

## BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN CLARKE

John Clarke, one of the most eminent men of his time, and a leading spirit among the founders of Rhode Island, was, according to the best authorities, born in Suffolk, England, Oct. 8, 1609. His father's name was Thomas, to whom belonged a family Bible which is still in existence and contains a family record. His mother, Rose Herrige, was of an ancient Suffolk family. The tradition that he was a native of Bedfordshire may have had its rise from the fact that there he married his first wife, Elizabeth, daughter of John Harges, Esq. To receive a legacy given her by her father out of the the manor of Wreslingworth, Bedfordshire, he signed a power of attorney, March 12, 1656, styling himself John Clarke, physician, of London. During his youth he received a careful training, and shared in the intellectual quickening of the period, though at what university he was graduated is not know. His religious and political convictions closely identified him with that large and growing body of men who bravely sought to limit kingly prerogative, and to throw around the personal liberty of subjects the protection of constitutional safeguards. He was indeed a Puritan of the Puritans. All efforts to reform abuses in either church or state proving abortive, he directed his footsteps toward the New World, arriving at Boston in the month of November, 1637.

A bitter disappointment, however, awaited him. The Antinomian controversy had just culminated, and one of the parties was being proscribed. Differences of opinion he expected to find on these Western shores, but he was surprised to find, as he tells us, that men "were not able to bear each with other in their different understandings and consciences as in these utmost parts of the world to live peaceably together." Since the government at Boston was as repressive and intolerant as that from which he had just fled, he proposed to a number of the citizens, for the sake of peace, to withdraw and establish themselves elsewhere, and consented to seek out a place. He had boldly resolved to plant a new colony, and upon a new basis; to incorporate into its foundation principles hitherto deemed impracticable, and even subversive of government, and indeed of all order.

The choice company he had gathered signed, March 7, 1638, the following compact: "We, whose names are underwritten, do here solemnly, in the presence of Jehovah, incorporate ourselves into a Body Politic, and as he shall help, will submit our persons, lives, and estates unto our Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and to all those perfect and most absolute laws of his given us in his Holy Word of truth, to be guided and judged thereby." They found in the Word of God warrant for their civil government, and claimed for it divine authority. It was, nevertheless, "a democracy or popular government," and no one was "to be accounted a delinquent for doctrine." Liberty of conscience was most sacredly guarded. The magistrate was to punish only "breaches of the law of God that tend to civil disturbance." The largest personal freedom consistent with stability of government was provided for. There are good reasons for believing that to the hand of Mr. Clarke this initial form of government must be traced.

The place selected for the colony was an island in the Narragansett Bay, known by the Indians as

Aquidneck, but subsequently named Rhode Island, which, Neal says, "is deservedly called the paradise of New England." The lands were obtained by purchase of the aborigines, the deed bearing date 24th March, 1638, the settlers "having bought them off to their full satisfaction." At first established at the north end of the island, the government was, the following April, transferred to the south end, which received the name of Newport. When in 1647 the island was united, under the charter of 1643, in a confederacy with the other towns included in what afterwards became the State of Rhode Island, the government of the united towns was framed by some one on the island. It is generally supposed, and for good reasons, that Mr. Clarke was the author of the government framed, both of the code of laws and of the means of enforcing it. "From the islanders," says Gov. Arnold in his history, "had emanated the code of law, and to them it was entrusted to perfect the means of enforcing the code." The code, which has received from most competent judges the highest praise, concludes with these words:

"And otherwise than thus what is herein forbidden, all men may walk as their consciences persuade them, every one in the name of his God. And let the saints of the Most High walk in this colony without molestation, in the name of Jehovah, their God, for ever and ever."

While constantly busy with the affairs of state, Mr. Clarke did not neglect the higher claims of religion. He is spoken of by early writers as the religious teacher of the people, and as such from the beginning. A church was gathered in 1638, probably early in the year, of which Mr. Clarke became pastor of teaching elder. He is mentioned (1638) as "preacher to those of the island," as "their minister," as "elder of the church there." Mr. Lechford writes in 1640, after having made a tour through New England, that "at the island ...there is a church where one Master Clarke is pastor." On his return to England, he adds, when revising his manuscript for the press, that he heard that this church is dissolved. A report had doubtless reached him on the controversy which had arisen on the island respecting the authority of the Bible and the existence upon earth of a visible church, when some became Seekers and afterwards Quakers.

