

SOME EARLY RECOLLECTIONS

OF THE CITY COLLEGE

BY

HENRY R. HOWLAND

CLASS OF 1863

COLLEGE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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### “Forsan et Haec Olim, Meminisse Juvabit”

“Youth longs and manhood strives, but age remembers;” which may furnish the reason why the reading of the interesting article “Et in Arcadia” in the October number of the *Quarterly*, has let loose a flood of memories that go back to the early days of our Alma Mater.

In 1852 my father removed from Springfield, Mass. where I was born, to New York City and for convenience to his business, took up residence in Harlem which was then a pleasant country suburb of the great metropolis.

For many years we lived on 129th street near the later line of 6th avenue. At that time there were but half a dozen houses in all between 5th avenue and 8th avenue at the foot of Convent Heights. The other avenues had not been laid out and all about it were open fields and fine trees and as none of the streets to the northward had been surveyed, there was nothing between us and the Harlem river, then a clean tidal estuary where we learned to swim. Eighth avenue ended at Macomb's Dam where an old wooden bridge crossed the river. A little beyond the Convent of the Sacred Heart, a rather steep and winding road led up from 8th avenue to Commonsville and was fitly called “Break Neck Hill” for here we used to coast and the twists of the road made careful steering necessary to avoid shooting over the edge and down the rocks. There was then no Central Park, only a region of rocks with squatters' shacks and omnipresent goats. The road leading down into the Harlem Plains was the old McGowans Pass, of Revolutionary days and continued northward, known as Harlem Lane where it ended at 125th street and 8th avenue. The Morningside Heights of today was then a region of rocks and brambles where we boys went after blackberries. There were then but two buildings on the Harlem Heights: the Leake and Watts Orphan Asylum and the Bloomingdale Asylum for the Insane.

On the heights overlooking the river north of Commonsville stood and still stands the fine old colonial mansion built by Colonel Roger Morris of the British Army who married pretty Mary Philipse of Yonkers, said to have been Washington's first love. In my youth the estate was very large with porter's lodges at the

gates and was occupied by old Madam Jumel, the widow of Aaron Burr, who was her third husband. One of my boyish recollections was of frequently seeing her driving out in her old fashioned coach with coachman and footman in livery; a white haired old lady who always had a poodle dog on her lap. She lived until 1865 and was then ninety-six years old.

The 12th ward grammar school of that day was No. 39 on 125th street near 2nd avenue, its Principal then being Jacob S. Warner of blessed memory. The school was conveniently near the river and at the noon recess the older boys went down to it and had a swim, and we spent the afternoon hours combing the salt out of our hair with our fingers.

My brother, Elijah A. Howland had preceded me at the Free Academy, where he was graduated in 1859, but in 1859 I entered the introductory class which then preceded the usual four academic years. A morning train took us down to 42nd street whence our cars were drawn through the 4th avenue tunnel to Madison Square. Then followed the five years at the old City College Building on the corner of 23rd street and Lexington avenue. It did not take long, even for such youngsters as we were, to drop into the daily routines of Academy and College life. Of course we stood in great awe of the President and Faculty, but this wore off after a time as we came into closer connection with them. In that intercourse, we were of course always respectful and that feeling deepened and always remained genuine, though among ourselves we were not always reverent.

Horace Webster was the first President of our City College and was always irreverently spoken of as "Pop." Dr. Webster was a graduate of West Point and something of a martinet, though he had a kindly soul. He was of medium height, a little gray and a little bald, with mutton chop whiskers, quick in his motions, walking with a rather rapid step and with head bent little forward, with keen penetrating eyes, always on the lookout for "characters" as in his speech he characterized those whom he directed and disciplined.

