

Two Philanthropic Ladies of Wilkes-Barre's First Methodist Episcopal Church: Priscilla Lee Bennett and Kate Pettebone Dickson

The Church has always been blessed by those persons of means who, recognizing that all they have is by the grace God, have been faithful stewards of their resources and strong financial supporters of the work of Christ. Perhaps no better examples within the Susquehanna Conference of two such unrelated persons within a single congregation are these two philanthropic ladies from the turn-of-the-century First Methodist Episcopal Church in Wilkes-Barre: Priscilla Lee Bennett (1819-1903) and Kate Pettebone Dickson (1851-1930).

One of five children of James Stewart Lee (1789-1851) and Martha Campbell (1792-1851), Miss Priscilla Lee married Ziba Bennett (1806-1878), a widower with two children, in 1856. No children would bless that union, but Priscilla Lee Bennett left a legacy that would bless succeeding generations in ways that stagger the imagination.

While this article concentrates on the exploits of Mrs. Bennett within the Wyoming Conference and one particular school in Mississippi, excerpts from her local obituary provide a much larger context for her generosity.¹

In her demise the Methodist Church has lost one of its most liberal contributors and the various charitable institutions a kindly, benevolent friend and supporter. Wilkes-Barre loses one of the most notable women who have graced its annals, she being known the country over as one of the most liberal women in the Methodist Church. In the distribution of her wealth she has made it a habit to make her bestowments in her lifetime instead of providing for them in her will. Thus she has been able to enjoy the good that her money was doing.

She largely contributed to the General Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, to the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society and the Woman's Home Missionary Society, to the church extension of the Methodist Church, to Drew Theological Seminary, besides helping numerous students preparing for the ministry and for missionary work. Wesleyan University, Wyoming Seminary, American University at Washington, Grant University at Chattanooga² were recipients of her bounty.

She gave to the local YMCA and YWCA; Home for Homeless Women; Home for Friendless Children, of which she was one of the founders, first treasurer, and for many years its president; City Hospital, Wilkes-Barre, endowing the "Washington Lee³ bed"; Brooklyn Methodist Hospital, endowing the

¹ Wilkes-Barre *Record*, 9/26/1903, page 9.

² Founded by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in 1886, this institution was renamed the University of Chattanooga in 1907 and is now UTC – University of Tennessee Chattanooga.

³ This is the noted Colonel Washington Lee (1786-1871), an uncle to Mrs. Bennett.

“Josephine Lee⁴ bed”; Lee Library and a building at Orangeburg SC; the Bennett building at Clarkson MS; besides many benefactions of which her family and friends know nothing

Mrs. Bennett was a faithful member of Wilkes-Barre’s First Methodist Episcopal Church, where she served for more than thirty years as assistant superintendent of the Sunday School. So great was her interest in that work that she provided the entire \$27,000 to erect and furnish the classrooms of the 1877 Sunday School auditorium which still stands today as part of the Downtown Arts Center. In 1885 when the existing sanctuary was erected, Mrs. Bennett donated the organ and two memorial windows. In 1897, at a cost of \$10,000, she replaced her original organ with an electric action organ having 64 stops and 2273 pipes.

While the buildings of First United Methodist Church ceased to be used for worship when the congregation dissolved in 2009, and the downtown property has become the city’s cultural art center, the influence of Mrs. Bennett is still very present in Wilkes-Barre United Methodism. In the 1890’s First Church established a Sunday School in the east section of the city. That ministry led to the development of a congregation and the erection in 1895 of the Bennett Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church – named for Mrs. Bennett and her enabling financial contribution that made construction possible. In 1983 Derr Memorial merged into Bennett Memorial to form the present Bennett-Derr United Methodist Church, still meeting in the building funded by Mrs. Bennett.

Perhaps most indicative of the spirit and generosity of Mrs. Bennett, however, was the Mississippi institution known as Bennett Academy. The 1930 Jubilee History of the Woman’s Home Missionary Society states the following in the section titled “Bennett Academy.”⁵

In 1913 the institution became known as Bennett Academy and Dickson Industrial Home – thus perpetuating the names of two women who were members of the Wilkes-Barre Methodist Episcopal Church, Pennsylvania, who, in 1890, gave to the Freedmen’s Aid Society the boarding school which was turned over to the Woman’s Home Missionary Society in 1894 with all its property, consisting of an academy, smaller buildings, and 200 acres of land.

The following two pages from the April 1922 *Woman’s Home Missions*, a monthly publication of the Woman’s Home Missionary Society, give more specifics about the nature and ministry of the Dickson Industrial Home and Bennett Academy.⁶ Bennett Academy was actually the umbrella name for the entire institution, while the Dickson Industrial Home housed and educated the females and another division, the Wood Home, did the same for the males. Following those

⁴ This is little Josephine Lee (1890-1894), daughter of Mrs. Bennett’s nephew Charles W. Lee.

⁵ *Looking Backward – Thinking Forward*, by Stella Wyatt Brummitt, page 182.

⁶ *Woman’s Home Missions*, vol. 39, no. 4, pages 4-5.

pages is a more detailed account of the role of Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Dickson in the early history of the institution.

WOMAN'S HOME MISSIONS

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DICKSON INDUSTRIAL HOME FOR GIRLS,

Mathiston, Mississippi
Miss SARA NAY, *Superintendent*

During the summer Dickson Home underwent some of the much needed renovations.

The building, which is frame, was painted white, and with its red roof is truly attractive, and a real home in appearance as it nestles among the tall, waving pines. The interior, too, presents the attractiveness of a real home, with the wall redecorated in oil gray paint, woodwork varnished, all screens and carpenter work in good condition, new rugs in the parlor, office, and hall, beds and washstands re-enameled.

When the scholarship girls returned to clean the Home in readiness for the fall opening, the custodian of property had been unable to have the inside varnishing complete because of a failure to secure necessary labor. Under the supervision of a competent painter, the girls themselves completed the varnishing. It was not a bad job, and they were delighted to do the work, thus feeling that they themselves had a real part in beautifying their home.

Six scholarship girls did the cooking and housework for themselves, the farmerette, and four scholarship boys who remained during the summer to do the work on the farm and assist in the painting, carpenter and general repair work. They milked four cows, took care of the chickens, and canned, under the direction of the farmerette, forty-six hundred quarts of fruits and vegetables. They made enough preserves and jellies to supply the summer table, and sold enough peas from the garden to supply the necessary ice. It was truly a more than self-supporting family. One of their number writes, "We feel that we have been helped by the experiences we have had. We have had good times together that we shall not soon forget. Beside this we have been able to do something for our school." During the school year of 1920-21 scholarship girls volunteered to do the janitor work in the school building, thus saving the cost of janitor service and leaving more of the boys free to help and to earn money on the farm.

Under the supervision of two teachers of Home Economics, the girls made good looking dresses, underwear, aprons, and did the household sewing. They are becoming good cooks, serve a table nicely, keep the house clean and attractive and are becoming nice laundresses.

All of this is accomplished through the assignment of one hour's work per day to each girl, so that the regular routine of the school work is not interfered with and high grade in scholarship is maintained.

Under the direction of a trained nurse the girls are receiving instruction in First Aid and Home Nursing. Through the generosity of Mrs. H. C. Hedges, the former Bureau Secretary, added equipment has been placed in the Lucretia Hedges Hospital, and the nurse in charge is carefully looking after the health and physical welfare of the girls.

A competent, attractive, devoted superintendent presides over the affairs of the Home. Her work is ably supplemented by the two thoroughly equipped, efficient Home Economics teachers, one of whom has charge of the cooking and serving in the Home, the other of the sewing.

A Mississippi woman employed with one of "The Affiliated Lyceum Bureaus of America" writes: "I want to say in all sincerity, that while I visit many schools, church



SCHOLARSHIP GIRLS AT DICKSON INDUSTRIAL HOME

and otherwise, I do not find the type of work you are doing there. In saying this I do not mean any reflection on any of the schools and colleges I visit, for there are many of them splendid, many of them doing a great work, but in none of them do I find in so marked a degree the spirit of love, reverence, helpfulness, that is so prominent in Bennett Academy. No one could visit that school and not be conscious of the working of our Master, and not see at once that there the ideal work is being done, that there is the place their money could be used to do the greatest amount of good. I like your entire management of the school, having your own farm, dairy, etc., and, above all, your making no difference in any way in any children and requiring all to have special tasks."

IRVING AND FLORENCE WOOD HOME FOR BOYS

Mathiston, Mississippi

Mrs. ESTHER SHANNON, *Superintendent*

Thirty-six husky, healthy boys are there this year, all of whom must be provided with a way to earn their own way. There is not a slacker among them, and not one of them wants an education given to him without making a real return effort of his own. During a recent visit, when the writer watched them, noisy, happy, in overalls and perspiring, come trooping into the dining room right out of the field, she felt that truly this is a worthwhile work.

Boys wash dishes by the aid of an electric dish washer, the gift of Pittsburgh friends. They wait on tables, scrub floors, keep the house in order, do janitor work, and this summer assisted in all the painting and repair work done in the three buildings.

"I am convinced myself that there is no more evil thing in this present world than race prejudice; none at all!

"I write deliberately—it is the worst single thing in life now. It justifies and holds together more baseness, cruelty, and abomination than any other sort of error in the world."—*H. G. Wells.*

THREE MINUTES WITH BENNETT ACADEMY

Mrs. H. D. KETCHAM, *Bureau Secretary*

Both ears, both eyes, and a vertical nod of approval. That's all this time as you read. The Woman's Home Missionary Society is doing wonderful service everywhere, but nowhere better than at Bennett Academy. Now I'm reminded of my text.

IT IS BENNETT

among the Mississippi cotton hills, seventy-five miles east of the Delta, and the same distance from the north line.

YES, SPLENDID BENNETT

with eighty-eight acres, three excellent buildings, electric lighting, good wells, fine girls, enterprising boys; good manners, morals, and manhood; a genuine working factory, transforming the raw material of the unfavored whites into worthwhile American citizens.

The people of the town and country value the academy and turn to it from the poorly equipped and poorly taught country and village school, with the eloquent appeal of genuine need, saying, "Just give my ragged boy and girl a chance." They'll make good, for their ancestors back somewhere "trekked" over the mountains to the plain after they "fit" for liberty, and you'll find the American flag under the "brats'" jacket now if you look.

BUT LISTEN TO THE ACADEMY YELLS

Then read the monthly paper printed by the students. It is called *Bennett Academy Breeze*. That is B. A. B. Translate it? Surely, "Boost Among Boys," or "Bigger and Better," or "Begin at Bottom"—anything just so it's "Baked all Brown" in the educational oven.

THE EQUIPMENT

A fine faculty of sixteen, all well-trained teachers from the North; two good dormitories, "Dickson" for the girls and "Wood" for the boys, and the fine Ohio administration building; a farm and farmerette, with summer fruit canning enough that if placed in a row the chickens could walk to market tandem without stepping on the ground; an athletic field; plain, wholesome food; a nurse and hospital. Feel like going? No, can't take you. Many turned away this fall. Poor laddies and lassies! they cried, but we couldn't help it. Maybe next year some good, generous Christian will fly over in an airship and drop another building down. We have the spot waiting. *If you knew the blessing already brought by your gifts, you would say, "Mine eyes have seen thy salvation."* But, unlike Simeon, you'd ask to stay long enough to try it again.

Three minutes up? Thank you. But wait long enough to repeat with me, *Blessings Attend Bennett*.

Bennett Academy turned away students from Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Alabama this year, believing that it must hold the space for the "hill people" of Mississippi.

When John Frank applied for admission to Bennett Academy and was asked where he lived, instead of replying, as most of them do, "In the sticks," he said, "Eight miles from town and three miles from a path."

