

# Cornelia and Pierce Connelly: New Perspectives on Their Early Lives<sup>1</sup>

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Cornelia Connelly's unusual vocation often brought her public notice even in her own day, but she was always extremely reticent about her own life. This reticence has presented serious difficulties for her biographers who have been able to record only the barest outline of the first twenty-two years of her life spent in Philadelphia.<sup>2</sup> Since these were years of an ordinary childhood and girlhood, they were not recorded by others; needless to say they were not much documented by personal records such as letters. Yet these Philadelphia years are not without significance; therefore details which have come to light in the research conducted for her Cause<sup>3</sup> will be presented here to expand and occasionally correct existing accounts. They make the young Cornelia and the young Pierce live again more vividly for us; some of these details have a direct if remote bearing on the decisive events of her mature life which were to draw her into the mainstream of English and American Church history.

The year 1831 in which Cornelia left Philadelphia, properly ends a period of her life and begins a new one, for her marriage on December 1st of that year to the Episcopal minister Pierce Connelly<sup>4</sup> ended her girlhood; and her baptism just nine months before in St. Stephen's Episcopal Church<sup>5</sup> began

<sup>1</sup> This article has been approved by Father Desmond McCarthy, *Promoter Fidei*.

<sup>2</sup> Mother M. Catherine Gompertz, S.H.C.J., *The Life of Cornelia Connelly* (London, 1922), pp. 3-5; 4th ed. abridged and rev. (London, 1950), pp. 3-5 (hereafter cited as *Life*); J. Wadham, *The Case of Cornelia Connelly* (London, 1956), pp. 21-27 (hereafter cited as *Case*); Mother M. Eleanor, S.H.C.J., *The Triumph of Trust* (Phila., 1950), pp. 1-14; Mother M. Osmonde de Maille, *Cornelia Connelly* (Paris, 1931), pp. 1-7; rev. ed. *Du Mariage au Cloître* (Paris, 1962), pp. 17-22.

<sup>3</sup> Documents relating to the life and works of Cornelia Connelly are assembled for the Process of her Beatification at the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus, Mayfield, Sussex, England. Much of the material presented in this paper is the result of research for the Cause done by Elinor B. McCarthy (Mrs. John J.) of the University of Pennsylvania Library. For studies on the later life of Cornelia Connelly utilizing new materials, see J. Walsh, S.J., *The Vocation of Cornelia Connelly*, published by *The Month* (London, 1959); also studies by J. Walsh, S. J. and others in *The Pylon* (published by the S.H.C.J. from Rome), especially since 1958; and M. M. Eleanor, S.H.C.J., "The March of Teaching and the March of Perfection," *Catholic Educational Review*, LX, No. 4 (Apr., 1962), 217-35; and *God Alone: An Anthology of the Spiritual Writings of Cornelia Connelly* (Springfield: Templegate Press, 1960.)

<sup>4</sup> *Records of Christ Church*, Vol. VIII, Marriages, 1800-1900, p. 4847. *National Gazette*, Dec. 2, 1831; *Daily Chronicle*, Dec. 3, 1831.

<sup>5</sup> *Parish Register*, St. Stephen's Church (Tenth St. below Chestnut St., Phila.), Vol. I, 1823-1865.

that supernatural life which was to be, in ever-increasing measure, the dominating force of her actions.

Before proceeding to what must be largely a factual recital of details of this early period, it will be well to review briefly the story of Cornelia's mature life.<sup>6</sup> She and Pierce went to Natchez, Mississippi, immediately after their marriage, where he was most successful as Episcopal minister. Before five years had passed, he and Cornelia had studied and embraced Roman Catholicism. Having renounced the ministry, Pierce became a professor in the Jesuit College in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, in order to support his wife and three children. In 1840, not quite five years after their conversion, Pierce told Cornelia he felt called to the priesthood, and that this would necessitate her becoming a nun and their finding a way to provide for their children. Although grief-stricken, Cornelia consented to his wish if a further period of prayer and spiritual direction, and finally, ecclesiastical approval should indicate that his vocation was truly from God.

In 1844, the couple, present in Rome, received this approval from the Holy See in the form of a decree of perpetual separation; the following year Pierce was ordained a priest. In 1846, with the approval of her spiritual director, Cornelia answered the appeal of Bishop Wiseman to assist in the Catholic Revival in England by founding a congregation for the teaching apostolate, although she had at first determined on the United States as her field of labor.

Scarcely had she begun her work when Pierce embarked upon an incredible course of action which he pursued to the end of his life. He began to interfere in the affairs of her congregation, removed the children from all intercourse with her, and alienated them from her and the Church. He attempted to force her through legal action to return to their married life, apostatised, and resumed the Episcopal ministry in Florence, Italy.

