

PROMINENT AND
PROGRESSIVE AMERICANS

AN
ENCYCLOPÆDIA OF CONTEMPORANEOUS
BIOGRAPHY

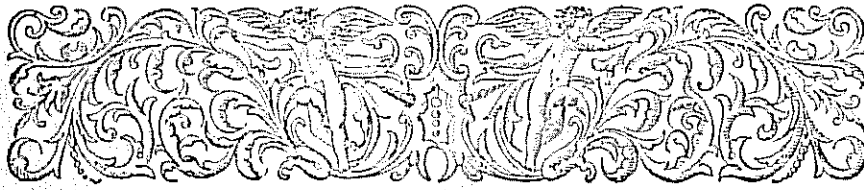
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JOHN WILLIAM STERLING

THE family of Sterling is one of the most ancient and famous ones in the history of the British Isles, where its name has for centuries been borne by an important city. The family line is traced back to Walter de Streverlyng of Kier, Scotland, who was born in 1130, and among whose descendants were numerous knights, barons, and other peers of the realm.

In the early part of the seventeenth century, however, one of its members, John Sterling, removed from Scotland to Hertfordshire, England, and established a branch of the family there. He had two sons, Sir John Sterling and David Sterling, who migrated to the New World. David Sterling came over in 1651, and settled at Charlestown, Massachusetts. He had a son named William Sterling, who was born at Charlestown, but on reaching manhood removed to Haverhill, Massachusetts, and thence, in 1703, to Lyme, Connecticut. One of his sons, Jacob Sterling, in turn removed from Lyme to Stratford, Fairfield County, Connecticut, and there founded the branch of the family from which came the subject of this sketch.

On the maternal side Mr. Sterling is descended from John Plant, who came from England about the year 1636, and was one of the early settlers of the town of Branford, Connecticut. From John Plant was descended David Plant, who was Lieutenant-Governor of Connecticut for four years, 1823-27, Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives, three times a State Senator, and for one term Representative in Congress.

In the last generation Captain John William Sterling of Stratford, Connecticut, son of David and Deborah (Strong) Sterling, was a man of high culture and much force of character. He was for many years commander of important ships in the South

American and China trade. He married Miss Catherine Tomlinson Plant, daughter of the David Plant above mentioned. To them was born, at Stratford, Connecticut, in May, 1844, a son to whom the name of his father was given.

John William Sterling, the second of the name, was carefully educated in preparation for college at Stratford Academy, an institution of high rank. At the end of his course there he was graduated with the rank of valedictorian. He then entered Yale College, where he soon gained eminence as a student and in the social life of the institution. He took one of the much-coveted Townsend prizes, and enjoyed the likewise much-desired distinction of election to Skull and Bones, one of the famous secret societies of the senior class, membership in which is limited to fifteen and is supposed to be the highest social honor in university life. He was also a member of Alpha Delta Phi, one of the foremost of the Greek-letter fraternities. At the end of his course he was chosen a member of the distinguished graduate fraternity of Phi Beta Kappa, and was graduated from Yale with high honors in the class of 1864. The following year he spent in special study of English literature and history under Professor Noah Porter, who was afterward president of Yale. Mr. Sterling next came to New York city and entered the Law School of Columbia College, where he pursued a brilliant career, and was graduated as valedictorian of the class of 1867.

At about the time of his graduation from the law school Mr. Sterling was admitted to practice at the bar of New York. He then entered the employment of the distinguished lawyer, David Dudley Field, being the youngest clerk in his office. In May, 1868, he left Mr. Field to become managing clerk in another office, but in the following December he returned to become, not a clerk, but a partner of Mr. Field, in the firm of Field & Shearman. This firm pursued a prosperous and distinguished career for a number of years. In September, 1873, however, Mr. Field retired from it, and the firm-name was thereupon changed to that of Shearman & Sterling, the senior partner of it being Thomas G. Shearman.

This firm has been connected with a number of the most famous cases in recent American jurisprudence. It had complete charge of the interests of Henry Ward Beecher in the

litigation brought against him by Theodore Tilton and others, which began in 1874 and lasted two years. The great trial consumed six months, and ended in the defeat of the plaintiffs and their payment of the costs. In 1876, also, Shearman & Sterling were retained as counsel in a number of suits arising out of the famous "Black Friday" in Wall Street in 1869.

In recent years Mr. Sterling has given his attention largely to railroad interests. He has been personally concerned in the formation, foreclosure, and reorganization of various important companies. Among those with which he has been thus connected are the International and Great Northern of Texas, in 1879; the South Carolina Railroad, in 1881; the Columbus, Chicago and Indian Central, the Canadian Pacific, and the Chicago, St. Louis and Pittsburg, in 1882; the Great Northern, in 1890; and the Duluth and Winnipeg, in 1896.

He aided in organizing the New York and Texas Land Company in 1880. He is counsel for many trust estates, and for many British corporations and investors. He is vice-president of the Pennsylvania Coal Company, and a director of the National City Bank, the New York Security and Trust Company, the Evansville and Terre Haute Railroad Company, the Duluth, South Shore and Atlantic Railway Company, and the Bond and Mortgage Guarantee Company.

Mr. Sterling is a member of numerous clubs and other organizations of the highest class. Among these may be mentioned the Union League, University, Lawyers', Yale, Union, Tuxedo, and Riding clubs, of New York; the Down-Town Association, the New England Society of New York, the American Fine Arts Society, and the Phi Beta Kappa and Alpha Delta Phi fraternities.

He has retained and cultivated, throughout all his busy life, his early love of literature, and has amassed a fine private library of several thousand volumes, included in which are some rare editions and works of exceptional value.

He has also retained a warm interest in the welfare of his Alma Mater. Osborn Hall, at Yale, was the gift of one of his clients, and was built under Mr. Sterling's supervision, at a cost of nearly two hundred thousand dollars. Yale conferred upon him, in 1893, the degree of LL. D.