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Seventy Years a Teacher

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Rev. Jonas Burnham, A. M.

By ARTHUR W. PERKINS

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SEVENTY YEARS A TEACHER

A Remarkable Record of Service as Written up by a
Local Historian

WHILE looking at a volume of "Select Sermons" published at Andover, Mass., in 1819, I noticed that they were presented on that same year, by the second president of Bowdoin College, Jesse F. Appleton, to one just entering the Freshman class at that institution, who later was identified not only with the educational interests of Farmington and Franklin County for a period of forty years, but also well known as a religious teacher, as well as a pioneer in the anti-slavery and temperance causes, and had taught for a period of nearly thirty years before coming to Farmington. I refer to Reverend Jonas Burnham, A. M. I think that the subject of this brief sketch was born in Kennebunkport, Me., May 11, 1798. He was the ninth and youngest child of Seth Burnham (born in 1760) and was occupied at home or at school until sixteen years of age, when he became a cabin boy, during the war of 1812-14, on a privateer which captured a British vessel — his share of the bounty being ninety dollars.

While there he was much impressed by the devotion of a certain British sailor to his Bible, his daily prayers and observance of the Sabbath. On arrival home he sought his pastor, Rev. George Payson, by whose religious influence he became an active worker in the Congregational church of Kennebunkport and also decided to prepare for the ministry. In 1817, he went to Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass., remaining there until 1819, fitting for Bowdoin College.

During his collegiate course he taught in Thornton Academy, Saco, Me., and in his native town. He also taught singing schools in the neighboring towns of Kennebunkport

and Kennebunk, which were attended by a large number of pupils.

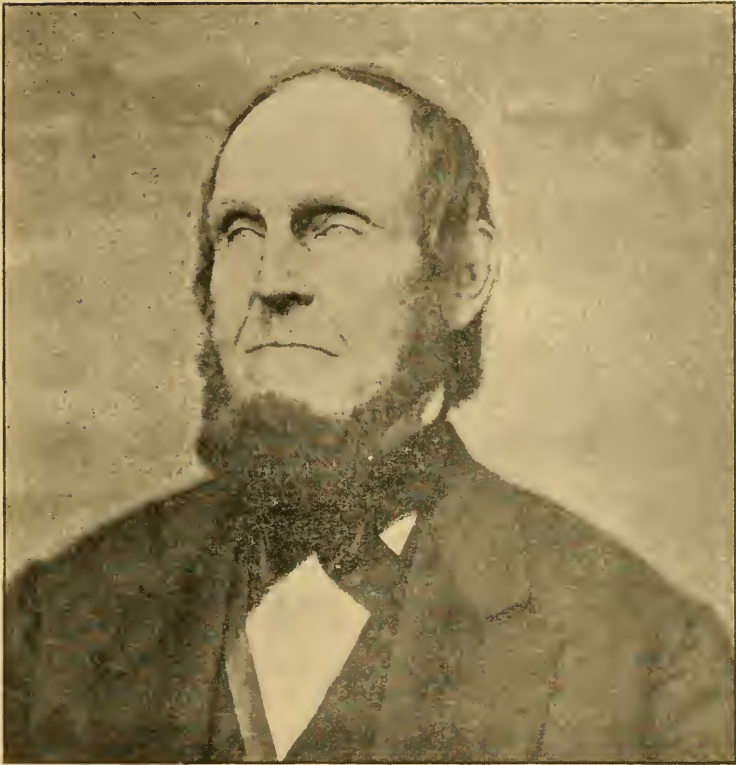
He was a member of the Peucinian society while in college and was noted for scholarship and a ready gift for expression, graduating from that institution in September, 1823, with such honor as to be one of the few admitted to the fraternity of Phi Beta Kappa. The trustees of Bath Academy were present at the commencement exercises, and they selected Mr. Burnham from the class of thirty-three members for principal of their academy, to which city he soon removed and remained there eight years.

During his college course he had managed, by strict economy, to lay by nearly five hundred dollars, over and above his college expenses. (This story of college receipts exceeding that of expenditures was a very interesting one and, if written, would have equalled any novel in its varied experiences.)

