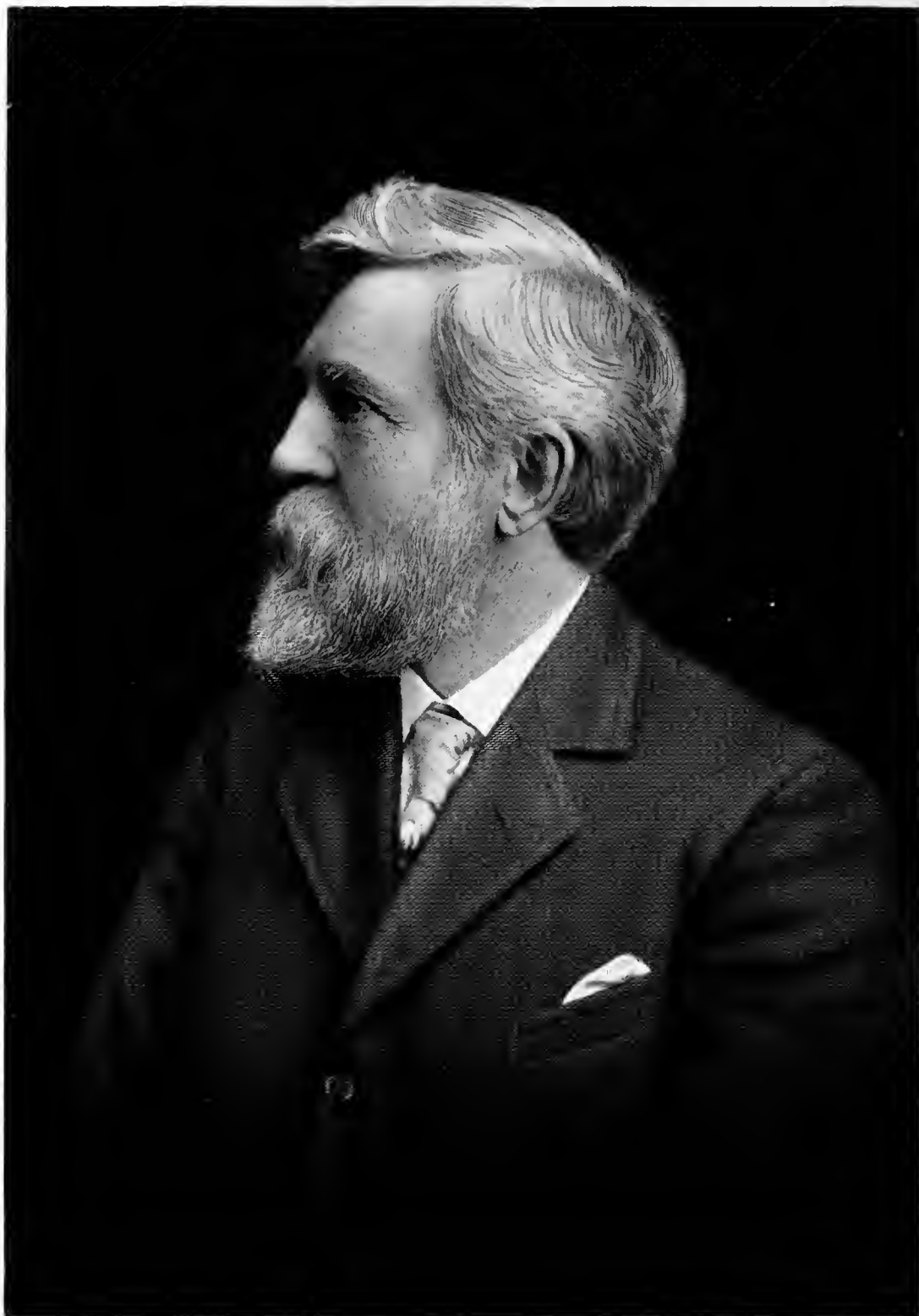


**JOHN E. BURTON**







*John E. Burton*  
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JOHN E. BURTON

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## JOHN E. BURTON.

