G. H. Thayer

GIDEON F. THAYER.

GIDEON F. THAYER, founder of Chauncy Hall School, Boston,— an establishment which he planned and conducted on a scale of liberality and with a degree of success seldom exemplified previously in any private seminary founded and maintained by the efforts of an individual unaided by any association, — was born in Watertown, Mass., Sept. 21, 1793; and the circumstances of his early life are worthy of notice, as testifying to the effectual character of the mental foundation laid, at that day, by the Massachusetts common school system of education, limited, as it comparatively was, in extent. To the operation of that system, and to his own otherwise unaided self-culture, Mr. Thayer owes all that he attained in the way of intellectual advancement. His father was a house-builder and carpenter. His grandparents, however, on both sides, were officers in the Revolutionary army, — a circumstance which doubtless had its influence in the active part which he afterwards took in the duties of the military company of "Rangers" formed in Boston at the beginning of the war of 1812.

Mr. Thayer's years of boyhood were passed principally in Brookline and Boston, till the age of fourteen, when he entered a retail store, as clerk, in which capacity he continued for six years. In 1814 he commenced his course of life as a teacher. His style of penmanship, for which, when a schoolboy, he had obtained a Franklin medal, enabled him successfully to apply for the situation of usher in the "South Writing School" of Boston, then under the care of Mr. Rufus Webb.

Mr. Thayer's labors in instruction were interrupted, in 1818, by a hemorrhage at the lungs, which, though checked by the invigorating effect of a resort to New Orleans and a horseback journey home, was followed by white swelling in the knee, which suspended his teaching for a year longer. In 1820 he was able to resume his vocation, but in a private school, on a very limited scale. His characteristic energy and devoted attention to his school, however, soon brought him a large increase of pupils; and, in 1828, the confidence felt in his success was such as to enable him to command, on credit, the means of purchasing the eligible site in Chauncy Place (now Chauncy Street), on which,

with the aid of a similar pecuniary foundation, his school edifice was erected.

The plan of the building was on a liberal scale of accommodation for all educational purposes, and embraced, in addition to the improvements then recently exemplified in some European school structures, several original features conducive to the physical and moral as well as intellectual purposes of education. The principle of the division of labor was carried to a much greater extent than in any private school at that time existing in our New England cities. The various branches of education usually pursued in preparation either for commercial or collegiate life, were distributed among a numerous corps of accomplished teachers; the principal reserving to his own more immediate care the departments of penmanship, orthography, and elocution, together with that of moral instruction, to which a regular daily attention was given, in conjunction with the subjects of practical habits and personal manners. On these latter points Mr. T. possesses a remarkable talent for commanding and holding the attention of a youthful audience. His brief addresses on such themes always enkindled a warmth of sympathy amounting to enthusiasm. His pupils were ever aware that he had at heart their moral progress much more than merely their intellectual advancement. They daily heard from his lips the noblest sentiments; and the most apposite examples of every virtue were introduced in striking instances from history and biography and daily occurrences in actual life.

The scale on which Mr. Thayer commenced Chauncy Hall School seemed, at the time, to some minds, too broad and too high to be sustained by an unaided individual; and not a few ventured to prophesy the failure of an experiment so bold. But its projector was aware of the force of that impulse which, at the time, actuated the general mind of New England, and of Boston in particular, on the whole subject of education, and on improved methods of instruction. With characteristic energy and enterprise, and indefatigable perseverance, he labored at his chosen work; and every year added its testimony to his ample success, till, yielding to the requirements of health, he withdrew to less exhausting pursuits at the close of the year 1855. The school, however, continues to flourish on its original plan, and, under the direction of Mr. Thomas Cushing, himself formerly its pupil, realizes all the liberal views of its founder.

Mr. Thayer's success in life is due to a strong and well-founded self-confidence, and to a tireless activity and energy — an inborn necessity for doing — which were abundantly shown in his early efforts at self-improvement, and which have ever since made him an

efficient helper in many enterprises of benevolence and mental and moral improvement, other than his profession. During the fifty-five years while Mr. Thayer has been earning his living in Boston, his interest in human progress has been unflagging, and his coöperation in all efforts for its promotion, whether in the city or in the suburban towns, where he has in part resided, constant and hearty.

While yet a youth, he was a member of a literary association called "The Belles-Lettres Club," which met weekly to read original compositions; was afterward, from 1825 to 1835, a member of the Boston Debating Society; and at still later periods belonged to "reading circles" together with such men as Dr. W. E. Channing, Dr. Follen, Dr. Tuckerman, Mr. Timothy Walker, &c. While a clerk he pursued a course of study in French, under M. Sales, in hours saved from business. After becoming an usher in the South Writing School, he continued, outside of school hours, to assist his former employer; and at the same time taught an evening school for the instruction of young men and apprentices in reading, writing, and arithmetic.

He early enlisted in the Sunday-school enterprise, was a teacher in Dr. Channing's school (now Dr. Gannett's), afterwards superintendent of that of Dr. Pierce's church at Brookline, and again in Dr. Lunt's at Quincy. The latter school, indeed, had been wholly discontinued, but under Mr. Thayer's vigorous ministrations grew to a total number of two hundred and twenty persons within a period of two years. He was for some time an agent of the Boston S. S. Society, and in that capacity visited many schools and delivered many addresses in various parts of New England; and since leaving the office he has still, from time to time, performed much of the same duty.

While residing in Quincy, Mr. Thayer lectured and labored with effect for the establishment of the high school there; was actual editor of a weekly paper, the *Quincy Patriot*, devoted to literature and material and mental improvement; was president of the lyceum for one year, during which was furnished the longest and best course of lectures ever enjoyed in Quincy; and was — as, indeed, elsewhere at various times — member of the business committee of his parish.

He was one of the founders of the American Institute of Instruction, of the American Association for the Advancement of Education, of the Norfolk County Teachers' Association, — one of the earliest bodies of its class, — and of the Massachusetts State Teachers' Association. He has attended most of the meetings of these bodies, and has held distinguished official positions in them. He was one of the editors of the *Massachusetts Teacher* for 1848; was many years chairman of the managers of the Boston Dispensary; was one of a commit-

tee for raising a fund for the Washingtonian Total Abstinence Society, which gathered five thousand dollars in one season; was six years a member of the Common Council of Boston, and, while such, a member of the Committee on Public Instruction, a visitor of the Boston Lunatic Hospital, one of the originators of the movement for establishing the Boston Public Library, and assisted in forming the Association of Franklin Medal Scholars.

Mr. Thayer's liberality of views and strong practical common sense have been markedly shown in his ready appreciation of improvements, and in his independence of personal action. Only a little later than 1820, he had, in connection with his school, some apparatus for physical exercise; and was then accustomed to take his pupils, at recess, to Boston Common, for open-air exercise and practice. He was connected with the gymnastic school which was under the care of Dr. C. Follen, and afterwards of Dr. Francis Lieber; and was early a quiet coöperator with Mr. Josiah Holbrook in introducing into schools a department of natural science.

To the younger members of his former profession Mr. Thayer has furnished a noble example of zeal and industry, and of entire devotedness to the daily duties of a teacher's life, in all the relations of promptness, punctuality, vigilance, regularity, and order; of strictness of requirement, yet generous allowance for the imperfections of childhood and youth, a warm sympathy with juvenile feelings, and unfailing readiness to aid the recovery of the erring to duty and to happiness. He has left also to those who are entering on the teacher's life the benefit of his example, in the earnestness with which he has engaged in all social and civil duties as a member of the community, never allowing himself to plead his school engagements as an excuse for omitting those of any just claim on his attention and effective action as a man, as a neighbor, or a citizen.

Every moment of school hours was sacredly devoted to its particular use; and hours of gratuitous attention were sedulously given to the voluntary discharge of extra duties of all sorts connected with the daily work of teaching. Yet so economically was every moment of the day planned and distributed, that no call of public or private duty seemed ever to be neglected. By method rigorously exact, and a military promptitude of habit and action, he was enabled to meet the demands of a multitude of professional and extra-professional duties connected with official stations in city life and beneficent associations in town and country. An active intermingling with society, and a liberal stake in the business of life, he deemed an aid, not a hindrance, to the true success of a teacher as an educator of men.

To one who, for successive years, enjoyed daily opportunity of observing Mr. Thayer's operations in the school-room, we are indebted for the following testimony:

"One could not be long within the sphere of his influence, as an instructor, without being fully convinced that he had fallen into the niche for which nature had designed him; that he was a *master* in every sense of the word. His dignified person and manners bore the seal of authority legibly impressed upon them; while his exact and thorough knowledge of whatever he undertook to teach was immediately apparent in his mode of communicating it. It was evident that, regarding the trust reposed in him as an important one, he was endeavoring to fill it with conscientiousness, earnestness, and efficiency; that he knew no half measures in his share of the work of instruction, and would be satisfied with none on the part of his pupils.

"In his ideas of his duty as a teacher Mr. Thayer was eminently *conscientious*. In taking charge of another's child, he felt, in its full force, what is made the legal obligation of the public teacher, to consider himself *in loco parentis*. Everything was to be done by him that could conduce to the improvement of the mind, heart, health, or manners of the precious charge. He did not consider his duty done by going through any formal routine of lessons or hours, but would *labor* in season and out of season; ever trying some new expedient to reach conscience or intellect, hoping against hope, and dismayed by no amount of dulness or unappreciating indifference.

"Personal comfort, or the enjoyment of time that might fairly be considered his own, were never thought of by him, when, by the sacrifice of them, there was a possibility of improving those under his charge. Years of time have been devoted by him in extra and self-imposed labor which could never have been expected of him. But such labor was not unrewarded. Impressions were often produced that could hardly have been looked for; and the animus of the teacher came to be understood even by the reckless and negligent. Whatever his requisitions or inflictions, his pupils felt that he was conscientiously acting for their benefit; and in maturer years, if not at the time, have acknowledged their obligations. Independent of any literary improvement, a valuable lesson was thus taught them, that was never forgotten.

"*Earnestness* was eminently characteristic of Mr. Thayer as a teacher. Regarding his duty as highly important, he undertook the discharge of it with all his might. Holding nothing unimportant in a work that is made up of particulars, a chain of many links, he would not allow one of them to pass from his hand unskilfully forged,

or carelessly polished and united. He was equally alive to the necessity of correcting an error or impressing a truth the ten thousandth time as the first, and would use the same liveliness of manner and clearness of illustration to impress it on the young mind. The writer can distinctly remember, after the lapse of thirty years, *when* various points of propriety and correctness were indelibly impressed upon *his* mind. Education, under Mr. Thayer's direction, was no sleepy process, no mere matter of books, or routine of question and answer, but something that called out the whole man, warm, fresh, and glowing with his subject. Possessed of much native eloquence and power of illustration and persuasion, Mr. Thayer used them freely, and often successfully, to warn, guide, and encourage; and his brief but impressive addresses have planted much good seed in the minds and hearts of his hearers. Mean, selfish, and unmanly actions received a withering condemnation from his lips, and the doers of them were glad to hide their abashed heads; while no one could better portray the honest, the just, the magnanimous in conduct, and confirm his hearers in the practice of them. Mr. Thayer had the qualities that go to make the orator or the advocate, and would, no doubt, have succeeded as well at the bar, or in the pulpit, as in the school-room. Believing that important ends were to be attained, he threw himself into his work with an ardor that increased rather than diminished with increasing years and experience, — not the mere sudden and quickly-spent fire of the novice, but the steady, undying warmth of the veteran.

"*Exactness* and *thoroughness* were original qualities of his mind, and were fully brought into play in the exercise of his profession. Whatever he knew, he *wholly* knew, and tried to impart in all its entireness. In his favorite department of *elocution*, he had early made the orthoëpy of the English language his special study, and had fixed in his mind the best authorized pronunciation of every word in it; at least, during a long intimacy, the writer never knew him at a loss to decide promptly and correctly when appealed to in regard to any doubtful or disputed point. The characteristics and habits of mind which will enable any one to do this, will be appreciated by those to whom the troublesome subject of English pronunciation is ever new, and whose minds are never fully settled in regard to it. His mind held, with a vice-like tenacity, anything connected with the subject, and reproduced it at the shortest notice. As a consequence, his teaching in this or any other branch that he undertook was marked by an unusual degree of promptness and accuracy. If there was a *best way*, he was master of it, and wished his pupils to be also;

His lectures before the Institute — the first on "*The Spelling of Words, and a Rational Method of Teaching their Meaning*," in 1830; and the last, on the "*Connection of Courtesy with School Instruction*," in 1840 — have been widely circulated and read, and have had a marked influence on the opinions and practice of teachers. So highly was the lecture on "Courtesy" esteemed by Mr. Mann, that he printed it entire in a number of the *Common School Journal*, as well as in pamphlet form, and of the last sent a copy to every school in Massachusetts. Of a portion of the same lecture Mr. Barnard has given a circulation of over fifty thousand copies in the form of an educational tract, and in his publications on school architecture. In 1856 Mr. Thayer commenced in the *American Journal of Education* a series of Letters to a Young Teacher, which he has continued in successive numbers, and proposes to continue until he has gone over in a plain, practical way all the principal topics of school-keeping. These "Letters," when completed and collected in a volume, will be a valuable contribution to our educational literature.

In consideration of Mr. Thayer's service to the cause of letters, the corporation of Harvard College, in 1855, and of Brown University, in 1854, conferred on him the honorary degree of Master of Arts.