

John Irwin Morrison and the Washington County Seminary

By MRS. ANNIE MORRISON COFFIN.

In view of the awakening interest in the history of education in Indiana, and numerous requests reported from public libraries for material upon the life of John I. Morrison, this contribution from his daughter and the accompanying photograph are published in the hope that they will be a welcome addition to existing sources of information and will help in bringing about a just appreciation of one of the great men of Indiana.

John I. Morrison was born in Franklin County, Pennsylvania, in 1806. The family moved to Washington County, Indiana, about 1824. Here he taught school at Walnut Ridge and the following spring he was given charge of the Salem Grammar School. His teaching was interrupted by a year's college course at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio; he entered with two years advanced credit and finished two years work in one. In 1828 he returned to Salem and opened the Washington County Seminary for which, in 1835, he put up an attractive building.

In 1840 he became a professor of Ancient Languages in Indiana University; in 1844 went back to the Washington County Seminary where he taught for about four years. His services as trustee of Indiana University, 1847-1855, 1873-1878, and president of the board 1854-1855 and 1874-1875, are referred to below.

Mr. Morrison was also for some time editor of the *Salem Democrat*. He represented Washington County in the Indiana House of Representatives 1839-40, and in the state Senate 1847-48, 1848-49, 1849-50. He was a member of the state Constitutional Convention, 1850, where he served as chairman of the committee on education. In this position he rendered invaluable services; he is said to have been responsible for the creation of the office of State Superintendent of Public Instruction and largely so for the provision for a "uniform system of common schools."¹

During the Civil war he was appointed, by President Lincoln, Commissioner of Enrollment. He was elected state Treasurer in 1864 and changed his residence to Indianapolis. In 1872 he removed to Knightstown, where he continued his public services as township trustee and as secretary of the school board. He died in 1882.—EDITOR.

¹ J. P. Dunn; *Indiana and Indianans* (Chicago, 1919), I, 487-491.

In a memorial address delivered at the Old Settlers' meeting at Salem, August 9, 1883, upon the life and character of John I. Morrison, Barnabas C. Hobbs said:²

On the 17th day of July, 1882, telegrams were wired to relatives and friends and to the daily journals that the Hon. John Irwin Morrison had ceased to live on earth. There are men and women from the Atlantic to the Pacific and especially among the teeming population of the Mississippi Valley in whom the sad tidings awakened deep and loved memories. It is fit even now to attempt a sketch of a character so well and honorably known, to give at least a fragmentary history of his life and service that it may be preserved for the benefit of friends and relatives and for the instruction and satisfaction of other generations.

He belonged to the type of men who in their very boyhood study the true ideal of a worthy manhood and make everything contribute to that ideal.

His first possession, a pig, was exchanged for a Latin Grammar and with this coveted treasure fairly his, laid the foundation of his accurate and ready scholarship. Headache had been an excuse when work in the field which a child could do was demanded, but it was a headache that soon eased itself upon the precious Latin Grammar, and it became established in the family that little John was to be a scholar,—no brother or sister but wished and did contribute to that result.

He began to teach at the early age of fifteen, and he ventured to test his self-command and courage as a teacher in the neighborhood of his nativity. There were rebels in the school room in that early day as now, and the largest boy in the school challenged to measure his muscle with his master, but was conquered. The little school master (as he was called), however, went home that evening with a sadly agitated nervous system, and sought a place to weep. He wept long,—night came on, and he sought the balm of sleep, but in the night watches, still weeping, he begged to come near his loved and loving mother. She soothed the grief of her nursling too soon grappling with the stern realities of life.

In the morning, calm and self-possessed, he rose to assume his duties and bear the burdens of life on his young shoulders with renewed courage and strength.

N. P. Willis' description of the "Little School Master" is so complete a description, that it might appear young Morrison was the subject of it. He was slender and small for one of his age—he seemed "old when young and young when old." His early manhood was marked by a ripeness and a natural dignity not often seen, which graced every movement and gave character and equanimity to his sociability. He en-

² Printed in the *Salem Democrat*, Aug. 15, 1883.

tered life when our State was in its formative period. About the year 1824, the rich lands and genial climate attracted the Morrison family to the West. They found a home a few miles north of Salem in Washington County.

John Morrison's introduction to the citizens of Salem is very ably presented by James G. May, a citizen of Salem, and very nearly the same age as his venerated teacher. He relates:

In December, 1824, in what was then Brown township, I first met John I. Morrison. Congress had set apart every sixteenth section of land for common school purposes. A liberal provision was also made for a State University. To render the system complete (by filling the vacancy between the common school and college), provision was made by the State for academic instruction in every county, by County Seminaries, whose graduates from the common schools could prepare to enter college. Buildings were erected generally for this purpose, but this part of the system failed to be a success by lack of capable teachers (with a few rare exceptions).

The trustees of the sixteenth section met to elect three congressional trustees. These trustees had control of the funds, etc., arising from the lease of the sixteenth section. Mr. Morrison on that occasion read the law governing such elections. He was at that time a youthful school-master, employed to teach a school on the Walnut Ridge. He was nineteen years old.

In the *Indiana Farmer*, March 5, 1825, published at Salem, the following notice appears:

SALEM GRAMMAR SCHOOL

The trustees of the Salem Grammar School would inform the public that they have employed Mr. John I. Morrison to take charge of said school. He will commence on the first Monday of April next (1825). The Latin and Greek languages, mathematics, etc., will be taught, as well as the various branches of an English education; those wishing to send will find a subscription paper open with the Treasurer, Hugh McPheeters, Esq., where they may ascertain terms, etc.—by order of the Board of Trustees, Feb. 25, 1825.—B. Bradly, Clerk.

The *Annotator* of March 12, 1827, said:

We witnessed an interesting examination of the Latin Grammar School. There were three in the Greek Testament, two in Horace and six in Virgil; for want of time, the class in Caesar was not examined. There were two classes in Grammar, amounting to 21 pupils, two classes in geography—21, and two classes in arithmetic.

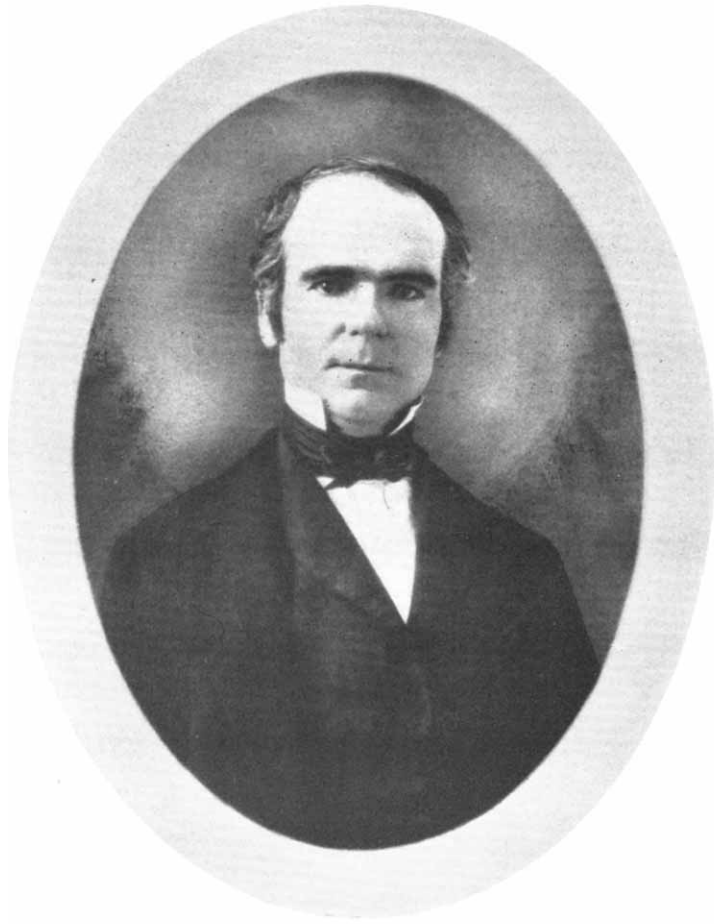
The following is taken from the *Annotator*, September 15, 1827:

Salem: We witnessed yesterday another interesting examination of Mr. Morrison's students in the Salem Grammar School in the branches of Greek, Latin, Mathematics, Astronomy, Geography, English Grammar, etc. The Trustees, examiners and spectators appeared highly pleased on noting the progress of the pupils of the several classes since the last examination. There must have been the strictest application during the session on the part of the students to have advanced with the rapidity which we witnessed yesterday, the progress of the school, since the last session, its different classes,—with the preceptor and his students—we have undoubtedly one of the most flourishing institutions of the kind in the Western States.

