

William Wirt

(Nov 1772 – 20 Feb 1834)

The National Intelligencer, February 19, 1834

Obituary



A great man has been taken from amongst us -- the scholar, the orator, the profound jurist, the able statesman, and honest man. A man whom genius and virtue, unaided by adventitious circumstances, combined to raise to the proudest eminence. A giant in intellect, and upright as he was able -- never dazzled by power, or deluded by ambition -- great without pretension, good without pretense, and benevolent without ostentation -- a Christian without bigotry, a man without reproach. He stood forth a glorious example of the combination of genius, with the highest moral and social excellence -- a bright model of public purity and private worth.

Such was William Wirt.

To know him, as the public knew him, by his writings and his speeches, was to admire and honor him -- to know him personally, was to esteem -- to know him at home, in his domestic circle, was to love him.

The nation has lost a man, whose place will not soon be filled -- his friends have sustained a loss, which can never be repaired. Adieu, great, noble, virtuous spirit. The heart which now bleeds for thy loss, and which has often thrilled at thy eloquence and warmed at thy goodness, may grow cold with age, but never shall be effaced from it the impression of thy kindness, nor love and admiration for the loftiness and beauty of thy public and private character. The head which now dictates this feeble tribute to thy memory, may be bleached by the suns of many summers, but never can we hope to know again thy like. Adieu -- and may the pure spirit which hath been so severely busied, but never bowed by afflictions here, have found a fit resting place, with kindred spirits, in a better world.

Obituary

Died, about meridian, yesterday, in this city, William Wirt, Esq. aged about 62 years.

In him his family have lost all that can be lost, in one among the most tender, devoted, and enlightened of husbands and fathers.

Of all who witnessed the strong and heart-endearing ties which this event has sundered, there lives not one but must sympathize, from his inmost soul, with the amiable and exemplary wife who at once imparted and partook the purest and highest enjoyments of conjugal union, and who is now to see a premature grave open to receive the mortal remains of him who was the source and the object of the hallowed affections by which that union was cemented and embellished -- with children, to whom the hand is now cold and motionless, which but yesterday led them, with paternal solicitude and unerring aim, through the paths of human science, in all the intricacies of which the exercises of studious youth, and the sustained application of mature years, had instructed him, and which his genius had illustrated; to those children, the eloquent tongue, though not yet mute to grateful memory, no longer speaks, in living accents, precepts of wisdom, morality, and piety, so lately enforced by the example, and adorned by the life and manners of a Christian, a scholar, and a gentleman.

His country, indeed, has lost a citizen, whose talents and virtues, always adequate to the higher tasks of public service, were always devoted, with unflinching patriotism, to his country's good: but to

that country he has left an inheritance in the extended fame which will perpetuate his name with the enduring monuments of the age and land in which he lived.

His professional brethren must largely participate all the causes of profound regret, both general and particular, that can affect either communities or individuals. Lamenting him as a brother, whom in life they loved with brotherly affection, and admired as the ornament of their profession; they have lost no time in evincing their alacrity to manifest their respect to his memory; and will, doubtless, follow out the first promptings of a spontaneous and all-pervading sentiment, and give unequivocal and lasting tokens of the sincerity and depth of their affection, their admiration, and their regret.

The National Intelligencer, Friday, February 21, 1834

In Memory of Mr. Wirt.

Baltimore County Court -- Jan. Term, 1834

Wednesday, 19th February

The Court have heard the annunciation of the death of William Wirt, a member of this Bar, with deep regret. His distinguished career at the Bar, and in the Executive Department of the Government, has made him known to the whole nation, while his literary labors have proved beneficial to the present generation, and will be read with profit and delight by succeeding generations as long as purity of morals are estimated or classic beauty of style shall be a subject of admiration.

The Court will, in respect for the memory of Mr. Wirt, direct an adjournment, and will further order this evidence of their high estimation of his services and capacity to be spread upon the minutes of the Court.

At a meeting of the Judges of Baltimore Court and City Courts, and of the members of the Bar of both Courts, held in the County Court Room, on Wednesday, the 19th instant, on motion of Col. U.S., Heath, the Hon. Stevenson Archer was called to the Chair, and Reverdy Johnson, Esq. was appointed Secretary.

On motion of John Glenn, Esq. the following resolutions were unanimously adopted:

Resolved, That it is with the most poignant grief that Bench and Bar of Baltimore County and City Court have received the tidings of the death of William Wirt.

That, long endeared to him by professional as well as personalities, they feel that in his demise they have lost a brother whose character and fame have dignified and illustrated the profession, and whose private worth commanded the liveliest affections of the community in which he lived:

That, richly gifted with the science of Jurisprudence his attainments have contributed in an eminent degree to the service of his country:

That, endowed with the most powerful eloquence, it has long and successfully been devoted to the support of right:

That, stored with the various accomplishments of a profound and elegant scholar, they have been rendered subservient to the instruction and expansion of the public mind:

That, imbued with the purest principles of virtue, or unbounded benevolence, charity and affection, bland and courteous in his manners, and fraught with the loftiest sentiments of honor -- that honor

which felt a stain like a wound, he gave an example in private life that improved and exalted the manners of the society around him -- and

That, impressed with a devout zeal of a Christian, whose faith rested on the conclusions of a mind earnest and dispassionate in its contemplation's, and firm and unwavering in its practice of the divine precepts, he afforded an eminent example to all who sought to attain the great ends of existence.

