

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.

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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## NATHANIEL IRWIN.

1773—1812.

FROM THE REV. JAMES P. WILSON, D. D.

NEWARK, N. J., June 15, 1857.

My dear Sir: I am glad that you are disposed to give to the Rev. Nathaniel Irwin, formerly the minister of Neshaminy, a place in your forth-coming work, and am more than willing to do any thing in my power to form a suitable memorial of him. You are aware that nearly all his contemporaries have passed away, and the few that remain have, for the most part, general impressions, rather than exact information, concerning him. My opportunities for becoming acquainted with his history and character were perhaps as good as they could be, considering that I was a little too late to have any personal knowledge of him. My first eight years of ministerial life were passed in connection with the Church of which he was the admired and beloved Pastor for thirty-eight years; and his memory there is fresh and fragrant to this day. My father, with whom he was in most intimate relations, used to talk much about him, and always expressed for him the highest respect and affection. He preached his Funeral Sermon, at the earnest request of the bereaved congregation.

NATHANIEL IRWIN was born at Fagg's Manor, Chester County, Pa., on the 17th of October, 1756. Of his parentage nothing can now be ascertained, though it is believed that he was of Scotch Irish descent. He was graduated at the College of New Jersey in 1770, being a contemporary and acquaintance there of James Madison, President of the United States, to whom he once paid a visit at the Capital, during his incumbency.

Soon after his graduation, he commenced the study of Theology, placing himself under the care of the Newcastle Presbytery, by which he was licensed to preach the Gospel between the meetings of Synod in 1772 and 1773. He took charge of the Neshaminy Church on the 1st of May, 1774, and was ordained and installed as its Pastor, by the First Presbytery of Philadelphia, on the 3d of November following. In this relation he continued till his death, which occurred on the 3d of March, 1812, in the fifty-sixth year of his age.

Mr. Irwin was not only in great favour with his own people, but was much esteemed and highly honoured by his brethren in the ministry. He was distinguished for his knowledge of human nature; for his great shrewdness in the management of difficult cases, and for a very uncommon facility at despatching public business. Scarcely any man exerted more influence than he in the General Assembly. His familiar acquaintance with all the forms of ecclesiastical procedure, his almost intuitive perception of the right and the wrong of every subject, in connection with the high respect that was felt for him, and the almost implicit confidence that was reposed in him, gave to his opinions and counsels a weight in that venerable Body, which rendered him at once one of its most prominent and useful members. One instance in particular is remembered in which, by his wise and timely interposition, he was instrumental of making clear an involved case, of cutting short a troublesome debate, and of securing the rights and vindicating the

character of an individual, who, from misapprehension of his views on the part of the Assembly, seemed in danger for a time of suffering severe injustice. As an evidence of the estimation in which he was held for his talent at public business, I may mention that he was Clerk of the Old Synod of New York and Philadelphia from 1781 to 1785; was Moderator of the General Assembly in 1801; and was Permanent Clerk of the same Body from 1802 to 1807.

As a preacher, Mr. Irwin attained to a high rank among the excellent preachers of his time. He was clear, fluent, forcible, and often deeply pathetic. He was particularly distinguished for his felicitous services at funerals—not only for his tender and impressive style of address, but for his ability to meet the peculiar circumstances of each case in the most appropriate and impressive manner. He was accustomed to ride to church on his “mare Dobbin,” and was in the habit of “letting her have her head,” as he called it—that is, letting the rein lie loose upon her neck; and she went slowly along while he prepared his sermon. He commonly cut across the fields; and the neighbours on Sunday morning used to let the bars down that he might not find any difficulty in his way to church.

In private life, his manners were generally somewhat distant—certainly they were not lacking in clerical dignity—and yet it was not difficult for him to unbend amongst intimate friends, and he was by no means averse occasionally to a harmless joke. He was, too, notwithstanding his ordinary reserve, fond of the company of young people, especially of young ladies, and he sometimes had parties at his house for their amusement—indeed I think he saw no harm in some amusements which most of his brethren were inclined to reprobate. He was passionately fond of music, and often indulged himself in playing on the violin.

