

THE PIONEER SUPERINTENDENTS OF INSTITUTIONS
FOR FEEBLE-MINDED CHILDREN.*

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The occasion of the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia, in 1876, bringing together people of all classes from all parts of our country, seemed to make it feasible for the first time to call an assemblage of representatives of institutions devoted to the care and education of idiotic and feeble-minded children; accordingly the management of the Pennsylvania Training School issued an invitation to all other existing institutions in the United States to meet at Media, Pennsylvania, which invitation was favorably responded to. At this meeting were present Dr. Seguin, who has been called "The apostle of the idiot;" Dr. Wilbur, the founder of the first American school, and Doctors Knight and Kerlin, two of the pioneer superintendents. These, together with Doctors Brown, Howe and Richards, struggled amid discouragements and doubts to carry forward the work of the magnificent institutions for feeble-minded now existing.

Dr. Wilbur received the inspiration for starting the work in this country from articles published in a British Medical Journal, depicting the work done in a training school for idiots in Paris in charge of Dr. E. Seguin. The result of this inspiration was a little school in his own house at Barre of some dozen pupils. He left here September, 1851, for Albany, New York, where an asylum had been organized and put under his charge. This school was so successful that it was transferred to Syracuse. It was at his own private school at Barre that he gained the experience which enabled him to

stand at the head of this first public institution for idiots established in this country, at Syracuse, making that asylum a model for all kindred schools which have sprung up since. He remained there until the time of his death, May 1, 1883. The institution was then in the thirty-third year of its existence.

Closely connected in this early pioneer work with Dr. Wilbur, we find Dr. Knight. Henry M. Knight was born in Stafford, Connecticut. After academic and medical studies, he commenced the practice of medicine in the town of Salisbury, Connecticut, which practice he faithfully and earnestly pursued for a few years. At or near the year 1855 he came to Barre with two others as commissioners of the state to see the institution, then just beginning to prove to the doubting world that it could live and be a success in the training and educating of the unfortunate class of feeble-minded youth. His earnest inquiries, his benevolent sympathy, led him to feel that his future calling and endeavor should be in that special direction and he soon took measures to receive into his own family the nucleus of a class which was the beginning of the now large and well known institution at Lakeville, which he so long and ably managed. He endeavored to enlist the public interest and aid of the state. It came slowly and reluctantly, but after many discouragements and rebuffs, which would have led most men to give up the project, the public sympathy and interest caused the enactment of laws, giving aid and support to a limited number of children, the state's sad and helpless ones, who had in him found a friend and advocate. He died January 22, 1880, when his institution had just entered its period of established usefulness, but the good work he began is now being carried on by others. He was a man of consecrated heart, and did his work not merely as a secular business but from purest and highest motives, and he loved it.

Also connected in the early work with Dr. Wilbur is Dr. George Brown, who was born October 11, 1823, in Wilton, New Hampshire. Choosing the profession of medicine, he was a student at Jefferson College, Philadelphia, and the University of New York.

When ready for practice, uncertain where to go and depressed that he could learn of no promising opening for a young physician, he chanced one day in the railroad station at Worcester, Massachusetts, to hear the announcement "stage ready for Barre," and immediately decided to go, though Barre was an unknown town to him. In the light of after events, he felt that a divine impulse led to this unexpected decision, for at Barre he found Dr. Wilbur earnestly engaged in solving the problem, can the feeble-minded be educated?

The good doctor had the faculty of interesting others in this problem, and when he left Barre for Albany, New York, September, 1851, Dr. Brown was easily persuaded to give up his general practice and take charge of this educational work.

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Only a pioneer like Dr. Brown, possessing exceptional qualities of mind and heart, with an unfaltering ambition to excel, could have succeeded as he did. His genial presence and unmeasured sympathy won the full confidence of parents who brought to him their little ones, so the number soon outgrew the moderate sized house with its two acres of land, where Dr. Wilbur commenced his labors. In 1853, the institution was removed to a larger residence surrounded by fifteen acres. When Dr. Brodie visited Barre a few years ago, he pronounced it an ideal institution. Dr. Brown died in May, 1892.

The first movement in Massachusetts toward the education of the idiotic and feeble-minded was an experimental school established in 1848, under the direction of Dr. S. G. Howe, in connection with the Perkins Institution for the Blind. J. B. Richards was engaged as teacher. It was afterward removed to a house in the same vicinity. At the end of two years it had proved so successful that the experimental school was converted into a permanent one.

The work was carried on in uncomfortable and narrow quarters until 1855 when it was established in its present locality. During the whole of this period, and up to his death in January, 1876, Dr. Howe was the superintendent of the institution and devoted to it his time and assiduous attention, serving for many years without compensation. Dr. Howe became interested in the work through an idiotic, blind child who was received at the institution for the blind as early as 1839. He had no previous experience whatever in training this class of defective children, but decided to retain and try to improve him. Two other similar cases of children, blind and idiotic, were afterward treated at the same establishment with considerable success.

The favorable results met with in training these children led him to infer that, if so much could be done for idiots who were blind, still more could be accomplished for those who had sight. What was accomplished has already been mentioned.

Dr. Kerlin was superintendent at Elwyn, Pennsylvania, for more than thirty years, commencing when the inmates were comparatively few in numbers and completing his life's duties when the roll numbered more than nine hundred. It seldom rests with any man to see so nearly accomplished a life work nobly planned. The great institution at Elwyn at the time of his death, in 1893, realized his ideal.

Another pioneer superintendent was James B. Richards, who was born in Ceylon Isle, 1817, the son of a missionary. His father died soon after and he came to America to be educated. His boyhood was passed in Plainfield, Massachusetts, at the home of an uncle. When the short boyhood was over, the young man went to Boston as a teacher. Time now showed that he was no common

hearer of lessons. His aptitude for teaching was no less than genius. The duller the pupil, the greater his joy and patience.

About that time, the famous Dr. Howe was projecting his institution for imbecile children in South Boston. He explained his plans and hopes to Horace Mann and asked him where he should find the teacher for such an experiment. "I know but one person," said Mann, "who should even attempt it." The young Richards was appealed to and, in a single interview, the matter was settled, his only stipulation being that he should be left free to find his methods and make his own experiments.

He then entered with absorbing interest upon what was to be the most notable work of his life. He left the wastefulness of the ordinary school teacher's ways and believed that new methods were needed. Through experiments and constant watchfulness his progress in discovery of new methods was steady.

In 1847 he went to Europe, where he visited some of the principal schools for imbeciles in England and France. He returned in the autumn of this year. His school at that time was in New York City, when a general disturbance drew away both the pupils and financial support which had come to him from the south. For the support of his family, he was obliged to take a position in the custom house.

In the fall of 1852 he came to Philadelphia and was the founder of the Pennsylvania Training School for Feeble-Minded Children, organizing it first as a private school and locating it at Germantown, Philadelphia.

In 1853, an act of incorporation was secured and under it he organized a training school, but dissatisfaction existed with his management of details and the organization fell to pieces and the institution well-nigh perished.

Mr. Richards retired to New York where he organized a private institution at Harlem which did well for a season, but reverses came and he was compelled to resort to other means for the support of his family. He was not in the work again until 1885.

Diligently, hopefully, pursuing his purpose of establishing a family home for the training and education of feeble-minded children, he was stricken with sudden and fatal illness and died February 14, 1886.

He shares with Seguin, Wilbur, Howe and Knight the honor of founding and dignifying our work in America. Who of us, whose work is so comparatively easy, would have suffered the hardships and endured the ridicule that enabled these men to give us the work as it is to-day?