Our morning assembly was held in the so called chapel on the top floor of the College Building when the president and faculty sat upon the stage, and Dr. Webster read a chapter from the Scriptures, always marking the place where he left off, and

I regret to say that it was not an uncommon diversion for some of us to change his marker back to the place where he began, so that sometimes for three or four mornings he would innocently re-read the same chapter, until its familiarity struck him and then "characters" had to carefully avoid his indignant search. His searches were so keen that we named the little series of windowed turrets around the roof "Pop's Observatories."

There were then, as now, many delightful men on the faculty. Foremost in my mind stands out Dr. John Jason Owen, Professor of Latin and Greek, genial, and kindly and thorough, and never the victim of student's jokes as sometimes happened to others. Of course, we were taught the English pronunciation of Latin, and so thoroughly did Dr. Owen ingrain this into our receptive minds that even to this day modern usage in this respect seems very strange and unfamiliar, and my children and grandchildren look upon me with stern Academic disapproval.

Distinguished among distinguished men throughout his life was Dr. Wolcott Gibbs, the famous chemist, who in my day, instructed the advanced classes in that science. His was a striking personality, for he was tall and erect and had the unusual combination of coal black hair and light blue eyes, and was affectionately known by us as "Gibbs the Pirate." He was severely practical, but always just, and commanded and held the respectful attention that he so well deserved. When the Civil War broke out, he became the President of the United States Sanitary Commission and was of necessity quite frequently absent from the College. When this occurred his lectures were taken by one of his laboratory assistants, whose name I do not recall, who puffed up with temporary importance, made himself greatly disliked by the students. I well recall one occasion when I was a Junior, I think, he made some insulting comment touching myself, and very naturally I resented it indignantly. He said, "You are impertinent, Sir, take this and report to Dr. Webster," so he wrote on a slip of paper "Impertinent" and handing it to me, I marched off with it in hand to the Doctor's office. The stern old gentleman, taking it from me, pushed his spectacles back and said severely, "What does this mean? What have you done?" I answered, "Doctor, I think we are entitled to be treated as gentlemen, and Dr. Gibbs always recognizes this. His assistant is not a gentleman and insulted me and I expressed

my indignation." The good old gentleman, martinet though he was, looked at me for a minute or two and then said, not unkindly, "Howland, go back and try if you can, to avoid trouble."

A striking contrast to Dr. Gibbs, in many ways, was Dr. Robert Ogden Doremus, who was also a distinguished analytical chemist and lectured to certain of our classes on chemistry, anatomy, physiology and hygiene. He was one of the handsomest men that I ever knew, tall and graceful in form and feature with rather long, wavy black hair. He was always smiling and genial and had a keen sense of humor which made him a general favorite. His left arm had been amputated between the elbow and the shoulder, but with his right hand and the stump of his left, he could accomplish difficult chemical manipulations better than could most men not so handicapped. He lived long and well. Visiting the College many years after my graduation, I dropped into his lecture room and sat until the hour was ended. He did not look to be a day older than in my student days, and as we hobnobbed together upon old times after the lecture, I asked him to tell me the secret of rejuvenation. The same old jolly smile lighted up his face as he said, "Howland, that is what the boys call taffy."

Another common favorite was Professor Charles E. Anthon, whose lectures on history were always delightful. In him too, the sense of humor was strong and he dearly loved a good joke, even at his own expense.

As I write, the memory comes to me of the Rev. J. Graeff Barton, who coached us for our Junior orations and our Commencement addresses, and at times sought to instruct us in belles-lettres. His long face wore a rather sad expression, only relieved occasionally by a kindly smile so that we called him "Smiling Grief." At the time of my entrance as an "Introductory" the Professor of German was Theodore Glaubensklee. At the close of the next summer, when returning from his vacation in Europe, the liner which brought him back took fire and was burned at sea. Professor Glaubensklee distinguished himself by his bravery in helping to save the lives of the passengers and was almost the last to leave the ill-fated ship, being, I believe, severely burned himself. When the September term began, and the students were on that first morning in chapel, there was a stir as we saw Dr. Webster come upon the stage escorting Pro-

fessor Glaubenslee. In an instant every student was on his feet and such cheers came from their full hearts as had never before been heard in that big Gothic room, and the tears rolled down the old man's cheeks as he bowed his head in silence, too much overcome for speech.

