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DR. WILLIAM HENRY RUFFNER

ROCKBRIDGE County has produced many sons of whom she may justly be proud, men who have been distinguished as warriors, statesmen, scientists, and preachers; but I question whether any man born in this splendid old county of the commonwealth of Virginia has done a greater service for the people of his state than William Henry Ruffner, the founder and protector of the public school system of Virginia. It has often seemed strange to me that the people of his native state have not erected some lasting memorial to this great and good man. It is true that a number of schools of Virginia are called "Ruffner," to perpetuate his name, one of these being a two-room, frame schoolhouse near his former home in Rockbridge County, about two miles south of Lexington; and his portrait hangs on the walls of our county courtroom along with other worthy sons of Rockbridge; but I hope the day may come when some fitting tribute shall be made to him who has been rightly called the "Horace Mann" of the South. It is with the purpose of doing honor to this great pioneer educator that I have attempted to prepare this sketch of his life and work.

No detailed life of Dr. Ruffner has been written, but a number of short sketches were published in papers and magazines shortly after his death, and a fairly full account of his life's activities are given by his daughter, Anne R. H. Barclay, in a contribution to the *West Virginia Historical Magazine* and published October, 1902, about six years before his death. I have drawn freely from these sources, as well as the reports of Dr. Ruffner while Superin-

tendent of Public Instruction, and the Historical Papers of Washington and Lee University, for data presented in this paper.

The Ruffners who first settled in Virginia in 1739 were Germans. Peter Ruffner and his wife made their home at Big Spring on the Hawksbill creek near Luray in Page County; and their son Joseph Ruffner built what was known as the Willow Grove Mills on the same creek. In 1794 Joseph bought a large tract of land known as the Dickinson survey of Kanawha, near what is now Charleston, West Virginia. The mill property was turned over to his oldest son, David, who was the father of Henry Ruffner, so well known in later years as the gifted professor and president of Washington College. At the death of Joseph Ruffner in 1803, the Dickinson survey was left to his sons, David and Joseph Jr., and a few years later David bought out his brother's interest and developed the famous salt works at Kanawha Salines. It is sufficient here simply to state that Col. David Ruffner, the grandfather of William Henry Ruffner, was a man of unusual intellect and force of character, and is revered today as one of the most distinguished and honored of the first settlers of West Virginia.

Dr. Henry Ruffner, David's oldest son, showed from his earliest days a love of books and a great desire for knowledge, so his father yielded to his wishes and gave him a thorough education. After taking his A. B. degree at Washington College in 1813 and studying theology under Dr. Baxter for a year, he was licensed to preach in 1815. From 1819 until his final resignation in 1848, he was connected with Washington College, serving as president during the last twelve years. In 1819 he married Miss Sarah Lyle, a daughter of Captain William

Lyle, a well-to-do farmer of Rockbridge County, living about four miles north of Lexington. She is said to have been a woman of great charm of manner and personal beauty and a fine conversationalist.

William Henry Ruffner was born in Lexington, Va., February 11, 1824, and spent the years of his youth and early manhood on the campus of Washington College, except for short visits to his grandfather at Kanawha Salines about once a year. At the age of 18, young Ruffner graduated from Washington College with the degree of A. B. In those early days it was the custom for the honor graduates to deliver an oration at the commencement exercises, and he chose as his subject "The Power of Knowledge." It is rather interesting to note that Jas. L. Kemper, who graduated at the same time and was later Governor of Virginia while Dr. Ruffner was Superintendent of Public Instruction, the two serving together on the State Board of Education, discussed in his oration "The Need of a Public School System in Virginia." Ruffner continued his studies as a graduate student, receiving the degree of Master of Arts in 1845, and delivered at this time an oration on "War," in which he suggested the settlement of all international difficulties by means of a court of nations.

As a young man Ruffner was greatly interested in church and temperance work and is said to have organized the first colored Sunday school in Lexington in 1845, where about 100 colored people were taught the fundamentals of religion by white teachers. This was probably the beginning of the Negro Sunday school which Stonewall Jackson taught at a later date. In the fall of 1845 he entered Union Theological Seminary at Hampden-Sidney, Va., and later studied theology at Princeton, N. J. In the early days of 1847 he had such a serious breakdown in health that he had to give up all work and come back to Virginia for complete rest and out-door living for a year or more. He was licensed to preach in

1848 and took up work in the mountains around Lexington. The next year he preached for a short time at Charlotte Court House and in September became chaplain at the University of Virginia, attending lectures in Moral Philosophy at the same time under the famous theologian, Dr. Wm. H. McGuffey. In 1851 he became pastor of quite a large church in Philadelphia, where he worked with marked success for 18 months, when he had to resign on account of serious throat trouble. We next find him devoting most of his time to farming in Rockingham County, Va., where on account of poor health he lived an out-of-door life for a number of years. In 1863 he came back to Lexington and Rockbridge County, the place of his nativity, to live among the people dear to his heart and where he could look out upon the hills and mountains that he loved so well.

Prior to the war Dr. Ruffner was a "strong anti-slavery Union man," but after Lincoln's proclamation his daughter states that his sympathies were with his own state and people. He was deeply interested all his life in the welfare and uplift and education of the Negro race. While in Philadelphia he was an active member of the board of directors of the African Colonization Society and in his office of Superintendent of Public Instruction he always favored a fair distribution of public funds for Negro schools. He discussed at great length in his first annual report as State Superintendent of Schools (1871) the subject of the Education of the Negro, maintaining that "every reason for educating the whites applied equally to educating the blacks; and that whilst it was necessary to educate the races in separate schools there should be no discrimination in respect to their schools as to management, usefulness, and efficiency." I quote also the following sentence from this report: "What the Negroes will be in the presence of our children, how far they will be a blessing or a curse, what proportion will have gone up-

ward, and how large a proportion will have gone downward, how much they, in connection with other races, may change our politics, our burdens, our public morals, our prosperity, our very forms of government, depends, under God, upon what is done for them, and what is left undone."

The biggest work of Dr. Ruffner's long and useful life was the organization and development of the public school system of Virginia. When Virginia was readmitted into the Union in 1869, the Underwood Constitution provided for a universal elementary school education at public expense; and it became the first duty of the legislature of 1869-70 to elect a Superintendent of Public Instruction and to pass the necessary school laws for inaugurating the free school system.

At this time Dr. Ruffner was living at "Tribrook," his country home about two miles south of Lexington. He had been deeply interested in the subject of public education for many years and his great desire that the new school system should be a success induced him to become a candidate for the office of State Superintendent of Schools.

It might be well to note here that a state system of free schools had been passed by the Virginia legislature as early as 1796, fostered by Thos. Jefferson, but it proved a total failure. Again in 1810 popular education was undertaken by the state but with very poor success. Still later, in 1846, Virginia tried an optional *County System* of free schools, but this likewise met with practical failure. The truth is that a large part of the wealthier and better men of the state were opposed to educating the masses of the people and maintained that education was a luxury only intended for the well-to-do who were able and willing to pay for it.

Educational development in America, as Virgil E. Dickson has stated, may be divided into three periods:

I. *The Colonial period*, when only the

few who had money received an education, and during this period Jones would argue, "You might just as well demand my plow to plow Smith's field as take my money to educate Smith's children."

II. *The period of optional free schools* for those who wished them, the arguments being that as each person is responsible for his soul's salvation, therefore everyone should have at least a chance to learn to read his Bible.

III. *The period of compulsory education*. Illiteracy is a crime against the state and therefore parents must be made to send their children to school in order to fit them for citizenship. At the present time we are with a slow and hesitating step entering upon this third period in the State of Virginia.

When the Conservative caucus of the legislature met, Dr. Ruffner received the nomination over 14 other candidates for the position and was elected without difficulty, receiving the hearty support of the Conservative party and most of the Republican votes. Dr. Ruffner had been closely associated with Gen. Robert E. Lee for several years as a member of the board of trustees of Washington College and attributed his election in large measure to a letter of endorsement written by Gen. Lee, which was read to the caucus by Hon. Wm. A. Anderson, at that time a state senator from Rockbridge, in nominating Dr. Ruffner for the position. Some one has said that Gen. Lee's wise judgment and foresight was never better justified than in the selection of Dr. Ruffner for this position.

The legislature at once requested Dr. Ruffner to draft an outline plan for the new school system and present it in 30 days as required by the constitution. This he did in such a full and satisfactory way to the committee on schools and colleges, that at their request he put his plan in shape as a bill of some forty pages, which was passed by the legislature and became the school law of Virginia.

How well Dr. Ruffner did this work is evidenced by the fact that these laws, with very few changes and amendments, served to govern the schools of Virginia for about fifty years and were used as the basis of the school systems of many of the Southern States. He believed in the small units of local school districts directed by three district trustees, having a county superintendent as the official head, the local school tax being used for the schools in the district in which it was levied. It was not until the last meeting of the legislature that the main body of our school laws were revised and the "County Unit" system adopted. In the minds of many thoughtful men there is grave doubt as to whether the new "County Plan" of management will be an improvement over the old "District School."

The job undertaken by our first superintendent was a big one—not only did he draw up the laws and inaugurate the school system, outlining the course of study and selecting the county and city superintendents; but what was most important of all, he had to see that the school funds were not diverted and to educate the majority of the intelligent people of the state to an appreciation of what the free school system could accomplish.

It is difficult for people of the present time, when the public schools are patronized and supported by all classes, to realize the stubborn opposition that existed to the system during the first ten years of its development. Dr. Ruffner was a forceful speaker and wonderfully clear and convincing in debate. He defended the school system with great vigor both in the press and from the public platform whenever it was assailed; and it was seldom that his opponent was not worsted. His famous debate with Dr. Robert L. Dabney of Union Seminary, who was bitterly opposed to the free school system, was carried on through the public press of the state for many weeks and was read by both sides with avidity. Such discussions as this, together with public addresses made

by Dr. Ruffner at teachers' institutes, etc., throughout the length and breadth of the state, rapidly informed the people of the merits of the new system, resulting in a steady growth of the schools in popular support. It was certainly fortunate for Virginia that we had a man of Dr. Ruffner's courage and ability to defend the public schools in those early days and put them on a successful working basis, before he retired with the change of state politics in 1882. By this time both the people and the press were strongly behind the school system and ready to support it with public funds. Among the men who were heartily behind Dr. Ruffner during this critical period in the school's development were Hon. Wm. A. Anderson, mentioned above as senator from Rockbridge and nominating Dr. Ruffner; Prof. John L. Campbell, who served as the first superintendent of schools for Rockbridge County; and Col. Edmund Pendleton of Botetourt, who later moved to Lexington and died here honored and loved by all. Lexington indeed played a most honorable part in the development of public education in Virginia.

The eleven annual reports issued by Dr. Ruffner as Superintendent of Public Instruction make a valuable compendium of the early history of education in Virginia. In these reports he discusses pretty much every phase and problem connected with education from the earliest days till the close of his administration. In his final report he states that "The Virginia school system has been pointed to as a model, and Virginia School Reports have been quoted as high authority in England, and were honored with a diploma from the Republic of Chile."

In his first report will be found a full account of the origin and history of the Literary Fund and also a good account of the Geo. Peabody donation for education in the South. In his report for 1873 will be found historical sketches of all the colleges in the State and a full list of Virginia newspapers

and periodicals, as well as a list of publications by Virginia authors during the years 1867-1873. No one can read these reports without being impressed with the wonderful amount of valuable historical data that they contain, and the wide scope of Dr. Ruffner's investigations, as well as his advanced views along educational lines.