Through the remaining thirty suffering years of her life, Cornelia fostered the development of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus and saw its schools begin to flourish in England. Just one hundred years ago, in 1862, she sent her first band of sisters back to her native land. Their first convent and school was in Towanda, Pennsylvania. The following year she established her sisters in Philadelphia where she had been born, raised and married; from this foundation the Society continued to grow in America. After her death it gradually extended its apostolate across the nation, and eventually formed two American provinces. The English province expanded in the

<sup>6</sup> All the biographies in n. 2 relate the story in detail; see also Walsh, *The Vocation of Cornelia Connelly*.

British Isles and to the Continent, and both English and American provinces sent sisters to establish schools in Nigeria and Ghana.

Her Society, flourishing today on three continents, is witness, above all, to the power of her holiness. It is also witness to the great natural endowments of mind and heart which she used for God. This paper will contribute, it is hoped, to a deeper understanding of those influences of family backgrounds and early life, in the days of the birth of her own nation, which helped to shape Cornelia into a great religious foundress.

From her maternal forbears, Cornelia inherited a generous share of enterprise, initiative, and a stake in the "American experiment." Behind the bare statement of her biographers that "her mother's family had emigrated from the Palatinate. . . two generations" before her marriage to Ralph Peacock,<sup>7</sup> lies a microcosm of eighteenth-century American colonial history. Cornelia's great grand-father, Daniel Steinmetz, arrived in Philadelphia in 1732 on the "Dragon," perhaps fleeing from the Palatinate; he was recorded on the passenger lists as "sick."<sup>8</sup> Within a generation, his family, which included her grandmother Susanna, had identified itself with the cause of Independence. In 1768 Susanna married a doctor, Jacob Swope, who later served as a surgeon for the Colonial forces in the Revolution.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, John Steinmetz, Cornelia's great-uncle, had become deeply involved in the vital issues of the day. In company with distinguished Colonial leaders, he signed the Non-Importation Agreement of 1765.<sup>10</sup> He had by this time become one of the principal wholesale merchants and importers of Philadelphia, and in 1776, suffered the seizure of his ship and cargo by the King's ships of war. In 1780 he subscribed two thousand dollars to the Pennsylvania Bank to raise provisions for the Continental Army, and was, in the same and subsequent years, elected Representative from his city to the Pennsylvania legislature. This venerable old patriot was still living when Cornelia's mother and father were married in 1798, and it is possible that the little girl heard from her mother stirring tales of her great-uncle's and her grandfather's part in the establishing of the Republic. It is interesting to note that a great-grandson of this uncle John, General George B. McClellan, played an important role in national history as commander of the Union forces in the Civil War,

<sup>7</sup> *Life*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Publications of the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania*, IX (1924), 51-53. Also R. B. Strassburger, *Pennsylvania German Pioneers: A Publication of the Original List of Arrivals in the Port of Philadelphia from 1727-1828*, ed W. J. Hinke in *Publications of the German Society of Pennsylvania*, VI, 3 (1934).

<sup>9</sup> *Pennsylvania Archives*, 5th series, III, 747. Jacob Swope is listed on Jan. 15, 1777, as a surgeon in Col. Thos. Hartley's regiment.

<sup>10</sup> *Publications of the Genealogical Society*, IX, 51-53; for the distinguished group with whom John Steinmetz signed the Agreement, see E. D. Baltzell, *Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1958), p.81.

at the same period in which his distant cousin Cornelia was establishing her first convent and school in her war-torn native land.<sup>11</sup>

What of Cornelia's father, Ralph Peacock, of "Yorkshire stock," whom her mother married four years after the death of her first husband?<sup>12</sup> His naturalization paper helps to add to existing biographical accounts. It indicates that, in contrast to her mother, he had come to America only after the stirring years of the Revolution and the establishing of the new government. In this document reflecting post-Revolutionary sentiments he swore that he had "resided upwards of two years now last part within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the United States. . ."; that he had never been "of any hereditary title or been of any of the order of nobility, and that if he should by any means unknown to him, become entitled to any such, he does hereby expressly renounce the same." His moral character and loyalty to the Constitution were sworn to by the prosperous and well-known Philadelphia merchant, Cornelius Comegys.<sup>13</sup> Was it for this benefactor that he later named his youngest daughter "Cornelia"?

Listed as a merchant in the City Directories,<sup>14</sup> Ralph Peacock does not seem to have achieved notable financial success in the course of his married life, though he was a promoter of varied business enterprises, including the running of a teamship between Philadelphia and Camden. Old records of Burlington County, New Jersey, show that he owned a farm there, and that he had a brother William who also owned property in the County.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the demands made upon him by his varied business interests and the rearing of six children, Ralph Peacock found time to be an active mem-

<sup>11</sup> *Publications of the Genealogical Society*, IX, 51-53. One of Cornelia's brothers was named George Steinmetz Peacock.

<sup>12</sup> *Life*, p. 3. For details on R. Peacock's Yorkshire background, see Mother M. St. Andrew, "Two Valiant Women," *Catholic Gazette*, LII, No. 7 (July, 1961), 184.

<sup>13</sup> Naturalization Record of Ralph Peacock, No. 108, Records Room 2040, Federal Court Bldg., 9th and Market Sts., Phila., Pa.

Cornelius Comegys is listed as a merchant of Phila. in the first U. S. census, 1790. The Comegys family was prominent in Md. and Del. history from the 17th to the 19th century; see "The Comegys Family in America," *Maryland Historical Society Publications*, IX (1914).

<sup>14</sup> *Phila. City Directories* (Historical Society of Pennsylvania), listings from 1805-1818.

<sup>15</sup> Will and Accounting of Ralph Peacock (1818), No. 58, Will Book 6, p. 578, Records of the Register of Wills, City Hall, Phila. In the records of the Orphans Court, vol. 5, p. 44, there is a statement by Dodsworth Peacock to the effect that his father's debts exceeded his assets. He appealed to the court so sell as much as was necessary. Cornelia's mother had an estate from her first husband and was not reduced to poverty at R. Peacock's death.

The Accounting of Ralph Peacock's Will records a \$1000 note on demand in favor of his "brother William Peacock."

The Mt. Holly, N. J. Courthouse Book, G2, p. 114 (1817) records a deed for land sold by John Neale to Ralph Peacock, Aug. 6, 1817. The Deed Book A2, p. 511 (1813) records a deed for land sold by Isaac Budd to William Peacock.

ber of the St. Andrew's Society for the aid of Scottish immigrants, appearing in 1808 as an incorporator under the Society's revised charter. As early as 1800, only three years after his own naturalization, he was active in providing friends, moral support, and funds to Scots newly come to the United States and endeavoring to become permanent and useful members of their community.<sup>16</sup> After his death in 1818, Cornelia's older brothers Dodsworth, Ralph, and George, gave evidence of their interest in civic and cultural affairs by their membership in Philadelphia's Athenaeum;<sup>17</sup> and in their mature years George, and especially Ralph, distinguished themselves as pioneer leaders in Texas.<sup>18</sup>

Cornelia's mother died in 1823 when she was fourteen. Fortunately she was taken into the home of her half-sister, Isabella Bowen Montgomery, who had married into a well-to-do family of good social standing.<sup>19</sup> Whatever cultural and educational advantages her own family had given her, were, as her biographers have told us, increased in her new home. "Mrs. Montgomery . . . bestowed the utmost care upon her education," giving her lessons in "grammar, mathematics, history, and geography," as well as in "drawing, sewing, music, French and Italian."<sup>20</sup>

What can be added here are a few facts concerning the religious background of Cornelia's family, and some significant details concerning the decisive influence of Episcopalianism which came to her through the Montgomery family. Her mother seems to have had a fairly consistent religious influence in her early life, for she was married in 1786 to her first husband, John Bowen, in the same German Reformed Church in which her parents had been married in 1768.<sup>21</sup> Her second marriage to Ralph Peacock was performed in the Episcopalian Christ Church,<sup>22</sup> but this does not seem to indicate any strong religious commitment, as neither was subsequently recorded as pewholders here. This view is strengthened by Presbyterian Church records. In 1808 Ralph and Mary Peacock buried an infant in the Second

<sup>16</sup> *An Historical Catalog of the St. Andrew's Society of Philadelphia, 1749-1907* (Phila., 1907), pp. 38, 412. Generally speaking this Society required either Scottish birth or descent for membership. Ralph Peacock came from an old Yorkshire family. We do not know what circumstances drew him to this Scottish society rather than to the Society of the Sons of St. George which did comparable work for English immigrants.

<sup>17</sup> *Minutes of the Committee of Superintendence, 1819-1826, Athenaeum of Philadelphia*: "June 4, 1821: Dodsworth Peacock elected annual visitor;" "Mar. 5, 1825: Ralph W. Peacock and George Peacock elected visitors for three months."

<sup>18</sup> F. C. Chabot, *With the Makers of San Antonio* (San Antonio, 1937).

<sup>19</sup> *Paxton's Philadelphia Directory, 1819*. Also, Will of Austin Montgomery (1855), No. 364, Will Book 34, p. 229.

<sup>20</sup> *Life*, pp. 3-4; *Case*, p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Publications of the Genealogical Society*, p. 52.

<sup>22</sup> *Records of Christ Church, Vol. VII, Marriages, 1789-1800*, p. 4565. The marriage took place Feb. 22, 1798.

Presbyterian Church cemetery.<sup>23</sup> Dodsworth, Cornelia's eldest brother who died at the age of twenty-four, was buried there in 1822, and her mother in 1823.<sup>24</sup> No religious affiliation has been found for Ralph Peacock at the time of his death in 1818, nor any significant records during his life. He spent some months before he died in a nursing home of a certain Sebastian Himmelsporcker in Camden, but neither that city's churches nor Philadelphia's hold any record of his burial.<sup>25</sup>

One isolated matter pertaining to Roman Catholicism comes down to us from the time of Cornelia's mother's death, but it apparently had no influence on the fourteen-year-old girl. Two books are still extant bearing the clear inscriptions "Mary Peacock, May 24th, 1823," and "Cornelia A. Peacock, May 24th, 1823." This is at first mysterious when one sees that these are Volumes II and III of *Sermons for Every Sunday in the Year* by a Discalced Carmelite and printed in Dublin.<sup>26</sup> A possible solution to the mystery is that these were given to Cornelia and her sister Mary from the library of their mother who had died just eleven days before the books were inscribed. She may have had them from their father who seems to have been very tolerant, perhaps even indifferent toward religious beliefs. The Sermons are plainly Roman Catholic in tone and content, and the probability is that Cornelia and Mary did not have them for long, or that they kept them for remembrance of their mother, not for their religious teachings, or for any early sympathies with Catholicism. As late as 1834 when she and her husband were turning toward the true Faith, Cornelia spoke of "... my prejudices and horrors which I have nurtured for the Catholic faith..."<sup>27</sup>

The well-to-do family of Austin Montgomery into which she was so generously welcomed in 1823 were members of the Episcopalian Church which "by the end of the eighteenth century was clearly the Church of the aristocratic élite of the Quaker City."<sup>28</sup> Under the truly great leadership of Bishop William White, who had founded Christ Church in 1789, Episcopalianism had become a civic and social as well as a religious force in Phil-

<sup>23</sup> *Records of the Second Presbyterian Church: Burials*, p. 423: "1808, March 1: A child of Ralph Peacock, 11 mos." Cornelia, born in 1809, was the youngest of seven children of Ralph Peacock, not of six, as her biographers have stated. She had a half-sister and brother, Isabella and John Bowen, children of her mother's first marriage.

<sup>24</sup> *Records of the Second Presbyterian Church: Burials*, pp. 462-63.

<sup>25</sup> Will and Accounting of Ralph Peacock, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Archives of the Novitiate of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, Rosemont, Pa.

<sup>27</sup> Mother M. Osmonde, S.H.C.J., *op. cit.* pp. 24-25.

<sup>28</sup> Baltzell, *op. cit.*, p. 244. For A. Montgomery as an Episcopalian, see the records of the pew-renters of St. Peter's (at Third and Pine Sts. — under the joint rectorship, with Christ Church, of Bishop White), 1800-1815; also the record of his burial in Christ Church cemetery, 1855: E. L. Clark, *A Record of the Inscriptions of the Tablets and Grave-Stones in the Burial Grounds of Christ Church Philadelphia* (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1864), p. 110.

adelphia.<sup>29</sup> A cousin of Austin Montgomery had become an Episcopal minister, and in the very year in which Cornelia went to live with the Montgomerys, had founded St. Stephen's Church on Tenth Street below Chestnut, not far from the Montgomery home.<sup>30</sup> It was this cousin, the Reverend James Montgomery, who baptized Cornelia in St. Stephen's Church, February 25, 1831. Evidence points to the fact that he had a strong religious influence on her family, for he baptized her sister Mary Peacock, a month later, and within a year, three children of her sister Adeline Peacock Duval.<sup>31</sup>

The introduction of Reverend James Montgomery into Cornelia's story does more than add to her religious history, for it indicates a possible channel by which she may have met Pierce Connelly. Since James Montgomery was a colleague of Pierce in the Episcopal ministry in Philadelphia at least from 1828 to 1831, and his residence was within a block of Pierce's father's home, it is quite likely that they knew one another.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore likely that James Montgomery was instrumental in the meeting that was to blossom into the courtship and marriage of Pierce and Cornelia. The courtship and marriage have been of prime concern to Cornelia's biographers, though they have had scanty information from which to draw. So, too, has been the subject of Isabella Montgomery's objections to the marriage. The information presented here on James Montgomery, and what will follow on the family background and education of Pierce, does not answer the problem of Isabella's objections, nor does it tell us all we would like to know of Pierce and Cornelia at this stage of their life. But it does show that existing biographical accounts are inadequate, and that one, at least, contains interpretations that cannot be borne out in fact.

Before detailing Pierce's background it will be well to note that the story of Isabella's objections rests on an oral tradition apparently transmitted by Cornelia's first religious companions, and on a single vague and inconclusive written document. This latter gives information only on some kind of an estrangement, and this at the time of its healing, eleven years after the marriage: On his way to Europe in 1842, Pierce wrote from Philadelphia to his wife in Grand Coteau. He had taken their ten-year-old Merty to visit the Montgomerys, and he reported:

As soon as I could I went . . . up to Mrs. Bowen's — just at dark I found her and Mrs. M.[ontgomery] together and you would suppose it

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 240-46.

<sup>30</sup> *Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Pennsylvania, 1823-26: "Proceedings, 1823,"* pp. 9-11, 17-18. Also, S. F. Hotchkin, *Memoir of the Rev. James Montgomery, D.D.* (Phila., 1899).

<sup>31</sup> *Parish Register, St. Stephen's Church, Vol. I, 1823-65.*

<sup>32</sup> For Pierce in the Episcopal ministry, see pp. 103-104 below. For residence of Henry Connelly, "gentleman," and Reverend James Montgomery see Philadelphia Directory, 1825.

had been you instead of me — both of them kissing me again and again and crying for some time, too much to say a word. There is no doubt they all love you dearly — I should say Mr. and Mrs. M. feel everything connected with your case far, far the most deeply: the more because perhaps there is a good deal they would like to make up for — if they had the opportunity.<sup>33</sup>

One of Cornelia's biographers has given her interpretation of what Mr. and Mrs. Montgomery had "to make up for," and has made of Cornelia's marriage very much of a romantic adventure. Her account runs as follows:

...when she was twenty-two, Cornelia announced her engagement to a young man called Pierce Connelly. How or when they met we do not know. It is unlikely they did so through the normal channels of social intercourse because Pierce was not acceptable to families like the Peacocks and Montgomerys. For the Connellys were in trade; the furniture trade with its aura of dusty rooms, shuttered windows and sunlight filtering slowly across silent piles of unused wood and upholstery. Behind lurked an even more sinister implication. A large proportion of the Irish immigrants who stole across the Atlantic to find their vocation in the land of promise, came as indented servants. There is, of course, no suggestion of the Connellys having arrived in such a way — other than the combination of their name and occupation. But to Mrs. Montgomery the threat must have been a very real one.

It did not, however, deter Cornelia. She was swept off her feet like many others by Pierce's charm...

As a suitor he was irresistible...Pierce had entered Holy Orders some years before and he was now a curate. Socially it was a mark in his favor and the reason why, perhaps, Cornelia and her friends knew of him. She sang, it is said, with her sweet soprano voice trained meticulously for evening parties, in the choir of his church.

The scene was all set for a stock romance...It was an exciting, dramatic situation pregnant with whispered consultations, forbidden letters and secret encounters...Mrs. Montgomery was not a woman to be trifled with...she refused her consent to the marriage.

Cornelia, however, could be as firm as she...From Adeline's, [the home of her other married sister] on December 1st, 1831, she was married to the Reverend Pierce Connelly.

Looking back on Cornelia's adventurousness in the matter, it is easy to assume it typical...There is much to suggest the opposite...Her boldness in marrying Pierce was exceptional...It was a strong decisive gesture, but Cornelia had fallen very much in love and Pierce's powers of persuasion were capable of turning stronger heads than hers.<sup>34</sup>

The historical record of the Connellys does not bear out the picture as it

<sup>33</sup> Portions of this letter are at Mayfield, England, among the documents assembled for the Process of Beatification of Cornelia Connelly. The tops of the four pages on which it was written had been torn off and lost when it was acquired by the Cause Committee. The "Mrs. Bowen" in the citation above is undoubtedly the wife of John Bowen, brother of "Mrs. M." — Isabella Bowen Montgomery.

<sup>34</sup> *Case*, pp. 24-6.



is given above. Instead, it gives Cornelia very solid reasons, based on far more than romance, for believing that Pierce was a prudent choice for a husband. And it does not indicate that they could not have met "through the normal channels of social intercourse."<sup>35</sup> At least a generation before him, his family had established a recognized tradition of public service and cultural attainment which brought them into contact with the social and civic leaders of the day. At the opening of the nineteenth century, his father Henry Connelly was a distinguished cabinet and chair maker:

...Henry Connelly...ranks in every way with the heralded Duncan Phyfe...<sup>36</sup>

Henry Connelly became one of the most prolific and best exponents of Sheraton in Philadelphia...[He] certainly possessed a familiarity with the "best London styles," a knowledge of cabinet-making techniques, such as the mechanics of the tambourslide or cylinder fall, and a necessary background of good business methods. His life away from his craft was centered in his family...His customers were men of affairs who might be seen daily on the streets of the city at the time — Stephen Girard, shipping merchant, Henry Hollingsworth, Quaker banker, Manuel Eyre of the shipbuilding family, Richard Ashurst and Charles Graff of the mercantile fraternity, Captain John Carson commander of the important "Pennsylvania Packet," and others...<sup>37</sup>

Henry's brother John, close to him throughout his life, devoted his entire life to public service in company with Philadelphia's, and in some cases the nation's, most eminent citizens. He served in the Revolution and was later named Colonel of his artillery battalion. In the War of 1812 he was a member of the Philadelphia Committee of Public Defense and the War Committee of Correspondence. Before his death in 1827 he had been Public Auctioneer for the City, and Representative and Senator in the State Legislature of Pennsylvania.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> At least one record exists of the Connellys and Peacocks meeting on equal grounds in the business world. In 1803 John Connelly, in his capacity of prison inspector, sold ground to Ralph Peacock for \$1525: *Deed Record Book EF*, No. 21 (1799-1809), p. 224, Register of Wills Office, City Hall, Phila.

Historical information is given on the Connellys in the following pages, not because it matters whether Cornelia married well socially, but in order to come as close as possible to a true knowledge of her life circumstances; the humanitarian and cultural achievements of her husband's family were part of these circumstances.

<sup>36</sup> W. M. Hornor, "Henry Connelly, Cabinet and Chairmaker," *International Studio*, XCIII (May, 1929), 44.

<sup>37</sup> M. S. Carson, "Henry Connelly and Ephraim Haines, Philadelphia Furniture Makers," *The Philadelphia Museum Bulletin*, XLVIII, No. 237 (Spring, 1953), 37. Carson notes that Connellys "beginnings were obscure," but is at pains to show that he soon achieved recognition.

<sup>38</sup> Henry Connelly Groome, *The Groome Family and Connections: A Pedigree with Biographical Sketches* (Phila.: J. B. Lippincott, 1907), pp. 71-4. Also J. B. McMaster, *The Life and Times of Stephen Girard*, 2 vols. (Phila.: J. B. Lippincott, 1918), Vol. I, pp. 343, 349; Vol. II, pp. 263, 266, 267.

He also showed his dedication to the public good by noteworthy service in humanitarian endeavors. He was among the principal organizers of public relief for the victims of the terrible yellow fever epidemic of 1793, and was remembered for his heroism in nursing the sick even after he had contracted the dread disease himself.<sup>39</sup>

Even before he had given himself to the care of unfortunates in the epidemic, John Connelly had already taken on a life mission of aid to prisoners through his work in the Pennsylvania Prison Society in which Henry Connelly and eventually Pierce shared to some degree. This Society is regarded as one of the most significant social reform movements of its century, providing both the seed and formative influence for the prison reform movement in America, and giving impetus to other reforms such as the treatment of the insane. John was among its first members, when it was founded in 1787 by those who were Philadelphia's leaders: Benjamin Franklin, then President of Pennsylvania; the noted Bishop White, for thirty-six years president of the Society; Dr. Benjamin Rush; Richard Stockton, a Signer of the Declaration, and others. Early records show John Connelly to have been one of the Society's most active and effective members. He served more than once in the onerous capacity of prison inspector, and his work was warmly commended by the noted Roberts Vaux. He also helped to frame the Memorials to the Executive Council of Pennsylvania through which the Society did its most lasting work. These Memorials were passed on to the Legislature to be used as the basis of law-making. John Connelly appears as a signer of one of these which initiated a systematic reconstruction of the prison system and penal code of Pennsylvania, introducing the much-needed principle of solitary confinement. His last service to the Society was a bequest in his will of \$1500.<sup>40</sup>

Henry Connelly gave a bookcase to the Society,<sup>41</sup> and what is more important, a period of service as a trustee. His name appears in a list of distinguished trustees: "Thomas Wistar, Gentleman, Samuel Powell Griffiths, Doctor of Medicine, . . . Roberts Vaux, and Caleb Cresson Jun' of the said City Merchants, Joseph Parrish, Doctor of Medicine, Thomas Bradford Jun' Esquire and Henry Connelly of the City of Philadelphia aforesaid Cabinet Maker."<sup>42</sup>

The purposeful careers of his father and uncle could not have been without influence upon Pierce who showed an interest in the Prison Society

<sup>39</sup> J. H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead* (Phila., 1949), pp. 176-77; 191-92; 275.

<sup>40</sup> N. T. Teeters, *They Were in Prison: A History of the Pennsylvania Prison Society, 1787-1937* (Phila., J. C. Winston Co., 1937), pp. 3, 26-30; 48, 64, 97, 131; see also Baltzell, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>42</sup> Hornor, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

before he left Philadelphia for Natchez. Undoubtedly they influenced him in his choice of the ministry, and enabled him to bring to his marriage with Cornelia a better than average degree of social, cultural, and moral development. This is reflected in his own academic career at the University of Pennsylvania and that of his brother. Pierce attended the University from 1818 to 1824, attaining to membership in the Philomathean Society and receiving a master's degree in 1824.<sup>43</sup> Between 1828 and 1831, George was one of the founders of the Zelosophic Literary Society, and at his graduation in 1831 was awarded the honor of delivering the Latin salutatory.<sup>44</sup>

Henry Connelly must have had a substantial income in order to have given his sons their years of study at the University. Apparently it came not only from his cabinet making but also from a successful cotton mill near Newark, Delaware.<sup>45</sup> His son Harry derived a very good living from this mill and others which he acquired after his father's death in 1826, and in 1828 he made a most successful marriage socially to Eliza Andrews, daughter of Robert Andrews of "Andrewsia," Delaware, and niece of John Andrews, prominent headmaster of Episcopal Academy, Philadelphia.<sup>46</sup>

Gradually, as had the Peacocks, the Connellys turned toward Episcopalianism. This again is an indication that by Pierce's time the family had advanced socially. The older generation of Connellys had been Presbyterians. Pierce had been baptized as a child of three, with his one-year-old brother Harry, in the First Presbyterian Church.<sup>47</sup> Here their father and their uncle had remained staunch members throughout their lives, serving as trustees and John as an elder.<sup>48</sup> However, the venerable Bishop White, president of the Prison Society, must have brought some Episcopalian influences upon the family, and these influences were strong at the University of Pennsylvania when Pierce and George attended it.<sup>49</sup> Whatever additional influences there may have been — perhaps the growing social prestige of Episcopalianism — they were convincing to Pierce who decided upon graduation to become an Episcopalian minister.

He was first cited as a candidate for the ministry by Bishop White at the Episcopal Convention of September, 1825. He was then required to place

<sup>43</sup> *University of Pennsylvania Catalog of Alumni Records, 1749-1893*, p. 62.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 80, 83.

<sup>45</sup> Groome, *op. cit.*, p. 74; *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, Nov. 6, 1826. Baltzell, *op. cit.*, notes that cotton milling was the industry of some of Philadelphia's best families (pp. 95-96).

<sup>46</sup> Groome, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>47</sup> *Records of the First Presbyterian Church, 1701-1856*: 1807, Oct. 7th.

<sup>48</sup> Groome, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>49</sup> Baltzell, *op. cit.*, p. 322. See *University of Pennsylvania Catalog of Alumni Records, 1749-1893*, "Introduction;" Episcopalians, U. of P.: John Andrews, Vice-Provost, 1791-1810; Frederick Beasley, 1813-1828; Wm. H. DeLancey, 1828-1834. (The last-named assisted at Pierce's ordination.)

himself under the direction of an ordained clergyman in order to obtain his theological training.<sup>50</sup> In November of 1826 the Convention accepted him as a candidate for Holy Orders; in June of 1827 he was ordained a deacon in Christ Church by Bishop White,<sup>51</sup> and he went to serve at Old Trinity, Wilmington.<sup>52</sup> Where did Pierce spend his year and a half "reading for the ministry?" Christ Church suggests itself, but so, too, does St. Stephen's founded by the Reverend James Montgomery shortly before Pierce began his studies. If Pierce were with James Montgomery from 1825 to 1827, could he not have met Cornelia then, a full five years before their marriage? No records have come to light to answer these interesting questions.

Pierce served at Old Trinity, Wilmington, from the summer of 1827 to the following summer or fall.<sup>53</sup> Here, as a deacon, he officiated at the marriage of his brother Harry on July 24, 1828.<sup>54</sup> Finally, on October 11, 1828, Pierce Connelly was ordained a priest of the Protestant Episcopal Church in St. James Church, Kingsessing, Philadelphia.<sup>55</sup> He served here as assistant to the rector at least from May, 1830 to January, 1832<sup>56</sup> when he departed for Natchez with his bride.<sup>57</sup>

The departure from Philadelphia of Pierce and Cornelia brings us to the terminal point of this paper. What, in summation, do the details of their Philadelphia background tell us of her? First, it is hoped, they make her more real to us by setting her concretely amid well-known events at the close of a stirring era of Philadelphia's history, and they show us what she may have absorbed as her national heritage.

More specifically, the details on Pierce would seem to have a direct if remote bearing on the question of the wisdom of her trust in her husband's ability to follow his unusual vocation, understanding always the aid of divine

<sup>50</sup> *Philadelphia Recorder*, Vol. VIII, Sept. 10, 1825. For training for the ministry for this period, see W. Manross, *A History of the American Episcopal Church* (New York: Morehouse Publishing Co., 1935), pp. 78-9.

<sup>51</sup> *Philadelphia Recorder*, Vol. V, June 16, 1827.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. VI, Apr. 5, 1828.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Groome, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>55</sup> *Philadelphia Recorder*, Vol. VI, Nov. 1, 1828. St. James Church at 6838 Woodland Ave., Phila., still has an active congregation. It was founded in 1762 as a Swedish Lutheran Church. It did not become officially Episcopalian (which it is today) until 1840, although from 1831 on, it had an Episcopalian rector. Even before this time, it had begun a policy of securing assistants from the Episcopalians. Pierce was one of these assistants. (See *Journal and Biography of Nicholas Collin, 1746-1831*, trans. from the original Swedish manuscript by A. Johnson, Phila., 1936. Nicholas Collin was rector at St. James when Pierce went there as assistant).

Old Trinity, Wilmington, had been Swedish Lutheran also from 1640 to 1800. (See *Records of Old Trinity Church, Wilmington, Del.*; and T. Scharf, *History of Delaware, 1609-1880*, Vol. II [Phila.: L. J. Richards, 1888]).

<sup>56</sup> *Journal and Biography of Nicholas Collin*.

<sup>57</sup> *Journal... of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Pennsylvania, 1832-41*, p. 51.

grace. Ultimately what she trusted was the guidance of their spiritual directors.<sup>58</sup> But it is not without significance for her part in dealing with Pierce, that she seems to have had very solid grounds for choosing him originally as her husband, and that her choice should not be viewed primarily as a romantic adventure.

Finally, do not certain elements of the background presented here relate remotely to the answer a recent writer gave to his question: "*Why An American Foundress for England in 1846?*" Father Walsh points out that Cornelia was particularly well-fitted to deal with the sensitive religious situations created by the Catholic Revival in England because of her own convert experiences, and of her familiarity with Catholicism in Rome. He notes that she was "peculiarly free from prejudices and preconceptions of the new converts as well as of the Old Catholics."<sup>59</sup> May we not say that in a remote way this freedom could have a base in the religious experiences of her early life? As we have seen, the milieu in which she was raised was one in which denominational barriers were crossed with all too great an ease; but at least it was not characterised by rigid sectarianism, and it showed her something of the varieties of religious experience. It is plausible to suggest that in her mature years she was able to draw good even from the somewhat indifferent character of her early religious background.

It was part of the essential greatness of Cornelia Connelly that she utilized and lifted up to God the good in all of her experiences, even the most challenging of these — her association with Pierce. She must have been influenced by him, by his background and training, as she was by her own — backgrounds framed by the growth of their young nation. It was she alone, in the end, who in cooperation with grace, used in its fullness the heritage she had shared with Pierce — resourcefulness, enterprise, courage, a sense of social responsibility, and a sensitivity to religious and cultural values. Her American pioneer contemporaries homesteading in the new West displayed no more courage and resourcefulness than did Mother Connelly in England, who, with almost no money, few friends and fewer workers, amidst enemies as dangerous as the Indians of the plains, established schools in anti-Catholic England which compelled the admiration of government inspectors. Her achievement was, of course, primarily the work of grace and not of factors the historian can measure and weigh. But grace builds upon nature, and whatever there was of the American in Cornelia that was so apt to God's great purposes, of this America is justly proud.

<sup>58</sup> Walsh, *The Vocation of Cornelia Connelly*, pp. 16-17; 19-31 *passim*.

<sup>59</sup> Walsh, "Why an American Foundress for England in 1846?" *The Pylon* XXIII, No. 3 (Winter, 1961-62), 3-6.