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JAMES PHINNEY BAXTER

HISTORIAN

PORTLAND MAINE

1831-1921

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*James Hinney Dexter*

# JAMES PHINNEY BAXTER

*Historian*

PORTLAND, MAINE

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## *A Short Biography*

Written for the Maine Writers' Research Club

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## *A Lifelong Opponent of Vivisection*

Written for the Christian Science Monitor

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By



PERCIVAL P. BAXTER

*Governor of Maine*



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# JAMES PHINNEY BAXTER

## HISTORIAN

Born, Gorham, Maine, March 23, 1831

Died, Portland, Maine, May 8, 1921

A BIOGRAPHY BY PERCIVAL P. BAXTER, GOVERNOR OF MAINE

*(Written for the Maine Writers' Research Club)*



IN THINKING of my father, his kindliness and consideration for others stand out as his pre-eminent characteristics. He was never quick or intemperate of speech or action, and although early thrown on his own resources, battling with the world single-handed, he achieved success without bringing disaster or misfortune to others. He was a worthy exponent of the principle "to live and let live," and in so far as I am aware left no wrecks in his path.

Born in the little town of Gorham, Maine, almost a century ago, his father a country doctor, he had no special advantages of education. The public school as we know it today, did not exist and boys were sent to "Academies" or private schools, few going beyond what today would be grammar school grades. It meant something during the period from 1835 to 1845 to obtain an education, and boys were obliged to study diligently both at home and at school if they intended properly to prepare themselves for life.

My father's mother was devoted to her children, and to her inspiration he owed the training that made him develop into a broad-minded, public-spirited citizen. The youngest child of the family, he was not "spoiled" although brought up with great care. A country doctor, however, whose big heart led him not to trouble about collecting his bills for professional services, could do but little for his children's advancement, so the youth was started on his business career at fifteen years of age with the acceptable salary of \$6.00 per month.

It required strength of character for a youngster of those tender years to devote his evenings and leisure hours to books, when other boys were at play; but this my father did. He conferred with older men and laid out a course of reading that comprised all the leading authors, classical and modern. Thus he acquired a taste for literature that grew with the passing years.

His business prospered, for he dealt fairly and worked hard. He had a vision far ahead of his contemporaries. He did not seek great riches but acquired a fortune sufficient for the needs of himself and family and ample enough to enable him to give generously to many worthy objects. Himself a lover of books he wanted others to have them, and although his means hardly justified his doing so, he donated a Public Library building to Portland and another one to Gorham, Maine, his birthplace, long before such gifts had become as general as today. In this he was a pioneer.

His business career was founded on uprightness. He never sought special privileges nor would he be a party to the practice, common then as now, of exploiting the people for private gain. As an example of this, he was a large owner in the Maine Central Railroad at a time when certain of that railroad's securities were to be issued. The directors manipulated the transactions for their own great profit, he protested, and, although at great financial sacrifice, refused to be a party to the "deal."

In politics he was a Republican, but never a "machine" man. For years he was urged to accept public office, but preferred to do his part "in the ranks." I recall when he first yielded to the call of his party. The Democrats were in power in Portland with the Republicans out of office and in an hopeless position. No Republican strong enough to win was available. A committee of citizens came to my father and urged him to save the day. He dreaded the conflict, but felt under a duty to step into the breach. Feelings ran high, corruption flourished and at the critical moment several packages of ballots were found to be missing. The matter went to the courts and as a boy I listened to the proceedings. The result was a new election and later a triumphant victory. From that moment the City's affairs were placed on a business basis and partisan politics were

relegated to the discard. Several years later the missing ballots of the first election were discovered by chance in a dark corner of an unused closet in the City Building!

Both as Mayor and as a citizen he did all in his power to beautify and improve his city. His outstanding civic accomplishment was the laying out and beginning of the Boulevard around Back Cove, recently appropriately named, "Baxter Boulevard." From 1893 until his death in 1921 he never lost his faith or interest in this improvement. Criticised and condemned, accused of self-interest, and abused in public and private, unfalteringly kept at work on his favorite project. In his heart he knew it was right, and that ultimately his fellow-citizens would see it as he did. So it was; today this Boulevard is the City's chief natural attraction and the citizens are planning to erect thereon a memorial to his memory.

He saw other men enter politics and come out broken and disappointed. Often he told me that "Any man who stayed in political life long enough is bound to die a disappointed man." This also is a lesson for others. His public service was entirely unselfish and he had no ambitions for high office. After serving four years he suffered defeat, on account of his insisting that the work on the Boulevard be continued. Six years later he was triumphantly called back and served the City for two more terms. This vindication meant much to him. Patience, perseverance and a good cause were bound to win.

