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A

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

OF

ROBERT M. PATTERSON, M.D.

BY

SAMUEL BRECK,

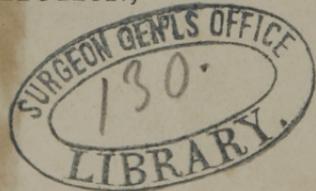
PRESIDENT OF THE

Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind.

PREPARED FOR

THE MANAGERS OF THAT INSTITUTION,

ACCORDING TO THEIR REQUEST.



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Printed by order of the Board of Managers.

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1854.

Miss Starr, with J. B.'s  
kind regards -

At a Meeting of the Board of Managers of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind, held on the 7th of September, it was—

“*Resolved*, out of respect to the memory of Dr. Patterson, to adjourn, without transaction of business, until Monday next, 11th inst., at 4, P. M.”

On motion, it was further unanimously—

“*Resolved*, That the President be requested to prepare for the Board an appropriate minute, expressive of the feelings of this Board, in view of the loss which this Institution and this community have sustained in the decease of Dr. Patterson.”

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And at a Meeting of the Board, held on the 5th of October, the following resolution was adopted :

“*Resolved*, That the thanks of the Board be presented to the President, for his truthful and eloquent tribute to the memory of our late associate, Dr. R. M. Patterson, and that it be printed under the direction of the Chairman of the Committee on Instruction.”



# A Short Biography

OF

DR. ROBERT M. PATTERSON.

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The President of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind, submits to the Board of Managers the following brief Memoir of the late Dr. Robert M. Patterson, prepared at their request:—

DEATH has taken from us an esteemed colleague and beloved companion; one who, for sixteen years, gave to this Institution a generous portion of his time and talents; who was endeared to us, by his kind and courteous deportment; his mild and unobtrusive manners; whose reputation, in every vocation of life, was unimpeached, and, who, when in charge of public business of the highest trust, fulfilled its duties for many years without reproach.

It is my purpose to take a concise view of the well-spent life of this good man; to endeavour to make that retrospection a source of consolation for his loss; to make it even a pleasing occupation to recall, in affectionate remembrance, the friendly converse of our past intercourse; to acknowledge, with a sense of justice, the useful and abiding influence of his counsel; to extol, in terms of suitable praise, his assistance in the management of this Institution; his ready co-operation in dispensing comfort and relief to its afflicted inmates; his pre-eminent agency in procuring them instruction;

and, as a consequence, in giving them contentment and happiness.

This is the feeling with which I shall speak of the man, who, in Christian charity, moved along with this school, step by step, from its feeble beginning, as it were, up to the period of its present solid and prosperous condition.

Dr. Patterson was elected a Manager, March 5th, 1838, and became immediately a constant and zealous participant in the business of the Board and its Committees.

The standing Committees at that time were Finance, Admission and Discharge, and Executive. The Committee on Instruction had been discontinued after the first year, at the request of Mr. Friedlander. It was again reorganized temporarily in July, 1837; but in the revision of the by-laws in March, 1838, a short time after Dr. Patterson's election, it was again discontinued.

For the first year, being a new member, he was not put upon any Committee; but on March 30th, 1839, after the death of Mr. Friedlander, he brought forward a resolution in these words, which was unanimously adopted:—"That a Committee of Instruction be appointed to supervise that department, and to ascertain what measures are rendered necessary by the death of the Principal."

In August following, this Committee was made a regular standing Committee, and has so continued ever since. To Dr. Patterson, therefore, must be awarded the merit of originating that highly important Committee. He was a member of it, from its organization, until his recent resignation as a manager. But he was not always its chairman: for in March, 1841, after having served as such during two years, he voluntarily

and courteously relinquished the post, for the purpose of putting his friend Alexander D. Bache in it: that worthy and distinguished gentleman, having been then re-elected to the Board.

In March, 1844, on Professor Bache's retiring from the Board, Dr. Patterson was again made chairman of the Committee of Instruction; and so continued until March, 1853, when, in consequence of declining health, he resigned his membership altogether; but the Board could not consent to part with him. He was solicited to remain with us and continue a member of the Committee, over which he had so faithfully presided for nearly ten years. The labour, however, of chairman was transferred to Dr. Dunglison.

Dr. Patterson was elected Vice President of the Institution in March, 1842, and continued by annual election, to occupy that place, until his final resignation in March, 1854. He was senior Vice President from March, 1843; and presided at the Board during the absence of President Richards in Europe.

Dr. Patterson was a member of the Committee of Organization, which, in 1842-3, remodelled the Institution in all its departments, and suggested the system of classification and division of labour in the government thereof, which still forms the mode of administering all our affairs.

Dr. Patterson, when complaint was occasionally made of the inconvenience of attending the stated meetings at the Institution, then so remote from the centre of the City, requested the members to assemble at the Philosophical Hall or at the Mint. I myself have sat with the Board at both those places; and it was in his office at the latter place, that the new system was finally discussed and agreed upon.

In his attendance at the meetings of the Board and

of his Committee, he was among the most punctual; and in each was prominent in zeal, intelligence and industry. His eminent services deserve our applause and thanks; and merit a higher testimonial of gratitude than my feeble pen can inscribe. I shall, nevertheless, proceed to speak of him, in the few following pages, devoted to the principal passages of his life, in the language of friendship and truth; trusting that another biographer, more intimately connected with him, will supply my deficiency, and pourtray in more polished phrase, the virtues that adorned the subject of this memoir.

The life of Dr. Patterson, was not exposed to many vicissitudes; and yet it had its lights and shades; not, however, in very strong contrast. On the contrary, they were so pleasantly blended, that the bright far outshone the sombre, and produced, humanly speaking, a reasonable measure of happiness, in nearly every stage of his earthly journey.

Robert Maskell Patterson was born in Philadelphia, March 23, 1787. He was the son of Professor Robert Patterson, who belonged for many years to the faculty of Arts in the University of Pennsylvania; and who filled the office of Director of the Mint for nearly twenty years.

Young Robert's disposition for study was first developed at the preparatory school of the University, which received him as a favour, when quite a child, and gave him his English education, even from the very alphabet. Latin and Greek followed with good progress. He gave, however, a decided preference to the study of mathematics.

His father, who was rather reserved in his family, perceiving in him, an absence of boyish mischief, and the development of a temper, mild, amiable and affec-

tionate, bestowed upon him his favour, and, indeed, his companionship, even at this early period.

At the age of seventeen (1804), Robert took his first degree in the Arts, at the University of Pennsylvania. A school-fellow and class-mate (Dr. S. Jackson) says he witnessed the commencement of his career in life, and testifies to his quiet disposition, by informing us that he was never known as the leader of tumultuous frolic or athletic game; but was rather the leader of classical exercises in school, where he bore away the palm in the themes of his class. Yet his success inspired no envy, for it was always borne without conceit or presumption. His first occupation, when freed from his collegiate studies, was one of filial duty and love. He took his father's place as instructor, in order to give him an opportunity to attend to other business temporarily, and to relieve him from the irksome toil of teaching.

He chose medicine as a profession, and pursued his studies under Dr. Benjamin S. Barton (an eminent physician in the early part of this century); and took his degree of M.D. in April, 1808.

Anxious to perfect his medical education, he sought for further instruction in the schools of Paris, where he spent two years. This was during the height of Napoleon's power and grandeur. The great events, then of daily occurrence, furnished constant topics for his observant mind, and were well suited to store his memory with a pleasing and useful fund of thought and reflection in after-life. His letters of that wonderful period have been preserved, and may, on some future occasion, be made public.

While at Paris at this period, an incident, arising from the name of Patterson, being the same as that of the lady of Baltimore, whom Jerome, the brother of

the Emperor, had married, came near to cause some inconvenience to our young doctor; and affords an instance of the bluntness and inconsistency of the Emperor Napoleon.

General Armstrong, the American Envoy, was about to leave Paris; and as there was no Consul-General in that City, he requested Mr. Patterson to take that office temporarily. The Emperor's consent was necessary. When the name was presented to him, he thought of his brother's American wife; and in a spirit of self-contradiction and haughty irony, refused the exequatur, because he would not consent to have a Patterson condescend to hold the office of Consul-General! It was strange, indeed, to see the man who had arbitrarily annulled the marriage of Miss Patterson, because of her plebeian birth; who forbade her to enter France, and who drove her to seek an asylum in England, for the purpose of giving birth to his brother's legitimate child, refuse to allow the exercise of an honourable office, created by a foreign power, because it was not of a grade sufficiently elevated for one bearing her name! The pretence was false, and the denial capricious. But to show, moreover, that the refusal of the exequatur was the mere whim of transient recollection; that it was a decision that could not be insisted on, even by his stern temper, Mr. Patterson was silently permitted to exercise the functions of the office, and receive the emoluments thereof, without troubling his imperial majesty any further. Had Napoleon been in earnest, this never could have happened.

The period of our young friend's residence at Paris was one of lively action—of extraordinary excitement.

In a letter to his brother, he writes:—"Napoleon is now in Paris with five kings; some others are coming.

Every thing is to be magnificent this winter. I intend, from curiosity, to see their several majesties; but I do not think they will excite in me more interest than *Haüy*, the first instructor of the blind. They are not, Napoleon himself excepted, greater men."

America was the dear country of his heart. Nor did he cease to represent, amid the great events that surrounded him, the happy condition of his own countrymen; and strive to show to the people of both England and France, their superior comforts as husbandmen and mechanics. He writes to his brother on this subject:—"I have frequently described, in England particularly, the character of an American farmer. I did not exaggerate, but I was not believed." "Why, sir, you would persuade us that they are lords!" "Pardon me, sir, they are kings." His letter concludes in these words: "Farewell! It makes the warm blood hasten through my veins with redoubled ardour, to write to my *friends*, and *about* my country."

Dr. Patterson left Paris in 1811 for London, where he spent a year, and heard the last course of lectures delivered by the distinguished Sir Humphry Davy; and in 1812 he returned home. His wishes, his studies, his view of permanent settlement in life, all prepared him to adopt the medical profession, and he now expressed his intention to engage in its practice. But an unexpected event changed his plan, and gave an entirely different direction to his subsequent occupation. In 1813 he was appointed professor of natural philosophy in the medical department of the University of Pennsylvania, and a year after (March, 1814,) was elected to the chair of mathematics, chemistry, and natural philosophy, in the faculty of arts. In this last he was successor to his father. A month later he was made vice-provost.

In 1813, during the short war with England, that

country sent a marauding army along our coast, which gave occasion to erect temporary fortifications around our city. Dr. Patterson volunteered his aid, and received the appointment of chief superintendent of the several works in hand. For this service he received, also, from the Committee of Safety a vote of thanks.

On the 20th of April, 1814, he was married to Miss Helen Hamilton Leiper; a lady remarkable for personal attractions in that day of her youth; and, during her wedded life of nearly forty years, equally distinguished for kindness, hospitality and benevolence. In the exercise of these, she performed for many years the duty of visiting member of the lady's Committee of this Institution.

During fourteen years, Dr. Patterson continued an uninterrupted course of college instruction in natural philosophy; while, without lessening his diligence in this his paramount duty, he became an active and useful adjunct to various other institutions of science and mechanic arts. Among them may be mentioned the Franklin Institute. These again were diversified by the presidency of a Life Insurance Company, and of the Musical Fund establishment. Of this latter, in the organization of which he was among the chief agents, we, as Philadelphians, may be proud of having originated a society for the double purpose of amusement and charity, which has been extensively copied in other cities.

But with no institution was he so fully identified, to none so warmly devoted, as to the American Philosophical Society. His membership began in 1809, when he was only twenty-two years of age, and continued to the day of his death: during which period, he held there the very laborious office of Secretary, then Vice President, and finally President.

In 1826, Governor Schultz appointed him upon a Commission to select a route for the State canal; an honour that I introduce here, for the purpose of showing the high esteem in which he was held by the rulers of his native State.

That State, however, he was called upon to leave two years after; the University of Virginia having, in 1828, elected him Professor of Natural Philosophy.

His numerous friends were determined to honour his departure by a public testimony of respect and affection; for this purpose a farewell dinner was given to him at Head's hotel, at which the celebrated Du Ponceau presided. On this occasion, the overflowing of friendship, however mingled with the conviviality of a joyous festival, was acknowledged by him in language of sadness and regret at the separation from his cherished associates.

Dr. Patterson removed with his family to Charlottesville, where he continued to reside for seven years, fulfilling faithfully and satisfactorily the professorial duties of his station; and receiving from the Board of Visitors of the University, when, at the end of that period his connexion with it was dissolved, the following expression of the sentiment of its members: "Dr. R. M. Patterson having resigned the professorship of Natural Philosophy, which for the last seven years he has filled with such distinguished ability and success, the Board of Visitors cannot permit his connexion with the Institution of which they are the guardians to close, without expressing the high sense they entertain of the valuable services he has rendered it, tendering him the cordial sentiments of esteem and respect, with which his character and conduct have inspired them—and assuring him of the lively interest they will continue to take in his prosperity and

happiness, wheresoever his duties and the course of events may call him."

The cause of his resignation was an invitation by President Jackson to accept the office of Director of the Mint. An affirmative answer was given, and he returned to his native city in July, 1835.

At this period he had been giving, for twenty-two years, his services as a teacher. His new station, in a great national trust, was in some measure a reward for those services. His father had received from Mr. Jefferson, a similar relief. The post which Dr. Patterson was now called upon to occupy, required an incumbent from the ranks of science; one conversant with the standards and relative values of metallic money; the legitimate metal of circulating mediums, and laws of coinage. These he may be supposed to have acquired during the Directorship of his father, which lasted nineteen years.

The business of the Mint had no doubt grown in the thirty years, since the senior Patterson took charge of it, in the same proportion as the commerce of the country; and indeed there was room for growth, if we may judge of its insignificance in 1805, when President Jefferson announced to the appointee of that date in a postscript to his letter, "that the duties of the Mint will easily admit your devoting the ordinary college hours to the University of Pennsylvania," (of which the elder Doctor was then a professor). "Indeed," continues Mr. Jefferson, "it is so possible that the Mint may some time or other be discontinued, that I could not advise a permanent living to be given up for it."

Short-sighted mortals may be found among the most sagacious! Even the discernment of the astute Jefferson, could not penetrate to the future wants of a vast

home currency; and much less did he, or any other statesman of his day, think of the subsequent period, when the son of the then director should succeed to his office, and send forth from the Institution under his care a coinage in gold alone, and in a single year, of more than fifty millions of dollars!!

The second Patterson administered these momentous concerns, with universal applause. He digested and consolidated a code of Mint laws, which was approved by Congress; superintended with suitable efficiency, the three southern branches; and retired, after sixteen years' faithful service, in July, 1851, on account of his declining health.

Although he held to the Jeffersonian or democratic school, he was always moderate; and too unambitious to accept a nomination to Congress, even before his removal to Virginia; and thus the bitterness of political conflict never disturbed him: hence his long continuance in office, notwithstanding the accession to the Presidency, during that period, of several individuals of the Whig party; none of whom ever sought to displace him.

Doctor Patterson never published much; and yet he held an able pen, as may be seen in some of his writings that have occasionally been printed; particularly in his history of the Philosophical Society, which he embodied in a discourse delivered at the Musical Fund Hall in May, 1843, when the 100th Anniversary of that Society was publicly celebrated.

Dr. Patterson enjoyed, for the greater part of his life, a vigorous constitution; sustained in strength and health by temperate living; by active habits in business; by a calm, contented mind; "calm and rich content, that sums up in that alone every bliss that man, in any station, may wish to share."

In concluding this very imperfect sketch of our departed colleague and friend, I may be permitted, perhaps, to associate myself with him personally in one passage of his life, which was to me as honourable as it was afflictive to himself. On the retirement of Mr. Richards from the Presidency of this Institution, we all looked to Dr. Patterson as his successor; particularly as he was the senior Vice President; but he declined. Soon after, in the adjoining parlour, where several members of the Board were assembled, he asked their permission, as I am told, to nominate a candidate for the vacant post; and on his uttering my name therefor, he gave, for the first time, unmistakable manifestations of the disease which lingered about him for two years, and finally caused his death. I have been often painfully affected, when reflecting upon this sad coincidence; and found my heart warmed with a sentiment of affection arising therefrom, which has given to the feeling of high regard and esteem I always entertained for him before, a sensation of augmented fervour, amounting to the liveliest love and respect for his memory.

Unite then with me, gentlemen, in the prayer, that his pure and christian spirit may be blessed at the great Fountain of Mercy! and "be wafted thence, through ways of light, to the bright Source of all."