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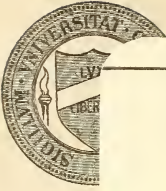
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"The Three Signers"

FROM DELAWARE,

BY

HENRY C. CONRAD.



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“THE THREE SIGNERS”



***An address by HENRY C. CONRAD, Esq., of Wilmington, Delaware, before The Sons of Delaware, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania ***

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SATURDAY EVENING
JANUARY 30, 1897



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The President of the Society, Richard Fisher, Esq., introduced Mr. Conrad, who said :

Mr. President and Gentlemen:—The three men whose names appear as representatives from Delaware on the Declaration of Independence have always interested me very much as public characters. I have had some natural bent, I think, for some years in the direction of Revolutionary affairs and have been brought into contact with these men as historical characters. And the more I have read of them and learned of them, the more interest I have felt in them, and recently I have prepared this fragmentary sketch, covering the lives of these three men, with the hope that it might prove interesting to such as may hear it.

The first of these men of whom I shall treat is Caesar Rodney, who was born in 1728, near Dover, in Delaware. His father's name was also Caesar. He was a grandson of William Rodney. His mother's name was Crawford, being the daughter of Rev. Thomas Crawford, I think the earliest Rector of Christ Episcopal Church at Dover. The name "Caesar" was the family name that came to Caesar Rodney, the signer, from his maternal grandfather, whose name was Thomas Caesar and who lived in London. The family was of English descent.

The ancestors of the family in this country settled in Kent County early in 1700.

In order that we may go back to the times in which these people lived, I want to quote, very briefly from a letter written by Thomas Rodney, a brother of Caesar, the signer, in which he speaks of the manners and customs of the people of that day:

"The manner and customs of the white people when

I first remember, were very simple, plain and social. Very few foreign articles were used in this part of the country for eating, drinking or clothing. Almost every family manufactured their own clothes; and beef, pork, poultry, milk, butter, cheese, wheat, and Indian corn were raised by themselves, served them with fruits of the country, and wild game for food; and cider, small beer, and peach and apple brandy for drink. The best families in the country but seldom used tea, coffee, chocolate or sugar, for honey was their sweetening. The largest farmers at that time did not sow over twenty acres of wheat, nor tend more than thirty acres of Indian corn, and there was very few of this sort, so that all the families in the country had a great deal of idle time, for the land being fertile supplied them plentifully by a little labor, with all that was necessary, hay with great abundance, more than enough, grudged nothing to those who happened to want. Indeed, they seemed to live as it were in concord; for they constantly associated together at one house or another in considerable numbers, to play and frolic, at which times the young people would dance, and the elder ones whistle, run, hop, jump or throw the disc or play at some rustic and manly exercises. On Christmas Eve there was an universal firing of guns, and traveling round from house to house during the holiday, and indeed all winter there was a continual frolic at one house or another, shooting-matches, twelfth-cakes, &c."

This is an indication of the simplicity of the people in the times in which these men figured.

Caesar Rodney's father died in 1745. The son Caesar, being the eldest son, inherited all. He was a man of meagre education, so far as known, and was raised a

farmer, and had very little advantage of books or of learning in that day. He was appointed High Sheriff of Kent County in 1758, when but thirty years of age, and shortly afterwards Justice of the Peace and Judge of all the Courts.

Delaware was then a Province (part of Pennsylvania) under the control of the English government.

In 1762 he was appointed with Thomas McKean to revise and print the laws—that is, all existing laws of this Province in force at that time—and there are copies of these laws now in existence. In fact, we have one or two in the possession of our Historical Society in Wilmington.

Rodney and McKean were elected to represent Delaware in the Stamp Act Congress which met in New York in October, 1765; and both took conspicuous and influential parts in its deliberations and served on its most important committees.

One of the issues which led up to the Revolution was the failure of the British Government to allow the people living in these colonies to tax themselves, and also the further denial of the right to be tried by their peers. As I understand it, in many cases of importance, the British authorities insisted upon taking the people who were to be tried, and who should have been tried here for these offenses, across the water to be tried by entire strangers to them; and they insisted that by right they were entitled to be tried by their peers.

From 1766 to 1769, Rodney was an active member of the General Assembly and sought to prohibit the importation of slaves, even at that early period.

Never a robust man, about this time, in 1768 I think

it was, there appeared on his face, what proved to be a cancer, and it was a source of very great pain and distress to him during the remainder of his life. I have here a letter written by him under date of June 13, 1768, in which he says he has gone to Philadelphia with a view to consulting physicians as to this trouble on his face. He says further: "But to conclude, my case is truly dangerous, and what will be the event, God only knows, I still live in hopes and still retain my usual flow of spirits."

In a letter written a week before, he says:

"I got to Philadelphia on Saturday, and on Monday applied to doctors concerning the sore on my nose, who all, upon examination, pronounced it a cancer, and that it will be necessary I should go through a small course of physick and then to extract it by a costick or by cutting it out, all which (to me) is a dreadful undertaking—and will require so much time, that it is impossible for me to now to determine when you may probably expect to see me in Kent again—if ever—as (no doubt) it will be attended with danger."

Then followed the letter of a week later, in which he says, "what will be the event, God only knows, I still live in hopes and still retain my usual flow of spirits."

I quote from these letters to show that notwithstanding what was almost a death sentence pronounced upon this man, for nearly twenty years after that he stood at his post of public duty and made for himself a name that has come down to us after more than one hundred years, as probably the foremost name in Delaware history.

Rodney was almost continuously a member of the Legislature and frequently its speaker—From the Stamp

act Congress in 1765 until the close of the Revolution, he was the most active, and was by odds the leading man in the State in espousing the American cause.

We have somehow drifted into the idea that at that time the whole people rose en masse in favor of severing the relations between these colonies and the mother country. As a matter of fact, the people were very evenly divided. There was a large number of people in every one of the colonies who were honestly of opinion that the time had not come when the colonies were strong enough to form and maintain a government of their own; that the time had not come when it was expedient for them to break the ties which joined them to the mother country. So that these men who stood in the fore-front of this movement for independence were harassed continually by this sentiment which existed in all of the colonies, and it was a great deal harder task that they had to perform, than if the overwhelming sentiment of the people had been in favor of independence. The result of this was, that men who were fighting in the field, and the men who were representing the different colonies in their assemblies, were continually harassed with this firing from the rear, so to speak, by these opponents of American independence. That was particularly the case as regards Caesar Rodney. In reading his letters you find that he was with the military one day and back in Dover the next, trying to prevent the people from overturning all that was being done in the field and in Congress. With that opposition existing you can appreciate the hard duty which these men had to perform.

There was a Committee of Correspondence in each of the colonies in 1772-73-74. Mr. Rodney was, during

all these years, a leading member of this Committee on Correspondence. That Committee, as its name suggests, was composed of leading men who were in favor of American Independence, and a continual correspondence was kept up with the different colonies, suggesting how the movement was getting along and how the sentiment for independence was growing from time to time. The Committee of Correspondence held a convention at New Castle, under date of August 1, 1774, with a view of choosing delegates to the first Continental Congress which was to meet in Philadelphia a month later. I have in my possession a most interesting relic, being a notice written and sent by Caesar Rodney, calling upon Dr. Charles Ridgely, a delegate from Kent County to attend this meeting at New Castle.

A month later (September 5, 1774), the first Continental Congress met in Philadelphia, with Rodney, Read and McKean as the representatives from Delaware. There were fifty-six delegates present. George Washington was a member from Virginia. Rodney was also a delegate to the Continental Congress of 1775-76.

The population of Delaware in 1775 was 35,000. Rodney was speaker of the Assembly of the State while in Congress. He was also a Brigadier-General in the Continental Army—in the field and back again to the State, serving as a military man and serving as the leading Statesman of the day; evidently the man of all others who was continually conferred with as to all lines of conduct in that time, both in the civil and in the military service.

Letters extant indicate that he was close to Washington—possibly as near to Washington as any man

living in Delaware at that time. There are a great many letters in existence, from Washington to Rodney and from Rodney to Washington, in which the situations of that day are discussed and explained. They are scattered all about. I do not recall that the Delaware Historical Society has even an autograph signature of Caesar Rodney. Some of them still are in the possession of the Rodney family. I think Mr. John M. C. Rodney, living at Cool Spring, has some of them. A good many of them are published in "Spark's Life and Correspondence of Washington."

Caesar Rodney was among the first to advocate the election of George Washington as Commander-in-Chief of the American Army. He was his warm, ardent and close friend all through the War of the Revolution, as shown by his correspondence.

We come now to July 1, 1776. On that day the vote was taken in the Committee of the Whole of the Continental Congress as to the framing and proclaiming of the Declaration of Independence. There were thirteen original colonies represented—I do not know whether anybody else has any such a faculty as I have of always forgetting which were the thirteen original colonies, but I have taken precaution this time to set them down, and as I have them before me, I will make no mistake this time.

The thirteen original colonies were—New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia; all feeble little colonies, scattered along the Atlantic seaboard.

In the Committee of the Whole, ten out of the thirteen

colonies voted in favor of proclaiming the Declaration of Independence. Pennsylvania had seven delegates; four of whom were opposed to it and three in favor of it. Delaware had two members present—McKean and Read—and being divided, did not vote. Rodney was absent. McKean was in favor of, and Read against the Declaration. McKean appreciating that it was most important, for the sentiment it would create, that the Declaration of Independence should be proclaimed, if proclaimed at all, by the unanimous vote of these thirteen colonies, sent for Rodney, who was at the time at one of his farms near Dover (one called "By-field" and the other "Poplar Grove") and the story goes that Rodney came post-haste and that he arrived just in time to save the day, and cast the vote of Delaware in favor of the Declaration of Independence.

McKean, writing of it years afterwards to Caesar A. Rodney, a nephew of Caesar Rodney, the signer, says: "I sent an express, at my own private expense, for your honored uncle, Caesar Rodney, Esquire, the remaining member for Delaware, whom I met at the State House door, in his boots and spurs, as the members were assembling. After a friendly salutation, without a word on the business, we went into the hall of Congress together, and found we were among the latest. Proceedings immediately commenced, and after a few minutes the great question was put. When the vote for Delaware was called, your uncle arose and said: 'As I believe the voice of my constituents and of all sensible and honest men is in favor of independence my own judgment concurs with them, I vote for independence,' or in words to the same effect."

And so in that way, by bringing Caesar Rodney those seventy or eighty miles and joining his vote with the vote of Thomas McKean, Delaware's vote was recorded that day in favor of proclaiming the Declaration of Independence. Pennsylvania's vote, it turned out, was cast for the Declaration also; and thereby the unanimous vote of the thirteen colonies was procured. It happened that only five, of the seven members from Pennsylvania were present, and three out of the five were in favor of it, three making a majority of those present, and so Pennsylvania's vote was cast for the Declaration. If the other members from that State who were opposed to it had been there, they could have thrown the vote of Pennsylvania against it.

Caesar Rodney was a member of the Convention that framed the first Constitution of Delaware, in August, 1776. He was again elected to Congress in 1777. In August, 1777, the forces of Lord Howe landed at Head of Elk, near what is now known as Elkton, and very shortly afterwards the Battle of Brandywine was fought. At that time Caesar Rodney was placed in command of the Delaware State Militia, and served to protect Delaware from the invasions of the British force which landed at the Head of Elk. The statement is made that he was in command and that his force was encamped a little to the Southeast of Middletown, at a place then called Noxontown, which was his headquarters, and there for several days he guarded the inhabitants of Delaware from the invasion of the British forces. There were forty-seven hundred and twenty-eight soldiers from Delaware in the Continental Army.

In 1778, a year afterwards, he was elected President

(Governor) of Delaware. He had served, as you see, almost without interruption, in the General Assembly of the State, and its representative in the Continental Congress, meeting from year to year. He was also serving as Brigadier-General, and now the General Assembly of State elected him Governor. Just here I want to read you, as a matter of interest, a very brief letter which he wrote in acknowledgment of the action of the General Assembly in electing him Governor.

“Wednesday, A. M., April 1st, 1778.

“Gentlemen of the General Assembly:

“I received yesterday afternoon your message declaring me duly elected President of the Delaware State”—

At that time, and for a few years afterwards, the Chief Executive of the State was called “President” and not “Governor.” Continuing he says:

“And am fully sensible of the honor done me by the appointment; but as I am too conscious of my own inability to suppose your expectation will be answered by my acceptance, I hope I shall be excused. I think, nevertheless, that at a time like this, it is the duty of every member of society to take such part in the civil line as shall be assigned him by the government, if tolerably qualified; therefore if the General Assembly cannot fix upon some other person more equal to that important duty, I shall, though with great diffidence, accept; in full confidence, however, that Your Honors will afford me every necessary aid in the due execution of the laws, and otherwise supporting the civil government as now established under the authority of the people; and as the provision made for the President is by no means an ample one; that the General Assembly would not wish to add

to the sacrifice I have already made, by which more than ought to fall to the share of any one member of the community.

“Caesar Rodney.”

He did accept, although his letter indicates that he hesitated about it; and he was Governor for three years. He was a member of the Legislative Council and its Speaker in 1784. On April 8, 1784, it is recorded that what was called the State Council, of which he was a member and the Presiding Officer, met at his own house out on one of his farms a little east of Dover. He being too ill to attend at the regular meeting place, the Council came to him.

Caesar Rodney died June 26, 1784, of cancer, yet a comparatively young man, being in his fifty-sixth year. He never married. For his time, he was regarded as a substantial man, a man of considerable means for that day and generation. His will indicates that he left a comfortable estate. There is a tradition in his family that he owned two hundred slaves. By his will they were all manumitted. And yet he doubtless sacrificed a great deal of his own means in the various positions in which he served his country during that trying time.

Judge Whitely, speaking of the Revolutionary soldiers, says, “that to Rodney more than to any other man in Delaware do we owe the position which our State and people took in that most important contest.”

John Adams, in his Diary, describes Caesar Rodney as follows:

“Caesar Rodney is the oddest looking man in the world; he is tall, thin and slender as a reed and pale;

his face is not bigger than a large apple, yet there is sense, fire, spirit, wit and humour in his countenance."

His brother, Thomas, describing him says: "Caesar Rodney was about five feet ten inches high; his person was very elegant and genteel; his manners graceful, easy and polite. He had a good fund of humour, and the happiest talent in the world of making his wit agreeable, however sparkling and severe. He was a great statesman, a faithful public officer, just in all his dealings, easy to his family and debtors, sincere to his friends, beneficent to his relatives, and kind to his servants, and always lived in a generous and social style."

He was buried on one of his farms near Dover. In 1888 or 1889, an association of young men in Dover calling itself the "Rodney Club," arranged for the removal of the remains of Caesar Rodney from the rather neglected locality on the old Rodney farm and interred the same in Christ's Episcopal Church-yard in Dover; and over his remains there has been erected a substantial granite tomb-stone, to mark his last resting place.

There is no picture of Caesar Rodney in existence; presumably on account of his face being so disfigured by the cancer, he was averse to having one taken. There is a picture extant of Caesar A. Rodney, a nephew of Caesar Rodney, the signer, and he is frequently confused with Caesar Rodney, the signer. Caesar A. Rodney was a very distinguished and prominent man in his day, but belonged to the generation succeeding Caesar Rodney, the signer.

GEORGE READ.

We come now to George Read. He was born of Irish parentage in 1734, and was the oldest of six brothers. His father's name was John Read. About the time, or shortly after George Read was born in Cecil County, Maryland, his father came over and settled near Christiana Bridge, at what we now call "Christiana." He was educated at Chester and at New London. There was at that time an Academy at New London of the first rank under the charge of Doctor Allison, afterwards connected with the University of Pennsylvania. He studied law with John Moland, in Philadelphia, who was a distinguished member of the bar of that city, and was admitted to the bar when nineteen years of age.

He was entitled by law to two shares of his father's estate; but he took the ground that his father had spent on him all that he was entitled to receive in giving him his education, and so he surrendered the two shares which the law gave him to his brothers and sisters, and refused to take anything himself.

He settled in New Castle in 1754. He married, in 1763, Miss Gertrude Ross, daughter of Reverend George Ross, Rector of Immanuel Episcopal Church at New Castle. Although a believer in the maxim that men who are ambitious of reaching the acme of their ambitions should never marry, he did marry. It was somewhat like the case of a man's preaching one thing and practicing another. George Read's wife, Gertrude Ross, was also a sister of George Ross, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence from Pennsylvania.

He succeeded John Ross as Attorney-General in

1763, and was really the first Attorney-General appointed to serve Delaware alone in the capacity of a prosecuting attorney. Before that the Attorney-Generals from Pennsylvania had merely visited the Courts here, and Read was the first one to serve Delaware alone.

In 1765 he held an office under the Crown, but espoused the American cause. He was elected a member of the General Assembly in 1765, and was a member continuously for twelve years.

You will observe how these three men, Rodney, McKean and Read, for a period of twenty years seemed to stay side by side, and wherever you would find one, there the others were. The people, during all that time, seemed to look to these three men as the men best fitted to exercise the most important public functions.

In 1774 Read was sent as a representative, with Rodney and McKean, to the first Congress, and continued a member until the close of the war in 1783, covering a period of nine years. One after another he served in these positions: He was one of the Representatives in the Continental Congress from Delaware; he shouldered a musket as a private in the militia in 1775, and was also enrolled in Richard McWilliam's Company of Foot in 1757; he was President of the Convention that formed the first Constitution for the State in 1776.

The first President of Delaware was John McKinly. McKinly is a name that we are familiar with at this time, but it is William now and not John. John McKinly was a doctor of medicine and a distinguished man in that day. After the Battle of Brandywine, the British swooped down on Wilmington and got possession there. They took Governor McKinly prisoner and put him on a boat

and held him in the Delaware River for several months. At that time Read was Speaker of the Assembly, and by virtue of that office, became President of the State. On the locking up of President McKinly, it devolved on Read to take command, and he proceeded to do so.

He was in Philadelphia at the time, and the shores of the Delaware River from Philadelphia down past Chester and on to Wilmington were largely in control of the British forces. It was deemed important for him to come down into Delaware and take command, so he struck out through New Jersey, coming down on that side of the Delaware River, going to Salem and going across from Salem in a boat. There were several British gun boats in the Delaware at that time and he came very near being taken prisoner in coming across; but finally landed on the Delaware side with his family, went to Dover, and during the time that John McKinly was held a prisoner on the British boat in the Delaware, Read acted as Governor.

He served as member of the General Assembly from 1767 to 1779, a period of twelve years. In 1782 was appointed Judge of the United States Court of Appeals in Admiralty, which position he held until the abolition of the Court.

In 1787 he was a member of the Convention that framed the Constitution of the United States. In 1789 he was elected the first United States Senator from Delaware. He resigned his seat in the Senate to become Chief Justice in 1793, and served until his death in 1798.

Governor Joshua Clayton, (who was Governor of Delaware when the Constitution of 1792 went into force), wrote to Read, who was United States Senator from

Delaware, asking him to accept the place of his choice in the judiciary system under the new Constitution of the State. He chose, after some hesitation, the position of Chief Justice, which he filled acceptably until his death.

He died at New Castle, September 21, 1789, in the sixty-fourth year of his age, after a most eventful life, which was spent largely in the public service, and was buried there in the grave-yard of the Immanuel Episcopal Church.

He must have been a man of means, always living in much style. The Read house, which was his home for years, and in which he entertained very handsomely all the prominent men of his day, was burned down in the fire of 1824. There is now in New Castle, a large house the Read house, but that house was built by George Read, Junior, the son of George Read, the signer; and it is said that he had the misfortune of investing so much money in it that it seriously embarrassed him. The house, however, must not be confused with the residence of George Read, the signer.

THOMAS McKEAN.

Thomas McKean was of Irish parentage, and was born at New London, Chester County, Pennsylvania, in 1734. He was principally educated there in the Academy that was presided over, as I have suggested, by Doctor Allison.

Of these three men, only Caesar Rodney was born in the State and of English parentage. George Read, being of Irish parentage was born just across the border in Cecil County, Maryland.

McKean too, like Read, was admitted to practice

before he was twenty-one, having studied law with David Finney, Esquire, of New Castle. He was early appointed Deputy Attorney-General. In 1757 and 1758 he was Clerk of the Assembly.

In 1752, he was appointed with Caesar Rodney to revise and print the laws then in existence in this Province. In 1762 he was elected member of the General Assembly, and this was repeated uninterruptedly for seventeen years, or to 1779.

Think of it for a moment, that one man should be held in such respect and esteem by his constituents as to be elected year after year for seventeen years as a member of the General Assembly of the State, all through the trying times of the Revolution. This was done after repeated declinations on his part. From 1773 to 1779, he had really lived in Philadelphia and not in Delaware; and after he had positively declined to allow the use of his name after his term of seventeen years, the people suggested to him that if he could not serve he had better name who should serve, which he did and they elected the men whom he suggested.

He was one of the members of the Committee of the Loan Office for three terms of four years each.

In 1765 he was appointed sole Notary Public for the three counties, and to that was added Justice of the Peace, and Justice of the Court of Common Pleas and Quarter Sessions and Orphans' Court for the County of New Castle; so that he seems to have had quite an accumulation of offices.

There had come across the water an edict that only stamped paper was to be used in the Courts of the Colonies, but he was bold enough to tell the authorities

that he would use unstamped paper when he chose to do so—and he did. He took this stand in the Common Pleas Court, in November, 1765.

McKean had been licensed to practice law in Delaware and Pennsylvania prior to 1766—although very young—and afterwards in New Jersey. In 1771 he was appointed Collector of Customs at New Castle. New Castle was his general home, although he owned land about Christiana Bridge, where he spent considerable time.

In 1774 he was a member of the first Congress, from Delaware, although living in Philadelphia, and continued a member until 1783, a period of nine years; and he was the only member of Congress who took his seat in the first Congress and remained a member until the close of the war. While serving Delaware as a member of Congress, he was acting for six years, from 1777, as Chief Justice of Pennsylvania. And during one year (1781), he acted in the three-fold capacity of Member of Congress from Delaware, President of Congress and Chief Justice of Pennsylvania.

If it would be possible ever to combine in any one public character more offices than that at one time, I am unable to appreciate it.

In 1776 he was in the New Jersey campaign with Washington as Colonel of the Philadelphia Associators. While there he was elected a member of the Convention to form the first Constitution of Delaware. He came to this Convention in August, 1776. Years afterwards, writing in regard to it, he said that in a tavern on the night preceding the meeting of the Convention, he drafted the Constitution itself which was adopted substantially

by the Convention, and that he drafted it without the aid of any book, sitting alone in a room of the tavern. He was then on his way from the New Jersey campaign to the Convention, which, I think, met at New Castle. In drafting this Constitution (which was afterwards adopted by the Convention as the first Constitution of Delaware) somebody suggested that he had a bottle of ink (and a bottle of something else), a quill and a sand-box; and that was all.

McKean served as Chief Justice of Pennsylvania for twenty-two years—from 1777 to 1799. He was elected Governor of that State and was twice re-elected, serving nine years altogether.

He retired from public life in 1808. He died in 1817, in Philadelphia, and was buried in Christ's Church-yard in Philadelphia, dying in his 87th year.

McKean is described as tall, erect and dignified, his face expressive of ability, courage and fortitude.

His first wife was a Miss Borden of New Jersey, by which marriage there were six children. His second wife was Miss Armitage of New Castle, and by this marriage there were eleven children.

You can appreciate that a man who was as long and as continuously in public life as was this man, made many bitter enemies; and especially during the time that he was Governor of Pennsylvania, he seems to have had the faculty of stirring up a great deal of opposition; so that many severe and cutting things were said about him. I presume the politicians of those days were about as ugly in their remarks as they are to-day. But Thomas McKean was able to hold his own. Here is his picture; and it is evident that a man having the characteristics as

shown in that face, was perfectly able to hold his own under all circumstances, as he did.

Here is a picture of George Read, the signer—a milder and gentler sort of man, evidently; a delightful face or visage. No wonder the people loved and honored him.

If in this brief and imperfect sketch of these three men, I have been able to interest you, and if in the consideration of their lives we shall all conclude that we have some characters in Delaware history of which we may be all proud, I shall feel amply repaid for any exertion made on my own part.

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SONS OF DELAWARE,
Philadelphia,
1897.



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