

The

LIFE OF CHARLES THOMSON

Secretary of the Continental Congress and
Translator of the Bible from the Greek

by

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EARLY DAYS OF CHARLES THOMSON

Extract from Life of Charles Thomson. Lewis R. Harley, 1900. Phila.
George W. Jacobs & Co. Pages 15-40 incl.

CHAPTER I.

Early Life

While the historian has done ample justice to the memory of the Fathers of the Republic, the patriotic services of Charles Thomson have been but slightly treated by even the most impartial writers. In every critical epoch of history there are two forces at work--the one attracting the admiration of the country by superior statesmanship or thrilling deeds of valor on the battlefield; the other a steady influence guiding the destinies of the State in the hour of peril. Charles Thomson is a representative of this latter force. To the hero worshipper, the Secretary of the Continental Congress might not prove a very inspiring subject. At the first casual glance, the clerk at his desk noting down the transactions of the Congress of the Colonies is too ordinary a personage to crowd himself upon the attention of the historian; but this was only a small portion of Thomson's services in our early political history. A finished scholar, he brought good judgment into public life; an ardent patriot, he labored incessantly to strengthen the sentiment for independence in Pennsylvania; a skillful organizer, he aided powerfully to hold together the discordant factions of the Continental Congress; in the retirement of private life, he made a valuable contribution to Biblical literature; of a vigorous constitution, he lived to see the struggling Colonies become a powerful Republic, and he died

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at a good old age at the very time when Lafayette was making his tour throughout the United States.

Charles Thomson was born in the town of Gortede, parish Maharan, County Derry, Ireland, the first week in November, 1729. He was the son of John Thomson, one of the most respectable men of Ulster. The birth of our subject occurred at a time when Protestant emigration was robbing Ireland of thousands of her best people. More than twenty thousand left Ulster and settled along the Atlantic seaboard on the destruction of the woolen trade and the enforcement of the Test Act. Froude says:

"And so the emigration continued. The young, the courageous, the energetic, the earnest, those alone among her colonists who, if ever Ireland was to be a Protestant country, could be effective missionaries, were torn up by the roots, flung out, and bid find a home elsewhere; and they found a home to which England fifty years later had to regret that she had allowed them to be driven."¹

Most of these immigrants sought a home in Pennsylvania, attracted by the reports of its great natural wealth and by the fact that under the charter of Penn and the laws of the Province, they could enjoy civil and religious liberty. Before 1726, six thousand had arrived, while the failure of the crops of Ulster increased the volume of immigration to twelve thousand a year until 1750.² They were nearly all Presbyterians in their church relations and

"they sought an asylum from Church and State intolerance and oppression, if it were to be had only in the wilderness of another continent."³

¹ "The English in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century," by James Anthony Froude, Vol. 1., p. 394.

² "A History of the Presbyterian Churches in the United States," by Robert Ellis Thompson, S.T.D., p. 23.

³ "A Tribute to the Principles, Virtues, Habits and Public Usefulness of the Irish and Scotch Early Settlers in Pennsylvania," by a Descendant, p. 7.

This great body of immigrants aroused the fears of the colonial authorities, and in 1729, James Logan wrote:

"It looks as if Ireland is to send all her inhabitants hither: for last week not less than six ships arrived, and every day two or three arrive also. The common fear is, that if they continue to come, they will make themselves proprietors of the province."⁴

John Thomson having been left a widower with six small children, William, Matthew, Alexander, Charles, John and Mary, determined to make a home for them in America. They set sail from Ireland in 1739, expecting to locate in Pennsylvania. The father was attacked with a violent sickness on the voyage, and dying within sight of the shore, was cast into the ocean near the capes of the Delaware. His expiring prayer was: "God take them up." The death scene was always very affecting to Charles, and referring to the occasion, he once said: "I stood by the bedside of my expiring and much loved father, closed his eyes and performed the last filial duties to him." The children were now left to the mercy of the sea captain, who embezzled the money which the father had brought with him, while they were turned on shore at New Castle. Their fate was a common one to thousands of immigrants at that time. The ordinary vessel of the eighteenth century was a pest-house of disease and misery. Mittelberger, in his "Journey to Pennsylvania in 1750," describes the sufferings that the Germans endured in crossing the Atlantic, as follows:

