

## Sisters in Mission: Frances Davidson and Mary Davidson Yoder

By Lucille Marr\*

Fall was in the air that October day of 1897. Mary Davidson Yoder hurried across Wooster, Ohio's busy downtown square to the County Courthouse. Her younger sister Frances Davidson walked quickly beside her. Their mission was to acquire a passport for Frances, who planned to leave the United States for South Africa in just a few weeks. The noise and bustle of the city, with the clatter of carriages and drays, the sounds of horses whinnying and their drivers "giddy-ups," traces of straw and manure steaming in their wake, with the occasional horse-less carriage weaving its way among the slower-paced vehicles, was an integral part of the fabric of Mary's life.<sup>1</sup>

As proprietor of the well-established Hotel Yoder, standing proudly on the opposite corner of the square, with its reputation as "the Oldest Reliable Hotel in the city," Mary would have been a familiar figure in downtown Wooster.<sup>2</sup> An upstanding member of the Methodist Episcopal church, just around the corner, she would have dressed in the tailored clothing fitting the image of a professional woman of the era, at the same time remaining

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<sup>1</sup> "Know Ohio: Our History in the Automotive Industry," Ideastream Public Media, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://www.ideastream.org/programs/newsdepth/know-ohio-our-history-in-the-automotive-industry>.

<sup>2</sup> Caldwell's Atlas (1897), Wooster, Ohio, accessed May 27, 2020, [https://wiki.wcpl.info/w/index.php?title=Caldwell%27s\\_Atlas\\_\(1897\)/Wooster,\\_Ohio](https://wiki.wcpl.info/w/index.php?title=Caldwell%27s_Atlas_(1897)/Wooster,_Ohio). See also "Our Dead, Christian B. Yoder," *Evangelical Visitor*, March 1, 1893, 80 (hereafter cited as *EV*); reprinted from *The Wayne County (Wooster, Ohio) Herald*, February 9, 1893.

within her denomination's standards of modesty.<sup>3</sup> Frances had just arrived from the sleepy town of McPherson, Kansas. She cut a quite different image from that of her sister, and could easily have been mistaken for a Quaker, or even a Mormon.<sup>4</sup> Frances belonged to another sectarian group, the Brethren in Christ; sometimes they were still known as River Brethren, as they had been christened by curious onlookers, intrigued by their practice of triune immersion in the local river or stream.<sup>5</sup> Frances took seriously the teachings on "modest apparel," and Brethren in Christ self-understandings as a "peculiar people" that disdained jewelry or other ornamentation.<sup>6</sup> She upheld the community's interpretation of New Testament writings, with the emphasis on the "duty" that women held to cover their heads at all times, as a reminder to be continually in prayer.<sup>7</sup>

The sisters' mission in downtown Wooster that fall day of 1897 gained Frances the passport that would launch her on her missionary career. Davidson is much lauded by contemporary Brethren in Christ. In his study of her life published in 1978, biographer E. Morris Sider has characterized Davidson as "one of the most extraordinary and striking persons to have held membership in the denomination."<sup>8</sup> Both Sider, and Carlton Wittlinger in his *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ*, also published in 1978, have emphasized Davidson's key role in assisting her father Henry Davidson in launching the church periodical the *Evangelical Visitor*. Wittlinger and Sider highlight Frances's quick response

<sup>3</sup> "Timeline of Women in Methodism," accessed May 10, 2023, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/timeline-of-women-in-methodism>; "Outward Modesty," Wikipedia, accessed May 10, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outward\\_holiness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outward_holiness); "Silhouettes, Historic Dresses and Costumes," accessed May 10, 2023, <https://silhouettescostumes.com/the-eras-we-build/1888-1898/>.

<sup>4</sup> H. Frances Davidson, personal diary 2, November 30, 1897, Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives, Messiah University, Mechanicsburg, PA. Hereafter Davidson's diaries are cited as HFD Diaries.

<sup>5</sup> A. W. Climenhaga, *History of the Brethren in Christ Church* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1952), 55-56, 69.

<sup>6</sup> "What is Meant by Modest Apparel?" *EV*, August 1, 1887, 14; C. G. Finney, "Dress Influence," *EV*, August 1, 1887, 16; "Brethren in Christ, U.S. History," accessed May 10, 2023, <https://bicus.org/about/history/>.

<sup>7</sup> M. L., "A Duty for Sisters," *EV*, November 1, 1887, 46.

<sup>8</sup> E. Morris Sider, *Nine Portraits: Brethren in Christ Biographical Sketches* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1978), 159.

when her father and his colleagues tested the idea of overseas mission.<sup>9</sup> Denominational history has nothing to say about her extensive family. It depicts Davidson as her father's daughter, and a hero in her own right.<sup>10</sup>

I bought into the image of Frances Davidson as her father's daughter until I began my own biographical work on this fascinating woman.<sup>11</sup> This paper is inspired by a post on the Brethren in Christ historical website. Denominational archivist Devin Manzullo-Thomas's brief exploration of what the Brethren in Christ could learn about their history by a close look at Davidson's 1897 passport brought her sister Mary to my attention. Manzullo-Thomas exclaimed over Davidson's bold declaration of life-long commitment to mission, noting with a literary chuckle that she had stricken the "entire section of the form dealing with returning to the States!"<sup>12</sup> I was captured by the fine penmanship of the passport witness: Mrs. Mary M. Yoder.

Research has revealed that Mary was Frances's eldest sibling. A brief exploration of Mary's life resonates with biographer and theorist Barbara Caine's thinking on the significance of the relationship between sisters.<sup>13</sup> Mary's key role as the eldest in the Davidson family of thirteen children, has brought me to a "re-imagining" of Frances Davidson as an integral part

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<sup>9</sup> Carlton Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1978), 182-83.

<sup>10</sup> Davidson's biographer has edited out information that would place Frances in a family; see, for instance, "The Journal of Frances Davidson," part 2: The Call to Africa (1895-1898), 181-204, ed. Morris Sider, *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 8, no. 3 (December 1985).

<sup>11</sup> See for instance, "Conflict, Confession, and Conversion: H. Frances Davidson's Call to Brethren in Christ Missions," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 11, no. 3 (December 2017), 335-52; "Henry R. and Frances (Fannie) Rice Davidson: Life and Vision," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 41, no. 2 (August 2018), 115-54; "Frances Davidson and the Spirituality of a Liminal Year," *Brethren in Christ History Life*, 45, no. 2 (August 2022), 240-59.

<sup>12</sup> Devin C. Thomas, "'I Am About to go Abroad as a Missionary': H. Frances Davidson's Passport Application and what it tells us about Brethren in Christ Life." Brethren in Christ Historical Society, <https://bic-history.org/i-am-about-to-go-abroad-as-a-missionary-h-frances-davidsons-passport-application-and-what-it-tells-us-about-brethren-in-christ-life-2/>; National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington D.C.; Roll #.496 – 01 October 1897-31 October 1897, accessed May 14, 2020, Ancestry.com. Thomas has made several insightful observations about what the passport can tell us about the mindset of the Brethren in Christ of the late nineteenth century, especially as he put it, Davidson's "unwavering commitment to her church's foreign mission endeavor."

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, a division of St. Martin's Press, 2010; published by Red Globe Press, 2019), 59.

[Form No. 899.]



[Form No. 899.]

No. 9203

Issued... OCT 26

# UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

STATE OF Ohio }  
COUNTY OF Stark } ES:

I, H. Frances Davidson, a NATIVE AND LOYAL CITIZEN OF THE UNITED STATES, hereby apply to the Department of State, at Washington, for a passport for myself, accompanied by Lyman Critchfield, Jr. as follows: Lyman Critchfield, Jr. born at Stark County, Ohio on the 14th day of March, 1868, and resides with his family at Smithville Stark County, Ohio

I solemnly ~~swear~~ that I was born at Smithville, Stark County, Ohio in the State of Ohio on or about the 14th day of March, 1868; that my father is a native-born citizen of the United States; that I am domiciled in the United States, my permanent residence being at Smithville, Ohio in the State of Ohio, where I follow the occupation of housewife; that I am about to go abroad temporarily; and that I intend to return to the United States with the purpose of residing and performing the duties of citizenship therein

### OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

Further, I do solemnly ~~swear~~ that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States ~~against all enemies, foreign and domestic~~; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion: So HELP ME GOD.

affirmed to before me this 21st day of October, 1897  
Lyman Critchfield, Jr.  
Notary Public

### DESCRIPTION OF APPLICANT.

Age: 27 years. Mouth: large, prominent upper teeth  
Stature: 5 feet, 4 inches, Eng. Chin: rather prominent  
Forehead: high and broad Hair: brunet  
Eyes: gray Complexion: medium light  
Nose: slender Face: oval

### IDENTIFICATION.

Witnessed at Ohio Oct 21st 1897

I hereby certify that I know the above-named H. Frances Davidson personally, and know ~~her~~ to be a native-born citizen of the United States, and that the facts stated in ~~his~~ affidavit are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Mrs. Mary M. Holte  
[ADDRESS OF WITNESS] Stark, Ohio

Applicant desires passport sent to following address:

H. Frances Davidson  
Proser  
Ohio

Frances's passport application, with Mary's signature. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

of a large family system, diverse in its religious affiliations. The focus of this paper, then, is to offer a brief sketch of Mary's life as it reflects on her relationship with Frances.<sup>14</sup>

Mary M. Yoder's signature on her younger sister Frances Davidson's passport is significant to our understanding of the relationship between the sisters. Mary was a good choice as witness to her sister's passport. For one thing, she was a member of the Methodist Episcopal denomination, which had a strong commitment to missions.<sup>15</sup> It is equally important to acknowledge that Mary was no stranger to the courthouse. Six years earlier, her late husband Christian B. Yoder had sold Eastern House, his inn on Wooster's East Liberty street; he had leased the prestigious Hotel American, losing no time in renaming it Hotel Yoder.<sup>16</sup> Under Yoder's management, it had quickly become known as "a first class place to stop," despite the reputation of the food being a little too good.<sup>17</sup> It made quite a stir in downtown Wooster when, only three days after opening the hotel, Christian was arrested for overfeeding his clients. Apparently, according to the *Wooster Daily Republican*, he was detained "in the innocent and zealous

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<sup>14</sup> Family historian Earl Brechbill, has provided helpful genealogical data, sketching out Henry Davidson's three marriages and thirteen children. I am fortunate to hold in my possession a copy of *The Ancestry of John and Henrietta Davidson Brechbill: A Historical Narrative* (Greencastle, PA: printed by author, 1972).

<sup>15</sup> Christian and Mary Yoder's denominational affiliation is revealed in his obituary: "Our Dead, Christian B. Yoder," 80; Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, The Reformation to the Present Day*, vol. 2, revised and updated (NY: Harper and Collins, 2010), 339. See also Diarmaid McCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 903; Mrs. J. T. Gracey, *Twenty years of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, Methodist Episcopal Church, 1869-1889* (Boston, MA: Heathen Woman's Friend, 1889), HathiTrust, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nnc2.ark:/13960/t6d29xv6j&view=1up&seq=3>.

<sup>16</sup> *The Wayne County Democrat*, Wooster, Ohio, May 18, 1891, 3, NewspaperArchive, <https://newspaperarchive.com/advertisement-clipping-mar-18-1891-33533992/>; *Wooster Daily Republican*, Wooster, Ohio, March 24, 1892, 3, NewspaperArchive, <https://newspaperarchie.com/advertisement-clipping-mar-24-1892-3354015/>; *Wooster Daily Republican*, Wooster, Ohio, April 12, 1892, 3, Newspaper Archive <https://newspaperarchive.com/advertisement-clipping-apr-12-1892-3354021/>, (Courtesy of Amber R. Coffman, Reference Librarian, Wayne County Public Library (hereafter WCPL).

<sup>17</sup> *Wooster Daily Republican*, Wooster, Ohio, May 4, 1892, 3 NewspaperArchive, <https://newspaperarchive.com/advertisement-clipping-may-04-1892-3354035/>. WCPL.

<sup>18</sup> "Arrested," *Wooster Daily Republican*, Wooster, Ohio, May7, 1892, 2, NewspaperArchive <https://newspaperarchive.com/arrest-clipping-may-07-1892-3354045/>. WCPL.

desire . . . to make things all that could be desired in the cuisine.”<sup>18</sup> The local news fails to let readers know how the Yoders got out of that fix.

Nine months later Christian died suddenly of what the doctor diagnosed as “brain congestion.” Mary immediately took over the running of Hotel Yoder.<sup>19</sup> With the buying and transfer of property, Christian’s arrest, and an “outrageous” sexual assault on Lulu McConnell, one of the hotel’s chambermaids, Mary must have been a familiar figure at the courthouse.<sup>20</sup> This time when Mary went to the courthouse, the mission was altruistic. Mary was accompanying her younger sister on this auspicious occasion, committed to acquiring the passport that would permit Frances to sail to South Africa, where she anticipated launching her missionary career.

Mary Davidson Yoder was the eldest of their father Henry Davidson’s thirteen children. Genealogical research suggests that she was the namesake of her paternal grandmother Mary (Young) Davidson. When Mary was nine years old, her mother Hannah Craft Davidson had died tragically of typhoid fever. Henry Davidson soon remarried; his new wife Fannie Rice Davidson, in her kind and loving way, took on the role of step-mother to Mary and her four younger siblings.<sup>21</sup> Fannie would rapidly reproduce, bringing eight more children into the family. Mary was fifteen when Frances was born, practically a generation older than her younger half-sister.<sup>22</sup>

Less than two years before Frances’s birth, the Davidsons had settled in Ohio’s Wayne County, Green Township, an environment where fertile indigenous Iroquoian speakers had recently thrived.<sup>23</sup> Green Township

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<sup>19</sup> “Peace to his Ashes,” *Wooster Daily Republican*, February 6, 1893, 3, Newspaper Archive, <https://newspaperarchive.com/obituary-clipping-feb-06-1893-3353646/>; *Wooster Daily Republican*, February 8, 1893, <https://newspaperarchive.co/advertisement-clipping-fed-08-1893-3354058/>. WCPL.

<sup>20</sup> “An outrageous Attempt Upon a Girl’s Honor,” *Wooster Daily Republican*, September 23, 1895, 4, NewspaperArchive, <https://newspaperarchive.com/anniversary-clipping-sep-23-1895-3354087/>.

<sup>21</sup> Brechbill, *The Ancestry of John and Henrietta Davidson Brechbill*, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Brechbill, *The Ancestry*, 26, 34.

<sup>23</sup> Wayne County History Book Committee, *A History of Wayne County*, Ohio (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1987), 34; “Mingo,” Wikipedia, accessed May 18, 2016, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mingo>.

included a variety of ethno-religious groups, including Scotch-Irish, English and German folks; like the Davidsons, the majority were Plain People.<sup>24</sup>

By age twenty-two, Mary had wed Christian B. Yoder, who judging by his surname had Amish roots. They were both raised on farms close to Smithville, Ohio, where they met and married. Christian practiced a variety of trades including building, contracting, grocering, before getting into hostelry. Their first child, Effa, came into the clan when Frances was eight years old. By the time her step-mother Fannie birthed her last child, Mary was mother to three.<sup>25</sup> The birth of LeRoy Isaiah would soon complete the family, only to have it shattered by the eldest child Edwin's death. Their decision to name the two younger sons for her full brothers William and Isaiah suggests the strong Davidson influence. This naming no doubt brought Mary comfort, reflecting the closeness of the larger family circle which had been wrenched with the death of their biological mother when Mary and her siblings were still small children.<sup>26</sup> Mary's strong role in her nuclear family and among her siblings would continue throughout her long life.

Mary began her career while their children were still young, when in 1882, she was appointed Postmistress in Easton, Ohio.<sup>27</sup> Mary was strong, a

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<sup>24</sup> Brechbill, *The Ancestry of John and Henrietta Davidson Brechbill*, 56. In *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, ed. Harold P. Simonson (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1963), 31, Frederick Jackson Turner has noted that “[b]y the census of 1820 the settled area included Ohio, southern Indiana and Illinois, southeastern Missouri, and about one-half of Louisiana. The settled area had surrounded Indian areas, and the management of the tribes became an object of political concern.” See also *A History of Wayne County*, 34 and Paul Lacher, who has noted the following: “The true story of Wayne County is written and best understood within the context of a myriad of tiny crossroads settlements that have come and gone from the landscape over a span of two centuries.” Green Township, Wayne County, Ohio's Chautauqua, Five Points, Stuckey's Corners, Georgetown, Paradise, Smithfield, Summit are among the historic towns that have disappeared; “Whippersnapper: Some Towns slowly faded from the Countryside,” *The Daily Record*, January 10, 2012, accessed December 22, 2022, <https://www.the-daily-record.com/story/news/2012/01/11/whippersnapper-some-wayne-towns-slowly/19462410007/>.

<sup>25</sup> “Henry R. and Frances (Fannie) Rice Davidson: Life and Vision,” fn. 2, 3 4, 10, 11; Brechbill, *The Ancestry*, 52, 55-57.

<sup>26</sup> “Our Dead, Christian B. Yoder,” 80; Year: 1870, Census Place: Orrville, Wayne, Ohio; Roll 14593\_1280; page 242B, 1870 U.S. Federal Census, Ancestry, accessed June 13, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> *The Wayne County Democrat*, Wooster, Ohio, April 12, 1882, 3, NewspaperArchive <https://newspaperarchive.com/advertisement-clipping-apr-12-1882-3353972/>.

survivor; she moved forward with confidence, even as she navigated losses that would have left many immobilized. Her ownership of Hotel Yoder is underscored by her decision to hold Christian's funeral there, rather than at the Methodist Episcopal Church, located nearby, where they were members.

Within hours of Christian's death, Mary established herself as the proprietor of the hotel. With the assistance of her sons William and Roy, and her son-in-law the "popular Wooster salesman" Harvey M. Oswald, she would manage the hotel renovated and branded by her husband only a year before his untimely death.<sup>28</sup> Only months after Christian's death, for instance, Hotel Yoder began a free bus service running "a magnificent eight-passenger Horse-drawn carriage, known as a Herdic coach," meeting all of the trains coming into the Wooster railroad station.<sup>29</sup> Before long, Mary also revived a long defunct lease to the Postal Telegraph company.<sup>30</sup>

The sudden death of her twenty-year-old son Roy, just eighteen months after his father's demise, failed to arrest Mary's resolve. LeRoy, known for his "winning ways," had left university to assist in the running of the hotel. Within months, he succumbed to typhoid.<sup>31</sup> Demonstrating a strength of character reminiscent of that for which her sister Frances is known, Mary continued to run Hotel Yoder with the assistance of her remaining son William, son-in-law Harvey M. Oswald, and eleven live-in servants and employees—a laundress, cooks, chambermaids, waitresses, a porter, and

<sup>28</sup> Although "Peace to his Ashes," *Ibid.*, gives no inkling of church affiliation, it does tell us that "Christ Yoder was a quiet, unassuming Christian gentleman who enjoyed the confidence of all with whom he did business, a father who loved his family and lived for them." The obituary in the *Wayne County Herald* gives a brief nod to his membership in "the M.E. Church;" reprinted in "Our Dead, Christian B. Yoder," *EV*, March 1, 1893), 80; *Wooster Daily Republican*, Wooster, Ohio, December 5, 1893, 4, NewspaperArchive, <https://newspaperarchive.com/advertisement-clipping-dec-05-1893-3353727/>.

<sup>29</sup> *Wooster Daily Republican*, Wooster, Ohio, June 26, 1894, 4, NewspaperArchive, <https://newspaperarchive.com/anniversary-clipping-jun-26-1894-3353738>, WCPL; "Herdic Coach," Wikipedia, accessed May 23, 2023, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herdic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herdic).

<sup>30</sup> *Wooster Daily Republican*, Wooster, Ohio, December 9, 1895, 4, NewspaperArchive, <https://newspaperarchive.com/advertisement-clipping-dec-09-1895-3353703/>. WCPL

<sup>31</sup> "Our Dead, LeRoy Yoder," *EV*, November 1, 1894, reprinted from *Wayne County Herald*.

<sup>32</sup> "Our Dead, Christian B. Yoder," 80; Wm. W. Yoder, 1900 US Federal Census, Census Place: Mansfield Ward 6, Richland, Ohio 13 A 1900 US F d l C d b l i ] P U T USA 1/21/22, 10:37 AM; "Searching for Mary Mathilda (Davidson) Yoder," Anabaptist Historians, <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2020/07/02/searching-for-mary-mathilda-davidson-yoder/> 7/8 Ohio, 13, accessed May 18, 2020, Ancestry.com, 1900 US Federal Census database.



a solicitor.<sup>32</sup>

Mary's attorney must have played an essential role in her entrepreneurial ambitions. On August 11, 1897, a few months before the passport run, she "closed a deal" and took on "the management of the other major downtown hotel, Archer House." As the *Wooster Republican* assured its readers, "Mrs. C. B. Yoder . . . will also continue in control of the Hotel Yoder, which she has conducted so successfully."<sup>33</sup> Six weeks later the *Wooster Republican* announced Mrs. C. B. Yoder's purchase of "the leading hotel" in Millersburg, twenty miles south, again assuring patrons: "The purchase will not affect the management of the Yoder House."<sup>34</sup>

Building an empire demands strength of character; it requires vision, confidence, and the ability to defend one's rights. By December, as her sister Frances neared South Africa's shores, the press revealed that Mary had engaged in a legal battle. "Mrs. M. M. Yoder, of the Yoder House," the *Wayne County Herald* intoned, "has filed a suit in Wayne County Court of Common Pleas against Bevard & List, of the Archer House." She was no longer known to the reading public as "Mrs. C. B. Yoder." For the first time, the local newspapers dropped the previous pattern of addressing her by her husband's name. The press announced that Mary Mathilda Yoder was insisting that Archer House owed her \$2,300.00 (valued \$78,000.00 today).<sup>35</sup>

Mary's hunger for property, and the central role that her solicitor and the courts played, stands in stark contrast to the ethic that Frances upheld. Frances's passport, which Mary duly signed in her impeccable *coupe de plume*, illustrates the younger sister's attempt to remain separate from worldly affairs. Holding to the Brethren in Christ doctrine of separation from the world, Frances refused to embrace her identity as an American.<sup>36</sup> As the clerk and her prominent sister Mary looked on, Frances boldly

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<sup>33</sup> *Wooster Daily Republican*, August 11, 1897, 6, NewspaperArchive, <https://newspaperarchive.com/advertisement-clipping-aug-11-1897-3353673/>.

<sup>34</sup> *Wooster Daily Republican*, September 29, 1897, 3, NewspaperArchive, <https://newspaperarchive.com/advertisement-clipping-sept-29-1897-3354091/>.

<sup>35</sup> *Wayne County Herald*, Wooster Ohio, December 16, 1897, 8, NewspaperArchive, <https://newspaperarchive.com/advertisement-clipping-dec-16-1897-3354122/>. WCPL; "CPI inflation Calculator," accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1890?amount=2300>.

<sup>36</sup> Wittlinger, *Quest*, 46.

stroked out the entire section regarding her duties as a US citizen; she also scratched out “swears to,” and replaced it with “affirmed.” Recorded history conceals the reason that Frances Davidson, the renowned Brethren in Christ pioneer missionary, engaged her sister, the Methodist Episcopal owner of several prestigious hotels, to witness her first passport, and later several others. We can assume that the Methodist Episcopal strong emphasis on missions cemented a strong bond between the sisters.<sup>37</sup>

What is becoming clear is Mary’s unflinching support of her younger sister’s mission. In summer 1905 when Frances returned for furlough, Mary, nearing sixty by that point, invited her to her new home in Lakeside, Ohio, the Methodist camp ground located on the southern shore of Lake Erie where she had purchased an inn.<sup>38</sup> The sisters spent a week with two of their younger sisters, Ida Davidson Hoffman, who had come east from Kansas, and Etta Davidson Brechbill, who farmed with her husband John in Indiana. Mazie and Fannie, the daughters of another sister, Rebecca Davidson Dohner, also were there. “We all spent a pleasant and restful week at this beautiful place. It was just what we all needed,” Frances recalled in her diary. On Sunday evening the Methodist community at Lakeside invited Frances to speak on mission.<sup>39</sup>

Nearly a decade later, Frances would make another voyage back to the United States. At the New York Harbour, as the ship docked on April 23, 1914, Mary, now approaching seventy, with their sister Sarah had come to meet Frances. In mid-June a family reunion brought ten of the Davidson siblings to their sister Etta’s farm in DeKalb County, Indiana; including spouses and nieces and nephews, forty-three members of the Davidson family were captured in the photo taken at Etta and her husband John Brechbill’s family home. It is the sole surviving photo that I have found of Mary.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2, 903; “Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church,” Wikipedia, accessed June 11, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woman%27s\\_Foreign\\_Missionary\\_Society\\_of\\_the\\_Methodist\\_Episcopal\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woman%27s_Foreign_Missionary_Society_of_the_Methodist_Episcopal_Church).

<sup>38</sup> “Lakeside, Ohio,” Wikipedia, accessed May 24, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lakeside,\\_Ohio#:~:text=Lakeside%20was%20established%20under%20the,movement%20began%20to%20gain%20popularity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lakeside,_Ohio#:~:text=Lakeside%20was%20established%20under%20the,movement%20began%20to%20gain%20popularity).

<sup>39</sup> HFD Diaries 5, August 6, 1904.

<sup>40</sup> HFD Diaries 8, August 13, 1915.

BRETHREN IN CHRIST  
HISTORY & LIFE



*Davidson family reunion, 1914. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.*



*Inset: Frances (extreme left, face slightly hidden), Will Davidson, and Mary Davidson Yoder (right).*

For Frances, that visit in summer 1914 extended into fall, as she laboured over her desk in an upstairs bedroom of her brother Henry and his wife Elizabeth's home, chronicling her missionary memoir. Frances's brief note in her journal some five years earlier suggests Mary's hand in this: "Sister Mary writes that she wants me to be sure and keep up my diary. Well, I have

never kept a diary only these few jottings in a journal which are so few that they give only a general outline of our life and scarcely that.”<sup>41</sup>

Mary’s unflagging support of her sister Frances Davidson during the latter’s twenty-four years in the Rhodesias suggests a heretofore undiscovered cheerleader and supporter, outside of the Brethren in Christ community. This brief look at Mary Davidson Yoder’s life and the relationship of the two sisters suggests a fruitful area for further glimpses into Frances’s life and the Brethren in Christ of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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<sup>41</sup> HFD Diaries 6, December 26, 1908.