

## SARAH RIGHTER MAJOR August 29, 1808-September 18, 1884

Miller, D. L. and Royer, Galen B., Some Who Led, "Sarah Righter Major.", Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1912, 70-72.

Born near Philadelphia, Pa. Daughter of John Righter, a minister of the Church of the Brethren. She had one sister. Sarah received a fair common school education.

When eighteen she was permitted to hear Harriet Livermore, a lady whose ministry attracted considerable attention and who was permitted to preach in some of the Brethren's houses in eastern Pennsylvania. Conviction entered her heart and she at one joined the Church of the Brethren in Philadelphia. Almost simultaneously with conversion came the call in her heart to preach. She suppressed it for a time and suffered great distress of mind, so much so that her father in a tender manner persuaded her to open her heart to him. He sympathized with her, spoke words of comfort to her and then advised with Brother Peter Keyser, who at the time was the leading minister of the congregation in Philadelphia. Brother Keyser spoke words of helpfulness, enabling her by the grace of God to overcome her fears, and begin the work of witnessing. Of course there were those who did not understand her call, spoke unkindly of her desires and discouraged her. But her strong convictions of the inward call, and the grace of her Lord enabled her to overcome, and in a very humble manner she began her public ministry in Philadelphia.

About this time Brother Israel Paulson, of the Amwell congregation in New Jersey, hearing of her experience, and in deep sympathy with her purpose, invited her to visit his congregation, and for them she spoke to great edification. Her field of service grew rapidly, and even those prejudiced against hearing a woman preach, who could be induced to go and listen to her, went away disarmed of all their prejudice. It is said that at one of the conferences the question was raised as to whether she should be allowed to preach; but after hearing her the Brethren would not say her nay. All these trials she had considered beforehand. Like Paul, she had her Arabian experience where she counted the cost, was assured of the lord, and then sought to do his will. Wherever she spoke she was urged to return and labor again among them. Though in a formal way never commissioned to preach, by common consent, and in recognition of the power and spirit of her message none forbade her.

She had good taste, good judgment and fine feelings. Often the spirit of her discourse would lead her into eloquence, and her appeals usually had great effect upon her own sex. Deeply spiritual, manifestly humble, and with no sign of ostentation, her manner and gesture in the pulpit always became her.

In 1842, when thirty-four years old, she was married to Brother Thomas Major, a minister of the Brethren. The following year they sold their home, near Philadelphia, and moved to Highland County, Ohio, where they lived till the close of life. They reared three children and were prospered in earthly things, for though both preached the Gospel they also gave proper attention to the affairs of life.

With due regard for Paul's teachings concerning married women, Sister Major felt there was still a place for her to labor. Her husband accompanied her when she went to hold meetings and assisted her all he could. When entering a place of worship she would not take her place behind the stand, but wait for her husband to invite her. Often he went into the pulpit, opened the meeting, made a few remarks and then asked her to address the meeting. On one occasion they toured through Indiana, and among other places stopped in the Solomon's Creek congregation. Brother J. H. Warstler thus recounts the event:

"When she and her husband entered the church she took a seat in front of the pulpit, while Brethren Shively and Major (her husband) went into the pulpit. After some little talk and arrangements on the part of the minister, Brother Major invited her and she took her seat at his right side. In dress she was neat and plain,-a very plain bonnet which she soon laid aside,- and a shawl over her shoulders. Her face showed marks of age and care and labor. She was the picture of meekness and humility completely subject to the will of her husband. After the opening exercises she was invited to preach. She arose, slowly announced one of the old texts, and from it brought forth new truths that delighted my heart. The sermon was a masterpiece."

She sympathized with the poor and wretched in every walk of life. Jails, infirmaries and like places received of her tireless ministry. The colored people were helped when she could reach them. In

her later years she became much interested in temperance work. But her greatest force was in her private example and home work. She delighted to enter the home of a stranger or friend, and in a simple, unassuming manner break unto them the Bread of Life. Wherever she went everyone rejoiced in her visitation.

Her husband survived her four years, and both sleep in the cemetery at Greenfield, Ohio.

---

In the late 19th century, Brethren Encyclopedia says, many districts permitted qualified women to become ministers. LAURA GROSSNICKLE (HEDRICK) was ordained in 1891.

Other names of female pastors include MARY WAGEMAN BAUMAN, MARY HOOVER, MARGARET HOOVER, ETTA TOMBAUGH, ETTA WARVEL BOWMAN, MARY PENCE, NORA BRACKEN DAVIS, CLARA MYERS FLORA..... Even after the practice of ordaining women ministers was discontinued during the 1920s and '30s, women still preached and evangelized, according to BE, which mentions MATTIE LEAR, CATHERINE BEERY VAN DYKE, BERTHA MILLER NEHER, MATTIE CUNNINGHAM DOLBY. Women missionaries: ELIZABETH HOWE (BRUBAKER) & ALICE BOONE, VIANNA DETWILER, GRACE SRACK, ADA L. GARBER DRUSHAL, ALICE HARLEY. Home missionaries: BERTHA RYAN SHIRK, MARY QUINTER, GERTRUDE ROWLAND EMMERT, MARY L. EMMERT, CHARLOTTE HILLEGAS JOBSON

---

The wife of Jakob Schneider was listed as an elder in the congregation at Schwarzenau, according to Brethren Encyclopedia p 1360. But participation in the church on the same level as men wasn't always followed. Until 1849 women were not permitted to break bread at communion for themselves, "rather, the presiding elder broke bread for the women," who probably baked it without help from the men. "This practice was first questioned at the 1849 Annual Meeting. JULIA A. GILBERT is credited with bringing about this change."