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JOHN THOMSON  
A Man With A Mission

by  
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BY ALEX T. CROCKETT

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*Alex T. Crockett  
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\* Portions of this work were prepared for, and published in, the Wythe County (Va.) Historical Review, Nos. 27 and 28. The author is a great-great-great-great-great grandson of the Rev. John Thomson. He is Vice President/Secretary of The Durham Herald Company, Inc., and Clerk of the Session at First Presbyterian Church, Durham, N.C.

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Presented by

Alex T. Crockett

## John Thomson---A Man With A Mission

By Alex T. Crockett

There is general agreement that the Rev. John Thomson (1690-1753) was the first Presbyterian minister---some say the first minister of any denomination---to preach in Western North Carolina.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, church historians have been able to reach a consensus on little else about the life and times of this hard-headed Scotch-Irish preacher, writer, progenitor, theologian and missionary.

"Thomson was a narrow and opinionated man. He became the father of all the discord and mischief in the American Presbyterian Church," declared Dr. Charles Augustus Briggs in his American Presbyterianism, published in 1885.<sup>3</sup>

That other historians were more charitable and that Dr. Briggs himself appears to have been at least as opinionated as the object of his criticism may be beside the point. There is no denying that John Thomson was a person who knew where he stood and where he thought the Presbyterian Church should stand.

Indeed, his life was so much a microcosm of the early Church in this country that it is well nigh impossible to study them separately.

Mr. Thomson was born about 1690 in Northern Ireland, educated at the University of Glasgow, ordained June 23, 1713, in the Presbytery of Armagh, came to America in 1715, and held pastorates in Delaware, Maryland (as a supply), Pennsylvania and Virginia. He preached extensively to early settlers along the frontier in Virginia and the Carolinas, and was a prolific writer.

Twice married, he fathered 13 children, was influential in the establishment of a number of pioneer congregations, and helped lay the groundwork for several institutions of higher learning.

He died in 1753 and was buried...not once, but twice...in what is now Iredell County, N.C.

It is ironic that more than two centuries after his death there is still some uncertainty about the number and names of his children. Dr. John Goodwin Herndon who compiled the most authoritative list offers one very logical reason:

"Although his will is above referred to and the distribution made in accordance therewith, neither the document itself nor a copy has been discovered in any of the court-houses of North Carolina or in the archives at Raleigh."<sup>4</sup>

He points out that the Thomson family Bible also has been lost.

In their attempts to piece together a list of Thomson descendants, various genealogies have made faulty assumptions and perpetuated glaring omissions. One of the earliest and most widely circulated books lists only four "known" children, one of whom is incorrect.<sup>5</sup>

Church records indicate that when the Rev. Mr. Thomson arrived in New York in 1715, he was accompanied by "his wife and family." Dr. Herndon astutely observes that "family" might have meant simply more than one child or it might imply that there were other relatives aboard.

He concludes that the minister, who was approximately 25 years of age at the time, "was accompanied by his wife (name unknown), his daughter, Esther, probably a second child, probably by his sister, Esther, and possibly other relatives."

The sister in question was the "Widow Esther Warranton ye Rev. Jno Thompson's sister," who was buried in Sussex County, Del., on April 6, 1768.<sup>6</sup>

It is singularly distressing...and more than a little surprising...that little is known about Thomson's first wife except that she came with him from Ireland to America, bore 12 of his 13 children, and died in 1733 or 1734. Her grave probably lies somewhere in Lancaster County, Pa.

Between August of 1734 and March of 1735, Thomson married a Mary McKean Reid. She was the widow of Thomas Reid who had been an elder in the church at Octorara, Pa., and a justice of the peace in Lancaster County. The Reids apparently had seven children of their own.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond the fact that she gave birth to Hannah, the last of Thomson's ten daughters and three sons, in 1735, little else is heard of Mary McKean Reid Thomson. Her name appears along with his on a land transfer dated Oct. 9, 1740, in Lancaster County, but not on similar documents in Virginia or North Carolina to which he removed in 1744 and 1751. It appears likely that the minister became a widower for the second time between late 1740 and late 1745.

The Thomson children included: ESTHER (m. 1st Samuel Crockett; m. 2nd William Sayers); MARY (m. Robert Baker, Jr.); JOHN, JR. (m. Margaret Davidson); ABRAHAM (wife's name

unknown); SARAH (m. the Rev. Richard Sankey); DAUGHTER (m. John Graham); DAUGHTER (m. John Finley, Sr.); ROGER (m. Ann Ferguson); JANE (m. 1st Douglas Baker; m. 2nd William Watson); ANN (m. James Cunningham, Sr.); MARGARET (m. John Shields); ELIZABETH (m. 1st Samuel Baker; m. 2nd Charles Harris); HANNAH (m. Roger Lawson).

To appreciate the role John Thomson played in the development of Presbyterianism in America, it is necessary to delve into a bit of church history.

Some of the problems faced by early Presbyterian settlers were common to all of those who came to a new land seeking religious freedom; others were peculiarly their own.

"It is admitted that the early history of the Presbyterian Church in the United States is involved in great obscurity," the Rev. Charles Hodge, D.D., points out in his Constitutional History of The Presbyterian Church, published in 1851.

"The reason of this fact is obvious. Presbyterians did not at first emigrate in large bodies, or occupy by themselves extensive districts of country...They came, as a general rule, as individuals or in small companies, and settled in the midst of people of other denominations.

"It was, therefore, in most instances, only gradually that they became sufficiently numerous in any one place to form congregations, or to associate in a Presbyterian capacity. It is true their increase was very rapid; partly by the aggregation of persons of similar principles, though of different origin, and partly by constant immigration."<sup>8</sup>

Hodge traces the path of the Scotch and Irish from their early concentration in Pennsylvania southward to Virginia and North Carolina. The Rev. William Henry Foote says that "on account of the inviting nature of the climate and soil, and the comparative quietness of the Catawba Indians, and the severity of the Virginia laws, in comparison with those of Carolina, on the subject of religion, many colonists were induced to pass through the vacant lands in Virginia, in the neighborhood of their countrymen, and seek a home in the Carolinas."<sup>9</sup>

According to Hodge, a thousand families arrived in North Carolina from colonies to the north in the single year of 1764.<sup>10</sup>

"But the Scotch-Irish would have been lost to the Presbyterian Church if it had not been for a vigorous missionary activity on the part of the presbyteries of the North and East," declares Ernest Trice Thompson, D.D., in his Presbyterians In The South, published more than a century after

the writing of Hodge and Foote.

"To follow these hardy pioneers into the Back Country of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia the early system of missionary itineration was greatly extended. Pastors were ordered by presbyteries and synod to leave their congregation and to take extended tours among the Scotch-Irish settlements. Young men who wished to enter the ministry were not ordained until they had made a visit to the frontier."

John Thomson was among the first of these missionaries and he came on his own initiative rather than because he was required to do so. He preached in the Shenandoah Valley and in what is now Prince Edward County, Va., as early as 1739, visited North Carolina in 1744, and left the comparative security of Pennsylvania for good the same year.

Undoubtedly, the steady migration of relatives and close friends to the frontier figured prominently in Thomson's increasing interest in the missionary enterprise, but it may be that his decision to take up residence there during the waning years of his ministry also was influenced more than a little by a desire to avoid further clashes with his peers.

He had found himself in the vortex of one such controversy during his first pastorate at Lewes, Delaware (1717-1729). It was he who, in September of 1727, introduced in the Synod of Philadelphia an overture for adoption of the Westminster Confession of Faith as a standard for the ordination of ministers.

Hodge sets the background this way:

A broad foundation for the Presbyterian Church was laid from the beginning. The English Puritans were all Calvinists and many of them Presbyterians. The Dutch were Calvinists and Presbyterians; a moiety, at least, of the Germans were of the same class. All the French Protestants were Calvinists and Presbyterians, and so, of course, were the Scotch and Irish.

As they merged their diversities of national character into that of American citizens, so the Scotch, Irish, French, English, Dutch and German Presbyterians became united in thousands of instances in the American Presbyterian Church.

As long as the church was small, and all,

or a large portion of its members, could be present at the admission of every new applicant, the most natural and the most effectual method to obtain a knowledge of his opinions, was personal examination. And as long as the churches with which the Synod corresponded were faithful to their own standards, their testimony was received as sufficient evidence of the soundness of the men whom they recommended.

But when from the multiplication of Presbyteries, the first method became impossible, and when the second was found to be unworthy of confidence, another plan was adopted. On the supposition that the church was to remain one, and that it had any zeal for its own doctrines, it was necessary that the several Presbyteries should understand each other, and unite in adopting a common standard of orthodoxy.

...As it regards doctrines, the point to be ascertained is whether the Presbyterian Church was a Calvinistic body, and required adherence to that system of doctrine as a condition of ministerial communion, or whether it demanded nothing more than assent to the essential doctrines of the gospel.<sup>12</sup>

Significantly, members of the Joint Committee on Presbyterian Union would grapple with this touchy issue all over again as recently as 1981. In 1727, John Thomson's overture sought to resolve it this way:

That the synod, as an ecclesiastical judicature of Christ, clothed with ministerial authority to act in concert in behalf of truth and in opposition to error, would, by an act of its own, publicly and authoritatively adopt the Westminster Confession of Faith, Catechisms, etc. for the public confession of our faith; and oblige each presbytery to require every candidate for the ministry to subscribe or otherwise acknowledge, coram presbyteris, the said Confession and promise not to preach or teach contrary to it.

All "actual ministers" coming among us to

do the like, and no minister to teach or preach contrary to said articles, unless first he propose the point to the presbytery or synod to be by them discussed. Each minister to recommend to his flock to entertain the truth in love, be zealous, and fruitful, and earnest by prayer with God, to preserve the wine from being spoiled by these deluding foxes.<sup>13</sup>

Response to the overture was mixed. Calvin and Knox had been dead little more than 150 years. Their devotion to doctrine and discipline still burned in the Presbyterian breast. But so did the hard-won (and, in some of the colonies, still far from secure) freedom of conscience. The idea of subscribing even to a precept of their own making engendered immediate suspicion. Religious oppression, by its nature, sometimes occurs under laws made acceptable through expediency.

Action on Thomson's overture was delayed until 1729, at which time it was referred to a committee of eight which included the author. By that time, according to the Rev. Jedediah Andrews (who also served on the committee), the overture enjoyed the support of "all the Scotch and Irish members present," with all the English and Welsh on the other side.<sup>14</sup>

The Rev. Jonathan Dickinson, described by Dr. Briggs as "the ablest man in the American Presbyterian Church in the colonial period," was one of the several committee members not favorably disposed toward subscription. Nevertheless, "it is said that Dickinson so shaped the Adopting Act as to make it satisfactory to all parties.

"It is due chiefly to him that the Church became an American Presbyterian Church, and that it was not split into fragments representing and perpetuating the differences of Presbyterians in the mother countries of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, and the several parties of those countries."

The American Adopting Act described the Westminster Confession and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms "as being, in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine." The wording differed from both the Scotch and Irish acts, and Briggs deemed the semantics of extreme importance.

The Scotch Adopting Act of 1690 approved the Westminster Confession "as containing the sum and substance of the doctrine of the Reformed Churches." The Irish Act of 1720

dealt with it "as being a good abridgement of the Christian doctrines contained in the sacred Scriptures."

Briggs points out that the American Act has two sides:

"The latter, 'good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine,' is of the same essential character as the Irish and Scotch acts. There is an important difference, however.

"The Scotch Act refers to the 'doctrine of the Reformed Churches'; the Irish Act to 'Christian doctrines,' and our American Act agrees with the latter, and not the former. The American Act, however, gives a still further qualification to its adoption. The Confession is not such in all its articles, but only in 'all the essential and necessary articles.'"<sup>15</sup>

Over the centuries, the Westminster Confession has continued to occupy a position of honor in credal documents of American Presbyterians, though not to the exclusion of other creeds and confessions. The Book of Church Order used in the Presbyterian Church in the United States prior to reunion required candidates for the ministry to "sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church as, in their essentials, authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do."<sup>16</sup>

Semantics again played a role in development of the Book of Order finally adopted by the reunited Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Candidates for ordination to the ministry now are required to make affirmative answer to the question:

"Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the Confessions of our Church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those Confessions, as you lead the people of God?"<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, back in the 18th Century, John Thomson had come to a parting of the ways with his congregation at Lewes. The reasons are somewhat obscure. Dr. Webster says that he "left Lewes in September 1729, through want of support," but there may have been other reasons."<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Herndon reports that "despite the urging of some of the congregation for him to remain with them, he decided to seek another field of labor."<sup>19</sup>

During the following year, Thomson supplied congregations at Snow Hill, Md., and at Lower Octorara, Fishing Creek, Middle Octorara and Middletown, Pa. He accepted a call and, in October of 1730, was installed as pastor of a parish which

included Middle Octorara, Fishing Creek and Chestnut Level, Pa.

Thomson was an original member of the Synod of Philadelphia which met for the first time in 1717. He became a member of the Presbytery of New Castle at its fourth meeting during the same year. He was elected Moderator of the Presbytery in 1718, again in 1722, and for a third time in 1730.

Similar honors had come to him at the Synod level. He was chosen Moderator in 1719, and in 1722, he became the first person elected twice to the highest office in the Presbyterian Church in this country after the organization of the General Synod. In 1736, he was elected Clerk of the Synod.

In 1732, the Synod decided to form those congregations lying within Lancaster County into the Presbytery of Donegal. Thomson was elected the first Moderator of the new Presbytery. He served as moderator pro tem in 1734, as Clerk from 1734 until 1737, and as "constant clark" (Stated Clerk) from 1742 until 1744.<sup>20</sup>

But things were far from smooth at the congregational level. As early as November 15, 1732, he requested the Presbytery to relieve him of further assignments at Middle Octorara, and complained of "the people's neglect to pay up their arrears according to appointment by which he and his family greatly suffer." Presbytery approved termination of the pastoral relationship with Middle Octorara on September 5, 1733.<sup>21</sup>

Thomson stayed on at Chestnut Level for 11 more years. Although this may have been one of the most productive periods of his life, it was not a happy time. He continued to experience financial difficulty because pledge payments lagged, and doctrinal differences which preceded "The Great Awakening" already were beginning to tear the infant Church apart.

Of even greater moment was the death of his wife in late 1733 or early 1734. Bereft of both his helpmate and the mother of his 12 children who ranged in age from about two years to approximately twenty years, he felt constrained to write his Poor Orphans' Legacy. The opening lines reflect in painful detail the depth of discouragement which seemed almost more than he could bear:

Dear children: - Some years have elapsed since I first began to entertain thoughts of preparing some words of wholesome advice, which might be of some lasting use and benefit to you, even when I am laid in the dust.

It hath pleased God in his holy and wise

dispensation of providence, so to order and overrule things concerning me in this world, that I have not been in condition either to make any provision for your worldly settlement, or even to afford you but a very small degree of education and learning, and far short of what is commonly given, especially by ministers of the gospel to their children; and it seems to grow still more unlikely that ever I shall be in a condition to do anything of value in these respects for you.

And besides, the providence of God hath so ordered matters, that I am obliged to commit some of you to the care of others, not being in a condition to do it myself; and perhaps, I shall be under a necessity to do so with more of you before it be long: and my troubles in this world seeming to increase rather than diminish, and some of you being yet in your younger days, whom I can scarcely expect to live so long as to see advanced to the age of maturity - these, with many other like considerations, have prevailed upon me to attempt to compose something by way of advice, that having it by you, it may be of some use and benefit to you, and you may hear your affectionate and tender father as it were speaking to you, and unfolding his very bowels, even when his body lies in the dust.

And I would beseech and entreat you, yea, I charge and command you, as a father who hath the spiritual and eternal concerns of your souls as much at heart as anything I can mention, next to my own eternal salvation; I say, I entreat and charge you, that you not only diligently peruse and ponder, but also carefully and perseveringly practice what I shall here offer for your good. <sup>22</sup>

There follows a lengthy discourse on the joys and obligations of the Christian life. Austere by 20th Century standards, the exhortations contain both general advice and specific admonition about study of the scriptures, prayer, spiritual rebirth, resisting temptation, the covenant life, stewardship of time, talents and material resources, meditation, observance of the Sabbath, wise choice of companions,

dealing with disappointment, devotion to duty, humility, forgiveness, marriage and parenthood.

It is easy to imagine that the Legacy served a second purpose of which the minister himself may not have been aware. It appears to have been a form of therapy for his own aching heart. From the depth of despair which permeates the opening lines, he presses onward and upward to the assurance that "this little legacy...may afford you more profit and comfort than if I had silver and gold, land and comfort and possessions to distribute among you by my last will and testament."

He concludes with the prayer "that my God and my father's God even that God who hath been remarkable to me in a continued series of singular gracious conduct in his providence ever hitherto, and I hope will be my guide unto my dying day; even that God who hath honoured me to be an office-bearer in his house, (in myself one of the most unworthy that ever thus he called and employed), that this very God may be also your God by everlasting and well ordered covenant, is and shall be, my dearly beloved children, my prayer for you while I live."

This benediction is followed by one last solemn warning from the minister-father in the form of a post script:

If you do not follow your father's advice and counsel in the twenty-two particulars, by a sincere endeavour to put them in practice, beware lest they follow you to the judgment and be a witness against you; and therefore I entreat you that you would desire and hope for your heavenly Father's blessing as well as mine...How much will you be to blame, if, after I have been at pains to prepare these counsels for you, you be so slothful and negligent as not to acquaint yourselves with them, in order to practice!"<sup>23</sup>

According to Dr. Herndon, The Poor Orphans' Legacy was published as a 38-page pamphlet in 1734 by no lesser personage than Benjamin Franklin. "So far as the present writer knows, only two copies of the original work still exist. One is in the rare book room of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1300 Locust Street, Philadelphia. The other, an imperfect copy, lacking pages 6 and 7, is in the Library of Congress."<sup>24</sup>

The published work included an introduction, "To The Reader," which the author undoubtedly composed sometime after the writing itself was completed. In it he explains that this was "my plain and homely way of speaking to my own children,"

and adds that: "I rather should rejoice than grudge that others besides should reap benefit by all or any of my poor labours." <sup>25</sup>

In 1792, Andrew Baker, one of Thomson's grandsons, republished the Legacy, and in May 1860, the Presbyterian Board of Publication reprinted this work. The Descriptive Catalogue of the Presbyterian Board of Publication dated 1880 contained this advertisement:

Poor Orphans' Legacy (No. 566). Being a short collection of Godly Counsels and Exhortations to a Young, Rising Generation. Primarily designed by the author for his own children, but published that others may also reap benefit from them.

This is a reproduction of an old work supposed to be from the pen of the Rev. John Thomson, of Donegal Presbytery, who came from Ireland as a probationer to New York in 1715 and spent the latter part of his life as a missionary in Virginia. Every parent would do well to place this instructive volume in the hands of his children. It is a complete manual of Christian morals. <sup>26</sup>

Although The Poor Orphans' Legacy may have been his best known---and certainly his least controversial---work, it was by no means the full extent of Thomson's writing. His sermon on The Doctrine of Conviction was denounced by the Rev. Gilbert Tennent and later answered by the Rev. Samuel Finley. And his treatise on The Government of the Church elicited criticism from the Rev. Samuel Blair and others.

Both were published in 1741 amid the growing storm which soon would divide the Church.

After his removal to Virginia, he published at Williamsburg in 1749, An Explication of the Shorter Catechism. Some of his overtures to Presbytery and Synod are preserved in early church records. If other sermons were published, they have not survived.

When he was not preaching, writing or performing official duties on behalf of the various church courts, John Thomson occupied himself with such other concerns as fund-raising and education. Herndon notes that the Fund for Pious Uses was established in 1718 and that Thomson served as a member of Synod's Committee for the Fund from that time until his removal to Virginia, signing its records "in a clear, vigorous penmanship."

Even after he had gone to Virginia, "the shadow of his influence continued; for in 1745 the Rev. Richard Sankey, one of his sons-in-law, was appointed to that committee, presumably in his stead."

Herndon adds that "this fund has grown from generation to generation and has become the financial backlog of the work of the Presbyterian Church in matters of Christian Education and Ministerial Relief and Sustentation, two objectives dear to the heart of John Thomson."<sup>27</sup>

It is risky business to ascribe credit for the founding of institutions to persons who may have been involved only peripherally in their establishment. Nevertheless, there is good and sufficient documentation for a claim that the John Thomson influence helped pave the way for the emergence of three distinguished institutions of learning.

In 1739, Thomson introduced an overture in Donegal Presbytery proposing the establishment of a school under the care of the Synod. The overture was referred to Synod and unanimously approved later the same year. Steps were taken to secure funds from Europe, as well as this country, and Thomson was directed to write a synodical letter on the subject to the various Presbyterian congregations.

War between England and Spain delayed the project,<sup>28</sup> but when Newark Academy was finally established in 1769 its charter began:

Whereas the Rev. Messrs. John Thomson, Adam Boyd, Robert Cross, Francis Alison, Alexander McDowell and some others, about twenty years since, erected a public school in the province of Pennsylvania for the instruction of youth in the learned languages, mathematics, and other branches of useful literature, and to qualify them for admission into Colleges and universities; which school they supported with much care and expense to the great advantage and benefit of the public:

And whereas, the said school, so as aforesaid, originally in the province of Pennsylvania, hath been removed and is now kept in the town of Newark, in the county of New Castle:

And whereas, etc.

Later, Newark Academy would become the College of Delaware, and in 1833, the University of Delaware.<sup>29</sup>

Concerning the establishment of Hampden-Sydney College, Dr. Joseph D. Eggleston has this to say:

It was mainly because of the three Presbyterian congregations of Buffaloe (which Thomson served as pastor from 1744 until 1750) on the west, Briery on the south, and Old Cumberland on the north, that Hampden-Sydney College came into being and was located on Hudson's Branch in Prince Edward County. Indeed, Dr. W.H.T. Squires, in an interesting sketch of John Thomson, says that "in the later years of his life, Thomson...established (in Prince Edward County) a school for the young men" of that section...

...The school attained a large success. Some of the lads rode miles to attend; others built cabins and cooked their own food. "In a rough way, this school might be called a forerunner of Hampden-Sydney College," says Dr. Squires.<sup>30</sup>

Nine years after Thomson moved from Virginia to North Carolina, the Rev. Richard Sankey, one of his sons-in-law, became pastor of the Buffaloe Presbyterian Church. On February 2, 1775, Sankey was named one of the original trustees of Prince Edward Academy. By May of 1776, Prince Edward Academy was known by the name of Hampden-Sydney College.<sup>31</sup>

Dr. Ernest Trice Thompson says that "Crowfield Academy (a forerunner of Davidson College) grew out of a classical school begun about 1760 in the bounds of Centre congregation in the present Iredell County. It received students from all parts of the South and from the West Indies and prepared them for the College of New Jersey."<sup>32</sup>

Thomson had preached at Centre, Fourth Creek, Poplar Tent and Thyatira from the summer of 1751 until his death in 1753. "He had one preaching station near the present site of Davidson College," according to J.K. Rouse.<sup>33</sup>

Education of ministerial candidates became one of the issues which led to the great schism of 1741...at least to the extent that it brought about an alliance between the Rev. George Whitefield and the Tennent family. The famous Log College, established about 1727 at Neshaminy, Pa., by the Rev. William Tennent, Sr., and operated privately rather than under the control of either the Presbytery or the Synod, had become a primary training ground for prospective ministers.

The Rev. Gilbert Tennent appears to have taken offense

on behalf of his family at the Thomson overture of 1739 regarding the need for a school which would be under the care of the Synod. Dr. William Henry Foote quotes from a Synod communication to the President of Yale College summarizing the educational disagreement:

Mr. Gilbert Tennent cried out that this was to prevent his father's school from training gracious men for the ministry; and he and some of his adherents protested against it, and counteracted this our public agreement, admitting men to the ministry which we judged unfit for that office.

While these debates subsisted, Mr. Whitefield came into the country, whom they drew into their party to encourage divisions. And by his interest Mr. Gilbert Tennent grew hardy enough to tell our Synod he would oppose their design of getting assistance to erect a college wherever we should make application, and would maintain young men at his father's school in opposition to us.

This, with his and his adherents' divisive practices, obliged the Synod to exclude him, and others of his stamp, from their communion...the four Tennents, Blair, Craighhead, Treat and Mr. Wales. These, especially the Tennents, Blair and Treat, being the ring-leaders of our divisions, and the destroyers of good learning and gospel order among us; and they with a few others that joined with them, erected themselves into a separate body, and licensed and ordained men for the work of the ministry, that were generally ignorant and warm in the division scheme, and they have troubled Virginia and the New England government.<sup>34</sup>

Harold Wickliffe Rose, in his The Colonial Houses of Worship in America, describes the schism this way:

The evangelistic preaching of George Whitefield in the colonies, which in 1740 and 1741 aroused the Great Awakening, caused considerable controversy and led to schisms in several denominations. In the Presbyterian Church, the younger generation of American-born liberals, known as the "New Lights," separated from the older generation who were known as the "Old Lights." The congregations took sides, and the liberal

churches became known as "New Side," as compared to the conservative "Old Side" churches.

Gilbert Tennent became active in the controversy, favoring the preaching of Whitefield, and the Tennent family of preachers together with their Log College became involved. As a result, the Presbytery of New York joined with the Tennents in 1745, and established the Synod of New York, which was New Side, while the Synod of Philadelphia continued to be Old Side.<sup>35</sup>

Termining the split, "a vehement dispute," in which ministers and churches took sides "with some asperity of feeling," Foote says that the parties drove each other "into extremes, using unkind expressions and unjustifiable means, and defending unwarrantable positions...These errors brought a glorious awakening into disrepute, and gave opportunity to all, who were not friendly to spiritual religion, to oppose a genuine work of God. The extreme of one side was formality in religion; of the other, extravagant bodily exercises."<sup>36</sup>

Not surprisingly, Dr. Briggs lays much of the blame at Thomson's door:

John Thomson, one of the chiefs of the "old side," wrote a book to advocate his high notions of ecclesiastical authority over against the two papers of the New Brunswick ministers...This brings out clearly the differences between the parties with reference to ecclesiastical authority...

...Thomson, (Robert) Cross, (Francis) Alison, and their friends were straining after an extreme type of Presbyterianism, beyond anything that had been previously known in America, and with stretches of absolutism which would have been strenuously opposed in the mother Presbyterian churches of Europe.

It was the necessity of their position in hostility to Methodism, rather than their conformity to ideal Presbyterianism which urged them on to such tyranny and disorder.<sup>37</sup>

It might be interesting to conjecture how Dr. Briggs arrived at his own enlightened understanding of what "ideal Presbyterianism" is, but it is hardly surprising that Thomson should have found himself at odds with those whose Calvinistic

leanings may have been, at best, only skin deep.

George Whitefield, champion of the New Side Presbyterians as well as one of the founders of Methodism, continued to be a priest in the Church of England as long as he lived. Jonathan Edwards, who carried the torch with Whitefield, preached one of his most famous sermons at the Congregational Church in Enfield, Conn. And William Tennent, Sr., had been an Anglican clergyman in Northern Ireland before becoming a Presbyterian in Pennsylvania.<sup>38</sup>

Dr. Herndon, as lavish in his admiration as Dr. Briggs was in his criticism, explains Thomson's position this way:

What Mr. Thomson complained of and condemned in the New Light ministers was their bold and uncharitable condemnation of their Old Light brethren as graceless, their ceaseless attempts to prejudice the people against their pastors, their disregard of established parish boundaries, and their teaching that every true Christian is sure of his own conversion and that no adult can be converted unless he first undergoes convictions in that subject which are ungracious and preparatory in nature.

He objected to their emphasis on the need or the desirability of convulsions on the part of the converts. He deplored their preaching in such a way as to delude their hearers that during their devotions they had seen Christ or a great light. He objected to the spirit of censoriousness which they seemed to inculcate in their converts....

...In fact he agreed that the revival had had good effects when it stirred up a great many people "to more serious thoughts about their soul's concerns than ever before." This he said was "a thing truly to be rejoiced in, and many, it is said, are much reformed in several particulars of moral practice, which also is just matter for satisfaction."<sup>39</sup>

By June 1, 1741, it had become obvious that the division was irreparable and the Rev. Robert Cross, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, read to the Synod a protest signed by himself, Thomson, Francis Alison, Robert

Cathcart, and eight other ministers and seven elders.

"No vote was taken on the protest, but after it was sensed that the overwhelming membership of the Synod supported it, those who would have been on the losing side, if a vote had been taken, withdrew," Herndon says. "They organized themselves as the Synod of New York in 1745. The two Synods kept in touch with each other and in 1758 reunited as the Synod of New York and Philadelphia."<sup>40</sup>

But the outspoken Dr. Briggs had yet one more indictment of John Thomson and his compatriots---and perhaps it was the most serious of all:

The twelve Protesters of 1741, by persisting in the wrong which they had done in dividing the American Presbyterian Church, threw away the one great opportunity, which has never since been repeated, of combining the entire Presbyterian strength of America in one compact organization.

For there can be little doubt that if the views of the Presbytery of New York had prevailed in the Synod of 1744, the Presbyteries of New Brunswick and New Londonderry would have been restored to their rightful position in the Synod; the breaches would have been healed, the Dutch and German (Reformed) Churches would have been cordially received; the corresponding breaches in these Churches would have been prevented from expanding into those schisms which soon afterwards distracted them; the French Churches of New York and Carolina would have joined the Union; and Presbyterianism would have become so strong in the Middle colonies that it would have been impossible to resist its onward sweep.

It would have entrenched itself as the national Church of these colonies as strongly as Congregationalism had established itself in New England.<sup>41</sup>

If such a golden opportunity truly existed it appears to have escaped the notice, not only of the divines of that day, but also of the contemporaries of Dr. Briggs nearly a century and a half later. In any case, Briggs himself felt constrained to acknowledge---almost grudgingly, it would seem---that Providence might have had a hand in the entire affair.

But such a supremacy of Presbyterianism in America might have involved a premature

struggle with the English crown; it would have prevented the establishment of those principles of liberty and equality which are now the boast of the American Republic.

Presbyterianism had to suffer through the folly of the twelve Protesters of 1741, and forfeit the religious supremacy of America, in order that there might be a Free Church in a Free State; in order to the establishment of the principles of Religious Toleration, Fraternal Recognition of different Denominations, and Ecclesiastical Comprehension, on a grander scale than Presbyterians aimed at in the eighteenth century...

...It was the external struggle against civil injustice and tyranny, and the internal struggle with narrowness, intolerance, and bigotry that made Presbyterianism in America the champion of civil and religious liberty.<sup>42</sup>

Efforts toward healing the costly breach in Presbyterianism became a major concern of leaders in both factions almost immediately. And, again, John Thomson and Gilbert Tennent found themselves in the forefront. Reflecting on the conflict and its aftermath, Dr. Hodge describes Thomson as "a man of self-command, learning and piety."

He took indeed an active and in some respects, a very mistaken part in opposition to Mr. Whitefield and Mr. Tennent; yet no one can read his writings without being impressed with respect for his character and talents. And it is a gratifying fact, that Mr. Tennent himself, after the excitement of controversy had subsided, came to speak of him in terms of affectionate regard.

Indeed, were nothing known of these two men, but their controversial writings, the reader could hardly fail to think, that in humility, candour, and Christian temper, Mr. Thomson was greatly superior to his opponent. It is, however, the weakest side of Mr. Tennent's ardent and impetuous character that appears in these writings and they would be a very unfair criterion to the man.<sup>43</sup>

Tennent, himself, in his Irenicum of 1749, described

Thomson's writings of 1741 vintage as breathing "the candid and humble spirit of true Christianity." And, of Thomson and his sympathizers, he adds that "as far from opposing the late revival of religion, that on the contrary they expressly acknowledged it, rejoiced in it, and prayed for its increase." 44

Agreeing that Tennent's "zeal and energy contributed not a little to the harmony of the Church" and its ultimate reunion, Dr. Foote has this to say of Mr. Tennent's role in the entire matter:

The Church has long since spread her mantle of love and sweet remembrance, over his memory; and a reference to his imprudent zeal will do him no harm, while it may be a warning to others against indulgence in passionate denunciation, and hasty judgment of character and Christian standing. 45

From Dr. Webster's history, it is possible to trace in concise fashion Thomson's own concern over reconciliation:

1749---John Thomson was then labouring in the Valley of Virginia; and the moderator, Timothy Griffith, was ordered to write him (concerning optimism that the split soon might be healed).

1750---The Philadelphia Synod met on the 23rd of May, 1750. The venerable John Thomson had come from Virginia to be present at this interesting period.

1753---The Philadelphia Synod, in 1753, did nothing towards the union: they had lost their two oldest members, John Thomson and Hugh Conn, and had gained none.

So time had run out for Mr. Thomson...but not for the Church to which he had dedicated his life.

1758---At three p.m. in the Second Presbyterian Church (of Philadelphia), the two synods met, Sampson Smith being moderator of the one, and Samuel Davies of the other. The plan of union was read and unanimously agreed to, the union was accomplished, and a new book opened and the whole plan and articles of agreement entered May 29, 1758. 46

Presbyterianism in America had survived its first serious crisis. This would not be the last, nor the longest, nor even

the most heart-rending separation it would experience. It would, however, provide a foretaste of the healing philosophy expressed more than two centuries later by Dr. Ben Lacy Rose, then Moderator of the PCUS, as it looked toward a long-sought merger with the UPUSA:

God does not require that we always agree with each other; only that we love and respect each other as brothers and sisters.<sup>47</sup>

John Thomson would have had no quarrel with that statement. He was not around to defend himself against Dr. Briggs' charge that he had been "a narrow and opinionated man who became the father of all the discord and mischief in the American Presbyterian Church," but he came very close to offering a suitable reply in his sermon on Conviction and Assurance. Discussing qualifications for the ministry---and perhaps indulging in a bit of self-examination---he admonished his listeners (or readers) in these terms:

It is the indispensable duty of every one who would aspire to the sacred office, to pray and labour in the greatest earnest for true sanctifying grace, and all other necessary qualifications to fit him for his work; and to propose single ends and views to himself in undertaking it. And it is no less the duty of those, whose part it is to call and ordain men to that work, to take all possible care to inquire into the saving grace as well as other qualifications in the persons to be ordained; and the neglect of either is a heinous sin, and of a dreadful tendency; no doubt a graceless ministry is an awful plague and scourge to any people...

...We are directed by the Westminster Assembly to inquire touching the grace of God in the candidate, and if he be of such holiness of life as is requisite in a minister of the gospel...

...No man or judicature on earth hath a right to know my spiritual state further than a profession of the faith of the gospel, and owning subjection to its precepts, go. None has a right to know the secret intercourse between me and my God, or between me and my own wicked heart and Satan's temptations.

