

John Hay Farnham

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(Presented at a meeting of the Washington County Historical Society.)

In beautiful Crown Hill cemetery—"Our Silent City"—as you may wander thru the historic part, known as the Old Cemetery, you will be attracted to a large maple tree, where a marble slab was wont to lean against its base.

Perhaps you are not interested in knowing the history of the march of time—then this slab will mean naught to you. Perhaps you are one who enjoys looking into the past, viewing thru the message written the lives and works of the hands long ceased from labor. If you are of this class we beg you to pause at this old tree, and read carefully the inscription on the slab, for time has almost obliterated the history chisled nearly a century ago. This is the inscription you will find:

John Hay Farnham
Born in Mass. A. D. 1791.
A graduate of Harvard University
A devoted friend to the interests of the West,
Who with
Eveleen Marie, exemplary as a wife, mother and christian,
And their Infant, died of cholera, July, 1833.
Four children sleep beside them,
Two orphans mourn their loss.

At the right of the tree stands another old stone, with the simple inscription: "William Farnham—Born 1760—Died 1829."

Then come the questions, who was John Hay Farnham? What did he do? What part did he play in the history of our community and state, that after a lapse of almost a century we of this HISTORICAL SOCIETY, should pause and pay tribute to his name?

To give you a complete biographical sketch of this illustrious character is impossible, but to present, altho in a scattered manner, gleanings for his memory, is our duty and pleasure.

From the *Washington County History* and from articles of reminiscences of Washington county, written by men who lived here in the days gone by, have come our sources of information.

John Hay Farnham was a brother-in-law of Dr. Charles Hay, father of John Milton Hay; he had come to Salem, before Dr. Hay, from New England. The wives of these two men, who were to play such an important part in the early history of Salem, were sisters, Helen and Eveleen Leonard. They lived in Harrison county, but their birthplace was near New Bedford, Massachusetts. These girls were Seminary pupils, and gained great fame by their ability in reading Latin. Thru the marriage of these sisters, was established a strong bond between the Hay and Farnham families.

John Hay Farnham was a brilliant lawyer and a speaker of state reputation. One writer speaks of him as an eminent lawyer of stout frame and giant mind. Next to Judge Benjamin Parke, he possessed the largest library in Salem. From every thot written by men who were active in the affairs of Salem at that time, we find the ability of John Farnham praised, and while not popular, every one acknowledged him a man of sterling ability.

From an old letter by Z. B. Sturgis, written in 1880, we find this:

Mr. Farnham was a graduate of Harvard University, and a classmate of Edward Everett. He had the misfortune of being born too soon for his own popularity in Indiana. Of the excellent public school system of Indiana (of which we as Hoosiers are justly proud), he was the champion before the people were ready for it. He was a ripe scholar, who spent his winters in Indianapolis, turning an honest penny, by writing speeches for members of the legislature, from the rural districts. Even a governor, James Ray, in welcoming Lafayette to Indiana, was not above availing himself of Mr. Farnham's eloquent pen.

From Frederick S. Mead, editor of the *Harvard Alumni Director*, we have learned that John Hay Farnham received his A. B. from Harvard in 1811 and his A. M. in 1821.

He and his wife were victims of the cholera, that decimated Salem in 1833, and only two children were left of his family, a son, William, and a daughter, Catherine, who were cared

for in the home of Dr. Charles Hay. They have since joined their parents.

That John Farnham was prominent in his home town, and his ability recognized is abundantly shown, for no public meeting was complete without an address, talk, or toast, by John Farnham.

On July 4, 1826, when Salem celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of American Independence, he delivered the address. His subject was "The Necessity of the Public School System in Indiana." "His position on the question of free schools and more education for the masses, was far in advance of his day," says a writer, "and for his public utterances along this line, he was bitterly assailed and relentlessly condemned on every hand." But nothing daunted, he battled manfully for what he thought was right, against all opposition.

His was the voice proclaiming the gift of education to Indiana, and from the prophecy made in his speech, we, of today are enjoying the blessings.

This story from one of the older men of our county had been told to Mr. John L. Schrum, (an attorney) of Crawfordsville, Indiana, who very kindly gave the story to me.

This is the story, as nearly as it is possible for me to give it, as it was related to me in 1899 by Mr. George Paynter, at that time one of the older surviving natives of your and my native county, a man above the average of men in intelligence and in the observation of public affairs and one possessing a most remarkable memory of historical affairs:

John Hay Farnham, an uncle of the renowned John Hay, was a graduate of Harvard Law School who came west almost a century ago and selected Salem as his location for the practice of law. He was not long in establishing a reputation as a man learned in his profession, a close student of politics and a brilliant orator. Though modest in his demeanor, he did not fail to gain the interest and the respect of those with whom he associated.

