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Sketch of the life of Rev. Levi Pillsbury

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REV. LEVI PILLSBURY.

There are few manuscripts that are not worthy of preservation and, especially, if they have escaped the hand of the destroyer for more than fifty years, they ought to pass into keeping where they will probably be taken care of. This was my thought when I rescued a bundle of old papers from that insatiable maw, (at any rate insatiable as far as literary matters are concerned) the paper mill.

Undoing the ancient green string that confined the papers, I found myself in possession of a mass of sermons preached, at the beginning of this century, by the Rev. Levi Pillsbury at "W," an initial which I subsequently found stood for Winchendon, Mass. Accompanying the bundle, or included in it, was a manuscript journal, left by the clergyman when he was a student in Dartmouth college, whence he graduated in 1798. This journal contains abstracts of many sermons, heard by him, several essays and poems read in class, a catalogue of books in the college library in his day and many pious reflections, the same continuing down to nearly the date of his death, which occurred in 1819.
The sermons are not written out in full; but are simply the headings of his discourses and give us a very good idea of the ability of the preacher. I suppose many would call them "skeletons" into which the preacher lays the flesh as he addresses his hearers. They are eighty-one in number besides one fragment. Some of them seemed to be especial favorites of the clergyman, having been preached many times, and on one I find no less than fourteen dates, he having preached it repeatedly in Winchendon and once, at least, in all the surrounding towns. These abstracts range in years from 1802 to 1819 in the February preceding his death.

Having had my curiosity piqued to know more of this man, into whose inner life I had been looking as I read the words so earnestly expressed more than seventy years ago, I turned first to my Triennial of Dartmouth College. By the way, the preacher's name does not occur in the papers from beginning to end, but on one page he mentions the receipt of a letter from his father informing him of the death of his sister, Hannah Pillsbury. The dates given along me to look in the catalogue for a Pillsbury, and there I find a Levi Pillsbury, in italics, consequently, a preacher, who died in 1819. Some of the sermons had been preached in Rindge N. H. So seeking his name in the history of Rindge I find that Rev. Seth Payson of Rindge in 1819 preached the funeral sermon of the Rev. Levi Pillsbury of Winchendon. My subject was located. A trip to the Antiquarian Hall was next in order and in Ezra Hyde's history of Winchendon I find the following in connection with church affairs:

"After a space of about one year and six months, Rev. Levi Pillsbury, educated at Dartmouth College, took the pastoral charge of the church. He was ordained June 24, 1801. He continued his labors till the period of his death, which occurred April 5, 1819, in the 48th year of his age, and 18th of his ministry."

That he was a careful painstaking pastor is evidenced by what follows in the narrative which professes to have been written for the edification of the youth of Winchendon and the adjoining towns:

Mr. Pillsbury's labors were greatly blessed to this people, and there are many now who hold his name in affectionate remembrance. During his ministry the church and people enjoyed a good degree of prosperity. There were one or two powerful (though they cannot, perhaps, be considered extensive or general) revivals of religion, which are now remembered with lively interest by the older members of the church. During the second year of his ministry, twenty or more were added to the church by recommendation and original profession.

Turning from Hyde to Marvin, I find in the latter's history many items, from which I call the following:

In town meeting March 16, 1801 it was "Voted to give Mr. Levi Pillsbury $400, for his annual salary, so long as he shall continue to be our public teacher of piety, religion and morality, the said Mr. Pillsbury relinquishing all claims to ministerial lands and rents belonging to said town." One hundred dollars was voted to defray expenses of ordination.

Winchendon was strongly Federal in politics, sometimes the Federal candidate receiving every vote cast and always a large majority. The minister was Republican or a follower of Jefferson and his school. This difference made pastor and people pull in opposite directions, and in 1807 an attempt was made to sever their mutual relations. On the 4th of May a committee was appointed to converse with the minister and endeavor to bring about a conciliation, or in other words to make him change his politics. Then it was voted to endeavor to bring about a separation. On the 15th of June Mr. Pillsbury sent in his letter, which is not on record. On the 29th of June the town voted whether the services of Mr. Pillsbury should be retained.

As I have stated, Marvin says that the letter is not on record; but in these papers I find a half sheet closely written in which the preacher very clearly defines his position. Without quoting much from it, suffice it to say, that he consents to give up his position provided the town will settle all arrearages of salary and pay him seven hundred dollars for the farm on which he lives and upon which he has made many improvements. It is impossible to say whether this ultimatum of money influenced the subsequent vote or not, but the vote stood 51 to 44 in Mr. Pillsbury's favor and Federal Christians had to take their religion from Republican lips.
In 1814 the trouble broke forth again, the clergyman warmly supporting the general government in the war against Great Britain, while the people seconded Gov. Strong in his opposition. In the warrant occurred this sentence; "Whether any alteration can be made which will render the preaching of the gospel in this town more useful." In town meeting it was voted that the preaching of the gospel in this place can be rendered more useful by each individual attending more strictly to the duties it enjoins, and the minister was directed to abstain from disseminating from the pulpit the principles which are not contained in the gospel. Mr. Pillsbury was strictly orthodox, but his non-gospel doctrines were those of Jefferson, Madison, et al. Thenceforward the minister was unmolested.

On his sudden decease in 1819 the town voted to pay the funeral charges and to purchase suitable mourning articles for his family. On the 10th of May the town voted to pay the bill presented. It included besides the usual articles of flour, sugar, meat, pay for horses and liquors, such as brandy and West India rum, "16 mugs of toddy delivered to the music, costing $4, and $3 for the committee." There was $30 worth of apparel. The coffin cost $4,—above the usual price. Though the funeral occurred in April, the 7th or 8th, there was paid to men for rum and sugar in shoveling snow from the road $1.54; cigars $1.13.

The picture which the above items present is well worth our inspection, the rum consumed by the singers and music committee costing more than the coffin in which the dead divine was lying. Some of our sighers for the "good old times" ought to be obliged to gaze on this scene ad nauseam. All honor to that old hero* of our city, in age verging a hundred, who first raised his voice against such courses. Before we have much more to say about the "wakes" held by a certain nationality let us remember that we are not fifty years away from time when the rites for the dead were sometimes turned into bacchanalian revels.

The funeral sermon was preached by the Rev. Seth Payson of Rindge, N. H., and we may conclude that the weather as well as the drinking habits was decidedly old fashioned as we read the item of snow shoveling. On the 15th of August following, the town voted $15 to purchase tomb-stones for its deceased minister. Four years later, these having been broken, the town procured others. Later still his children have set up an elegant monument.

"His death bed was calm and serene, and being asked what directions he wished to leave in relation to his family, he replied, 'Follow the leadings of Providence.' His ministry came in time to save the church from the experience of many others in the Commonwealth which lapsed into some form of Unitarianism."

In 1804 he withdrew from the Westminster Association and in 1806 joined that of Worcester which met at Rev. Samuel Austin's in Worcester. This Association has always been noted for its strict adherance to early Congregational usages. I find that he was opposed to the "half way covenant" which did so much towards unsettling firm religious faith in New England.

An incident given of his perseverance leads one to think that he must have come from the same stock as that veteran Abolitionist, Parker Pillsbury.

In 1807, towards the last of March, Mr. Pillsbury and Dr. Whiton struggled through the snow to the meeting-house, sometimes on the top of the wall. No one else was there, and they returned in the same way. Then too his attitude, when assaulted by the Federal party, partakes much of that heroic stubbornness that seems characteristic of the name.

So much as a sketch of the life of this man. Now let us see what his Journal contains. I turn over many abstracts of sermons and disquisitions on Edwards, the will, and Hopkins till I come to an essay on education, read before his college class in 1796. He begins,

"Tis education forms the common mind,
Just as the twig is bent the tree's inclined."

It is really a sermon under the guise of an essay. The man was a born preacher, as he shows in his method of illustration and arrangement. The same subject has been a stock theme for ages. Then follows a quotation from Pope's translation of

* Rev. George Allen.
the Iliad. Immediately, we stumble upon a form for the baptism of children, and then like Mr. Wegg we drop into verse as follows:

ON THE MIND.

"Immortal mind! How quick it runs
By fixed stars which may be suns,
And in an instant seems to trace
The vast expanse of empty space.

"Tis not like planets which do run
And make their orbits round the sun
More like the comets which do fly
In all directions through the sky.

The natural mind, in every station
Desires to gain the whole creation,
And could it all the world obtain
'T would still be seeking after gain."

This effusion was composed and spoken in 1797. His poem on the "Nature of Things" is quite too didactic for quotation here, but this of two stanzas, spoken in College Chapel July 6, 1797, we venture to give:

"In every paper and every book
I've ransacked well and pains have took
To find a piece, which in our age
Has not been spoken on the stage.

But all in vain! My time is lost
I've nothing found that pays the cost,
For everything that's good or queer
Has first or last, been spoken here."

