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P.W.C. Biography (Weems)

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PARSON WEEMS AND THE CHERRY TREE

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You all know the story of George Washington and the cherry tree. But do you also know of Parson Weems? Probably not, but if there had been no Parson Weems, neither would there have been any story of the cherry tree. For he first told it and probably invented it.

Mason Locks Weems was born on October 11, 1759 at "Marshes Seat" near Herring Bay on the South River in Anne Arundel County, Maryland. He was the youngest of nineteen children of David Weems by his second wife, Ester Hill. So he had no lack of company at home, though his oldest brothers and sisters must have seemed more like uncles and aunts to him. Two of these older brothers were already sea-captains while Mason was still a small boy.

Mason probably learned his letters at home, perhaps with a tutor or with an older brother or sister. A little later his father sent him over to Chestertown to the Kent County School. (This school later grew into Washington College.) Mason probably ferried across the Chesapeake Bay from Annapolis to Rock Hall and from there walked the twelve or fourteen miles on to Chestertown. Here he studied Latin and Greek and French as well as accounts, mathematics and writing. It was probably during his summer vacations that he sailed on two long sea-voyages with his sea-captain elder brothers. He was only fourteen when he went to London to study medicine like his greatuncle. The boy, when not yet seventeen, was actually surgeon on a British man-of-war for a few months. When he learned of the beginning of the American Revolution, he came home to Maryland on the ship of one of his brothers.

Directly after the fighting in America stopped, Mason was back in England, studying this time to be an Epis-

copal, or as they still termed it even in the United States, an Anglican clergyman. But when he and a fellow-countryman were ready to be ordained, no English bishop could perform the ceremony without the prescribed oath of allegiance to the British Crown. As loyal citizens of the new republic, this they refused to do. In August 1784 this oath was abrogated for foreign service and the following month they were ordained to the priesthood by the Archbishop of Canterbury without the obnoxious oath. Thus these two were the first to be ordained for service in the United States after the separation of the colonies from the Mother Country.

Following his ordination, Mason Weems returned to Maryland. For the next eight years he was rector of All Hallows Church, not far from his boyhood home. But the church was poor and paid its rector irregularly and little at that. So he opened a school for girls and a little later began to sell books to eke out a livelihood. When he and the vestry at All Hallows disagreed, Parson Weems as he was now called, left the church and started on the road with a stock of "improving" books and his fiddle. His "fiddle-playing" was one thing to which the vestry objected.

For more than thirty years, Parson Weems, with his long black clerical coat flapping about his legs, his hair tied in a queue, his black hat with a writing quill stuck in its band, and his fiddle under his arm, traveled up and down the countryside from New York City to Savannah, Georgia. At first he walked from house to house and from town to town. Then as his book stock grew, he went on horseback, his saddlebags bulging with books. Later he bought a "Jersey waggon"¹ and fitted it up as the first "bookmobile."

...labor to ride or drive the roads in
...Weems' day. Even a main thoroughfare like the
Philadelphia-Baltimore road or the Potomac Path
through Virginia from Alexandria to Richmond and be-
yond was little more than a wide path cleared through
the fields, climbing steep hills and dropping suddenly
into ravines. In few places was there a bridge across
the stream in the bottom. The Parson's bookwagon
lurched over stones and roots and hardened ruts in the
dry sections. Crossing such a slough as the Chopawamsic
Swamp, it often sank in the mud to the hubs, unless
some corduroy—small logs thrown crossways of the
road—had been put down by an extra zealous Path
Master² who disliked getting stuck in the mud himself.

In time of flood, a creek like the Accotink Run
might spread through the bottomland so that a rider
would have "to wade near a mile through water up to
his saddle-bags" as the parson complained to the Virginia
legislature. He liked to "drive like Jehu"³ but under
such circumstances he was lucky to make three miles in
an hour.

One day in the Carolinas, the Parson's wagon was
mired fast in the swamp. He and his horse couldn't
budge it. They were off the main highway and far from
any house. Instead of giving up in despair, Parson Weems
got out his fiddle and began to play. He made the
woods ring with the music of hymns, songs, and dance
tunes. Finally the curiosity of two countrymen, riding
along the main road, was aroused by the music coming
from the depths of the forest. They rode up the side
road to see where it came from. With their help the
fiddler and his wagon were soon again on their way.

The parson would stop at an inn or at the Court
House steps or wherever he found a crowd of people.
He would tell a few stories, always pointing a moral
lesson, and perhaps give a ludicrous imitation of a
drunken man or a scolding wife, and then spread out
his books for the people to buy. He sold all kinds—
Bible, hymn books, sermons, histories, biographies,
children's books, poetry, novels and moral pamphlets.
In one year he sold 3,000 copies of a handsome and
expensive edition of the Bible.

Evenings Parson Weems would join the story-tellers
about the tavern fireplace or in the farmhouse kitchen.
When he heard a story he liked, he would pull out a
little notebook from his coat pocket, slip the quill from
his hatband and, dipping the quill into the little inkhorn
fastened to his coat lapel, would write down the tale
so he could put it in a book, or add it to the stories
he told. If people wanted to dance, he often fiddled for
them. One night when the fiddler for a travelling puppet-
show was too drunk to play, Parson Weems played for
the show from behind the scenes, then came forward
and preached a fiery sermon against drunkenness. On
Sundays he preached in a nearby church or in a ball-
room or even in a cottage kitchen. He had great affec-
tion for the poor and ignorant of all races. When
preaching in a private house, he would ask that the
servants and slaves be summoned to hear him too. His



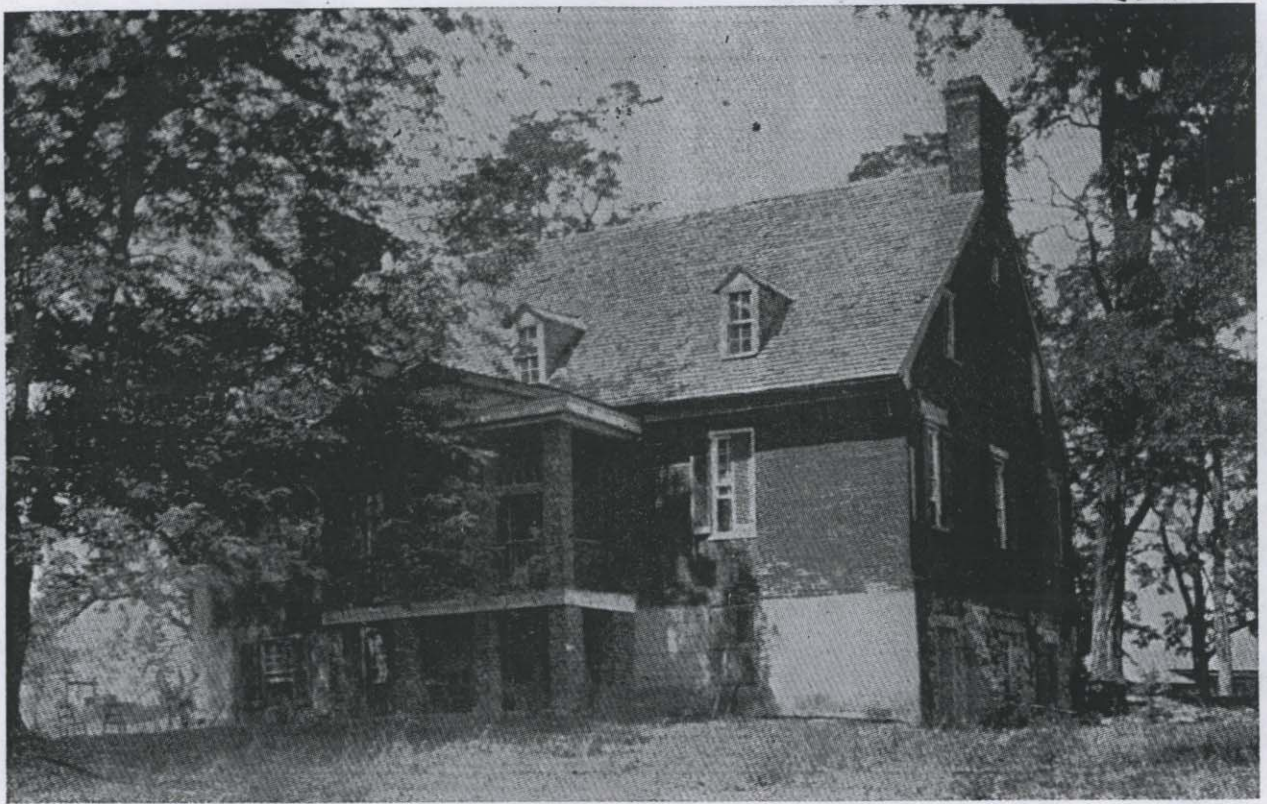
The Rev. Mason L. Weems, from an old print.

sermons were full of the evangelistic spirit.

After he had been selling books for a time, Parson
Weems began to write books himself. He believed strong-
ly in the power of good books to make people better and
happier. He felt that by turning bookseller and author
instead of rector he was just doing God's work in a
larger field. Now the whole country was his parish.

One of his popular small books was "The Drunkard's
Looking-Glass." This was illustrated with crude wood-
cuts to frighten the most wicked into repentance. If a
man were too poor to pay for a book the good book-
seller thought he needed, he would give it to him.
Parson Weems was one of the first Americans to write
books for children. These chapbooks would seem dull
and preachy to today's youngsters, but with the boys of
150 years ago they were as popular as the latest
science-fiction is with boys nowadays.

The book which gave the Parson not only popularity
in his own time but undying fame, was his *Life and
Memorable Activities of George Washington* which was
first published on February 22, 1800; less than two
months after Washington's death. This was the first life
of Washington to be published. The Parson had known
Washington, had corresponded with him a little. He
sometimes preached in Pohick Church which Washing-
ton attended, and he had once visited Mount Vernon.
Like most of his countrymen, he idolized The Father
of His Country. From the first, the book sold like
hotcakes and if anyone in those days had thought of
a "best seller" list, this would have made top rating
almost at once. Edition after edition was exhausted.
Everyone from the wealthy Philadelphia merchant to
the poor Carolina cotton-picker bought a copy of
Weems' *George Washington*. It was not till the fifth



Belle Air, The Virginia Residence of Mason Locke Weems.

edition which came out in 1806 that the now familiar story of the stone (not a silver dollar as sometimes given) thrown across the Rappahanock and of the hatchet and the cherry tree appeared. They immediately caught the popular fancy and have been repeated ever since, even though we now believe that the good parson made them up to flavor his book and set an example of virtue.

Finding the biography of Washington such a goldmine, its author then brought out other biographies of famous Americans. General Francis Marion, the Swamp Fox, was another of the parson's heroes. He named one of his sons Francis Marion Weems. His book on General Marion is filled with anecdotes and with the sound of muskets and the smell of battlesmoke. Writing biographies of Benjamin Franklin and William Penn gave him opportunity for broadcasting many good maxims. His books are early examples of fictionalized biography.

The parson had been riding up and down through Virginia on his book-selling trips for several years when he met and married Frances Elwell, a young woman living near Dumfries, Virginia, one of the towns on his route. She was a distant relative of George Washington on his mother's side. Before this, Parson Weems had been living at Billingsley-on-the-Patuxent, not far from Upper Marlboro, and travelling on foot or horseback.

After his marriage, he made his home in Dumfries so that Frances might be near her relatives while he was gone on his peddling trips. It was about this time too, that he bought his book-wagon.

He and his wife had ten children. It was a happy time in the house in Dumfries when the husband and father came home from one of his trips. What stories he would tell and what music he would play on his fiddle, or on the fine violin given him by a French refugee whom he had befriended. This violin was too precious to carry with him on his travels, so it was kept at home.

Parson Weems died in Beaufort, South Carolina, on June 25, 1825 on a book-peddling trip. His body was brought back to Bel Air, the fine brick home near Dumfries built by Frances' grandfather. Frances and he had owned it since the death of her father. He was buried in the family graveyard behind the house.

Next time you eat cherry pie or have hatchets and cherries for decoration on February 22, perhaps you will now remember not only the Father of His Country, but also give a thought to the kindly parson who first wrote the story.

Notes

- ¹ Jersey waggon—a four-wheeled surrey slung on leather straps.
- ² Path Master—highway commissioner of his day.
- ³ Drive like Jehu—drive furiously, like a hot-rod. See *Kings II 9-16*.