

**GENERAL JACOB DOLSON  
COX: EARLY LIFE AND  
MILITARY SERVICES**

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General Jacob Dolson Cox: Early Life and Military Services by William C. Cochran

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The subject of this sketch is another man, who, without any advantages of birth or fortune, without any exceptional opportunities, achieved distinction in half a dozen walks of life, wholly unrelated to each other, and served his country well in its greatest hour of need. His career suggests the following questions: How did it happen that a man who had no professional training and no aspirations for military glory, became a Major-General and the most illustrious volunteer officer that the war produced? How did it happen that a man who had not been in the State of Ohio for eighteen months, and did not know so much as the names of party "bosses," was nominated for Governor of Ohio by acclamation in June, 1865? How did it happen that a man who had voluntarily turned his back on politics and devoted himself to the practice of his profession was appointed Secretary of the Interior in 1869? How did it happen that a man who had no previous railway experience and no capital, was elected President of one of the great trunk lines of railway in the fall of 1873? How did it happen that a man who had not made teaching his profession, was tendered the presidency of five different colleges, and became President of the University of Cincinnati in 1885? How did it happen that a man who was not a professional scientist, put to shame German professors, and won the gold medal of honor for excellence in micro-photography at the Antwerp Exposition in 1891? How did it happen that a man who had retired from public life for more than eighteen years was tendered the Spanish Mission on the eve of the Spanish-American war, and was almost forced, against his will, to accept that responsible position? These are interesting questions. I shall not be able to answer them in detail. The very diversity of his employments and achievements makes it difficult to review them in a single address. I can, however, bring out some of the facts and guiding principles of

his early life which throw light on his subsequent career, and tend to explain his success.

Jacob Dolson Cox was born in Montreal, Canada, October 27, 1828. His parents were both native-born citizens of the United States. His mother traced her ancestry back to Elder William Brewster, of "Mayflower" importation, and many strains of early New England blood were mingled in her veins. His father, Jacob Dolson Cox, the first of that name, was of German descent, though born in New York. He was a carpenter and builder of great industry and ingenuity, and had achieved a reputation for his skill in building churches and warehouses, and in roofing great areas without using internal columns of support. This reputation led to his selection, at the age of thirty-three, to superintend the roof construction and carpenter work on the great church of Notre Dame, at Montreal. His integrity, and sense of honor, equaled his skill.

The subject of this sketch inherited from the Coxes his personal appearance, his thoughtfulness, his gentleness, his inflexible integrity, and his unassuming bearing, save when some important work required driving. He inherited from his mother<sup>1</sup> a puritan conscience and religious sentiment, combined with neatness and refinement, a love of art and music, and that sprightliness of temperament which enabled him to converse with ease and to speak and write with fluency and power. We justly attach much importance to heredity and environment in estimating a man's life and character, but they, alone, fail to explain any great man. A man is quite as apt to waste his inheritance of good traits and character as he is to squander a money inheritance. On the other hand, every great man develops qualities which are peculiarly his own. I have searched the family records with great care, but am bound to report that I am unable to find in any of his ancestors,

<sup>1</sup> Thedia Redelia Kenyon.

since William Brewster, professional attainments, scholarship, statesmanship, military genius, executive ability, or scientific research, such as distinguished General Cox above most of his fellow-men. There was not a bad citizen among all his ancestors; but the virtues were chiefly negative.

His father returned to New York City in December, 1829, and entered on a prosperous career as a builder and contractor. Dolson's early education was rather desultory and incomplete. A few terms at a private school,<sup>1</sup>—where he was taught French as an extra,—a year of study under a classically educated minister, and private reading and study, under the partial direction of a Columbia College student, constitute the whole of his preparation for college. He never thought the world owed him a living, and on his fourteenth birthday entered a law office in New York City as an articled clerk.<sup>2</sup> Here he became familiar with legal forms, and studied law. Two years later he entered the office of a Wall Street broker,<sup>3</sup> and became versed in book-keeping and the methods of business. He was, moreover, gaining almost unconsciously a broad education in all that relates to the affairs of men by his daily walks up and down Broadway and along the wharves, then crowded with shipping from all parts of the world, and by listening to the talk of lawyers and prominent business men. He had for a long time a passionate desire to become a sailor, and finally got permission to go on a voyage with a captain of good reputation. He packed his "kit," stowed it on board, and then, as the Captain said he would not sail for several hours, he went down to Staten Island to take a last farewell of his family. When he returned—all in good time—the

<sup>1</sup>This school was kept by Rufus Lockwood.

<sup>2</sup>The office of Gouverneur M. Ogden, a reputable attorney, whose father was then Surrogate of New York.

<sup>3</sup>Anthony Lane.



vessel was gone, the Captain having decided to take advantage of a favoring breeze and to leave at an earlier hour. It was a great blow; but, when he reflected on the grief his mother had shown at their parting, and the steady disapproval of his father, he accepted the event as a providential indication, and renounced forever his intention to follow the sea.

In the spring of 1842, Rev. Samuel D. Cochran, a graduate of Oberlin College (class of '39) and Seminary (class of '42), was, on the recommendation of Charles G. Finney, invited by Lewis Tappan and others to go to New York City and establish a Congregational church. He met with great opposition from the local clergy, who regarded Oberlin theology as rank heresy, but succeeded, in spite of them, in attracting large congregations and building up a church. He was a man of positive convictions; his logic was flawless; and he had a great warm heart and tender emotions. He began holding meetings in the hall of a medical college in Crosby Street, above Prince, and, as this was near by, the Coxes attended his services, and the mother and two oldest daughters joined his church soon after.

In the winter of 1842-43, Mr. Cochran arranged for a series of revival meetings at Niblo's Theater, in which he was assisted by Mr. Finney. One evening after an impressive sermon by Mr. Finney, all who wished to give their hearts to God were asked to come forward. A tall stripling arose in the rear of the theater and, finding the aisles blocked by the people, came leaping down to the front, using the backs of the seats as stepping-stones. His emotion was so great when he got there that he could not speak, nor even give his name. It was Jacob D. Cox. To all outward appearance this speechless emotion was the only immediate result of Mr. Finney's preaching; but, under the preaching and influence of Mr. Cochran, he was

baptized, and joined the church the following fall, when there was no special religious excitement, and, after his failure to go to sea, resolved to study for the ministry.

A full classical education was, at that time, regarded as an essential qualification. No short-cut, such as an "English Course in Theology," was conceived of as possible. It was still thought that the minister should be the most learned man in his community, as he had been, for the most part, during more than two centuries of New England history. So, in the spring of 1846, he and his younger brother, Kenyon, started for Oberlin College. How came they to this place? Oberlin had no glee club, no football team, no baseball team, alumni associations, endowment, or fine buildings, at that time; and yet the attendance was nearly as large in 1846, thirteen years after it was founded, as it was in 1900. The great attractions were the moral earnestness of the student body, the cheapness of living, the opportunities for self-support in whole or in part,—a prime consideration with Dolson,—and it was the place where Mr. Finney preached and taught.<sup>1</sup> When the boys arrived, after a long and wearisome journey, and were assigned to a room in Colonial Hall, the dismal downpour of rain, the crude aspect of the place, and their utter loneliness overcame them, as they were unpacking, and both broke down and wept. It seemed as though neither had been so wretchedly unhappy before. Kenyon went to bed, sick: but Dolson went to the Treasurer's office and applied for *work*. In an hour's time he was regaining his composure at the bottom of a cistern, which he had been hired to clean out. *Similia similibus curantur!* When letters of introduction they had brought from their pastor to Mr. Finney and to Mrs. Elizabeth Cole had been presented and they had been warmly welcomed, and when the regu-

<sup>1</sup> So great was Mrs. Cox's love and regard for Mr. Finney that she named her youngest son, born January 16, 1846, Charles Finney Cox.

lar routine of study and recitation began, their wonted cheerfulness returned. Owing to incomplete preparation, Dolson entered the Junior Preparatory class. He was, however, so far ahead of his class in many things, and so apt in learning, that he could give more time than his fellows to outside reading, music, and debate.

He inherited from his mother a love of music, and he studied violin and harmony with Professor George N. Allen.<sup>1</sup> He had a rich baritone voice of wide compass, and joined the noble choir. He was soon made assistant conductor, and often led the choir, violin in hand.

All his work as a student was stamped with the one word *thorough*. He shirked nothing. He went to the root of every matter that was discussed, and mastered every subject that was taught. The value of his "picked-up education" was most apparent in his society work. He early joined Phi Delta and, from the first, became its leading and most active member. His fund of general information was superior to that of most of his fellows, and he was an insatiable reader. He could throw additional light on almost every subject that was discussed, and he spoke readily and fluently. He was a keen debater, logical and forcible in presenting his side of a question, and quick to see and expose the weak points in his opponent's argument. But ready as he was, he always strove to improve. Many fail in the art of *expressing* themselves; others, in the duty of *repressing* themselves. He studied both.

I find two letters written by him during his college days. In the first, dated September, 1846, we see clearly the influence of the Oberlin spirit—of that day. He announces that he has engaged a school for the winter, and adds:—  
"In the district where I am going they have no church, nor any church meeting that I know of; and, as I cannot

<sup>1</sup> Professor of Sacred Music, as well as of Geology and Natural History, and the founder of Oberlin's Department of Music.