We are next favored with a long essay, read before the Theological Society; but it is quite too heavy for us. He gives his notions of being called to preach, believing that men were as much inspired by that divine mission in his day as in the days of Christ. Next, he proves Hopkinessianism to be Arminianism by metaphysics; he discourses on the unknowable and foreknowledge. He defines Democracy as supreme power lodged in the people; in the hands of wise men, Aristocracy. He quotes i. e. writes at length from Rollin, so I may conclude that

in early life he did not possess the works of the great Frenchman, but copied when he had a chance. He describes the three Greek feasts of Athenae, Bacchus and Eleusis. He transcribes an essay "Does the mind act continually?" read before the class in 1797. In monosyllabic distinctness I find the heading "Hell" "A place of punishment, wherein the wicked are to receive the reward of their evil deeds after this life." Mr. Pillsbury does not tell us what he thinks about it; but he does say that Mr. Whiston thinks that comets are so many hells, and Mr. Swinden thinks the sun itself may be a local hell because it is continually burning. He gives a long discourse on the subject of oratory, mainly from lectures delivered in college. He adds nothing new. I will confess my own inability to follow some of the theological reasoning as when he tries to prove baptized children to be holy. A history of the church of Rome before the Reformation and "How the Reformation was brought into England" he compresses into less than four pages of his MS.

He takes occasion to hit the Anabaptists a rap, showing, as he thinks, the inconsistency of their professions. One passage is headed "The Rev. Mr. Bradford's Church Covenant, read to me Nov. 25, 1798," Hereupon follows a most interesting account of his own spiritual progress from a condition of indifference to a most complete reliance on the saving mercies of Jesus Christ. Were it not for a seeming violation of confidence, I would quote it in full; but words written for other times and other men and, apparently, so thoroughly sincere, I cannot bring myself to transcribe. He appends to this part the date, Nov. 25, 1798, and his initials L. P.

Here is a poem made to be spoken at the dedication of the Rowley school house, Nov. 29, 1798.

1

My fellow students, one and all
Rejoice to leave that smoky hall,
The old school-house, I mean and say
Where we have studied many a day.

2

Where lads and lasses often met
And some half froze, some in a sweat,
In such a crowd not one to ten
Could read or write or mend a pen.

But here’s the place, oh this is meet
Where every boy may have a seat,
Where smoke our eyes can never spoil
Oh this is something worth the while.

Hail happy seats! what pretty things,
More pleasing than the court of kings,
And here let girls and boys unite
In all their studies and delight.

And if you think it not too nice
I’ll give you some of my advice;
Cut not your books nor your seat
But always keep them clean and neat.

He next, under thirteen heads, draws a parallel between physical and moral ailments, endeavoring to show how each, if taken in time, may be cured. Omitting several quotations from Dr. Rush and the comments of Mr. Davis on carousals on Christmas day, I find this final entry:

“Nov. 14, 1815. Received a letter from my Hon. Father, Canaan, which brings the melancholy tidings that my dear sister, Hannah Pillsbury, is no more. She married to Capt. Daniel Pillsbury and moved to Brownsville Pennsylvania and died in August, 1818, of a nervous fever, aged 26. “Surely all flesh is grass and the goodness of man as the flower of the field!” May I have grace to improve this event to the glory of God.”

Appended to this Journal is a catalogue of about one half the books in Dartmouth College Library, in the year 1796. He gives the names of over five hundred books and mentions as many more old books and pamphlets. How certain people whom I know in this Society would rejoice at a sight of these same old books thus ruthlessly lumped off. It is obvious that in his day there was no printed catalogue, else he would not have taken the pains to write so many names. A study of the titles is not uninteresting, for these books are the ones that

Daniel Webster must have read, if he read any, while he was in college. We find Rollin, Gibbon, Robertson and the other standard historians. Commentaries and sermons are in great abundance. There are some works in Greek and Latin; a very little on Political Economy; some on Botany. Addison and Pope are there; Baxter’s Saints’ Everlasting Rest, of course. In the entire list I find but one author who can be called a novelist, viz. Fielding. He is here in twelve volumes. I wonder if those staid young men, provided our subject was a fair example of the lot, took much pleasure in Tom. Jones or the Adventures of Jonathan Wild? John Wesley appears in “Original Sin.” There is very little local history; but on the whole the list is what we should very much dislike being confined to unless the “old books and pamphlets” turned out a better lot than those named. In those days books in order to be “improving” must be of a very select character and their solidity was often entirely lacking in elasticity. Some of them come down to our day and we lay them up on shelves as interesting curiosities and wonder if people ever really read such queer things.

I have followed the manuscript of this clergyman from his Alpha to his Omega and as I have no further use for it and the sermons, I take pleasure in presenting them to the Society.