WILLIAM TENNENT, SR.
1673 – 1746

Founder of The Log College, from which Princeton emerged

From Light in Darkness by Mary A. Tennent

During the 17th century often called the Era of Migration in American history throngs of refugees fled from the British Isles and Europe to escape religious and political persecution, among them thousands of Presbyterians from northern Ireland and Scotland. Through Philadelphia, the largest port of the colonies, this seemingly unending stream of dissenters continued to flow well into the 18th century, settling along the frontiers of New Jersey, Delaware and Pennsylvania.

Although the exact birthplace of Tennent has never been definitely established, he was born in the year 1673, presumably in the same section of Scotland where his forbears had lived since 1478. His grandfather, the Rev. John Tennent, Episcopal rector of Mid-Calder parish maintained a residence in Edinburgh, mentioned in his will; and his son John Tennent, Jr., father of William, was a merchant in Edinburgh in 1688. His mother, Sarah Hume, was a member of the powerful Border Clan of that name. Immediately after his graduation from the University of Edinburgh July 11, 1695, for a brief period he was employed as domestic chaplain to Lady Anne, Duchess of Hamilton. Anne was either a relative or connection of his mother’s to which fact he probably owed the office. She was also related to Catherine Kennedy, who later became his wife.

Catherine was the daughter of the Rev. Gilbert Kennedy, a Presbyterian minister at one time in Dundonald on the west coast of Scotland, and in County Ayr, but who fled to Ireland and later to Holland where he learned the Dutch language and translated Jonathan Edwards’ “Faithful Narrative of the Surprizing Work of God” for his parishioners. Besides Catherine, Mr. Kennedy had two daughters and two sons, one a doctor, the other a minister, all of whom lived in Ireland. The Kennedys were a powerful Scotch clan with a history reaching back to 1350 when John Kennedy obtained Cassillis and other lands in Ayrshire.

A dissenter and the daughter of a dissenting minister, Catherine quite likely exerted a strong influence upon [her husband’s] decision [to renounce Episcopacy and return to Presbyterianism]. It proved a fateful one not only for himself and his family, but for the Presbyterian church and the cause of Christian education in America. Plans, facilitated by James Logan, [Catherine’s cousin and ‘secretarie of all Pennsilvania’] were made to emigrate to Pennsylvania, where so many of his compatriots were already settled. Logan’s experience and position rendered him well qualified to give both advice and assistance. From subsequent developments it seems certain that Tennent needed both, for in all business matters, he was nearly helpless.

“On September 6, 1718, we landed safe at Philadelphia, the head town of Pennsilvania and were courteously entertained by Mr. James Logan,” Tennent recorded. When he had been in America two years, he compiled certain data concerning his family and prior ministry. Written partly in Latin and partly in English, he called the memorandum “Hicse Libellus,” noting at the beginning: “This little book contains matters worthy of being remembered.”
"In the year of our Lord 1702 May the 15 my and I was (sic) married by Mr. Thomas Orr, presbyter in the Countie of Down in the north of Ireland at Green graves.

"My eldest son Gilbert was born in Vennecash in the Countie of Armaugh in the year of our Lord Feb. 5 about 12 aClock at night was baptized the day following by Mr. Alexander Bruce in Vennecash in the north of Ireland.

"My second son William was born in Connor in the Countie of Antrim in the year of our Lord 1705 Jany. 3rd about 9 aClock and baptized by the Revd. Master John Manson, minister of Connor, Countie of Antrim.

"My third son John was born at Connor in the Countie of Antrim Nov. 12, 1706 about 4 aCloke in the morning: and baptized the following day by the Revd. Mr. Luck Greenshields, minister at Dunager."

He then inserts an earthly item: “John was weaned Jan. 6, 1708.”

"My daughter Eleanor was born in Colrain in the Countie of Derrie, Dec. 27, 1708, Monday about 12 or one in the morning and baptized by the Revd. Mr. Griphith.

"My fourth son Charles was born in Colrain in the Countie of Derrie and Liberties of Colrain May 3, 1711, about six aCloke at night and baptized by the Revd. Richard Donnell of Whitenourd Town."

In the fall of 1726 Tennent accepted a call to the Neshaminy church in Bucks County, Pa., which he had organized while pastor at Bedford in 1724. In addition he had charge of the Deep Run (Doylestown) church ten or twelve miles to the north. A home was rented on the highway between New York and Philadelphia, and about a mile from the church. At once he embarked upon a two-fold project, the building of a new meeting-house and a school. Along with his sons, he had tutored a limited number of students in his home, but the increasing number of applicants made additional space necessary. Elias Boudinot said that he undertook this extra labor and expense as the best service he could render “God and his newly adopted country.” America, at the time, could boast of only three institutions of higher learning: the College of William and Mary, founded in Virginia in 1693; and the two New England colleges, later universities, Harvard, established in 1696, and Yale in 1718. Few of the colonists could afford to send their sons to New England, and still fewer abroad. For the church this created an acute situation, as the trickle of ministers from Ireland and Scotland was far too small to supply pastors to the rapidly expanding settlements, a problem which was to beset the church for many years to come.

With the assistance of neighbors and his sons, logs were rough-hewn out of the surrounding forests and a cabin erected, with a stone chimney at one end providing a large fireplace for both warmth and cooking. Outwardly the building was rough and rugged; inside the furnishings meager and crude; but within those walls a group of eager young men studied diligently, soaking up with Latin, Greek and Hebrew the spirit and zeal of their teacher. No ivied tower this but a cabin so humble that in derision it was dubbed “The Log College,” a name that clung to it through its existence. No one could foresee that such a small beginning in time would be honored as the parent of all subsequently founded Christian institutions in the Presbyterian denomination including Princeton.
Here on a sunny day in September, 1727 the school opened its doors for the first session to a small but enthusiastic company of young men. Some of them continued to board in the Tennent home; others slept in the attic above the classroom, providing and cooking their own meals in the open fireplace. Still others commuted daily on horseback riding along dim wilderness trails.

The doors of the Log College closed in May, 1746, and those of the infant New Jersey College swung open for the first session that fall, receiving the enthusiastic support of the Log College alumni. [Log College graduates] Gilbert and William Tennent, Jr., Samuel Finley and Samuel Blair were appointed to the Charter Board of Trustees. Finley became the college’s fifth president. The College of New Jersey became Princeton University a hundred and fifty years later. On the walls of Nassau Hall hangs a bronze plaque inscribed:

Princeton University
1726  1746  1896
The Log College
Open 1726 at Neshaminy
Was discontinued in 1746
When members of the Synods
Of New York and Philadelphia
And the supporters of
The Log College
United in the organization of
The College of New Jersey
At Elizabethtown
First charter granted Oct. 22, 1745
By King George The Second
Through Jonathan Belcher, M.A., Governor-in-Chief

Of the Province of New Jersey
On Oct 22, 1896 the name of
The College of New Jersey
Was changed to
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
Dei Sue Numine viget

Although William Tennent’s influence upon Christian Education would insure him a permanent place in the history of Presbyterianism in America, the “church is probably not more indebted for her prosperity and for the evangelical spirit which has pervaded her body to any individual than to the elder Tennent.”

“There were during this generation three spiritual giants who sought to revitalize religion through evangelism: John Wesley, said to have preached with the fervor of Peter the Hermit. . . . George Whitefield, who took up where Wesley left off. . . . and William Tennent, who for thirty years wrought a ministry so significant that it has given him an unforgettable place in the religious and educational life of our country.”

He left no published work, but the manuscripts of seventeen sermons written between 1706 and 1740 have been preserved along with the manuscript of his brief memorandum, “Hicse Libellus,” which with one sermon are in the archives of the Pennsylvania Historical Society. The other sixteen sermons are owned by the Presbyterian Historical Society.

Over the nearly two-and-a-half centuries past [since 1971], the Log College and its founder have been commemorated on two occasions. . . .
September 5, 1889, a clear sunny day, the colorful celebration took place appropriately on a part of the old farm which Tennent had purchased in 1735. . . The event had been widely advertised ahead of time [and attracted over 8000 participants]. According to the New York Independent:

"We have special reference to the celebration of the founding of the old Log College which was one of the greatest gatherings of Presbyterians this country has ever seen. We may safely say that what the landing of the Pilgrims was to the Congregationalists in this country, the founding of the Log College has been to the Presbyterians. The after-influence of the small and slender institution was not over-estimated last week, and the vast throng which included the President of the United States and the Dean of Princeton, evinced an enthusiasm fully merited by the occasion."

The second celebration, commemorating the bicentennial anniversary of the founding of the Log College, was held October 2-5, 1927. One of the principal speakers was the late Dr. John Grier Hibben, President of Princeton. In an address entitled "Our Debt to Educational Pioneers," he paid honor to the Log College by saying that "Princeton University today represents the ripened fruit of the great enterprise started by William Tennent. . . .It is a good thing in this age of bigness to have respect for small things. Tennent devoted his talent to training men for service in the ministry, in contrast to most colleges whose purpose it is to train men to make money."

The celebration included a pageant featuring five episodes in the life of William Tennent. One hundred and twenty men, women, and children took part. . . Other events included a picnic dinner beneath the ancient oaks in the churchyard where two centuries earlier Whitefield and the Tennents had preached. The Presbyterian Historical Society presented a three plaques on the exact site of the Log College. . . and Mary A. Tennent of Greensboro, N.C. . . . unveiled the monument.


Further online reading:
The Log College
http://etcweb.princeton.edu/CampusWWW/Companion/log_college.html

Neshaminy-Warwick Presbyterian Church – History
http://nwpc.net/

PDF of Wm. Tennent, Sr.’s biography from the Church’s web site
http://nwpc.home.comcast.net/William_Tennent.pdf

William Tennent, Sr.