

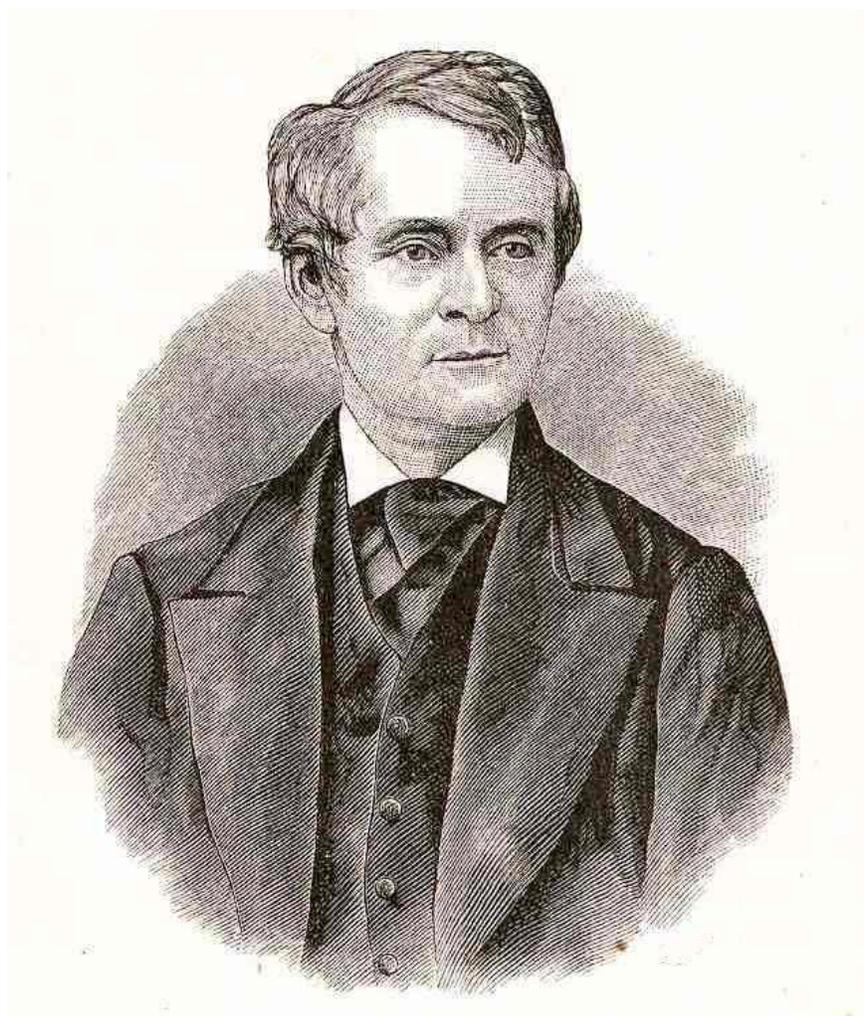
The Bugle



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Andrew Gregg Curtin

Governor of Pennsylvania
1861 – 1867

Curtin and the Soldiers' Orphan Schools

Governor Curtin is well-remembered as "The Soldier's Friend" for all of his work in supporting Pennsylvania's troops during the war. At home he also championed the cause of wounded soldiers, widows and orphans. In November 1863, he began the personal journey towards the creation of schools for the soldiers' orphans. We offer here the story of the beginning of that journey that begins with the visit of two orphans begging at Curtin's door. It was published in Pennsylvania's Soldiers' Orphan Schools, a report on the schools published by the state in 1877. The account is written in the flowery language of the Gilded Age and its long run-on sentences make it somewhat difficult to read but it does give a real sense of the writing style of the era.

In accordance with a custom which had its origin in New England during the early days of her history, and afterwards adopted by most of the States of the American Union, Governor Curtin, in 1863, issued the usual proclamation appointing the 26th of November as a day of Thanksgiving, and requested the people of Pennsylvania to assemble in their various places of worship and give thanks to God for the mercies and blessings of the closing year. On the morning of the day designated for this sacred service, two children called at the executive mansion and asked for bread. The request was not an uncommon one. Scores had, at that same door, asked and received alms, unobserved save by the servants who dealt out the charity. It would seem that it was ordained by Him who calls himself the God of the fatherless, that the Governor himself should meet and speak with these needy ones, to be told by them how their father had been killed in battle, how their mother had since died, and how they had been left utterly friendless and alone. There they stood before him, on that chill November day - the day appointed for public thanksgiving and social joy and feasting - clad in rags, timid, and piteously begging food! A pitiful sight, indeed, to the chief magistrate, who had been for more than two years calling for troops and hurrying them beyond the State border to the seat of war, with vows of guardianship over their children! Keenly did that great-hearted man feel the appeal. He attended Thanksgiving service heavily oppressed with the sad reflections which the fate of those two forlorn children of a slain soldier had awakened; and when again with his family, the deep regret burst forth in an agonized expression: "Great God! is it

possible that the people of Pennsylvania can feast this day, while the children of her soldiers who have fallen in this war beg bread from door to door!" He then narrated to them the affecting scene of the morning, and



with deep feeling and much excitement went from one thought to another evolved by the contemplation of the subject, feeling, as it were, his way to the attitude to be taken by the State towards these unfortunates. It was, he said, an unjust, a disgraceful, and unchristian-like thing, that a soldier's child should beg. Something, he determined, should be done to remove such disgrace from the escutcheons of the State.

The engrossing duties and cares of his office, peculiarly great at this time, never drove the resolve from his thoughts. "I really believe," he writes, "I am safe in saying that at some period of each day, until accomplished, it crossed my mind." Yet it was difficult to devise a method bringing the subject before the people, in such a way as to show them a duty, and thus secure legislative action, without arousing a suspicion of vanity and self-glorification. Plan after plan suggested itself only to be rejected.

It was while such reflections were revolving in his mind that an eminent religious teacher returned from England, where he had ably endeavored to enlighten public opinion in regard to the nature of the struggle going on in this country, and thus create more generous sentiments towards the North than then prevailed among certain classes of English society. As a recognition of his distinguished services abroad, a public reception, in the interests of the United States Sanitary Commission, was given him in the Academy of Music, in Philadelphia. Governor Curtin was invited to preside; and recognizing this as his opportunity to bring to the light the thoughts

that were crystallizing in his mind, he accepted. On taking the chair, he took occasion, while eulogizing the good work of the Sanitary Commission in their care of the sick and wounded, to refer to the "uncared for who were left at home by the gallant fellows who have gone forward." Eloquently he recalled the pledges made them, the abundance enjoyed by the people dwelling in safety at home, "unshared," he said, "by the surviving relatives of the slain, and the families of those who, maimed and wounded, have become helpless . . . Coming, as the claimants upon our patriotism and benevolence usually do, from the humble walks of life, their modest and unpretending wants are hardly recognized amid the clamor and excitement of the times, and the soldier's widow turns with natural pride from what might be considered the condition of a mendicant or the recipient of charity. My friends, let us no longer fail in the performance of our solemn duty, but let us make the position of these an honorable one, and not one of degradation. Let the widow and her dependent offspring become, in fact and in truth, the children of the State, and let the mighty people of this great Commonwealth nurture and maintain them. Let this not be a mere spasmodic effort, but let us now at once lay the foundation of a systematic and continuous work, which will enable the defender of the Constitution to know, as he paces his weary vigils upon the cheerless picket, that living, his family at home is cared for, and that dying, the justice, not the charity, of the country has provided for the helpless survivors."

Slowly, in the heat of conflicting thought, an idea had matured that was destined to give happiness and usefulness to many lives, which, but for its inspiration, would be miserably wrecked - the idea of making the children of disabled and deceased soldiers and sailors the honored wards of the State. To accomplish this, large sums of money would be required. Provision must be made for clothing, maintaining, and educating hundreds of children; and legislative guardians of the public funds are necessarily cautious in exercising their power of granting appropriations. How to move them was the Governor's perplexing problem. But money is cumulative. One dollar attracts another. And a nucleus had already been provided by that God whose providence is so plainly visible in the strange origin and through all the slow process of maturing and perfecting this most wonderful undertaking.

After the failure of the campaign on the Peninsula, in 1862, the President of the United States, at the instance of the loyal governors, issued a call for three hundred thousand more men. To arouse the people of Pennsylvania from the depression of that unexpected disaster, a public meeting was held in Pittsburgh, on the 10th of July, 1862. Many stirring addresses were made, and the excitement ran high; but the enthusiasm rose to its highest pitch, when Governor Curtin announced to the eager throng the reception of a telegram from the President of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, offering fifty thousand dollars for the organization and the equipment of troops. The Governor, however, declined this offer, as he could not accept it on account of the State without legislative sanction, and was unwilling to undertake its disbursement in his private capacity. And so for a while the matter rested. Subsequently, he entered into correspondence with the President of the Railroad Company in relation to the proffered sum, in the course of which he suggested the propriety of using it to erect an asylum for disabled soldiers. Consent was readily given, and the Governor, in a brief message to the Legislature, January, 1863, recommended the appropriation of the money for that purpose. The Legislature adjourned, however, without taking action on this communication.

Before another year rolled round, God had sent those two forlorn children to the Governor's door, or rather to his heart, and the idea of adopting the orphans of soldiers, as the special wards of the State, had matured. Abandoning his original purpose, he now requested the President of the Pennsylvania Railroad to allow the fifty thousand dollars, offered but not accepted, to be paid into the treasury of the State, for the purpose of creating a fund to be used in educating and maintaining destitute soldiers' orphans. That the case might have a warmer advocacy than letter-writing would admit of, he twice sent one of his official staff to Philadelphia to personally urge its adoption. The Company finally consented to permit the money to be used in accordance with the cherished wishes of the Governor, reserving the right to pay it in installments as it might be needed. The generosity of this concession will be appreciated, when it is considered that making grants for equipping troops in a time of danger was but making provision to guard its own extensive interests; while giving money to aid helpless children was a most unselfish and purely beneficent act.