These things are among the religious secrets which I have a right to conceal or to discover, as Christian prudence or discretion shall direct. <sup>48</sup>

Dr. Webster insists that Thomson's "book on the Government of the Church and his sermon on Conviction and Assurance are as able, learned, judicious, and evangelical, as any of the writings of (Jonathan) Dickinson and (Samuel) Blair." <sup>49</sup>

Mr. Thomson's interest in the Virginia frontier appears to have paralleled the very earliest settlements there. "There were no white inhabitants of the Valley anywhere along the Potomac or Shenandoah previous to about the year 1733; and no Presbyterian congregation before 1736 or 1737," according to Dr. Foote. <sup>50</sup>

Kegley's Virginia Frontier corroborates the first date. On December 15, 1733, Jacob Stover, a native of Switzerland, acquired title to 10,000 acres "on west side of the great mountains, and on the second fork of the Shenando River, on both sides of the branches thereof, for the settlement of himself and divers German and Swiss families, his associates, whom he proposes to bring thither to dwell in two years space.

"Place selected was the Indian Oil Fields called Massanutton, and here was made the first permanent white settlement in the Valley." <sup>51</sup>

Dr. Eggleston confirms the general arrival time of what appears to have been the first genuine Presbyterian congregation:

Miss Elizabeth V. Gaines has given a valuable account of the Scotch-Irish Settlement on Cub Creek, in the western part of Lunenburg (now Charlotte) County. The leader of this Settlement was John Caldwell, a native of Ulster County, Ireland, who settled first in Pennsylvania, and then, after spying out the land, brought a colony to Virginia in 1738.

In Pennsylvania he was an elder in the Presbyterian Church of which Rev. John Thomson was the pastor... In 1738, Mr. Thomson visited the Valley of Virginia, and was requested to remain as pastor, but his Presbytery declined to release him from his charge at Chestnut Level. He visited other communities in Virginia; in 1739 he was preaching at Cub Creek, at Buffaloe, and in other nearby communities. <sup>52</sup>

Dr. Foote is even more explicit:

Mr. John Thompson of the Presbytery of Donegall visited Virginia in the year 1739, and spent some time in the Opeckon neighbourhood, ---in the neighbourhood of Staunton, ---on Rockfish in Nelson, ---on Cub Creek, ---at Buffaloe, ---and in Campbell County. "He took up voluntary collections for preachers of the gospel" ---says the manuscript history of Lexington Presbytery ---"and in doing justice to his memory it is proper to observe, that he was active in promoting the Presbyterian cause in Virginia."

He was a man of great vigour and took an active part in the affairs of the church. Through his instrumentality Messrs. Samuel Black and John Craig were sent by Presbytery, the one to the Triple Forks, and the other to Rockfish.<sup>53</sup>

Thomson's growing interest in Virginia understandably did little to endear him to his Chestnut Level parishioners. Already in a turmoil over the Old Side-New Side controversy, the congregation was far from happy, which probably accounted in part for the Presbytery's unwillingness to dismiss him from the charge.

"In the troubles of the great rupture he had his full share," writes Dr. Webster. "The state of his congregation made it uncomfortable for him to remove; he was poorly paid, and he turned toward Virginia, where he had steadfast friends. He was not released till July 31, 1744; and then he at once made his home in the Valley."<sup>54</sup>

Dr. Ernest Trice Thompson picks up the narrative from the Virginia end:

In 1740, John Craig returned to Augusta (Old Stone) and Tinkling Spring churches, the first settled pastor in western Virginia. His congregation extended over a territory 30 miles long and 20 broad. Craig spent the rest of his days serving the Presbyterians of the Valley.

Samuel Black settled shortly afterward in Albemarle County, and Andrew Miller came to share the work in Augusta County. In 1744 John Thomson, who had itinerated earlier

through the frontier settlements, made his home in the upper Valley and carried on an extensive missionary work throughout the whole region.

For some time these four---Craig, Black, Miller, and Thomson---were the only pastors in the Valley; the majority of the settlers continued to depend on the occasional visits of itinerants for their religious ministrations.<sup>55</sup>

It was also in 1744---the year he moved to Virginia---that Thomson visited North Carolina for the first time. When the General Synod met in Philadelphia on May 24 of that year, it adopted the following minute:

A representation from many people of North Carolina, was laid before the Synod showing their desolate condition, and requesting the Synod to take their estate into consideration, and petitioning that we would appoint one of our number to correspond with them. Ordered, that Mr. John Thomson correspond with them.<sup>56</sup>

"He was, says Foote, "at that time on a visit to these petitioners and others in Carolina." Herndon adds that "whether he repeated these visits during his Buffalo pastorate is not known, but considering how extensively he traveled, it would not have been unlike him to have done so. Nevertheless we have no positive record of a further visit until 1751, after which he never returned to Virginia."<sup>57</sup>

Herndon also speculates that the years Thomson spent at Buffalo may have been the happiest and most useful of his life. He had married again in late 1734 or early 1735 and the youngest of his 13 children was born in 1735. The older children were grown, some were married, and the minister probably had a dozen or more grandchildren by the time he came to Virginia.

More than that, he was among friends who had come from Pennsylvania---and some, perhaps, even from Ireland---with him. If not forgotten, recrimination from the schism at least was pushed momentarily into the background.

It was during this time that he wrote his Explication of the Shorter Catechism, which Herndon believes "is still probably the keenest analysis of the Shorter Catechism yet written." A few excerpts contained in the Herndon book lend credence to this elaborate claim. A copy of the entire work is in the Virginia Historical Society library.<sup>58</sup>

Thomson's removal to North Carolina is a bit more difficult to understand than his decision to forsake Pennsylvania for Virginia. If Dr. Eggleston is to be believed, it may be that the Buffalo Settlement simply had become too tame for him:

A quiet and peaceable community makes little history, and there is little of a dramatic nature to be found among these settlers, who were busy with their farm operations and other businesses. It was a land of wheat, corn, tobacco, with some cattle; country stores at convenient points; and smithies, where everything from nails and horseshoes to wagons, and other vehicles, were made; one fulling mill; many mills for the grinding of wheat and corn.<sup>59</sup>

Always something of an adventurer, Thomson may have found the challenge of a new field begging for the Word of God irresistible.

Or perhaps he simply fell in love with Western Carolina during his visit in 1744 (and possibly on other occasions). His two youngest daughters had married and moved there, but he also left numerous children and grandchildren in Virginia. If he feared for the spiritual well-being of the latter, it may be that he and his son-in-law, the Rev. Richard Sankey, had some sort of understanding.

Sankey and a large part of his congregation came from Pennsylvania to the Buffalo colony in 1759 after 14 members of the flock had been killed in an Indian massacre.

"Whether there was a regular pastor between his (Thomson's) departure and the arrival of Mr. Sankey in 1759 is not known. It is known that there was at least one stated supply, and there were doubtless others," Eggleston reports.<sup>60</sup>

Whatever his motivation may have been, John Thomson elected to stay in North Carolina after his missionary visit in the spring or summer of 1751. Foote thinks he may have visited settlements along the Eno and Haw rivers en route to that part of Anson County which, in 1753, became Rowan, and, in 1788, Iredell County.<sup>61</sup>

He made his home with Elizabeth and Samuel Baker, his daughter and son-in-law. Death had claimed his second wife some years earlier.

