AN ORATION DELIVERED AT THE COMMEMORATION OF THE TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SETTLEMENT OF HAVERHILL, MASSACHUSETTS, JULY SECOND AND THIRD, 1890, PP. 127-197

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AN ORATION

Delivered at the
Commemoration of the Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary
of the Settlement of Haverhill, Massachusetts,
July Second and Third, 1890.

BY

REV. SAMUEL WHITE DUNCAN, D. D.

BOSTON
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ORATION.

Mr. Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen, — Two hundred and fifty years ago a vine was planted here in the wilderness. That vine has grown into a sturdy stalk, with far-outspreading branches, beautiful with an abundant foliage. Meanwhile, well-nigh eight generations have completed their mortal term and left their impress upon human society.

It is not strange that all of us, who, proud and glad, call this fair city by the Merrimack "Home," should be moved to pause for a brief space, reverently to confess our debt to the past, and gratefully commemorate the initiatory events in our history. To many here the occasion is one of peculiar and tender interest. Gladly heeding the summons,

you have come from afar to this festival, and tread once more with joyful feet the old familiar paths. How many of us are among the scenes of our most affecting memories. Here we were born; here, by the fireside, we heard the first accents of affection; here are the graves of our fathers; here is the school-house where we learned our earliest lessons; here is the house of God where we received the elevating and consoling truths which have fortified us for the temptations and sustained us amid the trials of life. We think of the great cloud of witnesses, who, invisible to mortal eyes, look down upon us.

Apart from indulging these ennobling sentiments of our nature, there is surely the highest wisdom in reviewing the two hundred and fifty years that stretch backward across the chasm between the feeble sapling set in the savage wilderness of the past, and the spirited, thriving city of the present. We all appreciate that the past is a mighty factor in making the present: that if we really want to know ourselves; if we would rightly measure the forces that throb and pulsate in society about us, we must study our ancestors. The Haverhill of to-day, its complex interests and busy life, its men and women, its thought and spirit, is an emanation of the Haverhill of the past; not only impossible of existence without it, but just as impossible to be understood without it, as our own broad river, apart from its originating springs far up in the mountain glens and forest glades of New Hampshire.

Moreover, our history for more than two centuries is the history of a New England town. And what is there so noteworthy about this? Why, in getting back to these primal New England towns, one finds himself at the fountain head of our present political system. In these unique communities, of which Haverhill was a worthy type, was first tried on American soil the great experiment of a free commonwealth. Here, as never before, the now world-renowned principle of a government of the people, by the people, took organized shape. Out of these miniature democracies, was subsequently carved, when "the fulness of time had come," "the colossal grandeur

of our great Republic." And federal constitution and government were not merely the natural growth from institutions and influences originating in New England towns; but under these same influences also, through a thorough training of upwards of one hundred and fifty years, the popular mind was prepared for the responsibilities which national independence, and the formation of the national government brought. This is no extravagance. For that keen and impartial observer of American institutions, De Tocqueville, saw the same thing, when he said, a half-century ago: "The impulsion to political activity was given to America in its towns."

Fellow Citizens: Such are some of the factors that give value and interest to the topic before us. Would that one better fitted stood in my place to unfold the diversified panorama of our history. I feel deeply sensible how difficult is the task before me. The story of two hundred and fifty years cannot be compressed within the limits of an hour. Much must of necessity be altogether omitted. Wherein I fail, whether by treating some points with too much, others with too little, fulness of detail, I must throw myself upon your indulgence, and ask you, each for himself, to make up the deficiency.

The settlement of Haverhill was coincident with the close of the Puritan exodus to America, which, viewed in the light of moral and political results, is unqualifiedly the most important migration the world has known. It began with the violent dissolution of Parliament by Charles I., in 1628, when the prospects of the non-conformists and of civil liberty were the darkest: it terminated with the assembling of the Long Parliament in 1640, when the battle became set between king and people, and on English soil was furnished to the Puritan a fair field for his world-significant struggle for freedom. Time will not permit of any detailed reference to the causes of this emigration. It was one of the issues of the struggle that had been going on in England, for more than a hundred years. So far as the Puritan was concerned, it was a struggle in

which intense religious convictions, zeal for liberty, and an indomitable spirit of personal independence, were intimately blended. The objections of the Puritans to the doctrine and ceremonial of the Anglican Church were not superficial, but grounded in their deepest sense of the spirit and nature of religion itself. The determination of the king to enforce conformity, coupled with the most offensive assertion and exercise of the royal prerogative, they regarded as an affront to conscience, subversive of free government and the rights of Englishmen. In such a conflict compromise was impossible, and when no alternative seemed left to them but conformity, or expatriation, they reluctantly chose the latter. In the eleven years that followed the arrival of John Endicott at Salem, in 1628, some three hundred ships brought twenty-one thousand souls, from their comfortable homes in England to the shores of Massachusetts Bay. They came from the sturdiest part of the English stock, and many of them were representatives of the best social life of England. Among them were men of wealth, learned scholars, great divines, eminent lawyers and statesmen. Religious enthusiasm in rare combination with practical wisdom, dauntless courage, the instinct of self-government, and the spirit of personal independence gives them a prominence among all the men of history. If they were intolerant in matters of religion, we must remember that they belonged to an age when toleration, as we understand it, was unknown. They had not yet advanced to the grandeur of such a conception as that of opening in America a refuge to which the persecuted of any creed might fly. This was logically involved in their principles, and sure to develop itself in due time. But as yet their controlling idea was to plant a commonwealth composed exclusively of persons of the same mind and faith, and where they might worship God in their own way, unmolested by civil or ecclesiastical authority. I would not intimate that all of this large company of colonists were alike actuated by the same lofty spirit and purpose. Doubtless with some the greed of gain, and the opportunities for the improvement of fortune

which the new world opened, were powerful inducements. But of all migrations of people, as has truthfully been said, "the settlement of New England is pre-eminently the one in which the almighty dollar played the smallest part, — however important it may since have become, — as a motive power."

With the close of the Puritan Exodus in 1640, for more than a century, there was no considerable migration to New England. These original colonists grew and multiplied on their own soil in remarkable seclusion from all other communities. On the basis of the Royal Charter which conferred the power of local self-government, brought over by Winthrop and his followers in the "Arabella," they built up their institutions, civil and religious. Independent of foreign influences, amid hardships and dangers, they developed a character so distinct and strong, that though their descendants now constitute at least one-third of the present population of the United States, and are widely scattered throughout the land, they still retain characteristic marks of their grand original.

Of such men were the early settlers of Haverhill. The idea of the settlement, though he himself never lived here, may be traced directly to Nathaniel Ward of Ipswich, "equally distinguished as author, preacher, jurist, and scholar." He was at this time at work upon the "Body of Liberties," which has justly been styled "the foundation stone of our State's independent sovereignty" and in commemoration of his great services to the State, a mural tablet will soon be placed in the Court House at Salem. Casting about for a promising opening for his son, John Ward, just come from England, and his son-in-law, Dr. Giles Firmin, that the hamlets along the coast, already crowded with the recent large accessions from the mother country, could no longer furnish, his mind turned to the unoccupied wilderness along the Merrimack.

With the zeal and skill of one in dead earnest, during the winter of 1639–40, he plied Governor Winthrop with letters, ably seconded by Firmin. In the May following, in conjunction with Newbury men, he petitioned the General Court on the subject of his settlement. A favorable answer

is returned, provided the petitioners make choice of a locality "within three weeks from the 21st present, and build there before the next Court." No letter, no record in diary or chronicle, has yet been found, by which to fix the precise date of the settlement of Haverhill. Under the limitations of the grant, however, there was need for haste. It must therefore have been early in June, 1640, that twelve resolute men from Newbury and Ipswich, having toilsomely worked their way up the river, — so it would seem — in a great pinnace, just such as Firmin wrote of, landed here upon its banks their scanty household goods, and began the work of rearing homes in the wilderness. One of Nathaniel Ward's letters contains a suggestive hint with regard to the character of these men. "Our company," he writes, "increases apace from divers towns of very desirable men whereof we desire to be very choice. We have already more than twenty families of very good Christians proposed to go with us." The names of these "desirable men and good Christians," whose memories we embalm to-day as the pioneers of our fair city, were: William White, Samuel Gile, James Davis, Henry Palmer, John Robinson, Christopher Hussey, John Williams, Richard Littlehale, Abraham Tyler, Daniel Ladd, Joseph Merrie, Job Clement, — the last four being from Ipswich.

The average moral worth and manly virtue of this little company was unusually high, as subsequent history shows. Down to the present time, the primitive "salt has not lost its savor" in their descendants, who are known among us as useful and esteemed citizens. The weight and influence of White and Clement were felt from the first. William White was a pillar in the church, strong and wise in action and counsel, a master spirit in all public affairs to almost the close of the century. His mantle descended to his son and grandsons, who, like their sire, were men honored and influential in church and town, large contributors to the prosperity of both. His descendants have been very numerous, and their impress may be distinctly traced in the religious,