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A PLACE OF GREAT HISTORIC INTEREST
PITTSBURGH'S FIRST BURYING-GROUND

BY

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CHAPTER I.

THE INDIANS AND THE FRENCH.

The burying-ground of the dead, among savages and civilized people alike, has always been regarded as being as holy as the temple or the church. It is this sentiment that inspired the savages to offer to the dead gifts of food and drink, and the civilized races with their more esthetic natures and less material tastes to deck the tombs with flowers. The early Christians animated by their new found knowledge of the resurrection regarded the cemetery as the sleeping place of the dead. It was the wish born of the innate hope for a reunion with the dead. The desire is illustrated by the story of the old Goth, who having been converted to Christianity and being about to receive Christian baptism, paused as he was stepping down into the font, and asked the priests, if in the heaven to which their rites would admit him, he would meet his pagan ancestors. On being answered in the negative he stepped out again and declined this method of salvation.

The earliest to die in any community, whatever their station in life, have an interest for those who follow after them, and if the dead are ancestors or kindred of the living the interest is doubly strong. Pittsburgh is comparatively

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LIFE AND TIMES OF WILLIAM FINDLEY

BY ROBERT M. EWING*

In a neglected spot in what is known as Unity burial ground in Westmoreland County, can be seen a modest tombstone bearing this inscription:

The Venerable
William Findley
Departed this life,
April 5, 1821,
In the 80th year,
Of his age.

There is nothing in this to indicate that William Findley was a commanding figure in Western Pennsylvania; nothing to indicate that he performed an active part in national affairs covering a long period of time.

We shall endeavor to show him to you as not only a prominent man locally, but one who served his country in its national councils for a longer period than ordinarily fell to the lot of men in his day, or falls to the lot of men in more recent times; and shall show you, perhaps, that his record as a man of standing and influence has not been handed down to posterity with the same zeal as that of men less worthy.

His life was a busy one. The records show that as a public man, he was a schoolmaster; a member of the Cumberland County Committee of Observation; elected but declined to serve as a member of the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1776; served on the County Board of Assessors in Cumberland County and aided in levying the first taxes under the Constitution of 1776.

He was captain of a company in the Eighth Battalion Cumberland County Associators and was in active service; was member of the Pennsylvania Convention that ratified the Federal Constitution of 1787. A member of the Council of Censors of Pennsylvania, he was also a member of the convention that framed the state constitution of 1790; was a member of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives; one of the two commissioners appointed by the four

* Read before the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on Tuesday, November 30, 1915.

western counties of Pennsylvania to interview President Washington at Carlisle concerning important matters during the Whisky Insurrection. For twenty years he represented Westmoreland County in the national congress; and in the midst of these activities found time to develop in a modest way his talents as an author. His best known work is a *History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties of Pennsylvania,* or more commonly known as the "Whisky Insurrection."

A life so full of activity might well be viewed in retrospect almost a century after it came to a close.

But little is known of his early life except that he was born in Ireland in 1741 or 1742, a descendant of one of the signers of the Solemn League and Covenant in Scotland, possessing a strictly religious education. He tells us that his father had a larger library of church history and divinity than many of his neighbors, and in his declining years he expressed himself as being under lasting obligations for the help given him by access to his father's library.

He came to America and to Pennsylvania in 1763, when he was about twenty-one years of age, and taught school for a number of years at or near Waynesboro in what is now Franklin County, but at all times had a strong desire to settle in what was then so commonly called the Western Country, and his apparent reason for not coming farther west at that time was the frequency of Indian raids that made the situation dangerous for the zealous emigrant.

It was while in Cumberland County that he played his part in the defense of his country as a soldier and by aiding in the establishment of what has proven to be such a stable system of government; and we must keep in mind that those were times that tried men's souls.

When some degree of order was brought out of the chaotic Revolutionary times, William Findley purchased land and settled on it near the village of Youngstown, in Westmoreland County, not far from the present site of Latrobe, and until his death in 1821 this was his home. The line of the Pennsylvania Railroad now passes through his farm and his residence was near the present location of the Monastery Coke Works.

The theory of Dr. Osler does not hold good in the case of this man, for at the age of about forty he entered a new field of activity and it seems was just in the vestibule of his life work.

For several years he tilled his land and plied the shut-

tle for he was a weaver by trade, and wove many a web of cloth for his neighbors, wove fabrics of flax and wool and linsey-woolsey, and as a result of this activity he was often called "Old Treadles" when he became enmeshed in political life. John N. Boucher, Esq., in his *History of Westmoreland County* (and to this History and that of G. Dallas Albert, Esq., we are indebted for much information,) says "In religion he was by birth a Covenanter, but settling in a strong Presbyterian section he connected himself with that church and remained with it through life. In church affairs as in everything else he was a leader. He was not so well educated as many of the prominent men of his day, but he had the confidence of all classes both high and low, and in this he surpassed all men in our county."

There was evidently something about him that appealed strongly to the masses and we soon find him the choice of the people as their representative in the Pennsylvania Council of Censors and in the state Legislature, and it was here in the state Legislature that he first came in contact with Hugh Henry Brackenridge, the representative from that part of the county which later became Allegheny County. Brackenridge was a soldier, orator, philosopher, lawyer, and man of culture who from the very first crossed swords with Findley on the issue of forming Allegheny County out of Westmoreland, Brackenridge, as may be supposed, advocating a new county and Findley leading the opposition. These men it appears were both of an ambitious nature and always political enemies, and Brackenridge never lost an opportunity to direct the shaft of satire at Findley. We are told that "the individual and political character of no public man of his day was more bitterly attacked than that of Findley," and yet he withstood it with credit as we shall see.

He sat with Gen. Arthur St. Clair on the Executive Council and while not hostile to each other in a personal sense, they were usually found opposing one another for St. Clair was a Federalist and Findley a Democrat.

This Council of Censors, as students of history know, was authorized by the Constitution of 1776. Two persons in each city and county of the state, were elected by ballot, "whose duty, amongst others, it was to inquire whether the constitution had been preserved inviolate in every part and whether the legislative and executive branches of the government had performed their duty as guardians of the people, or assumed to themselves, or exercised other or greater powers than they were entitled to by the constitution."

In this body he was a leading figure and on many important committees, not, however, entirely overlooking his personal interest for we find in a minute of a meeting held March 24, 1790 this action: "The Comptroller and Register General reports upon the account of William Findley, Esq., for the hire of his team taken into the public service in 1778, amounting to thirteen pounds, one shilling, was read and approved."

As a member of the Constitutional Convention of 1789 he introduced a measure which he tried to have incorporated in the organic law of the state, providing that in all parts of the state, the children of poor parents should be taught at the state's expense. The people were not ready for such a measure. Nearly forty years afterwards, however, Thaddeus Stevens by sheer force of his mighty intellect, put a similar provision on the statute books in opposition to the direct instructions of his constituents, and for this daring act has since been revered by every right thinking man, woman and child in Pennsylvania. "Yet the level headed old Westmoreland weaver, more than a generation before, and when Stevens was yet unborn, advocated the same measure, and proved himself to be far in advance of his age."

His character, ability and courage as a state legislator soon brought him into such prominence that he was called upon to represent Pennsylvania in Congress.* Elected in 1790, taking his seat in 1791, he served continuously with the exception of four years until 1817, an aggregate of twenty years, and it seems to be generally conceded that he would have continued to represent his district until his death in 1821 had he not positively declined re-election.

By reason of his long service in Congress he was known as the "Father of the House," a term even now applied to the senior member in point of service, and but recently held by a member from Pennsylvania.

In addition to a record for honesty and integrity he possessed wonderful powers as a campaigner. Visiting the farmer in his fields and plowing a few furrows, or lifting his full share at house and barn raisings he made the masses

*Members of the First and Second Congress from Pennsylvania (1789-1793) were elected on a general ticket for the whole state. William Findley was elected on such a ticket to the Second Congress (1791-1793). On March 16, 1791, a bill was passed by the General Assembly of the state dividing it into eight congressional districts, Westmoreland, Fayette, Washington and Allegheny counties comprising one district, which was represented in the Third Congress (1793-1795) by William Findley.—Ed.

feel that he was one of them, in other words, he was a man of the common people who largely predominated, and they remained loyal to him as long as he lived.

This popularity of Findley with the masses made him to some extent unpopular with other ambitious gentlemen. We are told that on one occasion Brackenridge was called to account for opposing Findley because he had been a weaver, to which he wittily replied "that he did not oppose him because he was a weaver but because he was nothing else than a weaver." Boucher tells us, however, that Findley was much more than a weaver and was perhaps stronger out of Congress than in it. The Scotch-Irish were always loyal to him to a man and he was revered by them and by the people generally.

G. Dallas Albert, in his *History of Westmoreland County*, says of him: "Findley was a consumate politician, and something more than a mere puller of threads and a disentangler of skeins.' He helped to shape political opinion here as much as any other man in Western Pennsylvania in his day."

It is also said of him: "He was a fluent talker in conversation but made few if any public addresses. While he could not address a public meeting, he could organize one, shape its actions to suit himself and get from it in the end all that he desired. He was in other words, a natural born leader of the people."

We have referred to the bitter attacks made upon him by his political opponents. This is accounted for in part at least by reason of his positive convictions on all public questions and policies, and the courage of his convictions which he exhibited to an unusual degree. The further fact that there does not seem to have been a public man in Western Pennsylvania in those days so loved by the common people, may have and apparently did create political jealousies. This position is reflected in a measure by a writer in the *Farmer's Register*, the one newspaper published in Greensburg at that time, who as late as Aug. 15, 1823, over two years after Findley's death, said: "In 1817 we were required to vote, but were denied the right of choice; we had freedom of thought, speech and action but were forbidden to favor opposition to William Findley." Incidentally this *Farmer's Register* was in those days a very usual method used by politicians to reach the people, and many columns were written by Findley on a variety of questions of a public and political nature and published, under the *nom de plume* of "Sidney" before the public knew who the writer was. So

far as we can learn no one, even his bitterest political enemies, questioned his honesty and integrity, and all were free to admit that whether in public or political life he would not knowingly deviate from the truth, but some did claim that his prejudices were strong and that they sometimes biased his judgment. That he lived in peace with his neighbors and acqaintances in private life is vouched for by Findley himself in these words: "I have always been happy in having few enemies in private life and consider it a consoling reflection in my advanced age that I have never had a quarrel with a neighbor. However, if it is my lot to have enemies, though I may regret the circumstance, yet my regret will be the less if I have given no just cause of offense. It would give me sensible pain to know that any conduct of mine had given cause of offense to a good man."

In the days of trouble and distress by reason of Indian raids, his advice was sought by Governor Mifflin and Secretary of State Dallas and the correspondence that passed between them as it appears in the *Pennsylvania Archives*, indicates that he was considered a wise and a safe counsellor.

But the testing time came when the Four Western Counties were in the throes of that which for a time seemed to threaten the safety of that government for which Findley and many other men struggled so valiantly to establish. It was called the Whisky Insurrection, and for a time not only Findley but John Smilie, of Fayette County, Hugh Henry Brackenridge of Allegheny County, Albert Gallatin and others, were under a cloud of suspicion of having aided and abetted a rebellion, but history today is less critical and these men are vindicated, and it is now generally conceded that they were loyal but misunderstood.

The Declaration of Rights of 1776, among other things, says: "That the people have a right to assemble together to consult for their common good, to instruct their representatives and to apply to the Legislators for the redress of grievances, by address, petition or remonstrance."

When therefore, the excise law was imposed on this Western country it was a great hardship and Findley and others in aiding their constituents to avail themselves of the Declaration of Rights which I have just quoted, especially after a few people lost their heads and committed depredations, if not openly accused of aiding and abetting a violation of law, were at least reflected upon very severely.

This opposition came in a great measure from Alexander Hamilton, the Secretary of the Treasury, for it was his pet excise measure that was assailed, and when meetings

were held remonstrating against the law, and in which plans were devised to procure its repeal, Hamilton called it insubordination or rebellion and Findley took issue with him and asserted in vigorous terms the rights of the people under the constitution, holding that a citizen rather than be assailed for remonstrating against an existing law should be protected in it; and his writings on this subject show a remarkable breadth of vision. Says he: "It will not do to say that to hold meetings to remonstrate against the passing of a law is admissible, but that to remonstrate against an existing law is improper. Such doctrine in this extensive country is absurd, for it must always happen, that a great proportion of the people, who are to be governed by the laws, know nothing about them until they are enacted or are in operation, consequently cannot petition against their passage.

"It is equally absurd to assert, that because our laws are enacted by our representatives, therefore we ought to submit to them without remonstrance, till our representatives who know our circumstances, and partake of our interests, think proper to repeal them. This doctrine is supported by a presumption, that a government of representatives can never mistake the true interests of their constituents, nor be corrupted or fall into partial combinations, whereas the contrary is presumable from the nature of man and verified by immemorial experience."

We cannot here discuss the insurrection but it appears that Governor Mifflin as early as 1792 wrote to Findley about the condition of the affairs—the temper of the people—in these counties and in replying Findley says: "That the injustice of being obliged to pay as much excise out of two shillings with difficulty procured, as other citizens better situated, have to pay out of perhaps three times that sum, much easier obtained, comes home to the understanding of those who cannot comprehend theories."

One writer says that his connection with the Whisky Insurrection is against him yet the very criticism is soon turned into eulogy of his character when he says: "Probably the example of so eminent and just a man led many weaker men astray, but at all events he was no worse than Gallatin and Brackenridge. Of all these he came first to a true realization of the situation and after that did all he could to rectify the errors he had committed." It truly takes a big man to freely admit his mistakes and if this writer's view of Findley's actions in connection with this Insurrection are true, he exhibited a meritorious trait of character and gave

proof of great statesmanship.

This same writer says: "William Findley was after Arthur St. Clair the most prominent man of his day in Westmoreland County. Those who are familiar with the Whisky Insurrection cannot fail to remember the faith our people had in him at that time, yet he lived more than a quarter of a century after that, and his hold upon the people increased constantly from year to year."

The activities and accomplishments of this man command our admiration. His writings alone commend themselves to the people, and did so very largely in the early days. We have referred to his writings in the *Farmer's Register* under the *nom de plume* of "Sidney." In 1794 he published quite an extensive "Review of the Funding System" and in 1796 a *History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties* or, as we call it, the "Whisky Insurrection." This publication of over three hundred pages written by one whom we have been told was by far the most noted man connected with it, and within two years after most of the incidents happened, could not but be interesting. In reading it and re-reading it we have been impressed with the splendid character and ability of the writer.

In the preface to the book he says: "I had many reasons for wishing this work to have been performed by some other hand. To write impartially of transactions wherein so many living characters are concerned is not desirable, and can scarcely fail of being censured by some. However, being conscious that I am not influenced by hopes or fears, and being at a time, and in a situation of life, that leaves me little to dread or hope, from the frowns or favors of party, or of men in power, I have studied impartially the characters I have delineated, and the facts which I have stated." He was fifty-six years of age when he thus writes about "little to dread or hope from frowns or favors of party, or of men in power," yet we find him still in Congress twenty-one years afterwards.

He proceeds to give his account of this insurrection covering 238 pages of the book and then lays aside all reserve and for about sixty pages pays his respects to Alexander Hamilton, who apparently was antagonistic to Gallatin, Findley and others in the Western counties who were politically opposed to him. One quotation will indicate his sentiments toward Hamilton.

"The blunders even of wise men are sometimes astonishing. However, I believe, we are not warranted in giving the appellation of wisdom to such persons as are destitute of

honor and virtue, let their station be ever so brilliant, or their influence ever so powerful. The reader will be able to judge for himself, how far the Secretary's conduct was directed by wisdom, or governed by the principles of honour and virtue."

Findley was also the author of *Observations on "The Two Sons of Oil"* containing a vindication of the American constitutions and defining the blessings of religious liberty and toleration. *The Two Sons of Oil* had been published by its author and contained assaults upon the United States Constitution and although in some manner publication was suppressed, Findley in the belief that the poisonous utterance contained in it required an answer from some one, undertook the task and in this volume written by him when at the age of three score and ten, is evidence of the wonderful intellect, ability and general knowledge that he had acquired in the busy years that had gone before. It was from a perusal of this volume which like the *History of the Insurrection,* is difficult to obtain, that we find some interesting sidelights on the man coming from his own lips. What is more impressive than this? "Having been also engaged in the early committees, etc., which promoted the independence of the United States, and in making and ratifying the constitutions of this state and of the United States, and for so long a period in one or the other of them, it appeared to me to be my duty to engage in their vindication when they were so grossly traduced. These reasons had such weight on my mind as to induce me to make observations on this extraordinary work, notwithstanding that my other engagements, and time of life, might have afforded a strong apology for declining it." In this book he took advanced ground, much ahead of his time when we consider that he and most of his people were born and bred under the English government.

The tendency to go into a review of his writings is strong but must be curtailed and we must confine ourselves to a brief description of the personality and home life of our subject before we conclude. He is described as being a large man, of light complexion, clean shaven and very tasty in his dress. He always wore, when away from home, knee breeches, a shad bellied coat, and long waistcoat. These with silk stockings and a cue completed his makeup, but while at home they were changed to homespun garments and a white felt hat.

Going to Congress in his day was an event, and Findley always went on horseback, for which he kept a special horse.

Great preparations were made on the occasion of these trips for he would leave in time for the first session in December, and not return until its close sometime in the following July or August, and from letters that we have had access to we learn that he made many purchases in Philadelphia for his neighbors and packed them across the mountains upon his return trip.

While not an orator he did participate to a considerable extent in debates while in Congress and delivered several memorable addresses, but reference will only be made to one or two near the close of his public career. On the Loan Bill that was considered on February 12, 1814, during our war with Great Britian, he delivered an address that the Hon. Thomas H. Benton in his *Abridgment of Debates in Congress* thought of sufficient importance to quote in full, covering many pages. This now somewhat decripit old man arose and said among other things: "Mr. Chairman: I have voted for the declaration of war, and for the means necessary to carry it on. * * * I now claim the attention of the committee to a few of the reasons that determined me to vote for war, and the means of carrying it on with effect. * * * This is the third declaration of war that I have lived to see, and I have read of many more. I believe of most that have been declared in Europe on the system that has been adopted for two centuries past; and I have observed but very few of them declared on grounds so perfectly justifiable as that in which we are now engaged.

"I have, sir, heard one, if not more respectable and honorable members, to give weight to their arguments in opposition to this war, mention that they had learned their politics in the old school—the school at Washington. You, sir, I know, consider old men to be privileged to some extent to talk about themselves. * * * I will make some use of the privilege, because this will be connected with my argument. I am, sir, now an old man. I have the frost of seventy years on my head. I am a scholar of the old school—of the school of Washington.

"I was elected a member of the first committee appointed to promote independence, in a very respectable and then, very extensive old county of the same state that I have the honor of representing in this House. I was employed in confidential stations to support it when declared. I risked my very life oftener than once, in situations where several of my friends fell, to give it the support I thought it deserved.

"When the present government was put in operation and General Washington was appointed President, I was consult-

ed by him about the circumstances and defense of the Western country before I had the honor of a seat in Congress; and owing to particular circumstances, was more intimate with and more consulted by President Washington and the members of his administration than I have been by any succeeding one. Therefore, I claim a right to be a desciple of that school, and perhaps the oldest in this House." He then proceeds with this argument, and in answer to some apparent reflections by his opponents, as to why he, who had been under English rule, should take the stand he did, somewhere near the middle of his speech, uses this language.

"I really do not understand how happening to draw my first breath in a particular spot can bring me under a moral obligation of perpetual allegiance to that spot under penalty of being guilty of treason. * * * I have been taught to believe that the law of nature, which is the law of nature's God, made it the duty of every man to consult and pursue his own happiness, and that this conduced to the general happiness. The same supreme law also taught me that I could not be brought under a positive moral obligation but by a conscious act of my own will. Now, sir, I am not conscious of when or where I drew my first breath; my will was not consulted about it; it was not my voluntary act. I was wholly passive in that matter. Wherefore, no moral obligation can arise from it to bind my conscience to perpetual allegiance to that spot of earth.

"If this reasoning be correct, I conclude that I am not guilty of the high crime of treason; that I am not a traitor. About twenty years after the time I was told I had drawn my first breath consulting my own happiness I came to Pennsylvania where I have resided for more than half a century. I have found that doing so conduced to my own happiness and the happiness of those with whom I am connected. I have a fairly numerous family of children and grandchildren who as far as they have grown up, bear true allegiance to the country of my choice but do not consider themselves as slaves to the soil on which they were born because they happened to draw their first breath in it."

And on January 14, 1817, when the Compensation Law was up for consideration, Thomas H. Benton in reporting the proceeding says: "Mr. Findley of Pennsylvania next rose to speak on the subject. His rising occasioned a deviation from the usual order of the House, by the members crowding around him, which may be attributed to the general respect for his years, experience and intelligence."

We have tried to show this man in his true light. We

know it is imperfectly done, but honestly done for he would not have a word of commendation that he did not deserve.

We are impressed with the fact that Findley was first of all an American from the day he landed on our shores; and that he would have scorned the term hyphenated American if applied to him; Oh, I think after reading his writings and his speeches and particularly his speech in Congress upon the Loan Bill in 1814 all breathing of the patriotism that was in his heart, that he must have greatly rejoiced at the repulse of the British at Baltimore in September 1814, and after the bombardment of Fort McHenry when Francis Scott Key was inspired to compose that enduring example of patriotic verse, how he must have been impressed to hear these lines: "Blest with victory and peace, May the Heaven rescued land, Praise the power that hath made and preserved us a Nation."

And methinks he would have wept tears of joy had he been permitted to see even in prophetic vision the *"Old Liberty Bell"* as it passed but recently in triumphal procession through the old county of Westmoreland and through the very farm upon which he resided for almost a half century.