

## THE DE GRAFF FAMILY.

BY WASHINGTON FROTHINGHAM.

The word "graff" or "grave" signifies in the original an office of much importance, and hence we have the term "landgrave" or "wildgrave," the latter being the keeper of the royal forest. The expression occurs in Burger's poem, "The Wild Huntsman," which Scott has so admirably translated—

"The wildgrave winds his bugle horn,  
To horse, to horse, halloo, halloo;  
His fiery courser snuffs the morn,  
His thronging serfs their lord pursue."

Such having been the position of the family in the fatherland, it need hardly be said that it has been fully maintained by its American descendants. The De Graffs were among the early settlers of Schenectady, and Isaac De Graff comes prominently before the public during that crisis which tried men's souls. He was born November 16, 1756, and served in the army of the Revolution, holding the rank of major.

During this service he made the acquaintance of La Fayette, who was then on Washington's staff, and who administered to him the oath prescribed by Congress. After the termination of hostilities, he was appointed first judge of the Court of Common Pleas for Schenectady county, which office he held during a large part of his life. He reached his 88th year, having the use of his faculties until his death, which occurred December 21, 1844. It may be added here, as a matter of connecting interest, that the Governor of the Dutch West India island of St. Eustatius, whose name was De Graff, was the first foreign official to salute the American flag, an act which the British government made a matter of complaint. Isaac De Graff had two sons, the oldest of whom (John I. De Graff) during the war of 1812 displayed a patriotic spirit equal to that of his father. This occurred at an emergency when our government was destitute of both funds and credit. The latter had been paralyzed by the capture and destruction of Washington by the British, and at this critical time Commodore McDonough was preparing his fleet for the defence of Lake Champlain. At this hour of need, John I. De Graff advanced the necessary funds, and three weeks after the destruction of Washington, the British fleet on the lake was defeated. Commodore McDonough acknowledged his obligations in a letter specially written, soon after the victory. John I. De Graff represented his district during two terms in Congress, and was honored by President Van Buren with the offer of a seat in his cabinet as Secretary of the Treasury, which he declined, owing to the pressure of private business. He was one of the projectors of the Mohawk & Hudson railroad, the first passenger road built on this continent, and was prominent in other features of public service. The second son, Jesse D. De Graff, was born in Schenectady on the 8th of January, 1801. He graduated at Union College, and studied law with the late Alonzo C. Paige, after which he removed to Albany and established himself in the profession with marked success. He was also appointed judge of Common Pleas by the council of appointment. On the 10th of August, 1830, he married Miss Gazena Catherine Visscher, the only child of Frederick Herman Visscher, whose name has been previously mentioned. Their union was of

a happy character, and Judge De Graff, after his marriage, made the old Visscher mansion his permanent home. He found occupation in the improvement of a large estate, and became a prominent man in the society of the day. He died August 4, 1868, and was buried by the side of his wife in the new cemetery in Schenectady.

His children were four in number, their names being as follows: Susan, Charles Herman, Alfred and Isaac Howard. The first of these became the wife of Mr. William Farnham, of Troy. She was highly esteemed for domestic virtues, but was early removed by death, leaving a precious memory. Charles and Howard died early, and hence Mr. Alfred De Graff is the sole representative of the family. This gentleman now occupies the old Visscher estate, being the fifth generation of proprietorship. He has reconstructed and enlarged the mansion, adding the improvements of modern architecture, until it now presents a tasteful and imposing appearance. The out-buildings are all renewed in the same style, and thus a general harmony pervades the establishment. The spacious lawn is shaded with forest trees, and the effect is heightened by the deer which grace the grounds, and which seem so natural that one at first sight would hardly believe them to be the work of the artist. The Danoscara, dashing over its stony bed and skirting the mansion, adds a fine effect to the general view, which is one of rare beauty. It may be added that the interior is admirably adorned with pictures and other works of art, as well as with a choice and valuable library. Among the curious heir-looms which one meets in this ancestral mansion is a silver dollar which has been in the family for one hundred and fifty years. It is computed that if this sum had been placed at compound interest, carefully reckoned during the whole time, it would have reached the handsome amount of fifteen thousand dollars. Mr. Alfred De Graff married, October 14th, 1869, Miss Anna Phillips, only daughter of the late Cornelius Phillips of the town of Florida, a sketch of whose life appears elsewhere in this volume. Three children adorn this union, Edith, Howard and Florence, who form the sixth generation connected with the estate settled by Harman Frederick Visscher, one hundred and twenty-seven years ago. As a feature in these family records it may be appropriately mentioned in this connection, that Isaac De Graff had two daughters, one of whom (Nancy) married Captain Philip R. Toll, of the same place. This family have been occupants of a large estate near Schenectady for two centuries, and therefore need no farther reference. Philip Toll was bred a physician, but afterward entered service during the war of 1812, holding the rank of captain of artillery, in which he won the special confidence of General Hampton. Soon after the close of the war he moved west, his permanent residence being Fawn River, Michigan, where his son Isaac D. Toll has reached a distinction equalled by few public men in that important State. Mrs. Toll is still living, and is the cherished object of affection in a large domestic circle. Another daughter became Mrs. Rev. Dr. Cuyler of Philadelphia, where she still resides, and though now past fourscore, retains the use of her faculties, and is a remarkable instance of well-preserved as well as honored old age.



JESSE D. DE GRAFF.



ALFRED DE GRAFF, FONDA, N. I.  
SON OF JESSE D. DE GRAFF



MRS. JESSE D. DE GRAFF



HOWARD, SON OF  
ALFRED DE GRAFF