



Augusta Dickerson, daughter of a Philadelphia
Conference preacher, and WFMS Missionary to Japan.
(Photo courtesy of GCAH, Madison, New Jersey)

Two Letters of Augusta Dickerson

Pioneer Missionary to Japan

Editor's note: Augusta Dickerson (1859-1946) was born in the Methodist parsonage of Milford, Delaware in 1859, the eldest daughter of Rev. Jacob Dickerson of the Philadelphia Conference. It was said that "the desire to be a missionary seemed but natural to Miss Dickerson, for her parents were always interested in the missionary program of the church, and her father... had offered his services in the South American field, but lack of funds prevented his going."¹ Her mother, Abigail Augusta Winchester, died in 1874. Her brother, Rev. Jay Dickerson (1865-1922), also served as a pastor with the Philadelphia Conference.

Educated in the public schools of Philadelphia and Delaware's Wilmington Academy, Augusta graduated valedictorian of her class at the Philadelphia Normal School in 1877. She worked as a public school teacher for eleven years in Philadelphia, before commencing her career as a missionary in 1888. It was while studying in Wilmington that she first seriously considered missionary service; she was influenced, among others, by one of her teachers, Margaret E. Layton,² who in 1878 became a missionary sent by the Women's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS)

¹Background information and photos of Augusta are taken from "Dickerson, Augusta," Mission Biographical Reference Files Collection, United Methodist Church Archives – GCAH, Madison, New Jersey.

²Margaret E. Layton (1841-1892) taught at the Wilmington school for eight years, and in 1878 was sent by the Baltimore branch of the WFMS to serve in a girls' school in Calcutta; she died there after contracting cholera. Wade Crawford, Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions; Volume 3: Widening Horizons, 1845-1895* (New York: Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, 1957), 598-599. Another WFMS missionary who encouraged Augusta to consider missionary service was Sarah Easton (1836-1915) who also went to India in 1878.

to south India. After an “inspirational summer spent at Ocean Grove” (New Jersey), Augusta offered herself to the Philadelphia branch of the WFMS in 1888, and set sail for Japan in November of that year. She arrived in Tokyo on December 24, and made her way to Hakodate, a port city in northern Japan, to take charge of a mission school which had been founded there in 1882. In a letter to her father in February 1890, Augusta reported that a Sunday school she had established in a nearby fishing village had already grown to some 350 students.³

Augusta would serve her entire career in Hakodate at Iai Jo Gako (Memorial Love Girls’ School), before her retirement and return to the United States in 1925. During her years of service, she witnessed the creation of the Japan Methodist Church as an autonomous national church in 1907 – the first foreign missionary field of American Methodism to become an independent body.⁴ In 1932, graduates of her school invited her to return to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of their graduation, and financed her way, accompanied by Miss Ella Morse, mentioned in the previous article as the future wife of Rev. Price Collins. Augusta was honored by the Japanese government with an Imperial Decoration for “outstanding service to Japanese women.” She died June 25, 1946 in Newtown, Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

The first letter, from April of 1890, was sent to her father while he was serving as a pastor in Norristown, and was published in the *Philadelphia Methodist* (the conference newspaper) in its issue of May 31, 1890. The second letter, from February of 1906, is transcribed from a handwritten original, which accompanied a biographical information sheet sent to her by Board of Missions in 1906, and which today is preserved in the United Methodist Archive in Madison, New Jersey.

³ *Philadelphia Methodist*, March 29, 1890.

⁴The Japan Methodist Church was formally created in 1907, combining the mission churches planted by the ME Church, the ME Church, South, and the Methodist Church of Canada. However, WFMS mission schools and other projects, including Dickerson’s school in Hakodate, continued to operate independently under the auspices of the American organization, though they worked closely with the newly established denomination. See J. Tremayne Coplestone, *History of Methodist Missions, Volume IV: Twentieth Century Perspectives, The Methodist Episcopal Church, 1896-1939* (New York: Board of Global Ministries, 1973), 724-740.

A younger image of
Augusta Dickerson,
perhaps the one she
mentions having sent
to the Board of Missions
in her 1906 letter, below.

(Courtesy GCAH,
Madison, New Jersey)



Hakodate, April 20, 1890

[To Rev. Jacob Dickerson]

It is Sabbath evening; the work of another Sabbath is over. How different our Sabbath days are here from the well-remembered Sabbaths at home. We had breakfast at seven o'clock, and at 8 o'clock, I started for the fishing village a few miles distant, where we have one little Sunday school. Some of the native girls from our school went with me. It was raining slightly when we started, but we kept on. We found eighty children gathered in the school. They seemed to enjoy the Sabbath very much. They are quiet and listened to the instruction of their teachers very attentively. They can sing very nicely such hymns as "Jesus Loves Me," "There is a happy Land," and "Bringing in the Sheaves," etc., and another, not a translation, but a pure Japanese hymn. They recite the Lord's Prayer, and many of them know the Beatitudes. We attend Japanese church at 9 o'clock, and every other Sunday we have English service in the Episcopal Church. In the afternoon, we hold a Sunday school in Hakodate with the girls of our school. In the evenings we hold meetings for the girls in our own school building also.

O, pray that I may have wisdom and power. I like to feel that each meeting is full of fire, that it makes a deep impression on those who attend, and that they receive help to be better and stronger. O, pray that I may be filled with the Spirit, that my work may burn its way into the hearts of these girls and arouse their consciences and lead them to Christ. Pray for us.