When he died, he was succeeded by Professor Adolph Werner, a name beloved by all who knew him. To those who have seen and known him in his later years, I need not attempt to speak of his lovable nature, his great ability and the peculiar charm which endeared him to all of us. No one ever crept into my heart more surely than he, and the friendship begun in those student days, continued in correspondence and occasional meetings until his earthly life ended. May eternal peace be his and may light perpetual shine upon him.

Our man of mystery was our French Professor, Jean Roemer, whose dignified and artistic bearing gave credence to the belief that he was in some way closely connected with European royalties.

Professor Morales, at the head of the Spanish department, was a very small, dark featured gentleman who unfortunately was very near sighted, and I regret to say that we sometimes took unfair advantage of this when one of our sections had a study hour at the back of the chapel and this gentle watch dog sat there with us. If Dr. Doremus had left the skeleton and the manikin on the platform, by some wicked and clever arrangement of long strings, they were made to go through unseemly performances, and the gentle watch dog could not understand how we found such material for mirth in our text books on which our attention was apparently placed.

The most picturesque member of the faculty was Professor Koerner, who taught us the elements of drawing and architectural perspective. He was short and sturdy, crowned with a splendid shock of long hair and with a bushy beard, both as white as snow. He was a nephew, I believe, of Theodore Koerner, the German soldier poet of the Napoleonic Wars. He himself had shared and suffered in the German revolution of 1848 and the current belief was that at that time his hair turned white in one night. I never dared to ask him about the truth of this, but we all religiously believed it.

My memory turns with profound respect to Professor

Nichols, who led us through the difficult paths of our higher mathematics. Occasionally when General Bartlett of West Point came down to call upon his old friend Dr. Webster, he would drop in to Professor Nichols' class room and sometimes take part in the morning's work, petrifying us by some well directed question to test our knowledge and confirm our own certainty as to the lack of it.

Professor Nichols' tutor aid or so called "Assistant" a term perverted by the boys with singular infelicity into "Sissy" was my dear friend, better known to all of you as Professor Alfred G. Compton of blessed memory. Besides these West Point cronies of our president, we not infrequently had other distinguished visitors. In 1860 the Prince of Wales visited New York and one morning we were all gathered in the chapel to give him a warm welcome when he came attended by his retinue and by Lord Lyons, then the British Ambassador to the United States. In the same year, the first visit to this country of a Japanese embassy occurred, and they too were brought to see us; fine, distinguished, two-sword men of the old Samurai Class, in their dark silken costumes, so strange to our Western eyes.

Even then the threatening clouds of Civil War were gathering fast, and when in April 1861 the storm burst, and the great President issued his proclamation calling for volunteers to save the nation, the response was immediate and hearty, and at once took toll of our members. Following the enormous mass meeting in Union Square, we had our own flag raising and when the famous 7th regiment marched down Broadway, we were proud to see in the ranks many of our own students, and some of my own class. I think that President Webster's son was one of these.

It is like stirring living embers when I recall those days of the beginning of strife, the drum beats, and the marchings; the days and months of enthusiasm, of doubts, of anxieties as the fortunes of war fluctuated. One after another of our older students went away, some of them never to return, and we who remained, waited, hoping for our turn to come.

On the 7th or 8th of March 1862, I took the little river steamer "Sylvan Shore" at Peck Slip, to carry me to Harlem Bridge, and as we passed close to the Brooklyn Navy Yards we



crowded to the side of the boat to look at that "Yankee Cheese Box on a Raft," the first monitor, which lay anchored in the Wallabout. That night she sailed for Hampton and revolutionized naval warfare.