It is especially interesting to such students as are attending our young institution from Kentucky and different parts of the State to know that a feeling interest is taken by the citizens of the town, in the education of their sons. We much regret, in common with the citizens of the town and vicinity, that Mr. Morrison is about to leave the institution and State. We venture to assert that no gentleman could have been more serviceable in building up an institution in this place than Mr. Morrison. His diligent attention to his students, and his superior mode of instructing, has given the utmost satisfaction to all who are interested. But two years since the school was placed in his charge, much deranged in order and with only twenty-three scholars. The first session there commenced three in the Latin language and four in English Grammar. Since that session the school has increased to near seventy in number.

There were yesterday at the examination five in the Greek class, ten or twelve in the Latin classes, five in the higher branches of mathematics, eighteen in geography and astronomy classes and fourteen in the grammar class. Thus in a period of two years, by his perseverance, he has so far furthered the interest of the Grammar School as to rank it among the most flourishing institutions of the kind in the Western States. We are informed that it is Mr. Morrison's intention to return to this town, if living, in one or two years, to take charge of the institution again or to commence one on his own footing. His object for leaving the school at this time is to acquire a knowledge of some languages which he can not obtain without residing one or two years in the Eastern States.

It must be remembered that when John I. Morrison did the great teaching work alluded to, the brick-and-mortar-age had scarcely begun. His work that invited students from abroad was executed in a small one-story brick house. This brick house was afterwards distinguished by being the birth-



John A. Morrison

place of Hon. John Hay, diplomat, author and statesman. But, like Mark Hopkins, John I. Morrison could make a good college in a log cabin.

The story of Mr. Morrison's preparation for college has been given by his sister:

Two of his sisters had the wool cut off the sheep's back, washed it, carded it, spun it, colored it, wove it, cut it, made it—a complete suit—in two days and a half from the first. It was blue jeans, a fine beautiful piece of cloth. In it he went to college, and I heard him say to one of his sons upon a similar occasion when asking for a broadcloth suit, "Yes, sir! and I graduated in the same suit". This may be accounted for, and its not wearing out, although he was fond of outdoor exercise, a great walker, etc., by his graduating in one year—taking two years in one and entering two years in advance.

He had grown taller, however, and his pantaloons were about three inches too short—that did not seem to distress him. He returned to Salem in the fall of 1828.

While at college he had the advantage of boarding in the president's family and having the president's son, George Bishop, a gifted young man, for his special friend and companion.

A daughter adds:

My father had a lasting respect for Dr. Bishop, the president of Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. He received from him most valuable impressions and instruction. I have heard him speak of his Scotch brogue, his shrewdness, his unwavering integrity, his devotion to the cause of education and his simple piety. All these qualities so wrought upon the students that my father said he had seen young men of the senior class, great strapping fellows, await the Doctor with chip in hand to scrape the mud off his boots before he entered. "You know," my father would add, "young men are not in the habit of doing such things."

In the fall of 1828 he returned to Salem and began vigorous, telling teaching work in the first Washington County seminary building. Soon pupils, far and near, came to gather wisdom and knowledge from the lips of the young preceptor. None who came went away disappointed. The Washington County Seminary, under his administration, gained a reputation for solid, thorough teaching that will not fade from memory for many a long year to come. Barnabas Hobbs, the first president of Earlham College and later (1868-1871) Superintendent of Public Instruction, and James G. May were students and afterwards assistant teachers in the seminary.

Barnabas Hobbs thus describes his work:

In 1828 after Mr. Morrison returned to Salem, he was called to open the first Washington County Seminary. He aimed at the best standard of school work; he read the best educational periodicals of America and was much profited by careful study of the life of Pestolozzi, whom he greatly admired. Young men and young women (for co-education was the order of the times) sought his instruction, from Southern Indiana and Kentucky. The leading men of Salem, such as Judge B. Parke, Micah Newby, Benoni Morris, Dr. Burr Bradley, Judge Peck, John Henderson, General DePauw, John H. Farnum, Jeremiah Roland, John Kingsburry, David G. Campbell, Beebee Booth, and kindred men gave him their encouragement and support. His course of study was mathematical, scientific and classical. He was careful to avoid favoritism—no one was overlooked or neglected. He was careful to give personal attention to some of the most elemental classes, and made it a point to keep all his classes evened up; guarding against a too prevalent inclination in youth to avoid thoroughness in branches in which they had no natural inclination. His school was always opened with devotional exercises. I well remember the solemnity of his countenance on these occasions and the appropriateness of his utterances.

The following animated sketch from the pen of Zebulon B. Sturgus, a native of Salem (afterwards a resident of Washington City) appeared in the *Indiana School Journal*:

I was a pupil of Mr. John I. Morrison from a very early age before the Seminary was built. I vividly recall after more than fifty, (now 98 years), the day we first entered that building. It was of Grecian type and had two large rooms and well seated. It was then not a common thing for girls to learn Latin and I well remember my surprise at Laura and Cornelia Leonard reading Horace to Mr. Morrison. The Seminary soon became famous. Pupils flocked not only from Washington County, but from adjoining counties, from Louisville, New Albany, Jeffersonville, Charleston, Bedford, Paoli, Corydon, Indianapolis and other places. The house was too small to hold all the pupils. Many families of the town took boarders who attended the Seminary.

Mr. Morrison's methods of instruction were very exact and thorough, and he made his impress on all whom he taught for any length of time. He was a man of very commanding presence; his musical voice, his sincere cordiality made him many friends. His mere presence in the school room secured order such as other teachers obtain only by strategy.

The school was always opened with prayer in which the petition, "That we may know Thee, the only true God, whom to know aright is life eternal."

Now, there happened to be two brothers in the County, Levi and Noah Wright, who were sheriffs of the county alternately for many years. It puzzled my small brain not a little, though as it was in a

prayer, I never ventured to make my wonderment known why Mr. Morrison should always pray for Noah Wright (know aright) and never once for Levi. I have seldom seen him laugh so heartily as he did when I told him long afterwards of this perplexity.

It was a mixed school, and all the better for that, as I take it. True the boys and girls occasionally fell in love with each other, but they will do that any way and they will be far less likely to make serious mistakes when they have studied and recited together and taken each other's mental caliber. There never were so many bright, pretty girls in any other school as that. Their presence made the boys behave better, and they were put on their mettle not to be excelled by them. As the grass has been growing over her grave for many years, I may mention Maria Bradley, who was among the foremost of the girls. Those who knew her then would testify as to her marked ability in all her studies. Among the boys, I can name only a few—Robert Allen was fitted for West Point in that Seminary. He was, during the war for the Union, in charge of the Quartermaster's service in Louisville, Kentucky—an able, upright man. Thomas J. Rodman, was another of the Old Seminary pupils who obtained distinction by inventing the huge gun which bears his name, but few remain of the old Seminary pupils.

Dr. A. W. King of Redlands, California, was a pupil there; he wrote to me at Christmas times. A daughter of his recently had an enlarged photograph of my father made and sent it to the Salem Historical Society. Five years ago he was 96 years old, yet wrote a clear legible hand. I can remember some others who have not survived so long. Dr. Elijah Newland of New Albany, Dawson Lyon, Robert Morris of Salem, Dr. John L. Campbell, connected for many years with Wabash College, W. C. DePauw, for whom DePauw College is named, Jerry Talbott, temperance lecturer, Volney T. Malott, president of the Indiana National Bank for many years, Newton Booth, Governor of California, his sister Lizzie Booth Tarkington (Booth Tarkington's mother), the Berkeys, Pecks, Hendersons, Gordons and many others.

James G. May writes:

Not long after Mr. Morrison opened the seminary, he was instrumental in establishing the Zelo-Paideusean Society, which accomplished an untold amount of good. John I. Morrison's great power as a teacher lay in his vigorous capacity to make his pupils independent thinkers. Every day he brought before the school something calculated to create a thirst for reading and for scientific advancement. After prayer he never failed to present something that induced thought and led to rigid investigation. In mind, I look back to those twenty-minute talks with the most intense delight!

Dr. E. Newland writes: "As a teacher Mr. Morrison had the rare combination of ability to impart instruction and to govern a school." Salem was called the "Athens of the West."

In 1832 Mr. Morrison was married to one of his former pupils, Catherine Morris, daughter of Benoni Morris, a prominent citizen of Salem. She had just returned from a famous Friend's boarding school—Westtown, near Philadelphia, where her father took her in those early days across the country in his carriage. She remained there two years and he came for her and took her home in the same manner. It was a perilous journey. A daughter adds:

We still have the letters her father and others wrote her in 1830-31. In one of these letters her father inquires, "What kind of trimming can possibly be used on the dress thee asked for that would make it cost five dollars?" Postage was 25 cents and it took three weeks for letters to go.

My mother's penmanship was exquisite and she taught writing in the Seminary and she made all the quill pens that were used in the school. The school room grew too small to accommodate all the pupils, and in 1835 Mr. Morrison built a substantial three-story building at his own expense for the accommodation of young lady pupils. It was a beautiful building of colonial type. He sent to Philadelphia for an architect. It had a solid wall of brick one foot thick from foundation to roof in the center from north to south. About the year 1838 or 1839 there was a terrific hail storm which broke every pane of glass on the south and west. My sister, Maria, older than I, was a baby. My mother grasped the cradle with baby and all and fled for safety to the east side of this wall and there she staid until the storm was over. I have heard it said that the hail stones were as large as hen eggs. Afterwards my father had shutters placed on every window on the south and west.

Professor Theophilus Wylie, of the state university, pays this tribute:

John Irwin Morrison was elected Professor of Ancient Languages in the Indiana University in 1840, Dr. Andrew Wylie then being president. Mr. Morrison was efficient and popular as a professor and highly esteemed by his colleagues and pupils. He was an enthusiast in the cause of education, and when in the State Constitutional Convention of 1850-51, he drafted the article in the report of the Committee on Education of which he was chairman, which created the office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Mr. Morrison after his resignation a second time was connected with the University as trustee from 1847-1855 and 1854-1855 he was president of the board. He was again 1873-1878 and from 1874-1875 president. There existed from 1868 to 1875 an examining committee whose business it was to examine the examination papers of the different classes at the close of their term examinations. The

members of this committee were selected on account of their scholarship. For six of the seven years, Mr. Morrison was a member of this committee and for five of these years the chairman of it.

Mr. Morrison was not a showy man,—he was more and better than he seemed to be. His good qualities were brought out by acquaintance with him. In public life, he was energetic, public-spirited and of excellent judgment, and in political life incorruptible. Mr. Morrison sprang from the good old Covenanter stock of Franklin County, Pennsylvania. He connected himself with the Presbyterian church in 1830; was a constant attendant on public worship and an exemplary Christian.

Dr. E. Newland of New Albany, thus speaks of his success as very remarkable as a man as well as a teacher:

No one ever stood higher in the esteem and confidence of the people of Washington County. I am informed that he was not an expert at physical labor of any kind, yet he was a good judge of the work of others, and I know had a very correct eye for measurements—was an expert shot—could hit the bull's eye nine times out of ten—superior mathematical talent, as well as knowledge and experience in surveying, having been surveyor of Washington County for several years. The East Building of the State University, during his incumbency as President of the Board of Trustees, and the fine academy at Knightstown, all attest his faithfulness and competency as supervisor. I am told that his name was cut in stone over the old building and may be seen on the inside of the well house as a tribute to his helpfulness in the construction of the old building and has since been preserved in the erection of the Rose well house over the door inside.

After having admirably fitted several young men for West Point, so long celebrated for its exactness in mathematics, he was appropriately appointed to represent Indiana on the Board of Visitors there in 1855; at that time Robert E. Lee was Commander. In 1844 he resigned his Professorship in Indiana University and accepted a call to the Washington County Seminary again, where he taught until about 1848. At that time the Presbyterians bought the institute for a college and called it the Salem Presbyterian Female College. My mother who was not much in favor of sectarian schools, said, "The name will kill it" and it did. They could not make it succeed and only paid the interest once, and after four years gave it up. We then went back to the old home and lived there until 1857, when it was sold to James G. May, who carried on a very successful school for many years.

