

MARION WALLACE RENINGER

ANN MOORE & MARY DICKSON

It may come as a pleasant surprise to many citizens of Lancaster who have urged that more women be appointed or elected to positions in local, state or national government, when they learn that two of the heads of our Lancaster postoffice, in the early years of our country, were women.

Ann Moore was postmistress of Lancaster from 1798 to 1829. Mary Dickson took office in 1829 and served for 21 years — until 1850. Thus, beginning in Thomas Jefferson's term as President, these two women held the office of Postmistress through the administrations of eleven Presidents. These included every President except Washington, during the first sixty years of our national existence — a remarkable record.

To quote from an article in the **Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine** of February 18, 1962:

“On February 20, 1792, President George Washington signed the first postal act, establishing the Federal Postoffice, taking over the 75 Colonial postoffices in the country, with 2000 miles of post roads and with postal receipts of about \$25,000 a year. It cost 6 cents to send a letter within a radius of 30 miles; 8 cents from 30 to 60 miles; 10 cents up to 150 miles. There were no postage stamps. However, the Colonial postmasters, who often used their own homes as postoffices, usually initialed dates on a corner of the letter with pen and ink. Adhesive postage stamps didn't come into use until 1847. The Postoffice ordered the first perforated stamps on Feb. 24, 1857, from a Philadelphia firm, Toppan, Carpenter & Co. These stamps were one, three, five, ten and twelve cent ones. A 24-cent stamp bore Washington's portrait; a 30-cent stamp had a bust of Benjamin Franklin; and a 90-cent stamp also Washington's portrait. Today we use 25 different regular denominations of stamps from 1/2 cent to \$5.00. Also we now have 6 air mail and 1 special delivery stamp. Now the U.S. handles more mail than all the rest of the world put together.”

It is therefore interesting to note that until about the year of Mary Dickson's retirement, no stamps at all had been used in the Lancaster Post Office which was located in various homes and buildings during the period.

When Robert Jenkins was a Congressman from Lancaster County he secured the appointment of Dr. George Moore as Postmaster of Lancaster, on April 1, 1797. It is said that Dr. Moore kept the Post Office in his drug store. He was a man interested in welfare work, and particularly in the Lancaster Colonization Society of which he was Secretary. This was an organization which made a determined effort to establish an industrial colony of free negroes on the coast of West Africa, later to be known as the present nation of Liberia. Pennsylvania's Colonization Society was incorporated in Philadelphia on December 29, 1829. It was believed by these leaders that a direct appeal should be made to the State Legislature — but it came to nothing.

With the great interest now taken in the new African nations, we should note that philanthropic Pennsylvania citizens of the early 1800's helped, together with those of many other States, to establish the present prosperous state of Liberia. And Dr. Moore was one of the Lancaster men who worked for this cause. His drug store, we read, was just above John Michael's tavern on King Street.

During the latter years of Dr. George Moore's life, and because of ill health he was unable to attend to business, the duties of the post office devolved upon his wife. Mrs. Moore's management of the office gave such general satisfaction to the citizens of Lancaster as well as to the Legislature then in Lancaster, which was the State Capital, that upon the death of her husband she was proposed as a candidate for the vacant office. According to the **Lancaster Examiner** of February 16, 1842, her obituary notice stated that "Although this application was a novel one, the government was at length induced by the urgency and respectability of those who pressed the claims of Mrs. Moore to grant her a commission. Her accounts with the General Post Office were always so regularly and accurately settled that she received the thanks of the Department."

Lancaster's Ann Moore was the first woman ever appointed to office in the Federal government. She retired after serving from 1798 to 1829 and spent the last ten years of her life at the home of a son in Baltimore, Md., where she died in 1842.

Also in her obituary we read: "Her character is deserving of notice as displaying the talent, energy and capacity that belong to the female mind, which when necessity requires, may assume the habits of business, without relinquishing those gentle virtues peculiar to her sex."

Mary Dickson, who became Lancaster's Postmistress on the 11th of April, 1829, was the daughter of George McIlvane, a merchant of Paradise, Pa., and the widow of William Dickson, the founder, with his brother Robert) of the **Lancaster Intelligencer**, the only Democratic newspaper in Pennsylvania between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh from 1799 to 1823. They had opened their printing office in Lancaster in 1796. In 1806 William Dickson was tried on a charge of libel on Gov. McKean, after having stated in his paper that the Governor made corrupt overtures to Senator

Wertz of Bradford County. Dickson, in fact, proved what he had charged, but was found guilty under the libel law of that time. He was sentenced to pay a fine of \$500 to the State and to undergo an imprisonment of three months in the county jail. His friends paid this fine and costs of the suit. Dickson was visited daily by his family, friendly citizens of Lancaster, and members of the State Legislature who were meeting here, since Lancaster was the capital of Pennsylvania from 1799 until 1812. His Democratic adherents even honored him with a supper party in jail! Dickson's imprisonment was generally regarded as a piece of political prosecution. His wife, Mary Dickson, refused to ask a pardon for her husband from Governor McKean, on the ground that he had done no wrong. A few years after his death in 1823 she was appointed Postmistress. After taking office in 1829 she moved the Post Office to the Lancaster Intelligencer Book Store at 106 N. Queen Street. The daughter, Mary Dickson, assisted her mother during her term of 21 years at the Post Office, and in 1848 married a clerk, John Offner, who held a position in the Post Office. So it was quite a family affair. In 1859 Mary Dickson retired.

Margaret Culkins Banning has written that "The multiplicity of tasks for women is nothing new. A woman's stature always increased with the diversity of her responsibilities — if she discharged them well."

Surely, such has been the case among the famous women of Lancaster County.

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