

Sketches of Early Black Methodists

What methods are we to employ in the understanding of history? Certainly one of the most useful—and fascinating—approaches is through personalities, the prominent and the little known. What better technique for our present study than to stroll through a portrait gallery, observing sketches of early black Methodists. Many are nameless, so far as extant records show, but these men and women whose names are now known only to God, made an invaluable contribution. Some faces are easily recognized. All belong and all have an important story to tell. Time permits us to select but a few. Many more could—and should—be included, and this calls for continued research and publication.

The Wesleys and Blacks—In Georgia

Blacks played a far greater role in the formation of Methodism than has been recognized. We turn to 1730 when a group of London philanthropists were attempting to put to appropriate use 1000 pounds which had been bequeathed in trust expressly for the grand and noble purpose of converting Negroes. This legacy and the resultant consultations played no small part in the formation of the Georgia experiment. In his September 28, 1735 letter to John Wesley, Dr. John Burton of Corpus Christi, Oxford, Trustee for Georgia and Patron of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, wrote from Eton College:

One end for which we were associated was the conversion of negro slaves. As yet nothing has been attempted in this way; but a door is opened, and not far from home. The Purryburgers have purchased slaves; they act under our influence; and Mr. Oglethorpe will think it advisable to begin there. You see the harvest is truly great: . . . this is a point among others to be kept in view.¹

John and Charles accepted the challenge, agreed to come to Georgia. The initial group of settlers from England, some 120, had sailed aboard the *Anne* with Oglethorpe, arriving on February 12, 1733. From the outset slaves and rum were forbidden—not on moral but economic grounds—“His Majesty thought fit to pass some laws since the Charter,

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¹ Nehemiah Curnock, ed. *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), VIII:287. Also see Frank Baker, *From Wesley to Asbury* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1976), p. 3f. Original spelling, capitalization, and punctuation have been retained.

whereby the Inhabitants are restrained from the use of Negroes, from the use of Rum, and from Trading with the Indians without Lycence."² It was blandly assumed the Georgia colonist "could ill afford the purchase"³ of Africans. White indentured servants "did not appear to offer the disadvantages" that were attendant upon the use of slaves. Slavery flourished in neighboring South Carolina—as Burton's letter mentioned. The first blacks in Georgia probably came from Carolina either in flight to escape bondage or they were brought covertly as slaves—public notice carefully avoided.⁴ Even so, "Col. Bull brought with him 4 of his Negroes, who were Sawyers, to assist the Colony; and also, brought provisions for them, being resolved to put the Trust to no expense."⁵ Possibly these are the first recorded black people in the English phase of the Georgia venture. Blacks may have accompanied the Spanish to the Georgia area as early as 1540.

The brothers Wesley set foot on "American ground" Friday, February 6, 1736. Charles' Georgia ministry lasted but five unhappy months. As he made his lengthy return to England via the eastern seaboard up to Boston, brother John accompanied him as far as Charleston. Here the Wesleys encountered slavery, perhaps their first face-to-face experience. It only confirmed their suspicions of the treatment of slaves. Charles was horrified:

I had observed much, and heard more, of the cruelty of masters toward their negroes; but now I received an authentic account of some horrid instances thereof. The giving a child a slave of its own age to tyrannize over, to beat and abuse out of sport, was, I myself saw, a common practice . . .⁶

Seeds were planted in the minds and imaginations of the brothers. One child owning another child, treating it as a pet—to love and caress one minute and then punish it the next. Charles took the memory back to England and it was never erased from his mind.

Friday, August 20, 1736 was a tiring day for John Wesley. He was at Frederica. Though ill, he rose at 4:45 a.m. and in the course of the long day at 9:00 a.m. was at home transcribing George Herbert. When this was finished he turned to *The Negro's Advocate*, and spent two hours reading it.⁷

Later, Wesley described his being in South Carolina, on Friday, April

² Patrick Tailfer et al., *A True and Historical Narrative of the Colony of Georgia. With Comments by the Earl of Egmont*, Clarence L. Ver Steeg, ed., (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1960), p. 39, note 18.

³ See B. H. Fant, "The Labor Policy of the Trustees for Establishing the Colony of Georgia in America," in *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, XVI:1-3, March, 1932.

⁴ See Ralph Betts Flanders, *Plantation Slavery in Georgia* (Cos Cob, Connecticut: John B. Edwards, 1967), pp. 3-22.

⁵ From *A Brief Account of the Establishment of a Colony of Georgia under General James Oglethorpe, February 1, 1733*, quoted in Spencer B. King, Jr., *Georgia Voices: A Documentary History to 1872* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1966), p. 12.

⁶ *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.* (London, Wesleyan Methodist Book-Room, [1849] n.d.), I:36, entry dated Monday, August 2, 1736.

⁷ J. Wesley, *Journal*, I:260.

15, 1737, "I walked over to Ashley Ferry, twelve miles from Charlestown, and thence, in the afternoon, went to Mr. Guy, the minister [Anglican] of Ashley, and to Colonel Bull's seat, two miles further."⁸ On Sunday the 17th Wesley met the Reverend Alexander Garden—Commissary for South Carolina under the Bishop of London. Garden invited Wesley to preach for him. Wesley had planned to return to Georgia but "stormy and contrary winds" forced his vessel back to Charleston. There he met, at Mr. Garden's "the clergy of South Carolina." It was the "annual Visitation," and gave Wesley an opportunity to talk with his fellow Anglicans. On Saturday, April 23rd Wesley was in conversation with Mr. Thompson, minister of St. Bartholomew's, near Ponpon.⁹ Thompson kindly offered Wesley one of his horses for a ride back to Georgia—later—rather than going by boat. Thompson even rode twenty miles with Wesley and sent his servant—probably a slave—to guide Wesley the remaining twenty miles to his house. It was at the Reverend Mr. Thompson's home in South Carolina that Wesley engaged in a lengthy conversation with a black woman. We do not know her name, but this major piece of dialogue—which Wesley regarded of sufficient importance to record *in toto*—and may be the first in depth conversation he had with a black person:

Finding a young negro there, who seemed more sensible than the rest, I asked her how long she had been in Carolina. She said two or three years; but that she was born in Barbados, and had lived there in a minister's family from a child.

