



FATHER ASA TURNER.
An Iowa Missionary Patriarch.

AN IOWA MISSIONARY PATRIARCH.

BY THE LATE DR. GEORGE F. MAGOUN.

In Volume II of the 3d series of *THE ANNALS*, pp. 526-529, the present writer sketched in a few words the unique career of one of the most single-hearted and revered of the builders of Iowa, Rev. Asa Turner—known for thirty years as “Father Turner of Denmark.” Having a few years since, at the request of his family and other friends, prepared a biography of this notable Christian patriarch,* I readily comply with the desire of the conductor of *THE ANNALS* to place upon its pages a more adequate sketch.

“Father Turner” came of Massachusetts Revolutionary and Puritan stock. His grandfather was a patriotic soldier, who was at Bunker Hill and at the surrender of Burgoyne, and died in winter quarters near Albany. The patriarch was himself born at Templeton, Worcester county, Massachusetts, one of seven townships granted to soldiers of the Narragansett War, and known as “Narragansett No. 6.” It lies between Wachusett Ridge and the valley of the Connecticut, and the first house was built on the grant in 1751. The Turner place was a rock-bound farm of 160 acres, looking eastward toward Gardner, on which a hard-working farmer brought up eight children. One of the younger sons became well known as Prof. J. B. Turner of Illinois college at Jacksonville, by his connection with the grant of Congress for Agricultural colleges and the Osage Orange hedge plant. Asa was born July 11, 1799.

He fitted for Yale college at Amherst academy, the precursor of Amherst college. Mary Lyon of Mt. Holyoke was one of his fellow students. Men afterwards eminent in church and state, in law and literature, were his college class-

*“Asa Turner, a Home Missionary Patriarch and His Times,” by George F. Magoun, D. D., First President of Iowa College, pp. 345. Boston and Chicago Congregational Sunday School and Publishing Society, 1889.

mates. He led in the religious life of Yale. Of twenty-five classmates who became ministers, two took the wrong side in a college rebellion over "conic sections," Drs. Wm. Adams and Horace Bushnell. Turner stood for law and order and the government. When religious interest revived in Yale, students flocked to his room for counsel and help by preference.

Taking three years of theological study at Yale, after graduating B. A., he joined an "Illinois Association" of seven who pledged themselves to missionary preaching and the planting of a college in Illinois. The State had come into the Union in 1818, and in 1830, when this "association" of New England students gave themselves to its upbuilding, had 157,445 souls. The seven men were Drs. Grosvenor, Baldwin and Sturtevant, Rev. Messrs. Jenney, Kirby, Brooks and Turner, to whom soon five others were added, Hale, Barnes, Bascom, Carter and Farnham. Later, Lemuel Foster and Dr. Edward Beecher joined in their work. The latter became the first president of their college at Jacksonville; Sturtevant the first professor and second president, and Grosvenor also a professor. Baldwin pioneered in Southern Illinois in 1829, and later, organized Monticello Female Seminary. Turner was sent to Quincy, a small frontier town, in 1830. His last year in theology had been largely occupied with raising \$10,000 in New England for Illinois college at Jacksonville.

At Hartford, Connecticut, August 31, 1830, he married Martha, daughter of Isaac D. Bull, M. D., his youngest child, fair, gentle, winning, and well educated at Litchfield in the school of the Misses Beecher—Catharine E. and Harriet E. Arriving at Quincy (a hamlet begun some eight or nine years before) in November, he preached in the court house to fourteen hearers. At the site of Chicago there were then a dozen families: seven years later the village of Springfield became the State capital (in place of Kaskaskia) and four years after was incorporated. One frame building had gone up at Quincy: there were about 400 people, mostly from New England, who had had preaching six times in

eighteen months. The Methodists were on hand; Peter Cartwright, the presiding elder, having a district 600 miles long, running up into Wisconsin. Mr. Turner had very soon as long a range and actually twice visited the Galena lead mines to preach, which Cartwright never did. Plenty of opportunity for hard work and a good deal of it, with hardship and self-denial *ad libitum*. "One room for study, sitting room, bed room, kitchen and dairy," "the most comfortable room [frame house] in Quincy." In it, "best bureau, two tables, three trunks, six chairs, two medicine chests, two writing desks, cupboard, and several other [!] pieces, besides bedstead." "We have plenty of wood (Mr. Turner cuts it himself)." "We live mostly on wheat batter-cakes and corn-dodgers; now and then I bake a 'pone' or loaf of bread." So wrote the slight and frail-looking, but fearless Yankee missionary's wife. He was himself of large, strong frame, wonted to severe toil on a rocky farm. His college "athletics" his brother and fellow student, Jona B., has thus described: "wherever chance presented we 'rowed' with the spade and 'played ball' with the buck-saw, for our amusement, at no cost and some little profit." They were working their way through Yale, boarding themselves "at a cost of thirty-seven and a half to seventy-five cents a week." He probably never heard till the day of his death the new word "altruism;" but the philosophy of the subject never furnished such examples of cheerful, happy self-sacrifice for others, as the practical every day lives of these beginners of Christian civilization in early Illinois.

