



The Life  
and  
Teaching  
of the  
Pious  
Schoolmaster

## THE LIFE OF THE “GOD-FEARING CHRISTOPHER DOCK”



Christopher Dock came to Pennsylvania early in the 18th century. By 1718 at least, he was teaching school in the Skippack community, north of Germantown. For the next 53 years, Dock left tracks on the pages of American history and a well-worn path for future generations.

Christopher Dock was by no means an ordinary German immigrant! He had come to America from the German Palatinate, where conditions for religious dissenters had become intolerable. The burdens of taxation and religious persecution may have spurred his move from his home in Europe to Penn's Woods, or perhaps his unpopular religious views barred him from his chosen profession of teaching in his native country. In any case, the complete religious freedom of Penn's "Holy Experiment" was undoubtedly attractive to a man with Dock's pious impulses for Christian duty. Whatever may have been Dock's reason for coming to Pennsylvania, it soon became apparent that God had sent him there.

Dock very probably was born in 1698. When he stepped ashore to become an American pioneer, he likely was a flourishing youth of around twenty. Although his educational qualifications are a secret of the past, his unique Christian management of his classroom indicates strong natural abilities rather than scholarly training.

Despite our lack of knowledge concerning Dock's "teacher

training," we know that he possessed one towering virtue—an "extreme love for children." This motive can be found behind practically every classroom innovation for which he is credited. It suffused his teaching with a natural motivating factor never surpassed by modern teaching techniques.

After teaching at Skippack for a successive ten years after his arrival, Dock turned his energies to farming. Undoubtedly then as now, teachers were not the wealthy of the land, and with a family to support, Dock evidently sought the security of a substantial income. In 1735 he purchased 100 acres of land from the sons of William Penn for 15 pounds and 10 shillings (about \$300 today) and built himself a house on a pleasant knoll overlooking a spreading meadow. During the next ten years he was to learn that God does not encourage His servants to borrow time from His work.

We can only suppose that Dock may have experienced financial disappointment in this venture, and he was undoubtedly conscience-smitten about leaving the teaching profession. When his Skippack friends urged him to teach again, saying that others could farm but not all could teach as he could, he readily complied. Of this experience Dock himself remarks, "I neglected that profession [teaching] for ten years, for which I often felt the smiting hand of God, which before then had served me well. May the Lord graciously overlook my neglect of the youth during that time."

His interest in his calling certainly did not abate during his ten years of farming because for four summers he traveled southward to Germantown, where he conducted classes in the Germantown Mennonite Meetinghouse for terms of three months each.

After Dock returned to teaching, he continued in this divine

trust until the moment of his death. For twelve years he taught three days each week at the Skippack school and the remaining three days at a school in the Salford Mennonite Meetinghouse to the north of Skippack. Dock coordinated his efforts in both schools by having the students in each school write letters to students of equal ability in the other school. These letters usually contained a description of classroom activities, some Scripture verses, and sometimes several questions to be answered from Scripture by the recipient of the letter. Dock himself was the postman! It requires only mild imagination on the part of a teacher to picture the enthusiasm of the students receiving these letters.

Dock's teaching techniques were singularly creative and far in advance of his times. He entertained serious doubts about the harsh methods of his day, which proposed one exclusive motivation for study: "learning to the tune of a hickory stick." He questioned the ability of such methods to lure the child "down the flowery paths of knowledge," and did not feel that corporal punishment alone could solve the problem of child misbehavior. He firmly believed that "the slap of the hand, hazel branch and birch rod are a means of preventing wicked outbursts, but they cannot change the stubborn heart." Although he did not hesitate to use the rod to curb outbursts of wickedness, he recognized the need for divine help in changing the heart and daily implored the help of God in this task. Kneeling behind his desk at the close of each school day with his roll book spread before him, he committed each student to the refining influences of God's love. In addition, Dock did not underestimate the power of a warm personal love for each student to melt barriers erected by disobedience. It is evident that Dock loved and was loved by his pupils.

The "pious schoolmaster of the Skippack" apparently was

fondly appreciated by his patrons also. One of these patrons was Christopher Saur, the Brethren printer at Germantown. Dock taught Christopher Saur Jr., the printer's son, in one of his schools.

In 1749, Saur tried without success to persuade the schoolmaster to publish the secret of his success with children. Dock, with unpretentious humility, considered such a task to be vain and a temptation to pride. Not to be thwarted, Saur engaged Dielman Kolb, a good friend of Dock's, to write up a statement of Dock's successful teaching methods. In the end, Dock was persuaded in 1750 to write it himself, but with the stipulation that it was not to be published during his lifetime.

The document lay unpublished for nineteen years. Meanwhile, Christopher Saur Sr. died, and the printing business fell to Christopher Jr., Dock's former pupil. Finally, in 1769, with the persuasion of friends, Dock consented to the publication of his *Schulordnung* (school management). But to the consternation of the young printer, the manuscript was nowhere to be found! He was accused by the public of intentionally preventing its publication. The kindly schoolmaster sent a characteristic consolation in the form of a letter, informing the worried printer that he never intended the manuscript to be published anyway. He urged Saur to stop searching and by all means to stop worrying.

Hoping to regain the lost manuscript, however, Saur ran advertisements for it in his paper, offering a reward to the finder. After a year of investigation, it was found in a place that had been thoroughly searched previously. And so *Schulordnung* was published, though it was twenty years after its writing!

The first edition of *Schulordnung* was published in 1770, and a second edition followed before the end of the year. A third