

Mercy Cox Ellis: Quaker minister from Pennsdale



Mt. Equity, Cox's home later in life, from the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society. Used with permission.

Mercy Cox Ellis (1761-1848) was a prominent member of the Quaker community in Pennsdale. She was known locally for her kindness and generosity, and after the death of her husband, William Ellis (1751-1806), she continued her 48-year ministry that took her all over Pennsylvania, to Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, and even to northern Canada.

Mercy was from a prominent and wealthy family in Darlington, Maryland, just south of the Pennsylvania border. Her family were members of the Deer Creek Meeting, which is where Mercy met William Ellis. Samuel Wallis, the largest landowner in Lycoming County at the end of the 18th century, had been a member of the same meeting. Wealth, education, culture and elegant living were prevalent among the Maryland Friends.

After a long courtship, and not until William had built a home for his wife, were Mercy and William married at Deer Creek on Feb. 10, 1785. William was already well established in Lycoming County. According to a family history written by their granddaughter Mary Rhoads Haines (*Clovercroft Chronicles: 1314-1893*, Lippincott, 1893), Mercy's parents had "strenuously objected to

their union in the prospects of their daughter and sister removing to a newly-settled country, where they supposed she might have many privations to endure.”

William had followed Samuel Wallis to the Muncy Valley. He was employed as a surveyor and land agent for Wallis, who had established Muncy Farms about 1769 on the 7000 acres of land he had purchased. In 1771, William purchased a tract of land nearby, built a log house and planted a garden and an orchard. In 1778, during the Big Runaway, when attacks by Native Americans and British Loyalists forced settlers to abandon their land and flee to safety at Fort Augusta, in what is now Sunbury, the Ellis log house and garden were destroyed. Not deterred, William built another house.

After their marriage in 1785, Mercy moved with her husband to the wilderness area, where they lived in the log house William had built. Over the next 18 years, Mercy gave birth to 11 children, five of whom survived to adulthood. According to her granddaughter, she accepted the privations of Lycoming County, which were much different from what she was used to in Maryland.

By 1792, the couple had moved into their newly constructed home they called Wolf Run, a beautiful, large stone house on the banks of Wolf Run, built with locally quarried stone. The home stands today on Route 220 near Pennsdale and across from the large red barn that was, until recently, an antique store.

William built a grist mill and a house for the miller. There were a blacksmith shop and a school nearby. To the west were several for cabins their free Black servants, according to Elizabeth Whitacre (“The Friends’ Settlement in Muncy Valley,” *Now and Then*, Vol. 20, no. 8, 1982).

William was often away from home, traveling on business or attending meetings. He wrote long letters to Mercy and, later, to his children. Because their home was on a main thoroughfare, Mercy often entertained visitors. Wolf Run House would become a stop on the Underground Railroad. The house was on the Genesee Trail, a former Indian trail that went from Muncy to Highland Lake, Elklands, through northern Pennsylvania and New York State to Canada, where the former slaves were free.

William died in 1806 at the age of 55 and was buried in the Friends Cemetery next to the Quaker Meeting House. Mercy was left with a large household, including four sons and three daughters, several servants and other dependants. Her youngest child was four years old. The Ellis family was quite wealthy, and Mercy and the children were not left in want (Linda Poulton, “By Way of the Ellis Family,” *Now and Then*, Vol. 26, no. 2, August 2002).

When her oldest son took over Wolf Run, Mercy had a home built for herself and her children across the fields from Wolf Run. The stone building was called The Cottage. The house, which is

now referred to as Mt. Equity, is now divided into apartments. For a period, it was the site of a Buddhist monastery.

After the death of her husband, Mercy expanded the scope of her active ministry and changed to a simpler style of dress. According to her granddaughter, she felt that “the simplicity of her neat and becoming costume gave her opportunities for more frequently relieving the wants of others.” She was described by her granddaughter as “of small frame but vivacious and happy in disposition, with rare intelligence and possessed of keen executive ability” (Haines, p. 90).

The Quaker faith recognized that both men and women could have a calling to ministry, and Mercy gave a great deal of time to her Meeting. She is recognized in Quaker records as a minister. She spoke at meetings near and far and attended both the quarterly and the important yearly meetings in Philadelphia; she was 77 when she made her last trip. At that time, it took four days to travel by carriage to Philadelphia.

Locally, Mercy was admired for being generous to the poor. She taught in the local Friends school and boarded students who came from a distance (Poulton).

As many women are, Mercy was talented at juggling multiple roles. This mother of 11 continued to be active in the ministry and a leader in the community until she was quite elderly. She died at The Cottage on Feb. 9, 1848, when she was 87, and is buried in the Quaker Cemetery with her husband and several of their children and grandchildren.

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