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THE PRESBYTERIAN OCCUPATION OF A HISTORIC HOUSE.

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The purpose of the present paper is to make a record of the recent epoch in the history of the famous building in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, known as the "Franklin Palace," during which epoch it was controlled and occupied by "The Board of Ministerial Relief of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America."

Some allusion to the history of the building, as well as to the historic contrasts between its earlier and later occupation and uses, was made by the late Dr. William C. Cattell, in an article contributed by him to *The Church at Home and Abroad* from which we here quote:

"The 'Home at Perth Amboy' is a noble mansion by the sea, surrounded by forest trees. It was built in colonial times by the Proprietors of the province of New Jersey as an official residence. The massive walls (nearly three feet thick, constructed of bricks brought from the old country), the large public rooms, the generous hall (twenty feet wide), the spacious verandas and the noble park of ancient trees in which it is situated, all show the views which the Proprietors had of a home suitable for the servants of a king.

"In 1774 it became the residence of Governor William Franklin. It was only the year before the removal of his official residence from Burlington to Perth Amboy that the governor had affixed, somewhat reluctantly, the colonial seal to a charter for 'The New Jersey Society for the better support of the Widows and the Education of destitute

Orphans of Presbyterian ministers.' As the Episcopalians had recently obtained a charter for their society for 'the Relief of Widows and Children of Clergymen in the Communion of the Church of England,'¹ the majority of the governor's council was in favor of granting a similar favor to the Presbyterians. But the governor and his official advisers had grave doubts both 'as to the Expediency and Legality of the Measure.' The attorney-general, Cortlandt Skinner, insisted upon several changes, among them the following: 'In the Second Line, instead of Presbyterian *Clergy* say Presbyterian *Ministers* or *Teachers*, and so throughout the Charter,' but advised the governor to defer granting the charter until he obtained 'His Majesty's Direction therefor.' This the governor says, in his dispatch to the Earl of Hillsborough, May 11, 1772, he was more willing to do, as upon a recent 'Petition for the Incorporation of the Presbyterian Ministers, &c., in New York, His Majesty's ministers were so lately of Opinion that it was not *expedient* upon Principles of *general Policy* to grant the Presbyterians of New York *any other Privileges* than they are *entitled to by the Laws of Toleration.*' (The italics are the governor's own.) He admits that the majority of his council approved of granting the charter, but adds, 'I have reason to believe that had there been a full Meeting the Majority would have been of the same Sentiment as the Attorney General.' However, after a delay of nearly three years 'His Majesty's Direction' was received and the colonial seal was affixed to the charter December 12, 1773.

"Little did the loyal governor dream, as he sat next year among the comfortable surroundings of his official residence at Perth Amboy, that the proprietors who had built the noble mansion for the king's servants 'had builded better than they knew'; that it would one day become the property of the Presbyterian Church and the peaceful home of its aged ministers—the King's ambassadors' indeed, though in the former day they would have been thought worthy only of such rights as were granted 'by the laws of *toleration*'!"²

Something more of the history of this interesting house may be learned from W. Jay Mills's *Historic Houses of New*

¹ The draft of this charter was made by a committee of Episcopal divines at a meeting held at Perth Amboy, May 12, 1768.

² See Vol. X of the Colonial Records, published under the direction of the New Jersey Historical Society, where the petition of Dr. Witherspoon and the draft of the proposed charter are given in full, together with the "opinions" of Messrs. Ogden and Skinner and the correspondence of the governor with the Earl of Hillsborough and the Earl of Dartmouth upon the subject.

Jersey, Philadelphia, 1902. Its erection was begun in 1764 by the Lord Proprietors for His Excellency William Franklin, Captain-general and Governor-in-chief of the Province of New Jersey, although not occupied by him till 1774. From then to the Revolution it was the scene of a succession of entertainments in which Franklin surpassed all his predecessors. To it in 1775 Benjamin Franklin journeyed to persuade his son to withdraw from the royal cause. After the Governor's arrest and the flight of his family, the palace became the headquarters for any British general happening to be in the Perth Amboy neighborhood. After the war it was sold to John Rattoone, who restored and enlarged it after the interior had suffered by fire. Early in the nineteenth century a syndicate converted it into a summer-resort, "The Brighton House," adding a wing to the south side of the building. Still later Joseph Bonaparte negotiated for its purchase for his American home: but it fell into the hands of Matthias Bruen, Esq., who occupied it until his death, and left it to his son, Alexander M. Bruen, M. D.

On March 28th, 1883, an Indenture was made between Alexander M. Bruen and Louisa Jay, his wife, of the city of New York, and "The Presbyterian Board of Relief for Disabled Ministers and the Widows and Orphans of Deceased Ministers," witnessing that Dr. Bruen in consideration of *one dollar* sold to said Board, the Mansion House, commonly known as the "Bruen House," and eleven acres of land in Perth Amboy, N. J., in furtherance of a desire to afford a Home for the beneficiaries of the Board of Relief.

This deed of gift was made to the Board of Relief on the express conditions, that if "within fifty years" the property should not be used for the purpose for which it was deeded, "or if at any time" any part of the property should be "assigned, conveyed, mortgaged, or otherwise disposed of, or attempted by any instrument of writing so to be, or if any judgment or attachment shall be obtained against said corporation for any debt or demand whatsoever, then this indenture, and all right and title hereby conveyed shall, *ipso facto* and immediately upon the cessation of such use, or upon

the delivery of any such instrument of writing, or the recovery of any such judgment or attachment, become absolutely null and void, and the same shall revert to and vest in said Alexander M. Bruen and his heirs, without any necessity of re-entry for condition broken."

The deed further stipulated that "the said 'The Presbyterian Board of Relief for Disabled Ministers and the Widows and Orphans of Deceased Ministers,' agrees faithfully to use the said premises, and only as a home for disabled ministers, as aforesaid."

An act of the Legislature of New Jersey having been obtained, authorizing the Board to hold the property, the Board of Relief took possession of it in 1883, and fitted up and furnished the building for permanent occupancy at a cost of a little more than \$12,000; and there was a public formal opening of the House, October 9, 1883. Every arrangement was made to give the beneficiaries of the Board a cheerful and comfortable home. It was supposed at the time that the Home, containing eighty rooms, would soon be overcrowded, the General Assembly going so far as to intimate that it might be just as well if those aged ministers who had friends should elect to remain among them. The late Dr. Cattell took the greatest pride in the historic house, and made special efforts to keep it before the minds of the Presbyteries and those for whose benefit it was intended. The General Assembly of 1889, meeting in New York City, made "a pious pilgrimage" to the Perth Amboy Home as the guests of Colonel Elliott F. Shepard. An open-air meeting was held in front of the mansion, and on the very ground where Governor Franklin had so often stood, Governor Beaver of Pennsylvania made a plea for the Presbyterian ministers whose rights the Colonial Governor had hardly felt bound to respect.

During the first year after the opening of the Home it had twenty guests. But this number gradually diminished and it soon became apparent that the aged people for whom the Home was intended were quite unwilling to avail themselves of its privileges and benefits. In 1899 the name of the Home was changed to "The Westminster House."

After the occupancy of the Home for nineteen years the expense of its maintenance so far exceeded the amount that would have been given to the guests had they received money appropriations instead of a free residence in the Home, that the Board asked the General Assembly, in 1901, for permission to close the Westminster House at Perth Amboy, N. J., and to open "The Merriam Home," at Newton, N. J., and transfer the guests to that place, "The Merriam Home" having come into the possession of the Board, with \$30,000 endowment, by the will of Mr. Henry W. Merriam.

The matter was postponed by the General Assembly for one year. The Board of Relief again went up to the Assembly of 1902 with the same request, and in its report for that year (pp. 7-21) set forth the facts and figures of their occupancy of the Perth Amboy Home so fully and conclusively that the Assembly granted leave to the Board to close the Home. This was done on September 10, 1904, and the guests remaining at that time were transferred to the Merriam Home at Newton, New Jersey.

The Board of Relief had no right to sell the property at Perth Amboy, and it could not afford to maintain it as a Home for the few persons who were willing to accept its privileges. It felt that the only thing that could be done was to surrender it to the heirs of Dr. Bruen and trust to their good will toward the sacred cause of Ministerial Relief to make a donation to the Board of such an amount as they might be pleased to make. These heirs have generously given to the Board \$15,059, which now forms part of its Permanent Endowment, and is known as "The Bruen Memorial Fund." The interest of this Fund is being used at present to assist in the maintenance of The Merriam Home at Newton, New Jersey.

For the purpose of avoiding any question of title the Board of Relief made an indenture conveying all their right, title, and interest in the same to the heirs of Dr. Bruen to whom the property reverted under the terms of his deed to the Board of Relief.