No statistics can record the manifold labors involved. Preaching, organizing churches, lecturing on temperance and founding societies for this and anti-slavery reform, hunting up scattered Christians in the wilderness, where now are a dozen populous and prosperous Illinois counties, stimulating common schools and the higher education, drawing young men and young women of promise to college and seminary from the prairies and the forests, toning up moral sentiment and public opinion in countless ways, persuading substantial, well-principled laymen with families to take up and occupy

new lands, besides benevolent industries which cannot be classified or described—these things, unappreciated, unknown, even unimagined, by millions who enjoy the fruits of them, are the broad, rich basis of the beautiful and powerful social structures of today—east of the Father of Waters.

It was in July, 1838, that this notable pioneer moved his family and home across the Father of Rivers to the little hamlet which was beginning to be Denmark. He had been there in May organizing a church with another memorable and most useful pioneer, Rev. Julius. A. Reed, late of Davenport, then his neighbor at Warsaw, Illinois. In Jan., 1837, Mr. (afterwards Dr.) Reed had preached in "Rat Row" at Keokuk, two years and a half before Rev. Samuel Clarke [M. E.] preached there in a grove.* There had been preachers on the soil before for a day, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, as far back as 1798. Dr. Reed had seen uninhabited Iowa in 1833, looking west from Commerce, "consisting of one log cabin and a corn-field;" Mr. Turner again in 1834, coming down the Mississippi from the lead mines on a steamer; in 1836 he and Rev. Mr. Kirby had explored "the Black Hawk Purchase" for missionary purposes, as far up as Crow Creek, Scott-county. "As to the country," he reported, "but one objection" (to the Home Missionary headquarters in New York city): "It is so beautiful there might be an unwillingness to exchange it for the paradise above."

Mr. Turner found here a settlement of New Englanders as he had at Quincy. Some of them had come west by his own influence. His church was the first Congregational church in Iowa, west of the Mississippi, indeed, and he was the first installed pastor of any denomination in the Territory. Giving it half his time, and half to the home missionary agency, till he was succeeded in 1845 by Dr. Reed, the Illinois pioneer of 1830-38 duplicated here his laborious life and manifold usefulness. I need not duplicate the story. He remained pastor until October, 1868, thirty years, a length of service in one church only surpassed by that of Dr. A. B.

*See sketch by Hon. S. M. Clarke, *THE ANNALS*, July, 1894, p. 456.

Robbins at Muscatine, fifty-two years, and that of Dr. Wm. Salter at Burlington, fifty years.* His last seventeen years were passed at Oskaloosa, with Mrs. C. P. Searle, his daughter. A stroke of paralysis came in 1878; death in December, 1885, at the age of eighty years, six months.

All the religious and educational bodies of which he was a member expressed by resolution their sense of the value and nobleness of his character. He had been an original trustee of Illinois College, but resigned after coming to Iowa. Denmark Academy and Iowa College, the oldest trustee of which he had been from their foundation to his death, with the Denmark Association and the State General Association, honored him as their oldest member by emphatic and affectionate testimony. No man in Iowa was so revered when he died.

What was there in this pioneer and patriarch that so drew the love and veneration of the best men of his generation? He impressed and influenced men by the power of plain, transparent, exalted character and shrewd sense. Like his father, "Old Capt. Asa" of Templeton, Worcester county, he was, "wholly immovable in all his convictions of right and duty except by processes of reason." A pretty solid foundation, that for life-long trust and honor from one's fellow-men. Like his mother, he had a quick and affectionate temperament and unbounded power of sympathy, which all mellowed into "his benign and gracious patriarchal manners as age wore on." He was a man of quaint and quiet humor, and as many good stories have been told of the enjoyable things he said, and the notably characteristic things he did, as ever were treasured touching the rare "characters" among the old time New England clergy. His hits were shrewd and incisive, but never biting. This keen sense of the ludicrous saved him in many an awkward turn of circumstances from embarrassment. Among his own Denmark flock personal and religious veneration steadied their sobriety under what-

*Dr. Salter's 48th anniversary of his installation was Sunday, Dec. 30, 1894.

ever unexpected sallies of his mother wit.* The simple, unaffected dignity of bearing that marked the fathers in church and state in past generations hung naturally and easily about him. Men received kindly and respectfully from him what they would not from others. Everybody had absolute confidence in his unselfish benevolence, however amusingly it expressed itself. The self-denial, courage, and steady consistency of his labors for his fellow men never failed. I once heard an early associate say of him to those present: "I never saw anything in him that was selfish." He was no more the "father" of all in his home-group of vigorous sons and beautiful daughters, than he was in larger assemblages. He never outgrew what made him one of the most loving and genial of quick-witted men.

Among the notable things in his active career was the stand he took for temperance and anti-slavery in both states in which he lived. The former subject had not then been so swept into the seething circles of politics and the struggles for law reform as the latter. In Quincy, on his own account and that of Dr. David Nelson—the noted evangelist in Kentucky and Missouri, and author of "The Cause and Cure of Infidelity" and of the hymn "My Days are Gliding Swiftly By"—he faced mobs raging and rioting around the church building. At Alton, just before the murder of Rev. E. P. Lovejoy, he was chairman of the meeting (1836,) which formed the first Anti-Slavery society in Illinois. Denmark was always one of the chief stations on "The Underground Railroad" in Iowa, and, being near the Missouri line, often threatened on these accounts with being burnt down. The people voted all one

*It was simply inevitable that a church and a settlement with such a leader and teacher of the highest things should become a model to others. It had all the orderliness, unity, consistency, moral and social reliability which mark the most stable of rural communities. As an index of this, the office of clerk in the Congregational church—long the only one in the town—has been held for nearly fifty-six years continuously by one man, Deacon Oliver Brooks, who came from New England in the autumn of 1838. With minute and scrupulous care he has recorded, not only the names of all persons received and dismissed, but all the deaths, marriages, and other details which go to make a complete history of this old Puritan church, and so of the town. But one is now left of those whose pastor and religious guide Father Turner became in August, 1838; but there has been a notable successive membership of Christian people like their pastor and deacon in sobriety, consistency, devoutness and elevated purposes in life. No Iowa community has had so large a proportion of them.

way—for temperance and against slavery. The pastor—there was no other for many years—was often reproached for his preaching on these subjects. When the late U. S. Senator Grimes had been nominated for Governor by his political party, then in a well-nigh hopeless minority, and the anti-slavery hosts gathered at Crawfordsville, Washington county, (1854) to find out what course their principles required them to take, a Denmark deacon was made chairman of the convention—one of the most resolute and potent ever held on our soil—and Father Turner chairman of the committee on resolutions. For the latter place it was not so much as imagined that any one else had the needful wisdom. The turning point in this historic convention is given by the writer (who was present) in his life of Father Turner, where these reform incidents are related in full. (“A Home Missionary Patriarch,” pp. 155-165, and 279-292.) Father T. had taken me to his place of entertainment. At his lodgings we canvassed the situation till about midnight—then slept upon it. The next morning, while his room-mate was dressing, Father Turner wrote on the back of a letter in pencil this unique and characteristically terse “platform,” probably now first published:

“WHEREAS (1), The Nebraska Bill is the great question of national politics, and,

“WHEREAS (2), The Maine Law is the great question of State politics; therefore,

“Resolved, That we will vote for James W. Grimes of Des Moines county, for Governor.”

Vehement debate over this for half a day. “It had been hailed with universal merriment when first read for its unexpected quality and pith; it was passed with a roar of unanimity by the most intense and vehement of popular assemblies.” “Its brevity—not likely to be imitated by such conventions!—and the shrewdness which excluded argument and epithet from it made it a chief factor in inaugurating the career of one of the ablest of State governors and one of the wisest of United States senators.”* Abolitionists, Free Soil-

*Life p. 287.

ers, and Liberty Party men, with Whigs and Democrats whose minds were made up and whose hearts were aflame against slavery, carried that platform in the election, though no one else of Gov. Grimes's associates on his party ticket was elected. The patriarch's penciled platform revolutionized Iowa on the issues of the hour.