Mr. Irwin was probably the most thoroughly scientific man of his day in the county in which he lived; and he took pleasure in making his knowledge practical and useful. He was the first person who took John Fitch, (of steamboat memory,) who was a Bucks County man, by the hand, and encouraged him in his scientific investigations. And the autobiography of Fitch is now in the Philadelphia Library, in manuscript, addressed to the Rev. Nathaniel Irwin.

In the public and political concerns of the day, Mr. Irwin did not scruple to bear his part. A distinguished citizen of Bucks County, who knew him well, writes thus concerning him:—“He was a clear-headed, strong-minded and persevering politician; and amongst lawyers, a first-rate bush-lawyer—the last a favourite character—the foot on which he limped. He sent for me at the commencement of his last illness to write his will, and counselled me, among his last words, to have nothing to do with law-suits.” At a time when the dispute ran high as to the location of the Court House of Bucks County, he entered with great zeal into the contest, and it was very much through his influence that it was ultimately fixed at Doylestown. There appeared at the time a printed caricature, representing Parson Irwin tugging, in his shirt sleeves and with his hat off, with all his might, to pull the building in the direction of Doylestown.

Mr. Irwin was twice married, and his second marriage was fruitful only of trouble. Indeed he was the subject of complicated domestic afflictions, which clouded his latter days, and finally broke his heart, and, as was generally supposed, occasioned his lamented death. He had not a large salary,

but by careful management he placed himself in easy circumstances, and left behind him quite an estate.

Dr. Alexander, on his first attendance at the General Assembly in 1791, saw Mr. Irwin for the first time, and, as the Memoir of his Life informs us, made the following note concerning him:—"Nathaniel Irwin of Neshaminy was an influential member of this Assembly. He was very tall, and had a voice the sound of which produced alarm, on a first hearing. He always took his stand at a place the most remote from the chair, and seemed to utter every thing with the greatest sound he could command. It was easy to discern that as his head was literally long, so it was intellectually."

Yours very sincerely,

JAMES P. WILSON.

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## SAMUEL STANHOPE SMITH, D. D., L. L. D.\*

1773—1819.

SAMUEL STANHOPE SMITH was born March 16, 1750, at Pequea, Lancaster County, Pa. His father was the Rev. Robert Smith, a distinguished clergyman of the Presbyterian Church, who emigrated from Ireland, and established, and for many years superintended, an Academy, which supplied many able and excellent ministers to the denomination with which he was connected. His mother was Elizabeth, daughter of the Rev. Samuel Blair, and sister to Samuel and John Blair, all of whom were among the most prominent clergymen of their day. She was a lady of high intellectual endowments, as well as excellent moral qualities, and fitted to grace the most exalted station in society. The son, at a very early period, gave indications of possessing a mind of no common order; and the parents quickly determined to give him the best advantages within their reach for cultivating it. When he was only six or seven years old, he commenced the study of the languages in his father's school; and, as his father had employed some most accomplished teachers from abroad as his assistants, perhaps scarcely any school in the country, at that day, furnished better advantages for becoming thoroughly grounded, especially in the classics. The only language allowed to be spoken in the school was Latin; and whoever uttered a word in the mother tongue was marked as a delinquent. Young Smith made the best of his opportunities, and was distinguished for his improvement in every branch to which he directed his attention.

Of his earliest religious exercises it is believed that no record has survived him. He seems, from childhood, to have evinced a serious turn of mind, and to have taken little interest in the sports in which his school-fellows indulged. He was accustomed to listen to sermons from the pulpit with great attention, and often, at the close of the service, could repeat a considerable portion of what he had heard. He also showed his predilection for the clerical profession, by sometimes gathering around him his brothers and sisters, and going through, as if he were a clergyman, with the various exercises of public worship. In the absence of his father, he some-

\* Life by Dr. Beasley.—MS. from his daughter, Mrs. Breckenridge.