




2002

Introduction to Reverend Thomas Barton's Letter of November 8, 1756 and Forbes Expedition Journal of 1758

James P. Myers Jr.
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ach>

 Part of the [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Myers, James P. Jr. (2002) "Introduction to Reverend Thomas Barton's Letter of November 8, 1756 and Forbes Expedition Journal of 1758," *Adams County History*: Vol. 8 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ach/vol8/iss1/3>

This open access article is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Introduction to Reverend Thomas Barton's Letter of November 8, 1756 and Forbes Expedition Journal of 1758

Abstract

When western York county became Adams county in the year 1800, the area already possessed something of a recorded history reaching back into the late 1730s. Principally in the form of documents relating to administrative, legal, and land-claim issues, these official papers provide us today with valuable evidence of the county's early settlers—who came, when they arrived, where they settled, and occasionally how they got along, or did not get along, with one another and with the colonial Penn government, and later with that of the new state erected during the Revolution. In its earliest period, these documents offer insight into an ethnically and religiously diverse people, largely Scots-Irish, with lesser components of Anglo-Irish, English, and, later, Germans and Swiss. These settlers struggled to subdue a natural world they perceived as barbaric and even hostile. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Adams County Historical Society, ACHS, Adams County, Pennsylvania History, Thomas Barton, Forbes Expedition

The Reverend Thomas Barton's Letter of 8 November 1756 and Forbes Expedition Journal of 1758

by James P. Myers, Jr.

Introduction

When western York county became Adams county in the year 1800, the area already possessed something of a recorded history reaching back into the late 1730s. Principally in the form of documents relating to administrative, legal, and land-claim issues, these official papers provide us today with valuable evidence of the county's early settlers—who came, when they arrived, where they settled, and occasionally how they got along, or did not get along, with one another and with the colonial Penn government, and later with that of the new state erected during the Revolution. In its earliest period, these documents offer insight into an ethnically and religiously diverse people, largely Scots-Irish, with lesser components of Anglo-Irish, English, and, later, Germans and Swiss. These settlers struggled to subdue a natural world they perceived as barbaric and even hostile.

The territory newly opened in the late 1730s was situated between the west bank of the Susquehanna and the eastern edge of a wild, daunting system of mountains that towered like a series of parallel Chinese Walls westward to the Ohio River Valley. The settlers were also confronted with the ambiguous boundaries of a foreign power, that of the French North American Empire, New France. Further complicating this scenario of struggle, as we all know, were the efforts of various indigenous peoples--“Native Americans” or “Indians”—to survive both their own intertribal power struggles and the invasion of their territories by British and French traders, trappers, and land-hungry farmers.

Apart from the small number of official reports and other documents exchanged between local provincial administrators and their superiors in Philadelphia, little in the way of personal accounts of life during those earliest days of settlement has survived. Indeed, the harried people of the frontier rarely enjoyed the leisure, energy, or motivation to set down such accounts. Notwithstanding, minutes and transcripts of various religious groups, notably the

Presbyterians and Society of Friends (Quakers), supplement the official record, as does an occasional personal diary, like that of weaver John McCullough, who both recorded business transactions and listed those unfortunate individuals who had been abducted or killed by French-and-Indian raiding parties.¹ Another notable exception to the dearth of personal testimony may be found in the letters, books, and journal of a man who lived for four years (1755-9) within the bounds of today's Adams county along the banks of Mud Run in Reading township near what became Lake Mead

(refer to figure 1 for a survey of Barton's plantation.)

A missionary of the Church of England's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), the Reverend Thomas Barton was required to submit annual reports of his activities to his superiors in London. Beyond this, however—and fortunately for us—he was also something of a compulsive letter writer who not only regaled his colleagues and friends with insights into life in Pennsylvania's backcountry, but also, at one important juncture of his life, maintained a journal of one of the most momentous military events to occur in pre-Revolutionary Pennsylvania, the 1758 expedition of Brigadier-General John Forbes to seize from the French their principal staging point for attacks on the Virginia-Maryland-Pennsylvania frontier, Fort Duquesne.

Anglo-Irishman Thomas Barton arrived in the trans-Susquehanna backcountry at an unfortunate moment in history.² Within months of his taking up residence “over Susquehanna” and assuming ministerial duties, an army commanded by Major-General Edward Braddock, marching north along the Monogahela River to seize Fort Duquesne, was ambushed and routed by a combined force of French and Indians. The defeat of Braddock's force left the frontier at the mercy of the French and their Indian allies. From July 1755 until the Forbes campaign three years later, the Pennsylvania backcountry was ravaged by raiding parties which effectively destroyed all but the most fortified and heavily populated centers of British settlement, rolling the frontier virtually back to the county seats of York-town and Carlisle. Because of this upheaval, instead of performing his missionary work among the Indians and attending to the religious needs of his three congregations at St. John's Church in Carlisle, Christ Church in Huntington township, and St. John's in York, the optimistically eager young Anglican minister soon found himself helping erect fortifications in Carlisle, stiffening the resolve of his fearful congregations, even leading armed patrols against rumored raiding parties, for, like several of his Presbyterian colleagues, Barton assumed the rank of captain in the Associated Militia raised to defend the settlements.

Barton's long letter to the secretary of the SPG in London details his early vocational aspirations, the frustration of those hopes, and the stop-gap defensive measures he participated in during his first year of residence (May 1755-November 1756) in what was then termed the Bermudian or Conewago Creek settlement. As a record of life during that anxious time in this area, his 8 Novem-

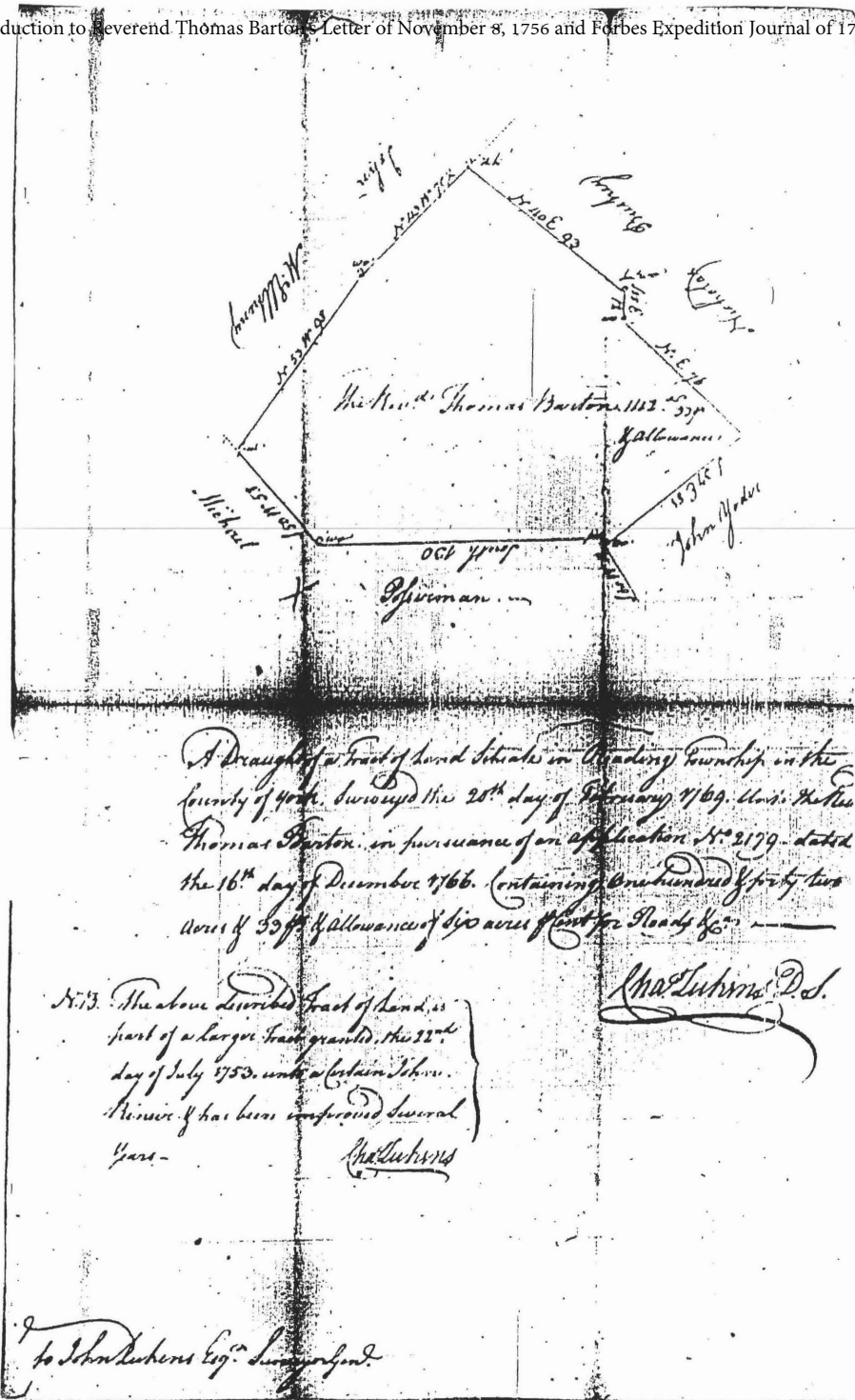


Figure 1. Surveyor's draft of Thomas Barton's "plantation" of 142 acres in Reading township, south of Mud Run.

ber 1756 letter has no parallel among the surviving documents of either Cumberland or York counties, and its full reprinting here for the first time appropriately helps commemorate Adams county as it enters into its third century: if nothing else, it reminds us that the history we take for granted might well have pursued a different, more disastrous course and that the bucolic landscape we also take for granted was once the stage where our predecessors enacted their most harrowing and purgatorial nightmares. It was a time when the bloodied tomahawk reigned and imminent death haunted the dark line of trees edging one's little fields of flax and wheat. *Memento mori*, "remember that you must die"—this was the maxim that preachers exhorted their congregations to meditate upon daily and that Thomas Barton incorporated into his own personal seal.

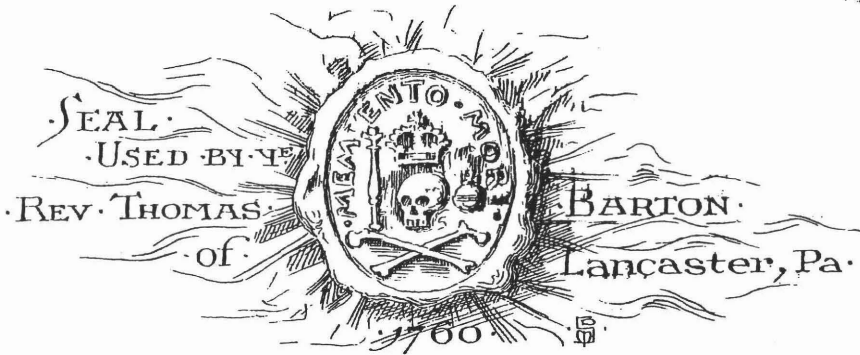


Figure 2. Thomas Barton's seal, with its emphasis on death. The traditional Latin motto *memento mori* may be translated as "remember death" or more loosely as "remember that you must die."

If Barton's 8 November letter to the SPG provides us with an unique witness to life in Adams county during the year following Braddock's defeat, his 1758 journal of the Forbes expedition also has no parallel. Indeed, one can read the collected letters of General John Forbes, Colonel Henry Bouquet, and Colonel George Washington, and one can examine as well the Forbes campaign documents and correspondence scattered throughout the Pennsylvania archives and elsewhere,³ but none will give as connected and revealing and succinct a narrative, even in its present incomplete form, as that preserved in the day-to-day account Reading township resident Thomas Barton recorded in his journal of that campaign, one of the principal events which helped turn the course of the French and Indian War around in Britain's favor.

The term *the French and Indian War* denotes the conflict that took place in North America between Great Britain and France during the years 1754-63.⁴ The war also involved substantial numbers of indigenous peoples or Native Americans. The French and Indian War was actually part of a far vaster, world-wide conflict known as the Seven Years' War (1756-63), a confrontation between Britain and France for imperial control in North America, India, Africa, the West Indies, and Europe itself. Its conclusion in 1763 left Great Britain the master of the North American continent. The victory, however, did not come easily.

From 1754 on, France, supported by several powerful Native American nations, scored a number of significant victories over the British regular and colonial forces, so that by 1758 the situation for the latter looked bleak, especially from the perspective of the settlers along the western and northern frontiers. In the Allegheny region of Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania (Cumberland and York counties), as well as in many of the latter province's northern counties, thousands of settlers were driven from their homes, killed, or taken captive. The audacious raids in April of 1758 into the Carroll Tract and Buchanan Valley, which resulted in several killings and the capture of Richard Baird and Mary Jamison, disclose how closely to home the French and their Delaware (Lenape) and Shawnee allies were able to carry the war.

In 1758 the British made a concerted effort to destroy the formidable staging points that had helped France achieve its great military advantage—Louisbourg in Nova Scotia, Fort Ticonderoga in the Adirondacks, Fort Frontenac on Lake Ontario, and Fort Duquesne on the Forks of the Ohio (site of today's Pittsburgh). In his journal, Barton duly noted General James Abercromby's disastrous failure at Ticonderoga, and the other resounding British triumphs at Louisbourg and Frontenac. The taking of Fort Duquesne was the business of Brigadier-General John Forbes's expedition, an undertaking that was in many ways one of the most arduous and heroic military actions of colonial history. Thomas Barton's journal preserves for us a vivid, though incomplete, record of that march through virgin forests and laurel jungles, and over the daunting Alleghenies by an army numbering some 6,000, not a few of whom, like Barton himself, had made their homes along Bermudian, Conewago, 'Possum, and Marsh Creeks.

Barton's journal also provides a running commentary on General Forbes's poor health, which further added to the expedition's difficulties. Throughout the campaign, Forbes was bed-ridden with several debilitating and ultimately mortal afflictions that often required his remaining far behind the main army and leaving his command in the capable hands of the Swiss-born Lieutenant-Colonel Henri Bouquet. Even when he felt well enough to move forward, Forbes had to be carried in a litter hung between two horses. In this way, the expedition's commander heroically inspired his troops on to ultimate victory. Forbes died 11 March 1759, three months after the fall of Fort Duquesne and was buried in Philadelphia's Christ Church.

Although he had enjoyed the rank of captain in the Associated Militia of York county, Barton accompanied the Forbes expedition in the office of chaplain. Typically, chaplains were attached to battalions, which were generally raised and organized locally. (The Third Battalion of the Pennsylvania Regiment, for example, was composed largely of men from York and Cumberland counties.) Thus, chaplains usually already knew the men in the unit to which they were assigned. When the Third Battalion was being enlarged, Barton had, at his request, been appointed chaplain to that unit. The largely Presbyterian enlistment in the Third Battalion, however, petitioned for a minister of their own denomination, and accordingly Andrew Bay of the Marsh Creek settlement was appointed to the position.⁵ Determined to accompany the expedition, Barton finally obtained a commission from General Forbes himself as a kind of Anglican chaplain-at-large to the entire army, the overall Church of England representation in Forbes's otherwise largely Presbyterian army being relatively small. As his journal suggests, even with responsibility for the welfare of the Anglican troops, Barton was relatively unencumbered with religious duties. This left him free to pursue other interests.

Like many learned men of the eighteenth century, Thomas Barton was something of a polymath. His eldest son, William, wrote that his father was a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, which would have guaranteed his obtaining a strong education in the classics.⁶ Before he took holy vows, he had tutored David Rittenhouse, who later became his brother-in-law and one of America's outstanding mathematicians and astronomers. Barton's correspondence also reveals his fascination with geography, mineralogy, astronomy, and new methods of manufacturing. It should come as no surprise, then, that he availed himself of numerous opportunities to investigate the frontier and speculate about and record in his journal particulars of those explorations—for example, the calcifying properties of Falling Springs at Chambersburg, coal deposits on the Allegheny Ridge, evidence that the Alleghenies had once been under sea, the extraordinary widespread defoliation south of Fort Bedford.

We find also in the journal, as we would expect, details of the campaign itself: movements of troops (including a few details of the activities of officers from Barton's area—Robert McPherson, Thomas Hamilton, Robert Latimore—and even occasionally members of his own congregations, namely, Archibald McGrew and Robert Callender, an important figure in Carlisle); encounters with hostile Indians, graphic descriptions and assessments of the various forts and depots supporting the expedition (including the only extant measurements of Benjamin Chambers's fortification at the settlement still bearing his name, Chambersburg); comments on morale; and bits of gossip relating to the varied personalities of the officers commanding the troops and their continuous conflict with one another. For some reason, he also occasionally incorporated into his diary smaller journals set down by those who had reconnoitered the territory through which the army had to move.

Barton's journal, a personal record of a participant in the Forbes expedition, is clearly beyond value, a unique witness to one of the most important events to occur within pre-Revolutionary Pennsylvania. It is therefore frustrating to the modern reader that, in its present form, the journal is unfinished, breaking off two months before the army, demoralized and marching at the edge of despair, garnered the unexpected news that the French, in even worse straits than itself, had blown up Fort Duquesne and retreated down the Ohio. William Hunter, the first to edit Barton's journal, convincingly argued that the only known extant manuscript of Barton's journal, now in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, bears evidence of being a later, revised draft of earlier notes.⁷ Why Barton never completed revising and transcribing we cannot determine. It may, however, be significant, that the journal ends neatly at the conclusion of a narrative Barton clearly found disturbing.

The digression upon which Barton expends an inordinate amount of space and effort details the execution of a deserter. Particulars in his account intimate that the deserter was singled out and brutally shot in such a way so as to intensify and prolong his death agonies because he was Roman Catholic: other, presumably non-Catholic, deserters tried and sentenced with John Doyle, were pardoned; the fully repentant Doyle begged his executioners to dispatch him in mercifully short order; they, however, deliberately shot him at close range in the abdomen, guarantee of a slow, painful death. In other writings, Barton is eloquent and fervent in his attacks on Catholics, but in the journal we cannot miss the great compassion he feels for John Doyle and his equally great disgust for the purposeful cruelty of the firing squad, "who advanc'd so near him that the Muzzels of their Guns were within a Foot of his Body. Upon a Signal from the Serjeant Major they fir'd, but shot so low that his Bowels fell out, his Shirt & Breeches were all on Fire, & he tumbled upon his Side, rais'd one Arm 2 or 3 Times, & soon expired. A shocking Spectacle to all around him; & a striking Example to his Fellow Soldiers." Indeed, and as I have argued elsewhere,⁸ the episode of John Doyle's execution appears to climax suggestions in the journal of Barton's evolving disillusionment with the un-Christian cruelty of Forbes's troops, regular and colonial alike.

At least one letter to proprietor Thomas Penn reveals that Barton continued on to the investing of Fort Duquesne.⁹ Moreover, another unsigned letter, written in a style unmistakably Barton's, celebrates the taking of Duquesne and Forbes's great victory.¹⁰ With the abrupt breaking off of the journal, though, we hear nothing from Barton until months later when he has taken up a new post as incumbent of St. James's church in Lancaster.¹¹ He probably completed the original diary, but, when revising it at some later time, appears, for any number of possible reasons, to have abandoned the effort altogether.

Over two hundred and fifty years after the founding of Adams county, we are fortunate to have Thomas Barton's 8 November 1756 letter and his Forbes expedition journal. We are fortunate not only because they open for us windows

into the quality and details of frontier life in this county during the 1750s, but also because they preserve for us in vividly personal ways how a man fairly typical of his neighbors--that is, of people who for the most part had migrated here from the north of Ireland--felt about and perceived life in the Pennsylvania backcountry. The two documents presented here thus set before us images both of the expectancy and hope and of the violence, fear, anxiety, and conflict that in effect describe the lives of the people who laid the foundations for what became Adams county.

Textual Note

William A. Hunter notes that Barton's manuscript journal, preserved by descendants from his first son, William, was purchased by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania at an auction in 1970. Hunter transcribed and annotated the manuscript for publication in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (4 [1971], 431-83). With permission of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, I have used Hunter's reprint for my copy text, comparing it closely with the original manuscript at HSP.