It did more. License of the liquor traffic had prevailed in our State from the times of the Indians down. Temperance men will recall how early 1854 was in the history of the old Maine Law. There were temperance men at work all over our new State; Father Turner and Gov. Grimes had been among the first temperance speakers in the southeastern section. Mr. Grimes had not at first entire confidence that the Maine Law plank in his Crawfordsville platform would suit our heterogeneous population. But after canvassing the two southern tiers of counties through to the Missouri River, he wrote me from Council Bluffs: "After I get home and rest, I shall canvass the two eastern tiers along the Mississippi up to and beyond Dubuque; and *in my speeches I shall take ground for the Maine Law.*" He did this, with his wonted shrewdness and force. Meantime, three prominent citizens of Davenport, who zealously supported him, two of whom had been Democrats, Hon. Hiram Price and John L. Davies and David S. True, Esqs., were framing our first prohibitory law,* the main provisions of which still stand on our statute book. Political parties had not then taken sides on that issue, and Gov. Grimes's administration was signalized by its enactment.†

Father Turner's agency in originating and establishing our two oldest institutions of education, Denmark Academy and Iowa College, is on record in these pages.‡ He stands historically as the projector and leading founder of both. Paper projects, earlier and later, had nothing to do with their organization,—neither the "Philandrian" at Denmark,

*Hon. B. F. Gue's sketch, ANNALS, Vol. I, p. 588.

†See Hon. B. F. Gue's sketch of Hon. Hiram Price, ANNALS, January, 1895.

‡See the writer's sketch of "The Iowa Band of 1843," ANNALS, Vol. I, 3d Series, p. 525, 1894.

1838, the Yale project of 1837, nor the "University" proposed twenty years later than these at Grinnell. In 1842, the year before the Academy was chartered, Father Turner made the first suggestion of a college to Dr. J. A. Reed. When "the Iowa Band" of 1843 arrived (at Denmark, most of them) in November of the following year it was found to have occurred to them also (later), and they joined the college councils. The patriarch's agency in bringing these eleven young preachers to the Territory is already recorded.* To what public man in our history as a commonwealth was it ever given to start so many permanent influences of the highest character in its infant and growing life? To whom shall the name of benefactor of Iowa be generously accorded, if not to this humble-minded, whole-hearted, intensely consecrated Christian preacher, of large plans and most multifarious labors—the pioneer of pioneers?

Our historical scholars are beginning to appreciate the place of the pioneer in our national history. Says one of these:† "Civilization in America has followed the arteries made by geology, pouring an ever richer tide through them;" "the true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West," "the growth of nationalism and the evolution of American political institutions were dependent on the advance of the frontier." He distributes this into six great particulars.‡ Now that we are told§ that "there can no longer be said to be a frontier line," all the more honor and reverence should be done to the grand men who half a century ago made the advancing line of Christian civilization, as it pressed upon savage life and the wilderness, noble and powerful enough to exert so memorable and benignant an influence upon our fortunes and

*Ibid and the Life of the Patriarch, p. 223-230. He had previously brought hither Rev. Messrs. Gaylord and Reed, and afterwards others.

†Prof. F. J. Turner, Ph. D., Professor of American History in State University of Wisconsin. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," pp. 34. Published by State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1894.

‡Id. pp. 2, 13, 22.

§Census of 1890, quoted by Prof. Turner, pp. 8.

character as a people. Time alone is lacking to make them illustrious.

NOTE.—The above article was written about two years before the death of the distinguished author, which will account for some discrepancies due to the lapse of time. It was deemed best, however, to print it as it came from his own pen.

FIFTY YEARS AGO.—Fifty years ago all the inhabitants of Polk county could have stood upon the space occupied by this [Van Ginkel Building] roof. Fifty years ago, if one could have climbed to this lofty elevation, what would he have seen? A row of cabins up and down the two rivers, a few straggling cabins here and there, and a vast open space where our city now stands, dotted here and there with hazel brush and an occasional duck pond. There are a few men living today who will tell you, if you ask them, that where the Rock Island depot and the Morgan House now stand, there was a famous duck pond or slough, which extended diagonally across our city from one river to the other. All was open space as far as the eye could see, where game abounded and from which the hunter never returned empty handed. To the north, south, east and west was not the sign of a habitation, unless of a hardy backwoodsman or two who kept ever on the van of civilization. Fifty years ago, and what a change from a straggling frontier post without a name, to the modern city of fifty-four square miles and 70,000 inhabitants, with millions of wealth and a civilization of any spot the peer, with the latest improved methods of travel and communication, instead of the stage coach and the saddlebags mail. * * * A view like this is like unrolling the panorama of one's life, or like climbing a high mountain and looking back upon the path of ascent, marking here and there a camping place, a grave, a misfortune or a triumph, as the well-known spots come up in memory. It is well to rejoice at past triumphs, as it will give courage, maybe, for future trials.—*Des Moines Mail and Times*, July 11, 1895.

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