Professor E. Ballantine, also of the state University, contributes the following:

I came here in 1854. Mr. Morrison, then President of the Board favored my coming as I understand,—received me most kindly and always treated me as a friend. I saw his active earnest efficiency during

those trying times in the University, the buildings having been swept away by fire just before I came with the library and the funds (by the decision of the courts in the suit brought by the Vincennes University). I resigned my chair in 1858. After four years, Mr. Morrison who had been requested to take the chair, learning I was ready to return, retired in my favor, before he had actually begun to give any instruction. I mention this as a special mark of his kindness and disinterestedness. He was ever in his place at the meetings of the Board, served on committees at extra times, met committees of the Legislature, visited the University at extra times, heard the classes recite, addressed the students in chapel, but never made himself unpleasant in his relations to the professors or faculty. Having come to the University from a far-distant state, I had reason to value the more the new friend I found in the President of the Board of Trustees.

He once filled a vacancy at the University as Professor of Mathematics. When his return to the college was the subject of conversation he surprised his auditor (who knew more of his attention to the classics) by saying that he did not know, but what he would prefer mathematics.

In 1851 John I. Morrison was a member of the convention to revise the state constitution, in which body he was chosen chairman of the committee on education. In this capacity he drafted with his own hand and by strong personal influence and exertion secured the adoption of that portion of the state constitution which gave Indiana its present effective public school system.

During the Civil war Mr. Morrison edited and published a paper called *The Union Advocate*. He was appointed by President Lincoln, commissioner on the Board of Enrollment for the draft, with his office in Jeffersonville. He made Union speeches in many places in the Southern part of the State and men would stand around the buildings with their muskets and one by one would come inside and listen to his wonderful and convincing words. When he thought they might be getting tired, they would exclaim, "Go on! John I. Go on!" I was one of the daughters who heard and saw this. He never carried arms, the confidence in his bravery inspired that of his body guard.

In 1861, my brother, Theophilus Wylie, who was born in Bloomington and named for Professor Wylie, entered the service as a volunteer. He was elected lieutenant and afterwards promoted to captain. He was aid-de-camp to General Jefferson C. Davis of Indiana in the 16th Infantry. He served all through the Civil War, and after the war was over, joined the regular army. He served in the Spanish American War

and was killed the first day of the battle of San Juan Hill, as he was leading his men up the hill to plant the flag on the Mora Castle.

Richard Harding Davis in *Harper's Monthly* giving an account of the engagement said, "It was that thin blue line of the 16th Infantry that planted the flag on the top of the hill." He was the only Indiana officer killed in that war. He was heard to say, "Come on, boys, don't be afraid", then he was shot, and his sergeant, springing to his side as he was falling, was killed in the same manner. His photograph is now hanging in the soldiers' and sailors' monument. The government named a war vessel in his honor and his daughter came from Los Angeles to christen the vessel. She was a doctor in a hospital in Los Angeles during the World War and contracted the influenza there and died a martyr to the service of the wounded soldiers.

I can not close this history of my father's life without speaking of the work he did for the university, while he was president of the board, in obtaining for women admission to the University. In 1868 he studied the law on the subject and stated in a board meeting that he could not see anything to prevent women entering as students. They told him to provide one, and he mentioned his eldest daughter, Sarah P. Morrison. She was a graduate of Mt. Holyoke and had been a pupil teacher at Vassar; had graduated from a business college; had been assistant principal at Glendale and had taught at Oxford Western Female Seminary—so why not? She was admitted and was the first woman graduate of the state university, in the class of 1869.

When the Indianapolis School Board asked my father to name a man suitable to be the head of the City Public Schools, he named A. C. Shortridge, who was reluctant to accept but was finally prevailed on and proved to be a most excellent selection.

Mr. Hobbs thus summarizes his career as a state official:

In 1864, Mr. Morrison was elected state treasurer and removed to Indianapolis. He managed the finances of the State carefully during those troublous times and was the intimate friend and counsellor of Governor Morton. He served two years and was succeeded by Nathan Kimball, one of his former pupils.