THE Easton Public Library was built on land which was formerly the graveyard of the German Reformed Church. It was the oldest burial ground in Easton. With one exception, the remains of all those whose graves could be identified were removed. One grave was allowed to remain and over it the citizens of Easton erected a tomb. On its flat marble slab is this inscription:

WILLIAM PARSONS, Esq.,
Born, May 6, 1701.
Died, December 22, 1757.
He rocked Easton in her cradle and watched of her infant footsteps with paternal solicitude.¹

This is a very pretty sentiment, but the expression “paternal solicitude” is subject to contradiction.

William Parsons was a native of England. There he served his apprenticeship and learned the trade of a shoemaker. With his trade fully mastered, he sailed for America and settled in Philadelphia some time before he reached his majority. At once he opened a shop of his own and soon established a paying business. He was married in Philadelphia, in the year 1722, to Johanna Christiana Zeidig. Her father was a gloomy pietist, who, in common with others of that school of theology, shunned all worldly amusements.

Parsons was industrious and ambitious. He was fond of reading and in his spare moments read all the books he could secure. His greatest interest lay in mathematics and he solved many vexing problems while bending over his last, fashioning the dainty slipper for a daughter of one of his customers or clogs for a servant in the same household.

¹ The date of death given on the tomb is incorrect. Parsons died December 17, 1757.
In 1727 Benjamin Franklin formed the Junto. This club for mutual improvement met every Friday evening. Franklin drew up the rules and regulations. These required that each member, in his turn, should propound a question on moral, political, or natural philosophy, following which there would be discussion by the members. Once every three months, each member presented an original essay on any subject whatsoever.

Among the members of this somewhat select organization was William Parsons. Franklin in his autobiography says: "William Parsons, bred a shoemaker, but, loving reading, had acquired a considerable share of mathematics, which he first studied with a view of astrology, and afterwards laughed at it."

Just how intellectual these Friday night discussions may have been we have no way of telling. The subjects selected indicate that no topic was too difficult or too complicated for the members to undertake. Most of the political and philosophical subjects could well be debated today, such as:

- Is self-interest the rudder that steers mankind, the universal monarch, to whom all are tributaries?
- Can any one form of government suit all mankind?
- Is it consistent with the principles of liberty in a free government to punish a man as a libeller when he speaks the truth?

In 1730 Franklin suggested that the members of the Junto pool their books and thus make available a fair-sized library for the use of their organization. Franklin soon broadened this plan and proposed a subscription library. Accordingly, on November 8, 1731, the directors, hand-picked by Franklin, and including William Parsons, met and elected a treasurer and secretary. The price of a share in the library was placed at forty shillings, and ten shillings was established as the amount of the annual dues. With the money thus raised, an order for books was placed in London. In October, 1732 the books arrived. There were about one hundred volumes in all. William Parsons helped unpack the trunk with considerable satisfaction. No doubt he stopped to admire and thumb through Dechall's Euclid, L'Hospital's Conic Sections, Ozanam's Course of Mathematics in five volumes, and
Keil’s *Astronomical Lectures*. As a director, Parsons may have had a hand in the selection of these mathematical works.

On March 4, 1734 William Parsons was elected librarian. He was to attend the library on Saturday of each week from four o’clock in the afternoon until eight in the evening. His salary was set at six pounds per annum. Rules for the duties of the librarian and the operation of the library were made as occasion required. Slumber in the reading room was deemed to occasion a loud and objectionable noise and instructions were issued, that “if any person hath to be awakened twice he shall be requested to leave.”

The proprietaries of the province granted a charter to the library and on May 3, 1742 fifty-three subscribing members, including Parsons, signed a document formally accepting the charter in the name of “The Library Company of Philadelphia,” by which name the institution is still known.

In 1743 Benjamin Franklin organized the American Philosophical Society which was “formed of virtuosi or ingenious men residing in the several colonies.” William Parsons not only qualified for this exclusively intellectual organization but, at Franklin’s solicitation, became a charter member.

During the period between the years 1730 and 1745, Parsons led a very active life. In addition to the time which he devoted to his literary, educational, and political organizations he carried on his trade as a shoemaker, conducted a wholesale general merchandise business, continued his studies, and became a practicing surveyor.

