Virginia having manifested their approbation of my design to apply the hundred shares in the James River Company, which they had before put at my disposal, to the use of a Seminary, to be erected in such part of the State as they should deem most proper, and in consequence of this referred to their opinion,—The Legislature having requested me to appropriate them to a Seminary in such place in the upper country, as I should think most convenient to a majority of its inhabitants,—After careful inquiries to ascertain that place, I have, upon the fullest consideration of all circumstances, destined those shares to the use of Liberty Hall Academy in Rockbridge county.

“It would seem to me proper, that this determination should be promulgated by some official act of the executive of Virginia, and the Legislature may expect it for the purpose of general information.

“With due consideration and respect, I am, sir, your most obedient humble servant,

GEO. WASHINGTON.

“His Excellency, ROBERT BROOKE, Governor of Virginia.”

The Trustees of Liberty Hall took the following action :

“ Washington Academy, April 12, 1798.

“ The committee appointed to draft an address to President Washington, respecting his destination of the use of the shares in the James River Canal Company to this Seminary, reported a draft, which being read and considered, was agreed to, and is as follows :

“ *Sir* :—It was not earlier than September, 1797, that we were officially informed of your liberal donation to Liberty Hall Academy.

“ Permit us as its immediate guardians to perform the pleasing duty of expressing those sentiments of gratitude which so generous an act naturally inspires. We have been long sensible of the disadvantages to which literary institutions are necessarily subjected, whilst dependent on precarious funds for their support. Reflecting particularly on the many difficulties through which this Seminary has been conducted since the first moments of its existence, we cannot but be greatly affected by an event which secures to it an independent and permanent establishment. Convinced as we are that public prosperity and security are intimately connected with the diffusion of knowledge, we look around with the highest satisfaction on its rapid advances in these United States, unfeignedly rejoicing that the citizen who has long been distinguished as the asserter of the liberties of his country, adds to this illustrious character, the no less illustrious one of patron of the arts and of literature. And we trust that no effort may be wanting on our part to encourage whatever branches of knowledge may be of general utility.

“ That you may long enjoy, besides the uninterrupted blessings of health and repose, the happiness which none but those who deserve it can enjoy, and which arises from the reflection of having virtuously and eminently promoted the best interests of mankind, is the fervent prayer of the Trustees of Washington Academy, late Liberty Hall.

By order of the Board, SAMUEL HOUSTON, *Clerk*.

“ His Excellency, GEO. WASHINGTON,
late President of the U. S. A.”

WASHINGTON'S REPLY.

“ Mount Vernon, 17th June, 1798.

“ *Gentlemen* :—Unaccountable as it may seem, it is nevertheless true, that the address with which you were pleased to honour me, dated the 12th of April, never came into my hand until the 11th instant.

“ To promote literature in this rising empire, and to encourage the arts, have ever been amongst the warmest wishes of my heart.