

[Russia (Gravesville), Herkimer Co. NY]

Christmas Eve at Russia

Believing that in God's providence there is no event so deserving the special commemoration of all Christians, as the nativity of our Saviour, commonly called Christmas, I was happy to join with a numerous audience in the celebration of Christmas eve at this place. With elevated and grateful feelings toward our heavenly Father, for all his loving kindness and tender mercies, and particularly for the great and unspeakable gift of his only Son to redeem the world from sin, and to bring life and immortality to light, I entered the church, which was prepared for this solemn and interesting service.

The edifice, a spacious building, was brilliantly illuminated; each window (28 in number) presenting a display of lights in the form of a pyramid, each candle (and the number appeared innumerable throughout the house) was tastefully decorated with sprigs of evergreen. The appearance of the house was splendid, and far surpassed anything of the kind I had ever seen, except in a city or large village. My attention was soon drawn from this dazzling scene to one of a more mental and devotional kind. The services were commenced by the reading of that portion of Scripture which so beautifully describes the birth of the infant Jesus - this was followed by an ode, "behold I bring you glad tidings," etc., sung with spirit and understanding also by a numerous choir filling the gallery; a fervent prayer to God was offered in all that meekness and piety which adorns the life and manners of the youthful supplicant - then succeeded the harmonious strains of the choir, who raised their voices chanting praise to the God of love. The speaker here arose, and addressed the audience in an impressive and even eloquent style; his theme was well suited to the occasion, to which he did great justice in manner and matter. This ended, another appropriate ode was performed. An address to the choir followed, which, on any other subject might have been considered rather too florid; it gave evidence that this order of talent was possessed and could be put in requisition at the pleasure of the speaker. This address was replete with music, in short, was music in and of itself; [and] encomiums, justly deserved, were applied to the choir... The church services were then closed by appropriate remarks to the congregation.

A concert ensued, and many difficult pieces of music were performed with great excellence. The choir consisted of two schools comprising 80 scholars, taught by Mr. William Johnson. To those acquainted with his peculiar talent at teaching sacred music, it would only be necessary to mention his name as the leader of the choir to be assured that the singing was of no ordinary character.

I cannot close this imperfect sketch of a truly gratifying scene without expressing the high satisfaction and great pleasure I experienced at witnessing the unexpected and excellent manner in which the youthful orator, Br. O[rrin] Roberts, acquitted himself on this occasion. It was his first appearance in this capacity in his own town, surrounded by his mates of those days. I have been acquainted with him from his early youth. Through all stages of life his conduct has been unexceptionable, moral, virtuous. Modest and unassuming in his deportment, with a character strongly marked with native diffidence, I feared he would lack both confidence and energy as a public speaker. Most happily was I disappointed in finding that he had surmounted these impediments which nature seemed to have placed in his way. He will, I trust, make not only a useful and exemplary teacher, but a talented and eloquent preacher.

N. F.

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Transcribed on 5 May 2005 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester NY