"It is not, however, till the ship has raised its anchor for the last time and started on its eight, nine, ten, eleven, or twelve weeks' sail for Philadelphia that the

⁴In 1729, the year of Thomson's birth, 4,500 passengers and servants from Ireland, arrived at New Castle. See Holmes' American Annals, Vol. 2, p.123.

greatest misery is experienced. Then there are heart-rending scenes! The filth and stench of the vessels no pen could describe, while the diverse diseases, sea-sickness in every form, headache, biliousness, constipation, dysentery, scarlet fever, scrofula, cancers, etc., caused by the miserable salt food and the vile drinking water are truly deplorable, not to speak of the deaths which occur on every side.

"It is little wonder that so many of the passengers are seized with sickness and disease, for, in addition to all their other hardships and miseries, they have cooked food only three times a week, and this (it is always of a decidedly inferior quality, and served in very small quantities) is so filthy that the very sight of it is loathsome. Moreover, the drinking water is so black, thick, and full of worms that it makes one shudder to look at it, and even those suffering the tortures of thirst frequently find it almost impossible to swallow it."

This account is also true in regard to the sufferings and privations of the Irish immigrants. They were plundered and ill-treated, while the infamous redemption system reduced thousands to a miserable condition.

On landing at New Castle, the Thomson children were separated and it is quite possible that they were bound to serve as redemptioners.⁵ According to some authorities, William drifted to South Carolina, and in the Revolutionary War distinguished himself by his great bravery. Alexander became a prosperous farmer near New Castle, and a number of descendants of his son, John, are still living in Newark, Delaware, and Philadelphia. Charles resided for a time with the family of a blacksmith at New Castle, who thought of having him indentured as an apprentice. John F. Watson relates:

⁵ "Indeed, some of the most honored names in our history were redemptioners, such as Charles Thomson, Secretary of Congress during the Revolution; Matthew Thornton, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and the parents of Major General Sullivan." -- Scharf's HISTORY OF MARYLAND, Vol. 1, p. 373.

"He chanced to overhear them speaking on this design one night, and determining from the vigor of his mind, that he should devote himself to better business, he arose in the night and made his escape with his little all packed upon his back. As he trudged the road, not knowing whither he went, it was his chance or providence in the case, to be overtaken by a travelling lady of the neighborhood, who, entering into conversation with him, asked him 'what he would like to be in future life.' He promptly answered, he should like to be a scholar, or to gain his support by his mind and pen. This so much pleased her that she took him home and placed him at school."⁶

⁶ "Watson's Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania," Vol. 1, p. 568.

SCHOOL CAREER

CHAPTER II.

School Career.--Dr. Francis Alison.--The New London Academy.--Becomes a Teacher. Business Pursuits.

The name of the lady who thus befriended Charles Thomson is unknown; but her act of kindness changed the whole course of his life. He was also aided in his education by his brother, Alexander, and he soon became a student in the academy of Dr. Francis Alison, at New London, Chester County, Pennsylvania. In a spirit of gratitude, Charles afterwards presented his brother with a farm in the vicinity of New Castle. When immigrants from the north of Ireland began to settle in Pennsylvania early in the eighteenth century, large tracts were purchased of the Penn family by companies, and the lands were disposed of to the settlers on easy terms. The London Company took up a large area in southern Chester County, from which originated the names of the townships, New London, London Grove and London Britain. A Presbyterian church was organized in New London township on March 26, 1768, composed of the northern members of the Elk River congregation. The first pastor was Rev. Samuel Gelston, a native of Ireland, who was succeeded in 1736 by Dr. Francis Alison. In his "History of the Presbyterian Churches in the United States," Dr. Robert Ellis Thompson¹ describes the character of the early ministers as follows:

¹ Dr. Thompson is himself a native of Ulster and came to this country in 1857. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, he was admitted to the Presbyterian ministry, and also became a professor in the University. He is at present the President of the Central High School of Philadelphia, one of the largest free colleges in the world.

"Especially they have served the country as educators of the Middle States, and of those which lie west of them. Their early ministers were generally graduates of Glasgow, and it was they who established the many academies of those States, in which young men were given an education which would at least have fitted them to enter any American college. This threw the Presbyterian clergy into contact with others than their own people, enlarged their influence for good, and caused their church to be more highly esteemed. In view of the church requirement that none but educated men should be regarded as candidates for the ministry, this combination of the schoolmaster with the pastor was regarded as natural and proper, as indeed their every seminary was a seed plot for the ministry. They thus rendered a great service in maintaining a high educational standard at a time when the poverty of the country, the general indifference to whatever was 'unpractical,' and the active hostility of many sects to literary culture made this very much harder to do than it is to-day."

Dr. Alison was born in the north of Ireland in 1705, and was educated at the universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. He came to America in 1734, and was employed for a time as tutor in the family of John Dickinson. He was installed as pastor of the New London Presbyterian Church in 1736, where he remained for fifteen years. In 1741, he opened a private academy at New London, one of the earliest in this country.² At this time, the only means of education in the middle colonies was to be found in the academies. There were no colleges in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania or Maryland, but there were a number of excellent academies, among them, one on the Neshaminy in charge of Rev. William Tennent, several in Philadelphia, Rev. Samuel Blair's school at Fagg's Manor, West Nottingham Academy

² Historical Discourse Delivered on the Occasion of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the New London Presbyterian Church, Chester Co., Pa., Jan. 22, 1876; by the Pastor, Rev. Robert P. Du Bois.

See also Biographical sketches of the Founder and Principal Alumni of the Log College; edited by A. Alexander, D.D., p. 108.

in charge of Rev. Samuel Finley, and Dr. Alison's academy at New London.

In 1744, Dr. Alison's school was established on a permanent basis by the Synod of Philadelphia, when the following plan was adopted: 1. That all persons who please may send their children and have them instructed gratis in the languages, philosophy and divinity; 2. That the school be supported for the present by yearly contributions from the congregations under their care; 3. That if any funds remain after paying the salaries of the master and tutor, they shall be expended in the purchase of books and other necessities for the school. Dr. Alison was appointed principal with a salary of £20 and the privilege of choosing an usher at a salary of £15. In 1748, the salaries were raised to £40 and £20, and to meet this in part, each student, except the needy, was to be assessed twenty shillings a year. The original academy building was located at Thunder Hill, about two miles southwest of the village of New London. John F. Watson and Henry Simpson both located the academy in Maryland, being led into the error on account of the long dispute over the boundary line. Tradition says that the school was first opened in the loft of a spring house which stood on the farm of the late John Whitcraft, now owned by his grandson, Robert Crowl. Mrs. George Storey, one of the oldest residents of New London, has distinct recollections of this building, the site of which is marked by some garden shrubs.

Pennsylvania owes much to Dr. Alison for his careful training of a large number of young men who became prominent either in the church or in the councils of the nation. Among his pupils were Charles Thomson, John Dickinson, Ebenezer Hazard, Dr. John Ewing, David Ramsay, Thomas McKean, James Smith, and George Read. Dr. Alison instructed at least four governors, eight Congressmen, and four signers of the

Declaration of Independence. The President of Yale College declared him "the greatest classical scholar in America," and he was frequently called the "Busby of the Western Hemisphere."³ He loved the sciences as well as the classics, which may be seen in the following letter to President Stiles, of Yale, after an unsuccessful effort to discover a comet:

"As I hope with more certainty and less trouble to acquire this kind of knowledge in the next stage of my existence, if it be necessary, I have determined to give myself no farther trouble till I be allowed to converse with Newton, Halley, Whiston and Flamstead, and some others of the same complexion, if these names be allowed to shine in one great constellation in heaven. Yet I am far from blaming you for your careful and accurate researches; they may make you more useful here, and form your taste to examine the works of God with a higher satisfaction in the coming world."⁴