His literary and historical work was his real life interest. He was devoted to books and to Art. He loved his State of Maine, and its history was as familiar to him as is the alphabet to most people. He lived with the early voyagers, knew of every settlement in Maine from its inception across the seas until its culmination on our shores. Dates, names and events were at his tongue's end and no man in Maine was his equal in early Maine and New England lore. He wished to be known as an "Historian," and told me he hoped to be remembered as one. His political and business successes were to him as nothing in comparison with those in connection with his historical work. A painter of landscapes and of animals, for his own recreation, he showed real ability as many canvases will testify.

A complete list of my father's historical works would occupy too much space in this brief biography, but some of the most important were as follows: "Trelawney Papers," "George Cleave and His Times," "The British Invasion from the North," "Sir Ferdinando Gorges and His Province of Maine," "The Pioneers of New France in New England," "The Voyages of Jacques Cartier," and "Documentary History of Maine" (24 volumes). The Documentary History herein referred to consists of transcripts made by my father from the original documents in the British Government archives. He spent two years in London and employed a number of trained assistants to locate and copy these records, which consist of more than 20,000 pages of manuscript. They constitute the foundation stones of early Maine history. Another work of quite a different nature was his contribution to the Shakespeare-Bacon controversy, entitled, "The Greatest of Literary Problems." He spent much time and study on the question of the origin of the plays generally attributed to Shakespeare, and he himself believed that Francis Bacon was their author. The keeping of accurate historical records and the preservation of places of historic interest were also subjects in which my father took deep concern.

As a member of historical, literary and artistic societies he always took the lead. The founder and first President of the Portland Society of Art, now one of Portland's finest institutions; for 21 years President of the Maine Historical Society, for 20 years President of the New England Historic-Geneological Society (Boston), the author and publisher of more than a score of histories of early voyagers and pioneers, the collector of the invaluable Documentary History of Maine, a writer of poetry; his life was filled to overflowing with usefulness. He was beloved and had friends throughout New England, and was recognized by all as the leading authority on Maine history.

His family was his "hobby." With six sons and two daughters living at his decease, three others having died in early youth, he had problems other than those of politics, business or authorship. Of these eight, six graduated from college, four sons from Bowdoin and the daughters from Wellesley. The two other sons entered Williams College,



but did not graduate. The home life was simple and all the children were brought up to be self-reliant. There was no pretense, no sham, and the usual striving for "social position" was unknown in his household. The children were all taught that what a man *had* in wealth or position was of no moment as compared with what he himself *was*, and that character was the foundation of happiness and real success. A true spirit of democracy prevailed at all times, and the house was governed by kindness, not fear, by patience, not command.

To have his children about him, to read and talk to them was his delight. Though occupied with business, politics and literary work he never neglected his boys and girls. He, with my mother, two sisters and myself made three trips together to Europe, on one of which we remained there more than a year while we children attended school in London. He and I went on many journeys and voyages together. It was all a part of our education. He always rejoiced to get safely back home and often remarked, "the home is the foundation of happiness, I am sorry for those without one." He had no tastes for club or secret society life. Although a Mason I never knew him to attend a meeting; his home and children were everything.

My father loved the out-of-doors, was fond of travel. He often took my brothers and myself into the woods and he and I began our annual fishing trips when I was but six years of age. On my second trip to Rangeley Lakes, I being seven years old, my father said to me "I will give you \$10 a pound as a reward for every fish you catch, five pounds or over." Within the hour I had hooked and landed an eight-pound spotted trout, all by my own efforts. There was rejoicing in camp (Indian Rock) that evening and the \$80 was paid over to me with proper ceremony. To teach me a lesson of thrift I was advised to put this small fortune in the Savings Bank, where it has remained to this day. Small boys are lucky; that was the biggest fish that ever took my hook, though for forty years since I have been a patient fisherman.

All my brothers and myself were taught to love animals. Rabbits, chickens, dogs, cats, ponies, white mice and even parrots were members of the family. It was in this way

that we were taught to be humane, and the lessons of those early days never can be forgotten.

My father believed in work; never folded his hands in idleness. How he ever wrote his numerous historical works I cannot understand. With children and dogs, the former making more noise than the latter, all about the house, he had a wonderful power to abstract his thoughts and could work under trying circumstances. Every moment of his long and useful life was occupied and he died "in the harness."

No man could have been more unaffected, more patient, more simple, or more natural than he. It would be impossible to mention here all his works or achievements but he believed in his country, state and city. He organized the Associated Charities of Portland, was responsible for the Walker Manual Training School (Portland), and was Overseer of Bowdoin College. He was interested in all philanthropic and charitable work. He was strictly temperate and, unlike most men, when he reached advanced years did not become intolerant of the views of younger men. The "old school," so-called, did not appeal to him; he always was progressive and even believed in Woman Suffrage; a point of view unusual for a man of his age and training. Money was of secondary importance to him, it was but a means to an end, the end being the opportunity money afforded for leisure time to study and work in congenial fields.

