

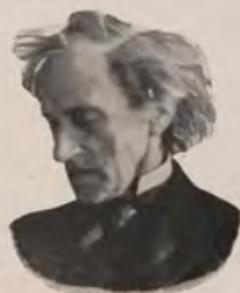


KINGSTON OF TO-DAY

Ye Ancient Little Rest

Nothing can be more natural, rational or commendable than that the increasing numbers who shall claim the Rhode Island College as their alma mater, however many stepmothers they may be necessitated subsequently to acknowledge, should insist that among the college annals some account should be found of the locality amid whose surroundings their nourishing mother breathed her first breath, lived her first decade, still lives and intends to live in prolific and vigilant maternity for all coming time. The present writer is glad to assist in answering this demand, his only claim of ability resting on the fact that he was born in said locality four score and odd years ago, and has lived there almost continuously to the present time. The first named important event occurred in the large two-story gambrel-roof house standing on the southwest of the four corners whence roads issue to the four quarters of the world. This the writer knows only from hearsay, receiving it, however, as perfectly authentic and reliable. He has no personal recollection of the time or place of his advent into the world, or of the circumstances attending his first joining that "innumerable caravan" which year by year moves on toward "that mysterious realm," but the acknowledged fact justifies him in commencing his story at that point. The house up to a recent period was designated as "the red house on the corner." For some twenty years past it has been called the "Lucca House." Madam Lucca, a noted singer of that day, spent a summer there with her retinue of attendants. Her portrait was allowed to remain on condition that her name for the house should remain. Her picture is still there, and no one now speaks or thinks of the house under any other name.

The Lucca house was built by Elisha Reynolds, grandfather of the late Hon. Elisha R. Potter, Sen., so well known in and out of the state during



the first third of the last century. It is still in possession of the family. The house is one of perhaps a dozen of the same style of architecture, built in the old colonial days. Their ample accommodations were needed for the immense families of those times. One-half of the dozen were each equal in space to a three-story house of the same ground area. Of these, three remain in prime order, and with the same care promise to serve as excellent homes for their occupants for another hundred years or more. The fourth and only one of that ancient period now standing is revered for the family name it perpetuates. It is known as the "Helme House." The honored name still lives in Little Rest, and we enjoy recalling the many who have distinguished it in bygone times until we reach that of Chief Justice James Helme, who was on the bench of the Supreme Court seven years, up to the year before the revolution. Another of these ancient structures stood well back on the northwest corner, where it describes a quadrant of a circle into the north road. In my early days it had reached a state of melancholy decrepitude, and in the late twenties of the last century the once noble, but then crazy old barrack with all its ungracious vicinage, was swept clean as far west as opposite the Lucca House, and the renovated area soon put on its present appearance. But the notable house on the corner had a history. The most interesting object associated with it in my boyhood was a little old man dressed in a style quite common then, the trousers and stockings meeting and fastened at the knee. This was Baker Greene, and his gingerbread was in importunate demand all over Washington County and in parts beyond. Jonathan P. Helme, who gave his recollections of still earlier Little Rest many years ago, claimed to hold Baker Greene's receipt, the most noticeable feature of which was that not a particle of ginger was required. The revolutionary chapter of this old mansion's history contains the most of interest. At that time it was the residence of Col. Thomas Potter. He was the son-in-law of the Elisha Reynolds already mentioned, and father of the Hon. E. R. Potter, Sen. Col. Potter, like all able-bodied men of that day, was liable to military duty, and was subject to call at any moment in some department of the service. The incorporated company known as the "Kingston Reds" was an active, wideawake body of men who, with the organized militia in general, had much to do in guarding our extended shore from the depredations of the enemy. Such service won his position and title in the militia of Washington County. Colonel Potter entertained General Washington and his staff at his residence when he was on his way back to Newport after its evacuation by



THE COURT HOUSE



THE TAVERN

the British. No doubt the Colonel accompanied the General and participated in the brilliant reception which awaited him there by the American and French forces. Colonel Potter was put in command of the garrison in the city, probably a small one, for the enemy had got about all they could expect from any part of Rhode Island by that time. Some pleasant traditions have come down to us respecting this brief visit at Colonel Potter's. One of his daughters in her old age loved to tell the story of her being taken by the General on his knee and enjoying a childish talk with him. No doubt the child remembered more of it than did the General. The westernmost object made to disappear from this clarified district of the village was a one-story gambrel-roof house where lived little old Major Lunt, whose barber pole shot well up to the sky from over his door. It was the boast of his life that his razor had traversed the cheeks of the father of his country, whether while in the army or on the occasion of the aforesaid bivouac at Colonel Potter's, history has neglected to relate. With other debris of the earlier colonial period was a dismal looking blacksmith-shop, sonorous with the anvil chorus; yet, like a gloomy ghost, it vanished with the early light of modern improvement, and with it the worst and about the last of the foul liquor dens against which civilization then and still struggles. It was in 1829 that Asa Potter, Esq., with his new wife, daughter of ex-Lieut. Gov. Jeremiah Thurston, possessed and exercised the good taste and ability to transform these ancient ruins into the attractive present.

We will hasten by the Abel Cottrel house, a plain but respectable structure erected in 1818 in place of an old low building demolished. It stands on the north side of the street, considerably elevated above the sidewalk.

The next building which arose in 1827, was the first to develop an ambition for something different from the old gambrel or barn roof, and so a style which may be called the double hip was adopted, which consisted in arresting the rafters about half way to the ridge pole, and crowning them with a box-like structure on which the hip roof was continued to its finality. This novelty was utterly destructive of the spacious accommodations which the good sense of the fathers had secured. But every man and every age to its own architectural fancy. We will proceed on the double quick to other matters.

What is now the ell of this house was formerly the main front, and contained the office of a lawyer well known in his day, John Hagadorn,

Esq., who had come with his sister and family from Dutchess County, N. Y., and died in 1813.

We have now reached that part of the main street of Little Rest which includes the ancient hotel where have been hospitably entertained the makers and administrators of law from 1756 to a recent period. The house seems to be composed of two houses worked into one by some process about the time the second court house was built for Washington (then King's County) and all business pertaining thereto transferred to Little Rest. This was the leading hotel of the village in the bygone years when three were required to accommodate the crowds of intellectual and animal life that swarmed to it on public occasions. There were no railroads to do almost hourly service, and the large barn still standing shows what generous provisions were made for the animal locomotives. It contained a spacious hall in the upper story, east end, for dining and cognate purposes, in which some seventy years ago the whole artillery company of Newport was feasted. I remember no speeches on the occasion, but plenty of singing, sentimental and jovial. They had their encampment in a beautiful meadow a quarter of a mile east of the village. The parade of the company in their brilliant uniforms with waving black plumes half a yard long, led by a fine band, was a rich entertainment to the village and neighbors. But the hall where the soldiers dined and sang has been metamorphosed into a variety of apartments for modern convenience, and feasting and singing are heard there no more.

Farewell, venerable hotel, with the life, the wit, the wisdom, the hospitality your walls have shown; "a word that must be—a word that makes us linger yet, farewell."

Northwest of the premises last mentioned, where the store of the Helme brothers now stands, was once a school house.

Imagination may do for us what the camera cannot, in reproducing the picture of the kind of edifice that would have met the educational ambition of those early times. Of one thing we may be well assured; those who were able to purchase their own education were ambitious for excellence in the three R's—reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic. Some splendid penmanship has come down to us from the ancient records, when there were no public schools and advanced ideas to lead the multitudes into a smattering of everything, and the voluntary aspirants for knowledge aimed at quality rather than quantity.

The village people were, of course, much interested in the schools, and one well known citizen liked to visit them and show the young ideas

how to shoot. His ponderous form contrasted strongly with the little readers before him. His own massive head dropped now on this shoulder, now on that, while exhorting them to hold up their heads, when reading, in this manner: "You know, my dear children, that them animals what sings always holds their heads up, but them animals what grunts always holds their heads down."

The long block that lines the street till it reaches the recess near the third court house is composed of three distinct structures combined into one. On the east is the dwelling erected in 1802 by John T. Nichols, Sen., whom I remember as a chipper old gentleman, who furnished quiet, not spirituous, entertainment to the public at that end of the house and made saddles and harnesses at the other. His theological views were somewhat mixed, for he is said to have replied to some one who ventured to ask him if he was a Christian, "Oh, no, no, no; I ain't a Christian; I'm a Quaker." The three buildings were united into one block for the accommodation of the Landholders' Bank, which was chartered in 1818 with Thomas R. Wells as first cashier, who served continuously until his death in 1853. The history of this institution illustrates how vice and virtue have progressed *pari passu* under the stimulating agencies of the nineteenth century. Its gold and silver, its bills and securities were to be protected, but the kind of protection then judged sufficient would seem to show that the science of burglary was then in its rudimental state. The vault consisted of an iron cage surrounded and protected by a thick granite encasement, which probably would have required longer time for a burglar to penetrate than his personal safety would allow, but the two thick and thicker iron doors were supposed to be fully secured by three locks invented by the well known deacon "Billy" Stillman, of Westerly, far famed both as a mechanical genius and as an inveterate taker of snuff. But the prudent policy which has always characterized this bank led to the adoption of additional and improved safeguards as fast as mechanical science discovered the means of overcoming them.