It was the custom in those days, more generally than now, for the people in each community to assemble annually in the observance of the anniversary of our Declaration of Independence and on such occasions they listened with great interest to the reading of that expression of the principles on which our government is founded. Some capable speaker was chosen to deliver an address in which the basic principles as formulated in our constitution were expounded and the topics involving the common interests of the people were discussed. Education

even in the rudiments of science, was not then considered as important as clearing the ground, tilling the soil and the establishment of homes. Mr. Farnham was among the few who were well aware of the importance of a more general education among the people in order to fit them for the responsibilities of a popular form of government, and in the year 1826 that question was uppermost in his mind.

The committee appointed for the selection of a speaker on the occasion of the celebration of our independence for that year invited Mr. Farnham to deliver the chief oration. He, with such modesty as is usual among men possessing well balanced minds, reluctantly consented on one condition, namely, that he be permitted to discuss the importance of a common school system for the recently organized state. The committee feared to concede that condition, mainly for the reason of the effect such a discussion would have on the popularity of the speaker; and it frankly endeavored to convince Mr. Farnham that the advocacy of such a policy would create a sentiment against him, because, as the committee thought, it was not in harmony with the doctrine of democracy. Mr. Farnham insisted, however; and the committee concluding that no other speaker as capable and interesting as he could be found for the occasion finally yielded and the advocacy of a public school system in Indiana was the principal theme of Mr. Farnham's oration at Salem, July 4th, 1826.

The effect of the discussion was as the committee feared. Mr. Farnham did become very unpopular for a time. The pioneers could not see the justice of taxation of their property for the education of the children of those who had no property for taxation. Mr. Farnham was, in fact, almost ostracized for a time.

But there were men of intelligence, conservative as well as progressive in those days who recognized the intellectual ability of Mr. Farnham; and it is said that for the few remaining years his services were in general demand in shaping the course of legislation in the general assembly. Not a few of the leaders among the people of those days had acquired their popularity by the reason of their military careers; and many of them were wholly unable to express understandingly their views in civic affairs. It is said that many of the speeches delivered by some of those leaders were either prepared throughout or whipped into shape for them by Mr. Farnham.

As deep and hidden waters bear the tides
That move from shore around the seas,
So on the thoughts of unknown men still rides
The Ship of State, tho' swayed by every breeze.

He was not destined to live many years. In 1833 the cholera scourge visited this state. He fell a victim to its demands and the state lost one of its fearless and most promising statesmen; one who was in his prime and just beginning to acquire the deserved prominence of the

people as well as the renown a man so courageous should acquire. While others have gained credit for the enactment of the laws which have so firmly established and developed a common school system, John Hay Farnham must always be regarded as a pioneer who blazed the way for it.

His remains lie buried in Crown Hill Cemetery and our people of succeeding generations, whose advancement in knowledge through our common school system have gained for Indiana notable distinction throughout the entire nation, can never show too much respect for the hallowed spot now marked as his final resting place.

In January, 1830, he assisted in the organization of the Indiana Historical Society, "which had for its object the collection and preservation of all materials calculated to shed light on the natural, civil and political history of Indiana, the publication and circulation of historical documents, the promotion of useful knowledge and the friendly and profitable intercourse of such citizens as are disposed to promote these ends."

From the Massachusetts Historical Society librarian, Julius H. Tuttle, we have this information that John Hay Farnham was elected a corresponding member of this society on August 30, 1831, having been nominated by Rev. Samuel Ripley.

Dr. A. W. King is authority for his name among the list of trustees of the Washington County seminary.

From the *Indiana Phoenix* of February 27, 1833, and the *Western Annotator* of March 2, 1833, we read of the celebration of Washington's Birthday in Salem, with John H. Farnham on the program. An eloquent and impressive eulogy on the character and virtues of the "Father of His Country" was selected and read by him, with a few appropriate remarks. The company then proceeded to the Union Hall and partook of an excellent dinner. After the cloth was removed, a number of toasts were given. This was given by him; "The Cause of Temperance in Washington County—Patronized by so many respectable citizens and advocates of both sexes it can not fail to prosper."

His place of residence in Salem was where the Charles Mobley home now stands. When the scourge of cholera swept thru the town, as told before, the home of John Farnham was laid low, and death swept this brilliant life from our history's page. The two orphan children were cared for in the home of Dr. Charles Hay.

John P. Scott pays tribute to these men of Salem pioneer days, among them John H. Farnham, and says:

They were of the order of men who found governments and build cities. I call them Romans, for their earnest devotion to the moral and material interests of their town and county. There is rarely found now so many men in one community. It is my habit in speaking of them to call them monumental men.

And what greater monument can one have than to have given to Indiana her system of free schools, and to have helped found and organize the Historical Society of Indiana, whose gleams thru the passing years have lighted the way for us today to "carry on" the work of his vision.

Through these years John Hay Farnham has slept unknown to the world of his great service to our own fair state. May we not acclaim him one of Salem's Monumental Men?

Thru the interest and appreciation of the Salem Cemetery Association the marble slab that marks his grave has been securely placed and will mark the resting place of the "man of the ages," in the history of Salem.