

Old St. George's Church, Fourth and New Streets, Philadelphia, as it appeared before the 1920s, when the street was lowered to accommodate construction of the Ben Franklin Bridge. Purchased by the Methodists for their use in 1769, Mary Thorn was among the earliest to worship there, and became the first woman to be appointed a class leader in America.

Mary Thorn: First Female Class Leader in American Methodism

George W. Lybrand (1884)

Editor's note: George W. Lybrand (1822-1889) was a clergy member of the Philadelphia Conference, predecessor body to the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. The leading conference historian of that era, he was a founder of the Historical Society in the 1860s. This essay appeared in the November 1, 1884 Philadelphia Methodist, the conference newspaper. While the letter from which he quotes would appear to be that housed in the archives of St. George's, and printed in this journal, there are significant differences between the quotations here and the text there. Either Lybrand felt the liberty to quote her rather loosely, filling in details and additional quotes of Thorn's from other sources, or he is drawing from an additional letter from Thorn, now lost. Considering the circumstances of her writing [see page 65], it is not improbable that she wrote any number of letters seeking the same assistance, retelling her story each time, with differences of detail. In any event, Lybrand's article is printed as it appeared in 1884; footnotes have been added by the current editor. In the various sources, Mary's name is spelled both Thorn and Thorne.

Mrs. Mary Thorn was of Welsh descent. She was the daughter of Thomas and Diana Evans, born in Bristol, Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Her parents settled in New Bern, North Carolina. She lost her father by death, and her mother married again James Mills, October 24, 1767. While in the South, she joined the Baptists. Here she married James Thorn, who died July 24, 1762, aged 28 years. After losing her husband, she came with her parents to Philadelphia. From a letter of hers, which has never appeared in print, now in my possession, I give the following facts: "In my twenty-third year I was convinced of sin, and joined the Baptist Church." She states: "when I had been a member of this church for seven years, Messrs. Boardman, Pilmoor and Webb came to Philadelphia, where I was, and made a very great stir in town."

She set apart a day for fasting and prayer to be guided aright, and went to hear them. "Mr. Boardman preached, and the Lord convinced me they were no false prophets. Upon my knees, I cried out in my soul to God, 'this people shall be my people, and their God my God.' But now I had a cup

of sorrow to drink to the very dregs. I lived with my dear parents; my dear mother I loved as my life, and strove to get them all to preaching. The Lord blessed his word. One brother and one sister were convinced of sin, and cried out for mercy. This alarmed my mother. She cried out, in the bitterness of her soul: ‘These birds of passage have bereaved me of my children; they will all soon be in bedlam.’ My mother used her authority, and positively forbid us having any connection with them. This was a sore trial to us, but we schemed it so as to deceive her for a little while; but she soon found us out, which made the matter worse than before. She said: ‘Is this their religion, to teach their children to be disobedient to their parents? I now say you shall either forsake them or me, for I will leave the country.’”

Mrs. Thorn laid the matter before God in prayer, when “he that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me,”¹ was applied to her heart, and she resolved to remain among her spiritual relations. Her record: “I gave my final answer to my dear mother, and they took their passage from Philadelphia to Newbern, North Carolina, and left me alone, and I have never seen one of them since. This was an awful sacrifice. I now gave myself wholly up to the cause of God and was made a class-leader. In less than two years I had three classes and two bands to meet weekly.”²

“The work now began to break out very rapidly, and I being a member of the Baptist Church, many of them joined, and met in class with me. This aroused the elders and deacons of the Baptist Church. A committee was appointed to wait on me, visiting me monthly for three months, to reason with me, and persuade me to give up my class-papers and tickets and renounce the Methodists. The Association met, and I was summoned to appear with the rest. When we appeared we were all sent out into the meeting-yard, and called in one at a time and examined till they were done. Then we all stood in a row before the communion table in the presence of

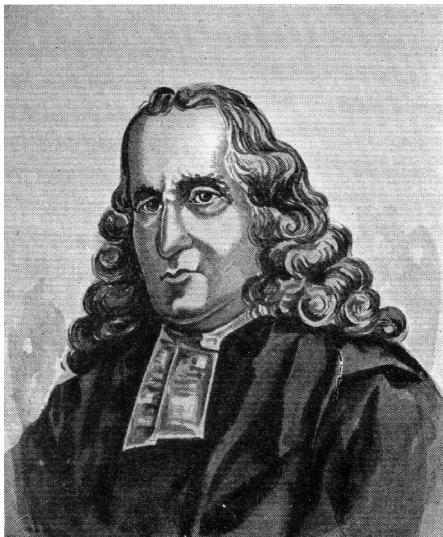
¹Matthew 10:37.