One of the most conspicuous figures in the recent history of the state of Wisconsin is John E. Burton, too well known to the readers of this historical and biographical compendium to need any formal introduction here, a man actively identified with the industrial and business interests of Milwaukee and vicinity, widely known as one of the leading financiers of this section of the state. Equally noted as a citizen whose useful career has conferred credit upon the state and whose marked abilities and sterling qualities have won for him much more than local repute, if not, indeed, a national fame, he holds today distinctive precedence as one of the most progressive men that ever inaugurated and carried to successful termination large and important undertakings in this locality. For over thirty-three years he has been a conspicuous figure in the mining world, his extensive operations in Alaska bringing him up to the front rank of his compeers. Strong mental powers, invincible courage and a determined purpose that hesitates at no opposition have so entered into his composition as to render him a dominant factor in the business world and a leader of men in important enterprises. He is essentially a man of affairs, of sound judgment, keen discernment, rare acumen, far-seeing in what he undertakes, and every enterprise to which he has addressed himself has resulted in liberal financial returns. Mr. Burton's extensive business interests are but the legitimate fruitage of consecutive effort, directed and controlled by good judgment and correct moral principles. He has forged his way to the front over obstacles that would have discouraged and even thwarted men of less heroic mettle, gradually extending the limits of his intellectual horizon until he is not only one of our twentieth-century captains of industry, but also one of the best developed mentally, having always been a close observer and a profound student and kept fully abreast of the times. Taken as a whole, his career presents a series of continued successes rarely equaled in the state. In the most liberal acceptation of the term, he is the architect of his own fortunes and eminently worthy of the proud American title of self-made man, meriting the high esteem in which he is universally

held. This high position in the minds and hearts of the people has been won to a considerable degree through his marked ability as a man of letters and for his public benefactions. All will agree that the men most influential in promoting the advancement of society and in giving character to the times in which they live are two classes, the men who study and the men of action. Whether we are more indebted for the improvement of the age to the one class or the other is a question of honest difference of opinion; neither class can be spared and both should be encouraged to occupy their several spheres of labor and influence, zealously and without mutual distrust. The career of Mr. Burton would indicate that he combines in his makeup both the elements of the scholar and the public-spirited man of affairs.

John E. Burton was born October 19, 1847, in New Hartford, Oneida county, New York. His ancestors were natives of Conningsby, Lincolnshire, England. His father, John Burton, emigrated to the United States in 1829. He married Ruth Jeanette Allen, the daughter of a soldier of the war of 1812. She was a devout woman, the possessor of many commendable attributes of head and heart. The father was a successful business man of exemplary character and was noted for his fortitude, courage and hospitality.

John E. Burton was reared in a most wholesome home atmosphere, and his early training beneath his parental roof-tree has no doubt contributed in no small measure to his success in later life. He was educated at the Cazenovia Seminary and at Whitestown, New York, having been graduated from the Whitestown Seminary with high honors in June, 1868. He won first prize for oratory in the Cazenovia Seminary. He began life as a school teacher at Cazenovia and during two years following was principal of the public schools in Richmond, Illinois. In 1870 he became principal of the public schools in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. In 1872 he established the *Geneva Herald* and a year later resigned from his school work to fill the position of editor of this paper. He followed journalism for four years, when he sold his paper and devoted his time to the manufacturing interests of Lake Geneva. He has been identified with nearly every public enterprise in Lake Geneva, and has acquired the enviable reputation of having done more for the promotion of this beautiful city than any other individual.

Mr. Burton's next most important work was as general agent and manager of the Equitable Life Assurance Society of New York for the state of Wisconsin. He was very successful in this field of endeavor, writing eight hundred thousand dollars of business for the company the first year. He was

then promoted by the company to general manager for Wisconsin, Minnesota and northern Michigan and increased the business to three million dollars in one year. In four years his total business exceeded six million and five hundred thousand dollars. In 1885 he resigned this position and undertook the work of promoting the iron mining interests of the Goebic and Penoque range, making an exploration of this country in February of that year, traveling by rail to the end of the railroad line and the balance of the way on foot and snowshoes. His investigation satisfied him of the value of some of the properties, which he secured, and their development within three years made him a millionaire and the acknowledged chief promoter of the Goebic range. He gave Hurley, Wisconsin, its place on the map, being its pioneer promoter, and erected the Iron Bank building, thirteen stores, thirty-five dwellings, the big foundry and the Burton hotel, two hundred feet long and four stories high, the latter building alone costing fifty-five thousand dollars, and it still stands as the best in the iron country. He also erected the Burton Manufacturing block in Chicago at an expense of one hundred and twenty thousand dollars. He purchased large amounts of property in Lake Geneva, and in almost every instance improved the poorer grades of buildings and built some fifteen or twenty new ones, including the Florence Manufacturing building, the Odell typewriter factory, many dwellings, also costly barns on the various farm properties. Seventy-five thousand dollars was put in the Aguan canal project to connect the Aguan river of Honduras with the Caribbean sea, opening up the resources of the country to the commerce of the world; a creditable scheme and one which ought yet to be carried out by some American with money and brains. It was his aim to connect the canal at Truxillo, above the rapids of the river. The object of this enterprise was to make a useless river navigable for two hundred miles and by this work control the mahogany markets of the world. By virtue of this effort Mr. Burton has the distinction of having received mention in Herringshaw's "Encyclopedia of American Biography." This work contains no paid biographical sketches of any kind, and only a few lines are devoted to men who have won distinction or have done something for the progress of our country. A large interest was taken in the Oakwood Sanitarium at Lake Geneva, a big grist mill was purchased, the Ladies' Seminary bought, the steamer line on Geneva lake was also acquired. He organized the American Fiber Company, which aims to produce merchantable fiber from any form of vegetation which contains fiber, owning the controlling interest in the same. He also purchased a book store

in Chicago, undertook the stocking of seven large farms with high grade live stock, the controlling interest in the First National Bank of Lake Geneva was purchased, as well as the principal interest in the bank at Hurley. A round million dollars' worth of various kinds of real estate was purchased for cash and iron stocks and together with the management of seven iron mines, employing nearly a thousand men. For upwards of two years his average expenses were forty thousand dollars per month, yet during that time no one went without their pay.

Mr. Burton devoted five years to mining in Calaveras county, California, developing and operating a crystal mine, taking out the largest rock crystals recorded in geology, the product of twelve tons being sold to Tiffany & Company, of New York. He also opened the Green Mountain hydraulic mine and extracted from this property gold to the value of over forty thousand dollars. Failing health forced him to return home in 1900.

Mr. Burton's attention having been directed to the northern Alaskan gold fields, he obtained all the information he could get about the Nome country, and decided that it was a promising field for exploitation, after spending the season of 1904 at Nome, Cape Prince of Wales, and visiting the graphite mine of Siberia. He accordingly acquired extensive interests of both gold placer and tin properties in this region, and thus became one of the potent factors in developing the resources of Seward peninsula. The gold mines are situated near Nome in the most promising part of the Nome district, and the tin properties are near Cape Prince of Wales on Cape Mountain. At this place the prospects for obtaining tin in commercial quantities possessed almost infinite possibilities, as Mr. Burton was quick to see, and his company at once shipped a ten-stamp mill and concentrators to its mines on Cape Mountain, and a large quantity of ore was soon obtained. This energetic initial move marked the beginning of a new world supply of commercial tin. He later succeeded, in December, 1903, in combining the tin interests of the York district in northwestern Alaska, the consolidation being to the betterment of all concerned.

Assuming nothing from rumors from the Nome country regarding the fabulous discoveries of tin, he went to Washington City and consulted the United States government geologist. He was shown accumulations in the geological department of tin ores gathered in Alaska, which showed that rich deposits were evidently there, of rich commercial tin, sixty per cent. pure tin or twelve hundred pounds to each ton of ore concentrated. He had no

trouble in interesting capital in the tin fields of York which was then believed to contain deposits of tin aggregating possibly four hundred million dollars.

Mr. Burton has shown his strength in the successful culmination of the many financial enterprises in which he has been engaged. He has also shown his strength of character in other ways. At the age of twelve years he began a collection of coins, and when he was thirty-four years old he had the most valuable collection of American coins ever owned in the Northwest. This splendid numismatic collection was sold under the hammer in New York city to supply Mr. Burton with funds to assist him in paying a security debt of twenty-eight thousand dollars. The collection was sacrificed for ten thousand and eight hundred dollars—and this was the penalty he paid for endorsing a friend's notes. A writer, in referring to this act of Mr. Burton, says:

“This was a sacrifice indeed, view it as you may. It was an act of dauntless courage, backed by a heroic sense of integrity, for it required much more than ordinary courage to give up one's cherished possessions and to severely flagellate one's self without flinching. Mr. Burton was now left to face the world empty-handed. To begin is a task, but not a severe one, for it is the common lot of all; but to begin over again is what tests the mettle of which we are made. The world smiles benignly upon the beginner, but not so friendly on him who seeks to retrieve fortune lost.”

Mr. Burton has always been a student and has familiarized himself with the world's best literature, and at the same time has kept well abreast of the times on current events and latest discoveries in the world of science and invention. He owns a private library of fourteen thousand volumes which is said to be the finest in the state of Wisconsin. This library represents the careful and constant accumulations of over thirty years. It contains two thousand four hundred and sixty volumes on Abraham Lincoln and Lincolniana. Everything that has ever been published about the martyred President may be found in the splendid collection that has been gathered by Mr. Burton, who has always been an ardent admirer of the Great Emancipator. Mr. Burton has written an oration on Abraham Lincoln which is a classic. Regarding him as the best man of history, studying his character from every actual and imaginary point of view, and being absorbed with his theme, it is not surprising that his eulogy possesses the strong individuality which entitles it to live with the best thought of the age. This splendid effort has been widely praised by critics. In order to give the reader some idea of Mr. Burton's masterly style, we quote from this oration a few random paragraphs:

"The character of Abraham Lincoln stands so high above all possible wrong doing that honesty was never mentioned or thought of as a virtue in him.

"He was not only the best product of pure American civilization which his country produced, but he was, all in all, the best public man and sincerest statesman who has ever figured in the destiny of this nation or in the history of the world.

"To all right-minded Americans he is the ripe and rounded product of what every man would like to be, and he will therefore remain, through all time, the symbol of perfected character. The whole world loves Lincoln because he did what the world knows was right, and he avoided doing what the world knows to be wrong, and it is therefore doubtful if any human being will ever again hold a similar position of greatness in a similar and transcendent epoch, or ever fulfill the world's expectations so completely, as did Lincoln.

"His fame grows so steadily, so perfectly, so naturally, and so mightily, and the very fiber of his character comes out so brilliantly as the searchlight of time reveals him from every possible point of view that the fear among thoughtful men is, that, with the lapse of centuries, his fame may pass the boundary line allotted to flesh and blood and become obscured by entering the realm of the mythical, where he may be lost to the world of struggling men among the gods and the myths which always inhabit the past.

"The great dream of the centuries seems to have blossomed in his eventful life, and the more we learn of it the more we come to realize and to know that in him was the perfect man in the sane and soundest sense of the word, physically, mentally and morally. Poverty made him good; suffering made him great; circumstance made him President; fidelity made him beloved; courage made him heroic, and martyrdom made him immortal.

"You may search the minutest records of recorded time and you cannot find another character who made so few mistakes during the chaos of such trying ordeals, or who possessed on all great occasions that sublimity of faith and courage of action, as mark and make the character of Abraham Lincoln; neither can you find another man who could control, and even guide to glory, all his impetuous subordinates in the heat of conflict and yet without offense compel them to unconscious obedience in the fulfillment of a destiny which he alone could read in the dusk of deathless performance.

"The record of this world does not show another character who was schooled in almost continuous failure in youth and early manhood, in order that he might the better serve as the successful and great commander in the most momentous epoch of human progress. Nowhere in the library of nations can you find another character so varied in all experiences and yet where every experience was clearly given for the perfect formation of a character unique and matchless.

"I have seen Abraham Lincoln and heard his voice. This is to me a happy recollection. \* \* \* With other men it was literary achievement; the triumphs of war; the aggrandizement of conquest; the glory of new discovery or the flight of imagination in the kingdom of art or song; but with Lincoln it was character, *character*, CHARACTER. This is why his name grows with each succeeding year. \* \* \* As a patriot he was ambitious, but an ambition that never crowded or even approached the limit of his patriotism, therefore absolutely safe in all emergencies; as a martyr, beautiful beyond that of saint or scientist, and as a memory he was and is the dearest, the gentlest and the most God-like."

The following extract from *The LaRue County Herald*, published at Hodgenville, Kentucky, under date of August 2, 1906, is deemed worthy of reproduction here, in connection with Mr. Burton's work relating to the martyred President:

"Mr. John E. Burton, a successful business man and a man of letters, of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, though a comparative stranger to the people of this section, is greatly admired by the people of LaRue county, and especially so by those who can appreciate the patriotic spirit which once brought Mr. Burton to Kentucky and which gave him a limited acquaintance with our people.

"When the Lincoln birthplace was to be sold Mr. Burton came to Kentucky as a prospective purchaser. He stood at the court-house door in Hodgenville the day the farm was sold and bid on it until he saw that it would go to an unlimited price and he permitted Mr. Collier's agent to buy it. He was not buying it for speculation, but simply wanted the honor of possessing the place and he wanted to see that it would fall into the hands of those who would not attempt to handle it as a financial speculation. While in the town he was surprised to observe that the town made little or no attempt to impress upon the visitor the fact that it was the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln, and it was his opinion that our people should give greater emphasis to the pride we take in that matter. Shortly after he went home he wrote to a

friend here and repeated his surprise that the town had nothing to speak out to strangers and to tell them that Lincoln was born within two miles of the place, and in order to inspire our people with the true spirit in that respect he stated in his letter that if the people would secure sufficient funds to build a monument in the public square to the memory of Lincoln, he would contribute one hundred dollars to the fund. In this way Mr. Burton became the originator of the idea of erecting the monument which will soon be built in the public square and which the Kentucky Legislature aided by giving two thousand and five hundred dollars. For the reason that our people are manifesting great pride in the monument to be erected and for the further reason that Mr. Burton first conceived the idea, we have reason to say that he is held in the highest esteem by our people and the *Herald* is glad to be able to print his picture herewith, as a formal introduction to those who failed to see him personally when he was here.

“As an enthusiastic admirer of the lamented Lincoln, Mr. Burton does not yield to any man. He holds Lincoln as his ideal man of all men. He has met Lincoln and has heard his voice. He has studied his life and is thoroughly familiar with his hero. He knows of everything that has been accredited to the life of Lincoln. When he hears of any incident connected with the life of the great man he ‘runs the report down’ and investigates it. And in this connection it can be said that Mr. Burton is the possessor of the rarest, if not the largest, private collection of works of biography upon Lincoln in existence, the volumes numbering over two thousand. He has portraits, paintings, photographs, autographs, mementoes and souvenirs of Lincoln by the hundreds. This is all the result of many years of study and labor on his part and fully illustrates the great admiration he possesses for the war President.”

In speaking of Mr. Burton's fine collection of Lincoln relics, *The Chicago Evening Post*, under date of December 8, 1908, says:

“The approaching centenary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, which is arousing public interest to all phases of the life of the great American, has brought to light one of his most devoted admirers and enthusiasts, John E. Burton, of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

“Mr. Burton has devoted his life to collecting all the published literature relating to Lincoln, and as a result of his labors has amassed a collection of over twenty-three hundred volumes, together with many pamphlets and still more precious autographic documents. This is said to be the largest and finest

collection of Lincolniana in existence, surpassing all public and private collections on this subject.

"Of the autograph documents one of universal interest is an authentic copy of the Proclamation of Emancipation, signed by Abraham Lincoln and William H. Seward, President and Secretary of State, and by John G. Nicolay, private secretary of the President. Of these there are only two in existence, the other being among the treasures of the state department at Washington. The original was burned in the Chicago fire of 1871. The genuineness of the signatures attached to this copy have been attested to by the late John Hay.

