

CHAPTER XXX.

THE ROLFE AND RUMFORD ASYLUM.

JOSEPH B. WALKER.

One of the most opulent and influential of Concord's earliest citizens was Colonel Benjamin Rolfe. He was born in Newbury, Mass., in 1710, and graduated at Harvard college in 1727. He came to Concord soon after its settlement, and from 1731 to 1770 was clerk of the proprietary. In 1737 he was made a clerk of the Massachusetts and New Hampshire boundary commission, appointed to determine the line between the two provinces. He was for many years town clerk of Rumford and Concord, a colonel of the provincial militia, and a representative in the general assembly. He possessed large business capacity, and was ever active, not only in his own affairs but in those of his town and province as well.

In 1764, or thereabouts, he erected on the west bank of the Merrimack, at the Eleven Lots, the house now occupied by the Rolfe and Rumford asylum.¹ For that time and this locality, it was an elegant mansion, and the best, doubtless, in central New Hampshire. Soon after its completion, wearied of his bachelor life, he married Sarah, eldest daughter of the town minister, Reverend Timothy Walker, and set up therein his household gods. At the time of their marriage he was some sixty years of age, while the age of his wife was about thirty. They had lived together but a few years when Colonel Rolfe died, leaving to his widow and their only son, Paul, the largest landed estate in Concord.

A year or two before the death of Colonel Rolfe there had come to Concord from Woburn, Mass., a young man to teach the town school. His name was Benjamin Thompson, and he was not quite twenty years old. He possessed a fine person, a good address, and a mind unusually well stored with scientific and general knowledge. He formed a pleasant acquaintance with Mrs. Rolfe, which, after her husband's death, ere long developed into a strong mutual attachment and culminated in their marriage. Thereupon Mr. Thompson moved into the house of his wife and became the protector of her child and the manager of her estate. Not long afterwards he formed an acquaintance with the provincial governor, John Wentworth. Similar

¹ Diary of Reverend T. Walker for 1764.

tastes and characteristics deepened this into a mutual friendship. Possibly Mr. Thompson's brilliant qualities, backed as they were by the social position and large fortune of his wife, may have suggested to the astute governor that he was a man whose influence was likely to become important, and should, if possible, be secured to the royal cause. Certain it is that both he and Mrs. Thompson found hearty welcome to the court circles of the provincial capital, and received there marked attentions.

It cannot be surprising to any one conversant with the condition of public sentiment at that time that this growing intimacy should have been noticed with jealousy by ardent friends of liberty, for the rumblings of the Revolution were now distinctly heard. Their suspicions as to Mr. Thompson's loyalty to the American cause were aroused. Nor did his appointment by the governor to a military position, over older and more experienced persons who had long waited for it, in any degree allay them. It created, also, an envy which ripened into personal dislike, and made him very unpopular.



Benjamin Rolfe and Countess Rumford House.

The dislike thus engendered increased from time to time, and to such an extent that a few years later (October, 1774), he was driven by an intolerant patriotism from his home and country to foreign lands, leaving behind him his wife, his stepson, Paul Rolfe,

and his infant daughter, Sarah, subsequently known in this country and in Europe as the Countess of Rumford.

Abroad he rose, with a rapidity rarely equaled, to the companionship of savants and an association with kings. In 1784 he was knighted in England, becoming Sir Benjamin Thompson. Having subsequently entered the service of Charles Theodore, the Elector of Bavaria, he was made a Count of the Holy Roman Empire in 1791, with the titular designation of Rumford, since which time he has everywhere been known as Count Rumford. But it is unimportant to the present purpose to trace further his well-known history.

These incidents account for the double name of Rolfe and Rumford given by its founder, the late Countess of Rumford, to this institution. The germinal idea of it may, doubtless, be found in a circumstance which occurred about one hundred years ago at Munich, in Bavaria, where Count Rumford, then in the service of the reigning Elector, was living with his daughter.

One of the most important enterprises which the Count had originated and carried to full success in that city was the establishment of an institution known as the House of Industry. Through its efforts large numbers of idle beggars had been converted to industrious and self-supporting citizens. It became very popular, and excited much interest in all Europe.

To pay her respects to her father on his forty-fourth birthday, the Countess called upon him on the 26th of March, 1797, accompanied by a dozen boys and girls from this House of Industry. An account of this call and its sequences may be gained from the following extracts of a correspondence resulting therefrom, to be found in full in Dr. George E. Ellis's "Life of Count Rumford."¹

In a letter dated Munich, December 17, 1797, to his lifelong friend, Colonel Loammi Baldwin, of Woburn, Mass., Count Rumford says:

In March last my Daughter, desirous of celebrating my birth-day in a manner which she thought would be pleasing to me, went privately to the House of Industry, and, choosing out half a dozen of the most industrious of the little Boys of 8 and 10 years of age, and as many Girls, dressed them new, from hand to foot, in the uniform of that public Establishment at her own expense, and, dressing herself in White, early in the morning of my birth-day, led them into my room and presented them to me when I was at breakfast.

I was so much affected by this proof of her affection for me, and by the lively pleasure that she enjoyed in it, that I resolved that it should not be forgotten; and immediately formed a scheme for perpetuating the remembrance of it, and often renewing the pleasure the recollection of it must afford her. I made her a present of 2000 Dollars American three *per cent* Stock, on the express condition that she should appropriate it *in her Will*, as a capital for clothing every year, *forever*, on *her* birth-day, twelve poor and industrious Children, namely, 6 Girls and 6 Boys, each of them to be furnished with a complete suit of new clothing, to the value of five Dollars, made up in the same form and colours as the uniforms of the poor children she had clothed on my birth-day.

To complete this arrangement it was necessary to determine who should be the objects of this charitable foundation, and it gave me much satisfaction to find that my Daughter did not hesitate a moment in making her option. She immediately expressed her wishes that it might be the poor children of the Town where she was born,—a spot which will ever be very dear to her, and where she is anxious to be remembered with kindness and affection.

Though the inhabitants of the Town of Concord are too rich, and have, fortunately, too small a number of objects of charity, to stand in need of such a donation as that which my Daughter is desirous of their accepting at her hands, yet, as the object she has principally in view—the encouragement of Industry among the children of the most

¹ Ellis's "Life of Rumford," pp. 287-298.

indigent classes of Society—must meet the approbation of all good and wise men, she cannot help flattering herself that the Town of Concord will do her the favour and the honour to accept of this donation for the purpose stipulated, and that either the Selectmen of the Town, or the Overseers of the Poor, for the time being, will take the trouble, *annually*, of seeing that the conditions of it are fulfilled.

What I have to request of you, my Dear Sir, is, that you would mention this matter to some of the principle Inhabitants of Concord, and endeavour to obtain their approbation of the scheme and a promise of their support of it, and their assistance in carrying it into execution. As soon as I shall be informed by you that our Plan meets with their approbation, my Daughter will make an application to them in a more direct and formal manner; and I hereby engage to be her surety for the punctual performance of all that she may promise in the progress of this business.

In compliance with this request of his friend, Colonel Baldwin addressed the following communication to the selectmen of Concord:

WOBURN 24th September 1798.

GENTLEMEN,—Sir Benjamin Thompson, Count of Rumford, and his daughter, the Countess of Rumford, now at Munich, in Bavaria, have made provision for the establishment of a fund of two thousand dollars, three *per cent* Stock of the United States, the income whereof is to be appropriated to clothe annually in the uniform of the House of Industry at Munich, on the 23d of October, forever, twelve poor and industrious children of the town of Concord, being the place of his daughter's birth, a spot dear to her, and where she is anxious to be remembered with kindness and affection.

The Count seems well apprised of the flourishing state of your town, that it is above the need of his assistance. Yet, as the encouragement of industry seems a principal object with him, they hope that the scheme will meet your approbation. In a letter which I received from the Count, dated the 17th December, 1797, wherein the plan of this institution was proposed is a paragraph to the following effect:

“Though the inhabitants . . . of it are fulfilled.”

There is also in the same letter a closing paragraph, which is as follows, namely:

“What I have to request . . . this business.”

I hope the foregoing sketches will be sufficient to give you the outlines of this plan. I have had conversation with several gentlemen of the town of Concord upon the same business who will perhaps be able to give further information respecting the matter; particularly I beg leave to refer you to the Hon. Judge Walker, to whom I have communicated the contents of the letter which I have received upon this subject from the Count.

When I contemplate the many, the very many, important improvements, institutions and establishments the Count has made which go directly to meliorate the condition of mankind, I am led, with grateful pleasure, to bless his name, and glory in our country which gave

him birth. And I should rest in full confidence that your proceedings and report in this concern will be such as will aid his usefulness and extend his benevolence in the world.

I have all along intended to wait on you in person with the Count's proposals, but have hitherto been disappointed, and now despair of having that pleasure this season; and so much time has elapsed since I received them that I have now only to request that your consideration and decision in the premises may be as speedy as their nature and your convenience will admit, and shall wait your advice.

I am with the greatest consideration and respect, gentlemen,

Your most obedient servant,

LOAMMI BALDWIN

The Gentlemen, Selectmen of the Town of Concord, N. Hampshire.

To this the selectmen of Concord made the following respectful reply:

CONCORD, N. H. Nov. 17, 1798.

DEAR SIR,—In your obliging letter of the 24th Sept., which we had the honor to receive, we find stated a plan of an Institution, proposed by Sir Benjamin Thompson, Count of Rumford, and his daughter, the Countess of Rumford, for establishing a fund of two thousand dollars, 3 *per cent* stock of the United States, the income of which is to be appropriated to clothe, annually, in the uniform of the House of Industry at Munich, twelve poor, industrious children of the town of Concord, and the same to continue *in perpetuum*.

Having attentively considered the proposal of the Count and his daughter, we, as a committee, in behalf of the town of Concord, request the favor of you, Sir, to communicate to them the following, viz.:—

That the object under consideration, to wit, the encouragement of industry, appears to us important, and meets the approbation of every good and enlightened citizen; but that the means proposed to be used for the accomplishment of that object will have the desired effect is with us a doubt. Whether the clothing of these twelve children, which to them will be temporary, or minds well informed in useful knowledge, which will be durable, and of which none can deprive them, will be most likely to effectuate so noble and benevolent design, are questions which we beg leave to submit to their judicious consideration.

That although a spirit of industry may be excited in children by holding up to them the idea of clothing, and that from that clothing a temporary comfort will indeed arise, yet we humbly conceive that by furnishing them the means of acquiring moral and political knowledge they might be equally excited, and, should their proficiency be good,—which from observing the general desire after knowledge among our youth we do not doubt,—it would not only afford them present comfort, but will directly tend to meliorate their several conditions in this life, will prepare them more fully to enjoy the blessings of civil and religious liberty, and induce them, as they rise into active life, more cordially to bless the memory of their munificent benefactress.

Whichsoever may appear most effectual in bringing about the object of the Institution, we beg leave of you, Sir, to inform Sir Benjamin Thompson, Count of Rumford, and his daughter, the Countess of Rumford, that we will, with grateful hearts, accept this donation for the stipulated design, and that we shall with the greatest pleasure exert our united influence to aid them in the accomplishment of so important and benevolent a purpose.

We are, Sir, most respectfully yours,

JOHN ODLIN, }
RICHARD AYER } Selectmen
of
Concord.

Hon. Loammi Baldwin, Woburn, Mass.

In regard to this correspondence, Dr. Ellis remarks: "No further steps were taken during the lifetime of the Count in reference to this proposition. His daughter cherished through her life the purpose of substantially carrying into effect the original design of her father, or of establishing some equivalent substitute for it."