Resolved, That as a testimony of the sorrow of this meeting, they will wear the usual badges of mourning for the remainder of the Term.

Resolved, That John P. Kennedy, Esq. be appointed to deliver a public address commemorative of the character and virtues of the deceased, at some early day after the commencement of the next Term,

Resolved, That a Committee of three be appointed, on the part of the Bench and Bar, to procure a suitable tablet dedicated to the memory of the deceased, to be set up on the room of the County Court, and that the said Committee be likewise directed to communicate to the family of the deceased the condolence of this meeting in the unhappy bereavement they have sustained.

The Chair appointed Messrs. Glenn, Leath, and Johnson, the Committee to carry into effect the object of the last resolution.

Stevenson Archer, Chairman
Reverdy Johnson, Secretary

The National Intelligencer, Oct. 13, 1846

The Late William Wirt

The following opinion of the character and talents of the late William Wirt--a biography of whom is about to appear, according to public report, from the pen of the Hon. J.P. Kennedy--is expressed in a letter to the editors of the New York Journal of Commerce:

Report says that John P. Kennedy, Esq., who wields a practiced pen, is about to publish the life of William Wirt, a noble subject for a portrait. Having had frequent opportunities of witnessing the public efforts of that distinguished man, and having also had some private acquaintance with him, I can speak of him with truth as one of the brightest jewels of our country. Possessing a commanding personal presence, a voice of singular compass and richness, and a highly cultivated mind, with great facility of giving utterance to its conceptions, he reached and maintained the highest rank in his profession. If from his published works the impression has been received that in the composition of his mind the imagination held the predominance, it is a mistaken one. On those works its energies seem to have been spent, while in his arguments at the bar the strength of his reasoning powers appeared to great advantage. He was master of a skilful and searching analysis, and equally vigorous and astute in the department of synthesis. His argument in the case of the impeachment of Judge Peck, was one of masterly skill and comprehensiveness; and he gained the defense against one of the strongest committees of impeachment ever commissioned by a legislative body. He was a favorite of Marshall, the great expounder of pure law, in whom the faculty of the imagination was so profoundly quiescent.

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The National Intelligencer, February 11, 1851

The Grave of William Wirt

The very interesting biography of William Wirt, by John P. Kennedy, has recalled to my memory a lamentable fact connected with his death, which I have long regretted as a melancholy evidence of the oblivion which usually follows the memory of the most illustrious when they sink into the tomb, and pass off forever from the stage of life.

At the death of this distinguished orator and jurist some of his legal friends proposed to erect a monument over his body, in the Congressional burying-ground in this city, provided his bereaved and afflicted widow would consent to allow it to remain there. This consent was obtained, and on the 20th of February, 1834, the remains of the lamented Wirt were laid in the receiving vault of the cemetery, preparatory to final deposit in the grave over which the contemplated monument was to be erected, as a testimonial of the high appreciation of his virtues and his genius entertained by the members of the bar in this city and throughout the United States. The rule adopted by the Vestry of Christ's Church, who have the management of this cemetery, limits, I believe, the retention of bodies in the receiving vault to one month. At the instance and solicitation of one of the friends of the deceased, to whom had been assigned the duty of obtaining funds from the members of the profession to erect the proposed monument, the time fixed by the rule for the removal of the body was, from time to time, extend; and it was not until the 20th day of January, 1835, that it was finally taken from the vault and deposited in the humble grave where it now reposes, between those of Gen. Jacob Brown and Judge Philip Barbour. No stone marks the spot where his remains are now moldering into and blending with their kindred elements. The admirer of eloquence and genius, when he asks where is the grave of him on whose lips, while living, I have hung with intense delight--whose polished intellect ornamented everything it touched, and whose glowing imagination irradiated the darkest intricacies of jurisprudence, will be answered, "Go to the sexton; he alone can point it out, or direct you to it." It is

"Where heaves the turf in many a moldering heap," and is as undistinguishable as that of the most obscure and unknown, whose body is moldering into dust in this last resting place of the dead. The eye glances over the marble tombs and splendid monuments erected by Congress, or by affection, to the

memory of those who had once been great, useful, or beloved. A broken shaft covers the body of Gen. Brown, erected by Congress; and every member of either House, whether he died here or a thousand miles off, has a tomb (to be sure very tasteless) with his name, age, etc. engraved upon it, erected to his memory. Why has the grave of Wirt, who has shed such lustre on the American bar and on the office of Attorney General of the United States, been so long and so strangely neglected? And what has become of the funds once collected for a monument to his memory among the members of the bar of which he was so brilliant an ornament? The officers of the navy have erected a fine monument in honor of the brave and gallant young men who fell off Tripoli, and the officers of the medical staff one to the memory of Dr. Lovell, formerly Surgeon General of the army, alike honorable to the living and the dead. If the members of the legal profession, although they promised to do so, as well as to contribute funds for the erection of a monument to Chief Justice Marshall, in the same cemetery, still neglect this duty, it is to be hoped that Congress will do something to honor the memory of both those great and illustrious men, who have given so high a character to the American bar and to American jurisprudence.