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A table of contents for *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* can be found here:

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Some Memorials of the Mercer Family.

By SIR WILLIAM J. COLLINS, K.C.V.O., M.S., M.D., B.Sc.

TRADITION asserts that the Mercers came from Normandy with the Conqueror; theirs was certainly a very ancient family in Sussex and for generations it has been fondly held that land in that county was allotted to Norman progenitors by William after the Battle of Hastings.¹ In Edward III's reign a Thomas Mercer was Member of Parliament for Arundel.² Between 1541 and 1549 the will of George Mercer was proved at Rye.³ Mercers appear in the registers at Wivelsfield from 1626 and continuously for two and a half centuries subsequently.⁴ One branch of the family appears to have settled in Scotland; a Mercer described as "a Scottishe Merchant" traded with France in 1389.⁵ Several Scottish Mercers, William of Aberdeen (1605-1675),

¹ See papers printed by the late Arthur Hall (1897), author of "Three generations of a Godly House" (1896), and asserted to me by the late Miss Adelaide Mercer (d. 1917), the last of the Ditchling family, in 1910.

² *Sussex Archæological Collection*, Vol. xxx., p. 185.

³ *Ibid.*, Vol. xxxii., p. 131.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. xxxv., pp. 47-49.

⁵ MS. in Miss Flint's (of Sedlescomb) collection containing extracts from the Prerogative office of Canterbury by Charles Blunt of Cross-in-hand, Hurst Green, Oct. 17, 1853.

Hugh of Aberdeen (1726-1777), James of Perthshire (1734-1804), and Andrew of Selkirk (1775-1842) are noticed in the National Dictionary of Biography. I have notes of a John Mercer of Hawkhurst, Kent, who died in 1626-7 and had three sons, John, Thomas and William, and a daughter who married Lawrence Dawe of Burwash, Sussex; also of Thomas Mercer, Yeoman of Penhurst, living in 1648, who had a son John; also of William Mercer of Hastings living 1640, of William and Thomas Mercer of Fairlight, living *circâ* 1640-50, and Thomas Mercer, Yeoman of Dallington, living 1703. The Records of the Prerogative Office of Canterbury contain numerous references to Mercers between 1689 and 1717, notably to Christopher Mercer of St. Paul's Shadwell (d. 1689), William Mercer of Westminster and of H.M.S. "Dragon" (d. 1692), Daniel Mercer a wealthy merchant of London, buried at St. Christopher's, whose will was proved May 12, 1692 bequeathing large legacies and lands in Ireland, and Lieut. James Mercer who served under General Wade and died 1715.⁶

The Kent and Sussex groups of the family were to be found in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries scattered between Maidstone on the East and Lewes and the valley of the Ouse on the West with *foci* at Cranbrook, Sedlescomb, Ditchling, and Wivelsfield. In the seventeenth century many of the Mercers, probably under the influence of Matthew Caffyn, "the Battle-axe of Sussex," became associated with the General Baptist movement and ardent supporters of that liberal form of dissent from the Anglican Church. On January 15, 1691, a certificate was made in the Barcombe district (near Lewes) for "a meeting for

⁶ See Some memorials of the Dendy Family, by the author, in Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society, Vol. v., p. 129.

Anabaptists held at the house of Thankful Hunt in Ticehurst and John Mercer.⁷

For eighteenth century information of the Mercer family I am chiefly indebted to a collection of papers in the possession of Miss Flint of Sedlescomb, great grand-daughter, through both her father and mother, of Joseph Mercer (1746-1834) of Hole Farm near Sedlescomb, and of Mary Cook (1763-1788).

The arms borne by Robert Mercer (1785-1849), of Lewes and Southwark, who married Sarah Hathaway the eldest daughter of John Treacher of Stamford Hill were:—"Per pale argent and sable, three grey-hounds courant, counter-charged; on a chief gules, three leopards' faces: crest a greyhound, in full course argent. Motto: '*Ubi Libertas ibi Patria.*'"

Such pedigree of the Kent and Sussex Mercers as I have been able to construct, from the fragmentary sources that have come to my hand, commences with Robert Mercer, born in 1625 and buried at Willingdon Church, near Eastbourne in 1717. The parish register contains the entry, "Robert Mercer a very ancient man was burried January 17th 1717." He is described as of Tunbridge Wells, Wateringbury and Offham. He married Elizabeth Beach of Beddingham, near Lewes, and had three children, 1 Joseph, 2 John, 3 Elizabeth. The two latter may be briefly dismissed. Elizabeth (1659-1710) married Robert Killie, died without issue and was buried in Southover churchyard, by Lewes. John Mercer (1662-1704) married 1 Elizabeth Benge, 2 Elizabeth Beach widow of — Messenger, and had five

⁷ Sussex Archæological Collections, Vol. xxx., p. 60. (I found a similar certificate of an Anabaptist assembly, given by the archdeaconry of Lewes in June 1716 for the house of Henry Wood at Ditchling "at the request of Nathaniel Webb the Preacher," among Miss Flint's collection.)

children, 1 John, 2 Mary, 3 Henry, 4 Elizabeth, 5 Joseph. He was buried at Brighthelmstone.

Joseph Mercer the eldest son of Robert (1658-1736) acquired farm lands in Kent near Maidstone, and in Sussex at Keymer and at Sedlescomb. He married Susannah Allison of Cuckfield who died of small-pox in 1713 and was buried in a railed grave on the S. side of Sedlescomb Church, near Battle. They had four children, 1 Robert Mercer (1687-1740), 2 Susannah (1692-1722) who married John Brooke of Northiam and had issue; 3 Elizabeth (b. 1697) married William Browning of Canterbury and had issue; 4 Thomas Mercer (1703-1744) a distiller in Maidstone and Southwark who married Sarah Bedwell (1703-1752) of Maidstone and had one child, Susannah, who married 1 Mr. Dowding an Attorney of London, 2 Mr. Chapman a stationer of King Street, Cheapside.

Robert Mercer (1687-1740), the eldest child of Joseph, married Mary Miller (1692-1771) of Hellingly. He farmed lands at Isfield and Sedlescomb, and was buried at Hellingly.⁸ They had two sons and two daughters who survived infancy, 1 Joseph, 2 Thomas, 3 Mary, and 4 Susannah. Mary, born in 1718, married William Marten of Telscomb. Susannah (1720-1746), like her brother Thomas, married into the Tempest family who were Seventh-day Baptists of Cranbrook; her husband was George Tempest (d. 1797); both were buried at Bodiam. A sister of Mr. George Tempest,

⁸ On April 11, 1919, I visited Hellingly churchyard and discovered the grave where so many of the Mercer family were buried. It is a fine old carved stone sarcophagus, but the lettering is in places barely decipherable. Here lie buried Robert Mercer (1687-1740) and his wife Mary, daughter of Mr. Henry Miller, and their sons Joseph, Robert, Henry, and Thomas, also the wife of the last named, the surgeon of Lewes, and William Tempest Mercer his son, and others. The next adjacent tomb is that of the Millers.

Penelope, married a Mr. Whittaker of Manchester Square, London, and Tunbridge Wells, and through him was connected with the Romilly, Rous, and Hamlyn families. Robert Mercer represented Warbleton at the General Baptist Assembly at Chichester in 1721. Also in 1724 at Horsham with Matthew Caffyn of the Horsham community and Robert Chatfield from Ditchling. In 1728 Brother Robert Mercer and Brother Bengue were appointed to preach the sermon in 1729. Robert Mercer's name appears as Messenger at the Assembly at White's Alley in 1732, 1733 and 1734, representing Warbleton. In 1735 he was chairman of the Assembly at Glasshouse Yard. He again represented Warbleton as Messenger in 1736, 1737 and 1739, the year prior to his death. A Thomas Mercer represented Warbleton at the Assembly in 1714.⁹

The two sons of Robert Mercer, viz. Joseph (1711-1747) and Thomas (1716-1779), were also strongly identified with the General Baptist community in Sussex during the eighteenth century, and both married wives of the same faith. Thus Joseph of Isfield married at Street, near Ditchling, Mary, the daughter and heiress of Richard and Martha Webb of "Fanners," Wivelsfield. Sarah Webb, sister and co-heiress with Mary Webb married Israel Paine of Brighton (1669-1757). Thomas, who practised as a surgeon at Lewes, married Bridget Tempest (b. 1719), daughter of Major Tempest, F.R.S. and J.P., who was a General Baptist preacher. He owned lands in Ewhurst and at Cranbrook. Dr. Thomas Mercer represented Dover at the General Baptist Assembly in 1743 and Ditchling in 1744. In 1743 Dr. Mercer and John Sayer conveyed land at Southover, by Lewes, to Joseph Mercer (his brother) of Isfield, Michael Marten of Ditchling, Stephen Agate of Ditchling,

John Caffin of Clayton, Benjamin Webb of Patcham and others for the purposes of a General Baptist Meeting House.⁹ Dr. Mercer was the author of an essay entitled "The Doctrine of Believers' Baptism asserted and vindicated in a short and plain discourse, 1738," which was printed in the Baptist Historical Society's *Transactions* for January, 1919.

Dr. Thomas Mercer (1716-1779) and Bridget Tempest had three children who survived infancy: 1 Thomas Mercer (b. 1750) apothecary of Lewes and afterwards of Wallingford, who married Elizabeth, daughter of Mr. Dunner of St. Botoph's, Aldersgate, Citizen of London; 2 William Tempest Mercer (1752-1786), Surgeon of Lewes, who married Elizabeth, daughter of Michael Chatfield of Court Gardens, Ditchling; 3 Susannah (b. 1755) married Thomas Babington of Chatham. Dr. Tempest Mercer of Lewes who died early, aged 34, and was buried at Hellingly, had by his wife, Elizabeth Chatfield, one daughter and three sons.

The Chatfield family from whom Mrs. Tempest Mercer came were like her husband's, one of very ancient settlement in Sussex, and also prominent in the General Baptist community. There were Chatfields (or Cattesfeldes) in West Meaton (near Ditchling) assessed to poll tax in 1378. Later they are described as of "Bedyles" or Ditchling manor and of Street. Robert Chatfield of Street who died in 1736 founded the General Baptist meeting house at Ditchling. The Chatfields are connected with the Motts, Clarkes, Nettlefolds, and Chamberlains.

The youngest son of Dr. Tempest Mercer, Robert Mercer (1785-1849) also married into a well known

⁹ Minutes of the General Assembly of the General Baptists. Edited by Dr. Whitley. Vol. ii., Minutes of the years 1724, 1731-39.

General Baptist family, his wife being Sarah Hathaway Treacher, daughter of John Treacher (1755-1838) of Stamford Hill and grand-daughter of the Rev. Benjamin Treacher (1722-1766) minister of Glass House Yard and Fair Street, Horsleydown, and Sarah Dendy his wife. (See *Baptist Historical Transactions*, Vol. II., No. 4.)

With the numerous progeny of Dr. Tempest Mercer and Sarah Hathaway Treacher we reach contemporary history. Suffice it to say that their eldest son, John Mercer (1816-1897), left England for America in 1833 and after adventurous times during the Mackenzie rising settled at Chatham, Ontario, where he became sheriff and was highly respected. He married Bethia Sarah Morrison of Norwood, sister of Rev. Alexander J. W. Morrison, M.A. One of their daughters married Mr. McWhinney of Toronto.

Reverting to the family and descendents of Joseph Mercer (1711-1747) of Isfield and Mary Webb, who mostly remained in Sussex and maintained their faith in and around Lewes, at Ditchling and at Sedlescomb, it may be said that one only of their children, Joseph Mercer (1746-1834) married, and had issue. He lived at Hole Farm, Westfield, near Sedlescomb and Battle. This was one of several estates in the neighbourhood which were long in the Mercer family. Others were Jacobs near Sedlescomb, which was held by Mercers for 200 years, Brickwall, The Stream and Oaklands, and another at Brede. Joseph Mercer married Mary Cook (1763-1788), she being then fifteen and they had three sons and two daughters: 1 Robert (1780-1861) of Jacobs, 2 Joseph (1787-1883) who married Lydia Cruttenden; 3 Richard (1788-1868), (one of whose daughters, Adelaide, died lately at Ditchling, the last of that name in that picturesque Sussex village with its quaint Anabaptist meeting house and burial

ground). The two daughters were: 1 Mary who married Mr. James Flint of Kingston,¹⁰ near Lewes, and 2 Sarah who married Mr. Thomas Johnstone. Joseph Mercer who lived to eighty-seven and owned land at Hurstpierpoint, Clayton and Wivelsfield as well as at Sedlescomb, and his young wife, Mary Cook, who died at twenty-five lie buried in the sarcophagus shaded by chestnut trees guarding the entrance to the parish church which crowns the hill at whose foot Sedlescomb nestles round its village green. Here also lie buried Robert Mercer (1780-1861), and his wife Anne (1783-1856), Joseph Mercer (1788-1883), also Jane Catt (d. 1856) who appears to have been connected with the Mercers, an interesting link with another old Sussex family. Robert Mercer (1743-1802) of Southover, the unmarried brother of Joseph Mercer (1746-1834), also lies buried here; his name appears in a deed preserved at the Westgate Chapel at Lewes dated 1778, when he was appointed one of the new trustees for the Southover meeting house along with Dr. Tempest Mercer (1752-1786), John Chatfield, Peter Marten of West Dean, William Marten of West Firle and others.¹¹ In 1823 Chatfield was the only survivor and among the new trustees then appointed was Samuel Flint of Lewes. Two years later the Eastport Lane meeting house was merged with the West Gate Chapel.

The Mercer family in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries afforded typical examples of the General Baptists of those days. They and their connections linked up the anti-Calvinist dissenters

¹⁰ At the little village of Kingston there was formerly a General Baptist Chapel and burial ground, now a barn and yard, opposite the Manor House.

¹¹ Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society, Vol. i., part 2, May 1918, "The deeds of the Westgate Chapel, Lewes," pp. 188-9.

of Kent and Sussex as the Dendy-Treacher Connection linked up those of the Buckinghamshire group with the Sussex group. Dr. Whitley has traced the General Baptists of the Thames Valley to the Lollards and Wycliffism as a source, while the S.E. of England group had affinity and associations with the liberal Mennonites of the Low Countries. Kent with some fifty separate communities in the seventeenth century, of which some eight or nine continue to this day (such as Bessels Green, Cranbrook,¹² Chatham, Headcorn, Deal, and Dover), was even more impregnated with this "dissidence of dissent" than Sussex. The latter county claimed some twenty-five communities in the seventeenth century of which only six now remain (viz., Horsham, Lewes, Northiam, Ditchling, Billinghurst and Chichester), some of them leading a rather precarious existence.¹³ The Annual General Assembly of the General Baptists formed a rallying ground for the families of the faithful who largely intermarried. They thus kept alive their simple Biblical Christianity and were enabled to compare experiences under persecution and ostracism, until toleration and freedom were achieved. No one can turn over the family records of these "tender folk," whom obloquy and opposition could not daunt or dismay without increasing one's regard for those who, in dark and difficult days, were content "to walk by faith and not the letter's sight and read their Bible by the inward light."

¹² I visited the quaint little wooden General Baptist Chapel at Cranbrook, on October 13, 1919. It stands by the smithy, where the road branches off to Canterbury. I was informed that service was only held there once in six weeks, and attended by a few elderly persons.

¹³ Minutes of General Assembly of the General Baptists, Vol. i., pp. lix.-lx. and lxx.-lxvi