

A Sketch of William Francis Oakey

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William Francis Oakey, born in Newark, August 11, 1807; died at his residence, 125 East 24th Street, New York City, November 13, 1888 - His father, Daniel Oakey, was the third son of Francis Oakey and M. Horsley. He was descended from William Oakey, of Doveridge Hall, on the River Dove, near Lichfield, England. The second son of this William Oakey was Colonel John Oakey (born about 1570?), who was one of the Regicides, and was executed at Tyburn in 1662. (A daughter of William Francis Oakey has in her possession a charming little engraving of "Doveridge Hall," a splendid mansion.) The family lived there at the time of Daniel Oakey's birth, and one of his daughters was buried in Lichfield Cathedral, March 26, 1839.

Alexander Forbes was a Major in the English Army at Charleston, S.C., during the revolution, his wife being with him, where she gave birth to a daughter, Sarah Catharine Forbes, a few days before the English evacuation. She and her child were carried aboard an English man-of-war on a litter and taken to England. About eight years later Major Forbes was struck by lightning, which injured his health so much that he was obliged subsequently to resign from the Army, and being presently advised by his physicians to try a change of air and a sea voyage, brought his wife, his son and his youngest daughter, the child above mentioned, to America. Finding the climate to agree with him, he bought a place in Newark, and lived there until his death. Daniel Oakey came from England to this country about 1803 on business, and fell in love with Miss Forbes. Her father, however, was violently opposed to allowing his youngest daughter to leave him and go to England, two of his daughters being already there, and Mr. Oakey accordingly decided to remain in America, marrying Miss Forbes that same year. He took up his residence in New York and there opened the house of Daniel Oakey & Co. The Oakeys appear in English history to have been of marked personality, sentiment and energy. The Forbeses were a very aristocratic family, originally Scotch, but are prominent in England today. Major Forbes' sister married the Count Montelambert, the distinguished French writer, and their son was named Charles Forbes Montelambert, and lived most of his childhood with his grandfather Forbes, on his beautiful estate in Scotland. He was also distinguished in literature. Daniel Oakey and Sarah Catharine Forbes, his wife, had eleven children, five of whom were born in Newark, where Mrs. Oakey was in the habit of spending the summer, not on her father's place, but at a resort of her own. Daniel Oakey was a great patron of music, presenting drums to the society that preceded the Philharmonic of New York, and an organ to the Oratorio Society.

William Francis Oakey, their third child and third son (practically the oldest, for the other two died early), was born, as stated above, August 11, 1807, in Newark, and was baptized in New York, by the Rev. Dr. Beach. His family were staunch Church of England people, and he attended Grace church, and his children were christened by Bishop Wainwright, either at Grace church or in his parlor. Subsequently he and his wife became Unitarians, attending All Souls church (the Rev. Dr. Henry Bellows'), Fourth avenue and Twentieth street, New York. Mr. Oakey was taken into

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partnership by his father, Daniel Oakey, when almost a boy, succeeding his father in the ownership of the business, which he managed successfully until within a few years of his death, or until he was nearly eighty years of age, always possessing the highest respect and most cordial esteem of his business contemporaries. His tastes were literary, scientific and artistic. He was aristocratic in his manner, of singular personal beauty, and characterized by a marked elevation of character, and was distinguished by his dignity and benevolence. He was profoundly interested in history of all sorts, and was a perfect walking encyclopedia of dates and facts. History of nations, history of the stage, of the arts, of music, was a specialty of his. He had known and observed interesting people and events from childhood. One of his earliest recollections was of the illumination for the peace following the War of 1812, when candles were placed in the panes of glass of the windows, and he looked from his nursery windows through rows of lighted candles at the illumination of other houses and heard the cannon. He went abroad with his father's intimate friend, Mr. Miller, at the age of seventeen, and at Paris saw Talma and Mlle. Marrs on the stage, and he was greatly impressed by them, though at the very close of their careers. Mlle. Marrs played a young part, and wore an apron with bretelles of pale orange ribbons, and "very well it looked," he used to say. He saw and heard all the famous actors and singers, and knew well Malibran. She used to come into the nursery and sit on the floor and sing to the children, and dine with his parents, he being permitted at the table. On one occasion Mr. Oakey stayed at a country house in England with Herschell, the astronomer, having been given his choice of what guest should be invited, and by good luck his chosen Herschell was able to be present. The beauty and elegance of Mr. Oakey's presence, and his fine cultivation, made him a desired guest anywhere. His habits of seclusion grew upon him, however, till during his later years he went nowhere, but entertained at his house many distinguished people, his and his wife's friends. His most intimate friend was Gordon Hammersley, from babyhood to old age, but the poet Bryant, Charles Sumner and a score of others were frequent visitors at his house. These men found him their most interesting companion. He accepted with benevolent interest the flood of gay young life that his large family brought about him, and dancing was mixed with the excellent music that nightly sounded in his parlors. He lived luxuriously, but without display, and was not only generous to his children to the degree of indulgence, but practiced a widespread charity to those less fortunate. The "ideality of his life was the most extraordinary I ever saw," says a member of his family.

In 1840 he married Sally Sullivan, of Massachusetts. Their marriage life was ideally happy. Although he had outlived most of his contemporaries, his death was regretted by a very large circle of friends and admirers. He was buried from All Souls church, and interred in the family vault in the Marble Cemetery in Second avenue, New York city. Mr. Oakey was elected a Corresponding Member of this Society, 1847.