"Other legal documents in Lincoln's handwriting proved that he belonged to six different law firms. These date from 1838 to 1855, and discover the firms of Stuart & Lincoln, Logan & Lincoln, Harlan & Lincoln, Lincoln & Herndon, Lincoln & Lamon and Goodrich & Lincoln. Another among the treasures is the printed copy of the debates between Douglas and Lincoln, which has been owned by Lincoln and corrected by him. The penciled interlineations or notes in the handwriting of one of the chief actors in the dramatic contest make the volume one of great interest. There also is a copy of 'The Constitutional Text-Book,' into which Lincoln had copied the thirteenth amendment. These relics are all the more rare, inasmuch as nearly all of Lincoln's books were burned in a fire in Philadelphia which destroyed a collection similar to this of Mr. Burton. Not all of Mr. Burton's Lincoln relics are books, however. The very book-case in which rest many of his most precious volumes is made from the flooring of Lincoln's bedroom in his Springfield home. It is of black stained oak, and very quaint in appearance.

"Mr. Burton, whose enthusiasm in the work of keeping green the memory of Lincoln knows no bounds, was a disappointed bidder for the farm where the President was born. On learning that its purchaser intended making of it a national park, however, he became reconciled, especially when the manager of the farm, William E. Burton, presented him the old drawing-knife used about the place, from which the wooden handles had long since rotted away and formerly owned by Lincoln's father.

"Reminiscent of the terrible close of the life of the Great Emancipator is another of Mr. Burton's relics. This is one of the checks signed by John Wilkes Booth during his stay at Washington from November till the following April, in which he matured his plans for assassinating the President. Booth deposited twelve hundred dollars in a bank and drew out the money in

various sums, issuing in all twelve checks. These have become historically famous as the 'blood money checks.' The one in the Burton collection is dated December 24, 1864, and reads: 'Pay to J. Wilkes Booth or Bearer Fifty Dollars.'

"Mr. Burton has prosecuted his self-assumed task under the greatest discouragements. Once he has seen sold beneath the auctioneer's hammer every book in his collection, but he resumed the work, and after twelve years has a great historical collection.

"Mr. Burton owns the original autograph copy of the first 'Life of Lincoln' ever known. This was written and issued by John Locke Scripps, a former Chicago newspaper publisher. It is related that the book, which was read to Lincoln in proof, contained the statement that among Lincoln's favorite books was 'Plutarch's Lives.' The story goes on to say that Lincoln asked to see the final proof, and that Mr. Scripps went to Springfield and read it to him. Then, continues the tale, Lincoln said: 'The truth is, Mr. Scripps, I had never seen "Plutarch's Lives," but since you were here last I have purchased it and read it from cover to cover—and now your statement is true.'

"One of Mr. Burton's aims is to prepare and publish a complete national bibliography of Lincoln. This would occupy three volumes and would in itself be a work of years. The collection now in Mr. Burton's hands is the natural starting point for such a work."

The one hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's birth was celebrated at Lake Geneva, February 12, 1909, at which Mr. Burton was one of the principal speakers. His oration, like that quoted from above, was a masterpiece. Space will not permit us to give more than his peroration, although the entire address is well worth quoting:

"Lincoln had no crown; but all the crowns of Europe thrown into the melting pot and the furnace of character, would not mould one good enough, pure enough, nor big enough to fit his kingly brow."

Mr. Burton has delivered many other notable orations, but we can no more than give a few of his themes here. "Address of Welcome," delivered at the twentieth annual reunion of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Association of Walworth County, at Lake Geneva, August 26, 1908; "The Unique Soldier," delivered at Lake Geneva, September 2, 1886, before the Northwestern Reunion of the Grand Army of the Republic, assembled at Camp Spence Smith; "The Secret of Luck," a lecture delivered March 22, 1893, before the Mead Association at Sheboygan, Wisconsin; "The Inspiration of Bibles," delivered at Ford's Theater, Lake Geneva, March 17, 1881; "The Birth and Death of

Religions," delivered at the same place, June 2, 1881; "The Honest Dollar of America; a New Ratio and Its Benefits"; "The Old Trail to the Mother Lode; A Miner's Souvenir Sermon." The latter was issued on the latter's fifty-ninth birthday, October 19, 1906. Mr. Burton has the original manuscript of "Sweet Bye and Bye," secured after many years effort. He also has an original copy of "Home, Sweet Home."