Augusta

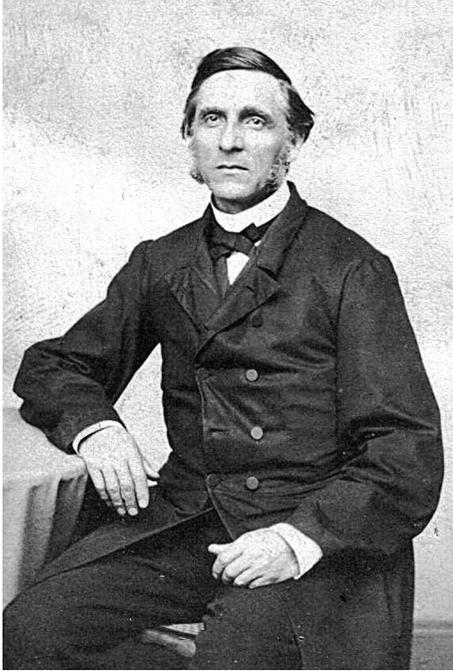
Hakodate, Feb. 19, 1906

My Dear Miss Moss,

Enclosed is the blank filled to the best of my knowledge. You have undertaken a great work and it is the least we can do to answer promptly. I have no photograph, and those taken in Hakodate are so poor that I have ordered one sent from Gutekunst, Philadelphia; he took my photograph when I was home three years ago, and I fancy that I have changed but little since then.

It was difficult to answer some of your questions briefly. "What led to me becoming a missionary?" So many things helped in turning my heart toward becoming a missionary: my father's consecrated life and his prayers; the great need of the untaught heathen world; the drain upon time and strength of school's work, leaving so little for definite Gospel teaching; the being set free from home cares and responsibilities by my father's marriage; a desire to use my life for God in a way that would tell the story of his love to those who were not favored with Christian surroundings, and get a continuous teaching. The Holy Spirit wrought the conviction of my heart deeper and deeper through a number of years, until, at last, the way was made clear.

Now may I write just a word about Miss Hampton? June 18, 1906, this present year, she reaches her 25th anniversary! During those years, she has had but two furloughs and each of these has lasted but one



Left: Augusta's father, Rev. Jacob Dickerson (1823-1901), photographed about 1862. Right: her co-worker in Hakodate, Mary Hampton.

year. Thus she has given more consecutive years of service, and more years of actual work in Japan than any lady in our WFMS, except (maybe) Miss Elizabeth Russell of Nagasaki; I am not sure of the length of her furloughs.⁵

She is modest in regard to her years of service, never self-assertive – always willing to take a quiet, unseen place, but a woman of such sound judgment and excellent common sense that her influence is widely felt and acknowledged. She has much of the “serving of tables” to do, but this is done uncomplainingly and unselfishly. The success of the

⁵Mary S. Hampton (1853-1930) was raised in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and graduated from Albion College in 1880. In the spring of 1881, she began her service in Japan, and served in Hakodate more than 36 years before her retirement in 1916. “Hampton, Mary,” Mission Biographical Reference Files Collection, United Methodist Church Archives – GCAH, Madison, New Jersey.

school is largely due to the lines of practical economy and simple living started by her. It is a happy thing that now at the end of 25 years of service, she is busily engaged in making plans for a new and commodious building on a new site which she hopes to have finished in time to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the opening of the school, in September of 1907.⁶ Until recently she has, in addition to her duties as Treasurer, Superintendent of City Work, and housekeeper, been a successful and interesting teacher in the school, carrying many hours of teaching each week. She has enjoyed excellent health, and is still full of energy and activity, eager in her work for the new building.

Another point which we think remarkable is that the first Japanese man who came here as a personal teacher of the Japanese language has remained in the employ of the school throughout these 25 years. Mr. Uno is his name. Together they have worked and planned, and for the school have given their lives. He is a man greatly respected in the community – quiet, conservative, but strong and manly. I do not think that there is any other native teacher in any of the schools with a record of 25 years of unbroken service.

Miss Hampton is quiet and undemonstrative, but those associated with her feel her love and sympathy, and the pupils and teachers have a deep, unchanging respect and love for her. Personally, as Principal of the School, I feel that the present success is largely due to the influence of these two, Miss Hampton and Mr. Uno. Because they are what they are, and because they gave the school its start along certain lines, and because they have been ever “behind the scenes” – the school enjoys an excellent reputation among the Japanese for simplicity, earnestness, thoroughness and stability. It has yet a great future before it to educate and train the daughters of this island for their part and place

⁶The new building then under construction was destroyed by an unexplained fire in June 1907, just before its completion. This was followed in late August by another, even more disastrous fire that devastated the city, and destroyed all of the existing buildings of the mission, including the missionary homes; Augusta and her associates lost all their personal possessions. *Thirty-Seventh Annual Report of the Philadelphia Branch, Women's Foreign Missionary Society* (1907), 32. The Philadelphia branch of the WFMS launched special fundraising efforts, and a new school was built and dedicated July 29, 1907; the main address was given by Bishop Hondo, first episcopal leader of the newly established Japan Methodist Church. *Thirty-Eighth Annual Report of the Philadelphia Branch, Women's Foreign Missionary Society* (1908), 29-30.

in the new Japan. We pray that both may be spared many years of service in the new building.

Wishing for good success and every blessing, I am,

Yours loyally,

Augusta Dickerson



A photograph taken in 1932, when Augusta Dickerson, then retired and living in the United States, returned to Japan to visit her former mission school. Dickerson is seated to the right; sitting in the chair to her right is Ella Morse, the future wife of Rev. Price Collins; and standing just to Ella's left is Mary Collins, Price's sister.