Memoir of William Logan Fisher
(1781-1862) For His Grandchildren

In March, 1850, William Logan Fisher dictated the following autobiographical statement, from which, about 1900, Joseph M. Fox, his grandson, had a typed copy made which is now at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, endorsed by Mr. Fox: "The original of this was written by an amanuensis for Wm. Logan Fisher, and is in my possession."

Fisher was the son of Thomas Fisher and Sarah Logan. Part of his mother's inheritance was a portion of her grandfather James Logan's Stenton estate, then on the outskirts of Philadelphia, and it was there that Thomas Fisher in 1798 built Wakefield, an impressive country house. Still standing at Lindley Avenue and Twentieth Street, Wakefield was later to become the home of his son William Logan Fisher, and eventually that of Joseph M. Fox, who inherited the Fisher family papers now at the Society.

As a businessman William Logan Fisher was enterprising and successful. About 1815 he established the Wakefield Manufacturing Company, which turned out woolen goods. Located at Eighteenth Street and Fisher's Lane, this business continued into the 1880s. Even more long-lived was his Duncannon Iron Works, which he established in 1836 on the Susquehanna River in Perry County. Its operations were continued by three or four generations of Fisher's descendants.

Fisher's business apprenticeship had been passed at New Bedford, where he was well acquainted with his fellow Philadelphia Quaker, Charles Waln Morgan. They married the Rodman sisters, granddaughters of William Rotch, the Nantucket, and later New Bedford, whaling king. Morgan and Fisher each owned a half interest in Duncannon. Morgan also owned a half interest in a 351-ton whaling ship, launched in the Acushnet River at New Bedford in 1841. With Morgan away on a business trip, the other owners named the vessel the Charles W. Morgan. She proved to be a famous vessel. Con-

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1 Anna Wharton Smith, Genealogy of the Fisher Family (Philadelphia, 1896), 63, 207.

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continuing her whaling career until 1921, she is today Mystic Seaport’s prize exhibit, the lone survivor of the golden era of American whaling.²

William Logan Fisher’s activities as a man of business and as a farmer were spiced by his intellectual drive. He was a prolific writer. As he informs us in his memoir, much of his writings for newspapers cannot now be located, having presumably been anonymously contributed. However, many of his published works bear his name. His favorite subjects, in his own words “the higher principles of human nature,” were Quakerism, other aspects of religion, and antisabbatarianism. The diarist Sidney George Fisher, his somewhat supercilious nephew, recorded in 1845: “Uncle William has published a book on the history of the Sabbath. It is an attempt to oppose the efforts of puritans and fanatics, who are endeavouring by influencing public opinion & thru that the legislature, to force upon the community by law their narrow-minded & gloomy superstitions. It is so well done that I was quite astonished that he could have written it.”³

Fisher’s bibliography is extensive. His major writings were: The Light of Truth in the Mind of Man, the only Rule of Faith and Practice (1824); An Examination of the New System of Society by Robert Owen (1826); Pauperism and Crime (1831); The History of the Institution of the Sabbath Day (1845), with revised versions in 1846 and 1847; Observations on Mental Phenomena, As Connected with the Philosophy of Divine Revelation (1851); A Review of the Public Relations of the Society of Friends (1852); A Review of the Doctrines and Disciplines of the Society of Friends (1854); History of the Institution of the Sabbath Day, Its Uses and Abuses (1859); An Inquiry into the Laws of Organized Societies as Applied to the Alleged Decline of the Society of Friends (1860); An American View of the Causes Which Have Led to the Decline of the Society of Friends in Great Britain and Ireland (1860); and, in the year of its author’s death, The Nature of War Together With Some Observations on the Coercive Exactions of Religious Societies (1862).

To these bibliographical entries may now be added the following modest memoir.

N.B.W.

I have felt so much at a loss for some memoranda respecting the lives and characters of my ancestors, that I have concluded to give such sketches of my own life as may supply the deficiency to those who may come after me, if indeed any one of them should feel sufficiently interested to read this account. It is of course only intended for the circle of my own family; as my life has been marked with no incidents but those of a purely domestic character it can only have interest, if at all, to them.

I was born on the 1st day of the 10th month 1781. My parents were Thomas and Sarah Fisher, my grandparents on my Father's side Joshua Fisher and Sarah Fisher, my great-grandparents Thomas Fisher and Margery Fisher, my great-great-grandfather was John Fisher who came to this country either with William Penn on his first voyage or about the same time. I have among my papers a memorandum in the handwriting of my grandfather Joshua Fisher which speaks of his grandfather John Fisher as being a man of respectable standing among Friends and of good estate, there are some notices in the early history of Pennsylvania which speak of John Fisher Glazier, hence I am inclined to believe that this was my great-great-grandfather's profession.

My grandparents on my Mother's side were William Logan from whom I derive my name and Hannah Emlen. She was the only daughter of George Emlen, Brewer, hence our connexion with the Emlen family. My great-grandfather was James Logan from whom Logan Square and the Loganian Library derive their names. My great-grandmother was Sarah Read. James Logan and Israel Pemberton married sisters hence our connexion with the Pemberton family.

My grandfathers and grandmothers died before I was born, except Joshua Fisher, and he when I was but a year or two old, and I know but very little of their characters. There is one anecdote of my grandfather Fisher when at an early period of his life he had become possessed of a number of slaves, as was then customary in the State of Delaware. Some of them he had sold; becoming dissatisfied with holding slaves, he not only liberated those he still owned, but repurchased those he had sold and their children and
reunited the whole of them. Those that were too old to be set free according to the laws of Delaware without bonds of maintenance in case they should become chargeable were supported by our family. One of them lived to be considerably over a hundred years of age, and his maintenance cost upwards of Two thousand dollars, having outlived his master more than 50 years and deceased only within the last ten years.

My Mother died soon after I was 14 years old, at the age of 45, having been born in the year 1751 and died in the last of the year 1795. She was the only daughter of William and Hannah Logan, was brought up in affluence, but was a plain and consistent Friend. For some years before her death her health was delicate and precarious, but at all times her household affairs were managed with the utmost neatness and propriety.

Inheriting from her Father a full share of his estate, her outfit, as it is generally termed, was rich and abundant. At my earliest recollection my parents lived in the house in 2nd Street between Dock and Spruce St. where I was born, and at that time they kept a one-horse chaise which accommodated the family riding. When I was about five or six years old, as near as I can remember, my Father purchased of Peter Reeve, an old friend, a house a few doors South of his then residence No. 142 and which at this time has descended to my niece Rebecca Smith. For this house I think my father paid $10,000, and I still remember the trouble it gave me on being told if the money was not paid my father would be sent to jail. This was a larger house than the former with fine back building, and an extensive garden extending to Laurel Court. My father built a stone stable on this court. The one-horse chaise was exchanged for a closed carriage or coach, to accommodate my mother, and a more common open carriage was bought for ordinary purposes. My brother Joshua and sister Hannah, some years older than myself, had a pony bought for them, and as I grew up a second pony was purchased. Thus we had a pair of horses and two carriages and two riding horses during the early part of my life. My Father was fully able to support this expense, having large personal and real estate, and being free from debt. My Father’s house was one of open hospitality; having travelled thro’ different parts of Europe, and in connection with his father and brothers maintained extensive
commercial relations, particularly with England, whence they had packet ships constantly employed, it brought him in connection with most foreigners who visited this country for commercial and other purposes; besides there was a free board for all the members of the Society of Friends, and many of the most distinguished members of the Society from one end of the continent to the other were found at his table. He was deeply interested on behalf of the natives of this country, was for many years a member of the Yearly Meeting’s Committee on that subject, and I have often known my Father’s parlour filled with Indians, who came to the government and to Friends to solicit redress for their various wrongs. The institution of the Westtown Boarding School is more due to my Father than to any other individual. He received all the subscriptions and paid all the money for its erection and early establishment. In contemplating the character of my Father, I am always filled with a deep feeling of respect and affectionate regard; a gentleman by nature, acting under the highest principles of duty, kind and conciliatory to all, after more than thirty years separation from him, I now bear with a full and feeling heart this small tribute to his memory.

To return to myself; my childhood was marked by no incidents of an uncommon character. Attempts were made at a very early age to make me learn Latin and Greek, and I went to a Latin and Greek school two continuous years. But others got the start of me, I became discouraged, was almost always at the foot of my class and, as I now recollect, I was an extremely dull and stupid scholar, and the end of it all was that I learned little and that little was soon forgotten. Besides this I was put to learning Spanish and French; these things resulted in a great deficiency in my English education. Though I was a dull scholar, I was, I think, an active and sprightly boy. My Mother died when I was about 14 years of age. At that time two eminent public Friends from England were in this country, Deborah Danby and Rebecca Young, and were much at our house. They had formed an intimacy with the Rotch and Rodman families in New Bedford. They advised my Father to endeavor to place me in the family and counting house of Wm. Rotch, Jun’r. in that place. This was promoted by the then recent marriage of my Uncle Samuel Fisher with Hannah Rodman, and thus I was placed when about 14
or 15 years of age in the family of William Rotch, Jun’r., then an eminent merchant. This was one of the most important events of my life, and had a bearing on my whole future character. In this family my youth was passed until I married. I was treated by them with the greatest kindness and consideration. I can never forget the particular marks of attention and regard which were manifested to me by my Mistress Elizabeth Rotch. If I had done wrong, if there was any lapse or indiscretion, she was always my advocate. Friends in New Bedford at this time were very plain, the town was small and I soon became acquainted with every man in the place. There was no way out of the town, either to the North or South, but through the main street to the top of the hill. Then the road diverged either way. I remember the first silver tea pots that were brought into the town, and I believe I remember the first carpet. I myself wore the first pair of suspenders that were ever worn in that place. But connected with this plainness was a simplicity far preferable to anything that I have witnessed in any other part of my life. There was a very nice company of young people, particularly of young women; I was constantly associated with them, and yet such was the custom of the times, that I never knew what would now be called a tea party, nor was I ever invited to drink tea even in a friendly way with those young people with whom almost as a matter of course I was expected to spend the evening. I was always invited to family dinners when the Rotch family were invited, but as a youth growing up I think I never had a special invitation to any dinner or tea whatever, and yet I was upon the most intimate footing with all the Rotch and Rodman families. Before Samuel Rodman’s family removed from Nantucket to New Bedford, Mary Rodman spent a winter in New Bedford with her Aunt Mary Rotch at her Father’s house. I was then a little more than 15 years of age and then began my intimacy and regard for her. Many evenings of that winter 1796–7 were spent with the Aunt and Niece. Our time was spent rationally, reading and improving ourselves. I still vividly recollect that period. Mary Rotch had been with her parents in Europe, and had been educated at some of the best schools there; my own education as I have stated amounted to very little, and I felt great ambition to qualify myself for some equality with her, who, though my superior in years, was still more
my superior in education and learning. Probably I had the further inducement of believing that this would be the passport to the kindlier feelings of her niece. This attention to make up the deficiencies of my education continued during my youth. I became familiar with history, read biography, was pretty well acquainted with modern poetry and understood the rudiments of the sciences so that when I attained my majority the information I had gained was equal to the average of those who had been my superiors as schoolboys, and has been of great advantage to me during all my subsequent life.

I am not sure that any cloud even for a moment rested upon the friendly intercourse I had with Mary Rodman. We were of the same age, and our associations and habits, however childish they may have been, were of a similar character. The time came in the spring for her to return to Nantucket and it was a very sad trial to me to part with her. I watched the packet as it slowly receded with sensations which still make impressions on me. I do not believe she felt as I did, but we had no communications of our thoughts. We were entirely separated for more than a year, and no remembrance or memento of any kind passed between us.

I need not account further the period of my youth than to say that in the spring of 1798, the family of Samuel Rodman removed to New Bedford. The childish affection of 1796 was not forgotten as years advanced upon me, the social circle was enlarged, there was a great deal of friendly intercourse, there might have been among the young people many indiscretions, but the general behaviour of those with whom I was associated was that of unmixed propriety. My master Wm. Rotch wished to have his house shut up at 10 o'clock, and I do not think that I ever was out a quarter of an hour after that time whilst a member of his family.

