

[Payson, James Milford]

DR. JAMES MILFORD PAYSON

Friend, Minister, Educator

Canton's Grand Old Man Passes On at 93 Years of Age

The long vigil in the big white house on Court street ended at 6:15 last evening. Dr. James Milford Payson had breathed his last. For over two weeks life had slowly ebbed from that frail body, for days only a spark flickered as though reluctant to leave this world and the many friends in which this choice and beloved man was so ardently interested.

On Thursday afternoon at two o'clock funeral services will be held in the church of his faith, of which he was pastor when the present structure was built, the Universalist church. Burial will be beside his wife and companion of 64 years of wedded happiness. Without doubt there will be a large gathering of friends and acquaintances paying tribute to this minister of the gospel, this educator of the young, the friend and lover of all mankind.

The church service will be conducted by Rev. Hugh S. Tigner, pastor. Members of the St. Lawrence Commandery, Knights Templar, of which Dr. Payson was Past Eminent Commander and for many, many years Prelate, will attend in a body. The burial will be at Fairview with Masonic honors.

Dr. Payson was born in the little village of South Freedom, Waldo county, Maine on April 13, 1848, the son of pious New England stock. His parents were Sion Wentworth and Mary St. Clair Payson... Universalism had many followers there. One can well imagine this young man growing up in such an environment. By aptitude and instinct he was a student, as testified by five years spent between the age of 15 to 20 years as a teacher in the rural schools. His own grounding in learning was had along the early route of reading, writing and arithmetic as offered by the little red school house.

James Milford Payson was no ordinary boy. He loved books. He saw beauty in nature and life. Coming under the influence of Rev. E. A. Reed he became deeply absorbed in religion. Like William DeWitt Hyde, late President of Bowdoin College, in Maine, he as a youth wrestled with doctrines and beliefs as preached in those days. He, too had decided liberal tendencies and he determined to enter the ministry and charted his course.

The Universalist faith was his natural selection. It squared with his upbringing, his youthful environment, the tendency of his own study and his personal outlook on life.

In distant New York state, at Canton, was the new Universalist Theological School, sponsored by the Universalist General Convention. In midwinter he set out on his journey to Canton. The trip required five days. In the bleak hours of an early Sunday morning he finally alighted at the Canton station. There was no one to meet him. Snow was piled high all

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about. It was zero weather. He made his way downtown, and at the old American House obtained lodging. The room was heatless and waterless. There was not much sleep that first night. The tolling of church bells found him inquiring his way to the old Universalist church. There he listened in rapt attention to the late Rev. George Weaver. After church he went to the college campus. What a campus it was compared with the present! only two buildings, the old college building, now Richardson Hall, and Herring Library. It was a desolate sight, a windswept, snow blanketed hill and only these two gaunt buildings. Few trees and numerous rail fences protruded through the snow. But to an eager youth it beckoned like a gigantic magnet. Here was education, a chance to learn, the avenue toward the great adventure to which he had set himself. There was no hesitancy, no doubt. Conviction was adamant, and twenty-year-old James M. Payson set himself at his task with enthusiasm.

He was an apt scholar. He made friends. Canton and its people took a fast hold on him. He was a Universalist. His religious tolerance was universal. With the young priest, Rev. James O'Driscoll, he drove the countryside lending his aid in raising funds with which to rebuild the Catholic church, just burned. Just because he had another belief was no barrier to helping what he considered a good cause, and aiding the young priest whose friendship he cherished. That same breadth of outlook on life, that same ability to win and hold friends, remained throughout all the years.

He received his degree from the Theological School in June, 1874, sixty-seven years ago. A call to become pastor of the Universalist church at Sherman, N.Y. was accepted. There was urgency that he begin his duties immediately, but that could not be as he had to remain in Canton a short time. Two important events were scheduled. First, on June 17, 1874, he was united in marriage to a beautiful young Canton woman, Miss Flora Bassett, daughter of Elijah and Harriett Rice Bassett. It was a happy event in his life, a happiness which continued year after year. The other need for delay was the laying of the corner stone of the new Catholic church, a work in which he had taken such great interest.

July found the young minister and his bride settled in Sherman. There, as everywhere his duty called him, life-long friendships were formed. Here he began his life work. Though only 24 he was already beginning to accumulate his library. He was an omnivorous reader, a keen observer. His mind was a limitless storehouse of what books told and the eye observed.

Seven years passed all too quickly. A call came from Rochester, Minn. ... He went. From 1881 to 1886 he remained at Rochester. There more friendships were won. Among his friends was Dr. William Mayo, father of the two sons who established the world famous Mayo Clinic.

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[The year] 1887 found the Paysons moved from Rochester, Minnesota to LaCrosse, Wisconsin, then a great lumbering center. Six delightful years followed. By 1893, nineteen years in the ministry, found the young pastor attracting wide attention. His sermons were unusual, his philosophy of life profound. Here was more than an ordinary minister. Here was an orator and scholar. There was great need for just such a man at the Canton Universalist church, one who could help weld the town and gown together, who could preach to both and hold both. There was need for a new church edifice. A big work was in the offing. A call was sent. Once more the Paysons bid goodbye to dear friends.

June [of] 1893 found them back in Canton with the most productive years of Dr. Payson still before him. He was then 45 years of age.

The new pastorate was most appealing, back at home among old friends, with the University greatly enlarged and growing rapidly under the leadership of Dr. A. B. Hervey. Dr. Payson set his shoulder to the wheel. Townspeople and students in increasing numbers came to hear him. Plans were set in motion and in 1898 the old church edifice had been replaced by the present beautiful structure, a monument to Dr. Payson and his parish workers of that day. Another great task had been accomplished, but at the expense of the pastor's health.

There are those living who will recall that Sunday in 1904 when Dr. Payson collapsed while conducting the morning service, was taken to his home, and his physician ordered a complete rest and release from all duties. Dr. Payson reluctantly accepted the verdict, tendered his resignation and with the benediction of his parish began his period of recuperation. For three years he gave his frayed nerves and frail body complete rest, though he was not inactive. There was the new home on Court street to be beautified, and a fine farm on the old Dekalb road was purchased. It was on the farm that Dr. Payson roamed and learned first hand about farming.

In 1907 the New York State School of Agriculture was established at St. Lawrence University. The University seized Dr. Payson's improved health to secure his services as secretary of the new school and to act as an instructor in academic subjects. The task was exactly to his liking. No better testimony can be offered as to his capacity to occupy these two important positions than the love and esteem of over fifteen hundred students who sat before him during 27 years of continuous teaching.

Dr. Payson's motto in the classroom was to teach his subjects and enrich that teaching with a wholesome philosophy of life. This same philosophy came through a seemingly endless fund of knowledge gained through personal observation in an active life. His students, one and all, acclaim that one of their most cherished [possessions?] is the influence of Dr. Payson's

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chapel talks. To him they came to be married. In time of sorrow and death they sought his comfort. In time of achievement they received his congratulations. For 31 years he had left an indelible imprint of his character upon this school. Through its periods of success and through the trying days following the war he remained a constant and confident bulwark of optimism. After 22 years of service Dr. Payson retired from the school faculty in June, 1929.

In addition to these duties Dr. Payson had lived for the community. He had served as Chairman of the Board of Education for many years; had administered to the people of the community in the joy of marriage and in the hour of sorrow. Not the least of service had been to St. Lawrence University which he had served as trustee since 1900 and on its executive committee until 1936. In season and out of season he was willing to contribute his time and energy for every worthy cause. The influence of his leadership had been widespread and probably in no place more impressively felt than in the Masonic Orders to which he had given so much of his time.

*St. Lawrence Plaindealer, Canton NY, Tue. 28 Oct 1941*

Transcribed on 28 Feb 2008 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY