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REVEREND JOHN THOMSON
(CA. 1690—1753)

JOHN GOODWIN HERNDON



JOHN THOMSON

PRESBYTERIAN CONSTITUTIONALIST
MINISTER OF THE WORD OF GOD
EDUCATIONAL LEADER AND CHURCH BUILDER

By
JOHN GOODWIN HERNDON

Privately Printed

1943

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JOHN

THE LANCASTER PRESS, INC.
LANCASTER, PENNSYLVANIA

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PREFACE

In the summer of 1942 I set about to learn everything I could concerning John Thomson. My first disappointment was the discovery that the Dictionary of American Biography contained no sketch of his life, although it did include somewhat lengthy notes on certain of his chief rivals in early Presbyterian affairs in this country. Yet *they* had claimed that the split in the General Synod in 1741 had been the result of Thomson's leadership of the "Old Side."

My colleague, Dr. John Alexander Kelly, called my attention to an article entitled, "The Buffalo Settlement and Its Makers," by Dr. J. D. Eggleston, which had appeared in two 1941 numbers of the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography. Then I discovered to my delight that at the library of the Presbyterian Historical Society, in the Witherspoon Building, Philadelphia, there were available for my examination the Records of the General Synod of Ulster, mentioning John Thomson's license to preach, the Records of the General Synod of Philadelphia which showed Thomson as a member from its founding until his death in 1753, the Minutes of the Presbytery of New Castle covering the entire period of his membership therein, and the Minutes of the Presbytery of Donegal of which Thomson was a charter member and with which he continued to be affiliated until his final departure for Virginia in 1744.

Then came the thrill of finding the proof that Thomson was the author of "The Poor Orphans' Legacy," a view long held but never previously absolutely established. At about the same time I was given the treat of examining original copies of John Thomson's other works still extant, among them his "Government of the Church of Christ," and his "Explication of the Shorter Catechism."

When a gracious letter from Dr. Eggleston arrived, assuring me of his willingness to turn over to me his accumulated data

on the family of that distinguished pioneer missionary statesman of the church, I went to the Prince Edward neighborhood, examined all records on that subject that I could find at the Farmville Courthouse, went out to the old and the present Buffalo Church properties, and visited at the home of Dr. Eggleston, former president of Hampden-Sydney College and now president of the Virginia Historical Society. I returned home to write my story, and to my joy was told by Dr. Thomas C. Pears, director of the Department of History of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., that he would be glad to publish it in the December 1942 and March 1943 numbers of the Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society.

At this stage of affairs I received a long letter on the same subject from Mr. W. S. Ray, of Austin, Texas, in which he furnished more details, and still later he prepared and sent me a typewritten book, leather-bound, which he called "Rev. John Thomson and His Orphans" which contains some additional items of value.

In addition to expressing my indebtedness to the gentlemen above named, I take this occasion to thank Mr. Guy S. Klett, assistant director of the Department of History of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., for his help to me in innumerable ways from the time I first examined a book on this subject until the final page proof of the article, as it appeared in the Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society, had been corrected. Of course, I appreciate the courtesy of that organization in permitting the use here of so much of what I wrote in the article it published under the title "The Reverend John Thomson."

Further details on the descendants of John Thomson (beyond the meagre notes in Chapter Eight) will be published by the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography in its October 1943 and later issues.

While the correct spelling of a man's name may be a matter of controversy when it appears in different forms in official records, no reasonable doubt exists that the subject of this sketch spelled his name Thomson. It is consistently so spelled in the records of the Synod of Philadelphia of which he was

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a member from the date of its final meeting in 1717 until his death. Moreover, in every document bearing his signature which is still extant, it is written Thomson. Yet because variations therefrom are to be found in certain Presbyterian records as well as on tax and voting lists, the name, in what follows, is copied as it appears in the various quoted documents. In Virginia the name was almost invariably written Thompson and among his descendants the "p" regularly appeared in the name as, for example, Anne Thompson Adams, John Thompson Sankey, etc.

JOHN GOODWIN HERNDON

HAVERFORD, PENNSYLVANIA,
26 September 1943.

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CHAPTER ONE

PREPARATORY PERIOD (CA. 1690-1717)

From Northern Ireland to the University of Glasgow

Because John Thomson entered the University of Glasgow March 1, 1706, it is likely that he was born about 1690, for then he would have been 15 or 16 on matriculation. Entering at the same time were 15 other boys. Two of these were Scotch, two were recorded as Anglo-Hiberians, while he and eleven others were listed as Scotch-Irish. These dozen were Hugh McKitrick, James McLaughlin, James Stuart, John Small, John Thomson, Moses Clark, Nehemiah Donaldson, Samuel Gelston, Samuel Orr, Samuel Wesson, Nathaniel Wilson, and Alexander Todd. These and the other four were members of the "*primae classae qui hoc Anno Academiam intrarunt sub praesidio Magistri Joannis Law.*"¹

Other Scotch-Irish Thomsons who studied at the University of Glasgow in the early 1700's were James (1702), Hugh (1717), and Thomas (1720). In the same record one Humphrey Thomson was mentioned as pastor of the Church at Ballybay, Ireland, December 10, 1695.²

Other Scotch-Irish students at Glasgow whose family names appear prominently in American communities where John Thomson labored so valiantly for the Christian cause were Robert and Thomas Anderson; Charles Caldwell; Hugh, James, Robert, and William Cunningham; Richard Donald (Donnell); John Graham; and John Macknight (MacKnitt).

Thomson continued his studies probably until 1710 or 1711, for he was awarded the master of arts degree. This we know because when in 1749 he published his *Explication of the Shorter Catechism*, the author's name and titles were given as "John Thomson, M. A. and V. D. M. In the County of Amelia." V. D. M., standing for *Verbi Dei Minister*, was not strictly speaking a degree, but it was often used by ministers

of the Gospel as the equivalent of the more common form "Reverend."³

Armagh Presbytery and the General Synod of Ulster

The General Synod of Ulster, meeting at Belfast June 20, 1711, began its session "*horâ quintâ a merid:*" and, after rollcall and prayer, recessed for two hours which were to be given over to private meditation and morning prayers. Then at 8 a.m. the Synod reassembled for business. Among the minutes of that meeting one reads:⁴

The Presbytery of Ardmagh report they ordain'd Mr. Robert Gordon, Mr. Thomas Anderson, and Mr. Hugh Henry, all on March 27th; and have entred Mr. John Thompson [sic] on his first Tryalls.

A year later, his first trials over, the next step was for a date to be set by the Presbytery when he should be "entred on Tryalls in order to Licensing." John Thomson's Presbytery—that of Ardmagh—made the appropriate report to the above effect so far as he was concerned, and the Synod at Belfast on June 19, 1712, recorded that fact.⁵

The following year the Ulster Synod, meeting at Antrim on June 23, 1713, noted:⁶

Ardmagh licens'd Mr. Jo: Thomson, and entred Mr. Patrick Simson (whom they invited to come from Scotland) on 2nd Tryalls.

His Arrival in America

The Presbytery of Philadelphia, meeting at New Castle on-the-Delaware, September 21, 1715, listened to a letter presented by the Reverend George McNish "from Mr. John Thomson, probationer, lately come into the country, desiring the advice and assistance of the Presbytery" and then directed Reverend Howell Powell to prepare a reply.⁷ When they met the next day at 8 a.m., Mr. Powell read the letter he had drafted. At the same time, however, a matter arose concerning the situation of the church needs at Lewes, Dela-

ware, with the result that the availability of Mr. Thomson was mentioned in a letter written to "Dear Brother Davis [i.e., Reverend Samuel Davis] and Christian Friends at Lewis [sic]" in these words: ⁸

As to a settled ministry, there is one Mr. Thompson [sic] now arrived at York ⁹ with his wife and family, concerning whom Mr. McNish will, in a little time, give you further advice.

His Call to Lewes

When the Presbytery met September 20, 1716, William Shankland, in his capacity as commissioner "from the people in and about Lewis-Town," presented a call from the said people to Mr. John Thomson, who was at that time "himself absent by reason of illness." He had, however, written a letter to the Presbytery in which he "signified his willingness to submit to what the Presbytery should think expedient for that people and his own good." As a result a formal call was directed to be prepared by the Reverend John Hampton, and on its acceptance by Mr. Thomson, the latter was "to take his trials" and then, if the appointed committee was satisfied, they were to proceed to his ordination on the first Wednesday in April 1717.¹⁰

What a tribute that four such men as McNish, Davis, Hampton, and Shankland all should have been responsible for John Thomson's going to Lewes! The first three were among the seven original members of the first Presbytery in this country. They were all from Somerset County, Maryland,¹¹ and had been fellow laborers with Francis Makemie there. And William Shankland and Samuel Davis had signed the well known 1689 Somerset County Address of Loyalty to Their Majesties William and Mary.¹² The versatile Samuel Davis (not to be confused with the great Samuel Davies, of Virginia) was commissioned on September 23, 1726, a justice of the peace, and in addition served one year from October 4, 1726, as coroner of Sussex County. William Shankland was appointed deputy surveyor on April 9, 1735,

coroner on October 8, 1749, and served as sheriff from October 6, 1750, for two years.¹³

¹ *Munimenta Alme Universitatis Glasguensis*, iii, 184.

² *Ibid.*, see Index in Volume iv.

³ For other examples, see William Warren Sweet: *The Presbyterians*, 722, in Volume 2 of the series entitled *Religion on the American Frontier*; and Richard Webster, *History of the Presbyterian Church* (hereafter cited as Webster), 349.

⁴ *Records of the General Synod of Ulster, 1621-1800*, Vol. I, 223.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁷ *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, embracing the Minutes of the General Presbytery and General Synod, 1706-1788*, (hereafter cited as Records), 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹ New York was undoubtedly intended.

¹⁰ *Records*, 41.

¹¹ Somerset then included what are now Worcester, Wicomico, and Somerset Counties, Maryland, as well as a part of Sussex County, Delaware.

¹² Clayton Torrence: *Old Somerset on the Eastern Shore of Maryland*, 450.

¹³ *Pennsylvania Archives*, Second Series, Vol. IX, 662, 664, 665.

CHAPTER TWO

DURING PASTORATE AT LEWES, DELAWARE (1717-1729)

Services to the Church at Lewes

“Mr. Thomson was ordained, according to appointment.”¹⁴ He remained pastor at Lewes from April 1717 until September 1729. Because the Presbytery of New Castle upon-the-Delaware had been erected by 1717, the Synod at its initial meeting appointed Mr. Thomson to join with it “till such time as there is a competent number to make up a presbytery in his neighborhood.”¹⁵

In 1723, according to Irving Spence, a brick church was erected there.¹⁶ Concerning this Henry C. Conrad, State Archivist of Delaware, made the following statement in October 1926 on the celebration of the bicentennial of the Cool Spring Church:¹⁷

An early pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Lewis, John Thomson by name, I have no doubt was fully enlisted in the establishment of the Cool Spring Church, and the second church at Lewes, built of brick, during his pastorate shows his initials J. T., and date 1728 on the eastern end.

Services to the People of Snow Hill, Maryland

At the meeting of the New Castle Presbytery¹⁸ held at Pencader on March 23, 1724/5, the following minute was adopted:

Upon the like supplication from the Congregation of Snowhill, Ordered that Mr Thomson supply them one Sabbath in Aprile, one in June & one July & that he give them timely advertisement.

And again at Philadelphia on September 16, 1725:

A supplication from Snow hill in Summersett county in Maryland . . . being read and considered, it is ordered that Mr John Thomson Supply the people at Snowhill 4 Sabbaths before March next. . . .

Again on November 9, 1725, when the Presbytery met at New Castle, the "appointment of Mr Thomson . . . with respect to . . . supplying the people of Snowhill . . . [was] continued."

When the Presbytery met at the Branches of the Elk, March 15, 1725/6, Mr John Thomson was ordered to supply the people at Snowhill four Sabbaths before the next Synod.

On March 28, 1727, Mr. Thomson reported that, as appointed, he had "supply'd at Snow-hill, in Summersett."

A year later the Presbytery appointed John Thomson "to give the call of the Snow Hill people to Mr. [Hugh] Stevenson to settle among them as their pastor." In the meanwhile Stevenson had been supplying frequently at Lewes and in that way the two men had become well acquainted. In June 1728, Stevenson accepted the call. When Presbytery met in September Thomson was appointed with Messrs. Anderson and Houston to hear and report on Mr. Stevenson's discourse. Then Messrs. Thomson, Stewart, and McCook proceeded with his trials, and on September 21, 1728, Mr. Thomson was directed to assist at Mr. Stevenson's ordination at Snow Hill.

Moderator of Presbytery and Synod

John Thomson became a member of the Presbytery of New Castle at its fourth meeting on September 24, 1717, but he was an original member of the General Synod of the Presbyterian Church which first met in September 1717, and he was then present.¹⁹ The following September he was elected Moderator of the Presbytery of New Castle and served at all its sessions that church year. When the Synod met at Philadelphia on September 16, 1719, he was elected moderator, as is shown by the following minute: ²⁰

Two being nominated by the moderator, namely Masters John Thomson and George Gillespie, one of whom to be chosen moderator, Mr. Thomson was chosen.

On September 20, 1722, he was again elected moderator of the Synod,²¹ and so became the first person ever to be elected twice to the highest office in the Presbyterian Church in this country after the organization of the General Synod. Two

days later the Presbytery of New Castle similarly honored him by choosing him its moderator for the second time.

Secretarial Services

During the period of his pastorate at Lewes John Thomson rendered significant secretarial services to the Presbytery in drafting, in whole or in part, an answer to the supplication of the people of Kent-upon-Delaware for ministerial supplies in 1725, a letter to the same people concerning provision to be made for assistance to the widow of Reverend Archibald McCook in 1729, and notice to other ministers as to their supply assignments.²²

Similar services on behalf of the Synod²³ included the writing of letters to the Trustees of Yale College on September 23, 1721; to George Williamson, September 16, 1724, "in answer to his in which he expressed some dissatisfaction with the judgment of the Synod in his case the previous year;" and to the Presbytery of Long Island, September 25, 1727.

On September 16, 1718, the Synod ordered²⁴ "Masters Anderson and Thomson to revise the Presbytery book of Philadelphia, and Masters Andrews and Jones to revise the Presbytery book of New Castle." At a later date, probably in 1719, John Thomson performed a similar service for the New Castle Presbytery, in whose book at the end of the record of the seventh session is the following note:²⁵

This book is so far approved by the Synod.
JOHN THOMSON Mod: Synod.

Certain Ministerial Assignments

By direction of Presbytery²⁶ he was "ordered to serve on a committee to take the exegesis from Mr. Cook and inquire [into] his knowledge of the [Latin, Greek, and Hebrew] languages and the rest of the extemporaries as usual for trials, previous to ordination, and if they shall find satisfaction therein, they shall ordain him as Pastor of that Society of the Presbyterian Perswasion in the County of Kent upon

Delaware." And he was to preside at the ordination service. The date of the order was May 9, 1727. At an adjourned meeting of the 41st session of the New Castle Presbytery held at "Kent Supra Delaware," June 7, 1727, the following minute was adopted:

The minute of last Presbytery relating to Kent being read, Mr. Cook according to appointment delivered his exegesis and several other pieces of trial in order to his ordination, and was approved. On the day following, a proclamation being three times made by Mr. Joseph Houston at the door of the Meeting House that if any person had any thing to object against the ordaining of Mr. Cook, they should then make it known, and no objection being made, they proceeded to his ordination, solemnly setting him apart for the work of the ministry, with fasting, prayer, and imposition of hands. Mr. John Thomson preached his ordination sermon and presided in the work according to appointment.

By the same authority Mr. Thomson preached at Duck Creek, Delaware, the third Sunday in September 1728.

By direction of the Synod he participated in the ordination of John Clement as minister at Pocomoke and William Stewart as minister at Manokin and Wicomico. The service of their ordination was held at Rehoboth, Somerset County, Maryland, in June 1719.²⁷

In September 1729, when the Synod met, Mr. Thomson was appointed to serve on a committee to go to Rehoboth to act in the case of the Rehoboth Congregation against Mr. Clement, who was then suspended. (A year later he was restored to the ministry on making a full confession of his previous guilt, and later on suspended again upon "inquiry into his manner of life.")²⁸

Judicial Services

John Thomson was appointed also to serve on a committee which was to hear the complaint of the people of Snow Hill against Samuel Davis, "which affair is to be determined by said committee, before the committee appointed in the business of Mr. Clement return home."²⁹

Mr. Thomson in 1717 was appointed to and served on a committee "to receive and audit the reasons of the people of New Castle, if they had any to offer, against the removal of [Reverend] Mr. [James] Anderson to New York or any other place, and that the same committee do fully determine in said affair."³⁰ Four years later Mr. Thomson was ordered to preach at White Clay Creek and there to read the Synod's letter concerning the contumacy of James Morehead.³¹

Services on Behalf of the Fund for Pious Uses

At the first meeting of the Synod "a committee for overtures, consisting of Masters McNish, Andrews, Jones, Thomson, and Pierson, was appointed" and the next day Thursday, Sept. 19, 1717, recommended

That it is to be proposed to the several members of the Synod to contribute something to the raising of a fund for pious uses, and that they do use their interest with their friends, on proper occasions, to contribute something to the same purpose, and that there be chosen a treasurer to keep what shall be collected, and that what is or may be gathered be disposed of according to the discretion of the Synod.

This overture was approved and Mr. Andrews designated to be treasurer until the Synod met a year later.³²

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.

The original record book of the Fund has recently been re-discovered. Its records to a certain date were audited by a synodical committee and their signatures appear thereon. Among them was John Thomson's in a clear, vigorous penmanship.³³

The Fund for Pious Uses was established in 1718. In 1719 John Thomson was moderator and in 1720 and 1723 he was absent from the meetings of the Synod on account of illness. With these exceptions he was a member of the Committee for the Fund continuously during the period here under review.

In fact he continued to serve thereon until his removal to Virginia made his attendance at Synod impossible. Even after he had gone to Virginia the shadow of his influence was continued; for in 1745 Rev. Richard Sankey, one of his sons-in-law, was appointed to that committee, presumably in his stead.³⁴

But not only was he a member of this important committee, but year after year he was among those who reported having "brought something for the fund." A typical statement reads:³⁵

Inquiry being made who had made any collections for the fund it was found that these following had done it, Mr. Malachi Jones, Mr. Robert Cross, Mr. John Thomson, and Mr. David Evans. Ordered that the ministers here present should represent to the several Presbyteries that there be yearly something done for the fund as was formerly appointed.

Author of Overture on the Westminster Confession of Faith.

By all odds the most significant event in the Presbyterian Church during the years while John Thomson was pastor at Lewes, Delaware, was the debate over his overture that the Synod require the Presbyteries to require of candidates for licensing and of all ministers subject to their jurisdiction the acceptance of the Westminster Confession of Faith as the confession of their faith.

As early as 1724, the New Castle Presbytery required as a condition, precedent to licensing Mr. William McMillan for service in Virginia, his subscription to a statement that he accepted the Westminster Confession of Faith. Present at that meeting were Messrs. Thomas Craighead, Gillespie, Orme, Thomas Evans, and Alexander Hutcheson.

"From this time," says Hodge,³⁶ ". . . it seems to have been the common practice of the Presbytery. It is obvious that the same reasons which induced the Presbytery of New Castle to adopt this measure themselves would lead them to wish for the concurrence of the whole church of which they were a part."

Mention of this overture appears in the New Castle minutes of March 27, 1728, June 5, 1728, and August 27, 1728, at the last of which meetings it decided to defer the consideration of "Mr. Thomson's overture untill the meeting of y^e Presby att ye time of Synod." When the Synod met, although a large attendance was present, it decided to postpone action for one year "judging this to be a very important affair" and agreeing that "timeous notice" should be given to the absent members.³⁷

Passage of the Adopting Act

When next the Synod met, the overture was referred to a committee of which Thomson was a member and which prepared its report thereon. After long debate it was accepted in the following words, to which has since been given the name, the Adopting Act:³⁸

Although the Synod do not claim or pretend to any authority of imposing our faith upon other men's consciences, but do profess our just dissatisfaction with, and abhorrence of, such impositions, and do utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority in the church, being willing to receive one another as Christ has received us to the glory of God, and to admit to fellowship in sacred ordinances, all such as we have grounds to believe Christ will at last admit to the kingdom of heaven; yet we are undoubtedly obliged to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints, be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so handed down to our posterity; and do therefore agree that all the ministers of this Synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted into this Synod, shall declare their agreement in and approbation of the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being, in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine; and do also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the Confession of our faith. And we do also agree, that all Presbyteries within our bounds shall always take care not to admit any candidate of the ministry into the exercise of the sacred function, but what declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession, either by subscribing the said Confession of Faith and Catechisms, or by a verbal declaration of his assent thereto, as such minister or candidate shall

think best. And in case any minister of this Synod, or any candidate for the ministry, shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall, at the time of his making the said declaration, declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds, and to ministerial communion, if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government. But if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge such ministers or candidates erroneous in essential and necessary articles of faith, the Synod or Presbytery shall declare them incapable of communion with them. And the Synod solemnly agree, that none of us will traduce or use any opprobrious terms of those that differ from us in these extra-essential, and not necessary points of doctrine, but treat them with the same friendship, kindness, and brotherly love, as if they had not differed from us in such sentiments.

It should be borne in mind that the expression "disclaim all legislative power and authority in the Church" meant then "disclaim the right to make laws binding the conscience of members on matters of truth and duty" and certainly did not mean that the Synod was denying its right to enact the legislation it was then enacting as a basic law of the Church. Such an interpretation would be too stupid and naive to merit any consideration.

Mr. Thomson, concerned for orderly government within the church, also supported and may have been the author of the Directory of Worship Act, approved at the same session, which reads as follows: ³⁹

The Synod do unanimously acknowledge and declare that they judge the Directory for Worship, Discipline, and Government, commonly annexed to the Westminster Confession, to be agreeable in substance to the word of God, and founded thereupon, and therefore, do earnestly recommend the same to all their members, to be by them observed, as near as circumstances will allow, and Christian prudence direct.

In these two laws of the Church are the essence of Presbyterianism. Both of them stem directly from the heart and pen of John Thomson, whose overture was the occasion for their

enactment. Today, 215 years after their original acceptance, they are still part and parcel of the Constitution of the Church, except for modifications in them making them more explicit, and even more binding.

While the whole of the overture can not be here reprinted because of its length,⁴⁰ its outline may be presented, and a few sentences quoted. Mr. Thomson entitles it:

An overture humbly offered to the consideration of the reverend Synod; wherein is proposed an expedient for preventing the ingress and spreading of dangerous errors, either among ourselves or the flocks committed to our care.

After a brief introduction, there follows a statement of nine reasons for the overture. Next he cites four dangers facing the Church if the Synod should fail to establish legal standards by which to act when, in certain circumstances, cases should be presented to it for judgment. The expedient he proposed was the adoption of the following resolution: ⁴¹

That the Synod as an ecclesiastical judicature of Christ clothed with *ministerial* authority to act in concert in behalf of truth and opposition to error, would, by an act of its own, publicly and authoritatively

- (1) adopt the Westminster Confession of Faith, Catechisms, etc. for the public confession of our faith, and
- (2) oblige each presbytery to require
 - (a) every candidate for the ministry to subscribe or other wise acknowledge, *coram presbyterio* the said confession, and promise not to preach or teach contrary to it,
 - (b) all actual ministers coming among us to do the like, no minister to teach or preach contrary to said articles, unless he first propose the point to the Presbytery or Synod to be by them discussed;
 - (c) each minister to recommend to his flock
 - (1) to entertain the truth in love
 - (2) to be zealous and fruitful
 - (3) to be earnest with God by prayer to preserve their vine from being spoiled by those deluding foxes.

The deluding foxes were "those who being visible members of a church do not openly and violently oppose the truth pro-

fessed therein but in a secret, covert way endeavor to undermine it.”

Overture on Prevention of Law Suits

At the time while the Synod was considering the overture just mentioned, a minute⁴² adopted by the New Castle Presbytery directed Messrs. James Anderson, John Thomson, and Adam Boyd to prepare an overture on the prevention of law suits, first to be considered by the Presbytery and later to be submitted to the committee (later called ‘commission’) of the Synod.

Departure from Lewes

Early in Presbyterianism in this country the system of presbyterial visitation of individual churches was adopted, similar to episcopal visitation which had long existed in the established church in England. In accordance with that custom the Presbytery appointed certain of their number to visit Mr. Thomson’s congregation at Lewes the first Wednesday in June 1729, and direct him to preach.⁴³

When that day came Mr. Thomson preached from Eph. 6: 12, which, the minutes say, “was approved.” The elders present, Messrs Smith, Wilson, and Fassit, were then asked about Mr. Thomson’s public performances and his behavior among them as their minister, to which “they declared their satisfaction with both.” When Mr. Thomson was asked about the session of his church, he declared that their behavior “was suitable, and that they endeavour according to their ability to walk accordingly, so far as he knows. Then the congregation when asked about their feeling toward their pastor declared their satisfaction with him in public and private sincerely, *nemine contradicente*.”⁴⁴

That afternoon Mr. Thomson laid before the committee several reasons for requesting to be released from his charge at Lewes, which the committee considered “relevant,” but their judgment was that instead of acting with authority themselves the request should be laid before the Presbytery at its meeting to be held on September 17. On that date, however,

action was deferred "by reason of y^e absence of severall Members . . . until our Next *sederunt*." It was nevertheless voted that the "weightyness of the affair of Lewis [sic]" made it desirable to ask for correspondents from the Synod to meet with the Presbytery in determining the sad affair. Three days later, after the Presbytery with the correspondents had debated this matter, they recommended that Mr. Thomson and his congregation should be "left to their liberty, he to remove, and they to look out for another minister as they shall—either of them—see cause." A note added that the Presbytery "would be exceedingly pleased if they should keep together as formerly, in case circumstances will allow."⁴⁵

Despite the urging of some of the congregation for him to remain with them, John Thomson decided to seek another field of labor, Webster says, "through want of support."⁴⁶ Nothing in extant records shows, however, whether that was the reason for the action Thomson took, so far as this writer has been able to ascertain.

¹⁴ *Records*, 48.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁶ Mentioned in Webster, 355.

¹⁷ French and Armstrong: *The Crockett Family and Connecting Lines*, 195.

¹⁸ "The Records of the Presbytery of New Castle upon Delaware" for the years 1717–1730 have been published in Volumes XIV and XV of the *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*. Here see *Journal*, XV, 103.

¹⁹ *Records*, 45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

- ²² *Journal*, XV, 106, 189, 199.
- ²³ *Records*, 67, 79, and 87.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.
- ²⁵ *Journal*, XIV, 301.
- ²⁶ *Journal*, XV, 118.
- ²⁷ *Records*, 52, 53, 55.
- ²⁸ Webster, 371, wherein is pointed out the slight difference between Rehoboth, Coventry, and Pocomoke which were substantially interchangeable names for the same place.
- ²⁹ *Records*, 62, 66, 70.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 66.
- ³² *Records*, 49.
- ³³ A photostatic copy is available for examination in the library of the Department of History of the Presbyterian Church, Witherspoon Bldg., Philadelphia.
- ³⁴ *Records*, 78, 81, 82, 85, 88, 93, 96, 100, 102, 103, 107, et seq.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ³⁶ Charles Hodge: *History of the Presbyterian Church* (hereafter cited as Hodge), 128. The vote was: in favor of requiring subscription, 31; opposed, none; present, but not voting, one; absent, seven. In 1730 the last-mentioned person "gave in his acceptance."
- ³⁷ *Records*, 91.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.
- ⁴⁰ From the Ebenezer Hazard Mss. printed in Hodge, 136-141.
- ⁴¹ Modifications from the literal text have been made only as to punctuation, capitalization, indentation, etc., including the use of numbers and letters to indicate coordinate and subordinate matters. The text used is that found in Webster, 103, rather than the fuller one in Hodge, 136-141.
- ⁴² *Journal*, XV, 188.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 183.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 185-186.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.
- ⁴⁶ Webster, 355.

CHAPTER THREE

BETWEEN PASTORATES AT LEWES AND OCTORARA (1729-1730)

His Calls to Different Congregations

On January 27, 1729/30, a letter from some of the members of the New Castle congregation was presented to the Presbytery by Archibald Murphy, who requested the concurrence of the Presbytery in order "to their obtaining Mr. Thomson to settle among them as their pastor."⁴⁷ But nothing came of it.

Soon, however, another call came. The Presbytery appointed a committee to examine the matter and report. This they did some time in February or March next.

att the affaresaid comtt^{ee} a Supplication with a Call from Midle Actarara fishing Creek and Chestnut Level, to Rev^d Mr. John Thomson

The Comtt^{ee} Judges it expedient that M^r Thomson take the Call under his Consideration, leaving the determination of said Affair to our next full Presbitery in April next

Appointed by said Comtt^{ee} that Mr. Thomson supply att Newcastle the second and third Sab: of Janr and the 4th of Jan^r and first Sab: in feb att Middle Actarara & the second and third sabbaths in feb: att Lower Actarara & the rest of the time untill our next full Presby att Middle Actarara (concluded with prayer).⁴⁸

When the full Presbytery met on April 15, 1730, at Christiana Creek, the preceding minutes were read and approved. Then it was noted that Mr. Thomson had fulfilled the assignments made to him by the committee. The Presbytery then recommended that action on the call be postponed for two months and ordered him to supply the people of Nottingham (Lower Octorara) the third Sunday in April, the people of Fishing Creek the following Sunday, the people of Middle

Octarara the first Sabbath in May "and so on till our Next."

Mr. Stevenson was to supply at Lewistown (Lewes) and Mr. Stewart at Pocomoke "every 5 or 6 sabbaths until our next Synod" and Mr. Thomson was to "advertise them of their appointments." Additional services as supply by Mr. Thomson were rendered in Snow Hill, Maryland, and Middletown, Pennsylvania.⁴⁹

Secretarial Services

John Thomson on behalf of the New Castle Presbytery wrote a letter to the Philadelphia Presbytery containing allegations against John Wilson about whom he had received a letter from a member of the Armagh Presbytery in Northern Ireland, and shortly thereafter Mr. Thomson was ordered to "cite Mr. John Willson to attend at the Synod to account for his malconduct."⁵⁰

Subscriber to the Confession of Faith

At White Clay Creek on September 2, 1730, the following document was signed by John Thomson and ten others:⁵¹

We the ministers of the Presbytery of New Castle whose names are underwritten do, by this our act of subscribing our names to these presents, declare and testify that we own and acknowledge the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms to be the confession of our faith, being in all things agreeable to the Word of God, so far as we are able to judge and discern taking them in the true and genuine and obvious sense of the words.

⁴⁷ *Journal*, XV, 195.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 193-194.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 195, 196, 197.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 206-207.

CHAPTER FOUR

DURING PASTORATE AT MIDDLE OCTORARA, PENNSYLVANIA (1730-1733)

Service at Middle Octorara

On September 19, 1730, James Turner, an elder and commissioner from Middle Octorara, presented to the New Castle Presbytery a supplication that some of the members of the Presbytery be appointed to meet at the Middle Octorara Meeting House to attend the installation of Reverend Mr. John Thomson as pastor there. Being interrogated "anent his acceptance of said call from said people, Mr. Thomson declared his acceptance thereof." Rev. James Anderson presided at the service of installation the second Wednesday of October, 1730.⁵²

The parish included at that date not only Middle Octorara, but also, as the call of January or February 1730, indicated, Fishing Creek and Chestnut Level, and continued to do so until September 1733.⁵³

Services to the Presbytery of New Castle

On November 11, 1730, Mr. Thomson was for the third time chosen moderator of the New Castle Presbytery. On that occasion taking for his text, Psalm 103: 8, he preached on "The Mercy of God," a sermon "which was approven *nemine contradicente*." ⁵⁴

He printed a letter concerning the raising of the contributions to the Fund, which after being approved by the Synod, he presented to the Presbytery as his "overture concerning ye Funds." ⁵⁵ He supplied at Middletown, Pennsylvania, the last Sabbath of November, and at the meeting of Presbytery on December 30th, he made a report "on the affair of John Wilson." ⁵⁶

Erection of the Presbytery of Donegal

The substantial influx of Presbyterian families from Northern Ireland during the preceding ten years, who instead of settling near the coast pushed into "the back parts of Pennsylvania" (the Lancaster, Mt. Joy, Paxtang neighborhood), brought keenly to the realization of the ministers the impossibility of continuing the old bounds of the New Castle Presbytery. In September 1732, the Synod decided to constitute those whose congregations were within the limits of what was then Lancaster County into the Presbytery of Donegal. John Thomson was again honored by his brethren by being elected as the first moderator of the new Presbytery on its organization on October 11, 1732, at the Donegal Meeting House.

Services to the Synod of Philadelphia

He continued to bring in contributions to the fund for pious uses, established by the Synod, and to serve on the committee for the fund; with Mr. Boyd he was appointed, September 15, 1731, to revise the Presbytery book of Philadelphia; and served on a select committee to draft a letter to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland "in order to use our interest," as the Synod's instruction reads,

with that venerable Assembly with our being assisted with money from the societies for the propagation of religion, or elsewhere to enable us to maintain some itinerant ministers in Virginia or elsewhere; as also to procure their assistance to obtain the favourable notice of the government in England, so as to lay restrain upon some gentlemen in said neighbouring province as may discourage them from hampering such itinerant ministers by illegal prosecutions; and, if it may, to procure some assistance from his majesty for our encouragement by way of *regium donum*.⁵⁷

Difficulties at Middle Octorara

The early minutes of the Donegal Presbytery⁵⁸ are filled with the difficulties which Mr. Thomson encountered in securing that minimum of financial support which had been

pledged to him by the congregation at Middle Octorara. As early as November 15, 1732, he requested the Presbytery to relieve him of any 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." Fifty persons had already asked for his transfer, while 43 signed a petition in his favor. The opinion of the Presbytery was that his supporters were "the orderly side" and that until the arrearages were met, no change in pastoral relationships would be authorized.

This was a time of great growth in population. The Presbytery noted that a considerable number of families between Nottingham and Chestnut Level and between Swatara and Donegal must join the congregations nearest them. It is small wonder that difficulties grew.

By May 16, 1733, a report was filed showing that 25 persons were behind in their pledges to their minister's support, varying from 5 shillings to £2 5s.⁵⁹ The total still due was £34 6s. 5d. There was, however, then no dissatisfaction with his ministry on the part of those of his people located at Chestnut Level, for on March 25 the Presbytery, meeting at Chestnut Level, had made inquiry of "Mr Thomson and the people of this congregation concerning their satisfaction in, and their dutiful behaviour towards one another, and they gave a very comfortable and desirable account of one another to the Presby."⁶⁰

His financial plight was so bad that when the Presbytery met at Middle Octorara on May 16, 1733, it ordered that a copy of Mr. Thomson's representation of "his distressing and low circumstances in respect of secular affairs," together with a copy of the minute they adopted on the subject, should be publicly read "upon a Lord's day in all our meeting houses and a return be made of what shall be collected or procured in pursuance thereunto." Such action was to be completed before the first of August 1733.⁶¹

On September 5, 1733, he reported that the appointment for a "collection for his relief was tenderly regarded by the several ministers and congregations."⁶² We can well imagine

the appreciation as well as the humiliation he, who was then their Moderator, must have felt at such a come-to-pass. On that day the Presbytery gave consent to the termination of his pastoral relationship to the congregation at Middle Octorara. Thereafter he would be minister only at Chestnut Level.

⁵² *Journal*, XV, 199.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 198, 199.

⁵⁵ *Records*, 96, 100, 102, 103, 106.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 204, 205.

⁵⁸ References are to the typewritten copy of the *Records of Donegal Presbytery, 1732-1750*, in the Presbyterian Historical Society. These are hereinafter cited as Donegal. Here see Donegal, 1-3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 12.

CHAPTER FIVE

DURING PASTORATE AT CHESTNUT LEVEL, PENNSYLVANIA (1733-1744)

Situation at Chestnut Level

The contraction of the boundaries of his parish did not solve for John Thomson all his problems. Still due him were substantial "arrears" for his past services. While for a time there was more unity in his one congregation than there had been in the two (or three, if Fishing Creek, be included, as it was in the original call), that situation was not long going to continue. Doctrinal disputes were playing a large part in the religious life of the times. With that true for the settled communities, it is easy to see how much more so it was likely to be true in a frontier settlement. John Thomson by virtue of his recognized leadership in the Synod became a target of attack, first by Jonathan Dickinson,⁶³ who in April 1729, published his "Remarks on Thomson's Overture, introducing the Adopting Act," and then by others. It was natural that certain "disorderly" ministers should refuse to recognize boundaries of congregations drawn by the Presbyteries of New Castle and Donegal and should preach to congregations within those limits. This tendency increased year after year and grew greater with the arrival in 1741 of the Great Awakening. From then on, John Thomson pleaded more and more to be allowed to go to Virginia on a permanent mission.

At the time of the Presbyterian visit to Chestnut Level⁶⁴ the Presbytery found that everything was satisfactory about John Thomson and his congregation except that (1) the church burial ground had not been fenced off, (2) the pulpit had not been finished, and (3) no effectual method of raising his support had been devised. As a result his salary was fixed at £60 per annum by obligation or £70 by subscriptions for which he was to devote his entire pastoral attention to Chestnut Level.

On that occasion Mr. Thomson preached from Ephesians 3: 8, "Unto me who am less than the least of the saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." How appropriate a text for him to choose! For his every recorded work bears testimony to his own humility of spirit, to his constant desire to preach among those who have not heard the Gospel message, and to his insistence upon a constant search for the riches of Christ. It is small wonder that the sermon was unanimously approved.

Two months earlier Daniel McConnell, repentant over his past sins, agreed to pay John Thomson the sum of £2 10 s. which he owed him.

Presbyterial Offices Held

After ending his term as moderator in November, 1733, he was called upon again in 1734 to act as moderator *pro tempore*. When the Presbytery met at Donegal on October 16, 1734, he was chosen clerk, a position he continued to hold uninterruptedly until 1737. On September 21, 1742, the Presbytery, while again meeting at Donegal, elected John Thomson "constant clark." We should now say "Stated Clerk." This position he continued to hold until 1744.

During these years 1733-1744 he supplied "the people over the Elk River;" those at Nottingham "on Sabbath come a seven-night" after November 18, 1735, where he was to observe "what members of New Castle Presbytery have done by way of preaching within our borders;" the people of Conodoquinet,⁶⁵ or "beyond the river," or "beyond susquehanna;" at Conestoga; at Deer Creek, "first on Sabbath come a fortnight" after Sept 9, 1738, then "every third Sabbath thereafter till our next;" at Lower Meeting, Hopewell; at Leacock, and Donegal; and in 1741 by direction of the Synod, at Norriton.⁶⁶

Secretarial and Judicial Services to Presbytery

On behalf of the Donegal Presbytery Mr. Thomson revised with Mr. Anderson all the minutes from 1732 to 1734; wrote

letters to the New Castle Presbytery in 1735 and 1740, to the Lewes Presbytery in 1740, to the people of Nottingham in 1735, to Alexander McCameron in 1740, and to Rev. John Craig in 1741; transcribed all the records in the Orr-Kilpatrick case of 1735; and prepared a call to Mr. Paul from Nottingham in 1736. He served as correspondent to other presbyteries three times: to New Castle in 1733 and 1734 and to Lewes in 1736. His specific judicial activities concerned the cases of Margaret Finney, Mr. Dunlap, and Reverend Samuel Black, the censure of Rev. John Boyd, and a petition to Synod concerning Messrs. Gilbert Tennent and Samuel Blair.

He served on the committees (1) to transact business between meetings of the Presbytery 1735, 1736; (2) to perambulate the bounds of certain congregations in 1736; (3) to visit Virginia and arrange for supplies there, 1737; (4) to examine candidates for the ministry, 1737; and (5) to secure funds for "The School." He participated in the ordination of ministers, had the usual share of preaching assignments, and more than once the minutes refer to his forgiveness of offenders.

Author of The Poor Orphans Legacy

In 1734 Benjamin Franklin published a 38-page pamphlet entitled *The Poor Orphans Legacy*, whose author was described as a minister of the Gospel. We now know that the author was John Thomson. Numerous expressions therein are those that John Thomson later used in certain of his signed works, notably in his *Explication of the Shorter Catechism*. A few illustrations will suffice. This brochure has a subtitle, for example: "Being a short Collection of godly Counsels and Exhortations to a young arising Generation." He dedicates the *Explication* to "the young rising Generation of Christians."⁶⁷ The expression "for the removal of this inconsistency" reminds one of "There is a double inconsistency" quoted in the passage in chapter six of this article. Lastly his advice "First then, in general, I entreat and charge you to make practical religion your main and prin-

incipal work and business while you are in the world” anticipates the answer to the fourteenth question in the *Explication*, “Is it needful for a Christian’s glorifying God to have the glory of God continually in his thoughts as his main and principal end in everything he is employed about?”⁶⁸

The event that had occurred which justified the title was the death, just shortly before, of his first wife, the mother of his twelve children then living. He realized that if he too should then die, his children would indeed be poor orphans. So he explained that this collection of counsels was “primarily designed by the Author for his own Children, but published that others may also reap Benefit by them.”

In the “Introduction Addressed to the Reader” he gave the following reasons for this action:⁶⁹

To the Reader:

I think it convenient to acquaint thee with the Reasons which moved me to expose these counsels to publick View, which were originally designed for my own Children, and they are these;

First, There’s a necessity for their being printed, that my own Children might reap the Benefit of them. 2. I rather should rejoice than grudge that others besides should reap Benefit by all and any of those my poor Labours. 3. I am encouraged hereunto by some christian Friends, out of the Zeal which they have for publick edification; *bonum quo communis eo melius*, the more extensive and communicative any Good is, the better it is.

If my plain and homely Way of speaking to my own Children, may seem to any not so suitable to the Edification of the Publick; for removing of this Inconveniency, I desire that such as may think so, may (while they are reading) either suffer the Author to be their own Father, or that their Father had composed and prepared these Counsels for their Use, and perhaps it may, at least in part, remove or prevent any Disrelish which otherwise might be conceived at this Performance, or any Part or Passages of it.

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.

When Martha Baker died in Prince Edward County, Virginia, in 1759, the inventory of her estate made shortly thereafter showed that she owned the following books: 2 Bibles, 1 Testament, 1 *Papist and Protestant*, 1 Thomson’s *Explication*

of the *Shorter Catechism*, 1 Thomson's *Orphans Legacy*, and 1 *Young Man's Companion*, according to Dr. Eggleston,⁷⁰ but a careful recheck of that inventory shows that the word "Thomson's" does not appear in the record before *Orphans*.

In 1792 Andrew Baker, one of her nephews and one of John Thomson's grandsons, republished *The Poor Orphans Legacy*,⁷¹ referring to its author as John Thomson.

In May 1860, the Presbyterian Board of Publication reprinted this work. Of the two thousand copies then published (the price was fifteen cents each) not a single one is now owned by the Presbyterian Historical Society today. The authors of the *Crockett Family and Connecting Lines* in 1928, said that a few copies of that edition were then extant in southwestern Virginia.⁷² In that edition the work consisted of 67 pages, 18 mo. The church advertisement read:⁷³

Every parent would do well to put this instructive volume into the hands of his children. It is a complete manual of Christian morals.

Another item of interesting proof that John Thomson was the author of this work has recently come to light. In the Library of the Presbyterian Historical Society is a volume entitled *The Assembly's Shorter Catechism Explained by Way of Question and Answer*, which had been written in two parts. Part I dealt with what man is to believe concerning God; Part II with what duty God requires of man. Part I was completed prior to 1752 when Ralph Erskine, one of the authors, died; Part II, in 1760 according to a statement in the Introduction by the last of the three authors, James Fisher. The copy above mentioned was printed in Glasgow in 1764. The Reverend Matthew Wilson purchased it in 1767, as he indicates on its fly leaf. He studied its contents with extreme care and noted on almost every page what some one else had written on the subject treated on that page. At the bottom of page 90, of Part II, in Matthew Wilson's own penmanship is a note reading:

Or Wilison's Sacr. Catechism, etc.,
Or Thompson's Orphans Legacy.

The first of these referred to John Willison's *Sacramental Catechism*, published in Belfast in 1735; the latter, to John Thomson's *Poor Orphans Legacy*, published in Philadelphia in 1734.

Author of Overtures in Presbytery

On April 4, 1739, Mr. Thomson was appointed to attend the next Presbytery of New Castle to get their concurrence on a supplication concerning the "conscientious scruples" of some of the people "about the English mode of swearing in judgments" and he was directed to draft an overture on that subject. Others of which he was the author related to (1) ministers and probationers from Ireland, (2) strangers preaching to vacant congregations, (3) the erection of a seminary of learning, and (4) disorderly preachers. Reference will be made later to certain of these when discussing his overture to the Synod of Philadelphia.

Services to the Synod of Philadelphia

At the May 15, 1736, meeting of Synod, John Thomson was chosen clerk.⁷⁴ On behalf of that body he (alone or with others) drew up overtures on the following subjects: (1) on Mr. Gilbert Tennent's overture, 1734,⁷⁵ on ministers coming from Europe, 1735,⁷⁶ on the McNeal affair, 1735,⁷⁷ on the Hunter affair, 1736,⁷⁸ on the complaint against Rev. Wm. Tennent by some of the people of Neshaminy, 1737,⁷⁹ on the West Hanover supplication, 1738,⁸⁰ and, on the Tennent-Covell affair, 1739,⁸¹ the purpose of which was "to compose the differences between Gilbert Tennent and Mr. [David] Covell."

Mr. Thomson's secretarial activities included the preparation of a call to a new minister at Philadelphia in 1736, and the drafting of letters (some times with the aid of others) to the congregation at Jamaica, N. Y., 1737, on behalf of funds for Mr. Barr in Philadelphia, 1737, to the Synod of Ireland, 1737, to all Presbyterian Congregations on erecting a School of learning, 1739, and to the General Assembly of the Church

of Scotland, 1743.⁸² The purpose of this last mentioned letter was to "lay before them the low and melancholy condition of the infant church, both for want of probationers to supply our various vacancies, and also for want of a suitable encouragement to ministers in new settlements and entreat them both to send ministers and probationers to us and to allow them some small support out of their fund for some years in new places. And that they may be pleased to enable us in some measure and by some method to erect a seminary or school for educating young men for those ends among ourselves." Here are mentioned two of the outstanding items in John Thomson's interest—missionary encouragement and an educated ministry.

He served during the years 1721–1746 on the Committee for the Fund as has been already noted from 1734 to 1746 on the Commission for the Synod (except in 1745 when he worked so strenuously for peace between the Synods of New York and Philadelphia) and in 1735 on the Committee "on license to print." Nothing was to be published by a member of the Synod in a controversial matter without the Synodical *imprimatur*. The committee appointed for this purpose was divided into two parts and John Thomson was to serve in the area south of Philadelphia, along with Messrs. Anderson, Thomas Evans, Cathcart, and Stevenson, any three of whom were to constitute a quorum.⁸³

Signer of the Protest

June 1, 1741, is an important date in American Presbyterianism. The controversy over the New Brunswick Presbytery's refusal to observe orders of the Synod with which it did not agree, the bitterness of the attack by Gilbert Tennent and others on many of their brethren as "graceless and unconverted ministers," and the publication of certain anonymous scurrilous attacks on them, had then reached a head. When every effort at reconciliation had failed, the Reverend Robert Cross, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, read that day to the Synod what has become

known as the Protest of 1741. It was a moderately-toned, wholly dispassionate statement of what he and the other signers believed to be basic in Presbyterian Church government.

It seems so reasonable, when read now two centuries later, that one cannot help wondering why matters were ever allowed to reach such an ugly pass in a Christian body that such a protest became necessary. Its logic is so irrefutable, that it is not surprising that after the passions of the day had been spent and the Great Schism wrought, wise counsels prevailed and the movement for reconciliation got well under way.

The protest was signed by Robert Cross, John Thomson, Francis Alison, Robert Cathcart, and eight other ministers and seven elders.⁸⁴ 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. 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.

The ground work for the protest had been laid by John Thomson who on April 1, 1741, had presented to the Presbytery, meeting at Donegal, an overture described in the minutes as an overture "to prevent disorderly persons from intruding into our congregations and [to prevent our people] from going to hear them."⁸⁵ The authors were John Thomson and three elders of his Chestnut Level congregation. They were concerned over the "woeful and lamentable divisions, distractions, and confusions that are on foot in this poor, weak, infant Church in this part of the world." One cause for that condition was "the divisive, uncharitable, rash judging [and] disorderly practice of some members of our Synod who take upon them [selves], in a very daring and presumptuous manner, to pass sentence upon their brethren, as it were by wholesale without distinction, as carnal, graceless, unconverted ministers, whose ministry can do no good to precious and immortal souls." Such members of the Synod, said the overture, "have been going about . . .

preaching to the flocks . . . of other ministers, sowing the seeds of divisions and possessing the people who are exceedingly amused and captivated with the show of extraordinary zeal and piety which those brethren bear before them." One of the results was to produce "deep prejudices against their own pastors" and "by such means persuade them to turn their backs upon their own pastors and the ordinances of the Church administered by them in truth and purity." As a result of these schemes "most congregations in the country are reduced to such disorder and confusion that the preaching of the Word is despised and forsaken, the ministers of the Gospel are contemned and evil spoken of, their public administrations and private conduct misrepresented and traduced." What has been said was the visible cause of the trouble. "We are also sensible . . . that our abuse of mercies, especially of the Gospel privilege, is at the bottom of all this trouble." "We have provoked our Heavenly Father, offended our loving Redeemer, and grieved his Holy Spirit so that we are just given up of God to fall into these confusions." Then follows a prayer for the outpouring upon the authors of the overtures and all others of

a spirit of repentance, of grace, and of supplication that every one of us would in earnest examine ourselves, wherein we have every one by our own peculiar misconduct contributed to the procuring of this dreadful plague and judgment which hath so much sin in it, that unless true repentance and reformation prevent it, we may look on it as a sure presage of some judgment yet more terrible, which He is preparing for us, while we are preparing ourselves yet for it, by our uncharitable divisions, whereby we bite and devour one another.

Then this statement followed :

We being deeply affected and afflicted with the serious considerations of these things, and being still willing and desirous to do all that lies in our power for the healing and removing of these woeful threatening evils; or if we can do no more, then bear our testimony against them; we have agreed among ourselves to propose, the following particulars to the serious consideration of our Reverend Presbytery.

Days of Fasting and Prayer

When the Donegal Presbytery met on June 17, 1740, it agreed

that considering the unhappy divisions of the Church in this part of the world, there be a day of public humiliation, fasting, and prayer kept thro' the several Congregations in our bounds, and that Mr. John Thomson shall draw up a kind of representation of these melancholy divisions as the occasion of the fast, to be publicly read in our congregations on the morning of the said day, and that the 2nd Thursday of August shall be set apart for said fast.

Again in September 1740, there was a similar day observed. The reason for this second fast day so soon after the other one was, however, vastly different. September 3rd was to be "a day of fasting and prayer in order to implore the divine blessing and concurrence on this great work," i.e., the ordination of Mr. John Craig as first pastor of a church in Virginia, in the south part of Beverly Manor.

Sermon on the Doctrine of Conviction

The year 1741 is also important in this study, for it was then that John Thomson published two important works which still survive and which throw light on his place as a leader in the church. One of these was the *Doctrine of Conviction set in a clear Light, or an Examination and Confutation of several Errors Relating to Conversion*. This was denounced by Gilbert Tennent, as a detestable and inconsistent performance.⁸⁶ Another to attack it was Samuel Finley, noted for his fondness for controversy,⁸⁷ and the use of bitter invective. He called Thomson and others of the Old Lights "the set of priests whom Christ damned for their rotten performances, fastings, prayers, and alms," "diabolical reasoners," "ministers of Satan." Finley's reply was a discourse entitled *The Clear Light Shining out in Obscure Darkness, or Examination and Refutation of Mr. Thomson's sermon, entitled, etc.* Examining it a century later, Hodge says of it, "Mr. Thompson's [sic] sermon is a long and excellent discourse in 1 Cor.

iii, 12, 13,"⁸⁸ and Webster called it "able, scriptural, dignified."⁸⁹

The Government of the Church of Christ

The other work was *The Government of the Church of Christ and the Authority of Church Judicatories established on a Scripture Foundation: And the Spirit of Rash Judging, arrainged and condemned, or the Matter of the Difference between the Synod of Philadelphia and the Protesting Brethren justly and farely stated BEING an Examination of two Papers brought in by two of the Protesting Brethren and read publickly in our Synod in May 1740. And also of an Apology brought in, subscribed by the Protesting Brethren, and read also in open Synod in May 1739.* The Synod had authorized the publication of this book when on June 1, 1741, it had "ordered that Messrs. Thomson, Thomas Evans, and Alison defend the protestation in print, if need be."⁹⁰ The Synod then ordered John Thomson to preach the very next Sunday at Norriton, whose congregation was known as enthusiastic about the New Light doctrines.

The following quotations from that book on church government illustrate the nobility of John Thomson's soul better than paraphrases could:⁹¹

This matter belongeth unto us in a special manner, firstly, by virtue of our office and station; and again, because we have had a guilty hand in bringing in the evil; we should, therefore, strive and endeavour to have a prime and leading hand in healing and removing it. In order to this, I think these things are undoubtely incumbent on us: First, that every one of us endeavour, with an impartial severity, to examine and look back upon our past conduct and behaviour as Christians and as ministers of the gospel, calling and setting our consciences to work, to compare our past behaviour with the divine law, which is holy, spiritual, just, and good; weighing ourselves in the balances of the sanctuary, with the same exactness with which we expect to be weighed by our holy and impartial Judge, that we may be convinced how far we have come short of our duty, even of what we might have done, as Christians and ministers, for the glory of God, our own and others' salvation; and especially how far we have come short of that exemplary piety, circum-

spection, and tenderness of walk, and spiritualness of converse with others, which, as ministers of the gospel of Christ, we should have studied; as also, how far we have failed in degree of love, care, zeal, and tender concern for the souls of men.

2. Another thing incumbent on us, that whatever our consciences lay to our charge in these matters, we confess the same before the Lord, and bewail them with grief and sorrow of heart, in deep humiliation, earnestly praying for pardon; and resolving in the strength of divine grace, to amend and reform all we find wanting or amiss in these or any other particulars, resolving still to grow in the exercise of every grace and the practice of holiness.

3. Another thing incumbent is, that we labour to be possessed with an earnest care and concern for the salvation of our own souls; and particularly to make sure of a work of grace and regeneration in our own hearts, so as never to be at ease and quiet without some comfortable evidence of it, in the discernible exercise of grace in our hearts, together with the suitable genuine fruits of holiness in our lives.

4. Let us earnestly labour to get our affections weaned from the world and all sublunary things, and to set them on things above, that our love to God and to our Lord Jesus Christ, our concern for his glory in the faithful performance of duty and the promotion of the kingdom of grace, by the conversion and edification of souls, may so employ and take up our thoughts that all worldly interests may appear but empty trifles in comparison with these things. . . . There is a great difference between preaching the gospel that we may get a living, and to desire a living that we may be enabled to preach the gospel. And happy is that minister who is enabled cheerfully and resolutely to the latter, and truly and effectually to avoid the former.

5. Another thing to be endeavoured by us, is to strive to suit our gospel ministrations, not so much to the relish and taste as to the necessities of our people; and in order thereunto to endeavour, by all means, to be acquainted with their spiritual state, as far as practicable by us; that knowing their diseases and wants we may know how to suit our doctrine thereunto.—And particularly we should endeavour to bend our forces and to use our best skill, to suit the prevalent distemper of this carnal and secure age, striving with all our might to rouse secure sinners and awaken them out of their sleep, and drowsy saints from their slumber and carnal security.—For this purpose we should not only assert and maintain the necessity of regeneration and converting grace, and of a righteous and godly walk, and of increase and advancement therein, but also endeavour to press the same home upon their consciences with

all earnestness, as if we saw them perishing and would gladly be the means of their deliverance.

6. It would also contribute not a little to promote and revive a work of grace, if we could effectually revive congregational discipline, in order to convince sinners and make them ashamed of their scandalous outbreaks. For I am afraid that most of us are too lax and remiss in this matter, so that the highest privileges of Christ's church, I mean external privileges, are too often given to such whose conversation is very unsuitable unto them.

and lastly :

. . . yea, I am firmly persuaded that our barrenness and fruitlessness under the means of grace, the decay of vital godliness in both ministers and people, our too great contentedness with a lifeless lukewarm orthodox of profession, is one principal evil whereby our God hath been provoked against us, to suffer us to fall into such divisions and confusions as we are visibly involved in.

Mr. Thomson's Position Summarized

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. Concerning some of these things he said, "It is a downright calumny and slander to allege that we prejudice against the work of God because we sometimes declare our judgment against such particulars as these, which we verily are persuaded are not the work of God either in ministers or people." 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."⁹²

After the lapse of eight years Mr. Gilbert Tennent, in his *Irenicum*, speaks of these works of John Thomson's as breathing "the candid and humble spirit of true Christianity," and of John Thomson himself and his fellow-minded ministers "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."⁹³ Time had done much to heal the wounds of 1741.

In summarizing this conflict Dr. Hodge has presented the following appraisal:⁹⁴

[Mr. Thomson] appears to have been 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 those writings and they would be a very unfair criterion of the man. In what is here said in relation to Mr. Thomson's controversial writings, reference is had to those which were published with his name, or in defence of the Synod. The writer is not aware that any of the scurrilous anonymous publications of that day were ever attributed to him.

In his *History of the Presbyterian Church*, Dr. Webster, writing of Gilbert Tennent, has this to say about him and his controversy with John Thomson:⁹⁵

He reached home just before the division of the Synod, and preached in Philadelphia May 31, 1741, five times, and baptized eight adults. The next day the Protest was introduced. He

published at once "an examination and Refutation of the Protest." He soon lamented the rupture and the sad aspect of the churches throughout the colonies. . . .

In 1749, he preached and printed his "Irenicum, a Plea for the Peace of Jerusalem," to effect a union between the Synods of New York and Philadelphia. He did full justice to the brethren he had so bitterly assailed, and especially holds up Thomson—once the victim of his unsparing invective—as a worthy representative of the excellent and estimable principles of his Old-Side associates. He freely justifies them from the charge of being opposers of the work of God or heart enemies to vital goodness—doing it as cordially as if he had been foremost & loudest in creating these unfavorable impressions of them.

Part in Establishing the University of Delaware

Possibly by 1727 Reverend William Tennent, Sr., had established at Neshaminy, Pennsylvania, his school, later called the Log College, where many able young men received an excellent training for the ministry. The Log College was a private rather than a church undertaking, being under the control of neither the Presbytery nor the Synod.

Mention has already been made⁹⁶ of the overture which on April 4, 1739, Mr. Thomson introduced at a meeting of the Donegal Presbytery to provide for "the erecting of a public school or seminary of learning," which should "be laid before the Synod." The Presbytery unanimously agreed and then directed its author to go to the next meeting of the New Castle Presbytery to "endeavor to get the concurrence of that Presbytery therewith." When the Synod had met the previous May, the Presbytery of Lewes proposed that instruction be arranged for candidates for the ministry and that John Thomson be appointed on the committee serving south of Philadelphia to instruct in philosophy, divinity, and the languages.⁹⁷

In May 1739 the Synod unanimously approved the overture submitted to it from Donegal Presbytery and took steps to secure funds for the school, if possible, from Europe and Boston. On August 15, 1739, at a meeting of the Commission of the Synod Mr. Thomson was directed to write a synodical

letter on this subject which was to be sent to the various Presbyterian congregations.⁹⁸ Correspondence continued on behalf of this project but no further organized action was taken until the committee on the school met at the Great Valley on November 16, 1743, when it decided to open the school which should be free to all persons who may choose to send their sons to it for instruction in philosophy, divinity, and the languages. Each congregation was to make yearly contributions for its support "as God may incline them to contribute, until Providence open a door for our supporting the School some other way." Mr. Francis Alison was to be master and to receive £20 per annum and "his usher" was to receive £15. When the Synod met in 1744, approval was given to the work of the committee, but the Synod appointed a board of trustees for the School, three of whom were directed to visit the school every quarter. The sessions of the school were to extend from the third Wednesday of September to the last Tuesday of June each year. John Thomson was chosen to serve on the original board of trustees.⁹⁹

While this is not the place to trace the changes that were made in the school tuition, its personnel and similar matters, it seems appropriate to mention that about 1752 Mr. Francis Alison went to Philadelphia, where he took charge of the academy in that city which later grew into the University of Pennsylvania, and that his place in the synodical school was taken by Mr. Alexander McDowell under whose leadership it continued to grow in great usefulness. McDowell, a native of Ireland, is said to have been living in Virginia when John Thomson, visiting the new settlements in that colony, became acquainted with him, and presented to him the idea of entering the ministry.¹⁰⁰ Mr. McDowell moved the school to Newark, Delaware, and in 1769 Thomas and Richard Penn chartered it as the Newark Academy. Later it was called the College of Delaware and is now the University of Delaware. The charter of 1769 reads:

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, &c.¹⁰¹

The Beginning of Interest in Virginia

In 1733, as already mentioned,¹⁰² the letter to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland included an appeal for funds for the use of itinerant ministers in Virginia. Mr. Hugh Stevenson had just reported "the harsh and injurious usage which he met with from some gentlemen in Virginia."

"As early as September 1735," says Dr. Webster in his *History of the Presbyterian Church*,¹⁰³ "the emigration to Virginia attracted the attention of Thomson, of Chestnut Level, and he proposed to Donegal Presbytery to employ an itinerant in Virginia. The overture was 'simply approved . . . : they concurred in his plan heartily.' "

When Presbyterian missionary operations actually began in "the back parts of Virginia" has never been settled. There is, however, a statement in the records of the Donegal Presbytery for September 1, 1736, which reads, "Mr. [Samuel] Gelston reports that he has fulfilled his appointment with respect to Virginia."¹⁰⁴ On April 7, 1737, the Presbytery ordered that "one of the members of the said [standing] committee [on which John Thomson was serving] proceed to pay a visit to the people of our persuasion lately settled in Virginia,"¹⁰⁵ and five months later "a supplication from the new settled people of Beverly Manor in the back parts of Virginia requesting supplies was read." The Presbytery, judging it inexpedient to send supplies that coming winter, decided to have Mr. James Anderson "write to them an encouraging letter and to signify that Presbytery resolves, if it be in their power, to grant their request next spring."¹⁰⁶

On April 11, 1738, the Donegal Presbytery approved John Caldwell's supplication and agreed to recommend it to the

Synod. When the Synod met six weeks later it adopted the following minute: ¹⁰⁷

Upon the supplication of John Caldwell, in behalf of himself and many families of our persuasion, who are about to settle in the back parts of Virginia, desiring that some members of the Synod may be appointed to wait on that government, to solicit their favour in behalf of our interest in that place: Overtured, That according to the purport of the supplication, the Synod appoint two of their number to go and wait upon the governor and council of Virginia, with suitable instructions in order to procure the favour and countenance of the government of that province, to the laying a foundation of our interest in the back parts thereof, where considerable numbers of families of our persuasion are settling, and that something be allowed out of our fund to bear the charges of said brethren who are appointed; and that also provision be made for supplying the congregations of said brethren during their absence from them, while prosecuting said affair; and that Messrs. Robert Cross, Anderson, Conn, and Orme prosecute said affair; and that Messrs. Thomson, Dickinson, and Pemberton, prepare instructions for said brethren, and write a letter in the name of the Synod to the said government, to be brought in and approved by the Synod; and that the respective Presbyteries take care of these Congregations during the absence of their pastors. And it is further overtured, that these brethren be allowed a discretionary power of using what money they have occasion for, to bear their expenses in a manner suitable to their design, being accountable to the Synod for their conduct in the whole affair. Approved *nemine contradicente*.

The above-mentioned letter was written May 3, 1738.¹⁰⁸ John Caldwell was a member of Mr. Thomson's congregation.

A year later Mr. Anderson reported back to Presbytery ¹⁰⁹ the satisfactory conclusion of his mission to the Governor of Virginia, and the letter of the Governor was spread on the Minutes of the Synod. The committee thanked Mr. Anderson on behalf of the Synod for his services.

On September 4, 1739, for the first time,¹¹⁰ there is a written item concerning the willingness of Mr. Thomson to go to Virginia, "if the Lord shall please to call him thereunto." "If the other difficulties in the way can be surmounted," reads the minute, "the Presbytery look on him as a very fit person for this great undertaking but leave the further consideration

of the matter till our next." The matter was then deferred until October 30.

First Controversy at Chestnut Level (1739-1741)

On that date John Thomson petitioned the Donegal Presbytery to dissolve his pastoral relationship to the Chestnut Level Church in order to enable him to settle in Virginia. Hints of difficulties of some personal sort appear. We read in the minutes of October 9th of that year, "Mr. Thomson's affair in reference to Virginia is taken into consideration and he addressed himself to his congregation in a patriotic manner very much to the Presbytery's satisfaction." He had preached to the Chestnut Level congregation a sermon whose text was Psalm 103: 17, 18. The next day the decision not to grant his request was made. Instead the Presbytery recommended "to our brother Mr. Thomson that he be strictly watchful of his conduct as pastor and sincerely endeavour diligence in the work of the ministry." They earnestly urged "both to Mr. Thomson and his people that they exert themselves in a Christian manner, to cultivate and exercise mutual love, forbearance, and concord." "Mr. Anderson is appointed to exhort them thereunto."¹¹¹

On December 10, 1740, two supplications from Middle Octorara were read "complaining of Mr. Thomson's conduct and doctrine as being too general." He was thereupon ordered to supply at his old church the second Sabbath in February, 1741.¹¹²

Meeting at Donegal on April 9, 1741, the Presbytery examined the charges against Mr. Thomson brought by one Daniel McFarland and pronounced them "a forgery."¹¹³ After the tumult that resulted from the reading of the forged charge had subsided a bit, John Luckey requested "a demission from Mr. Thomson as his pastor, for the same reasons [as] mentioned in the forged charge." The Presbytery rejected this request because the reasons alleged in it appeared to them "false and groundless."¹¹⁴

The controversy, it would seem probable, was based on the congregation's opposition to their pastor's preoccupation with

the Virginia mission (to be discussed in the next chapter) and with his leadership of a part of the church in the historic fight between the Old Side and the New Side in the fight of 1741.

Improvement in the Situation at Chestnut Level

On November 11, 1742, Mr. Thomson notified the Presbytery that he understood "that there has been some industry, used by the members of his session, to bring the affairs of the congregation to a more comfortable situation but that the business is not yet brought to perfection."¹¹⁵ Five months later further improvement at Chestnut Level was noted by the Presbytery.¹¹⁶

On the third Sunday in September 1743 Rev. Messrs. Boyd and Bertram preached to the people at Chestnut Level admonishing them to take some regular and feasible measures to raise and secure a reasonable maintenance for John Thomson "for his encouragement to remain among them." As a result the elders there promised carefully to collect Mr. Thomson's stipend for this year "and then to solicit subscriptions from those persons in the congregation who had not formerly pledged anything."¹¹⁷

His Request to leave Chestnut Level Granted

Three years were to elapse before the matter of the severance of the ties between John Thomson and his congregation reappeared. On April 4, 1744, he renewed that request, but action was deferred until the June 12th meeting.¹¹⁸ Then John Alison on behalf of the Chestnut Level congregation pleaded that no action be then taken until the Presbytery should meet again at his church, which date was fixed for July 31st.¹¹⁹ When that day arrived the following minute was adopted:¹²⁰

"It was a wrong step for Mr. Thomson to sue for a demission before he came home among his people after so long a time."

The Presbytery furthermore voted to submit the whole matter to the Synod. To this whole procedure and judgment Mr. Thomson objected and asked for a review which was granted, to take place the next day.¹²¹

The rest of the story told in the original records is as follows:¹²²

The Presbyt called for the session of this church's congregation to enquire if they were willing for a review and they declared that Mr. Thomson not acquiescing in the judgment has much exasperated the people, that they feared many would not adhere to him if he should be obliged to stay and that his continuing would be like to rent [*sic*] the congregation and would not be for edification as other wise it might and therefore they were willing it should be reviewed and that the Pby should do as they saw cause, tho for their part they would all heartily desire his staying, if it would be for good.

Then the people were called in—and after they had concluded together they declared by their commissioner the same thing and that they found plainly they could not make good what they had promised yesterday . . . some others of the people declaring that they had heard many of the people declare they would never adhere to him more.

The Pby called Mr. Thomson and the people and heard Mr. Thomson's reasons again and what more he could urge and then inquired of the Session and people whether they thought the people would cordially adhere still to Mr. Thomson, whether they thought they could provide such support as they had before proposed and found the people were so dissatisfied with Mr. Thomson's urging and persisting for a demission after the judgment had been given that his staying was not likely to be for edification, was likely to occasion rents among the people and that there was little hope that it should be for the glory of God, the promoting of religion in this place or the comfort of either part as to continue their relation and therefore after considering the whole state of the affair, though the Pby must judge that the people have been deficient on their part heretofore, yet they cannot think but that Mr. Thomson's conduct hath been a great occasion of bringing things to this pass: and so in consideration of the reasons he urges, but chiefly because his stay will not be for the good of religion, They agree to grant him a demission, as thinking they have now sufficient reasons to do this and having resolved in the last¹²³ judgment to do so if sufficient light were got without delaying till the Synod. All parties were called in and this judgment publicly read and

Mr. Thomson and the people [were] exhorted suitable to the occasion and all parties acquiesced in the judgment. . . .

Ordered that Mr Thomson supply Chestnut Level for ordinary untill he go to Virginia and Mr. Boyd the last Sabbath of October.

⁶³ Webster, 359.

⁶⁴ All subsequent statements in this Chapter relating to Presbyterian matters are based on the Minutes of the Donegal Presbytery for the years 1733-1744.

⁶⁵ Guy S. Klett: *Presbyterians in Colonial Pennsylvania*, 70.

⁶⁶ *Records*, 161.

⁶⁷ *Infra*, 51.

⁶⁸ *Infra*, 50.

⁶⁹ *Poor Orphans Legacy*, 1-2.

⁷⁰ Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, Vol. XLIX, 315, and I Prince Edward Wills 42.

⁷¹ *Opus cit.*, 200.

⁷² *Descriptive Catalogue of Presbyterian Board of Publication*, 210.

⁷³ *Annual Reports of the Presbyterian Board of Publication*, Volume II, 1859-1870, 13.

⁷⁴ *Records*, 122.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 140, 148.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 133, 135, 151, 170, 171.

- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, 118.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 157-160. Hodge, Part II, 147-156.
- ⁸⁵ Donegal, 319-330.
- ⁸⁶ Gilbert Tennent: *Examiner Examined*, 17.
- ⁸⁷ Webster, 161-162, 489.
- ⁸⁸ Hodge, Part II, 190.
- ⁸⁹ Webster, 162.
- ⁹⁰ *Records*, 161.
- ⁹¹ John Thomson: *Government of the Church of Christ*, 29, and other pages.
- ⁹² *Ibid.*, 33, 34.
- ⁹³ *Opus cit.*, 82.
- ⁹⁴ Hodge, 128-129. He spells Thomson as Thompson throughout. Otherwise the quotation is literally followed.
- ⁹⁵ *Opus cit.*, 392-393.
- ⁹⁶ *Supra*, 28.
- ⁹⁷ *Records*, 141.
- ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.
- ⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.
- ¹⁰⁰ Webster, 356, 468.
- ¹⁰¹ Quoted in Hodge, 222.
- ¹⁰² *Supra*, 20.
- ¹⁰³ *Opus cit.*, 331-332.
- ¹⁰⁴ Donegal, 171.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.
- ¹⁰⁷ *Records*, 138-139.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.
- ¹¹⁰ Donegal, 256.
- ¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 262-263.
- ¹¹² *Ibid.*, 301.
- ¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 316.
- ¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 317.
- ¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 370.
- ¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 373.
- ¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 392, 394.
- ¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 413.
- ¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 415.
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 418.
- ¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 418-419.
- ¹²² *Ibid.*, 419-422.
- ¹²³ Meaning "latest previous."

CHAPTER SIX

DURING PASTORATE AT BUFFALO, VIRGINIA (1744-1750)

Early Visits to Virginia

How many times between 1733 and 1744 Mr. Thomson visited Virginia is not known, nor is the date of his first trip there certain. It was in 1739, according to Dr. Hodge,¹²⁴ that "he supplied in the neighbourhood of Winchester and Staunton," while Dr. Eggleston has written:¹²⁵

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 in Pennsylvania.

Regardless of whether 1738 or 1739 is the correct date, it is known that he was spending much, if not most, of his time thereafter in Virginia. In fact, that circumstance was probably one of the chief causes of resentment against him among certain of his people at Chestnut Level. The record is clear¹²⁶ that some time during 1739 he preached in the Opeckon neighborhood, both parts of which supplicated to secure him as their permanent minister, and later he preached near Staunton, next at Rockfish Gap in Nelson County, then at Cub Creek in Brunswick (now Charlotte) county, at Buffalo and Walkers in Amelia (now Prince Edward) county, and at Hat Creek and Concord in Campbell county. He had, as Dr. Foote has mentioned,¹²⁷ taken "up voluntary collections for preachers of the Gospel . . . itinerating in the new settlements and was active in promoting the best interests of our church."

On September 7, 1743, the Presbytery,¹²⁸ meeting at Donegal, ordered Mr. John Thomson "to supply the back parts of Virginia until sometime in November at discretion."

When, moreover, Alexander McDowell was about to leave for his work in Virginia, Mr. Thomson was directed "to give him recommendations to that people." It is reasonable to suppose that they were personal as well as presbyterial, and that they were based on Mr. Thomson's acquaintance with Presbyterians in the neighborhoods which McDowell would serve as evangelist, as well as on his own knowledge of the young man himself, who, it is believed, entered the ministry as a result of Thomson's influence upon him.¹²⁹

Settlement at Buffalo

When released by the Donegal Presbytery from his tie to the Chestnut Level congregation, he promptly moved with certain members of his family to the Buffalo neighborhood where, in the opinion of this writer, he spent the happiest and possibly also the most useful years of his life. The old dissensions were behind him. In his new community the families led by John Caldwell and those who later came were decidedly pro-Thomson. There he labored in a peaceful, despite its being a pioneer, settlement. But he loved pioneering, for his spirit was, as Dr. Eggleston has said,¹³⁰ the spirit of the true missionary, "to press on into regions that had as yet been unreached, and to organize churches." In the opinion of the present writer, this Virginia community was chosen by Thomson for such labors because therein and nearby lived many families who were close of kin to members of his congregation in Pennsylvania. In both Provinces there were Andersons, Garlands, Cunninghams, Daniels, Lawsons, Parks and numerous other families, mostly or entirely Scotch-Irish in origin. Those friendly groups constituted real magnets, drawing John Thomson toward them.

Unfortunately the loss of the Session Books of the Buffalo Church prior to 1803 has made it impossible to learn who its members were, when and whom they married (except for the partial collection of marriage bonds still available for examination at the Prince Edward and Amelia Courthouses), the names of their children, when they were born and baptized, and the dates of death (except as the settlement of their

estates in the county records may throw light thereon). Of course, some parts of these intimate data have been preserved in family Bibles and in certain cases have been published.

Services to the Presbytery and Synod

Despite the inconvenience of travel from "the back parts of Virginia" to Philadelphia, John Thomson made that trip in May, 1745, in order to attend the meeting of Synod which was going to deliberate on a plan which he hoped would prevent the secession of "the New York brethren." In the minutes of the session of May 24, 1745, we read: ¹³¹

After much consultation had in this affair they appoint again that Messrs. [John] Thomson, [Francis] Alison, [Timothy] Griffith, [John] Steel, and [Alexander] McDowell be a committee to prepare a plan for union, against our next *sederunt*: any three of them to be a quorum to do this.

The next day after the plan was submitted to and rejected by the New York brethren, the creation of the Synod of New York was authorized by the Synod of Philadelphia. This procedure was followed because the New York brethren desired this in order "that they may not be thought to set up and act in opposition to this, and that there may be a foundation for the two Synods to consult and act in mutual concert with one another hereafter and maintain love and brotherly kindness." Thereupon a committee consisting of Messrs. Thomson, Alison, Griffith, and McDowell was appointed to draft the Act of Constituting the Synod of New York. They brought in their report on Monday morning, May 27. It reads as follows: ¹³²

The unhappy divisions which have subsisted among us for some years, cannot but deeply affect all that wish the welfare of Zion; but it particularly affects us, that some of our brethren of New York do not at present see their way clear to continue in Synodical communion with us. And though we judge they have no just ground to withdraw from us, yet seeing they propose to erect themselves into a Synod at New York, and now desire to do this in the most friendly manner possible, we declare, if they or any of them do so, we shall endeavour to maintain charitable and Christian affections toward them and show

the same upon all occasions by such correspondence and fellowship, as we shall think [to be our] duty and consistent with a good conscience.

That day Thomson prepared at the request of Synod a letter to the Governor of Virginia who had been in correspondence with the Moderator over certain religious disturbances that had been taking place in the Old Dominion. In it he pointed out the differences between the New Lights and the legally recognized Presbyterians. No further difficulty on that score was ever again noted by the Synod. In addition, he was also that day appointed a member of a committee to prepare "a declaration against the present divisive practices that prevail in the church."¹³³

On November 10, 1747, the Donegal Presbytery, when it had heard the report of a committee of the brethren in Virginia, authorized Messrs. Thomson, Black, and Craig to act with full powers in ecclesiastical matters in Virginia. Rev. Richard Sankey, Thomson's son-in-law, was directed to send them a copy of that minute.¹³⁴ This is the last reference to John Thomson in the records of that Presbytery.

Although he did not live to see the reunion of the two Synods, the Philadelphia Synod was well aware of his interest on that matter, and on May 25, 1749, adopted a minute which reads in part as follows:¹³⁵

The delegates from the Synod of New York, having conferred with us for some time upon their plan for an union, and having given us some hopes that our great ground of complaint may be removed . . . Ordered, that Mr. Griffith write a letter to Mr. Thomson in Virginia, on this head.

Author of the "Explication"

Whether Thomson's *Explication of the Shorter Catechism* was his most influential work may be disputed, but it is undoubtedly that which enjoyed the widest circulation and had a long continuing appeal. It is still probably the keenest analysis of the Shorter Catechism yet written. A single illustration of his method of teaching is worth giving. Let us assume that the child has learned that the chief end of man is

to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. What do the words mean? Well, John Thomson asks as the second question—the first in explanation of the first question in the Shorter Catechism—“What are we to understand by the ends of a thing?” He answered that and then asks and answers each of the following questions: ¹³⁶

3. What are we to understand by a chief end?
4. Are there other ends of a person's actions besides his chief end?
5. What are we to understand by the chief end of man?
6. What are we to understand by glory?
7. How many ways may a person be glorified?
8. How can man glorify God both these ways?
9. How many ways may a creature glorify God by manifesting His glory?
10. What is it to glorify God objectively?
11. What is it to glorify God actively?
12. How many ways may a reasonable creature actively glorify God?
13. Can a person that is in an unconverted state glorify God?
14. Is it needful for a Christian's glorifying God to have the glory of God continually in his thoughts as his main and principal end in every thing he is employed about?
15. Why is the enjoying of God joined with the glorifying of Him as part of man's chief end?
16. What is it to enjoy God?
17. Who are happy in the enjoyment of God?
18. Why are none others admitted to this happiness?
19. When are believers made thus happy in the enjoyment of God?

After this catechetical exercise, the author advances to an analysis of the second question of the catechism. It was with such thoroughness that the whole catechism was “explicated.”

Quotations from the “Explication”

Instead of discussing the merits of that work, a few sample passages are quoted: first, the title page, then the dedication, then two sentences from the introduction, after that an excerpt from the preface, and last the conclusion of the preface.

The wording of the title page was as follows:

An Explication of the Shorter Catechism, composed by the Assembly of Divines, commonly called the Westminster Assembly, wherein the several Questions and Answers of the said Shorter Catechism are resolved, divided, and taken apart into

several Under Questions and Answers; in order to render the whole more plain and easy to be understood not only by the rising young generation but also by the more weak and ignorant of more advanced years; that all may be helped forward in their growth in knowledge and acquaintance with the Doctrines of Faith and Principles of our holy Protestant reformed Christian Religion

By JOHN THOMSON, M. A. & V. D. M., in the
County of Amelia

John xiii, 17 If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them
2 Pet. iii, 18 But grow in Grace and in the Saving Knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ
Hos. iv, 6 My People are destroyed for lack of Knowledge
Luke xii, 48 But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes

Williamsburg:

Printed by William Parks MDCCXLIX

The Dedication follows: ¹³⁷

To the young Rising Generation of Christians in this Colony: More especially the children of Presbyterian Dissenters: and also to all Parents and Governors of Families, this Performance is affectionately dedicated.

One of the opening sentences of the Introduction follows: ¹³⁸

I have now been a Preacher of the Gospel these 36 years and am now become old and gray and know not how soon I may be called to give an account of my stewardship; and accordingly I expect that this may, perhaps, be the last Attempt which I shall make in so publick a manner for the advancement and propagation of my great Lord and Master's Interest in this world; and it would yield no small comfort to me, if I should yet live to know that this little performance, how mean so ever in itself should, by God's blessing, prove an effectual means of the Increase of Christian Knowledge where it shall come.

The last sentence of the Introduction reads thus: ¹³⁹

I now commend you and this little book (which I would advise you to make your VADE MECUM, or constant companion) unto the Blessing and protection of Divine Providence and to

the enlightening and sanctifying influences of his Holy Spirit and subscribe myself the sincere friend of your spiritual and eternal interests.

John Thomson.

Here is an excerpt from the Preface: ¹⁴⁰

There is a double inconveniency that Christian professors [i.e. professing Christians] labour under, particularly in the back parts of this Colony which is a great hindrance to the Improvement of Religion both in Knowledge and Practice: viz. . . . It is well known that of late years great numbers of families of Presbyterian Dissenters have come from the Northward to inhabit the back parts of this Colony, whose inclination, it may reasonably be presumed, is and will be to enjoy Gospel Administrations according to their education, yet who by reason of their circumstances in the World are very unable to support ministers of their persuasion to preach constantly among them and instruct them. Another inconveniency they labour under is a difficulty of being supplied with good and edifying Books, such as might in some measure, supply the want of preaching, our merchants' stores so far as I apprehend, not being commonly furnished with such plenty and variety of these as of other goods, and particularly with such books as are adapted to instruct in the doctrines and principles of religion.

Here is the conclusion of the Preface: ¹⁴¹

Now I will shut up this short preface or Epistle with an earnest exhortation and entreaty to all into whose hands this Piece may come to mind the one thing needful: to be fully persuaded of the necessity of Knowledge in the Understanding, Grace in the Heart, & Holiness in the Conversation, in order to Everlasting Life; and also to peruse this piece without prejudice with seriousness of attention and prayer to and dependence upon God for his blessing to make it savingly profitable to their souls which is also the sincere desire and prayer of one of the meanest labourers in Christ's Vineyard.

John Thomson.

Author of Work on the Articles of the Church of England

Coupled with the *Explication*, as a sort of second part thereof, is an entirely different work, which is, in the opinion

of the present writer, the most extraordinary of John Thomson's writings. Its unusual character is not in its content but solely in the fact of its authorship. Here we find in the middle of the 18th Century a leading Presbyterian Clergyman and scholar writing a book primarily for Presbyterian young people, the very purpose of which is to show them the unity of the faith of the Episcopalians and Presbyterians. The full title of that work was:

An Appendix, Containing the Articles of the Church of England Agreed upon in a Convocation in London, in the year 1552, in the Reign of Edward VI and afterward confirmed, promulgated, and ratified in the Reigns of Queen Elizabeth, King James I & King Charles I

And which, ever since, have been held and acknowledged to contain and express the Articles of Faith, or Doctrines of the Christian Religion, as professed and taught in that Church:

And which are here reduced into the Form of a Catechism: every Article having a suitable Question prefixed, into which the Article following gives an Answer Together with nine Assertions of Lambeth, composed in the Year 1595, by the Archbishops and Bishops, &c. of the Church

And also, an Extract of the Articles of the Church of Ireland (i.e. The Church of England in Ireland) agreed upon by the principal Clergy of that Kingdom in the year 1615, in Dublin *Articles of the Church of England reduced to the form of a Catechism In order to render them more easy and ready to be committed to memory and repeated in the Manner of Question and Answer.*

This Amelia County Church-statesman was probably the earliest writer in this county to stress the lack of any difference in doctrine between the Church of England and the Presbyterian Church. Notice how he does it in the "Introduction to the Articles":¹⁴²

And here I do acquaint the reader, who perhaps might not know so much before, that in all the British Dominions where the Church of England is established by Law, the Presbyterian ministers in general do freely and without scruple, in pursuance of the Act of Toleration, made in King William's reign, in favour of Protestant Dissenters I say, they in general subscribe

all these 39 articles, 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.

His final plea for Christian love among all believers emphasizes the need of distinguishing between the essential and the nonessential in religion. He concludes the "Articles" with these words:¹⁴³

Let us all cordially endeavour 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 substantial parts of Religion can have to unite and cement our souls together in mutual Christian Love.

His Connection with Hampden-Sydney College

While Hampden-Sydney College as such was established in 1776, as is well known, and the Reverend Richard Sankey was a member of its original board of trustees, it is not generally known that the college itself seems definitely to have had a predecessor school out of which it grew.¹⁴⁴ This is indicated in Dr. W. H. T. Squires' interesting sketch of John Thomson wherein he says, ". . . in the latter years of his life, Thomson . . . established [in Prince Edward County] a school for the young men [of that section]." He gives as his authority Rev. Vernon I'Anson. "The school attained a large success. Some of the lads rode miles to attend; others built cabins and cooked their own food." For these reasons Dr. Squires said, "In a rough way this school might be called a forerunner of Hampden-Sydney College." Mrs. Augusta B. Fothergill, of Richmond, Va., has written:

My cousin, the Rev. Vernon I'Anson told me that his ancestor, the Rev. John Thomson, went to the Buffalo Settlement and founded a school from which Hampden-Sydney later sprang.

¹²⁴ Hodge, Part II, 213.

¹²⁵ Joseph D. Eggleston: *The Buffalo Settlement and Its Makers*, in *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. XLIX, 234-243, 311-325, subsequently cited as Eggleston.

¹²⁶ William Henry Foote: *Sketches of Virginia*, First Series, 118, subsequently cited as Foote; Elizabeth Venable Gaines: *Cub Creek Church and Congregation 1738-1838*, 11-12, 15-16; Webster, 355-356.

¹²⁷ Foote, 118, and Webster, 356. Each quote from a manuscript *History of Lexington (Va.) Presbytery*.

¹²⁸ Donegal, 393.

¹²⁹ Webster, 468.

¹³⁰ Eggleston, 235.

¹³¹ *Records*, 179.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 181.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹³⁴ Donegal, 439.

¹³⁵ *Records*, 195.

¹³⁶ John Thomson: *Explication of the Shorter Catechism*, 1-5.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, v.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁴² Appendix to the preceding, iii.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, v.

¹⁴⁴ 32 *Union Seminary Review*, Richmond, Va., 159, and Eggleston, 242.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FINAL YEARS—IN NORTH CAROLINA (1751–1753)

Beginnings of Presbyterianism in North Carolina

When the General Synod met at Philadelphia on May 24, 1744, it adopted the following minute: ¹⁴⁵

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.

“He was,” says Foote, “at that time on a visit to these petitioners and others in Carolina.” ¹⁴⁶ 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.

A Missionary Journey in 1751

The story is that he, on leaving Buffalo, did not accompany the others of his family with whom he later made his home in North Carolina, but instead traveled on foot. One morning, after he had stopped over night at a farmhouse, he inquired of a woman there whether his horse had been fed. When she replied that she had fed it carefully with her own hands, the old minister rebuked her for her falsehood, saying that the staff in his hand was his horse. ¹⁴⁷

In the course of that journey he became acquainted with Henry Patillo and another young man and arranged with them to return with him to Pennsylvania and there commence their studies in preparation for the ministry. But

the length of Mr. Thomson's stay in North Carolina caused the second young man to relinquish his plan of study. Paitillo then accepted an invitation from the Reverend Samuel Davies to live with him, and the project for his study in the Alison or McDowell school was abandoned.¹⁴⁸

His Preaching at Fourth Creek Church and Other Places

The following is quoted from Rumble's *History of Rowan County, North Carolina*:¹⁴⁹

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 (sic) came into this region as early as 1751, and settled near Center Church. He preached at Fourth Creek and several other stations in Rowan County, for about two years, and it is said the people came from twenty to 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. He had one preaching station near where Third Creek Church is, one at Morrison's Mill, one near the present site of Davidson College. As Cathey's Meeting House (Thy-tira) was established about this time, or earlier, no doubt John Thompson preached at that place also.

Purpose behind Visit to Rowan Neighborhood

Family tradition has it that John Thomson went in the spring or summer of 1751 to that part of Anson County, North Carolina, which in 1753 became Rowan, and in 1788 Iredell County. While it is not certain, it seems likely,¹⁵⁰ that he removed to North Carolina at the solicitation of Moses Winslow, George Davidson, and other settlers on the same creek, in the neighborhood of his son-in-law Samuel Baker. Rockwell thinks that Thomson was in Carolina at that time for the purpose of remaining there, in this respect differing from Foote's view.¹⁵¹

John Thomson seems to have been the first minister of any denomination to preach in that region. The mileages not given in the *History of Rowan County* are furnished in other

places.¹⁵² William Morrison's, near Concord Church, was six miles northwest of Statesville, Cathey's meeting house was ten miles from Salisbury. Another of his preaching stations was at the Osborn meeting house; another south of Davidson College in the vicinity of Hopewell and Sugar Creek Churches. His North Carolina "parish" contained about 314 square miles. "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."

His Death

Records of the Church show that he was present at Synod May 27, 1752, when his "last year's absence was excused for indisposition."¹⁵³ A year later it was recorded:¹⁵⁴ "The Rev. Messrs. John Thomson and Hugh Conn died since our last Synod."

The old gentleman had had a cabin built a short distance from the house of his son-in-law Baker. In it he spent most of his time when at home, and there he died and was buried under the floor of his cabin.

His Grave Located

Concerning the location of the grave of John Thomson, Mr. Worth S. Ray, of Austin, Texas, wrote to John G. Herndon, under date of September 19, 1942, as follows:

Three years ago we spent—wife and I—about three weeks in Charlotte, N. C. Prior to that time on two other occasions we had visited the place. The burial place of Rev. John Thomson is practically forgotten, but we did find it, through a great deal of local effort. The stone wall that once enclosed the burial ground and the slabs of sandstone that stood at some of the graves have all been torn away, hauled to a distance and ground up to make the *foundation of a highway*. The great Oak, under whose spreading branches the eminent Divine delivered the first Presbyterian sermon to a concourse of people "some of whom came as far as twenty miles" to hear, no longer stands, but goodly sized trees, sprung, no doubt from its acorns and

rooted in the same soil, are there, the only inanimate things to mark the spot, while the sluggish waters of the Catawba wind their way southward, just as they did in those old days. Three miles away is Cowan's Ford, where General William Lee Davidson was killed in the Revolution; four miles farther back on the highway stands "Hopewell" where the Davidsons and Alexanders, "Signers of the Mecklenburg Declaration" sleep, including also the McDowell, the Ewings, George Ewing being Hannah Thomson's brother-in-law, the Moores, and the Barrys. It is a shame that the Presbyterians of Charlotte (owning not less than \$15,000,000.00 worth of church property) have not marked the spot. Davidson College is about seven miles distant, and there young Doctor Chalmers Davidson, of the faculty, dug up Davidson's *Historical Magazine*, Vol. III, May 1870, in which we found a sketch of Rev. John Thomson, by Prof. E. F. Rockwell, called *A Gospel Pioneer In Western North Carolina*, in which the author, speaking of the old Baker's Creek Cemetery (now gone, see above) said that "The names of Brevard, Winslow, Wilson, Courier, McConnell, Givens, Lawson, White and others" are here found on the monuments. There are no monuments there now. . . .

In the section where John Thomson died, he was literally surrounded with kinfolks—his son-in-law Samuel Baker and family, the John Finley who married another daughter, John Shields and his wife Margaret, and his daughter Hannah and her husband Roger Lawson, who lived some miles further down on what afterwards became Lawson's Fork of the Paolet River, which was named for Roger. . . .

Mr. William D. Kizziah, Register of Deeds for Rowan County, has furnished a map of the neighborhood in which John Thomson's grave is located, which shows very plainly that the Baker graveyard is in Iredell County today.

Concerning this matter Mrs. H. B. Asbury, of Charlotte, N. C., wrote to Dr. J. D. Eggleston, of Hampden-Sydney, Va., on October 14, 1942, a letter from which the following is quoted:

"Yes, I do own the 'Baker graveyard' and it is in Iredell County. During the time of the Revolution it was in Rowan County, but since then a lot of new counties have been cut from the original counties, and Baker graveyard is in Iredell county. It is situated right back of the old log house that was built before the Revolution."

On the other hand Mr. Ray wrote to the author of this book August 9, 1943, that there are two Baker graveyards and that the one in which Rev. John Thomson's grave is located is now owned by Mrs. J. V. Knox, Route 2, Huntersville, N. C., and that it is approximately three miles south of the Mecklenburg County line.

Reverend E. F. Rockwell, of Statesville, N. C.,¹⁵⁵ called John Thomson "The first missionary and gospel pioneer in this section of North Carolina, who traversed this region before McAden, McWhorter, Spencer, and Craighead," and wrote concerning him this epitaph:¹⁵⁶

Born by the side of the River Foyle, in the 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 birth; Iredell County a grave; the heavenly Jerusalem a final rest.

¹⁴⁵ *Records*, 175.

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in 5 *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 1213.

¹⁴⁷ Rev. James Porter Smith, Jr.: "John Thomson, Apostle," published in the *Presbyterian of the South*, Nov. 11, 1931 (Vol. 105, No. 45), page 2.

¹⁴⁸ From Foote, quoted in 5 *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 1215.

¹⁴⁹ *Opus cit.*, 365.

¹⁵⁰ In Dawson's *Historical Magazine*, August 1869, pp. 78-82.

¹⁵¹ William Henry Foote: *Sketches of North Carolina*, 213.

¹⁵² See references in footnotes 146 and 149.

¹⁵³ *Records*, 205.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁵⁵ See references in footnotes 146 and 149.

¹⁵⁶ Whether the correct reference is Dawson's, as quoted by Rev. James Porter Smith, Jr. (see footnote 146) or Davidson's, as quoted by Worth S. Ray (see preceding quotation), this author has had no opportunity to verify personally. In either case there is a conflict in date in the citation, the former saying August 1869, the latter May 1870.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HIS FAMILY AND HIS PROPERTY

What does "Family" Mean?

When the subject of this study arrived in New York in 1715, he was accompanied by "his wife and family."¹⁵⁷ As there used the word "family" might connote relatives or it might imply that there was more than one child. For if there were no accompanying collaterals and only one child, the better expression to use would certainly have been "his wife and child." But if in addition to his wife and only child he was accompanied by others of the Thomson household, "family" was the proper word to use. From what we know of his family that is exactly what happened. He was accompanied by his wife (name unknown), his daughter Esther, probably a second child, probably by his sister Esther, and possibly other relatives.

His Sister Esther Warranton

John Thomson lived from 1717 to 1729 in Sussex County, Delaware, while he was pastor of the church at Lewes. In the *Records of the United Presbyterian Churches of Lewes, Indian River, and Cool Spring, Delaware*, it is stated that the burial of "Widow Esther Warranton y^e Rev. Jno Thompson's sister" took place on April 6, 1768,¹⁵⁸ and elsewhere it is noted that at her funeral the preacher was the Reverend Matthew Wilson. It seems probable that the eldest child of John Thomson was named for this sister.

His Daughter Jane

When Archibald Smith, of Sussex County, Delaware, made his will November 27, 1729,¹⁵⁹ one bequest was made "to Jane, daughter of Rev. John Thompson." Every other person named as a beneficiary thereunder was mentioned as a

“cozen,” aunt, uncle, sister, brother, etc., and six of these were designated as then in Northern Ireland. In the opinion of the present writer, Jane was born about 1726.

Rev. John Thomson, Jr., Not His Son

The Synod at its 1739 meeting¹⁶⁰ noted that Mr. John Thomson, Jr., had been ordained by the Presbytery of Lewes since the last Synod. Despite the rule always to note on the records any changes in the ministerial ranks of the church and to record presences and absences of members of the Synod, no further reference to him was ever made. That he was not a son of our John Thomson will be seen later when we examine the records of Prince Edward County, Virginia, where there is a reference in 1755 to John Thomson, Jr., son and heir-at-law of John Thomson, deceased.

Presbyterial References to His Family

At a meeting of Donegal Presbytery on Nov. 15, 1732, when John Thomson was serving as moderator, he caused a note to be made in the minutes “of the people’s neglect to pay up their arrears according to appointment” whereby “he and his family greatly suffer.”¹⁶¹

Four years later Mr. Thomson reported to the Donegal Presbytery “that he could not correspond [with] the Presbytery of Lewes as appointed by reason of the indisposition of some of his children at that time.” The excuse was sustained.¹⁶²

His First Wife

The name of his first wife is not known. She was the mother of all but one of his children. She seems to have died in 1733 or 1734.

His Second Wife

Duncan C. Lyle, of the Valley of Virginia, long years ago prepared a paper on the Reid Family in which the following appeared:¹⁶³

Thomas Reid came from County Down in Ireland to Pennsylvania. His brothers John and Andrew came afterward. They all settled at Octorara, about 18 miles from Lancaster, with Shawnee Indians for neighbors. Thomas Reid's wife was a McKean "a Highland woman of dark complexion." She married for her second husband the Rev. Mr. Thompson of Prince Edward County.

On Feb. 2, 1733/4 Thomas Reid, of Octorara, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, justice of the peace, Presbyterian elder, made his will. By it he left property to his wife Mary, and his children John, Nathan, Eleanor, Alexander, Thomas, Mary, and James Reid.

His Pennsylvania Property

On October 9, 1740, a survey of 140 acres in Lancaster County was made and a warrant therefor issued to John and Mary Thomson. Other Lancaster County land warrantees named Thompson were persons whose given names were John, James, Matthew, William, Hugh, Thomas, Henry, Andrew, Samuel, Alexander, Robert, and Nathan.¹⁶⁴ Only one other in the long list had a name spelled Thomson. He was Samuel, doubtless the Reverend Samuel whose 100 acres were surveyed March 4, 1750.¹⁶⁵

Reverend Samuel Thomson Not His Son

There seems to be no reason whatever to assume that the Reverend Samuel Thomson was John Thomson's son, except that both were Presbyterian ministers from Northern Ireland, with about 22 years difference in age and both members of Donegal Presbytery. The younger man was not of the same Irish Presbytery or from the same county as the older one.¹⁶⁶ More significant, however, is the fact that not one of the numerous writers of that day or the next century mentioned any family relationship between the two. Yet frequent references to Richard Sankey as the son-in-law of John Thomson are to be found.

His Virginia Property

Samuel Cobbs, of Amelia County, Virginia, sold to John Thomson, of Raleigh Parish, that county, by indenture dated

December 19, 1745, for £24 a tract of 386 acres, "beginning at a corner Red oak of William Watsons, thence north 33 degrees, 74 poles, etc. . . . to a corner of the mountain survey on Spring Creek . . . on Watson's line."¹⁰⁷

We have found no record of the retransfer of this property. It seems likely that this tract was still owned by John Thomson at his death, and that the suit of the Bakers against John Thomson's eldest son may have concerned these acres.

His North Carolina Property

In Rowan County, North Carolina, there is recorded an indenture¹⁶⁸ dated March 25, 1752

between the Right Honorable John, Earl Granville, Viscount Carteret, and Baron Carteret of Hawns, etc. . . . of the one part, and the Rev. John Thomson, of Anson County in the Province of North Carolina, Gentleman, etc. . . . a tract of 640 acres of land in the County of Anson, on both sides of fifth creek, etc.

The date of registration does not appear.

There is also there recorded a deed dated March 4, 1755¹⁶⁹

between Samuel Baker and Elizabeth Baker his wife, and Roger Lawson and Hannah Lawson his wife, of Rowan County of the one part, and James Mordah, of the County and Province aforesaid (new comer) of the other part. . . . Whereas the Right Honorable John Earl Granville, etc. did by his Agents, etc. make over by deed of sale unto y^e Reverend Mr. John Thomson, deceased, a tract of 640 acres being and lying in the County and Province aforesaid as appears by said Deed bearing date the 25th day of March 1752 and further ye said Mr Thomson deceased in his last will and testament left the above tract of 640 acres unto y^e above named Samuel Baker and Roger Lawson by said Will and Testament Relation being thereunto had may more fully and at large appear, 640 acres on both sides of the South Side of Fifth Creek, etc.

Samuel and Elizabeth Baker and Roger and Hannah Lawson signed this deed in the presence of Alexander Osburn and Peter Fleming.

His Lost Will

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 courthouses of North Carolina or in the archives at Raleigh. It was probably probated at Wadesboro, seat of Anson County from which Rowan County was formed in 1753.

His Family Bible Lost

Even more unfortunate is the loss of John Thomson's family Bible. As a result we lack the exact date of birth, baptism, marriage, and death of his children. Despite this loss we know their names and a great deal about their families. From the data collected by numerous persons, notably Dr. J. D. Eggleston, of Hamden-Sydney, Va., and Mr. and Mrs. Worth S. Ray, of Austin, Texas, the approximate dates of the birth of the children of John Thomson have been carefully estimated.

The John Cunningham List of John Thomson's Children

By all odds the most important of the lists of descendants of John Thomson is that compiled by John Cunningham (1793-1874), of Greensboro, Georgia, and carefully continued by his daughter Mrs. Mary Wingfield (Cunningham) Linton, and his son-in-law, Samuel Daniel Linton, and now framed and hanging in the front hall of their old home, now the home of their daughter Mrs. Minnie (Linton) Winn, in Greensboro, where the author of this article examined it during Christmas week 1942. John Cunningham was the outstanding leader of Presbyterian educational activities of his time in Greensboro, in that sense a true descendant of his illustrious great-grandfather. He built and presented to the Synod of Georgia the Greensboro Female College.

His son-in-law Samuel Daniel Linton had good reason to keep up the record, for not only were he and his wife Thomson descendants, but his brother William Alexander Linton's

wife, Martha Indiana Grimes, was also a descendant of John Thomson. Samuel Daniel Linton was for a long time an elder in the Greensboro Presbyterian Church. His brother William Alexander Linton was at the time of his death in 1860 an elder in the Presbyterian Church at Enterprise, Mississippi. They were two of the sons of Dr. Alexander Brown Linton, a distinguished physician and civic leader of Athens, Georgia, and his wife Jane Daniel. The latter was a daughter of William Daniel and his wife Hannah Cunningham. This Hannah Cunningham was a sister of the James Cunningham who was the father of the John Cunningham who started the diagram of the family of John Thomson. James and Hannah were two of the children of James Cunningham, Sr., and Ann Thomson.

The diagram that Mr. Cunningham used was a bit complicated. "Jno Thompson, minister, Prince Edward County, Virginia," was in the center of the diagram. Around those words was an ellipse in which were entered the names of his sons John and Roger Thompson (the almost unanimous choice of the latter generations being to spell the name with a "p"), the names of his sons-in-law Richard Sankey and James Cunningham in full, the name of the latter's wife Ann, the names of the other sons-in-law as Baker, Lawson, Shields, and Graham.

Mr. Cunningham, being unfamiliar with the names of some of the other sons-in-law, omitted them. Certain of his Georgia relatives being Lawson descendants, he mentioned Ann, Roger, and Hugh Lawson as grandchildren of John Thomson. He not only named every child of James and Ann (Thomson) Cunningham and whom they married but used their family nicknames in certain cases. Each of these children is mentioned in the will of James Cunningham, Sr.

The remarkable aspect of the John Cunningham chart is that not even one statement made thereon has been found to be at variance with the records left in the Virginia counties where the family lived for certain years. He certainly knew whereof he spoke.

Additions to the Aforementioned List

Dr. J. D. Eggleston, president emeritus of Hampden-Sidney College and now president of the Virginia Historical Society, agrees, as a result of his intensive studies into every available record pertaining to John Thomson in Virginia and North Carolina, that the foregoing list is correct, as far as it goes, but believes that John Thomson had three other daughters: Esther who married first Samuel Crockett and secondly William Sayers, another who married John Finley, Sr., and Jane who married, first, Douglas Baker, and secondly, William Watson.

When the author of this article called on Dr. Eggleston at his home in Hampden-Sydney in September 1942, the latter did not know of the Shields and Graham marriages, but he had, however, collected numerous notes pertaining to the Shields family who had had many intimate tie-ups with members of the Thomson connection. He had, moreover, supporting data from numerous correspondents, descendants of the other lines named, except the Grahams.

Since then discovery of Abraham Thomson as another son has been made.

Addition made by Mr. Worth S. Ray

We are indebted to Mr. Ray, of Austin, Texas, for furnishing many details about activities of certain of the children of this family and for showing that the Mary who married Robert Baker was also a daughter of Rev. John Thomson.

Brief Notes on His Children

By his first wife whose name is unknown, John Thomson had twelve children. By his second wife, née Mary McKean, he had one daughter, Hannah.

The children were the following:

1. ESTHER (*ca.* 1713–1770) married first *ca.* 1734 SAMUEL CROCKETT (1685-*ca.* 1750); secondly *ca.* 1753 WILLIAM SAYERS (*ca.* 1730–1784). The record of her descendants is found on pages 10–202 of Volume V of *Notable Southern Families*—

The Crockett Family and Connecting Lines by Janie Preston (Collup) French and Zella Armstrong, published in 1928 by King Publishing Company, Bristol, Tennessee.

2. MARY (*ca.* 1715–1761) married in Lancaster County, Penna., ROBERT BAKER, JR. (—–1759). In addition to the children mentioned in Eggleston's "The Buffaloe Settlement and Its Makers" (*Va. Mag. Hist. and Biog.*, XLIX, 317–8), this couple had another daughter, named Eliza, who married William Baldwin.

3. JOHN (*ca.* 1716–1791) married MARGARET DAVIDSON; removed to Bedford County about 1756; died in Campbell County. He and his wife had seven children: John, Andrew, Esther who married — Phair, Matthew, William, Elizabeth who married William Gill, and Jane who married — Mitchell.

4. ABRAHAM (*ca.* 1718–post 1772) married — and had a son, John, who died in 1795 in Prince Edward County.

5. SARAH (*ca.* 1720—) married *ca.* 1737 in Lancaster County, Penna., Reverend RICHARD SANKEY. They had one son and four daughters. The son, John Thompson Sankey, married in Wilkes County, Georgia, his first cousin once removed, Anne Thompson Daniel, daughter of William and Hannah (Cunningham) Daniel. The daughters were Sarah who married William Hamersley, Margaret who married Archibald Simpson, Elizabeth or Esther who married Joseph Park(s), and another who married James Park(s), Jr.

6. DAUGHTER who married JOHN GRAHAM, son of the John Graham whose will dated 12 April 1743 was probated in Lancaster County, Penna., 2 February 1743/4.¹⁷⁰ Its executors were Reverend Richard Sankey and Brice Sankey. John Graham, son-in-law of John Thomson, lived in Prince Edward County, Virginia, in 1755.

7. ROGER married 2 May 1750 ANN FERGUSON in Amelia County, Va.

8. DAUGHTER married JOHN FINLEY, JR. Among the children of this couple were Elizabeth who married in January 1764 in Prince Edward County, Va., James Gillespy, of Au-

gusta County, Va., and John, also called Junior, who married in Mecklenburg County, N. C., Martha Walkup.

9. JANE (*ca.* 1726—) married first *ca.* 1744 DOUGLAS BAKER (*ca.* 1720–1765), by whom she had the children mentioned in Dr. Eggleston's article referred to above, and married secondly 10 April 1767 in Prince Edward County, Va., as his second wife WILLIAM WATSON, by whom she had no child.

10. ANN (*ca.* 1728– *ca.* 1778) married *ca.* 1747 JAMES CUNNINGHAM, SR., of Charlotte County, Va. From 1742 to 1756 he had owned the land on which the Buffalo Church was built. He and Ann deeded that and other property to Samuel Cunningham in 1756, part of which the latter in turn conveyed to John Caldwell, John Cunningham, James Daniel, and William Watson in 1761 for a consideration of five shillings (2 Prince Edward Deeds 77) "for the use and Behoof of the Presbyterian congregation in Buffalo settlement in the aforesaid County that is under y^e Immediate Care and Inspection of the Rever'd Mr. Richard Sankey, minister of the Gospel in said Congregation." James Cunningham and his family lived near the Cub Creek Church. In 1756 he was a petitioner along with several others for the recognition of the rights of the Presbyterians of Lunenburg County (Charlotte County had not yet been created out of a part of Lunenburg) to hold divine services therein at designated places according to the Act of Toleration. When he made his will in December 1775, his wife Ann was still living. She, however, predeceased him, for he married secondly in September 1780, Mrs. Jane (Kelso) Daniel, widow of James Daniel, an elder of the Buffalo Church who was buried in its original cemetery. To Ann Thomson and her husband James Cunningham were born ten children, named in his will, probated in Charlotte County, Va., 6 November, 1780. Therein he mentioned one grandchild whose name was significantly Ann Thompson Adams. Their children were: (1) Samuel; (2) Elizabeth who married James Daniel, eldest son of James and Jane (Kelso) Daniel; (3) Sarah who married first Samuel Caldwell and secondly John Daniel, second son

of James and Jane (Kelso) Daniel; (4) Margaret who married Richard Gaines, Jr.; (5) Jane who married James Adams, Jr.; (6) Ann who married Andrew Hannah; (7) Mary who married William Johnston; (8) Hannah who married William Daniel, youngest son of James and Jane (Kelso) Daniel; (9) Andrew who married Martha Scott; and (10) James, Jr., who married Frances, daughter of Captain Thomas Redd.

11. MARGARET (*ca.* 1730—) married JOHN SHIELDS, and lived in 1771 near the home of her sister and brother-in-law John Finley, in Mecklenburg County, N. C.

12. ELIZABETH (*ca.* 1732–1776) married first *ca.* 1749 SAMUEL BAKER (—1758) and secondly in North Carolina CHARLES HARRIS (—1776). She and her husband Samuel Baker had five children, four of whom are mentioned in the will of their father: (1) Robert, (2) John, (3) Mary, and (4) Margaret. She and her husband Charles Harris had two sons: (1) Samuel who was graduated from Princeton in 1787, became a tutor there and died in 1789, and (2) Charles, born in 1762.

13. HANNAH (1735–*ca.* 1769) married *ca.* 1752 ROGER LAWSON (1731–1803) and had five sons and two daughters. They were (1) Hugh who married Anne —; (2) John Thomson who married Alice Moore; (3) Roger who died in 1802; (4) William; (5) Andrew Thomson who married Mary Moore Barry; (6) Ann who married Major John Gamble; and (7) a daughter who married a Mr. Algood, of Rome, Georgia. Sometime between 1756 and 1763 Roger Lawson and his family located in that part of Georgia which is now Jefferson County. He and his five sons served with the American forces during the Revolution. After the death of Hannah he married again, and by his second wife had one son and three daughters. He died in August 1803.

- ¹⁵⁷ *Records of the Presbyterian Church*, 40.
¹⁵⁸ *Opus cit.*, 491, in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
¹⁵⁹ 1 Sussex Wills, 321.
¹⁶⁰ *Records of the Presbyterian Church*, 143, 144.
¹⁶¹ Donegal Presbytery Minutes for Nov. 15, 1732.
¹⁶² Donegal Presbytery Minutes for Sept. 1, 1736.
¹⁶³ Mentioned in a letter from J. D. Eggleston to John G. Herndon, dated Sept. 28, 1942, which contains also the following comments:

Lyle then goes on to give the descendants of the brothers, among whom were Lyles, McDowells, Millers, etc., etc. I have checked him as far as I could, in the families I have studied, and he has proven right as far as I have gone.

Again, Jane Reid Venable, one of the Venable genealogists, in her paper of decades ago, writing of the Alexander-Reid-McClung-Lyle-Venable intermarriages, had this to say:

“Thomas the 1st married a McKean, a Highland woman of a dark complexion. Their children were (and she proceeds to tell whom they married). . . .” When Thomas Reid the 1st died, his wife married the Revd. Mr. Thompson who lived in Prince Edward County.

- ¹⁶⁴ Lancaster Co. (Pa.) Wills, Book A, Vol. 1, page 14. It was proved 6 Aug. 1734.
¹⁶⁵ 24 Penna. Archives, third series, 545 *et seq.*, and 547.
¹⁶⁶ Records of the General Synod of Ulster, 1621–1800, Volume 2, 213, 236.
¹⁶⁷ 2 Amelia Deeds, 317.
¹⁶⁸ 2 Rowan Deeds, 11.
¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 64–66.
¹⁷⁰ Lancaster County Abstracts of Wills, p. 320, in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

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