

JOURNAL
OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

VOL. I., No. 5. PHILADELPHIA, PA. SEPT. A. D., 1902.

SIX LETTERS OF PRESIDENT BURR.

By WILLIAM L. LEDWITH, D. D.

Old Nassau Hall is very dear to the hearts of all the alumni of Princeton, and around its ancient walls cluster the bright and precious memories of nearly one hundred and fifty years. Anything, even if of the slightest importance, has an interest and value in connection with that old building, which at the time of its erection was the largest of its kind in the British Provinces of North America. The names of the men who were active and faithful as loyal Presbyterians and lovers of education in those days should never be forgotten, and among them as a leading spirit was the Rev. Aaron Burr, the second of that noble line of Presidents that have made Princeton famous as a seat of sound learning. These letters relating to college affairs in the time of its beginning have never been published, we believe, as a whole, though some of them have been quoted in Dr. John Hall's history of the First Church in Trenton. As they relate to the time when the College of New Jersey was removed from Newark to Princeton, and the building of Nassau Hall, it will be of interest to publish them, with slight annotations, so that they will be intelligible to all readers.

They were addressed to the Rev. David Cowell, an intimate

(317)

friend of Burr, pastor of the First Church in Trenton, and one of the trustees of the college under the second charter, by appointment of Gov. Belcher. He was a devoted friend of the institution, deeply interested in all the plans for its permanent establishment and anxious for its welfare. He was acting President after Burr's death until the coming of President Edwards, and afterwards was very active in securing the election and the acceptance of Samuel Davies, as is shown by the original correspondence between these two men, now in the possession of the Historical Society.

The college was established at Elizabethtown with Jonathan Dickinson as its president, under the first charter granted in 1746 by President Hamilton of the Provincial Council of New Jersey, and Aaron Burr was named as one of the first trustees. On the death of Dickinson in 1747, the college classes were moved to Newark and put under the care of the Rev. Aaron Burr, who was appointed president under the second charter granted by Gov. Belcher in 1748. The classes remained in Newark until Princeton was finally chosen as the seat of the college, and in the autumn of 1756 the new building referred to in this correspondence, and erected under the supervision of Burr, was so far completed as to be used, and the seventy students were transferred to Princeton and occupied the building.

These letters were all written from Newark, N. J., and will be given in the order of their dates with such brief notes as will explain certain allusions and present certain facts concerning the persons whose names are mentioned in them.

The first letter bears the date of July 16, 1753.

The school referred to in this letter was one in connection with the parish of Mr. Cowell in Trenton. It was built on the church grounds, erected by and belonging to the trustees of the church for the purpose of a school house.

The Mr. Reed spoken of was the son of Mr. Andrew Reed, the first treasurer of the borough of Trenton, and afterwards a resident of Philadelphia and a trustee in the Second Church of that city. Joseph Reed graduated at Princeton in 1757, and then studied law under Richard Stockton. He was the Military

Secretary of Washington, and was with him when he crossed the Delaware; was Adjutant General of the Continental Army, Member of Congress, President of the Executive Council of Pennsylvania, and elected Chief Justice of that State, which office he declined. He was strongly attached to the Presbyterian Church, and while residing in Trenton was trustee of the First Church from 1761 to 1769. After moving to Philadelphia he attended the Old Pine Street (Third) Presbyterian Church. In one of his publications, speaking of the Church he says: "When I am convinced of its errors or ashamed of its character I may perhaps change it; till then I shall not blush at any connection with a people, who, in the great controversy, are not second to any in vigorous exertions and general contributions, and to whom we are so eminently indebted for our deliverance from the thralldom of Great Britain."

The "brother-in-law" of whom Mr. Burr writes in this letter was Timothy Edwards, the eldest son of Jonathan Edwards whose daughter, Esther, Mr. Burr married June 29, 1752. Timothy was born July 25, 1738, graduated at the College of New Jersey in 1757. He became a merchant first in Elizabethtown and in 1771 at Stockbridge, Mass., where he ended his days. He was a member of the State Council, 1775-1780, Judge of Probate, declined nomination to Congress in 1779, and died Oct. 27, 1813.

I.

Rev^d & dear S^r: I find my self a good Deal in your Debt as to the Article of Letters and like other Bankrupts, tho I never expect fully to pay, yet I would make some attempts, y^t I may retain my Credit a little longer. In answer to your last without Date I will do my best in providing you a Scholmaster but have some Fears whether I can quite suite you or no. One of y^e best I must keep for my own use. One or two more y^t I could recommend are otherwise engaged. I have three in my mind and am a little at a Loss w^o to send.— I wish you could be at examination the last Wednesday in July, next week. Alow me to press you to it. Besides discharging your Duty as a Trustee; you might consult abt providing for y^r school in y^e best manner.

