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H. P. Peet

New York Institution for the Deaf and Dumb.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

OF

HARVEY PRINDLE PEET, LL.D.,

PRESIDENT OF THE NEW YORK INSTITUTION FOR THE
DEAF AND DUMB;

WITH A

HISTORY OF THE INSTITUTION.

[Reprinted from Barnard's American Journal of Education for June, 1857.]

NEW YORK:
D. VAN NOSTRAND.
1857.

Also first published for the first time.

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THE HISTORY OF THE NEW YORK INSTITUTION FOR THE DEAF AND DUMB

HISTORY OF THE INSTITUTION

Published by the American Society for the Deaf and Dumb

NEW YORK:
D. VAN NORTLAND,
1877.

THE following memoir of Dr. PEET, for twenty-six years at the head of the instruction, and domestic management of the New York Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, and for ten years President of the Board of Trustees, was prepared at the request of the editor, to accompany a History of the Institution which appeared in the June number of the "American Journal of Education." Both articles are reprinted in this form for the gratification of the personal friends of Dr. PEET, and the numerous pupils and graduates of the Institution.

HARVEY PRINDLE PEET, LL. D.

HARVEY PRINDLE PEET was born in the little town of Bethlem, Litchfield Co., Conn., November 19, 1794. Bethlem is one of the smallest and roughest towns in the state, but has been remarkably favored in the successive ministrations of two great lights of the church, the Rev. Joseph Bellamy, D. D., and Rev. Azel Backus, D. D., both eminent as theologians, as preachers, and as teachers of youth. Dr. Backus, afterward the first president of Hamilton College, conducted in this town a family school of high character, which attracted to Bethlem several families of rare intelligence and refinement. Under such influences, the intellectual and religious tone of the society in which the earliest years of the subject of this sketch were passed, was eminently such as to favor the acquisition of that force of character, amenity of manners, and strength of religious feeling for which Dr. Peet has ever been distinguished; while at the same time, born a farmer's son, and growing up with healthful alternations of study, labor and free recreation on the rugged and picturesque hills of Litchfield County, he acquired that well developed frame, freedom of movement, physical hardihood, and practical tact that have eminently fitted him for the exhausting work of a teacher of the deaf and dumb.

His early advantages of education were few. Working on a farm in the summer, and attending a district school in the winter, and fond of reading at all seasons, like many other New England boys who have worked their own way to education, and in the rough process acquired the power of working their way to subsequent distinction, he began at the early age of sixteen to teach a district school. This employment he continued during five winters, till at the age of twenty-one, he had established a character for ability in his profession, which procured him the situation of teacher of English studies in schools of a higher class,—at first, in that of Dr. Backus already mentioned, in his native town, and afterward in that of Rev. Daniel Parker, in Sharon, Conn. He now saw prospects of higher usefulness opening before him, to the realization of which the advantages of a college education would be important. In the school of Dr. Backus he began his Latin grammar at the same time that he taught

a class in English studies. After a delay, chiefly occasioned by want of means, he went, in the fall of 1816, to Andover, and fitted for college in Phillip's Academy, under the care of John Adams, LL. D.,* father of Rev. William Adams, D. D., of New York.

As an illustration of the early difficulties that young Peet manfully met and overcame in his pursuit of a liberal education, we mention that, at Andover, he earned a portion of his support by gardening in summer, and sawing wood in winter.

Mr. Peet entered the time honored walls of Yale in 1818, and graduated in 1822, taking rank with the first ten in his class. He had made a public profession of faith in Christ some years before, and his original purpose was to devote himself to the work of the christian ministry, but an invitation to engage as an instructor of the deaf and dumb in the American Asylum at Hartford, gave him an opportunity of discovering his special fitness for this then new profession. Thus began that career which has proved so honorable to himself, and so beneficial to that afflicted portion of the human family in whose service his life has been spent.

