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ANNALS  
OF THE  
AMERICAN PULPIT;  
OR  
COMMEMORATIVE NOTICES  
OF  
DISTINGUISHED AMERICAN CLERGYMEN  
OF  
VARIOUS DENOMINATIONS,  
FROM THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE COUNTRY TO THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR  
EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE.  
WITH HISTORICAL INTRODUCTIONS.  
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BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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VOLUME III.

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## JOHN MOORHEAD.

1730—1773.

FROM THE REV. A. W. McCLURE, D. D.

JERSEY CITY, September 19, 1854.

My dear Sir: In compliance with your request, I send you the following sketch of my venerable ancestor, the Rev. John Moorhead, which I have compiled, partly from original documents, and partly from family traditions. I believe it embraces every thing concerning him that is at once sufficiently important and sufficiently authentic, to be used for the purpose which your request contemplates.

In the year 1729, a large number of families landed at Boston, having left the Counties of Londonderry, Donegal, Antrim, and Down, in Ireland. They were of the race generally called "Scotch Irish," which emigrated from Scotland to Ireland in the time of James the First. Their descendants came to New England for the double purpose of mending their worldly circumstances, and enjoying more fully the blessings of religious liberty. Most of them settled in Boston; but many of them founded the towns of Ellington, in Connecticut, Colerain in Massachusetts, Londonderry in New Hampshire, and other places in New England.

That portion of this people which found a home in Boston, made it their first care to provide for the worship of God, according to the doctrines and usages of the Scottish Kirk, so dear to them and their fathers. From one of their number, John Little, they purchased a lot of land, at the corner of what are now called Federal and Channing Streets. Either before they left Ireland, or very soon after their arrival in Boston, they invited Mr. Moorhead to become their minister; and he joined them in the year 1730.

JOHN MOORHEAD was born of pious and respectable parentage, in Newton, near Belfast, in the County of Down. His father, a farmer, afforded him the best opportunities in his power for a liberal education, which he completed at one of the Scotch Universities. He came to Boston about the twenty-third year of his age. There is no record of his ordination, and the presumption is that it took place previous to his leaving Ireland. This little "Church of Presbyterian strangers," as they styled themselves, worshipped at first in a *barn*, which stood on part of the ground they had purchased, and which was cheaply fitted up for their accommodation. They professed not to be ashamed to worship Him in so humble a sanctuary, who, for our salvation condescended to be born in a stable. As their numbers were enlarged by other emigrations from Scotland and Ireland, they practised "church extension" by adding two wings to their unpretending tabernacle. In 1744, they were able to erect, on the same spot, a very decent and commodious house of worship. This again gave place, early in this century, to a spacious and elegant Gothic edifice.

The first meeting held for the election of elders,—Mr. Moorhead being present,—was on the 14th of July, 1730. The elders then chosen were John Young, Robert Patton, Samuel McClure, Richard McClure, and Thomas McMullen, who were solemnly ordained to the office. This church session maintained watch and discipline over all baptised persons, as well as

over members in full communion. The discipline was exercised with great strictness and solemnity. In 1744, there were twelve elders, and the congregation was divided into twelve districts; each of which was assigned to the care of an elder, whose duty it was to visit and pray with the sick within his bounds, to advise and reprove, as occasion might require, and to provide pecuniary aid for the suffering poor.

Once or twice in each year, Mr. Moorhead, taking with him one of the elders in rotation, visited every family of his flock,—whether in town, or scattered in the country. In these visits, he inquired into the spiritual state of the heads of the family, catechised the children and servants, and closed by kneeling in prayer, and earnestly pleading for the members of the household, according to the spiritual state of each. In addition to this, and the frequent visitation of the sick, he twice in the year convened all the families in each district, respectively, at the place of worship, where he questioned the older persons on the doctrines of the Confession of Faith, and again catechised the children and youth.

At the age of twenty-six, Mr. Moorhead was married to Sarah Parsons, an English lady of a bright and poetic turn, and highly educated. None of their children left issue except one daughter, who was married to Alexander Wilson of Boston. Mr. Moorhead's ministry lasted about forty-four years, till his death, December, 1773, at the age of seventy. He was a warm friend of liberty, but died at the opening of the Revolutionary war. He received from John Hancock substantial tokens of satisfaction at his course in reference to the rights of America. According to his portraits, one of which is finely engraved, he was tall in stature, of a commanding presence, with an agreeable and benignant aspect. His Funeral Sermon was preached by the Rev. David McGregore of Londonderry, N. H., from the text,—“Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile.” He published nothing except, in connection with Jonathan Parsons and David McGregore, “A fair Narrative of the proceedings of the Presbytery of Boston, against the Rev. Robert Abercrombie, 1756.” His papers were destroyed or lost, when Boston was evacuated by General Gage.

The Rev. Dr. David McClure, who was, for many years, pastor of the church in East Windsor, Conn., and who, when a youth, was well acquainted with Mr. Moorhead, gives the following estimate of his character:—

“He was unwearied in his endeavours to promote the edification and salvation of his people. His thoughts and plans of benevolence extended also to their temporal concerns. He encouraged the industrious by such small pecuniary aids as were within his ability to bestow; or solicited assistance for them. Virtuous strangers from North Britain and Ireland were sure to find a friend in him. As a good Bishop, he was given to hospitality. As a sample of this benevolence, allow me to mention that it was his custom, when he heard of ministers from the country who were strangers in Boston, at public houses, to go or send for them to come to his hospitable roof.

“He was faithful and impartial in his duty, as a reprover of error and vice in all their forms. While he rebuked with sharpness, he showed an affectionate concern for the offender, and by meekness and condescension laboured to reclaim him. With equal cheerfulness he visited the hut or the garret of the poor, and the parlour of the rich, to do them good. Some were offended at the severity of his reproofs, and withdrew from his society

to others where they could find more indulgence. He was universally respected by the good, and feared by those of the opposite character. He appeared less ambitious of fame than of faithfulness as a minister of Christ.

“Mr. Moorhead was a plain, evangelical and practical preacher. He paid very little attention to the ornaments of style in his pulpit performances. His discourses appeared to be extemporaneous. He expounded the Scriptures in course in the morning, and delivered a sermon in the afternoon. He preached the Law and the Gospel in their spirituality and purity. He insisted principally on the peculiar doctrines of the Gospel—the deep depravity of human nature; the Divinity of Jesus Christ, and the efficacy of the atonement; the special agency of the Divine Spirit in regeneration; the necessity of repentance, of faith in Christ, and of good works.

“He possessed strength of mind, sprightliness of imagination, and readiness of expression; but appeared indifferent to the choice of the most appropriate phraseology. His manner was solemn, affectionate and pathetic. His language and manner were the index of his mind. He spoke from the heart. His tears flowed in the earnest, alarming, or persuasive application of his sermons. He was an ‘Israelite, in whom was no guile.’ Such was the success of his faithful labours, and the accession of foreign Protestants, that, in six years after the founding of the church, the communicants were about two hundred and fifty. Four times in the year he celebrated the Lord’s Supper. They were seasons of great solemnity. On these occasions, Mr. Moorhead commonly had the assistance of one or two of his brethren, particularly the Rev. Mr. McGregore, and afterwards the Rev. Mr. Clarke, of Londonderry, and once of the celebrated Mr. Whitefield, when every heart was moved by his solemn and enrapturing performances. On these occasions, each minister served a table in rotation.

“At those seasons of fervent zeal in religion, the house could not contain the multitudes eager to hear the words of eternal life. The doors and windows were crowded with spectators.

“The Society in general were respectable for good morals, industry, sobriety, attention to the duties of family religion, and the government and education of their children.”

I think it proper to state that, if a uniform tradition can be relied on, my ancestor had a full share of that good humour and keen wit, which are generally understood to form a leading trait in the Irish character. There are many anecdotes illustrative of this characteristic, still current among his descendants, some of which I might venture to relate, if I did not fear that I should give too great a shock to the gravity of your readers. The propensity seems to have been as natural as his breath, but never to have been indulged at the expense of treating irreverently any thing of a serious nature.

With great respect and affection,

Yours most truly,

A. W. McCLURE.