

[Blunt, George William]

DEATH OF GEO. W. BLUNT

His Career as a Public Officer.

Brief Sketch of His Life—Over Thirty-Two Years In the Public Service—
The Positions Which He Held—The Blunt Family As Writers on Nautical Subjects.

Mr. George W. Blunt, Secretary of the Board of Pilot Commissioners, died at 6:30 P.M. yesterday, after a lingering illness, in the seventy-seventh year of his age. In January last, in alighting from a Broadway stage, he lost his balance and fell heavily upon the pavement, receiving a severe contusion of the right frontal region. He was taken home stunned, bleeding, but not wholly insensible, and after a few days of rest was recovered sufficiently to attend to his usual avocations. But the severe shock to the nervous system, combined with advancing years, was not to be obviated by a few days of repose. Symptoms of gastric irritation, accompanied by extreme languor and exhaustion, supervened, and soon became so severe that he was confined to his room. A few days previous to his death, dropsical symptoms developed themselves and rendered the case practically hopeless. His death removes a public man of the old régime: one whose disinterested public spirit, strong convictions and iron adherence to his principles have given him something of the conspicuousness of an antique sculpture.

Mr. Blunt was a native of the quaint old town of Newburyport, Mass., where he was born March 11, 1802. His father, Edmund M. Blunt, removed to Newburyport from Portsmouth, N.H., in the latter part of the last century, bought a press of Benjamin Franklin, and published a newspaper. A history of the Blunt family would be almost a complete history of nautical literature in this country. After his removal to Newburyport the elder Blunt busied himself with the preparation and composition of a work entitled the *American Coast Pilot*, which describes every port on the coast of the United States, and has gone through 18 successive editions since its publication in 1796. It has been translated into every language in Europe, and is still an authority in nautical circles. He published numerous other works on navigation, and died in 1860 at the advanced age of 90. With this hereditary bias for the science of navigation, it is scarcely to be wondered at that of the four sons, of whom the deceased was the third, two should have followed the profession of the father. The eldest, Joseph Blunt, was for many years a lawyer of eminence in this City; the second son, Edmund, born at Newburyport Nov. 23, 1798, made, in association with his younger brother, the first survey of the Harbor of New-York, at the age of 17. From that date, 1816, until 1833, he was engaged in the West Indies and Guatemala surveys, and in a survey of the coast of the United States for the successive editions of the *American Coast Pilot*. In 1833 he was appointed first assistant, by Mr. Hassler, of the United States Coast Survey, in which office he continued until the day of his death. The fourth son, Nathaniel B. Blunt, adopted the profession of law, and died in the office of District Attorney for this

[Blunt, George William]

City. In those early times there was a school in Newburyport kept by a quaint old man still remembered as old Master Payne. It was under his tutelage that the sons of Edmund M. Blunt, the bookseller of Newburyport, received such education as they brought to this City with them; and as his pupils, they became intimate with that eccentric wanderer and poet, J. Howard Payne, the author of "Home, Sweet Home," first sung in London as a part of an English opera now forgotten.

George William Blunt did not long remain under the tutelage of the old school-master. According to a manuscript autobiography in the possession of his daughter, Mrs. Van Wyck, he shipped as a sailor on board one of his father's vessels at the early age of 14, and followed that profession for five years, when he addressed himself to other pursuits. In the year 1821, on his way home from England, he made the acquaintance of Miss Martha Garsett; the acquaintance ripened into an intimacy, and the intimacy into an offer of marriage, which was accepted on condition that Mr. Blunt should [would] abandon the sea.