"His North Carolina 'parish' contained about 314 square miles," according to Herndon. "He is said to have gone on his

circuit on horseback, prepared to encamp wherever night overtook him---hobbling his horse, and turning him loose to feed upon the abundant and luxurious pea vines which continued green nearly all winter."62

Sturdy oaks which grew from the little acorns Thomson planted in his North Carolina "parish" include the historic congregations of Centre, Poplar Tent, "Old Fourth Creek" (now the First Presbyterian Church of Statesville), and Thyatira. J.K. Rouse's Colonial Churches in North Carolina tells a bit about Thomson's role in each:

CENTRE---Soon after the land along Davidson Creek in Anson County (now Iredell County) was settled by the Scotch-Irish in the year of 1748, the pioneers constructed a small log church building, two miles north of the present town of Davidson College and named the church the Osborne Meeting House.

(Because the Osborne Meeting House seemed to be in the center of the congregation, the name was changed to Centre Presbyterian Church in 1765.)

It was to this frontier settlement that the Presbyterian missionary, John Thompson, came in the summer of 1751...at the invitation of John Brevard, Moses Winslow, George Davidson, and other Scotch-Irish people whom he had known in Pennsylvania... To the Centre Presbyterian congregation, (he), no doubt, gave his famous sermon on the Nature of Conviction for Sin.

POPLAR TENT---In a beautiful grove of Poplar, Oak and Elm trees, seven miles west of Concord, stands the old Poplar Tent Presbyterian Church, established in 1751. The first services were held under a large Poplar tree near the present colonial brick church. In a very short time, the congregation erected a tent for a place of worship. The Scotch-Irish emigrants to the Carolinas often used these tents until the congregation could build a permanent building.

Dr. James Hall of Iredell County said that he had seen large numbers of people standing in the rain and snow to hear the gospel preached. One day in a meeting at the tent

someone said, "What shall we call this place?" One said, "Poplar Springs," another standing by threw a cup of water against the tent and said, "Poplar Tent," hence the name of the church...

...There is strong presumptive evidence that, Charles Harris, who emigrated to the Poplar Tent community of Anson County (now Cabarrus County) from Lancaster County, Pa., in 1750, was the man who invited the Rev. John Thompson of the Davidson Creek Settlement to preach to the Poplar Tent Pioneers under the shade of a giant poplar tree which once stood on the present Poplar Tent Presbyterian Church grounds.

It is a matter of record that after the death of his first wife, Jane McIlkenney Harris, Charles Harris (one of Poplar Tent's first elders), in 1758, married Elizabeth Thompson Baker (whose first husband, Samuel Baker, had died earlier the same year), the daughter of this first Presbyterian minister to make his home in Western North Carolina.

"OLD FOURTH CREEK"---The First Presbyterian Church of Statesville, or "Old Fourth Creek Church," was established in 1753...From the History of Fourth Creek Church, written by Rev. E.F. Rockwell, we learn that Fourth Creek was gathered into a congregation at least as early as 1751, and their place of worship was fixed upon as early as 1756.

The Rev. John Thompson came into this region as early as 1751, and settled near Centre Church. He preached at Fourth Creek and various other stations in Rowan County, for about two years, and it is said that people came twenty or twenty-five miles to his appointments. "From the Davidson Settlement and the region of Beattie's Ford, they came; from Rowan, the Brandons, the Cowans, the Brawleys. Sometimes he baptized a score of infants at once."...

...The town of Statesville, one of the oldest towns in Western North Carolina, grew up around old Fourth Creek Presbyterian Church and is considered a child of this

institution. In 1875 the church name was dropped and Fourth Creek Congregation became known as the First Presbyterian Church of Statesville.

THYATIRA---Thyatira Presbyterian Church, located in the western part of present Rowan County, about ten miles west of Salisbury, in the village of Mill Bridge, is said by many to be the oldest Presbyterian Church in North Carolina, which has documentary proof of its antiquity... William Kizziah's study reveals that "Thyatira Church is older than Rowan County," and that to his knowledge, "there is no documentary record of any church that was established in Rowan County before Thyatira."...

... "The Catheys and Brandons came down from Lancaster, Pa., by way of Augusta County, Va.; and these two families alone were sufficient to establish a sizeable congregation for a church. These families probably came in 1748 and obtained the necessary entries for their land and later the grants were issued... Since (they) had obtained their lands as early as April 6th, 1749, there is no reasonable doubt that one of their first acts after erecting some sort of shelter for their families was to build a meeting house."...

... The first services that were held at the Lower Meeting House in the Cathey Settlement were conducted by visiting Presbyterian missionaries from the Synod of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania... The Rev. John Thompson, an Old Side Presbyterian minister, came to North Carolina in 1751 to serve the Presbyterian churches west of the Yadkin River. He made his home with his son-in-law, Samuel Baker, and daughter, Elizabeth, who lived in the Centre Settlement, some fourteen miles west of the Lower Meeting House.

Rev. Thompson was the only licensed Old Side Presbyterian minister living in this section of North Carolina in 1753 and it is the writer's opinion that he was the pastor of the Lower Meeting House at the

time the deed was made on the seventeenth day of January 1753.

This gray-headed disciple of Christ so presented the view, principle and customs of the Old Side Synod to the Thyatira Congregation that, two years after his death, they were unable to come to an agreement on whether the church should extend a call to the Rev. Hugh McAden, a Presbyterian missionary of the New Side Synod, who made a visit to the Congregation in 1755.<sup>63</sup>

It is not likely that, in preaching the gospel as he understood it, John Thomson would have deliberately prejudiced one of his congregations against dedicated ministers from the New Side. Certainly, there is nothing in the record to indicate that he did anything to disparage young Hugh McAden, who, by all accounts, was a thoroughly competent missionary in his own right. Under different circumstances, the two men might have labored side-by-side in the Lord's vineyard.

The problem was that dissension rampant in the Pennsylvania congregations had followed Presbyterian settlers to Virginia and the Carolinas. With one notable exception, the early Scotch-Irish communities in Western North Carolina adhered with fierce loyalty to the Old Side tenets.

That exception was the Rocky River settlement in present Cabarrus County. Organized about 1751, this congregation was composed of settlers from Lancaster County, Pa., who "adhered to the New Side Synod that took great delight in the glorious revival of Rev. George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards."<sup>64</sup>

Although it lay well within the bounds of his "parish," there is no record of Thomson's having been invited to preach at Rocky River.

By 1755, however, the great schism had taken a heavy toll on the supply of available ministers from the Old Side Synod of Philadelphia. By contrast, the New Side Synod of New York seemed to be blessed with an abundance of zealous missionaries. It was this situation which accounted for Mr. McAden's visit to the Thyatira congregation in the first place.