Missionary tours were made in various directions, an numbers were added to the church from sections quite remote, as from Rehoboth, Hingham, Weymouth. Some of them continued to live at a distance. One of these was William Witter, whose home was in Lynn. Becoming infirm he was visited by his pastor, Mr. Clarke, in 1651, who reached his house the 19th of July, accompanied by Obadiah Holmes and John Crandall, elders in the church. The three visitors were summarily arrested, and without there being produced "either accuser, witness, jury, law of God, or man," were sentenced. They were each to pay a fine, "or else to be well whipped." Some one unknown to him paid, it is said, Mr. Clarke's fine of twenty pounds. At any rate he was, after a detention reaching into the middle of August, set free as summarily as he had been apprehended. He had hoped for the sake of the truth that there might be a public disputation, his last communication on the subject to the governor and his advisers being dated from prison, 14th August. Though disappointed in this hope, the results of the visit were far-reaching and most gratifying. Many eyes were opened to the truth, and "divers were put upon a way of inquiry."

Meanwhile the colony was in peril, its government in jeopardy, and its very life threatened. On his return from Lynn he was importuned to go to England and represent the infant colony at the English court, and, complying with the request, set sail in November, 1651. The following year, 1652, his famous word in defense of liberty of conscience, entitle "Ill News from New England,"

etc., was published in London. The immediate object of his visit--the revocation of Gov. Coddington's commission--having been attained, he continued to reside abroad to watch over the imperiled interests of the unique State, and succeeded not only in parrying the attacks of enemies, but in gaining for it a substantial advantage over its older and more powerful rivals. The boundaries of the State were even enlarged.

The charter obtained in 1663 guaranteed to the people privileges unparalleled in the history of the world. It is an evidence of his skill in diplomacy that he could obtain from King Charles, against the earnest prayers of the older colonies, a charter that declared "that no person within the said colony, at any time hereafter, shall be anywise molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question for any differences of opinion or matters of religion." In the second of two addresses presented to the king he said respecting his colony, that it desires "to be permitted to hold forth in a lively experiment that a flourishing civil state may stand, yea, and best be maintained, and that among English spirits, with a full liberty of religious concerns." To these labors in England his colony was deeply indebted, owed indeed its existence. Yet they have never been duly appreciated, nor have the difficulties environing his way been sufficiently considered. The consummate fruit of his toils--the securing of the great charter-- has even been ascribed to another, as indeed have also the results of other of his labors. The charter was received by the colony with public demonstrations of great joy.

His return home in July, 1664, after an absence of more than twelve years, was hailed with delight. He was immediately elected to the General Assembly, and re-elected year by year until 1669, when he became deputy-governor, and again in 1671. During these years he performed much important public service; was in 1664 the chief commissioner for determining the western boundary of the State, and the same year chairman of a committee to codify the laws; two years later he was appointed along "to compose all the laws into a good method and order, leaving out what may be superfluous, and adding what may appear unto him necessary." Although he retired from public life in 1672, his counsels were still sought in emergencies. Only six days before his death he was summoned to attend a meeting of the General Assembly, which desired "to have the advice and concurrence of the most judicious inhabitants in the troublous times and straits into which the colony has been brought." He died suddenly, April 20, 1676, leaving most of his property in the hands of trustees for religious and educational purposes. His last act was in harmony with one of the first on the colony's records, which was to establish a free school, said to have been the first in America, if not in the world.

He was a man of commanding ability, and from first to last planned wisely and well for his colony. His endowments of both mind and heart were of a very high order. He was "an advanced student of Hebrew and Greek." Arnold says, "He was a ripe scholar, learned in the practice of two professions, besides having had large experience in diplomatic and political life...With all his public pursuits, he continued the practice of his original profession as a physician, and also retained the pastoral charge of his church."

He left a confession of his faith, from which it appears that he was strongly Calvinistic in doctrine. His views of Christian doctrine have been pronounced "so clear and Scriptural that they might stand as the confession of faith of Baptists to-day, after more than two centuries of experience and investigation." He has, and perhaps not inaptly, been called the "Father of

American Baptists." And his, it has been claimed, "is the glory of first showing in an actual government that the best safeguards of personal rights is Christian law." Allen (Bio. Dict.) says,

"He possessed the singular honor of contributing much towards establishing the first government upon the earth which gave equal liberty, civil and religious, to all men living under it." Backus: "He was a principal procurer of Rhode Island for sufferers and exiles." Bancroft: "Never did a young commonwealth possess a more faithful friend." Palfrey, although ungenerous unjust in his judgments upon Rhode Island affairs and Rhode Island men, and especially toward Mr. Clarke, is constrained to admit that he "had some claim to be called the father of Rhode Island;" and that "for many years before his death he had been the most important citizen of his colony." Arnold says he was "one of the ablest men of the seventeenth century." "His character and talents appear more exalted the more closely they are examined."