The early success and reputation of the American Asylum, which made it, thirty years ago, in popular estimation, the model institution of its kind, was mainly due to the careful and felicitous choice of its early teachers. Mr. Peet's associates at Hartford were all able and most of them distinguished men. When we find that, among such teachers as his seniors in the profession, Thomas H. Gallaudet, Laurent Clerc, William C. Woodbridge, Lewis Weld, and William W. Turner, Mr. Peet was early distinguished in all the qualifications of an efficient teacher of the deaf and dumb, we are prepared for the subsequent eminence he attained. Within two years after he joined the Asylum, he was selected as its steward, an office giving him the sole control of the household department, and of the pupils out of school hours. The duties of this post were superadded to those of the daily instruction of a class, either alone sufficient to occupy the energies of an ordinary man. Shortly before assuming the duties of steward, he had married his first wife, Miss Margaret Maria Lewis, daughter of Rev. Isaac Lewis, D. D., an estimable, accomplished and pious woman, who proved in every sense a helpmeet for him.

In the year 1830, the Directors of the New York Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, the second American school of its kind in priority of date,—which had been for years losing ground in public estimation, were awakened to the importance of placing their school on higher ground. Seeking for a man whose weight of character, acquaintance

* This worthy man is still living at Jacksonville, Ill., at the advanced age of 83.

with the most successful methods of instruction and tried efficiency as a teacher and as an executive officer, would invite confidence in advance, and justify it by the results; who could introduce improved methods of instruction, in the school-rooms, and at the same time, order and efficiency in all departments of the institution, their attention was fortunately directed to Mr. Peet, who, almost alone in his profession, had established a reputation for equal and eminent efficiency as a teacher and as the superintendent of an asylum. The offices of principal teacher and superintendent had been separated at the New York Institution, much to the disadvantage of the institution. The title of principal, uniting the two offices, was now tendered to, and accepted by Mr. Peet. He held likewise the office of secretary of the Board of Directors, till he became its president fourteen years later. The new head of the institution thus had immediate control of all departments of the establishment, with a seat in the Board of direction itself. While such an arrangement increases the labors and responsibilities of the principal, it also makes success more fully dependent on the qualities and personal exertions of that officer, and, where the man is equal to his task will secure higher results by securing unity of will in all departments of the establishment.

Mr. Peet, entering on his new duties in New York, on the first of February, 1831, found, in the task before him, abundant need of all his energies and resources. Order and comfort in the household, discipline and diligence among the pupils, and interest and method in the school-room, had to take the place of confusion, negligence, frequent insubordination, and imperfect methods of instruction. The labors which Mr. Peet imposed upon himself at that period were multitudinous and herculean. He practically inculcated that all the inmates of the institution formed but one great family, and himself as its head, taking with his wife and children his meals with the pupils, rose to ask in the visible language of the deaf and dumb, a blessing, and return thanks at every meal. He ever gave prompt and paternal attention to the complaints and little petitions of his pupils, and devoted for the first few weeks, a large share of his personal attention to inculcating and enforcing habits of order and neatness. He conducted, for the first year or two, without assistance, as he has ever since continued to do in his turn, the religious exercises with which the school is opened each morning and closed each evening. On Sundays, he delivered two religious lectures in signs, each prepared with as much care as many clergymen bestow on their sermons, and delivered with the impressive manner, lucid illustrations, and perspicuous pantomime for which he was so eminent. He gave his personal attention to the school-room arrangements of all the

classes, and to preparing lessons for the younger classes. He kept the accounts and conducted the correspondence of the institution, and attended the meetings of its Directors. He planned numerous improvements in the details of every department of the establishment, down to dividing the classes by screens, painting the floors, and marking the linen,—and superintended their execution. And in addition to all this amount of labor, enough to task the full energies of most men, he taught with his accustomed eminent ability a class during the regular school hours.

Those who were then members of the institution still retain a vivid recollection of the wonderful powers of command which Mr. Peet displayed over the male pupils, many of them stout young men, grown up wild before coming to school, habitually turbulent, and prejudiced in advance against the new principal. Equally vivid is their recollection of the lucid and forcible manner, strongly in contrast with the style of the former teachers, in which he was wont to deliver in pantomime a religious lecture or a moral exhortation, or explain a scripture lesson. Where some other teachers were only understood by a particular effort of attention, the signs of Mr. Peet were so clear and impressive, even to those not much conversant with the language of the deaf and dumb, that they could have imagined themselves actual spectators of the events he related, and in his gestures, and the play of his features, traced all the thoughts and emotions of the actor.

The following, preserved by one of his assistants, as the first Sabbath lecture delivered by Mr. Peet in the New York Institution, (February 6, 1831,) may serve as a specimen of the outlines or skeletons of these lectures, which were written out on the large slates at one side of the room, fitted up as a temporary chapel;* the object of preparing and writing out these skeletons being in part to aid the lecturer, and in part to make the lecture an occasion of improvement for the whole school in written language, as well as in moral and religious knowledge. But no words would give an adequate idea of the spirit and power with which these written outlines were explained and illustrated in pantomime. What appeared on paper a mere skeleton, under the hand of the teacher started to life, and swelled out in full, natural and graceful proportions.

“Matthew, 19 : 14. But Jesus said, suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

“The kingdom of heaven is that kingdom of which Christ is king. All belong to it, whether in heaven or on earth, who love and obey him.

* There was no room fitted up as a chapel in the New York Institution till Mr. Peet took charge of it.

All these enjoy his present favor, and they will enjoy eternal glory with him.

This is the kingdom to which children who seek the blessings of Christ belong.

They belong to it because they are united to it.

1st, In their feelings, 2d, in their services, 3d, in their enjoyments, 4th, in their prospects.”

REFLECTIONS.

“1. Children who indulge in wicked feelings do not belong to the kingdom of heaven.

2. Children should be kind and affectionate to others, and try to lead their companions to Christ.

3. Children should not seek their happiness in this world, for they can not obtain it.

4. They who are humble and pious will go to heaven when they die, and be happy forever.

5. If you are impenitent, and do not seek the favor of Christ, you can not be admitted into heaven.”

In delivering a lecture like the above, to a congregation of deaf mutes, for most of whom, signs are far more clear and impressive than words, and many of whom are in so rude a state of ignorance that they have never distinctly contemplated many of the ideas which seem simple and elementary to those who hear and speak, it is necessary for the teacher, at almost every word on his slate, to go back to the simplest elements of thought, to define, analyze and illustrate; to adduce familiar examples, and prefer always the concrete to the abstract. In this art of adapting his explanations and illustrations to the comprehension of intellects as yet very imperfectly developed, as in other branches of his profession, Mr. Peet was eminent.

The effect of Mr. Peet's labors was soon evinced in a marked improvement in every department of the institution, which, from that day to this, has been steadily gaining in reputation and usefulness. In the domestic department, he was well seconded by his excellent wife, and by her devoted friend, Miss Martha Dudley. In the department of instruction, he had the able assistance of Mr. Leon Vaysse, who had been invited a few months previously from the institution of Paris, to which he returned three or four years later.* With this exception, Mr. Peet had for some time, to labor alone. The old teachers left within a year or two, and the selection of new ones was a difficult task, for it is not every clever and well educated

* Mr. Vaysse is senior professor and *ex-officio*, second Director, (vice-principal,) of the institution of Paris.

young man who is found, on trial, to possess the mental and physical adaptation, necessary to success in the instruction of the deaf and dumb. But in making the selection, Mr. Peet displayed his accustomed tact, and met with his wonted success. Within a few years, the institution could boast of a corps of teachers hardly to be rivaled for zeal, talent, and special adaptation to their profession by those of any similar institution in the world.

In proportion as Mr. Peet succeeded in training up an efficient corps of teachers, his labors were lightened. Each teacher, as he acquired sufficient skill and readiness in pantomime, conducted the religious exercises in turn, and took charge of the pupils out of school in turn. And after the first three or four years, the principal was relieved from teaching a class personally, to enable him to superintend more at ease the general course of instruction, and the general affairs of the institution. At a much later day, however, he voluntarily assumed the instruction of the highest class for several terms, in a temporary scarcity of experienced teachers.

Mr. Peet was soon called to experience a bereavement of the heaviest kind. His amiable, intelligent and accomplished wife, for seven years, had added to the cares of a young family, the duties of matron at the American Asylum, and on removing to New York, continued to devote herself to the general oversight of the female pupils, and of the domestic department, though relieved by her friend, Miss Dudley, of much of the actual labor. There is reason to fear that her warm sympathy with the efforts of her husband to elevate, in every sense, the institution with whose interests and success he had identified himself, led to greater exertions in her own department than her feeble frame could support. A constitutional tendency to consumption became developed in the year following their removal to New York, and soon assumed that character of beautiful yet hopeless decline, so familiar to thousands whose dearest connections have traveled this gentle declivity to the grave. Removed to her native air, in the vain hope of relief, she died at Hartford, on the 23d of September, 1832, leaving three little sons,—an infant daughter having been taken to heaven before her. Those who watched by her death-bed, remember with deep and solemn interest, that in the last moments of life, after the power of speech had failed, the dying one was able to spell distinctly the word MOTHER with her weak, emaciated fingers. Did she mean to recall to her weeping sister her promise to be a *mother* to the babe left motherless; or to convey that the sainted spirit of her own mother, who had departed six years before her, in the triumphs of faith, was hovering to welcome her

on the confines of the spirit land? In the words of Lydia Huntly Sigourney, whose little poem "The Last Word of the Dying" commemorates this touching incident:

We toil to break the seal with fruitless pain,
Time's fellowship is riven, earth's question is in vain.

But in view of this and other instances in which dying persons have been able to make intelligible communications by the aid of the manual alphabet, after the power of speech has failed, we would suggest that a familiarity with that alphabet may be of priceless value in many exigences easy to be conceived, but impossible to predict.

Three years after, Mr. Peet formed a second connection, by marriage, with Miss Sarah Ann Smith, daughter of Matson Smith, M. D., whose wife was a lineal descendant of the first Mather's of New England.

As soon as the success of the institution, under its new head, had become such as to invite public confidence, successful application was made to the legislature of the state for an increase of pupils and appropriations; and there was at the same time an increase of those pupils from families of better circumstances, who are attracted by the reputation of a school. The New York Institution became, within a few years, the largest on this side of the Atlantic; and, gaining slowly but surely, during a quarter of a century, in the confidence of the public and of the legislature, it has recently overtaken even the institution of London, long the largest in the world.

Mr. Peet did not confine himself to exhibiting such marked results in his school as should challenge investigation and inspire confidence. Feeling it his duty to use every means to secure the opportunity of a good education to all the deaf and dumb children of the state, he labored, by his annual reports and other publications, to diffuse correct information, and keep alive an interest in the cause of these unfortunate children. Almost every year he visited Albany, to urge the claims of his institution on the legislature; and on such occasions, his tact and knowledge of the world, not less than his distinguished reputation, gave him much personal influence among the members of the legislature. It was customary, when an application on the part of the deaf and dumb was before the house, to exhibit the attainments of a few of the pupils by special invitation, in the legislative hall itself; a scene always of great interest to the members, and which never failed to convince the most incredulous of the benefits of instructing the deaf and dumb. On one occasion, in order to awaken in remote parts of the state an interest which might (and did) result in sending to school several promising deaf-mutes, hitherto kept in heathen ignorance by the apathy or want of information of their

friends, Mr. Peet traveled with a deputation of his teachers and pupils from the Hudson river to Buffalo, and Niagara, holding exhibitions at the principal places on the route. A lively and graphic report of this tour is annexed to the twenty-sixth Annual Report of the institution, from which we make an extract, bearing on a question that has been raised by some, as to the propriety of public exhibitions of the pupils of such an institution.

"From the above brief sketch, it will be seen that we held exhibitions in seventeen of the principal cities and villages west of Albany, in five places repeating our exhibitions at the urgent request of the citizens. The audiences assembled were estimated at from two hundred to two thousand. Probably in all from ten to fifteen thousand persons, many of them among the best educated and influential citizens of the state, have had the opportunity, through this excursion, of acquiring correct notions on the subject of the instruction of the deaf and dumb, and of witnessing, many of them for the first time, practical illustrations of the success attained under our system.

Many thousands besides, who could not personally attend, have had their attention awakened to the subject, and have acquired some degree of correct information, through the notices of our exhibitions, published in the papers of the various places we visited. We have reason to believe that the results have been highly beneficial, and that the large accession of promising pupils to the institution, within a few weeks after our tour, is, in part attributable to the interest and attention which we were the means of awakening.

The obstacles which the friends of deaf-mute education have to encounter, are, partly, the prejudices of many, formed from occasional instances of partial failure in instructing deaf-mutes under unfavorable circumstances, partly the incredulity of others, who refuse to believe, upon report, facts as contrary to their own previous experience as is the congelation of water, or the lengthened day and night of polar regions to that of an inhabitant of the equator; and partly, the indifference with which the great bulk of mankind regard matters which no peculiar circumstances have pressed upon their personal notice.

There are thousands who regard the deaf and dumb with some degree of compassion, and hear of the efforts made in their behalf with cold approbation, but the subject has never taken hold of their feelings. They hear of deaf-mute children in the families of their acquaintances, perhaps they meet them; they advise their being sent to the institution; but the advice is too coldly given to turn the scale, when, as is too often the case, there exists disinclination on the

part of the parent or guardian. If we could infuse, into the mass of our benevolent and educated men, a more heartfelt interest in this subject,—if we could prompt each to warmer and more earnest efforts in those cases that may come to his knowledge,—if finally, the pastor or magistrate, or professional man, in whose neighborhood there may be a deaf-mute growing up in ignorance, and in danger of being left for life without the pale of social communion, and of christian knowledge, could be fully impressed with the momentous consequences at stake, and fully apprised of the only and easy means of escape, then we should have less cause to complain that parents and guardians, often uneducated themselves, take too little thought for the education of their deaf and dumb children.

In this point of view, we trust our excursion has, in many places, sown the seed which may hereafter spring up and ripen to a gladdening harvest. Many men, now wielding, or destined to wield an important influence, attended our exhibitions. In two or three places the opportunities of this kind were peculiarly favorable. In Auburn, for instance, the students of the Theological Seminary were present at our lecture and exercises. These young men are destined to go forth into the various cities and towns of the state, to exert a high moral and intellectual influence, and *ex-officio*, to take the lead in benevolent undertakings. That this body of men should be correctly informed of the extent to which the instruction of the deaf and dumb is practicable; that they should be warned against the blind enthusiasm that, aiming at too much, fails of accomplishing the greatest practical good, and that their feelings should be interested in view of the striking intellectual, moral and religious contrast between the educated and the uneducated deaf-mute, is a great point gained, and can hardly be too highly appreciated."

When Dr. Peet, (we find it easier to speak of him by that now familiar title, though the degree of LL. D., conferred on him by the regents of the university of New York, is of somewhat later date than the period we are now speaking of,) had been able to collect around him such a corps of well trained teachers that his daily attention to the routine of instruction was no longer required, he turned his attention to the preparation of a course of instruction, or a series of language lessons, adapted to the peculiar circumstances of a class of deaf-mutes,—then a very serious want. Several attempts, under the spur of urgent necessity, had indeed been made to provide such lessons; and in two or three instances, they had been printed to save copying with a pen; but these little books were of a character unsatisfactory even to their authors; and, such as they were, copies were