Mr. Burton's religious training was in accordance with the Methodist Episcopal church. For sixteen years he was a member of this church, but drifted into agnosticism, and became an admirer of such men's work in this field as Ingersoll and Voltaire. He has been all his life a worker in the Republican party, but in the Bryan-McKinley campaign both his judgment and sympathy were in favor of bi-metalism. Mr. Burton is a Royal Arch Mason, and his daily life would indicate that he endeavors to carry its sublime precepts into his actions among his fellow men.

The Wisconsin State Historical Society at Madison reviewed Mr. Burton's work in the development of the state's resources, he being credited as the chief promoter in opening and developing the Goebic iron range of northern Wisconsin and Michigan and voted him a life membership and vice-president of the society and sent him an official request, in 1888, to have his portrait hung in the state historical gallery. An excellent oil painting was accordingly made by Frank B. Carpenter, the painter of Emancipation-Proclamation fame. This was not only in recognition of Mr. Burton's efforts in developing Wisconsin's iron interests, but also for his contribution of many specimens to the society collection which he had gathered in Cuba, Yucatan, Honduras and Mexico.

On December 7, 1869, John E. Burton married Lucretia D. Johnson, of Killawag, Broome county, New York, his schoolmate at Cazenovia. She is the representative of an excellent old family and is a lady of culture and refinement, having long been a favorite with a wide circle of friends. This union has been blessed by the birth of four children, namely: Howard E., Warren E. and Kenneth E., all young business men of much promise, engaged principally in mining in Colorado; and Bonnie E., who married Prof. Edmund D. Denison.

John E. Burton is a man of strong convictions and unswerving honesty. He is very practical, and yet is an idealist. The large success he has won in business enterprise is a manifestation of the practical man; his love of books, his idealization of the strong and masterful men of history, his work in the

subtle realm of thought are evidences that there are times when he is an intellectual dreamer. And notwithstanding his strenuous career, his stupendous business affairs and his public work he finds time to court the muses and has produced some exquisite verse on diverse themes, and had he devoted his life exclusively to literature, he would have, no doubt, taken a very high rank among his famous compeers as a man of letters. He has no use for the tawdry tinsel of society, or for the sham and hypocrisy of the world. If he has been assiduous in gathering gear, it has not been entirely "for the glorious privilege of being independent," but for the gratification he would derive from using wealth for the accomplishment of something that will be helpful to others.

Mr. Burton is a gentleman of pleasing personality, courteous in his relations with his fellow men and his individuality, which is very distinct, is impressed upon any work with which he is connected, and in the accomplishment of a purpose he is willing to assume any amount of labor required or any responsibility incurred. He is a broad-minded, manly man, a gentleman without ostentation whom to know is to respect, admire and honor, for he is a splendid specimen of well developed, well rounded, symmetrically poised, virile manhood, with a commanding presence, moving among his fellows as one born to leadership. With duties that would crush the ordinary man, he has his labors so systematized that he experiences little inconvenience in doing them. Everything moves with the regularity of clock work at his Milwaukee office or in the field of his vast mining operations. He is a vigorous as well as independent thinker, a wide reader, and he has the courage of his convictions upon all subjects which he investigates. He is also strikingly original and fearless, prosecutes his researches after his own peculiar fashion, and cares little for conventionalism or for the sanctity attaching to person or place by reason of artificial distinction, tradition or the accident of birth. He is essentially cosmopolitan in his ideas, a man of the people in all the term implies and in the best sense of the word a representative type of that strong American manhood, which commands and retains respect by reason of inherent merit, sound sense and correct conduct. Measured by the accepted standard of excellence, his career has been eminently useful, and his life fraught with great good to his fellows and to the world.