In those days, as soon as war began, the studies of Ordnance and Gunnery and of Field Fortifications had been added to our curriculum, and six months after the Monitor sailed I was going home one afternoon in a third avenue car and was studying my next day's lesson in Ordnance and Gunnery, when a gentleman at my side asked me some very direct question about the special problem of that day's study. I answered as well as I could and then followed a series of questions which showed me that I was in the hands of an expert. I looked up and saw that he was a rather spare, tall man with a longish beard and that one side of his face was blackened with gunpowder stains and the truth flashed upon me. "Have I the honor of speaking with Captain Worden?" I said, and he replied, "Yes, my boy." Captain Worden," I said, "I saw the Monitor on the day that you sailed for Fortress Monroe, and I have always been greatly interested in your fight with the Merimac, I wish you would tell me about it." Perhaps my boyish frankness pleased him, for he told me much that I have never seen in print, and when he left the car, he shook hands with me and said that he was glad that the boys were studying such things as might make them useful to their country.

And so those years of storm and stress crept on while in July 1863, having finished our work and with our standing assured, we approached the day when we should be graduated and finally receive our sheepskins. But before that day came, a fury of midsummer madness swept our helpless city and held it in the terrible grip of the draft riots of 1863, the worst riots ever witnessed on our western hemisphere.

Our Commencement exercises were set, I think, for the evening of July 17th and all our preparations had been made. On the morning of Monday, July 13th, I took a third avenue car for the city, and as we passed the Provost Marshal's office at the corner of Third avenue and 46th street where the drafting was to begin at 9 o'clock, the avenue was crowded with a dense mass of men, women and illfavored children, but we were allowed to pass unmolested and I went at once to the College on 23rd

street. An hour later some one came in and told us that the mob had sacked the Provost Marshal's office, had broken up the drafting wheel and had set fire to the building. I had occasion to go further down town and returning soon after midday, our street car was stopped at Union Square by the rioters, who compelled the passengers to leave it and proceeded to tear up the tracks.

Among the passengers was a badly frightened lady who was our near neighbor in Harlem and, acting as her escort, I conveyed her safely to Madison Square where we took one of the cars leaving at 2 o'clock. These cars were drawn by horses to 42nd street where the full train was then made up. As we waited for this to be done, we saw a policeman running for his life up 43rd street and into one of three brownstone houses which had lately been erected on Lexington avenue. Instantly the mob surrounded the house, broke open its doors, threw furniture and bedding out of the windows, and before our train started, the house was in flames.

On Tuesday morning a train on the New York and Harlem R. R. took me down to Madison Square, but this was the last attempt to run a train on that or any road. So at noon a classmate and myself started to walk up 3rd avenue, seven miles to Harlem. The mob had possession and very soon we heard such ominous threats as "There go two damned Black Republicans" and the like, so stepping around a corner we took off our hats, and ties, turned up our coat collars and slouched our hats, and striving to hide respectability, made our way home. We were frequently stopped and questioned. As we passed my brother's home on the corner of 90th street and 3rd avenue, the mob were tearing off the palings of his fence, to serve them for clubs, and when a little nearer home, we saw a section of the mob, dragging a young man, who had been one of my school friends with the evident intention of hanging him at the nearest lamp post. Just then a negro appeared in sight and as the crowd yelled and started to capture him, my friend wrenched himself away, darted into a nearby alley and through the back yard, made his escape. At once, on reaching home, I went to the 12th ward Police Station, enrolled myself as a special policeman, and armed with a club, and an old fashioned pepper box revolver, patrolled the streets, with my squad, during all of that dreadful week.

Of course, our Commencement exercises were postponed. On the 12th of August 1863 I sailed on the Arago for Port Royal, S. C., having been sent thither by the United States Commissary General for service with the 10th Army Corps in the Department of the South and later with the Army of the James in Virginia and when in October our commencement evening came, and my name was called, it was starred as being "Absent at the seat of War."

Henry R. Howland,  
Class of 1863.

Buffalo, N. Y.,  
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