I cannot now recollect the precise period when my affection for Mary Rodman ripened into a declaration of my sentiments, because it was marked by no change in my associations or affections, I was as intimate with her before as after that period. My impression however is that we had some understanding when about 18 years of age, and that more than a year after that, after some struggles with my childish bashfulness, I had some communication with her Mother on the subject. On the 25th of the 11th mo. 1802 we were married. I passed meeting the first Monthly Meeting after I was
21 years of age. My Father and brother James Fisher attended the marriage, and on the next day we set off accompanied by Eliza Rodman and Thomas Rodman on a visit to spend the winter in Phila., it having been decided that we should make a permanent settlement in New Bedford. Nothing particularly marked our residence in New Bedford, our associations with the Rodman and Rotch family and with friends generally were of the most pleasant character. I entered into commercial affairs, became part owner of several ships in the whale fisheries, lived in a plain and unostentatious manner, kept my horse and chaise and had sufficient success in business to support my family and make a small increase to my capital. My two eldest children Thos. and Sarah were born there, and I suppose I should have continued there for a long time, perhaps until the present period, but for circumstances connected with my Father’s family. In 1806 my eldest Brother Joshua Fisher died suddenly of bilious cholic, my Father became indisposed with severe and repeated attacks of tic-doloroux in his face which disqualified him for any of the enjoyments of life, and he proposed to give me this estate of Wakefield, and that I should remain here. Here was another very important crisis in my affairs. From my childhood, from being much in the country I had become very fond of agricultural concerns, and in New Bedford, though a small one, I had one of the nicest gardens in the place, stocked with shrubbery, fruit and flowers. Here was a great opening for me to exchange the perplexities of the countinghouse for the quiet scenes of rural life. Through exposure and too much exertion in fitting a ship, I had become exposed which ended in chronic disease of the liver. From the excessive use of mercury taken under the best medical advice, in the endeavour to remove the disease, the pain in my shoulder and right arm which had always accompanied the disease, had still further added to it an inability to write with my former facility. For a number of years I wrote with my left hand, sloping the letters backwards, until that also became affected by the removal of pain to my left side, and I then wrote as I now do, with both hands. This indisposition has continued with me through life, so that I have never passed a day for more than 40 years wholly free from pain in my side. At this early period it formed another inducement for me to exchange a commercial for a country life. In the autumn of 1807 we removed from New Bedford to Wakefield with our two children.
My affections for New Bedford where I had spent so many happy days continued unabated, and I cannot help still feeling myself identified in some degree with all that concerns that place. About a year or two after I removed here, I purchased of Thomas Roberts the Mill property consisting of about four acres. My wife’s uncle Thos. Rotch was settled at Hartford. He became infatuated, as was common at that day, with the mania for merino sheep, none of which until that period had been brought into this country. He paid as high as $900 for one sheep, and told me he would not take twice the sum, under the idea that no more would be suffered to leave Spain. Next came the manufacture of the wool, which he established in Hartford.

When I purchased this Mill there was already a small spinning jenny in the garret, put up by an Englishman for the manufacture of stockings, the first spinning jenny, as I have understood, that was ever put up in this country. This, the introduction of merino sheep, and my connection with Thomas Rotch led as a sequence to the establishment of the woolen manufactory at Wakefield Mills. All the information that he had was freely imparted to me. I erected the fulling Mill on the homestead part of the property. The difficulties and finally war with England in 1812 came on; woolens rose to an enormous price and thus I became fully embarked in the woolen manufactory.

My Father died in the year 1810 in his 70th year. The extreme suffering, to which I have alluded, had impaired his faculties for a year or two before his death, so that his quiet release was rather a blessing than otherwise. On the 4th of the 6th mo. 1813, I lost my amiable and beloved wife Mary Fisher. Though my subsequent affections have been of a fast and enduring character, yet I cannot allude to this severe bereavement without pain. I cannot revert to the agony that I felt when the scale which held life and death seemed to be suspended with an even balance. She passed quietly away without acute suffering, and I felt that I had performed my covenant as an affectionate husband. Many years have now passed, but my mind turns to our youthful affections and to her memory with a tenderness of regard which nothing can efface. She died in our back room which is now our library and on the 6th was interred in Germantown. Her Mother Rodman was present, and she told me after she was gone, how much she wanted to say to her, but was
prevented by the fear of disturbing her, "I will be a protector, and a Mother to thy children." Mary Rotch was also here, and nothing could be kinder than the Rodman family were to me, as is shown by their letters which are still amongst my papers. Here then I was left at the age of 31, a widower with three children, and at this period began my intimacy with the Pierce family, two of whom were in our family as instructors. I lived a widower almost four years, travelled in the interior through the western states on horseback, accompanied by Jacob Pierce and Benjamin Rodman, and pursued with considerable care and assiduity the woolen business, kept steadily within the limits of my circumstances, had no fictitious paper of any kind, and though the profits were not large, they were sufficient for my moderate requirements and I never was in any danger from its want of success.

