

## John Pierpont Died a Failure

John Pierpont died a failure. In 1866, at age eighty-one, he came to the end of his days as a government clerk in Washington, D.C., with a long string of personal defeats abrading his spirit.

Things began well enough. He graduated from Yale, which his grandfather had helped found, and chose education as his profession with some enthusiasm.

He was a failure at school teaching. He was too easy on his students. And so he turned to the legal world for training.

He was a failure as a lawyer. He was too generous to his clients and too concerned about justice to take the cases that brought good fees. The next career he took up was that of dry-goods merchant.

He was a failure as a businessman. He could not charge enough for his goods to make a profit, and was too liberal with credit. In the meantime he had been writing poetry, and though it was published, he didn't collect enough royalties to make a living.

He was a failure as a poet. And so he decided to become a minister, went off to Harvard Divinity School, was ordained as minister of the Hollis Street Church in Boston. But his position for prohibition and against slavery got him crosswise with the influential members of his congregation and he was forced to resign.

He was a failure as a minister. Politics seemed a place where he could make some difference, and he was nominated as the Abolition party candidate for governor of Massachusetts. He lost. Undaunted, he ran for Congress under the banner of the Free Soil party. He lost.

He was a failure as a politician. The civil war came along, and he volunteered as a chaplain of the 22nd Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteers. Two weeks later he quit, having found the task too much of a strain on his health. He was seventy-six years old. He couldn't even make it as a chaplain.

Someone found him an obscure job in the back offices of the Treasury Department in Washington, and he finished out the last five years of his life as a menial file clerk. He wasn't very good at that, either. His heart was not in it.

John Pierpont died a failure. He had accomplished nothing he set out to do or be. There is a small memorial stone marking his grave in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The words in the granite read: POET, PREACHER, PHILOSOPHER, PHILANTHROPIST.

From the distance in time, one might insist that he was not, in fact, a failure. His commitments to social justice, his desire to be a loving human being, his active

engagement in the great issues of his times, and his faith in the power of the human mind - these are not failures. And much of what he thought of as defeat became success. Education was reformed, legal processes were improved, credit laws were changed, and, above all, slavery was abolished once and for all.

Why am I telling you this? It's not an uncommon story. Many nineteenth-century reformers had similar lives - similar failures and successes. In one very important sense, John Pierpont was not a failure. Every year, come December, we celebrate his success. We carry in our hearts and minds a lifelong memorial to him.

It's a song.

Not about Jesus or angels or even Santa Claus. It's a terribly simple song about the simple joy of whizzing through the cold white dark of wintersgloom in a sleigh pulled by one horse and with the company of friends, laughing and singing all the way. No more. No less. "Jingle Bells." John Pierpont wrote "Jingle Bells."

To write a song that stands for the simplest joys, to write a song that three or four hundred million people around the world know - a song about something they've never done but can imagine - a song that every one of us, large and small, can hoot out the moment the chord is struck in our spirits - well, that's not failure.

One snowy afternoon in deep winter, John Pierpont penned the lines as a small gift for his family and friends and congregation. And in doing so left behind a permanent gift for Christmas - the best kind - not the one under the tree, but the invisible, invincible one of joy.

*(Postscript. In the winter of 1987, in the Methow Valley of the Cascade Mountains of Washington State, I finally got a long-held wish. The snow was three feet deep, the temperature hung at zero, the sky was clear, the sleigh was open, the horse was dappled gray with red harness and bells, and we dashed over the snow, laughing all the way.*

*Thanks, John Pierpont. Every word of the song is true.)*