

**A SKETCH OF THE HISTORY  
OF BAPTIST EDUCATION IN  
PENNSYLVANIA**

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A Sketch of the History of Baptist Education in Pennsylvania by Frank Grant Lewis

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A Sketch of the History  
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Baptist Education in Pennsylvania

BY

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The subject is timely for at least two reasons. In the first place no general account of the history of Baptist education in Pennsylvania seems to have been undertaken hitherto. In 1909, when the Pennsylvania Baptist Education Society reached three score and ten years, a sketch of its work was prepared by Rev. Jacob G. Walker, D. D., who had been its recording-secretary since 1871. A sketch of the University at Lewisburg (from 1886 Bucknell University) was published in 1876, and another in 1890. When Crozer Theological Seminary was thirty years of age a brief historical address was issued. There are probably other sketches of aspects of Baptist education in Pennsylvania which have not come to my attention. Up to the present, however, the field of Baptist educational activities in Pennsylvania as a whole has remained open to the historian, and the topic is important for its own sake. Just now, moreover, the entire question of Baptist education in Pennsylvania is under discussion and can receive best treatment only on the basis of a knowledge of past days.

I must emphasize at the beginning that this paper is only a sketch. Anything more would require a small volume at least. In spite of the limits which are imposed upon me, however, it will be best to give considerable attention to the earlier days.

Baptists began to come to Pennsylvania as early at least as 1684. A company from Rhode Island under the leadership of Thomas Dungan settled at Cold Spring, between Bristol and Trenton, and organized themselves into the first Baptist society in Pennsylvania. This church was of only temporary duration, however, lasting merely until 1702.

In the winter of 1687-1688, probably in the month of January, a church was organized near Pennepek Creek which in its early history was known as the Pennepek, but now is more quickly recognized as the Lower Dublin church, within the limits of the present city of Philadelphia. In 1707 this church, the only one in Pennsylvania, with that at the Welsh Tract, Delaware, and the churches at Piscataqua, Middletown and Cohansie, N. J., united into an organization out of which developed the present Philadelphia Baptist Association. The organization was very simple and probably for some years few if any minutes or other records of the meetings were made. Not until 1749 was there any effort to secure a record of the origin of the churches of the association and of the annual gatherings. From that time on minutes of the meetings were more carefully made and from 1766 or earlier they were published in broadside or pamphlet form.

I have taken time to speak of these simple origins and the records because on these records, exceedingly brief before 1750, and largely compiled from memory, we are chiefly dependent for our knowledge concerning the beginning of Baptist education in Pennsylvania.

In these records the first reference to education is in 1722, very likely written from the recollection of some one who was interested in the action. The entire record for that year is as follows:

At the Association in the year 1722, it was Proposed for the Churches to make Enquiry among themselves if they have any Young Persons hopfull for the Ministry And Inclinaire for Learning, And if they have, to Give Notice of it to Mr. Abel Morgan before the first of November that he might Recommend such to the Accademie on Mr. Hollis his account.



This quaint language is a reference to one of the benefices of Mr. Thomas Hollis, Jr., a wealthy and well disposed Baptist merchant of London and a liberal giver to the Baptists of Boston, who founded professorships in Harvard College and distributed other evidences of his generous interest in education and in religious life. What academy is referred to is not clear. The statement shows, however, not only that Mr. Hollis was disposed to aid in the education of young men preparing for the ministry, but also that the Baptists of the Philadelphia association, which then included all the Baptist churches in the United States as far as they were associated together, were favorably inclined to education as a requisite element in Baptist ministerial life.

In connection with this fact it should be kept in mind that the Baptist pioneers of the Philadelphia association were not altogether ignorant men. Their leaders and many of the members of the churches had come from Wales and England and were not unacquainted with the elements of education.

A further reference to the minutes of the Philadelphia association furnishes some evidence on this point. Recollections of the associational activities gathered in 1749 were then written out in a somewhat pretentious blank book prepared for the purpose. This book is still the property of the Philadelphia Baptist Association deposited among the archives of the American Baptist Historical Society for preservation. I have been interested to scan those pages not simply for the data which they furnish but also for the form of English composition which the pages exhibit. These pages are evidently the work of men considerably skilled in the writing of the English language. The composition may not be typical of that of a large proportion of the Baptists of that day, but we can hardly suppose that the one who served as clerk at the time was the only man who possessed such qualifications as he displayed. In short the early Baptists of Pennsylvania and New Jersey were men of considerable education for their time and naturally desired an educated ministry for themselves and their children.

It will not be amiss here to recall that while transportation and communication in those days were slow, from our point of view, the people of the different communities and different colonies learned with such promptness as the time

permitted what were the events in other communities and other colonies. Accordingly the members of the Baptist churches throughout the broad limits of the Philadelphia Baptist Association not only knew of Harvard College and that the ministers of the New Haven colony had organized in 1701 an institution of learning out of which came Yale University, but also were aware of other educational thought and activities of the period. It was in no sense remarkable, therefore, that the action of 1722 was taken.

Indeed if we knew all of the incidents which occurred we should be aware that the subject was under more or less constant discussion. This is disclosed through a statement in the minute for 1729, according to which it was ordered "Mr. Holme and Mr. Jones to Write to Mr. Wallen & Mr. Hollis to Mantain our Correspondence with them and others in London." This was only two years before the death of Mr. Hollis. He at some time during the period under review had sent to the Philadelphia association a rather large number of books for the use of the ministers of the churches. This is clear from various references to the volumes, though the exact number of these is nowhere stated. These books became materials of ministerial study and sermonic work for the entire century. Apparently the books were distributed among the churches. Once distributed they were so eagerly held that it was difficult to bring them together. In 1760 the association appointed "S. Morgan and Burkloe to enquire after the public books." Similar steps to collect the volumes were taken at various times until in 1809 an offer was extended to bear the expense of transporting them to Philadelphia if those who had them would forward the books. Even that offer did not bring the volumes together, and in 1813 the association voted to distribute the works among such churches as a committee appointed for this purpose thought proper. Not until 1829 did the committee, which was re-appointed from time to time, complete its work, make its report, and be discharged.

I have thus sketched the career of this gift of Mr. Hollis in advance of the general course of events because it appears highly important. Mr. Hollis undoubtedly sent valuable books. They seem to have been eagerly desired by ministers of the association and to have been so attractive that it was practically impossible to bring them together. Undoubtedly some of them were lost, some were carelessly neglected and

went to ruin, and others were worn out long before the collection was finally disposed of. In spite of this, the volumes must have been of large service and have left a permanent impression upon the mentality not only of the ministers of the association but through them upon the people of the congregations.

We probably do not understand the course of Baptist education in this commonwealth unless we take largely into account the generous gift which Mr. Hollis made and recognize its enduring effect. Such a point of view helps us to understand, for example, the following paragraph in the minutes of 1756:

Concluded to Raise a sum of Money Among our Churches for the Encouragement of a Latin Grammar School, Mr. Isaac Eaton to be Master thereof.

Isaac Eaton was then pastor of the church at Hopewell, New Jersey. In his home the Latin Grammar School was established and until 1764, under his direction, served a very useful educational purpose.

At first thought the institution thus established appears to have been outside of Pennsylvania altogether. The location, however, was incidental. If Mr. Eaton had been pastor of one of the churches in Pennsylvania the institution would have been founded on Pennsylvania soil. Though located in New Jersey it was as much a Pennsylvania institution as though it had flourished in Philadelphia. The New Jersey churches remained, and were to remain until 1811, members of the Philadelphia association.

The Association did not merely found this academy. In 1758 it is recorded that "what hath been bestowed hath been Well laid Out, and seeing a number of sober Youths have well Improved themselves in Usefull learning & like to be helpfull in our Churches."

The association, in addition to undertaking the support of this educational movement itself, ventured to ask for aid from the Baptist brothers in England. This is shown by the following quotation from a letter bearing date of May 16, 1762, signed by Peter Peterson Vanhorn and Morgan Edwards which they wrote in accordance with the order of the association at its meeting in the autumn of 1761: