

[Potterton, Thomas Edward]

DR. THOMAS E. POTTERTON

Dr. Thomas Edward Potterton died suddenly Friday, December 8, at his home, 425 Clinton Ave., Brooklyn. Downstairs seventy-five persons had assembled to hear Dr. Potterton give his new lecture on "Alaska and the Canadian Rockies," based on a trip last summer. Upstairs the pastor lay in the bath room, where he died about 7:15, probably of heart failure. When the lecturer failed to appear, George A. Friedrich and others went up to investigate and found him. A physician rushed up from the audience, but could do nothing. The medical examiner and physician estimated that he had been dead about an hour.

Earlier in the week Dr. Potterton had been in Syracuse, where he had attended a meeting of the finance committee of the State Convention Board. Apparently he was in his usual health.

The funeral was held in All Souls Universalist Church, Tuesday, Dec. 12, at 8 p.m., and was conducted by Dr. Frank Oliver Hall, assisted by the Rev. Cornelius Greenway, pastor of the church.

Thomas Edward Potterton was born at Clarksburg, Mass., May 15, 1868, the son of Abraham and Mary M. Potterton. He received his schooling at Drury Academy, North Adams, at a commercial school in Pittsfield, at Canton Theological School, and at the Harvard Summer School. St. Lawrence University gave him the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity in 1905. He was ordained to the Universalist ministry in 1891. On Nov. 30, 1893, at Somerville, Mass., he was married to Anna T. Nye, who died a short time ago, and who in the latter years of her life was a great invalid.

His pastorates were as follows: Brookline, Mass., 1892-1893; West Somerville, Mass., 1893-1901; Taunton, Mass., 1901-1903; Brooklyn, N.Y. (Church of Our Father) [First Universalist Society], 1903-1933. He had been trustee of the New York State Convention of Universalists and president also, vice-president of the Universalist General Convention, the first chairman of the Board of Foreign Missions, president of the New York Universalist Club and a lecturer at St. Lawrence University. During the World War he lectured in Southern training camps under the auspices of the Y.M.C.A.

Dr. Potterton gave much attention to travel lectures, illustrated by stereopticon slides, and had one of the largest private collections of slides in New York. He edited a parish paper, "The Little Minister," and gave careful attention to a department called "Pert Paragraphs by Potterton," which was frequently quoted.

The strong church over which he presided for so many years had run down in recent years, due to changing city conditions and to the death of influential parishioners. When it became necessary to sell the church property, the society purchased a large residence which provided parlors for a meeting place and an apartment upstairs for the minister. On April 7, 1932, he wrote to Dr. Etz, General Superintendent, "It is cheering to have a happy word of congratulation in the youth of old age. We commence another round of duty with courage."

He was an ardent admirer and student of Lincoln and had visited all the historic Lincoln shrines many times and given numerous lectures on the Civil War President.

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He possessed one of the largest and most valuable Lincoln libraries in America, containing about 350 volumes, many of which were first editions. The library will be given to his alma mater, St. Lawrence University.

On the occasion of his thirtieth anniversary as pastor of the Church of Our Father last March, Dr. Potterton described the civic and religious changes he had observed in Brooklyn since he went there as "bewildering" in their rapidity. He looked forward eagerly at that time to many more years of Christian service.

After completing twenty-three years in the Church of Our Father in 1926, Dr. Potterton resigned, but later reconsidered his decision when his parishioners came to him and begged him to remain. He had offered to resign because he felt a younger man would be more successful in building up the church. His congregation voted unanimously to refuse his resignation.

Dr. Potterton, in one of his numerous lectures on Lincoln, caused something of a sensation when he said that in his opinion Abraham Lincoln would never have been President of the United States had it not been for his marriage to Mary Todd. He contended that with his "phlegmatic disposition" Lincoln probably never had risen to the heights had he married Ann Rutledge, and "not had Mary Todd to irritate him."

In 1932, when plans were under way to place the replica of Mount Vernon in Prospect Park, he described it as a "sacrilege," declaring that the "inspiration" derived from a visit to the real home of Washington "cannot be gotten from a Twentieth Century copy of this hallowed spot."

He was prominent in Masonic circles and right up to the time of his death was a member of King David Lodge in Taunton, Mass. When he went to Brooklyn from there he was made a member of the lodge of which he had been chaplain, and he never transferred his lodge affiliations. He was a Knight Templar.

He was a staunch Republican, and among his clubs was the Alpha Kappa Clergy Club in Brooklyn.

Among his writings were "The Comforter," written in 1903, and "Nineteen Hundred and Now," written in 1920. He was also the author of numerous pamphlets and booklets.

He is survived by a brother, Dr. Arthur Potterton.

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[a Universalist newspaper]

Transcribed on 24 Jun 2009 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY