MICHAEL JACOBS.

BY PROF. C. A. HAY, D. D. ¹

Michael Jacobs was born in Franklin county, Pa., January 18th, 1808, of parents of Alsatian descent, and received his early intellectual training in the country schools of his neighborhood.

In the fall of 1823 he entered the preparatory department of Jefferson College, Canonsburg, Pa., and completed his course in that institution without the least stain upon his record, being graduated in 1828 with the second honor of his class and the valedictory.

Shortly afterwards he visited Gettysburg, where his brother David had begun the Gettysburg Gymnasium, and was already suffering from overwork as a consequence of being the sole teacher. In conference with Dr. Schmucker and his brother, he promised to take charge of the mathematical and scientific instruction of the school but, as he had already engaged to teach in a boarding school at Bel Air, Md., he could not enter upon his work until the following spring. In April, 1829, he accordingly moved to Gettysburg, and when, in 1832, the Gettysburg Gymnasium became Pennsylvania College, he was elected Professor of Mathematics and the Natural Sciences. He read theology privately, and in the fall of 1832 was licensed by the West Pennsylvania Synod. The degree of D. D. was conferred upon him in 1858, almost simultaneously, by Wittenberg College, Springfield, O., and his Alma Mater, In 1833 he was married to Miss Julia M. Eyster of Harrisburg. His labors in the College were very arduous. Three professors have occupied the field which he had to cultivate alone. The resources of the College were so limited that, in order to do justice to his department, he was compelled to construct the most of the chemical and philosophical apparatus that he used, and portions of this apparatus were so well made that they are in use to-day in the class-room. He filled his regular appointments as preacher in the College church. He was repeatedly President and Treasurer of his Synod, and for a time he was Secretary of the General Synod. He was editor of the second volume of the Linnaean Record and Journal. In 1865 his department was divided, and he remained Professor of Mathematics alone. In 1866 he withdrew entirely from the work of instruction. For some years his health had gradually been declining. He continued a student until the last, and was engaged in a course of scientific reading until within a few days of his death, which occurred on July 22d, 1871.

Among the strongly marked characteristics of Dr. Jacobs, we note the following:

1. His quickness of perception. He seemed almost by intuition to grasp at once any subject to which he gave attention. This was most strikingly illustrated in his favorite department of mathematics, often to the no small vexation of the less gifted and more sluggish minds that he was painfully laboring to inspire with a love for his darling science. Indeed, this very gift became sometimes a cross to him, as it fairly tortured him to find how slow his pupils were to grasp what seemed to him clear as a sunbeam. This trait made him minutely thorough and accurate in all the branches of his wide department, and constituted him a close and discriminating observer, not only of the phenomena of nature, but also of human conduct and character.

¹ Credit is hereby given for matter taken from the sketch in Dr. Morris' “Fifty Years in the Lutheran Ministry,” by H. E. J. [Ed. Note: Henry Eyster Jacobs, M. Jacobs’ son]

2. His soundness of judgment. This is a quality often lacking in men richly endowed with intellectual gifts, but in Dr. Jacobs it was so strongly marked as to single him out as a good adviser even in the most ordinary affairs of life, and particularly in matters pertaining to his line of study. This trait was specially [sic] noticeable in his contribution to the then just formulating science of meteorology of which he was one of the early students. The observations of Prof. Jacobs rank high, and his conclusions in reference to the methods and means necessary for the forecasting of weather changes have stood the test of more recent investigations, and in a large measure anticipated them. It is greatly to be regretted that the results of these researches were not placed in permanent form. Several papers were published in the Linnaean Record and Journal, and one which attracted much attention in the Records of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Not long ago the Weather Bureau authorities at Washington made inquiry for the lectures of Prof. Jacobs, desiring to print them as an evidence of the value of early inquiry into meteorology by Americans.

3. His excessive modesty. True merit is always modest, but in Dr. Jacobs this amounted to bashfulness, and operated often to his disadvantage, hindering him from that recognition of his talents and acquirements to which he was so justly entitled.

4. His self-sacrificing devotion to what he was convinced was his duty. It is not too much to say that he “counted not his life dear unto himself” that he might fulfill the task to which he had devoted it, viz.: to serve the Church in the sphere to which his Heavenly Father had assigned him. Indeed, the thought will obtrude itself upon us that that precious and most useful life might have been longer spared to us had he somewhat restrained his zeal and relaxed his excessive labors.

5. His outspoken frankness and sincerity. Himself the farthest removed from all double-dealing or hypocrisy, he could hardly restrain his indignation when these traits betrayed themselves in others, nor did his native mildness of disposition then prevent him from administering deserved rebuke.

6. His true love of nature. He was in harmony with her everywhere. The stones and the flowers were his familiar friends; the very clouds seemed to reveal their secrets to him. His Father made them all, and in and through them he loved his Father all the more.

7. His sincere attachment to the Lutheran Church. And this not merely, as in the case of many others, to her name and to her Protestant principles in general, but to her doctrines and life. With no taste for controversy, he was always firm and consistent in maintaining his ground as a sound and orthodox Lutheran.

8. His warmly affectionate pulpit style. His native and unconquerable timidity operated, as elsewhere so also in the pulpit, to his disadvantage. But he never failed to exhibit an earnest and even yearning desire to instruct his hearers and to persuade them to embrace the truth and come into living communion with God. Those accustomed to hear him, speak of the impressive character of his discourses and their stimulating influence. He joined heartily with his colleagues in the Faculty, during the seasons of special religious interest in the earlier years of the College, when, under their faithful searching sermons and affectionate appeals, so many of the students were hopefully converted. Doubtless there are many now in the ranks of our ministry, and in other spheres of honorable Christian usefulness, whom he was instrumental in winning to Christ.
He possessed in an eminent degree the elements of a good teacher. He was greatly 
devoted to the work. He comprehended with unusual facility and fulness [sic] the branches he 
taught. Though these ran in different- lines of thought, he was equally at home in each of them, 
whether it was Higher Mathematics, Chemistry, Natural Philosophy, Mineralogy, Geology, 
Meteorology, or Botany. He kept fully abreast of the advances in each department, and carried 
with him to the class-room a vast amount of information on each subject, which, as occasion 
required, he freely communicated. He sought to stimulate inquiry and awaken interest in the 
mind of his pupils. He would simplify and clear away knotty points, and often give original and 
easier solutions of mathematical problems, for the purpose of encouraging the student. It was not 
enough that a lesson was well recited, but he saw to it that it was understood. The many pupils 
under his charge during the thirty-seven years of his Professorship bear testimony to his special 
fitness as a teacher,