²At St. George’s, letters written to Thorn from Boardman, Pilmoor, Rankin, and Asbury are preserved, a number of which address her as “Molly.” The earliest, dated February 7, 1770, is from Richard Boardman, in which he says, “I am glad you have got two classes. I sho’d have no objection against your have[sic] three. There is a wide difference between being tired of, and tired in the service of God. However I hope both classes will be taken from you the moment you feel yourself sufficient to be a leader. I look upon a deep sense of insufficiency [sic] as a necessary qualification of a class leader. It is better to ware [sic] out than rust out.” Early Methodist class leaders held a position of spiritual authority, and essentially provided pastoral care and accountability for the members of their class, which met weekly under the leader’s direction.

In the text of Thorn’s 1813 letter (below), she says that she had been a Methodist 43 years, bringing us back to 1770; Boardman’s letter would appear to corroborate the date of her formal association with St. George’s as 1770, and to fix the time of her becoming a class leader as no later than early February of that year.

the ministers, elders and deacons. A short exhortation was given by Dr. Rogers. Then the word was given, whoever stood firm to the Methodists were to stand – the others were to sit down. Ten of us stood firm. The books were opened and our names erased. My heart being full I spake aloud, and said, ‘Blessed be God! Ye cannot erase my name out of the Lamb’s book of life! We know whom we worship.’ The sacrament was administered but we were turned to the left hand and not suffered to partake. I returned home with my soul full of joy and sorrow, and met Mr. Asbury waiting for me, who said: ‘Now sister, I will

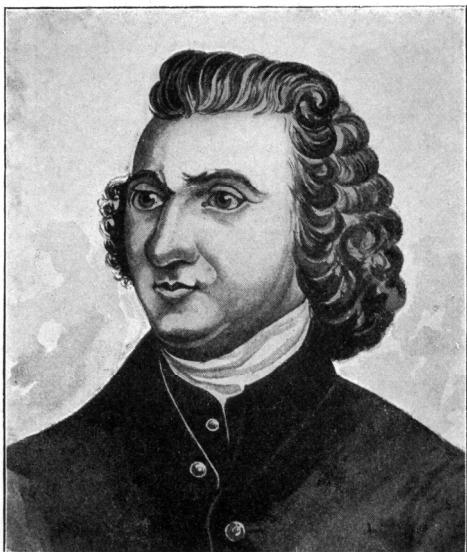
give you the right hand of fellowship.’ From this time nothing particular happened till the American War, excepting the Rev. William Percy, one of Lady Huntingdon’s preachers, arrived from Charlestown, South Carolina, with a commission from the Rev. Oliver Hart, a Baptist minister,³ to endeavor me to forsake the Methodists. He sent for me, and after hearing my statement, approved of my conduct, and ever after was my friend. The war being declared and the plague breaking out, besieged by sea and land, our streets were like a butcher’s slaughterhouse.⁴ With my life in my hand I visited the sick and the hospitals night and day.”



Joseph Pilmoor

³Oliver Hart (1723-1795), was a native of Warminster, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and joined the Southampton Baptist Church. In December 1849, he became the pastor of the Baptist Church in Charleston, serving there until 1780. Two letters from Hart to Mary Thorn are in the archives at St. George's. In one, dated April 12, 1771, he says, “I had really formed the conclusion that I had displeased you, in being so plain about your joyning [sic] the Methodists. I could wish to hear your reasons for so doing, for I assure you, I am not pleased with it yet.” The second, dated April 1, 1772, makes it clear that Hart was the agency of Thorn’s conversion as a Baptist years before her arrival in Philadelphia. Hart was pastor of the Hopewell, New Jersey, Baptist Church from 1780 until his death. His papers are in the Library of the University of South Carolina.