Silently, Hunter modernized the original's punctuation, substituting periods for Barton's dashes or simply deleting them altogether. As Barton's numerous manuscript letters demonstrate, he consistently employed the dash or the period with the dash to end a sentence; he also frequently used dashes where we normally employ commas to set off clauses and phrases. Barton's practice is not unique in eighteenth-century writing: Laurence Sterne, for example, similarly employs the dash throughout his novels *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*, as well as in his personal correspondence. Used consistently throughout a long piece of writing, the dash suggests spontaneity, abruptness in transition, even perhaps haste, although the present manuscript, as Hunter has convincingly argued, represents a draft written somewhat later and more carefully than the presumed original which was set down during the expedition. To reproduce Barton's style accurately, I have restored Barton's original punctuation and capitalization to Hunter's reprint, which I used as copy-text, again with kind permission of *PMHB*.

Hunter's reprint contains several misreadings of the manuscript text. In a few other instances, Hunter inadvertently dropped words and lines. Without comment on Hunter's omissions and errors, I have silently supplied the correct readings.

Hunter's notes are plentiful and thorough. They offer the reader informative explanation and clearly identify Barton's numerous allusions and references to soldiers involved in the expedition. With permission of *PMHB*, I have retained Hunter's footnotes in their entirety. Only occasionally do I correct an error or oversight (for example, note 6 identified Barton's residence as Huntington township, site of Christ Church's glebe-land. As Barton makes clear

Myers: Introduction to Reverend Thomas Barton's Letter of November 8, 1756 and Forbes Expedition Journal of 1758 in various letters, however, he resided in Reading township, a fact confirmed by the survey in the Adams County Historical Society archives and by William Barton in his biography of his uncle, David Rittenhouse).¹²

Notes

1. A copy of John McCullough's diary is in the collections of the Adams County Historical Society (ACHS).

2. For early background on Thomas Barton, see William Barton, *Memoirs of the Life of David Rittenhouse* (Philadelphia, 1813), *passim*; William A. Hunter, "Thomas Barton and the Forbes Expedition," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 95 (1971), 431-39; James P. Myers, Jr., "The Reverend Thomas Barton's Conflict with Colonel John Armstrong, ca. 1758," *Cumberland County History*, 10 (1993), 3-14, and "Preparations for the Forbes Expedition, 1758, in Adams County, with Particular Focus on the Reverend Thomas Barton," *Adams County History*, 1 (1995), 4-26; and A. H. Young, "Thomas Barton: a Pennsylvania Loyalist" *Papers and Records* [Ontario Historical Society], 30 (1943), 33-42.

3. For three principal primary sources relating to the Forbes expedition, see Henry Bouquet, *The Papers of Henry Bouquet, 2: The Forbes Expedition*, ed. S. K. Stevens, Donald H. Kent, and Autumn L. Leonard (Harrisburg, 1951); John Forbes, *The Writings of General John Forbes, Relating to His Service in North America* (Menasha, Wisconsin, 1938); and George Washington, *The Papers of George Washington, Colonial Series*, vol. 6 (Charlottesville, Va., 1988).

4. Seymour Schwartz, *The French and Indian War, 1754-1763: the Imperial Struggle for North America* (New York, 1994) offers a brief, recent, well-presented account of the conflict.

5. For an account of the controversy concerning the chaplaincy of the Third Battalion, see Myers, "Barton's Conflict with Armstrong," pp. 6-9.

6. William Barton, *Memoirs of the Life of David Rittenhouse* (Philadelphia, 1813), p. 102.

7. Hunter, p. 437.

8. See Myers, "Barton's Conflict with Armstrong," pp. 11-12.

9. For a discussion of the evidence for Barton's remaining with the Forbes expedition, see Myers, "Preparations for the Forbes Expedition," pp. 20-1.

10. Reprinted in Myers, "Preparations for the Forbes Expedition," pp. 21-3.

11. William Frederick Worner, "Thomas Barton's Family Prayer Book," *Papers Read to the Lancaster Historical Society*, 35 (1931), n. 6, p. 269: "on the cover of an old book, now in possession of Mr. George Reynolds, is the following, written by Mr. [Thomas] Barton: 'Arriv'd & settled at Lancaster May 15th, 1759, but first preach'd there as Minister of the Place, on Easter-Day, the 15th of April 1759.'"

12. William Barton, *Rittenhouse*, p. 111.