

Spiritual Narrative of Mary Harmstead

As told to Peter D. Myers (1849)

Editor's Note: Mary Harmstead (1763-1849) was a member of St. George's from the late 1790s until her death. The following account of her experience, with its fascinating glimpses into the life of early Philadelphia Methodism, was recorded by Peter D. Myers, who was a leader in the church for many years. In 1870, about eighteen months before his death, Myers donated a packet of papers and old records to the church, which included the narrative. The packet is still together in the vault beneath St. George's with Myers' cover note, requesting that the papers "be put in some safe place, and kept for future reference." A second copy of the narrative in the same hand, perhaps given at the same time, is among a collection of manuscripts in another section of the vault. The following transcript was made by the editor using both versions.

I am the youngest daughter of Jacob and Sarah Taylor, and was born May 13th, 1763. My father was not a religious man, but my mother was a very pious, good woman. When I was about 15 years old, I was awakened under a Baptist preacher. The preacher went away and I lost most of my serious impressions, but they were not totally effaced; I went much into gay company but I could not feel happy.

At the death of my mother, which was about the 23rd year of my life, I was again convicted which I never lost till I became converted. I then felt determined to get Religion. I felt distressed and wished I had never lived; I joined the Episcopal Church when I was about 30 years of age, and was baptized in it and confirmed in Christ Church by Bishop White;¹ all this time I had no religion. When Mr. Pilmore left the city, I

¹Rev. William White (1748-1836) was the second bishop consecrated for the Episcopal Church in America, its first Presiding Bishop, the first Bishop of the Diocese of Philadelphia and the second chaplain of the US Senate, during the presidency of George Washington. For 57 years he was rector of Philadelphia's Christ Church, from 1779 to 1836. See Benjamin Dorr, *A Historical Account of Christ Church, Philadelphia* (New York: Swords, Stanford and Co., 1841), 284-286.

joined the Methodists.² I think I lived just as pious after my mother died until I got religion as I have since.

After I had been attending the Methodist Church a considerable time, I was advised to join that church, but I thought it was too wicked for me to join the church, and not belong to the Lord. I was sitting in meeting one day [when] Rev. Charles Cavender³ preached. I felt greatly distressed that day; when the time came to leave church I did not like to, for I had been weeping and I looked so bad. I was met at the door by Brother Wilmer, who accosted me saying, "I want to know where you meet in class." Said I, "I don't belong to Society." He replied, "Why do you not join?" I answered, I am not fit. Said he, never mind, that the Lord will make you fit. "Now," said he, "I meet class in this house (St. George's) every Wednesday night. I will not let go your hand (grasping me by the hand) until you promise me you will come." I told him I would if nothing happened. "Well," said he, "let every breath be prayer until Wednesday, and every time I bow my knees I will pray for you." That gave me great encouragement. I thought, will that old man pray for me? I hope the Lord will hear the prayer of such a good man, but mine he will never hear.⁴

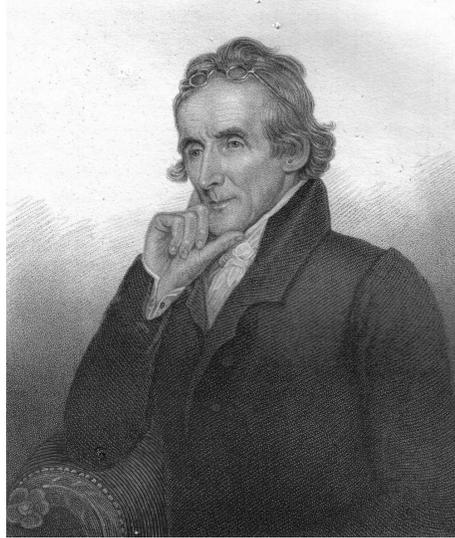
I went home and opened the Bible, and kneeled down, determined to read whatever my thumb rested upon. The words were "The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" [James 5:16]. This gave me much encouragement. I could not read another word. I thought the Lord would certainly answer the prayer of that old man. I went to class, but did not feel any comfort. The next morning he came

