THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH AND THE SCOTCH-IRISH ON THE PENNSYLVANIA COLONIAL FRONTIER

By Guy S. Klett
Research Historian of the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia

How closely associated the growth of the Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania and the great migration of the Scotch-Irish to the same colony were becomes apparent from a close study of the evidences available in the records of that day. At the close of the seventeenth century Presbyterian forces were not numerous in colonial Pennsylvania. Reliable evidence points to the fact that only one congregation of Presbyterians existed in the province before 1700, and that was in Philadelphia. Of the seven ministers who formed the general Presbytery which met in Philadelphia in 1706, Jedidiah Andrews, minister to the Philadelphia Presbyterians, was the only one of the group resident in the province. In 1717 two other ministers were serving in Pennsylvania when the Synod of Philadelphia was organized; namely, Malachi Jones and David Evans. The latter worked chiefly among the Welsh.

During the closing months of 1717 and the following year a decided change took place in the forces that made up Presbyterian interests. From this time on the correspondence of James Logan

2 Records of the Presbyterian Church (Philadelphia, 1904), pp. 45, 46, 48.
reveals that the Scotch-Irish came to the province in ever increasing numbers. In 1728 he informed John Penn that “The Palatines crowd in upon us & ye Irish yet faster, of w[tre] no less than five [?] Ships are arrived at Newcastle and this place [Philadelphia] wthin these ten days and many more are daily expected.” Less than a year later he stated: “It now looks as if Ireld or the Inhabitants of it were to be transplanted hither.” During the subsequent decades of the colonial period this migration continued till the Scotch-Irish, according to Franklin, comprised about one-third of the provincial population.4

Although some of the newcomers established themselves in the older settled area, the trend was for these people to go to the frontier. On the one hand they were encouraged to go to the frontier by the authorities of the province at a time when the latter were apprehensive of Indian trouble.5 On the other hand it was natural for a people, who had been characterized as “land-hungry” before they left the shores of their homeland, to seek lands where freedom from restrictions that burdened them in the Old World could be enjoyed in the New. Consequently they moved to the unoccupied, but not unclaimed, lands. Proprietary manors, however, were no deterrent to them—they settled on the land that was claimed by both the Penns and the Baltimores.

One may ask what grounds are there for claiming these people as Presbyterian. Space does not permit a search into the evidences of their religious allegiance before they left Ireland. But the evidence from this side is sufficient to put at rest the questioning minds. In 1723, the Rev. George Gillespie, a Presbyterian minister located at the Head of Christiana Creek, stated that “wthin the space of five years by gone, near to two hundred Families have come into our parts from Ireland, and more are following: They are generally Presbyterians.”6 In the same year a Church of England missionary attested to the fact that “the Church at Newcastle is environed with greater numbers of Dissenters than ever, by reason of these fresh recruits sent us of late from the north of

5 Writings of Benjamin Franklin (editor, Albert H. Smyth), IV (New York, 1905), 337n.
6 Charles Briggs, American Presbyterianism (New York, 1885), Appendix, p. lxxxiv.
Ireland."* Jedidiah Andrews, of Philadelphia, added to this testimony in 1730 in the following comment:

Such a multitude of people coming in, from Ireland, of late years, our Congregations are multiplied, in this Province, to the number of 15 or 16, which are all, but 2 or 3, furnished with ministers. All Scotch and Irish but 3 or 4. Besides divers new Congregations ye are forming by these new comers, we all call ourselves Presbyterians, none pretending to be called Congregational, in this Province.9

In a communication of 1760 to the people of Great Britain and Ireland, the Corporation for the Relief of the Poor and Distressed Presbyterian Ministers stated that the "Frontier Counties of Pennsylvania and Virginia were mostly settled by people of our Denomination."9

In 1766 when Charles Beatty and George Duffield went on their appointment, made by the Synod of New York and Philadelphia, to the frontier settlements of Pennsylvania, they contacted Presbyterians along the course of their travels. Their course in the early stages of their journey led from Carlisle across the North Mountain into Sherman’s Valley and onward into the Tuscarora Valley where they found groups of varying sizes whose intent was to make some provision for the Gospel Ministry. Duffield moved along a route that led to the Path Valley where he preached to large congregations. In this valley in the township known as Fannet there were about seventy families that could be the basis for a religious society. This settlement, he described, as:

not much mixed being allmost all of one Mind, and a People very unanimous among themselves; they have fixed on a Place for a Meeting House about 8 or 9 Miles from the Head of the valley where they purpose Soon beginning to build a House of Square Logs of 50 feet by 26.—the Valley will admit of a number more Setlers

*W. S. Perry, Historical Collections Relating to the American Colonial Church, V (Hartford, 1871), 37.
*Samuel Hazard, Register of Pennsylvania, XV, 199-200.
*Minutes of the Corporation for the Relief of Poor and Distressed Presbyterian Ministers, and of the Poor and Distressed Widows and Children of Presbyterian Ministers, p. 18 (photostat).
in it—& they Expect to be able to Support a Minister after some years, but at present are as the other Valleys but Just begining the world in a Manner after th[e]ir late Destresses by the werr [war].

He visited the Great Cove where people were planning to join with those of Conococheague. In the meantime Beatty was carrying on his ministry to settlers in the Juniata and Kishacoquillas valleys and down the Aughwick to Fort Littleton where he and Duffield again united. They pushed on to the westward and preached at Bedford. There is no other record in this journal of their having preached to any assembly until they arrived at Fort Pitt where they took turns in preaching to the soldiers within the fort and to the inhabitants outside the fort.

About six years later, in the closing months of 1772 and during the next year, when David McClure and Levi Frisbie made a missionary journey to western Pennsylvania, they found settlements ready for religious worship. McClure's description of some of these settlements west of the Susquehanna River deserves attention. In writing about the people of Big Spring (Newville, Pa.), he said: "The people of this settlement are almost all of scotch irish descent. Immigrants from the North of Ireland, or descendents of such. They are presbyterian, well instructed in the principles of religion, & a number of them very exemplary and pious." Of the people of Sherman's Valley he wrote: "they are presbyterians, & attentive to the education of their children, in the principles & duties of religion. Happy people, to whom the providence of God has given this pleasant fertile and retired abode."

As he journeyed westward beyond the mountains, he found:

The inhabitants west of the Appalachian mountains are chiefly Scotch Irish presbyterians. They are either natives of the North of Ireland, or the descendants of such & removed here from the middle Colonies. There are some Germans, English & Scotch. The presbyterians are generally well indoctrinated in the principles of the christian religion. The young people are taught by their par-

---

10 Beatty's Journal (Ms.), pp. 7-8.
11 Ibid., pp. 5 ff.
ents & school masters, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, & almost every family has the Westminster Confession of Faith, which they carefully study. . . .

In August, 1772, when he arrived at Ligonier, he was informed that "the settlement in the valley of Ligonier consisted of about 100 families, principally Scotch & Irish. . . ." He preached two sermons at Joseph Hunter's near the Youghiogheny, "to a serious & attentive audience. Some of the settlers here had not heard a sermon for 14 years. There was no settled minister or church organized in all the country westward of the Appalachian Mountains. The people are generally presbyterians. A few illiterate preachers of the baptist persuasion, have preached about, zealous to make proselytes." After having visited and preached to the settlers of Ligonier, Proctor's Tent, Jacob's Swamp, etc., he wrote in November of 1772:

The settlements to which I have preached have invited me to tarry with them, which I have engaged to do, until May or June next. To encourage the business they have drawn up subscriptions, forming themselves into something like ecclesiastical order. I engaged to preach in five of the new settlements. It is about 6 years since the people began them. They are from almost all parts and generally presbyterians. It was pleasing to find in each of them, some zealous and pious persons, who came forward, & willingly devoted their time & labours to form the people into society, for the purpose of the public worship of God. . . .

During the years 1775 and 1776 the Presbytery of Donegal, handling the frontier areas of Presbyterianism in Pennsylvania received supplications for ministerial supplies from about eighty settlements of which fifteen or more were located along the northern reaches of the frontier and in the neighborhood of thirty-two were west of the mountains.

Settlements, consisting mainly of Presbyterians, established the meeting house as the assembling place to hear the Word of God

---

Ibid., p. 112.
Ibid., p. 41.
Ibid., p. 47.
Ibid., p. 104.
Minutes of the Presbytery of Donegal, III, 194 ff.
and to provide those means that would cultivate their spiritual life. Not only was the meeting house the center of the religious life outside of the home, but it was oftentimes, and especially on the frontier, the only real center of assembly for a settlement. In the French and Indian War John Steel’s meeting house was even fortified, and bore the name of a fort.

As soon as circumstances permitted, steps were taken to secure a minister of the Gospel. To obtain all or part of the services of a minister it was necessary for a congregation to provide a competent maintenance for him by means of subscriptions from the members. David McClure stated that the ministers of Pennsylvania were supported by subscription, and “appear to live as well as their brethren in New England. Although their Salaries are small, they have opportunities to purchase lands, and have comfortable farms.”

Congregations were organized by electing elders, formed into the Session with the minister as moderator, to attend to the spiritual welfare of the members, and the trustees to look after the material needs of the congregation. Various duties fell to each group in its efforts to maintain the religious life of the community. Each congregation within a designated area was allowed to send the minister and one elder to a presbytery which handled matters outside the jurisdiction of the session. Although there were judicatures above the presbytery, our attention will be directed to the work of the two mentioned, because they affected the life of the community more directly than the others. Both the session and the presbytery played an important role in the life of the community by functioning as courts. Through the practice of visitations by the presbyteries for purposes of ordaining and installing a minister, of enquiring into the life and conduct of the congregation, and of settling any problems that may have arisen within the congregation, a further aid to orderly conduct was maintained.

That the church had the opportunity of exercising an influence in behalf of order was a well recognized fact. Cut loose from the restraints of an old order, placed in an environment remote from civil control and in contact with forces that were not always virtuous, these people found in the church a restraining influence.
that could not be exerted by the civil authorities. The colonial officials recognized this fact, and used both ministers and elders to maintain order.

Not only James Logan testified to the necessitous condition and lawlessness of a great many newcomers, but the Corporation for Relief of Poor and Distressed Presbyterian Ministers, in a letter "To all pious & charitable Christians in Great Britain & Ireland," stated that:

As the first Settlers were generally in low Circumstances & were obliged by the Force of hard industry to make new Settlements on our Frontiers, they were unable to do much for the support of a Gospel Ministry. And many worthy protestant Ministers who left Europe with a truely Catholic Spirit to promote the Kingdom of Christ in this Wilderness, and many educated in this Country, have had great & uncommon Difficulties to struggle with. Many of the lower Ranks who flocked in thither were ignorant, vicious and intractable, readier to learn the vices of their Indian Neighbours, than to teach them the more perfect ways of God. They were soon elated with the Name of Plantations, tho' their greatest Wealth was no more than the necessaries of Life; they were not easily brought to the more strict and civilized Conduct which the Gospel requires; and were highly pleased with the prevailing principles that Gospel Ministers should work for their Livings, and Preach for Charity. . . .

In this same letter the authors testified to the fact that the inhabitants are "inconstant and unsettled and are always shifting their Habitations, either from Love of variety, or from the fair Prospect of more commodious Settlements on the Frontier of this, or the Neighbouring Provinces."

Besides those who purchased land in an orderly manner, there were others who indulged in the common practice of squatting. To seek the most with the least possible outlay was a trait as common to that day as to this. The incoming Scotch-Irish, Logan stated, settled along the Maryland border, which was involved in the boundary dispute between the Penns and the

19 Minutes of Corporation for Relief of Poor and Distressed Presbyterian Ministers . . ., p. 16.
20 Ibid., p. 18.
Baltimores, and consequently hindered any chance of the sale or rental of those lands. Furthermore, the manor lands, claimed but unsettled, felt the onrush of this avalanche in search of a place to live. Logan stated that they all alleged “That it was against the Laws of God and Nature that so much Land should lie idle while so many Christians wanted it to labour on and raise their Bread.”

Some of these newcomers began to settle on lands before their purchase from the Indians. But the authorities were partially responsible for this trend; for they invited the newcomers to move to the frontier because they “might prove a considerable Security” at a time when a misunderstanding with the Indians existed. And the restlessness of such a people would not observe limits set by the authorities. When the inevitable difficulties arose through the squatting tendencies, the colonial authorities appealed to the ministers and elders to assist in keeping the people within bounds. In 1730 James Logan found it necessary to call upon James Anderson, the Presbyterian minister of Donegal, to exert his efforts to check the settlers who were encroaching on Conestoga Manor. This appeal was made with the acknowledgment that:

Thy Christian Endeavours have hitherto been highly Serviceable to thy Hearers themselves as well as to the Publick Tranquillity that thou wouldst advise & prevail with these unhappy People to desist in time & obey the Magistrates who have now strict Orders from the Govern to proceed against them.

He also called upon Andrew Galbraith, a Presbyterian Elder, to add his influence to that of Anderson to persuade the people to assist the sheriff in expelling the squatters from Conestoga Manor.

That the Presbyterian Church recognized the seriousness and dangers of squatting upon the lands that had not been purchased from the Indians appears in the instructions given to Charles Beatty and George Duffield in 1766 when they went on a mission to the frontier settlers of Pennsylvania and to the Indians in

"Logan Papers, Letter Books, IV, 213; III, 339; IV, 215."
the Ohio Country. The Corporation for the Relief of Poor and Distressed Presbyterian Ministers, that financed this important mission, addressed them in the following manner:

It is our Judgment, & we hereby order, that these ministers preach to none of our people, who have Settled on lands yt are not yet purchased of the Indian Nations; as we think this practice of encroaching on these nations Unjust in its Self, & likely to prevent the Success of the Gospel among these people, if so provoked & defrauded of their Lands, as well as a Violation of the Laws of this Province. And we request Sd Mess:—Beatty & Duffield every where to warn people against this wicked & unjust practice, if they find any guilty thereof; and to assure them, that we will disown them, if any of our people do so.

One of the commission, sent to warn the people of Redstone and the surrounding country to withdraw from the unpurchased Indian lands in 1768, was John Steel, a Presbyterian minister located at Carlisle. And the sermon was used as the medium to induce these people to become law-abiding citizens.

The underlying desire to enjoy the privileges of the Christian ministry, referred to earlier in this paper, prepared the way for the sessions and presbyteries to act in a judicatory capacity. The records of the sessions and presbyteries reveal that the Church entered intimately into the life of the people. Unfortunately the records of frontier colonial churches are few, and the records of the presbytery have to be relied upon for this work of the Church. Through the practice of parochial visitation by presbyteries the affairs of the congregations came before this higher judicature. On such occasions the presbytery enquired into the welfare of the congregation by questioning the elders about the minister, the heads of families about the lives and manners of the session, and the minister and elders about the conduct of the congregation. It is of interest to examine some of the questions asked the congregation about the minister. They are as follows:

2Minutes of the Corporation for Relief of Poor and Distressed Presby-terian Ministers . . ., p. 60.
2Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania, IX (Harrisburg, 1852), 507.
Is he a haunter of Ale-houses and Taverns? Is he a Dancer, Carder or Dicer? . . . Is he contentious, a Brawler, Fighter, or Striker? Is he a Swearer of small or minced Oaths? . . . Is he a filthy Speaker or Jester? Bears he familiar Company with disaffected, prophane, or scandalous Persons? . . . Keeps he much at Home at his ministerial Work? Or doth he occasion to himself Distraction, and unnecessary Diversion therefrom? . . . Doth he frequently catechise his Parishioners, and administer the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper to them? . . . At the Lord’s Supper, doth he not cause cut the Bread in large and fair Shaves, fit for mutual Fraction and Distribution . . . ?

Of the minister the Presbytery asked whether the elders . . . attend Gospel Ordinances and the diets of the Session? (3) Are they grave, pious and exemplary in their Lives and Conversations? Do they worship God in their Families? Is any of your Elders an ignorant Man, a drinker of Healths, a Tipler, a drinker excessively to Drunkenness, a Swearer, and observer of Yule Days, &c.? Is he one that observes not the Sabbath? . . .

A few of the questions asked about the congregation were:

. . . (1) Doth the Body of the People attend Ordinances duly and timeously, and stay till the Blessing be pronounced: Are they diligent in improving the Means of Knowledge, and are they growing therein? . . . What Scandals, Schisms, Heresies or Divisions are among them, and if on the growing Hand? How do they observe the Lord’s Day?25

As a result of this form of procedure numerous cases were tried before the presbytery. Quarrels between members, disagreements in trade and barter, mistreatment of a neighbor, gossip injurious to the peace of the congregation, violation of the Sabbath, breaches of conduct jeopardizing the moral integrity of the community, such as fornication, adultery, and divorce, drunkenness, swearing, etc., came under the jurisdiction of the presbytery. To safeguard the defendant adequate evidence and witnesses had

*Form of Process in the Judicatories of the Church of Scotland; with Relation to Scandals and Censures . . . (Glasgow, 1764), pp. 59 ff.*
to be produced. If the accused were found guilty, he or she would be deprived of church privileges by the session until the individual acknowledged his or her sorrow for the sin. Depending upon the degree of the offense, acknowledgment would be required before the congregation in order to be restored to full membership.

To get some idea as to how the Presbytery handled some of these matters, let us look at certain portions of their judgment on cases that came before such a body. In the case of questionable conduct of a member of the Pennsburgh congregation in 1749, the Presbytery of Donegal gave as part of its judgment the following:

That inasmuch as Mr Deniston complains that his Dau Mary's Character has been aspers'd by this Congregation, we don't find she has been guilty of Actual Immorality, tho' it appears she has been too much off her guard, & Acted imprudently in ye choice of her Company, how much soever this conduct may be imputed to yt innocent freedom that young persons Somtimes use, & however favourable the negative evidences appear in her excuse yet we could wish she had been more circumspect in her walk & cautious in respect of her company considering how liable young persons are to reproach, & be narrowly watch'd in every part of their behaviour.

With the growing disregard for maintaining the Sabbath a holy day, the Presbytery of Donegal handed down a decision of the following tenor in December, 1759:

Upon the Consideration of a Supplication brought in complaining of the Notorious Prophanation of the sabbath, by unnecessary Journeyings, Driving of Carriages &c. Order'd yt Mess. Roan and Rob. Smith be a Committee to prepare an Address to the Court of Quarter sessions for their Concurrence to Suppress this growing Evil.

Not only did the Presbyterian Church endeavor to right the ills that had crept into the community life of the frontier settle-

---

26 Minutes of the Presbytery of Donegal, I, 310.
27 Ibid., II, 9.
ments in the foregoing manner, but through its agencies it sought to lessen the burden of frontier suffering during the time of crises. This is particularly evident in the way in which the Corporation for the Relief of Poor and Distressed Presbyterian Ministers appropriated money in the interest of the frontier settlers. In 1762 this Board gave forty pounds to the Rev. John Brainard to be used in building a few cabins, or in clearing land for the support of the families of some Christian Indians who had been driven from the frontiers of Pennsylvania and "a neighboring Province in the late war." A sum of one hundred and fifty pounds was given to John Elder, James Galbreath, John Steel, George Duffield, John Montgomery, and John Armstrong "to divide Among the distressed families driven from their habitations by ye Savage Indians. & that they consider & help those only that are exceeding poor of all Denominations without exception."88

One of the major steps taken by the Corporation to relieve the suffering of the frontier occurred in July, 1762, when they decided to apply some of the money recently collected abroad by Charles Beatty to purchase the liberty of the captives of the Indians. The outcome of negotiations with the Governor, James Hamilton, resulted in the appropriation of five hundred pounds that was paid to the Governor to secure the release of the captives, estimated to be about four hundred. It appears that as late as 1767 the Corporation was having some difficulty in securing an account from Josiah Franklin Davenport, into whose hands the Governor had placed the fund, of the actual amount that had been used to redeem the captives.89

When the occasion merited it, the Corporation provided funds for individual purposes. A certain Catherine Crow, from Cumberland county, whose husband had been killed by the Indians, and she and her four children taken captive in June, 1764, found herself after her escape without much in worldly possessions because of the seizures made by the Indians and her husband's creditors. Her appeal for assistance to take out a warrant for land prompted the Corporation to advance "as much money for

88 Minutes of the Corporation for Relief of Poor and Distressed Presbyterian Ministers . . . , p. 52.
89 Ibid., 39-40, 53, 55, 64, 65.
her as will pay for a warrant for a Plantation not exceeding two hundred acres." The Corporation also gave fifteen pounds to a Thomas Smiley in April, 1766, to redeem his daughter "above thirty nine years of age" who had been a captive for eight years and who "earnestly longs & desires to Obtain her liberty & to be restored to her parents & Children & to the Churches of Christ." To aid them further in an effective prosecution of this relief work the Corporation directed Thomas Smiley or his son to secure information about the number of white people in captivity, the nations that held them, the terms on which they could be redeemed, and the names of the captives.

It was through this Corporation, working in conjunction with the Synod of New York and Philadelphia, that missionary enterprises were maintained on the frontier. In 1771 the Board voted that thirty pounds should be paid yearly to the committee of the Synod "to be disposed of by them for ye releif of poor & distressed Presbyterian Ministers, or for propagating the Gospel on our frontiers, or Among ye Indian Nations." This action provided a regular income for the maintenance of this work.

In summarizing one does not need to enumerate again the various fields of activity in which the Presbyterian Church touched the life of the Scotch-Irish. Ministers and laymen alike participated in promoting the religious life on the frontier. The maintenance of order through its judicatures and the propagating of the Gospel through its ministry were recognized as the means to win men to a sense of their responsibility to Church and State. The Corporation for the Relief of Poor and Distressed Presbyterian Ministers, in the membership of which, besides such ministers as Gilbert Tennent, Francis Alison, John Rodgers, John Ewing, were such laymen as William Allen, Esq., Dr. John Redmond, George Bryan, Hugh Williamson, William Humphreys, Col. Ephriam Blain, did much to promote the interests of the Presbyterian Church on the frontier. This same organization, in 1760, expressed its view of the magnitude of this work in which ministers and "their People are every Day enlarging the Bounds of Christs Kingdom & extending the British Empire in America. . . ."

---

"Ibid., 54-55.
"Ibid., p. 59.
"Ibid., p. 87.
"Ibid., p. 19.