Wesley was obviously intrigued:

I asked her whether she went to church there. She said, 'Yes, every Sunday, to carry my mistress's children.' I asked her what she had learned at church. She said, 'Nothing; I heard a great deal, but did not understand it.' 'But what did your master teach you at home?' 'Nothing.' 'Nor your mistress?' 'No.' I asked, 'But don't you know that your hands and feet, and this you call your body, will turn to dust in a little time?' She answered, 'Yes.'

Wesley continued, probing earnestly:

'But there is something in you that will not turn to dust, and this is what they call your soul. Indeed, you cannot see your soul, though it is within you; as you cannot see the wind, though it is all about you. But if you had not a soul in you, you could no more see, or hear, or feel, than this table can. What do you think will become of your soul when your body turns to dust?' 'I don't know.'

Wesley, the emerging evangelist, now drove his point home, responding to the honest, straightforward statements of a sincere black woman:

'Why, it will go out of your body, and up there, above the sky, and live always. God lives there. Do you know who God is?' 'No.' 'You cannot see Him, any more than you can see your own soul. It is He that made you and me, and all men and women, and all beasts and birds, and all the world. It is He that makes the sun shine, and the rain fall, and corn and fruits to grow out of the ground. He makes all these for us. But why

⁸ Ibid., I:348.

⁹ Ibid., I:350, entry for Saturday, April 23, 1737.

do you think He made us? What did He make you and me for?' 'I can't tell.' 'He made you to live with Himself above the sky. And so you will, in a little time, if you are good. If you are good, when your body dies your soul will go up, and want nothing, and have whatever you desire. No one will beat or hurt you there. You will never be sick. You will never be sorry any more, nor afraid of anything. I can't tell you, I don't know how happy you will be; for you will be with God.'

Wesley concluded with his personal observation. It had been a penetrating dialogue:

The attention with which this poor creature listened to instruction is inexpressible. The next day she remembered all, readily answered every question; and said she would ask Him that made her to show her how to be good.¹⁰

This conversation must be taken at face value. It comes from the 18th century and is an honest exchange between two authentic people. (Warning: we must not read into Wesley something that is not there. We must not put into his mouth words and ideas which originate from late 20th century psychologists and sociologists.)

The following Wednesday, the 27th of April, Wesley came to the Belinger plantation where he "met [an old negro who was tolerably instructed in the principles of Christianity, and who, as well as his fellow negroes and] a half Indian [woman] (one that had an Indian mother and a Spanish father) seemed earnestly desirous of further instruction."¹¹ They told Wesley that at Ashley Ferry going to church was possible, but at the plantation, buried in the woods, though church was five miles away, lame though they may be, they would crawl thither. Later, Mr. Belinger "sent a negro lad" who conducted Wesley to Purrysburg. This community "with no form or comeliness" was said to be the first settlement in South Carolina to introduce slavery. Wesley detested the place. This same black lad who had accompanied Wesley was "both very desirous and very capable of instruction." Wesley had an idea:

And perhaps one of the easiest and shortest ways to instruct the African negroes in Christianity would be, first, to inquire after and find out some of the most serious of the planters. Then, having inquired of them which of their slaves were best inclined and understood English, to go to them from plantation to plantation, staying as long as appeared necessary to each.¹²

Three or four plantation owners appeared happy to assist in the venture.

John Wesley in England

Wesley's relationship with blacks appears a number of times in subsequent years. General Rules forbade Methodists from "The buying or selling of men, women, and children with an intention to enslave them."¹³ In

¹⁰ Ibid., I:350-351.

¹¹ Ibid., I:352.

¹² Ibid., I:352-353, dated April 27, 1737.

¹³ Quoted in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1980* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1980), p. 69, from *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies*.

a brief notation on Sunday, June 29, 1740 in his Diary at 8:00 a.m. at Moorfields, Wesley "collected for the Negro school." On Sunday, July 27, 1755, he recorded, "I was much affected about this time by a letter sent from a gentleman in Virginia"—the Reverend Samuel Davies, an "able, zealous, and eloquent Presbyterian" of Hanover. He was later to become President of Princeton. His correspondence with Wesley is deeply touching. He wrote:

The poor negro slaves here never heard of Jesus, or His religion, till they arrived at the land of their slavery in America, whom their masters generally neglect, as though immortality was not the privilege of their souls in common with their own. These poor Africans are the principal objects of my compassion, and I think, the most proper subject of your charity.