²Joseph Pilmore (1743-1825) was one of the first two missionaries sent by John Wesley in 1769 to shepherd the fledgling Methodist societies in America. He later became an ordained Episcopal priest. Harmstead seems to refer to Pilmore's tenure as assistant at St. Paul's Church on Third Street, from 1789 to 1794, after which he accepted a call to a church in New York City. Harmstead evidently began attending St. George's in 1794. Pilmore returned in 1804 to become rector of St. Paul's. See Frederick E. Maser, et al., eds., *The Journal of Joseph Pilmore* (Philadelphia: Message Publishing Co., 1969), 245.

³Rev. Charles Cavender was admitted on trial as a preacher in 1795, and ordained elder in 1797. He is listed as appointed to Philadelphia, 1797-1799, and he was also a member of the committee that oversaw the Book Concern after the death of John Dickins in 1798. Cavender located in 1799. *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences Annually Held in America From 1773 to 1813, Inclusive* (New York: Hitt and Ware, 1813), 148, 214, 228, 236.

⁴Lambert Wilmer and his wife Mary were among the original fourteen persons to form St. George's Society. Lambert was a Maryland native and an officer in the Revolution. Mary was the second female class leader at St. George's, appointed in 1775. See John Lednum, *A History of the Rise of Methodism in America* (Philadelphia, 1859), 42. The early class meetings were groups that met weekly for mutual accountability, prayer and study, and were a critical part of the early Methodist movement in America.

with a note saying, he had been to see the preacher, and entered me in the church and in his class, and now I had to come to class. It is singular that I belonged to the Society two years before I received the last comfort, after all that I had passed through. Rev. Ezekiel Cooper was preaching on Sunday night,⁵ and toward the last, he recommended to all to read the Bible and commence that night and read it for one month, and if it did not profit us any, to throw it aside. I commenced that night and have done so for 42 years.



Rev. Ezekiel Cooper

I did not attend class steady before I got Religion; I was afraid the people would all think me a hypocrite and say, if there was any sincerity in her she would have got Religion long ago.

One day, Mrs. Dickins⁶ came to me. She asked me what was the reason I did not come to class and reprov'd me very sharply. I told her I had my children to attend to at home, for they were sick. She said it was a judgment upon me for not attending class. I felt very bad and went upstairs and knelt down, and vowed to the Lord that if he would give me the least sign that he would pardon my sins, I would never allow any excuse except sickness to keep me from class.

My husband and I went one evening up to Zoar, and Mr. Wilmer (my class leader) preached. When he gave out the hymn, "Long have I seemed to serve the Lord," I was in much distress. I thought some one had written it down and he had it in his book to make me believe it was in the Hymn Book. I dropped right down upon my knees, and there I was till meeting was out. The people came round me to talk, but in the midst of it my husband came up to me and said roughly, "Polly, it is time

⁵Rev. Ezekiel Cooper (1763-1847) was appointed to succeed John Dickins as Book Steward in Philadelphia in 1798. He served there, also sharing in preaching and general leadership, until 1804, when he moved with the publishing concern to New York.

⁶That would be Betsy Dickins, widow of Rev. John Dickins. See page 56,68.

to go home.” Well, I got up and started to go home, but I had to weep all the way, which exasperated him very much. He said to me, “Do you think crying will do you any good?” When we got home, he went to bed, but I, after I had blown out the light, [got] down upon my knees and stayed there until near daylight, when the child awoke, and I had to get into bed to it.

Whether I went to sleep and dreamed it, or whether I did hear it I cannot say, but something seemed to say with a loud voice, “Rise ye dead and come to judgment.” I jumped right out of bed and cried as loud as I could, until I waked every apprentice and every journeyman in the house. Such an exercise as that I had experienced for two years, to such an extent that I had no peace, day nor night. Before I got the blessing, two women, Mrs. Jackson and Mrs. Smith, came to see me on sacrament day, and asked me to go to sacrament. I told them I was not fit, but they took hold of my arms and almost forced me up, so I had to go. When I was going up the words came to my mind, “He that eateth, etc.”⁷ I shook like the leaf of a tree. I took the sacrament, feeling I can hardly tell how, but I now determined as I had made a public profession to the world, I would make use of every means of grace and act as if I was a Christian. I thought then I would leave the event with the Almighty, and do the best I could. That night I was converted.

