

A BRIEF MEMOIR  
OF THE LIFE OF  
JOHN F. SLATER

OF NORWICH, CONNECTICUT

1815 TO 1884

BY

REV. S. H. HOWE, D. D.

Pastor of the Park Church in Norwich





*John F. Slater*



THE TRUSTEES OF THE JOHN F. SLATER FUND

OCCASIONAL PAPERS, No. 2

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1894



## TRUSTEES OF THE FUND.

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*Appointed.*

1882.	RUTHERFORD B. HAYES, of Ohio.	* 1893.
1882.	MORRISON R. WAITE, of the District of Columbia.	* 1888.
1882.	WILLIAM E. DODGE, of New York.	* 1883.
1882.	PHILLIPS BROOKS, of Massachusetts.	† 1889.
1882.	DANIEL C. GILMAN, of Maryland.	
1882.	JOHN A. STEWART, of New York.	
1882.	ALFRED H. COLQUITT, of Georgia.	* 1894.
1882.	MORRIS K. JESUP, of New York.	
1882.	JAMES P. BOYCE, of Kentucky.	* 1888.
1882.	WILLIAM A. SLATER, of Connecticut.	

*Elected.*

1883.	WILLIAM E. DODGE, JR., of New York.
1888.	MELVILLE W. FULLER, of the District of Columbia.
1889.	JOHN A. BROADUS, of Kentucky.
1889.	HENRY C. POTTER, of New York,
1891.	J. L. M. CURRY, of the District of Columbia.
1894.	WILLIAM J. NORTEN, of Georgia.
1894.	ELLISON CAPERS, of South Carolina.
1894.	C. B. GALLOWAY, of Mississippi.

From 1882 to 1891, the General Agent of the Trust was Rev. A. G. HAY-GOOD, D. D., of Georgia, who resigned the office when he became a Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Since 1891, the duties of a General Agent have been discharged by Dr. J. L. M. CURRY, of Washington, D. C., Chairman of the Educational Committee.

\* Died in office.

† Resigned.



## ANNOUNCEMENT.

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The Trustees of the John F. Slater Fund propose to publish from time to time papers that relate to the education of the colored race. These papers are designed to furnish information to those who are concerned in the administration of schools, and also to those who by their official stations are called upon to act or to advise in respect to the care of such institutions.

The Trustees believe that the experimental period in the education of the blacks is drawing to a close. Certain principles that were doubted thirty years ago now appear to be generally recognized as sound. In the next thirty years better systems will undoubtedly prevail, and the aid of the separate States is likely to be more and more freely bestowed. There will also be abundant room for continued generosity on the part of individuals and associations. It is to encourage and assist the workers and the thinkers that these papers will be published.

Each paper, excepting the first number (made up chiefly of official documents), will be the utterance of the writer whose name is attached to it, the Trustees disclaiming in advance all responsibility for the statement of facts and opinions.



# MEMOIR.

BY REV. DR. S. H. HOWE.

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## I.

Mr. John Fox Slater, the Founder of the Fund that bears his name, was born in Rhode Island, March 4th, 1815.<sup>1</sup> His family came a generation before from England, and was identified with manufacturing interests in the countries both of its birth and its adoption. He who was to be associated in the public mind with industrial education among one of the races on the continent, was born to the inheritance of a name which has held high eminence for its relation to industrial progress. One of his near relatives has been called the "Father of American Manufactures." Family tradition and family prominence along these lines, early determined for him the career of a manufacturer, by which he laid the foundations of the fortune which he ultimately amassed. He early developed rare business aptitudes, as was evidenced by the entrustment to him of one of the mills of his father, at the age of seventeen. From this early period he continued in the career of a manufacturer until his death, maintaining and enlarging the plant covered by his sole ownership not only, but also identified with other large manufacturing corporations as shareholder and director. Starting from the solid foundation

<sup>1</sup> Died in Norwich, Connecticut, May 7, 1884.



of a good academical education, he found in business life a training and discipline which fitted him to grapple, with the hand of a master, with the largest questions in business and finance, and to achieve success where others failed. He had large experience in business life, and developed rare powers for the grasp of its intricate problems. His business successes were not due to the chances of trade, or the fluctuations of values, or to the daring and the ventures of speculation, but were the fruit of the sagacious and alert use of the opportunities which were in his own as in other men's reach. He possessed profound insight and exhaustive knowledge of affairs and men, with mental grasp and business training, some have believed, sufficient to have wisely controlled the financial interests of a nation. His judgment and counsel were sought by great corporations, in the management of enterprises and industries, which represented large investments and a vast outlay of capital. It is not strange that his ventures were so largely successful, and that his failures and losses were exceptional and rare.