If you can't possibly come, I will do the best I can for yr school. The encouragement is £25 per An. and his Board, as I remember.

As to a Compⁿ for Mr. Reed's Son, (with whom I am well pleased), I have in y^e House a Brother in Law, who is sober, well-behaved & very studious. Will

be a year before Josie & I think will make him as profitable a Companion as I could chuse.—

I am with much respect

Yr afft Friend
& hu' Serv'

NEW* July 16, 1753.

A BURR

The second letter was dated November 7, 1753.

The Mr. Ogden referred to was probably Louis Ogden, whose name appears among the graduates for 1753.

“Mr. Woodruff's eldest son” was Benjamin, the son of Samuel Woodruff, an eminent merchant of Elizabethtown. He graduated at Princeton in 1753, and studied theology likely under the Rev. Elihu Spencer, who was a graduate of Yale, a friend of Jonathan Edwards and David Brainerd, and a trustee of the College of New Jersey from 1752–1784. He was ordained and installed over the Presbyterian Church at Westfield, N. J., and was the beloved and acceptable minister of that people for forty-four years, dying April 3, 1803. He has been described as a man “small in person, dignified and precise in manner, social in his habits, scrupulously exact and fastidious in his dress, with small clothes, silk hose, buckles, cocked hat and ruffles. Everywhere the same and always commanding respect.”

II.

Rev^d Sr: The Scholars were so dispersed before I certainly knew y^t Mr Ogden would not come to Trenton that I find it difficult to provide you with a Master to my Mind. There is one y^t I believe I could prevail with to make Trial for Quart^r or half year: whose Character later in brief. He has but a middling Genius, rather below than above y^e Common sort. He is a Person of great Industry, of great Integrity and by his good Beheivour he recommends himself to all his acquaintance. He is a middling good Scholar, writes a pretty good hand. If you think he will answer let me know and when you desire he should come.

I am y^t affection^t hu' serv^t

A BURR

NEWARK Nov^r. 7, 1753.

P. S. The Person I mean is Mr. Woodruff's eldest Son.

The third letter is dated August 5, 1754.

The reference to Mr. Cross brings up the whole question of

the first schism in the Presbyterian Church, in which the Rev. Robert Cross, the pastor of the First Church in Philadelphia, took an active part. He was born in Ireland in 1689, came to this country and was ordained and installed pastor of the church at Newcastle in 1719. In 1723 he was installed pastor over the congregation at Jamaica, L. I., and in 1731 became pastor of the First Church in Philadelphia. In the revival under the influence of Whitefield, Cross of Philadelphia, Thompson of Lewes, and Francis Alison of New Castle and others were opposed to what was considered "the Methodist movement." Then arose the conflict in the interests of a godly ministry, and Cross and those associated with him stood for the extreme type of Presbyterianism and all that was traditional in method, while the Tennents and those associated with them were very zealous in the use of new methods and complained of the dead orthodoxy of the church. The Tennent party were somewhat severe in their criticisms of those who did not agree with them or follow their methods, and in their zeal intruded themselves into the flocks of other ministers. The climax was reached in 1740, when Gilbert Tennent preached a sermon at Nottingham, Pa., "On the danger of a godless ministry," and it contributed not a little to division in the Church which took place in 1741. This sermon, according to the judgment of Archibald Alexander, was "one of the most severely abusive sermons ever penned."

The friends of the Log College attached themselves to Princeton, so that Cross and his party were opposed to it. The reference to him in Burr's letter has then this explanation. When Davies and Tennent went to Great Britain, they found the "Nottingham Sermon" in the hands of several of the brethren there, and Cross was suspected of having sent it. The sermon was probably circulated by the Rev. Wm. Smith, a churchman, who was then in London in the interest of the Philadelphia Academy. Cross did, however, write to Scotland to excite prejudice against the college and its agents, and Davies and Tennent answered this letter which "they stigmatized as a malignant, ungenerous, clandestine effort." In this connection a quotation from Davies' diary is of interest as throwing further

light on the reference in Burr's letter, and also as it reveals to us how Tennent's views had changed in thirteen years towards the "Old-Side" men. He became an active and zealous advocate for the union of the two synods, as may be seen in his "Irenicum, a Plea for the Peace of Jerusalem," which he preached and printed.

Mr. Davies thus writes in his journal :

"Tuesday Jan. 22. (1754). Observing at Mr. Chandler's that our college would be a happy expedient to unite the German Calvinists with the English Presbyterians, Mr Smith, afterwards Provost of the University of Philadelphia, replied 'that the union would not be desirable.' Tennent immediately answered, 'Union in a good thing is always desirable.' Mr Chandler said, 'I have seen a very extraordinary sermon against union,' and reached him his Nottingham Sermon. Chandler had also read the examination of Tennent's answer to the Protest. All that we could say had no effect. He told us that he would do nothing for us. The next day we waited on him, and Tennent made honest, humble concessions:—that the sermon was written in the heat of his spirit, when he apprehended a remarkable work of God was opposed by a set of ministers; that some of the sentiments were not agreeable to his present opinions; that he had painted sundry things in too strong colours. He plead that it was now thirteen years, and he had used all his influence to promote union between the synods. He produced his 'Irenicum,' and the minutes of the synod, to show the state of the debate. He urged that, if the sermon was faulty, it was the fault of one man, and should not be charged on the whole body."

III.

Rev^d & Dr^r Sr.: Yours of July 31 came in due Season. I like M^r Worth's Proposals very well on first View, and think with you y^t it is necessary to have Meeting of y^e Commtee, and as many others as can attend as soon as may be. We agree on Tuesday next week Aug^t 13th. I shall give Notice to all y^e Trustees this Way. If you dont come on Monday pray be early in y^e Morning.

Yesterday I rec^d Letters from Messrs Tennent & Davies dated Apl 30 which bring y^e agreeable News y^t they have in Hand & Promise £1400 Ster.

O^r good Friend Mr Cross has endeavoured to prepare y^e Way for them in Scotland. I think he is in a fair Way to lose the little Remains of Credit he has left. But I forbear my Censures till I am better informed what he has wrote.—please to notify Mr Smith & desire him not to fail meeting us.

I am w^t sincere Respect

Y^rs affectly

A BURR

NEWARK, Aug^t 5. 1764.

The fourth letter bears the date of August 30, 1754. Several times in the early history of the college permission was obtained to make use of a lottery for its benefit. Doubtless the reference here is to the drawing of a lottery within the bounds of the Colony of Connecticut, which was granted March, 1754, by the General Council of that Colony on the petition of the trustees of the College. We learn from a newspaper advertisement of that time there were in that lottery eight thousand eight hundred and eighty-eight tickets, and three thousand and eighty-eight prizes. The Provincial Council of New Jersey refused such a request in 1748, but granted it in 1761-2, and the trustees were again refused when an appeal was made to the legislature of New Jersey in 1813. The privilege of drawing a lottery was once granted in Pennsylvania, but it is a question whether the College received much money in this way.

John Brainerd, who promised to go to Princeton but afterwards failed to do so because he was sick, as we learn from the fifth letter, was the brother of David and a native of East Had-dam, Conn. He graduated at Yale in 1746, was licensed by the New York Presbytery April 10, 1747, and went as a missionary to the Indians at Cranbury. He was the successor of Burr in the church at Newark, and trustee of the College from 1754 until 1780 the time of his death. He with the Rev. Caleb Smith constituted the committee which in 1758 went to Stockbridge to secure the removal of Jonathan Edwards to the Presidency of the College.

"Honest Tommy" was the man-servant of the Rev. Wm. Tennent, of Freehold. There is another interesting reference to him at one time when Mr. Tennent was dining with Governor Livingston and Mr. Whitefield. In the course of a conversation Whitefield expressed the hope that soon his work would be done, and that he should depart and be with Christ. He appealed to Mr. Tennent as to whether he did not have the same comfort. Mr. Tennent said: "What do you think I should say if I was to send my man Tom into the field to plow, and at noon find him lounging under the tree, complaining of the heat and his difficult work, and begging to be discharged of his hard service? What should I say? Why, that he was an

idle, lazy fellow, and that it was his business to do the work that I had appointed him."

Wm. Peartree Smith, trustee from 1748, was grandson of Wm. Smith, Gov' General of the island of Jamaica. He was born in New York in 1723, a graduate of Yale in 1742, and was for forty-five years a trustee of the College of New Jersey.

Peter Van Brugh Livingston, a trustee from 1748, was a graduate of Yale, a merchant in New York, and the eldest brother of Governor Livingston of New Jersey.

IV.

NEWARK Augt 30: 54.

Revd dear Sr.: Some Trustees this Way, in particular Messrs P. Smith & Livingston desire I would get a List of all y^e No^s y^t are to go on Roster of College, to send to them before they publish y^e Prizes.

This will be y^e best Method to give general Satisfaction.—If you have any unsold y^t you can't dispose of, please to send y^e N^o by next Post, but I trust you have none.—Let me know if you think I had best bring a Man with me to Princeton y^t understands Quarrying—

—This minute drops in yours of 15 Inst. I like y^e Contents of it. Wish you Success in agreeing with Mr Worth. Mr. Brainerd has promised me to go to Princeton & do y^e Errand you desired me to write abt.

Where pray is y^e Letter I wrote last? I fear you have not received it.—I hear yt Mr Tenn^t's honest Tommy has already brought a N^o of Stone y^t are good for Nothing. Tis not impossible it may be so. They will be turned on his Hands.—We must begin a Barn, buy a Waggon &c immediatly.—

It pleases me to find the College lies so much on your Mind. I have an hundred Things to say y^t must be referd to o^r Meeting and can only add y^t I am ut semp!

Yours afftly

A BURR

The fifth letter is dated October 28, 1754.

Mr. Worth was the mason who did the stone and brick work on Nassau Hall and the president's house.

"At a meeting in Princeton Jan. 24, 1752, Thomas Leonard, Samuel Woodruff, Esq., and the Rev. Messrs Cowell, Wm. Tennent, Burr, Treat, Brainerd and Smith were appointed a committee to act in behalf of the trustees in building the college according to the plan agreed upon by the Board." The land was purchased from Mr. Nathaniel Fitz Randolph, who gave the

trustees a deed for ($4\frac{1}{2}$) four and a half acres, for (£150) one hundred and fifty pounds. Mr. Randolph said, "I never did receive one penny for it, it was only to confirm the title." Mr. Samuel Hazard, trustee, and Mr. Robert Smith, architect, were a committee to select the spot and mark out the ground. The ground was broken on July 29th, 1754, and the corner-stone laid at the northwest corner, and the whole structure built of stone from a quarry near Princeton.

V.

Dear Sr.: We appointed y^e Com^{tee} to meet at Princeton on y^e 3^d Tuesday of Nov^r but I fear Things will suffer in mean Time. We depended on Mr Brainerd's going to see how Things went on—but he is sick.

Wish your affairs would admit of your visiting y^e Building, and if you Think there is Need of it you may appoint o^r Meeting sooner: but if nothing will suffer tis best y^e other apt. should stand.

I am just returned from Boston & found your Lett^r here. Shall speak with the Treasurer abt supplying Mr. Reed with Money.—There should be y^e utmost Care y^t the Foundation be laid Strong—We ought to have had a Man to oversee the work *de Die in Diem*, tho I put great Confidence in Mr Worth. I know how much you have y^e Affair at Heart & so needd not add but yt always am

Yrs affectionately

A BURR

NEWARK Oct^r 28. 1754.

The sixth letter bears the date of November 23, 1754.

"Mr. Clarkson" is probably Matthew Clarkson, who was one of the passengers with Davies and Tennent in their voyage to England. Dr. John Hall, of Trenton, claims him as one of his ancestors. We have not been able to find out what the "refusal" is that is mentioned in this letter.

VI.

Rev^d dr Sr.: Yours of Nov^r 18 & 21 & Mr Reed's of D^o etc. Mr Clarkson's Refusal came safe. I hope some Part of y^e Money you want will come with this and y^e rest very soon. I should have answered last Post but expected to have seen Mr Tennent here & settled Clarkson's affair, but shall have no further Dependance there for a Supply. —We shall do our utmost to supply Mr Reed with all Expedition. We have Liberty, I hear from y^e Gov^r to draw for some more money on o^r Banker. If a Bill of £50 or £100 Ster. would suite Mr Reed as well as money we could send it;—or if not, can send y^e money

soon. It would be much best if some of o^r Money in Phil^d could be got; but I dare not put of Mr Reed with Orders any more. Pray excuse me to Mr Reed for not answering his Lettr with my respectfull Complim^{ts}. I have a grt sense of o^r Obligations to him. Jos. is well. They ask double y^e Price for Carting at P—tn to what they do this Way; so I believe it would not be best they should Cart much sand.

To write in hast without any Regard to Method Propriety or even good sense any further than is necessary to be understood. *Hanc veniam damus petim^{us}que vicissim.*

I am—

Yours sincerely & affly

A BURR.

Nov^r 23. 54.