I was at class and Sally Beitchtell prayed. She was as happy as she could be, and as I knew she would come to me, I slipped out of class and went down New Street. She met me and said, “Sister Harmstead, come home with me. I do think the Lord will convert somebody in my house tonight.” “Well,” said I, “I am willing to see the work of the Lord go on anywhere,” but I had not the least idea it would be me. Well, I never had been in her house before, for although I knew her very well, I kept away from all God’s people, for I thought I was not fit to go amongst them. We went there with some others. When we got there her husband opened the door and, perceiving something was the matter in his quiet spoken way, he said, “What is the matter?” One of our company said, “Sally is filled with new wine; she cannot walk straight!”

This displeased him so much he banged the door. We went in and sat down; she was so happy she could not sit down, she ran about

⁷This is probably a reference to 1 Corinthians 11:27-28: “Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.” (KJV)

the room, praising God, rousing all the people up. Her brother, seeing her, said "Sit down! Don't make such a fool of yourself." She kept saying, "O brother, come in and I will tell you what the Lord has done for my soul. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he separated my sins from me." At last he said, "Well, Sally, I have seen fools before, but you are the damnedest fool I ever saw." The moment he said that, I felt such a chill go over me that I jumped up and spoke, "If she is a fool, may the Lord make us all fools." That very moment, as quick as lightning, the power of the Lord came upon me, and I jumped (they say) three yards from my seat, crying all the time, "Lord, make me a fool." Before I was converted I was in the estimation of the world a very dear member of church. But after I got religion, I was the worst there ever was in their estimation. But I lived in an ocean of love all the time.

One evening I was at St. George's [and] Samuel Coate preached.⁸ I do not remember his text, but he spoke from that passage where Peter was in prison. He explained the first gate opened of its own accord as justification, and the second gate opened as sanctification. I felt myself between those two gates, and I felt more miserable than before, for I felt like a prisoner trying to escape; that if I was caught where I was, I would be greatly punished. I went this way for about three weeks, when it came into my mind [that] if I would acknowledge what God had done for me, he would do the rest. I went down to Ebenezer for a Love Feast with a determination to speak and tell what God had done for me, and while the bread and water were going round, I felt pretty comfortable and thought, I would speak as soon as ever there was an opportunity.

When the opportunity came, I felt as if a voice said to me, "Don't speak now, you have just got Religion. Let some of the older members speak first." This was the enemy, but I did not know it at the time. The very moment I yielded, all that good feeling went away and the enemy came and said, you're done, you did not speak; you do not now feel a bit of grace and it is lying to God. I fell on my knees and pled with God for mercy. I was on my knees till meeting was out, pleading with

⁸Rev. Samuel Coate, a native of New Jersey, was appointed to Philadelphia in 1801. He married a niece of Philip Embury and was remembered as an eloquent preacher and a bit of a dandy, fastidious of dress with "beautiful locks" of flowing hair that attracted special attention. After several years serving as Presiding Elder in Canada, he withdrew from ministry in 1810 to pursue business interests, and later "fell into habits of vice." See Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, Vol. III (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1867), 195-198; and Elmer T. Clark, ed., *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), II:357, III:275, 393.

the Lord to spare my life until that night [the next] week when there was a Love Feast at St. George's, and I would then speak. When meeting was out, old Mr. Steward picked me up and said he would take me home. He wished me on the way home to tell him what was the matter with me, but I could not tell. All I could do was to cry. When I got home, I fell on my knees in the entry and pled with the Lord to spare my life another week; until the eighth day from that night I ate nothing but a small bit of bread in the morning and a cup of coffee, working hard all the time and nursing an infant boy.

That night I went to the Love Feast, determined to speak and did so; I received a great blessing, making a great noise and shouting. This was about the time the great split took place between the shouting members and the quiet members.⁹

Rev. J. McClaskey¹⁰ rose up and said, right before the whole audience, "would rather stand up to my neck in cold water than to hear the stamp of a foot or the clap of a hand. There is no religion in it." When I heard him say this, the Lord gave me strength to jump up, and I said, "Mr. McClaskey, when the Lord converted my soul, I clapped my hands until they were as black as your hat, and I did not know any more about it than you did, who was in New York. Then he called out, "Put that woman out of the house!" Nobody put me out. Then said he, "If I can't have order, I must use the knife of discipline. Open the door and let the people out." This was all written out and sent to the next conference and they blamed him very much. After that he came to see me and told me he was very sorry for what he had done. A great many came to see me the next day, some to scold me for speaking so the Preacher, and others to pity me knowing I was sincere at last. Polly Wallace came and said, "What is to be done with us?" I told her I did not know. I said if I was

⁹The "great split" refers to the division that occurred in St. George's about this time, resulting in the creation of Union ME Church by disaffected members. Francis Asbury was deeply concerned about the conflict; a number of his letters dealing with it survive, and can be read in Clark, III:205-219. Ezekiel Cooper characterized it as a division between "wealthy and respectable" members and the poor majority; he sided with the poor. See George A. Phoebus, *Beams of Light on Early Methodism in America* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1887), 287-292. Harmstead's description of the division as between "shouting and quiet members" adds an intriguing dimension to the split. Among those who left to form Union was Harmstead's class leader, Lambert Wilmer.

¹⁰Rev. John McClaskey (1756-1814) was a native of Ireland who came to America as a teenager. He joined the Philadelphia Conference on trial in 1786, and was appointed to Philadelphia twice, in 1795 and again in 1802. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences, 1773-1828* (New York: Mason and Lane, 1840), 257.

any detriment to the church, I would never go into it. But I could not promise her I would never make a noise if I did go. I did not expect to, but I could not promise her I would not. I told her I would just as soon promise if death was to come, I would not die, as to promise if I went to church I would not make a noise. I could just promise one as soon as the other. "Well," said she, "go to church, and if you cannot help making a noise, shout on." When she was gone, I prayed unto the Lord, saying, "Lord, Thou hast given me Religion with which I am perfectly satisfied."

DREAM

While I was under conviction, I went to bed one night, being in great distress. I dreamed I was up at my father's. I thought my sister Sarah and I were standing in the room, where all at once I heard a great noise in the air. Said I, "Sally, what is that?" She said "I believe it is an earthquake." As soon as she said that, I thought it, and there was such a rushing, mighty wind, that it upset the tables, chairs and everything. I thought I would shut the door to keep it out and she said "Polly, would you go to shut this out? Why, look at mother" (Mother had been dead several years). Well, I turned round to look at her and there she sat, filled with light so much that I could see through her, yet I knew it was her. She was singing. The most heavenly music came out of her mouth I ever heard in all my life, and I just ran right to her and grasped her right in my arms. Said I, "Dear Mother, what shall I do to be in your stead?" And she said to me, "Pray and I'll intercede to God for you."

Well, I thought I had her in my arms, and holding her very fast, I awoke, and found it was the bed clothes. I jumped right out of bed and screamed with all my might. My husband hearing me said, "What is the matter?" I said, "My mother has appeared to me and told me to pray. Must I not pray?" Although this was a dream, yet still it gave me such a clear evidence that Mother was happy with God, ready to intercede for me, that it made me much more faithful from that time, until I got Religion.

AN ACCOUNT OF HER LAST ILLNESS AND DEATH

On Thursday, December 6th 1849, Brother Castle and myself called to see our good aged friend, Sister Harmstead, who had been ill since Monday morning last. We found her very much debilitated,

apparently unconscious. Thinking it not prudent in her state of feebleness to have prayer, Brother Castle and myself were about retiring. I took hold of the old lady's hand, to bid her farewell, when (the ruling passion strong in the death of a Christian) she rallied, and said to me, "Won't you pray?" I could not stand this. Brother Castle was called back, and prayed. After he was done, she gave a hearty amen. After prayer again, she gave the same response, and also said, "Lord hear prayer; Lord answer prayer." She then said, "The last time I was in St. George's (which was last Sabbath morning) the Lord most powerfully manifested himself to my soul. I thought, how could any go to hell from that church, where the gospel has been preached so long, and still is preached in the Holy Ghost? Though I was not converted there, I was sanctified there. I was converted in Front Street, and have never lost the evidence from that day to this. I have striven the best I knew how to serve the Lord, and I believe he will not leave or forsake me now."

On Friday, December 7th I visited her, and found her in much pain. She had passed a night of much suffering. When I came in, she was glad to see me. I spoke a few words to her, to which she replied, "I must be made perfect through suffering." I said, "Sister, trust the Lord." "That I am endeavoring to do," said she. "I know God cannot lie."

"Do you have any desire to live longer?"

"I have only to say, the will of the Lord be done. I have no desire about it." She then adverted to that last Sabbath morning, what a great blessing she received, and said, "I thought afterwards, if the Lord would permit me once more to attend the Wednesday night meeting, I would try, and give a little longer detail of my experience, but always fearing that I was taking up too much of the others' time, I have not done it."

In answer to a question, she said, "The 20th day of February next will be 47 years since I was converted in the house of Mrs. Bechtel in Front Street, when I became a fool for Christ's sake. In the allusion to the manner in which she was converted, she said, "While a wicked man who stood at the stair door, and said to his sister, who was in the room very happy and praising God with another person, and I sitting on a chair and not expecting or looking for the blessing, 'Do behave yourself and don't act like a damned fool.'" At that exclamation she said, "I am willing to become just such a fool for Christ's sake," and immediately rose to her feet, leaping and praising God, and was there till two o'clock in the morning. Six months after this, God sanctified her soul under the

Rev. Joseph Castle, pastor of St. George's in 1849, who accompanied Peter Myers to Mrs. Harmstead's bedside, and also wrote the tribute to her found on the pages 52-53.



preaching of the Rev. John Walker¹¹ in St. George's ME Church. She said "Pray that my faith may hold out to the end," I said, "Does it in any manner appear to be shaken? Does the enemy begin to make you doubt in the least now?"

She said, "Oh, no; that he cannot do. God cannot lie. Only I want my faith strengthened to hold out." In prayer she heartily responded as the day before. She then related a little circumstance that took place some twenty years ago, of a poor woman, for whom she undertook to beg a little money in the class. How diffident she was, and what a cross it was for her to bear, to turn beggar. However, when Brother T. J. Thompson, the preacher and then leader of the class, went to call off the names, she arose and began the duty. The Lord gave her such a powerful blessing, she lost sight of everything but Christ; but after a while, becoming composed, all who had any money came and threw it in her lap, and more was sent to her the day following for the object she wished to accomplish. "I have been a beggar ever since," said she; "Why, the blessing I received that day was worth a hundred dollars. Said I, "You have had many a one since that day; you must be very rich." "I am," said she, "if money can buy them."

"Farewell Mother" said I. She replied "Farewell. If we meet no more here, meet me in heaven."

¹¹Rev. John Walker (1764-1849), a native of Burlington County, New Jersey, was licensed as a local preacher at the age of 21, joined the Philadelphia Conference in 1802, and ordained an elder in 1806. He had moved to Philadelphia in 1796 and served there as a class leader and local preacher before becoming an itinerant. It is difficult to fit his service record precisely with Harmstead's chronology, since he was appointed to Trenton, 1802-1803, and was appointed to Philadelphia, 1808-09. See *The New Jersey Conference Memorial* (Philadelphia: Perkinpine and Higgins, 1865), 150-156.