

**DISCOURSE ON THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF
THE HON. LITTLETON WALLER TAZEWELL,
DELIVERED IN THE FREEMASON STREET
BAPTIST CHURCH, BEFORE THE BAR OF
NORFOLK, VIRGINIA, AND THE CITIZENS
GENERALLY, ON THE 29TH DAY OF JUNE, 1860**

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Discourse on the Life and Character of the Hon. Littleton Waller Tazewell, Delivered in the
Freemason Street Baptist Church, Before the Bar of Norfolk, Virginia, and the Citizens
Generally, on the 29th Day of June, 1860 by Hugh Blair Grigsby

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HUGH BLAIR GRIGSBY

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HON. LITTLETON WALLER TAZEVELL,

DELIVERED IN THE

FREMASON STREET BAPTIST CHURCH,

BEFORE THE

BAR OF NORFOLK, VIRGINIA, AND THE CITIZENS GENERALLY,

ON THE 29th DAY OF JUNE, 1860,

BY

HUGH BLAIR GRIGSBY, LL.D.,

MEMBER OF THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY, OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETIES OF
VIRGINIA, PENNSYLVANIA, KENT, &c.

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DISCOURSE.

GENTLEMEN OF THE BAR :

WHEN the sad event occurred which has drawn us together this morning, you met in your accustomed hall, and expressed the feelings which such an event might well inspire. You then adjourned to assist in performing the last solemn rites over the bier of your departed friend. Clad in mourning, you attended his remains from his residence to the steamer, and, embarking with them, transported them over the waters of that noble bay which our venerable friend had crossed so often, and of which he was so justly proud as the Mediterranean of the Commonwealth; and, in the deepening shadows of the night which had overtaken you, and which were rendered yet deeper by the glare of the solitary candles flickering in the wind, more touching by the ceremonies of religion, by the grief of his slaves, and by the smothered wailing of his children and grandchildren, and more imposing by the sorrowing faces and bent forms of some of our aged and most eminent citizens, you deposited the honored dust in its simple grave; there to repose—with two seas sounding their ceaseless requiem above it—till the trump of the Archangel shall smite the ear of the dead, and the tomb shall unveil its bosom, and the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the statesman who ruled the destinies of empires, and the peasant whose thoughts never strayed beyond his daily walk, shall rise together on the Morn of the Resurrection.

But you rightly deemed that your duty to the memory of your

illustrious brother did not cease at his grave. You knew that, whatever may be the estimate of the value of the life and services of LITTLETON WALLER TAZEWELL, it was never denied by his contemporaries that he was endowed with an extraordinary intellect, and that in popular assemblies, at the Bar, in the House of Delegates, and in the Senate of the United States, if he did not—as it was long the common faith in Virginia to believe that he did—bear away the palm from every competitor, he had few equals, and hardly in any department in which he chose to appear, a superior. And you thought that such a life, so intimately connected with your profession, deserved a special commemoration; that its leading facts should be recalled to the public mind; and that you might thus not only refresh your own recollections by the lessons presented by so remarkable a career, but hand down, if possible, whatever of instruction and encouragement and delight those lessons may contain, for the eye of those who are to succeed you. Your only error—and I speak from the heart—is in the hands to which you have confided the task.

The time for performing this duty has arrived; and I rejoice to see associated with you the Mayor and the Recorder of the City, the gentlemen of the Common and Select Councils, the officers of the army and navy, the President, Professors, and Students of William and Mary College, his venerable *alma mater*, and various public bodies distinguished by their useful and benevolent purposes. It is meet that it should be so. At the call of your fathers, gentlemen, he was ever prompt to render any service in his power; and on two occasions especially, when important interests affecting Norfolk were in jeopardy, at great pecuniary sacrifices on his part, he was sent abroad to protect them. On another occasion, when a foreign fleet was in our waters, he undertook the errand of your fathers, and performed it with unequalled success. It was in the service of your fathers that he won his great reputation as a lawyer; and to them and to you, disregarding the obvious dictates of personal interest and ambition, he clung for almost two-thirds of a century, as to his friends and neighbors, and to your city as the abode of his brilliant manhood, and the home of his declining years; and he has left his children and grandchildren, those dear objects of his love on whom his eyes rested in the dying hour, to

live and to die among you. Indeed, so intimately connected was his name with the name of your city for sixty years, the first words that rose on the lips of travelled men in our own country and in England, were inquiries respecting Mr. Tazewell. The generation of men who smiled at his wit, whose tears flowed at his bidding, who relished his wonderful colloquial powers, who regarded with a sense of personal triumph his marvellous displays at the Bar and in the public councils, and who looked up to him in the hour of danger as their bulwark and defence, have, with here and there a solitary exception, long preceded him to the tomb. Those men were your fathers. He performed the last sad rites at their graves, as, one by one, year after year, they passed away; and you, their sons and successors, and, I rejoice to add, their daughters and granddaughters, have now met to pay a tribute to his memory. To honor the illustrious dead is a noble and a double office. It speaks with one accord and in a language not to be mistaken, the worth of those who have gone before us, and the worth of those who yet survive.

In contemplating a human life which is older than the Commonwealth in which we live—a life stretching almost from century to century, and that century embracing the American Revolution, and sweeping yet onward with its unexpired term beyond the present moment—even if the humblest figure filled the canvas, the review of its history would far exceed the time allotted for my present office; but if that figure be prominent, if he made his mark upon some of the great events of his age, or influenced the opinions of masses of men, or moved before them in any remarkable attitude of genius, of massive intellect, or of public service, the task is proportionably enlarged. And the only method that is left us is to point out the striking traits of the general portraiture, and to let the minor incidents take care of themselves. It is in such a spirit I shall treat the theme you have assigned me.

It appears to me that the life of Mr. Tazewell may be divided into three striking periods: The first, extending from his birth to his settlement in Norfolk in 1802; the second, from the settlement in Norfolk to the close of his term as Governor of the Commonwealth; and the third, thence to his death.

It is common to associate the birth of an eminent man with the

memorable events that were contemporaneous with it, and to dwell upon the influence which those events may be supposed to have exerted upon his life and character. In this respect the life of Mr. Tazewell was remarkable. Four months before the seventeenth day of December, 1774, when he was born, his father had been present at the August Convention of 1774, the first of our early conventions, which deputed Peyton Randolph, George Washington, Patrick Henry, Edward Pendleton, Benjamin Harrison, and Richard Henry Lee to the first Congress which met in Carpenter's Hall, Philadelphia, and but two months had elapsed since the adjournment of the Congress; and while the infant was in the nurse's arms, his father was drawing, probably in the same room with him, a reply to the conciliatory propositions of Lord North, to be offered in the House of Burgesses. His youthful ears were stunned by the firing of the guns of the Virginia regiments drawn up in Waller's Grove, when the news of the passage by Congress of the Declaration of Independence of the Fourth of July, 1776, reached Williamsburgh; and, as he was beginning to walk, he was startled by the roar of cannon when the victory of Saratoga was celebrated with every demonstration of joy throughout the land. As a boy of seven he heard the booming of the distant artillery at Yorktown; and he might have seen the faces of the old and the young brightening with hope, when the Articles of Confederation, which preceded the present Federal Constitution, having been ratified at last by all the States, became the first written charter of the American Union. In his ninth year the treaty of peace with Great Britain, which acknowledged the independence of the United States, was ratified by Congress; and in his fourteenth, when he remembered with distinctness current events of a political nature, the Commonwealth of Virginia adopted the present Federal Constitution.

The first of the Tazewells, who emigrated to the colony of Virginia, was William, a lawyer by profession, who came over in 1715, and settled in Accomack. He was the son of James Tazewell, of Somersetshire, England, and was born at Lymington in that county, and baptized, as appears from an extract from the register of that parish in my possession, on the 17th day of July, 1690; and was twenty-five years old on his arrival in the colony.

DERIVATION OF THE NAME.

Wills of wealthy persons, which are still preserved in his handwriting, attest his early employment; and his name soon appears in the records of Accomack, on one or the other side of every case in court. Within the precincts of Lymington church, whose antique tower and rude structure, typifying in the graphic picture struck off by the Camden society what the old church at Jamestown probably was, may be seen the tomb of a Tazewell, who died in 1706, on which is engraved the coat of arms of the family,—a lion rampant, bearing a helmet with a vizor closed on his back; an escutcheon, which is evidently of Norman origin, and won by some daring feat of arms, and which could only have been held by one of the conquering race. A wing of the present manor-house of Lymington, built by James Tazewell, the father of William, who died in 1683, is still standing.

The orthography of Tazewell, like that of the earlier Norman names which were forced to float for centuries on the breath of the unpolished Anglo-Saxon, has been spelt at various times in various ways by members of the same family, and in various ways in the same writing; as the name of Shakspeare, though a plain Anglo-Saxon name, was spelt in four different ways in his will. Thus, in the parish register of Buckland Newton, in the county of Dorset, the name is spelt in four different ways; and one of the spellings, which is still popular in England, is Tanswell, and opens up to us the true original of the name in Tankersville, the name of one of the knights who came over with William the Norman, and whose name is inscribed on the roll of Battle Abbey. The process was evidently Tankersville, which, contracted, and marked by the apostrophe, became Tan'sville; and, as the Norman blood became, in the course of centuries, more intimately commingled with the ruder but steadier Anglo-Saxon stream, the Norman *vill* gave way to the Saxon *well*, and Tan'sville took the form of Tanswell; and Tanswell and Tazewell, variously spelt, have been used indifferently by father and son of the same family for more than three hundred years, and are so used at the present day.* The late Mr. Tazewell thought that his name was originally spelt Tazonille, and

* The various spellings are Tan'well, Ta'nswell, Tassel, Taswell, Tazewell. Tanswell is another abbreviation of Tankersville.