⁴Asbury’s journal entry for Thursday, February 6, 1777 reads, in part: “...I met with brother George Shadford the next day, and saw an affecting letter from Mrs. Mary Thorne of Philadelphia, in which, after she had given some account of the abounding wickedness of that city, she informed us of the declension of a few religious persons, of



Thomas Rankin

marriage to Captain Samuel Parker on February 12, 1778, at St. Paul's Church, Rev. William Stringer, minister, once a Methodist preacher. Here I have to regret and blame myself all the days of my life; not but what I got a sincere, good, pious husband as ever woman had, but I left my charge in the time of their greatest trouble. Had I done as my dear friend Mr. Asbury did – to stand my ground, come life or death – it would not have been with me as it is now – destitute and afflicted, without a friend to have compassion upon me in extreme poverty and old age."

the fidelity of others, of the camp fever that was then prevailing there, and that many died thereof – sometimes twenty, thirty, and even forty in a day. An awful account indeed! So it seems as if the Lord intends to bring us to our proper reflections and duties by the sword, the pestilence, and famine. Alas! who can stand before the displeasure of the Almighty! How much better would it be, for men to please God, and live in love to him and one another, that they might partake of his blessing, instead of his curse! Lord, grant thy people wisdom and protection in all times of danger!" Elmer T. Clark, *The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury*. 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), I:229-230.

⁵Lybrand noted the location of her house as "near the corner of Bread and Arch Streets;" In his *History of the Rise of Methodism in America* (Philadelphia, 1859), 42, John Lednum says, "She lived near the corner of Bread and Mulberry streets; and often did Messrs. Boardman, Pilmoor, Asbury, and others of the early laborers, turn into her house for retirement and intercourse with Heaven." Arch Street was originally called Mulberry. Lednum also specifically says it was Pilmoor who appointed Mary as a class leader.

"When our chapel was taken from us and made a riding school for the cavalry, my house⁵ was opened for preaching, and here I became acquainted with Captain Parker. He had a ship of his own in the Government service. He was an acquaintance of Mr. Thomas Rankin, and by him we were introduced to each other. Mr. Parker's ship being chosen to come to England with invalids, Mr. Rankin and two other preachers took their passage with him, and they persuaded me to do the same; and seeing there was no sign of anything but war and bloodshed, I consented, and was united in

She states, when orders came that the fleet was to sail, she went aboard, accompanied by a multitude of weeping friends. In her own words: "We now sailed with our three preachers, and had singing, praying, preaching, class and band meetings all the way over till we arrived at Cork, where I met with my old friend, Mr. Boardman, who introduced us to Mr. Wesley, who had just arrived. He took us everywhere with him to dine and drink tea till we sailed for England. When we arrived in London and were settled, Mr. Wesley often came to see us." Rankin records: "I left the Capes of Delaware on the 17th of March, 1778, and arrived safe at the Cove of Cork on the 15th of April."

Her husband at that time was a man of property; had a good ship at sea and money in the funds, and his ship, house, purse and heart were open to all – the preachers and the cause. "Mr. Wesley appointed him Steward at Gravel Lane, and me a class-leader. Thus we continued till we removed to Scarborough, in Yorkshire. There my husband was made Steward and Trustee, and I the leader of two classes." Reverses came. "We lost ship after ship till we lost our all and were reduced to poverty." They both died in the Methodist faith. Her only son was some time teacher at Woodhouse Grove, among the Wesleyans, but left and came to Philadelphia, where he died, leaving a widow and daughter. They are dead.

Mary Thorn Parker's Own Story; Transcript of a Letter of 1813

Editor's Note: the following is a transcript of a remarkable letter written by Mary Thorn, in which she tells her story as a member of Philadelphia's St. George's Society in its infancy. The letter, which is in the possession of St. George's Church, Philadelphia, was written in 1813 to Thomas Coke and Adam Clarke, then presiding over a conference of British Methodist preachers, seeking employment for her son, and aid for her and her husband in their destitute circumstances. It is noteworthy for the picture it presents of early prejudice against the Methodists in Philadelphia, as well as her description of circumstances surrounding the British occupation of the city in 1777-1778. The handwriting is quite legible, and the only editorial changes have been to create paragraphs, eliminate erratic patterns of capitalization, and modify punctuation marks for readability. On differences between the text of this letter and quotations by George Lybrand in his essay, see the introduction to the previous article, and note 6, below.

The Rev^d Dr^s Coke and Clarke⁶

Rev^d Sirs

How ever strange it appears that I should presume to write you, yet, perhaps the following will plead my apology. If any man on earth can resemble the great example, who though surrounded with a crowd of attendants and concerns, yet condescended at least to listen to the application of an individual, surely it is the venerable body of men now assembled in Mount Pleasant Chapel. How ever obscure, neglected and forgotten we are now, it was not so once – in the course of our pilgrimage in the Methodist cause, myself for 43 years and my husband for 55, it has fallen to our lot to make greater sacrifices, perhaps, than is now considered.