I had been acquainted with my present wife, Sarah Lindley, through a visit made with my Father and Mother, from my childhood. I had seen her a few times afterwards and her Father, whom we always called cousin from some distant collateral connexion, was intimate at our house. I do not know when or where the suggestion first came that a connexion with Sarah Lindley might be suitable to my circumstances and condition, but that seemed to be the course my mind took after more than three years singleness; and on the 21st of the 3rd mo. 1817 we were married. After more than thirty years I now write that the connexion has been a blessing to myself and my children. All the superiority which her character bore when I married her has been realised in our married life. With two classes of children, which sometimes make jars in families, we have been a united harmonious and happy family, and such we continue to be to the present day.

This second marriage forms another important era in my life. Our Wakefield house was open to an increased number of friends and associates, my children grew up, the woolen business was pursued, and though I was affected for a long series of years with chronic liver disease which gave me considerable suffering, I bore it without much complaint, never being confined to the house. In the year 1834, after a visit to my wife's Brother Jacob Lindley, who was settled in Perry County in the Iron business, he proposed to me to assist him in building a furnace, stating to me that he had inexhaustible quantities of iron ore and large tracts of woodland in
which I should be equally concerned with him and that $7000 was all the money that would be required. I consented, without considering that the sanguine temperament of Jacob Lindley was liable to lead him to the most erroneous estimates. My brother-in-law Chas. W. Morgan offered to be on equal shares with me in this concern. Here was our introduction to the iron business. The abundance of ore which was so confidently predicted was found only in limited quantities, more money was required than was expected, and the Monte Bello Furnace, after having been in operation 15 years, has barely sustained itself, and paid for its depreciation. Two years after Monte Bello was built, the Duncannon property was offered for sale, we purchased the whole estate, including four thousand acres of mountain land for $8000. Its extreme cheapness was the moving cause of this purchase. Jacob Lindley was unable to continue his Iron Works and we became the owners of the entire Furnace.

The iron business cannot be carried on without great expenditures in stock and machinery and though I personally attended to almost every expenditure, and often sacrificed what appeared to be highly advantageous prospects to save the expenditure of money whenever it could be avoided, the expenditures at Duncannon have been very great. In my more limited circumstances, the advances were mostly made by Chas. W. Morgan, hence came a large charge of interest which required all our care to surmount. In the spring of 1840 there came a tremendous freshet, which swept through the dam of the Mill and caused us a loss of $35,000. We however sustained it all without material embarrassment.

In the year 1844, the Bloomsburg Furnaces, called Iron Dale, went into operation, and have proved eminently successful. By the sale of one half my stock then, I have been able to relieve Duncannon in a great measure from interest, and now when I write this in the 3rd mo. 1850 I consider my iron estates to be standing on a safe and secure footing.

I may take some further opportunity to give expression to my reflections now in the latter part of my life in reference to the past. The conflicts that have agitated the Society of Friends have separated me much from Society affairs, whilst I still remain a member, but every thought and every feeling has centered me more firmly
in the first principle which the Society of Friends professed and from which I believe every thing good proceeds, that God in his mercy has given to us in the secret of our own souls sufficient knowledge to refine and purify us to fit us for every thing that is excellent in this life and to prepare us for that which is to come. I desire for my descendents an attention to this principle much more than an increase in the things of time. I have found in it a solace and support which I could have derived from no other source. I have derived from it strength in carrying on temporal affairs which nothing else could impart.

As I now write I feel a decided objection that any of my children should connect themselves with any society called religious, as they now exist. I do not ask them to become Quakers, that must be left to themselves, but it seems to me that sitting under a hireling Minister is in itself calculated to degrade the mind. I say not this lightly, I have nothing to lose or gain, my sentiments proceed from a deep reverential confidence in the Power of Divine Love, manifested in each individual soul. Men go to sects and to forms as the Pagan to his image of wood, they want an ostensible God, idols that they can bow down to. They worship images in neglect of that small voice within which teaches perfection. I am yet aware that there are many excellent people connected with these things, yet the principle seems to me to be so false, so unworthy of an intelligent mind, to hire men to preach and to pray for us, that I feel a choice that my descendents should be separated from it.

As I may never write another word upon the subject, I will just advert to my published essays. I have written very many pieces for the public papers upon various subjects some of which may be found in the bundle of newspapers in my drawer, much the larger number have been lost. Those that have taken the form of books remain. I believed it right at the time to write them and publish them. They were generally thrown off as the occasion called for without much critical correction, but I have felt satisfied with the general treatment of the subjects. However imperfectly they may be written, their object has mostly been the higher principles of human nature, the most interesting that could engage the attention of the mind.