His first professional surveys were made in 1730, and by 1734 he was quite active in this line of work. His ability attracted the attention of Richard Peters, who was in charge of the land office, with the result that in August, 1741 he was appointed surveyor general of the province.

The domestic life of William Parsons was not a happy one. By temperament he and his wife were entirely unfitted for each other. Mrs. Parsons inherited the gloomy outlook of the pietists. Her restless, morbidly religious craving could not be satisfied. At times she became despondent. In her search for spiritual peace she joined each new sect with which she came in contact. First she joined the Dunkers, by whom she was immersed. Then she became affiliated with the French Prophets. Not finding peace with them she became a Separatist. George Whitefield’s preaching caught
her fancy for a time. Then came the Moravians and here at last she found that peace of mind and heart for which she had been yearning so long.

Parsons was a Lutheran, but he was not an active church member. His industry, study, social life, and public activities were guided by his great ambition to succeed in a worldly way. He could not understand his wife's religious melancholy, and she was entirely unsympathetic to his desires. Many rumors and false statements had been circulated about the Moravians. At that time they were not looked upon with favor by those men in the province whose friendship Parsons wished to cultivate. Fearful that his wife would join their church and that thus he might lose the friendship of persons of influence, he forbade her and his six children to attend their services. This order was accompanied by a threat that disobedience to his command would result in his leaving them.

In 1745, when he found that he could not control the religious activities of his family, he put his threat into effect. Forsaking his wife, he took the two youngest children Grace and Sarah, aged nine and seven, to his plantation on the Swatara Creek in the Blue Mountains, about thirty-five miles northwest of the present city of Reading. Parsons and his wife were never reunited.

Due to the sedentary life of a shoemaker led during his early years, his constitution was not rugged enough to withstand the rigors and hardships connected with the office of surveyor general. His health failed. His troubles were not helped by the fact that his official residence was in Philadelphia and his actual residence was now in the wilderness on the frontier eighty miles from his office. In poor health, and away from his friends and the scenes of his triumphs and successes, he saw his plans and ambitions crumble before him, a hopeless wreck. In his depressed state of mind, he blamed the Moravians for all his troubles and came to look upon them with intense bitter hatred.

In 1748, he was compelled to resign the office of surveyor general. His weakened constitution could no longer withstand the strain of the work. So he now moved with his two children to Lancaster, where through his friendship with Benjamin Franklin, Richard Peters, and members of the proprietary party, he secured commissions as justice, prothonotary, register of wills, and recorder of deeds, for Lancaster county.
Parsons, a native Englishman, had spent the best years of his life in Philadelphia with English friends and acquaintances and where there were relatively few Germans. He did not care for the characteristics of the predominately German population of Lancaster county. Perhaps this feeling was intensified by the fact that his wife was a German. Whatever the cause, he came to despise the Germans. In a letter, written in a sarcastic vein, he says: “The world has ever been changing, even this new world has taken a great turn of late and now we must acknowledge that the earth with the fullness thereof belongs to the Dutch, at least they think so.”

His fondness for surveying continued and, when his health permitted, he undertook work of this nature. As early as 1743, Parsons had some direct correspondence with Thomas Penn in regard to a proposed town on the Schuylkill. This correspondence continued until 1748, when a final plan was accepted and Parsons laid out a town which was given the name of Reading. Parsons continued his private work as a surveyor, and now and then undertook work of a public nature. One of his most important surveys was the establishment of the southern boundary of the “three lower counties,” now the state of Delaware.

Our interest in the establishment of the dividing line between the present states of Maryland and Delaware starts with the year 1750 when the province of Maryland and “the three lower counties” appointed commissioners to establish this boundary, and the Penn commissioners selected William Parsons as their chief surveyor and clerk. The commissioners, their surveyors and clerks met at Newcastle, where Parsons and his assistants surveyed the town to find its exact center. At night they established a true meridian by the use of a plumb line, a candle swung from the court house steeple and observations on the last star in the tail of the Little Bear.

The commissioners could not agree upon any of the points which necessarily arose and they adjourned. As a result of this disagreement, the surveyors decided to run the southern line of the lower counties. This was to be a due west line, starting from the extreme eastern point of Cape Henlopen. This work was started on December 20. Due to the disagreeable weather, the work was temporarily stopped. In April, 1751 the survey was resumed, and completed on June 15 of that year. While the
Maryland commissioners had their own engineers, William Parsons, the chief surveyor for the Penns, was the dominating head of the combined forces. Thus the southern line of the present state of Delaware was established by the former Philadelphia shoemaker.

On March 11, 1752, the northern or wilderness part of Bucks was taken to form a new county which was named Northampton. At the same time, Easton, a town which did not yet exist except in the mind of Thomas Penn, was named the county seat. It now became necessary to lay out the town, establish courts, and select the various county officials. Thomas Penn also required a representative in the new town and county. Richard Peters, in looking over the possibilities, decided that William Parsons was the one man who could satisfactorily perform these functions.

Parsons was not enthusiastic over the prospect, but out of a sense of duty to the proprietaries and to please his friend Richard Peters he reluctantly accepted. The appointment was a happy one for all concerned, with the possible exception of the appointee. His ability as a surveyor, coupled with his experience at Reading, eminently qualified him as a town planner. His services as justice, and in the various offices at Lancaster fitted him for the same positions in Northampton County. His seven years as surveyor general and the consequent contact with Richard Peters and the land office of the province made him an admirable representative of the Penns. Thomas Penn, in writing to Peters, said: “You will please let William Parsons know the satisfaction we have in his appointment, on whose prudence we shall very much depend in the settlement and good government of the town.”

On May 7, 1752 William Parsons and Nicholas Scull left Philadelphia for the Forks of the Delaware with instructions to lay out a town at the confluence of the Delaware and Lehigh rivers. Parsons carried commissions issued by Governor Hamilton the day before, appointing him prothonotary, clerk of the orphan’s court, and recorder of deeds for the new county. It took two weeks to lay out the town, but Scull returned to Philadelphia before the work was completed. It was under the direction of Parsons, who had been appointed a justice, that the first court was organized and held in June, 1752.

The ferry rights across the Delaware at Easton had been granted to David Martin. After his death, the title became vested in
Richard Peters who held it in trust for the Penns. Peters leased the ferry to Parsons at a very nominal rental. Nathaniel Vernon held a lease from Martin and this lease was binding on Martin’s heirs, successors, and assigns. So when Parsons tried to remove Vernon he found himself involved in a law suit. Much to his chagrin Parsons lost this court action and Vernon retained possession of the ferry. The animosity engendered resulted in many suits with each party alternately taking the part of plaintiff and defendant.

The few scattered houses and taverns in Easton had hardly taken on the appearance of a village when the inhabitants realized that they were destitute of ministers and schoolmasters. No educational facilities had been planned for their children, who were likely to grow up without the knowledge and benefit of the “blessed gospel.” A fund of £20,000 had been raised in Europe for educational purposes in the provinces. In 1754 the poor Germans in and about Easton addressed a petition to the trustees of this fund, praying for the means to erect a schoolhouse and to secure the services of a schoolmaster.

The petition was given to William Parsons who in turn sent the paper to Richard Peters. His letter of transmittal was generally sympathetic, but he recommended that the petitioners not be permitted to contribute to the schoolhouse fund for, he wrote: “They are so perverse and quarrelsome in all their affairs that I am sometimes ready to query with myself whether it be man or beast that the generous benefactors are about to civilize. ... I will not be negligent in whatever the Trustees may desire, though it seems to me like attempting to wash a blackamoor white.” The trustees granted the request of the “poor Germans” and donated the large sum of thirty pounds to the cause. William Parsons, with five others, was appointed to the local board to handle this contribution and manage the school. Either Parsons assumed the duties of the board, or their lack of interest thrust these duties upon him, for he became in every sense the superintendent of Easton’s first school.

This school was in part a charity school. Not, however, as we understand the term nor, to his credit, as William Parsons understood it. It was the intention of those who could well afford to pay for the tuition of their children, and who had contributed to the construction of the building, that their children should receive...
free tuition, but that the poor Germans, who could ill afford any charge should pay for the privilege of having their children educated. Strange as it may seem, the Philadelphia trustees held the same views. William Parsons, in defense of his principles was compelled to defend the position of the poor. The mere fact that the poor happened to be the despised Germans did not deter him from championing their cause. However, the situation gave him some satisfaction, for his personal enemy, Nathaniel Vernon, had several children in the school for whose tuition he refused to pay. The very frank letter which Parsons wrote to the authorities in Philadelphia, on this subject, affords us an insight into his character which we otherwise could not have. The following is taken from his letter: "When I proposed to Mr. Vernon his paying something to the Master I acted from judgment and a principle of equality and justice. When Mr. Smith signified the minds of the Honorable Trustees to me I acted in obedience thereto in violation of principle and judgment, for their will was a law to me. . . . If the original intention of the society was that the children of English parents should receive the benefits of the charity school freely and that the poor Germans should pay for it, then the school at Easton is upon a right establishment, otherwise it is not." He accused Mr. Smith and the other trustees of partiality and added: "I am very willing and desirous that the world may have an opportunity of judging which of us have acted with partiality." How this first school rumpus turned out is not known. Let us hope that William Parsons was able to maintain his position.

Parsons undoubtedly considered his lot in Easton an unhappy one. He was living in the midst of the Germans and Moravians and his official duties threw him into personal contact with them. From Parsons' own statement we know that he did not get along well with the principal citizens of the town and county. He complained to Richard Peters that he could have no idea of the wicked men with whom he was entangled. He called Nathaniel Vernon a monster and a villain. He accused Vernon and Gordon of planning to make his task in Easton an uneasy one. Jasper Scull, he said, was a rash indiscreet man, and he distrusted John Jones of Bethlehem. Chapman, Jennings, Gordon, Vernon, Scull, and Jones were all "wicked men," and he had no respect for James Burnside who defeated him for the Assembly. In a letter to Peters he expressed the fear that he might have "incurred the
imputation of being peevish and vindictive,” which he stated “truly can’t justly be imputed to me.” A suspicion of its truth no doubt prompted the denial.

Parsons had his friends, but they were not numerous. Of three we are sure: Timothy Horsfield, Richard Peters, and Benjamin Franklin. In the course of his life at Easton, he became fond of Horsfield and named him one of the executors of his will. His friendship with Benjamin Franklin is herein fully shown. Richard Peters in a letter to Parsons in November of 1754, says: “Pray let me know how you are and if possible I will come and pay you a visit, for no man loves you more or desires your welfare with a more sincere wish than I do.”

The life of William Parsons in the first three years after the founding of Easton was filled with political squabbles, personal and religious animosities, business troubles, ill health, and bitter disappointment. However, his tribulations in this period were trivial compared with the burden he carried for the next two years, the last two years of his life.

The defeat of Colonel Washington in the summer of 1754 and of General Braddock in the summer of 1755 by the French and Indians, caused the Delaware and Shawnee Indians to ally themselves with the French and to institute barbarous and relentless warfare on the frontier. It is not necessary to draw upon our imagination to picture the dreadful conditions existing along the frontier in the year 1755. Richard Peters describes them in a letter to Thomas Penn: “almost all the women and children, over the Susquehanna, have left their habitations and the roads are full of starved, naked, indigent multitudes, who but the other day lived with comfort and satisfaction.”

As the Indian raids spread toward the northeast, the same conditions became prevalent in Northampton county. With the Gnadenheutten massacre the exodus from the Blue Mountains and their foothills received an impetus to which Peters’ description fails to do justice. Bethlehem, Nazareth, Friedenthal, and Easton became havens of refuge. William Parsons realized he had been sent to Easton to help build and to develop the town. He knew his responsibility to the proprietaries and, with intense loyalty and unassuming bravery, he stood like a rock and watched the human flood pass through Easton and on to safety. But his daughter
Grace, whose well-being was of first importance to him, he sent to Philadelphia.

The authorities of Northampton county were without guns, powder and lead. There was neither food for the destitute nor funds with which to secure it, and the melancholy Parsons sank to the very depths of despair. His constant letters kept the authorities in Philadelphia in touch with the situation, but his appeals for aid remained unanswered. In this dreadful situation he wrote to his friend Benjamin Franklin. His faith was not misplaced. In his reply Franklin told him "that an act is passed granting sixty thousand pounds chiefly for defence of the province. . . . I have . . . procured and sent up . . . a chest of arms, containing fifty and five loose, fifty five guns in all, of which twenty five are for Easton, and thirty to be disposed of to such persons nearest danger on the frontier, who are without arms and unable to pay. . . . By the same wagon we send twenty guns for Lehigh Township, and ten to Bethlehem to the Moravian Brethren."

Ten days later, Franklin again wrote Parsons and informed him that he and Mr. Hamilton were leaving Philadelphia on the following Thursday to visit him at Easton, in order to ascertain at first hand the true state of affairs in the hinterland. He concluded: "I enclose you twenty pounds toward buying meal and meat for the poor fugitives, that take refuge with you. Be of good courage, and God will guide you. Your friends will never desert you."

Parsons had received some lead and powder and with Franklin's assurance of guns and militia he must have experienced a certain relief, although it is quite unlikely that he saw any silver lining to the clouds which hung so heavily over the Forks of the Delaware. True to his word, Franklin left Philadelphia on Thursday, December 18, 1755. Some time the following Saturday, he and his company rode over the crest of the hill at John Street in Easton and descended into the forlorn village. It must have been a comforting sight to the residents as the little cavalcade rode into town. The Moravian guide, William Edmonds, led the procession. Then came the rather portly Franklin, the fastidious Hamilton, the Quaker garbed Joseph Fox, and Franklin's son, William, dressed in the scarlet uniform of a grenadier. They were accompanied by a rather motley troop of cavalry led by Captain James McLaughlin.
The report had been circulated that the Indians intended to attack and burn Bethlehem on Christmas eve. Added to the suffering of the refugees and the great fear of the citizens of Easton, the probabilities of the burning of Bethlehem cast terror among the people. It was in this atmosphere of gloom that Franklin, Hamilton, Fox, and Parsons gathered on Christmas Eve to discuss the situation. If there was any sign of cheer in this gathering it must have come from Franklin, certainly not from Parsons. When the dawn of Christmas day found Bethlehem still safe and the rangers had made no report of Indian hostility, the citizens took on new courage. Before Franklin left Easton with his party, he commissioned Parsons a major and placed him in charge of the troops in Northampton county.

In the summer of 1756, the first Indian conference at Easton was held. As far as the official records are concerned, Parsons appears to have taken little or no part. However, the demands made upon him, due to the unsettled conditions of the county and the staging of the treaties at Easton, were a burden which, coupled with his ill health, undoubtedly hastened his death.

It was a duty which fell upon him, as a representative of the proprietaries, to see that the settlers who had fled from their habitations and were temporarily living in Easton or merely passing through were fed, housed, and clothed. In a small community, struggling for its own existence, with poor accommodations and few houses, and with funds insufficient even to pay for the services of a messenger to carry their communications to Philadelphia, this was a hopeless task. The lean, haggard, and careworn women who, with numerous ill clad, shivering children, dragged themselves into the village, were a pitiable sight. We must assume that Parsons handled this dreadful situation in a capable manner for there are no records of any deaths from exposure or lack of sufficient food to keep body and soul together. Parsons drew on his own funds for this purpose and in one of his letters stated that he had expended what little cash he had.

The Indians who attended the conference were troublesome and it was necessary to police the town. This too was Parsons' job. He was now major of the local militia and had charge of the men stationed in Easton. It must have been a trying situation for any slight untoward incident would have provoked the white men or the red men to attack, with a resulting catastrophe which would
have had an unpredictable effect upon the Indians, and might have changed the final outcome of the French and Indian War.

The Indians, who were constantly drunk, were not the only cause of worry. Of the farmers, still living in the vicinity of the town, Parsons said: “our rude neighboring farmers when they come to town seldom leave it sober . . . and it will be necessary to have two sentries to keep off one of those headstrong drunken Dutchmen from the Indians.” His opinion of the citizens of Easton was not much better. Of them he wrote: “Many of the town people are very ignorant and indiscrete and will with difficulty be brought to behave to the Indians as they should.”

With all the trouble due to the Indian uprising, and the holding of the conference at Easton, Parsons still had his regular duties to look after. His offices as justice, clerk of the orphans’ court, prothonotary, and recorder of deeds made heavy demands upon his time. During part of this period he was also county treasurer. As major of the county militia he visited the frontier forts. All the troubles of a hastily organized militia, poorly drilled, ill equipped, and without discipline, were thrust upon him. He presided at court martials and acted as quartermaster and commissary of the county troops. He carried on all the official correspondence with Philadelphia and Bethlehem. With all this he found time to do some surveying and occasionally visited his plantation on the Swatara Creek.

While Parsons’ health continued to fail, his outlook on life greatly improved. His five years at Easton in close contact with the Moravians had changed his opinion of this denomination. His prejudice disappeared and his contacts with them became most cordial. He now realized why his wife and his children had embraced their faith. The cause of his separation from his family was thus removed. “Time had cured the wounds which reason failed to heal.” His health continued to fail and he realized that his end was near. Overtaken by remorse, he sent a message from his death bed to his wife and children, asking them to come to him. His pathetic appeal to his wife came too late for her to reach his bed side. However, his daughters, Grace and Molly, then living in Bethlehem, reached Easton in time to receive his blessing and to hear him acknowledge his error and pay tribute to the Moravian brethren.
On December 17, 1757 William Parsons died. At his request, Rev. Jacob Rogers of the Moravian Church, the husband of his daughter Molly, conducted the funeral services. He was buried in Easton in the little graveyard on top of the hill. The remains of this pioneer, who served the Philadelphia library as librarian for twelve years, now rest in front of the Easton library near the books which he loved so well.

In his will Parsons made numerous bequests. Among them was one of two hundred pounds to the Academy of Philadelphia for the benefit of needy scholars. This academy grew into the University of Pennsylvania. The residue of his estate he left to his wife and after her death to his children. Since his debts and bequests absorbed his entire estate, his wife received nothing. Hugh Roberts, a contemporary, in speaking of Parsons' gift to the Academy said that he had "bequeathed more than his estate . . . to raise a fame after death which he had the unhappiness to fail gaining in the conduct of life."

Three years after Parsons' death, Thomas Penn stated in a letter to Richard Peters: "I do not remember what you wrote about Mr. Parsons, am sorry he died poor. . . . I do not remember he moved to Easton on our account. . . . However what services you employed him in should be paid for and if you . . . think he ought to be allowed One Hundred Pounds, let it be paid him." Cold! Austere!!

Benjamin Franklin was in London when he heard of Parsons' death. On February 16, 1758, he wrote to his wife: "I regret the loss of my friend Parsons. Death begins to make breaches in the little junto of old friends, that he had long forborne, and it must be expected he will soon pick us all off one after another." He also wrote to Hugh Roberts: "Two of the former members of the Junto you tell me are departed this life: Potts and Parsons. Odd characters both of them. Parsons a wise man, that often acted foolishly; Potts a wit, that seldom acted wisely. If enough were the means to make a man happy, one had always the means of happiness, without ever enjoying the thing; the other had always the thing without ever possessing the means. Parsons, even in his prosperity, always fretting; Potts in the midst of his poverty, ever laughing. It seems, then, that happiness in this life rather depends on internals than externals; and that, besides the natural effects of wisdom and virtue, vice and folly,
there is such a thing as a happy or unhappy constitution. They were both our friends and loved us, so, peace to their shades. They had their virtues as well as their foibles; they were both honest men, and that alone, as the world goes, is one of the greatest of characters. They were old acquaintances in whose company I formerly enjoyed a great deal of pleasure, and I can not think of losing them without concern and regret."

William Parsons did rock the swaddling clothed Easton in its cradle and he did guide its tottering infant footsteps, but he had no love for the new-born village. For the successful accomplishment of this difficult and, to him, distasteful task, the citizens of Easton honor his memory. He was a faithful agent of the Penns, and an acknowledgment of his loyalty and unselfish devotion to the interest of the proprietaries is a tribute to his memory much greater than the words cut in the cold marble slab which marks his grave.