

# 150 YEARS OF JOSEPH PRIESTLEY

By Margaret Weirick



When you begin to read about the life and accomplishments of Joseph Priestley, and you come across references to the Priestley House, the Priestley Chapel, and the Priestley-Forsyth Memorial Library, it may seem that Joseph Priestley lived for about 150 years. A closer examination of events reveals that there were actually 5 Joseph Priestleys in that span of time, four of whom made direct contribution to our area.

**THE Joseph Priestley** was born in an English village near Leeds in 1733. This Joseph Priestley was set apart from his contemporaries from birth since he was born into a family of Dissenters whose religious views were antithetical to the Church of England. Their position meant that Joseph was barred from attending university, and was excluded from military and civil appointments. Priestley's religious studies led him to deny the existence of the Holy Spirit, to reject the Virgin Birth, and to denounce the notion of

the Trinity. Instead, he believed in only one God, and espoused Unitarianism, as opposed to Trinitarianism. Priestley spoke very openly about his convictions, and his unpopularity grew. On Bastille Day, 1791, a Birmingham mob burned his New Meeting Church, his house, his laboratory, and all his manuscripts. He and his wife escaped to the home of their daughter. Joseph and Mary later moved to London and left for America in 1794.

In 1793, Priestley's son, **Joseph Priestley, Jr.**, had traveled to Philadelphia with his wife, Elizabeth Ryland, and their infant son, Joseph Rayner Priestley. Joseph Priestley, Jr., was involved in an effort to procure land and establish a settlement outside of Northumberland for English immigrants. His efforts were unsuccessful, and he ended up buying property in town. In 1794, virtually penniless at the age of 61, Joseph with his wife, Mary joined their son in Northumberland. The Priestley house was completed in 1798 and became the home of Joseph Sr., 65; Joseph Jr., 30; and Joseph Rayner, 5. Joseph Priestley, Sr., died there in 1804.

Joseph Jr., and his son lived at the Priestley House until 1812. During this time, Joseph Jr. was active in developing Northumberland. He was a Commissioner for the Northumberland Bridge Company, which sought funds for a Susquehanna River bridge. He was appointed to the County Court of Quarter Sessions to consider building some planned streets in Northumberland. He helped develop a turnpike from Sunbury to Reading, and he was a member of the Northumberland Fire Department.

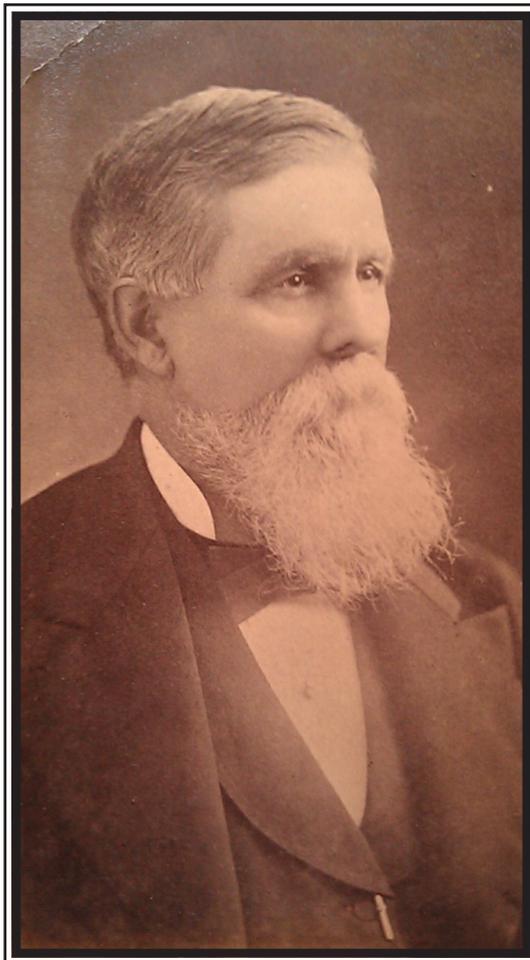
In 1812 Joseph Jr. and his son moved back to England. The Priestley House was sold to Seth Chapman in 1815. Joseph Priestley, Jr., died in England in 1833.

In 1816, **Joseph Raynor Priestley**, age 18, returned to Pennsylvania, and in 1817 married Frances Biddle of Reading. They moved back to Northumberland in 1819 where their son, Joseph Priestley was born. (Since in 1844 their son received his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania, he is known as Joseph Priestley MD, to differentiate him from the other Joseph Priestleys.)

In 1821, Joseph Rayner and family were part of a Unitarian congregation formed by Reverend James Kay. In 1834, John and Hannah Taggart gave land for the construction of the Priestley Memorial Chapel. A building was erected on Front Street in Northumberland in the style of a typical English country church. The building still stands today as Northumberland's oldest house of worship.

In 1847 **Joseph Priestley MD**, age 28, married Hannah Taggart, and in 1849, **Joseph Rayner Priestley**, named for his grandfather, was born. Unfortunately, he lived on two years and died in 1851. Joseph Rayner Priestley died in 1863.

In 1874 Joseph Priestley MD was named Chairman of the Northumberland Committee of 34 leading citizens whose job it was to welcome chemists visiting Northumberland to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the discovery of oxygen. During the first day's session, the group decided to form a national chemistry society. The National Chemical Society was established in 1876.



Joseph Priestley MD died in 1883 in the home he had purchased in Northumberland. Formerly the Cross Keys Inn, located at 100 King Street, the building was remodeled to become the Priestley family residence and Joseph Priestley MD's office.

In addition to his son Joseph, Joseph Priestley MD had 4 daughters: Hannah, Frances, Sarah Anne (known as Annie), and Jean.

His daughters Annie and Jean never married and lived in the house till Annie's death in 1922. After Annie's death, her sister Frances Priestley Forsyth and Frances' sister-in-law, Mary Forsyth Herr, endowed a town library in memory of their families. In 1926, Frances donated the house to become the new home of the Priestley-Forsyth Memorial Library, which is still in existence today as the Northumberland town library.

Since Joseph Priestley MD's son Joseph Rayner died in 1851 at 2 years of age, the direct line of Priestley descendants came to an end with the death of Joseph Priestley MD: 1733-1883 - 150 years of Joseph Priestleys!

*Article by Margaret Weirick with two images:*

*Silhouette of Joseph Priestley Jr. (1768-1833), (from Priestleyana by Edward Fahs Smith, [Philadelphia, 1923])*

*Photo of Dr. Joseph Priestley (1818-1883) (4<sup>th</sup> generation), courtesy Archives, Priestley Forsyth Library, Northumberland, PA*