From Bath he went to Bridgton and was principal of that academy seven years (1832-1839). From Bridgton he went to Hallowell and was the first teacher of the High school there six years, afterward removing to Augusta, where he was the beloved preceptor of the Cony Female Academy two years. Prior to commencing his engagement in Augusta he served again as principal of Thornton Academy for two terms, where his popularity and success rendered his leaving a source of mutual regret. Mr. Burnham removed from Augusta to Farmington and became principal of Farmington Academy, August 27, 1849, filling the vacancy caused by the resignation of Alexander Hamilton Abbott, A. M., who had assumed charge of "The Abbott Family School at Little Blue."

A few days after Professor Burnham's arrival in Farmington, he wrote the following letter to his daughter, Miss Georgia P. Burnham, later the wife of the late John F. Woods, at that time away from home:

"Well, here I am at the Stoddard House, in Farmington, the prettiest village I ever saw. Commenced school Monday, 27th ult. Have had fifty-four pupils this week and this is



REV. JONAS BURNHAM, A. M.

enough, if they are permanent. Thus far I like very much. Have made a favorable beginning and I hope for reasonable success. My pupils are still, studious and respectful—twenty young ladies and thirty-four young gentlemen. One is a man of 25 or 30, and there are boys of 10 years. The academy is a very good building; looks much like the academy at Kennebunk. The school is in the upper room, a large hall fitted for the purpose. It will accommodate over one hundred. There is a good bell and some apparatus. Tuition \$3.00 and \$3.50, according to the studies. I wish you were here to help me, for I have to work without ceasing. Mary Deering is coming up Tuesday, and Sarah Wood is here from Winthrop. Have seen Mr. Cutler, Mr. Goodenow, General Ladd and lady, Hiram Belcher and lady, Samuel Belcher, Esq., Rev. Mr. Rogers and lady, and others. Mr. Reed lives here; he plays the violin at the Congregational church. Miss Fanny Wentworth, (later Mrs. Reuben Cutler) a connection of his, is here giving lessons on the piano and organ.

“The scenery all around is grand and beautiful. Lofty hills and extensive forests and cultivated fields can be seen in every direction and the beautiful Sandy river, with its rich intervals, adds greatly to the interest of the landscape. The village is twice as large as I supposed and the buildings are all neat and handsome. Mr. Rogers (Rev. Isaac Rogers) is a very faithful and excellent preacher.”

The late Hon. Francis Gould Butler, in his “History of Farmington,” refers to Professor Burnham’s success at the academy, in these words:

“During Mr. Burnham’s preceptorship, from August 27, 1849, to July 15, 1859, the number of terms was twenty, the total number of scholars two thousand five hundred and twenty-four, with an average of one hundred and twenty-six to a term; and fifty students were fitted for college.”

After leaving the academy he was appointed by the Congregational State Conference as stated supply for the churches in Strong, Wilton, Farmington Falls and New

Sharon, which position he acceptably filled until 1874. He also taught Greek and Latin at the "Wendell Institute" (named for Abraham Wendell, a brother of the late Mrs. F. G. Butler) during the seventies. This was a private school kept by Miss Julia H. May ("Poet Laureate" of Maine) and Miss Sara R. May ("Mother Superior" of Christian Endeavor), accomplished graduates of Mount Holyoke Seminary. Instruction in drawing, painting and penmanship was given by Mrs. J. M. D. Houghton, Mrs. George B. Cragin (nee Miss Abby Belcher) and Mrs. Florence G. Varney (nee Miss Florence Goodrich of Windham, Me.). Elocution was taught by Professor J. M. Chapman, for so many years an instructor at the New Hampton, N. H., Literary Institution.