In several of his reports he discusses at great length the use of the public lands of the United States for educational purposes, giving the history of these lands and how they were acquired, etc., making a strong claim on the part of Virginia for a good share of the revenue from public lands, as based especially on the cession of the North-West Territory. I think it will be interesting and illuminating to quote a few of his statements on this subject: "This claim is two-fold; first the old, but not the less valid, claim of unfulfilled agreement in the matter of the North-West Territory; and second, the claim that whilst millions of acres of public lands in this and other territorial regions have been divided among twenty-six states for educational purposes, Virginia, who held a double claim, has never received anything There have been received into the treasury of the United States eighty millions of dollars, the proceeds of the public lands ceded by her. If the residue should be sold at the same rate, the whole aggregate will exceed *two hundred millions of dollars*.

"Minnesota, in proportion to her school population, is enjoying as large a school revenue from Federal bounty as Virginia is now raising from her state tax, and nearly 3,000,000 acres of her school lands yet remain unsold."

Dr. Ruffner also quotes Commodore Maury as saying:

"In 1780 the Congress of the United States pressed Virginia to surrender the North-West Territory, now composing the States of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, to the General Government,

reminding her how indispensably necessary such a cession was, to establish the Federal Union on a fixed and permanent basis.

"Virginia listened to the appeal, and granted the loan on the expressed condition (among others) that the lands within the territory so ceded should be considered as a common fund, for the use and benefit of all the States (Virginia included), and should be faithfully and bona fide disposed of for no other use or purpose whatever."

We can readily see where a large part of the school revenue in the states of the west has come from; but Dr. Ruffner, like other statesmen of the Old Dominion, failed to get a share of these public lands for the Mother State.

Dr. Ruffner was very firm in his opinions regarding educational questions and when he took a stand he fought to the bitter end. Many of his ideas were too advanced for the people of his day, and he made a great many enemies during his term of office; but when he retired after twelve years of faithful service, he had the satisfaction of knowing that the large mass of the people approved his work and that the schools of Virginia were too firmly established in the hearts of the best citizens to be seriously damaged by his personal enemies.

Mr. E. C. Glass, Superintendent of the City Schools of Lynchburg, a man who has been in active public school work for a longer time than probably any other man in the state, some years ago paid the following tribute to Dr. Ruffner:

"It is fair to say that the superiority of the Virginia school system is due mainly to the well perfected shape it assumed in the beginning under the moulding hand of Dr. Ruffner. No more perfect piece of machinery was ever turned out in so short a time, or set going with so much ease. In mental force, scholarship, and gifts of speech; in powers of organization, in executive ability and professional zeal, no state has ever had a chief executive school officer

superior to Virginia's first Superintendent of Public Instruction. What our schools are we owe chiefly to him."

Dr. Ruffner maintained that teaching is a high technical profession and that for good results in her work the public school teacher needs special professional training just as much as a physician or a lawyer. At various times during his administration he tried to get the legislature to make an appropriation for the establishment of a special normal school for training teachers; but it was not until 1884 that an appropriation for this purpose was available. Dr. Ruffner was the logical man to work out the detailed plans for such a school; and at the unanimous and urgent request of the board of trustees he accepted the position as first president of the "State Female Normal School" established at Farmville, and served in this capacity for three years. In *The Virginia School Journal* for June, 1889, Miss Parrish writes:

"Under his wise, upright, and efficient management the success of the school was phenomenal. The prestige of his name gave it the respect which, as an innovation, it could not otherwise have commanded; his sound educational philosophy shaped and gave tone to its professional instruction," etc.

When a technical school for men was wanted in Virginia, Dr. Ruffner's services were again demanded; and as chairman of a special committee from the first board of visitors of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute at Blacksburg he is said to have been responsible for the entire plan of management and course of instruction in the early years of this institution.

In 1874, Dr. Ruffner decided that his active work as a preacher of the gospel was over, and at his own request Lexington Presbytery granted him a demit from the office of a minister, without censure.

From early youth he had a fondness for natural science and during his entire life he

made a special study of geology and scientific agriculture, writing many articles along these lines for newspapers and magazines. He ran a geologic section across Virginia from the eastern shore to the Ohio River and made a very complete collection of Virginia minerals, which was deposited at one time with the Commissioner of Agriculture. He claimed to be the first man to correctly locate the Alabama coal fields on the geologic scale; and his daughter states that the Georgia Pacific Railway moved their staked-out line for a distance of some forty miles in order to follow a line eight miles further north as laid down by Dr. Ruffner. After leaving the office of Public Instruction Dr. Ruffner did a considerable amount of work as a professional geologist not only in Virginia but also in Alabama, and he made two trips as far west as Washington Territory in order to examine and report on properties for business syndicates. In his declining years on his little farm "Tri-brook," near Lexington, he took much pleasure in his experiments along the lines of scientific agriculture and irrigation.

During the last fifteen years of his life he devoted a large part of his time to historical and biographical writing. The Historical Papers of Washington and Lee University Nos. 4, 5, and 6 were written largely by Dr. Ruffner and give the most reliable records we have of the history of Washington College and of the noted men of this section of Virginia during the first half of the 19th century. All residents of Virginia who wish to be well informed about the early history of Lexington and desire to imbibe a little of the halo surrounding this historic community during those days before the Civil War should read these documents. Pamphlet No. 6 will be found especially interesting.

Dr. Ruffner was a man of very imposing appearance. He was six feet tall and weighed something over 200 pounds—his eyes were blue and his complexion swarthy,

and as I recall him during his old age he had heavy flowing locks of snow-white hair. Some of us can remember the striking picture the old gentleman made, driving into Lexington nearly every day in his old high-seated buggy, with a black slouch hat on his head and a long cape around his shoulders. A stranger would involuntarily stop and take a second look at this commanding figure.

In 1850, he married Miss Harriet A. Gray, daughter of Robert Gray, an able lawyer of Rockingham County. She lived as his faithful and devoted helpmate for 45 years. From this union four children were born—two sons, Robert Gray and Henry, both died in infancy; Anne Howell, who married Mr. Howard Barclay; and Sally M., who was the first wife of Dr. Robt. F. Campbell, a well known Presbyterian minister of Asheville, N. C. Mr. Ruffner Campbell, a young lawyer of Asheville, is the only direct descendant of Dr. Ruffner living at this time.

William Henry Ruffner died on the afternoon of November 24, 1908, at the home of his daughter, Mrs. Campbell, in Asheville, N. C., and his mortal remains lie buried in the Lexington cemetery by the side of his wife and children.

H. WADDELL.

SOME THINGS UNDERTAKEN IN THE HANDLEY SCHOOLS

BEFORE taking up this brief discussion of some things being undertaken in the Handley Schools I want to avail myself of this opportunity to disabuse your minds of certain impressions concerning our system which seem to have gained statewide circulation. There is, apparently, the feeling by many of our associates that we in Winchester have become

educational Pharisees, that we have assumed a holier-than-thou attitude, and that we have drawn our skirts about us to keep them from being soiled through contact with the other school systems of the commonwealth.

Nothing could be further from our intentions or desires. Geographically Divine Providence has shuffled us off into the northernmost section of the state and has placed high natural fences around us, but that is beyond our control. Also, we have been favored by a beneficence which has enabled us to erect an unusual building and to carry out certain developments which have been denied to other localities, but just as the same sun which lightens your day and the same moon and stars which glorify your night lend a part of their splendors to us, so do the same educational principles and policies which direct you guide us in our developments. We would have you feel that we are a part of and not apart from the great growing educational system of the State of Virginia. We are not working for ourselves nor for the city of Winchester alone, but that we may develop something which any from the one-room to the large city high school may find useful and adaptable in producing more efficient educational procedure.

It has been my experience in visiting many of the experimental schools such as the Lincoln and Horace Mann schools in New York, the Park School in Baltimore, and many others, that they are doing wonderful things which are not of practical value for our schools. We face the same problems which you have—crowded classes, insufficient funds, and the other ills—and when such are the conditions, the development of systems whose expenditures seem limitless are not adaptable. Toiling under the same conditions and much of the same environment as yours, we hope eventually to give you something which you will find useful, and we give it out of the fulness of the educational heart.

An address before the Educational Conference of District G of Virginia State Teachers Association at Harrisonburg November 7, 1924.