

ISABELLA GRAHAM & THE POWER OF FAITH

ISABELLA MARSHALL GRAHAM (1742-1814) WAS AN EDUCATOR AND PHILANTHROPIST WHO WORKED tirelessly to assist women and orphans on both sides of the Atlantic. She grew up in Lanarkshire, Scotland, was confirmed in the Presbyterian Church by John Witherspoon, and followed her husband, the military doctor John Graham, to the New World—first to Canada, then Antigua. John died of fever in 1774, a tragedy that shaped Isabella’s life. Alone in a foreign land, penniless, pregnant, and with three young children to care for, she made the arduous crossing back to Scotland.

While leading a boarding school in Edinburgh, Isabella dedicated herself to helping others survive misfortune. She realized that if every poor person in her neighborhood set aside a single penny each week, the gathered funds could assist contributors during times of special need. The idea spurred the organization of The Penny Society, later known as The Society for the Relief of the Destitute Sick.

After the Revolutionary War, John Witherspoon encouraged Isabella to bring her gift for benevolence to the infant United States. She again crossed the ocean in 1797, becoming the first director of New York’s Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children, a group that helped families ravaged by yellow fever and showed the way for future women-led charities.

Isabella went on to serve the Orphan Asylum Society and the Society for the Promotion of Industry amongst the Poor. Her Christian faith formed the bedrock of her life and her legacy after death. *The Power of Faith*, a biography with collected writings, tells the story of Isabella Graham’s boundless compassion.

Heritage Sunday is a day of celebration set aside by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). To celebrate and learn more about the history of Presbyterianism in America visit: www.history.pcusa.org/hs

PRESBYTERIAN
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