The chamber above the banking room was for many years the office of the well known legal firm of Dixon and Newell, the former representing the firm in Westerly and the latter in Little Rest. It continued in the occupancy of N. F. Dixon, Second, long after the death of both members of the firm and until his own death.

Little Rest in 1776-7, the darkest period of the revolution, acquired the distinction of having two houses for the courts and the migratory legislature of the state, the second and third of the four in which Rhode Island

has enacted and administered her laws until recently. The second was built in 1756. It followed the first, built in 1732 on Tower Hill, and was used for about a quarter of a century. Its successor stood on the spot where now stands the residence of the writer of this article. It was demolished just one hundred years after the erection of number one on Tower Hill. Number three, directly opposite, a much larger building, started with improved conveniences, but had undergone many changes for the better, when in the '90's of the last century it ceased, after a service of a hundred and twenty years, all connection with the law, but is still used by the state as a deposit of one of its free libraries, for the care of which and of the building itself the Kingston Library Association has the use of it for all congruous purposes.

We would that the past could telephone to the present somewhat of the intellectual struggles those halls have witnessed over questions of disputed jurisdiction of neighboring colonies, the repeated issues of bills of credit, the absorbing anxieties of the approaching revolution, and, at last, the trembling hesitation in view of yielding the supreme sovereignty of this little hand breadth of territory called the state of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, to the qualified sovereignty of the United States, which it was the last of the thirteen to do. There is an impressive and fascinating interest attached to the names of those eminent men who at various periods have made those venerable walls resound with their forensic eloquence. The names of Marchant, of Burrill, of Brigham, of Greene, of Pearce, of Hazard, of Potter, of Tillinghast, of Cranston, of Updike, of Robinson will live in history, and their spirits often revisit these and other scenes of their earthly labors. Legislation and courts, legal contests and judicial reasoning have been succeeded by college halls, scientific lectures and classroom drills. Instead of sagacious lawyers and judges and a mixed multitude of washed and unwashed jurors, witnesses and contestants, we have the intelligent life of the college faculty, and the youthful buoyance of the whole student body. We drop a tear of sad regret over the one; we hail with great satisfaction the advent of the other.

West of court house number three the Kings County jail formerly stood, probably where the college road now opens. Rhode Island at an early period had issued orders to Kings County to build a cage, what we now call a prison, for the confinement of offenders. The expense of such a building could not have been a burden, for its dimensions were ordered to be only ten by twelve feet. But the order was not carried out for

some years. Probably the people of the south county recoiled sensitively from the project of caging their fellow men as they would a fox, a panther or a bear. Hence orders were given that disturbers of the peace should be sent to Newport and there confined. But at length Little Rest had a cage to facilitate the purposes of justice, as administered in court houses numbers two and three, standing somewhere between number three and Mrs. French's house. This was abandoned and jail number two was built on the spot where the present jail number three now stands. Jail number two of Little Rest, the same as number three of Kings County, was a weak affair, but judged to be strong enough for the criminal tendencies of the times. It consisted of four or five dungeons, about 6 by 8 feet, at the south end of the building, and a corridor some five feet wide running along these from east to west, with an iron-grated window at each end. With the exception of these iron bars the entire building was of wood. The balance of the building contained sufficient accommodations for the turnkey and his family. It was from one of these "cages" that Mount was taken to be hanged at the foot of Little Rest hill on the west. Through his last night he had the Hon. Elisha R. Potter, Sen., for a companion. He had been counsel for the condemned man, and after doing all that man could do to save his client, when death was the penalty for much smaller crimes than now, his sympathetic nature drew him to the condemned man's side to the last. "The bravest are the tenderest."

In 1856 this weak, old wooden cage gave place to the present well-constructed prison, from which it would be difficult for the most accomplished rogue to escape. The keeper's residence built contiguous with the jail, is the work of John R. Eldred, done as thoroughly and faithfully as his father and three brothers always did their work.