We joined not the Methodists in their prosperity, but during their adversity, when no one could follow them for their loaves and fishes, but for their reproaches. Such it was in the time when Mr. Pilmoor and Mr. Boardman planted the first Methodist Church in America; when after having been a member of the Baptist Church 7 years, I cried, “this people shall be my people and their God my God.”⁷ This I did not for honour, since for this, in their meeting, I was struck down nearly lifeless; for this at the hazard of my life, I was pitched through a glass door; and for this when a leader of 3 classes I was reproached with the name of Mother Confessor, pelted through their streets, and stoned in effigy; it was for this that one armed stood behind the class door to kill me, till the Lord smote him with a better weapon; for this cause it was that my husband at the hazard of his life rescued a Methodist preacher from the mob by slipping him through a

⁶This would be Bishop Thomas Coke (1747-1814), and Dr. Adam Clarke (1760-1832), who was a British Methodist leader and Bible commentator. On a slip of paper with Thorn's letter is written the following: “A letter addressed by Mrs. Mary Parker to Rev. Drs. Coke and Clarke attending the British Wesleyan Conference, in session, in the Mr. Pleasant Chapel, Liverpool, England, July 29, 1813. In this she solicited help for herself, her circumstance needing it, having lost all her property. Her maiden name was Evans, born in North Carolina. Her first husband was Thorn, her second, Capt. Parker. She was the first female class leader of Phil. At one time she had charge of three classes and 2 bands. G. W. Lybrand, Mar. 16, 71.” A label also reads in part, “presented by Rev. G. W. Lybrand, April 10th, 1871 [to the] Historical Society of the Philadelphia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.” As noted on page 61, Lybrand may have had an additional letter of Thorn's in 1884, when he quotes from a letter of hers which he says is “now in my possession” – thirteen years after donating the one transcribed here.

⁷An allusion to Ruth 1:16. Thorn is quoted by Lybrand from some other source on page 61 that she was in her twenty-third year when converted as a Baptist. This, together with her testimony that she was a member of the Baptist Church seven years when she heard Boardman and Pilmoor in Philadelphia, would make her about 29 years old when she united with the Methodists, and about 72 when she wrote this letter.

window and for this cause it was, that I was soon call'd to make as great a sacrifice as perhaps human nature can bear: to forsake a beloved father and mother for the cause of religion.

My mother, alarmed because one son and 2 daughters were under serious convictions, in the bitterness of her soul she cried out, "these birds of passage have bereaved me of my children; they will all be in bedlam." She then interposed her authority, and said, "you shall either forsake the Methodists or we will forsake you and leave the country." A day of wormwood and gall never to be forgotten, when my mind was in an agony and that word of our Lord, thundered in my soul, "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." I cried out, "it is enough Lord, here I am. Do with me as seemeth good in thy sight, only save my soul." Thus I gave my final answer to my dear mother and never saw them more, and this I suffered only for Methodism, their only cause of offence. Whilst a leader of 3 classes and 2 bands, yet I remained a member of the Baptist Church, which it may be remembered was not inconsistent with Mr. Wesley's first intention of Methodism.

This, however, roused the elders and deacons of the Baptist church, and as this was a community that I highly esteemed, yet for the Methodists it was given up. They appointed persons to reason with me for three months to resign my class papers and to renounce the Methodists. At last I, with their other members that had met amongst the Methodists, were summoned before the association, before whom we were called and examined singly; and after having stood this trial we were placed before the communion table, where the ministers, elders and deacons sat, and after an exhortation, 10 of us standing firm, the books were opened, and with awful denunciations, our names before the whole congregation were erased out. My heart being full, I said "Blessed be God, ye cannot erase my name out of the Lamb's Book of Life; we know whom we worship." The sacrament was administered, but we were turned to the left, and not suffered to partake. But I can truly say I never felt the Lord so present and precious at a sacrament as at that time. Of a truth he broke to my soul the bread of life, and I could then and I can still say, "Whom man forsakes thou wilt not leave, ready the outcasts to receive."⁸

⁸Thorn quotes a Wesley hymn, "When, Gracious Lord, Shall It Be," see Franz Hildebrand and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, eds., *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 276-277. After being disowned by her family, Mary evidently lived for a time at the Mulberry (now Arch) Street home of John Dowers, an original trustee of St. George's, as evidenced by early letters to Thorn addressed there. Thorn supported herself by teaching and, apparently, by taking in sewing; an entry in St. George's cash book for February 11, 1772 records payment to

This was another sacrifice for the same cause. With a soul full of joy and sorrow, I returned home and found Mr. Asbury, who said, "Now, sister, I will give you the right hand of fellowship." After this, the Rev. Mr. Percy, cousin to Earl Percy, then one of Lady Huntingdon's chaplains, was directed by the Rev. Oliver Hart to persuade my revolt from the Methodists. This I also withstood. And when Philadelphia was besieged by the war, the famine and the plague, that I, as some in this kingdom yet know, took my life in my hand and by day and night visited the hospitals and the sick and the dying, whether by wounds or the plague, when often not the nearest friend would approach on account of the infection, and thus by attending them in their extremity, I sometimes had the consolation of seeing them die happy. This I continued till the Methodist Chapel the soldiers made into a Riding School,⁹ and my house became their Chapel.

There originated my acquaintance with Capt. Parker, my present husband, a friend of Mr. Thos. Rankin, and Mr. Parker's ship then returning to England, Mr. Rankin and 9 other preachers then came with us, having a present made of their passage. Thus all the way over we had singing, preaching and class meeting. Here I did wrong. Though at that time surrounded by war and bloodshed, I should, as Mr. Asbury then did, have stood my ground and not have fled. Then, come life or death, it would not have been with me as it is now, destitute and afflicted, without a friend to have compassion on me in this, my poverty and old age. I was accompanied to the ship by a number of weeping friends, but where have I now one to feel for me? If I go to the rich to let them know that my poor husband, now above fourscore, is afflicted with fits, and has not a bit of bread to eat, they say, "We might try to get you to the poor house." Is not this like a plaster of mustard to a bleeding wound?

At Cork, my old friend Mr. Boardman introduced us to Mr. Wesley, with whom and the Methodist preachers we lived on terms of particular intimacy, while in different circumstances; for then my poor husband was a person of property, had a good ship at sea, money in the funds, and his house, his purse, and heart were open to all the preachers and the cause. Mr. Wesley appointed him steward for the Gravel Lane Chapel, London, and me a class leader; and so at Scarborough, Yorkshire, where my husband was steward and trustee, and myself a leader of 2 classes. Here also and at Newby

Thorn of 16 shillings "for making 4 shirts for Mr. Wright." See F. H. Tees, *Methodist Origins* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1948), 113.

⁹St. George's was not unique in this regard. All but a handful of Philadelphia's churches, as well as other public buildings, were confiscated by the British for use as hospitals, stables or riding academies for officers. See John W. Jackson, *With the British Army in Philadelphia, 1777-1778* (San Rafael, California: Presidio Press, 1979), 21-22, 173.

our house was a welcome and a frequent home for the preachers and their families. Thus we went on receiving and doing all the good we could for the cause of God, till Providence took an awful turn: we lost ship after ship till we lost our all, and were reduced to poverty.¹⁰

So we continue still, grappling with extreme poverty and the infirmities of old age, unable to do anything to get a bit of bread; all our dependence is on our son, who is now thrown out of business, by an old concern; he is now about 3 publications, nevertheless he would be thankful for a situation, if you have a vacancy at the schools, bookroom or elsewhere, to help maintain his poor old father and mother. Now, my dear honored friends, permit a poor old afflicted mother to plead her only son, the stay and staff of our old age: for the Lord's sake, for his soul's sake, and for our sake, if ye can encourage [sic] him, do, and you will not repent it, for he fears God, and will be found faithful to the charge committed to him.

I remain in that same sentiment maintained for 43 years, your truly respectful and attached friend,

Mary Parker

P.S. As my son had left a prospectus for the two Latin dictionaries in his drawer, I have taken the liberty to enclose it, should it prove of any interest when convenient, to peruse it. With your leave at a future opportunity I will take the liberty to call to see if anything can be done

Liverpool N^o 21 Bridport Street July 29th 1813.

¹⁰Their fortunes had declined by 1798, as evidenced from a letter to Samuel Parker from Thomas Rankin, in the archives at St. George's, dated October 9 of that year. Rankin writes that he has learned of their "distress" and says, "I pity your visitation, although I have never learned to this day, what have been the true causes of your being so reduced. May the Lord lead you, and yours, to a proper improvement; and then all will end well. This visitation is not sent for nothing; may the Lord help you to bear up under it. Inclosed [sic] I have sent you a two pound bank note, and I wish it had been more."



Richard Boardman

Francis Asbury's Letter to Mary Thorn, 1796

The following letter appears in volume 3 of Elmer Clark's Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, page 156. Clark notes that the letter, though undated, was likely written in December, 1796, when Asbury was in New Bern with Thomas Coke, prompted perhaps by the recollection that Thorn once had lived in that community. Clark erroneously states that the letter is in the possession of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania; it is in fact in the archives at St. George's. The current editor has made minor corrections to Clark's transcript.

NEWBERN, N.C

[To Mrs. Parker]

My dear Sister:

It is possible that you have so far forgotten your own country and your Father's House. Long have I wished, oft have I asked about Sister Thorne but no account, so have you changed your name and former friends and country. Surely you sometimes think how often we have sat and talked together at your own house and the houses of others, about the precious things of God.¹¹ In our conversation last evening, the Doctor [Bishop Coke.] gave me the most perfect information of your state. Your friends have thought [it] strange indeed you never wrote. I do most earnestly desire you will send me a letter every year as long as you and myself live. You know I have faithfully and frequently lent you my feeble hand in tenderness and love to pluck you out of the low dungeon when your soul has been covered with an awful gloom.

You are become a joyful mother of children. Oh, let not these dear little creatures draw your heart from God. Remember pious Watts "The fondness of a creature's love, how strong it strikes the sense" and so on.

Oh my dear sister what poison lies rapt up in every sweet connection of life; once you thought so, but now you painfully feel it. I desire

¹¹Asbury's journal entry for Monday, December 19, 1774 (Clark, 1:141) reads: "My body was indisposed, but my soul enjoyed health. The Lord gives me patience, and fills me with his goodness. In meeting sister Mary Thorne's class we had a mutual blessing.

O that I could all invite,
His saving truth to prove!
Show the length, and breadth, and height,
And depth of Jesus' love."

you would write me all your heart that when I know your case, though at this distance, I may give you some advice and [resume?] my pastoral charge. The prospect of religion, the glory of Zion, and the increase of her sons and daughters, the opening we have in your native soil, the building a church in Charleston and the joyning [sic] some thousands, in that state, Doctor Coke, who is the missionary of the churches, will inform you. I have been rather sharp in my present letter but unless you write me with great freedom and acknowledge your fault in neglecting me and your American friends, maybe I shall be more severe.

I shall be pleased to represent you to your old friends, as being as ever and more than ever given up to God. I charge you before God be much in prayer. Spend when able, not less than an hour, in the morning and the same in the evening, in solemn private meditation and prayer with God every day and step aside at noon to speak with God if you can. Seek perfect love, seek it now. Brother and Sister Baker¹² and Wilmer¹³ yet live. Sister Patterson¹⁴ went from hence a few weeks past into the unseen world; There I expect to see you. It appears Providence has given me your country and strangely united my heart to the country and people. So it is with you in respect to my country. I am with affectionate regards as ever yours,

F. Asbury

¹²Jacob Baker (1753-1820), was a convert of Pilmoor's, and joined St. George's with his wife Hannah (1753-1817) in 1773. A dry goods merchant who was "remarkably benevolent," Jacob was on St. George's second board of trustees, and in 1801 he and Hannah left the congregation to help organize Union ME Church, where both were later buried. Jacob was also an early president of the Chartered Fund (the first pension program for Methodist ministers); see Lednum, 44; Clark, 3:155, and F. Tees et. al., *Pioneering in Penn's Woods* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Conference Tract Society, 1937), 184.

¹³Lambert Wilmer and his wife Mary were among the earliest members of the St. George's society organized by Captain Webb in 1767. During the American Revolution Lambert was an officer in the Continental militia, and saw action in the battles of Germantown, Trenton and Princeton. Mary became the second female class leader at St. George's, after Mary Thorn. See Lednum, 42; Tees, *Pioneering*, 183; and F. E. Maser, *The Journal of Joseph Pilmore* (Philadelphia: Message Publishing Co., 1969), 228.

¹⁴Lednum, 41, mentions that a John Patterson and his wife were members of the St. George's society in 1771.