The young couple who had thus strangely met were united in marriage on the 22d day of December, 1821, by Right Rev. Bishop Close, of the Diocese of New-Brunswick, and returned to Newburyport in state on board a sloop specially assigned to the marriage tour by the father of the bridegroom. The removal to New-York followed immediately upon Mr. Blunt's going into business as his father's successor in the publication of nautical works, which was arranged in May, 1822. He continued in this business until 1866, when he sold out his establishment and retired from active work in nautical literature. His business engagement did not, however, prevent him from doing a great deal of active outdoor service relevant to the science of navigation. As early as 1826 he had completed, in co-operation with his brother, a series of elaborate marine surveys, in which the Bahama banks and the harbor of this City were included, neither of them having up to that date been brought thoroughly under the dominion of nautical science. In 1834, impressed with the imperfections of the existing light-house system of the United States and with the great superiority of the system in use in France, Mr. Blunt presented a memorial to Congress calling attention to the subject. This was followed in 1838 by a joint memorial prepared by himself and his brother Edmund. But Governments are proverbially slow to act, and it was not until 1850 that these memorials eventuated into the establishment of the Light-house Board and the adoption of the system recommended by the memorialists.

In the meantime, Mr. Blunt's career as a public officer had commenced, in the appointment, in 1845, of a special committee for the organization of the present system of pilotage for New-York Harbor, which has been of such signal advantage to our commerce. Mr. Blunt, as a practical adept in the science of navigation, was the leading spirit of this commission, out of which grew the Board of Pilot Commissioners, as a member of which he served zealously for 32

[Blunt, George William]

consecutive years, and as Secretary of which he died. It as been observed of his services as a member of this board, by an eminent publicist, that but for George W. Blunt New-York Harbor would have been ruined years ago. In 1857, in recognition of his disinterested services as Pilot Commissioner, he was created a Harbor Commissioner to protect the harbor of the City, at a salary of \$1,000 per annum. But at the expiration of two years the Legislature voted to abolish the salary, while the Senate declined to accept the resignation of the Commissioners, and they were thus compelled to serve without remuneration. He was for five years one of the Trustees of the Seaman's Rest, and for two years one of the Commissioners of Emigration. He was removed from the board of the latter by Gov. Seymour, "because," as he quaintly expressed it in his manuscript, he "would not let the board be used for the propagation of Irish Catholicism." "I have," he frankly adds, "held public offices for 49 years, during only seven of which I have received any salary from the Government." As a citizen of the United States, Mr. Blunt cast his first vote in 1823, and voted in every election since that date as an opponent of the Democratic Party. "I did my best," he sums up, "to kill that party in the election of 1872, when it was led to the slaughter by Mr. Greeley, of whom it may be said, as of Sampson, that in is death he slew more than in his life." He concludes his manuscript with this brief and simple confession of faith: "I believe in God, in his infinite power and mercy, in the mission of our Savior, in the flag of the Union, and that next to God, one's duty is to his country and obedience to its laws."

At the advanced aged of 76, a few weeks ago, the lassitude that betokens with the old the final breaking up of the physical functions, crept stealthily upon him. His medical attendant reported that there was no lesion, nothing to which medicaments could be applied. For several weeks previous to his death he had been confined to his room, restless, disquieted, but entertaining from the first no expectation of recovery. From the beginning the gastric irritation was such as to defy remedial measures. Dropsical symptoms developed themselves as the resistance of the system diminished; and thus he died, in the seventy-seventh year of his age, worn out with years of active service in his profession.

Mr. Blunt leaves two daughters, both of whom are married. His wife died in 1870. The funeral service will take place at Rev. Dr. E.[Edwin] H. Chapin's church [Fourth Universalist Society of the City of New York], of which Mr. Blunt was a member, at 9:30 o'clock on Monday morning.

New York Times, New York NY, Fri. 20 Apr 1878

[Blunt, George William]

FUNERAL OF GEORGE W. BLUNT
A Simple and Impressive Service in Rev. Dr. Chapin's Church—
A Large Number of Prominent Persons in Attendance

With services that were at once simple and impressive, the body of the late George W. Blunt was yesterday laid away to rest in Green-Wood Cemetery. At 9 o'clock the body was removed from Mr. Blunt's late residence in Twelfth-street to the Church of the Divine Paternity [Fourth Universalist Society], Fifth-avenue and Forty-fifth street. It was encased in an oaken coffin, covered with black cloth and ornamented with short bar handles. A silver plate upon the lid bore the following inscription:

George W. Blunt
Died April 19, 1878
Aged 76 years 1 month and 9 days.

