

JAMES BENJAMIN TOWNSEND, '35

The son of William and Martha (McWhorter) Townsend, was born in Hebron, Washington County, N. Y., August 8, 1810. Having received a good accademical training, his father intending him for the legal profession, he entered the Union College, Schenectady, N. Y., where he was graduated in 1835 with honor. He spent the ensuing year as assistant Principal of a Seminary in Castleton, Vt., where he entered the Auburn Theological Seminary. He removed there two years where he finished his theological course in the Union Seminary, New York, in 1838. He was licensed by Buffalo Presbytery in September, 1839, and ordained the following year by the same Presbyery. His health was feeble, and he was led to seek a more salubrious climate, having suffered from a hemorrhage of the lungs. He removed to Knoxville, Tenn., taking charge of a Seminary for young ladies. His expectations of restored health were not realized, and he was somewhat at a loss whither to direct his steps, when General John H. Cooke, of Virginia, providentially formed his acquaintance and gave him a pressing invitation to visit him, which he did. Under the genial influences of a Christian hospitality, with rest and a careful regard to his diet and exercise, his health was restored and he felt able to renew his preaching, which he did in Goochland County, Va. In 1843 the pressing calls from the destitute places in Missouri prompted him to go to that State. He removed to Paris, Monroe County, Mo., and encountered with true courage the hardships of a pioneer life, and whilst his strength remained he shrank from no duty or toil, but labored to carry the message of life to dying sinners, but his health gave way, and he was compelled to desist.

At this juncture, he was invited to take charge of the Free church in St. Louis. This church was an outgrowth of the revival labors of Rev. James Gallaher, and was an effort to reach the masses of the city more effectually; and here Mr. Townsend labored for six years, beginning in 1844. He was eminently successful, and was blessed with frequent and large additions to the communion. The congregation grew rapidly, in spite of strong competition around it, beyond the capacity of its edifice; and a commodious structure, now known as the Pine Street church, was built under his administration.

In 1850 he was invited to Huntsville, Alabama, and at the same time to the Third church, in Cincinnati, Ohio. The latter call he accepted, and was settled there near the close of the year. But in the lapse of eighteen months, the disease of his throat and lungs made such progress, as compelled him to retire from the pulpit; and, though he survived for twelve years, he did not afterwards preach. During five years he was engaged in business in St. Louis, and then removed to a farm near Bloomington, Ill.; and in that city he died, January 27, 1865, of Consumption.

He married Miss Cordelia Dunning, of Fairfield, N. Y., September 6, 1839, who now resides in Bloomington. They had no children.

He was in person small, but very active; and entirely self-possessed and dignified in his whole appearance. His temperament was sanguine and excitable. He was endowed with superior talents; and had also the faculty of using all his abilities and attainments to the best purpose. His knowledge of men was excellent; and his aptitude for business and for affairs was quite superior. At the same time, he did not lay aside the integrity and sanctity of his character; nor did he secularize himself so as to lose in the least the esteem of his Christian brethren.

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He ever appeared to be a man of uncommon fervor and spirituality. His preaching was singularly searching, pointed, fearless and Biblical. As a result, there were numerous additions to the churches where he labored. One little passage of his life may be here related. After his licensure by Buffalo Presbytery, September, 1837, he visited his home. His preaching and ministerial visits awakened a good deal of interest, and an extensive revival followed, numbering among its subjects his own father, with three sisters and a brother.

As a pastor Mr. Townsend had many excellencies. His nature was sympathetic and tender. His feelings were alert; and he was watchful for opportunities to gain access to men's hearts. When the cholera raged in St. Louis, in 1849, though other ministers were absent, he was at his post, and carried the consolations of religion to many a sufferer. For eight weeks, almost every waking hour was devoted to such ministrations; and the same was the case in 1850. Though his ministerial life was short, hindered by disease at its beginning and at its close, still it was an active one; marked with energy, zeal, and success.

He was a great sufferer. For the last two years of his life, he was able to speak only in a whisper, and was in other respects quite helpless. Yet his mind retained its wonted activity. Particularly was he interested in the national struggle, and recognized, most fully, the import of the momentous questions and trials then before the public. Through his long years of weakness, his confidence in the wisdom and mercy of God never wavered. He seemed to enjoy, in a remarkable degree, the smiles and presence of the Redeemer. When suffering extremely, he would say, "Oh, if it were not for my Saviour, I do not know how I could endure this agony. But now I can bear it very well; for I feel as if I were lying right in the arms of Jesus." The evening before he died, when quite unable to converse, in answer to an inquiry by his pastor, Rev. J. W. Bailey, he faintly said, "I rest in Jesus."

Rev. T. Hill, of Shelbyville, Ills., writes thus:—"He was a devout man, earnest, active, practical, of fair mental ability, capable of using all his knowledge and influence to good advantage, good judgment and common sense, a pleasant friend."

From: Wilson's Historical Almanac of the Presbyterian Church
Vol. 8 p. 228-230

JAMES BENJAMIN TOWNSEND, b. Hebron, NY, Ag 8, 1810; UnionC, 35; tea, Castleton, Vt, 35-6; AubTS, 36-7; UTS, 37-8; ord (Pby), Sp, 39; tea, Kno ville, Tenn, 39-40; s.s., Goochland Co, Va, 42-3; ss, Paris and Florida, Mo, 43-4; pas, St. Louis, Mo, 44-50; pas, Cincinnati, O, 50-2; wc, do, 54; wc, St Louis, Mo, 52-7; wc, Bloomington, Ill, 57-65; d, do, Ja 27, 65.

From: Union Theological Seminary Catalogue
1836-1926 p. 2

*JAMES BENJAMIN TOWNSEND, b. Hebron, N. Y., Aug. 8, 1810; Union Col. 1835; Aub. 1835-7; Union T. S. 1837-8; m. Cordelia Dunning, Fairfield, Sept. 6, 1839; ord., Buffalo Presb., Sept., 1839; tea. Knoxville, Tenn., 1839-40; Goochland Co., Va., 1842-3; Paris and Florida, Mo., 1843-4; Free Ch., St. Louis, 1844-50; 3rd Ch., Cincinnati, O., 1850-2; in bus. St. Louis, Mo., 1852-7; farming near Bloomington, Ill., 1857-65; d. do., Jan. 27, 1865.

Class 1838.

Auburn Theol. Sem Lab.

TOWNSEND, James Benjamin; b, Hebron, NY, Ag 8, 1810; Union C, 35; tea, Castleton, Vt, 35-6; UTS, 37-8; ord (Presb), Sp, 39; tea, Knoxville, Tenn, 39-40; ss, Goochland Co, Va, 42-3; ss, Paris and Florida, Mo, 43-4; pas, St. Louis, Mo. 44-50; pas, Cincinnati, O, 50-2; wc, do, 54; wc, St. Louis, Mo, 52-7; wc, Bloomington, Ill, 57-65; d, do, Ja 27, 65.

From: Union Theol Sem. Cat. 1836-1918

Townsend, James B.
senior - "particularly unfortunate in possessing a 'glib tongue'... without a sufficient quantity of brains. "bores" Philomatheons with "stump" speeches...."what he lacks in sense, makes up in length... too much self-esteem".
Pearson Diaries V.2, pp.30-31

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