The Kent News

SATURDAY, JUNE 6, 1931

KENT COUNTY'S PRIZE ESSAY

THE REVEREND JAMES JONES WILMER."

By ELOISE P. HEPBURN

The Reverend James Jones Wilmer, the author of the Memoirs, was a versatile parson. Among the books in the library of George Washington, purchased from his heirs by the Boston Atheneum, is a pamphlet no other copy of which is known to exist. It was presented to Washington by the author, with the title "Memoirs by James Jones Wilmer." This pamphlet seemed worth reprinting not so much on account of its rarity, but as the sketch of the career of this interesting and picturesque character. It also gave a glimpse of Anglo American life in the last half of the eighteenth century. The author does not tell us directly that it was he who first proposed the name Protestant Episcopal for the American Church.

Mr. Wilmer was born January 15, 1749, at Sassafras River, Kent County, according to the register of Shrewsbury Parish, South Sassafras. He came from a Kent County family of gentlemen planters being the youngest son of Simon Wilmer of Sassafras, Kent and his wife, Mary Price. Simon Wilmer was a large land proprietor and held numerous public positions of importance in Kent. Mary Price, the mother of the author, was the daughter of John Price, Presteign, in the county of Radnor, Wales. Mrs. Price apparently remarried as her second husband was the Reverend Hugh Jones, rector of St. Stephen's, Cecil County, Maryland. It was doubtless through the latter's influence that the author of the Memoirs became a clergyman. Though he was the first of the Maryland Wilmers to enter the church, this family in its other branches later contrributed many clergymen to the Episcopal Church.

At a very early age he was sent to a rich uncle in England to be educated. He received the highest honors in St. Paul's School at Londan. Then he entered Oxford and graduated in 1468 from that school. After this he took the orders of the Church of England. He returned home just before the Revolution and officiated for over a decade in various parishes in Marylond.

During the early part of his rectorship he married Sara Magee. This marriage took place May 21, 1783, while he was rector of St. Georges Church, Harford County. She was born about 1794, daughter of Daniel Magee, known as gentleman of Baltimore," and his wife, Sarah Prillips. The family was very prominent and wealthy. James and Sarah's five children were:

Lieut. James Phillips Wilmer, who was born August 13, 1785, and appointed midshipman to the United States Navy, December 27, 1802. He was appointed lieutenant February -6, 1809. Then he served on the "Nautilus," "Constellation," "Constitution" and "Essex." Later he was killed in action on the "Essex," Mar. 28, 1814, near Valparaiso.

Emanuel Wilmer cannot be traced, but tradition said he served in the army and died when a young man.

The third son, Edward Wilmer, also cannot be traced, but tradition said the same about him as the former.

Mary Anne Wilmer, one of his daughters married Griffith Smith, of Virginia, in June 26, 1817, at St. Paul's, Baltimore.

Sarah Phillips Wilmer, another daughter was born November 11th, 1789, and married her first cousin James Phillips, son of James Phillips and his wife Martha Paca in August 18, 1808.

After the death of his first wife, he married secondly by license dated March 18, 1803, Mrs. Letitia Day, widow of Dr. William Fell Day, Baltimore County. He does not appear to have had any children.

During the time he was a parson, he spent "floating England and America" as a claimant to an elusive fortune left him by an wealthy, English uncle.

It would be interesting to record the outcome of the author's quest of the "elusive fortune," which like a will-o'-the wisp had so often led him to and fro across the Atlantic. In the summer of 1791 he seemed to have written a pamphlet denouncing Simon Wilmer, a Baltimore merchant, son of his brother, Edward Price Wilmer, that he accused him of conspiring with other trustees of his uncle, Edward Price, of England to defraud him of his share of the estate. No copy of the pamphlet can now be found. The nephew defended himself in the columns of the Maryland Journal for July 29, 1791. The parson again rushed to attack in a vitriolic rejoiner in the Maryland Gazette for August, 2. The last shot in the campaign seemed to have been fired in the September 21, 1792. issue of the latter's paper. In this issue the parson announced that he was about to institute proceedings against his nephew and the other trustees. This is the last we hear of the fortune which, it seemed probable, was from the first greatly overestimated. This certainly had a most unfortunate influence upon the career of our author. As for the merits of this dispute with his nephew, we have no means of judging.

During this period he was suffering from what we might call "acute Swedenborgianism." He has received great criticism which had been aroused by his recent conversion to the doctrines of Swedenborg or the New Jerusalem Church.

However, he tried to support himself and his family as a schoolmaster. In the Maryland Gazette and Maryland Advertiser for August 15, Nobember 29, December 6, 1791, lengthy advertisements appear of a school for boys to be known as the Fells Point Academy. This school opened on the first Monday of January 1792. The founder described himself as "formerly of Christ Church College, Oxford" and for ten years an officiating clergyman in the State of Maryland. Apparently the Fells Point Academy did not flourish, for he announced in the Maryland Gazette by a letter dated January 6, 1793, that he was then about to leave Baltimore; and fired a farewell shot at his enemies that he still believed in a "Trinity of Person and not in a Trinity of Persons," whatever this may mean. The newspaper in its issue of July 5 announced the opening of "A New Seminary" in Charles Town, Cecil County, by him. There must have been a rapid change in plans, for the issue of August 6 annunced the opening by him inHartford County, of the Havre de Grace Academy, in that town on the twelth of August. There was reason to believe that this venture was a little more successful than the Fells Point Academy, for he seemed to have remained in Havre de Grace a year or two.

Besides being a schoolmaster, clergyman and author, he appeared in many roles: versifer, litogant, advocate before Washington and the Congress for Swedenborgianism as a national religion; finally a reconvert to his old faith, again a clergyman of the church he had christened.

The closing chapters in Wilmer's career began with his appointment as chaplain in the United States Army May 20, 1813. The records of the War Department show that he served in the War of 1812 from this date until April 14, 1814, the date of his death. A rather graphic account of the events leading up to his death while serving as brigade chaplair with the North-Western Army, in the campaign on the Great Lakes, is to be found in this obituary notice copied in comptempory local papers from "The Ohio Vehicle" of Xenia, Ohio: "From Detroit, Extract of a letter dated April 24, 1814:

On the 14th instant, the Rev. James J. Wilmer, brigade chaplain in the Northwestern Army, died in this place after a lingering illness. The loss of this good and venerable old man will be severely felt by his relatives as well as his country. He was cast away in a small vessel which was running along the Chippeway October last. This vessel was run ashore at an Indian settlement about 22 miles below Falden, but fortunately the Indians had run off upon the appearance of the American Army. Mr. Wilmer was for thirteen years chaplain to Congress. Since he was ordered to join the army, he took notes of the most important events, which if properly understood and explained, will remain a standing monument to his abilities. These notes, it is said he had desired, should be sent to the seat of the government."

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ADVERTISE IN THE KENT NEWS

LYNCH SCHOOL REUNION HELD

One of the happiest Memorial Day gatherings was a Lynch School Reunion in honor of their teacher, Miss Sophie Miller, at her home. Quite a number of pupils and their families who attended from 1900 to 1913 planned this meeting.

At 12 M. a program consisting of music by Lower Kent Orchestra, an original poem composed by Miss Sophie, on schools taught by her; roll call of all pupils, each present responding with a reminiscenses of his or her days at school; a short talk by Rev. S. S. Hepburn and a memorial service for the deceased pupils of that period, Hanson Stavely, Alan Robinson, Ruth Copper Copper Diblin, Leonard and Frank Mann, Rev. Linwood Crowding, giving the eulogy.

A sumptuous seated luncheon was served to those present who were old pupils: Bertha Biddle Williams and family, Sadie Copper Northamer and daughter, David and William Biddle and families, Sara Copper Williams and family, Barney Cooper and Julin Cooper mothers and families, Daisey Jones DeWitt and family, Anna Jones Harris and family, Herbert Robinson and family, Wroth Stavely and family, Ray and Harry Silcox, John Melvin and family, Harvey and Mary Melvin, Linwood, Laura and Hilda Crowding, Lillian Melvin Culver, Addie Taylor Mench and children, Florence Keyser Usilton, George B. Rasin, Jr., Helen Silcox Groves and family, Howard Jewell, Floyd and Florence Coleman, Alberta Cornelius, Anna Cornelius Cooper.

Rev. S. S. Hepburn, Mrs. Myra Roseberry, Mrs. Wm. Bonwill, E. C. Bowers, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Crowding, Mrs. Mary Matthews and Anne Matthews, Mr. and Mrs. Harry T. Williams and Julia Williams, Enna Cooper, Miss Dugan, Louise Hepbron were also present.

"It's A Wise Child" At New Lyceum, June 8 And 9

Marion Davies is starred in "It's a Wise Child," which will be shown at the New Lyceum Theatre on Monday and Tuesday, June 8 and 9, as a new Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer starring vehicle.

The picture, directed by Robert Z. Leonard, is an adaptation of the Broadway stage hit by Laurence E. Johnson. It has as a motivation the Lester Vail is the bank clerk; Polly small-town gossip that creates a scandal against the wrong girl.

Sidney Blackmer plays opposite Miss Davies as the lawyer who is willing to marry her in order to save her good name, only to find the sacrifice a mistaken one.

James Gleason heads the supporting cast as the iceman and Marie Prevost is the servant girl whose secret marriage and approaching motherhood start the gossip which reflects against the belle of the town. Moran is Bertha; Johnny Arthur is Cousin Otho; Robert McWade, the gruff banker; Ben Alexander, the brother; Hilda Vaughn, Alice; Clara Blandick, Mrs. Stantin and Emily Fitzroy, the town gossip.

The picture gets away to a rapid start with a thrilling race between a limited train and a midget roadster and continues to pick up swift and hilarious momentum until the confusion is explained in a striking climax.

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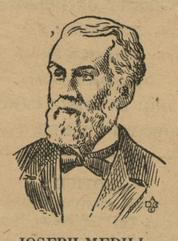

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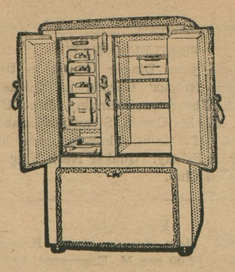

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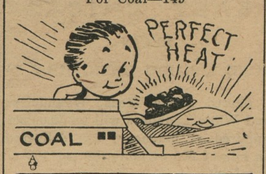

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The Clerk of the Court has no discretion in the matter but will be held accountable to the State for the collection of all penalities.

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