At the church door the body was received by a large delegation of pilots and the attachés of the Pilot Commissioners' office, and the coffin was borne up the aisle to the measures of a simple funeral march by Mendelssohn. It was placed upon a stand in front of the pulpit, and upon it were deposited a few floral emblems—a sheaf of wheat with the symbolic sickle, a ship, an anchor, and several wreaths. The front pews on the right of the central aisle were occupied by Mr. Blunt's daughter, Mrs. Van Wyck and her daughters, his nephew Mr. George W. Blunt, Jr., and his wife, and several intimate friends. Behind them sat a large delegation of members of the Union League Club. On the left of the central aisle sat the Pilot Commissioners, the employes [sic] of the Pilot Commissioners, and about 40 of the Sandy Hook pilots, many of them gray headed, gray bearded, and bronzed by many years' exposure. Near the door sat Hon. Thurlow Weed and his daughter. The services were opened by the Rev. Dr. Chapin with the reading of appropriate passages of Scripture, and then Mrs. Louise Oliver sang very sweetly the hymn by William Cullen Bryant beginning, "Deem not that they are blessed alone." The funeral address that followed was a plain lesson of trust and hope, and it closed with a warm and truthful testimonial to the sterling qualities of the dead man. The services closed with prayer. The coffin was then uncovered, a line was formed, and nearly all in the church passed slowly by. Among those who paused to look at the features was Mr. Thurlow Weed, who, after gazing intently for a moment, bent over and tenderly touched his lips to the cold forehead, while his eyes streamed with tears. At 11 o'clock the coffin was closed and removed to the hearse. It was followed to Green-wood by the relatives only, and was buried in Mrs. Van Wyck's lot. [A long list of attendees at the funeral has been omitted].

New York Times, New York NY, Mon. 23 Apr 1878

[Blunt, George William]

WANTED—A "G.W.B"

The harbor of New-York once had a self-appointed, and therefore most zealous, guardian angel in the voluminous form of Mr. GEORGE W. BLUNT. While Mr. Blunt was alive, people did not obstruct the harbor without being powerfully reminded of what they were doing. A load of oyster shells could not with impunity be emptied into the Narrows. When such an outrage was attempted an indignant protest straightway appeared in the *Evening Post* over the familiar initials "G.W.B." To warn the people against encroachments on the harbor was the public function of "G.W.B." It was also in those days pretty much the sole public function of the *Evening Post*. The guilty dumpers of the shells hated "G.W.B.," and, metaphorically speaking, they shied their oyster shells at him in the old Athenian method of expressing disfavor. The wits of the press lampooned him, and the *Evening Post* put derisive headings over his solemn protests. But "G.W.B." had a good conscience and a thick skin, and neither ostracism nor sarcasm had the slightest effect upon him. The result was that the harbor was kept tolerably free in his time of all willful instructions.

... The tendency to talk about the harbor was unquestionably overloaded in "G.W.B.," who much wearied his fellow-citizens with his importunity on that subject. But if the importance of preventing encroachments on the harbor had only assumed in the mind of "G.W.B." its proper place among the various objects of human interest, he would have been by no means so useful a citizen and Jeremiah as he was... Mr. Blunt in his enthusiasm was worth a force of twenty inspectors doing their work in a perfunctory way. It seems likely that, as Mr. Knapp wrote the other day to THE TIMES, we shall have to go into an extensive and expensive series of dredging operations to prevent the choking up of the harbor from unavoidable causes. It seems too bad that we should also have to incur great expense in removing perfectly avoidable obstructions which have been made because no one was as much in earnest to prevent the deposits as the depositors were to make them.

New York Times, New York NY, 24 Jun 1883

Transcribed on 2 Nov 2009 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY