



Painted by J. H. Sartorius

*Amos A. Phelps.*

AMOS A. PHELPS, D.D., WAS BORN IN THE  
TOWN OF ANDOVER, MASS., IN 1791.

## WILLIAM F. PHELPS.

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WILLIAM F. PHELPS, the first principal of the State Normal School of New Jersey, was born at Auburn, New York, on the 14th of February, 1822—the oldest of three sons. His parents were intelligent and in comfortable circumstances, and gave to their children such educational advantages as the times and their means could afford. He was accordingly sent to such imperfect district schools as were to be found, at that period, in his native state.

In consequence of the manifest incompetency of his teachers, and of the barren results which followed their work, Mr. Phelps was frequently led, even at an early age, to reflect upon the absurdity of their methods, and upon the unprofitable character of the instruction they attempted to impart. He went with the greatest aversion to his senseless tasks, and his want of progress convinced him of the fundamental errors which characterized the prevalent mode of teaching. It was evident that this mode was not at all adapted to the nature and wants of the mind, and hence it failed to secure its development and progress.

In 1834, the Auburn High School was established, under the auspices of a ripe scholar and intelligent teacher, Albert Metcalf, A. M., of Massachusetts. This school being liberally supplied with blackboards, philosophical and astronomical apparatus, and being under the management of a polished gentleman, as well as a most efficient, kind, and affectionate teacher, soon attained a high character; and Mr. Phelps was transferred to its more genial atmosphere. Its strict discipline and rigorous instruction made a deep impression upon his mind and heart. He, however, felt keenly the effects of early misdirection, and though he profited much by the lessons of the high school, yet some of the advantages of his new position were lost through the effects of the habits already formed. It was at the high school that the benefits of classification and method were first exhibited to his mind; and the genial influence of kindness and affection, as educational forces, were first made apparent. But this school was too far in advance of the times, and of the intelligence of the community, to be properly appreciated. The teacher, after struggling against fearful odds, overtaken and disheartened, fell a victim to his devotion, and died on the field of his usefulness. Nothing now remained

to our pupil but the old district school and its repulsive associations.

Several ineffectual attempts were made by the parents of Mr. Phelps to install him in a commercial position. For several years, therefore, his time was divided between the farm in summer, and the country district school in winter.

It was while a pupil in the latter, in the winter of 1838-39, that his father was strongly impressed, by the schoolmaster, with the belief that William was abundantly competent to keep school. Accordingly, after spending the summer of 1839 on the farm, he was warned, in the autumn of that year, that he must "take a school" during the following winter. The proposition struck him with amazement, and he objected and even protested; but was obliged to obey. It would not be worth while to describe his long-continued and disheartening efforts "to get a school," nor to praise the distrust, and in some cases, the contempt with which his application was frequently received by narrow-souled trustees. After weeks of mortifying effort, he at length found a school in a retired neighborhood. This school was distinguished for its unpromising antecedents. Its record was one of battles fought between teachers and taught. The last of these had resulted in the discomfiture of his immediate predecessor, and his expulsion from the premises. This was, therefore, his first school. The building was in a crossing, where four roads met, in a low and forbidding spot. The only means of reaching the door was through the carriage track in the middle of the roadway. The school-house was, in dimensions, about eighteen by twenty-two feet. It had an old worn-out stove in the center, and the forms, or writing desks around the room. Surrounding the stove were seats made of slabs, with holes at each end, the legs crossing each other, and protruding at least two inches above the upper surface. These seats were about two and a half feet high, and were intended for little children. These arrangements, with an old rickety table, and a few shelves at one end, for the children's clothing, completed the outfit of the school in respect of furniture.

In these quarters, Mr. Phelps "kept a school," with sixty pupils of all ages, sexes, grades, and conditions, for four months and a half. The only notable characteristic of this school, was a tolerable degree of order, secured by constant exertion, and by a sort of omnipresence on the part of the teacher. A good feeling was maintained among both pupils and parents, and the reputation of the schoolmaster was established in that district for all time. But one incident of a somewhat striking character occurred to relieve the monotony of the session.

There was one family in the vicinity distinguished for the ungovernable character of its children. One of these children having one day openly defied the authority of the teacher, chastisement was inflicted upon the offender, in accordance with the theory and the practice of those days, made and provided. As the parents had conscientious scruples against juvenile obedience, these being abundantly manifested in their home practice, much indignation was felt by them at the success of the teacher in reducing the child to subjection, by means of corporeal punishment. Accordingly, a complaint was made before a justice, and a warrant was issued for Mr. P.'s arrest. He was held for his appearance at court, to answer to the grave charge of assault and battery.

Being quite young, and exceedingly sensitive, with no experience in the terrors of the law, he concluded that his character was lost irreparably. But the people of the district rallied to his support, rejoiced at his conquest of one of the barbarians, and the master's confidence was quickly restored. The complainant dared not go to the grand jury, and the prosecution dropped. The affair was, on the whole, a fortunate one for the neighborhood, and resulted in securing a wholesome state of subordination among its young ungovernables.

An incident of a more amusing character occurred during this first winter's experience in the life of a country schoolmaster. A certain family, residing a mile and a half from the school-house, and sending six children to the school, used to pack them all, young and old, into what is called a jumper, which consists of a crockery crate mounted upon a pair of runners, and in this plight they were sent to school. The horse was stabled at a neighbor's, and at night the precious freight was returned to the bosom of the family. It was the uniform practice then, as now in many quarters, for the teacher "to board around." It fell to Mr. Phelps' lot to be one of this lively sleighing party at night, during a part of that winter. In the morning he was obliged to make his way back to the school on foot, make the fire, and sweep the school-room, in order to be ready for the day's work by nine o'clock. We will permit him to describe his first visit to this family, in his own sprightly language, as communicated some time since, in a letter to the writer of this sketch. He says:—

"I never shall forget my first trip with this (the sleighing) party, nor my first meal with the family. There were seven children in all, and at home they were the most noisy and unmannerly set of urchins on this side of that mythical land, classically denominated 'bedlam.' Their voices, loud enough to startle the seven sleepers, could easily be heard across the street, when the house was closed. The mother

was one of the most industrious and tidy housekeepers I have ever met. With her shrill voice sounding above the clatter and confusion of the seven children, there was music such as would never soothe a nervous man to rest.

"Arriving at the house, we found a warm dinner 'smoking upon the table,' and it was not long before a general rush was made by the children, on some magic signal which I neither saw nor heard, for the gustatory onslaught. Being a stranger and somewhat diffident, I waited for an invitation to join in the work of destruction. At length the 'gude wife' spoke out in her highest key, and commanded me to 'come to the table.' A blessing was asked by the 'pater familias,' in a tone so low that I could scarcely distinguish a word, although sitting next him on the right. The last word was not uttered, before six forks went playing into a huge dish of potatoes, and thence, 'quick as thought,' into a plate of sliced ham, while the bread and other accompaniments disappeared as the dew before the sun of a summer morning. Here my modest reserve was again put to the test! I waited to be helped. Vain expectation! Desolate prospect for a half-starved schoolmaster! But the mother soon came to my relief, and in an instant, by a masterly stroke, she vanquished the accumulated bashfulness of seventeen years. Again, raising her voice to its highest pitch, she exclaimed, 'come now, you must help yourself. If you don't, you'll fare hard, for we haint got any manners here!' The thing was done. I at once 'fell to,' and helped myself; felt at home, and ever after, amidst all my experience in the barbarous practice of 'boarding round,' managed to adapt myself to the company I was in, and to keep my poor body several degrees above the point of starvation."

The succeeding summer was spent in the Auburn Academy, then under the charge of a very efficient corps of teachers. For several successive winters, Mr. Phelps taught district schools, often in retired neighborhoods, and amid discouraging circumstances. His plan was to teach in winter, and attend the academy in the summer, with a view to prepare for college. His success was uniformly marked, and he succeeded in securing the reputation of being one of the best teachers in the country. He became gradually impressed with the great utility of the blackboard, and his experience gave him more and more insights into the nature of the teacher's work, and the true dignity of his calling.

After an experience of five years as a teacher in the rural districts, Mr. Phelps was called upon to take charge of a large public school in the city of Auburn. This was a trying position. The buildings

were old, dilapidated, and inconvenient. There was but one room for the accommodation of one hundred and forty pupils of all grades. While the furniture, and other needful appliances for instruction and training, were of the most meager and unsatisfactory character.

While engaged in the conduct of this school, Mr. Phelps received notice of his appointment, by the county board of supervisors, as one of the first representatives to the New York State Normal School, which was opened in December, 1844. His impressions, gathered from the glowing accounts presented by the official descriptions of foreign normal schools, their comprehensive courses of study, their rigorous discipline, and their practical methods of training, were that they were far superior to our colleges, and believing that his native state, with her great resources and liberal educational policy, would not be found behind even the governments of Prussia, Switzerland, and France, in the endowment of her normal school, he at once gave up all thought of college, and enlisted in the new movement with all the enthusiasm of a Columbus, on his first voyage of discovery.

On the 16th of December, 1844, he for the first time took leave of his friends, and made his way to Albany, in order to be present at the opening of the school, which occurred on the 18th. The emotion which he felt on his first interview with such men as Samuel Young, Alonzo Potter, David P. Page, and Francis Dwight, was one of the greatest veneration. Noble men! They have all, with one exception, passed away, having sealed with their lives their devotion to the great cause of universal education and of human progress.

The school was opened, according to notice, on the 18th. Col. Young, who was then state superintendent of common schools, and chairman of the executive committee of the normal school, gave a lucid and able exposition of its nature and objects. Immediately thereafter, the exercises of the institution were commenced by Mr. Page, in that quiet and unpretending style so eminently his characteristic. There were but twenty-nine pupils present during the first day, and, amid the din of the carpenter's hammer and saw (for the apartments were yet incomplete,) the great work was commenced.

Mr. Page and his associates were all novices in the conduct of normal schools, and were obliged to "feel their way," as it were, amid many difficulties, and wholly unaided by the light of experience in the work of training teachers. The first six weeks were spent in a cursory review of the elementary branches of study. These subjects, treated as they were by the teachers, soon became dry and distasteful to those who had deemed themselves proficient in them long ago. Accordingly a change of programme was agreed upon, and all those

who, during the six weeks, had shown themselves qualified, were allowed to advance to higher studies. A class in algebra and physiology was accordingly formed; the former under the able mathematician, Perkins, and the latter under the leadership of Mr. Page himself. In this manner, the exercises of the first term of twelve weeks were conducted. Large accessions were constantly made to the number of the pupils, so that, before the end of the term, the school had increased to nearly one hundred pupils.

Thus far, the work had been preliminary and preparatory. None of those striking processes and results, so graphically described as characterizing the normal schools of Europe, had been realized. Mr. P's hopes were disappointed, and he regretted his choice. But, having unbounded confidence in Mr. Page, and trusting to time to correct all the errors, supply all the defects, and develop all the excellencies he had expected, he determined to hold fast and continue his normal life. The second term opened in May, 1855. With this term, the experimental school or school of practice was to be inaugurated, as one of the distinctive features of the normal school system for the training of teachers.

Having, by means of several long conversations with Mr. Page, upon the subject of teaching, as well as by intercourse with him in the capacity of a student, formed an intimate and favorable acquaintance with him, Mr. Phelps was designated by him as the person to organize this experimental school. He had thus the advantage of making upon the children the first impression, which proved to be a very pleasant and happy one. A strong attachment at once sprung up between the teacher and the pupils. This feature of the normal school establishment promised, in the outset, to be a highly successful one. Mr. P's term of service was fixed at two weeks. But before the expiration of this period, Mr. Page was taken seriously ill, and he was desired by the officers of the school to continue in charge of it until the principal's recovery. This detained him for six or eight weeks, and served to strengthen the ties between him and the children under his charge. At length, on the recovery of Mr. Page, he was allowed to return to his class, and the plan of rotating the teachers of this department was set in operation. But the change was injurious. The children no sooner became acquainted with a new teacher than he left them and a stranger was substituted. This led to difficulty and disorder. There was no uniformity either in the discipline or the instruction, and the experimental school became an object of dread to the pupil-teachers, of aversion to the children, and of vexation and trouble to the principal, whose other duties allowed him but little opportunity to attend to its details.

A change of plan was accordingly determined upon, and it was proposed to place a permanent teacher or superintendent in charge of this department, subject to the advice and counsel of the principal of the normal school. It should be his duty to prescribe such regulations as might be necessary for the government of the school, to advise and direct the pupil-teachers during their term of practice, to notice and criticise their methods of teaching, to preserve order and uniformity in the school, and to train the pupil-teachers in the principles of their future calling. This plan was to go into effect at the commencement of the fall term of 1845. After mature deliberation, Mr. Phelps was chosen for this difficult, uninviting, and responsible position. He accepted it with reluctance, and entered upon its duties in October.

The plan succeeded. By it the school was redeemed from failure. Order was brought out of confusion, the children were happy, the pupil-teachers were again reassured, because pleasantly and profitably employed. Before the end of the term, so popular and successful was this department, that its capacity was doubled, and the tuition, which had been previously free, was fixed at twenty dollars per annum. So effective was the discipline and the instruction, as to exert a powerful influence upon the normal school, its methods, and its spirit. It served the purpose of a school of observation as well as practice, and many sound views of the nature and objects of education were here imbibed and carried forth into the schools of the state.

The constantly rotating teachers could not fail to produce constantly varying results. While one would secure the respect and affection of the children, and good order as a consequence, another would in a single day undo the good work of an entire week. These phenomena could not fail to provoke inquiry into their causes. The labors of different teachers were compared, their results were noted, and, after long observation, general principles were deduced and classified. These principles were at length produced in the form of lectures to the pupil-teachers, to their manifest interest and profit. Mr. Phelps occupied this position, trying but useful as it was, until the spring of 1852. Constant application to his work, with a view to master the difficulties which beset him, and to overcome all obstacles, produced at this time a serious derangement of his health. For one year he was a great sufferer from hemorrhage of the lungs and debility. He remained at his post, however, until even these physical weaknesses were overcome, and until the principles for the conduct of his "peculiar institution" were well established and embodied in its organization.



Finally, after having had some six hundred pupil-teachers pass in review before him, and after having labored faithfully to infuse into them his own life-giving spirit, he rested from these labors, and spent more than two years in travel and in the pursuits of business. During this time, his health became firmly established and his knowledge of men and things was greatly increased, by intercourse with the world.

Not long before the close of his connection with the experimental school at Albany, the degree of Master of Arts was conferred upon him by the trustees of Union College, at Schenectady.

In the summer of 1855, the first board of trustees of the New Jersey State Normal School, appointed under the legislative act of the preceding winter, elected Prof. Phelps, by a unanimous vote, principal of the new normal school, and called him at once to counsel with them in relation to their duties. Finding his qualifications adequate, they soon confidently committed the enterprise almost wholly to his management, imposing little or no restraint upon him except that which arose necessarily from the limited pecuniary resources at their disposal. Prof. Phelps adapted himself, with characteristic facility, to the new circumstances in which he was placed. He threw all his energies into the new enterprise, surmounted with skill the various difficulties with which the whole movement in New Jersey was at first embarrassed, and succeeded in a short time in opening the normal school under the happiest auspices, and with a very desirable degree of popular favor. It was not long before, under his management, the institution began to attract great attention, and visitors from the state and from abroad began to flock in to witness the arrangements, and the modes of discipline and instruction. It is remarkable that very few, even of those who were at first most prejudiced, ever visited the school without leaving it as friends. Indeed, hundreds of those who had originally been hostile to the movement, became the warmest friends and advocates of the school. When the new building was opened, and the requisite facilities were obtained for exhibiting the plan to the best advantage, it became a resort for multitudes; and, after the first public examination, the reputation of the principal and the school was established. Prof. Phelps has manifested a devotion to the interests of the school, and an ability in the whole and the detail of its management, which have already placed him in the front rank of the practical educators of our country, as one of the most efficient and intelligent leaders of the great educational movement in America.