

**BIOGRAPHICAL
MEMOIR OF JOHN
LAWRENCE LECONTE**

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Biographical memoir of John Lawrence Leconte by Samuel H. Scudder

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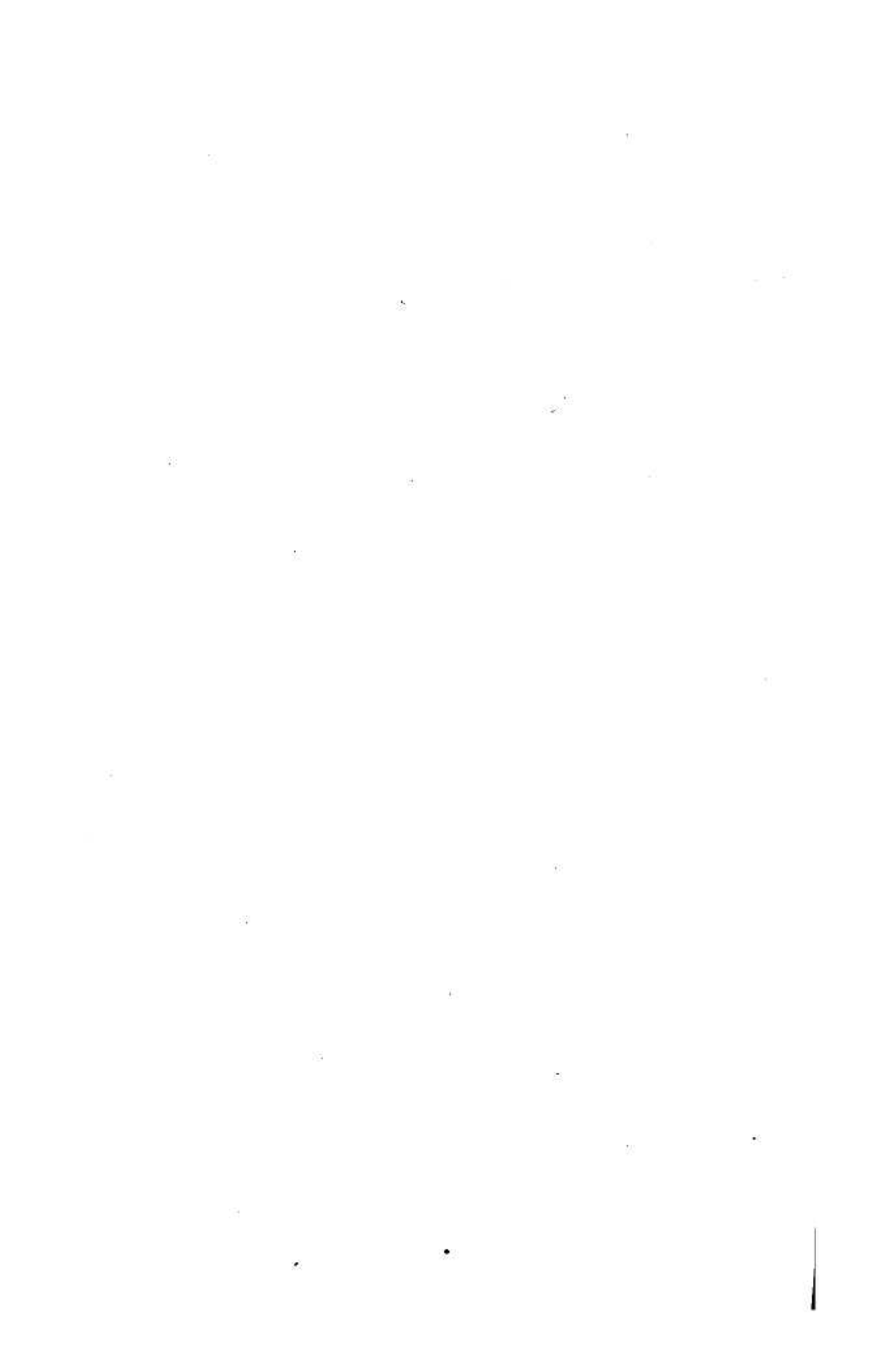
SAMUEL H. SCUDDER

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OF
JOHN LAWRENCE LECONTE.
1825-1883.

BY
SAMUEL H. SCUDDER.

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BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR OF JOHN LAWRENCE LECONTE.

The revocation of the edict of Nantes, with its attendant persecutions and other horrors, was incidentally of advantage to science; for of the tens of thousands who expatriated themselves from a community given over to tyranny and fanaticism, not a few carried with them and transmitted to their offspring, born in the land of refuge, a spirit of scientific investigation, which was doubtless quickened by the intense life of the time; and in after years, when the hereditary trait again appeared, it may often have found its healthy growth re-enforced by the admixture of the new element afforded by residence in a foreign country. At all events other countries owe much of their scientific fame to the men of Huguenot ancestry, who fled from the intolerance of Louis XIV, and whose influence outside of France would but for this have certainly been lessened for lack of direct contact; for among the Huguenots, or their descendants, as has frequently been pointed out, was an unusual proportion of men devoted to science, literature, and the arts. Thus, to mention but a few names, Switzerland owes to this movement her DeCandolles, and Saussurea, with Plantamour and a host of lesser lights; Germany and Holland, Charpentier and Lyonet; and our own country, Bowdoin, of Cambridge, an early president of the American Academy; John Jay, of New York, and the LeContes, living and dead.

The name of LeConte, or LeComte, as it was indifferently spelled, was a frequent one in France in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and particularly in Normandy. The families were mostly of noble blood, and many were possessed of considerable estates; others, however, were born in poverty, of whom some came to a more honorable distinction than wealth or title could give, such as the learned Antoine LeConte, a jurist of Noyon, famous for his attacks on Calvin, or the other Antoine, possibly a direct descendant, who was Baron de l'Echelle and governor of Sedan, and was well known

in Huguenot times for his controversial letters addressed to a Jesuit; but whether of noble or plebeian blood we rarely find their names in those days, excepting as staunch Huguenots, and without leaving Normandy we come to such cases as that of Isaac LeComte, of Coutances, who, in 1687, at the age of sixty, was sentenced to the galleys because a book "of the religion" was found in his house; and of Daniel LeConte, of Poitou, sent to the galleys the following year for the crime of being a Huguenot; of Abraham and Henry LeConte, who fled to England in 1687 for conscience and life's sake; and of Guillaume and Pierre LeConte, besides others of the same name, who took refuge in our country.

Guillaume, with whom we are specially concerned, was born at Rouen, March 6, 1659. His exact ancestry is unknown; but from seals still in the possession of the family, and to judge from the researches of Dr. LeConte, it seems tolerably evident that he was descended, through his mother or grandmother, from the barons of Nonant, a Norman family of importance, and that he or his father adopted the name of the maternal line.* In the troubles which arose in his early manhood, Guillaume, finding that neither justice nor liberty would be allowed him in his native country, fled to Holland and cast in his fortunes with the Prince of Orange. "At the time of his arrival in Holland," writes Major LeConte in a manuscript at hand, "William, the Stadtholder, was preparing to invade England, and readily accepted the offer of my ancestor's service in his army. With him he proceeded to England," and apparently remained in his army until it was disbanded after the peace of Ryswick, for we find him with that army at the conquest of Ireland, and the family still retain a fine folio Elzevir Bible of 1669, presented to Guillaume by William III, in token of his friendship. Moreover it was in the year following the peace of Ryswick, namely in 1698, that Guillaume emigrated to this country with two nephews,

* Dr. LeConte, in a letter to Rev. C. W. Baird, says: "The tradition in my family is that my ancestor was so disgusted with the political conditions of France that when he went to Holland he dropped his father's and took his mother's name. . . . The LeConte seal is quartered at the lower right hand corner, and indicates a female of the family of that name of the seigneurs of Nonant, Bretoncelles, etc." But it is not known, I believe, that any Huguenots changed their name for the cause here assigned, and it seems more probable that the change was made by himself or an ancestor for some purely family reason.

JOHN LAWRENCE LE CONTE.

Thomas and Henri, of the Nonant line. These two nephews, it may be said in passing, married in this country, but left no children.

Shortly after his arrival in New York he is said to have made a voyage to the West Indies,* where he met and married, February 16, 1701, Margueritte de Vallean, daughter of Pierre Joyeux de Vallean, of Martinique. If so, he soon returned to New York and purchased a considerable estate, aided by presents from King William. His wife's father must soon have died, perhaps before they returned to New York, for they early came into possession of her father's estates in Martinique, and sold in New York the sugar produced thereon. The date of his wife's death is not known, but it could not have been long after the birth of their only son, William, (December 3, 1702), for on April 17th of the following year he married a second time, Margarec Mahant (Mahoo, Mahoe, or Mahault), by whom he had two other children, Pierre and Esther. He and his second wife died in New York on the same day, September 15, 1720, of yellow fever.

William, the son of the first wife, married Anne (Marie Ann) Bealie, of New Rochelle,† and had two daughters, through the second of whom, Susame, who married another Besley (or Bayley), comes the family of that name, in whose succession were Mother Seton, the founder of the Sisters of Charity in this country, and the late Archbishop Bayley, of Baltimore.

Of the marriage or descendants of Esther nothing is known to

* "No evidence has been recorded to show that Guillaume ever went to Martinique; it is much more probable that Margueritte had come with her father to New Rochelle, but continued to refer her home to the island from which they had emigrated."—Family records by Prof. LeConte Stevens. It may be added that the name of Pierre Vallean appears on the New Rochelle list from the earliest period.

† A romantic story is told of this son in Major LeConte's manuscript to the effect that he made a visit to his mother's relatives in the West Indies, and was there betrothed to a Miss Dugand. Before the time of the proposed marriage business took him to New York for a few months, and he then returned to claim his bride. On landing at St. Pierre's and inquiring about his betrothed, who lived some miles out of the city, he was told she had married, whereupon he at once re-embarked on a vessel just sailing for New York, determined to marry without delay the first lady who should show any regard for his attentions. In a few days he met Miss Beslie, and soon married her. He afterwards learned that it was another Miss Dugand, and not his betrothed, of whose marriage he had heard.

ma.* The descent of the family name comes through Pierre,† who lived in New Jersey, and married, first, Margaret Pintard, and, three years later, Valeria Eatton, of Eattonville, New Jersey. The first left no children, the second five—William, John Eatton, Margaret, Thomas, and Peter. William married, but died childless. Thomas and Peter did not marry. Margaret married Rev. Jedediah Chapman, one of the founders of the Presbyterian church in this country. So again the male descent and name comes solely through one son, John Eatton, who was born September 2, 1739, and married Jane Sloan in 1776, by whom he had three children—William, who died at the age of thirty, unmarried; Lewis, born in 1782, who lived in Georgia, where he married Anne Quartermann, and was the father of Professors John and Joseph LeConte, of the University of California, the only living children out of four sons and three daughters; and finally John Eatton, born in Shrewsbury, New Jersey, February 22, 1784, who married Mary Anne H. Lawrence in July, 1821, and had three sons, two Edwards, both of whom died in infancy, and the subject of the present notice, John Lawrence, who was born May 13, 1825.‡

As the life of Dr. LeConte was an uneventful one, its principal incidents may be merely sketched. At the completion of his collegiate course at Mt. St. Mary's College, in Emmetsburg, Maryland, he entered the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York, from which he was graduated in 1846. Although he thus made medicine his declared profession, he never followed its practice to any extent, inheriting, as he did, means sufficient to render him independent. From 1848 to 1850 he made several journeys to Lake Superior and California to increase his knowledge of our fauna. In 1852 his father's family removed to Philadelphia, where he has since resided, marrying in 1861—the year after his father's death—the daughter of the late Judge Grier, who, with two sons, survives him. He made other expeditions at various times, both before and after his marriage, to Honduras and Panama, the Rocky Mountains, Europe,

* See Appendix.

† "Dr. Peter LeConte . . . settled in New Jersey, becoming a resident of Monmouth county as early as 1794. In Middletown he practiced medicine for many years, and there is a tradition that he sometimes preached as a minister."—Family records by Prof. LeConte Stevens.

‡ Fuller details of the genealogy of the family will be found in an appendix.

Egypt, and Algiers. At the outbreak of the civil war he entered the army medical corps as surgeon of volunteers, and was soon advanced to the post of medical inspector, with the rank of lieutenant colonel, where he remained until the close of the war. In this field his fine organizing power and good sense showed themselves to excellent advantage. After this he held no post demanding his time until 1878, when he entered the United States Mint in Philadelphia, a position which he retained until his death, which occurred November 15th last.

Francis Galton, in his work on "Hereditary Genius," and Alphonse DeCandolle, in his "Histoire des sciences et des savants depuis deux siècles," have clearly proved the influence of heredity in the development of scientific men. To mention a single example, DeCandolle points out that among the ninety-two persons who had been the chosen "foreign associates" of the French Academy of Sciences up to the time of his writing, a father and a son occur no less than four times, a number which is surprising when we consider that the election was made out of about twelve hundred men of science. The influences which affect the study of this question among ourselves are diversified, for here, perhaps, better than anywhere else in the world, one may carve out one's own destiny, and a man of genius may consequently more readily rise from the lower ranks; our lineage, too, is so much more mixed, and in a large proportion of cases so obscure, that the traces of hereditary character are less readily discernible; yet, to pass by all names that are in close relation with European immigration, we have some clear instances of family influence in science alone, as may be seen by repeating merely the names of Dana, Draper, Eaton, Harris, Hitchcock, Pickering, Pierce, Rogers, and Whitney, and especially LeConte, while if we were to include, as we should, the mother's side, we should have to add such related names as Franklin and Bache, to which, no doubt, a serious research would add illustrious examples. But the historical element of our country is so modern, our professional life so unstable as it were, the growth and opportunities of scientific culture so recent, that in nearly all these instances we have but the connection of a single pair of names; hence it is that the name of LeConte is here somewhat conspicuous.

Pierre, the great-grandfather of Dr. LeConte and son of the original Guillaume, was a physician of some distinction in his day, and possessed, through his success, considerable property. His second wife,