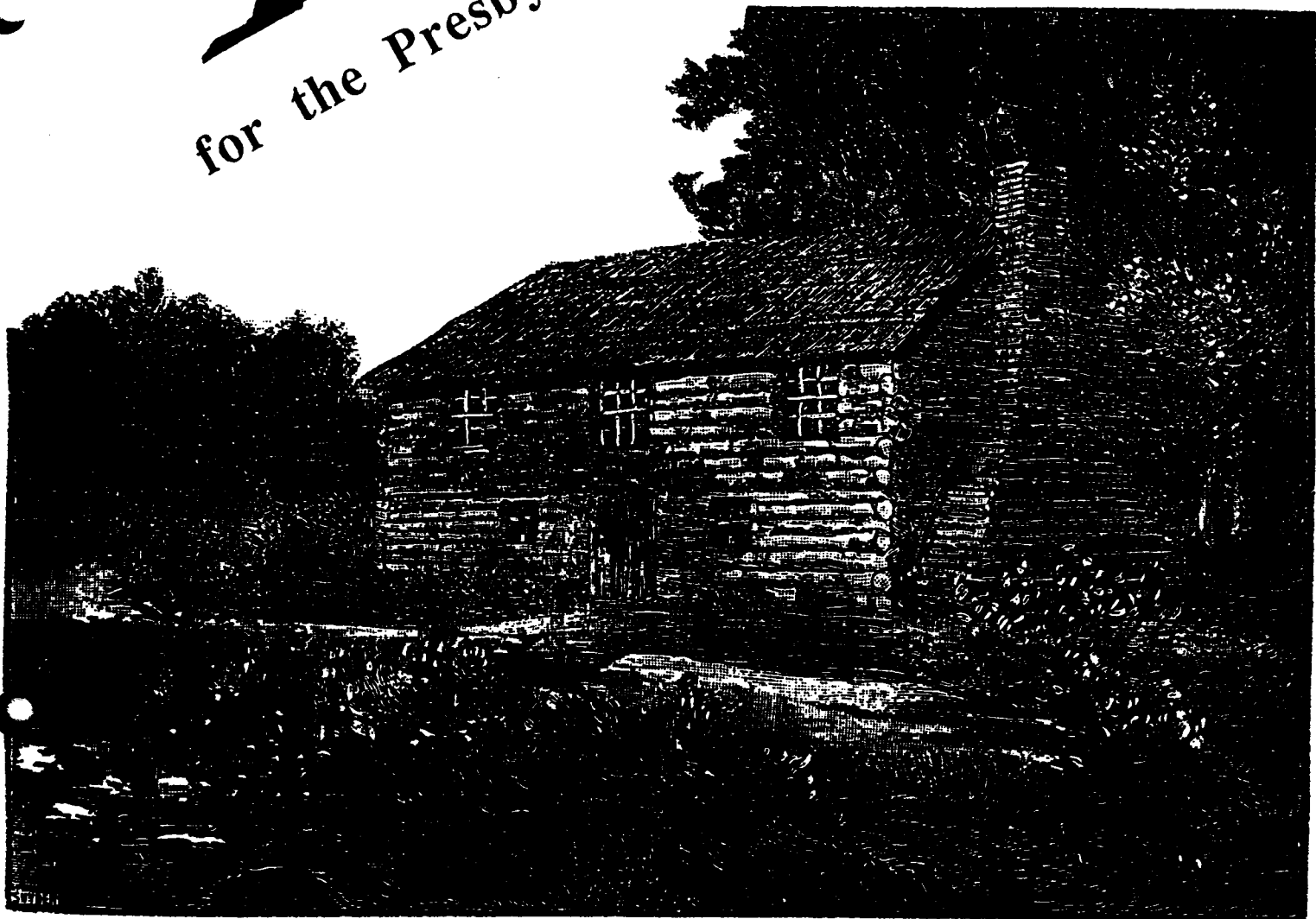


# An Historian's Handbook

for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)



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**Cover:** A woodcut depicts the large log house built in 1735 by William Tennent, an immigrant minister of the church of Ireland. The Rev. Mr. Tennent began the first American seminary in the building in Neshaminy, Pennsylvania, where young men might be trained for the ministry. Many ministers scorned "log college" men, but graduates strongly influenced evangelism in 18th-century America.

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## Introduction:

### THE TELLER OF PARABLES

At a meeting of archivists in Chicago someone staying at the hotel wandered by. Browsing through pamphlets and samples, he seemed mystified. "Just what is it you fellows do?" he asked. It was easy to explain that an archives is a depository for records, documents, letters, notes, and anything else that needs to be saved.

An archivist pulls out staples and rusting paper clips, repairs damaged documents, placing it all into acid-free folders so they will last. An archivist organizes, catalogs and helps people refer to collections for information. An archives keeps legal records where they can be found quickly and frees filing space in other offices so no one drowns in a sea of paper.

The man left, possibly unconvinced that archivists do much important. How do we justify spending time and money on the PCA Historical Archives when the money and time spent can be used to plant churches or pay missionaries? You may face the same question as historian of your church or WIC group.

One handbook for church historians reports that we need to collect and keep the history of the church for the same reason people make fruit into preserves. The preserves can be savored later. We can also savor our heritage and share our common background with one another.

The answer to the man at the hotel doesn't describe the work of the PCA Archives. Neither does the preserves analogy, though that is a side benefit.

On an airplane flight I sat next to a young woman who politely asked about my work. I told her I am employed by the Presbyterian Church in America, without being specific.

"You know I was raised as a Presbyterian, but my family doesn't go anywhere now. It just seemed like my church didn't really believe or teach much, so what was the point?" she said.

During the flight she learned that there are Presbyterian churches who have something to teach because they believe God's Word. God has given us quite a message. She also learned of a PCA church that is beginning in her city.

Fleshing out the message of the Gospel. . .shouting what God has done in our midst. . .telling our generation. . .the next. . .and the next. . .That is what a church archives and you as church or WIC historians should be doing.

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You don't think your church histories have much potential as tools for evangelism? You doubt they will ever be used. So makd them useful. That's what this guidebook is all about:

--Collecting and writing a history which does witness to God's mighty acts among His people.

--Keeping a record of the church and its community that is a complete and accurate tool for planning ministries or introducing the church to new neighbors.

--Pulling together the story of the past so it can stimulate thinking about the present and future.

--Focusing the members and friends of the congregation on the heritage they share. (Sure we need to sample the preserves!)

Asaph, the musician and psalm-writer of ancient Israel, described the work of the church historian in Psalm 78:1-7. In Asaph describes those who learn the secrets of the past as the tellers of "parables." Asaph's parables tell of a rebellious people and a holy but patient God of salvation. These parables came from the fathers (the past). They are told to the children of the fathers (the present). They must be saved so the next generations may also hear (the future).

Why? So they will put their trust in God. As a christian historian, yours can be an evangelistic voice to the present and the future. God may use your work after you have become one more name of the church's past.

You may also be called as a "change agent" in your church. That is a modern buzz phrase, but it does describe how key people can make things happen. They get things off dead center. Church historians have a wonderful opportunity to help a church advance, because the historian is the person with the facts, who has tried to learn what they mean. The records are a good resource. So is the recorder.

This job description may make you feel more inadequate than ever. That's good! You will not learn everything. . .and part of what you know won't be accurate. Keep questioning yourself and others. Be a student of your church. Realize that what you are covering is God's very work in history. Do all for His glory--not just to "can preserves."

. . .Then you will be a teller of parables Asaph would be proud to know.

--Paul Ingram