In this simple call of an affectionate daughter upon her father on his birthday, is doubtless to be found the origin of the Rolfe and Rumford asylum. In its foundation the Countess has sought to embody the two leading ideas expressed by her father and by the

selectmen of Concord, in the correspondence above quoted. In accordance with the first, she has secured to its inmates the pecuniary encouragement afforded by gratuitous support. Agreeably to the second, she has made ample provision for their moral, intellectual, and industrial training.

The Countess of Rumford died on the 2d of December, 1852, at the age of seventy-eight years. By her last will and testament she founded this institution, which bears the surname of her brother, Colonel Paul Rolfe, and her own, upon

an endowment consisting of all her real estate and the sum of fifteen thousand dollars. Her mansion was made the seat of it. Its beneficence was restricted to needy children born in Concord, particularly those without mothers.

Its establishment and maintenance were intrusted to a perpetual board of five trustees, who were authorized to fill occurring vacancies, subject to the approval of the judge of probate for the county of Merrimack, to whom they are required to make annual reports. Thus was founded the Rolfe and Rumford asylum by the Countess of



Rolfe and Rumford Asylum.

Rumford, who, in "*the town of Concord, being the place of her birth, a spot dear to her, was anxious to be remembered with kindness and affection.*"

The fund left for its support being deemed inadequate by the trustees, was allowed to accumulate until January 15, 1880, when the institution was opened for the reception of beneficiaries.

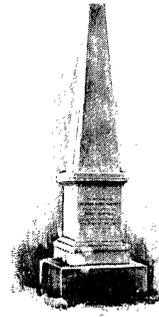
Its first principal was Miss Arabel A. Comins, who continued at its head until 1882, when she resigned the position, and was succeeded by Mrs. Eliza M. Robinson, who has discharged its duties with marked ability for a period of seventeen years. Associated with Mrs. Robinson are Miss Emma J. Dupee, as housekeeper, and Miss Grace Bunker as school teacher. While, as before stated, the general management of the institution is confided to a board of five trustees, its more immediate supervision is intrusted to five lady visitors, selected for their fitness, who visit it at stated periods and keep themselves at all times intimately conversant with its condition and efforts.

The beneficiaries are restricted by its charter to female children, born in Concord. They are received only at early ages, and upon surrender to the institution, by their parents or guardians, for definite periods, usually until they attain the age of eighteen years. Their maintenance is gratuitous. They are instructed in the ordinary common-school branches of learning, in dressmaking, and in the various departments of housework. The aptitude of each is carefully noted by the principal, and, so far as practicable, her training is guided thereby. To pupils leaving the institution, such advice and assistance is given as seems judicious to aid them in securing places of occupation.

The asylum has at present accommodations for twenty pupils. The whole number received since its opening is thirty-nine, and there are eighteen now in residence. Its graduates may be found in different places pursuing various useful avocations. Some have been married and are discharging the duties of domestic life; some are in counting-rooms and shops; some are engaged in household service. Thus far all have made creditable records.

The interest of the asylum in its pupils does not cease upon their leaving it, but follows them wherever they go, and is by them generally reciprocated.

The income of the Rolfe and Rumford asylum has sufficed for its maintenance. Its property consists of the real estate of the founder, including her mansion, which has been twice enlarged since its founder's death, two small cottages, and the endowment fund before referred to, increased in 1893 by a generous legacy of nearly forty thou-



The Countess Rumford Monument.

sand dollars left to it by the late Mrs. Abigail B. Walker of Concord.

Thus far its record has been a creditable one, and it has proved itself a worthy associate of its kindred institutions of benevolence in Concord. It is hoped that, as demands upon its beneficence hereafter increase, as they are likely to do, additional contributions to its endowment may keep pace therewith. It has nearly attained its first score years of age, and bids fair to keep in lasting remembrance, in the hearts of the people of her native town, the name of its benevolent founder.