

# SIDELIGHTS ON THE HISTORY OF LOUISIANA.

By MRS. S. B. ELDER.

## PAUL OCTAVE HEBERT.

Exclusive of our two Governors Pro Tem, this gentleman was the twelfth occupant of Louisiana's highest office.

His home on the Mississippi River recalls, by its name, Acadia Plantation, the fact that his ancestors once dwelt in the forest primeval, "the home of Acadia farmers." "Men whose lives glided on like rivers that water the woodlands, Darkened by shadows of earth, but reflecting an image of heaven," as Longfellow most gracefully expresses it.

Governor Hebert was born in 1818, and died in 1886, so his life, through its nearly threescore years, saw all the vicissitudes, all the "shadows of earth," and some of the brightness of heaven.

The honors heaped upon him from his earliest youth to his latest manhood form quite a lengthy list, each one redounding to his solid worth and varied capabilities.

In 1836, at 18 years of age, he graduated head of his class in Jefferson College, Louisiana, and, in 1840, he was the head of the West Point graduates, of whom there were forty-four in number.

In 1841 he was appointed Second Lieutenant in the Engineer Corps and later Assistant Professor of Engineering at West Point, when he was sent to superintend the construction of the defenses of our Mississippi Passes.

Governor Mouton, then Governor of Louisiana, in 1845, claimed the services of his fellow-countryman, and, drawing him from the United States Army, offered him the position of Chief Engineer of the State.

In 1848 the lure of battle prompted him to join the American forces in their struggle against Mexico. He bore a gallant part in the engagements of Contreras, Churubusco and Melon del Rey. At the storming of Chapultepec and the taking of the City of Mexico, he won unfading laurels, and he received high praise from General Scott in person.

After the Texian war he retired to his "goodly acres," and thought to live "at peace with God and his neighbor." But he was called from his retirement to visit Paris, in 1851, as one of Louisiana's Commissioners to the World's Fair. And, on his return to his native land, he was elected Governor of the State, 1853.

A poetic feature of his life was the incident of being unable, on account of illness, to attend the Capital, so that the oath of office was tendered him at own home, on his own sunny farm.

How little did his persecuted, exiled forefathers, "the Acadia farmers," ever dream that one of their descendants would, under his own roof-tree, be made Governor of far-away, proud Louisiana!

Among "the shadows" of this Administration was the prevalence of yellow fever. The year of 1853 was sadly noted for being the worst year of this terrible plague. No other year, before or since, has ever equaled it in its fatal virulence and widespread desolation. Free as the State and city are now from its ravages, it is not necessary to harrow hearts by the statistics telling of its victims and its awful ravages.

Another calamity darkening Governor Hebert's Administration was the crumbling of the interior of the Orleans Theatre, Sunday, Feb. 26, 1854.

The theatre was crowded (Alas! on Sunday), and the list of killed and wounded by the falling timbers, the iron supports, etc., includes the names of well-known Louisianians.

The papers of that time announce the terrible catastrophe in these vivid headlines:

**HORRIBLE CATASTROPHE.**  
**Ecrasement des Galeries du Theatre d'Orleans.**

The performance consisted of a vaudeville entitled "Petite Fille de la Grande Armee," and its enjoyment was such that every face was wreathed in smiles. A strange noise was suddenly heard throughout the house, supposed, at first, to be upon the stage.

It was the yielding, bending of the iron supports of the upper gallery or third tier which in an instant precipitated itself upon the second tier, a part of which crushed down upon the first.

It was thought, at first, that every one in the "premises" was killed, but the result, though fearful, might have been worse—only two were killed outright, although scores were wounded, many of whom died subsequently.

Names of the wounded, many fatally, are those of families living in our midst to-day, namely: De Buys, Durai, Maloche, Pratz, Fallock, Bouligny, Michel, Canonge, Theard, Roman, Delery and others.

A brave act was performed on this day of horror, which lightens the gloom of the disaster somewhat. A young notary, Florian Mallus, was lying on a projection of one of the ruined tiers, and no ladder was available, except a very short one, by which to reach him.

Several gentlemen raised it on their shoulders, supporting it thus until his body was extricated.

Among these two names alone are mentioned Mr. Gerard, who raised the young man in his arms, and M. Lacroix, who helped to sustain the ladder down which Mr. Gerard bore the helpless form.

But doubtless every help which these unnumbered could give to the maimed and wounded was given nobly and fearlessly.

But if charity, unstinted and unbiased, can form a glorious contrast to these sad memories of that day, it must be the reading of the will of the noble Israelite, Judah Touro, which was opened about this time.

Its generous distribution of his princely fortune to Jew, Protestant and Catholic institutions makes Louisiana proud of her adopted son. His generosity has borne abundant fruit, and the Touro Tabernacle and the Touro-Shakespeare Home are among the fairest, noblest blessings. "They do not die who live in hearts they leave behind them."

Another story of this period is the visit to New Orleans of General Joseph Villamil, who, although a Louisianian had given his time and talents to the cause of Venezuela in its struggle for independence, but after an absence of over forty years from his native land he longed to visit it once more.

He arrived in New Orleans the very day an old friend of his, an honored citizen of the State, M. Alexander Prieur, was being buried. All the city regretted the death of this gentleman, and it pleased the attendants at the funeral to see the brave old General Villamil taking part in its sad ceremonies. When the coffin was about to be put into the tomb, General Villamil snatched from his military dress a part of its adornments, and, placing it over his friend's remains, exclaimed with the deep emotion of a soldier's heart:

"Not farewell, Alexander, we shall soon meet again!"

Among the reminiscences of the veteran from Venezuela he told of a battle fought in that State July 4,

1851, when to reassure those with him of success he cried aloud:

"No Yankee can be defeated on a 4th of July!"

And the result proved the truth of his assertion. It is recorded that he fought in seventeen engagements, and in each he said he felt that all Louisiana was looking at him, and this thought nerved him to the highest daring, even in the darkest moment of the battle.

My readers can well imagine how he was welcomed and honored by Louisianians, to whom bravery and patriotism are among the highest, holiest virtues.

It was also during this administration that the Southern people decried the purchase of Cuba by the United States. The reason for this desire was the introduction of coolies in large numbers into the island, and it was thought that Spain, mistress of Cuba, was, under England's pressure, about to emancipate her slaves and employ coolies as laborers.

Of course, this would affect slaveholding States most seriously, especially as Northern abolition spirits were, at that time, just "spitting fire" wherever they thought a spark would reach.

Governor Hebert, in his message of 1854, spoke thus in regard to this matter:

"Confiding in the firmness, patriotism and truly national spirit of the Chief Magistrate of the Union, the deliberate expression of the sentiments of the people of Louisiana upon this all-important subject (purchase of Cuba) would at once sustain the watchfulness of the Administration, and strengthen their hands in executing any measure for our protection which they might deem it necessary to adopt."

"Our protection," these words showed that Louisiana still believed that the constitutional rights of the States would be heeded and safeguarded. But the negotiation for the purchase of Cuba came to naught—and "protection" in less than a decade became confiscatory, and emancipation of the slaves without preparation or compensation.

It is interesting to learn that while Governor Hebert was at the head of our State, Jefferson Davis (afterwards the first, last and only President of the Southern Confederacy) was Secretary of War in the Cabinet of President Pierce. In the fulfillment of the duties of his office he occasionally visited Fortress Monroe, a military post on an arm of the Chesapeake Bay. There he was received with all the martial honors due his high position, and with fine personal attentions because of his worth and many services.

In that same fortress, a few years later, he was confined as a prisoner, with a ball and chain of iron fastened to his feet!

The abolition party had done its work, unheeding Henry Clay's earnest pleadings:

"If ever you stand, young men, in the halls of Congress dissipate speedily the smallest speck of a cloud that would seem to portend evil to any one part of the Union more than to another, and then there will be union with liberty, and liberty with union."

Mr. Gayarre tells us that Louisiana had made great progress in the construction of railroads and many other internal improvements; but, sad to say, the State had been very unfortunate in her collectors of taxes during the last eighteen years.

In which time there had been sixty defaulters of the public money—the amount thus diverted into individual pockets summed up \$271,855.

How rich Louisiana would be, and how grandly would internal improvements be carried on if public officers would only remember President Cleveland's noble statement "that a public office is a public trust," and act accordingly.

It ennobles him who holds it as such, and endears his name and memory to posterity.

Another shadow that deeply grieved the heart of Governor Hebert was that several late general elections in New Orleans had been scenes of turmoil and bloodshed. He spoke of them as great "public crimes," once unknown in the State, and, in fact, always deemed impossible.

The Know Nothing Party was largely responsible for this sad disturbance, but that unpatriotic organization died during this administration, "unwept, unhonored and unused."

When Governor Hebert's administration closed in 1856, he had the proud consciousness of knowing that the finances of the State were sound and flourishing, with a balance, not a deficiency, in the Treasury of \$442,635.

His last words to his people fore-shadowed the dark days which in reality were very near although they seemed so far.

"The wild spirit of fanaticism which has for so many years disturbed the peace of the country, has steadily increased in power and influence. It has grown so powerful that it now aspires to control the Federal Legislature."

With these sad forebodings on his mind Governor Hebert retired from office to his Acadia home, but, like his ancestors in Nova Scotia, he was called into "the midst of the strife and tumult of angry contention," and like them, "knew all the dull, deep pain and anguish" of loss, of failure, of desolation.

He was appointed Brigadier General, first in the Provisional Army, then in the Regular Army of the Confederacy.

It was not on Louisiana soil, however, that he surrendered his sword to General Granger, of the United States Army. It was at the Galveston defenses that he saw the end had come, and home was no longer possible. In the scale of fate the sword was found heavier than the Constitution, and he yielded to the inevitable.

At the close of the war he retired to his Acadia plantation, but President Johnson, successor of Mr. Lincoln, removed General Hebert's political disabilities, and he accepted. In 1873, the position of State Engineer, and later he was appointed Civil Engineer on the Board of United States Engineers for the Mississippi River.

His West Point training and fine soldierly attainments well fitted him for these responsible positions.

He lived to see his State redeemed from Federal bayonets, and to realize that its people had entered upon the road of peace and prosperity.

Perhaps it would not be out of place to say here "a good word" for that President Johnson, of whom we know so little, yet who did justice to Governor Hebert's fine character by every means in his power.

The Southern people owe President Johnson deep gratitude, and time, which unveils truth, will awaken this feeling "some day" in their hearts.

This good word is spoken by General Richard Taylor, one of the

South's most brilliant leaders. He says:

President Johnson never made a dollar by public office, abstained from quarreling a horde of connections on the Treasury, refused to uphold rogues in high places, and had too just a conviction of the dignity of a chief magistrate to accept presents. \* \* \* He had gone back to wise, lawful methods and desired to restore the Union under the Constitution, thus following the policy declared by President Lincoln in his last public utterance. \* \* \* He fought his fight in his own way, had his hands completely tired and barely escaped impeachment, the Congress meanwhile, making a whipping post of the South, and inflicting upon it every humiliation that malignity could devise.

That President Johnson, in trying to avert those humiliations, lost friends, favor and a re-election, surely entitles him to our heartfelt and grateful remembrance.