

PHILADELPHIA. SIGHTS FROM A STEEPLE.

Written for the North American.

No. 1.

THE SWEDES CHURCH.

Not far from the Delaware, in the southernmost part of the city, stands an old church, which, from its simple and solemn architecture and its venerable age, attracts the attention and the interest of the spectator. It is a relic of a people now melted away from the face of the country; it is, in itself, one of the few memorials we have of the remote colonial era. There worshipped the Swedes of the second generation, plain and hard-working men, dressed in vests and breeches of skin, with moccasins instead of shoes, and caps of fur. There were buried the Swedes of the first generation, who were the first to find a grave in that new country to which their hopes had been directed. When we reach its door, and look upwards on its thin, weather-stained, extinguisher-like steeple; and study its venerable shape, extended in the form of the cross; and then, crossing its threshold, find ourselves sheltered by its ancient walls; we feel admonished to fall back upon those earlier days when its porch was crowded by the people who had built it after the manner of their fathers!

The Swedes arrived on the Delaware in 1637, and in 1700, the church was consecrated under the name of Gloria Dei. William Penn, in one of his letters, thought fit to compliment them for their farmer-like tastes, rather at the expense of their Dutch neighbours, whom he said were always wanting to buy and sell. Mr Watson, in his annals, is pleased to attribute to them great honour for their skill in raising chick turkeys, which, as soon as they were hatched, were plunged into cold water, and forced to swallow a whole pepper corn, which made them "as hardy as hen's chicks," though probably in the present day, it would end in suffocation. Sassafras, they used for tea, anticipating, we believe, not a few of the quack doctors now in vogue. From the persimmons they extracted beer and brandy; and from the bayberry bushes, they made their candles, though by what process we are not told. Their houses, probably on account of the harsh climate to which they had been accustomed, were much less comfortable than those of the neighbouring settlers. While the Dutch knew well how to pile up brick walls, and so divide off the space they enclosed into snug and well sheltered apartments, the Swedes were contented with huts containing but one room, with a door which only admitted quadrupeds without stooping; with sliding lids of wood, instead of glass panes, in the windows; with chimneys made of sand, and with walls cemented with mud. But if to the house of *man* they were inattentive, such was not the case with the house of God; and none of their rival neighbors could, on the Sabbath, bow their heads under a roof so suitable for the great and solemn object to which it was devoted. They would approach it on horseback, as we are told by one whose early days almost run back to them, men and women clothed stoutly in skin, and the women, as they entered within the paling, would take off their "safeguard petticoats," as they were called, hang them on the fence, and keep them there till the close of service made them resume their forest costume. It would be a lesson to those who now suffer a snow storm to keep them home from church, or even look upon a cold wind as an unsurmountable barrier, to have seen the little congregation, as they collected. Some came down the river in canoes, others travelled, as we have mentioned, on horseback; but all, men and women, would be clothed in skin. But when they got there, they were well repaid for the labor and the trouble of their journey. Within those wainscotted walls, and underneath that doubly lined roof, could they find their own country again. The soil of Sweden was not there, but there were its strange and rude hymns, and its language, and its solemn worship. They were away, when they entered that ancient church, from the new world, with its dangers and its wildernesses, and they were back again in their native country. Go there now, and you have both church and congregation. The church lifts itself before you as it did in earlier days, the congregation rest underneath the green sods by which the walls are surrounded. You go in, you pass up the aisle, and, as you look toward the pulpit,

you see inscribed beneath it, the names of the early pastors who preached Christ crucified, in the wilderness. They are dead, but they yet speak—the house in which they labored is before them—the people to whom they spoke fill the ground by their side. It is some consolation for a christian to look upon the scene, for it tells of a people who, even in the wilderness, consecrated their first fruits to the service of the living God. Scarcely more than a line over the grave of those early preachers of the gospel remains to tell their history, their hopes, and their destiny. What they did, or how they lived, there is nothing now to tell us; but one thing we know to be certain—

Sin can never tempt them now,
Nor doubt their faith assail;
Nor their meek heart in Jesus Christ,
And the Holy Spirit fail:
But they have gone to seek the good
Whom on earth they loved best,
Where the wicked cease from troubling,
And the weary are at rest.

The church is sixty feet long, thirty wide and twenty feet in height to the eaves. So often has the patch of repair been applied to it, that except the thick brick walls, very little of the original edifice remains. Close to the church, in a garden which rivals in solemnity and retirement the grave yard that is next to it, stands the personage. Entering, and passing through the narrow gate, you find yourself out of the city, in a country grave yard, the firmness of whose soil, and the denseness of whose verdure, tell you that it holds bones long since placed within its bosom. The bird, who haunts the lilac tree, may find her nest there undisturbed; and well is it that the notes of forest music are allowed to quiver through the air which rests on those solemn graves. By the side of the church walls lies the body of Alexander Wilson. If it can be said that when a poet dies,

"Mute nature mourns her worshipper."

What must be the dirge sung over the grave of one who has disclosed to the world the beauties of a new creation, not of fiction, but of reality; and who has opened the fountains of fresh and most exquisite enjoyment? To unfold to the gaze of the spectator the jewelled throat of the humming bird,—to catch the wildest forest songs,—to trace out and narrate the history of the numberless little tribes with which the woods of the new world are vocal,—to depict their habits,—to delineate their forms,—to describe their tastes,—to unveil, in fact, a new sphere of innocent enjoyment as well as of scientific research, endowed with sights the most exquisite, and with sounds the most delicious,—these things merit, if any thing human can merit, the grateful love of mankind. If there are any who could visit the Swedes church without interest,—who could gaze without reverence upon the grassy tabernacles under which rest the people who once worshipped within its walls,—we are sure there are none who can pass lightly by the grave which contains all that was mortal of Alexander Wilson.

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WASHINGTON SQUARE.

Directly to our south-west, almost immediately under us, is a square sheet of green, that breaks in very beautifully upon the furrowed acres of house-tops around us. Even from above, the eye dwells upon it with the same pleasure that it does upon a green patch in the middle of a great ploughed field; and could we pass over the commonness of the sight,—could we allow ourselves to forget that we had seen it so often, that its fresh foliage and its rich grass plots cease to awake in us thoughts at all different from those called up by bricks and mortar,—could we suffer ourselves for a moment to stop, as the Spring sets in, and stoop over the buttercups which are shining upwards from their grassy firmaments, or dwell for a moment on the big white flowers of the dog-wood, or the tight oral buds of the wild cherry, could we do this, we might go back again to brick walks and brick walls with hearts humbled and softened. In the midst of summer, when looking over the iron railings, you see the heated air ascending spirally upwards from the still more heated pavements, it is hard to refuse to acknowledge, the

truth that such places are the lungs of great cities.—And yet how few among the many whose hearts need such breathing places, think it worth while to step so far from their rapid walk as to take, even as an alternation, a path in which their thoughts should be diverted from the dull track of money-making! Many are there, even among the most close-fisted, who, if they would stop, might unconsciously find their thoughts diverted to earlier and better days,—to the days of boyhood,—when they could join body and soul, in the earnest little party, that, stationed in the dry and scooped hollow around the roots of the chestnut tree, was flinging up to the burry treasures above, all the ammunition which the forest arsenal possessed!

There are words, however, written on the leaves and grass of Washington Square which, could they be read, would tell of a great deal more than of nut-hunting or cowslip picking. Every body recollects the story of the Eastern monarch, who, when doubting how it could be that a hundred years to the Deity was as one moment, was ordered by the magician to dip his head in a basin of water. He did, and in a flash, a life time of vicissitudes, concentrated in a second's compass, burst on him.—He lived, loved, and suffered—went through the ordinary changes of life, and even ran so far out of the usual routine, as to be on the point of being bow strung, when in the agony of the last struggle he lifted his head from the water, and heard the quiet voice of the magician, saying, "a hundred years may be as a moment!" If in the cool of the night, when the shadows have folded themselves over and over on the sky, and when even the dense leaves in Washington Square become obscure and melt in the surrounding darkness, we could take some one of the thousands of hard-working and hard-thinking men who daily pass by it without giving it a glance, and, dipping his head into the deep shades within its gates, compress its last hundred years' history in a moment before him, what a strange story he would tell! A hundred years ago, when Pennsylvania was a slave State, and when, in fact, every respectable householder had his own little swarm of negroes, Washington Square used to be set apart for the use of the slaves as a body, who, according to Mr. Watson, used "to go there to the number of one thousand, of both sexes, and hold their dances, dancing after the manner of their several nations in Africa, and speaking and singing in their native dialects." How would the man of dollar and cents shudder to see the gaily dressed troop which a hundred years would bring back! African dames, and African songs, songs of Jerusalem sung in a strange land,—snatches of tropical melodies, or glimpses of the savage orgies, would not these bewilder a brain that a few seconds before had been resting on a well feathered pillow in a well built city?

It was during the revolution, however, that Washington Square became most famous. For some time previous, its centre had been fenced in by a brick wall, about forty feet square, which enclosed a small grave yard, belonging to one of the oldest Philadelphia families, a member of which, a suicide, having been first placed there from the fact that the circumstances of his death excluded him from consecrated ground. In 1777, when small-pox and camp fever made such terrible ravages in the American army, the whole square was converted into a public grave yard, and the dead piled up there in pits which were rapidly opened, in layers of sometimes twelve coffins, as it is said, to a pit. Never, in its fiercest contests with a foreign foe, did the little revolutionary army suffer such devastation as it did when encamped about Philadelphia in that memorable winter. "The sexton told me," said John Adams, in a letter dated April 13th, 1777, "that upwards of two thousand soldiers had been buried there, and by the appearance of the graves and trenches, it is most probable to me that he speaks within bounds. To what cause this plague is to be attributed, I don't know,—disease has destroyed ten men for us where the sword of the enemy has killed one!"

In 1793, again, when the yellow fever made such fearful progress, the Potter's Field, as it was then called, was opened for the last time. Charles Brockden Brown's novel of Arthur Mervyn, gives a vivid description of the awful scenes by which it was distinguished. The dead were carried there in heaps—pits were excavated, and shafts dropped,