During the latter days of his life, Thomson had occupied a small cabin in the yard of the Baker home. Legend has it that when he died, "the floor of the cabin was taken up and his grave made inside the cabin walls. This was the beginning of the Baker graveyard."<sup>65</sup>

Even in death, however, John Thomson was unable to escape confusion and consternation. The confusion was natural enough. Most historians fixed the location of "the Baker graveyard" at "Centre, North Carolina."

And so it was. But 20th Century maps and documents list a "Centre" in Guilford County, a "Center Township" in Stanly County, two "Center" communities in Yadkin, and one in Davie County.<sup>66</sup> Only those familiar enough with Mr. Thomson's North Carolina "parish" to know that it included the Centre congregation at Mount Mourne could have guessed where to look for the cemetery.

The Rev. E.F. Rockwell, a former pastor of the old Fourth Creek Church at Statesville, was one who knew the location very well. According to J.K. Rouse, he wrote the following epitaph and had it inscribed on a marker at the head of Thomson's grave:

Born by the side of the River Foyle, in North of Ireland, where he first opened his eyes on the world, he closed them in the wilderness, on the banks of Catawba; an ocean rose between his cradle and his grave, an emblem of his stormy life. Ireland gave him his birth; Iredell County a grave; heavenly Jerusalem a final rest.<sup>67</sup>

So much for the confusion. The consternation arises from a set of circumstances Rockwell's epitaph had no way of anticipating. It bursts forth when an amateur archeologist or genealogist makes a pilgrimage to the site...only to discover that it now lies at the bottom of the largest man-made lake in North Carolina!

But this, it turns out, really is a blessing in disguise. In a quiet corner of the old cemetery across the road from Mount Mourne's Centre Presbyterian Church---and barely a stone's throw from busy Interstate 77---a simple marker reads:

Baker Cemetery  
Moved To This Site  
1961  
From Original Location  
3½ Miles Southwest  
In Lake Norman

Nearby is another marker:

The Rev. John Thomson  
c1690-1753  
Pioneer Presbyterian Preacher,  
Teacher and Writer.  
Graduate of U. of Glasgow  
Advocate of the Adopting Act 1729.  
Probably the First Minister to  
Preach in What Became Concord  
Presbytery  
Buried in This Enclosure

It is enough. This place is a proper setting in which to reflect upon John Thomson's contributions to his Church and his Nation. The first Presbytery that met between the Catawba and the Yadkin held its sessions at Centre Presbyterian Church. And it was here that the Synod of the Carolinas was formed in 1788, and the Presbytery of Concord in 1796.

The second and fourth meetings of the Synod of the Carolinas also were held in Thomson's "parish"---the former in 1789 at Poplar Tent, and the latter in 1791 at Thyatira. <sup>68</sup>

There is yet another historic dimension to the Centre Church cemetery. Sixteen members of this congregation fought in the American Revolution. Many of them undoubtedly were baptized in early childhood by the flock's first shepherd. Some now share the hallowed ground with him. Their Nation, like their Church, has prospered under a provident God.

The Rev. John Thomson sleeps in peace...but the work he started goes on.

There can be little doubt that he intended his Poor Orphans' Legacy to be read by an audience larger than that of his own children, but it seems just as obvious that it was meant to contain a very personal message to his kith and kin.

From the 13 children---and at least 61 grandchildren---he left, Thomson's progeny have spread over the entire country with the heaviest concentrations probably in Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia. Wherever they have scattered, a strong religious faith has gone with them. Most often it has been expressed through his cherished Presbyterian Church.

Yet, the one descendant whose life may have followed most closely the John Thomson blueprint was a Methodist minister! The Rev. William Chaffin Crockett (1852-1921), a great-great-great grandson, ministered to far-flung circuits in the Wythe-Bland-Giles area of Southwestern Virginia and was the founding pastor of a number of congregations.

This turn of events was not as strange as it might seem. The Rev. Mr. Crockett and the seven other children of William Guise and Emily Chaffin Crockett were exposed to almost equal amounts of Presbyterian and Methodist theology as they were growing up. The Methodist influence came from their mother and grandmother.

Even as Chaffin Crockett was committing his life to the Methodist ministry, a younger brother, Dr. Alexander George Crockett, was mixing the practice of medicine with practical Presbyterianism. He was an elder in Abingdon Presbytery's historic Anchor of Hope congregation until his death in 1919 ...but he also served as one of the original trustees for the Max Meadows, Va., Methodist Church.

Obviously, the tension which existed between these denominations at the time of "The Great Awakening" posed no problem for this particular family of Thomson descendants. The old missionary would have been delighted. He said as much a century and a half earlier.

Despite his controversial role in the first serious division within his own denomination, Thomson had addressed Christian unity in terms that might have come straight from the 20th Century ecumenical movement. At a time when Presbyterians often felt a heavy hand of oppression from the Church of England, he deemed it desirable to discuss---not the differences---but the similarities between the two denominations in a companion document to his Explication of the Shorter Catechism.

He pointed out that "Presbyterian ministers in general do freely and without scruple...subscribe all the 39 articles (adopted by the Church of England in 1552) except the 34th, 35th, and 36th and the 1st Clause of the 20th, all which do only relate to the Authority, ceremonies, Homilies, & Consecration of Archbishops & Bishops & Ordination of Priests and Deacons; and not at all to any main point of Christian Faith."

Then he adds this exhortation:

Let us all cordially endeavor to be united in our Christian Affections and Charity towards one another as well as true Love towards God. Let us all cordially strive to initiate, emulate, & encourage one another in everything that is commendable before God and agreeable to our consciences; and let us beware lest our differing judgments and sentiments in lesser points of religion have more influence upon us, to

alienate affections from one another,  
than our agreement to the more substan-  
tial parts of Religion can have to unite  
and cement our souls together in mutual  
Christian Love.<sup>69</sup>

In a sense, the Rev. John Thomson was a product of the times in which he lived. But, in a broader context, it would not be an exaggeration to say that he helped shape the events of that day at least as much as he was shaped by them. His ministry was one of dedication, determination, decisiveness and devotion.

He held strong opinions and he was hard-headed and outspoken. There may have been occasions when he took himself too seriously and, certainly, there were times when prudence might have dictated that he should be listening instead of talking. These are vexing---though rarely fatal---genetic flaws which have continued to afflict his progeny unto the seventh and eighth generations.<sup>70</sup>

It is impossible to study John Thomson's life (and the writings which have survived) without speculating how he might have reacted to the historic sequence of developments which brought about the long-sought reunion of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America 230 years after his death.

Quite probably, he would have quibbled over some of the same sticking points which bedeviled the Joint Committee on Presbyterian Union. But the masterfully-drawn Foreword which introduced the Plan for Reunion would have been a document after his own heart!<sup>71</sup>

History does not record what kind of singing voice John Thomson himself had. But---the harsh judgment of Dr. Charles Augustus Briggs notwithstanding---it is difficult to believe that he would not have wanted his descendants (spiritual, as well as genealogical) there in the front ranks when the joyful group in Atlanta sang, "Blest Be The Tie."

And some of them undoubtedly were.

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1. There can be little doubt that "Thomson" was the original spelling, although a few early church records, several historians, and his descendants almost without exception opt for "Thompson." In the interest of accuracy, the name

is spelled herein just as it appears in the particular source material.

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