When Mrs. Washam went to see her boys one Saturday at Wood Home, she came to the room of the president and said: "Miss Tomm, sometimes when I have to go out in the field and work so hard that my boys may be up here,

and I see other women sitting around taking life easy, I just can't feel that God is just. But when at night I hear those women's children going home in wagon loads from some dance, hollering and screaming, both boys and girls drunk, I just thank God I have Bennett where my boys may be safe."

BENNETT ACADEMY

Mathiston, Mississippi

MISS HELEN FRAZER TOMM, *President*

The year 1920-21 at Bennett Academy shows good progress and satisfactory results as compared with the years which have preceded. Steadily improved equipment with like improvement in the work done is our aim.

On May 27 a fine class of fourteen girls and two boys was graduated.

Both Dr. Lowry and the Rev. Mr. Hester said, that so far as they had been able to learn, Bennett Academy is the only school in the State under any religious control which is taking care of children of high-school age and below that grade. Increasing importance is being laid by educators upon the advantage of religious influence accompanying the education of students of junior college rank. A professor in the University of Tennessee told the writer this summer that there is a character foundation among students coming to the university from denominational schools not found among those who have no religious influence in their early school training.

For ten years a compulsory education law has been pending in the State Legislature. Two years ago it was passed, subject to ratification by the counties. Last winter it became a law. Parents are now required to keep the children between the ages of seven and fourteen in school one hundred and eighty days, about six months. Those in a position to know say that the law is not being enforced. Some parents complain that such a law is against the Constitution of the United States and an interference with personal liberty in telling a man what he must do with his children. The public school conditions are unsatisfactory enough, so that the management of Bennett Academy has been approached with the question as to whether it would be willing to take over the direction of the public school in the village.

One of our 1921 graduates of Bennett Academy, Rex Malone, was awarded one of the prizes offered by a Memphis newspaper for the best essay indicating the best use which could be made of \$1,000,000 for the benefit of the city of Memphis. One of the Bennett Academy Alumni, after his graduation went to Millsap College in Mississippi. He won every prize offered in debate during the four years of college and was awarded a Rhodes scholarship. Another young man who graduated at Bennett four years ago, and later at the State Agricultural and Mechanical College, is this year entering the State University of Wisconsin as an instructor in electrical engineering.

To live with the saints in heaven
Is untold bliss and glory;
But to live with the saints on earth
Is quite another story.—*Anon.*

"What are you going to be when you grow up, Jennie?"

"I'm going to be an old maid."

"An old maid, dear. Why?"

"'Cause I don't think I'd like to kiss a man a hundred times and tell him he's handsome every time I do shopping. I'd rather earn money and buy things for thysel'."—*Baptist Boys and Girls.*

The Freedmen's Aid Society was established by the Methodist Episcopal Church after the Civil War to help freed Negroes get the education and training they needed to rise above the restrictions imposed upon them by slavery. A project that developed in a log building in Clarkston MS was greatly enhanced when, a few

years apart and apparently independently of each other, Mrs. Dickson funded a dormitory for Negro boys and Mrs. Bennett funded a similar facility for Negro girls. The Freedmen's Aid Society then turned the project over to the Woman's Home Missionary Society. In 1912 a fire destroyed some of the buildings and the institution, now named Bennett Academy, moved eight miles south to Mathiston MS.

In 1936 the name of the institution was changed to Wood Junior College, and continued operating by that name as a two-year college under the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church until it closed in 2003. For five years the Woman's Division of the GBGM operated the site as Wood Institute, a conference and retreat center. In 2008 the denomination ended its ties with the property and it was sold to the Golden Triangle Regional Planning and Development consortium.

The "other" benefactor of Bennett Academy from Wilkes-Barre's First Methodist Episcopal Church was Kate Pettebone Dickson. One of six children of Payne Pettebone (1813-1888) and Caroline M. Swetland (1820-1900). Miss Kate Pettebone married Allan Hamilton Dickson (1851-1893) in 1874. Three children would bless that union, but only daughter Dorothy would live past the age of six.

Daughter Caroline died in 1883 at the age of five, and son Hugh died of diphtheria in 1893 at the age of 3. That death⁷ appears to have been one of the factors that moved Mrs. Dickson to her life of philanthropy, for the gift to the work in Mississippi was to erect Dickson Hall in memory of her son Hugh.⁸ In addition to providing funds and buildings for educating Negro children in Mississippi, Mrs. Dickson did the same for European immigrants in Wilkes-Barre by purchasing and providing the ten-room house that became the Midvale Settlement House of the Woman's Home Missionary Society.⁹

Kate Pettebone Dickson did not neglect her own congregation. First Church had a parsonage at 57 North Franklin that housed its pastors from 1869 to 1924. In 1924 Mrs. Dickson purchased the house at 63 North Franklin and presented it to First Church for use as a parsonage, and the former parsonage became the church house for offices, meetings, etc. A tablet placed on the new parsonage read...

⁷ The very sudden and unexpected death of her husband four days later at the age of 41 also undoubtedly made a lasting imprint on her life. The obituary of Mr. Dickson does not attribute his death to diphtheria, but simply to an "organic weakness" in his heart exacerbated by a sudden chill and the heartbreak of his son's death.

⁸ *He Holds the Stars in His Hands: The Centennial History of the Wyoming Annual Conference of the Methodist Church*, by Leroy E. Bugbee, page 220.

⁹ Bugbee, page 222. The story of the Midvale Settlement House is told more completely in the Blanche Kingery Carroll article beginning on page 10.

This parsonage was purchased and presented to the First Methodist Episcopal Church by Kate Pettebone Dickson in loving memory of her father, Payne Pettebone.

Mrs. Dickson also remembered the church of her parents and her childhood. In December 1925 the Pettebone-Swetland-Dickson Memorial addition to the Wyoming Methodist Episcopal Church was dedicated. Describing that and other Dickson donations, historical records of the church state “an addition known as the Sunday School building was erected at a cost of \$50,000 as a gift of Mrs. [Kate] Pettebone Dickson in memory of her parents. Still later the church received a three-manual Teller organ, given by Mrs. Dickson’s daughter, Mrs. Frank Darte, in memory of her parents.”¹⁰

Also in 1925 Mrs. Dickson gave the borough of Wyoming a Christmas gift that is still being enjoyed – the triangular plot of land bounded by Pettebone and Dickson Streets and Monument Avenue, to be set aside and known as Pettebone Park in honor of her father.¹¹

But Mrs. Dickson not only passed on monetary gifts, she passed on her spirit of Christian stewardship to her surviving daughter Dorothy, the Mrs. Frank Darte mentioned above in connection with the Wyoming church. Dorothy Dickson (1883-1969) married Franck George Darte (1873-1936), another marriage like that of Priscilla Lee Bennett and Kate Pettebone Dickson that left a relatively young widow with significant financial resources.

Mrs. Darte is best known in Wilkes-Barre in connection with the Center for Performing Arts at Wilkes University. The first part of the complex was dedicated in 1965 in memory of Allan Hamilton Dickson and Kate Pettebone Dickson. But despite her great contributions to the Wilkes community, Mrs. Darte never permitted Wilkes to honor her as a donor. In fact, President Eugene Farley often referred to her as “an anonymous donor” in his speeches, even when she was listening in the audience.

In 1969 the Center for Performing Arts was completed, but Mrs. Darte passed away just before the building’s dedication. Her daughter Katherine Darling then gave Wilkes permission to use her mother’s name – and so the complex is now the Dorothy Dickson Darte Center for the Performing Arts.

The Chronicle counts it privilege to have opened its volume on **Passing the Torch** with the stories of Priscilla Lee Bennett and Kate Pettebone Dickson.

¹⁰ *Service of Consecration* booklet, 9/17/1967.

¹¹ *Wilkes-Barre Record* 12/24/1925, page 17.