

Memoirs of Members of the Social Circle in Concord: Second Series. Memoir of Ephraim MERRIAM by Grindall Reynolds, January 1872. Pages 241-244.

Ephraim Merriam was a descendant of one of the original settlers of Concord. According to Shattuck's history, Joseph Merriam, the ancestor of all the Concord Merriams, died January 1, 1641, only five years after the founding of the town, and the gravestone of his son Joseph, who died April 20, 1677, is the oldest memorial of that kind found in the first or Hill burying-ground.

Ephraim was the oldest son and second child of Ephraim and Mary Brooks Merriam. He was born November 27, 1796 **, in the time-worn yellow house now standing at the corner of the Lexington and old Bedford roads, which has been the residence of the family for at least three generations, and which stands upon land which was probably part of an original grant of two hundred and sixty-two acres to one of the Merriams. His father died when he was only seven years old, leaving a widow and four children, the oldest nine years of age, and the youngest two. His mother married one William Swan, probably in the year 1808. Ephraim lived at home until he was nearly, if not quite, twenty-one, working on the farm summers, and attending winters, first the district school, and then the town school in the centre. At best his opportunities for education were sufficiently slender, and whatever success he had in after life depended rather upon his native powers than upon any early culture which they received. A remark which probably could be made with truth of most of the farmers' boys of that period.

He early displayed thrift and business enterprise, and, about the period of his majority, deserted the farm, and entered into the business of butchering and candle-making with his second cousins, Nathan and Cyrus Stow, under the title of Stows & Merriam. When this partnership was first formed, Mr. Merriam stipulated that he should have the privilege of keeping school winters. In accordance with this understanding, he applied for a school in Carlisle, and was examined by Parson Litchfield, who declined to give a certificate, on the ground, as the waggish remark has it, "that he could not spell beef." At any rate, he was not discouraged by this rebuff, but, with characteristic perseverance, made an application for a school in Acton, passed an examination, obtained the school, and taught it with success two winters. By this time his business vocations became sufficiently engrossing to withdraw him finally from the work of teaching.

Mr. Merriam remained in business with his cousins until the death of Nathan Stow in 1831, when the partnership ceased. After this time he was in business in Lowell with Reuben, son of Deputy Sheriff Abel Moore, dealer in wood and lumber. Whether there as any formal partnership between the two I am unable to say, though Mr. Cyrus Stow thinks there was. Certainly his transactions in Lowell were not confined to this partnership. He speculated in real estate there, buying and selling lands, lending on mortgages, and in all ways rolling up a good property. Something of this business he did in union with Daniel Shattuck. In 1840, so far as he was in definite business relations with any one, he gave them up, and devoted himself to the care of his property, and to such public duties and honors as came to him. In all matters of trade he was close, shrewd, thrifty, and in every business alliance was sure to contribute his part of good judgment, care, and energy. He was successful. He began life with four or five hundred dollars.

He left to his heirs not much less than forty thousand dollars, a large estate in those days for a small country town.

Mr. Merriam did not confine himself strictly to business, but from the beginning manifested an interest in town affairs, and a willingness to do his part of the work necessary to carry them on. He was an active member of the debating society and lyceum; was elected a member of this Circle in 1828; was an overseer of the poor pretty much all the time from 1830 to 1840; a trustee of the Middlesex Institution for Savings from the outset; a member of the monument committee in 1835 and 1836; and one of those intrusted with the repairs of the meeting-house of the First Parish in 1840 and 1841. In all these posts of honor and duty he displayed a good deal of executive ability and much sound judgment.

In the later years of his life he changed his political opinions; while in youth and early manhood he had been a strong Federalist, he now attached himself to the fortunes of the Democratic party, then the dominant power in the town and in the country. There was not wanting those who accused him of making this change from ambitious motives. Be this as it may, he proved to be a valuable accession to his new friends. A man of much natural vigor and sound judgment, well-to-do in the world, of good character, of manners soft and ingratiating, he was an ally worth rewarding. At any rate, he was chosen representative for the years 1838, 1839, and 1840, and senator for 1841. His business capacity and knowledge of property were considered so great that he was made a member of the valuation committee.

In the spring of 1842, while engaged in grading the grounds around the remodelled church, he exposed himself, and caught a cold from which he never recovered. This deepened into a settled consumption, and on the 7th of April 1843, he died, at mid-life, at the age of forty-seven, the very age which stands recorded on the first gravestone in Concord, that of his kinsman, Joseph Merriam.

Mr. Merriam was what is called an old bachelor, though report says that he once made a futile attempt to change his condition, and lived to the last in the old homestead with his again widowed mother, and there he died. He was an old bachelor, and therefore missed what married people, at least, are apt to call the ameliorating influence of home life and home duties. Still, those who knew him when they were young and he in his manhood, speak of him as gentle to children, thoughtful about them, and pleasant to them.

From what I can gather, I feel sure that he must have been a man of much more than average mental powers. In business transactions, I judge him to have been sharp, shrewd, and probably a little hard, but not usually over-reaching or unjust. He was not a lavish man, and not naturally what would be called a generous man; not fond of searching out good objects on which to bestow his means; not very fond of giving, even when the good objects came to him. All the more credit, therefore, is due for any generosity which he manifested, and which we may conclude, in the language of the old theologians, came not so much from nature as from grace. And as he did do his part respectably, if not lavishly, in sustaining good works, and in relieving the poor, it is just to believe that he was a man who had it in his heart to do his duty in this respect. He, however, regretted in his last years that he had not dealt more generously with his fellow-men, and at his death left eight hundred dollars for the silent poor of Concord.

Considering his virtues and his faults, and amid what opportunities they were developed, we count him to have been a favorable specimen of that type of plain, efficient, sagacious men, who are the best products of the district schools of New England, of New England's necessity of labor, and of the training of that best of political common schools, a country town meeting.

** The Merriam Genealogy in England and America, by Charles Pope (1906), gives Ephraim Merriam's birthdate as November 26, 1785.