A system of chronology or mnemonics was invented by Professor Burnham by means of which the date of any event might be retained in one's memory and was a very valuable acquisition to one liable to forget dates of important events. In his teaching of the English branches, he arranged them in a very attractive metrical form, so that they might be sung or recited as in poetry. Especially was this true regarding the rules of grammar and arithmetic, with their arbitrary rules, and also the geographical names of countries, mountains, rivers, lakes, islands, etc., for what is geography to any schoolboy but an array of jaw-breaking names? Although the rivers in Scotland and England ending in

"Clyde, Forth and Tay,
Tweed, Dee and Spey,
Thames, Severn, Mersey,
Humber, Ouse and Trent,"

were not so very hard to pronounce, when the scholars reached the mountains and lakes in South America and the countries in Africa closing with

"Bambarra, Timbuctoo,
Yarida, Houssa and Bornou,
Begharme, Darfur and Begoo,"

great emphasis was placed upon the last named country similar to a "college yell," showing the exhilaration produced upon

the completion of the task by the students reciting in concert. I think that Professor Burnham would derive the largest number of English words from Greek and Latin "roots and stems" of any person I ever met. It never seemed to make any difference what word from the Latin or Greek he selected, for he always derived a long list of English words arranged in the form of an interesting story.

As an illustration, let us take the Latin verb *stare* (to remain) and from the stem, *sta-*, the students attention would be called to "a distant *sta-te*, where they were to visit a *sta-tesman*, who owned a large *sta-ble*, with many *sta-lls*, in which were a number of *sta-llions* hitched to *sta-nchions*, when they were not being exercised in the *sta-dium* or driven to the railway *sta-tion*, where they would be obliged to *sta-nd* until a *sta-ted* time, when the train would arrive, bringing two guests, one a *sta-tistician*, with a wallet full of *sta-ters* to be distributed among the *sta-te mongers*, attending his lecture on *sta-tocracy* and *sta-tistology*, and the other a man, tall in *sta-ture*, who had recently published a *sta-ndard* work on *sta-tical* electricity and magnetism."

By using this unique method of deriving English words, Professor Burnham would impress the student with the practical value of the Latin and Greek languages, against the study of which so much has been written and said by many of our prominent educators at the present day.

I recall an incident in connection with the derivation of words, when a member of a class, consisting of a few students, including the late William Holley Cothren, who later graduated from Bowdoin College with high honors; Frederick G. Chutter, now a Congregational clergyman, and Everett B. Norton, Esq., who has traveled so many thousand miles in the employ of "Uncle Sam," and is now laying out R. F. D. routes "in the land of the Dacotas." We were assigned the task of deriving as many words as possible from a single Latin "root or stem" in connection with our regular recitations in Latin and Greek. On the following morning "Fred," "Everett" and myself passed in our list of words, when

"Will" took from his pocket a large sheet of brown wrapping paper completely filled with words. I shall never forget the look of exultation and satisfaction which crossed his fine intellectual countenance as he took his seat.

The Greek verb, so difficult for many students to remember in their preparation for college, was made comparatively easy under his instruction. At a reunion of the Alumni and Alumnae of the "May School" in 1900, Miss Julia Harris May alluded to Professor Burnham in the following verse:

"Nor could we, ought we, to forget that dear old Father Burnham,
Who taught the Greek verbs once so well, we did not have to learn 'em,
His memory lingers in our hearts, and still forever lingers,
Though Homer's Iliad, somehow, has slipped between our fingers;
We seem to see him studying yet,
What we remember and forget."

Not only did Professor Burnham teach "the Greek verbs so well we did not have to learn 'em" but those who were under his tuition in Greek and Latin became acquainted with very many Greek and Latin authors, whereas under the ordinary preparation for college, one reads very few authors comparatively.

In addition to the reading of Caesar, Cicero and Virgil, the students were introduced to selections from Latin historians, Eutropius, Justin and Cornelius Nepos, together with the poets, Ovid and Horace. Preparatory to the reading of Xenophon and Homer, the students were urged to read extracts from Æsop's Fables, Jests of Hierocles and Strabo's "Work on Geography," which was not a mere register of names and places, but a rich store of interesting facts and of great utility in the study of ancient literature and art, also "Anecdotes of Philosophers" by Zeno, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates and others. In history and biography might be mentioned "Plutarch's Lives" of celebrated historians, statesmen and orators of ancient Greece. Nor should we forget the "Lyric Poets," Sappho and Anacreon, and the Idyls of Bion and Moscus, furnishing a college preparatory course in Latin and Greek of great variety and interest.

