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THE

LIVES OF THE SIGNERS

OF THE

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE.

BY N. DWIGHT, ESQ.

.o.c.

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VIRGINIA.**GEORGE WYTHER.**

GEORGE WYTHE was a native of Virginia. He was born in 1726, in the county of Elizabeth. On the decease of his father, who was a wealthy farmer, he came into possession of an ample estate, sufficient to render him independent.

His mother was a woman of superior intellect and acquirements, and she took much pains to have him well instructed. All the education he derived from schools, amounted only to reading and writing his native language, with but a slight acquaintance with the rules of common arithmetic. But his mother, who was well instructed in the Latin language, took on herself the instruction of her son, and aided him much in acquiring a knowledge of both the Latin and Greek. He lost both of his parents by death, before he had reached twenty-one years of age, and was left to his own guidance, in possession of pecuniary means sufficient for indulging all his desires for worldly pleasure and amusement, which unrestrained youth are too prone to pursue. After the decease of his mother, he gave way to the seductions of pleasure, laid aside study, and devoted several years to amusement and dissipation.

In the course of a few years, however, he seems to have come to sober reflection, for at about the age of thirty, he withdrew himself from his gay associates, relinquished his levities, and returned to his studies with a zeal and application, which prepared him for the distinguished honor and usefulness to which he afterwards obtained. This assiduous application he continued to the end of his life. He did not cease to lament the misimprovement of his early years, even in his old age, and he always viewed the time he spent in pleasure, not only as a heavy, but an irreparable loss.

Having by his own efforts acquired a preparatory education, superior to that of many who enjoy better advantages than he did, he commenced the study of law, under the instruction of Mr. John Jones, a distinguished lawyer in the colony. Soon after his admission to the bar, he rose rapidly to

the head of the profession in the county where he resided. In his practice, Mr. Wythe uniformly observed a course of conduct worthy of universal imitation. He would never knowingly engage in an unjust or unrighteous cause. His integrity, and his strict attention to business were such, as inspired the community with the fullest confidence in his character, and he rose rapidly in his profession. He was highly distinguished for his learning, and for the purity and correctness of his conduct in his profession; and when on the recommendation of congress, Virginia organized a government for herself, Mr. Wythe was appointed chancellor of the state, which was the first judicial office in the gift of the state. That office he held, and the duties of it he discharged, with strict justice and impartiality to the end of his life.

He was called early by his fellow citizens, to a seat in the house of burgesses; in which he continued by periodical re-elections till near the commencement of the American revolution. In the legislative hall he was associated with some of the first men and most ardent patriots of Virginia. It will be sufficient to name Messrs. Lee, Harrison, Peyton Randolph, Pendleton, Bland, and Henry. He was of a kindred spirit in politics with them; and he enjoyed, as he fully deserved, their confidence and esteem.

That system of oppressive measures, which the British ministry intended to pursue relative to the American colonies, of which the "Stamp act" was the leader, found a decided and resolute opposer in George Wythe, in connection with his no less resolute and decided associate fellow patriots in Virginia. With them he continued a stedfast and uniform opposition in the legislature of Virginia, to the encroachments of the British parliament on the rights and liberty of the American colonists, until their perseverance brought forth the great crisis, when the people of the provinces, finding their oppression no longer to be endured, began to resort to arms in their own defence. At that memorable juncture, Mr. Wythe joined a volunteer corps, and girded on his armor, prepared to meet in the field the hostile invaders of his country.

In 1775 he was remanded to the duties of legislation, by his confiding countrymen, and was appointed a delegate to the general congress; of which he continued a member in the year following, when the great question of declaring the American colonies free and independent of the government of Great Britain, was introduced, and decided in the affirmative. This object, which had been contemplated by him, received his

cordial support ; and he set his signature to it with much satisfaction.

After Virginia had formed a government for herself, it became necessary to adapt her code of laws to the new political condition in which she was now placed, as an independent state. A revision of the laws became necessary ; and for this important purpose a committee was appointed ; one of which was Mr. Wythe. His acting colleagues were Jefferson and Pendleton.

At that time, when the country demanded the active employment of all the best talents it contained, Mr. Wythe was kept constantly employed in some public business of importance. In 1777, he was chosen speaker of the house of burgesses ; and the same year, he was elevated to a high judiciary station, one of the three judges of the high court of chancery. And when that court was organized anew, he was constituted sole judge. In that character he occupied the bench more than twenty years, with the full approbation of the community. While in that station he was called to give the first decision on the great question, whether debts contracted by persons in the United States, to men in Great Britain, previously to the revolution, were recoverable at law. Popular feeling was strong against it ; and the excitement was extensive in America. But Chancellor Wythe, acting with uprightness, having, after a thorough investigation, satisfied his mind that they were recoverable, decided the question, with an independence which is highly creditable to his firmness and integrity.

In addition to his judicial office, he held for a season the office of professor of law in the college of William and Mary ; but on his removal to Richmond, he resigned it, finding it incompatible with his other duties.

In 1786, he was chosen a delegate to the convention for forming the new constitution of the United States. In 1788, he was chosen a member of the state convention, assembled to consider the question of adopting or rejecting that constitution. After its adoption, and the government had gone into operation, he was twice chosen an elector of a president of the United States.

His was the singular honor of having been the law instructor of two presidents and one chief justice of the United States.

Notwithstanding all his public occupations, he instituted a private school, which he instructed personally, free for those who attended it ; as he demanded no compensation for

his services. He took also a favorite young negro boy, and instructed him to some extent in the Latin and Greek languages, intending to give him a literary education; but he died a short time before his benefactor.

Mr. Wythe, like several of his fellow laborers in the cause of his country, and of civil liberty, rose from obscurity to high literary, political, and professional eminence, by his own resolute and persevering exertions, with but little collateral assistance. He resolved to rise to distinction; and he accomplished his purpose. And this he effected by adopting and pursuing, with untiring perseverance, a course of application to study, of integrity, and impartiality in business, of virtuous moral deportment among men, and an undeviating and inflexible adherence to what he believed was right.

His death occurred on the 8th day of June, 1806, and was undoubtedly occasioned by poison, administered by some person in a portion of his food. Suspicion fell strongly on a person nearly related to him; but he was acquitted by a jury. He was in his eighty-first year when this melancholy event took place.

During his life he gave freedom to his slaves, and furnished them with the necessary means of support until they could provide for themselves; and in his will, he made provision for the support of a man, woman, and child, whom he had manumitted during their lives. The boy fell a victim to the same poisoned food which caused his master's decease, and died a short time before him.

Mr. Wythe was twice married. His first wife was a daughter of his preceptor, Mr. Jones. He had but one child, who died young. He left no offspring to survive him.

The character of Mr. Wythe was, and still is, much venerated; and his violent death justly lamented by his surviving friends and fellow citizens, to whom he had been a public benefactor.



RICHARD HENRY LEE.

If a lineal descent from ancestors, who through successive generations were distinguished by rank and office, both honorable and lucrative, can confer gratification to the feelings of a republican, no man can justly claim more, than Richard

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