I once asked him what was the greatest single factor of success. "The ability to control one's own surroundings," was his reply. He felt he ought to be able to do anything any other man could do; this was in humility of spirit, but he would not admit inferiority to anyone.

His last public appearance was in his ninetieth year when he delivered the Maine State Centennial oration at the First Parish Church, Portland (June, 1920). Although erect and in good health at the time I was anxious for him and was immensely relieved when the exercises were over, for he had made a great effort. Often he said that he was thankful that his lot had been cast in the State of Maine, a State that had no equal, and among people whose character and industry were unsurpassed.

Two provisions of his Will deserve special mention. First, he provided that none of his fortune ever should be paid to any person who practiced vivisection. He could not bear to think of the sufferings inflicted upon dumb creatures in the name of "science." Second, he recognized the services of incalculable value rendered to this Nation and the world by the Pilgrims, Puritans and other early pioneers of New England. They were the founders; they were the master builders of the Nation; to them belonged the laurels. My father bequeathed \$50,000 to the City of Boston, this sum to accumulate at interest until it should amount to \$1,000,000, at which time (estimated at 63 years from his death) it is to be used to construct a "New England Pantheon," or memorial building in which are to be portrayed and recorded the lives of those New England men and women who made this country what it is.

In his last sickness he never uttered a word of complaint, but repeatedly remarked he was grateful to his Creator for the long life, health and happiness that had been given him. The last words he uttered expressed the hope that his children would not forget him.

My father had faith in mankind, faith in the future of America, faith in God and faith in the world to come.

# JAMES PHINNEY BAXTER

1831—1921 PORTLAND, MAINE

A LIFE-LONG OPPONENT OF VIVISECTION; THE PROVISIONS  
OF HIS WILL.

By PERCIVAL P. BAXTER, GOVERNOR OF MAINE

*(Written for the Christian Science Monitor)*

The late James Phinney Baxter of Portland, Maine, my father, was the son of a country family doctor who for almost fifty years during the middle of the last century practiced his profession in the small towns of rural Maine. In those days of the horse and chaise and of unimproved roads, a country physician had no hospitals or trained nurses to supplement his professional efforts. He was obliged to use the few remedies the times afforded and was forced to rely upon his own skill. It was a rough and ready life where native ability and common sense were the chief factors in curing disease and healing broken bones.

My father, raised in this wholesome, self-reliant atmosphere, learned of the efficacy of simple remedies and became well grounded in the rules of sane living. No doubt that accounted for his wonderful health and long life of more than ninety years. He always opposed the excessive use of drugs and preached correct living as the preventative of disease.

Raised in the country on a rugged Maine farm he early came to know and love domestic animals, and throughout his life never tired of telling of his horses, dogs and other animal friends. They meant much to him. His eight children became well grounded in animal lore, and there was no limit to the pets allowed them. I myself once had five large Irish setters, all of whom had the run of the house.

As the years rolled by and the medical profession "advanced" in wisdom and worldly attainments my grandfather and father, came to view with disapproval the increasing use of animals for experimentation. The elder man died before vivisection became popular with physi-



cians, but the younger set his face against it and determined in so far as he was able to check the practice.

Whenever occasion offered my father protested against what he believed to be the needlessness, and knew to be the cruelty of animal experimentation. His unyielding attitude on this question impressed me and naturally I became imbued with his ideas.

I do not recall the exact date when he first wrote the clauses in his Will that prohibited the payment of any funds from his estate to persons who practiced vivisection, or the use of any of his real property for such purposes, although I was in his confidence at all times and aided in its drafting. This, however, was done at least twenty years before his death, and succeeding Wills, including the last, all contained the clauses referred to, each one being couched in stronger and more forceful language than those previously executed.

In his Will dated October 8, 1920, and probated July 18, 1921, it is provided that none of my father's property ever shall descend to, and that none of the income therefrom ever shall be paid to, any devisee, legatee or beneficiary who "in any way or manner practices or performs vivisection or animal experimentation upon any living person or animal." Further provision is made that none of his property, land or buildings, ever shall be used for such purposes and this restriction against them must be incorporated in all deeds of conveyance of his property. The clauses referred to are written in legal phrases, the meaning of which is clear and convincing.

Of course my father realized that his voice on this matter would be but a feeble effort amid the clamor of "the Friends of Medical Progress" and the devotees of "advanced" medicine and surgery. He however desired to go on record for all time as opposed to animal experimentation, and felt that his protest might cause some few persons, at least, to pause and consider the question from a humane and reasonable viewpoint. My father believed that our animal companions deserve fair treatment at the hand of man, and that man degrades and betrays himself when he practices cruelty upon them. It is needless to say that my father's sentiments are my own, and that I hope his message some day will be heeded and bring relief to the countless creatures that suffer in the name of science.





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