Professor Burnham possessed a memory the most marvellous, which had been strengthened in a measure by a rule he made when young, to commit each evening before retiring, a whole chapter from the Bible. He took a deep and lasting interest in the young and always encouraged his students to secure a classical education at any cost.

During the declining years of his life, he occupied his time fitting young men for college, many of whom owe their success in college and after life to the fatherly interest manifested by the faithful teacher. Even the Tuesday preceding the day of his death, Mr. Burnham listened to a recitation from one of his students: (Fred C. Nottage, a graduate of our State Normal School, class of 1887; advanced course, 1889). Mr. Burnham was ever a consistent member of the Congregational church, and actively labored in every good work to advance the cause of Christianity. He was present at the dedicatory services of the "New Old South church" held on the fifth day of June, 1888, and pronounced the benediction, being then ninety years of age.

Mr. Burnham was twice married. In September, 1823, he married Miss Jane Merrill of Kennebunkport and after almost half a century of happy wedded life she died in April, 1872. Three children were born to them, one of whom is now living, Mrs. John F. Woods. In 1873 Mr. Burnham married his second wife, Miss Mary L. Wells of Chesterville, by whom he had one child, Mary Sophrene, (born in 1878 when Professor Burnham was eighty years of age) now living and who was graduated from Leland Stanford University, California, with honors.

As one, who had the rare privilege, when a youth in my 'teens, of reciting to Professor Burnham in Greek and Latin, and of listening to those incomparable lectures upon all subjects, which any student in college would be deeply interested in, I would bear sincere and reverent testimony to the personal worth and influence of that prince of teachers. In affection and love I would speak of him as my instructor and my friend and gladly avail myself of this opportunity to bear witness

that his treatment was not only kind, encouraging and impartial, but that his instructions were eagerly assimilated by those under his tuition.

Not only was he faithful to all under his instruction, but he was a friend, kind and true.

Thousands will bear witness to his worth, including many who now hold or have held positions in the national government — such as Chief Justice Fuller, the Washburnes, and many others. He lived to the advanced age of nearly ninety-one (having died March 9, 1889), loved and honored by all who knew him, and whoever might have the pleasure of conversing with him would have said that surely he was one of the grandest Christian patriarchs of modern times. I recall but two academic careers in this state that approach that of Professor Burnham in duration (a period of nearly seventy years from the time of his admission to Bowdoin College, until the time of his death, for he taught a great deal during his college course), October 1, 1819-March 9, 1889 — that of Alexander Hamilton Abbott, A. M., who taught during the forties at the Farmington Academy and was proprietor of "The Abbott Family School at Little Blue" for nearly fifty years (1849-1899), made a total of nearly sixty years; and that of Rev. A. S. Packard, D. D., who was an officer of Bowdoin College in uninterrupted service for a period of sixty-five years, and under whose presidency we Farmington boys were enrolled as pupils at Bowdoin twenty-two years ago and to whom the great poet, Longfellow, in his famous "Morturi Salutamus," delivered upon the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his class eight years before (when Professor Purington, principal of our Normal school, was a student at Bowdoin College) referring to the teachers of his college days, turned and said:

"They are no longer here, they all are gone
 Into the land of shadows — all save one —
 Honor and reverence and the good repute
 That follows faithful service as its fruit,
 Be unto him, whom living we salute."

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After the death of Professor Packard, which occurred while I was a student at "Bowdoin," there appeared in the Bowdoin Orient of October, 1884, (a weekly paper published by the students of that institution) a beautiful sonnet written by Edward Clarence Plummer of our class (now a lawyer of Bath) and being one of the most eloquent of the many tributes ever paid the memory of Professor Packard, I think it very applicable to our Professor Burnham:

"Like to the anthem of a master mind
Made vocal through the organ's metal throats,
Where sweetly winning and strong-sounding notes
Are all in perfect harmony combined;
And seem a wave of beauty undefined
Which sinking into silence leaves the heart
Of him who listens moved in every part
With strange emotions which it leaves behind;
And lingers like an echo in the breast
When long the notes have ceased to breathe in sound;
A sense of something beautiful and best,
Like unseen incense breathing all around,
Was the pure life which went away to rest
With days completed and with labors crowned."

ARTHUR W. PERKINS.

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