

SUSANNA WRIGHT

One of the outstanding Colonial women of Pennsylvania was Susanna Wright. She was born and educated in England, of Quaker ancestry. Most of her life, however, was lived in Hempfield Township (later Columbia), Lancaster County. Her rare personality made her a valued friend and correspondent of many of the prominent men of her day. She was engaged in a number of activities quite unique for a woman. Her life exemplifies the functions of a good citizen and public servant in that or any period.

John Wright, her father, was an English Quaker and a friend of the Penns. He was born and grew to manhood in Lancashire, England. With his wife and children, excepting his daughter Susanna, who was left in England to complete her education, he came to America in 1714 and settled near Chester. Here the Wrights established themselves in a congenial circle of friends, and when Susanna arrived a few years later she met the prominent English settlers in and around Philadelphia. She enjoyed this cultured society which with her native wit and extraordinary accomplishments were unusual for a woman of that day. Through her life she was in correspondence with such Colonial leaders as James Logan, Benjamin Franklin, Charles Thompson, Isaac and Charles Norris, with whom she exchanged ideas on politics, literature, foreign affairs and agriculture.

Among her father's friends in Chester was the eminent Samuel Blunston whose grandfather, John, had come with Penn and settled at New Castle, Delaware. Blunston helped survey the boundary of Lancaster County.

Chester County had grown very large, and at the suggestion of John Wright the Assembly decreed its division into two. The new County was called Lancaster after Wright's English Lancashire.

Samuel Blunston and John Wright purchased tracts of land in Lancaster County in 1726.

Blunston paid suit to Susanna, it is said, but "due to an unfortunate train of circumstances their love affair went awry. Blunston married a very rich widow, possessed of a large dowry, a Mrs. Bilton." She died a few years later.

After the death of her invalid mother in 1722, Susanna assumed the position of head of her father's household. In 1726 the Wrights moved to Hempfield Township, where their friend Samuel Blunston had preceded them and taken possession of his land adjoining theirs on the banks of the Susquehanna.

In 1729 Blunston became Prothonotary, Registrar, and Recorder Clerk of the Court of Lancaster County. He was later a justice of the Court, and his advice was sought for in every affair of the province. He was a member of the General Assembly, like John Wright, and served there in 1732, 1741, 1742 and 1744. Due to his heroic and self-sacrificing efforts he preserved to Pennsylvania the land lying west of the Susquehanna river. Governor Keith of Pennsylvania wished to check the encroachment of Maryland in this territory. Blunston was commissioned to issue licenses to settlers during 1733 to 1737.

German families then settled in Township Hallam (now York County) which received its name from the native home of the Blunstons in Hallam, England.

"Thomas Cresap, a blustering bully, volunteered his services to the Governor of Maryland to raise a company of volunteers or braves and drive out the settlers, in 1731. He molested these settlers until 1736 until he was finally arrested."

Blunston firmly resisted the attacks of the Marylanders with courage and at his own expense. A full account of these troubles can be found in the Pennsylvania Archives. John Wright, his neighbor and his family did all they could to keep this land for the province.

In this remote frontier settlement Susanna became a tower of strength. She must have greatly missed the social life of Chester. The romance of her life was renewed in her deep friendship with Samuel Blunston. Though he was a widower and she a spinster, they never married. However, the relationship between them was very close. In his last feeble years she virtually managed all his affairs. Upon his death in 1745 he left her all his possessions, including 900 acres along the Susquehanna river and his home for her lifetime.

Her father, John Wright, with his son John operated the first ferry over the Susquehanna to the lands west. He was very active in the General Assembly and in other projects for the province. At one time he was commissioned to further the raising of hemp in Lancaster County. With Blunston he cautiously tried to keep the Marylanders out of the land west of the river. A Justice of the Peace in Chester County in 1718, he continued the position in Lancaster County from 1726 until 1741. In the Assembly he was recognized for his business ability, as a financier and legal advisor. John Wright was busy all his life on committees for the work of the province.

Shortly after Blunston's death, Susanna and her brother James moved into the Blunston home. Here she lived for forty years; her home was a center for hospitality. Franklin wrote his "Ode to Hospitality" after a visit there. Many visitors came and there was much activity regarding the affairs of Lancaster County. Susanna was looked up to for advice and direction, not only by all in her own family, of which she became the head, but also by neighbors and friends. Disputes between them were frequently left to her sole arbitration, and there was almost never an appeal therefrom. Her advice was sought in the settlement of estates, as her judg-

ment was wise and clear. She acted as scrivener for deeds, wills and legal papers of all kinds. As a physician, since she had studied physics and medicine in England, her neighbors came to her for treatments and advice, which she gave cheerfully. It was remarkable that she always found time for study and reading the "polite" literature of her time. She wrote religious poetry of force and feeling.

Her acquaintance with the foremost men of the colonies is notable in the samples of her correspondence which her descendants own today. She worked with plants and herbs and took great delight in manufacturing articles required for domestic use. She distilled "simples," compounding medical herbs for the sick. Her mortar and pestle are still in existence; also a handsome portfolio presented to her by Queen Anne, to whom she had sent a piece of silk, products of her own silkworms. She was the first person in America to engage in silkworm culture. Attending herself to the raising of the silkworms, she reeled and prepared the silk and made many articles of utility and beauty. With home-raised dyes she dyed yards of silk. At one time there was sent back to her from England, where she had sent her raw silk to be manufactured, upwards of sixty yards of mantua silk.

"The little house where she kept the silkworms, with the two mulberry trees growing about it," writes Elizabeth Heistand, "was still in existence when I was a little girl and was always called 'The Coonery'."

Follows a quotation from a letter to her from Charles Norris, dated Phila., April 19, 1759, in which he tells about her silk:

"I cannot omit mention that when General Amherst was in town one day, his brother was drinking tea with us, when as a curiosity, thy silk stockings was produced. Thy Brother, taking note that he seemed much pleased with them, proposed presenting them to the General, as the first pair made here; the eggs hatched, the balls wound, silk twisted and stockings wove in the province of Penselva (Pennsylvania), and on the occasion he experienced surprise at the perfection of the first, and he declared he would not put them on till he had the pleasure of waiting on His Majesty on his Return (if please God he should live to see that day). When he did protest he would display them to the full and sh'd write Mistress Amherst he was already fixed with stockings for that occasion such as was not in her power to procure, and drank the Lady's health who made them."

Susanna Wright said, in a letter to Charles Norris:

"I must add a few words of a fruit, or whatever you call it, which when sliced and fried is vulgarly called pork steak. Jimmy (her brother James) either did not hear — or forgot, the technical name of this plant or its produce. If it is propagated by seed we must entreat you to send us some; if by any other way, pray advise us of it and put us in the method of procuring wherewithal to get the precious animal plant into our garden, where at present we have nothing but mere vegetables."

To which Mrs. Heistand comments: "This plant referred to was undoubtedly our eggplant."

Susanna Wright took a great deal of interest in the welfare of the Indians living about her. She championed their cause many times. Her efforts to gain redress for the poor squaws and children, after the Paxton boys murdered the Indians at Turkey Hill, are a matter of history. She went

personally to see the Governor of the Province to solicit aid for the Conestoga Indians about her own home.

After Samuel Blunston's death, and when she and her brother were settled in his late home, she acted, as Blunston had, as a prothonotary.

"She sat for hours each day," writes Mrs. Heistand, "by a little square window¹ put together by wooden pegs and guarded by a hand-wrought iron bar, interviewing the Indians, listening to their complaints and giving advice."

She attended to legal matters, throughout the county, acted as scrivener, or writing clerk, for many people. For her neighbors and friends she wrote prescriptions of physicks.

Although Susanna Wright was the head of the settlement after her father's death — its lawyer, its doctor, its general adviser — with authority and looked up to, she could be gentle and endearing, people said.

Deborah Norris Logan describes her in a letter as follows:

"She was small in person and had never been handsome, but had a very penetrating, sensible countenance and was truly polite and courteous in her address and behavior. She was well acquainted with books and had an excellent memory and a clear and comprehensive judgment. She spoke and wrote French with great ease and fluency. She had a knowledge of Latin, and could read Italian and had made considerable attainment in many of the sciences."

There are no portraits of her extant. She remained the head of a lively household of nephews and nieces until her death, which Mrs. Heistand states occurred in 1784, at the age of 87. She was buried in the old Quaker burying ground in Columbia. No marker was placed on the graves, by Quaker custom, and there is nothing now to prove that a Quaker burying ground was ever on this spot.

The Bethel family — children of Blunston's niece — inherited the Blunston home after her death, and the name became Mt. Bethel. Her brother James built a spacious home in Columbia which is standing today.

The president of the Lancaster County Historical Society, George L. Heiges, wrote a paper titled "Benjamin Franklin in Lancaster County." It was published in the first quarterly of Volume 61 of this Society, in January 1957. Here Mr. Heiges has included some letters between Franklin and Susanna Wright, and introduced them with a fine account of the close friendship which evidently existed between the Franklin and Wright families. Mr. Heiges states that these letters are now owned by Mr. John J. W. Mifflin of Middlebush, New Jersey, who is a lineal descendant of John Wright. Several of these letters follow:

"Benjamin Franklin to Susanna Wright
Philada, Nov. 21, 1751

Madam:

Your guests all got well home to their Families highly pleased with their Journey and with the hospitality of Hempfield.

¹Mrs. Heistand writes: "We have the quaint little window, but the old house built in 1726 where she lived so long, was razed for the approach of a bridge over the Susquehanna river."

When I had the pleasure of seeing you, I mentioned a new kind of Candles very convenient to read by, which I think you said you had not seen. I take the Freedom to send you a Specimen of them. You will find that they afford a clear white Light, may be held in the Hand even in hot weather, without softening; that their drops do not make Grease Spots like those from common candles; that they last much longer and need little or no snuffing. I may add, what will be another Recommendation of them to you that they are the Manufacture of our own country; being made at Marcus Hook.

In the Magazine of August (Gentlemen's Magazine) I find that the magnificent King of Portugal has raised his Marble Aqueduct near 100 foot higher than your Chickesalunga. It must be a stupendous Work. I send you a Prospect of it.

Accept an Almanack for the New Year, with my hearty Wishes that it may prove a happy one to you and your Friends. I am

Madam

Your obliged and Huml Serv't
B. Franklin"

* * * * *

"Benjamin Franklin to Susanna Wright

Philada, July 11, 1752

Madam:

I should sooner have answered your Fav'r of the 27th past but that I have been in daily Expectation of getting home the Piece you desired which is lent to a Friend. I hope to have it ready for the next Post.

In the meantime I send you two pamphlets in which you will have the Pleasure to see a most impudent Imposture detected, and the Honour of our great Poet vindicated.

I send also "Christianity not founded on Argument" a piece that has made a great noise and received many answers, in a supposition that it favours Infidelity under the Guise of recommending Faith.

We have had excessive hot weather now near two weeks. My thermometer as been almost every Day at 94 or 95, one at 97 which is but 3 degrees short of the hot Sunday June 18th 1749. This town is a mere Oven. How happily situated are our friends at Hempfield! I languish for the Country, for Air and Shade and Leisure, but Fate has doom'd me to be stifled and roasted and teased to death in a City. You would not regret the want of City conversation if you considered that 9/0 of it is Impertinence.

My wife joins in tendering our best Respects to you and your good Brothers. (John and James)

Your intimating to me wherein I can serve you, needs no Apology, as if it were giving me Trouble, for it really affords me Pleasure and therefore a Favour for which I must acknowledge myself.

Your obliged Friend & Servant
B. Franklin"

* * * * *

"Benjamin Franklin to James Wright

London, July 9, 1759

Dear Sir,

By the Cornelia, Capt. Smith, I sent you in a box to Mrs. Franklin

Norden's Egypt	4	4	0
Maintenon's Letters & a Book of Husb'y	0	6	0
A Thermometer	1	11	6

which I hope got safe to hand. There has been at my house one Mary James, who was taken from the Juniata about 3 years and a half since, and carried by the Indians to Canada, was redeem'd from them by Col. Schuyler & got among the French; was sent with other Prisoners to old France,

and after living there 15 months, got over hither. She tells me she left two Children with you and your good Sister, whom she is desirous of seeing. I am endeavouring to procure a passage for her.

I wrote to you some time since concerning the Silk Affair. For public matters must beg leave to refer you to my letters to the Speaker having now only time to add that I am, with affectionate Regards to all my Friends at the River.

Your most obedient Servant
B. Franklin

Billy presents his Respects”

* * * * *

“Susanna Wright to Mrs. Benjamin Franklin

Dear friend:—

A few days ago I had the pleasure to receive your Dear Sallies Polite Billet, 14 days after the date, and tho it was no more than a Billet, it was most welcome, as it brought us the agreeable tidings of her worthy Papa's safe arrival in England. We were under no great degree of anxiety at being so long without any account of him, not as politicians but as Friends, old fashioned friends and in that character we pay our ardent wishes for healthy felicity and a safe and happy Return in due course to his affectionate family and native Soil.

April 14, 1765

* * * * *

Susanna Wright to Mrs. Benjamin Franklin

Dear friend:—

I ought long ago to have acknowledged your last obliging letter, but if you know how sick, and how hurried and how everything we have been, you would excuse me. I now do it very sincerely.

Sister Rhoda begs your acceptance of a few of our apples, spitzbergen & pippins and a little pickled salmon (that is what we call salmon). She could not get as much of it as she wished and was forced to fill up the kegg with perch. When you have taken it out, you will please to let a serv. return the Kegg to the waggoner, as it is a borrowed one and the people insist on having it again. This is ill manners, but with you our good friend, we can be quite free. We rejoiced to see Mr. Franklin here for a quarter of an hour, and to hear of you and Sally. My brother, Jemmy will return Mr. Franklin's book and I have desired him, and now I desire you to return for me a thousand thanks. Everybodys kind and affectionate regards are to you all, in great haste.

Your truly obliged Servant
S. Wright

* * * * *

Testifying to the clear thinking of Susanna Wright's mind, we will note her suggestion to Franklin when he came to Lancaster to procure horses and wagons for Braddock's Army.

Mr. Heiges explains this in the following:—

“In his efforts in Lancaster County to procure the necessary accoutrements for Braddock's Army, Franklin had the advice and help of his dearest friends in this area, none less than the celebrated Susanna Wright and her brother James. In 1755 Susanna was living in the house on Second Street, Columbia, known as Mount Bethel. And here, enroute to Lancaster to get wagons for General Braddock, Benjamin Franklin paused for a conference with Miss Wright. We learn this from the following letter and we further learn that Franklin's broadside was printed in German as well as in English. It also became apparent that **Miss Wright had made**

a suggestion to Franklin which aimed at expediting the accumulation of the necessary horses and wagons. The letters was written from Lancaster."

"(Lancaster) Monday morning

Dear Mm:

I thought from the first that your proposal of calling the several Townships together was very judicious. I was only at a loss how to get them called by some Appearance of Authority. On the Road from your Place hither, I considered that at the Court of Oyer and Terminer here there would probably be Constables from most of the Townships and if the Chief Justice could be prevailed on to recommend it from the Bench, that the Constables should immediately call the Inhabitants of their respective Townships together, perhaps the business might by that means be effectually done. I know not whether he will think a Person in his Station can in Court regularly intermeddle in such affairs, but I shall endeavour to persuade him to it, as strict Forms, ought in my opinion be disregarded in cases of necessity.

The Dutch Advertisement is composing and will be printed in two or three Hours, as Mr. Dunlap tells me. I have taken the liberty of detaining your Servant so long, after inquiring & being informed by him that his immediate return was not absolutely necessary. I am with the greatest Esteem and Respect Mm

Your most humb'l Serv't
B. Franklin"

There is a bronze tablet on the bridge between Columbia and Wrightsville, testifying to the pioneer Wright family who did so much for the province of Pennsylvania.

Lancaster Pennsylvania

MARION WALLACE RENINGER

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- I. Paper written for the Lancaster County Committee of the Colonial Dames by Mrs. Henry Heistand of Marietta, Pa., a lineal descendant of James Wright, a brother of Susanna Wright. In Lancaster County Historical Society. Vol. XXVI, No. 9, 1922. By Mrs. Heistand and I. C. Arnold, Esq.
- II. **Benjamin Franklin in Lancaster County** by George L. Heiges. Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society. Vol. 61, No. 1. January 1957.
- III. **Pennsylvania Archives**. Vols. 2 & 3. Lancaster Free Library, Lancaster, Pa.
- IV. Article in *New York Times*, May 1, 1942 — "Susanna Wright" by Helen Burr Smith.
- V. "The Wright Mansion." Lancaster County Historical Society. Vol. XLII, No. 4, on Unveiling of Tablet Commemorating Bicentennial of James Wright house, Columbia, Pa. 1938.
- VI. Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania. Vol. VIII. July 1831 to June 1832. **Early Poets and Poetry of Pennsylvania; Susanna Wright.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marion Wallace Reninger is a native of Lancaster. She is a graduate of Miss Stahr's School and attended Wellesley College. After her marriage to Henry A. Reninger they resided in Allentown until Brigadier General Reninger's death in 1949. Since returning to Lancaster Mrs. Reninger has written three books of local historical interest: *My Lincoln Letter*, *Orange Street*, and *A History of the First Presbyterian Church*.

As a member of the Historical Research Committee of the Pennsylvania Society of the Colonial Dames, Mrs. Reninger has worked on two books and several articles.

She has one daughter, Mrs. Stokes F. Burtis, of Swarthmore; and three grandchildren.

(Editor's Note: The William Smith mentioned in Dr. Burl Osburn's paper on the "Mysteries of Martic" in this issue afterwards became government agent for collecting supplies for Washington's army, and after the Revolution was an agent for the Loan Office until 1786. He was a great, great, grandfather of Mrs. Reninger. Among her ancestors were Justice Thomas Edwards and James Clemson, member of Assembly.)