

**BENJAMIN WEST'S FAMILY;
THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT
OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY
OF ARTS NOT A QUAKER**

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Benjamin West's family; the American president of the Royal academy of arts not a Quaker by
Charles Henry Hart

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CHARLES HENRY HART

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BENJAMIN WEST'S
FAMILY

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT OF
THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS

NOT A QUAKER

By
CHARLES HENRY HART

WITH UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF WEST



PHILADELPHIA

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BENJAMIN WEST'S FAMILY.

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY
OF ARTS NOT A QUAKER.

BY CHARLES HENRY HART.

With letters of West in the Collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Transcribed by Miss J. C. Wylie, Assistant Librarian in charge of Manuscripts.

So very little is known of the family of Benjamin West, the Pennsylvanian President of the Royal Academy of Arts, London, that every little counts, and mayhap by exploiting that little it will act as the magnet and draw more ample data to itself. John Galt, who was the official biographer of West, was a romance writer and not a historian; consequently he coined many pretty fictions that have taken root and spread by being served up by all subsequent writers, so that now it is almost impossible to lop them off and eradicate them, although mere romances. What seems strange, too, is they appear to have received the sanction of West himself, who, however, was noted for his vanity, which they helped to flatter. Ashmead, in his *History of Delaware County, Pennsylvania* (p. 726), says: "His biographer, Galt,

(1)

has succeeded in gathering about the narrative of West's life more mythical incidents than any book purporting to be historical published during the nineteenth century."¹

In the instance of the West family the usual traditional three brothers did come to America. William, Thomas and John West, sons of Thomas and Rachel² (Gilpin) West, emigrated from England to Pennsylvania, soon after its settlement, and located in Chester County. They were birthright members of the Society of Friends, but John, the father of Benjamin, the brother in whom we are interested, came to this country *without a certificate of transfer*, which shows that he was not in good standing with Friends when he left England.

William West married Deborah Coppeck and died, in 1720, without issue.

Thomas West married Mary Dean and had eight children, with whom he removed, in 1736, to what is now Wilmington, in the State of Delaware, where he died, in 1748, leaving many descendants.

John West, born in 1690, arrived in Pennsylvania *circa* 1716, leaving a wife in England, who soon after gave birth to a son,—named for his grandfather, Thomas,—and died in childbed. As we have noted, John West was not a Quaker when he settled in Pennsylvania,³ as he is represented to have been by Galt and his followers, and he did not become a member of that sect until late in life. He married, in Chester County, Sarah, daughter of Thomas Pearson who came from England with William Penn. She, too, was a birthright member of the Society of Friends, but for some indiscretions, prejudicial to the well-being of Friends, was "disowned," or read out of meeting, so

¹ Buell's *Post Jones* will doubtless hold in the present century the unique position that Galt's *West* held in the last century.

² In all printed accounts her name is given as "Ann"; but Mr. Albert Cook Myers, who has made special investigations into the Gilpin family, says this is an error; that her name was *Rachel*.

³ Smith's *History of Delaware County, Pennsylvania*, p. 512.

*Benjamin West's Family.*

3

that "this marriage was not accomplished according to the good order of the Society of Friends"¹ and the children of John and Sarah West, credited to number ten, were therefore *not Quakers*. This is the reason we do not know their names; otherwise they would be upon the records of meeting.

It is both important and interesting to know that *Benjamin West the painter was not a Quaker*, either by birth or by adoption, after all these years and with the many stories that have been told of his struggles with Friends, in and out of meeting, to follow his bent for art. This fact alone shows the multitudinous errors of Galt, as he hangs so much upon West's being a Quaker.

Sarah West, the mother, died in 1756, aged fifty-nine, and it was not until three years later that John West, the father, who had kept, for many years, a public house of entertainment, in Chester County, joined meeting.

We are ignorant of the names of West's brothers and sisters, but he is credited with being the youngest child. We know that he had a brother William, for there are several interesting letters from the former to the latter in the archives of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, printed supplemental hereto. In one of July 2, 1780, Benjamin writes: "Our brother at Reading [Thomas] and his family are well.....I mention the death of our Father to have been on the fifth of October 1776." In another, February 14, 1789, he says: "It is with great pleasure I can assure you that our nephew Mr. J. L. Clarkson has every appearance of a deserving sensible young man; and it has afforded me great satisfaction in having had the happiness of seeing him." Unfortunately, a better acquaintance with this young scion changed his uncle's opinion, as on February 18, 1798, he writes to his brother: "John L. Clarkson is in London, but I do not see him often." He then speaks of his having come to plunder him "under the mask of relationship." According to the *Memoirs of Matthew Clarkson of Philadelphia*,

¹ Smith's *History of Delaware County, Pennsylvania*, p. 512.

(p. 28), "John Clarkson of the New York branch married a Rachel West." These were doubtless the parents of "John L. Clarkson," which would make his mother "Rachel" a sister of Benjamin West. And in West's letter of February 28, 1772, *infra*, he speaks of his sister Rachel and her unhappy marriage, doubtless the same. Galt (pt. 1, p. 68) also mentions that West was living in Philadelphia, in 1758, with "Mr. Clarkson, his brother-in-law, a gentleman who had been educated at Leyden." The author of the Clarkson memoir states that "a Joseph West married an Elizabeth Hazard who died in Philadelphia July 14, 1758." He then naively says that his object in introducing these West items "is to claim, however remotely, some kindred with the American painter Benjamin West."

William West died December 6, 1808, at the age of eighty-four. He was a noted agriculturist¹ and for five years a member of the legislature of Pennsylvania. He was not received into membership with Friends until 1752, which shows that he was not a Quaker by birth. John Trumbull painted a miniature cabinet portrait of him which the artist took to England in 1794 and presented to Benjamin.² According to Cope and Ashmead,³ William West had four children, Passmore, Sally, Samuel, and Hannah. But in the *McFarland and Stern Families* (p. 167) mention is made of "Joseph West a son of Benjamin's brother William," whose daughter's family lives near Alexandria, Virginia, and owns (1885) West's self miniature painted when he was eighteen, a reproduction of which is there given.⁴

¹ *Vide* Eulogium on William West. By James Mease. February 13, 1810. *Memoirs of Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture*, vol. 2, p. 147.

² Letter from B. West to William West, July 27, 1794, *infra*.

³ *Historic Homes and Institutions of Chester and Delaware Counties, Pennsylvania*, vol. 2, p. 10.

⁴ "It was sold with the effects of the lady to whom he gave it and purchased by Joseph West, a son of Benjamin's brother William, for \$147, and is yet in his daughter's family near Alexandria, Va."