Then his sagacity in business, which amounted to genius, was allied to honorable methods and to inflexible business integrity. Few men have had an aversion so severe and uncompromising to unfairness and to doubtful practices. His opportunities for speculation were many, but he carefully held himself aloof from all but the legitimate channels of trade. He gathered fortune by honorable methods—a fact of some significance to those who handle his munificent trust, and a significant fact to those who are helped to manhood and culture by it. The hands which created this noble foundation were clean hands.

## II.

Mr. Slater, as may be inferred from what has been said, was a man of wide intelligence, peculiarly receptive and hospitable to truth. To his strong Puritan sense of right and devotion to principle, he added that larger interest in the



world and the age in which he lived, which gives scope and breadth to thought, and defends against mere local and provincial sympathies. And yet he was a public-spirited citizen in his adopted city, jealous of its good name, generous toward its charities. Toward his country he was patriotic and loyal, interested in its politics and its legislation.

He was a man of strong, pronounced personality; of fine fibre, and of genuine manliness—a gentleman by instinct, and training, and habit; reserved and self-respecting, though genuinely sympathetic toward, and accessible to, all classes of men. He was sensitive concerning, and deeply averse to, that adulation which goes after great fortune for its own sake. It is the testimony of a friend, who saw him most frequently through a long period of years, and shared his confidence in a larger sense than others, that in all his intercourse with him he had not heard a sentence that suggested the pride of fortune. He wished to be estimated for what he was, and not for what he possessed. And this rule governed him in the estimate which he placed upon others. He was modest and unostentatious to the last degree. While he was touched and gratified by the honor which came to him in connection with his great gift to benevolence, he did nothing to invoke it or to stimulate it. He remained amidst it all the same quiet, reserved, unostentatious citizen. He was, to those who knew him well, a most delightful and resourceful conversationalist. His breadth of view, his versatility, his familiar acquaintance with affairs and men, with questions of finance, politics, and religion, his taste for art, his knowledge of the world gained from travel, made his companionship delightful to those who shared it.

His interest in, and gifts to, benevolence antedated his later beneficence. Great gifts are never a bit of pure extemporization. Great things are not done on the spur of the moment. Those who develop unexpected resources on great occasions, or show themselves capable of conspicuous sacrifices or services, have had in advance their rehearsals. The noblest philanthropies are not extemporized or wrung forcibly from their



authors by the stern importunity of death. Even legacies have generally a background of practical benevolence. Mr. Slater had given wisely and generously to objects that commended themselves to him. Many of these gifts were in the public eye; but it is the testimony of his nearest friends, that he gave with larger liberality than the public could be aware of, with simplicity, and without ostentation; responding to cases of distress and suffering, generously, but in such fashion as to conceal the giving hand.

### III.

But the conspicuous act of his life, with which the public has most concern, is of course the creation of the foundation for industrial education among the freedmen. Much that had gone before in his life, had been leading up to this princely gift. He had always manifested a profound interest in education, had given largely, and had projected generous measures for educational work in the community, which however were yielded in the interest of his larger purpose. His interest in local education has been most worthily commemorated by the splendid Memorial Building erected in his honor by his son in connection with the Norwich Free Academy. Mr. Slater realized, and as his fortune grew was oppressed with, the sense of the responsibility of wealth, and planned long in advance to give in bulk to some worthy object of benevolence; and he resolved to execute this purpose in life, rather than by bequest. The issues of the great civil war which unloosed the fetters of the slave, but which did not qualify him for the responsible duties of citizenship, gave Mr. Slater his great opportunity. He thought this problem through. He had been loyal, patriotic, and generous in his gifts when the struggle was upon the nation, and he rejoiced in the successful outcome; but here was a new field and an unlimited opportunity, which he resolved to appropriate. His plan originated wholly, and without suggestion from others, with himself, and was elabo-



rated to its minutest detail, in advance of its publicity. Standing at this distance, and looking through the experimental test of more than a decade of its working, it is impossible to resist the conviction that it was statesmanlike, patriotic, and Christian, in its conception and spirit. Mr. Slater was wise to see what we have been learning, that the exigent want for the emancipated race was practical and industrial education. The higher education has its offices to take in exceptional instances, but for the masses of the race, so long submerged and held down to the low levels of intelligence where emancipation found it, the wisest, most practical and resultful plan for its elevation was that devised by the founder of this educational fund. It was the instinct of patriotism and of practical statesmanship, to go to the weakest spot in the body politic, to strengthen it; as it was the impulse of Christian thought to place the ladder of ascent within reach of the foot of the lowest man, who was most hopeless of self-recovery. Perhaps this is occasion for surprise. Mr. Slater might have been patrician in his sympathies, exclusive and reserved in his associations; he had aptitudes and opportunities for aloofness from other than the privileged classes; he might have been exclusive in his sympathies rather than inclusive. But his sympathies swept him around to the opposite pole from that on which he stood; he crossed the whole diameter of society, to find the lowest groove in our social and national life, that he might do this conspicuous act of beneficence to the poorest of this nation's poor. Such examples of wise beneficence, which express the sympathy of the privileged for the unprivileged classes, do much to lighten the strain of self-government in a nation like ours. They do much to allay the antagonisms of society, and to bridge the chasm which opens between those zones of enormous wealth, on the one hand, and a degrading poverty which are drawn across the map of our modern life. When wealth consents after this fashion to reach out helping hands toward the nation's poor,



and gives aid toward self-help, then many of the perplexing problems of modern socialism will be solved.

The wisdom of this foundation in its intent and aim, cannot easily be overstated. Not to create the conspicuous institution, that by concentration of forces, focuses the public eye upon the giver, but rather and more wisely to distribute aid over a wide area, among a score or more of institutions; not to do the premature thing of providing foundations for university training for which the race has, and for generations will have, such scant preparation, but rather to make provision for training along those practical and industrial lines, which is the exigent need, in order to self-help, toward the creation of the home and an ordered life in the social community. The verdict of his fellow-workers in this field of philanthropic effort, after watching the experiment for a decade, is "Well done, good and faithful servant," and we may well believe that in these words we hear a higher verdict than man's.

#### IV.

The reflex influence of Mr. Slater's beneficence, we are persuaded, has been great. We cannot estimate the good we do when we do good. The effect of this splendid beneficence, in stimulating philanthropic enterprise, passing as it has into the currency of popular thought as a quickening inspiration; its impetus to the noble army of workers for the uplifting of the race has been enormous. Its inspiration and influence upon this greatest decade of giving, in all the history of the world, has been immense, we are confident. Other millions have gotten into the wake of this one; and we believe other men to whom God has given great wealth, and into whose hearts the passion of the cross has been poured, are to be moved by it to the breaking of their costly boxes of alabaster in the presence of the world's Christ. Such men are, and are to be, the saving and the enduring forces of the world. They may disappear from the eye; they cease to be seen as visible per-



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sonalities, but they become immortal in the world, as quickening influences. They walk in uncrowned regality through the ages. Their gifts, their lives, will be reduplicated as they spread by contagion the spirit of philanthropy among men; passing for a sort of fresh incarnation into the minds and hearts of others, who catch their spirit, and go to spread it and give it fresh forms and embodiments. Over such lives even death can have no power.

## V.

Mr. Slater only lived to see the genesis of the work he did, and of the forces he started in the world. His great gift, at that time almost an unprecedented one, awakened wide-spread interest. The news spread over the land and was borne across the sea. Hundreds of letters congratulatory and appreciative poured in upon him. His friends gave expression to their admiration. His city, to whose name his beneficence had imparted a fresh eminence and fame, made him aware of her appreciation of the honor he had bestowed upon her; but amid it all he remained the same unostentatious, quiet citizen—grateful and appreciative of the honor which had come to him, but accepting it rather as an unreckoned-upon accompaniment of his unselfish act. He remained in the routine of his accustomed business, and in the fellowship of friends and neighbors, as if he had only done a duty or accepted a privilege which lay in the path of his accustomed living. Two years later the fatal disease laid its hand upon him, when in the faith of a Christian he girded himself to go unto his Father's House. To many of us it was the summons to the presence of Him who was and is ever the Supreme Friend of the poor and the lowly, to hear His commendation: "In as much as ye have done these things unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done them unto me. Enter into the joy of thy Lord."

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## APPENDIX.

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### I.

#### LETTER OF THE TRUSTEES ACCEPTING THE GIFT.

NEW YORK, *May* 18, 1882.

*To John F. Slater, Esq., Norwich, Conn.*

The members of the Board of Trustees whom you invited to take charge of the Fund which you have devoted to the education of the lately emancipated people of the Southern States and their posterity, desire, at the beginning of their work, to place on record their appreciation of your purpose, and to congratulate you on having completed this wise and generous gift at a period of your life when you may hope to observe for many years its beneficent influence.

They wish especially to assure you of their gratification in being called upon to administer a work so noble and timely. If this trust is successfully managed, it may, like the gift of George Peabody, lead to many other benefactions. As it tends to remove the ignorance of large numbers of those who have a vote in public affairs, it will promote the welfare of every part of our country, and your generous action will receive, as it deserves, the thanks of good men and women in this and other lands.

Your Trustees unite in wishing you long life and health, that you may have the satisfaction of seeing the result of your patriotic forecast.



## II.

### THE THANKS OF CONGRESS.

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JOINT RESOLUTION OF THE SENATE AND HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES OF THE UNITED STATES,  
APPROVED FEBRUARY 6, 1883.

*Resolved*, by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, That the thanks of Congress be, and they hereby are, presented to John F. Slater, of Connecticut, for his great beneficence in giving the large sum of \$1,000,000 for the purpose of "uplifting the lately emancipated population of the Southern States and their posterity by conferring on them the blessings of Christian education."

*Sec. 2.* That it shall be the duty of the President to cause a gold medal to be struck with suitable devices and inscriptions, which, together with a copy of this resolution, shall be presented to Mr. Slater in the name of the people of the United States.

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JOINT RESOLUTION OF THE SENATE AND HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES OF THE UNITED STATES,  
APPROVED APRIL 9, 1886.

*Resolved*, by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, That the sum of one thousand dollars, or so much thereof as may be needed, is hereby appropriated out of any moneys in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated, to defray the cost of the medal ordered by public resolution numbered six, approved February sixth, eighteen hundred and eighty-three, to be presented to John F. Slater, of Connecticut, then living, but now deceased.

*Sec. 2.* That said medal and a copy of the original resolution aforesaid shall be presented to the legal representatives of said John F. Slater, deceased.



### III.

## REMARKS OF PRESIDENT HAYES ON THE DEATH OF MR. SLATER.

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*Gentlemen of the Board of Trustees of the John F. Slater Fund:*

Our first duty at this the fifth meeting of the Trustees of the John F. Slater Fund for the Education of Freedmen is devolved upon us by the death, since our last meeting, of the Founder of this Trust.

John F. Slater died early Wednesday morning, the 7th of May last, at his home in Norwich, Connecticut, at the age of sixty-nine. He had suffered severely from chronic complaints for several months, and his death was not a surprise to his family or intimate friends.

Two of the members of this Board of Trustees, Mr. Morris K. Jesup and myself, had the melancholy privilege of representing the Board at the impressive funeral services of Mr. Slater at his home, at the Congregational Church, and at the Cemetery in Norwich, on the Saturday following his death.

When he last met this Board, his healthful appearance and general vigor gave promise of a long and active life. It was with great confidence that we then expressed to him our conviction that his wise and generous gift for the education of the emancipated people of the South and their posterity, was made at a period of his life when he might reasonably hope to observe during many years its beneficent influence. But in the Providence of God it has been otherwise ordered, and the life which we fondly wished would last long enough to yield to him the



satisfaction of seeing the results of his patriotic forecast, has been brought to a close.

He had a widely extended and well earned reputation for ability, energy, integrity, and success as a manufacturer and as a man of affairs. He was a philanthropist, a patriot, a good citizen, and a good neighbour. He was a member of the Park Congregational Society in Norwich for many years and was warmly and strongly attached to the denomination of his choice. His church relations did not limit his sympathies, nor narrow his views of duty. In his letter establishing this Trust is the following clause :

“The general object which I desire to have exclusively pursued, is the uplifting of the lately emancipated population of the Southern States, and their posterity, by conferring on them the blessings of Christian education.”

When asked the precise meaning of the phrase “Christian education,” he replied that “the phrase Christian education is to be taken in the largest and most general sense—that, in the sense which he intended, the common school teaching of Massachusetts and Connecticut was Christian education. That it is leavened with a predominant and salutary Christian influence. That there was no need of limiting the gifts of the Fund to denominational institutions. That, if the Trustees should be satisfied that at a certain State institution their beneficiaries would be surrounded by wholesome influences such as would tend to make good Christian citizens of them, there is nothing in the use of the phrase referred to to hinder their sending pupils to it.”

I forbear to attempt to give a full sketch of Mr. Slater. Enough has perhaps been said to bring to your attention the great loss which this Trust has sustained in the death of its founder, and the propriety of placing on our records, and giving to the public, a worthy and elaborate notice of his life, character, and good deeds.

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