We must by no means fail to pay our respects to the venerable old French house, repaired and put in its present shape in 1792 on the basis of one or more buildings that had stood on the same ground, so long that the memory of man runneth not to the contrary thereto. Some of the white oak materials of the Little Rest jail, number one, were brought into the remodelled edifice, and are still shown as objects of interest; and here it may be said that in the house of the present writer are materials taken from the court house, number two, which to all appearances may be sound a thousand years hence. The patriarch of the Little Rest branch of the French family was Gen. Cyrus French, who came from Grafton, Mass. He was a lawyer by profession, and with his legal skill he brought some new, practical methods of working the contumacious material so



THE FRENCH HOUSE



THE LUCCA HOUSE

abundant on Little Rest Hill and elsewhere in New England. These were simply splitting by wedges, which is only one instance of the ease with which being and beings of the most unpromising nature can be managed if one but knows how. Gen. French managed to secure the fine lawn in front of his house and adorned it with trees whose mature age now supplies grateful shade, thus rendering the place a delightful resort for the many who seek and enjoy the hospitality of the family. We must speak more particularly of William French, a son of the patriarch. He was from early life until his death a conspicuous personage in the village. For many years he carried on the hatters' business in the shop then standing on the southwest corner of the building as it now is. Many a tall, bell-crowned beaver has gone out of his shop to adorn the head of the dandies of his day, and a multitude of common felt hats for ordinary people. He was a man of naturally abundant resources of mind and was never at a loss how to meet an emergency. He had no embarrassing attachments to old customs and ideas, and was always on the watch for new and improved methods. When the manufacture of hats ceased to be profitable he resorted at once and vigorously to cultivation of his lands and sought and seized upon the instruction of agricultural science and experience with avidity. Were he now living he would be an enthusiastic friend of the R. I. College and an eager recipient of its helpful instruction. Mr. French was identified with every movement for the promotion of human welfare, and was prominent in the financial operations of the village. He was the active member of a company that conducted a shoe manufactory for some years. He was always in advance of public sentiment in matters of reform, and he sought to create a wholesome public sentiment instead of stupidly waiting for public sentiment to shame or drive him into reform movements. He was active in religious and educational movements and wide awake to all the happenings of religious, social and political life, and always on all occasions himself and no other. He had, without knowing it, a certain poetic quality which would well up on all occasions. He felt a strong interest in the rights of woman in those times when suffrage had not become so prominent as one of the rights claimed for them. He thought the church was too indifferent to the possibilities of female influence. A good sister having in her last sickness ordered a communion table for the church—the same now standing under the pulpit—his feelings got the better of him while offering prayer in a public meeting, and with sobs he prayed that the church might remember that "alabaster box of ointment under the pulpit."



THE POTTER HOUSE



THE SOUTH ROAD

The only church edifice in the village was built in 1820 for the use of the Congregational Society, organized at the same time. It stands on land donated for the purpose by the Hon. E. R. Potter, Sen. The same lot had many years before been given for a "Six-Principle" Baptist church by a previous owner, but it was never used for this purpose. The first deed set forth definitely the creed of that society, quoting chapter and verse for its authority. In the winter of 1856 and '57 a heavy gale overturned the steeple. All from above the bell room was speedily rebuilt in its original form, but with much better mechanical judgment by the Maxson firm, of Westerly. A new and heavier bell was placed in the tower at the same time. From 1820 there have been eight pastorates of two or sixteen years continuous, besides supplies for shorter periods. The lighting apparatus has progressed from lamp and tallow candle, which the faithful carried to and fro to the services, to the present system. The music has varied from the unorganized voluntary congregational singing led by a preceptor of a gallery choir led or accompanied by a bass viol, violin, flute, reed organ, cornet; in fact almost everything but a fife or Jew's harp, until the pipe organ was reached, of which there have been three in succession, the last of which was donated by Herbert J. Wells. For this organ an addition of twenty feet, including an organ loft and chapel, was built in 1899.

We close our views of Little Rest with a brief notice of the mansion where lived and died the Hon. Elisha Reynolds Potter, Sen., built in 1809, the year before his marriage to his second wife, who was a descendant of the Huguenot family, LeMoine, afterwards Maunezy, and in the year of his second term in Congress, where he remained until 1815.

It is a large house facing the east, with a piazza on the front and rear, from the latter of which the owner could survey his landed estate, reaching over a mile west to the Chenuxet River. The surrounding grounds have been the subject of constant improvement under the tasteful direction of various members of the family. The names of E. R. Potter, Senior and Junior, are too well known in the state, that was the object of their life-long services, to call for further notice here.

Most of what has been said in these pages relates to the village of Little Rest, which, by the request of the inhabitants in 1826, and by action of the Postoffice Department in Washington, became the village of Kingston.

NOTE: The above historical sketch is an extract from an article written by the Rev. J. Hagadorn Wells, who was born in Kingston, R. I., January 28th, 1817, and graduated from Amherst College in 1837. He was the principal of the "Latin School" from 1856 to 1862. At that date he assumed the pastorate of the Congregational Church of the village, continuing in charge until 1877. Since that time he has followed literary and scholastic pursuits. Mr. Wells has always been a staunch friend of the college, especially in the stormy days of its foundation, and the Editorial Board take this occasion to express their appreciation of his efforts in their behalf.