Davies went on to say the population of Virginia was "about three hundred thousand, and one half of them are supposed to be negroes."¹⁴

The following year, March 1, 1756, Wesley made another reference to a letter from Davies. "When the books arrived I gave notice after sermon," said Davies, "and desired such negroes as could read, and such white people as would make good use of them and were able to buy, to come to my house." Of all the books sent by Wesley none pleased the slaves more than "the Psalms and Hymns, which enabled them to gratify their peculiar taste for psalmody."¹⁵

Another letter from Davies, written January 28, 1757—and noted by Wesley at the same date in his *Journal*, "My success is not equal to my wishes . . . I have baptized near one hundred and fifty adult negroes, of whom about sixty are communicants." Davies went on, "Among them in the first place, and then among the poor white people, I have distributed the books you sent me." He concluded, "And let me and my congregation, particularly my poor negro converts, be favoured with your prayers."¹⁶

Wesley's first baptismal service for blacks holds special importance. The story begins on Tuesday, January 17, 1758, "I preached at Wandsworth. A gentleman, come from America, has again opened a door in this desolate place." He went on, "In the morning I preached in Mr. Gilbert's house. Two negro servants of his and a mulatto appear to be much awakened. Shall not His saving health be made known to all nations."¹⁷ The gentleman mentioned was Nathaniel Gilbert of Antigua, spending some months in England before returning to the West Indies. On Wednesday, November 29th Wesley joyfully noted the culmination of his preaching in the Gilbert household:

I rode to Wandsworth, and baptized two negroes belonging to Mr. Gilbert, a gentleman lately come from Antigua. One of these is deeply convinced of sin, the other rejoices in God her Saviour, and is the first African Christian I have known. But shall

¹⁴ J. Wesley, *Journal*, IV:125.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, IV:149.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, IV:194-195.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, IV:247-248.

not our Lord, in due time, have these heathens also 'for His inheritance'?¹⁸

We have another first—and we do not know their names. In due time the wealthy Mr. Gilbert and his household returned to Antigua, preached the gospel, and these people are said to be responsible for “the first Methodist chapel in the Torrid Zone.”¹⁹ Gilbert appears to have preached with considerable power, beginning with the slaves on his own plantation, telling them of God’s love. The question immediately comes: why did he not manumit them on the spot? In part, we are told, it was due to the island’s laws which were exceedingly harsh toward freed slaves. Nonetheless, starting with Gilbert’s house, the Methodist movement spread throughout Antigua. By 1786 the membership in that beautiful island comprised 1,569. Only two were white. Blacks made up the rest.

The Caribbean appears to have occupied Wesley’s thoughts. On the 26th of November, 1758 he noted talking with a lady from Barbados.²⁰ Blacks are mentioned—in passing—in the conversation.

Sunday, May 7, 1780, at Whitehaven, Wesley spoke poignantly, “I was particularly pleased with a poor negro.” He went on, deeply affected, “She seemed to be fuller of love than any of the rest. And not only her voice had an unusual sweetness, but her words were chosen and uttered with a peculiar propriety. I never heard either in England or America, such a negro speaker (man or woman) before.”²¹ Wesley has here given us another nameless Methodist heroine.

On Friday, March 10, 1786, while in Bristol, Wesley recorded, “I baptized a young negro, who appeared to be deeply serious and much affected; as indeed did the whole congregation.”²²

Wesley Against Slavery

Wesley’s most trenchant attack on slavery came in 1774 in his justly celebrated *Thoughts Upon Slavery*,²³ widely reprinted and circulated in England and America. In reality it was the work of that stalwart Quaker, Anthony Benezet whose *Some Historical Account of Guinea*, published in Philadelphia in 1771 caused Wesley to ponder—perhaps recalling memories of South Carolina. On Wednesday, February 12, 1772 Wesley noted:

In returning I read a very different book, published by an honest Quaker, on that execrable sum of all villainies, commonly called the Slave-trade. I read of nothing like

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, IV:292.

¹⁹ See J. Robinson Gregory, *A History of Methodism* (London: Charles H. Kelley, 1911), I:180. Also see J. H. Graham, *Black United Methodists* (New York: Vantage Press, 1979), p. 2. and John A. Vickers, *John Wesley: Founder of Methodism* (Loughborough: Ladybird Books Ltd, 1977), p. 44.

²⁰ J. Wesley, *Journal*, IV:292.

²¹ *Ibid.*, VI:277-278.

²² *Ibid.*, VII:144.

²³ In *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1872), XI:59-79.

it in the heathen world, whether ancient or modern; and it infinitely exceeds, in every instance of barbarity, whatever Christian slaves suffer in Mahometan countries.²⁴

Wesley's *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, a careful abridgment of Benezet's work, proved to be immensely important; its influence was widespread. It also linked the founder of Methodism with the leading foes of slavery in England: Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, and William Wilberforce.

Wesley made a scathing reference to slavery in his 1775 *A Calm Address to Our American Colonies*. Colonists insisted they would no longer be slaves.

"Who then is a slave?" Look into America, and you may easily see. See that Negro, fainting under the load, bleeding under the lash! He is a slave. And is there "no difference" between him and his master? Yes; the one is screaming, "Murder! Slavery!" the other silently bleeds and dies!

In Sermon LXIX, "The Imperfection of Human Knowledge," Wesley made a vivid plea to his day and generation, English people of the Enlightenment, "And who cares for thousands, myriads, if not millions, of the wretched Africans?" He continued:

Are not whole droves of these poor sheep (human, if not rational beings!) continually driven to market, and sold, like cattle, into the vilest bondage, without any hope of deliverance but by death? Who cares for those outcasts of men, the well-known Hottentots?

He concluded, "O Father of mercies! are these the works of thy own hands, the purchase of thy Son's blood?"

Perhaps one of the most exciting preaching experiences Wesley recorded took place in Bristol, that center for so much of the coming and going of slave ships. He had preached for "two or three quiet days" and concluded "my sermon upon Conscience." On Tuesday, March 4, 1788, the following day, he "gave notice of my design to preach on Thursday evening upon (what is now the general topic) Slavery." Lo, when Thursday arrived the house was filled "from end to end" and all sorts and conditions of people were on hand, "high and low, rich and poor." It was obviously a time of great expectation, and no one was disappointed.

I preached on that ancient prophecy, 'God shall enlarge Japhet. And he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.'

All was well, thus far:

About the middle of the discourse, while there was on every side attention still as night, a vehement noise arose, none could tell why, and shot like lightning through the whole congregation. The terror and confusion were inexpressible. You might have imagined it was a city taken by storm. The people rushed upon each other with the utmost violence; the benches were broke in pieces, and nine-tenths of the congregation appeared to be struck with the same panic. . . . It was the strangest incident of the kind I ever remember; . . . We set *Friday* apart as a day of fasting and prayer [for] those poor outcasts of men; and . . . make a way for them to escape, and break their

²⁴ J. Wesley, *Journal*, V:445-446.

chains in sunder.²⁵

Wesley's Letters

A number of letters to important members of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade—formed in 1787—indicate Wesley's deep concern. In August of 1787 Wesley wrote to Thomas Clarkson. Clarkson had referred to the "celebrated" Wesley "whose useful labours as a minister of the gospel are so well known to our countrymen." In the Clarkson letter, Wesley "informed the Committee of the great satisfaction which he had also experienced when he heard of their formation. He conceived that their design, while it would destroy the slave trade, would also strike at the root of the shocking abomination of slavery." The letter went on:

He desired to forewarn them that they must expect difficulties and great opposition from those who were interested in the system, that they were a powerful body, and that they would raise all their forces when they perceived their craft to be in danger.

The practical, common sense Wesley continued to point out what might come from the opposition:

They would employ hireling writers, who would have neither justice nor mercy. But the Committee were not to be dismayed by such treatment, nor even if some of those who professed goodwill toward them should turn against them. As to himself, he would do all he could to promote the object of their institution. He would reprint a new large edition of his *Thoughts upon Slavery*, and circulate it among his friends in England and Ireland, to whom he would add a few words in favour of their design.²⁶

In his October 11, 1787 letter to Granville Sharp, Wesley notes, "Ever since I heard of it first I felt a perfect detestation of the horrid Slave Trade . . . Therefore I cannot but do everything in my power to forward the glorious design of your Society." He then gave down-to-earth advice:

Indeed, you cannot go on without more than common resolution, considering the opposition which you . . . encounter, . . . by men who are not encombered with either honour, conscience, or humanity, and will rush on *per fasque ne fasque*, through every possible means, to secure their great goddess, Interest.

He went on, ". . . these men will lay hold on and improve every possible objection against you . . . To *hire* or to *pay* informers has a bad sound and might raise great, yea insurmountable prejudice against you." The letter then concluded:

After all, I doubt the matter will turn upon this, 'Is the Slave Trade for the interest of the nation?' And here the multitude of sailors that perish therein will come to be considered. In all these difficulties what a comfort it is to consider (unfashionable as it is) that there is a God! Yea, and that (as little as men think of it!) He has still all power both in heaven and on earth! To Him I commend you and your glorious Cause;

²⁵ *Ibid.*, VII:359-360. The editor added a footnote, "The Methodists, following their leader, took a noble part in the great Emancipation movement." p. 359, note 2.

²⁶ John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), VIII:6-7.

It was a letter of wise counsel filled with common sense admonitions as to methods of procedure, and—above all—“shows how keenly Wesley felt the horrors of the Slave Trade.”

In his letter to Thomas Funnell, November 24, 1787, Wesley wrote about the work of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade:

Whatever assistance I can give those generous men who join to oppose that execrable trade I certainly shall give. I have printed a large edition of the *Thoughts on Slavery*, and dispersed them to every part of England. But there will be vehement opposition made, both by slave-merchants and slave holders; and they are mighty men. But our comfort is, He that dwelleth on high is mightier.²⁷

Again, we see Wesley as a man who took a realist's view toward a problem, but always a man of faith who saw a solution—with God's help.

Wesley wrote Henry Moore from Bristol on March 14, 1790, “I would do anything that is in my power toward the extirpation of that trade which is a scandal not only to Christianity but humanity.”²⁸

Wesley wrote to Samuel Hoare from the Isle of Guernsey, August 18, 1787, “A week or two ago I was favoured with a letter from Mr. Clarkson, informing me of his truly Christian design, to procure, if possible an Act of Parliament for the abolition of slavery in our Plantations.” He went on:

I have long wished for the rolling away of this reproach from us, a reproach not only to religion, but to humanity itself . . . My friends in America are of the same mind. They have already emancipated several hundred of the poor negroes, and are setting more and more at liberty every day, as fast as they can do it with any tolerable convenience. This is making a little stand against this shocking abomination; but Mr. Clarkson's design strikes at the root of it.

He then warned of defiance, “But without doubt, you . . . [may] expect to meet with rough and violent opposition. For the slave-holders are a numerous, a wealthy, and consequently a very powerful body.” They do not want their lucrative business endangered. “And when you bring their craft into danger, do you not touch the apple of their eye? Will they not then raise all their forces against you and summon their friends from every side?” He concludes, “I trust you will not be discouraged thereby; but rather more resolute . . .”³⁰

The grandest letter—and the concluding *magnum opus* of his thousands of written communications—is Wesley's letter to William Wilberforce, written from Balam, February 24, 1791. It was occasioned by the last book Wesley read, an autobiography of Gustavus Vasa, an African slave. To Wilberforce:

²⁷ Ibid., VIII:16-17.

²⁸ Ibid., VIII:23.

²⁹ Ibid., VIII:207.

³⁰ Ibid., VIII:275-276. Also see the letter to Granville Sharp, November 14, 1787, “It was from a real desire to promote in whatever way I could the excellent design which you have in hand . . .” VIII:277.

Dear Sir,—Unless the divine power has raised you up to be as *Athanasius contra mundum*, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villany, which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.

Reading this morning a tract wrote by a poor African, I was particularly struck by that circumstance, that a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being a *law* in all our Colonies that the *oath* of a black against a white goes for nothing. What villany is this!

That He who has guided you from your youth up may continue to strengthen you in this and all things is the prayer of, dear sir,

Your affectionate servant.³¹

It is said by some that “John Wesley, his last words Slave Trade.”³² While this may well be an apocryphal story, we cannot gainsay the certainty this monstrous evil was on his heart. His was one of the few voices raised against the traffic in human blood.

Blacks and Wesley's Preachers in America

We pick up the American story with the preaching of Robert Strawbridge c. 1764 on Sam's Creek, Frederick County, Maryland. A member of the Society was a slave of the Sweitzer family, Anne or Annie, recorded as “Aunt Sweitzer.”³³ Jacob Toogood, a slave, holds a place of special interest. “Old Jacob Toogood was a slave of Mr. Maynard. He had permission to preach to the colored people . . . his master would frequently go to hear him.”³⁴ Some maintain he is the first black preacher mentioned in American Methodism.

The New York story lists Betty, the servant of Barbara Heck, who was present at that first Methodist service of worship, in Philip Embury's home, October, 1766. Betty became a charter member of what was to become the John Street Church. There were other black women who became members of the congregation, possibly domestics in the parsonage:

Two hundred and fifty names of subscribers are still preserved, among which are African maids—Dinahs and Chloes are in honor with the Livingstones and Delanceys, the blue blood of the time. Special mention must be made of Rachael, who gave nine shillings and Margaret contributed seven shillings.³⁵

Names long associated with John Street are Mary and Peter Williams. Peter Williams (175?-1823), child of slaves brought from Africa, was

³¹ *Ibid.*, VIII:264-265.

³² *Ibid.* Wilberforce is the source: “the old crusader put off his armour.”

³³ See Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Salvation* (Garden City, New York: Anchor-Press/Doubleday, 1976), pp. 284, 295. Also see Graham, p. 11.

³⁴ Gordon Pratt Baker, ed., *Those Incredible Methodists* (Baltimore: Commission on Archives and History, The Baltimore Conference, 1972), pp. 13-14.

³⁵ A. B. Hyde, *The Story of Methodism* (New York: M. W. Hazen Company, 1887), pp. 351-352.

born in a barn at the back of his owner's house on Beekman Street. He often spoke of the relationship of his place of birth with that of the Savior. Williams was converted under the noted Captain Thomas Webb, and became very active in the Society. He married Mary "Molly" Durham, a slave who had come from the West Indies—St. Christopher. Williams became sexton at John Street in the early 1770's and Mary became maid at the parsonage. Records state that on June 10, 1783, the John Street trustees "paid Mr. [James] Aymer for his negro Peter—40 pounds."³⁶ Williams immediately began working to pay the trustees for his freedom. At one time four pounds was remitted by "Black Peter." The Records continue, "By cash received of Peter Williams in full of all demands on the fourth day of November, 1785, five pounds seven shillings."³⁷ In mid-December 1785 a "formal Paper of Emancipation was enacted at the Court by the trustees, recorded in Lib. 53 of Conveyance, p. 220, of the city's official records."³⁸ Williams became a prosperous businessman, contributing to the building of Zion Church, at Leonard and Church Streets, personally laying the cornerstone in 1800. He is thus regarded as one of the founders of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. The Williams had two children: Peter, Jr. became an ordained clergyman of the Episcopal Church. Mary, their adopted daughter assisted her father in his extensive business. Mrs. Peter Williams—Mary—died in 1821, was buried at Forsyth Street Methodist Church. Her epitaph, "Words cannot express her worth."³⁹

Thomas Taylor—an early exponent of Methodism in America—wrote a remarkable letter to Wesley in 1768, and spoke glowingly, "Within six months, about twenty-four persons received justifying grace, nearly half of them were white, the rest negroes . . ."⁴⁰ Blacks were part of the Methodist witness—from the very beginning.

Wesley's first official missionaries to America, Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore arrived in Philadelphia on October 22, 1769. Their *Journals* and letters contain numerous references to the presence of blacks. Boardman's first letter, from New York, to Wesley, notes "The number of Blacks that attend the preaching affects me much. One of them came to tell me she could neither eat nor sleep because her master would not suffer her to come to hear the word. She wept exceedingly, saying, 'I told my master I would do more than ever I used to do, if he would but let me come.'⁴¹

Pilmore, writing from New York, Sunday, January 27, 1771 noted, "After preaching, I met the Negroes apart, and found many of them very happy. God has wrought a most glorious work on many of their

³⁶ Nolan B. Harmon, ed., *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), II:2567.

³⁷ Graham, p. 6.

³⁸ Harmon, II:2567.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, II:2568.

⁴⁰ Richardson, p. 43.

⁴¹ *The Arminian Magazine* (1784), VII:164, cited in Frank Baker, pp. 88-89.

souls, and made them witnesses that he is no respecter of persons."⁴² It is indeed glorious that God was no respecter of persons, but Pilmore, for all his good intentions, seems to have been meeting them "apart."

Francis Asbury, on November 17, 1771 observed "their sable countenances in our solemn assemblies."⁴³ It was but one of the first in a long list of references and notations in his subsequent *Journal* entries and his letters.

Thomas Rankin, in 1774, observed the Love Feast:

Some of the poor black people spoke with power and pungency of the loving-kindness of the Lord. If the rich in this society were as much devoted to God as the poor are, we should see wonders done in the city. Holy Jesus, there is nothing impossible with thee.⁴⁴

Representative Personalities

No two individuals are alike. As we observe the many word portraits of early black Methodists, we are struck by the varied personalities, the different talents, and the several roles played. We now turn to a select group—each representing a particular aspect of ministry and witness.

Henry Evans

Henry Evans (c.1740-1810) stands as one of the leading preacher-pastors of his day. He excelled both as a man of the spoken word and as a shepherd of souls. Freeborn, in Virginia, he became an itinerant local (lay) preacher. He is credited with establishing the Fourth Street Church in Wilmington, Delaware. He is said to have then moved south towards Charleston. He stopped in Fayetteville, North Carolina about 1780 and there kept his rendezvous with destiny. He saw the wretched conditions among the slaves and quickly made up his mind to stay and preach. Preach he did, with amazing power. It was so much power that the town officials became alarmed at his persistent "agitation" and ordered him out of the community, to the surrounding sandhills. He was personally threatened by mob violence. His persistent, straightforward preaching soon won the white leaders to his side. The entire town of Fayetteville—or Cross Creek or Campbellton as it would have been known then—came out to hear Evans. He was soon invited back into the town where he preached regularly. Before 1800 a simple structure for worship was erected. White visitors soon outnumbered the slaves.

Bishop William Capers commented that Evans was "so remarkable, as to have become the greatest curiosity of the town; insomuch that distinguished visitors hardly felt that they might pass a Sunday in Fayetteville

⁴² Frederick E. Maser, ed., *The Journal of Joseph Pilmore* (Philadelphia: Historical Society of the Philadelphia Annual Conference, 1969), p. 74.

⁴³ Elmer T. Clark, ed., *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958). *Journal* I:9-10.

⁴⁴ Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1866), I:212.

without hearing him preach."⁴⁵ it is a familiar theme—the black preacher who provided an interesting message for those who had nothing better to do. It all took a remarkable turn. It was far more than amusement; it was an authentic gospel and people, white and black responded. Asbury called the church the "African meeting house." It became the meeting house for all people. Evans lived in a room at the rear of the chancel. He preached faithfully until 1806, at which time his health failed and the pulpit was then filled by preachers appointed by Bishop Asbury.

Henry Evans made an exceedingly interesting will, dated December 9, 1809, in which he bequeathed the part of the building and lot used for church purposes to the Methodist Episcopal Church. The residence section and the remainder of the lot would go to the Church only at the time of his widow's death. This remarkable document is on file today—Cumberland County Index of Wills, June 1811, p. 165.⁴⁶ It means, of course, that Henry Evans purchased the original property. The location of this building is the present site of the Evans Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Henry Evans is "father of the Methodist Church, white and black in Fayetteville . . ." The present Hay Street United Methodist Church, predominately white, traces its founding to Evans.

Henry Evans died in 1810. Bishop Capers told of Evans' last message to his congregation; Capers was the witness to the event:

On the Sunday before his death . . . the little door between his humble shed and the chancel where I stood was opened, and the dying man entered for a last farewell to his people. He was almost too feeble to stand at all, but supporting himself by the railing of the chancel, he said: 'I have come to say my last word to you. It is this: None but Christ. Three times I have had my life in jeopardy for preaching the gospel to you. Three times I have broken the ice on the edge of the water and swum across the Cape Fear to preach the gospel to you. And now, if in my last hour I could trust to that, or to any thing else but Christ crucified, for my salvation, all should be lost, and my soul perish for ever.'⁴⁷

His funeral, said Capers, was attended "by a greater concourse of persons than had been seen on any funeral occasion before." The entire city of Fayetteville appeared to mourn. Henry Evans "was buried under the chancel of the church of which he had been in so remarkable a manner the founder." Few pastors have been responsible for so meaningful a ministry, and it was a ministry set in the context of adverse circumstances. Evans overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Methodism in Fayetteville stands as his monument.

John Stewart

John Stewart (1786-1823) is generally recognized as the first home missionary of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Born a freeman in Pow-

⁴⁵ Harmon, I:814.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

hatan County, Virginia, Stewart was of Negro and Indian parentage. While young he made his way to Ohio. His family had been Baptist, but youthful Stewart regarded himself as a "careless sinner" who had pronounced feelings against the Methodists. It was Camp Meeting time, near Marietta, with Marcus Lindsey preaching. Stewart, "drunken and poverty-stricken" and "intent on suicide"⁴⁸ was gloriously converted. He united with the Methodist Episcopal Church and was licensed as an Exhorter. He had scant learning, but was a "melodious singer" who felt divinely called. "His mind became much exercised about preaching." One day in the field, while praying:

It seemed to me that I heard a voice, like the voice of a woman praising God; and then another, as the voice of a man, saying to me, "You must declare my counsel faithfully." . . . They seemed to come from a northwest direction.⁴⁹

It was enough! With knapsack on his back, Stewart set off for the northwest.

Stewart reached "the old Moravian establishment among the Delawares" at "Goshen, on the Tuscarawas river" where he learned that Indians were living much farther north on a reservation. At Upper Sandusky he met William Walker, the government Indian agent and Mrs. Walker "a most amiable woman, of good education and half Wyandotte." Stewart then made up his mind to work among the Wyandot. Fortunately he came to know Jonathan Pointer, a black, who agreed to serve as his interpreter. The work went forward with abandon. Stewart had immediate rapport with his "red brothers" and he entered into the life of the people in a dramatic fashion, engaging in tribal dances. Alas, in 1818 it was noised abroad that Stewart, unordained, had administered baptism and officiated at a wedding.

Hearing that a Quarterly Conference was to be held near Urbana, Stewart immediately moved in that direction, determined to apply for a Local Preacher's License. Moses Crume, Presiding Elder of the Miami District of the Ohio Conference, 1818, wrote:

Here [Urbana] we found Stewart, with several of his red brethren, the Wyandotts, with a recommendation from the chiefs that had been converted, earnestly desiring to have him licensed to preach the Gospel, according to the rule and order of our church. At the proper time, . . . his case was brought before the quarterly meeting conference, his recommendations read, and his brethren heard, who gave a good account of his life and labors in the conversion of many of their nation: . . .

Crume concluded his report with an eloquent pronouncement, "I think it was the unanimous vote of that respectable body of men, that he was licensed: all believing that they acted in conformity to the will of God."⁵⁰

John Stewart continued his ministry among the Wyandot with re-

⁴⁸ Wade Crawford Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions* (New York: The Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, 1949), I:203.

⁴⁹ James B. Finley, *History of the Wyandott Mission* (Cincinnati: Wright and Swormstedt, 1840), p. 76.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 94f.

markable success. A number of white Local Preachers had originally requested that they be permitted to assist him. Stewart married and Bishop McKendree collected \$100. which was used to purchase sixty acres joining the Wyandot reservation. Here the Stewarts lived.

John Stewart, a remarkable man—and a man with a remarkable missionary vision—died at age 37, on December 17, 1823.⁵¹ It is a reminder that most of the early circuit riders and missionaries died young, burning themselves out in a ministry that demanded almost superhuman strength. Stewart was buried in the garden on his farm. Later, just as the Wyandot made their final departure from their reservation, they “gathered his bones and buried them on the south side of the Wyandot Mission Church.” At his grave is a stone bearing John Stewart’s name and the inscription “Earth for Christ.”⁵²

Richard and Sarah Allen

When the Christmas Conference assembled in Baltimore, December 24, 1784, in session until January 2, 1785, the Methodist Episcopal Church was born. Two blacks were probably in the assembly—documentary evidence is lacking. Nonetheless, tradition insists that Richard Allen and Harry Hosier were present. They certainly *ought* to have been there.

Richard Allen (1760-1831) stands among the foremost churchmen of America. Born a slave, February 14, 1760 in Philadelphia, he rose to heights, making a contribution to the entire nation. His conversion in 1777 marks the beginning. His preaching in 1780 resulted in his being invited to preach in his master’s house. Allen purchased his freedom and began traveling in Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. Perhaps it is the fiercely independent spirit which marked Allen from the outset—and in part made him the personality he was. His standing toe to toe with Asbury, an accomplishment few could boast of, is one example.

Rev. Bishop Asbury sent for me to meet him at Harry Gaff’s. I did so. He told me he wished me to travel with him. He told me that in the slave countries, Carolina and other places, I must not intermix with the slaves, and I would frequently have to sleep in his carriage, and he would allow me my victuals and clothes. I told him I would not travel with him on these conditions. He asked me my reasons. I told him if I was taken sick, who was to support me? and that I thought people ought to lay up something while they were able, to support themselves in time of sickness or old age.

To this rather startling declaration, Asbury responded in even, firm tones:

He said that was as much as he got, his victuals and clothes. I told him he would be taken care of, let his afflictions be as they were, or let him be taken sick where he would, he would be taken care of; but I doubted whether it would be the case with myself. He smiled, and told me he would give me from then until he returned from the

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 214f.

⁵² Barclay, I:205.

eastward to make up my mind, which would be about three months. But I made up my mind that I would not accept of his proposals.⁵³

It is not surprising that after the St. George's incident, November of 1787, Allen walked out not only of that particular local church but the denomination. The Free African Society came into being April 12, 1787 and the African Methodist Episcopal Church was born April 9, 1816 with Allen its first Bishop. Only a man of independent spirit could have accomplished so much. Yet, to the credit of two stubborn men, Allen and Asbury remained on good terms. June 11, 1799 Asbury ordained Allen a deacon—giving him the position of the first black to be ordained in the Methodist Episcopal Church. One of the marked qualities of Richard Allen was that though men did not always agree with him, they respected him. He moved with power: as a businessman of substance, as a preacher, as a citizen of Philadelphia, as a Bishop of a rapidly growing denomination. He stands as the executive—always keeping a firm hand on the helm until the very time of his death on March 26, 1831.

The story of Richard Allen is incomplete without due recognition of Sarah Allen, who stands not only as the wife of a noted clergyman, but distinctly in her own right. She was active in the life of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She was a foremost leader in giving assistance to runaway slaves. William Colbert, pastor at St. George's, said, "I believe if there is a Christian in Philadelphia this black woman is one."⁵⁴ Another wrote of her:

She was not only an associate and counselor to the bishop [Allen], but she was a friend, frank and sincere. All who desired could come to her with their problems and difficulties. Fugitive slaves found in her one who would aid them in their pursuit of freedom. Ministers who needed help discovered her a friend. Her home was a resting place for them, and her purse was always open to the needy.

The account continued:

With her hands she produced raiment for them in the days of homespun cloth. After a day's journey upon a horse, pants and coat would often need repair. Mother Allen's needle would be brought quickly into service.⁵⁵

Indeed, the Allens made a remarkable team. They are buried at Mother Bethel in Philadelphia—the spot where Allen had his blacksmith shop and where a denomination was born.

⁵³ See *The Life Experiences And Gospel Labors Of The Rt. Rev. Richard Allen . . . Written by Himself* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960. Originally published in 1880), pp. 22-23. Also see Carol V. R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 32. Additional information on Richard Allen may be found in Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders 1755-1940* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977), Chapter II, pp. 15-17, 21, 25-27. Also see Russell L. Adams, *Great Negroes Past and Present* (Chicago: Afro-Am Publishing Company, 1964), pp. 21, 77, 82, 88.

⁵⁴ Cited in Frederick E. Maser, *Richard Allen* (Lake Junaluska, North Carolina: Commission on Archives and History, The United Methodist Church, 1976), p. 27.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

Harry Hosier

Harry Hosier (1750?-1806) stands in a class by himself. His saga is the *Everyman* of the black circuit riding preacher, writ in letters large. Born a slave, manumitted, he began to preach. Information about the events in his remarkable life is hard to come by. Unable to read and write, he left no personal mementos, letters, sermons, or journals. All we know of him we must learn from others. Of this we are certain: he was acclaimed by those who knew and appreciated good preaching as one of the greatest public speakers of his time. He ascended to heights of oratory seldom known to preachers or public figures. Men such as Bishop Thomas Coke; Dr. Benjamin Rush the noted Philadelphia physician; seasoned preachers such as G. A. Raybold, Thomas F. Sargent, and William Colbert all testified to his superb preaching zeal and skill, his ability to hold audiences of all races in the palm of his hand.

Traditionally, Hosier, or "Black Harry" as he was called, is said to have been born near Fayetteville, North Carolina, but there is no documentation to support the theory. There is a good chance that he may have been associated with the Henry (Harry) Dorsey Gough family at their plantation, Perry Hall, near Baltimore, but again this is speculation.⁵⁶

Positive proof regarding Hosier's life is to be found in the *Journal* and several letters of Francis Asbury and the *Journal* of Thomas Coke. Freeborn Garrettson's *Narrative* and Henry Boehm's *Reminiscences* and William Colbert's *Journal* all provide valuable data. These preachers knew him personally and wrote of their travels. A single clipping from *The New York Packet* of September 11, 1786 has been reprinted and thus provides a reporter's first hand witness to Hosier's preaching. G. A. Raybold's *Reminiscences* contributes valuable material on Hosier, all having been told the author by those who remembered stories about "Black Harry."

A document, the Sally Lyon charge against Hosier—which happily was completely cleared—may be found in the Morrell Collection at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. Nineteen preachers of the Philadelphia Conference signed a document—The Preachers request—in behalf of Hosier. The paper is in possession of St. George's Church in Philadelphia. Linked with this rather limited amount of documentation is oral tradition, myth, pious legend, and the good story. Out of these a dynamic speaker emerges. He was a man of deep piety, great skill in oratory, friend and associate of several leading personalities of the Methodist Episcopal Church. They called him "the African wonder." They also said he was "no man made preacher." They spoke of his great humility and his skill in quoting the Bible; hymns were also cited in

⁵⁶ See Warren Thomas Smith, "The Incomparable 'Black Harry'" in *Together*, October 1970, pp. 40-41. Also by Smith "Harry Hosier: Black Preacher Extraordinary" in *The Journal of The Interdenominational Theological Center*, Volume VII, Number 2, Spring 1980, pp. 111-128. Also by Smith *Harry Hosier: Circuit Rider* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1981).

beautiful English. They mentioned his power in prayer.

We cannot locate his grave today. It is, tradition tells us, in Palmer Burying Ground in Philadelphia. Perchance it might be on the original location of Zoar Church. This we know: Harry Hosier's name lives. He represents late 18th century and early 19th century preaching at its best.

"Punch"

In 1788, Francis Asbury was in South Carolina. He saw a black man fishing at a stream. Asbury paused, got down from his horse, came to the black and began a conversation. "Do you ever pray?" "No sir," was the reply. The man to man conversation went on; both instruction and exhortation were employed by Bishop Asbury. The black man wept. Asbury prayed and sang a hymn, and then departed. Twenty years later the black came to thank Asbury.

Some forty-eight years went by from the time of the initial conversation. The date would have been 1836. A circuit rider made a special visit to a plantation in South Carolina. He had learned there were Methodist slaves there. When he arrived he found between two and three hundred black people in a thriving Methodist Society. The leader was a very aged black who rejoiced that a preacher had come. "I have many children in this place. I have felt for some time that my end was near. I have looked around to see who might take my place when I am gone, and I have been praying to God to send someone to take care of them." The old man continued, "The Lord has sent you, my child, and I am ready to go." All that we know of this singular black man is that he is called "Punch" and that he met Francis Asbury beside a stream.⁶⁷ He is one of the black Methodists whose influence was phenomenal—there in his South Carolina plantation—but whose personal history has not been recorded.

A Glorious Tradition

The narrative could—and should—continue. This is the stuff of which life is made. These are the people who make history come alive. These are the people who make history—even though history has failed, often, to record their names. Black preaching, witness, ministry, and living—it is a vital part of the story of Methodism. It is a grand tradition, worthy of emulation!

⁶⁷ See Stevens, III:360f. Also see Richardson, pp. 168-169.