In 1752, Dr. Alison purchased a tract of land in New London village and erected a large brick mansion for the use of the academy; but before it could be occupied he resigned to accept the rectorship of the Academy of Philadelphia. The New London Academy passed into the hands of Rev. Alexander McDowell, who removed it to Newark, Delaware, where it became the foundation of Delaware College and Academy. The connection between these two institutions is clearly shown in the charter granted to the Newark Academy in 1769 by Thomas and Richard Penn:

³ Richard Busby was born in Lincolnshire, England, in 1606. In 1628, he graduated from Oxford, and in 1640, he became headmaster of Westminster school. His reputation as a teacher soon became so great that many of the noblest families entrusted their children to his care. He, himself, once boasted that sixteen of the bishops who then occupied the bench had been birched with his "little rod." Among his students were South, Dryden, Locke, Prior and Bishop Atterbury. He died in 1695, in his ninetyeth year.

⁴ The Life of Ezra Stiles, D.D., LL.D., by Abiel Holmes, A.M., p. 68.

"Whereas, the Rev. Messrs. John Thompson, Adam Boyd, Robert Cross, Francis Alison, Alexander McDowell, and some others, about twenty years since, erected a public school in the province of Pennsylvania, for the instruction of youth in the learned languages, mathematics, and other branches of useful literature, and to qualify them for admission into colleges and universities; which school they supported with much care and expense, to the great advantage and benefit of the public: And whereas, the said school, so as aforesaid, originally in the province of Pennsylvania, hath been removed and is now kept in the town of Newark, in the county of Newcastle."

Dr. Alison was elected Vice-Provost of the College of Philadelphia in 1755, a position which he held until the time of his death in 1779. In his funeral sermon Dr. Ewing thus referred to him:

"All who knew him acknowledge that he was frank, open and ingenuous in his natural temper; warm and zealous in his friendship; catholic and enlarged in his sentiments; a friend to civil and religious liberty; abhorring the intolerant spirit of persecution, bigotry and superstition, together with all the arts of dishonesty and deceit. His humanity and compassion led him to spare no pains nor trouble in relieving and assisting the poor and distressed by his advice and influence, or by his private liberality; and he has left behind him a lasting testimony of the extensive benevolence of his heart in planning, erecting and nursing, with constant attention and tenderness, the charitable scheme of the widows' fund, by which many helpless orphans and destitute widows have been seasonably relieved and supported; and will, we trust, continue to be relieved and supported, so long as the Synod of New York and Philadelphia shall exist."⁵

While a student at the New London Academy, Charles Thomson frequently gave manifestations of his ardent zeal for knowledge. On one occasion he got hold of some loose leaves of the "Spectator," and admiring its style, he so longed to possess the whole work that he walked all night to Philadelphia and returned the next day in time to be present in his classes. He was charmed with the study of Greek, and he actually

⁵ "Annals of the American Pulpit," by William B. Sprague, Vol. 3, p. 76.

walked to Amboy for the purpose of visiting a British officer there who had the reputation of being a fine Greek scholar. His relatives and friends urged him to commence the study of theology after having finished his academic course. For this purpose they recommended to him the reading of certain theological works. It is related that he at once inquired from whence these writers drew their religious knowledge? His relatives answered: "From the Holy Scriptures, most assuredly," and seemed to be surprised at his asking such a question. "Well, then," replied young Charles, "if they whom you so highly recommend as models drew their religious instruction from the Scriptures, I shall apply directly to the same source, instead of taking knowledge at second hand."⁶ Although he had no intention of preparing for the ministry, he at once began a careful study of the Bible, and laid the foundations of that intimate knowledge of the Scriptures which he displayed in later years.

From the most reliable evidence at hand, it appears that on leaving the New London Academy, Charles Thomson at once became a teacher. He made his home for a time in the family of John Chambers,⁷

⁶ "The Friend:" A Religious and Literary Journal, Vol. 1, p. 230.

⁷ John Chambers married Deborah Dobson in the county of York, England, April 13, 1699. They came to Philadelphia with a certificate from Friends in England in 1713, and two years later, they settled along White Clay Creek, in New Castle County, where they took up twelve hundred acres of land, a part of which, has always been known as the "Hopyard." This property has been in the Chambers family for nearly two centuries.

who resided on a large farm, on the edge of New Castle County, about one hundred yards from the Pennsylvania line. Thomson opened a subscription school in the cooper shop that stood on the Chambers farm, and Sarah Black Chambers, the chronicler of the family, who died in 1898, at the age of ninety, often remarked that he was considered the best teacher in all that region.

While a student at the New London Academy, Thomson made the acquaintance of Dr. Franklin, and frequently sought his advice in regard to the prospects of a suitable vocation in Philadelphia. Being President of the Board of Trustees in the new Academy of Philadelphia, Franklin made use of the opportunity to secure a position for Thomson in the school.⁸ The Trustees of the Academy held a meeting on December 20, 1750, and the minutes contain the following notice in regard to Thomson:

"Mr. Charles Thomson having offered himself as a Tutor in the Latin and Greek School, and having been examined and approved of by the Rector, is admitted as a Tutor in the Latin and Greek School at the rate of sixty pounds a year, to commence on the seventh day of January next."

The same day, David James Dove was elected master of the English School. Dove soon resigned his position and opened a school in Germantown, where he led an erratic career as a teacher.⁹ He substituted disgrace for corporal punishment, and generally stuck the birch into the back part of the collar of the unfortunate culprit,

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This institution was founded in 1749, as an academy and charitable school. In 1755, it was chartered as the College, Academy, and Charitable School of Philadelphia, and after a series of troubles during the Revolution, it was finally incorporated in 1791, as the University of Pennsylvania.

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History of the Germantown Academy, by Rev. William Travis, Philadelphia, 1882, p. 17.

who was compelled to take his stand upon the platform, with this badge of disgrace towering above his head. He also had a contrivance to secure regular attendance at school. This was to send five or six pupils after the tardy boys, with a bell and lighted lantern, and in this way they were escorted through the streets to school. Dove happened to be late on a certain morning, and he found himself waited upon in the usual fashion. He submitted to the ordeal, and following the lantern and bell, marched with great solemnity to school, to the gratification of the pupils, and entertainment of the spectators.¹⁰

Thomson began his duties in the academy on January 7th, 1751. His services must have pleased the authorities, for new responsibilities were soon added to his position. On July 14, 1752, the trustees resolved that

"Charles Thomson, one of the Tutors in the Latin School, having some time since, at the request of the trustees, undertaken to collect and keep account of the school money, and having in pursuance thereof gathered in and paid the Treasurer upwards of five hundred pounds, be allowed two pounds, ten shillings per cent. on money by him so collected and paid."

Thomson remained as a teacher in the academy until July, 1755. From the meagre accounts of the school at that time, it appears that he was a most capable instructor. When he came to Philadelphia he was regarded as one of the best scholars in the province, especially in the classics. He carried this reputation into the school room, and gave to his classes the best results of his training under Dr. Francis Alison. Thomson's resignation is

officially noticed in the minutes of the trustees, as follows:

"A letter to the trustees from Mr. Charles Thomson, one of the Tutors in the Latin School, was read acquainting them with his intention of leaving the academy within two or three months, having a design to apply himself to other business. Mr. Peters was, therefore, desired to assist Mr. Alison in providing another in his room. The trustees, at the same time, declared themselves well satisfied that the said Mr. Thomson had discharged the duties of his place with capacity, faithfulness and diligence."

Two years later, Thomson again became a teacher, having been elected to a position in what is now the William Penn Charter School, Philadelphia.¹¹ The minute books of the Overseers for "the twenty-seventh day of ninth month, 1757," state that Charles Thomson was engaged to take charge of the Latin School, it being

"mutually agreed that he shall enter into service next Second Day morning, 29th inst., for one year certain, at the rate of one hundred and fifty pounds per annum, and in case of any dissatisfaction arising on either side, six months' notice to be given before he shall be at liberty to decline the service or we to discharge him."

At the appointed time, Thomson was introduced into the Latin School, and his services having proved satisfactory, his salary was increased in 1758 to two hundred pounds per annum. At a meeting of the Overseers, held "2nd of 1st mo., 1760," there is minute:

¹¹ This school was established under instructions from Wm. Penn in 1689. It was called at first the "Friends' Public Schools." It received charters from William Penn in 1697, 1701, 1708 and 1711. Among its prominent teachers in early times were George Keith, Thomas Makin, Charles Thomson, Robert Proud and Jeremiah Todd. It is one of the oldest secondary schools in the country. It is at present located on Twelfth Street, below Market, and is in a flourishing condition, in charge of Dr. Richard M. Jones, Headmaster.

"Charles Thomson now attending informed the Board that as he intends to enter into other business the next year, he has concluded to resign his place as Master of the Latin School at the expiration of the present year, and pursuant to the terms of our first agreement, he gives this timely notice of his intentions which remains under consideration."

On "6th of 10th mo., 1760," there is this minute:

"Charles Thomson attended the Board and made resignation of his charge of the School agreeable to notice formerly given; at same time he laid before the Board a Catalogue of the Library belonging to the Latin School and, also, his Account."

Thomson seems to have severed his connection with the School at this time, and after fruitless efforts to find a successor, the Latin School was temporarily given up, until September 5, 1761, when Robert Proud,¹² the historian of Pennsylvania, was elected teacher of the School, and it resumed operations.¹³

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Robert Proud was born in Yorkshire, England, May 10th, 1728. About 1750, he went to London and made his home in a family of Friends. He devoted his leisure time to the study of medicine, but soon became disgusted with it. In 1759, he came to America, and two years later became a teacher, a vocation which he followed until 1790. In 1797, his History of Pennsylvania appeared, in the publication of which he was aided by some of his former pupils. He died a bachelor in 1813.

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While teaching in this school, Thomson boarded for a time in the house of David J. Dove, his former colleague in the Academy of Philadelphia. He soon found that Dove and his wife were addicted to scandal and gossip, which became disgusting to his honest nature. John F. Watson says: "Wishing to leave them, and still dreading their reproach when he should be gone, he hit upon an expedient to exempt himself. He gravely asked them one evening if his behavior since he had been their boarder had been satisfactory to them. They readily answered, 'O, yes.' 'Would you then be willing to give me a certificate to that effect?' asked Thomson. 'O, certainly,' was the reply. A certificate was given, and the next day he departed from them in peace."

On leaving the Friends' School, Thomson next engaged in mercantile pursuits. For a while he was an importer, receiving large invoices of dry goods, hats, etc., from various London firms. He was following this business at the time of the passage of the Stamp Act, and in settling his accounts with the foreign houses, he frequently complained of the bad effects of the measure upon trade.¹⁴ At the same time, he was also concerned in the Batsto furnace, near the junction of the Batsto and Egg Harbor rivers, New Jersey. This furnace was built in 1766, by Charles Read. It is mentioned in the Journals of the Continental Congress as "Dr. Coxe's iron works in the Jerseys." During the Revolution it was employed in casting cannon-shot and bombshells for the American army, and it remained in operation until after the middle of this century.¹⁵ Thomson was successful in his business enterprises, and had considerable wealth when he became Secretary of Congress. As early as 1760, he subscribed liberally for the paving of Second street, between Market and Race, it being the first regularly paved street in the city.¹⁶ Although his fortune was considerably impaired during the Revolution on account of his close application to public affairs, he was able, in 1780, to take stock to the amount of \$15,000 in the new Pennsylvania Bank.

14 Collections of the New York Historical Society for the year 1878, p. 5.

15 A Concise History of the Iron Manufacture of the American Colonies, by J.E. Pearse, p. 54; also History of American Manufactures, by J.L. Bishop, Vol. 1, p. 549; also, History of the Manufacture of Iron in All Ages, by J.M. Swank, p. 120.

16 This street used to be very muddy, and one of the Whartons getting mired there, between Chestnut and High Streets, was thrown from his horse, and had his leg broken.