

Methodism, Slavery, and Freedom in the Revolutionary Atlantic, 1770-1820

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## APPROVAL PAGE

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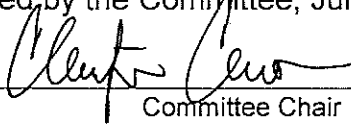
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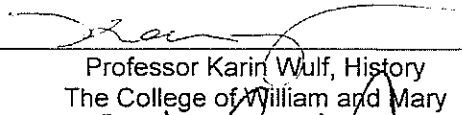
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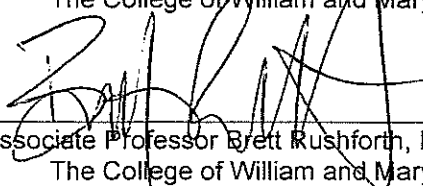
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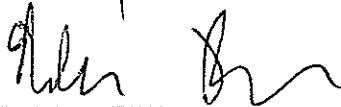
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## ABSTRACT

From its quiet arrival in the British colonies of North America in the 1760s, Methodism unexpectedly grew to become America's largest Protestant denomination by the early nineteenth century. But its rapid growth was not limited to the early United States. Methodist missionaries attracted large numbers of converts in Britain's remaining North American and Caribbean colonies. This dissertation analyzes the connections that linked and ultimately divided Methodists across political, social, and racial lines throughout the Atlantic world, arguing that the movement's rapid expansion amidst revolutionary change led to the fracturing of the transatlantic ties that united its adherents.

This project thus expands the geographical borders of early American Methodism to include regions beyond the United States, including Britain's Maritime, Canadian, and Caribbean colonies, and even venturing across the Atlantic Ocean to the West African community of Sierra Leone, where a large number of former slaves from the American South resettled following the American Revolution. Methodists spoke of themselves as a *connection*, a term that signified both their adherence to the teachings and theology of John Wesley and their attachment to other Wesleyan Methodists across the globe. The events of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, including political revolutions in North America and the Caribbean, slave rebellions, and growth of the abolitionist movement exposed strains within the Methodist connection, as adherents divided over national allegiance and race.

"Methodism, Slavery, and Freedom" is organized into six broadly thematic chapters covering the period from 1770-1820. The first chapter sets the stage for those that follow, tracing the migrations of several groups of Methodists in the wake of the American Revolution. Methodists found themselves on all sides of the conflict, and participated in both the Loyalist diaspora and the republican march westward. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 propose a reexamination of Methodist attitudes toward slavery and antislavery, examining the impact of Methodist connections between the United States and the Caribbean on institutional policies and individual activities. Chapter 5 shifts attention to the impact of revolutionary events and racial tensions on the ecclesiastical politics of Methodism, comparing and contrasting the first independent black Methodist churches in the United States and West Africa. The sixth and final chapter returns to some of the themes explored in chapter 1, analyzing the experience of Methodists in the United States-Canadian borderlands from the American Revolution through the War of 1812.

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For Karim. Who else?

## INTRODUCTION

In mid-April 1787, Methodist minister Thomas Coke arrived in Halifax County, Virginia. Recalling his last visit to the state two years earlier, Coke remembered encountering “a little persecution ... on account of the public testimony I bore against negro-slavery.” The “little persecution” was actually quite severe. Following one sermon, a group of rioters “combine[d] together to flog” Coke. The following day, another mob assembled “to meet [him] with staves and clubs.” The Methodist preacher now learned that legal proceedings had earlier been enacted against him, as well. “Soon after I left the county on my former tour,” he wrote in his journal, “a bill was presented against me as a seditious person before the grand jury.” On his return visit to Virginia, Thomas Coke met with none of the opposition that marked his earlier travels. The people of Halifax County “all received me with perfect peace and quietness.” In Richmond, “instead of opposition, the governor of the State ... ordered the courthouse to be opened” for preaching to Coke and his companions.<sup>1</sup>

The drastically different receptions Thomas Coke received in 1785 and 1787 resulted from a change in his own stance on slavery. During his initial visit to Virginia, Coke proudly bore “a public testimony against slavery” at nearly every opportunity and privately urged Methodists to manumit their slaves. At the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in December 1784, where he and Francis Asbury were elected as co-superintendents (later *Bishops*) of the new church, he helped push through “new terms of communion” requiring all

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. by John A Vickers (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 2005), 53-55, 87-88.

church members to manumit their slaves on penalty of excommunication. Coke also led a campaign to petition Virginia's General Assembly to enact gradual emancipation. Although he still fancied himself "a plain blunt man, that goes directly on," Coke admitted in 1787 "that however just my sentiments may be concerning slavery, it was ill-judged of me to deliver them from the pulpit." His reversal on the subject of slavery was conditioned in part by the swift opposition to his earlier abolitionist efforts. Church leaders were forced to table the new antislavery measures indefinitely when opposed by "a great many principal friends" who insisted "on a Repeal of the Slave-Rules." The efforts to enact more general emancipation also failed, with Virginia's General Assembly unanimously rejecting the terms called for in the Methodists' antislavery petitions.<sup>2</sup> But Coke's stance on slavery was also altered by his recent visit to the West Indies.

In addition to his duties as Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States, Thomas Coke served as President of the Irish Methodist Conference and maintained a station in London, as well. Upon returning to England after his first visit to America in 1784-85, Coke published plans for Methodist missions in Scotland, the Channel Islands, and Britain's colonies in North America and the Caribbean and made plans to visit the latter two as part of his second episcopal tour of the United States. Coke arrived in Antigua with three English preachers on Christmas Day in 1786 and spent two months touring the Leeward Islands. His time in the West Indies directly influenced his approach to missions and ministry, especially as it concerned free and enslaved people of

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<sup>2</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 53, 58, 87; Frederika Teute Schmidt and Barbara Ripel Wilhelm, "Early Proslavery Petitions in Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 30:1 (January 1973): 133-146.

color.<sup>3</sup> In Antigua, St. Kitts, and other neighboring islands, Coke encountered almost none of the hostility from the planter class that he had earlier confronted in the southern United States. He recorded in his journal that they were treated “rather like princes than subjects” and noted with satisfaction the many planters, political officials, and men and women “of property” who invited them into their homes. In Dominica, a “Mr. Burn, a planter [and] generous young man” was “very glad to encourage a Mission in the island” and assured Coke and his companions that “there were about four hundred negroes in the neighbourhood, and that he had no doubt but the few neighbouring planters would give us the same encouragement.”<sup>4</sup> The effect of such cooperation with the planter class was not lost on Coke. Working with, instead of against, slave owners, overseers, and assemblymen provided access to potentially thousands of prospective black converts. It was this lesson that Coke took back with him to the United States, now convinced that it was “ill-judged” to publicly preach against slavery.

This change in his public approach to slavery was accompanied by a parallel alteration in his attitude toward enslaved women and men. In spite of his more forceful condemnation of slavery during his inaugural visit to the United States, Thomas Coke largely ignored the spiritual and temporal needs of enslaved Africans in America. In his journal, he spoke of slavery as a moral evil, but focused his remarks on how it affected the spiritual standing of white

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<sup>3</sup> From his initial voyage until his death in 1814, the islands and their inhabitants were never far from Coke’s mind. He served as superintendent of Methodist missions until 1804, visiting the Caribbean five times and appointing dozens of preachers there. See John Vickers, *Thomas Coke: Apostle of Methodism* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 75-77.

planters. Enslaved persons' worth was addressed only in terms of monetary value. In praising a "Brother Kennon" for freeing "twenty-two slaves," Coke noted that "these are great sacrifices: for the slaves are worth ... thirty or forty pounds sterling each, and perhaps more." Though he was pleased to see black attendees at Methodist meetings, Coke arranged for separate preaching services, delegating the responsibility to Harry Hosier, a free black preacher Coke nevertheless often spoke of in possessive terms.<sup>5</sup>

Upon his return to the United States in 1787, Thomas Coke took a much more particular interest in the salvation of the enslaved. "Since my visit to the islands," he noted, "I have found a peculiar gift for speaking to the blacks."<sup>6</sup> In each of his subsequent visits to the United States and the West Indies, Coke prioritized preaching to African-American and Afro-Caribbean audiences, taking immense satisfaction in the hundreds of thousands of converts of color to the Methodist movement. Although he occasionally lent his support (or at least his signature) to subsequent antislavery efforts in the United States, he never again pursued abolition with the same energy and conviction he displayed during his first visit to America. In 1795, Coke concluded that "if they have Religious Liberty, their Temporal Slavery will be comparatively but a small thing."<sup>7</sup> The slaves' spiritual salvation took precedence over their physical freedom.

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<sup>5</sup> In November 1784, Coke recorded in his journal that "Mr. Asbury ... has given me his black (*Harry* by name)." Though he praised Hosier as "one of the best preachers in the world" and "one of the humblest creatures I ever saw," Coke scheduled all of his preaching appointments. See Coke, *Journals*, 35-37, 53, 87.

<sup>6</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Coke to Ezekiel Cooper, 23 April 1795, in Thomas Coke, *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. John A. Vickers (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 2013), 200.

Thomas Coke's ministry reorients familiar narratives about early American Methodism. As his experience suggests, Methodism's accommodation of southern slaveholders had much deeper roots in the West Indies, where Methodist missionaries worked closely with slave owners in order to more easily proselytize the enslaved population. His travels to and from the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies, furthermore, demonstrate the insufficiency of limiting the study of Methodism to national borders. From 1784 until 1808, when he was released from his episcopal duties in the United States, Coke logged seven transatlantic voyages, visiting the United States six times and the West Indies four times. Other Methodist leaders and laity likewise crossed national borders. Their travels helped forge and sustain important links between Methodists in the early American republic and their counterparts throughout the Atlantic World.

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This dissertation expands the geographic scope of early American Methodism, examining the movement's beginnings and early development in not only the United States, but also Britain's Maritime, Canadian, and Caribbean colonies, as well as in the West African colony of Sierra Leone, where former slaves from the American South, including many Methodists, settled in the 1790s. Studying Methodism from this much broader vantage point challenges common understandings of the movement and its trajectory during the Revolutionary era.

The story of Methodism's rapid growth and development in the early American republic is by now well known, the subject of several excellent studies.<sup>8</sup> From its quiet arrival in the British colonies of North America in the 1760s, the movement unexpectedly grew to become the largest Protestant denomination in the United States by the early nineteenth century. But Methodism's early success occurred not only in the United States. It attracted thousands of converts elsewhere around the Atlantic world, as well, including in both the British Isles and the Crown's Maritime, Canadian, and Caribbean colonies. Its growth and development coincided with and was shaped by larger transatlantic currents, including religious revival, political revolution, and continued debates over slavery and the slave trade.

"Methodism, Slavery, and Freedom in the Revolutionary Atlantic" brings American Methodism and the extensive scholarship on the subject into comparison and conversation with Methodism in Britain's North American and Caribbean colonies. In doing so, I aim to both challenge and move beyond historiographical debates over the democratization of early American Christianity that have limited both the geographic and thematic scope of historical scholarship on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evangelicalism.<sup>9</sup> While some

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<sup>8</sup> The best studies include Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2005); Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770-1810* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); John W. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).



historians of Methodism have rightly pointed out the persistent transatlantic ties that connected Methodists in Great Britain and the United States, their scholarship had largely ignored Canada and the Caribbean, regions that shared much in common socially and culturally with the United States, even after the American Revolution severed their political ties.<sup>10</sup>

Methodists throughout the Atlantic World spoke of themselves as a *connection*. The word possessed multiple meanings in the Methodist lexicon, referring to the band of evangelical preachers “in connection with the Rev. Mr. John Wesley,” the ecclesiastical structure of the movement, and the nature of its missionary force. In contrast to congregationalism, which privileged local control of ministerial appointments, ownership of church property, and oversight of church government, Wesley’s connectionalism maintained centralized control of church property and preaching stations, and enforced a uniform code of discipline overseen by its itinerant ministry.<sup>11</sup> The Methodist societies in the Americas were initially envisioned as a natural extension of the Wesleyan connection. The Methodist connection was intended to transcend politics and political boundaries, as well as regional differences and racial tensions.

This project is a study of connections and disconnections, of religious growth and division. From its earliest beginnings, American Methodism’s

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<sup>10</sup> Important exceptions include Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and George A. Rawlyk, *Radical Evangelicalism in British North America, 1775-1812* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Russell E. Richey, “Connection and Connectionalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, ed. by William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 211-28.

boundaries extended beyond the borders of what later became the United States. Church leaders did not differentiate between the various societies in North America and the Caribbean. Each was part of the American branch of the Wesleyan connection. But Methodism's rapid growth and the disruptions of the Revolutionary era in which that expansion occurred ultimately revealed fractures within the Wesleyan fold. While Methodism succeeded in spreading its message and attracting converts, it ultimately failed to sustain ecclesiastical connections across the shifting social, racial, and political boundaries of the Revolutionary Atlantic world.

Two interrelated thematic frameworks shape the structure and argument of this dissertation. The first concerns political revolution and ecclesiastical development. The American Revolution had a profound impact on Methodism. "By a very uncommon train of providences," wrote John Wesley in 1784, "many of the provinces of North America are totally disjoined from the British empire, and erected into Independence States." Because "the English government has no authority over them either civil or ecclesiastical," Wesley reluctantly authorized the formation of an independent Methodist church, appointing "Dr. Coke and Mr. Francis Asbury, to be joint Superintendents over our brethren in North America."<sup>12</sup> But the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church marked only the beginning of Methodism's Americanization. That process begun by the Revolution continued in its wake, as American Methodist preachers faced stiff resistance in regions beyond the borders of the United States. The

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<sup>12</sup> John Wesley to Dr. Coke, Mr. Asbury, and our Brethren in North America, 10 September 1784, in *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, Annually Held in America, from 1773 to 1794, inclusive* (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1795), 75-77.

Americanization of Methodism in America had less to do with spreading democratic ideals and much more to do with hardening national identities.

The second framework deals directly with Methodism, slavery, and race. Contrary to claims that early Methodists were uniformly opposed to slavery, the movement from its beginnings included a large and vocal proslavery faction. The American Revolution, which lent Methodist antislavery advocates ideological and emotional ammunition, was limited in its effect. In Canada and the Caribbean, it made no impact at all, and as the case of Thomas Coke shows, proslavery Methodism in the West Indies provided a model on which proslavery Methodists in the southern United States could justify their position. Antislavery Methodist leaders' retreat from abolition furthered friction between white and black Methodists, and helped spur free black Methodists in the Middle Atlantic states to independence. But the rise of independent black Methodist churches was not only an American phenomenon. Across the Atlantic Ocean in the newly formed colony of Sierra Leone, a group of black Methodists, former slaves from the American South, initiated their own ecclesiastical independence from white leaders. Although separated by the Atlantic Ocean and mostly unknown to one another, their paths toward ecclesiastical independence shared much in common, and the experience of the Sierra Leone group provides a fascinating point of comparison. By analyzing the connections and disconnections that shaped the Methodist experience in North America and the Caribbean, this study reveals how one religious community responded to the social and political upheavals of the Revolutionary era.

Although Methodism's institutional beginnings in America are typically traced to those societies of lay believers formed in Maryland (1764) and New York (1766), the first Methodist society in the Caribbean predates them both. In June 1759, Antiguan planter Nathaniel Gilbert returned from a two-year sojourn in England, where he and two of the slaves accompanying him were converted under the preaching of John Wesley. Upon arriving back at his Antiguan estate, Gilbert "collected a few persons in his own house for exhortation and prayer, and at length publicly preached the gospel to the slaves."<sup>13</sup> Though he lacked ministerial training and experience, Gilbert "signified to one or two persons that as there was no service at Church in the afternoon, any person disposed to join my family was welcome." Attendance at his weekly preaching appointments grew rapidly, from "six besides my own family" the first Sunday to nine "on the second" and "on the third about eighteen." Within a year, word of Gilbert's preaching had "not only spread through the town" but all "through this island." The society quickly grew to some 200 members, composed mostly of enslaved and free people of color.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History of each Island: With an Account of the Missions Instituted in those Islands, From the Commencement of Their Civilization; But More Especially of the Missions which have been Established in that Archipelago by the Society Late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley*, Volume 1 (Liverpool: Nuttall, Fisher, and Dixon, 1808), 212-13. Coke dated Gilbert's return to Antigua as 1760, but a 1759 letter from Mary Leadbetter, the Gilbert family's governess (and after 1767, Francis Gilbert's wife) who accompanied them to Antigua, makes clear that they arrived in June 1759. See John Walsh to John Wesley, 16 October 1759, in *Arminian Magazine* (June 1780): 330-32.

<sup>14</sup> Nathaniel Gilbert, "Copy of a Letter from Antigua, giving an Account of the dawn of a Gospel-Day," 10 May 1760, in *Arminian Magazine* (June 1780): 387-89; Coke, *History of the West Indies*, 1:213.

Shortly after Nathaniel Gilbert began preaching in Antigua, two additional Methodist societies were founded in North America. Robert Strawbridge, a local preacher from Ireland, immigrated to America in either 1760 or 1761 and began preaching near his home in Frederick County, Maryland. By 1764, he and his wife Elizabeth had organized a small society of Methodist adherents. Further north, another group of Irish immigrants arrived in New York City at approximately the same time as Strawbridge. By 1766, they too had begun meeting, with lay preacher Philip Embury preaching weekly in his home. Additional societies were soon established elsewhere in North America, including Pennsylvania, Virginia, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland. The first licensed preachers sent by John Wesley reached America's shores in 1769. Additional preachers followed, and by the eve of the American Revolution, they were organized into several preaching circuits and holding annual conferences.

The outbreak of the American Revolution revealed the first strains within the Methodist movement. Chapter one revisits this well-trod ground. But instead of focusing solely on the anti-revolutionary writings of John Wesley and the persecution of those itinerant preachers who remained in the colonies, I look instead to the laity, examining several migrations of Methodist men and women spurred by the Revolution. Methodists could be found on all sides of the conflict and participated in both the Loyalist diaspora and the republican march westward during the 1780s and 1790s. These Methodist migrants carried with them their religious faith, often traveling together and organizing the first Methodist classes and congregations in several regions through the North American interior and

broader Atlantic world, including the Northwest Territory, Upper Canada, the Bahamas, and Sierra Leone. But Methodism's expansion exposed conflicts within the movement. In addition to the political divide separating Loyalists and Patriots, dissension arose between white and black Methodists and between pro- and anti-slavery factions within the Methodist movement.

Chapters two, three, and four explore Methodism's complicated relationship with slavery. The second chapter begins with a reconsideration of John Wesley's own attitude toward slavery and early debates on the subject among Methodists in North America during the 1780s, tracing the development of Methodist policies and positions through the early nineteenth century. Contrary to claims that Methodists in early America were "rabid anti-slavery activists," I trace a large and persistent proslavery position within the movement, and argue that the majority of early Methodists did not oppose slavery. When church leaders initiated an antislavery campaign aimed at ridding the church of slavery and encouraging the enactment of legislative measures to abolish slavery within the United States, it exposed additional divisions within the Methodist movement.

The third chapter shifts focus from North America to the Caribbean, analyzing the reciprocal relationship between debates over slavery in the West Indies and the United States. Methodists in the Caribbean never evinced any of the outright antagonism toward slavery that some of their counterparts in the American South did. Following the precedent established by Nathaniel Gilbert, the missionaries that arrived in the West Indies in the 1780s and afterwards worked with political officials and planters in order to gain access to slaves. While

they encouraged slave-owners to treat slaves more humanely, they promised their preaching would make slaves more dutiful servants. Led by Thomas Coke, Methodist preachers in the American South eventually adopted the tactics of the Caribbean preachers, thus signaling a retreat from their earlier antislavery activism.

Black Methodists were not passive observers in Methodist debates over slavery. As white Methodists in the early nineteenth century collectively retreated from their earlier flirtation with abolition, free people of color in both the United States and the West Indies raised their voices in protest. But while most black Methodists opposed slavery, their views were neither static nor uniform. Chapter four compares and contrasts the lives, experiences, and antislavery writings of several prominent black Methodists in the Caribbean and the United States. The attitudes and actions of Anne Hart, Elizabeth Thwaites, Richard Allen, Daniel Coker, and others demonstrate the diversity of views among black Methodists on the subject of slavery, and reveal the ways in which their approaches were shaped by their membership in Methodist churches.

Chapter five examines further the experiences of free and enslaved people of color in Methodism, shifting away from debates over slavery to an analysis of their place within the institutional churches to which they belonged. In this chapter, I reconsider the beginnings of independent black Methodism, bringing the experiences of the African Methodists in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York City into comparison with a parallel push for religious autonomy among black Methodists across the Atlantic Ocean in Sierra Leone. In 1796, just two

years after Richard Allen organized the first black Methodist congregation in Philadelphia, more than one hundred black Methodists, all former slaves in North America, organized the “Independent Methodist Church of Freetown.” Though they asserted their full institutional independence from white oversight nearly two decades before Allen and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, they struggled to achieve that autonomy. Like their counterparts across the Atlantic, black Methodists in West Africa worked for more than twenty years to win legal recognition of their independence from white control.

The sixth and final chapter of this dissertation returns to the themes explored in the opening chapter. It revisits the experience of Methodists in the Revolutionary War and compares it with that of Methodists caught in the middle of the War of 1812 a generation later. In both conflicts, Methodists were harassed as political agitators and agents of imperialism. But whereas Wesleyan preachers along the eastern seaboard in 1776 were accused of opposing American independence, the preachers itinerating in the U.S.-Canadian borderlands in 1812 were charged with spreading American Republicanism. In neither conflict were Methodists the political threats others feared them to be, but the divergent reactions to Methodists in the two wars point to the ways in which American Methodism changed in the ensuing decades. The War of 1812 exposed once more the ways in which the Methodist experience was shaped by political allegiances and national identities. It also signaled the beginning of the end of the Methodist Episcopal Church’s presence in Canada, further aligning the church’s borders and ideals with those of the United States.



A conclusion looks to the Methodist Episcopal Church's General Conference of 1816, where, in the wake of Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke's deaths, church leaders opened a new era in the history of their movement. Over the course of the previous decades, American Methodism's borders were redrawn multiple times, in each instant conforming more and more closely to those of the American nation. As American Methodism entered a new phase in its development, it would look and act increasingly in concert with the United States.

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This project began as a comparative study of Methodism in three regions of the Americas: the Maritimes, the Chesapeake, and the Leeward Island. Its geographical scope and thematic focus expanded as I followed Methodists to and from each region as they journeyed elsewhere, throughout the Caribbean islands, along and beyond North America's southern, northern, and western frontiers, and across the Atlantic Ocean to Africa. As these Methodist migrants established roots in each area and the movement's membership grew, they wrestled with the realities of the era, including political revolution, slavery, and religious liberty. At the center of the political, social, and spiritual worlds Methodists around the Atlantic rim inhabited was a contest over freedom, its meanings, and its limits. In time, that contest would fracture the transatlantic Methodist connection.

The Methodist experience in the Revolutionary Atlantic World points to the complicated and sometimes unexpected ways in which political, religious, and

racial identities intersected during this era. Their story is an important example of one Christian community that attempted (and ultimately failed) to transcend the commotions of the Revolutionary Age. In spite—or perhaps, *because*—of that failure, Methodism thrived in the early American republic, becoming by the mid-nineteenth century the nation’s largest and most visible church, the epitome of mainline Protestantism in the United States. Before American evangelicalism became democratized in any meaningful sense, it needed first to be Americanized. That process, which included not only a realignment of the Methodist Episcopal Church’s borders with those of the United States, but also a reassessment of the church’s mission to “reform the continent” (including the ever-present issue of slavery), is the subject of the study that follows.

## CHAPTER 1

### In Search of the Land of Liberty: Methodist Migrations in Revolutionary America

On November 7, 1775, Lord John Murray, Fourth Earl of Dunmore and Royal Governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation declaring martial law from his headquarters aboard the large merchant vessel-turned-warship *William*, anchored near the mouth of the James River in between Norfolk and Portsmouth. In addition to “requir[ing] every Person capable of bearing Arms, to resort the His Majesty’s STANDARD,” Dunmore “further declare[d]” that “all indented Servants, Negroes, or others (appertaining to Rebels) ... that are able and willing to bear Arms” who joined “His Majesty’s Troops as soon as may be,” would be awarded freedom in return.<sup>1</sup> Dunmore’s Proclamation formalized a process already at work in the Chesapeake. The British had long threatened to arm slaves and dozens of enslaved laborers from various Tidewater towns and plantations had escaped behind British lines since Dunmore’s escape from Williamsburg in June. Following the publication of the Proclamation in mid November, those numbers multiplied rapidly. By month’s end, “between two and three hundred” runaways had joined Dunmore’s forces. By the spring of 1776, that number had grown to approximately 1,500. Over the course of the entire war, roughly 20,000 slaves throughout North America safely escaped to British lines.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Virginia Gazette*, 24 November 1775. On the background of Dunmore’s Proclamation, see James Corbett David, *Dunmore’s New World: The Extraordinary Life of a Royal Governor in Revolutionary America—with Jacobites, Counterfeiters, Land Schemes, Shipwrecks, Scalping, Indian Politics, Runaway Slaves, and Two Illegal Royal Weddings* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 94-110.

<sup>2</sup> The 20,000 estimate is a significant revision of earlier estimates by historians that placed the number between 80,000 and 100,000. See Cassandra Pybus, “Jefferson’s Faulty Math: The Question of Slave Defections in the American Revolution,” *William and*

Unlike so many of the slaves who escaped before the Revolution, who often acted individually, those who took advantage of Lord Dunmore's Proclamation took flight as families and friends.<sup>3</sup> They also traveled as congregations. A group of over 100 black Methodists from Tidewater Virginia successfully escaped between 1776 and 1779. Closely linked by ties of both fictive and real kinship, the black Methodists converted under the preaching of the first Wesleyan itinerants to reach southern Virginia. After spending the majority of the war in British-occupied New York City, most of the black Methodists joined the larger Loyalist resettlement in Nova Scotia. There, they established anew their class and congregations, working with white preachers to spread the Methodist gospel, rapidly expanding their membership in the process. In 1792, over three hundred joined the group of 1,200 black Loyalists who volunteered to help settle the new abolitionist colony of Sierra Leone, where they introduced Methodism to Africa, organizing the first congregations and classes on the continent well before the arrival of the first Methodist missionaries.<sup>4</sup>

Virginia's black Methodists were joined by other Methodist migrants who participated in the Loyalist Diaspora. Joining the black Loyalists in Nova Scotia were several prominent lay men and women from New York City's John Street

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*Mary Quarterly* 62:2 (April 2005): 243-64; Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 48-52.

<sup>3</sup> Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles*, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Cassandra Pybus, "Mary Perth, Harry Washington, and Moses Wilkinson: Black Methodists Who Escaped from Slavery and Founded a Nation," in Alfred F. Young, Gary B. Nash, and Ray Raphael, eds., *Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 155-68. Pybus has identified at least 134 black Methodists in Tidewater Virginia among the Loyalists. See "Virginia's Black Methodists from the Book of Negroes," available online at <http://methodists.blackloyalist.info/browse.php>. Accessed 25 April 2016.

Methodist congregation, including the brothers James and John Mann, longstanding pillars of New York Methodism and lay preachers who helped shepherd the congregation through the turbulent war years when no regular preachers were available. Paul and Barbara Heck, who helped found the John Street society before relocating further north in New York State, led an exodus of Loyalist Methodists across the Saint Lawrence River to Montreal before settling further upriver in August Township.

Not all Methodist migrants were Loyalists. American adherents joined the post-Revolutionary mass migration westward, settling in the newly ceded expanses of the Northwest Territory and forming the first Methodist congregations there. Their number included several prominent preachers from Virginia, whose migrations were propelled by a combination of political allegiance, economic opportunity, and antislavery principles. Uniting Wesleyan theology and Republican rhetoric, the Virginians freed their slaves and moved to what would soon become the state of Ohio.

The experience of these and other Methodist migrants during and immediately after the war reorients our understanding of Methodism and the American Revolution, a subject too often limited to an analysis of John Wesley's anti-revolutionary writings and the activities of itinerant ministers. The war's impact on Methodism ranged far beyond a few persecuted preachers and the eventual creation of the Methodist Episcopal Church. It altered the lives of several thousand Methodist men and women, spurring their relocation to new reaches of North America and the British Atlantic world. Their migrations had far-

reaching consequences for the nascent movement in the Americas, expanding Methodism's borders even further around the Atlantic rim and into the American interior. But they also exposed core tensions within the Wesleyan fold. As preachers were dispatched to minister to the migrants, political and national divides surfaced. And in the interaction between white and black Methodists in the new territories, further divisions emerged over race and slavery. Methodism's rapid post-Revolutionary expansion in the Americas, then, was marked by ongoing division. Transnational religious unity proved increasingly difficult to achieve in the Revolutionary Atlantic World.

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In September 1775, John Wesley published a 23-page pamphlet entitled *A Calm Address to Our American Colonies*. Borrowing heavily from another political tract published earlier, Samuel Johnson's *Taxation No Tyranny*, it defended the right of Parliament to tax the American colonies "for any end beneficial to the whole empire" and objected to the colonists' complaints that they lacked sufficient liberty. "After all the vehement cry for liberty," wrote Wesley, "what more liberty can you have? What more religious liberty can you desire, that that which you enjoy already? ... What civil liberty can you desire, which you are not already possessed of? ... Would the being independent of England make you more free? Far, very far from it."<sup>5</sup> The tract proved immensely popular, with nineteen printings and 100,000 copies published in the first year. Wesley's views marked a modest departure from his earlier expressions of sympathy for the

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<sup>5</sup> John Wesley, *A Calm Address to Our American Colonies* (London: R. Haws, 1775), 4, 15.

colonists' plight, but they were also in line with his long-standing suspicion of political radicalism, allegiance to the British Crown, High Churchmanship, and his theological understanding of the relationship between sin and civil conflict.<sup>6</sup>

Although copies of Wesley's *Address* never reached American shores—Wesley's hopes for it to be sent “abroad as I designed” were frustrated because “the American ports were shut up”—rumors of its publication circulated widely in the colonies and his Loyalist views were well known.<sup>7</sup> Wesley's political writings made matters difficult for both preachers and laity in America, who were immediately stigmatized as enemies to the colonists' cause. They also complicated his admonition to the preachers in the colonies as recent as April “to be peace-makers, to be loving and tender to all, but to addict yourselves to no party” and “say not a word against one or the other side.” In March 1776, Francis Asbury complained that “some inconsiderate persons have taken to censure the Methodists in America, on account of Mr. Wesley's political sentiments” and that he was “truly sorry that the venerable man ever dipped into the politics of America.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Two excellent recent treatments of Wesley's pamphlet are Glen O'Brien, “John Wesley's Rebuke to the Rebels of British America: Revisiting the *Calm Address*,” *Methodist Review: A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies* 4 (2012): 31-55; and Jeffrey Williams, *Religion and Violence in Early American Methodism: Taking the Kingdom by Force* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 43-55, which provides a fascinating analysis of the tract within the context of Wesley's larger corpus of theological writings on politics and just war theory.

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, “A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England,” in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, 14 vols., ed. Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872) 11:129; John Wesley to Thomas Rankin, 20 October 1775, in *Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols., ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 6:182. The claim that Methodists in America destroyed copies that reached the colonies has been corrected in O'Brien, “John Wesley's Rebuke to the Rebels,” 46-47.

<sup>8</sup> Wesley to Thomas Rankin, 1 March 1775, in Wesley, *Letters* (Telford), 6:142; Francis Asbury Journal 19 March 1776, in *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, in Three*

Aspirations of remaining above the political fray were made more difficult still by the actions of several of Asbury's fellow preachers. In the fall of 1776, George Shadford filed a petition with the Virginia legislature "in Behalf of the whole Body of the people Commonly called Methodists in Virginia" opposing the disestablishment of the Anglican Church there, forthrightly "beg[ging] leave to set forth that we are not Desenters, but a Religious Society in Communion with the Church of England."<sup>9</sup> The following year, Martin Rodda was found guilty of circulating copies of King George III's *Proclamation for Suppressing Rebellion and Sedition* in Baltimore, and only narrowly avoiding execution. Thomas Rankin similarly preached "in favour of the British cause," declaring during one sermon in Philadelphia "that God would not revive his work in America, until they submitted to their rightful sovereign, George the Third." By 1778, six of the eight preachers dispatched for America by Wesley, including Rankin, Rodda, and Shadford, had returned to England, leaving only Asbury and James Dempster behind.<sup>10</sup>

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*Volumes*, ed. by Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton (London and Nashville: Epworth Press and Abingdon Press, 1958), 1:181 (hereafter *JLFA*).

<sup>9</sup> "Methodist Petition, Oct. 28, 1776," in "Virginia Legislative Papers," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 18:2 (April 1910): 143-44.

<sup>10</sup> Freeborn Garrettson, *American Methodist Pioneer: The Life and Journals of Freeborn Garrettson, 1752-1827*, ed. Robert Drew Simpson (Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1984), 150, n52; Thomas Ware, "The Christmas Conference of 1784," in *Thomas Ware, a Spectator at the Christmas Conference: A Miscellany on Thomas Ware and the Methodist Christmas Conference*, ed. by William R. Phinney, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Robert B. Steelman (Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1984), 277; Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 47-55; John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 93-97. Asbury spent most of the remainder of the war in hiding in Delaware, while Dempster retired from the active ministry and moved to upstate New York, where he later accepted an invitation to minister to a Presbyterian congregation. See J.B. Wakeley, *Lost Chapters Recovered from The Early History of American Methodism* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1858), 250-54.



Although the remaining American preachers' political views and attitudes toward the war were quite varied, accusation of Loyalism continued to haunt Methodists for the remainder of the conflict and beyond. Attempts to assert their neutrality were interpreted as efforts "to preach passive obedience and nonresistance" in the aid of the King. The situation was especially difficult in Maryland, where several itinerants refused to sign the required oath of allegiance and were imprisoned.<sup>11</sup> Only in Virginia, where most Methodist preachers and laity vocally supported the colonists' cause and where the state's unique religious landscape benefitted the movement, did Methodists manage to escape the conflict relatively unscathed.

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Widespread accusations and assumptions about Methodist Loyalism similarly shaped the wartime experiences of the lay men and women who made up the membership rolls of the Methodist societies throughout the colonies. Some, including Thomas Webb, the prominent local preacher who helped consolidate the early classes and congregations in New York City, Philadelphia, and Delaware, eagerly courted the oft-repeated accusations of Loyalism. Webb, a veteran of the Seven Years War, maintained active correspondence with Lord Dartmouth, Secretary of State for the American Colonies, and passed along whatever intelligence he could gather regarding planned Continental Army campaigns to assist British officials. Though he narrowly avoided charges of

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<sup>11</sup> John Littlejohn, *Journal of John Littlejohn*, Microfilmed Typescript, Methodist Library, Drew University, Madison, NJ. The best account of the Methodist experience during the war, including an analysis of the Maryland persecutions, is Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 55-62.

treason after being arrested in 1777, Webb remained a prisoner of war until 1778, when he was permitted to return to England.<sup>12</sup> Other Methodists were less enthusiastic in their support of the King, initially opting to remain neutral in the conflict until pushed to do so. Included in that category are many of the Irish Palatine immigrants who formed the first Methodist society in New York City.

In the spring of 1778, patriot forces seized the recently vacated home of Barbara and Paul Heck in Charlotte County, New York. The Hecks had moved upstate from New York City eight years earlier, joining several close friends and family members with whom they had jointly secured a lease on 2,500 acres of land in New York's Camden Valley. The Hecks claimed two hundred and fifty acres of wooded land on which they planned to live and farm. Within seven years, they had cleared forty-two acres and built "a House and a New Frame Barn & other Buildings."<sup>13</sup> They also united themselves with the local Methodist Society, founded by Irish immigrant Thomas Ashton one year earlier on a land grant he held five miles south of the Hecks' new home. The congregation there resembled in its membership the early Society in New York City. It included, in addition to Barbara and Paul, John Lawrence, John and Sophia Dulmage (Heck's brother-in-law and sister), and Philip and Margaret Embury, who had all first migrated to America from Ireland in the 1750s, and who were members of the John Street Society in New York City. It was Philip Embury whom Barbara Heck had insisted begin preaching in 1760, and who subsequently assumed charge of the New York City society before the arrival of the first itinerants in 1769. Once

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<sup>12</sup> Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 52-53.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Heck, Claim, 3 November 1786, American Loyalist Claims, Series II, AO 13/13, 203-204, National Archives, Kew, London, England.

settled in the Camden Valley, Embury once more served as local preacher to the Ashgrove Society, preaching on Sundays and making periodic visits to another lay Methodist society in Chesterfield, New Hampshire.<sup>14</sup>

In spite of recent assessments that the Irish Palatines were “principled Loyalists,” the settlers evidenced some ambivalence when war broke out between Great Britain and her colonies in 1775. Though they later claimed to have been devoted Loyalists even “before the War,” the Camden Valley Methodists only reluctantly took sides. Though they likely did not realize it at the time, their arrival in Charlotte County in 1770 placed them in the middle of an emerging conflict. The tracts of land on which they settled were claimed by both New York and New Hampshire, and the settlers remained under constant threat of harassment from Ethan Allen’s Green Mountain Boys. In 1775, Allen’s militia raided the settlers’ farms, stealing livestock and other animals from their farms, including a cow from the property of Philip Embury’s widow, Margaret. Subsequent raids, together with physical harassment and the threat of imprisonment, finally pushed most of the Methodist men in the region to volunteer for military service.

John Dulmage was among the first to join, signing up in 1776. Paul Heck joined the Corps of Volunteers several months later, in early 1777, signing on for a one-year stint. Several were organized under the command of Captain Robert Leake, making up approximately one-third of the 83 Loyalist combatants that

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<sup>14</sup> Wakeley, *Lost Chapters*, 117-140; Samuel J. Fanning, “Philip Embury, Founder of Methodism in New York,” *Methodist History* 3 (1965): 16-25; Arthur Bruce Moss, “Philip Embury’s Preaching Mission at Chesterfield, New Hampshire,” *Methodist History* 16 (1978): 101-09.

participated in General John Burgoyne's failed campaign at Saratoga in September and October 1777. While Dulmage remained enlisted for the duration of the war, eventually attaining the rank of Lieutenant, others, including Heck, had seen enough and returned to their families. Earlier that year, Barbara Heck, their five children, and at least one slave migrated north across the Saint Lawrence River to Montreal. They were joined by at least one other Methodist family, Margaret Lawrence, Philip Embury's widow who had subsequently married John Lawrence. Following their respective discharges from military duties in August 1778, Lawrence and Paul Heck joined their families in Montreal, where Lawrence found work in the Commissariat Department and Heck sustained his family on irregular work as a carpenter and dockhand, and later as a bateauman.<sup>15</sup>

Following the war's conclusions and the colonists' victory, the Irish Palatine immigrants prepared to move yet again, joining some 8,000 other Loyalists in what was then the British colony of Quebec. Three-fourths of those Loyalists settled further upriver, on lands in what became, in 1791, the province of Upper Canada. Their number included all but a small handful of the Camden Valley Methodists. Those who had served in the military received deeds to tracts of land, and by 1785, Methodist migrants had settled in three primary areas – the Bay of Quinte, the Niagara Peninsula, and Augusta Township, near present-day Prescott, where Paul and Barbara Heck moved in 1785. In both Montreal and Augusta Township, the migrants "carried on their Methodist testimony." John and

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<sup>15</sup> Eula C. Lapp, *To Their Heirs Forever: United Empire Loyalists, Camden Valley, New York to Upper Canada* (Belleville, Ontario: Mika Publishing Company, 1977), 197-230, 253-274.

Margaret Lawrence hosted the first Methodist class in their home, a group that included Paul and Barbara Heck, three of their children, and Philip Embury's son, Samuel, who assumed his father's former post as leader of the small society.<sup>16</sup>

Paul Heck died in 1795 and Barbara in 1804. Having played a central role in the introduction of Methodism to both the United States and Canada, Barbara Heck was memorialized by nineteenth-century denominational historians as the "mother of Methodism" in North America.<sup>17</sup> Historians today most commonly highlight the Hecks' role in laying the foundation for the large congregations that later developed in New York City, upstate New York, and Upper Canada. But focusing on their connections to any particular place obscures the reality of the Irish Palatine Methodists' lives as immigrants. After converting to Methodism in the 1750s, they moved four times, first from Ireland to New York City, and then onto Charlotte County, across the Saint Lawrence River to Montreal, and finally to Augusta Township. In each instance, they introduced Methodism to the area years before the first licensed preachers arrived. Their lives highlight not only the significant role lay men and women played in the spread of early American

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<sup>16</sup> G.G. Findlay and W.W. Holdsworth, *The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society* (London: Epworth Press, 1921), 1:354-55; Abel Stevens, *The Women of Methodism: Its Three Foundresses, Susanna Wesley, the Countess of Huntingdon, and Barbara Heck; with Sketches of their Female Associates and Successors in the Early History of the Denomination* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1866), 193-94.

<sup>17</sup> On Barbara Heck, see Frank Baker, *From Wesley to Asbury: Studies in Early American Methodism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1976), 40-44; Dee E. Andrews, "Heck, Barbara," in *American National Biography Online* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), <http://www.anb.org/articles/01/01-00393.html>; accessed 23 April 2016; G.S. French, "Ruckle, Barbara," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 5 (University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003), [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/ruckle\\_barbara\\_5E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/ruckle_barbara_5E.html), accessed April 23, 2016.

Methodism, but also the important part migration and mobility played in defining those early Methodists' lives.

At the same time that the Hecks, Lawrences, and other Irish Methodists were making their way down the Saint Lawrence River to their new home in Upper Canada, another group of Methodist Loyalists was arriving in the Maritime colonies of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. They were part of the 30,000-plus Loyalists that arrived between 1783 and 1787, nearly tripling the region's population.<sup>18</sup> Those migrants, arriving from New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the Carolinas, represented a wide swath of society and arrived in search of political protection and economic opportunity. Their number included landed slave-owners and slaves, indentured servants and newly-free people of color, as well as many middling men and women suddenly displaced from their former homes. The Methodist migrants included some from each social class.

The majority of the Methodist migrants to Nova Scotia had initially sought wartime refuge in British-occupied New York, and there found a lively Methodist community at the John Street Chapel first established by the Irish Palatines. In fact, the Methodist chapel on John Street, because of its connection with the Church of England, was one of only a handful of church buildings that remained open during the war in New York City. In January 1777, John Wesley reported that he had "just received two letters from New York; ... They inform me that all the Methodists there were firm for the Government, and on that account persecuted by the rebels." The preachers, he noted, "are still threatened, but not

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<sup>18</sup> Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles*, 353.

stopped.”<sup>19</sup> In May, however, when the Wesleyan preachers met for their annual conference in Deer Creek, Maryland, no appointment was made for New York City, though the minutes recorded a membership there of 96. The following year, with most of the English itinerants having set sail to return home and Francis Asbury forced into hiding, leadership lost almost all contact with the New York society, and no appointments were made or membership reported there until after the war, in 1783 and 1784.<sup>20</sup>

With no licensed preacher available, the society was kept together under the care of several lay men and women. John Mann, a class leader, trustee, and treasurer of the congregation, initially assumed responsibilities as lay minister, preaching weekly sermons, organizing and overseeing classes, and regulating membership from 1776 to 1778, when he was relieved of his duties by Samuel Spragg, a licensed preacher from Philadelphia recently arrived in the city.<sup>21</sup> Under Spragg’s leadership, the society continued to grow, hosting love feasts and other large gatherings, and initiated correspondence with John Wesley in England. Membership numbers are not available for the years between 1777 and 1783, but likely numbered several hundred. In addition to the several New York Methodists who continued living in the city during the war, the steady stream of Loyalists who flooded into the city each month almost certainly bolstered those numbers, as did the British military officers and soldiers. John Mann’s brother James worshipped at the John Street Chapel, as did Robert Barry, a successful

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<sup>19</sup> John Wesley to Joseph Benson, 11 January 1777, *Letters* (Telford), 6:249.

<sup>20</sup> *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the Years 1773-1828* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 8-20.

<sup>21</sup> James Mann, “Memoir of John Man, Missionary in Nova Scotia” *Methodist Magazine* (London), 41 (1818): 641-646.

merchant who later settled in Shelburne, and Charles White, an original trustee of the chapel and a close friend of Francis Asbury.<sup>22</sup>

While the Methodists who eventually ended up in Nova Scotia shared political and religious allegiances with their counterparts who traveled to Canada, they differed from one another in important respects. Those who spent the war in New York City were, on the whole, a considerably more diverse lot than the ethnically homogenous group from Camden Valley, with more single men and women and proportionally fewer families. Their numbers included not only the soldiers and wealthy white merchants mentioned above, but also working class women and men, indentured servants, and slaves. A number of Methodist worshippers in the city were black. Charles Inglis, the rector of Trinity Episcopal Church and early subscriber to the John Street chapel, noted in 1780 that “attention to the Negroes is become the more necessary as some thousands of them have escaped to New York from the revolted colonies.”<sup>23</sup> The sexton and undertaker of the chapel, in fact, was a black slave named Peter Williams. And the regular worshippers at Wesley Chapel surely included the hundreds of black Methodists who had earlier escaped from slavery in Virginia and North and South Carolina, taken up arms in Lord Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment, and then been

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<sup>22</sup> Allen B. Robertson, *John Wesley’s Nova Scotia Businessmen: Halifax Methodist Merchants, 1815-1855* (New York: Peter Land, 2000), 15. Nineteenth century church historian J.B. Wakeley attributed the financial stability of the congregation during the war—collections evidently increased, and Samuel Spraggs was allotted a larger salary than any Methodist preacher before the war—to “most of the [other] Churches in the city being closed” and the attendance of “British officers ... as well as soldiers.” See Wakeley, *Lost Chapters*, 287-88.

<sup>23</sup> John Wolfe Lydekker, *The Life and Letters of Charles Inglis: His Ministry in America and Consecration as First Colonial Bishop, from 1759 to 1787* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1936), 203.



sent to New York to wait out the war. Taking an active part in Wesleyan worship, the former slaves also lived in constant fear of irritated former owners visiting the city on a mission to reclaim lost property, and were relieved, at the war's conclusion, to be issued certificates of freedom and to board ships bound for new homes. It must have come with some relief, then, when the black Loyalists finally found themselves in 1783 setting sail from New York's harbor, bound for Nova Scotia.

Although most of the black Loyalists went onto Nova Scotia, black Methodists traveled elsewhere, too. Paul and Barbara Heck owned slaves, and at least one—"Bett, my servant Maid"—went with them to Canada.<sup>24</sup> Others joined their masters or were sold to others in the Caribbean. In some instances, they alone were responsible for introducing Methodism to a region. Shortly after the war's conclusion, a North American slave named Harry was "sold to a M<sup>r</sup>. Godette" on the small Dutch West Indian island of Sint Eustatius. Previously "a member of [the Methodist] Society" in his former home, Harry began to "mi[x] among his fellow servants, ... to speak the word of God, and sing hymns and hold prayer-meetings." When Thomas Coke arrived with the first crop of Methodist missionaries to the island in 1787, he was shocked to learn that "the Lord raised up lately a negro-slave ... to prepare our way," and upon his departure, left the newly organized Methodist classes in the care of Harry and

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<sup>24</sup> In 1795, Paul Heck willed Bett to Barbara, though he included a provision that "she shall have her Freedom" upon "arriv[ing] to the age of Twenty Five Years." Another of the Heck's slaves named Betty was among the original six-member class that began meeting in Philip Embury's home in 1766. "A true copy of Paul Heck's will signed by Samuel Reynolds," as cited in Lapp, *To Their Heirs Forever*, 293. Although they shared a similar name, "Bett" is clearly not "Betty," as evidenced by her young age.

another black “North American sister.”<sup>25</sup> Methodism was similarly introduced to the Bahamas when a small group of black Methodists arrived in Abaco in 1783.

Unlike Harry and the unnamed female Methodist slave in Sint Eustatius, the Methodists that arrived in the Bahamas were former slaves. Joseph Paul, born a slave in South Carolina, was converted under the preaching of George Whitefield. During the American Revolution, he moved with his master Richard Cartwright to New York City, where he became actively involved in the thriving Methodist community. He was also able to eventually purchase his freedom, along with that of his wife and three children, but when the war ended, was forced to indenture himself to a Captain Patrick Kennedy in order to afford the cost of migrating together as a family. In August 1783, the Paul family boarded the ship *Nautilus* and joined roughly 40 other black Loyalists en route to the Bahamas. Among their fellow passengers were at least three other black Methodists: Timothy Snowball (also indentured to Kennedy), a “stout mulatto fellow” formerly owned by the Norfolk, Virginia sea captain and merchant Cornelius Colbert (also indentured to Kennedy), and Jack and Venus Jordan, a “stout little man” and “stout little wench” both indentured to John Job.<sup>26</sup> Jordan and Snowball were part of the close-knit community of black Methodists in

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<sup>25</sup> “Some account of Harry the Black, mentioned in Dr. Coke’s History: taken from a recital of a Black Woman in St Bartholomew” (January 1819), Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, West Indies, Correspondence, 1817-1819, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. John A. Vickers (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 2005), 82.

<sup>26</sup> Jack Jordan had previously been the property of prominent Quaker merchant Robert Jordan in Nansemond County, just southeast of Norfolk. Venus Jordan’s previous owner was a “Captain Wingfield of Boston New England.” See *Book of Negroes*, <http://blackloyalist.info/source-image-display/display/?file=76>.

Tidewater Virginia who successfully escaped under the provisions of Dunmore's Proclamation.

The *Nautilus* arrived in Abaco in August 1783. By 1784, Joseph Paul and his family had moved to Nassau, on the island of New Providence where he began preaching "to the eastward of town under a large spreading tree" and quickly garnered a congregation of several hundred.<sup>27</sup> Among his followers were at least some slaves, including "Old Mrs. Wallace," an African-born woman who had spent time in Jamaica, British West Florida, South Carolina, and East Florida before being transported to New Providence with her Loyalist master after the war. Although Paul later left Methodism, pursuing ordination in the Church of England, his first congregation formed the initial nucleus of the Methodist community in the Bahamas.<sup>28</sup>

The mass evacuation of Loyalists from the city left the John Street Society in poor shape. John Dickins, an experienced itinerant Francis Asbury sent in 1783 to oversee the postwar reintegration of New York City into the Methodist fold, reported in July that the initial reception he met "was rather cool." "Many of the societies are gone," he reported, "& others going to England & Nova-scotia, So that I think it likely that our societies will be reduced to less than 100." Of those remaining, "Most ... want fellowship with each other," he reported, "& many want zeal & simplicity. They have had but little discipline among them for some

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<sup>27</sup> Samuel Kelly, *An Eighteenth Century Seaman: Whose Days have been Few and Evil*, ed. Grosbie Garsten (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1925), 115.

<sup>28</sup> John W. Catron, "Evangelical Networks in the Greater Caribbean and the Origins of the Black Church," *Church History* 79:1 (March 2010): 104; Sandra Riley, *Homeward Bound: A History of the Bahama Islands to 1850 with a Definitive Study of Abaco in the American Loyalist Plantation Period*, Bicentennial Edition 1983, Fourth Printing (Miami: Island Research, 2000), 140.

time.”<sup>29</sup> But as Methodism in New York struggled to regain its footing, the movement of several hundred Methodists to Nova Scotia strengthened its previously small and isolated societies.

Even before the war had ended, a 22-year-old lay preacher named William Black had written to John Wesley requesting that he send preachers to the province. Black had arrived in the Cumberland Valley in 1775 as a fifteen-year old, and after experiencing conversion four years later, began informally preaching to the nucleus of Methodist families in the region. Following the arrival of several thousand Loyalists beginning in the latter half of 1783, Black began itinerating throughout the colony, preaching to audiences both large and small and doing what he could to organize the influx of Methodist migrants he found. At Wesley’s urging, Black set off in September 1784 “to visit the States, intending to get some help from our brethren there.”<sup>30</sup> Three months later, he attended the famed Christmas Conference at which Asbury and Thomas Coke were set apart to superintend the work in the United States. When he returned in early 1785, accompanying him were two licensed and ordained preachers representing the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church.

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On December 24, 1784, approximately sixty Methodist preachers gathered in Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore, Maryland. In the wake of the

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<sup>29</sup> John Dickins to Edward Dromgoole, 4 July 1783, Edward Dromgoole Papers, Correspondence, 1775-1787, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

<sup>30</sup> William Black, “The Life of Mr. William Black, Written by Himself,” in *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers, Chiefly Written by Themselves, Edited, with an Introductory Essay, by Thomas Jackson, Third Edition, with Additional Lives* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1866), 5:283.

American Revolution's outcome, John Wesley, whose opposition to the American colonists' cause was widely known, was left wondering how to make sense of the American victory and how to proceed moving forward. In a letter dated September 10, 1784, Wesley took note of this "very uncommon train of providences," noting that "many of the provinces of North America are totally disjoined from the British empire, and erected into Independent States." "Our American brethren," he continued, "are now totally disengaged both from the State, and from the English hierarchy." While Wesley remained firmly attached to the Church of England, he "dare[d] not entangle" American Methodists, "either with the [State] or the [Church]," and pronounced them "now at full liberty, simply to follow the scriptures and the primitive church. And we judge it best that they should stand fast in that liberty, wherewith GOD has so strangely made them free."<sup>31</sup>

Wesley dispatched Thomas Coke, Richard Whatcoat, and Thomas Vasey for America, with instructions to ordain Francis Asbury and organize the first independent Methodist church. At the assembled conference in December, the Methodist preachers "agreed to form ourselves into an Episcopal Church." Over the course of the next several days, Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury "were unanimously elected to the superintendency of the Church," and Asbury was ordained to that station by Coke, who was "assisted by two ordained elders."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> John Wesley to Dr. Coke, Mr. Asbury, and our Brethren in North America, 10 September 1784, in *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, Annually Held in America, from 1773 to 1794, inclusive* (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1795), 75-77.

<sup>32</sup> Francis Asbury, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, Volume I: The Journal, 1771 to 1793*, ed. by Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton (London and Nashville: Epworth Press and Abingdon Press, 1958), 474.

The newly constituted superintendents then went to work organizing the church, agreeing upon a form of church government and organization, affirming core theological doctrines, and instituting policies governing the lives of adherents. Although the entire enterprise was justified on the grounds that in America, “no one either exercises or claims any ecclesiastical authority” and “there is none either to baptize or to administer the Lord’s supper,” the Methodist Episcopal Church’s jurisdiction would extend beyond the borders of the new United States.<sup>33</sup>

Among those invited by Wesley to attend the Christmas Conference was John Baxter, the naval shipwright-turned-lay preacher who had assumed leadership of the large body of Methodists in Antigua, and William Black, recently arrived from Nova Scotia in hopes to recruiting preachers for the province. In the wake of the late war, neither Antigua nor Nova Scotia found itself “totally disjoined from the British empire.” Methodists in each region had ready access to Anglican clergy and congregations for ordinances. But the continued growth of Methodism in both the Caribbean (Antigua reported membership of 1,000 in 1786) and the Maritimes (spurred by the influx of immigrants in 1783 and 1784) meant that both needed additional preachers. Among the fifteen elders ordained at the conference were John Baxter and Jeremiah Lambert, who was elected to accompany Baxter back to Antigua and assist in the work there. William Black was not ordained, but successfully secured the appointment of two preachers for

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<sup>33</sup> *Minutes of Several Conversations between The Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D., The Rev. Francis Asbury and Others, at a Conference, Begun in Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, on Monday, the 27th. of December, in the Year 1784, Composing a Form of Discipline for the Ministers, Preachers and Other Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Philadelphia: Charles Cist, 1785), 3.

Nova Scotia. Freeborn Garrettson was appointed to Shelburne and James Cromwell to Port Roseway. Within five years, the Methodist Episcopal Church had assumed control of the Canadas, too, sending the first preacher to the congregation of exiled Loyalists in the Bay of Quinte in 1790.<sup>34</sup>

Over the course of the 1780s and 1790s, the preachers sent to Nova Scotia and Canada, working in concert with the lay Methodists in each region, steadily grew both the number and size of congregations. By 1794, a decade after the arrival of the first ordained ministers, Methodist membership in Nova Scotia had surpassed 1,100. In Upper Canada, too, Methodists quickly increased their numbers. When William Losee, the first preacher assigned to the region reached the Bay of Quinte in 1790, he found a congregation of approximately 200 devout Methodists. Within a decade, membership in the province had reached almost 1,000.<sup>35</sup> But with this growth, and with the American-based Methodist Episcopal Church assuming ecclesiastical oversight of regions outside of the United States, came tensions.

The preachers immediately faced opposition from Anglican clerics in each area. Freeborn Garrettson, persecuted and imprisoned just a few years earlier on charges of being an enemy to the Revolution, now faced accusations of spreading Republican ideals. But Anglican officials were not the only ones wary

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<sup>34</sup> *Minutes* (1840), 22-24; Coke, *Journal*, 42, n93.

<sup>35</sup> *Minutes* (1840), 57, 92-93. As elsewhere throughout North America, the total number of attendees at Methodist meetings was perhaps four to five times that number, and preachers often reported preaching to congregations of several hundred in areas where membership was significantly smaller. See David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 211.

of the American Methodist preachers. Lay Methodists, too, voiced their preference for preachers from Britain. “A number of people would prefer an Englishman to an American,” wrote Garrettson in 1786. “Many have refused hearing me on this account.”<sup>36</sup> Wesley was reluctant to send preachers from England, though. As he explained to Methodist merchant Robert Barry, “It is an invariable rule with me, not to require any one to go out to America; nay, I scruple even to advise them to it.” Wesley’s rule was based on practicality. Methodists in the United States could more easily and more quickly supply preachers for nearby Nova Scotia than could the British Conference.<sup>37</sup> But over the course of the 1790s, as Nova Scotian Methodists increasingly voiced their preference for English preachers, church leaders in America struggled to find itinerants willing to take up the assignment.

The tensions were partially resolved by the ordination of several Nova Scotian preachers, including John and James Mann and William Black, who was ordained in 1789 and then set apart as superintendent of eastern British North America.<sup>38</sup> The first Methodist Episcopal minister reached Canada at approximately the same time. William Losee was admitted to the Methodist ministry on trial in 1789, and appointed to the Lake Champlain circuit in upstate New York. In early 1790, he ventured north across the border into Quebec and

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<sup>36</sup> Garrettson to Asbury, 1786, Garrettson Family Papers, GCAH (*American Methodist Pioneer*, 251).

<sup>37</sup> John Wesley to Robert Barry [1784], as cited in T. Watson Smith, *History of the Methodist Church within the Territories Embraced in the Late Conference of Eastern British America, Including Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Bermuda* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Methodist Book Room, 1877), 145.

<sup>38</sup> Black, “The Life of Mr. William Black,” 287; G. S. French, “MAN, JAMES,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 5 (University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003– ), [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/man\\_james\\_5E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/man_james_5E.html), accessed April 26, 2016.



then upriver to the Loyalist settlements of Kingston and Adolphustown, where he “knew some of the settlers ... before they left the United States,” including some of his own family members. After preaching in the area for several months, he returned to New York in October with a petition signed by several Methodists requesting Losee be appointed to them on a more permanent basis. The petition was approved, and in 1791, he returned, formally organizing classes and congregations in Adolphustown, Ernestown, and Fredericksburgh. Crucial to Losee’s initial success was not only his shared ties to friends and family in the region, but also shared political sympathies. William Losee was evidently a Loyalist himself. “Had he been on the revolutionary side,” wrote one nineteenth century Canadian Methodist historian with perhaps a little exaggeration, “the warm loyalists would not have received him,—rather would have driven him from the country.”<sup>39</sup>

Whether or not that is true is difficult to say, but as in Nova Scotia, tensions existed in the years to come between Loyalist laity in Canada and the American preachers sent to minister to them. Some of that tension can be seen in the subscription paper drawn up to solicit funds for the first Methodist church in the region. In a document dated February 3, 1792, 22 men and women in Adolphustown signed their name to a document announcing their intentions “to build a Meeting-house or Church for the more convenient assembling of ourselves together for social worship before the Lord.” The signers “agree[d] to

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<sup>39</sup> George F. Playter, *The History of Methodism in Canada: With an Account of the Rise and Progress of the Work of God among the Canadian Indian Tribes, and Occasional Notices of the Civil Affairs of the Province* (Toronto: Anson Green, 1862), 21-25; J. William Lamb, *William Losee: Ontario’s Pioneer Methodist Preacher* (Adolphustown, Ontario: Board of Trustees for the Old Hay Bay Church, 1974).

build said church under the direction of William Losee, Methodist preacher, our brother who has labored with us this twelve months past.” In anticipation of a potential transfer for Losee, they added the following: “Or in his absence under the direction of any assistant Preacher belonging to the Methodist Episcopal Church in Great Britain or America, sent from there by proper authority (such as the Bishop) to labour among us.” While the signers were emphatically clear that “no other denomination or society of people shall have any privilege or liberty to preach or teach in the said Methodist church” without their consent, their confusing reference to “the Methodist Episcopal Church in Great Britain or America” points to the tensions underlying American Methodism’s march into Upper Canada.<sup>40</sup>

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The Methodist experience in North America during the 1780s and 1790s was marked not only by political tensions, but also by racial ones, too. Many of the 3,500 black Loyalists who had arrived in Nova Scotia at the conclusion of the war endured one disappointment after another in their new home. Due to the unexpectedly large number of both black and white Loyalist émigrés, land was not as plentiful as planned. Lots originally designated for black settlers were given instead to (or, occasionally, simply taken by) their white neighbors. The timing of their arrival worsened conditions. After disembarking in late summer, the former slaves scrambled to find work and were forced to make do with scarce provisions in preparing for the winter months ahead. Most ended up living in

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<sup>40</sup> The document is reproduced in Playter, *History of Methodism in Canada*, 30-31.

small, crudely constructed dugouts, or pit houses, large enough only to sleep in.<sup>41</sup>

As it had during their enslavement and then again during their wartime trials, religion provided an avenue of solace and success for the black community. The large contingent of black Methodists now living in the Maritimes had initially converted to Methodism in Tidewater Virginia in the years immediately before the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. In addition to their regular attendance at Sunday worship, the group also met in clandestine class meetings, late at night in the secluded confines of the Great Dismal Swamp in southern Virginia, far from the watchful eyes of masters and overseers. One early convert named Mary, a domestic slave in the home of prominent Norfolk planter and county official John Willoughby, later described “for so many nights in the week, after having put her master and mistress to bed,” taking “her own child upon her back, and [going] up into the country; and, during the night, [assembling] a number of other slaves, and instruct[ing] them.” Others, including a young and charismatic convert named Moses, owned by Suffolk merchant Mills Wilkinson, likewise assumed informal positions of leadership.<sup>42</sup> Those religious networks formed among the slaves persisted through their time in Lord

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<sup>41</sup> The best treatment of the black Methodist experience in Nova Scotia remains Ellen Gibson Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1976). See also James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); and more recently Ruth Holmes Whitehead, *Black Loyalists: Southern Settlers of Nova Scotia's First Free Black Communities* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Nimbus Publishing, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> “Singular Piety in a Female African, Letter from the Rev. Mr. Clark, Chaplain to the Sierra Leone Establishment, to his Father in Scotland,” *Evangelical Magazine* (1796), 463. I am indebted to Cassandra Pybus, who first pointed out the letter to me. See also Pybus, “Black Methodists,” 155-68.

Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment and during their sojourn in New York City. They also helped structure and sustain the black Methodist community in Nova Scotia.

When Freeborn Garrettson and other white Methodist preachers arrived in Nova Scotia in 1785, they expressed some surprise at finding a thriving black Methodist community, already informally organized into congregations and classes. Though the white ministers and black preachers worked in harmony with one another, black congregants were often segregated from their white peers in worship, as they were in the United States. As early as August 1785, black Methodists in Shelburne were encouraged to build "themselves a little house at the north end of town," so that Garrettson could preach "to them separately, in order to have more room for the whites." There were also several predominately black congregations, the 200-plus member Birchtown society led by Moses Wilkinson, the charismatic convert from Suffolk, Virginia, left lame and blind after contracting smallpox during the war.<sup>43</sup> Over the course of the 1780s, additional black congregations emerged in Bridleytown and Preston, an unordained black preacher presiding over each.

Whatever solace and sense of independence their weekly worship provided, black Methodists continued to face severe struggles in their day-to-day lives. They grew alarmed at the steadily increasing number of slaves in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, and likely resented that some of their fellow congregants bought, sold, and owned slaves. Many of the freed people, moreover, were forced by their indigence into "temporary bondage to white

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<sup>43</sup> Garrettson, *American Methodist Pioneer*, 127; Mathew Richey, *A Memoir of the Late Rev. William Black, Wesleyan Minister, Halifax, N.S. Including an Account of the Rise and Progress of Methodism in Nova Scotia* (Halifax: William Cunnabell, 1839), 128.

masters,” accepting terms of indenture that bordered on slavery. As historian James Walker noted, “in a society conditioned to thinking of blacks as slaves, their claims for equality were not always to be taken seriously by white individuals.”<sup>44</sup> Harsh winters, continued poverty, and still-unfulfilled promises of land allotments from colonial officials made matters worse still, collectively contributing to a growing sense of restlessness among the black population. An atypically long and cold winter in 1789 reduced Nova Scotian society to the brink of famine. The black community was hit especially hard. Black Methodist preacher Boston King later remembered that “many of the poor people were compelled to sell their best gowns for five pounds of flour, in order to support life. When they had parted with all their clothes, even to their blankets, several of them fell down dead in the streets, thro' hunger.”<sup>45</sup>

It is little wonder, then, that so many of the black Loyalists, including the vast majority of the Methodists among them, eagerly accepted the 1791 invitation of John Clarkson to resettle in Sierra Leone. Clarkson, a lieutenant in the British Navy and brother to the noted abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, arrived in Nova Scotia representing the Sierra Leone Company. Speaking to Moses Wilkinson’s congregation, he promised much of what colonial officials in Nova Scotia had failed to deliver, including free land on which to settle and improve and guaranteed civil and religious freedom. The invitation was met with overwhelming enthusiasm. The black Methodist congregations led by Moses Wilkinson, Luke

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<sup>44</sup> Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 42. See also Jasanoff, *Liberty’s Exiles*, 281. On slavery in Nova Scotia, see Harvey Amani Whitfield: *North to Bondage: Loyalist Slavery in the Maritimes* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> Boston King, “Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, a Methodist Preacher,” *Methodist Magazine* (May 1798): 210.

Jordan, and Boston King all agreed to go, as did the followers of black Baptist preacher David George and the Huntingdonian congregation led by Cato Perkins.

Fifteen ships carrying more than 1,000 passengers set sail in January 1792, arriving at their destination a little less than two months later in early March. Indicative of their deeply held Christian beliefs and suggestive of the ways in which they understood their journey as a modern-day reliving of the Israelites' exodus, the black Loyalists sang the following refrain as they approached their destination: *The day of Jubilee is come! / Return ye, ransomed sinners, home. / Return ye, ransomed sinners, home.*<sup>46</sup> But instead of a land flowing with milk and honey, the migrants discovered the shoddy remains of the recently razed Granville Town, a failed attempt resettle London's "black poor" just a few years earlier. Thick jungle encircled the indistinguishable plots of land they were promised. Inadequate shelter and the arrival of monsoon season in the spring of 1792 led to an outbreak of malaria among the new settlers, killing 138 before finally subsiding. And if the former slaves hoped to at last live in a society removed from slavery, they were disappointed once more. Freetown was located just upriver from the notorious slave-trading fort on Bunce Island.<sup>47</sup>

Early relations with colonial officials did little to improve the experience. As in Nova Scotia, the government failed to deliver on its promises of ample and cheap land. When John Clarkson was replaced as governor in 1794 by Zachary Macaulay, a former slave-manager on a West Indian plantation recently

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<sup>46</sup> J. B Elliott, *Lady Huntingdon's Connexion in Sierra Leone* (London, 1851), 15.

<sup>47</sup> Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Books, 2006), 139-155.

converted to the abolitionist cause, the new governor resisted not only the black Loyalists' efforts to receive their promised allotment of land, but also attempted to institute a new set of policies governing their religious lives, mandating catechism classes in the Anglican church for all children and refusing to recognize the Methodist and Baptist preachers' rights to administer ordinances. Macaulay mocked the preachers' pretensions to religious authority, decrying Moses Wilkinson's congregation as "mad Methodists" and criticizing "their government" as "pure democracy, without subordination to anyone."<sup>48</sup>

In response, the black settlers wrote a series of letters to John Clarkson in London, petitioning the Sierra Leone Company's board to reappoint him as governor. Their letters provide unparalleled insight into the experiences and perspectives of the black Loyalists in Sierra Leone. In November 1794, several of the settlers, frustrated with Governor Macaulay's friendly relations with slave traders stopping off at Bunce Island, complained to Clarkson that "we wance did call it Free Town but since your Absence We have A Reason to call it A Town of Slavery."<sup>49</sup> The letters also reveal the way in which the black Methodists' understanding of themselves and their many migrations were affected by their religious beliefs. In March 1796, Methodist James Liaster expressed his regret "that we ever Came to this place," though he hoped God had a hand in it. "We Believe that it was the handy work of Almighty God," he continued, "that you

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<sup>48</sup> Zachary Macaulay Journal, 26 November 1794, 13 September 1793, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

<sup>49</sup> Luke Jordan and others to John Clarkson, 19 November 1794, in Christopher Fyfe, ed., *Our Children Free and Happy: Letters from Black Settlers in Africa in the 1790s* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 43. Among the several additional signers to the letter were Methodists Isaac Anderson, James Hutcherson, Stephen Peters, and "Moses Wilkinson, preacher."

should be our leader as Mosis and Joshua was bringing the Children of Esaral to the promise land.” Repeating these themes, James Hutcherson and Moses Murray wrote Clarkson two months later, comparing their struggles to “the Oppression that King Pharoah Where With Oppressed the Egyptians” and imploring him to “leave us Not in the Wilderness to Oppressing Masters – but be Amongst us. As you have took that Great undertaking As Mosis & Joshua did – be with us Until the End.”<sup>50</sup>

In casting themselves as contemporary Israelites, the Methodists of Sierra Leone were tapping into a particular strain of Revolutionary era rhetoric. As James Byrd has observed, “no biblical narrative was more influential or more diverse in its applications” during the Revolutionary War “than the story of Exodus and its intrepid if inarticulate hero, Moses.” Patriotic ministers and politicians alike saw in the account “a Parallel between the Case of Israel and that of America, and between the Conduct of Pharaoh and that of [King] George.” Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin reportedly hoped to include in the design for the seal of the “confederated States” an image of “Moses lifting up his Wand, and dividing the Red Sea, and Pharaoh, in his Chariot overwhelmed with the Waters.” The Patriots’ appropriation of Israelite identity did not go unchallenged, though, and both Loyalist church leaders and African Americans alike disputed the comparisons linking Patriots with Biblical Israelites and the Crown with the oppressive Pharaoh. Black slaves, including some Methodists, “reversed Revolutionary America’s reading of the Exodus story,” pointing out the

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<sup>50</sup> James Liaster to John Clarkson, 30 March 1796; James Hutcherson and Moses Murray to John Clarkson, 24 May 1796, in Fyfe, *Our Children Free and Happy*, 49-50, 51.



hypocrisy of describing burdensome taxes and unequal representation as “slavery” while continuing to hold others in bondage and profit from their unpaid labor.<sup>51</sup>

Critiques of this sort from both black and white Methodists, though, differed from others in one crucial respect. While John Wesley and others condemned the hypocrisy of American slaveholders in directing screams of “Murder! Slavery!” at the British Crown while their own chattel slaves were “fainting under the load” and “bleeding under the lash,” they also laid fault for the war at the feet of the British empire.<sup>52</sup> British Methodist leader John Fletcher, for example, argued that although the colonists’ rebellion was wrongheaded and Britain’s actions in response entirely just, the Revolution itself was a punishment for the Empire’s collective sins, including the transatlantic slave trade, in which “our countrymen turned Africa into a field of blood.” In a rare instance of a white preacher identifying enslaved Africans as Israelites, Fletcher warned that “Cruel usage of the Israelites destroyed Egypt,” and argued that both Great Britain and her colonies risked the fate of Pharaoh: “Do not the sighs of myriads of innocent negroes unjustly transported from their native country to the British dominions,” he asked, “call night and day for vengeance upon us [?]”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> James P. Byrd, *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 45-47, 56.

<sup>52</sup> John Wesley, *A Calm Address to our American Colonies* (London: Robert Hawes, 1775), 3.

<sup>53</sup> John Fletcher, *The Bible and the Sword: Or, the Appointment of the General Fast Vindicated, In an Address to the Common People, Concerning the Propriety of Repressing Obstinate Licentiousness with the Sword, and of Fasting When the Sword is Drawn for that Purpose* (London: R. Hawes, 1776), 8. See Byrd, *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War*, 118-120.

Tapping into this uniquely Methodist reading of the Revolution, the escaped slaves regularly shifted the roles of the several characters and places in their own Exodus story. While they might once have agreed such assessments, having escaped from their masters, taking up arms in opposition to the American forces, and expressed their “willing[ness] to be govern[ed] by the laws of england in full,” they now struggled against English and not American oppressors. Zachary Macaulay and the Sierra Leone Company, not George Washington and the Continental Congress, now assumed the place of Pharaoh.<sup>54</sup>

When it became evident that Clarkson’s return to the colony was unlikely and in the face of renewed efforts by Macaulay to enforce the payment of quitrents the black settlers objected to, a group of several Methodist families took matters in their own hands. Nathaniel Snowball, a member of Moses Wilkinson’s congregation going back all the way to their time as slave hands in Tidewater Virginia, announced in a letter to Clarkson that “I am Chosin out of the head of A Number of people to take my Departure as the Ezerlites did” so that “we may be no longer in bondage to this tyrannious Crew.” The company, led by Snowball, James Liaster, and Luke Jordan, negotiating with local Koya Temne rulers the acquisition of “a piece of ground” called Pirate Bay located about four miles west of Freetown. By 1797, “six or nine Family” had left “the Colony,” with “many other Familys ... thinking of going,” perhaps as many as “one half of the Colony.”<sup>55</sup> Though nowhere near half of the settlers joined the company, Snowball and

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<sup>54</sup> Beverhout Company to John Clarkson, 26 June 1792, in Fyfe, *Our Children Free and Happy*, 25.

<sup>55</sup> Nathaniel Snowball and James Hutcherson to John Clarkson, 24 May 1796; Boston King to John Clarkson, 1 June 1797; in Fyfe, *Our Children Free and Happy*, 52, 54.

Jordan did successful recruit 30 families to their new colony, where Snowball was elected governor.<sup>56</sup>

The majority of Methodists remained in Freetown, continuing their struggle against colonial leaders even after Macaulay was relieved of his position and governor in 1799. Some feared they would not live to see the fulfillment of their exodus—the arrival in a promised land—but hoped that their children might. “We have not the Education which White Men have,” they admitted in one lengthy petition to the Sierra Leone Company’s “Chairman & Court of Directors,” but “we have feeling the same as other Human Beings and would wish to do every thing we can for to make our Children free and happy after us.” Having survived slavery themselves, they held out hope that “our Children” would not “be in bondage after us.”<sup>57</sup> Following the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and the transfer of colonial control from the Sierra Leone Company to the British Crown in 1807, the situation in Sierra Leone slowly improved on several fronts, though tensions with white leaders persisted and the settlers’ long-sought liberty was never fully realized.

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As the formerly enslaved black Methodists journeyed from the American South to New York City, Nova Scotia, and across the Atlantic Ocean to Sierra Leone in search of a land of liberty, a cohort of their coreligionists in their former home of Virginia embarked on an exodus of their own. At the organizing conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784, church leaders

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<sup>56</sup> Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 185.

<sup>57</sup> Settlers’ Petition, undated, in Fyfe, *Our Children Free and Happy*, 36-37.

introduced “new terms of communion” requiring all members owning slaves to issue deeds of manumission or risk expulsion from the church. Bishops Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke were forced to quickly retreat from their antislavery ideals and revoke the measures, however, when opposition immediately arose both within and without the church. A group of abolitionist-minded Methodists in southern Virginia, frustrated with both their church and their state’s acquiescence to slavery, protested by leaving their homes and migrating west to the newly-opened Northwest Territory, settling in the Scioto River Valley in present-day Ohio. Like the other groups of Methodist migrants, their decision to move was directly influenced by the outcome of the American Revolution. The region to which they removed was newly ceded to the United States under the terms of the Treaty of Paris in 1783. Like the black Loyalists who had earlier escaped their own enslavement, the Methodist settlers to Ohio were firmly opposed to slavery and drew upon similar Old Testament tropes in understanding their migration. But unlike the other migrants, they were proud patriots. Their longed-for land of liberty mixed Methodist notions of religious freedom with republican notions of economic opportunity.

When Philip Gatch moved with his family from Powhatan to Buckingham County in early 1785, he “had in view a settlement for life.” He purchased a 1,000-acre plot of land and “reduced 500 acres of it to cultivation, and made such other improvements as were calculated to render my family comfortable.” Recently retired from the itinerant ministry, Gatch had been instrumental in sustaining and growing the nascent American Methodist connection during the

disruptive years of the Revolutionary War. From 1774 to 1785, he traveled circuits and fulfilled preaching assignments all along the eastern seaboard, from New Jersey to North Carolina. Seeking now to settle down with his wife, Elizabeth, and their two youngest children, Gatch planned to take up farming and assume an active role in the local Methodist congregation. Buckingham County, home “to a flourishing society of Methodists” was a seemingly ideal location.<sup>58</sup>

But the Gatch family’s stay in Buckingham County lasted little more than a decade. Thirteen years later, Philip, Elizabeth, their eight children, and four black servants, joined a group of several dozen others, left their homes in southern Virginia, and set out for the newly opened Northwest Territory. Although Virginia had provided them with almost “all the advantages and privileges we could expect in a fallen world,” one particular nagging issue finally prompted the group to set out for the Ohio Country. “I could not feel reconciled to die and leave my posterity in a land of slavery,” Gatch explained.<sup>59</sup>

Gatch’s arrival in Buckingham County coincided with the climax of Methodist opposition to slavery in the state. In addition to church leaders’ mandate to Methodists to free their slaves, Methodists in Virginia also submitted several petitions to the state legislature in 1785 calling for “the immediate or Gradual Exterpation of Slavery.”<sup>60</sup> Both efforts proved to be remarkable failures.

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<sup>58</sup> John M’Lean, *Sketch of Rev. Philip Gatch* (Cincinnati: Swormstead and Poe, 1854), 95.

<sup>59</sup> M’Lean, *Sketch of Rev. Philip Gatch*, 94

<sup>60</sup> The several petitions, each identical in language, were submitted and signed from inhabitants by county. See, for example, Electors Petition, Frederick County, 8 November 1785, Legislative Petitions of the General Assembly, 1776-1865, Accession Number 36121, Box 81, Folder 10, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. See also

While many Methodists—including Philip Gatch—did, in fact, emancipate their slaves, many did so quite reluctantly. Others freed only a small number of slaves, and still others refused to cooperate altogether, directly challenging the rules laid out in the Methodist *Discipline*. Virginia’s General Assembly, meanwhile, “rejected without dissent” the Methodists’ antislavery petitions, which also elicited several counter petitions from proslavery Virginians.<sup>61</sup>

The ensuing years witnessed continued debate over the issue, both within and without the church, and those Methodists opposed to slavery grew increasingly concerned. In 1789, Methodist preacher James O’Kelly published an *Essay on Negro Slavery* in which he expanded on the argument made in the 1785 petitions but lamented that “my beloved Methodist brethren approve of slavery.”<sup>62</sup> Three years later, fed up with the lack of progress on the issue and in protest of what he viewed as the antidemocratic nature of the Methodist Episcopate and autocratic tendencies of Francis Asbury, O’Kelly left the church and formed the rival Republican Methodist Church. His new church proved short-lived, but succeeded in attracting thousands of Methodists in southern Virginia and North Carolina, including many antislavery white Methodists and an even

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Richard K. MacMaster, “Liberty or Property? The Methodists Petitions for Emancipation in Virginia, 1785,” *Methodist History* 10 (1971): 44-55.

<sup>61</sup> Frederika Teute Schmidt and Barbara Ripel Wilhelm, “Early Proslavery Petitions in Virginia,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 30:1 (January 1973): 133-146. “Rejected” from James Madison to George Washington, 11 November 1785, in *Papers of James Madison*, eds. Robert A. Rutland, William M.E. Rachal, Barbara D. Ripel, and Frederika J. Teute, Congressional Series, Vol. 8 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 403-05.

<sup>62</sup> James O’Kelly, *Essay on Negro-Slavery* (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1789), 8.

larger percentage of black members.<sup>63</sup> Others similarly unsatisfied with church leaders' passive approach to slavery but still committed to the episcopal form of government chose to leave Virginia instead of the church.

The Northwest Territory, formally opened to settlement in 1787, provided the frustrated Methodists with a seemingly ideal outlet. To the migrants who made the journey, it was a providential opportunity. One migrant, Frederick Bonner, wrote with confidence to a friend in Virginia that "the Lord [has] provided for the Vertuous sons of the Eastern States in the liberty of [the] State of Ohio – the thing speaks for its self."<sup>64</sup> The liberty of which Bonner spoke encompassed political, economic, and religious meanings—all of which were linked in the minds of the Methodists. Free from the harmful effects of a slaveholding society and its corrupting influence on both civil and ecclesiastical matters, they hoped to receive God's blessing.

The links between slavery and religion are explicit in the diaries, correspondence, and memoirs of the migrants. Just before departing Virginia, Philip Gatch sat down with his neighbors and friends and urged them to join the exodus to Ohio. Taking Acts 20:25 as his text, Gatch's farewell sermon to those who "shall see my face no more" admonished them to forsake the wickedness of Virginia society. "I viewed the evils of slavery at present as great, and apprehended more serious results in the future, if some effectual remedy should

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<sup>63</sup> Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 74-78.

<sup>64</sup> Frederick Bonner to Edward Dromgoole, 17 July 1807, Dromgoole Papers, Southern Historical Collection-University of North Carolina; in William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1840: Volume IV, The Methodists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 170-71.

not be applied,” he explained.<sup>65</sup> Those “serious results” he feared pertained to both political and ecclesiastical spheres. Frederick Bonner was thus disheartened that “the Legislature of Va has determined against liberty” and Methodists there were “purchasing Slavs without a prospect of liberating them.” “Whats worse,” he continued, “they take protection under General Conference. Lord have Mercy on the Methodists cause and fix it on a firm basis.” Concerned about “the condition of the church in the state when slavery is encouraged & liberty suppressed,” Bonner and his family followed the Gatches west to Ohio.<sup>66</sup>

The Methodist migrants, like their Loyalist counterparts, eventually came to understand their journey to Ohio in biblical terms, endowing their new home with sacred significance. Writing to his brother-in-law, Peter Pelham described not resting “day or night until I set my feet on the North Western bank of the most beautiful river I ever beheld, the river Ohio.” “When I reached the town [of] Cincinnati,” he continued, “inexpressible sensations [ran] thro all the powers of my mind [and] my soul.”<sup>67</sup> Moreover, they sacralized the migratory journey itself. Frederick Bonner thus explained to his former neighbors in Virginia, “I know there are difficulties not only in preparing to start but also on the way; but thanks to the Lord there is no read Sea in the way; no pharos host to pursue us while traveling to the American Canaan.” After comparing himself and his fellow migrants to the children of Israel, he continued, “as for our Jordon (I mean the Ohio) it is easy to cross and (whats better) when once planted here our children are saved from the

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<sup>65</sup> M’Lean, *Sketch of Rev. Philip Gatch*, 95.

<sup>66</sup> Bonner to Dromgoole, 17 July 1807, Dromgoole Papers, SHC-UNC; in Sweet, 170-71.

<sup>67</sup> Peter Pelham to Edward Dromgoole, undated. Dromgoole Papers, SHC-UNC.



harmfull practice of trading on their fellow creatures.”<sup>68</sup> The identification of Ohio with the biblical Canaan was a recurring theme in the personal writings of the migrants. In an 1802 letter, Philip Gatch explained that he “felt unwilling” to “leave my Children whom I tenderly loved in a land of slavery not knowin what the Evils there of would amount to in there time.” “The Lord,” he gratefully concluded, “has conducted us safely to this New Countrey.”<sup>69</sup>

Methodist migrants to Ohio found a resonance between their Wesleyan beliefs and the political ethos of the Jeffersonian Democratic Republican party. Several Methodists, including Philip Gatch, Thomas Scott, and Edward Tiffin, took an active part in Ohio’s constitutional convention in 1802, and a few went on to successful political careers in the new state. As evidence of their antislavery ideals, the Methodist delegates helped push through measures forbidding slavery in the new state. But lurking beneath their spirited antislavery rhetoric decrying the institution as a “morel Evil” is a noticeable lack of sympathy for the slaves. Their opposition to slavery was, at its core, one intensely concerned with their own personal righteousness and that of their family.<sup>70</sup>

In an 1807 letter, Frederick Bonner expressed his relief that his wife and children would grow up in “a land where they are not to be troubled with slaves.”<sup>71</sup> Peter Pelham expanded on this point, expressing with satisfaction that “my wife, and our children *do wonderfully*, we had our Dinner yesterday, our

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<sup>68</sup> Pelham to Dromgoole, undated. Dromgoole Papers, SHC-UNC.

<sup>69</sup> Philip Gatch to Edward Dromgoole, 11 February 1802, Dromgoole Papers, SHC-UNC; in Sweet, 152.

<sup>70</sup> “Morel Evil” from Bennett Maxey to Edward Dromgoole, 27 July 1807, Dromgoole Papers, SHC-UNC, in Sweet, 175.

<sup>71</sup> Bonner to Dromgoole, 17 July 1807, Dromgoole Papers, SHC-UNC.

supper last night and our breakfast this morning, ... and that *too without one black person to wait on us*.” He reiterated this claim in another letter, explaining that his family “frequently mention how much better [it is] to do their family business of Cooking &c themselves, than to have any black ones about them.”<sup>72</sup> Sometimes, though, the slaves themselves were cast as not merely troublesome but dangerous. Enslaved men and women (and not merely the institution of slavery) threatened the spirituality and safety of white Methodists. James Tawler thus noted, “I frequently think of and tremble for my native state [Virginia],” praying that God would “relieve her from the Most dangerous & formidable enemy she has under heaven, I sincerely believe, the *slaves*.”<sup>73</sup> Fears of this sort were heightened by Gabriel’s Rebellion in 1800 and subsequent threats of slave revolts. Peter’s wife Parthenia wrote with concern to family members in Virginia after being “inform’d of an insurrection of the negros” there.<sup>74</sup> Just two years after Gabriel’s Rebellion, and responding to a question concerning the threat of Indian attacks in Ohio, Philip Gatch assured his correspondent that “we feel no more affraid of them than you do there. ... We have been more affraid of the Negroes in Virginia than I have ever been in this Country of Poor Indians.”<sup>75</sup>

But it was not only slaves the Methodist migrants expressed concern over. Free people of color were unwelcome, too. At the 1802 Constitutional Convention, Methodists thus helped push through a measure making slavery

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<sup>72</sup> Pelham to Dromgoole, 20 June, 1807; Pelham to Dromgoole, 27 July, 1807, Dromgoole Papers, SHC-UNC; in Sweet, 163-67; 172-73.

<sup>73</sup> James Tawler to Edward Dromgoole, 11 September 1809, Dromgoole Papers, SHC, UNC.

<sup>74</sup> Parthenia Pelham to “My Dear Child,” undated, Dromgoole papers, SHC, UNC.

<sup>75</sup> Gatch to Dromgoole, 11 February 1802, Dromgoole Papers, SHC, UNC.

illegal in Ohio, but their collective record on other measures securing certain rights for black Ohioans is more mixed. While Philip Gatch opposed a measure removing the right to vote from “all male negroes and mulattoes now residing in this territory,” his close friend and fellow Methodist preacher, Edward Tiffin, cast the deciding vote in the proposal’s favor. But even Gatch was inconsistent in his support of racial equality, supporting a later measure that ensured “no negro or mulatto shall ever be eligible to any office, civil or military, or be subject to do military duty.”<sup>76</sup> A few years later, Peter Pelham noted, with apparent approval, that “our assembly appear to be much against coloured people settling in this State.” Pelham was referring to the “Black Laws,” a series of acts passed by the Ohio Legislature in 1804 and 1807 “to regulate black and mulatto persons in the state.” The first iteration of the Black Laws required all free people of color in the state to produce a certificate of freedom and forbade anyone from employing those that could not. Ohio’s first governor, Methodist Edward Tiffin, signed it into law in 1804.<sup>77</sup>

Underlying the migrants’ critique of slavery was, as historian Andrew Cayton pointed out, “a desire for an open society of autonomous individuals,” as well as a deeply-seated concern for their own salvation and not the souls of the

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<sup>76</sup> *Journal of the Convention of the Territory of the United States North-west of the Ohio, Begun and Held at Chillicothe, on Monday the First Day of November, A.D. One Thousand Eight Hundred and Two, and of the Independence of the United States the Twenty-Seventh* (Chillicothe: N. Willis, 1802), 37, 40.

<sup>77</sup> Pelham to Dromgoole, undated, Dromgoole Papers, SHC, UNC. On the Black Laws, see Nikki M. Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati’s Black Community, 1802-1868* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 32-37; 203-05; Stephen Middleton, *The Black Laws: Race and the Legal Process in Early Ohio* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005).

enslaved.<sup>78</sup> The removal of these Methodists from Virginia to Ohio may have turned the Midwest into a center of Methodist growth during the nineteenth century, but it was one that looked unlike the movement's earlier geographical strongholds, free from not only slavery, but also almost entirely free of non-white Methodists altogether. Among the black Methodists in the Miami district were four slaves belonging to the Gatch family. Though included in Gatch's 1788 deed of manumission, the four slaves—John (age 20 in 1798), David (17), Nancy (16), and Phoebe (13)—had not yet reached the minimum age of freedom (21 for males and 18 for females). Joining the Gatch family in their new Scioto Valley home, the four slaves' legal status was somewhat ambiguous, creating "a kind of de facto slavery in the Northwest Territory" that placed individuals like John, David, Nancy, and Phoebe in difficult positions with little real freedom.<sup>79</sup>

The religious lives of the black individuals who accompanied their Methodist masters were similarly precarious. Methodism thrived in Ohio. A "Brother Browne" happily described "a great revival of religion in and about Chillicothe," with a "camp meeting ... where it was supposed there was 3 or 4 Thousand people and a powerful work of the Lord." Caroline Pelham rejoiced that "Religion flourishes in this neighborhood," and Peter Pelham mentioned "many being Converted" and large crowds, "both on public Preaching Days and

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<sup>78</sup> Andrew R.L. Cayton, *The Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio Country, 1780-1825* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1986), 58.

<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth Conner, *Methodist Trail Blazer: Philip Gatch, 1751-1934: His Life in Maryland, Virginia, and Ohio* (Rutland, Vermont: Academy Books, 1970), 178. Names and ages of slaves taken from Gatch's 1788 deed freeing the slaves, Powhatan County Deed Book, No. 1, 1777-1792, p. 486. Microfilm, Library of Virginia; Cayton, *The Frontier Republic*, 57-58.

Night prayer meetings.”<sup>80</sup> Black people attended these meetings—Philip Gatch rejoiced in 1801 that “a Black Boy of our Familey got converted”—but often resisted joining the Methodist Episcopal Church. Of the 20,000-plus Methodists in the MEC’s Ohio Conference in 1812, only 561 were non-white and most of them lived on the other side of the Ohio River, in slaveholding Kentucky. The Miami district, where the Virginia migrants were concentrated, counted only 50 people of color among its members.<sup>81</sup> As in other regions, black Methodists in Ohio were relegated to segregated seating in chapel galleries or formed into separate congregations. By the 1820s, black congregations in both Cincinnati and Chillicothe voted to leave the Methodist Episcopal Church and unite with Richard Allen’s independent African Methodist Episcopal Church instead.<sup>82</sup>

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The outcome of the American Revolution changed Methodism. It triggered the creation of the first independent Methodist Church in the world, John Wesley urging his American disciples to “stand fast in that liberty, wherewith GOD has so strangely made them free.”<sup>83</sup> Much of Methodism’s spectacular growth in the decades immediately following the Revolution was initially spurred by the several migrations of its members to new regions. Loyalists, black and white alike,

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<sup>80</sup> Bro. Browne to Sarah Dromgoole, undated; “many being Converted” in Pelham to Edward Dromgoole, 27 March 1809; “both” in Pelham to Dromgoole, 2 February 1809, Dromgoole Papers, SHC, UNC.

<sup>81</sup> *Minutes* (1840), 227-29.

<sup>82</sup> On Cincinnati, see Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 39-43, and on Chillicothe see “Quinn Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church,” in Lyle S. Evans, ed., *A Standard History of Ross County, Ohio: An Authentic Narrative of the Past, with Particular Attention to the Modern Era in the Commercial, Industrial, Civic and Social Development*, Volume 1 (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1917), 334-36.

<sup>83</sup> Wesley to our Brethren in North America, 10 September 1784, in *Minutes* (1795), 76.

introduced Methodism to several Caribbean islands, Upper and Lower Canada, and even Sierra Leone, while Methodists in the United States moved west, organizing classes and congregation in advance of the itinerant preachers who soon followed. But their migrations did more than merely grow the movement. They revealed long-simmering tensions that threatened to divide the movement, between Loyalist and Whig Methodists, between black and white adherents, and between pro- and antislavery advocates.

## CHAPTER 2

### Not All Abolitionists: Methodism and Slavery in the United States

When Methodist preachers gathered in December 1784 to organize the Methodist Episcopal Church, they took care to emphasize their continued allegiance to John Wesley and his Methodist societies in England. In choosing an episcopal form of church government and electing two superintendents to lead them, they emphasized that they were “following the counsel of Mr. John Wesley, who recommended the Episcopal mode of church government.” In their Arminian theology, their strict discipline governing church membership and personal behavior, and their itinerant ministry, they were thoroughly Wesleyan, “acknowledge[ing them]selves his Sons in the Gospel.”<sup>1</sup> Recognizing “the Impropriety of making new Terms of Communion for a religious Society already established,” the two newly-elected superintendents, Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke nevertheless thought it their “most bounden Duty” to introduce one such term on a “most pressing” point: ridding the new church of slavery. In an effort to introduce “some effectual Method to extirpate this Abomination from among us,” they mandated that “Every Member of our Society who has Slaves in his Possession” must “legally execute and record an Instrument, whereby he emancipates and sets free” those slaves. “No Person holding Slaves,” furthermore, would “be admitted into Society or to the Lord’s Supper,” and those who refused to comply “shall have Liberty quietly to withdraw ... from our

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<sup>1</sup> *Minutes of Several Conversations between The Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D., The Rev. Francis Asbury and Others, at a Conference, Begun in Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, on Monday, the 27th. of December, in the Year 1784, Composing a Form of Discipline for the Ministers, Preachers and Other Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Philadelphia: Charles Cist, 1785), 3.

Society[.] ... Otherwise the Assistant shall exclude him.” Anyone caught buying or selling slaves (“or giv[ing] them away”) was “immediately to be expelled.”<sup>2</sup>

Although the new rules allowed for some flexibility in accordance with individual state ordinances governing the manumission of slaves, they nevertheless represented a radical stand for a brand new church in a brand new nation.

The response to the new rules was swift and severe, and within six months, Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke were forced “to suspend the execution of the minute on slavery, till the deliberations of a future conference.” Although the opposition the preachers’ antislavery efforts provoked among southern planters is often credited with forcing their hand and relaxing the rules regarding slavery, it was pressures from *within* and not *without* that triggered the initial retreat. In May, Coke and Asbury were greeted in Virginia by “a great many principal friends” who insisted “on a Repeal of the Slave-Rules,” which they reluctantly did the following month.<sup>3</sup> Those who opposed the superintendents’ efforts to rid the church of slaveholders and slavery included both preachers and laity alike. As Virginia preacher Edward Dromgoole noted, the group that insisted upon the “Repeal of the Slave-Rules” included “those who had been long in our membership.”<sup>4</sup> They represented a long tradition of Methodist support for slavery, one that stretched back not only to the earliest Methodist classes in America but even back to John Wesley himself.

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<sup>2</sup> *Minutes* (1785), 15-17.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Coke Journal, 1 May 1785, in *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. by John A. Vickers (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2005), 58.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Dromgoole, Autobiography, Edward Dromgoole Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.



Contrary to commonplace assumptions that portray Wesley as a lifelong opponent of the slave trade, the first three decades of his ministry were marked by a general ambivalence toward slavery. From his first interaction with African slaves in the 1730s and continuing through the 1760s, Wesley's primary interest was in preaching to the slaves. The emergence of Quaker antislavery in the 1760s and 1770s and the growth of the abolitionist movement spurred many Methodists, including both Wesley and Francis Asbury, to oppose the slave trade. But even as antislavery sentiment spread among Methodist societies throughout the Atlantic rim, many Methodists continued to defend their right to buy, sell, and own slaves. Viewed within that much longer context, the efforts of Methodist leaders in the 1780s to rid the church of slaveholders and petition elected officials to enact gradual emancipation in the Upper South represent an aberration, not a viable challenge to southern values.

Most studies of Methodist antislavery efforts in the early Republic privilege the writings and actions of preachers in the northern United States. But most Methodists in the eighteenth century lived south of the Mason-Dixon line. Virginia, not New York, Maryland, or Pennsylvania, counted more Methodists on its membership rolls than any other state. It is perhaps unsurprising then that Virginia assumed center stage in Methodist debates over slavery. More Methodists in the Old Dominion manumitted slaves than any other religious group in the state. But many more Methodists there bought, sold, and owned slaves, and defended their right to do so. Some saw no disparity between their religious beliefs and the enslavement of others, but others wrestled with the

spiritual and ethical implications of their involvement in the slave system. Many of those who did oppose slavery and manumitted their slaves later left Virginia, while others opted to leave the Methodist Episcopal Church, joining James O’Kelly’s Republican Methodist Church in the 1790s. Their departure left the church in the hands of local slaveholders and laid the foundation for the emergence of a more fully developed theological defense of slavery.

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Long before the first Methodists began forming classes and congregations in New York, Virginia, and Antigua, John Wesley arrived on the shores of colonial Georgia as a 33-year-old Anglican missionary for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Wesley had been appointed to take charge of the newly-formed parish in Savannah, where he also intended “to visit the heathens” and “impart to them what I have received, a saving knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Although the “heathens” Wesley had in mind were Native Americans—the Creek Indians who inhabited the region—he also came into contact with enslaved Africans during his time in North America. Slavery was illegal in Georgia—a provision hotly contested during Wesley’s two years there—but John and his brother Charles both journeyed to South Carolina, where they encountered for the first time plantation slavery. The brothers were horrified by “the cruelty of masters towards their Negroes” that they observed. Charles described in his personal journal those who had been long in our membership

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<sup>5</sup> John Wesley to the Revd. John Burton, 10 October 1735, in *Letters II*, ed. Frank Baker, vol. 22 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976– ), 441.

several examples of such abuse in graphic detail, concluding that “it were endless to recount all the shocking instances of diabolical cruelty these men (as they call themselves) daily practice upon their fellow-creatures.”<sup>6</sup> But the Wesley brothers also recognized the opportunity to convert the masses of unbaptized enslaved Africans their appointment presented. Describing a church service in Charleston in July 1736, John Wesley noted his pleasure at seeing “several Negroes at church; one of whom told me she was there constantly, and that her mistress (now dead) had many times instructed her in the Christian religion.” Over the course of the next several months prior to his return to England in December 1737, John Wesley found additional opportunities to proselytize slaves, both in formal preaching services and in more intimate encounters.<sup>7</sup>

Wesley would later draw on his experiences in America in articulating his opposition to slavery, claiming in a 1787 letter to abolitionist Granville Sharp that “ever since I heard of it first I felt a perfect detestation of the horrid Slave Trade.”<sup>8</sup> Taking a cue from Wesley, many historians have read the scattered references to slaves and slavery in Wesley’s journal during the 1730s through the lens of his

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Wesley Journal, 2 August 1736, in *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, ed. John R. Tyson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 77-78. Unlike John Wesley’s journal, Charles’s was not intended for public consumption and was only published after his death. For more on Charles Wesley’s attitude toward slavery, see S.T. Kimbrough, Jr., “Charles Wesley and Slavery,” *Proceedings of the Charles Wesley Society* 13 (2009): 35-52.

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, 31 July 1736, *Journals and Diaries I (1735-1738)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, vol. 18 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 169. See also entries for 2 August 1736 and 23 April 1737, *Journals and Diaries I*, 169, 179-180. Wesley also began teaching “the principles of Christianity” to a group of “young negro lads” on board the *Samuel* during his return voyage. See entries for 26 December 1737, 7 January 1738, *Journals and Diaries I*, 207, 208.

<sup>8</sup> Wesley to Granville Sharp, 11 October 1787, in *Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols., ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 8:17.

later writings and concluded that this self-assessment was largely accurate. There is little documentary evidence to back up those claims, however. In fact, Wesley's entry into the ministry and mission to America coincided with a period of significant transition within missionary Anglicanism, in which it grew ever more committed to the institution. As historian Travis Glasson has demonstrated, the 1720s-1740s witnessed increased "efforts to harmonize Christianity and slavery" among many prominent SPG leaders, including Edmund Gibson, who served as Bishop of London from 1723 until his death in 1748. Gibson's short tract on the subject, which Wesley read during his first visit to South Carolina in August 1736, advocated the proselytization of slaves but made clear that that, "as to their outward Condition, ... their being baptiz'd, and becoming Christians, makes no manner of Change in it."<sup>9</sup> Wesley's enthusiasm at the prospect of preaching to enslaved audiences during his short stay in America should be read in this context—his interest at this early period was in their spiritual salvation; *not* their

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<sup>9</sup> Travis Glasson, *Mastering Christianity: Missionary Anglicanism and Slavery in the Atlantic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 96; Geordan Hammond, *John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 150, citing JWD, 20 August 1736; Edmund Gibson, *Two Letters of the Lord Bishop of London: The First, to the Masters and Mistresses of Families in the English Plantations Abroad, Exhorting Them to Encourage and Promote the Instruction of their Negroes in the Christian Faith, The Second, To the Missionaries There; Directing them to Distribute the Said Letter, and Exhorting Them to Give their Assistance Towards the Instruction of the Negroes Within their Several Parishes* (London: Joseph Downing, 1727), 11. Wesley also read Morgan Godwyn's *The Negro's & Indians Advocate, Suing for their Admission into the Church: Or A Persuasive to the Instructing and Baptizing of the Negro's and Indians in our Plantations. Shewing, That as the Compliance therewith can Prejudice no Mans just Interest; So the Wilful Neglecting and Opposing of it, is no less than a Manifest Apostacy for the Christian Faith. To Which is Added, a Brief Account of Religion in Virginia* (London: Printed for the Author, 1680), which, as its title suggests, advocated the proselytization of slaves. See Wesley, *MS Journals and Diaries*, 20 August 1736, *Journals and Diaries I*, 410. For more on Godwyn, see Rebecca Anne Goetz, *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 1-10.

temporal freedom. Inasmuch as he shared the horror at the cruel treatment of slaves at the hands of their owners and overseers expressed by his brother, young John Wesley was an ameliorationist, not an abolitionist.

Wesley was, however, consistent in his belief in the humanity and spiritual potential of non-Christian peoples across the globe, including indigenous Americans and enslaved Africans. Upon his return to England, he reflected on his time in America, optimistically concluding that “a few steps have been taken towards publishing the glad tidings both to the African and American heathen.”<sup>10</sup> In the coming months and years, Wesley’s energies were devoted to the beginnings of the formal Methodist movement and the subject of slavery seems to have largely receded from his thoughts. After a passing reference to money “collected for the Negro school” in June 1740, the next mention of slavery found in Wesley’s writings came fifteen years later, in 1755.<sup>11</sup> That year witnessed the

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<sup>10</sup> Wesley, 3 February 1738, *Journals and Diaries I*, 222.

<sup>11</sup> Wesley, *London Diary*, 29 June 1740, *Journals and Diaries II (1738-1743)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Hietzenrater, vol. 19 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 425. Several historians have claimed that Wesley instituted a rule in 1743 prohibiting English Methodists from selling, buying, or owning slaves. It appears that the source of this claim is Donald Matthews, whose 1965 *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality*, mistakenly asserted that “In 1743 when he wrote the General Rules, [Wesley] had prohibited ‘the buying and selling the bodies and souls of men, women, and children, with an intention to enslave them.’” See Matthews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 5-6. Matthews cites no source for his claim, and no such prohibition is found in the *General Rules*, either the 1743 edition or any subsequent editions. See John Wesley, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules, of the United Societies, in London, Bristol, King’s-wood, and Newcastle upon Tyne* (Newcastle upon Tyne: John Gooding, 1743). Nor is it found in other foundational documents of Methodism, including Wesley’s *The Character of a Methodist* (Bristol: Printed by Felix Farley, 1743), *The Principles of a Methodist* (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1743), or the published *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, From the First, Held in London, by the late Rev. John Wesley, A.M., in the Year 1744*, Volume I (London: Printed at the Conference Office, 1812). Debates over the rule’s origin go back to the nineteenth century. Nathan Bangs (*A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*

publication of his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*. In his commentary on 1 Timothy 1:10, Wesley identified the *man-stealers* mentioned with, among others, “most Traders in Negroes” and censured them as “the worst of all thieves, in comparison of whom Highwaymen and House-breakers are innocent!” It was Wesley’s most forthright denunciation of the slave trade to date, but still a far cry from his later explicitly-abolitionist writings on the subject. Far from attacking slavery itself, Wesley condemned the practice of procuring servants through thievery, identifying as equally guilty those who impressed unsuspecting individuals into military service or indentured servitude.<sup>12</sup> His

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(New-York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1839), 1:213) claimed in 1840 that it was included in the original *Discipline* agreed upon in 1784, while Robert Emory (*History of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New-York: G. Lane and C.B. Tippet, 1845), 181) pointed to the 1789 revision to the MEC’s *Discipline*. Rules against buying and selling slaves were instituted at the founding conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784, but this specific rule first appeared in the 1788 *Discipline*, though with slightly altered wording (“buying or selling the bodies and souls of men, women or children, with an intention to enslave them”). See *A Form of Discipline for the Ministers, Preachers, and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Considered and approved at a Conference Held at Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, On Monday the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 1784: in which The Reverend Thomas Coke, L.L.D. and the Reverend Francis Asbury, presided. Arranged under proper Heads, and Methodised in a more acceptable and easy Manner. With some other useful Pieces annexed* (Elizabeth-Town, NJ: Shepard Kollock, 1788), 52. The exact wording quoted by Matthews did not appear until the 1808 edition of the *Discipline*. See *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, The Fourteenth Edition* (New-York: John Wilson and Daniel Hitt, 1808), 48. For a sampling of scholars repeating Matthews’s claim (each citing him as their only source), see Christopher Phillips, *Freedom’s Port: The African American Community of Baltimore, 1790-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 120; Moira Ferguson, ed., *The Hart Sisters: Early African Caribbean Writers, Evangelicals, and Radicals* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 22-23; and Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770-1810* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 122.

<sup>12</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: William Bowyer, 1755), 558. Likely influenced by Donald Matthews’s earlier mistake, Warren Thomas Smith incorrectly dated the publication of Wesley’s *Explanatory Notes* to 1743, an error subsequently repeated by other historians seeking to confirm Wesley’s consistent opposition to slavery. See Warren Thomas Smith, *John Wesley and Slavery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 60; Randy L. Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 125.

commentary on other scriptural passages to slavery were even less denunciatory. Commenting on Ephesians 6, for example, Wesley implored slave masters to behave “with gentleness and humanity, not in a harsh or domineering way.”<sup>13</sup>

His interest in utilizing the slave system as a means of converting the enslaved, meanwhile, received a boost later that year when he received “a letter sent from a gentleman in Virginia” requesting assistance in supplying “the poor negro slaves” with Christian literature. Samuel Davies, an evangelical Presbyterian minister in Hanover County, had, since his arrival in Virginia six years earlier, sought out the enslaved domestics and field workers belonging to his parishioners and attempted to convert them to Christianity. Believing that their ability to read the Bible and other religious literature was crucial to that goal, Davies sought assistance from “a transatlantic network of ministers and benefactors” that spanned the denominational spectrum.<sup>14</sup> Wesley reported being “much affected” by both Davies’s request and his reports of several hundred slaves regularly attending his preaching; Wesley immediately sent a shipment of books, and in early 1756 received a thank you letter from Davies, who reported additional success among the slaves, including “the pleasure of seeing forty of their black faces at the Lord’s Table.” One additional letter arrived in early 1757, soliciting prayers for Davies’s “congregation, particularly my poor

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<sup>13</sup> Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, 521.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey H. Richards, “Samuel Davies and the Transatlantic Campaign for Slave Literacy in Virginia,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 111:4 (2003): 335.

Negro converts.”<sup>15</sup> Little did Wesley know that he would soon have African converts of his own.

On Tuesday, February 17, Wesley recorded in his journal: “I preached at Wandsworth. A gentleman come from America has again opened a door in this desolate place. In the morning I preached at 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 unto all nations?” Nine months later, Wesley returned to Wandsworth “and baptized two Negroes belonging to Mr. Gilbert.” Nathaniel Gilbert and his slaves soon returned to Antigua, where they introduced Methodism to the Caribbean and organized the first Wesleyan Methodist society in the Americas. Wesley noted in his journal the pleasure he took in “one of [the slaves being] deeply convinced of sin” and “the other rejoic[ing] in God her Saviour[. She] is the first African Christian I have known.” Concluding the entry on a similar note to the one recorded after his first encounter with the Antiguan women, Wesley wondered, “But shall not our Lord in due time have these heathens also ‘for his inheritance’?”<sup>16</sup> There is no indication that Wesley was either appalled by this personal encounter with slavery or that he looked upon Gilbert as anything other than a newly converted Brother in Christ and kindly master. Over the course of the next decade, though, Wesley’s attitude towards slavery and the slave trade took a decidedly abolitionist turn.

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<sup>15</sup> John Wesley, 27 June 1755, 1 March 1756, 28 January 1757, *Journals and Diaries IV (1755-65)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, vol. 21 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976– ), 21-22, 41-42, 84-85.

<sup>16</sup> Wesley, 17 February 1757, 29 February 1757, *Journals and Diaries IV*, 134, 172.



While his Arminian belief in the free will and spiritual potential of all humankind certainly contributed to his emerging opposition to the slave trade, it appears that political developments and the nascent transatlantic abolitionist movement more immediately influenced his feelings on the subject. Over the course of the 1760s and 1770s, Wesley took an increasingly active role in responding to political developments in the British Empire. His championing of individual natural rights was conditioned by a wariness of radicalism and a firm commitment to the British crown and Parliament, shaping his reaction to not only the slave trade but also the American Revolution.<sup>17</sup>

In 1772, on the heels of the famous Somerset Case in which slavery was disallowed in England and Wales (though *not* Britain's overseas colonies), Wesley read "a very different book, published by an honest Quaker, on that execrable sum of all villainies, commonly called the slave trade."<sup>18</sup> That book—most likely *Some Historical Account of Guinea* by Philadelphia school teacher Anthony Benezet—was part of a larger outpouring of Quaker antislavery sentiment that emerged during the 1750s and 1760s, and stirred Wesley to action; he immediately wrote to Benezet, thanking him for his efforts and expressing his willingness to get involved. Benezet suggested he contact Granville Sharp, "the father of the English emancipation movement," and the three men began a correspondence that culminated in the 1774 publication of

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<sup>17</sup> See Introduction to Graham Maddox, ed., *Political Writings of John Wesley* (Bristol, England: Thoemes Press, 1998), 9-37.

<sup>18</sup> John Wesley, 12 February 1772, *Journals and Diaries V (1765-75)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, vol. 22 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976– ), 307.

Wesley's *Thoughts Upon Slavery*.<sup>19</sup> The 53-page tract borrowed heavily from Benezet's own earlier writings, and marked a distinct departure from Wesley's more tepid commentary on slavery in earlier publications. To Benezet's description of the primitive African landscape, which Wesley borrowed almost word for word, the Methodist leader added a forthright denunciation of nearly all aspects of chattel slavery. In this, he moved beyond condemnation of man-stealers to indict slave owners, as well. "You first acted the villain in making them slaves," he warned, "whether you stole them or bought them." No longer were only particular players in the slave trade guilty; the entire system, Wesley now believed, was inherently corrupt. "All slavery," he wrote, "is as irreconcilable to Justice as to Mercy."<sup>20</sup> He drew a sharp contrast between English slave traders, merchants, and owners and the Africans they enslaved: Holding up "the Negroes who inhabit the coast of *Africa*" as "remarkably sensible," "industrious to the highest degree," "fair, just and honest in all their dealings," and "far more mild, friendly and kind to Strangers, than any of our Forefathers were," Wesley rhetorically wondered "where shall we find at this day, among the fair-faced natives of *Europe*, a nation generally practicing the Justice, Mercy, and Truth, which are found among these poor black *Africans*?"<sup>21</sup> Wesley's understanding of Africans themselves was shaped not only by his intellectual pursuits and

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<sup>19</sup> Quote from Frank Baker, "The Origins, Character, and Influence of John Wesley's *Thoughts Upon Slavery*," *Methodist History* 22:2 (January 1984): 78. For more on the correspondence between Wesley, Benezet, and Sharp, see Brycchan Carey, "John Wesley's *Thoughts Upon Slavery* and the Language of the Heart," *The Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 85:2-3 (Summer/Autumn 2003): 269-284; and Maurice Jackson, *Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of Atlantic Abolition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2009), 153-160.

<sup>20</sup> John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (London: R. Dawes, 1774): 33, 42-43.

<sup>21</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, 16-17.

relationships with other antislavery activists; it was also formed by his own personal interaction with Africans and Afro-Caribbeans. In addition to his encounter with Nathaniel Gilbert's slaves fifteen years earlier, Wesley had even more recent and extensive interaction with two African converts to the faith.

During the course of his correspondence with Anthony Benezet, Wesley was introduced to two African brothers in Bristol. Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John were, until 1767, successful slave traders in the African port of Old Calabar, when they were captured and sold into slavery. Their Atlantic odyssey, which included multiple escapes and captures, took them first to the West Indian island of Dominica, then to Virginia, and finally to Bristol, England, where they arrived in 1773 on the heels of the Somerset ruling.<sup>22</sup> Having encountered Methodism somewhere—or perhaps, in multiple locales—during their six-year sojourn in slavery, the Robin John brothers requested an introduction to Charles Wesley upon arrival in Bristol. Over the course of the coming year, they studied under the tutelage of Charles, became converted and were baptized, “receiv[ing] both the outward and visible signs of the inward & spiritual grace in a wonderful manner & measure.”<sup>23</sup> They became members of Bristol's tight-knit Methodist community, worshipping with white men and women and dining in their homes. Upon their return to Old Calabar in 1774, they began preaching to their family members and former acquaintances there, and in 1778, successfully petitioned the Methodist Conference in England to send two

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<sup>22</sup> The Robin Johns brothers' experience is described in rich detail in Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar*.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Wesley to William Perronet, 23 January 1774, as cited in Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar*, 117.

missionaries.<sup>24</sup> When Wesley thus described Africans as being “remarkably sensible” and far removed from their reputation as “perfidious Savages,” he was drawing not only on literary descriptions published by other abolitionists but also his personal experience.<sup>25</sup>

Wesley’s views had changed significantly—and somewhat rapidly—in his later years, shaped both by the intellectual currents of the day and his own acquaintance with the two former African slaves. During the final decades of his life, he never wavered in his commitment to abolishing the slave trade.<sup>26</sup> The publication of Wesley’s *Thoughts* marked the beginning of Methodism’s institutional opposition to slavery. Historian David Hempton has argued that “as was the way in Wesleyan Methodism, the master had spoken. Antislavery was now the default position of the Methodist movement throughout the British Isles, the Caribbean Islands, and North America.”<sup>27</sup> Wesley’s publication certainly did set the tone for Methodism in the British Isles. Copies were sent to all Wesleyan societies in England, and Methodists there assumed an increasingly active role in the emergent abolitionist movement. As Hempton points out, Wesley publicly lauded the newly created Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787, and Methodists throughout England lent their support to various abolitionist

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<sup>24</sup> Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar*, 107-126; 133-135.

<sup>25</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> *Thoughts Upon Slavery* went several additional printings on both sides of the Atlantic prior to Wesley’s passing in 1791 and the subject occupied an increasingly prominent role in both his public and private writings. See Irv A. Brendlinger, *Social Justice Through the Eyes of Wesley: John Wesley’s Theological Challenge to Slavery* (Ontario, Canada: Joshua Press, 2006), 33-43.

<sup>27</sup> David Hempton, “Popular Evangelicalism and the Shaping of British Moral Sensibilities, 1770-1840,” in *British Abolitionism and the Question of Moral Progress in History*, ed. Donald A. Yerxa (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 62.

efforts. Charles Wesley penned hymns with lyrics that saw God's omnipotent hand in the "wild tornados / Strewing yonder sea with wrecks / Wasting town, plantations, meadows, Is the voice with which he speaks." John Fletcher and Thomas Vivian condemned the slave trade in their own publications, and Methodists in Manchester joined others in signing their names to an antislavery petition.<sup>28</sup> Wesley's public opposition to slavery also shaped the views of several young preachers sent to America, and, in the minds of many, marked both them and their converts in the colonies as anti-slavery activists. But Wesley's earlier attitude toward slavery—particularly his realization that access to enslaved Africans Methodists hoped to convert might require the cooperation of slave owners and overseers and his efforts to ameliorate the more brutal and inhumane aspects of the practice—never fully disappeared, and antislavery was far from the default position of most Methodists in 1774. In fact, several of the first Methodists in North America and the Caribbean owned slaves, including Paul and Barbara Heck in New York City and Nathaniel Gilbert in Antigua. Their ownership of slaves, and those slaves' conversions to Methodism, loomed large over Wesleyan preachers' initial efforts to convert the peoples in the Americas.

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The arrival of the first missionaries dispatched by John Wesley for North America coincided almost exactly with their leader's emergent abolitionist views.

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<sup>28</sup> Hempton, "Popular Evangelicalism and British Moral Sensibilities," 63-65; John Coffey, "Evangelicals, Slavery and the Slave Trade: From Whitefield to Wilberforce," *Anvil: A Journal of Theology and Mission* 24:2 (2007): 104, 109. See also Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History, 2006), 337-39, who argues that little antislavery actions was taken by British Methodists before the formation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787.

While some of those sent to the colonies seem to have shared their leader's assessment of slavery as wicked and immoral, others did not. But nearly all Wesleyan preachers understood their assignment to include a mission to free and enslaved people of color. Those uninterested or indifferent to the conversion of America's large black population before departing the British Isles changed course upon arrival. They could hardly avoid doing so. In New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Norfolk, preachers regularly attracted large biracial audiences. Methodists had always prioritized preaching to and empowering marginalized groups often untouched by the established church – the working class poor, women, and immigrant groups. Wesley also envisioned his ministry and the movement he led to be a global undertaking. It is little surprise then that in America, preachers reached out to enslaved Africans. It is also unsurprising that so many slaves, some prepared by the earlier preaching of George Whitefield, Samuel Davies, or SPG missionaries, found in Methodism a new and welcome faith community. As was the case with Wesley, though, antislavery emerged only gradually among Methodists in America.

The example of Francis Asbury in this regard is important, both because it demonstrates the process by which early preachers came to regard slavery as morally wrong, and also because of the authority and influence Asbury came to have among the American Methodists. As John Wigger has recounted in his biography of Asbury, it was not until 1776, after Wesley had been in the colonies for nearly five years, that he reflected at any length on the subject. In time, though, Asbury came to regard slavery as a profound moral evil. Like Wesley

before him, it was the influence of American Quakers that helped turn his thoughts toward the “liberation of slaves,” which in June 1778, Asbury believed to be “a very laudable design; and what the Methodists must come to, or, I fear, the Lord will depart from them.”<sup>29</sup> By the war’s conclusion in 1783, the first formal Methodist antislavery efforts in America had begun. Three years earlier, the New York Conference passed a resolution condemning slavery and calling on all members to repudiate the practice and set free their slaves. In the wake of the American Revolution, Methodist leaders would set their sights on loftier goals, including the emancipation of all slaves in the new United States.

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In the emerging debates over slavery within early American Methodism, Virginia assumed center stage. This was in part because of the movement’s tremendous success there during the wartime years, when a series of revivals had expanded Methodism’s membership in the state from just 100 in 1773 to 3,721 in 1784, making Virginia the largest of the newly established Methodist Episcopal Church’s several conferences.<sup>30</sup> Virginia’s position of prominence in those debates was also shaped by the larger forces at play in the Old Dominion. When Quaker antislavery advocates successfully lobbied the state legislature to pass an act allowing for the private manumission of slaves in 1782, Methodist leaders saw an opportunity to both morally regulate their own ranks and to achieve wider reform by urging the General Assembly to go a step further and

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<sup>29</sup> See John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 122-23.

<sup>30</sup> *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the Years 1773-1828* (New York: Thomas Mason and George Lane, 1840), 1:5, 20.

enact gradual emancipation of the sort then beginning to occur in states further north, including Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Rhode Island.<sup>31</sup> The effort, which included strictures on church members who owned slaves and culminated in the submission of several petitions to the state in the late fall of 1785 calling for “the most prudential, but Effectual method, for the immediate or Gradual Extirpation of Slavery” in Virginia, successfully resulted in the manumission of hundreds of slaves owned by faithful Methodists in the following years, but failed miserably to achieve any larger legislative reform.<sup>32</sup> It also ignited opposition to Methodism in Virginia and threatened, once again, to divide the movement in North America.

Concerns among Virginia’s slaveholding class were not new. When lay preacher Robert Williams arrived in Norfolk in 1772, his first sermon—delivered extemporaneously on the steps of the courthouse and followed by the singing of a hymn—attracted both white and black passersby and provoked Norfolk’s mayor to exclaim, “If we permit such a fellow as this to come here, we shall have an insurrection of the Negroes.”<sup>33</sup> Though Williams gained a number of enslaved

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<sup>31</sup> On gradual emancipation more broadly, see Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); David N. Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008); Paul J. Polgar, “‘To Raise Them to an Equal Participation’: Early National Abolitionism, Gradual Emancipation, and the Promise of African American Citizenship,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 31:2 (Summer 2011): 229-258; and Paul J. Polgar, “Standard Bearers of Liberty and Equality: Reinterpreting the Origins of American Abolitionism” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Richard K. Macmaster, “Liberty or Property? The Methodists Petition for Emancipation in Virginia, 1785,” *Methodist History* 10:1 (October 1971): 44-55.

<sup>33</sup> John Littlejohn, *Journal of John Littlejohn*, Microfilmed Typescript, Methodist Archives and History Center, Drew University, Madison, NJ. Hereafter MAHC.



converts, the concerns over a Methodist-inspired insurrection never materialized. In fact, a number of slave owners—mostly merchants and small planters—in the Tidewater region converted to the movement. The same held true further west, where Devereux Jarratt helped lead the revival of 1775-76 that bolstered Methodism's ranks in the state's southern counties, increasing membership there from roughly 200 in 1774 to over 2100 two years later.<sup>34</sup>

Though an ordained Anglican, Jarratt's conversion as a young man came under the preaching of New Light Presbyterians and he maintained an evangelical approach in his ministry. Traveling a circuit that spread outward from his parish in Dinwiddie County, Jarratt first encountered Methodism when Robert Williams expanded his work beyond the Tidewater region into Sussex and Brunswick Counties in 1773. Jarratt's ongoing interest in revival and preference for itinerant preaching made him a seemingly ideal fit for John Wesley's brand of evangelical Anglicanism, and he worked alongside Williams, another Wesleyan preacher sent from England named George Shadford, and an Irish immigrant-turned-American preacher named Edward Dromgoole, to spread revival throughout the region. Jarratt's collaboration with the Wesleyan preachers did not go unnoticed by Methodist leaders, either. In 1781, Asbury expressed his opinion that "there have been more souls convinced by his ministry, than by that of any other man in Virginia." Two years later, the American Conference included a note in their minutes publicly "acknowledge[ing] their obligations to the Rev. Mr.

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<sup>34</sup> *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, Annually Held in America, from 1773 to 1794 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1795), 10, 18. The 1776 figure includes the Norfolk, Brunswick, Hanover, and Pittsylvania circuits. There were an additional 683 members in North Carolina, which two years earlier was part of the Brunswick circuit.

Jarratt, for his kind and friendly services to the preachers and people from our first entrance into Virginia, and more particularly for attending out Conference in Sussex, in public and private; and advise the preachers in the south to consult him, and take his advice, in the absence of brother Asbury.”<sup>35</sup> Jarratt’s mutually beneficial relationship with Methodist preachers proved short-lived, however, and he quickly became one of the movement’s most vocal detractors.<sup>36</sup>

Lurking beneath Jarratt’s relationship with Methodist leaders were tensions. Jarratt objected both to Asbury’s ordination at the hands of Thomas Coke and opposed the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784. He also grew progressively frustrated with Methodism’s increasingly outspoken opposition to slavery. Though not opposed to the conversion of slaves—indeed, the large crowds and thousands of converts during the 1775 revivals included many enslaved Africans—the Anglican cleric did not share his Methodist counterparts’ shift toward antislavery preaching in the years that followed. In May 1785, he wrote to Edward Dromgoole after not attending the annual conference. Jarratt explained that his “not being at the Conference, was not out of want of inclination,” but rather because he was not “invited by either of the Superintendents.” The reason he received no invitation, he suspected, was because he had “advised against” the stance taken on slavery at the 1784 conference, “& pointed out the destructive & divisive Consequences of it.” At the famed Christmas Conference—so called because it began on Christmas Eve—

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<sup>35</sup> *Minutes* (1840), 1:17.

<sup>36</sup> On the Virginia revival, see William Warren Sweet, *Virginia Methodism: A History* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1955), 60-71; and Wigger, *American Saint*, 76-85. For Jarratt’s own account, see Devereux Jarratt, *The Life of the Reverend Devereux Jarratt*, ed. David L. Holmes (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995).

the preachers jointly denounced slavery “as contrary to the Golden Law of God ... and the unalienable Rights of Mankind,” concluding that it was their “most bounden Duty, to take immediately some effectual Method to extirpate this Abomination from among us,” and exhorting “every Member of our Society who has Slaves in his Possession” to issue a deed of manumission “whereby he emancipates and sets free every Slave in his Possession” according to the timetables legally allowed by each member’s state.<sup>37</sup> “As I have foretold,” Jarratt wrote to Dromgoole with satisfaction, they “have already done more harm than the united efforts of all the Preachers, I fear, will ever do good.”<sup>38</sup> Devereux Jarratt was responding not only to the recent rules passed at the 1784 Conference, but rather to five years of increasingly vocal antislavery agitation from Methodist leaders and preachers.

As early as 1780, preachers in Methodism’s northern circuits passed a resolution deeming slavery “contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature.” From that point forward, preachers in Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey (and, in time, the New England states, Delaware, and Maryland) were required to manumit their slaves “on pain of future exclusion.” In 1783, the Conference expanded the scope of the resolution to include “local Preachers who hold slaves” without specifying a punishment. The following spring in April 1784, they attempted to enforce the rule by suspending slaveholding local preachers “in Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New-jersey,” and “try[ing] those in Virginia another year.” They also took aim for the first time at rank and file

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<sup>37</sup> *Minutes* (1785), 15-16.

<sup>38</sup> Devereux Jarratt to Edward Dromgoole, 13 May 1785, Edward Dromgoole Papers, Southern Historical Collection-University of North Carolina.

Methodist members, threatening to “turn out” those who “buy and sell slaves,” but stopping short of condemning slaveholders.<sup>39</sup> The 1784 Christmas Conference held eight months later went two steps further by broadening the geographical scope of the policy and by threatening to expel not only ministers but also lay members who continued owning slaves. Francis Asbury and other traveling preachers had previously urged lay members to manumit their slaves in private, but never before threatened them with expulsion from the church as a punishment for refusing to do so. As the minutes recognized, this was “a new Term of Communion,” something the recently-arrived Thomas Coke and newly-ordained Francis Asbury finally felt empowered to do, now that they were no longer merely overseeing a lay movement within the Anglican fold, but superintending an independent Methodist church.

The new terms of communion were not absolute, nor were they permanent. In recognition of the fact that North Carolina did not permit the private manumission of slaves, the Conference clarified that “these Rules are to affect the Members of our Society no farther than as they are consistent with the Laws of the States in which they reside.” Methodist preachers had not yet traversed as far south as South Carolina and Georgia, which meant that the new rules were aimed primarily at those within the bounds of Methodism’s largest conference—Virginia. While those further north were given twelve months to comply with the policy, those in Virginia, “after due Consideration of the peculiar Circumstances,” were allowed “two Years from the Notice given, to consider the Expedience of

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<sup>39</sup> *Minutes* (1795), 38, 62, 71.

Compliance or Non-Compliance with these Rules.”<sup>40</sup> The two-year deadline never arrived, and at the inaugural Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the “minute on slavery” was suspended indefinitely.<sup>41</sup>

Response to the new rules was almost immediate, attracting the attention of both Methodists and suspicious outsiders. Many perceived it as unwelcome encroachment from Thomas Coke, apparently unaware of just how hostile southern slaveholders would react to any attempt to wrest from them their property, especially when the dictates were coming from a British minister. Following the conclusion of the conference, Coke set out on a tour of the American states, traveling north to Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New York, before returning south to survey the work in Virginia and North Carolina. On March 30, he met for the first time Devereux Jarratt. The two “talked largely on the minutes concerning slavery,” wrote Coke in his journal, “but he would not be persuaded.” The following week, Coke “dared for the first time to bear a public testimony against slavery.” Although on this first foray, he did “not find that more than one was offended,” Coke quickly learned that Jarratt’s views were not an anomaly. An April 10 sermon so alarmed listeners that “a high-headed lady” offered fifty pounds as a reward to whoever “would give that little doctor one hundred lashes.” The gathering mob abated, but not before regrouping the next day “to meet [Coke] with staves and clubs.” Coke avoided the subject of slavery that day, bragging in his journal that the rioters’ “scheme was [thus] defeated.” Nevertheless, the threat of violence evidently scared the diminutive preacher,

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<sup>40</sup> *Minutes* (1785), 15-17.

<sup>41</sup> *Minutes* (1795), 83.

who seemed relieved to pass into North Carolina three days later, where he could be “done with [his] testimony against slavery for a time, ... the laws of this state forbidding any to emancipate their negroes.”<sup>42</sup> Hostile outsiders, however, were far from the only ones upset with Coke and the “new term of communion” for Methodist slaveholders.

Reactions from within the church were only marginally better. In addition to alienating now-former allies like Devereux Jarratt, the minute on slavery caused consternation among the still faithful. When Francis Asbury visited Brunswick County in April 1785, he discovered “the minds of the people greatly agitated with our rules against slavery.” Edward Dromgoole confirmed this assessment, noting that “some prejudices arose on account of the new minutes that were made, and new terms of communion proposed, to those who had been long in our membership, chiefly with respect to holding slaves.”<sup>43</sup> Coke was seemingly unaware that Virginia Methodists—still bitter over earlier battles over ordination and lay representation—were particularly sensitive to any perceived ecclesiastical autocracy. He pushed forward, seeing in slavery an opportunity to separate the wheat from the tares and purify the church. When invited to preach a funeral sermon for Thomas Bedford, a well-known Methodist and prominent slaveholder in Charlotte County, Coke used the opportunity to say “nothing good of [the deceased], for he was a violent friend of slavery.” Because Bedford was “great among the Methodists in these parts,” Coke worried that he “would have been a dreadful thorn in our sides.” The untimely death of an unrepentant

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<sup>42</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 52-56.

<sup>43</sup> *JFLA*, 1: 488; Edward Dromgoole, *Autobiography*, Edward Dromgoole Papers, SHC, UNC.

slaveholder was, to Coke, a sure sign that God approved of his attempts to rid the church of slaveholders.<sup>44</sup> In spite of the internal dissent it provoked, the Methodist push for manumission did achieve some success, though its immediate impact seems comparatively small. The exact number of Methodist deeds and wills manumitting slaves in 1785 is unknown. Statistical surveys of nine Virginia counties—including Methodist strongholds in the southern part of the state—show only eight total deeds or wills manumitting slaves, an uptick from earlier years, but a comparatively small percentage of all Methodist slaveholders in the state.<sup>45</sup>

In the face of such resistance, the headstrong Thomas Coke and other antislavery preachers pushed forward in their aim to purge the church of the sin of slavery. At a meeting of the Virginia Conference in May 1785, several prominent Methodist planters met the preachers “to insist on a Repeal of the Slave-Rules.” Coke responded by threatening to withdraw all preachers from their stations, causing the slave owners to reluctantly “[draw] in their horns,” revoke their request, and humbly ask, “that Preachers might be appointed for their Circuit.” But after another month of near-constant opposition, the Bishops finally relented, judging it “prudent to suspend the minute concerning slavery, on account of the great opposition that had been given it, our work being in too

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<sup>44</sup> Coke, *Journal*, 53; *JLFA*, 1:488.

<sup>45</sup> Statistical information for the nine counties comes from Eva Sheppard Wolf’s study of emancipation in Accomack, Charles City, Chesterfield, Lancaster, Fauquier, Mecklenburg, Botetourt, and Wythe Counties and Art Budros’s examination of evangelicalism and manumission in Brunswick County. See Eva Sheppard Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner’s Rebellion* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 46; Art Budros, “The Antislavery Movement in Early America: Religion, Social Environment and Slave Manumissions,” *Social Forces* 84:2 (December 2005): 944.

infantile a state to push things to extremity.” Yet even as they moderately retreated for the time being from ridding the church of slavery, Coke and Asbury set their sights on loftier goals.<sup>46</sup>

During their short stay in North Carolina in April, Coke and Asbury noted with satisfaction that “we have ... drawn up a petition to the General Assembly of North-Carolina signed by the Conference, intreating them to pass an act to authorize those who are so disposed, to emancipate their slaves.” At the conference one month later in Virginia, where such a law permitting manumission was already on the books, the preachers drew up petitions to be circulated among Methodists throughout the state “intreating the General Assembly of Virginia, to pass a law for the immediate or gradual emancipation of all the slaves.” The following month, they passed a resolution to likewise petition Maryland’s legislative assembly for the gradual emancipation of slavery.<sup>47</sup> Echoing the combination of revolutionary and religious rhetoric found in the Conference minutes, the petitions declared “LIBERTY ... the Birthright of Mankind—The Right of every Rational creature without Exception,” and claimed “that the Body of Negroes have been robbed of that Right.” The enslaved, they continued, “ought in Justice to have their Right restored,” both because “the Glorious and ever Memorable Revolution can be Justified on no other Principles” and “Above ALL” because “that deep debasement of Spirit, which is the Necessary Consequence of Slavery utterly incapacitates the human mind ... for

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<sup>46</sup> Coke, *Journal*, 57-58, 65.

<sup>47</sup> Coke, *Journal*, 65, n190.



the reception of the Noble and Enlarged principles of the Gospel.”<sup>48</sup> The petitions were the most ambitious Methodist attempt to combat slavery anywhere since the publication of Wesley’s *Thoughts* one decade earlier, and in the estimation of one historian, “the high-water mark of the evangelical crusade against slavery in Virginia.”<sup>49</sup>

In hindsight, the effort seems strikingly naïve. But early Methodists were nothing if not ambitious, and believing that both God’s decrees of the equality of all men and the American Revolution’s legacy of expanded rights were in their favor, the petitions appear to have been a sincere effort by Methodist leaders to rid the Old Dominion of chattel slavery. Coke noted in his journal that “there have been many debates already on the subject in the Assembly,” and expressed his belief that the number of signatures the petitions attracted “will not be few.”<sup>50</sup> The Bishops also sought to enlist the support of several prominent non-Methodists, including George Washington. On May 26, Asbury and Coke waited on the famed general at his Mount Vernon home. Asbury recorded in his journal that Washington “received us very politely, and gave us his opinion against slavery.” Coke boldly implored Washington to sign their petition. Washington demurred. “He informed us that he was of our sentiments, and had signified his thoughts on the subject to most of the great men of the State,” wrote Coke in his journal, but “that he did not see it proper to sign the petition,” offering instead a promise to

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<sup>48</sup> Electors Petitions, 8 November 1785, Legislative Petitions of the General Assembly, 1776-1865, Accession Number 36121, Box 81, Folder 10, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. See also Richard K. MacMaster, “Liberty or Property? The Methodists Petitions for Emancipation in Virginia, 1785,” *Methodist History* 10 (1971): 44-55.

<sup>49</sup> MacMaster, “Liberty or Property,” 44.

<sup>50</sup> Coke, *Journal*, 58. The seven petitions collected a total of 261 signatures. See Electors Petitions, 8 November 1785, LVA.

support any proposed legislation to that effect “if the Assembly took it into consideration.”<sup>51</sup> Washington almost certainly knew that the petitions would gain little traction, thus rendering his promise moot.

When the House of Delegates took up the matter on November 10, “sundry respectable members,” echoing Washington, expressed their support for the principle the petition espoused, but when it came time to vote, the Methodists’ proposal was “rejected without dissent.”<sup>52</sup> It was a sobering blow to Methodist leaders, and the consequences of their actions were greater than legislative defeat alone. The petitions calling for emancipation provoked several counter petitions from slaveholding Virginians, especially those in central and southern Virginia, where Methodism was numerically strongest but also regions dominated by tobacco production and slave labor. More than 50 percent of the population in Hanover, Henrico, Amelia, and Brunswick Counties were slaves, and masters there were adamant about protecting their economic interests and the structures that held it in place. The counter petitions, totaling eight in all, attracted over 1,200 signatures – nearly five times the number produced by the Methodists. The petitioners not only defended the rights of slaveholders and resisted any form of forced manumission; they also challenged the Methodists’ attempt to claim the Revolutionary mantle, portraying the evangelical upstarts as “Enemies of our Country, Tools of the British Administration,” and “contemptible Emissaries and Hirelings of Britain.” They contested not only the philosophical

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<sup>51</sup> *JLFA*, 1:489; Coke, *Journal*, 63-64.

<sup>52</sup> James Madison to George Washington, 11 November 1785, in *Papers of James Madison*, eds. Robert A. Rutland, William M.E. Rachal, Barbara D. Ripel, and Frederika J. Teute, Congressional Series, Vol. 8 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 403-05.

claims raised in the original petitions, but also the scriptural reasoning advanced by Coke and Asbury. Citing Old Testament passages from Genesis, Leviticus, and Ecclesiastes, they claimed the Bishops' attempt "to WREST FROM US OUR SLAVES" was "unsupported by Scripture or Sound Policy."<sup>53</sup> It is not clear how much of a difference those counter-petitions made in influencing votes, but the results seem predictable from the vantage point of today. The motion to enact gradual emancipation was roundly rejected in a unanimous vote, with even sympathetic voices unwilling to offer anything more than unofficial support for the measure. Not only had Methodist efforts to reform Virginian society failed spectacularly, they had also increased opposition towards the movement, giving renewed urgency to wartime suspicions of Methodists that imagined them as outside agitators opposed to American ideals.

Such suspicions convinced Methodist leaders to quietly retreat from their efforts to reform the larger slaveholding society of Virginia, and to scale back the more modest efforts to expunge slavery from the church. As the surviving journals and correspondence of several itinerant preachers reveals, however, many Methodist ministers continued to publicly preach against slavery and privately encouraged Methodists to manumit their slaves. The diary of James Meacham, who was admitted on trial to the Methodist ministry in 1788 and traveled several circuits in southern Virginia and North Carolina for nearly a decade before locating to Sussex County in 1797, is a particularly rich source of

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<sup>53</sup> "Enemies" and "Tools" from Amelia County Petition, 10 November 1785; "contemptible Emissaries" from Lunenburg County Petition, 29 November 1785, both in Legislative Petitions of the General Assembly, 1776-1865, LVA. See also Frederika Teute Schmidt and Barbara Ripel Wilhelm, "Early Proslavery Petitions in Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 30:1 (January 1973): 133-146.

Methodist antislavery action during this period. Meacham regularly preached against slavery, decrying it as “that accursed sin” and lamenting that “that bloody hateful name of oppression” that “kills the life of love and liberty” had infected the Methodist church.<sup>54</sup>

James Meacham was greatly influenced by James O’Kelly, a longtime Methodist preacher who presided over the several circuits in southern Virginia from 1785 until 1792. O’Kelly developed a reputation as a fierce critic of slavery. He was among the earliest group of Virginia Methodists to manumit slaves, setting free an enslaved female named Dianna in March 1785, and in 1789, published *An Essay on Slavery*.<sup>55</sup> O’Kelly’s essay briefly outlined the history of African slavery, drawing primarily on Wesley’s *Thoughts* (1774), James Ramsay’s *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (1784), and Thomas Clarkson’s *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1786), and then condemned it from both a biblical and republican point of view. The book represented the first sustained attempt by an *American* Methodist author to engage with larger transatlantic debates over the abolition of slavery—no small feat for unlettered evangelical preacher in rural Virginia.<sup>56</sup> But though O’Kelly’s *Essay* tapped into transatlantic literary currents, it nevertheless centered its focus on decidedly local concerns.

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<sup>54</sup> “A Journal and Travel of James Meacham, Part I: May 19 to August 31, 1789,” *Trinity College Historical Society Papers*, IX (1912): 67, 79.

<sup>55</sup> James O’Kelly, Deed of Manumission, 5 March 1785, Mecklenburg County, Virginia Deed Book, Microfilm, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia.

<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth A. Georgian, “‘That Unhappy Division’: Reconsidering the Causes and Significance of the O’Kelly Schism in the Methodist Episcopal Church,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 120:3 (2012): 221.

Drawing on American Methodism's uniquely homespun Arminian theology, O'Kelly pleaded with his coreligionists to "prove [God] with your free-will offering, before it is extorted from you by civil authority." Slavery's eventual demise, far from a foregone conclusion in 1789, was nevertheless inevitable in O'Kelly's thinking, or at least his rhetoric. Failure to manumit one's slaves prior to legal emancipation would result in "a blot which time would not wipe away from the church."<sup>57</sup> Scattered references in preachers' personal papers indicate that O'Kelly and his crew of loyal antislavery preachers enjoyed some success in their efforts. A 1788 letter to Thomas Coke from Philip Bruce, presiding elder in Portsmouth, reported not only the conversion of "a great number of blacks" in Sussex and Brunswick Counties, but also "that at the February court in Sussex, the Methodists manumitted above an hundred, at that one court."<sup>58</sup> James Meacham recorded in his journal in June of the following year that "our Dear honest Hearted bro. Seward broke the yoke of oppression from off of his poor Slaves," and expressed his hope that "God may make it a growing work."<sup>59</sup> Statistical surveys of manumissions in Virginia during the 1780s and 1790s suggest that while Methodists manumitted slaves at a greater rate than non-Methodists in the Old Dominion, the push for manumission never reached the levels hoped for by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, or James O'Kelly and James Meacham.

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<sup>57</sup> James O'Kelly, *An Essay on Negro-Slavery* (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1789), 31.

<sup>58</sup> Philip Bruce to Thomas Coke, 25 March 1788, in Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook*, Volume II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 96-97.

<sup>59</sup> "A Journal and Travel of James Meacham, Part I," 73.

In her study of manumission in eight Virginia counties, Eva Sheppard Wolf noted a correlation between areas with a large Methodist population and high manumission rates, and in cases where a manumitter's religious identity could be identified, Methodists accounted for more than half (33 out of 62). In a separate study of Brunswick County, sociologist Art Budros estimated that somewhere between 70 and 94 percent of manumitters from 1782 to 1808 were Methodists.<sup>60</sup> Those numbers, though confirming the conviction of anti-slavery Methodists, can be deceiving. Only 33 individuals manumitted slaves by deed or will in Brunswick County over that 26-year span, meaning that even if Budros is right in his claim that "at least 94 percent of [them] were Methodists," only a small fraction of Methodist slaveholders actually freed their slaves.<sup>61</sup> The preachers' journals again bear this out. Just weeks before James Meacham celebrated "Dear bro. Seward" manumitting his slaves, he reported traveling with "Old Bro. O. Myrick of Brunswick County" and conversing upon the subject of slavery. Meacham was amazed that Myrick, "now with his wife a numerous Age, without any Child, [and with] an immense Fortune" refused to free his slaves. He remained "as Bloody

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<sup>60</sup> Eva Sheppard Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 56, 239-241; Art Budros, "The Antislavery Movement in Early America: Religion, Social Environment and Slave Manumissions," *Social Forces* 84:2 (December 2005): 945.

<sup>61</sup> Budros, "The Antislavery Movement in Early America," figures from Table 1: Slave Manumissions in Brunswick County, Virginia, 1782-1808, p. 944. Quote from p. 945. In 1782, the Brunswick Circuit had 671 members; it reached its apex for the period under consideration in 1788, with 1604 members (1249 white, 355 black), and after a major schism and the division of the district into several smaller circuits, still numbered 554 in 1808. If we take the 1788 numbers, and conservatively estimate that 25% of all Methodists on class lists were adult men (312), and that one-third of those (104) owned at least one slave (a conservative estimate again, since, according to the 1788 tax lists, 64% of Brunswick County households (617 out of 966) owned at least one slave), the 31 Methodist manumitters identified by Budros represent a significant minority of Methodist slaveholders in the county.

oppressor perhaps as may be found,” Meacham concluded ruefully.<sup>62</sup> In October 1791, he threatened to expel from society “a poor woman of our community” for repeated “cruelty with her poor slaves, but could not do anything with her.” The woman “persisted in her own way and testified she would still do the same if they would not work.”<sup>63</sup> The unnamed woman contrasted with Meacham’s typical experience with female Methodists in his circuit. On more than one occasion he met wives of slaveholding Methodists adamantly opposed to the practice.

One of the regular stops for Meacham and other Methodist preachers in Mecklenburg County was the home of Tignal and Sarah Jones. The two married in 1767, and a decade later, Sarah converted to Methodism against the explicit wishes of her husband. When he later converted and religion receded as a source of tension in the marriage, slavery took its place. Tignal Jones owned over 1300 acres and nearly 80 slaves, and consistently refused the overtures of Methodist ministers and his wife alike to manumit any of his enslaved workers. Sarah, by contrast, was a firm opponent of slavery; her husband’s ownership of so many slaves was a constant source of unrest for her. Limited in her ability to legally manumit the slaves herself, she nevertheless persisted in voicing her opinion and influencing others within her circumscribed sphere. Jones recorded in her diary entering into “Stiff debate upon Slavery” with her husband, taking “great care it was gently conducted.” Exercising her motherly prerogative, she also described a “Sweet and precious Evening ... conversing with my Son from College and 2 young daughters of righteousness and judgment and justice and

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<sup>62</sup> “A Journal and Travel of James Meacham, Part I,” 68.

<sup>63</sup> “A Journal and Travel of James Meacham, Part II, 1789-1797,” *Trinity College Historical Society Papers*, X (1914): 91.

mercy and the Blackness of Negro Slavery.” “Oh whata Shame,” she implored her children, for “Christians to hold them in chains.”<sup>64</sup> Jones ultimately reconciled her marriage to a slaveholder by focusing on his commitment to Methodist religion and rationalizing in her mind that she would not be punished for her husband’s sins. “Although the oppressed stare me though,” she somewhat ominously described in a 1790 letter to preacher Jeremiah Minter, “I will try to be clear of their blood. My witness is in Heaven, my record is on high; and I will try to live in everlasting fire.”<sup>65</sup> As the experience of Sarah Jones suggests, Methodist debates over slavery occurred not only between pro- and anti-slavery preachers and laity, but also between husbands and wives, and between parents and children.

As in the case of Sarah and Tignal Jones, those debates complicated other concerns. Among other things, the Methodist *Discipline* discouraged marriages between Methodists and non-believers. Methodists, then, faced a problem when female converts married those outside the faith. When the non-Methodist spouse was a slave-owner, the situation was even more precarious. Although Tignal eventually followed his wife into the Methodist community, not every spouse of a Methodist convert did. Nor were the marriages of Methodist lay men and women alone cause for concern. Francis Asbury, who never married, fretted constantly about the ill effects of a married ministry altogether. Not only

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<sup>64</sup> Sarah Jones Journal, Special Collections, Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

<sup>65</sup> Sarah Jones, *Devout Letters: Or, Letters Spiritual and Friendly, Written by Mrs. Sarah Jones, Corrected and Published by Jeremiah Minter, Minister of the Gospel* (Alexandria: Samuel Snowden, 1804), 7. See also Chad Sanford, “Practicing Piety: Sarah Jones and Methodism in 1790s Virginia” (MA Thesis, College of William & Mary, 2004).



did a wife and children distract from the single-minded devotion to Christ and the conversion of sinners Asbury expected of all Methodist preachers. It also threatened to take away some of Methodism's most able preachers from the itinerancy altogether. Concerns over the church's ability to support a married minister (and his family of regularly-increasing size) had plagued British Methodist leaders since the movement's beginnings and continued to confront Thomas Coke and Methodist missionaries in the West Indies. Though some preachers, like Freeborn Garrettson, remained active as traveling preachers long after their marriage, they were the exception to the rule. The small and unreliable salaries for itinerant preachers convinced most that it was simply untenable to raise a family on such meager wages.<sup>66</sup>

In the south, the concerns regarding preachers locating from the itinerant ministry and marrying were closely related to apprehensions over slavery. That is because an increasing number of preachers married the daughters of slaveholders. In Brunswick County, four of the five men who served as local preachers during the 1780s and 1790s married into slaveholding families and each eventually owned slaves themselves.<sup>67</sup> Methodist leaders could hardly rely

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<sup>66</sup> On debates over Methodist preachers and marriage, see Wigger, *American Saint*, 343-351; and Anna M. Lawrence, *One Family Under God: Love, Belonging, and Authority in Early Transatlantic Methodism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 133-57.

<sup>67</sup> By cross-referencing manuscript and published Methodist sources with databases of marriage bonds and ministerial returns for Brunswick County, I have identified five local preachers active there during the 1780s and 1790s: Aaron Brown, Edward Dromgoole, Cary James, John Jones, and James Meacham. All but Meacham owned slaves. See Catherine Lindsay Knorr, ed., *Marriage Bonds and Minister's Returns of Brunswick County, Virginia, 1750-1810* (Early, SC: Southern Historical Press, 1982). Information on each preacher's slave-owning came from surviving manuscript personal property tax lists for Brunswick County from 1788 and 1798, available online at <http://binns-genealogy.com/VirginiaTaxListCensuses/> (accessed 13 November 2014).

on preachers to encourage members to forsake slavery and manumit their slaves when they themselves owned slaves. James O’Kelly alluded to the problem in his 1789 *Essay on Negro Slavery*. Addressing himself “to the preachers of the gospel,” O’Kelly implored them to resist “violent temptation to withdraw from us, and venture eternal for temporal things.” Acknowledging the difficulties of supporting a family on a preacher’s meager salary, he continued: “Perhaps you will be permitted to suffer sometimes for food or raiment ... But he that only seeks the interest of Christ, regards none of those things. To save souls is our work, and God is our portion forever.”<sup>68</sup> The underlying message of O’Kelly’s exhortation was clear – slaveholders threatened not only the purity of the church, but also the itinerant ministry, the very backbone of the Methodist movement.

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Perhaps no one demonstrates better the tensions over slavery that plagued early Virginian Methodism than Edward Dromgoole. Born in Sligo, Ireland in 1751, Dromgoole immigrated to America in 1770. It is unclear whether he converted from Roman Catholicism to Methodism in his native country or upon arrival in North America, but he quickly came under the influence of fellow Irish immigrant Robert Strawbridge in Maryland and by 1772, had become a preacher himself. At the Philadelphia Conference in 1775, Dromgoole was assigned to the Brunswick Circuit in southern Virginia, which then encompassed the entirety of southern Virginia and much of North Carolina. He was instrumental in the revival that turned Virginia into a stronghold of the Methodist movement. Among his converts was one Rebecca Walton, the daughter of a successful

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<sup>68</sup> O’Kelly, *Essay on Negro-Slavery*, 32.

planter in Brunswick County, Virginia. In March 1777, Dromgoole married Rebecca, but continued as a traveling preacher for nearly another decade, playing a key role in the debates over church government and ordination during the wartime years in Virginia. In 1784, he abruptly located from the itinerancy following the death of his two young children. In 1786, the Dromgooles built a home on a large plot of land in Brunswick County, where Dromgoole oversaw a modest plantation and operated a successful mercantile store that eventually expanded to include five branches in surrounding towns and counties.

Upon their marriage in 1777, Edward and Rebecca Dromgoole inherited from her father a small number of slaves. Methodist antislavery fervor in Virginia reached its apex at the exact moment that the Dromgooles first built their home and set up their initially modest plantation and mercantile shop. Most historians have pointed to his retirement from the itinerancy in 1786 to take up life as a planter and merchant as evidence of Edward's support of slavery, painting him as "an ambitious and pious" southern patriarch who wanted "to prosper as easily as possible." The reality, it appears, was much more complicated, and his path toward "resolv[ing] the paradox of piety and economic well-being" was not as straightforward as the scholarly accounts suggest.<sup>69</sup> The pressures of trying to support a family on the unreliable wages afforded an itinerant preacher did concern Dromgoole. Francis Asbury recalled a meeting with Dromgoole in 1780, lamenting that "Edward Dromgoole is a good preacher, but entangled with a family." Worried that the traveling connection might soon lose his preaching abilities and leadership, Asbury proposed "a plan for building houses in every

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<sup>69</sup> Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism*, 44-45.

circuit for preachers' wives, and the society to supply their families with bread and meat; so the preachers should travel from place to place, as when single."<sup>70</sup> Although that plan never fully materialized, Asbury succeeded in convincing Dromgoole to continue riding his circuit, which he did for another six years. While historians like Donald Mathews and John Wigger have claimed that Dromgoole "left the itinerancy in 1786 to become a successful Brunswick County planter and slaveholder," the immediate impetus for his retirement from traveling was not an impious pursuit of wealth but rather, as both Christine Heyrman and Cynthia Lynn Lyerly have noted, the premature death of his six-year-old-son from an unspecified illness. In spite of his commitment to the Methodist ministry, the guilt-ridden Dromgoole resolved to locate immediately to take care of his suffering wife and their lone surviving child, a daughter.<sup>71</sup> Though already a slaveholder, Dromgoole remained conflicted over the subject, even after locating from the itinerancy.

Contrary to most historical assessments of his life, Edward Dromgoole wrestled internally over the question of emancipation, and in 1791 freed his several slaves. Although Dromgoole signed his name to one of the several antislavery petitions submitted to Virginia's General Assembly in November 1785, it took another six years for him to issue his own deed of emancipation. On

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<sup>70</sup> Wigger, *American Saint*, 153.

<sup>71</sup> Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind*, 43-44; Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 133-134, who mistakenly places the events a decade later in the 1790s. The year following Dromgoole's retirement from the full-time ministry, the General Conference passed a resolution reducing the stipend allotted for married preachers, in response to "many of our Preachers and people" being "dissatisfied with the salaries allowed our married Preachers, who have children." See *Minutes* (1795), 104; Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 213-218.

June 27, 1791, Dromgoole penned a carefully worded document that “hereby set free from Bondage the several Slaves” in his possession, eleven in all.<sup>72</sup> At first glance, Dromgoole’s deed is an otherwise unremarkable document, merely one of many issued by Methodists in Brunswick County and surrounding communities in the 1780s and 1790s. Upon closer inspection, though, several things stand out, each suggesting that far from exemplifying Methodism’s supposed antislavery bent, Dromgoole’s deed shows instead the ways individual slaveholders wrestled with their leaders’ admonitions. Unlike his more fervent abolitionist friends, Dromgoole offered no explicit reason for the manumission. Whereas his close friend and fellow preacher Philip Gatch made clear in his own deed manumitting each of his nine slaves that he did so out a belief “‘that all men are by nature equally free,’ and from a clear conviction of the injustice of depriving my fellow Creatures of their natural Right,” Dromgoole remained officially silent on the reasons for issuing his own deed.<sup>73</sup> His deed was not altogether unexceptional in this respect—many other Virginia manumitters during the 1780s and 1790s remained silent on their reasons for freeing their slaves—but it was unusual for a Methodist, and especially a prominent and influential

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<sup>72</sup> Electors Petition, 8 November 1785, Legislative Petitions of the General Assembly, 1776-1865, Legislative Petitions Digital Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia; Edward Dromgoole, Deed of Manumission, 27 June 1791, Brunswick County Deed Book, 15:93, microfilm, JDRL, CW. James O’Kelly’s *Essay on Negro Slavery* might have played a role in Dromgoole’s decision. Dromgoole was gifted a copy from “I.P.” His copy of O’Kelly’s pamphlet is held in the North Carolina Collection at the Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. A photocopy is available at MAHC, Drew University.

<sup>73</sup> Philip Gatch, Deed of Manumission, 18 December 1788, *Powhatan County Deed Book*, No. 1, 1777-1792, 486; Dromgoole, Deed of Manumission, JDRL, CW.

preacher, to not include some statement explicating his belief in the injustice of the system or the spiritual brotherhood of all men.<sup>74</sup>

Further evidence of Dromgoole's conflicted feelings over slavery is seen in the timetable he provided for the manumission of each of the several slaves. Delayed manumission was common among those freeing their slaves, and certain delays were required by law to prevent the state from having to support the manumitted persons. The 1782 Act to Authorize the Manumission of Slaves required masters to "support and maintain" those "above the age of forty-five years" or "under the age of twenty-one" (males) or eighteen (females).<sup>75</sup> None of Dromgoole's slaves were immediately manumitted, and while several were too young in 1791, Dromgoole delayed their freedom beyond their eighteenth or twenty-first birthdays. Instead of following the timetables laid out under law, Dromgoole opted instead to follow those proposed by Methodist leaders in 1784, even though those rules had been subsequently scrapped. This allowed Dromgoole to simultaneously benefit from the continued labor of his several slaves while also providing a religious justification for their delayed release from bondage. The minutes from the December 1784 Conference required "every slave ... between the Ages of Forty and Forty-five" to be freed "immediately," those "between the Ages of Twenty-five and Forty immediately, or at farthest at

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<sup>74</sup> Eva Sheppard Wolf has noted that Methodist ministers "provided examples by freeing their own slaves, witnessed deeds of manumission drafted by others, and in some communities preached against slavery," and that they were more likely than their Quaker counterparts to "invoke God more explicitly" in their deeds." See Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 56.

<sup>75</sup> "An Act to Authorize the Manumission of Slaves," in William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619*, Volume XI (Richmond, 1823), 39.

the Expiration of five Years from the Date of the [deed],” those between 20 and 25 “at furthest when they arrive at the Age of Thirty,” and “every Slave under the Age of Twenty, as soon as they arrive at the Age of Twenty-five at farthest.”<sup>76</sup> For the five oldest slaves in his possession—aged 37, 24, 19, 17, and 15 in June 1791—Dromgoole followed the Methodist timetables exactly. Bet was thus freed in 1796, five years from the date of manumission. Boatswain, then 24, was freed in January 1792. Adam, “aged nineteen years last October” was granted his freedom January 1, 1797, four years after the legally acceptable date but right on schedule with the limits permitted by the church. Daniel, two years younger than Adam, was similarly freed at the age of 25, in 1799. Hannah, a fifteen-year-old female, was also kept in bondage until 1797, a full three years longer than Dromgoole could have granted her freedom.<sup>77</sup>

Not all of the delayed manumissions fit the Methodist model, though. Five of the eleven slaves were aged nine or younger, including an infant named Orange, “born the twelfth day of last January.” He would not be freed until January 1, 1818, eleven days shy of his twenty-seventh birthday.<sup>78</sup> The reasons for the delay are not clear, but the most obvious explanation is economic considerations. As Eva Wolf Sheppard explained, “manumitters ... saw delayed manumission as a reasonable compromise between their antislavery leanings and their need for laborers. Even when they were genuinely uncomfortable with owning slaves, they could not afford to be without them.”<sup>79</sup> Yet even by those

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<sup>76</sup> *Minutes* (1785), 15-16.

<sup>77</sup> Dromgoole, Deed of Manumission, JDRL, CW.

<sup>78</sup> Dromgoole, Deed of Manumission, JDRL, CW.

<sup>79</sup> Wolf, *Race and Liberty*, 79.

standards, the timing of Dromgoole's manumissions was excessively long. Economic interests alone are not enough to explain the delays decided on by Edward Dromgoole. A related motivation for the timing dictated by Dromgoole might have been an effort to earn the trust and ensure the loyalty (and dutiful labor) of the slaves. By dangling the carrot of eventual freedom in front of the enslaved laborers, owners sought to lessen the slaves' incentive to runaway and to reduce the need for discipline. This was a particularly appealing approach for Methodist masters, who sought to reform slavery as an institution and ameliorate the excessively harsh conditions of slave life.<sup>80</sup>

While Dromgoole clearly intended to continue benefitting (and profiting) from the slaves' labor for years to come, he also took care to free from bondage "the future increase of the females," a stipulation often left unrecorded that allowed more reluctant manumitters (including some Methodist preachers) to retain ownership of soon-to-be-freed adult slaves' children born into slavery while still satisfying the demands and pressures of their coreligionists. The timing patterns laid out in Dromgoole's deed hint at yet another motivation for the delayed manumission, one that identifies Dromgoole as a forerunner of the benevolent patriarch that would come to define southern Methodism in the early nineteenth century. Of the eleven slaves listed in the deed, the first two to be manumitted were "Boatswain, aged twenty four years" and "Austin, aged thirteen years last June," to be freed January 1, 1792. Austin, of course, did not meet the minimum age requirement of twenty-one for manumitted males, indicating that

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<sup>80</sup> Wolf, *Race and Liberty*, 80-81. On Methodist melioration, see Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 140-143.



the older Boatswain (perhaps Austin's brother) was to assume charge of the newly-freed but still underage Austin. Similarly, Adam (age 19), Hannah (15), and Bob (9) were each scheduled to be freed on the first day of January, 1797, when Bob would be 15, still six years shy of the required age. Their relationship within one another is not entirely clear, but the three were likely related to one another – a supposition supported by the fact that they were apparently living together fifteen years after being freed.<sup>81</sup> Edward Dromgoole scheduled the several slaves' effective dates of manumission, then, to both continue benefitting from their labor and, in some instances, to keep families together. Just a few years later, he would employ a similar sense of patriarchal benevolence to justify the purchase of new slaves.

It is unclear whether or not Edward Dromgoole intended in 1791 to be done with slavery entirely by the time of the last manumitted slave's release in 1818. Perhaps he assumed that the Methodist Episcopal Church would renew its antislavery fervor and disallow its members to possess slaves entirely by then, or perhaps he believed that either the state or federal government would disallow chattel slavery at some future date. Dromgoole did continue to wrestle with the morality of slavery. As late as 1805, he felt that "a state where none of the human

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<sup>81</sup> It is possible that the three were biological siblings, though Adam (Abram) and Bob (Woodlief) each assumed different surnames after manumission. Adam Abram is listed in the 1810 Federal Census as a Head of Household with three individuals. By 1820, that household had expanded to four. There is a separate entry in the 1820 census for one Robert Woodliff, a free black aged 26-45 living alone, who may or may not be Bob Woodlief. See Appendix A and Appendix B in Francis Holloway Wynne, ed., *Register of Free Negroes and also of Dower Slaves, Brunswick County, Virginia, 1803-1850* (Fairfax, Virginia: 1983), 191, 194, 196. For their surnames, see certificates of freedom for "ADAM, alias ADAM ABRAM" and "BOB alias BOB WOODLIEF" in *ibid.*, 43, 45.

race are in captivity, would afford my mind more rest.”<sup>82</sup> Constantly pressured by his former friends and coreligionists now residing in Ohio to leave “the land where you are now,” a “land of slavery” and a “land of oppression,” and “Come in the Name of the Lorde” to “this good land Where that evil is not,” Dromgoole nevertheless resisted. Though he continued to express some reservations about the morality of slavery and apparently considered making the move west, he also reasoned that God had kept him in Virginia for a divine purpose.<sup>83</sup>

Dromgoole believed that “a Heaven may be secured in any place or condition that divine providence shall place us in” and in an 1809 exchange with Peter Pelham (an old friend and fellow Methodist whose daughter Sarah married Dromgoole’s oldest surviving son, Edward, Jr.), he wrote that “there may be situations and circumstances more advantageous than others,” and while the refusal of Ohioans to admit slavery into their state was commendable, the more advantageous situation for Dromgoole was to remain in Brunswick County.<sup>84</sup> In spite of his friends’ pleas, Dromgoole took actions that enmeshed him further into southern Virginia’s slaveholding society. Dromgoole’s mercantile operation and his slaveholdings expanded alongside one another, and by 1800, he has opened four additional branches of his store throughout southern Virginia and northern North Carolina. He also purchased new slaves, gradually expanding his holdings

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<sup>82</sup> Dromgoole to Asbury, 20 December 1805, Dromgoole Family Records, 1788-1840, LVA.

<sup>83</sup> Bennett Maxey to Edward Dromgoole, 27 July 1807, Edward Dromgoole Papers, SHC, UNC.

<sup>84</sup> Peter Pelham to Edward Dromgoole, 8 September 1809, SHC, UNC. The letters Dromgoole wrote to his friends Ohio have not survived. The first words quoted from his exchange with Pelham are Pelham’s, but are prefaced with “I believe (as you do).” The second passage is placed in quotation marks by Pelham and is apparently something Dromgoole has written in his last letter to Pelham.

until they reached the number he manumitted in 1791. By the time Orange, just six months old when the deed was issued, obtained his freedom in 1818, Dromgoole again owned 11 slaves.<sup>85</sup> Edward Dromgoole did not immediately begin purchasing slaves after issuing his deed of manumission in 1791. He purchased one slave from Benjamin Harrison in November 1797, and another from Richard Walpole a little over a year later, in January 1799. Both slaves had formerly been the property of the since-deceased John Walpole and were separated by will at the time of his death. Dromgoole evidently was attempting to reunite kin separated by slavery, an interesting point in light of his earlier effort to keep manumitted slaves together as families.<sup>86</sup>

Like almost all Methodist slaveholders in the eighteenth century, Dromgoole surely sought to convert his slaves. This was part of both a sincere desire to reform the harsh realities of slave life and an effort to ensure the obedience of the enslaved to both their earthly and heavenly masters. Dromgoole named his plantation “Canaan,” lending the slaves’ lives and labor, as well as his ownership of them, biblical import. The contrast between Dromgoole’s “Canaan” and the “land of Canaan” sought by his antislavery friends living in the newly established state of Ohio is stark and points to the growing fissure between northern (and western) and southern brands of Methodism. The further contrast of each with the Canaan sought by the formerly enslaved Methodists from Tidewater Virginia, now battling antagonistic governmental and

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<sup>85</sup> See 1820 United States Census, Meherrin Parrish, Brunswick County, Virginia, 33 (NARA Microfilm Roll: M33-134). There were also three free people of color living with Dromgoole at the time, including a 26-43 year old male, almost certainly Orange.

<sup>86</sup> See contracts between Benjamin Harrison and Edward Dromgoole, Sr., 29 November 1797, and 3 January 1799, Microfilm Reel 1, Edward Dromgoole Papers, SHC, UNC.

ecclesiastical leaders across the Atlantic in Sierra Leone, highlights the divergent ways in which debates over slavery and the place of free and enslaved people of color divided the transatlantic Methodist community.

Dromgoole's efforts to preach to and convert his slaves, however, were apparently frustrated by the slaves themselves. Itinerant preacher and staunch antislavery advocate James Meacham, who located and settled in neighboring Sussex County in 1797, lamented that Dromgoole's slaves maintained a "hardness and inattention to the things of eternity," which he blamed on "their Lordly Master" being "a preacher ... for many years" yet continuing "to hold them in slavery."<sup>87</sup> One wonders how Violet, Fanny, Clarissa, and Orange—the four slaves whose manumissions occurred *after* Dromgoole began purchasing new slaves—must have felt about their master's actions. Dromgoole's continued ownership of slaves also strained relationships with friends and family members. Francis Asbury, who regularly stayed with the Dromgooles during his southern preaching tours, arrived in Brunswick County in December 1797, just weeks after Dromgoole had purchased a slave. Asbury recorded in his journal being plagued by "some fear lest I had or should say too much on slavery" and risk offending his host and longtime friend.<sup>88</sup> By 1810, any reservations Dromgoole once had about the morality of slavery had subsided, further damaging relationships with old friends. When Dromgoole didn't immediately respond to Peter Pelham's 1809 letter, Pelham feared he "had written something too freely, so as to have given

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<sup>87</sup> James Meacham Papers, Duke University, as cited in Lysterly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind*, 61-62.

<sup>88</sup> Francis Asbury Journal, 22 December 1797, in *JLFA*, 2:144.

you offence unintentionally in some of the subjects, mentd therein.”<sup>89</sup> At the time of his death in 1835, Dromgoole owned over 800 acres and 17 slaves. His obituary eulogized him as a kindly “husband and father” whose “conduct inspired love and reverence,” and as a benevolent master who, “without employing severity or harshness ... maintained a proper authority; and thereby secured to himself, from his domestics, respect, attachment, and willing obedience.”<sup>90</sup> From itinerant preacher to reluctant slaveholder, Dromgoole had become a conflicted manumitter and then once again a reluctant slaveholder, before making one final transition to benevolent slaveholder and southern patriarch. His life, preaching career, and especially his shifting attitudes towards slavery, exemplify the trajectory of Methodism’s relationship with the peculiar institution during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, not necessarily because his attitudes and actions are representative of all Methodists in their particulars, but rather because Dromgoole demonstrates the ever-shifting spectrum of individual Methodist attitudes and institutional Methodist policies toward slavery in the South.

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As Edward Dromgoole’s experience shows, those individual attitudes and institutional policies were shaped amidst, and contributed to, larger debates within both Methodism and American society. The risk of schism within the church raised by continued debates over slavery threatened to retard the

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<sup>89</sup> Pelham to Dromgoole, 16 April 1810, Dromgoole Papers, SHC, UNC.

<sup>90</sup> 1830 United States Census, Meherrin Parrish, Brunswick County, Virginia, 239 (NARA Microfilm Roll M19-195); Edward Dromgoole Obituary, *Richmond Enquirer*, 19 June 1835, 3.

momentum the movement had built during the 1770s and 1780s, as it increased its numbers and stretched its geographical boundaries into the Deep South. In 1785, Devereux Jarratt warned church leaders that pursuing antislavery policies would prove “destructive & divisive,” especially among Virginians, who “may be led but not drove.”<sup>91</sup> His warning proved prophetic in 1792, when James O’Kelly abruptly left the inaugural General Conference of the MEC in protest against Asbury’s increasingly concentrated episcopal authority. O’Kelly had long advocated ecclesiastical reform, arguing for the admittance of lay preachers to conference and the rights of traveling preachers to refuse appointments by Asbury. It was the Bishop’s rejection of the latter proposal that prompted O’Kelly to exit the meeting early and ultimately, to leave the Methodist Episcopal Church entirely. Backed by a contingent of close friends and influential preachers, O’Kelly organized in December 1793 the Republican Methodist Church, abolishing the offices of bishop and presiding elder and placing all preachers— itinerant and lay alike—on equal sacerdotal footing. At least 20,000 lay Methodists, including both black and white members, followed O’Kelly out of the church.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Jarratt to Dromgoole, 31 May 1785, in Dromgoole Papers, SHC, UNC.

<sup>92</sup> Nearly all historians of early American Methodism have analyzed the O’Kelly schism. Among the most helpful are Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 202-207, and Wigger, *American Saint*, 211-219. Andrews focuses on the political and structural issues underlying the schism while Wigger emphasizes the personality issues at play. The most recent scholarly treatment, which includes a helpful historiographical overview and portrays the schism as a national instead of local event, is Georgian, “That Unhappy Division,” 210-235. Georgian suggests that the traditional figure of 20,000 departed Methodists is a gross underestimate, arguing that “more members must have left” the MEC “than records indicate.”

Though slavery was not the central concern of O’Kelly’s schism, it nevertheless played a crucial role in both his rhetorical battles with Episcopal Methodist preachers and in the growth of his Republican Methodist Church. In 1789, after completing his manuscript *Essay on Negro Slavery*, O’Kelly “put [it] into the hands of bishop Asbury,” who then gave “it to Dr. Coke for correction.” According to Nicholas Snethen, the grammar and logic were so poor that the Bishops refused to print the pamphlet. O’Kelly “took offence, and determined to trust no more of his works in the hands of such critics.” While O’Kelly unlettered style may very well have played a role in the bishops’ refusal to support its publication, its subject almost certainly played a role as well. Following the 1785 apex of Methodist antislavery effort in Virginia, Asbury and Coke retreated from their more strident denunciations of slavery. O’Kelly’s volume attempted to ignite the dying flames of Methodist antislavery sentiment. The dissenting Methodists “used the language of slavery to present their grievances against the church and Bishop Asbury.” Tapping into a discourse articulated earlier by his Episcopal Methodist opponents, O’Kellyite Hope Hull thus asked, “O Heavens! Are we not Americans!” Claiming the mantle of the American Revolution as Asbury and Coke had done a decade earlier, Hull continued: “Did not our fathers bleed to free their sons from the British yoke? and shall we be slaves to ecclesiastical oppression?”<sup>93</sup> Perhaps most notably, though, slavery shaped O’Kelly’s republican schism in the racial makeup of the followers it attracted.

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<sup>93</sup> Georgian, “That Unhappy Division,” 221; Hope Hull, as quoted in James O’Kelly, *The Author’s Apology for Protesting Against the Methodist Episcopal Government* (Richmond: John Dixon, 1798), 38.

In her otherwise excellent essay on the “causes and significance of the O’Kelly schism,” historian Elizabeth Georgian claims that although “O’Kelly should have drawn disproportionate support from black Methodists, given his unusually firm antislavery stance and his southern base, ... the evidence suggests otherwise.” Citing the proportional rates of black and white Methodist membership during the 1780s and 1790s, Georgian points to the rise in black membership in the final years of the 1790s as evidence that “blacks were far less likely to depart” the Methodist Episcopal Church than their white counterparts. In order to prove this point, she quickly glosses over the fact that the number of black Methodists in the circuits overseen by O’Kelly at the time of schism dramatically decreased from 1793 to 1797.<sup>94</sup> Drawing on the very same dataset of church membership but arriving at markedly different conclusions, Charles Irons has argued that “African American Virginians made the most of their freedom to join whatever church they wanted.” In the southern Virginia counties in which O’Kelly had labored for over a decade, “blacks joined churches associated with O’Kelly.” According to Irons, the circuits presided over by O’Kelly prior to 1792 witnessed a 53.3 percent drop of black church membership from 1793-1796. White membership also fell, though not as dramatically (24.4 percent). When the Sussex and Surry circuits were merged in 1794, they had over 1,000 black members, accounting for 46.4 percent of Methodists there. One year later, there were only 240 black Methodists in the Sussex Circuit, and in

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<sup>94</sup> Georgian, “That Unhappy Division,” 222-23.



1796, just 180.<sup>95</sup> It appears, then, that the schism led to a large (if localized) departure of antislavery white and (especially) black Methodists from the Methodist Episcopal Church in the years immediately following the establishment of the rival Republican Methodist Church. When black Methodist membership did eventually rebound in Virginia and elsewhere at the turn of the nineteenth century, it nevertheless continued to lag in the several Southside counties where the Republican Methodist Church—called simply the Christian Church after 1801—enjoyed its greatest numerical strength.

When Methodist preachers met for General Conference in October 1796, they took up the issue of slavery for the first time since 1785, hoping to offer some clarity on church policy. While remaining officially committed to “the extirpation of the crying evil of African slavery,” the new rules agreed upon represented a notable departure from earlier precedent. While reiterating several of the prescribed punishments for church members who bought and sold slaves, or refused to issue a deed of manumission, the General Conference delegated oversight of their enforcement to each of the several yearly conferences, quarterly conferences, or in some instances, to itinerant preachers overseeing individual circuits. Interestingly, they also added a subtle but significant addendum to the recommended timetables for manumitting slaves, one that aimed to keep slave families together, as Edward Dromgoole had done five years earlier. “If the member of our society, executing the said instrument of manumission, judge it proper,” the minute read, “he may fix the times of

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<sup>95</sup> Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 75-77.

manumission to the children of the female slaves before mentioned, at an earlier age than that which is prescribed above.”<sup>96</sup> Historian Donald Mathews aptly characterized the 1796 empowerment of annual and quarterly conferences to enforce, and in some cases, “make whatever regulations they judge proper” concerning slaveholders, as an exercise in “formalized frustration.”<sup>97</sup> Aimed at better controlling the enforcement of antislavery rules, it led instead to altogether irregular and somewhat haphazard regulation, with individual conferences adopting strikingly different approaches.

Expectedly, the three newly-formed Annual Conferences covering the vast majority of Methodist territory south of the Mason-Dixon line (the Virginia Conference, including all of Virginia south of the Rappahannock River and portions of North Carolina north of the Cape Fear River, the South Carolina Conference, covering the rest of North Carolina and all of South Carolina and Georgia, and the Western Conference, composed of Kentucky and Tennessee) largely left slaveholders alone, while the New England, Philadelphia, and Baltimore Conferences regularly turned out recalcitrant slave-owners. Not only had the number of slaves and political strength of slaveholders grown throughout the South in the decade between pronouncements from Methodist leaders on the subject, but the remaining vestiges of antislavery sentiment in Virginia—once an outspoken and somewhat sizable minority of members—had all but vanished, with most opponents of slavery either following O’Kelly into the Republican Methodist Church or joining Philip Gatch and others in Ohio. Because the newly

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<sup>96</sup> *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Volume I: 1796-1836* (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1855), 23.

<sup>97</sup> Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism*, 20.

formed Annual Conferences did not conform precisely to state boundaries, small pockets of antislavery resistance remained in the Old Dominion. Circuits located in Virginia's northern-most cities and along its Northern Neck were part of the Baltimore Conference, and those on the state's Eastern Shore part of the Philadelphia Conference. As the number of manumission deeds from Methodists throughout Virginia declined in the 1790s, the Accomack circuit on Virginia's Eastern Shore stood out as an exception to the rule. There, Methodists continued to manumit slaves into the first decade of the nineteenth century, even increasing the total number of deeds issued. Surviving disciplinary records from the Accomack circuit further underscore the emphasis on emancipation in the region: thirteen of the eighteen disciplinary cases heard by the circuit's quarterly conference included charges of slaveholding.<sup>98</sup> Leaving the regulation and enforcement of its antislavery rules up to local leaders ultimately weakened antislavery throughout southern Methodism, even as small pockets like Accomack County persisted in opposing its members holding slaves.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Of the 33 or 34 Methodist manumitters in eight Virginia counties identified by Eva Sheppard Wolf (Wolf identifies one as Episcopal/Methodist), 25 or 26 were in Accomack County. Of those, 19 or 20 issued deeds of manumission *after* 1800. See Appendix A in Wolf, *Race and Liberty*, 239-241. On the disciplinary cases, see John W. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 142.

<sup>99</sup> Sometimes, compromises were reached between slaveholding Methodists and their church leaders. Shortly after its formation in 1802, a Washington, D.C. congregation (part of the Alexandria circuit in the Baltimore Conference) demanded that two of its members free their slaves; the first they allowed to keep his slave an additional ten years, and the second indefinitely, "as from her age the law prevents the society from manumitting her." As quoted in W.M. Ferguson, *Methodism in Washington, District of Columbia, Being an Account of the Rise and Early Progress of Methodism in that City, and a Succinct History of the Fourth-Street Methodist Episcopal Church; also, Sketches of the Preachers from the Earliest Times, and an Appendix of all the Methodist Churches at Present in the City* (Baltimore: Methodist Episcopal Book Depository, 1892), 36. The Accomack Circuit retained its ties to the Philadelphia Conference and northern

By 1798, Francis Asbury had reconciled himself to the reality that slavery was growing more firmly entrenched in Virginian society. On January 9, he confided to his journal, “I am brought to conclude slavery will exist in Virginia perhaps for ages.” In a nod to Episcopal Methodism’s gradually declining membership within the state, Asbury placed the blame for slavery’s survival and growth on irreligion. “There is not a sufficient sense of religion nor of liberty to destroy it,” he concluded.<sup>100</sup> In reality, it was forces largely beyond Asbury’s control that further embedded slavery into Virginia’s identity.

In the summer of 1791, less than two months after Edward Dromgoole submitted his deed of manumission to the Brunswick County Court, a group of slaves on the French West Indian outpost of Saint Domingue launched a carefully planned and well-executed attack on several plantations. The rebellion spread, attracting both enslaved Africans and free people of color, who controlled most of the island by 1792. News of the rebellion spread quickly throughout the Atlantic World, striking fear into the hearts and minds of slaveowners everywhere. White slaveowners in Saint Domingue, meanwhile, began fleeing the island, seeking refuge in nearby North American port cities, including New Orleans, Charleston, New York, Philadelphia, and Norfolk. The first refugees to

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Methodism in the wake of the 1844 separation of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, though the Onancock congregation split over the issue in 1850 when a minority of proslavery members formed their own congregation and united themselves to the Methodist Episcopal Church South. In 1860, the congregation separated itself from the MEC and briefly formed the independent Convention of Accomack before returning to the Philadelphia Conference and the MEC in 1864. See Kirk Mariner, *Revival’s Children: A Religious History of Virginia’s Eastern Shore* (Salisbury, Maryland: Peninsula Press, 1979), 338-39.

<sup>100</sup> *JLFA* 2:367.

arrive in Virginia came in 1793, bringing with them their large chattels of slaves. The sudden surge of “French Negroes” worried Virginian slaveowners concerned about the introduction and spread of rebellious ideas among their own slaves, as had already occurred in Jamaica and South Carolina. Fears of a slave revolt thus took on increased urgency over the course of the 1790s, as the rebellion in Saint Domingue transformed into a full-scale revolution, culminating in the establishment of the independent black republic of Haiti in January 1804.<sup>101</sup>

White Virginians’ worst fears were nearly realized in the summer of 1800, when a group of slaves led by an enslaved blacksmith named Gabriel planned a large-scale rebellion in Richmond and surrounding communities. Though the revolt was ultimately foiled before it began, it caused enough of a scare to cause Virginia governor James Monroe to dispatch the state militia to Richmond and to authorize the arrest of the several conspirators. Seventy-two men—71 of whom were slaves—were arrested and tried on charges of conspiracy. Thirty-nine were found guilty, though thirteen of them were pardoned. Twenty-six men, including Gabriel, were executed in September and October.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> On the Haitian Revolution, see Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), and Jeremy D. Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). On Saint Domingue refugees in Virginia, see James Sidbury, “Saint Domingue in Virginia: Ideology, Local Meanings, and Resistance to Slavery, 1790-1800,” *Journal of Southern History* 63:3 (August 1997): 531-552.

<sup>102</sup> The best treatments of the failed revolt are Douglas Egerton, *Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730-1810* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Michael L. Nicholls, *Whispers of Rebellion: Narrating Gabriel’s Conspiracy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), from which the statistical information in this paragraph is drawn (“Appendix B: Men Tried for Conspiracy and Insurrection,” pp. 156-58).

The timing could not have been worse for Methodist interests in the state. Just months earlier, the church's General Conference had issued a statement decrying slavery as an "enormous evil" and calling for each of the annual conferences "to draw up ADDRESSES for the gradual emancipation of the Slaves to the Legislatures in those states, in which no general laws have been passes for that purpose."<sup>103</sup> Although on its face it was the boldest call for manumission since the 1785 petitions, the address was in actuality a token nod to the more fervently abolitionist members of the Conference. Its primary effect was to shift the focus of the church away from demanding all church members manumit their slaves, instead encouraging those members to petition for a legislative remedy for slavery. In fact, the proposal to draft the address came late in the conference and only after each of several other motions to alter the church's policies on slavery were rejected, including a proposal by Nicholas Snethen to refuse admission into the church to any slaveholder and another by a "Brother Lathomus" to restore the rule mandating that every current slaveholding member issue "an instrument of emancipation for all his slaves" within a one year period.<sup>104</sup> But that nuance, and the concessionary nature of the document was difficult to discern, and the response to the address from outside the church was expectedly stark. Copies of the broadside were burned in South Carolina. Though nothing quite so severe appears to have occurred in Virginia, the address was nevertheless alarming to Virginia's plantocracy, not only for what it said, but also because of who it was authored and signed by. In addition to the

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<sup>103</sup> *The Address of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, to all their Brethren and Friends in the United States* (Baltimore, 1800).

<sup>104</sup> *Journals of the General Conference*, 1:31-41.

signatures of the three Methodist Bishops—Coke, Asbury, and the newly elected Richard Whatcoat (who, like his co-superintendents, was of British birth)—it carried the names of the three-member committee who drafted it. Two of the authors—William McKendree and Jesse Lee—were native Virginians, the sons of slaveholders who rejected slavery themselves. The other, Ezekiel Cooper, was a Maryland native, but had traveled various circuits in the Virginia Conference over the course of his ministry and who had, a decade earlier, published a series of antislavery letters in the *Virginia Gazette*.<sup>105</sup> In spite of the fact that antislavery sentiment among Virginian Methodists was at a post-Revolutionary low, the Methodists were again looked upon with renewed suspicion and disdain throughout the state. The attention surrounding the planned slave rebellion later that year only made matters worse.

Methodists and other evangelical missionaries to slaves had long raised the ire of apprehensive masters and protective overseers wary of the effect their preaching might have on the slaves. The trials of the several enslaved conspirators implicated in Gabriel's failed revolt only served to confirm their suspicions. In a September 17 affidavit given by Ben Woolfolk, a Henrico County slave and associate of Gabriel who was arrested and tried but ultimately pardoned for his role in the conspiracy, he testified that it was his understanding that "all the whites were to be massacred, except the Quakers, the Methodists, & the French men; & they were to be spared on account as they conceived of their

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<sup>105</sup> Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History*, Volume 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 86-88.

being friendly to liberty.”<sup>106</sup> Though Woolfolk was the only one to note this particular directive, Methodists were further implicated in the plot’s immediate aftermath. After his planned rebellion was discovered, Gabriel attempted to flee, escaping down the James River to Norfolk on a schooner named *Mary*. It was there, on September 23, that Gabriel was found and finally arrested. He would be executed two and a half weeks later, on October 10. Though Gabriel had no apparent connections to Methodism other than his (mistaken) belief that its members were universally “friendly to liberty,” the captain of the ship who escorted him from Richmond to Norfolk did. Richardson Taylor, a former overseer, was in fact, a recent convert to the faith who had freed the only slave he owned upon conversion. When Gabriel boarded the *Mary* just outside of Richmond, he claimed to be a free man named Daniel. The bondmen hired out as crewmen by Taylor suspected otherwise, and evidently told Taylor that they believed him to be the instigator of the recently foiled revolt. Taylor ignored their claims, but when officials boarded the *Mary* and discovered Gabriel onboard, Taylor changed tactics, and claimed that he had captured the escaped suspect and was holding him “as his prisoner.” Unconvinced, the constables ordered the captain to return to Richmond and appear before the Mayor there. No charges were ever formally leveled, and the suit against Taylor by Gabriel’s owner T.H. Prosser for £1,000 in damages was ultimately dropped.<sup>107</sup> Proslavery Virginia

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<sup>106</sup> “Ben Woodfork [Woolfolk] Affidavit,” in Philip J. Schwarz, ed., *Gabriel’s Conspiracy: A Documentary History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 75-76.

<sup>107</sup> It has long been thought that Taylor absconded, “never arriv[ing] in Richmond” nor “seen again in Norfolk.” (See Egerton, *Gabriel’s Rebellion*, 177.) But as Michael Nicholls’s exhaustive research shows, Taylor not only returned to Richmond and appeared before the city’s mayor, he also remained in the region, marrying in 1802 and



officials capitalized on the fear generated by the events in Richmond and Tidewater Virginia, passing a series of laws in the coming years that tightened the reins on enslaved laborers and cracked down on the freedoms afforded free blacks in the state, culminating in the 1806 law overturning aspects of the 1782 manumission law and requiring all slaves freed on or after May 1 of that year to leave Virginia within twelve months or risk “forfeit[ing] all such right” to freedom and risk being re-enslaved.<sup>108</sup> Francis Asbury’s 1798 conclusion that “slavery will exist in Virginia perhaps for ages” seemed even more prescient in the wake of Gabriel’s Rebellion and the new legislative strictures in the state.

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The message for Methodists moving forward was clear: Slavery was here to stay. While legislative debates over the rights of recently manumitted slaves did lead to one final rush of Methodist manumissions (almost all in Accomack County), they also prompted a decisive turning point in Methodism’s official policies concerning slavery and the rights of slaveholding church members. At the 1804 General Conference, after “a variety of motions were proposed [and tabled] on the subject of slavery,” a committee deliberated and then recommended that separate editions of the Methodist *Discipline* be published for northern and southern Conferences. Likely because manumission was still legal there, Virginia was grouped with the northern Conferences, meaning that its members were, in theory, still bound by the *Discipline*’s relaxed but remaining

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then again in 1806, before removing to Kentucky sometime after 1810, where he passed away in 1835. See Nicholls, *Whispers of Rebellion*, 105.

<sup>108</sup> Wolf, *Race and Liberty*, 119-127.

antislavery rules.<sup>109</sup> If there were any flickers of hope among the more abolitionist-minded Methodist clergy that the Virginia Conference would enforce prescribed penalties for members owning slaves, they were quickly extinguished. The 1808 General Conference, acknowledging this reality, granted each annual conference the authority to “form their own regulations relative to buying and selling slaves.”<sup>110</sup> In 1809, the elderly Asbury finally conceded the fight. He now wondered if all of the effort from 1784 on had been for naught: “Would not an *amelioration* in the condition and treatment of slaves have produced more practical good to the poor Africans, than any attempt at their *emancipation*?”<sup>111</sup> While some white preachers and the several hundred slaves freed by Methodist masters would almost certainly answer in the negative, Asbury and the movement he led had come full circle, arriving back at the conclusions reached by a young John Wesley nearly a century earlier.

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<sup>109</sup> *Journals of the General Conference*, 1:41, 60-64.

<sup>110</sup> *Journals of General Conference*, 1:93; Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism*, 26-32.

<sup>111</sup> *JLFA*, 3:298. Emphasis in original.

### CHAPTER 3

#### The Roots of Accommodation: Methodism and Slavery in the Caribbean

Nathanial Gilbert died in 1774. Though he almost certainly never read John Wesley's *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, he was likely familiar with Wesley's developing abolitionist sentiments. Beyond the time he spent with Wesley while in England, Gilbert also corresponded with Anthony Benezet. In 1768, he wrote to the Quaker abolitionist, complimenting him on his several publications. "Your tracts concerning slavery are very just, and it is a matter I have often thought of, even before I became acquainted with the truth," wrote Gilbert. "Your arguments are forcible against purchasing slaves, or being anyway concerned with the trade." Relying on this letter, some historians have suggested that it was Gilbert who introduced Benezet's writings to John Wesley.<sup>1</sup>

The letter is revelatory in shedding light on Gilbert's own developing attitudes toward slavery. He apparently shared at least some of Benezet and Wesley's opposition to the slave trade, marking a decided departure from other Antigua slaveholders, including his own father. Nathaniel Gilbert, Sr., who passed away in 1761, was notoriously hostile in his treatment of enslaved workers. On two separate instances, he collected a reward for the dead corpses of slaves who had escaped from his sugar plantation. His son, by contrast, was, according to his biographer, "cast in a more merciful and compassionate mould

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<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Gilbert to Anthony Benezet, 29 October 1768, in Roberts Vaux, *Memoirs of Anthony Benezet* (London: W. Alexander, 1817), 53-54. Gilbert may have been introduced to Benezet by his brother-in-law Thomas Webb, the former soldier and noted lay Methodist preacher, with whom Benezet was acquainted in Philadelphia. See Anthony Benezet to George Dillwyn, 15 2mo. [April] 1774, Anthony Benezet Papers, 1750-1936, Folder 8, Quaker & Special Collections, Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania.

than his father.”<sup>2</sup> But Anthony Benezet’s hopes that his Antiguan correspondent would eventually support abolition—he noted in a 1773 letter that Gilbert was in an “afflicted & mournful state of mind”—were dashed by Gilbert’s sudden death in 1774.<sup>3</sup>

Gilbert never did manumit any of his several hundred slaves. Instead, he dealt with the moral dilemma of keeping slaves by preaching to them, utilizing his position as owner to proselytize them to the Methodist brand of Anglican Christianity. Upon his return to Antigua in 1760, Nathaniel Gilbert almost immediately went to work organizing the first Methodist society in the Americas. “About two weeks before we settled, I signified to one or two persons,” he related to John Wesley in a May 1760 letter, “that as there was no service at church in the afternoon, any person disposed to join my family, was welcome.” Within weeks, word had “not only spread through the town, that I have preached, but ... through this Island.” Preaching quickly became a full-time passion for the planter. He wrote of “find[ing] my disposition very averse to the practice of the Law and indeed inclined to nothing but the care of souls.”<sup>4</sup> By 1774, the small society meeting at Gilbert’s plantation had grown to 200 members. His friend Benezet eulogized these efforts “for the sake of poor Negroes on that Island,” writing to John Wesley upon learning of Gilbert’s death that “Providence has raised [the

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<sup>2</sup> Edgar W. Thompson, *Nathaniel Gilbert: Lawyer and Evangelist* (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Benezet to George Dillwyn, 5 8mo. [October] 1773, Benezet Papers, Haverford.

<sup>4</sup> As cited in Thomas Coke and Henry Moore, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley* (London: G. Paramore, 1792), 470.

slaves] such a friend, and by his means such an opportunity of comfort in their affliction.”<sup>5</sup>

From its beginnings in the West Indies, then, Methodism manifested an ambivalence toward slavery. Though the vast majority of Methodists in the islands were slaves, its membership rolls included several slave-owning adherents. Even those who opposed slavery and the slave trade remained mostly silent on the subject of abolition, including the many missionaries who began arriving from England and Ireland in the 1780s. Following the precedent set by Nathaniel Gilbert, they focused their efforts on freeing the slaves from spiritual and not temporal slavery. They worked with political officials and planters, assuring them that their preaching would make slaves work harder and behave better, while at the same time admonishing slave-owners and overseers to treat slaves with greater kindness and gentler discipline. Amelioration and not abolition became the watchword of Methodist missionaries in the West Indies.

The absence of any sustained antislavery activism sets Methodists in the Caribbean apart from their American counterparts. Still, Methodist attitudes toward slavery in each location share much in common, including not only a sustained proslavery element but also, somewhat ironically, a persistent difficulty in convincing the plantocracy of their innocence in inciting slaves to rebellion. As in the American South, Methodist preaching to slaves was consistently seen as suspect, a cover for more sinister plans lurking beneath assurances otherwise.

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<sup>5</sup> Benezet to John Wesley, 23 5mo. [July] 1774, published in the *Arminian Magazine*, vol. X, 1787. Those slaves converted under Gilbert's preaching likely received baptism and other sacraments from Gilbert's friend and fellow council members, the Rev. Francis Byam, Rector of St. John's Parish Church. See Thompson, *Nathaniel Gilbert*, 26-27.

As in the case of the rumors surrounding Methodist involvement in Gabriel's Rebellion in Virginia, the slave revolt-turned-revolution in Saint Domingue prompted local authorities and planters throughout the British West Indies to monitor more the preachers' activities. Methodist missionaries on several islands were denied access to slaves on certain plantations and, in a handful of more extreme instances, faced legal restrictions and extralegal punishments for their proselytizing efforts.

Methodist activities in the Caribbean were, in turn, affected by events in North America. The missionaries' efforts to convince white West Indians that they posed no threat to the stability of slave society were frustrated on several occasions by reports that reached the islands of Methodist antislavery activities in North America (as well as Methodist involvement in English abolitionism). Methodism's changing relationship to slavery was shaped not only by local concerns and national events, but also by larger forces at work in the Atlantic World, including religious revival and Methodist growth itself.

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The address issued at the Methodist Episcopal Church's General Conference in 1800 was widely circulated throughout the United States, appearing as either a broadside or a newspaper announcement everywhere from Maine to Georgia. It also made its way to the West Indies. On a Friday afternoon in April 1801, Robert Thomson, president of the small sugar producing island Saint Kitts, summoned to his office Methodist missionary John Brownell. "A printed address was there put into my hands," wrote Brownell in his journal, "from

the general conference in America to the people called Methodists, requesting them to petition the Legislative Body to Abolish the Slave-Trade.” Its appearance in Saint Kitts “caused no small alarm” among colonial officials who, according to Brownell, suspected the missionaries to be “so many Spies, whose object it was to see the nakedness of the Island, raise an insurrection, & cover the land with blood.”<sup>6</sup> The address provoked concern from West Indian officials for many of the same reasons it worried their American counterparts. In an era of political revolution, antislavery agitation, and slave rebellion, any push for emancipation was looked upon with suspicion and fear.

Unlike Methodists in the United States, though, those in the Caribbean had no prior track record of antislavery agitation. The appearance of the address from Baltimore, then, prompted not only fear but surprise, especially because of the signatures attached to it. Whereas it was the names of native Virginians and noted opponents of slavery that most concerned authorities in the American South, it was the signatures of the three British-born Bishops that triggered the ire of West Indian officials. Thomas Coke’s inclusion was particularly troubling. Well known and generally well respected throughout the Leeward Islands, Coke was known in the West Indies as anything but an abolitionist. When “the report was discovered” with “Doctor Coke’s name to it,” described Brownell, it quickly “Spread, & banishment was thought too small a punishment.”<sup>7</sup>

Nor were President Thomson and his associates the only ones genuinely startled by it all. So, too, was John Brownell, who expressed under oath his

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<sup>6</sup> Journal of John Brownell, 10 April 1801, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

<sup>7</sup> Brownell Journal, 10 April, WMMS, SOAS.

doubts concerning “the authenticity of the address.” The veteran missionary simply “could not believe that Doctor Coke could be so imprudent as to send miss[ionaries] into the West Indies, & then expose them to so much Suspicion & danger.” The missionary seemed wholly unaware of Coke’s antislavery efforts in North America. “How came D<sup>r</sup> Coke’s name there?” he wondered, now concerned that the superintendent of Methodist missions had unknown intentions in the West Indies that placed all missionaries there at risk. “Does it not at least make known his intentions?” In spite of his own internal unease, Brownell assured President Thomson that he “had rec<sup>d</sup> no directions respecting the matter & that it was not the intention of the English Conference to my knowledge, to meddle with political affairs at all, but that our intention was to bring people to a knowledge of God.” He carefully “distinguish[ed] between the English & the American Methodists,” noting that while “they agreed in points of doctrine respecting religion, ... in political matters they differed,” and clarifying that “the English Conference had no authority in America, nor the American in England.” The multiple hats worn by Thomas Coke, of course, complicated such distinctions, and it took a second visit to the president’s office the following week to finally placate him. At that follow-up meeting, Brownell more explicitly assured Thomson “that the Methodists were not unanimous respecting the Abolition of Slavery, nor was it made a condition of communion amongst them.” He pointed to the large number of Methodist slave-owners in the West Indian islands, and noted that their “Slaves are in Society with them.” Furthermore, the “greater part of the preachers had never considered the matter attentively,” and that



regardless of personal opinions on the matter, all sent to the West Indies received specific instructions to avoid discussions of slavery altogether, and “to destroy any pamphlets which they might have relating to the subject.” Brownell’s assurances placated the president, who “seemed fully satisfied that our intention was not to abolish Slavery but to preach the Gospel.”<sup>8</sup>

John Brownell’s brush with colonial authorities in Saint Kitts is instructive in both its delineation of English missionaries’ attitudes and approach to slavery and in its revelation of the subtle and unexpected ways in which debates and developments among Methodists in the United States could and did affect the experiences of their counterparts and coreligionists in the Caribbean. Like the first preachers sent to North America, those dispatched from England and Ireland to the West Indies encountered not only a society but a church largely at ease with the system of slavery in place. Unlike those in the new United States, Methodist missionaries in the West Indies, as Brownell’s account indicates, received explicit instructions to leave slavery alone. They were neither to try and convince slave-owning Methodists to manumit their chattels nor to encourage legislative action towards emancipation. The man responsible for the policy was the same who had helped spearhead the Methodist antislavery campaign in Virginia just fifteen years earlier: Thomas Coke.

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Thomas Coke played a greater role in shaping Methodist policy toward slavery than most historians typically recognize. After their joint appointment as co-superintendents of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784, the ministries of

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<sup>8</sup> Brownell Journal, 10 April, 14 April 1801, WMMS, SOAS.

Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury were each marked by constant movement. As his biographer John Wigger summarized, Asbury “traveled at least 130,000 miles by horse and crossed the Allegheny Mountains some sixty times. For many years he visited nearly every state once a year, and traveled more extensively across the American landscape than probably any other American of his day.”<sup>9</sup> Coke logged perhaps even more miles in his ministerial travels, but spent most of that time not on horseback, but rather aboard ships and schooners, traversing the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea. If Francis Asbury embodies Methodism’s adaptation “to the landscape and culture of America,” Thomas Coke represents the transatlantic ties that linked Methodism in the United States and the rest of the Anglo-Atlantic World.<sup>10</sup> He not only symbolized those ties, though. He often established them personally.

Thomas Coke’s first visit to North America lasted seven months, and in June 1785 he returned to England to resume his responsibilities there. As he reported on events in America and mediated the conflict among English church leaders over Asbury’s ordination and the formation of an independent Methodist Episcopal Church, he also planned his second transatlantic voyage, in which he intended to not only visit the United States but also Britain’s Maritime and Caribbean colonies. In early 1786, Coke published a proposal for the support of Methodist missions to the highlands of Scotland, the Isles of Jersey and Guernsey, and most significantly in his mind, the British North American provinces of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Quebec, and the islands of the

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<sup>9</sup> John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Wigger, *American Saint*, 3.

West Indies.<sup>11</sup> The plan represented an altered and expanded version of Coke's premature proposal three years earlier "for the establishment of missions among the heathens." The new effort was, unlike the earlier plan, decidedly Methodist and inextricably tied to Coke's new episcopal responsibilities in America.<sup>12</sup> In January, he wrote to Charles Grant, a director of the East India company, explaining, "at present our openings in America, and the pressing invitations we have lately received from Nova Scotia, the West-Indies, and the States, call for all the help we can possibly afford our brethren in that quarter of the world."<sup>13</sup> The plan for his second visit to North America was to sail to Halifax, Nova Scotia, home to a rapidly growing body of both black and white Methodists, and there dispatch two missionaries—John Clarke and William Hammett—for Newfoundland. He would then travel south through the United States, visiting each of the several conferences and conducting church business before continuing onto the Caribbean, where he intended to leave the third British preacher accompanying him, William Warrener. The group of Methodist missionaries set sail from England in September, but Coke's second visit to North America would come after, and not before, his first trip to the Caribbean islands.

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Coke, *An Address to the Pious and Benevolent, Proposing an Annual Subscription for the Support of the Missionaries in the Highlands and Adjacent Islands of Scotland, the Isles of Jersey, Guernsey and Newfoundland, the West Indies, and the Provinces of Nova Scotia and Quebec* (London, 1786).

<sup>12</sup> On Coke's earlier proposal, see John Vickers, *Thomas Coke: Apostle of Methodism* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1969), 132-36.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Coke to Charles Grant, 25 January 1786, in Thomas Coke, *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. John A. Vickers (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 2013), 69.

The growth and expansion of Methodism might have turned out quite differently had the ship that carried Thomas Coke, John Clarke, William Hammett, and William Warrener not been rerouted from the original destination of Nova Scotia to Antigua in late 1786. After three months at sea and a series of storms that had thrown the ship off route, the captain shifted course and set sail for the West Indies. Coke was immediately impressed that God might have a hand in the whole affair, and upon arrival in Antigua on Christmas Day 1786—two years to the day after his ordination of Francis Asbury—his impressions were satisfactorily confirmed. After debarking from the ship and setting out to see if they could locate the local Methodist congregation, they “met brother Baxter,” whom Coke had ordained in Baltimore the previous year, “going to perform divine service.” Coke and his band of missionaries remained on the island for nearly two weeks, and when he departed for Dominica on January 5, 1787, he left behind William Warrener to superintend the work in Antigua in Baxter’s absence, whom was now serving as Coke’s guide. They next visited, in succession, Saint Vincent, Saint Kitts, Nevis, and the Dutch island Sint Eustatius, before continuing on to the United States. When Coke arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, he was alone, having left behind each of the three missionaries who accompanied him on the voyage, stationed in Antigua (Warrener), Saint Vincent (Clarke), and Saint Kitts (Hammett), respectively.<sup>14</sup> The unexpected visit to the West Indies was an important moment in Methodist history, and left a profound impact on Thomas Coke and the movement he helped lead in both the United States and

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<sup>14</sup> For Coke’s first-hand account of their travels, see Thomas Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. by John A. Vickers (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 2005), 69-84.

the Caribbean. Most importantly, Coke's one-and-a-half-month stay in the West Indies clarified in his mind that God had an important work for him to lead in this "quarter of the world," and that missions to those he termed *heathens* were to be a central focus of his ministry moving forward. Although he continued to remain active in both the British and Irish Conferences and, near the end of his life, turned his attention eastward to Asia, Coke prioritized the Americas above all else. The voyage to the Caribbean also confirmed lessons he had learned in Virginia two years earlier.

After helping lead the push for "the new terms of communion" at the 1784 Christmas Conference, threatening to expel any Methodists who refused to manumit their slaves, and leading an effort to petition the Virginia legislature to enact gradual emancipation in the state, Coke moderated his stance on antislavery in the wake of fairly intense opposition from both within and without the church. He seemed relieved to arrive in North Carolina, where, as he recorded in his journal, he could be "done with my testimony against slavery for a time" since "the laws of this State forbid any to emancipate their Negroes," and upon returning to Virginia the following week, Coke tried out "a method of delivering [a testimony against slavery] without much offence, or at least without causing a tumult: and that is, by first addressing the negroes in a very pathetic manner on the duty of servants to masters; and then the whites will receive quietly what I have to say to them."<sup>15</sup> Coke's biographer John Vickers has concluded from the Bishop's early forays into antislavery preaching that his approach to slavery was more pragmatic than that of other American Methodist

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<sup>15</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 57.

preachers. The opposition he faced both within and without the church, according to Vickers, “forced [Coke] to concede victory to his opponents” and “for the time being,” let the matter rest.<sup>16</sup> But Coke did not concede victory, at least not yet. He continued to preach against slavery and initiated the first efforts to petition state legislatures in Virginia and Maryland to pass gradual emancipation laws. But the lesson Coke learned—that preaching obedience to slaves went a long way in gaining the favor of their masters—was an important one that would become even more evident during Coke’s first visit to the West Indies, and in the subsequent ministries of the three missionaries he left to attend the work in the islands.

Shortly after arriving in Antigua, Coke quickly realized that, as in the southern United States, preachers were often dependent upon the goodwill of slave owners to gain access to their slaves. But he also learned that, in contrast to America, local Methodist leaders were on relatively good terms with colonial officials. Contrary to Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood’s claim that “until the second decade of the nineteenth century relations between evangelical missionaries and planters varied from short-tempered toleration to active persecution,” the Methodist experience in the British Leeward Islands, the Virgin Islands, and elsewhere for much of the 1780s and 1790s suggests that the missionaries not only understood but appreciated that positive relations with both planters and politicians could help facilitate their work in the islands.<sup>17</sup> Nathaniel Gilbert’s

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<sup>16</sup> Vickers, *Thomas Coke*, 97-98.

<sup>17</sup> Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 130.

legacy thus loomed large even a decade after his death, in both his efforts to convert the slaves and especially in the connections he used his position as Speaker of the Antiguan Assembly to establish.

Thomas Coke reported being treated “rather like princes than subjects,” as John Baxter made introductions to several gentlemen and women on each island, who hosted the missionaries and informed them that they “would be always welcome to instruct and preach to their negroes at proper hours.” They also found favor with local authorities. Before departing Antigua, Coke and the other missionaries “dine[d] with Prince William Henry,” King George III’s son and then-captain in the Royal Navy stationed at Antigua. In Dominica, they secured the favor of a Mr. Otley, “a member of the Council, and son of the principal men, perhaps the second in the island,” and in Saint Kitts, accepted “an invitation to preach at the Court-house” by several prominent men and the Council president’s son.<sup>18</sup> This system of establishing good relations with prominent men and women set the standard for the future of Methodist missions in the West Indies. It also led to a change in Coke’s broader approach to his own ministry.

On February 10, Coke set sail for Charleston, South Carolina, where the first Methodist preachers had arrived just years earlier. After landing on March 1, he “had the pleasure of opening a new church,” where he preached the following morning to “about three hundred.” He was especially delighted see so many slaves in attendance at the early morning service. “Since my visit to the islands,”

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<sup>18</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 75-81. The only opposition mentioned by Coke during his initial voyage came an “ill-natured commander in chief.” The officer refused to allow the missionaries to preach to “six or seven of the soldiers in the barracks” who had expressed an interest while stationed in Dominica.

he noted in his journal, “I have found a peculiar gift for speaking to the blacks. It seems to be almost irresistible. Who knows but the Lord is preparing me for a visit in some future time to the coast of Africa?”<sup>19</sup> Coke never did go to Africa, but the consequences of his interaction with so many free and enslaved people of color in the Caribbean were far-reaching. During his first visit to the United States two years earlier, he had preached to several mixed-race congregations in various locales. He seems then to have considered the salvation of slaves of only secondary concern to the salvation of their masters, whose spiritual progress he believed was held back by their ownership of slaves. The success of the work in the West Indies convinced him to change course. Although he continued to oppose slavery in principle, he now understood that the mass conversion of slaves he desired required a different approach. Upon reaching Virginia and returning to “the county of Halifax, where I met with a little persecution on my former visit to this continent, on account of the public testimony I bore against negro-slavery,” Coke drew a large audience for his first preaching appointment. In contrast to the threats of violence that marked his last visit there, “perfect peace and quietness prevailed” as Coke “now acknowledge[d] that however just my sentiments may be concerning slavery, it was ill-judged of me to deliver them from the pulpit.”<sup>20</sup> Coke also understood the immediate and long-term effects of preaching to the slaves in a different light. As he put it in a later letter to Ezekiel Cooper, “if [the slaves] have Religious Liberty, their Temporal Slavery will be comparatively but a small thing.” Though he “long[ed] for the time when the Lord

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<sup>19</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 85.

<sup>20</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 87.



will turn their Captivity like the Rivers of the South,” Coke could only counsel Cooper to “have great Compassion on the poor Negroes & do all you can to Convert them.”<sup>21</sup> The position marked a significant retreat from his earlier enthusiasm for emancipation and helped set the Methodist Episcopal Church on its own path to accommodation of southern slaveholders.

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Thomas Coke’s example also set the tone for the missionaries left behind to labor in the West Indies during his initial visit and those he would station there in years to come. The experiences of William Hammet are helpful in highlighting this point. Hammet accompanied Coke on his first visit to the West Indies, and subsequently took charge of missionary efforts in Saint Kitts and Nevis (1787-1788), Saint Croix and Tortola (1788-1789), and Jamaica (1789-1791), before moving to the United States and preaching in Charleston, South Carolina and the surrounding environs until his death in 1803. Though most entries in Hammet’s diurnal during his time in the West Indies are quite brief (typically noting where he was, with whom he met, and the scriptural verses he took as the texts of his sermons), they provide an outline of the ways in which Coke’s system was first implemented.

The first entry in Hammet’s record is also among the longest: “Sund[ay March] 11 [1787]. Basseterre – Preached in Morn. From Act. 26. 28 Under this discourse Geo. Skerrett got deeply consumed.” George Skerrett was a well-known merchant and planter heavily involved in the slave trade. His conversion under Hammet’s preaching was crucial to the mission’s early success. Hammet

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<sup>21</sup> Coke to Ezekiel Cooper, 23 April 1795, in *Letters*, 200.

used Skerret's home as the base for his operations for the next several months, preaching to slaves, admitting several as catechumens and then converts, organizing classes, and administering the sacrament. In time, he expanded his ministry beyond Basseterre, visiting Sandy Point and Old Road, as well as several other plantations on both Saint Kitts and Nevis—he mentions “the Diamond Estate,” “Mr. Williot's French ground,” and “Mr. J. Brown's near Sandypoint” in succession in April 1788, and thereafter used each as a regular stopping point on his makeshift preaching circuit, expanding it to include stops at “Sr Ralph Payne's,” “Mr Brown's own Estate,” and “St Patrick Blakes” in the coming months. He also raised the funds to purchase land and then build a chapel, and trained a handful of lay preachers to act as his assistants, including William Brazier, the illegitimate mixed-race son of the Council president in Nevis, who remained a trusted associate and ultimately followed Hammet to the United States in 1791.<sup>22</sup>

In 1789, following his transfer to Saint Croix and Tortola, William Hammet continued on a similar course, finding friendly planters, preaching to their slaves, and establishing classes along the way. Though the entries provide little in the way of his day-to-day interactions, the scriptural passages provide important insight into the content of his sermons to the slaves. The vast majority—like the sermon he preached in the first entry—focus on Christian conversion, God's sovereignty, and Christ's grace. Among the most common in Hammet's record

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<sup>22</sup> William Hammet, *Diurnal*, William Hammet Papers, 1787-1825, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina. For more on Hammet, see D.A. Reily, “William Hammet, Missionary and Founder of the Primitive Methodist Church,” *Methodist History* 10 (1971): 30-43.

were Isaiah 53:5 (“But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed”) and Romans 8:16 (“The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God”). There is no mention of any scriptural passages that could be construed as antislavery.<sup>23</sup>

In 1796, Thomas Coke claimed that “no one was more strenuous against slavery than [Hammet], while destitute of the power of enslaving.”<sup>24</sup> Coke’s accusation came on the heels of a very public and contentious falling out between the two men. Given the context of what Methodist opposition to slavery meant in the West Indies, Hammet was certainly not provoking slaves to rebellion, nor calling on planters to manumit their slaves. Even if he personally opposed slavery, as Coke claimed, Hammet’s public opposition was limited to speaking out in opposition to the inhumane treatment and brutality often inflicted on enslaved laborers. We get the faintest hint of this in a June 29, 1789 diary entry: “I dined at A. Hodges, where I had a hot dispute.” Though the details of the dispute are not mentioned, it seems likely that they centered around his treatment of slaves. Arthur Hodge was the owner of a large plantation who later served as a member of the Legislative Assembly in Tortola. He was also a notoriously brutal master, who regularly inflicted harsh punishment on his slaves, much to the consternation of the Methodist missionaries who sporadically visited his plantation. Some twenty years after his “hot dispute” with Hammet, Hodge was tried and found guilty of murdering one of his slaves and became the first

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<sup>23</sup> Hammet, *Diurnal*, SCL, USC.

<sup>24</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 230.

West Indian slave owner to be executed for killing one of his slaves. Two Methodist ministers attended to him immediately before his execution.<sup>25</sup>

Further insight into Hammet's ministry to the slaves is provided by Dorcas Lillie, a fascinating individual who hosted Hammet in her home and opened her cellar to him as a space to preach to slaves in the 1780s. Born on the British West Indian island of Anguilla in 1721 to a wealthy, white family, Lillie was raised in the Church of England. In 1735, she moved with her father to Tortola, where a year later, she married Giles Powell, who unexpectedly died three years later. Only 19 and already a widow, Dorcas fell into "a trying state of affliction." She was rescued from her depression when befriended by a small band of devout Quakers on the island, led by Governor James Pickering and his preacher-wife (also named Dorcas). Her conversion to Quakerism angered her father, who disowned her. Lillie left home once again, only to return a short time later to attend to her father as he lay dying.

While caring for her estranged father, she was introduced to John Latham, a wealthy landowner whose marriage proposal she reluctantly accepted in hopes of appeasing her father, who championed the union. Following her father's death, Dorcas and her new husband John moved to the nearby island of Saint Croix, then under Danish control. Latham's antagonism to Quakerism—"my husband would not permit me to go amongst Friends any more," she later recalled—and their removal to an island without a Quaker meeting caused a brief lull in Lillie's religiosity, but her second marriage lasted only a little longer than her first.

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<sup>25</sup> Hammet, *Diurnal*, 29 June 1789, SCL; On Hodge, see John Andrew, *The Hanging of Arthur Hodge: A Caribbean Anti-Slavery Milestone* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2000).

Latham died just a few years into their marriage. Her third marriage, to Thomas Lillie, an English merchant living on the Danish island, proved a more agreeable union than her previous two, not least because Thomas not only consented to his wife's resuming communication with Quakers in Tortola, but in time converted himself.

Utilizing his connections as "captain of the burghers ... at St. Croix," Thomas Lillie secured permission to "erect a meeting house" in Christianstadt, the first such Quaker establishment on the island, and together, the Lillies built up a small society there. They also began correspondence with leading Quakers in London, New York, and Philadelphia, including Anthony Benezet. A violent storm in 1772 and her husband's death in 1776 left Dorcas Lillie once again a widow, and this time in debt. Thomas's estate in Saint Croix was seized by government officials to satisfy creditors, forcing Lillie "to quit my habitation, and hire a house in town." The couple's several slaves "had been left free by my husband's will" but because of his debts "the will was broke" and Lillie retained ownership of her "few servants." It was during this time that several of the other Quakers left the island, leaving Lillie largely alone as the surviving remnant of the once small but thriving society.<sup>26</sup>

In 1785, Lillie travelled to Philadelphia, establishing connections with the thriving Quaker community there. Upon her return, she discovered a new set of

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<sup>26</sup> Biographical information drawn from Dorcas Lillie, "A Brief Account of the Life of Dorcas Lillie as taken down by herself," MS, December 1785, in private possession of Michael Kent. An edited version of Lillie's Account was published in 1832. See Dorcas Little "A Brief Account of the Life of Dorcas Lillie; Written by Herself," *Friends' Miscellany*, December 1832, 201-220. See also Charles F. Jenkins, *Tortola: A Quaker Experiment of Long Ago in the Tropics* (London: Friends' Bookshop, 1923), 55-57.

preachers on the island. Thomas Coke and William Hammet first met “Mrs. *Lilly*, a Quaker-Lady” in 1789, when she opened her house to the missionaries to lodge. Describing her as “well-known and respected in the island,” Coke wrote glowingly of her defense of Methodist preachers, then “under a warm persecution.” She “went from house to house among the principal inhabitants of *Roadtown*, testifying against their conduct, and declaring her full persuasion that the Missionaries were men of God.” When asked why she, as a Quaker, would defend the missionaries, she responded by claiming to be “both a Quaker and a Methodist.”<sup>27</sup> In a letter to James and Phebe Pemberton, prominent Philadelphia Quakers she had met on her visit to the United States, Lillie wrote that “my Great & Good, God ... has been pleased ... in sending His Ministers, tho’ Called by a nother Name, to Geather in the Hearves which was Ripe, amongst the Blak People, in Tortola. ... these Witnessis for God are colled Methodists, & have a large congregation of the Black People in all the West-Indies Ilands.” Explaining her reasons for hosting the Methodists, she wrote further: “I finde it my Duty to give a Room in my seller, for the Blacks to Meet in, when Broth Hammit comes to Vissit them.” Of particular note is the relationship Lillie discerned between the Methodist preacher’s efforts to convert the slaves and the Quaker community’s aims to emancipate them. “I hope the Lord of the harvist will, in His own time, sending some of our friends to Visit us,” continued Lillie, “but I finde, their Work is to free the Blacks, from Bodily Slavery, whiltes other instruments ar Colled, to

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<sup>27</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 140. See also William Hammet to Dorcas Lillie, 20 March 1789, Quaker Collections, Collection 861, British Friends’ Letters, 1650-1985/Letters of England Friends, Box 3 (H-M), Haverford College Quaker Collections, Haverford, Pennsylvania.

prepair thair souls, for the happy enjoymen there of.”<sup>28</sup> Foreshadowing Thomas Coke’s statement to Ezekiel Cooper six years later, Lillie evinced a belief that religious conversion would make slavery more bearable for the enslaved. On another occasion, she justified her own possession of black slaves (that she had inherited from each of her three deceased husbands) by claiming that she was saving them from the “more severe slavery of those who did not know [Quaker] principles.” “As we worked together,” she wrote, in language that foreshadowed the paternalistic defenses of slavery of antebellum southern slaveholders like Edward Dromgoole, “we were happy with one another ... and lived comfortably, each having a room furnished suitable to their station, and being content.” It was, Lillie maintained, the slaves’ “choice to be with me” and “they were indulged, being old, to do as they liked best.”<sup>29</sup>

Lillie’s comments are also revealing in highlighting the ways the missionaries’ message could simultaneously be both a stabilizing and socially disruptive force: “Religion,” she concluded her letter to the Pemberton’s, will “no doubt ... make [the slaves] more thankfull, under a sense of Gratitude, to their benifacto[rs] for bringing about so laborious a Work for their Double deliverance, both from sin & Slavery, through our Lord Jesus Christe.”<sup>30</sup> While Methodist missionaries like William Hammet often chose to emphasize the more stabilizing

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<sup>28</sup> Dorcas Lillie to James and Phebe Pemberton, May 1789, Cox-Parrish-Warburton Papers (Collections 0154), Series 4: Alphabetical Papers, 1700-1900, Box 12, Folder 27, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. On Lillie’s time in Philadelphia, see mentions in Susan Klepp and Karin Wulf, eds., *The Diary of Hannah Callender Sansom: Sense and Sensibility in the Age of the American Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 299, 309, 311.

<sup>29</sup> Lillie, “A Brief Account.”

<sup>30</sup> Lillie to James and Phebe Pemberton, May 1789, HSP.

effects of preaching on slaves, Lillie's comments make clear that there was a perceived connection between deliverance from sin and deliverance from slavery.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, it was Methodist efforts at ameliorating the more cruel aspects of slavery that increasingly drew the ire of planters and colonial officials alike. Hammet experienced this first hand during his sojourn in Jamaica, where he was appointed in 1789. He remained for nearly two years, following the pattern he had employed in his previous stations. Though Hammet enjoyed some moderate success in Jamaica, establishing a society of several hundred congregants and building a chapel, he also encountered opposition to a degree he had not previously experienced elsewhere. In fact, much of the initial animus toward Methodist missionaries occurred in Jamaica, and to a slightly lesser extent, in Barbados, large islands with sizable white populations (in both raw numbers and percentage of the total population), and ones in which Methodists lacked the sort of political connections that facilitated their work in Antigua, Saint Kitts, and the Virgin Islands. Whereas Methodists there could take satisfaction in the protection afforded them by the patronage of local officials, Barbados missionary Benjamin Pearce had only been on the island a short while before he was brought to lament that "my enemies are many, and some of them men in power." After a mob interrupted one of his sermons and pelted the newly constructed chapel with stones in September 1789, Pearce "applied to a magistrate for redress." Though

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<sup>31</sup> Mary Turner makes a similar point regarding the overlap between missionary activity in the islands and the abolitionist movement in England. See Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 10-11.



“the charges were proved with the most unquestionable certainty” and the judge promised “to do us justice,” Pearce explained, “all the redress we could obtain was the following:—‘*The offense was committed against Almighty God; it, therefore, does not belong to me to punish!*’”<sup>32</sup> Similar difficulties were faced in Jamaica, where a mob broke into the chapel in Kingston and attempted to raze it, and where William Hammet faced multiple threats on his life. When Coke reached the island on a second visit in January 1791, he noted with despair that opposition in Jamaica, “very far exceeds all the persecutions we have met with in the other Islands unitedly considered.” Coke discovered Hammet “worn almost to a skeleton with opposition and fatigue,” and after one final threat made on the missionary’s life and the acquittal of those charged with ransacking the chapel, Coke and Hammet made immediate plans to leave the island.<sup>33</sup>

After their departure on January 25, a debate broke out in the local press over the alleged dangers of Methodist preaching. A letter published in the *Daily Advertiser* from an anonymous “Store Keeper” sought to expose the threat the missionaries’ “dark activity and zeal” posed to Jamaican society. “Such nonsense as this,” he wrote, “has already turned the brains of many of our negroes and made them useless to their masters and dangerous to the community.” Alluding to the 1760 rebellion of more than one thousand slaves on the northeastern coast of the island, the author sounded a warning. “In this country, where the

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<sup>32</sup> Cited in Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History of Each Island: With an Account of the Missions Instituted in Those Islands, from the Commencement of Civilization; But More Especially of the Missions Which Have Been Established in that Archipelago by the Society Late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley*, Volume 2 (London, 1810), 146.

<sup>33</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 149. See also Hammet Diurnal, 2 September 1789, William Hammet Papers, SCL, USC.

spirit of insurrection is but with difficulty held in by the strong hand of superior knowledge, ... we anxiously watch to prevent a repetition of those horrid scenes.”<sup>34</sup> The letter provoked a response from an unidentified “Friend to Moderation,” who defended the Methodists. Instead of inciting slaves to rebellion, he replied, the missionaries were trying to “civilize the negroes, to give them by the simplest methods of instruction a just conception of their interest in another world, to implant in their minds a fixed and rooted detestation of vice, and ... to inculcate the propriety as well as necessity of a submission to the will of their masters.”<sup>35</sup> Further responses from each correspondent were published, with no real resolution reached. But the exchange demonstrated that Methodist missionaries were no idle threat in the minds of Jamaican planters.

Much of the planters’ concerns were driven by forces beyond the missionaries’ control. The letters in the *Daily Advertiser*, and those that followed in response, appeared alongside the standard series of runaway slave advertisements and news from both Europe and elsewhere in the Americas. The earliest reports of the incipient rebellion in nearby Saint Domingue heightened fears of insurrection and underlined the dangers posed by evangelizing slaves. In September 1791, the newspaper relayed news of a “great slaughter” in Cape François that left more than ten thousand dead. There were, according to the paper, “among the prisoners ... several Ecclesiastics, who had disguised themselves as negroes, and who, it is supposed, incited the mischief that has

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<sup>34</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, 2 March 1791.

<sup>35</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, 4 March 1791.

taken place.”<sup>36</sup> Nor were Jamaicans alone in their reaction to events in the French colonial outpost. As in Norfolk, New Orleans, and New York, white refugees and their slaves arrived in Jamaica, Antigua, Saint Kitts, and Sint Eustatius. Unlike the American port cities, the refugees received a decidedly unfriendly welcome in the British islands, and when war broke out between England and France in 1793, the refugees were expelled from Antigua, Saint Kitts, and elsewhere. The events in Saint Domingue coincided also with the growth of the abolitionist movement headed by William Wilberforce in England, further heightening fears of social unrest and possible slave rebellion in the Caribbean. When a group of free people of color, led by several “elders of the Methodist church,” petitioned the Jamaican Assembly in 1792 for the revocation of restrictions on several of their (non-religious) rights, it was rejected. Planter Simon Taylor accused the “worthless Methodists” that backed the petition of utilizing “the exact plan that was first used at Hispaniola, to make divisions between the whites and people of colour there, and then to stir up the rebellion.”<sup>37</sup> Saint Domingue and the threat of slave rebellion loomed large over the missionaries for much of the next decade and beyond.

In spite of their best efforts to avoid conflict over the subject, Methodists were now marked in the minds of many as abolitionists—a point not abated by the activities of their coreligionists in America and England. John Wesley’s own opposition to the slave trade picked up considerable force in the final years of his

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<sup>36</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, 5 September 1791.

<sup>37</sup> Simon Taylor to Chaloner Arcedeckne, Spanish Town, 5 December 1792. Accessed at [slaveryandrevolution.soton.ac.uk](http://slaveryandrevolution.soton.ac.uk) on 17 June 2014 (original in Cambridge University Library); David Geggus, “Jamaica and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt, 1791-1793,” *The Americas* 38 (October 1981): 229.

life, as he continued to develop close relationships with prominent abolitionists. In fact, the last surviving letter penned by Wesley was to Wilberforce. Dated February 24, 1791—just over a week before the 88-year-old Methodist founder died—Wesley encouraged Wilberforce in his “glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy, which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature,” suggesting that “God had raised you up for this very thing” and exhorting him to “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.”<sup>38</sup> His death in March attracted attention in the West Indies, and at least some of obituaries and biographical sketches run in the local press included mention of his antislavery zeal. Even more pointed and potentially damaging to the missionary effort abroad were the writings of preacher Samuel Bradburn, who in 1792 published *An Address to the People Called Methodists; Concerning the Evil of Encouraging the Slave Trade*, the most thorough Methodist literary contribution to the abolitionist movement since the publication of Wesley’s *Thoughts* nearly two decades earlier. Bradburn decried slavery as unconstitutional and immoral; he expressed his satisfaction that “I have never conversed on the subject with but one methodist in the nation, who did not avowedly oppose the slave trade,” praising those of his fellow believers who joined with others in Manchester to sign the antislavery petition. Invoking the memory of “your late Venerable Pastor,” who “faithfully testified against that disgraceful traffic in human beings, near twenty years ago,” Bradburn implored

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<sup>38</sup> John Wesley to William Wilberforce, 24 February 1791, Methodist Archives & History Center, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.

his readers to do still more, and called for boycotts of West Indian sugar and rum, as well as cotton, which formed the backbone of Manchester's booming textile industry.<sup>39</sup> It is little wonder, then, that Methodists in Jamaica and Barbados attracted the anger of the planting class.

Things grew so tense in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion's beginnings in Saint Domingue that Methodists met opposition in locales where they had previously enjoyed widespread support. In Saint Vincent, for example, rioters vandalized the Methodist chapel one night in 1791, "seized the Bible, took it to the public gallows, and hanged it [there]; where it was found hanging the next morning." Thomas Coke's appreciation for the initial efforts to catch the perpetrators turned to exasperation in January 1793, when he received word that Matthew Lumb, stationed on the island since 1789, had been imprisoned for preaching "THE GOSPEL TO THE NEGROES IN OUR OWN CHAPEL, built with our own Money, and on our own ground!" The local legislature, he was informed, had enacted a law specifically targeting Methodism's itinerant missionary force, forbidding public preaching by anyone "that had not previously resided for twelve months on the Island." "How unparalleled a Law in these modern times," wrote Coke in his journal, "and under a government called Protestant; and which boasts of the liberty of its subjects."<sup>40</sup>

For most of the 1790s, though, Methodists remained on amiable, if sometimes tense, terms with colonial officials. The final decade of the eighteenth century was one of rapid growth for the nascent movement, and also one of

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<sup>39</sup> Samuel Bradburn, *An Address to the People Called Methodists; Concerning the Evil of Encouraging the Slave Trade* (Manchester: T. Harper, 1792).

<sup>40</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 151; 180-82.

profound change. During his second tour of the islands in 1788-89, Thomas Coke brought with him three additional missionaries from the English Conference, stationing them in Barbados, Saint Croix, and Tortola, and commissioned several additional local preachers, sending them to the Dutch islands of Sint Eustatius and Saba. He reported a membership of nearly 4,000 (not including catechumens), over 3,800 of whom were “black” or “coloured people.”<sup>41</sup> Ten years later, he estimated that “there are about forty thousand, or from that number to fifty thousand, who regularly attend the ministry of our preachers. ... Out of these, near ten thousand are members of our society.”<sup>42</sup> The growth in Methodist members in the West Indian mission field coincided with several important internal developments within the movement in the British Isles that had a direct bearing on Methodism and slavery in the mission field. Most notably, it was over the course of the 1790s that the Wesleyan Methodist Church was formally organized, as the English Methodists finally followed the example of their American brethren in separating from the Church of England. Meanwhile, the expansive growth in the West Indies eventually necessitated that Coke, who alone had overseen missionary efforts for nearly two decades in the West Indies—he was, as historian Mary Turner aptly put, “a one-man missionary society”—be assisted in his efforts by a “Committee of Finance and Advice,” which was formed in 1804.<sup>43</sup> Methodism’s worldwide growth and its transition from an evangelical movement within the established church to an independent

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<sup>41</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 116, 118. Early reports did not distinguish between the number of free and enslaved members, but the vast majority of the converts were slaves.

<sup>42</sup> Coke to London Missionary Society, February 26, 1798, in Coke, *Letters*, 230.

<sup>43</sup> Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 7.

denomination had critical consequences for its future in the Caribbean and beyond.

Talk of separation from the Church of England began immediately in the wake of Wesley's death in March 1791. When that independence ultimately did come, it had an especially pronounced impact on the legal rights afforded the movement, as Methodists were now classified as dissenters—a label Thomas Coke strenuously rejected.<sup>44</sup> The earliest evidence of the effects on Methodist missionary work in the West Indies came in 1793, when Matthew Lumb was arrested in Saint Vincent. As noted above, Coke decried the imprisonment as especially unbecoming of “a government called Protestant, ... which boasts the liberty of its subjects.” In his mind, persecution in the colonies was intimately connected with opposition at home. “The Government that would persecute us in the extremes of its Empire,” he concluded, “would undoubtedly persecute us to its centre.”<sup>45</sup> But Methodism did maintain some friends among colonial officials. In 1798, the General Assembly of the Leeward Islands passed a law declaring that “no Proprietor ought to be allowed to restrain in any manner the Slaves under his direction from receiving religious instruction ... from any qualified Person who may voluntarily or otherwise engage himself in such an undertaking,” an important concession for non-Anglican missionaries in the islands.<sup>46</sup> Robert

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<sup>44</sup> See John A. Vickers, “The Churchmanship of Thomas Coke,” *Methodist History* 7:4 (July 1969):15-28.

<sup>45</sup> *Journals of Thomas Coke*, 180-182.

<sup>46</sup> “An Act more effectually to provide for the Support, and to extend certain Regulations for the Protection of Slaves, to promote and encourage their Increase, and generally to meliorate their Condition,” in *The Laws of the Island of Antigua: Consisting of the Acts of the Leeward Islands, Commencing 8<sup>th</sup> Novemeber 1690, ending 21<sup>st</sup> April 1798; and the Acts of Antigua, Commencing 10<sup>th</sup> April 1668, ending 7<sup>th</sup> May 1804. With, prefixed to*

Thomson, then president of Saint Kitts, voiced his support for the new law, singling out the success of the “Moravians and Methodist ministers settled in all of [the Islands], for the purpose of affording moral and religious instruction to the Negroes.”<sup>47</sup> While the immediate consequences of Methodism’s independence from the Established Church were thus mixed, the separation did grant colonial officials an apparent legal basis on which to regulate the activities of Methodist missionaries moving forward.

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In spite of continued suspicion surrounding Methodists as agents of discontent and social disorder, many missionaries not only refrained from condemning slavery, but increasingly implicated themselves in it. In fact, Methodist preachers in the West Indies had purchased slaves as early as 1788, a decision made by Thomas Coke himself. During his first visit to Saint Vincent that year, Coke had successfully lobbied the colony’s legislature to support the planned Methodist mission to the island’s Black Caribs. The mission was granted “one hundred and fifty acres of valuable land on the borders of the *Caribb* country” that would include a chapel, a schoolhouse, and a place of residence to be shared by the missionary, the school teacher, and their families.<sup>48</sup> “It appeared to me,” Coke wrote, “a providential gift” designed to make the mission

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*each Volume, Analytical Tables of the Titles of the Acts; And, at the End of the Whole, A Copious Digested Index*, Volume 1 (London: Samuel Bagster, 1805), 32.

<sup>47</sup> “Extract of a Letter from President Thomson to his Grace the Duke of Portland; dated St. Christopher’s, 28<sup>th</sup> June 1798,” in *West Indies Correspondence, 1803-1816*, WMMS, SOAS.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Coke, *The Case of the Caribbs in St. Vincent’s* (n.p., 1788), 3-5. The slaves were apparently purchased in Antigua and brought to Saint Vincent by John Baxter and his wife.



largely self-sustaining, and he sanctioned the purchase of “*six to ten*” slaves to cultivate the large tract of land, growing coffee on one half and cotton on the other.<sup>49</sup> It was a bold move by Coke, not only because it marked a significant retreat from his earlier denunciations of slavery, but also because of the growing antislavery sentiment among those in England, including Wesley and several of the patrons who helped fund the West Indian missions. Fully aware from the outset that “our friends in *Europe*” would not approve, then, he avoided any mention of it in his publications soliciting further support from his coreligionists in the British Isles. He also initially opted to not comment on it in either his published journal or his personal correspondence with other church leaders in London, and we might know nothing of it were it not for William Hammet, who, after arriving in South Carolina in 1791, grew frustrated with Coke and took umbrage at the unilateral authority leveled by Francis Asbury.

In 1792, Hammet wrote a scathing indictment of Coke’s leadership of the Methodist missions in the West Indies, apparently in an effort to secure the support of church leaders in England for his newly independent Methodist congregation in Charleston. Among other things, Hammet condemned Coke’s hypocrisy, alerting readers to the slaves purchased on behalf of the mission in Saint Vincent and wondering why, if “Dr. C. has *printed* and *preached* against

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas Coke, *An Address to the Preachers, Lately in Connexion with The Rev. John Wesley, Containing Strictures on a Pamphlet published by Mr. William Hammet; intitled, “An Impartial Statement Of the known Inconsistencies Of the Rev. Dr. Coke, &c.”* (London, 1793), 17-22. “Six to ten” from William Hammet, *An Impartial Statement of the Known Inconsistencies of the Reverend Dr. Coke, in his Official Station, As Superintendent of the Methodist Missionaries In the West-Indies: With a brief Description of one of his Tours through the United States* (Charleston, South Carolina: W.P. Young, 1792), 14. The number purchased was nine. See Coke to John Phillips, 26 April 1788, in Coke, *Letters*, 93.

negro traffic,” would he then “give orders to purchase them upon any pretence whatever?”

If it was right to purchase slaves, it was wrong for him to print and preach against it. If right to preach against it, it must be wrong to purchase. If right to purchase, why could he sport with the money of his friends in Europe, to cast so many hundreds away at one stroke, by manumitting those he bought with it?<sup>50</sup>

Hammet’s final question alludes to the fact that Coke eventually manumitted the slaves, though the timing of that move is not clear. In his published response to Hammet’s charges, Coke claimed that he “had hardly left the Island, when my established Principles began to operate” and he “considered that no exempt case could justify the proceeding: that we are not to do evil that good may come.” But it wasn’t until “some months” later that he “at last wrote from Baltimore, to inform our Missionary, that I could not admit of any Slaves upon the estate, on any consideration.” He also downplayed his role in the initial decision to purchase slaves, asserting that he first proposed employing “several of the free Blacks and Mulattoes of our connexion” to live on and farm the land “upon the plan of the Moravian settlement.” Failing to find any willing free Methodists of color to take him up on the offer, Coke then suggested “that the work should be done by hired Negroes.” But “some judicious Planters” talked him out of it, claiming that it was a sure path to bankruptcy. And once he was convinced that purchasing slaves was the only suitable course of action, Coke justified the decision by reasoning that “the Slaves purchased would certainly be treated by us in the tenderest manner.”<sup>51</sup> While Coke’s “established Principles” likely did play a part in his

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<sup>50</sup> Hammet, *An Impartial Statement*, 15. Emphasis in original.

<sup>51</sup> Coke, *An Address to the Preachers*, 18-19.

decision to set the slaves free, so too did the Carib mission's spectacular failure. Coke reported that "Mr. Baxter saw but little fruit of his labor," and "the prospects which lay before him in the Charaib country presented, in a moral view, nothing but 'a situation waste and wild,' which could neither give encouragement to perseverance, nor expand the wings of reasonable hope." By 1790 the school and mission had both been closed, the Baxters returned to Antigua, and Coke's brief flirtation with slave ownership had ended.<sup>52</sup> But as the society appointed to assist Thomas Coke in 1804 quickly learned, the involvement of Methodist missionaries with slavery had not.

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At the organization of the "Missionary Committee of Finance & advice" in August 1804, the minutes make clear that "Dr Coke is re-appointed to the office of General-Superintendent of the Missions" and that the two additional committee members—"Mr Entwisle the Secretary, and Mr Lomas the Treasurer"—were to serve an advisory role, handling fundraising and helping to manage the incoming and outgoing correspondence relating to missions. But they also seem to have anticipated potential conflict, implementing measures to resolve "any difference of opinion ... between the General Superintendent & the majority of the Com<sup>ee</sup> concerning any important measure."<sup>53</sup> Given the headstrong personality of Thomas Coke, and the unilateral authority he had wielded in managing the

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History of Each Island: with an Account of the Missions Instituted in those Islands, from the Commencement of their Civilization; but more Especially the Missions which have been Established in that Archipelago by the Society Late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley*, Volume II (London, A. Paris: 1810), 266.

<sup>53</sup> First Minute Book, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, Home and General, April 1798-August 1816, WMMS, SOAS, 5.

missions for nearly two decades, it is little surprise that conflict did, in fact, occur. Within months, Coke and the committee were in disagreement over a number of issues, including the distinction between personal and official correspondence sent to Coke, the management and disclosure of finances, and the islands on which Coke had recently stationed several missionaries.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps most troubling to the Committee members, though, was the discovery in 1806 that several preachers in the West Indies had married slaveowning women.

In a striking parallel to the concerns that plagued Francis Asbury a decade earlier in North America, Methodist missionaries in the West Indies were marrying into slaveowning families, thus becoming slaveholders themselves. Unlike Francis Asbury, who remained unmarried for the entirety of his life, Thomas Coke married not once, but twice—in 1804, to Penelope Smith, and then after her unexpected death seven years later, to Anne Loxdale in 1811. Although Coke did not marry until he was 57 years old and shared with Asbury a frustration and disappointment in response to the many “holy, experienced, zealous, able Men” lost from the itinerancy following their marriage, he traced the root of the problem not to the institution of marriage itself, but rather the lack of financial support the church provided for its ministers.<sup>55</sup> His experience in the Caribbean furthermore convinced that him that married missionaries could be quite useful. John Baxter’s wife had served as able assistant to her husband in their mission to the Black Caribs in Saint Vincent, and Coke rejoiced upon his

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<sup>54</sup> The majority of Coke’s voluminous correspondence in 1804 and 1805 was addressed to either Entwisle or Lomas, or jointly to “the Missionary Committee.” See Coke, *Letters*, 358-415.

<sup>55</sup> See Vickers, *Thomas Coke*, 248-49.

1804 marriage that his “most beloved Penelope ... is as much a Pilgrim ... as myself.”<sup>56</sup> Whether Coke approved of the marriages of the several missionaries to women who owned slaves is unclear, but he was obviously aware of it. Nevertheless, he did not fight the measures enacted by the British Conference in 1807 at the Missionary Committee’s urging. In response to the question, “What further regulations are adopted with respect to our Missions?” the Conference answered, “No person shall be employed in any of our Missions at home or abroad, who is not deemed perfectly proper to be employed in our regular Circuits.” An “exemption formerly allowed to our Foreign Missionaries ... with respect to marriage” was “hereby repealed.” The minute concluded with a swift denunciation of those who had married slaveowning women:

The Conference determines that none of our Preachers employed in the West-Indies, shall be at liberty to marry any person, who will not previously emancipate, in the legal methods, all the slaves of whom she may be possessed: and if any of our brethren there, already married, have, by such marriage, or in any other way, become proprietors of slaves, we require those brethren to take immediate and effectual steps for their emancipation.<sup>57</sup>

The measure marked a milestone in Methodist policy towards slavery in the West Indies. It was the first explicit attempt to regulate the rights of church members to own slaves, preacher or otherwise. Though likely not directly influenced by similar policies in North America implemented two decades earlier, the strictures echo those advocated by Francis Asbury and others in the 1780s. So, too, did the immediate response from those preachers now guilty of owning slaves. Four

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<sup>56</sup> Coke to Richard Whatcoat, 1 May 1805, in Coke, *Letters*, 407.

<sup>57</sup> *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, from the First, Held in London, by the Late Rev John Wesley, A.M. in the Year 1744*, Volume II (London: Thomas Cordeux, 1813), 401-02.

years later, at least six preachers still owned slaves. At the Conference held in Sheffield that year, the Missionary Committee “recommended to the Conference to recal [those] Preachers,” which “was received, and confirmed, unanimously, by the Conference.”<sup>58</sup> Just as American Methodist leaders began their retreat from earlier attempts to regulate the slaveholding of church members and ministers, their British brethren were just beginning their attempts to enact such regulations on those in the West Indies. Although the demands of the missionary committee and Conference—that the missionaries release their slaves and that no more missionaries be permitted to marry slave-owning women—did not initiate the intense opposition faced by Methodists in the Caribbean, it certainly did not help matters.

As the nineteenth century dawned, Methodist missionaries faced more concerted scrutiny than ever before. Following his summons to the office of Saint Kitts President Robert Thomson in 1801, John Brownell noted that “a heavy cloud hung over the Society” as fears of persecution remained acute. In July 1802, the missionary described in his journal “a Strange event [that] has taken place.” Several slaves on a large plantation had solicited the assistance of an unidentified “White man” to write to local authorities and notify them of their overseer’s “cruel usage” and “ill treatment.” The slaves’ actions violated the island’s slave code, and two of them “were taken up & sent to Jail.” When the rest of the slaves protested by “refusing to work for a day or two,” soldiers were

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<sup>58</sup> Minutes of the Sheffield Conference, 9 August 1811, First Minute Book, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, Home and General, April 1798-August 1816, WMMS, SOAS, 116.

dispatched to round up any who persisted and throw them in jail. “The Methodist Preachers,” Brownell recorded, “bore the blame.” In order “to Save the whole Society from a Severe Persecution,” he continued, “I was under the necessity of expelling ... all those who had left their Work on those two days.”<sup>59</sup> Things in Jamaica, where the Methodist presence had always been tense, were even more precarious.

The Jamaican legislature passed three separate acts aimed at undermining Methodist activity in the first decade of the nineteenth century. The first, passed in 1802, sought to restrict the ministerial labors of “persons not duly qualified by law.” It targeted those who, “under pretence of being a minister of religion, presume to preach or teach in any meeting or assembly of negroes or people of colour within this island.” Those found guilty of violating the law faced fines, imprisonment, and a period of “hard labour.”<sup>60</sup> In both intent and effect, the law limited the rights of both ordained Methodist missionaries and the free and enslaved people to whom they preached. In fact, it was Methodism’s fairly elastic notions of *preachers* and *preaching* that made the law so effective. Methodists carefully distinguished between ordained clergy—those given charge of a circuit and qualified to administer sacred sacraments—and the much larger number of local preachers, exhorters, and class leaders (a category that included both men and women) who carried on the day-to-day work and worship of the congregations and classes in the absence of the itinerant missionaries. In practice, though, all members of society “preached,” bearing testimony, exhorting

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<sup>59</sup> Journal of John Brownell, 27 April 1801; 11 June 1802.

<sup>60</sup> *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica, Vol. XI: 1802-1807* (London: Alexander Aikman, 1809), 74; Coke, *History of the West Indies*, 1:444-46.

their coreligionists to righteousness, and taking turns leading the singing of hymns in their class meetings and other small gatherings.<sup>61</sup>

Ironically, the 1802 law relied on a similarly broad definition of preaching to restrict Methodist activity. The very act of preaching, especially when the preacher was an enslaved or free person of color, was a threat to the established social order, and local magistrates interpreted the law expansively enough both to reject the credentials of regularly ordained British preachers like Daniel Campbell and to sentence one “Mr. Williams, a free man of colour” to one month’s imprisonment and “hard labour in the work-house” for “singing a few hymns, and praying.”<sup>62</sup> In April 1804 the British government disallowed and annulled the law, and for three brief years, Methodist missionaries again operated openly in Jamaica.

By 1807, Jamaican legislators were again attempting to restrict Methodist activity. The British Parliament’s “An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade” incensed West Indian slaveholders, and the resolution handed down from the Methodist Conference forbidding missionaries to own slaves or to marry a slave-owning woman further persuaded colonial officials more than ever that the missionaries were not to be trusted. In June 1807, the Common Council in Kingston passed an ordinance repeating much of the now-annulled 1802 Act, but also making illegal “public worship ... earlier than the hour of six o’clock in the

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<sup>61</sup> See Coke, *History of the West Indies*, 1:433.

<sup>62</sup> Coke, *History of the West Indies*, 1:447-53. See also Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 15-16.



morning, or later than sun-set in the evening.”<sup>63</sup> The impact of the ordinance was far reaching because the enslaved inhabitants of the island spent the entirety of the daylight hours working. In effect, the time restrictions banned the daily class and prayer meetings that formed the foundation of Methodist worship and community.

Then, in November 1807, as part of the island’s newly revised slave code, the Jamaican Assembly clamped down even harder on the rights of the missionaries. This time they singled out the ministers by name, providing “that no Methodist Missionary, or other sectary, or preacher, shall presume to instruct our slaves, or to receive them into their houses, chapels, or conventicles,” essentially prohibiting all Methodist preaching on the island.<sup>64</sup> Church leaders in London again petitioned the King, decrying the “grievous religious persecution” and “the antichristian principle on which it is founded.” Meanwhile, missionaries stationed in Jamaica were denied permission to preach and all Methodist chapels and preaching houses were closed. The law was finally disallowed in April 1809, when the Committee of Council for Trade and Foreign Plantations annulled its implementation and enforcement on the grounds that it was “in direct contravention of the rights and privileges secured to [Preachers and Teachers dissenting from the Established Church of England] by the Toleration Act.”<sup>65</sup> In

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<sup>63</sup> Coke, *History of the West Indies*, 2:15-17. See also James Knowlton to Coke, 23 June 1807, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Archives, West Indies Correspondence, 1803-1816, Box 112, School of Oriental and African Studies.

<sup>64</sup> Coke, *History of the West Indies*, 2:19-20; *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica, 1802-1807*, 611, 644-47.

<sup>65</sup> Coke, *History of the West Indies*, 2:27-30.

August, after nearly two years, Methodist missionaries resumed preaching in Jamaica.

Several months after the passage of the 1807 law, and still some time before it was disallowed, Thomas Coke wrote to his close friend, Ezekiel Cooper, a prominent Methodist preacher in America. “I am come here from London,” Coke wrote, “on acct. of a dreadful persecution which has arisen in Jamaica against our People.” Whereas years earlier Coke had thanked God for the religious protections provided by the British constitution, he now envied Cooper’s country. “O what a blessing it is,” wrote the veteran preacher, “to be in a country where there is no danger of persecution.”<sup>66</sup> The intervening years had made Coke much more skeptical toward Britain’s avowed commitment to toleration, especially in her colonies.

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The final years of Thomas Coke’s life (he died in 1814) did little to relieve his skepticism. When the second volume of Thomas Coke’s *History of the West Indies* went to press in 1810, he added a footnote regrettably informing his readers “that the persecution in Jamaica still continues, notwithstanding his Majesty’s gracious interference.”<sup>67</sup> Although the new Toleration Act passed by Britain’s Parliament in 1812 afforded the Methodists and other dissenting preachers renewed protections, and no missionaries were denied a license to preach by Jamaican authorities after 1815, suspicions persisted. Some historians have pointed to the 1810s as the moment when “the climate for mission work

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<sup>66</sup> Coke to Ezekiel Cooper, 1 March 1808, in Coke, *Letters*, 547.

<sup>67</sup> Coke, *History of the West Indies*, 2:33.

began to improve,” marked by a “mild thaw in relations between planters and missionaries.” But while the relaxed regulations in Jamaica resulted in Methodism’s growth there over the course of the decade (membership in Jamaica surpassed 6,500 in 1820, more than any other island by far, including Antigua), missionaries throughout the West Indies continued to be accused anytime slaves planned a revolt, as they did in Barbados (1816) and Demerara (1823).<sup>68</sup>

The years between the arrival of the first Methodists in the Americas and the early nineteenth century witnessed not only the expansive growth of Methodism throughout the Atlantic World but also dramatic shifts in the movement’s relationship with slavery. Early American Methodism’s accommodation to the pressures of the slaveholding southern United States is typically told as a regional or national story. But Methodist attitudes toward slavery, together with persistent perceptions of Methodists as outspoken abolitionists, were the product of larger forces operated throughout the Atlantic World, including the internal and inconsistent dynamics of Methodism itself.

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<sup>68</sup> Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 138. Membership figures from *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences* 5:128.

## CHAPTER 4

### Abolition and Amelioration: Black Methodists and Slavery in the United States and the Caribbean

On May 5, 1804, Methodist laywoman Elizabeth Hart penned a letter to missionary Richard Pattison, outlining the history of Methodism in her native Antigua, including “a more circumstantial detail” of her own “spiritual course.” Born to black, slaveholding Methodist parents in the colonial capital of Saint John’s, Hart subsequently was converted under the preaching of Thomas Coke and William Warrener and married a white evangelical educator. Initially uncomfortable worshipping with slaves—“I proudly held out on wholly joining them,” she wrote—Hart “was at last stripped of my fancy goodness” and began meeting with “a Class of young women who were Slaves,” exhorting them to righteousness and “enforcing upon them the necessity of a present Salvation.” Though she believed slavery to be a “horrid system,” Elizabeth Hart was not an abolitionist.<sup>1</sup> Nor was her sister, Anne, who also married a white Antiguan and joined her sister in ministering to slaves, including some of those she and her husband John Gilbert had inherited from her father at the time of their marriage. The Hart sisters maintained that the greatest evils of slavery were the abuses perpetrated by owners and overseers and the vices it inculcated in slaveholder and slave alike, and focused their antislavery efforts not on abolition or emancipation but rather on improving the conditions of the slaves. They were, as

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Hart to the Reverend Richard Pattison, 5 May 1804, WMMS, West Indies Correspondence, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. A transcription of the letter is published as “Elizabeth Hart Thwaites, *History of Methodism*,” in Moira Ferguson, ed., *The Hart Sisters: Early African Caribbean Writers, Evangelicals, and Radicals* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 89-96.

John Saillant has effectively argued, “moderate opponents of slavery” and ameliorationists.<sup>2</sup>

The attitudes and actions of the Hart Sisters toward slavery were not static, though, and over the course of the first decades of the nineteenth century, each shifted their views in response to different pressures, while maintaining a firm commitment to reform the institution and improve the lives of the enslaved. In 1809, they formed a Sunday School in English Harbour for the instruction of enslaved boys and girls, sparking some controversy in the community. “It was the first institution of the kind formed in the West Indies,” wrote missionary William Box years later, “and it was formed at a time, too, when teaching slaves to read was so unpopular and suspicious a measure, that the missionaries were instructed to avoid it, lest it should prevent their admission into places where they might otherwise be allowed to preach the Gospel.”<sup>3</sup> Over the course of the next decade, the Hart sisters established at least two additional Sunday Schools and a female refuge society, and in 1820, Anne Gilbert manumitted one of her slaves, the first of twelve such deeds issued by Gilbert and her husband John over the

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<sup>2</sup> John Saillant, “Antiguan Methodism and Antislavery Activity: Anne and Elizabeth Hart in the Eighteenth-Century Black Atlantic,” *Church History* 69:1 (March 2000): 86. Saillant was writing in response to Moira Ferguson’s earlier claims that Elizabeth and her sister Anne Hart Gilbert were advocates of abolition and authors of “antislavery polemics.” See Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 1-47; and Moira Ferguson, ed., *Nine Black Women: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Writers from the United States, Canada, Bermuda, and the Caribbean* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 1-45. I largely follow Saillant, though, as will be seen, I disagree with his reading of Elizabeth Hart Thwaites’s theology and its impact on her views on slavery, as well as the reasons for their more moderate opposition to slavery.

<sup>3</sup> William Box, *Memoir of John Gilbert, Esq., Late Naval Storekeeper at Antigua, to Which Are Appended a Brief Sketch of His Relic, Mrs. Anne Gilbert, by the Rev. William Box, Wesleyan Missionary, and a Few Additional Remarks by a Christian Friend* (Liverpool: D. Marples, 1835), 86-87. The sketch of Anne Gilbert included there is reprinted as “A Brief Sketch of Mrs. Anne Gilbert by the Reverend William Box, Wesleyan Missionary,” Appendix A, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 117-123.

next five years.<sup>4</sup> Although both Hart sisters stopped short of advocating abolition, their activities and writings in the first decades of the nineteenth century are indicative of the increased participation of black Methodists in debates over slavery at the dawn of the nineteenth century. In the United States, free black Methodists in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore also became increasingly involved in speaking out against slavery.

The actions of both African American and Afro-Caribbean Methodists came in response to the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in the British Empire (1807) and the United States (1808). As Kyle Bulthuis has recently summarized, “black Methodists assumed the primary role in the first public displays celebrating the end of the slave trade, held on New Year’s Day 1808” in New York City.<sup>5</sup> Two years later, in 1810, Baltimore preacher Daniel Coker published a 43-page tract attacking the legal, historical, and theological justifications for slavery entitled *A Dialogue Between a Virginian and an African Minister*. It was, according to historian Richard Newman, the first and only “black-authored pamphlet printed below the Mason-Dixon line during the early national period.”<sup>6</sup> Coker shared some of the same concerns as the Hart sisters. Most significantly, each believed that slavery inculcated vice in both slave and slaveholder alike. But whereas the Hart sisters proposed that the conversion of slaves to Christianity could help the enslaved overcome their sinful natures,

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<sup>4</sup> Ferguson, *Nine Black Women*, 5-9; 27-30; and Sue Thomas, *Telling West Indian Lives: Life Narrative and the Reform of Plantation Slavery Culture, 1804-1834* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 41-42.

<sup>5</sup> Kyle Bulthuis, *Four Steeples over the City Streets: Religion and Society in New York’s Early Republic Congregations* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 106.

<sup>6</sup> Richard S. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 124.

Coker maintained that even a Christian slave under the watchful care of a Christian slave-owner lacked “his own free agency” necessary to fully accept Christ and to live a Christian life. Coker called not simply for the better treatment of slaves or for individual masters to manumit their chattel, but for the general abolition of slavery altogether.<sup>7</sup>

The space separating the antislavery activity of black evangelicals in the British West Indies (like the Harts) and those in other parts of the Black Atlantic (including Coker and Richard Allen in the United States) can be attributed in part to their respective relationships with slavery—Elizabeth Thwaites and Anne Gilbert were slaveholders and the children of slaveholders, while Daniel Coker and Richard Allen were each born and raised in slavery, finding a path to freedom as adults. In addition, the location in which each lived played an important role. As scholar John Saillant has argued, “a fervid faith and a gripping sense of blackness were not adequate to make one an abolitionist. The conviction that state power could and should be directed against slaveholders and for blacks was also needful,” and because “the Hart sisters never felt themselves to be members of a nation-state, but of a peripheral, West Indian colony, far removed from the centers of state power,” they lacked that conviction.<sup>8</sup> But it was not only citizenship in a potentially powerful nation-state that shaped their antislavery approaches. It was also their membership in increasingly different institutional expressions of Methodism.

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Coker, *A Dialogue Between a Virginian and an African Minister, Written by the Rev. Daniel Coker, a Descendant of Africa ... Minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Humbly Dedicated to the People of Colour in the United States of America* (Baltimore: Benjamin Edes, 1810).

<sup>8</sup> Saillant, “Antiguan Methodism and Antislavery Activity,” 100.

The attitudes and actions of black Methodists toward slavery in both the United States and the Caribbean occurred against a backdrop of changing and sometimes-conflicting official policies and procedures, and both the Hart sisters and Daniel Coker relied on institutional Methodism to further their aims. The Hart sisters thus emphasized the influence of John Fletcher and Thomas Coke in shaping their views and formed a Sunday School and then a female refuge society in their initial efforts to ameliorate slavery in Antigua. They taught enslaved boys and girls to read, an act white missionaries dared not attempt for fear of provoking planters' anger and suspicion. Richard Allen and Daniel Coker, meanwhile, tapped into familiar Methodist anti-slavery tropes earlier voiced by John Wesley, Francis Asbury, and Freeborn Garrettson. And when they grew tired with white Methodist leaders' retreat from their earlier antislavery activism and continued refusal to recognize black preachers as integral parts of the Methodist Episcopal Church, black Methodists moved toward forming their own independent Methodist churches.

The lives and writings of Elizabeth Thwaites, Anne Gilbert, Richard Allen, and Daniel Coker point to the diversity of views among black Methodists on the subject of slavery. They also reiterate the increasingly divergent tracks taken by Methodist churches in the United States and the Caribbean in the early nineteenth century covered in the previous two chapters, even as they complicate those trajectories in significant ways.

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When Anne Hart married John Gilbert in 1798, it formally united two of the oldest Methodist families in Antigua. John Gilbert was the nephew of Nathaniel Gilbert II, who, along with his two female slaves, had introduced Methodism to the island in 1760. Nathaniel's brother Francis joined him in preaching to slaves, first from 1762-1764 and then again from 1773-1775, briefly assuming leadership of the Methodist community in the wake of his brother's death in 1774. Among the converts made by Francis during his first preaching tour of Antigua was a freed slave named Frances Clearkley and her daughter, Anne, who in 1766 married another Methodist, Barry Conyers Hart. Anne Hart, born in 1768, was the couple's oldest daughter. Her marriage to John Gilbert, then, reinforced earlier relationships between the Gilbert and Hart families, even as it cut across prescribed racial and social lines.<sup>9</sup>

It is difficult to generalize about the attitudes of Methodists toward slavery in the eighteenth century Caribbean, even if we limit our focus to a single island. Some, like Nathaniel Gilbert of Antigua, were sympathetic to the antislavery arguments of John Wesley and Anthony Benezet, but never manumitted any slaves. Certainly many of the enslaved Methodists opposed their own enslavement, though their voices remain largely hidden from the documentary record. Much of the historiography on Methodists in the Caribbean has

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<sup>9</sup> Biographical information on the Hart family drawn from Ferguson, *Nine Black Women*, 27-30 (which revises earlier birthdates for Anne and Elizabeth published in Ferguson's *The Hart Sisters*); and that on the Gilberts drawn from Thomas, *Telling West Indian Lives*, 35-36. On Frances Clearkley being a freed slave, see John Neal, "William Warrener's Contribution to Methodist Missionary History," paper delivered at the Methodist Missionary History Project Conference, Leeds, UK, 2013, available online at <http://www.methodistheritage.org.uk/missionary-history-neal-william-warrener-2013.pdf>. Accessed 10 February 2016.

highlighted the connections that linked free and enslaved Methodists of color. Methodist membership rolls kept in the Caribbean were sometimes divided into two categories: *white* and *coloured and black*, thus collapsing free and enslaved people of color into a single category. Furthermore, some free individuals (including Anne and Elizabeth Hart) sometimes praised enslaved individuals (like Mary Alley and Sophia Campbell) as important and talented local leaders. But the boundaries separating free and enslaved Methodists could never be fully collapsed, both because of their temporal freedom and because several black Methodist families owned slaves themselves.

That group of slave-owning black Methodists included the families of Anne and Elizabeth's mother and father. Their father, Barry Conyers Hart, was born the illegitimate son of John Hart, the former Governor of Maryland and Captain-General of the Leeward Island, and his enslaved mistress. In spite of his illegitimacy, Hart inherited from his father "£200 at [age] 21 & £50 c. yearly" thereafter. Putting the money to use, Hart procured an estate and small plantation at Popeshead. He remained a slaveholder until his death in 1808.<sup>10</sup> Their mother, Anne Clearkley Hart, was also the product of a liaison between a white master (Timothy Clearkley) and a black woman (Frances Clearkley), and slave registers from the early nineteenth century show each of the Clearkley

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<sup>10</sup> "John Hart of Antigua, Esq., Will dated 15 Dec. 1759," in Vere Langford Oliver, *The History of the Island of Antigua, One of the Leeward Caribbees in the West Indies, from the First Settlement in 1635 to the Present Time* (London: Mitchell and Hughes), 2:67. See also John Neal, "In the beginning ...": Gender, Ethnicity and the Methodist Missionary Enterprise," paper delivered at the Methodist Missionary History Project Conference, Woodbrooke, Birmingham, UK, 2011, 15-16. Available online at <http://www.methodistheritage.org.uk/missionary-history-neal-in-the-beginning-2011.pdf>. Accessed 22 February 2016.

children—Anne, Lydia, Elizabeth, and Grace—owning a small number of slaves. In 1789, Anne’s youngest sister Grace married Richard Cable, “a Mulatto gentleman, a printer,” and the editor of the *St. Christopher Advertiser and Weekly Intelligencer* on nearby Saint Kitts. Cable was originally from Antigua, and had converted to Methodism sometime prior to his departure for Saint Kitts in 1782 and is credited as being one of the first three Methodists on that island. In 1787, he was instrumental in bringing Thomas Coke to Saint Kitts, hosting the Methodist leader and helping to make housing arrangements for William Hammet, who remained on the island.<sup>11</sup>

It is unclear whether Richard Cable owned slaves prior to marrying Grace Clearkley, but the couple likely inherited a small number of domestic workers at the time of their marriage in 1789. The earliest available slave registers indicate the couple owned six slaves—four adult women, one adult man, and a young child—in Antigua and an additional five slaves in Saint Kitts—two adult men, one woman, and two young children, who worked as a “Press Man,” “News Carrier,” and “Drudge” in their print shop.<sup>12</sup> Although it does not appear that the Cables

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<sup>11</sup> On the Clearkley family, see Neal, “In the beginning,” 15-16. See also John Horsford, *A Voice from the West Indies: Being A Review of the Character and Other Colonies in the Charibbean Sea, with Some Remarks on the Usages, Prejudices, &c., of the Inhabitants* (London: Alexander Heylin, 1856), 192-93. See also the entry in Thomas Coke’s journal for 15 January 1787, in *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. John A. Vickers (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 2005), 81.

<sup>12</sup> See entries for “Richd Cable for Grace Cable, Proprietess” and “Richd Cable for Grace Cable the younger, Proprietess” (St. Christopher, 1817); and “Grace Cable, Coloured Woman Proprietor” and “Grace Cable Guardian of Elizabeth Parker, Proprietor” (Antigua, 1817-1818) in *Slave Registers of Former British Colonial Dependencies, 1813-1834*. Online database (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com, 2007). Accessed 23 February 2016. Grace Cable the Younger and Elizabeth Parker were two of the Cable children. It is likely that the “Richd Cable” identified here was Richard and Grace Cable’s oldest son, as Richard Cable had passed away sometime before July

actively purchased and sold slaves, they did bequeath some slaves to each of their children, and on at least one occasion transferred a slave from one island to the other: In February 1822, Grace Cable “legally Imported” and “formally retrieved” Tom Penny, a six-year-old boy from Saint Kitts. Grace Cable, who lived until 1854, when she was 91, continued to own slaves as late as January 1834, just months before the formal abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire.<sup>13</sup>

Grace Cable’s 1854 obituary, penned by a Methodist missionary, praised her as a “venerable Christian lady” and “a woman of masculine understanding, of great uprightness, energy, and decision of character.” It also highlighted her familial and spiritual connections to the Gilbert family, noting that “her mother was brought to the knowledge of the truth under the ministry of Mr. Francis Gilbert” and that her nieces included “the late highly respected Mrs. John Gilbert ... and Mrs. Thwaites.”<sup>14</sup> Like their aunt, Anne Gilbert and Elizabeth Thwaites “labour[ed] assiduously in promoting the education of the young.” Unlike their aunt, the sisters struggled more overtly with the morality of slaveholding, taking a particular interest in the education of slaves, the protection of abused slave women, and opposing (however inconsistently) the institution of slavery itself.

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1817. The Antigua returns for 1817 identify Grace Cable as “Grace Cable of the Island of Antigua, Widow.”

<sup>13</sup> See entry for “Grace Cable, Proprietor” (Antigua, 1824) in *Slave Registers of Former British Colonial Dependencies, 1813-1834*. Ancestry.com. Accessed 23 February 2016. It is unclear why Cable would transfer from Saint Kitts to Antigua a young enslaved boy, though it may have something to do with the death of another young slave, Priscilla (age five 1817) some time before 1824. The entry for “Grace Cable, Proprietress by Richard Cable” for Saint Christopher in 1834 records her owning four slaves. The last available register for Antigua, dated February 1832, shows “Grace Cable, Proprietor” owning six slaves there. See also Neal, “In the beginning,” 16.

<sup>14</sup> The obituary was published in Horsford, *A Voice from the West Indies*, 192-93.

Contemporaneous writings by and about Anne and Elizabeth Hart make clear that the sisters were, generally speaking, antislavery. There has been some disagreement among scholars, however, over the nature and extent of their beliefs on the subject. Moira Ferguson, who has done more than anyone else to highlight the significance of the Hart sisters and make their private and published writings available, argued in her introduction to a 1993 edited collection of their writings, that the Hart sisters were “staunch and much hated abolitionist[s]” whose writings “helped formulate the ideological strategy for emancipation.”<sup>15</sup> She reiterated that view in her 1998 anthology of nineteenth-century female writers, positioning the “vigorous anti-slavery perspective” of Elizabeth Hart Thwaite and Anne Hart Gilbert as lone voices crying in the wilderness of a Wesleyan Methodism far removed from its antislavery roots.<sup>16</sup> Writing in response to Ferguson’s conclusions in 2000, historian John Saillant argued instead that “Anne and Elizabeth Hart were moderate opponents of slavery, not abolitionists, but meliorationists.” Their lives and writings illuminated not the seeds of emancipationist ideology, but rather the variety of “black antislavery

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<sup>15</sup> Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 21, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Ferguson, *Nine Black Women*, 8. Ferguson’s interpretation has been influential. Babacar M’Baye, while arguing for the importance of African cultural influences in the Hart sisters activism, quotes Ferguson at length and repeats her argument that the sisters were abolitionists who “work[ed] for the emancipation of slaves.” See Babacar M’Baye, *The Trickster Comes West: Pan-African Influence in Early Black Diasporan Narratives* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 144-77. See also Evelyn O’Callaghan, *Women Writing in the West Indies, 1804-1839: “A Hot Place, Belonging to Us”* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 181, n2, who, relying on Ferguson, calls the Hart sisters “staunch opponents of slavery” who “outspokenly promoted emancipation.”

Christianity in the late eighteenth century.”<sup>17</sup> Neither characterization fully represents the complexity of the sisters’ attitudes and actions toward slavery.

Two recent examinations of the Hart sisters’ lives and writings strike a more nuanced stance. In a 2014 essay, historian Natasha Lightfoot argues that “neither of the sisters advanced a clear argument” on social issues, including slavery, and that their writings “offer at best oblique presentations of their politics.” Countering Ferguson, she argues that “the Hart sisters’ views” were “not avowedly abolitionist,” while lamenting that Saillant’s argument lacked sustained “attention to the combined gendered, racial, and class circumstances that underline the Hart sisters’ political moderation.” Most significantly, she recognizes that Anne Gilbert and Elizabeth Thwaite “advance[d] complicated positions on slavery,” and did so in different ways. Comparing each sister’s 1804 letter to Richard Pattison, Lightfoot notes that Thwaites’s letter incorporates her own personal struggle for piety into the account of Methodism’s progress that she is narrating, while “Anne mainly assumed an omniscient and strategic distance from her subject matter.” Both work toward the same end, but did so in different ways.<sup>18</sup>

Significantly, Lightfoot notes that Anne Gilbert “owned slaves in her adulthood,” a point ignored entirely by earlier writers, but one crucial to understanding her relationship with slavery.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, there is no further

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<sup>17</sup> Saillant, “Antiguan Methodism and Antislavery Activity,” 86.

<sup>18</sup> Natasha Lightfoot, “The Hart Sisters of Antigua: Evangelical Activism and ‘Respectable’ Public Politics in the Era of Black Atlantic Slavery,” in Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage, eds., *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 53-54, 63, 70 n2.

<sup>19</sup> Lightfoot, “The Hart Sisters of Antigua,” 62.

investigation into Gilbert's ownership of slaves. That oversight is rectified, however, in another volume published in 2014, Sue Thomas's *Telling West Indian Lives*, which includes the fullest examination of Anne (and her husband John) Gilbert's "creole benevolence and antislavery" to date. Thomas avoids staking out explicit ground in the debate over the Hart sisters' abolition or amelioration, presenting instead evidence that only complicates the picture further. Like Lightfoot, Thomas notes that Anne Gilbert (and her sister Elizabeth Thwaites) both owned slaves in their adulthood, lending further credence to the suggestion that they were decidedly not abolitionists. But she also reveals that John and Anne Gilbert manumitted several (but not all) of their slaves in the early 1820s and that the Hart sisters' Female Refuge Society was tied to and patronized by antislavery societies in England.<sup>20</sup>

What, then, are we to make of these seeming contradictions and inconsistencies? And what does the more complex portrait demonstrate about free black Methodists and their relationship to slavery? The Hart sisters and the church to which they belonged evolved in their views toward slavery, responding to various internal and external forces at work in the Anglo-Atlantic world.

Elizabeth Hart's earliest statements on slavery come from a 1794 letter to an unidentified correspondent, evidently a supporter of slavery. The letter, which Elizabeth presents as being the first time she has ever "declared my sentiments so freely to any person (except my sister) ... on this head," lays the groundwork for her subsequent writings on the subject, as well as her benevolent work decades later. In criticizing slavery, Hart identifies "the black train of ills ...

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas, *Telling West Indian Lives*, 4-5, 42-43, 182, n159.

inseparably connected with *this* species of slavery” as its most problematic feature. Slaves, she explains, lack legal means of redress to combat “their personal injuries,” are only “allowed a very small portion of their earnings,” and (worst of all) are denied opportunities to improve in “decency and virtue.” But it also contains her most forceful condemnation of the slave trade. Lamenting “the shocking practice of taking Africans from their native land,” Hart concludes her letter by quoting (and endorsing) a passage from the “pious writer” and philanthropist, Hannah More:

I indulge myself in moments of the most enthusiastic and delightful vision, taking encouragement from that glorious prophecy, that “of the increase of His government there shall be no end;” a prediction which seems to be gradually accomplishing, and in no instance more, perhaps, than in the noble attempt about to be made for the abolition of the African Slave-Trade.<sup>21</sup>

The quoted passage is important in understanding the nature of her views at this early period. Though she insisted to her correspondent that “it is not anything I have read that has furnished thoughts upon the subject,” and that “I was no sooner capable of thinking, than my heart shuddered at the cruelties that were presented to my sight,” she also admitted to having read not only Hannah More, but also “a piece on ‘Charity’ by Cowper.”<sup>22</sup> Both More and William Cowper were close associates of John Newton, William Wilberforce, and other leaders of the Evangelical abolition movement that emerged in England during the 1780s. Their

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Hart to a Friend, 24 October 1794, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 104-11. The letter was originally published in Horsford, *A Voice from the West Indies*, 222-28. The passage Hart quotes comes from Hannah More, *Thoughts on the Manners of the Great, to the General Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: T. Cadell, 1788), 110-11. See also Thomas, *Telling West Indian Lives*, 22-23.

<sup>22</sup> Hart to a friend, 24 October 1794, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 111.



work was part of the larger outpouring of literary and political efforts opposing the slave trade. It also left a marked influence on early Methodist antislavery.

According to David Hempton, “the formation of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 led to another gear shift in Methodist mobilization.” The Methodists’ *Arminian Magazine* increased its attention to abolitionist efforts (including printing one of Hannah More’s antislavery poems), and, as discussed in the previous chapter, Samuel Bradburn published in 1792 *An Address to the People Called Methodists; Concerning the Evil of Encouraging the Slave Trade*.<sup>23</sup> It was within this context that Elizabeth Hart first put her thoughts on slavery to paper.

Hart’s thoughts echo those of the evangelical abolitionists (Methodist and otherwise) across the Atlantic, but they also reveal an attention to more local concerns – concerns that in some cases tempered her more general enthusiasm for abolition. If Methodists in England were more actively involved in opposing slavery than ever before, the missionaries dispatched to the West Indies were careful to avoid such overt antagonism of the plantocracy. It is unclear how Hart’s relationships with Thomas Coke, William Warrener, or Bartholomew McDonald—each of whom she names as important spiritual mentors—affected her own views toward slavery, but given the moderate stances the missionaries staked out on the subject (or remained silent about altogether), it seems safe to say that they did not push Hart toward abolition. Most notably, Elizabeth reflected on recent events in Saint Domingue, where enslaved Africans and free people of color

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<sup>23</sup> David Hempton, “Wesley in Context,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, ed. by Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 71-73.

launched a coordinated attack on several plantations. As the rebellion turned to revolution, it attracted the attention and fear of free people throughout the Atlantic World, including Elizabeth Hart. “Nor have we reason to suppose the Negroes in St. Domingo, Martinique, &c., are one whit better than ever they were,” wrote Hart. “Concerning these we have strange accounts, many of them having taken their masters’ places; and the oppressors are now the oppressed.”<sup>24</sup> The nascent Haitian Revolution “forced other slaveholding Atlantic Empires, especially Britain, to recognize the urgency of the emancipation debate and the need for state control of the abolition process” and helped fortify the efforts of English evangelicals to lead the charge.<sup>25</sup> But while Elizabeth Hart was supportive of their efforts, she prioritized her own, even as she (aptly, it turns out) understood that they might undermine the larger abolitionist project. “I am,” she concluded her letter, “most concerned to have the evils within rectified, or rather cured; this will perhaps render some of those that are without less poignant.”<sup>26</sup> The Hart sisters’ efforts to Christianize slaves and ameliorate slavery would come at a cost, curbing their support for abolition in deference to their local ministry to slaves.

By 1804, when each of the Hart sisters sat down to write letters to Richard Pattison describing “the rise and progress of Methodism in Antigua,” much had changed. The landscape of Caribbean slavery had shifted. The slave rebellion in Saint Domingue had blossomed into full-scale political revolution, culminating in the January 1, 1804 Haitian Declaration of Independence, making the former French colony the first black republic in the world, the second independent nation

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<sup>24</sup> Hart to a friend, 24 October 1794, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 110.

<sup>25</sup> Lightfoot, “The Hart Sisters of Antigua,” 56.

<sup>26</sup> Hart to a friend, 24 October 1794, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 111.

in the Americas, and the first to formally abolish slavery.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, battles between abolitionists and the West Indian interest grew increasingly intense in both print and the halls of Parliament. Two narrowly failed attempts to abolish the slave trade in 1794 and 1796 were enough to push opponents of abolition to successfully pass a 1797 Parliamentary measure recommending formal amelioration in the Caribbean colonies. The measure, which left the implementation up to colonial legislatures, aimed at both effecting social controls to limit the threat of slave rebellions and preserving and replenishing the existing slave population in anticipation of the slave trade's eventual abolition. In 1798, the Leeward Islands legislature—a body made up of representatives from Antigua, Saint Kitts, Nevis, Montserrat, and the Virgin Islands—passed into law an act formally implementing several measures intended to ameliorate the conditions of Caribbean slavery.<sup>28</sup>

The Hart sisters found themselves suddenly caught between their earlier abolitionist sentiments and the new ameliorationist policies. In spite of the less-than-altruistic motives undergirding the 1798 Act, the new law nevertheless did implement several measures that improved the situation of slaves in Antigua and nearby islands, and addressed some of the specific critiques raised by Elizabeth Hart in her 1794 letter, including medical assistance, legal redress, and religious

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<sup>27</sup> On the Haitian Revolution, see Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Jeremy D. Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> See Elsa V. Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 31-34.

instruction for slaves.<sup>29</sup> Hart's 1804 letter to Richard Pattison reflected an awareness of the new measures, and evinced a determination to build on the foundation they laid for reform. Though she refers to slavery as a "horrid system," Hart's focus in 1804 was squarely on reforming the systems many "evils," including "Quarreling and Unchastity," especially "concubinage." Having begun teaching a weekly class of "upwards of 160," Hart was convinced that the key to reforming slavery was conversion. "I am inclined to think," she wrote, "that one reason why so many of the poor Slaves upon the Estates, cause you trouble and discouragement is, that they are in general received into Society, as Catechumens, and not convinced Sinners." "If a genuine work of Grace does not take place," she continued, "they soon relapse into those Sins, which habit and custom have rendered as their meat and drink."<sup>30</sup> These themes were even more explicit in the letter written by Elizabeth's sister, Anne, a month later. In her letter to Richard Pattison, Anne emphasized "the thrice blessed effects of the Gospel, not only in civilizing but christianizing, the people of this Island." More optimistic that her sister, Anne rejoiced that "prostitution is now esteemed abominable & disgraceful by the greater part of the Colour'd Women" and that "lawful alliances take place as frequently among them as among the whites." This "great civilization of the Slaves" was directly tied to a tangible amelioration in their

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<sup>29</sup> *An Act More Effectually to Provide for the Support and to Extend Certain Regulations for the Protection of Slaves; To Promote and Encourage their Increase, and Generally to Meliorate their Condition* (Basseterre, St. Christopher: Richard Cable, 1799). Cf. Hart to a friend, 24 October 1794, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 104-111. See also David Barry Gaspar, "Ameliorating Slavery: The Leeward Islands Slave Act of 1798," in *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion*, ed. by Robert L. Paquette and Stanley L. Engerman (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 241-258.

<sup>30</sup> Hart to Pattison, 5 May 1804, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 96.

treatment. “Their gradual emergence, from the depths of ignorance & barbarism, has imperceptibly had an over-awing effect upon the System of tyranny & cruel oppression that was formerly exercised over them with little or no restraint,” and “as a natural consequence, those that are set over them feel more cautious in dealing with rational creatures than they did with being imbruted in ev’ry way both body & mind.”<sup>31</sup> Though they were motivated by different purposes, Anne Hart and the West Indian plantocracy were both satisfied that such reforms were being accomplished without “tumultuous distracting revolution, massacre, and bloodshed” as has occurred in Haiti.

The irony underlying the sisters’ shift in support from abolition to amelioration is that by 1804, the West Indian lobby had lost significant support in Parliament, and just three years later, the slave trade was formally abolished throughout the British Empire.<sup>32</sup> But the Hart sisters’ newfound support for amelioration was complicated by the circumstances of their personal and religious lives. In 1798, Anne Hart married John Gilbert, a recently widowed naval officer, storekeeper, and lay Methodist preacher. In 1805, her sister Elizabeth married a white educator named Charles Thwaites. The interracial unions attracted much attention, and were opposed by many. According to a later reminiscence, John and Anne Gilbert endured “the sneers of the scornful, the contempt of the proud, [and] the animadversions of fools.”<sup>33</sup> The couple was denied a marriage license, having to instead publish their banns of marriage in

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<sup>31</sup> Anne Hart Gilbert to Richard Pattison, 1 June 1804, WMMS, SOAS, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 73-74.

<sup>32</sup> Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands*, 41-47.

<sup>33</sup> Box, *Memoir of John Gilbert*. Reprinted as “A Brief Sketch of Mrs. Anne Gilbert,” in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 119.

the local paper, “as though [Gilbert] had been one of the commonest persons in the community.” Gilbert’s fellow officers in the Militia “called upon him to urge him to re-consider his conduct,” threatening to court martial him (he resigned his commission instead). Even John Baxter, then the superintendent of Methodism in the West Indies, urged Gilbert to reconsider, warning that “persistence in the course on which he had resolved would lead to his incarceration as a lunatic.” John Gilbert and Anne Hart moved forward and, on October 7, were wed. Returning home after the ceremony, the couple discovered that the door of Gilbert’s office had been painted, “one half white, and the other yellow.”<sup>34</sup> The message communicated was clear – the interracial union was not acceptable in the eyes of the island’s white inhabitants. The Gilberts, with few other options, relocated from Saint Johns to English Harbour. Charles and Elizabeth Thwaites joined them there in 1805.

In 1808, one year after the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire, Barry Conyers Hart, passed away. His death returned the several slaves “conveyed by Anne Gilbert (previous to her Marriage) to her Father ... in trust for her own use, and that of her Heirs and Assigns,” making John and Anne Gilbert (as well as Charles and Elizabeth Thwaites) slave owners.<sup>35</sup> For Anne, it marked the first time she had legally owned slaves outright. John, who had inherited “two or three slaves” from his father, claimed “they were unprofitable to me” and sold

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<sup>34</sup> Horsford, *A Voice from the West Indies*, 66-67.

<sup>35</sup> Entry for “John Gilbert in right of Anne his Wife, Proprietor,” (Antigua, 1817) in *Slave Registers of Former British Colonial Dependencies, 1813-1834*. Ancestry.com. Accessed 1 March 2016. The exact number of slaves left by Barry Conyers Hart to each of his daughters in 1808 is unknown. The earliest available data (1817, 1824) shows the Gilberts and the Thwaites owning five each.

them “for about £50 sterling,” evidently prior to his 1798 marriage to Anne.<sup>36</sup> In addition, John Gilbert assumed charge of a dozen slaves when he resumed his position as storekeeper for the Naval Yard Department in English Harbour.<sup>37</sup> The ownership of slaves necessarily strengthened each couple’s ties to the institution of slavery, and in time, to slaveholding society. It also provides crucial context for understanding their subsequent religious and educational pursuits.

From 1809-1816, the Hart sisters founded at least four benevolent and educational institutions, including a Methodist Sunday School in English Harbour (1809, “the first Sunday School known in the West Indies”<sup>38</sup>), another intended for the instruction of plantation slaves named Bethesda (1813), the Female Refuge Society (1815), and the Distressed Females’ Friend Society (1816, and later renamed the Female Orphan Society). Their charitable activity drew much attention, and earned the two families some amount of respect within the community. In 1813, “the Hon. Lady Grey” extended her patronage to the English Harbour Sunday School, and in 1817 “a commodious school-house” was built. Two years later, Lady D’Urban, wife of the newly appointed Antiguan governor, offered her own patronage to the Female Refuge Society.<sup>39</sup> These relationships expanded the Gilberts and Thwaites’s connections beyond the Methodist community, and helped forge important alliances with like-minded reformers.

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<sup>36</sup> Box, *Memoir of John Gilbert*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Entry for “John Gilbert (Storekeeper and Naval Office of His Majesty’s Careening Yard in this Island) for and on behalf of His Majesty, his heirs, and Successors,” (Antigua, 1821) in *Slave Registers of Former British Colonial Dependencies, 1813-1834*. Ancestry.com. Accessed 1 March 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Box, *Memoir of John Gilbert*, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 83.

<sup>39</sup> Box, *Memoir of John Gilbert*, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 83-86; Horsford, *A Voice from the West Indies*, 200-01.

Prominent among those reformers was William Dawes, a former officer in the British Marines who had served three separate stints (1792-94, 1795-96, 1801-03) as governor of Sierra Leone. In 1811, Dawes married Grace Gilbert, the sister of Nathaniel and Francis Gilbert and aunt to John. In 1813, the couple moved to Antigua, where Dawes assumed work as attorney to the plantation of Nathaniel Gilbert IV, his wife's cousin and son of the Nathaniel Gilbert who had earlier introduced Methodism to the Caribbean. After a falling out with Gilbert in 1815, the Daweses were invited to live with John and Anne Gilbert. The two couples quickly realized a shared interest in benevolent concerns, and Dawes quickly lent his support to the English Harbour Sunday School and Female Refuge Society. By 1819, he had become an agent for the Church Missionary Society, an evangelical Anglican organization that welcomed "pious persons of all denominations of Protestant Christians."<sup>40</sup> In that position, he helped Charles Thwaites secure an appointment as schoolmaster and superintendent of CMS schools in Antigua, and arranging in 1822 for the incorporation of the English Harbour Sunday School Society, which now included at least eight classes, under CMS auspices. Although Dawes's earlier involvement with the Sierra Leone colony and his friendships with William Wilberforce and Zachary Macaulay earned him a reputation as an abolitionist, his views became increasingly aligned with those of evangelical reformers like the Gilberts and Thwaiteses.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Benjamin D'Urban to Earl Bathurst, 12 March 1824, as cited in Thomas, *Telling West Indian Lives*, 52-53.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas, *Telling West Indian Lives*, 47-53. Although Dawes's earlier involvement with the Sierra Leone colony and his friendships with William Wilberforce and Zachary Macaulay earned him a reputation as an abolitionist, his views became increasingly aligned with those of evangelical reformers like the Gilberts and Thwaiteses.



The Hart sisters' partnerships with William Dawes and wealthy benefactors, and even the alignment of the English Harbour Sunday School with the CMS, did not represent a departure in their affiliation with Methodism. The Gilberts and Thwaiteses both remained active in the Methodist church, with Anne and Elizabeth serving as female class leaders in English Harbour. John Gilbert "preached or expounded the scriptures every Sabbath" in between visits from Wesleyan missionaries, and the Gilbert and Thwaites homes alternated as makeshift meetinghouses until a chapel could be built.<sup>42</sup> They also continued their correspondence with Methodist leaders in England, including most notably, an 1821 "account of the Conversion of a Mahomedan Negro" penned by Anne Gilbert.<sup>43</sup>

Their continued affiliation with Methodism and their connections with other reform-minded evangelicals persisted in marking the Hart sisters and their husbands as suspect in the eyes of Antigua's ruling class. Old fears that Methodist missionaries were stirring up slaves to rebellion were given new life in the wake of slave revolts in Barbados (1816) and Demerara (1823). Rumors that Methodist preachers were "deeply implicated in the insurrection" proved

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<sup>42</sup> Box, *Memoir of John Gilbert*, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 83-86.

<sup>43</sup> Anne Hart Gilbert, "A short account of Peregrine Pickle (now baptized Peter) a negro belonging to His Majesty, and employed in the Naval Yard at English Harbour, Antigua," WMMS, SOAS. A heavily edited version of the account was published in the *Methodist Magazine* 44 (1821): 947-949. For more on the specifics of the edits, see Robert Glen, "Narrative Voice in 'Peregrine Pickle ...A Negro' (1821)," *CLR James Journal* 13:1 (Spring 2007): 99-107; and Thomas, *Telling West Indian Lives*, 89-94. The slave worked under Gilbert's supervision in the Naval Yard at English Harbour. See entry for "John Gilbert (Storekeeper and Naval Office of His Majesty's Careening Yard in this Island) for and on behalf of His Majesty, his heirs, and Successors," (Antigua, 1821) in *Slave Registers of Former British Colonial Dependencies, 1813-1834*. Ancestry.com. Accessed 1 March 2016.

groundless, but those rumors point to the reputation that shaped perceptions Methodist missionaries and laity throughout the Caribbean. Indeed, in some instances, “Methodist” was used as a negative epithet for “nonconformist evangelical missionaries” of any or no denomination.<sup>44</sup> In Antigua, this found expression in critiques of the Female Refuge Society and Distressed Females’ Friend Society as “methodistical intrusion and innovation,” in spite of the fact that both were officially under the direction of the CMS. In an 1824 letter, Anne Gilbert reluctantly noted, “I am not anticipating any rapid progress in improvement; at present I feel as if all that we can do is to take good Mr. Cecil’s advice: ‘If we cannot prevent evil, let us hang upon its wings and retard its progress.’”<sup>45</sup> Gilbert’s letter is interesting both for what it reveals about the reputation of Methodism at this point in time and for what it reveals about her attitude toward slavery at the time of writing.

What exactly Gilbert meant by “retarding [the] progress” of evil is not clear, but John and Anne Gilbert had taken some steps in recent years to suggest that they were concerned not only with the evils that resulted from slavery but with the freedom of slaves themselves. In 1820, Anne Gilbert manumitted a 23-year-old female slave named Eliza “preparatory to her Marriage” and “as a reward for her obedience and fidelity.”<sup>46</sup> The next year, on May 18, John and Anne Gilbert

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<sup>44</sup> See Robert Michael Reed, “The Destruction of the Methodist Chapel at Bridgetown, Barbados, October 19, 1823,” *Methodist History* 10:1 (October 1976): 43-67; and Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 11.

<sup>45</sup> Anne Gilbert to Mrs. Luckock, 24 August 1824, as cited in Thomas, *Telling West Indian Lives*, 17-18.

<sup>46</sup> William Dawes to Secretary of the Church Missionary Society, 28 March 1820, as cited in Thomas, *Telling West Indian Lives*, 42.

manumitted the remaining four slaves in their possession: Margaret (age 48), Nat[haniel] (20), Phebe (57), and James (20).<sup>47</sup> At some point between October 1824 and June 1825, the Gilberts acquired an additional seven slaves—3 males and 4 females, ranging in age from two to 49—who they then manumitted on June 10, 1825. The details surrounding their acquisition of the slaves are unclear. As of October 20, 1824, six of the seven slaves were owned by Anne Gilbert's aunt, Grace Cable, "for Elizabeth Clearkly, Guardian of Lydia Clearkly, Proprietor," and the Clearkley family owned at least some of them for nearly a decade or more.<sup>48</sup> John and Anne Gilbert never again owned slaves in the remaining years of their lives, though John's legal supervision of those slaves employed at the Naval Yard continued until his retirement in April 1832.<sup>49</sup>

Knowing what to make of the Gilberts' manumissions is difficult. They were part of a much larger number of manumissions in Antigua during this time.

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<sup>47</sup> "Antigua—A RETURN of the Number of Manumissions, effected by Purchase, Bequests, or otherwise, as recorded in the Register Office of the said Island, from the 1st day of January 1821 to the 31st day of December 1825," in *British Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 72: *Slave Trade* (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1969), 56. Hereafter cited as "Antigua Manumission Returns, 1821-1825." The manumission returns do not provide the ages of the slaves. I have gathered those from the 1817 and 1821 slave registers, in *Slave Registers of Former British Colonial Dependencies, 1813-1834*. Ancestry.com. Accessed 1 March 2016.

<sup>48</sup> "Antigua Manumission Returns, 1821-1825," in *British Parliamentary Papers*, 65. The seven slaves manumitted were Joe Clearkly (age 34), Ophelia (49), Mary Shaw (9), Sarah Martin (24), Rose Frederick (4), Edward Van (2), and William Van (age unknown, but possibly a newborn child). All but William are included in the 1824 slave register under the entry for "Grace Cable for Elizabeth Clearkly, Guardian of Lydia Clearkly, Proprietor." In 1817, Joseph, Ophelia, Sarah, and Mary were registered under the ownership of "Elizabeth Clearkly, Guardian of Lydia Clearkly, Proprietor." Both in *Slave Registers of Former British Colonial Dependencies, 1813-1834*. Ancestry.com. Accessed 1 March 2016.

<sup>49</sup> See entry for "John Gilbert (Storekeeper and Naval Office of His Majesty's Careening Yard in this Island) for and on behalf of His Majesty, his heirs, and Successors," (Antigua, 1821) in *Slave Registers of Former British Colonial Dependencies, 1813-1834*. Ancestry.com. Accessed 1 March 2016; and Thomas, *Telling West Indian Lives*, 42.

Over 2,000 slaves were set free by deed, purchase, or will on the island between 1817 and 1830, and the motivations for each varied. In some cases, as with the enslaved Eliza in 1820, slaves were manumitted as a reward for good behavior and to ensure that the slave's children would be born free. Others were sold their freedom by masters who, sensing that the end of slavery was near, hoped to recoup some of their forthcoming losses. And still others were motivated by moral or religious sensibilities and the growing influence of the antislavery campaign in Britain.<sup>50</sup> It is entirely possible that the Gilberts freed their slaves for some combination of reasons—they certainly were actively interested in the physical, social, and religious well being of slaves, including their own, and the Methodism that underlay their commitment to reform spurred others throughout the Atlantic world to support abolition. We know that by 1825, Anne Gilbert had grown thoroughly disenchanted with the implementation and enforcement (or lack thereof) of amelioration laws. In an undated letter to William Dawes, she expressed her exasperation at the state of slaves in Antigua: "Sunday after Sunday, and often through the week, my eyes behold, destitute, neglected female innocence upon the brink of ruin and disgrace." The pain of it was almost too much for her to bear. "These details are distressing and sickening to me while I write them," she concluded.<sup>51</sup> But while the Gilberts might have sensed (and been caught up in) the rising tide of antislavery sentiment in England during the 1820s, they were also at a position in their lives—older and more established,

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<sup>50</sup> Gaspar, "Ameliorating Slavery," 60-81. The figures are provided in Table 4.1 on p. 65.

<sup>51</sup> Anne Gilbert to William Dawes, undated, as cited in Sue Thomas, "Anne Hart Gilbert, Creole Benevolence and Anti-Slavery, 1815-1834," *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 33:3 (July 2011): 238-39.

both socially and financially—where they were no longer dependent on slave labor.

Even if the Gilberts had fully embraced antislavery by the 1820s, other Methodists had not. Charles and Elizabeth Thwaites continued to own slaves until at least 1828, when they evidently gifted their five slaves—Jacob (41), James (10), Mary (43), Penny (36), and Grace (21)—to a relative.<sup>52</sup> So, too, did other members of the Clearkley and Cable families. As late as 1831, Anne and Elizabeth’s aunt, Elizabeth Clearkley, bequeathed her slaves to her sister Grace (who received four of the slaves) and her niece, Mary Cable (who received three).<sup>53</sup>

Neither Elizabeth Thwaites (who died in 1833) nor her older sister, Anne (who passed away early the following year, 1834) lived to see the end of slavery in Antigua and throughout the British Empire. But their lives and their writings reveal the complicated and shifting ways in which free Methodists of color in the Caribbean responded to and participated in slavery and its opposition in the years leading up to emancipation. Never fully allied with either British abolitionists or the West Indian plantocracy who supported amelioration only as a means to

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<sup>52</sup> See entries for “Elizabeth Thwaites, Proprietor” (Antigua, 1824), and “James H. Thwaites, Guardian of Caroline H. Thwaites” (Antigua, 1828), both in *Slave Registers of Former British Colonial Dependencies, 1813-1834*. Ancestry.com. Accessed 1 March 2016. The 1828 entry notes that the five slaves were gifted “by Eliz<sup>th</sup> Thwaites, the then Proprietor.” One slave—Jacob—died sometime prior to May 3, 1828. The relationship between Charles Thwaites and James or Caroline Thwaites is unclear.

<sup>53</sup> See entries for “Elizabeth Clearkley, deceased” (St. Christopher, 1831); “Grace Cable, Proprietor” (Antigua, 1832); and “Mary Cable, Proprietor” (Antigua, 1832); all in *Slave Registers of Former British Colonial Dependencies, 1813-1834*. Ancestry.com. Accessed 2 March 2016.

prolong plantation slavery, the Hart sisters carved out for themselves a middle ground in which they advocated amelioration and worked to achieve reform.

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Historian John Saillant compared the Hart sisters to other black evangelicals throughout the Atlantic World, noting that, unlike Richard Allen, Quodna Ottobah Cogoano, Olaudah Equiano, Lemuel Haynes, and John Marrant, Anne Gilbert and Elizabeth Thwaites stopped short of embracing abolitionism. This he attributes primarily to the Hart sisters living in “a peripheral, West Indian colony, far removed from the centers of state power” limited them from ever realizing the possibilities provided by a strong, central state in combating slavery.<sup>54</sup> In Saillant’s view, black evangelicals’ approaches to slavery were influenced by the theological currents on the day but ultimately informed by the nation-state in which they lived.<sup>55</sup> His analysis misses an additional element

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<sup>54</sup> Saillant, “Antiguan Methodism and Antislavery Activity,” 100.

<sup>55</sup> Saillant, “Antiguan Methodism and Antislavery Activity,” 100. Curiously, Saillant argues that the Hart sisters’ attitudes toward slavery were shaped by Calvinist theology that had crept into their Wesleyan Arminianism. But what he sees as “remnants of predestination,” is actually fairly straightforward eighteenth century Arminianism. The “‘over-ruling’ God, a ‘directing,’ ‘providential’ deity who uses human beings as ‘instruments,’” referenced in Anne Gilbert’s 1804 letter to Richard Pattison is not a uniquely Calvinist theological idea, and in fact was central to the theology of holiness and sanctification articulated by Wesley and (especially) John Fletcher. Saillant’s argument that the Hart sisters “comprehended little of the Wesleys’ Arminianism” and articulated instead “a ‘popular Calvinism’” does not hold up. Thwaites and Gilbert were demonstrably familiar with both Methodist theology and the theologians behind it. Indeed, John Fletcher—whose work Elizabeth Hart cited as influential—had deep ties to the Antiguan Methodist community – Francis Gilbert was a member of Fletcher’s class in Madeley in the 1750s, just prior to his return to Antigua. In 1759, John Wesley approached Fletcher himself about undertaking a mission to the Caribbean, an invitation Fletcher refused on the grounds that he lacked “sufficient zeal ... grace & talents” that “a mission in the Indies required.” Francis Gilbert’s nephews, Nathaniel Gilbert III and Melville Horne—who would both later undertake missions to Sierra Leone—each served as curates under Fletcher in the 1780s. It was Nathaniel Gilbert III who, while living in

that shaped both the attitudes and actions of black evangelicals throughout the Atlantic World: the Church. This was especially true for Methodists like Anne Hart, Elizabeth Thwaites, and Richard Allen, who each remained forcefully committed to not only Methodist theology but also Methodist institutions.

Comparing the lives and writings of the Hart sisters with those of Richard Allen and other black Methodist leaders in the early American republic, the differences separating American and Caribbean Methodism on the subject of slavery are brought into sharper focus.

On January 1, 1808, a group of predominantly black New Yorkers gathered at the African Methodist Church on Leonard Street for an all-day preaching service and celebration. Nine months earlier, on March 2, 1807, United States President Thomas Jefferson had signed into law “An Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves,” and the assembled crowds at the African Church on New Year’s Day were there to celebrate the abolition of the slave trade in the United States, which went into effect that day. Among those that addressed the congregation that day was Peter Williams, Jr., the son of former slaves who had been among the earliest black converts to Methodism in New York City.<sup>56</sup> In his oration, Williams celebrated “this auspicious moment” in which “this inhuman branch of commerce ... is, by the singular interposition of Divine Providence, this day extinguished.” Outlining the history of the slave trade, Williams praised the “laudable endeavours” of “benevolent men,” a group that included both “the sons

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Antigua after his short stint in West Africa, brought his cousin John Gilbert into the Methodist fold. John would marry Anne Hart shortly afterward. See Thomas, *Telling West Indian Lives*, 35.

<sup>56</sup> Joseph B. Wakeley, *Lost Chapters Recovered from the Early History of American Methodism* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1858), 438-42.

of 76” that fought to make their country “free and independent” and antislavery activists on both sides of the Atlantic. But while the abolition of the slave trade “must be extremely consonant to every philanthropic heart,” he continued, it was of special importance and meaning to “us Africans, and descendants of Africans.” Imploring his audience to “let your imagination carry you back to former days” and “behold a vessel, bearing our forefathers and brethren, from the place of their nativity, to a distant and inhospitable clime” where they were “separated without regard to the ties of blood or friendship,” Williams urged all in attendance to rejoice in their freedom and to protect it, “by a steady and upright deportment” and “strict obedience and respect to the laws of the land.”<sup>57</sup>

When Williams invoked the memory of “our forefathers and kinsmen”—those made the “unhappy victims” of the slave trade—he almost certainly had in mind his own ancestors. His paternal grandparents were “both slaves, brought from Africa.” In 1749, they were owned by a Mr. Boorite, living on Beekman Street in lower Manhattan, near the banks of the East River. The couple had ten children, including Peter Williams, Jr.’s father and namesake. Peter’s mother, Molly (Mary) Durham, was also likely a slave, evidently born in Saint Kitts and brought to America by her owner. At some point in the 1760s, Peter Williams, Sr. came under the influence of Philip Embury and Thomas Webb’s preaching, and began worshipping with the nascent Methodist congregation, first in the “Old Rigging Loft” on Cart Street that served as a makeshift meetinghouse, and then at Wesley Chapel on John Street after its construction in 1768. It was there that

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<sup>57</sup> Peter Williams, Jr., *An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade; Delivered in the African Church, in the City of New-York, January 1, 1808* (New York: Samuel Wood, 1808).



he first met Molly, and the two were wed shortly thereafter. Their son Peter was born in 1780.<sup>58</sup>

At some point prior to the outbreak of war in 1776, Peter Williams, Sr. was sold to James Aymar, who worked as a tobacconist and trained Peter in the trade. When his master, a staunch Loyalist, left for Canada in 1783, he sold his slave to “the trustees of the Methodist meeting in the city of New-York.” “Negro Peter” was appointed sexton and undertaker of the John Street Chapel, a position for which he received a small remuneration, which he put towards periodic payments to the church’s trustees to purchase his freedom.<sup>59</sup> If Peter, Sr. was among the assembled congregation on New Year’s Day, 1808—and it seems likely that he was—he would surely have listened to his son’s word with no small amount of pride.

Peter Williams, Jr. was only one of several to sermonize that day. His oration was preceded by an invocation by Abraham Thompson, “an appropriate anthem sung under the direction of William Hamilton,” and “an introductory

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<sup>58</sup> The legal status of Molly Durham is not clear. It seems likely that she was a slave, though some have suggested she was instead an indentured servant. Joseph Wakeley’s account of her life simply notes that after her marriage to Peter, “when the hour of separation” between Molly and the Durham family came, “all parties wept.” See Wakeley, *Lost Chapters*, 442. Because of this uncertainty, it is also not clear if Peter Williams, Jr. was born a slave.

<sup>59</sup> The fullest account of Peter Williams, Sr.’s life is Wakeley, *Lost Chapters*, 438-79. See also Bulthuis, *Four Steeples over the City Streets*, 44-46, 97-99; and Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 136-37. Although Williams evidently repaid the trustees “in full of all demands” on November 4, 1785, he did not receive his manumission papers until October 1796. See Wakeley, *Lost Chapters*, 463-66. One historian has claimed that the John Street trustees purchased not only Peter, Sr., but also Molly and Peter, Jr. and that he purchased not only his freedom, but also that of his family, but I am unaware of any supporting evidence for this claim. See John H. Hewitt, *Protest and Progress: New York’s First Black Episcopal Church Fights Racism* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 13-15.

address” by Henry Sipkins. Following Williams’s address, another hymn was sung, and a benediction by Thomas Miller. All of which was followed by an afternoon service of more hymns, prayers, and sermons.<sup>60</sup> The event was successful enough that it became an annual occurrence in the years to come, not only in New York City but also in other northern cities with sizable free black populations.

The commemorations of January 1, 1808 were not only held at the African Methodist Church. Although not explicitly a Methodist meeting and open to the general public, almost the entire roster of participants was made up of Methodists, including all of the leaders in what later became Mother Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church, including Thompson, Miller, Hamilton, June Scott, and James Varick. Indeed, the only non-Methodist that participated that day was Peter Williams, Jr., who had left the Methodist Episcopal Church just a few years earlier to become an Episcopalian. Even as celebrations expanded in the years to come, black Methodists continued to play a prominent role in their planning and performance.<sup>61</sup> The orations, prayers, and hymns offered by prominent black Methodists were an expression of their identities as free people of color, as Christians, and for many, as former slaves. Like the Hart sisters in Antigua, the writings and speeches of James Varick, William Miller, and others demonstrate a familiarity with the ongoing progress of the abolitionist movement. Indeed, they are representative of the increased participation of black Methodists in that

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<sup>60</sup> Williams, Jr., *An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, [5].

<sup>61</sup> Williams, Jr.’s reasons for leaving Methodism for Episcopalianism are not entirely clear. Some have surmised that he followed his friend, the white preacher Thomas Lyell, who preferred the Protestant Episcopal Church’s high church liturgy to Methodism’s low church culture. See Bulhuis, *Four Steeples over the City Streets*, 105-08, 141-42.

movement in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Whereas Peter Williams, Sr. had been largely limited in his ability to oppose slavery in the eighteenth century, his son and the next generation of black Methodists were emboldened by the changes wrought by gradual emancipation laws and the formal end of the slave trade in 1808.

The earliest extant antislavery commentary from black Methodists in the United States comes from Richard Allen. In 1794, he and Absalom Jones penned “A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia.” Intended primarily to disabuse the public of spurious claims made by white Philadelphians that the city’s black population pilfered homes amidst the outbreak of Yellow Fever the previous year, the tract was among the earliest pamphlets printed by African Americans.<sup>62</sup> Jones and Allen emphasized that far from looting the property of others, black Philadelphians “have been useful to the sick” afflicted by the fever and helped bury the dead victimized by it. To the narrative, the authors appended three brief addresses, one “to those who keep Slaves, and approve of the practice,” one “to the People of Colour,” and one “to the Friends of Him who hath no Helper” (that is, abolitionists who “strive to raise the slave, to the dignity of a man”). The point of the addendums was to highlight and attack what they understood to be responsible for anti-black prejudice: slavery.<sup>63</sup> Although they were careful to note that “we do not wish to make you angry,” Jones and Allen put slaveholders on

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<sup>62</sup> Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Philip Lapsansky, eds., *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African American Protest Literature, 1790-1860* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 32.

<sup>63</sup> Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 105-14.

the defensive, charging that slavery was “hateful ...in the sight of that God, who hath destroyed kings and princes, for their oppression of the poor slave.” Tapping into earlier arguments made by Anthony Benezet, John Wesley, and others, they blamed the presumed mental and social inferiority of slaves on their enslavement. Their pointed question became a recurring theme in the antislavery sermons of subsequent black Methodists: “Will you, because you have reduced us to the unhappy condition our colour is in, plead our incapacity for freedom, and our contended condition under oppression, as a sufficient cause for keeping us under the grievous yoke?”<sup>64</sup>

Turning their attention from slaveholders to slaves, Jones and Allen urged readers to “put your trust in God” and serve Him, maintaining “an affectionate regard towards your masters and mistresses” so that “the whole family where you live” will take notice “and tend to promote your liberty.” In this, Jones and Allen drew on their own experiences as slaves whose masters eventually allowed them to purchase their freedom. But their encouragement on this point also pointed to a larger emphasis on forming alliances across racial lines in working to end slavery. To those African Americans “who are favoured with freedom,” the authors urged them to “manifest your gratitude toward the compassionate masters who have set you free,” for “there is much gratitude due from our colour towards the white people” who “are instruments in the hand of God for our

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<sup>64</sup> Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793: And a Refutation of Some Censures Thrown Upon Them in Some Late Publications* (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1794), 23-26.

good.”<sup>65</sup> In the years and decades to come, many black Methodists (including Allen himself) would become routinely frustrated with white allies, even as they continued to work with them toward achieving abolition.

Beyond the pamphlet’s content, Jones and Allen’s *Narrative* modeled for other free black Americans the possibilities of print. As Allen’s biographer Richard Newman observed, “it represented yet a further maturation of Allen’s reform politics.” He and “other black leaders emerging in the age of democratic revolutions ... relied increasingly on print to wage struggles against both slavery and racial injustice.”<sup>66</sup> Among the most significant such pamphlets that followed in the years to come was Daniel Coker’s 1810 tract, *A Dialogue Between a Virginian and an African Minister*. Coming on the heels of the abolition of the slave trade in both Great Britain (1807) and the United States (1808), and occurring alongside the Abolition Day Celebrations in New York and elsewhere, it represented an effort to “sustain antislavery momentum” in the wake of the backlash toward emancipation generated by the Haitian Revolution and, more recently, Gabriel’s Rebellion.<sup>67</sup> Coker’s tract took on more particular meanings within the Methodist community. The Methodist Episcopal Church’s retreat from its earlier abbreviated efforts to enforce rules against slaveholding in the southern conferences was all but complete by 1808, and in 1809 Bishop Francis Asbury not only conceded that fact but wondered whether the whole effort had been in vain.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 26-27.

<sup>66</sup> Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 79.

<sup>67</sup> “Introduction,” in Newman, et al, *Pamphlets of Protest*, 8, 11.

<sup>68</sup> *JLFA* 2:591.

Coker's pamphlet was intentionally aimed at a broad audience. It was printed by Benjamin Edes, a third-generation printer whose namesake and grandfather helped instigate the Boston Tea Party, for Joseph James, a Quaker teacher originally from Philadelphia. While the pamphlet's title identified Coker as a "Minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore," it was dedicated not to his coreligionists, but rather all "people of colour in the United States of America," and included a short appendix listing ordained and local African American ministers, the assorted Methodist, Episcopal, Baptist, and Presbyterian "churches" (congregations) they represented, and various other "descendants of the African Race, who have given proofs of talents."<sup>69</sup> It is also significant that the Maryland-born Coker set his fictional *Dialogue* in Virginia, a state in which he had never set foot. The aim of his pamphlet, then, was to demonstrate the need for general emancipation throughout the nation. It was rhetorically addressed not only to Methodists or to the local communities of the mid-Atlantic and Northeastern United States, but to Southerners, as well. They, Coker believed, needed to see evidence of not only the fallacy of slaveholding, but also the contributions and capabilities of free black individuals and communities.

Nevertheless, Coker's *Dialogue* bears distinct markers of Methodist influence. Virginia was not only the largest and most important slaveholding state

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<sup>69</sup> Daniel Coker, *A Dialogue Between a Virginian and an African Minister, Written by the Rev. Daniel Coker, a Descendant of Africa ... Minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Humbly Dedicated to the People of Colour in the United States of America* (Baltimore: Benjamin Edes, 1810), 6-8, 27, 39-43. When Freeborn Garrettson published his *Dialogue* in 1805, he went not to his close friend and fellow abolitionist Ezekiel Cooper at the Methodist Book Concern, but instead opted to have Peter Brynberg, a newspaper publisher in Wilmington, Delaware publish and print the tract.

in the early American Republic. As discussed in chapter 3, it was also the site for Methodism's most important disputes on the subject. Coker was interested in not only addressing southern slaveholders generally, but also Methodist masters in particular. Moreover, Coker's pamphlet mentions Francis Asbury by name, noting his opposition to slavery at the exact time the aged Methodist bishop had given up the fight. Most significantly, Daniel Coker's argument echoes the exact arguments against slavery employed by John Wesley over three decades earlier and subsequently repeated by Francis Asbury and Freeborn Garrettson, who, in 1805, published his own antislavery pamphlet entitled *A Dialogue Between Do-Justice and Professing Christian* that may have served as a model for Coker.<sup>70</sup> Both pamphlets employed the same format: a fictional dialogue between a Methodist preacher and a slaveholding southerner. Both presented lengthy and detailed rebuttals of the emerging proslavery Christian defense of the institution, both advocated for the universal emancipation of slaves, and both proudly trumpeted the role of Methodists in championing that goal.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Freeborn Garrettson, *Dialogue Between Do-Justice and Professing-Christian. Dedicated to the Respective and Collective Abolition Societies, and to all other Benevolent, Humane Philanthropists, in America* (Wilmington, Delaware: Peter Brynner, 1805). See also John W. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 240-41, n47, who notes that Coker's tract is "very similar in style, tone, and themes to Garrettson's dialogue," but interrogates no further.

<sup>71</sup> It is not clear whether Coker read Garrettson's pamphlet before writing his own, but it is certainly plausible. In several instances, his semi-fictional black minister offers nearly the exact same response to his conversationalist's questions, as when the question is raised of emancipation resulting in widespread intermarriage. See Coker, *Dialogue*, 28-29; and Garrettson, *Dialogue*, 58, in which both ministers first dismiss the assumption that such intermarriages would be widespread and then condemn the "many criminal and shameful adulterous mixings, with the whites and those in bondage" (Garrettson) that result in "children of different complexions, [who] swarm on every side" (Coker).

By the very virtue of his blackness, however, Daniel Coker's pamphlet did something Freeborn Garrettson's did not, and indeed, could not: It asserted the religious superiority of black Christians to white slaveowners. Early in the conversation, *Virginian* asks whether his black ministerial counterpart has "ever studied divinity," to which Coker replies (and reveals himself to be the African minister), "No sir, I have never studied it in the way which I expect you mean, that is, so ... to be titled Rev. D. C——, D.D. but, let this be as it may, God can teach me by his spirit to understand his word."<sup>72</sup> This was a very Methodist claim to authority, and an increasingly very black one, too. It pointed to the larger point of Coker's pamphlet, to not only *claim* but also *prove* the religious, social, and intellectual capabilities of black men once freed from slavery. To Freeborn Garrettson's invocation of "Richard Allen, a colored man" and former slave "now of note and fortune, and a minister in the African church, in Philadelphia," Coker's pamphlet adds the names of several additional free people of color and their achievements. Added as an appendix to Coker's pamphlet is a brief overview of black accomplishments, "show[ing] what God is doing for Ethiopia's sons in the United States of America," including separate lists of "African Ministers who are in Holy Orders," "African local preachers," black churches (including 11 such Methodist churches, two Baptist, one Presbyterian, and one "Protestant"), and "the names of the descendants of the African Race, who have given proofs or talents," meaning in this instance those men who delivered orations, addresses, and sermons commemorating the abolition of the slave trade and penned letters

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<sup>72</sup> Coker, *Dialogue*, 15. See also Dickson D. Bruce, *The Origins of African American Literature, 1680-1865* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 115-18.



and tracts supporting the cause.<sup>73</sup> It is this final point that sets apart Coker's pamphlet from Garrettson's, and the antislavery activism of African American Methodists from their white counterparts more generally. As black Methodists, they were voicing not only their opposition to slavery, but presenting themselves as ready and able to assume full political, social, and ecclesiastical equality.

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The antislavery writings and speeches of black Methodists throughout the Atlantic world thus reflected a growing sense of their own marginalized position in not only civil society but also within the church. Just as Daniel Coker pointed to the achievements of "Ethiopia's sons in the United States," so too did Anne Gilbert and Elizabeth Thwaites present themselves and other black West Indian Methodists as evidence of the good they could accomplish. It was not just that the Hart sisters spoke up where Methodist missionaries, of necessity, remained silent. It was that black women were uniquely positioned to do so. In one instance, Anne Gilbert lamented that too few white missionaries were aware of the persistence of African folkways and religious rituals, noting that "too much of this diabolical work still exists in the West-indies" because "our preachers in general not being aware of it, pass too lightly over the sin of witchcraft." In another, she complained that the moral shortcoming of several preachers and their wives (whose "familiarity with the World" and love of "Tea-parties & feasts" had left them "destitute of every principle of vital piety") left several enslaved converts wary of white leadership. "My complexion," wrote Anne, "exempted me

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<sup>73</sup> Coker, *Dialogue*, 39-43.

from those prejudices & that disgust which the instability of their white Brethren had planted in their hearts,” and only through her ministry did the small congregation eventually “receive us as friends.”<sup>74</sup> In contrast to Daniel Coker, then, who listed only the names and accomplishments of “Ethiopia’s sons,” the Hart sisters aggressively asserted the importance of black Methodist women to the movement.

This focus was reflected not only in their ecclesiastical accomplishments. Where Coker focused almost entirely on the effects of slavery for enslaved men, Anne Gilbert and (especially) Elizabeth Thwaites described in great detail the deleterious experience of female slaves. Indeed, this was central to the sisters’ antislavery activism. It is Elizabeth Hart’s emphasis on the sexual violence inherent to slavery that separates her critiques from those of her male counterparts. In her 1804 letter to Richard Pattison, she thus makes the somewhat striking claim that “truly labour and want are not the evils of Slavery ... though these, as well as the Oppressor’s Yoke, cause many still to groan.” Rather, it is the forced entry “into that way of Life, that cause women in another sphere to fall into disgrace and contempt, I mean concubinage” that is particularly pernicious.<sup>75</sup> This focus on the female experience in slavery was central to the Hart sisters’ future efforts at reform, especially in their establishment of the Female Refuge Society.

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<sup>74</sup> Gilbert to Pattison, 1 June 1804, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 63, 72, 74-75. Natasha Lightfoot’s 2014 essay is the most attentive to the gendered dimensions of the Hart sisters’ writings. See Lightfoot, “The Hart Sisters of Antigua,” 53-72.

<sup>75</sup> Hart to Pattison, 5 May 1804, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 96.

The gendered focus of Anne Gilbert and Elizabeth Thwaites versus that of Richard Allen and Daniel Coker is certainly reflective of each writer's own sex. But it is also indicative of the space occupied by men and women—especially men and women of color—in American and Caribbean Methodist churches more generally. As the nineteenth century progressed, women assumed greater responsibility within West Indian Methodist congregations and classes, whereas free black Methodist men in the United States, in an effort to achieve middle class respectability, asserted their own masculinity to a degree that downplayed, and in some cases silenced, the place and role of female congregants within the black Methodist church.<sup>76</sup> In the Caribbean, Methodist women of color spoke up and acted against slavery to a degree no white missionary dared. In the United States, by contrast, black Methodists in the early nineteenth century sought to resuscitate the dying antislavery activism of earlier white preachers. Both instances highlight the ways in which black Methodist opposition to slavery was intricately linked to and shaped by Methodist institutions, and the different approaches to slavery adopted in the United States and the West Indies.

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<sup>76</sup> Bulthuis, *Four Steeples over City Streets*, 105-19.

## CHAPTER 5

### From Philadelphia to Freetown: The Beginnings of Independent Black Methodism in Transatlantic Perspective

On a Sunday morning in early June 1792, a small cadre of black congregants arrived at St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia, where they were instructed by the sexton standing at the door "to go to the gallery," which they accordingly did. After taking their seats and joining the mixed-race congregation in singing the opening hymn, they joined others in kneeling for the invocation, but had scarcely done so when two of their number—Absalom Jones and William White—were accosted by one of the congregation's white trustees, who demanded that the group immediately arise and move elsewhere to make room for late-arriving white congregants. After a brief exchange, the group of black Methodists arose and, according to Richard Allen, who led the procession, "all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us in the church."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen. To Which is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Containing a Narrative of the Yellow Fever in the Year of Our Lord 1793: With an Address to the People of Colour in the United States* (Philadelphia: Martin & Boden, Printers, 1833), 14-18. Other early accounts of the incident include the preface to *The Doctrines and Disciplines of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia: Richard Allen and Jacob Tabisco, 1817), 2-4; and "Sketch of Churches and Ecclesiastical Organization among the People of Color," *The Colored American*, 14 October 1837. Due in part to the chronologically confusing account offered in Allen's later memoir, there has been some debate among historians about the timing of the St. George's walkout. While scholars for a long time dated the event to 1787, more recent investigations have pinpointed 1792 at the correct date. The most useful scholarly analyses of the events include Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 118-19, 130-33 (Nash was the first to come down firmly on the side of 1792 as the year of the walkout); Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 145-50; and Richard S. Newman's excellent

It is to this impromptu walkout that historians typically date the beginnings of independent black Methodism. Black congregants had worshipped alongside their white coreligionists in Sunday-morning meetings since the founding of St. George's chapel in 1769, and Allen and Absalom Jones had served as local preachers there since at least 1786, regularly preaching to black (and sometimes multiracial) congregations. And although tensions between black congregants and white preachers had occurred before, the June 1792 walkout was the immediate impetus for separate black congregations. It made clear, according to historian Gary Nash, "what many blacks must have suspected—that there would be no truly biracial Christian community in the white churches of the city."<sup>2</sup> Within a year, ground had broken on St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church, and Absalom Jones accepted ordination in the Protestant Episcopal Church and leadership of its newly formed black congregation. Richard Allen, by contrast, refused to leave the Methodist fold, and in 1794 went to work constructing a makeshift chapel from the frame of an old blacksmith shop at the corner of Sixth and Lombard Streets. The African Methodist Episcopal Church, or *Bethel*, as it was commonly called, was completed that summer, and on June 29, Methodist Bishop Francis Asbury preached the inaugural sermon. Separate black congregations soon appeared in other mid-Atlantic port cities, and by the turn of

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biography of Allen, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 63-68, 70-73. The number of black converts in Philadelphia had rapidly increased in recent years, and St. George's African members had been relocated from their regular pews among their white coreligionists and "placed ... around the wall." They were asked to move seats once again, when construction was completed on raised galleries in early 1792. The new seating was designed as a means of both accommodating increased attendance at divine service and segregating the congregation.

<sup>2</sup> Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 119.

the century, African Methodists in Baltimore, Wilmington, and New York had each built chapels or rented space in which to hold racially-separate services.<sup>3</sup>

For the next two decades, each of these black congregations (and the several more that arose throughout the United States) struggled within the limiting confines of a white-led denomination, battling presiding elders and trustees from the parent Methodist Episcopal Church over a number of issues, including most significantly access to ordination, ownership of church property, and the right to regulate the affairs of black congregations. Beginning first with the separation of lay black Methodists in Wilmington, Delaware and the formation of the African Union Church in 1813, and followed by the establishment of the much larger (and more successful) African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Salem, New Jersey in 1816, and then, in 1820, by the African Methodist Episcopal (Zion) Church in New York City, limited congregational autonomy gave way at last to complete denominational independence.<sup>4</sup>

Missing from almost all discussions of the rise of independent black Methodist churches, though, is recognition and consideration of an additional body of black believers that formed the very first such institutions nearly two decades before any of their counterparts. Across the Atlantic Ocean, in the recently settled community of Freetown, Sierra Leone, another group of former

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<sup>3</sup> Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 150-54.

<sup>4</sup> Will B. Gravely, "African Methodisms and the Rise of Black Denominationalism," in Russell E. Richey and Kenneth E. Rowe, eds., *Rethinking Methodist History: A Bicentennial Historical Consultation* (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 1985), 111-124. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, or AMEZ, was initially called, like the Philadelphia organization, the African Methodist Episcopal Church. "Zion" was finally added in the 1840s to distinguish it from Richard Allen's church.

slaves from North America and the Caribbean asserted their autonomy from the strictures of white leaders. On July 11, 1796, a group of 128 individuals signed their names to a letter sent to colonial governor Zachary Macaulay. Styling themselves “The Independent Methodist Church of Freetown,” they forthrightly declared themselves to be “Dissenters” and, in their own estimation, “a perfect Church” with “no need of the assistance of any worldly power to appoint or perform religious ceremonies for us.”<sup>5</sup> Although separated by more than 4,000 miles of ocean, the pathway toward ecclesiastical independence by black Methodists on either side of the Atlantic shared much in common, and the experience of the Sierra Leone group provides an interesting point of comparison to the several black Methodist congregations in the early American republic. Each congregation initiated independence in the 1790s in response to the unwelcome encroachment of white authorities into their ecclesiastical affairs, and each culminated in the formation of new African Methodist churches in the 1810s and 1820s. Moreover, both drew upon the dual discourses of democratic revolution and Methodist theology in asserting their right to self-rule. As with Methodist debates over slavery, ecclesiastical independence was a transatlantic and biracial affair.

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Although the first independent black Methodist congregations did not emerge until the 1790s and the first black Methodist churches for another twenty years after that, free and enslaved people of color were integral members of the

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<sup>5</sup> “The Independent Methodist Church in Freetown to the Governor and Council (11 July 1796),” in Viscountess Knutsford, *Life and Letters of Zachary Macaulay*, 145-46.

Methodist movement in America since its beginnings in the 1760s. The presence of “poor Affricans” at weekly worship meetings was remarked on by nearly all of the early preachers. Joseph Pilmore remarked in 1769 that that “the Lord is making bare his arm in the sight of the heathen, and many of the Poor Affricans are obedient to the faith.” Three years later, after preaching to a mixed race congregation in Norfolk, Virginia, Pilmore was pleased to be confronted by “two poor slaves,” who implored the preacher to “instruct them in the way of salvation.” Pilmore gladly complied, and after “shew[ing] them how sinners may come to God and be saved,” the trio “joined in singing and prayer” and departed, the two black slaves newly “determined to be Christians.” Thomas Rankin, meanwhile, noted in his journal that “at a general love feast” held in Philadelphia on July 4, 1773, “the people spoke with life and divine liberty, and in particular some of the blacks.” Preaching in Maryland the following year, Rankin advised the congregation to turn and “look towards that part of the chapel where all the blacks were” and to take note of “the number of the black Africans, who have stretched out their hands and hearts to God!”<sup>6</sup> In a letter to Lord Dartmouth written at the close of 1774, Rankin estimated the number of free black Methodists in the colonies to be “upwards of five hundred.” Combined with an

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Pilmore, *The Journal of Joseph Pilmore*, ed. by Frederick E. Maser and Howard T. Maag (Philadelphia: Message Publishing Co., 1969), 26, 149; Journal of Thomas Rankin, 1773-1778 (4 July 1773), Typescript, General Commission on Archives and History, Methodist Library, Drew University, Madison, NJ.



unknown number of enslaved converts, Dee Andrews has suggested that as many as 30% of all Methodists in pre-Revolutionary North America were black.<sup>7</sup>

The total number of free and enslaved Methodists in North America remained roughly the same during the wartime years, and in 1786, the Methodist Episcopal Church counted just 890 blacks among its nearly 20,000 total members (or just 4.5%) in the former colonies. The inclusion of the 1,000 black Methodists in the West Indies in the Minutes that year, then, more than doubled both the total number and percentage of black Methodists.<sup>8</sup> Over the next four years, though, Methodist preachers made major inroads among both burgeoning free black communities in the urban North and, more significantly still, among slaves throughout the upper South. Of the 57,631 Methodists on the MEC's membership rolls in 1790, 11,682 (20.3%) were free or enslaved people of color. When the scope of American Methodism is expanded to include the Caribbean and Canadian colonies, the totals are even more striking. Black Methodists totaled 16,402, or one-fourth of all Methodists in the Americas that year. In 1800, the Methodist Episcopal Church counted 13,449 people of color among its nearly 65,000 total members, or 21 percent. But while membership among both whites

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Rankin to Lord Dartmouth, 29 December 1774, published as "Thomas Rankin to Lord Dartmouth on the State of Religion and Political Affairs in America," *Methodist History* 23 (1985): 116-120; Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 132.

<sup>8</sup> *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the Years 1773-1828* (New York: Thomas Mason and George Lane, 1840), 1:26 (hereafter cited as *MEC Minutes*) The lack of growth among people of color in North America is partly deceptive, due to the several hundred enslaved Methodists who escaped during the Revolution, took up arms for the British, and settled in Nova Scotia and then Sierra Leone after the war. Because Methodist membership numbers were not broken down by race prior to 1786 and because it is unclear just how many of the Black Loyalists who identified as Methodist were actual members of societies or classes before running away, it is impossible to quantify their impact on membership totals.

and blacks in the United States briefly plateaued during the final decade of the eighteenth century, West Indian membership had exploded, more than doubling to just over 12,000 by 1800, of whom 11,938 were, in the parlance of the official *Minutes*, either (free) *Coloured people* or (enslaved) *Blacks*. The inclusion of these figures, together with the membership totals of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, reveals that roughly one-third (25,387 of 75,561 total) of all Methodists in North America and the Caribbean at the turn of the nineteenth century were free or enslaved people of color.<sup>9</sup>

As in the United States, Methodism's itinerant missionary force quickly spread to nearly every island in the British West Indies. From a single congregation in Antigua in 1786, Methodism grew to include, by 1800, adherents on no fewer than 13 islands. Certain islands stood out in strength of numbers, however. Antigua and the other Leeward Islands had long been the center of the movement in the region: In 1800, Antigua had just short of 3,000 members on class lists and society rolls. Saint Kitts was close behind with 2,163, and Nevis 827. Jamaica, meanwhile, only counted 500 members at the dawn of the nineteenth century, a tiny percentage of the 300,000-plus inhabitants on the island. Tortola, by contrast—a relatively tiny island with a total population of

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<sup>9</sup> For North American numbers, see Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 123, 132, citing *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 1:39, 93. For statistics in the Caribbean and Maritime colonies, see *Minutes of the Methodist Conference, from the First, held in London, by the Late Rev. John Wesley, A.M., in the Year 1744* (London: Thomas Cordeux, 1812) 1:230, 2:56. The membership totals for Nova Scotia and New Brunswick did not break down the membership by race, and I have counted all members there at white, even though a minority of Methodists there were black, either free people of color who remained in the Maritimes when so many of their coreligionists resettled in Sierra Leone or slaves owned by Methodist and non-Methodist merchants and planters in the area.

approximately 10,000—had a society totaling over 2,700 strong, of whom “only 16 were Whites.” The vast majority of Methodists throughout the West Indies were slaves, but in Tortola the proportion was particularly striking, with almost 95% of Methodists there being enslaved. Perhaps even more remarkably, nearly one-third of the island’s entire slave population (roughly 9,000) belonged to the Methodist society, with many more who regularly attended Methodist worship.<sup>10</sup>

While the ratio of enslaved to free black converts in Tortola (and the rest of the West Indies more broadly) was particularly high, most black Methodists in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries throughout the Atlantic world were slaves. Even as independent black congregations and classes led and populated by free people of color began to emerge, their aggregate numbers paled in comparison to the number of black slaves on Methodism’s membership rolls. Of the 13,452 “colored” members the Methodist Episcopal Church included in official tallies for 1800, 11,849 lived south of the Mason-Dixon line, with an additional 867 in Delaware. And while some of those twelve thousand-plus were free men and women (particularly in Maryland, where Methodist congregations in Baltimore included a sizeable number of free persons), the vast majority of early

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<sup>10</sup> *Minutes of the Methodist Conference* (London), 2:56. I have been unable to find concrete population figures for the Virgin Islands in 1800. I’ve estimated the 1800 total for Tortola at ~10,000 based on figures for 1790 (9,000 total, of whom 8,000 were “coloured people and blacks”) and 1811 (11,000, with roughly 9,700 free or enslaved people of color). Both are from Thomas Coke, *History*, 3:108, 111. A separate estimate for 1805 places the total population of Tortola and the other British Virgin Islands at 10,520, including 9,000 slaves and 220 free people of color. See Thomas Southey, *Chronological History of the West Indies* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1827), 339. I’ve conservatively estimated the number of enslaved Methodists at 2,600, which might actually be too low. 16 of the 2,739 Methodists in Tortola were white, and the rest were free or enslaved people of color, but the island only had somewhere between 200 and 250 total free people of color. Even if every single free person of color in Tortola was a member of the Methodist society, that would still leave 2,473 enslaved Methodists, or 90% of all Methodists.

black Methodists were not. Moreover, many black Methodists in more northern states were still enslaved. Such was the certainly the case in New York and New Jersey, where gradual emancipation laws like that enacted in Pennsylvania in 1780 did not pass until 1799 and 1804, respectively, and in Delaware, which never passed any legislation abolishing slavery.<sup>11</sup> In both North America and the Caribbean, the experience of enslaved converts—most of whose names and particular life experiences have been lost—was much more typical in defining the early black Methodist experience.

While most black converts were first introduced to Methodism in multiracial settings, either in the halls of their masters' home or amidst the crowds of urban centers and port cities, where preachers would often offer impromptu exhortations, segregation was from the start a regular feature of the Methodist experience. Black Methodists were, as Dee Andrews has aptly summarized, "more often than not ... set apart."<sup>12</sup> The segregation took many forms. In congregational settings, black members were, like those in Philadelphia, required to sit in the chapel's elevated gallery—the "nigger pews," as they were later dubbed—apart from their white coreligionists on the ground floor. If the chapel lacked a gallery, then black worshippers were relegated to seating or standing room's around the chapel's inner perimeter, or sometimes forced to remain outside of the building altogether, listening to what they could of the sermon and exhortation through open windows. More often than not, and especially in areas with large enslaved populations, including the American

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<sup>11</sup> See Paul J. Polgar, *Standard Bearers of Liberty and Equality: Reinterpreting the Origins of American Abolitionism* (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 124.

South and the Caribbean islands, black Methodists were segregated not only spatially, but also temporally. Preachers would often hold multiple Sunday preaching services, and designate one for white members of the society and the other for black members.<sup>13</sup>

Segregation was starker still in the weekly class meetings, which stood at the center of early Methodist worship. It was there, in the smaller and more intimate early-morning or late-evening gatherings, that membership was regulated, testimonies were shared, and the more intensely emotional forms of worship later associated with the much larger camp meetings most frequently occurred. In the words of one historian, the class meeting formed “the soul of Methodism.”<sup>14</sup> While some of the first black converts to the faith were initially admitted to predominantly white classes, as soon as there were enough people of color in a congregation, a separate class was organized. A single society would typically have several classes, each with between a dozen and three-dozen members. Separation of this sort occurred not only along racial lines. White Methodist classes were also segregated by sex, with women and men meeting separately. That gendered separation often disappeared in black classes, however, which often consisted of both men and women (and both enslaved and free members).

While certainly representative of the broader racism faced by people of color, ecclesiastical segregation of this sort also provided black Methodists with opportunities unavailable elsewhere. In class meetings, black men and women

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<sup>13</sup> Lysterly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind*, 51-52.

<sup>14</sup> See Philip F. Hardt, *The Soul of Methodism: The Class Meeting in Early New York City Methodism* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2000).

preached to and exhorted one another to righteousness. They served as class leaders and assumed responsibility for organizing the weekly meetings and inquiring into the spiritual welfare of each participant. It was in their positions as class leaders that each of the Hart sisters first ministered to slaves in Antigua. Elizabeth Hart recalled “meet[ing] upwards of 160 in Class, [which] affords me an opportunity of knowing several who have a hearing ear, and understanding heart.”<sup>15</sup> Nor was it only free men and women of color who served in this capacity. John Cory, “a mulatto slave, who was by trade a tailor,” and Christopher Nibbs, another “mulatto” who was “convinced of sin” in 1786, were both Class Leaders in Antigua. From 1784 to 1796, Cory “was a leader and an exhorter,” and according to John Baxter, “his conduct was worth of the Christian character.” Nibbs likewise “was an active and good class-leader; and without all doubt was made a blessing to many souls.”<sup>16</sup> In some instances, these classes included white participants, a very rare instance of blacks presiding over whites in a slaveholding society.

Black class leaders reported to white preachers and missionaries, of course, and their white overseers closely monitored their activities. But in the day-to-day and weekly worship of a local Methodist community, class leaders were often times the most stable and visible leaders. This was both because Methodism’s white itinerant missionaries travelled a circuit and visited several

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<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Hart to Richard Pattison, 5 May 1804, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 95.

<sup>16</sup> John Baxter to Thomas Coke, 24 May 1794, in Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, Containing the Natural, Civil and Ecclesiastical History of each Islands With an Account of the Missions Instituted in Those Islands, from the Commencement of their Civilization; But More Especially of the Missions Which Have Been Established in That Archipelago by the Society Late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley* (London: A. Paris, 1810): 2:445-46.

congregations on a rotating basis, meaning that weeks and sometimes months would pass before returning to visit a given class or congregation, and because in many instances, informal black classes existed, complete with default leaders, before white missionaries stepped in to regulate their affairs. This was the case in Antigua, where after Nathaniel Gilbert's 1774 death and the return of his brother to England a year later, "a praying remnant" of Methodists was kept together by "two black women"—Mary Alley and Sophia Campbell—assumed informal leadership of the Methodist society, "praying and meeting with those who attended every night" until the arrival of local preacher John Baxter in 1778.<sup>17</sup> When Baxter arrived, he was left with little choice but to encourage the women to remain active as local leaders. A number of early class leaders on other islands were originally members of Gilbert's congregation in Antigua, and started separate Methodist classes in their new homes elsewhere in the Leeward Islands and beyond. In Saint Kitts, it was Richard and Grace Cable, together with Lydia Seaton, "a gentlewoman of the same complexion" who first welcomed Thomas Coke to the island and assumed leadership in the absence of a missionary, and in Dominica, a mixed-race woman named "Mrs Webley" welcomed Coke to the island in 1787. She had earlier been converted under the preaching of John Baxter in Antigua.<sup>18</sup>

In some instances, local black leaders went beyond their prescribed duties, becoming default preachers. Thomas Coke's first visit to the Dutch island of Sint Eustatius began much like his stops in Saint Kitts and Dominica. In

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<sup>17</sup> John Baxter to John Wesley, 16 April 1778, in *Arminian Magazine* 11 (1788): 383; and Anne Hart Gilbert to Richard Pattison, 1 June 1804, in Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 63.

<sup>18</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 78, 81.

January 1787, he was “met by two black men,” who “had received intelligence ... from Saint Kitts of our intention to visit them.” Upon arrival, Coke was pleased to discover that “the Lord raised up lately a negro-slave whose name is Harry ... to prepare out way.” “Formerly a member of [the Methodist] Society” in North America, Harry had been “sold to a Mr. Godette” in Sint Eustatius. Upon his arrival, he began holding prayer meetings among the slaves, eventually “rais[ing] up a little body of people” to whom he preached “whenever he had spare time allowed him.” Even the island’s governor, Johannes Runnels, eventually came to hear Harry. Although Runnels initially “approved of him,” he began to grow concerned over the slave-preacher’s growing audience and influence on other slaves. When Runnels “called a second time to hear” Harry preach, the number of listeners had “increased considerably” and the governor bristled at the sight of a black slave calling the people to repentance. He worried about reports that “the poor slaves were so affected under the word, that many of them fell down as if they were dead,” and grew concerned “this man would make the blacks too wise.”<sup>19</sup> Runnels summoned Harry to his office and forbade him from preaching, under the threat of imprisonment. When Coke arrived shortly thereafter and secured permission for Methodist missionaries to preach, he apparently assumed that the approval extended to Harry and other lay preachers. Upon departing the island two weeks later, Coke left three classes “to the care of Harry, two to [a] North American sister, and one to a black named Samuel.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “Some account of Harry the Black, mentioned in Dr. Coke’s History: taken from a recital of a Black Woman in St Bartholomew,” WMMS, West Indies Correspondence, 1817-1819, SOAS, 1-3; Coke, *Journals*, 83-84.

<sup>20</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 84.



When Coke returned in 1789, things had taken a decidedly worse turn. A law aimed at forbidding public prayer had been passed, disrupting Methodist preaching and leaving the classes in a state of disarray. Harry was found guilty of “the unpardonable sin of praying with the people,” received thirty-nine lashes, and was banished from the island. This “diabolical persecution” infuriated Coke, who described the law in his journal as “the first instance known among mankind, of a persecution openly avowed against *religion itself*.” It was particularly shocking, he wrote, “in this liberal and tolerating age.” Leaving it to God to “carry on his blessed work” in the Dutch island “by means of secret class meetings,” Coke departed “this place of tyranny, oppression, and wrong,” returning to Saint Kitts and “blessing God for a British constitution and a British government.”<sup>21</sup> But as Coke soon discovered, even in lands protected by the British constitution’s policy of religious toleration, black Methodists often attracted unwanted attention.

Following the departure of William Hammet from Jamaica in 1791, care of the small congregations he established fell to free and enslaved people of color. The class in Manchioneal Bay, on the island’s far eastern shore, came under the supervision of Sister Burnett, “a respectable coloured female.” The class’s origins are unclear—neither Hammett nor any other Methodist missionary appears to have visited Manchioneal—and evidently Burnett and others heard from others about the Methodist preachers elsewhere on the island, who taught “that the people ought to meet together to pray to God, and, that instead of living as they were doing, they ought to get decently married.” According to a later account,

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<sup>21</sup> Coke, *Journals*, 109-14. Italics in original. Coke and Harry were reunited in 1796 in the United States. See Donald S. Ching, *Harry’s Children: Methodist Origins in the Dutch West Indies* (Kingston, Jamaica: Methodist Book Steward, 1961), 9-11.

Burnett acted on “the light she then had” and began assembling “a few of her neighbours, and they performed their religious exercises as well as they could.” In addition to preaching, praying, and exhorting, Burnett “saw no way but to perform the duties of the clergyman herself, and she actually married several couples, which were amongst the first negro marriages solemnized on the island.” Predictably, this act attracted “the suspicions of the principal inhabitants; who became so incensed against her, that at last she had to escape to Kingston for her life.” Upon her arrival, Burnett changed her name to Mary Wilkinson and “immediately joined the Society.” When, in 1807, the Jamaican Assembly passed a law prohibiting Methodist missionaries from preaching on the island, Mary Wilkinson persisted in her ministry, regularly “attend[ing] divine service in the [Anglican] parish church” and then hosting a makeshift Methodist class meeting, “conversing with many who tarried to receive her instructions.” She was, according to a missionary who knew her later in life, “a Christian of no common kind.”<sup>22</sup> Like so many other black Methodist men and women, Mary Wilkinson assumed a ministerial role during the absence, whether regular or prolonged, of white missionaries.

While Mary Wilkinson’s status as a free woman of color allowed her some measure of protection, enslaved black Methodists had to sometimes retreat to the safety of faraway forests and nighttime darkness in order to meet for worship. Following the expulsion of Harry from Sint Eustatius, the remaining Methodists there “could not hold our meetings at all, but in the dead of night, ... far out in the

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Duncan, *A Narrative of the Wesleyan Mission to Jamaica; with Occasional Remarks on the State of Society in That Colony* (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1849), 18-20.

country places.”<sup>23</sup> These nighttime prayer meetings were common in North America, too, forming the basis of what Albert Raboteau labeled the “invisible institution.” Under the cover of darkness, slaves would gather for worship, sometimes within the confines of a slave cabin but often deep in the woods, where slaves from multiple plantations could assemble. There, according to Raboteau, “Christianity was fitted by the slave community to its own particular experience,” complete with the singing of spirituals, ring shouts, and of course, preaching and exhortation.<sup>24</sup>

The “invisible institution” of the antebellum South is typically contrasted with the visible black congregations (and eventually, churches) of the North. But the boundaries separating the two were often blurred, especially in the eighteenth century. A number of informal black classes and congregations operated beyond the purview of white oversight. In Oxon Hill, Maryland, just across the Potomac River from Alexandria, Virginia, white preacher William Colbert discovered a black congregation of believers. Like Mary Wilkinson, they had organized of their own initiative. Having “obtained their freedom and embraced religion,” they built a small chapel and held weekly meetings before Colbert arrived. “Their society is very numerous, and very orderly,” Colbert recorded in his journal. The congregation agreed to join the MEC, and Colbert visited them as a regular stop on his circuit, assisted by “two leading characters

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<sup>23</sup> “Some account of Harry the Black,” WMMS, SOAS, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, Updated Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 212-19.

among them, that fill their station with dignity.”<sup>25</sup> In Fayetteville, North Carolina, Henry Evans, a free black shoemaker who had earlier acted as a lay preacher in Virginia, began “to preach to the negroes, with great effect.” When Fayetteville authorities interfered and prohibited him from preaching, he “withdrew to the sand-hills, out of town, and held meetings in the woods, changing his appointments from place to place,” thus skirting the letter of the law and eluding the town council. Such congregations did not last long, however. In time, Evans’s preaching attracted white and black listeners, and when Fayetteville authorities approved the construction of a Methodist chapel within town limits, “there was no longer room for the negroes,” who were relegated to makeshift sheds attached to either side of the church building. By the early nineteenth century, the now mixed-race congregation had been incorporated into the Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>26</sup>

Another independent black Methodist congregation in North Carolina was brought under Episcopal Methodist control around the same time. In 1796 or 1797, William Meredith arrived in the port city of Wilmington, where he immediately “began preaching to the negroes,” who were, he reported, like

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<sup>25</sup> As cited in J. Gordon Melton, *A Will to Choose: The Origins of African American Methodism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 138-140. See also Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind*, 58.

<sup>26</sup> William M. Wightman, *Life of William Capers, D.D., One of the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; Including an Autobiography* (Nashville: M.E. Church, South, 1858), 124-28. For a critical reading of Capers’s autobiography, the primary source from which most information on Evans’s ministry is drawn, see Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind*, 48-50.

“sheep without a shepard.”<sup>27</sup> While some historians have suggested that Meredith was, at the time of his arrival in North Carolina, “an independent Methodist,” he actually arrived as a preacher in connection with William Hammet’s Charleston-based Primitive Methodist Church. Meredith was the second white preacher assigned to the Wilmington congregation, after the free black South Carolinian preacher Luke Rushton was “impeached for drunkenness, and having turned out the Church in N.C.” in December 1795. Shortly after his arrival, though, Meredith also fell out with Hammet’s sect, and he took steps toward joining the MEC before his death in 1799.<sup>28</sup> Although Meredith left the church building to Francis Asbury for the MEC in his will, it would be several years before the congregation formally came under the supervision of an assigned white preacher. Unlike in Fayetteville, class meetings and day-to-day activities were overseen by “the African elders” (lay black class leaders and stewards) until at least 1813, and even then, as the congregation expanded to

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<sup>27</sup> Wightman, *Life of William Capers*, 162; James Jenkins, *Experience, Labours, and Suffering of Rev. James Jenkins, the South Carolina Conference* (n.p.: Printed for the Author, 1842), 36.

<sup>28</sup> William Hammet, Diurnal, 20 December 1795, William Hammet Papers, 1787-1825, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina. The details concerning Meredith’s ministry in North Carolina are fuzzy. There has been some debate among historians about the year of Meredith’s arrival in Wilmington, with estimates ranging from “no later than 1795” to 1797. Drawing on William Hammet’s journal for 1795, which has Meredith traveling to the Bahamas in March 1795 and Luke Rushton not “having turned out the Church in N.C.” until December 1795, I place his arrival sometime during 1796-1797. See Hammet, Diurnal, 27 March 1795, William Hammet Papers, SCL. Secondary sources include Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 128; Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 16-18; Walter H. Conser, Jr., *A Coat of Many Colors: Religion and Society along the Cape Fear River of North Carolina* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 90-92; and John W. Catron, “Evangelical Networks in the Greater Caribbean and the Origins of the Black Church,” *Church History* 79:1 (March 2010): 102-03.

include several white members, it remained predominantly black and was popularly (if pejoratively) known as “the negro church, or meetinghouse.”<sup>29</sup>

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At the very same time that white preachers began to bring these independent black congregations and classes into the Methodist Episcopal fold, integrated Methodist congregations in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York were on the verge of segregating into wholly separate societies. The demonstration led by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones at St. George’s in 1792 was only one of several such instances around the same time. As early as 1787, black Methodists in Baltimore had balked at the strikingly similar instructions from white leaders to sit in the galleries of the Lovely Lane and Strawberry Alley meeting houses, opting instead for private worship services in the privacy (and security) of their own homes.<sup>30</sup> By 1795, though, they sought a similar arrangement to that of Richard Allen’s Bethel Congregation in June 1794. On May 30, 1795, Francis Asbury met with Baltimore’s black Methodists “to consult about building a house, and forming a distinct African, yet Methodist church.” Five months later, he noted with some annoyance that “the Africans [in Baltimore] desire a church, which, in temporals, shall be altogether under their own direction, and ask greater privileges than the white stewards and trustees

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<sup>29</sup> Wightman, *Life of William Capers*, 164; Catron, “Evangelical Networks in the Greater Caribbean,” 103; Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 17-18.

<sup>30</sup> As Will Gravelly rightly points out, the dating of the beginnings of separate worship in Baltimore should be treated with some caution, since it relies on (sometimes much later) “autobiographical recollections and undocumented histories.” See Gravelly, “African Methodisms and the Rise of Black Denominationalism,” 116. The 1787 date comes from James A. Handy, *Scraps of African Methodist Episcopal History* (Philadelphia: AME Book Concern, 1902), 13-14.

ever have a right to claim.”<sup>31</sup> Black members of New York City’s John Street and Bowery congregations, meanwhile, “obtained permission from Bishop Francis Asbury to hold meetings by themselves” in 1796, renting a house on Cross Street in between the two larger white congregations.<sup>32</sup> Others followed suit, and by the turn of the century, independent black Methodist congregations were a standard feature of the Methodist Episcopal Church along the eastern seaboard.

Recent work comparing the individual paths of each congregation from limited congregational autonomy to full institutional independence has highlighted the sometimes-subtle differences between black Methodists in Philadelphia and New York or Wilmington and Baltimore. Historians have also pushed back against an earlier historiography that privileged those congregations as being representative of black Methodism in early America more generally. As Kyle Bulthuis noted in his analysis of black Methodists in New York City, “the creation of a black Methodist church ... involved separation of not only black from white, but also black from black.” The majority of black Methodists, even in those cities where independent congregations thrived, remained members of predominantly white congregations (though they continued to meet in separate black classes).<sup>33</sup> But the historical literature on the beginnings of black Methodism, much like that

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<sup>31</sup> *JLFA* 2:51, 65.

<sup>32</sup> Christopher Rush, *A Short Account of the Rise and Progress of the African M. E. Church in America, Written by Christopher Rush, Superintendent of the Connexion, with the Aid of George Collins. Also, a Concise View of Church Order or Government, from Scripture, and from Some of the Best Authors on the Subject of Church Government, Relative to Episcopacy* (New York: By the author, 1843), 9-10. See also Kyle T. Bulthuis, *Four Steeples over the City Streets: Religion and Society in New York’s Early Republic Congregations* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 72.

<sup>33</sup> Bulthuis, *Four Steeples Over City Streets*, 72.

on early American Methodism, has remained stubbornly wedded to nationalist paradigms.

Most significantly, scholars writing on the subject have largely ignored the experience of another independent black Methodist church – that established in the British colonial outpost of Sierra Leone in 1796. The experience of the several dozen men and women who attached their names to the 1796 document declaring their only loyalty to “the Governor of the universe, whose we are and whom we serve,” differed in important ways from that of their counterparts along North America’s eastern seaboard. Most significantly, they were not American citizens settled in a large city, but rather British subjects in a newly settled colonial outpost under the immediate authority of the Sierra Leone Company. Moreover, there were no formal representatives from any parent Methodist body in Sierra Leone until 1811. Those Methodists who announced their independence in 1796 were rebelling not against the paternalistic actions of presiding elders but rather in response to the heavy-handed tactics of the colony’s civil rulers. They also thus asserted not just some measure of congregational autonomy, but rather full institutional independence: “We are Dissenters, and esteem it our privilege to be so,” they announced, “and as such we consider ourselves a perfect Church, having no need of the assistance of any worldly power to appoint or perform religious ceremonies for us.”<sup>34</sup> More than segregated seating was at stake for Black Methodists in Sierra Leone. They were responding to a direct challenge to their nebulous religious rights.

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<sup>34</sup> “The Independent Methodist Church in Freetown to the Governor and Council (11 July 1796),” in Knutsford, *Life and Letters*, 145-46.



But the charter members of the Independent Methodist Church of Freetown also shared much in common with members of Philadelphia's Bethel congregation and New York City's Zion Methodist church, as well as the formerly independent black congregations in Fayetteville, Wilmington, and Oxon Hill. The shared suspicion of all black Methodists who made moves toward some measure of independence in the 1790s had deep roots in their earlier experience as slaves. Moreover, the black Methodists had spent almost an entire decade in Nova Scotia, which, although a British Crown Colony, initially fell under the supervision of Methodists from the United States. Some of the same traveling preachers who had worked with free black classes in New York and Philadelphia were appointed in the 1780s to oversee the activities of black Methodists in Nova Scotia. As in the United States, not all black Methodists in Sierra Leone joined in the push for ecclesiastical independence. And while the Independent Methodist Church of Freetown made the move toward full institutional independence decades before Richard Allen and others did in North America, their independence was neither complete nor initially fully accepted by white authorities. In fact, their formal status as a legally and ecclesiastically-recognized independent church—this time, under the name of the West African Methodist Episcopal Church—did not come until 1822, six years after the organization of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia and Baltimore, and one year after the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in New York City. Comparing and contrasting the two movements for ecclesiastical

independence sheds important light on the several issues at the core of black Protestant religiosity in the Atlantic world.

Among the many enslaved Methodists described above who actively participated in secret and illicit prayer and preaching meetings late at night, deep in the woods, and away from the watchful eyes of masters and overseers, were several who opted to chance escaping behind British lines following Governor Dunmore's 1775 Proclamation.<sup>35</sup> The wartime experience of those escaped Methodists is notoriously difficult to document, given the paucity of sources. New York's Wesley Chapel remained open throughout the war, as white Methodists, harassed as suspected Tories elsewhere in the colonies, enjoyed the protections afforded by Loyalist-controlled New York City. That the sexton and undertaker of the John Street Chapel, Peter Williams, was a black man might also have helped attract incoming black Methodists from elsewhere. But the religious activities of those black Loyalists who temporarily called the city home during wartime are not included in any accounts of Methodism in revolutionary New York. There is circumstantial evidence, though, of their participation in the John Street society's worship services and prayer meetings. Charles Inglis, the rector of Trinity Church during the war, noted in 1780 that "attention to the Negroes is become the more necessary as some thousands of them have escaped to New York from the revolted colonies."<sup>36</sup> It seems likely that Methodists likewise attended to the influx

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<sup>35</sup> Their experience on the run and in battle, together with their postwar search for a promised land of liberty in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone was described and analyzed in Chapter 1. Their efforts at church building received only passing attention there, though.

<sup>36</sup> John Wolfe Lydekker, *The Life and Letters of Charles Inglis: His Ministry in America and Consecration as First Colonial Bishop, from 1759 to 1787* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1936), 203.

of black Loyalists, as well, especially since the John Street Chapel was located relatively close to both the barracks that housed black soldiers and “Canvas Town,” home to thousands of fugitive slaves during the war. Furthermore, the ease with which black Methodists organized themselves into classes and congregations upon arrival in Nova Scotia, complete with appointed preachers, suggests that some semblance of organized religious life persisted during the wartime years.<sup>37</sup>

The Loyalist occupation of New York City came to an end in November 1783, and the evacuation of white and black Loyalists alike began several months earlier. Their departure resulted in a precipitous drop of Methodist membership in the city, with only 60 individuals on membership rolls in 1784. A substantial number of those Methodists departed for Nova Scotia, the first arriving in Port Roseway (soon renamed Shelburne) in May 1783. William Black, the self-appointed lay preacher who began petitioning John Wesley for missionaries to Nova Scotia in 1782, arrived in Shelburne one month after the Loyalists’ arrival, pleased to discover “some of our friends from New York,” a group that included wealthy merchant Robert Barry and the brothers James and

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<sup>37</sup> It is on the basis of this final point that Cassandra Pybus claims that Moses Wilkinson’s “congregation,” consisting of friends and extended kin from nearby plantation in Tidewater Virginia, remained intact during their time in New York City. Curiously, Pybus suggests that “Moses’s congregation would ... have turned to the clergy of Trinity Church” during the war, apparently unaware of the thriving John Street congregation. See Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Books, 2006), 31, 33-34. Most accounts of Methodism in revolutionary New York City rely extensively on J.B. Wakeley, *Lost Chapters Recovered from the Early History of American Methodism* (New York: For the Author, 1858), 267-290, and Samuel Seaman, *Annals of New York Methodism, Being a History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the City of New York from A.D. 1766 to A.D. 1890* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1892), 72-86. For recent scholarly analyses, see Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 55-61; and Bulthuis, *Four Steeples*, 44-47.

John Mann, the latter of whom had assumed primary responsibilities as preacher of the John Street Chapel during the latter part of the war.<sup>38</sup> Two months later, on August 27, *L'Abondance* arrived, carrying the core of the black Methodist community that first emerged in Tidewater Virginia a decade earlier, including lay preachers Moses Wilkinson and Luke Jordan.

The majority of black Methodists (and the majority of all arriving black Loyalists) settled in Birchtown, the community set apart for black settlement just four miles southeast of Shelburne, though over the course of the next half-decade, they expanded beyond the peninsula's southern shore. When William Black returned to Shelburne the following April, he was delighted to find a thriving multiracial Methodist community in place. "I preached three times and met two classes," Black recorded in journal on April 17. "The blacks are very lively. O that they might provoke the whites to jealousy, to love and to good works!" The following day he journeyed to Birchtown for the first time, where more than 1,500 black inhabitants were still living in the makeshift huts they had constructed to survive the winter. There Black "preached to about two hundred negroes" and was pleased to find some "deeply affected, and others greatly comforted." Since the arrival of the black Methodists in August, Black learned, "upwards of sixty of them profess to have found peace with God." He was particularly delighted to hear Moses Wilkinson, left blind and lame from a lifetime of enslaved labor and the smallpox outbreak while stationed on Gwynn's Island, preach: "The principal instrument God has employed in this work," Black recorded with surprise in his

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<sup>38</sup> William Black Journal, 5 June 1783, in Matthew Richey, *A Memoir of the Late Rev. William Black, Wesleyan Minister, Including an Account of the Rise and Progress of Methodism in Nova Scotia* (Halifax: William Cunnebell, 1839), 105.

journal, “is a poor negro, who can neither see, walk, nor stand.” Wilkinson, assisted by Luke Jordan and others, had organized fourteen classes in the community, all, according to Black, “in a prosperous state.”<sup>39</sup>

Among the converts made that winter was Violet King, who later proved instrumental in the conversion of her husband, Boston. “Soon after my wife’s conversion,” he wrote a decade after the fact, “the Lord strove powerfully with me.” After meeting with Joseph Brown, another black preacher from Tidewater Virginia, King’s “convictions increased ... for about six weeks” before “the enemy assaulted” him and he temporarily backslid. “But blessed be the Lord, he did not suffer the enemy to rejoice long over me,” wrote King, whose conversion was finally accomplished under the preaching of Freeborn Garretson, recently arrived from the United States and appointed to oversee the burgeoning work in Nova Scotia.<sup>40</sup>

Less than a decade earlier, while traveling the Kent, Delaware circuit, Garretson had been responsible for the conversion of both Richard Allen and his master, Stokely Sturgis, who agreed to allow Allen to purchase his freedom. Linked by their shared connection to Freeborn Garretson’s ministry, Richard Allen and Boston King nevertheless almost certainly remained unknown to one another. But both would prove key players in the emergence of independent black Methodism in the years to come.<sup>41</sup> Like Allen, Boston King immediately

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<sup>39</sup> Richey, *Memoir of William Black*, 128-29.

<sup>40</sup> Boston King, “Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, A Black Preacher, Written by Himself, during his Residence at Kingswood School,” *Methodist Magazine* (March-June 1798), in Joanna Brooks and John Saillant, eds., *“Face Zion Forward”: First Writers of the Black Atlantic, 1785-1798* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 218-221.

<sup>41</sup> On Allen’s conversion, see Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 40-45.

embarked on a preaching career following his conversion, driven by “a great concern for the salvation of others.” In spite of some self-doubt about his abilities “to officiate as an exhorter among the people,” King nevertheless continued to preach and pray with his neighbors and friends, “labour[ing] in Burchtown and Shelwin [Shelburne] two years.”<sup>42</sup> His sphere of labor gradually expanded as he traveled the colony in search of stable work and preaching opportunities alike, until 1791, when William Black, newly-appointed as Presiding Elder of the Nova Scotia district, invited King to “assume care of the Society” in Preston, a black settlement located ten miles northeast of Halifax.

King’s was one of three entirely black Methodist congregations in the colony: In addition to the group in Preston and Moses Wilkinson’s Birchtown society, there was one more in Brindleytown, near the larger white settlement of Digby in southwestern Nova Scotia. Although ecclesiastical records for those congregations are scarce, they appear to have operated much like the congregations led by Richard Allen and Abraham Thompson that would arise in Philadelphia and New York less than five years later. They worshipped and conducted their meetings independently, but their activities were overseen by a traveling white preacher, who also administered the sacraments to the black believers.<sup>43</sup>

The first membership estimates for Nova Scotian Methodism were presented in 1786, with the official *Minutes* of the Methodist Episcopal Church reporting 510 throughout the colony. Four years later, they reported 710. The

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<sup>42</sup> King, “Memoirs,” 222.

<sup>43</sup> On black Methodist congregations in Nova Scotia, see Walker, *Black Loyalists*, 72-74;

British *Minutes* for 1791 recorded 730, including 200 black Methodists. Both figures are almost certainly too low, especially the estimated number of black church members. Moses Wilkinson's Birchtown congregation alone numbered at least 200 (and according to Freeborn Garrettson "about five hundred in the town" attended his preaching in 1785), to which need to be added the 60-plus in Bridleypoint and the 34 in Boston King's disappointingly "tolerable congregation" in Preston. In addition to those several hundred black Methodists were congregants of color in the Shelburne, Halifax, Liverpool, and Saint John, New Brunswick congregations.<sup>44</sup> At least some of those black Methodists were slaves, including "eleven or twelve black men" who helped build Centenary Methodist Church in Liverpool in 1793 at the bid of merchant, financier, slaveowner, and recent Methodist convert Simeon Perkins.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, there was some significant crossover between black Anglican and Methodist communities in Nova Scotia. In Brindleytown, Charles Ingliss accused the black preacher Joseph Leonard of "lean[ing] toward Methodism," a move Leonard would later make official in Sierra Leone. Ingliss was shocked and dismayed to learn that Leonard

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<sup>44</sup> Garrettson quote from Freeborn Garrettson Journal, August 1785, in Robert Drew Simpson, ed., *American Methodist Pioneer: The Life and Journals of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson, 1752-1827* (Rutland, Vermont: Academy Books, 1984), 127. The number of white Methodists in Nova Scotia almost certainly exceeded the estimate above, as well. The Methodist chapel in Shelburne "accommodate[d] three to four hundred," which Freeborn Garrettson complained was still too small to "hold as many as wished to hear." The multiracial congregation in Liverpool also regularly drew over 100 attendees, and the several smaller congregations and classes scattered elsewhere in the province added up to at least an additional one to two hundred. See Freeborn Garrettson, *The Experience and travels of Mr. Freeborn Garrettson, Minister of the Methodist-Episcopal Church in North-America* (Philadelphia: Joseph Cruikshank, 1791), 206.

<sup>45</sup> Simeon Perkins Diary, 9 July 1794, in Charles Bruce Ferguson, ed., *The Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1790-1796* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1961), 300. See also, Allen P. Stouffer, "Towards Community: Black Methodists in Nineteenth-Century Nova Scotia," in Bruce L. Guenther, ed., *Historical Papers 2000: Canadian Society of Church History* (Canadian Society of Church History, 2000): 197.

had begun baptizing prospective converts and administering the sacrament, and rejected the lay preacher's requests for ordination and authorization to form an "an entirely independent" congregation "separate from the whites."<sup>46</sup> A conservative estimate of 350 for Nova Scotia's total black Methodist membership would still place it among the largest black Methodist communities in the Methodist Episcopal Church at the time – the Birchtown congregation of 200 in 1791 made it larger than the total black membership of Methodist churches in Philadelphia and New York, and roughly equal to that of Baltimore.<sup>47</sup>

Racial separation in the Maritimes came not only at the insistence of black leaders and laity. White preachers, too, segregated those they ministered to in Nova Scotia. In Shelburne, black Methodists were initially relegated to gallery seating, but when Freeborn Garrettson arrived in 1785 "to regulate the society," he recommended instead that "the blacks of Shelburne buil[d] themselves a little house at the north end of the town," where he could preach "to them separately, in order to have more room for the whites."<sup>48</sup> As Methodist historians Russell Richey, Kenneth Rowe, and Jean Schmidt concluded, "even the antislavery zealots, like Garrettson, played their part in the qualification of Methodism's tentative egalitarianism."<sup>49</sup> Segregated worship, though, was the least of the black Methodists' concerns. It represented not an interruption, but rather the

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<sup>46</sup> Charles Ingliss Journal, September 1791, as cited in Walker, *Black Loyalists*, 68-69.

<sup>47</sup> See *Minutes*, 43.

<sup>48</sup> Garrettson, *Experience and Travels*, 206.

<sup>49</sup> Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History, Volume 1* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2010), 60.



resumption of independent meetings held by the black Methodists, going back to their time as slaves in Tidewater Virginia and coastal Carolina.

That independence was further nurtured in Sierra Leone, where approximately 1200 free black Nova Scotians arrived in March 1792. There, as historian Ellen Gibson Wilson has summarized, “the churches ... became far more important than they had been even in Nova Scotia. They were wellsprings of social as well as spiritual life, and above all, they were political centers.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, prior to July 1796, when 128 black Methodists signed their names to a letter announcing the formation of an independent church with “no need of the assistance of any worldly power,” most of the Methodists’ frustrations were political. In the colony’s earliest years, the Methodists had found themselves at odds with colonial authorities over the payment of quitrents, access to property, and the failure of the Sierra Leone Company to protect them from nearby slave traders and French privateers. But other disputes were more explicitly religious. When the first chaplain was appointed to Sierra Leone in September 1793, the Methodists might have been encouraged to learn that Thomas Coke had helped arrange for Melville Horne to assume the post. Horne was, according to Coke, “a zealous Methodist preacher,” and one with important connections to missions to African peoples – his uncle, Nathaniel Gilbert, had introduced Methodism to Antigua in 1760. Horne’s early efforts in Sierra Leone (focused, like those of white preachers to predominantly black congregations and classes across the Atlantic, on “restrain[ing] the fervor of the black preachers” and worshippers) seem to have been successful. Colonial officials praised the apparent effect of

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<sup>50</sup> Ellen Gibson Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1976), 337.

his inaugural sermon to the settlers, claiming that the black Methodists' prayers were now "uttered with a lower humble & devout voice" than before.<sup>51</sup> The initial cooperation did not last long, however, as black Methodists learned that Horne was not Methodist in the same sense they considered themselves to be.

In Nova Scotia, the black Methodists' sense of independence set them apart from the white preachers dispatched from the Methodist Episcopal Church, but Methodists in Nova Scotia, both black and white, also understood themselves to be an independent church. Melville Horne, by contrast, emerged from a different Methodist tradition, one that identified with Methodism's theology and emphasis on religious experience but that prized its continued relationship with the Church of England. Horne was ordained in the Church of England in 1786 and, prior to taking up the missionary post in Sierra Leone, served as curate of Madeley in Shropshire, succeeding his mentor John Fletcher.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, he came to Freetown as the colony's official chaplain, representing the interests of the established church and not the Methodist movement.

His alliance with Macaulay and Dawes raised the suspicions of black Methodists even further. Those suspicions were seemingly confirmed in January 1793, when Horne and governor William Dawes ordered Anglican services to be held at the same time as the black preachers hosted their own "chapel meetings." Adding insult to injury, Horne also claimed the right to preach in each

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<sup>51</sup> James Strand Journal, as cited in Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks*, 346.

<sup>52</sup> Suzanne Schwarz, "The Legacy of Melvill Horne," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 31:2 (April 2007): 88.

Nova Scotian chapel at least once every two weeks.<sup>53</sup> Tensions continued for several months, widening the gulf between the groups. In June, Horne wrote to friends in England, complaining that “the religious people, & particularly the Methodists and almost all the preachers join[ed] in the most violent spirits, & adopt[ed] measures, which if persued, must issue in the ruin of the Colony.”<sup>54</sup> Three months later, on September 15, Horne preached an afternoon sermon aimed at “expos[ing] the reigning folly of the Methodists of this place, the accounting dreams, visions and the most ridiculous bodily sensations as incontestable proofs of their acceptance with God and of their being filled with the Holy Ghost.” If Horne had stopped at “shew[ing] that the Holy Spirit acted always in strict conformity to the word of God as delivered in the Scriptures” and that “when dreams &c. were exactly conformable to the word of God they might afford the same ground of comfort,” it probably would have been received by the black audience. But his clarification that when dreams “were contrary to it, they might be considered as the suggestions of Satan transformed into an angel of light” (and the unspoken implication that he considered the claims of the black Methodists to be such), proved a step too far. Two days later, at an evening preaching service in the Methodist chapel, outspoken preacher Henry Beverhout “warmly reprobated Mr. Horne’s doctrine,” identifying it, and not the black Methodists’ “as the doctrine of Satan” which threatened to “destro[y] the power of

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<sup>53</sup> James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992, Reprint, 1999), 200.

<sup>54</sup> Horne to Mary Fletcher, 10 June 1793, Mary Fletcher Papers, John Rylands University Library, Manchester, England, as cited in Suzanne Schwarz, “‘Our Mad Methodists’: Abolitionism, Methodism and Missions in Sierra Leone in the Late Eighteenth Century,” *Wesley and Methodist Studies* 3 (2011): 126.

God's children." He then turned his attention to William Dawes, "pointedly comparing" him "to Pharaoh whom the just judgment of God would sooner or later overtake," and concluded his discourse by "recommending to his hearers ... patience under their sufferings as God in his own good time would deliver Israel."<sup>55</sup> By the year's end, Melville Horne had returned to England, frustrated with the obstinacy of the black Methodists. According to Suzanne Schwarz, he felt not only rejected but unneeded. Whereas he assumed "that the former slaves were in a childlike state and thus in need of his religious and moral tutelage," he discovered instead that their congregations "were already cohesive and independent and unwilling to tolerate interference even from someone who had enjoyed John Wesley's favour."<sup>56</sup>

After the September incident made clear that Horne was unlikely to get through to the Methodists in Freetown, Governor Zachary Macaulay surmised that "it might be well if Dr. Coke or some delegate from him were to visit Freetown in order to establish some kind of discipline among the Methodists, for at present their government is pure democracy, without subordination to anyone."<sup>57</sup> Melville Horne had only increased the independent and oppositional spirit of the black Methodist society in Sierra Leone. His time in the colony had also altered his own relationship to the movement. In a letter to Mary Fletcher, Horne confided that he felt increasingly isolated, and worried about his future.

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<sup>55</sup> Zachary Macaulay Journal, 15 September 1793, 17 September 1793; as published in Suzanne Schwarz, ed., *Zachary Macaulay and the Development of the Sierra Leone Company, 1793-4, Part I: Journal, June-October 1793* (Leipzig: Institut für Afrikanistik, Universität Leipzig, 2000), 61-62.

<sup>56</sup> Schwarz, "Our Mad Methodists," 124.

<sup>57</sup> Macaulay Journal, 17 September 1793, in *Zachary Macaulay and the Development of the Sierra Leone Company, Part I*, 62.

Expressing a desire to return to his former post at Madeley, Horne noted “there I was just as much & just as little of a Methodist, as irregular & as stationary, as I wished to be.”<sup>58</sup> White Methodist missionaries were thus transformed by their interaction with Sierra Leone’s black Methodist community.

It was another fifteen years before another Methodist minister visited Sierra Leone. Following Horne’s departure, Mr. Jones, one of the Company’s schoolteachers was elevated to chaplain. Equally as committed to Governors Macaulay and Dawes, but without any of the theological sympathies Horne shared, Jones’s appointment deteriorated Methodist-government relations even further. After the schoolteacher called the Methodists “a rotten society” in January 1794, he was refused “all liberty of preaching among them.” In July, when some unspecified conflict arose between two of the Methodist chapels, Moses Wilkinson “accused Mr. Jones” of sewing the dissension and organized a boycott of all Anglican services until Jones was replaced, which he finally was in 1796.<sup>59</sup>

In January of that year, John Clarke was appointed chaplain to Sierra Leone. A Presbyterian with evangelical leanings, Clarke refused ordination in the Church of England. His status as a dissenter with evangelical leanings initially appealed to the Methodists, who ended their nearly two-year-long boycott. But, as with Horne, early cooperation proved fleeting, and in May 1796, black leaders denounced him as “the Company’s Chaplain, and no Pastor to the Settlers.” They reinstated their earlier boycott of Anglican services, forbidding lay

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<sup>58</sup> Horne to Mary Fletcher, 10 June 1793, in Schwarz, “Our Mad Methodists,” 128.

<sup>59</sup> Knutsford, *Life and Letters*, 60, 84; Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 201.

Methodists from attending the catechism classes taught by Macaulay and changing the times of their own preaching appointments to overlap with Clarke's sermons. Asserting their independence, they threatened those who broke the boycott with excommunication.<sup>60</sup>

On July 4, 1796, Zachary Macaulay fired back at the recalcitrant Methodists, drawing up a proposal requiring all marriages to be performed by either an ordained minister or himself. Four days later, the proposal became law. On July 10, black Nova Scotians scheduled a meeting to devise a response. Evidently, they understood the new laws as part of an effort to "make Calvinists and Presbyterians" of the black settlers – that is, no longer Methodists. Henry Beverhout, who had led the opposition to Melville Horne three years earlier, again took charge, asserting to his coreligionists "that the rights of our Society are being taken away, viz the right of Baptism and Marrying." He invited "all those who are to stand by the Society" to "go to one Side" of the chapel "and those who are for the Church [of England] go to the other." When no one took the latter option, Beverhout dictated the letter that became the Methodists' own declaration of independence. "GENTLEMEN," the letter began, in drastically understated language, "We have reason to believe that you have entertained no very exalted idea of our loyalty and attachment to you on several occasions heretofore, and we are sorry that any cause should be given us to conduct ourselves in such a manner, as still to confirm you in your suspicion of us." It then pivoted quickly to the heart of the matter:

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<sup>60</sup> Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 202.

But when we see our religious rights struck at, all regard for our own character is lost from our view, and our only concern is to persevere in our loyalty and attachment to the Governor of the universe, whose we are and whom we serve. We consider this new law as an encroachment on our religious rights; and as such we not only mean to be inattentive to it, but to influence the minds of all we have to do with against it. ... We must acknowledge that your advertisement is very disgusting to us, for we are Dissenters, and esteem it our privilege to be so, and as such we consider ourselves a perfect Church, having no need of the assistance of any worldly power to appoint or perform religious ceremonies for us. If persons in holy orders are allowed to marry, we see no reason why our Ministers should not do it. Our meeting-house we count as fit for any religious purpose as the house you call the church. We cannot persuade ourselves that politics and religion have any connection, and therefore think it not right for a Governor of the one to be meddling with the other.<sup>61</sup>

The language of the letter is striking, and combined with the timing (twenty years to the week since American colonists had penned their Declaration of Independence) some historians have portrayed the black Methodists as late Revolutionaries. Cassandra Pybus thus noted that “they had ... been trained and educated in the American Revolution,” claiming that “their radical notions about their rights as free men and women ... we forged in their tortuous negotiations to secure their freedom and to make it a tangible reality in their lives.”<sup>62</sup> While their experiences escaping from slavery and taking up arms in the Revolutionary War did affect their quest for ecclesiastical independence, the language of their letter also betrays some familiarity with British religious law. In forthrightly proclaiming themselves “Dissenters,” the black Methodists were attempting to leverage certain rights for their ministers under the stipulations of England’s Toleration Act – the right to marry, the right to baptize, and the right to conduct their own

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<sup>61</sup> “The Independent Methodist Church in Freetown to the Governor and Council (11 July 1796),” in Knutsford, *Life and Letters*, 145-46.

<sup>62</sup> Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 202.

religious services. These were radical proposals indeed, especially since none of the Methodist preachers had been ordained by any recognized ecclesiastical authority.

Their declaration of ecclesiastical independence was significant, too, because it marked the earliest such move by any body of black Methodists. At the very same time that Methodists in Freetown made the move toward full institutional independence, their counterparts in the United States were just beginning the first steps toward congregational autonomy. In August, nine trustees in Philadelphia signed the “Articles of Association of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, of the City of Philadelphia, in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.” While the Articles of Association provided “that none but coloured persons shall be chosen as trustees of the said African Episcopal Bethel Church” and granted those trustees ownership of all church property, it also made clear “that the trustees and members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church do acquiesce in, and accord with the rules of the Methodist Episcopal Church ... and that they and their successors will continue forever in union with the ‘Methodist Episcopal Church of Philadelphia.’”<sup>63</sup> According to historian Sarah Barringer Gordon, the document, written by white minister Ezekiel Cooper, “combined elements of white paternalism and black agency.” It furthermore gave the Bethel congregation “some unique powers” but also “some unusual disabilities.” Most significantly, the congregation was placed under the ecclesiastical oversight of

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<sup>63</sup> *Articles of Association of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, of the City of Philadelphia, in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: John Ormrod, 1799), 6, 8.



the white elder at nearby St. George's MEC.<sup>64</sup> The Sierra Leone declaration, by contrast, was dictated by a black preacher and signed by 127 additional black congregants. It asserted its full independence from "any worldly power," and specifically rejected the authority of any white minister to interfere in its affairs.

But if the Independent Methodist Church of Freetown was more radical in its assertion of independence, it was also on less secure legal footing. Black Methodists in Philadelphia were officially incorporating as a legal body, whereas their counterparts in Sierra Leone were merely announcing their independence to government leaders, with no guarantee or expectation that the independence would be recognized. And, perhaps predictably, it was swiftly rejected. Governor Macaulay responded to the petition by accusing the signers of treason, and threatening them with death by hanging. "In consequence," wrote Macaulay in his journal, "numbers of those, whose names I had called over as affixed to the letter, came to me, some protesting that their names were there without their knowledge, others expressing the utmost sorrow for having been led to sign it." Several of the signers "told me that the letter had been read to them, but that they did not understand it," believing that "it was merely to say they were Methodists, and that they meant to continue so."<sup>65</sup> For black Methodists on both sides of the Atlantic, the events of 1796 were only the first efforts in a 20 plus-year struggle for full independence.

The Methodists in Freetown thus continued on as they had before. By 1807, they had evidently split into three main factions: the Great Meeting, the

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<sup>64</sup> Sarah Barringer Gordon, "The African Supplement: Religion, Race, and Corporate Law in Early National America," *William & Mary Quarterly* 72:3 (July 2015): 400.

<sup>65</sup> Macaulay Journal, in Knutsford, *Life and Letters*, 147.

Interceding Meeting, and Christ's Chapel, along with several small independent groups, as well. The exact nature of their reasons for dividing from one another are not clear from the surviving record, but at least some of the Methodists resumed attendance at Anglican services during this time, relying on Established clergy for marriage, burial, and even baptism. But they also continued to cling to their identity as Methodists, and regarded "the church of England as bad for them," refusing to "confess its faith."<sup>66</sup> In addition, they continued to pursue and attract new converts, including many of the Jamaican Maroons who arrived in the colony in 1800. One 1806 visitor to Sierra Leone remarked that "most of the inhabitants are methodists; and on a Sunday not only the black men preach, but the women also." At least one woman, Amelia Buxton, presided over a congregation in her home, known popularly as the Speaking Congregation.<sup>67</sup>

In 1804, Joseph Brown, lead preacher at the largest congregation of Methodists (the Great Meeting, on Rawdon Street), appealed to Thomas Coke for a missionary to be sent from England. When that letter was met with no response, he sent another, in July 1806, "pray[ing] that God may send us a person of warm zeal, to assist in carrying on his blessed work; and that our Brethren, of whose household we are, may remember us in this important matter."<sup>68</sup> This appears to be the earliest such request made by the black

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<sup>66</sup> Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 291-92.

<sup>67</sup> F.B. Spilsbury, *Account of a Voyage to the Western Coast of Africa; Performed by His Majesty's Sloop Favourite, in the Year 1805, Being a Journal of the Events which Happened to that Vessel, from the Time of Her Leaving England till Her Capture by the French, and the Return of the Author in a Cartel* (London: J.G. Barnard, 1807), 29; Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 290.

<sup>68</sup> J. Brown, Preacher to the Methodist Congregation at Free-town, to the Rev. Dr. Coke, 5 July 1806, in *Arminian Magazine* (June 1807), 283-84.

Methodists, and might have been extended on the recommendation of Boston King, who spent two years (1794-1796) in England, being trained as a missionary at the Methodist Kingswood School. King had returned newly “convinced, that many of these White People instead of bring enemies and oppressors of us poor Blacks, are our friends, and deliverers from slavery, as far as their ability and circumstances will admit.” Published serially in the *Methodist Magazine* in 1798, King’s words might be read as a rebuttal to the anti-government actions of Henry Beverhout and others, but a closer reading suggests “*these* White People” were British Methodists, not white Englishmen more broadly. “I have met with most affectionate treatment,” he clarified, “from the Methodists of London, Bristol, and other places which I have had an opportunity of visiting. And I must confess, that I did not believe there were upon the face of the earth a people so friendly and human as I have proved them to be. I beg leave to acknowledge the obligations I am under to Dr. Coke, Mr. Bradford, and all the Preachers and people; and I pray GOD to reward them a thousand fold for all the favours they have shewn to me in a strange land.”<sup>69</sup> Boston King died in 1802, nearly a decade before the first missionary officially dispatched by Methodist leaders in England arrived in Sierra Leone.

By the time George Warren was sent in November 1811, much had changed. Most significantly, Britain had abolished the transatlantic slave trade, and Sierra Leone had become an official Crown Colony, no longer under the direction of the Sierra Leone Company. George Warren took a cautious

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<sup>69</sup> Boston King, “Memoirs of the Life of Boston King,” *Methodist Magazine* (June 1798), 264.

approach to his mission, respecting the independence of local black Methodists, shouldering instead the administrative load, securing additional funding for the building and repair of chapels, and taking steps to reunite the various Methodist factions. His first communication to Thomas Coke revealed that the Freetown Methodists “inquired if I had any letter, from yourself or the Conference, to them. ‘We believe,’ said they, ‘that you are properly sent out to us, but still we wish to have some real evidence of it.’”<sup>70</sup> In response to Warren’s presentation of a letter from Coke, he was greeted warmly, being assured by black Methodists that “this ... is what we have been long praying for & now the Lord had answered our Prayers.” One month later, he reported in a letter concerning one of the independent chapels, “occupied ... by persons who separated from the society” and led by “Mr. Henry Warren, their minister.” “We have had one meeting with him on the subject, and it is likely that an union will soon be effected, to the mutual satisfaction of both parties.”<sup>71</sup> But Warren quickly succumbed to poor health, passing away just nine months after his arrival, in July 1812. His obituary described “his death” as “sudden,” attributing it to his “being too confident from the uninterrupted health which he enjoyed” and “labour[ing] even more than would perhaps have been prudent even in his native country.”<sup>72</sup> Warren was the first of several English missionaries who struggled to adjust to Sierra Leone’s climate.

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<sup>70</sup> George Warren to Thomas Coke, 13 November 1811, in *Methodist Magazine* (August 1812), 637.

<sup>71</sup> George Warren to John Simpson, 9 December 1811, WMMS, Correspondence Sierra Leone, 1811-1834, Yale Divinity School Special Collections, New Haven, Connecticut (hereafter YDS); George Warren to Mr. Francis Collier, 6 December 1811, in *Methodist Magazine* (April 1812), 318.

<sup>72</sup> *Methodist Magazine* (September 1813), 706-07.

The newly established mission was left to the care of two Methodist schoolmasters, John Healey and Thomas Hirst, who had accompanied Warren in 1811. Although they appear to have continued their predecessor's policy of cooperating with local leaders, neither was as enthusiastic about the work as Warren. They reported in April 1813 that their meetings, both on Sundays and during the week, "are in general well attended," and remarked that "the old blind, & Lamé man, Moses Wilkinson, is yet alive but attends very seldom." Moses, now 66 years old and in very poor health, evidently had not lost his touch for electrifying preaching: "When he speaks," reported Healey and Hirst, "he outstretches his voice at times, to terror and frightfulness." Another letter a little more than a year later revealed that in spite of Warren's earlier efforts, the Methodists in Freetown remained divided. Though "the present state hereof is nearly the same as last quarter," the missionaries noted with obvious disappointment that "one (Moses Wilkinson the old lame & blind Preacher mentioned by Mr Black in his journals as having been very useful in Nova Scotia) has exchanged our Society for another."<sup>73</sup>

The tensions between Methodists picked up renewed steam with the appointment of William Davies as missionary to Sierra Leone in 1815. Unlike George Warren (and, to a lesser degree, Healey and Hirst), Davies did not defer to local customs. Like Melville Horne and John Clarke in the 1790s, he instead formed a close working relationship with colonial officials, becoming a senior alderman and justice of the peace. Most significantly, he refused to acknowledge

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<sup>73</sup> J. Healey and T. Hirst to Thomas Coke, 25 April 1813; J. Healey and T. Hirst to Thomas Blanshard, 20 July 1814; WMMS, YDS.

the black congregations' right to request his credentials and refused to consult with them on the appointment of various class leaders. They accused him "of lording [his authority] over them, of being too proud for a Methodist Preacher, and of paying too much attention to Government." Davies fired back, charging local preachers of being "a proud stiff necked generation" jealous of his standing in the colony. Asserting their own authority as guardians of the pulpit, the black Methodists refused Davies further access to the chapel, rejecting him as their ecclesiastical superintendent. Davies, in turn, accepted a position preaching to liberated Africans in the nearby village of Leopold, for which he received "a small salary from the government."<sup>74</sup>

Davies was replaced in his position as superintendent of the Wesleyan mission to Sierra Leone by Samuel Brown. Relations between black Methodists and white missionaries continued along relatively well for the next few years, as Brown was replaced by John Baker and John Gillison. New congregations were formed in nearby Portuguese Town, Congo Town, and Soldier's Town. But tensions arose once more with the appointment of John Huddleston and George Lane in 1820, culminating in a fierce battle over the black congregants right to control access to their pulpit and the disputed ownership of the chapels. When Huddleston attempted to dissolve the society and readmit only those who sided with him, black Methodists physically occupied the chapel and, once again, announced their independence from white rule. This time, unlike twenty-five

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<sup>74</sup> "Extracts of Letters rec<sup>d</sup> from Mr Davies at Sierra Leone Africa, dated 1 Jan<sup>y</sup> 1817," WMMS, YDS; Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 293.

years before, they achieved a legal victory and established themselves as the West African Methodist Society.<sup>75</sup>

The timing of their long-sought independence from white rule is striking. It occurred just six years after the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia and less than a year after the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in New York City. A closer examination of the paths to independence pursued by black Methodists on either side of the Atlantic Ocean reveals just how similar they were, while also highlighting the crucial ways in which they differed.

In a 1985 article, historian Will Gravely identified five issues of particular importance “in the shift” from independent black Methodist congregations “to Afro-American denominationalism,” including “access to ordination, representations in denominational governance, consultation about pastoral appointments and services, the ownership and use of church property, and participation in congregational discipline.”<sup>76</sup> Of those, black Methodists in Sierra Leone shared at least four. Like their counterparts in Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore, Freetown Methodists were especially protective of representation in ecclesiastical affairs, their right to appoint, accept, and reject pastoral appointments, participation in congregational discipline, and, most crucially, the ownership of church property. From the arrival of Melville Horne in 1793, they had fiercely protected access to their pulpit, culminating in their refusal to accept John Huddleston’s appointment of a Moses Brown, a white schoolmaster as a

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<sup>75</sup> Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 293-95.

<sup>76</sup> Gravely, “African Methodisms and the Rise of Black Denominationalism,” 111-124.

class leader in 1821. Perhaps most crucially, though, were their efforts to secure and protect their ownership of church property.

Sarah Barringer Gordon has recently demonstrated the critical role that corporate law played in securing denominational independence for black Methodists in Philadelphia, noting that “bringing law into focus shows how such churches were built, defended, and fought over by black congregations.” As noted above, the African Methodist Episcopal Church first incorporated in 1796. Doing so provided black congregants with access to legal channels otherwise limited to them on account of their race. But the Articles of Association under which black Methodists in Philadelphia incorporated left them dependent upon the cooperation of white ministers. When, in 1805, a southern minister named James Smith was appointed to oversee the Bethel congregation as part of his duties at St. George’s, he brought with him an antagonistic attitude toward black independence and, according to Gordon, “was determined to subdue the independent Bethelites.” This marked the first major problem between the black congregants and white ministers in their decade of congregational independence, with Smith demanding control of the building and Richard Allen refusing. While the Articles made clear that Bethel’s nine black trustees owned the chapel, that claim was muddled by the stipulation that the congregation does “acquiesce in, and accord with the rules of the Methodist Episcopal Church.” Seeking to shore up their right to ownership, Allen and the other trustees, assisted by a lawyer, submitted several proposed amendments to Pennsylvania officials. Known as “the African Supplement,” the amendments granted to trustees the right “to



mortgage the church, expel or suspend current members, appoint preachers and exhorters, and refuse to accept any preacher nominated by the (white) Methodist minister of the nearby St. George's Church." Deemed "lawful" by state officials, the African Supplement strengthened the black congregation's claims to ownership and control of the church. A string of legal battles with white Methodist leaders over the next decade led finally to the formal and decisive split of the Bethel congregation and the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816.<sup>77</sup>

Although black Methodists in Sierra Leone operated within a different legal system than their counterparts in the United States, they engaged in strikingly similar battles over church property. In 1812, Governor Charles William Maxwell was tasked with overseeing a series of new laws reforming the colony's land grant policies. Among other things, it required current properties and claims to be newly titled.<sup>78</sup> John Healey and Thomas Hirst, looking to secure the property for the Wesleyan Mission, had a deed drawn up for the piece of property on which the Rawdon Street chapel stood, on April 14, 1813. The chapel and adjoining lands were granted to "Thomas Coke, his Heirs and Assigns." Coke was president of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society at the time the deed was signed, but it made no mention of the Mission by name.<sup>79</sup> When Coke passed away just over a year later, it left ownership of the property in question. But as long as the missionaries and the black Methodists who attended the chapel were

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<sup>77</sup> Gordon, "The African Supplement," 385-422.

<sup>78</sup> Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 117-18.

<sup>79</sup> Copy of Title Deed, 21 April 1813, WMMS, YDS.

getting along, there was no problem. But when efforts to construct a new and more permanent stone structure on the property to replace the original wooden building, the question of ownership was raised.

On April 16, 1821, George Lane, John Huddleston, the several trustees, stewards, and local preachers, along with many others, assembled on the chapel grounds for a meeting. Huddleston's hopes that they would get to work on finishing the chapel were "soon blasted" when "the leaders, and trustees" confronted him, demanding to know, "To whome does the chapel belong, to the trustees, or to the conference." Relations between the two groups had been tense for some months past, with the black trustees and local preachers insisting "that the Methodist Body in England have nothing to do with them: and that they were under no obligation at all to the Missionary Committee." Black leaders insisted that the chapel and grounds "belonged to them," but Huddleston and Lane "positively affirmed, that the chapel belonged to the preachers, and people, who were in connection with Conference."<sup>80</sup> Now "convinced that it was highly necessary to come to some final conclusion" on the matter, the missionaries proceeded "to dissolve the society," afterward readmitting "those who were willing to conform to the Methodistical discipline." In June, Huddleston reported to mission leaders in England that "[w]e have got all the chapels in our possession, though at the same time we have had much trouble about the Freetown Chapel." In response to the missionaries' insistence that the mission owned the chapel, down to the hinges on the front door, the black Methodists "pulled the door off[

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<sup>80</sup> George Lane to the Committee of the W.M. Miss<sup>y</sup> Society, 11 June 1821; John Huddleston to the Weslean Missionary Committee, 11 June 1821; WMMS, YDS.

the hinges and stole it.” When Huddleston “attempted to put a new one on,” the “trustees prevented me by force.” Intimidated by their physical occupation of the chapel grounds, Huddleston opted to appeal to the courts, confident that “the deeds which are in the Mission House” would confirm that “the chapel” was intended “for the enjoyment of Weslean missionaries and them only.”<sup>81</sup>

Huddleston was disappointed to learn, however, “that this cannot be settled here.” “The Chief Justice himself,” he wrote ruefully to London, “says he cannot think how it can be settled here.” Sierra Leone evidently had “no court for such business,” but the ambiguity of the original deed no doubt dissuaded authorities from intervening, as well, hoping that “the business” might “be settled in England.”<sup>82</sup> With the assistance of a lawyer, the missionaries presented to Governor Charles MacCarthy with a “Deed of Covenant” that sought to supersede the original deed and secure the property for the Mission. The Deed presented a legal interpretation that connected John Wesley to Thomas Coke and Coke, in his capacity as President of the Methodist Missionary Society, to the missionaries then in Sierra Leone. To this, they attached a letter appealing to the governor’s desire “for Peace & Unity among all Parties of his Majesty’s Subjects under your Government,” expressing their “lament” at “the dreadful Seperation which has lately taken place in our Society.”<sup>83</sup> The black Methodists’ claims to ownership, by contrast, were based on two primary facts: first, that they had occupied the original chapel since its construction in 1798, thirteen years

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<sup>81</sup> Huddleston to Weslean Missionary Committee, 11 June 1821, WMMS, YDS.

<sup>82</sup> Huddleston to Weslean Missionary Committee, 11 June 1821, WMMS, YDS.

<sup>83</sup> “Deed of Covenants relative to Chapel at Sierra Leone, 1821;” Copy of a Memorial present by the Methodist Mission to Govr Sir C. MacCarthy, 18 January 1822, WMMS, YDS.

before the first white missionaries even arrived, and second, that their trustees had raised money for the new chapel. On March 12, 1822, Governor MacCarthy handed down his judgment:

The present enjoyment of the Chapel shall be given to the Trustees named in the Deeds (or the Survivors of them) & those associated with them in the Trust, that the Rights of the Ministers of the Conference shall remained undecided, but that no Minister or Missionary sent out by the Conference shall take upon himself to Preach or Teach in the Chapel without the Consent of the Trustees for the Time being, or the Major Part of them, signified in Writing, to the Gov<sup>r</sup> for the Time being in his capacity of Chancellor.<sup>84</sup>

Though only offered as a “provisional decree” and couched in language of “for the time being,” the judgment was a landmark victory for the black Methodists. It not only granted them ownership of the primary piece of Methodist property in the colony, but also authority to control access to their pulpit, thereby lending force to their earlier expulsion of Huddleston and Lane from the society. Like their African Methodist peers in Philadelphia, the Freetown congregation had won a decisive victory in court, one that helped propel them immediately toward independence.

On major difference that separated the black Methodists of Freetown from their counterparts across the Atlantic, however, was the fight for access to ordination. Part of the reason the 1796 Articles of Association drawn up by black Methodists in Philadelphia were limited was the fact that no African American Methodist had yet been ordained to the ministry. That changed three years later, in 1799, when Bishop Francis Asbury privately ordained Richard Allen a deacon. The following year, the Methodist Episcopal Church quietly approved a new rule allowing for the ordination of “black and coloured people” more generally. From

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<sup>84</sup> Copy of Provisional Decree from C. MacCarthy, Gov<sup>r</sup>, 12 March 1821, WMMS, YDS. See also Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 293-95.

1800 until his death in 1816, Asbury ordained at least ten black men as “local deacons.” It was a peculiar designation, one that granted the black preachers some measure of ecclesiastical authority, but only in a local (instead of itinerant) sphere, and without the full rights to administer various sacraments reserved for those ordained “elders.” As Will Gravely has noted, “without full ordination, there was no chance for direct denominational representation and participation in governance.”<sup>85</sup> When Richard Allen and Daniel Coker led their Philadelphia and Baltimore congregations toward full denominational independence in 1816, they made sure to have Allen ordained “by prayer and the imposition of the hands of five regularly ordained ministers” to ensure “the validity of his Episcopal Ordination.”<sup>86</sup> Five years later, when black Methodists in New York were refused ordination by white Methodist Episcopal leaders and Richard Allen alike, they turned instead to William Stilwell, Sylvester Hutchinson, and James Covell, “all regularly ordained Elders of the Methodist Episcopal Church” who had recently split from the MEC and formed the schismatic Methodist Society of New York. On June 17, 1822, Covell ordained Abraham Thompson, James Varick, and Leven Smith “Elders in the church of God,” thus granting the three black preachers the authority needed to establish the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Reginald Hildebrand, “Methodist Episcopal Policy on the Ordination of Black Ministers, 1784-1864,” *Methodist History* 20 (April 1982): 124-42.

<sup>86</sup> *Doctrines and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia: Richard Allen and Jacob Tapsico, 1817), 10.

<sup>87</sup> Christopher Rush, *A Short Account of the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in America, Written by Christopher Rush, Superintendent of the Connexion, with the Aid of George Collins: Also, a Concise View of Church Order or Government, from Scripture and from Some of the Best Authors on the Subject of Church Government, Relative to Episcopacy* (New York: By the author, 1843), 84. Richard Allen refused to ordain the New York preachers as elders unless they united

There is no record, by contrast, of the black Methodists in Freetown actively pursuing ordination, either in Nova Scotia or Sierra Leone. While they recognized the ecclesiastical authority of white Methodist (and in some instances, Anglican) ministers, relying on them for several sacraments, including baptism, the Lord's Supper, and marriage, they also evidenced little hesitation about performing those ordinances themselves when they viewed it as necessary. Indeed, the right to marry and baptize was central to their reasons for announcing their independence in 1796. "We consider ourselves a perfect Church," they announced, "having no need of the assistance of any worldly power to appoint or perform religious ceremonies for us. If persons in holy orders are allowed to marry, we see no reason why our Ministers should not do it." Macaulay derisively labeled them "self-created preachers," and in a very real sense they were.<sup>88</sup> But they were neither consistent nor clear on this point. When George Warren arrived in 1811, the black Methodists expressed their joy to have someone "qualified to administer the sacrament," which meant that they would no longer need to attend Anglican services. And when confronted with hostile missionaries in the 1820s, the black congregants felt no compulsion to wait for or seek ordination to justify their separation.<sup>89</sup>

As a group of lay men and women asserting their right to ecclesiastical independence and separation from white parent bodies, the Freetown Methodists resembled the African Union Church, the first wholly independent black

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their congregation with his AME Church. See Bulthuis, *Four Steeples Over the City Streets*, 137-38.

<sup>88</sup> "The Independent Methodist Church in Freetown to the Governor and Council (11 July 1796)," in Knutsford, *Life and Letters*, 145-46; Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks*, 343.

<sup>89</sup> Warren to John Simpson, 9 December 1811, WMMS, YDS.

Methodist church in the United States. Led by lay preacher Peter Spencer, the “Union Church of African Members” formally organized themselves into a church in 1813 in Wilmington, Delaware. In September of that year, they set Spencer apart as their pastor, even though he lacked ordination of any kind. The authority to ordain was drawn from the congregation, not one already ordained.<sup>90</sup> Unlike the AUC, who did not hesitate to drop “Methodist” from their church’s name, however, the black Methodists in Sierra Leone clung to their identity as Methodists.

The 1796 congregation called themselves “The Independent Methodist Church of Freetown,” and even after several members recanted their signatures in the face of Macaulay’s threats to charge them with treason, they clarified that they merely wanted to be clear “that they were Methodists, and that they meant to continue so.”<sup>91</sup> By contrast, following their departure from St. George’s church in Philadelphia a few years earlier, black Methodists found themselves threatened with expulsion from the Methodist Episcopal Church. Outraged, Richard Allen insisted that “if you deny us your name [as Methodists], remember ‘that you cannot seal up the Scriptures from us, and deny us a name in heaven.’” When Allen’s close friend and associate Absalom Jones was offered ordination in the Protestant Episcopal Church, Allen refused to follow, citing his identity as a Methodist.<sup>92</sup> The black Methodists of Sierra Leone evidently shared Allen’s opinion that, in spite of the “violent persecution” suffered at the hands of its white

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<sup>90</sup> On Peter Spencer and the African Union Church, see Lewis V. Baldwin, *The Mark of a Man: Peter Spencer and the African Union Methodist Tradition* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987); Melton, *A Will to Choose*, 82-84.

<sup>91</sup> Macaulay Journal, in Knutsford, *Life and Letters*, 147.

<sup>92</sup> Allen, *Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours*, 16; Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 70-73.

adherents, “no religious sect or denomination would suit the capacity of the coloured people as well as the Methodist; for the plain and simple gospel suits best for any people.”<sup>93</sup> Just prior to their declaration of independence in July 1796, several black Methodists informed Sierra Leone chaplain John Clarke, “Sir, we are Methodists, we are determined to live and die such, we will not change our religion for anything you can say to us.” One couple went further: In response to Clarke’s sermon inviting “them to come to Christ,” they pointedly explained, “We are in Christ already and have been for these 22 years.” As evidence of their Methodist convictions, they presented to Clarke two books authored by John Wesley. Surprised, Clarke inquired whether or not the couple could read. “We can’t read it is true,” they confidently replied, “but *our souls* can read them.”<sup>94</sup> Their commitment to Methodism remained strong in the years leading up to their eventual independence in 1822, and shortly after securing the chapel and organizing themselves, the church adopted as their name, the West African Methodist Society.

Kyle Bulthuis’s observation that “the creation of a black Methodist church ... involved separation of not only black from white, but also black from black.” This was seen not only in the tensions that existed between Allen’s African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church of New York City, but also “between black men and women, and between middling and laboring blacks.”<sup>95</sup> Whereas middling free blacks in New York City, aiming for social respectability, set themselves apart from their enslaved coreligionists,

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<sup>93</sup> Allen, *Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours*, 16.

<sup>94</sup> Knutsford, *Life and Letters*, 136; Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks*, 350.

<sup>95</sup> Bulthuis, *Four Steeples Over the City Streets*, 72, 99.



most of whom remained members of the white-run Methodist Episcopal Church, in Sierra Leone, black Methodists split along ethnic lines.

In Freetown, there were three distinct groups of black inhabitants in the early nineteenth century: those that had come from Nova Scotia in 1792, the Jamaican Maroons who first arrived in 1800, and liberated Africans (or “recaptured Negroes”), those the British Navy had rescued from illegal slavers following the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. By the 1810s, Methodists had made significant inroads among both the Maroons and the liberated Africans, organizing classes and congregations in their spatially separate neighborhoods and villages in and around Freetown. In 1818, a group of Methodist Maroons in Freetown’s west end, announced plans to build a chapel of their own. Although the Maroons were members of a class in connection with the Wesleyan Mission, they insisted that “they would not make over the Chapel to Conference” and that it “will be open to whoever they may choose to preach in it.” In fact, it may have been the Maroons who told the Nova Scotian settlers that they “have sold our Chapel to Conference” and “given up landed property,” thus prompting the ensuing fight with missionaries over the Rawdon Street chapel and property.<sup>96</sup> In spite of their own difficulties with white preachers, the black trustees of the Freetown society—all Nova Scotians—refused the several petitions of Maroon and liberated African converts to serve as class leaders and local preachers, preferring to reserve those positions for themselves. Following the 1822 establishment of the West African Methodist Society, the Nova Scotian

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<sup>96</sup> “The Petition of the Wesleyan Society of the Colony of Sierra Leone,” 25 June 1819, WMMS, YDS.

Methodists succeeding in securing the support of the several liberated African classes. The missionaries maintained the allegiance of the Maroons who, although they continued to refuse the Mission ownership of their chapel, agreed to lease the building to the mission for a fourteen-year period, thus ensuring that tensions between the Nova Scotians and Maroons remained high for the foreseeable future.<sup>97</sup>

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The parallel timelines of the push for institutional independence among black Methodists in North America and Africa is striking, especially in light of the fact that leaders on either side of the Atlantic were likely unfamiliar with the other's specific circumstances. Black Methodists in Sierra Leone and their counterparts in the United States shared much in common and responded to similar pressures and processes at work in the Revolutionary Atlantic World. Their shared experience was rooted in their earlier enslavement and subsequent achievement of freedom. Black adherents throughout the Atlantic World found in Methodism a rich religious experience (one they believed uniquely well suited to black men and women) entrenched in experimental spirituality, one that welcomed visions, dreams, and spiritual manifestations as divinely legitimate. They also found in their new faith a discipline and set of rules that provided both structure and meaning to their transition from slavery to freedom. Furthermore, both groups were responding to (and participants in) the forces of institutionalization at work throughout the Methodist movement. Methodists

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<sup>97</sup> Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 295.

institutionalized along not only racial lines, but also along national lines and ideological lines at the turn of the nineteenth century.

But there are also several intriguing connections linking black Methodists in each locale. Some are fleeting and likely inconsequential: African Methodist leaders in Freetown and Philadelphia alike were familiar and friendly with Paul Cuffee, the noted black Quaker businessman and champion of colonization. In his 1812 tract, *A Brief Account of the Settlement and Present Situation of the Colony of Sierra Leone, in Africa*, Cuffee included an antislavery address “from the Society of Sierra Leone, in Africa, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ.” It was signed by several prominent black Methodists, including Moses Wilkinson, John Gordon, Joseph Brown, and James Wise. The tract was published in New York and circulated widely throughout the United States, aimed at promoting colonization among black America’s “first characters”—that is, African American leaders like Richard Allen.<sup>98</sup> Allen’s own attitude towards colonization was never consistently supportive, but he knew Cuffee personally and likely read his 1812 tract. There is no evidence, though, that he knew anything of Moses Wilkinson and James Wise’s contemporaneous push for black Methodist independence.<sup>99</sup> When Cuffee set sail for Sierra Leone a second time in December 1815, he was accompanied by nine black families from the United States, including at least two

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<sup>98</sup> Paul Cuffee, *A Brief Account of the Settlement and Present Situation of the Colony of Sierra Leone, in Africa* (New York: Samuel Wood, 1812), 9-10.

<sup>99</sup> On Allen’s complicated attitudes toward colonization, including his relationship with Cuffee, see Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 183-208.

Methodists: Samuel Wilson, a 36-year-old member of Richard Allen's Bethel congregation, and Perry Lockes, a 30-year-old Methodist from Boston.<sup>100</sup>

By far the strongest and most intriguing connection linking black Methodists on either side of the Atlantic was the 1820 arrival of Daniel Coker in Sierra Leone. Coker, who had led his black Baltimore congregation from the Methodist Episcopal Church and united with Allen's AME Church in 1816, subsequently experienced a falling out with church leaders over unspecified issues. He subsequently accepted a post as an agent of the American Colonization Society, setting sail for Sierra Leone in 1820. Coker was a leading black voice in support of colonization, and it was on his recommendation that the colonization society altered its plans to pursue a permanent settlement on Sherbro Island, eventually settling on land further south that became Liberia. Coker and his family opted to settle in Freetown, where he remained until his death in 1835. Records documenting the final years of Coker's life are scant, but in 1822, he was named superintendent of Hastings, one of the several villages for liberated Africans on the outskirts of Freetown. The position included both teaching and preaching responsibilities, and Coker assumed leadership of the local Methodist class there. The timing of his new appointment coincided with the separation of the Nova Scotian Methodists from the Wesleyan Mission, and Coker's Hastings class was one of several that opted to unite with the newly independent black Methodists. According to at least one historian, it was Coker

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<sup>100</sup> Kevin G. Lowther, *The African American Odyssey of John Kizell: A South Carolina Slave Returns to Fight the Slave Trade in His African Homeland* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 200. There is no record of either Wilson or Lockes interacting with black Methodists or attending Methodist services in Sierra Leone, though it seems likely that they did both.

himself who recommended the name, “West African Methodist Society,” repeating in Africa his earlier efforts in America “to integrate identity with independency.” Coker also provided the new church with unprecedented ecclesiastical authority, ordaining at least two preachers, Prince Stober and Joseph Jewett.<sup>101</sup>

The beginnings of independent black Methodism was thus a truly transatlantic affair, connected both by the movement of ideas, institutions, and people throughout the Atlantic World. As religious studies scholar Jehu Hanciles has noted, in Sierra Leone, “as in the New World, racial consciousness and reaction to white domination manifested itself most emphatically in religious separatism.”<sup>102</sup> In spite of the different legal and political conditions of their respective residences, black Methodists in Sierra Leone and in the United States shared much in common. Both faced white encroachment into their ecclesiastical affairs, initiating racially segregated worship in response. That each followed remarkably similar timelines to ecclesiastical independence highlights the central role race played in the institutionalization of the Methodist movement. But it was not the only force at work among Methodists in the early nineteenth century. At the same time black Methodists finally achieved their independence from white Methodist churches, those churches were also solidifying their own institutional boundaries in response to ongoing political conflict.

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<sup>101</sup> Jehu Hanciles, *Euthanasia of a Mission: African Church Autonomy in a Colonial Context* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 151. See also Mary Corey, “Daniel Coker: Between an Oppressive Culture and a Liberating God” (PhD diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1988); and Christopher Fyfe, “The West African Methodists in the Nineteenth Century,” *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion* 3:1 (1961): 23.

<sup>102</sup> Hanciles, *Euthanasia of a Mission*, 151.

CHAPTER 6  
Ecclesiastical Borderlands: Methodism and War in British North America,  
1776-1815

When war broke out between Great Britain and her colonies in North America in 1775, the small band of Wesleyan preachers traveling the nascent Methodist circuits along the eastern seaboard were accused of opposing independence. They were classified as “a set of Tories, under the cloak of religion” and “sent here by the English ministry to preach up passive obedience and non-resistance.” By 1778, all but one of those preachers had returned to the British Isles. Many Methodists, including those sympathetic to the revolutionary cause but who refused to take an oath of allegiance, were harassed, beaten, and forced into hiding for the duration of the war.<sup>1</sup>

Thirty-seven years later, the United States and Great Britain resumed hostilities. And once again, Methodists in British North America were accused of being dangerous political threats. Only now, Methodists in Upper and Lower Canada fended off accusations of disloyalty to the British Empire. Disparagingly branded as “Yankees” and “stigmatized as Jacobins” by their detractors, the Methodists of British North America struggled to refute the charges. Anglican clerics in particular had long been critical of Methodists in the region, concerned that the evangelical movement not only syphoned away congregants from the Established Church, but also posed a serious threat to the social order. Most of the 21 preachers from the American-based Methodist Episcopal Church then

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<sup>1</sup> William Watters, *A Short Account of the Christian Experience, and Ministereal Labours, of William Watters, Drawn up by Himself* (Alexandria: S. Snowden, 1806), 49-50; Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 50-62.

laboring in Canada retreated across the border to the safety of the United States, and there remained for the duration of the war.<sup>2</sup>

Methodists in neither conflict were the surreptitious political threats others feared them to be. Preachers were instructed always to avoid weighing in on political matters from the pulpit, especially in instances where the minister served in a foreign land. And the political views and wartime experiences of both preachers and parishioners were more diverse than is typically recognized. Methodists in Revolutionary Virginia enjoyed a relatively peaceful existence during the tumultuous years of the 1770s, free from the legal and extralegal violence faced by preachers in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere. In contrast to those states, where Methodism grew in spite of their suspected Toryism, Virginia's unique religious landscape and the more overt patriotism of several Virginia Methodists allowed the movement to flourish during the war. By 1780, nearly half of all Methodists in North America lived in Virginia.<sup>3</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, Methodists sought to capitalize on their success in the state, using it as a launching ground to pursue various reforms, including the general abolition of slavery. Only then did Virginia's Methodists encounter the degree of intense opposition faced earlier by their coreligionists elsewhere.

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<sup>2</sup> Letter, May 26, 1812, Methodist Missionary Society Fonds, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Ontario. Microfilm Roll A-258.

<sup>3</sup> *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the Years 1773-1828* (New York: Thomas Mason and George Lane, 1840), 13. The 3,871 Methodists in Virginia made up over 45% of the movement's total American membership of 8,504. See also John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 198 (Table A.2).

At the same time that Methodists in the Old Dominion were being targeted as “Tools of the British Administration,” those that moved north into British Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were harassed as American imperialists. Methodism’s growth between the American Revolution and the War of 1812 was not limited to the United States. The flood of loyalist exiles into the Maritime and Canadian colonies led to the creation of Methodist classes and congregations in those regions. Their arrival, and the subsequent success of preachers there, presented church leaders with the question of how best to minister to those Methodists living in what remained of British North America. Would ecclesiastical boundaries be redrawn to mimic political borders, or would the territories come under the oversight of the newly established Methodist Episcopal Church, headquartered in the new nation of the United States? Initially, British and American Methodists shared responsibility for the region. But the ongoing suspicions and outright hostilities faced by American preachers in both the Maritimes and Canada eventually forced the MEC to scale back its presence and then withdraw entirely, ceding control to the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in the wake of the War of 1812. Following the War’s conclusion, the Methodist Episcopal Church would reorient its outlook, both ideologically and geographically. Looking west with renewed focus and fervor, Methodists by the 1820s were more comfortable with American political, military, and civic culture than ever before.

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On a congressionally appointed fast day in March 1776, Methodist preacher William Watters attended the preaching service of the Anglican parson in Alexandria, Virginia. Taking as his text Romans 13:1-2, the minister’s sermon



“consisted of two parts. First, of what he called an explanation of the text,” and “secondly, an attack on the Methodists.”

We were all in general, and the preachers in particular, declared to be a set of Tories, under a cloak of religion. That the preachers were sent here by the English ministry to preach up passive obedience and non-resistance. That they pretended their desire for the salvation of the people, led them to travel and preach through the country; but money in his opinion was their real object. He concluded this part of his subject by declaring that he would, if at the helm of our national affairs, make our nasty stinking carcasses pay for our pretended scruples of conscience.

Watters was shocked, both because “I never had heard of his saying a word about us in public” prior to this encounter and because the charges were, in Watters’s mind, so patently false. Rising to address the assembled congregation at the conclusion of the minister’s remarks, Watters “observed, that in all accusations particularly those of a public nature, where there was no proof offered, ... they deserved no answer, except by silent contempt.” But because “the present assertions were of so extraordinary a nature,” he felt compelled to respond. “First—The parson has told you, ‘we are all Tories.’ I say as preremptorily we are not,” Watters retorted, challenging the minister “or the whole neighbourhood, to prove if they can, an action in any one of us, which is unbecoming good Citizens.” On the accusation that the Methodists had been “sent by the British ministry, to preach up passive obedience and non-resistance,” Watters denied “that they ever sent me, or that they know there is such a being on earth” and again asked his audience for proof that “any one of us say one word like the doctrine of passive obedience and non-resistance.” In response to the final charge of the preachers swindling the people for financial

gain, Watters could only laugh. If true, he chortled, “then I venture to say we preach for what we don’t get.”<sup>4</sup>

William Watters’s experience, in which a patriotic Anglican minister charges an American-born evangelical preacher with being a subversive tool of “the English ministry,” cuts directly against popular perceptions of insurgent evangelical Patriots triumphing over a staid Established clergy and helping usher in the sweeping changes of the Revolutionary era. It also points to the unique place occupied by Methodists in the religious landscape of colonial and revolutionary Virginia – evangelical but not necessarily dissenter; loyal to the Church of England but not always England itself. In his response to the unnamed Anglican rector, William Watters expressed a perspective common among Methodist preachers in the war’s early years: “I concluded by observing,” wrote Watters, “that ... I did not think politics ought to be introduced into the sacred pulpit on any occasion” and that “I firmly believed my business was the preach the Gospel, and not to meddle with those public affairs, which were in much better hands, and in my opinion was unbecoming men of my profession.”<sup>5</sup> This stance was in line with John Wesley’s directive for preachers in America “to be peace-makers, to be loving and tender to all, but to addict yourselves to no party.”<sup>6</sup> But just as Wesley’s instructions were undermined in the eyes of many by his own subsequent publications on political affairs, so too were Watters’s efforts to keep politics out of the pulpit belied by his own expressions of political allegiance: “I did most seriously deny that there was one drop of Tory blood

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<sup>4</sup> Watters, *A Short Account*, 48-52.

<sup>5</sup> Watters, *A Short Account*, 52.

<sup>6</sup> John Wesley to “My Dear Brethren,” 1 March 1775, in John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 6:142-43.

flowing through my veins,” he stressed to his audience. When “a Magistrate presented” several Methodist preachers “the oath of allegiance,” Watters “had no hesitation in taking it.” Watters remained loyal to the Anglican Church—“we considered ourselves at this time as belonging to the Church of England,” he wrote—but that loyalty did not extend to the political sphere.<sup>7</sup>

How representative were Watters’s views among Methodists in Virginia more generally? At first glance, they appear to be directly contradicted by other itinerant preachers traveling in the state, sometimes alongside Watters himself. Just months after Watters’s challenge to the Alexandria congregation to present evidence of the Methodists’ rumored Toryism, George Shadford, one of the original ordained preachers dispatched by Wesley to North America, penned a petition to the Virginia legislature. Written in October 1776 amidst ongoing debates over the disestablishment of the Church of England in Virginia, Shadford’s petition was intended to distinguish the Methodists from other dissenting evangelicals in the state: “That your petitioners being informed the dissenters are preparing to lay a petition before your House for abolishing the present Establishment of the Church,” Shadford began, “and Whereas it may be that we also come under the Denomination of Dissenters & Desire the same thing.—We beg leave to set forth that we are not Dissenters, but a Religious Society in Communion with the Church of England.” Citing unspecified “very bad Consequences” he feared disestablishment would cause, Shadford then concluded, “We therefore pray that as the Church of England ever hath been, so

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<sup>7</sup> Watters, *A Short Account*, 52, 57, 60-61. On John Wesley and the American Revolution, see Glen O’Brien, “John Wesley’s Rebuke to the Rebels of British America: Revisiting the Calm Address,” *Methodist Review* 4 (2012): 31-55.

it may continue to be Established.”<sup>8</sup> Shadford’s petition, which he signed “in Behalf of the whole Body of the people Commonly called Methodists in Virginia,” is often cited by historians as confirmation for “the patriots’ sour impression of the Wesleyans.”<sup>9</sup> And while Shadford did, in fact, remain loyal to not only the Church of England but also the Crown—he prayed for the King, refused to take an oath of allegiance, and in March 1778, joined Thomas Rankin, Martin Rodda, Robert Lindsay, and an unidentified black preacher on a return voyage to England—support for the Church of England did not necessarily equal support for Great Britain, as the experience of William Watters shows.<sup>10</sup>

Methodist historians Russell Richey, Kenneth Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt aptly observed in their recent survey of American Methodism that Revolutionary-era Wesleyans included “collaborators, Loyalists, pacifists, persecuted, and Patriots.”<sup>11</sup> While Methodist attitudes in Virginia toward the incipient conflict spanned the spectrum, their wartime experience stands in stark contrast to their coreligionists elsewhere in the Chesapeake and Middle Atlantic colonies in two crucial ways: First, Methodists in the Old Dominion escaped much of the legal and extralegal persecution suffered by preachers and laity elsewhere; and second, the movement experienced tremendous growth amidst the conflict. The relationship between those two trends is imprecise but unmistakable. Methodists enjoyed enough numerical strength in Virginia by 1776 to offset most of the suspicion their affiliation with the Church of England or John

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<sup>8</sup> “Methodist Petition, Oct. 28, 1776,” in “Virginia Legislative Papers,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 18:2 (April 1910): 143-44.

<sup>9</sup> Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, eds., *The Methodist Experience in America: A History* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 1:28; Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 55.

<sup>11</sup> Richey, et al., *The Methodist Experience*, 1:28.

Wesley's allegiance to the British Constitution might have caused. The general lack of overt persecution, in turn, ensured an uncommon stability for Methodists in Revolutionary Virginia that allowed it to continually attract new converts.

Ironically, it was George Shadford who was largely responsible for the movement's initial numerical growth. In May 1775, the three Methodist circuits in Virginia—Fairfax, Norfolk, and Brunswick—reported a combined membership of 955. Shortly after the conclusion of the annual conference held that month in Baltimore, Shadford assumed his new post overseeing the work on Virginia's Brunswick Circuit. There, he met for the first time Devereux Jarratt, an itinerant Anglican minister in Dinwiddie County who shared with the Methodists an evangelical outlook. Together, the two teamed up to lead a revival in the region. According to Jarratt, the revival began in his own Bath Parish (Dinwiddie County), and quickly spread throughout the colony's Southside counties and into North Carolina. Beginning in late fall, the resurgence of religious activity continued all winter and into the spring of 1776. It was, the evangelical Anglican minister estimated, "a Revival of Religion, as great as perhaps ever was known, in country places, in so short a time."<sup>12</sup> The Brunswick circuit, which served all of southern Virginia and North Carolina, numbered 800 prior to the revival, second only to Baltimore (840) in total membership. At the annual conference held in May 1776, the Brunswick circuit was officially divided to create three additional circuits covering southern Virginia and North Carolina. Membership in the four circuits had blossomed to 2,664. One year later, two additional circuits were created, with Methodists in Virginia's Southside counties eclipsing 3,100 and an

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<sup>12</sup> Devereux Jarratt, *A Brief Narrative of the Revival of Religion in Virginia, in a Letter to a Friend* (London: R. Hawes, 1778), 6.

additional 930 in North Carolina.<sup>13</sup> By 1780, Methodist membership in the region over the previous five years had grown by more than 400% to 3,871.

Membership in Pennsylvania, by contrast, remained stagnant, with totals in 1775 and 1780 both coming in at just 190. Even Maryland, where Methodists would experience a post-revolutionary boom in membership, only saw a slight increase during that five-year span, from 1,503 to 1,767.<sup>14</sup> While wartime growth never again matched the rates produced by the revival, Methodists continued to enjoy success in the region and Virginia remained the backbone of the American Methodist body into the 1780s and beyond.

It is a curious counterfactual to wonder what might have happened had the British-born Shadford remained in the region after the revival, but he left in 1777, returning to the Baltimore circuit. Would his continued presence in Virginia have stirred up opponents of Methodism and offset some of the subsequent growth in the region? Perhaps. Shadford's departure evidently came in response to his being "threatened ... with imprisonment" for "pray[ing] for the king" and refusing "to take the test-oath to renounce him forever."<sup>15</sup> It was better to leave the work in the hands of individuals like Jarratt, who lent at least nominal support to the Revolution, and Edward Dromgoole, who more forcefully supported the Patriot's cause than perhaps any other Methodist preacher. Dromgoole, an Irish immigrant who had joined the Methodist itinerancy in 1774, accompanied George Shadford to the Brunswick Circuit in 1775. When the circuit was split the following year, Dromgoole was appointed to the newly formed Carolina circuit. In

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<sup>13</sup> *Minutes, 1773-1828*, 7-8. The best accounts of the revival include XXX and XXXX.

<sup>14</sup> *Minutes, 1773-1828*, 1:5, 13. See also Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 197-199.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Jackson, *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers, Chiefly Written by Themselves* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office: 1878), 6:171.

the summer of 1776, Dromgoole had just concluded a sermon in Halifax, North Carolina, when news reached the county that the Continental Congress had signed and ratified the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia. Dromgoole was promptly invited by “Willie Jones, Esquire, and other distinguished patriots of the town,” to read the Declaration, an invitation he gladly accepted.<sup>16</sup> In the Methodist stronghold of southern Virginia and North Carolina, it was Edward Dromgoole and not George Shadford who more generally represented the views of the “people Commonly called Methodists,” in spite of Shadford’s claims otherwise.<sup>17</sup>

This was in part a calculated move by Methodists in the state. In 1777, Hollis Hanson was appointed to join Philip Gatch on the Sussex Circuit in southern Virginia. After traveling some 200 miles from Baltimore, Hanson turned back. According to Francis Asbury, Hanson “had some scruples of conscience about taking the test oath” and “was obliged to return.”<sup>18</sup> Nowhere else is the difference in wartime experience between Methodists in Virginia and elsewhere more demonstrable than in the test oaths required of all residents. In May 1777,

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<sup>16</sup> William L. Mackenzie, *Sons of the Emerald Isle, or Lives of One Thousand Remarkable Irishmen; including Memoirs of Noted Characters of Irish Parentage or Descent* (New York: Burgess, Stringer, and Company, 1844), 47. Halifax was a hotbed of revolutionary sentiment. The “Halifax Resolves”—a set of resolutions drafted by a committee of seven delegates from North Carolina’s Fourth Provincial Congress in April 1776—are recognized as “the first official provincial action for independence in any of the colonies.” It is not clear whether Dromgoole’s recital of the Declaration of Independence came before or after the reading by Cornelius Harnett on August 1, 1776, commemorated as the first public reading in North Carolina. See E.T. Malone, “Edward Dromgoole,” *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), at <http://ncpedia.org/biography/dromgoole-edward>. Accessed on 9 December 2015; and

<sup>17</sup> “Methodist Petition,” 144.

<sup>18</sup> *JLFA* 1:245, where Hanson is misidentified as “brother Hartley.” See Elizabeth Connor, *Methodist Trail Blazer: Philip Gatch, 1751-1834* (Rutland, Vermont: Academy Books, 1970), 80.

Virginia's General Assembly passed an act requiring "all free born males, above 16 years old, to take the oath of allegiance." Five months later, Maryland passed an "Act for the better security of the Government." The respective laws, though similar in intent, differed in both their particulars and their enforcement. In contrast to the Virginia law, the Maryland act required not only sworn fidelity and allegiance to the state, but also a commitment to military service.<sup>19</sup> Several of the preachers refused to take any oath, whether on the grounds of moral opposition to oaths in general or, more commonly, on pacifist principles. As early as 1776, Methodists in Maryland faced fines and imprisonment for refusal to serve in the military, and after the state made military service a requirement of its test oath two years later, the number and frequency of Methodists—including both preachers and laity—in prison increased.<sup>20</sup> In Virginia, by contrast, there is no record of any Methodist facing jail time or even a fine for refusal to comply with the test oath requirement.

It was not at first clear just how the Virginia law would affect Methodism in the state. As the preachers assembled for their Quarterly Conference in Greensville in August 1777, they "were a little interrupted just before our meeting

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<sup>19</sup> "An Act to Oblige the Free Male Inhabitants of this State Above a Certain Age to Give Assurance of Allegiance to the Same, and for Other Purposes," in William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619* (Richmond: J. & G. Cockran, 1821), 281-83; "An Act for the Better Security of the Government," in *Laws of Maryland, Made Since MDCCLXIII, Consisting of Acts of Assembly under the Proprietary Government, Resolves of Convention, the Declaration of Right, the Constitution and Form of Government, the Articles of Confederation, And, Acts of Assembly Since the Revolution* (Annapolis: Frederick Green, 1787), Ch. XX.

<sup>20</sup> The pacifism of Methodist preachers was neither uniform nor static. Some preachers echoed Quakers and Mennonites in denouncing war and refusing to bear arms, including some already enlisted in continental regiments. Others maintained that their ministerial service, and not their religious conscience, exempted them from military service. See Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 56-59.



commenced.” “Several of us being from another state,” wrote William Watters, “a Magistrate presented to us the oath of allegiance, (just published) which required ministers of every denomination belonging to another state, if they refused taking it, to give bond and security, to leave the state in a given time, or go to Jail.” Watters “had no hesitation in taking it,” but noted that others were more hesitant.<sup>21</sup> Included in that group was Freeborn Garrettson, who had been admitted on trial to the Methodist ministry and assigned to travel the Kent (Maryland) circuit in 1776, and then reassigned to accompany William Watters on the Brunswick Circuit the following year. Feeling that he “could by no means be subject to my rulers in this respect, as it touched my conscience toward God,” Garrettson refused to sign the oath and was left with the option of either leaving the state or submitting to arrest. “Many of my friends endeavoured to persuade me to comply” in order to avoid jailtime, he noted, while “the rulers said, ‘You must leave the state.’” Garrettson, believing that “the conference appointed me to this place” and that “my appointment is approved of by my Heavenly Father,” refused either, and resigned himself to the threat of imprisonment. But when, “at a certain place several of the rulers bound themselves to put me to gaol, ... the Lord laid his afflicting hand on some of those ruling men ... so that when I went there, several of them had already made their exit off the stage of human action: and another was lying on the point of death.” Satisfied that “there was none to lay the hand of violence upon me,” Garrettson rejoiced that “the persecution from this quarter entirely subsided during my stay in the state.”<sup>22</sup> In actuality, the persecution Garrettson courted by his refusal to either take the oath or leave the

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<sup>21</sup> Watters, *A Short Account*, 60.

<sup>22</sup> Garrettson, *American Methodist Pioneer*, 64.

state, was never particularly pronounced in Virginia, and those who took issue with the oath appear to have continued in their labors with little trouble.<sup>23</sup>

The relative peace enjoyed by Methodists in Virginia is brought into even sharper relief when Garrettson's brief time there is compared with his subsequent travels in his native Maryland, where he returned in 1778, just after the "Act for the better security of the Government" went into full effect. In contrast to William Watters, who reported that Methodists in Virginia "seldom suffered either in person or property," Garrettson faced near constant danger in neighboring Maryland, where he was threatened with imprisonment twice within a month of his arrival and only barely escaped the efforts of a mob to hang him. Leaving the state in September, Garrettson traveled to Delaware, where he was "also accused of being a friend of King George" and again threatened with hanging. Traveling back to Maryland in November, Garrettson was greeted in Somerset by local authorities "with a writ to take me to gaol." Narrowly escaping yet again, the constantly harassed itinerant again left the state, traveling to Philadelphia at Francis Asbury's request to help reorganize the societies there. Upon his return to Maryland in the late fall, Garrettson's hopes for a more peaceful sojourn were quickly dashed.

In early February 1780, Freeborn Garrettson was informed that the county court in Dorchester County had "charged me with toryism." Opting to "withdraw to Mr. A's" for "two days," Garrettson was compelled to return after "a most remarkable vision of the night ... revealed to me what I was to suffer; and that the

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<sup>23</sup> William Watters discerned that "if I was to take the oath, [the Magistrate] would overlook the others present," and upon doing so, "he quietly retired." "I believe he was fully persuaded," wrote Watters, "that however weak we might be, we were conscientious men, and not unfriendly to our country." See Watters, *A Short Account*, 60-61.

Lord would stand by me, so that my enemies should not injure me.” On Saturday, February 25, after “preach[ing] with freedom to a weeping flock,” Garrettson and fellow itinerant Joseph Hartley found themselves surrounded by a large group of men. “They beat my horse, cursed and swore, but did not strike me,” recounted Garrettson in his journal. Forcefully taken before James Shaw, a local magistrate who Garrettson characterized as “as much my enemy as any of [the mob],” the two men were “committed to gaol.”<sup>24</sup> In the published edition of his journal, Garrettson claimed their only offense was “the crime ... of preaching the gospel,” but court documents make clear that the charges were in response to their refusal to take the test-oath: “By a Certificate transmitted to this Board by James Shaw one of the Justices of the Peace of Dorchester County in the State of Maryland,” reads a deposition concerning the arrest, “it appears that F. Garrettson was carried before him as a Disaffected Fugitive from the State of Delaware.” “On Examination” by Shaw, Garrettson “acknowledged he had not taken the Oath of Fidelity to his State or either of the United States and refused to take the Oath prescribed by the Act of the General Assembly of Maryland entitled an Act for the better Security of the Government.”<sup>25</sup> On February 27, Garrettson was “thrust into prison,” where he spent two miserable weeks, with “a dirty floor for my bed, my saddle bags for my pillow, and two large windows” left open to let in the cold, late winter winds.<sup>26</sup>

Garrettson passed the time reading, corresponding with friends, and preaching to a steady stream of curious visitors. On March 13, Thomas Hill Airey,

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<sup>24</sup> Garrettson, *American Methodist Pioneer*, 69-89, 94-96.

<sup>25</sup> “Deposition of Thomas Hill Airey before Allen Quynn – 8 March 1780,” in “Correspondence Relating to Garrettson’s Imprisonment and Release,” Appendix One in Garrettson, *American Methodist Pioneer*, 404.

<sup>26</sup> Garrettson, *American Methodist Pioneer*, 98.

the wealthy son of an Anglican cleric, co-signed Garrettson's 20,000£ bond and personally "went to the governor of Maryland" to plead Garrettson's innocence on the grounds that "his residence was in the Delaware State generally," and that he was not "a Disaffected Fugitive." Airey was successful, and Garrettson was given twenty days to "make his Personal Appearance before the Executive Council of the State of Delaware," and ten additional days to then return to Maryland and present his new credentials. Airey and Thomas White, a respected Delaware judge and Francis Asbury's benefactor and friend, arranged Garrettson's meeting with Delaware officials, and on March 20, he secured a signed statement from Governor Caesar Rodney that "the said Freeborn Garrettson" was "a Preacher among the People called Methodists, who hath a considerable time past resided chiefly in this state, and under its Protection." On April 5, the charges were finally dropped and Garrettson resumed his itinerant duties, though more circumspectly than before.<sup>27</sup>

Methodists in Virginia, then, enjoyed a comparatively peaceful existence amidst the ongoing hostilities of the Revolutionary War. The extent of the persecution they faced were occasional run-ins with hostile individuals, as in the case of William Watters and the accusatory Anglican cleric, whose threat to "make [the Methodists'] nasty stinking carcasses pay for our pretended scruples of conscience" remained just that—isolated threats. Even when individuals in potentially powerful positions took issue with Methodist preachers, their efforts remained largely unconnected and never achieved their intended aims. When

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<sup>27</sup> "Thomas White Kent Co. Delaware State Deposition – 19 Feb. 1780;" "Freeborn Garrettson's Bond to the State of Maryland – 13 March 1780;" "Cesar Rodney, Dover, Delaware State Certificate – 20 March 1780, 5 Apr. 1780," collected in "Correspondence," *American Methodist Pioneer*, 404-05.

Philip Mazzei, an Italian physician and close friend of Thomas Jefferson who lived in Virginia and acted as an agent to purchase arms for the colonial militia, heard that “a Methodist minister, recently arrived from England,” had begun preaching in his neighborhood, he “went with two other friends to hear the preacher.” The preacher’s sermon that day was on “the dangers of losing one’s soul by sudden death” and “the greatness of that danger in time of war,” but Mazzei was sure the subliminal message was more subversive. “We saw clearly the purpose of his argument. Hardly had he left his post when I went to him and told him that I had listened to his evangelical doctrine, and that I hoped he would deign to hear mine.” The Methodist preacher, evidently uninterested, made an effort to leave, but Mazzei’s companions “told him in an emphatic manner to remain.” Mazzei then laid bare what he imagined to be the itinerant preacher’s more treasonous intentions as an agent of English imperialism. He spoke to the congregation of Lord Dartmouth’s friendship with John Wesley—going so far as to claim that he was “made Secretary of State because of his close friendship with the head of the Methodists”—and claimed that the preachers had been sent to America to subtly “place the yoke on our neck without opposition from us.” When the preacher “went away confused, without opening his mouth,” Mazzei took it as acknowledgement of the conspiracy. In reality, the preacher (almost certainly not “recently arrived from England,” as Mazzei claimed) was probably sincerely confused.<sup>28</sup> Though Mazzei repeated widely circulated rumors about Wesley’s relationship with Lord Dartmouth to make his point, this sort of opposition was uncommon in Virginia.

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<sup>28</sup> E.C. Branchi, “Memoirs of the Life and Voyages of Doctor Philip Mazzei,” *William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine* (July 1929): 249.

In spite of Mazzei's efforts to expand the audience of his views on Methodism's potential threat—in addition to accosting the preacher and addressing the audience, he “made a report and gave it to [a friend] that he might send it to the printer at Williamsburg to be printed”—they remained mostly muted for the duration of the war.<sup>29</sup> Mazzei's report was evidently never printed, though the fears he expressed briefly resurfaced in 1781, as the British commander Lord Cornwallis set his sights on subduing Virginia. In June, Josiah Parker, acting colonel of a militia brigade stationed in Portsmouth, wrote with alarm to the Virginia Assembly that there was “danger to be dreaded of a religious nature.” “A certain sett of Preachers, called Methodists,” he wrote, “are preaching the doctrine of passive obedience.” Although every preacher dispatched by John Wesley but one either long since returned across the Atlantic or left the Methodist fold, Parker spoke of “some sensible preachers from England” whose seditious message as “payed by the Ministry through Wesley for this purpose.”<sup>30</sup> But even in the most tense of situations—just two months later, Parker would play a key role in discovering that the British had embarked for Yorktown—neither the Assembly nor the public more generally believed the Methodists to be a real threat to the safety of Virginia society.

In addition to patriot preachers like William Watters, Edward Dromgoole, and Philip Gatch, the Methodists also counted among their number a small but growing number of well-known (and well-off) patriots in the state, countering

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 249-50.

<sup>30</sup> “J. Parker, Acting Colo. Comg., to the Hon. Speaker of the Assembly – 9 June 1781,” in William P. Palmer, ed., *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts, from April 1, 1781, to December 31, 1781* (Richmond: James E. Goode, 1881), 152.

claims that “Methodism appealed primarily to the humble.”<sup>31</sup> That list was led by Henry Fry, who served for four years (from 1760-65) in the Virginia House of Burgesses alongside George Washington, Peyton Randolph, and George Wythe. Fry, who converted to Methodism under the preaching of Philip Gatch in 1776, was also a close friend of Thomas Jefferson, who was elected in 1769 to Fry’s former seat as Albemarle County’s delegate in the House of Burgesses. Soon after his conversion, Fry was appointed a class leader and then, in 1778, as a general steward at the Methodist conference in Leesburg.<sup>32</sup> With little evidence to support the claims, and the high concentration of patriotic Methodists in the state, the recurring charges that Methodist preachers promulgated passive obedience in an effort to undermine the revolutionary effort failed to gain traction in Virginia to the degree they did elsewhere.

Just as rapid Methodist growth at the war’s outset helped protect it against charges of loyalism, so too did the lull in persecution help stabilize and grow the movement in Virginia. Early Methodist success in Virginia, then, was the result of its precarious place in a shifting religious landscape. As Rhys Isaac aptly observed over thirty years ago, “the Methodists met the same needs to which the Baptists had responded,” but remained through the wartime years “a movement for ‘vital religion’ within the Church of England.” Because “the connection with the

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<sup>31</sup> Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, New Paperback Edition (Chapel Hill and Williamsburg: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute for Early American History, 1999), 261.

<sup>32</sup> Though often identified as a preacher, Fry was never ordained. In his autobiography, he clarified that “my labors as a preacher have been chiefly as a substitute, wherein I have been greatly assisted and comforted.” See Henry Fry, “Autobiography,” in Philip Slaughter, *Memoir of Col. Joshua Fry, sometime Professor in William and Mary College, Virginia, and Washington’s Senior in Command of Virginia Forces, 1754, Etc., Etc., with an Autobiography of his son, Rev. Henry Fry, and a Census of their Descendants, by the Rev. P. Slaughter, D.D.* (Richmond: Randolph and English, 1880), 100.

traditional establishment was formally maintained” and Methodist preachers were still “dependent on [Anglican] clergymen ... to conduct the communion services,” the earliest inroads in the state were made possible by the relationships established between itinerant preachers and (typically) evangelical-minded Anglican ministers like Devereaux Jarratt.<sup>33</sup> It was precisely those relationships that facilitated the series of revivals in southern Virginia in 1775 and 1776.

Methodists in Virginia did benefit from the inroads made by Baptist (and to a lesser extent, Presbyterian) preachers during the 1750s and 1760s. They could appeal to those individuals who craved a more overtly enthusiastic religious experience of the sort advocated by Baptists but who also preferred to remain within the Established Church. This was the case with Elizabeth Henry, sister to the famed Virginia politician and Patriot orator and wife of not one but two Revolutionary War leaders (William Campbell, who died in 1781; and William Russell, whom Elizabeth married in 1783). Elizabeth’s religious heritage typified many early converts in the region, faithful members of the Established Church, but with decidedly evangelical leanings. Her uncle, and Anglican rector in Hanover County, was an associate of George Whitefield, and her mother was converted by the Presbyterian Samuel Davies. In Methodism, Elizabeth and her second husband William Russell, found a religious community to satisfy their spiritual longings.<sup>34</sup> Others, including Henry Fry, were first convicted of their sinfulness by Baptists before later experiencing conversion (and in the case of Fry, sanctification) under Methodist preaching. The Baptists, Fry later recalled,

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<sup>33</sup> Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, 260-61.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas L. Preston, *A Sketch of Mrs. Elizabeth Russell, Wife of General William Campbell, and Sister of Patrick Henry* (Nashville: Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1888); Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 164-66.



“were the only professors of vital religion within my acquaintance,” and though he gave his name to them, he was left unsatisfied about his spiritual state and some of the Baptists’ teachings. When Fry heard of a Methodist appointment to preach at the local Anglican chapel, he attended with anticipation. “O! how did my soul drink in the Word,” he recalled.<sup>35</sup> In both instances, individuals found in Methodism a satisfying religious experience that combined evangelical preaching within the confines of the Anglican tradition.

Having survived both the war and a major schism, Methodists in America moved forward with the business of, as Francis Asbury put it in 1784, “spread[ing] scriptural holiness over these lands.” With John Wesley’s initially reluctant blessing, they organized, in December 1784, the Methodist Episcopal Church. Wesley dispatched Thomas Coke to ordain Asbury, and the two were set apart on Christmas Day in Baltimore as co-superintendents (later Bishops) of the new church. The American itinerants who emerged as important leaders during the wartime years, including William Watters, John Littlejohn, and Freeborn Garrettson, finally received ordination as ministers and were dispatched to different stations to not only preach, but also administer church ordinances and sacraments.

In addition to spreading scriptural holiness, Asbury and Coke initiated efforts to “reform the continent.” A central plank of that focus was their efforts to confront and combat the growing evil of slavery and the slavery trade, both within the church and in the new nation. As discussed in chapter 3, they implemented unprecedented penalties for church members who owned slaves, threatening expulsion for those who refused to draw upon deeds of manumission. When they

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<sup>35</sup> Fry, “Autobiography,” 88-95.

were forced to quickly scrap those mandates in the face of widespread internal opposition, Asbury and Coke turned their attention to American society at large. In North Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia, they circulated petitions calling for the “immediate or gradual extirpation of slavery,” and submitted them to state legislatures. The American Revolution appears to have provided an additional impetus for Methodist antislavery, and church leaders tapped into Revolutionary sentiment in their petitions, basing their calls not on abstract theological principles but rather the language of individual and democratic rights and soliciting the support of revolutionary leaders, including most notably, George Washington.<sup>36</sup>

Methodists failed miserably in these efforts, failing to garner even a single legislative vote in support of their petitions in Virginia. They also failed in their efforts to claim the mantle of the American Revolution. In fact, they had the exact opposite effect, resurrecting earlier fears that Methodists in Virginia were “Tools of the British Administration.” The sudden antislavery actions of the English-born Asbury and Coke provided tangible evidence lacking from earlier accusations. Most of the petitions did not mention Methodists by name, though they drew upon those earlier anti-Methodist attacks and used words that made clear whom they were targeting. Petitioners in Amelia, Mecklenberg, and Pittsylvania Counties, for example, accused unspecified “Enemies of our Country ... supported by certain Men among us of considerable Weight” of attempting “To WREST FROM US OUR SLAVES.” This “a very subtle and daring Attempt,” they continued, was “unsupported by Scripture or sound Policy.”<sup>37</sup> In Brunswick

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<sup>36</sup> Cite Chapter 3.

<sup>37</sup> Teute, “Proslavery Petitions,” 139.

County, petitioners accused antislavery activists of being “disaffected to our State and Government,” opting to attack their motives. Those petitioning the legislature to enact a general emancipation merely “pretended to be moved by Religious Principles.” The petition submitted from Halifax County spoke of “a Number of deluded Men among us” who sought “to cover their Design, with the Veil of Piety.”<sup>38</sup> Petitioners in Lunenburg County, by contrast, attacked Methodist leaders more directly, singling out “a proscribed Coke” and “an imperious Asb[ur]y” as “contemptible Emissaries and Hirelings of Britain,” adding that “No Language can express our Indignation, Contempt and Detestation of the apostate Wretches.”<sup>39</sup> Methodists in Virginia quickly learned that their support for the Revolution did not give them the right to claim its legacy. In Virginia and elsewhere, they continued to face suspicion in the years and decades to come.

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As part of the formal founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury published the first *Discipline* of the new church, an abridgment and revision of John Wesley’s “Large Minutes” that established the rules and regulations governing all Methodists. The *Discipline*, like the Large Minutes before it, consisted of a series of several questions and answers. The fourth question posed in the 1785 *Discipline* asked, “What may we reasonably believe to be God’s Design in raising up the Preachers called *Methodists*?” In response, Coke and Asbury made a subtle change to the English *Minutes*’ answer. Whereas Wesley had answered, “To reform the Nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land,” Coke and Asbury now

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 142.

replied, “To reform the *Continent*, and to spread scriptural Holiness over these *Lands*.”<sup>40</sup> The changes were small but significant: The English *Nation* and its *land* became the *lands* of the American *Continent*.

The lands that Asbury and Coke set out to reform included not only the thirteen individual states in the new nation, but also those territories along the western frontier. As noted in chapter 1, by the 1790s, Methodists had joined the wave of new migrants to the Northwest Territory, as well as Kentucky and Tennessee. Those lands also included regions of British North America further north, including Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Quebec (which, in 1791, was divided into Upper and Lower Canada). Methodists had resided in Nova Scotia since the 1774, when a small band of Wesleyan disciples came from the villages of Yorkshire as part of a much larger migration to North America on the eve of the American Revolution. Settling in the Cumberland Valley on the Chignecto Isthmus that connects Nova Scotia with the rest of North America, they sustained themselves spiritually in the years leading up and during the war via correspondence with church leaders in England and utilizing their own houses and barns to host prayer meetings. The group nevertheless remained small, lacking not only ordained ministers but also licensed lay preachers.<sup>41</sup>

The arrival of several hundred Methodists as part of the Loyalist Diaspora in the years following the conclusion of hostilities reinvigorated the fledgling

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<sup>40</sup> Robert Emory, *History of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: G. Lane and C.B. Tippet, 1845), 27. See also Sam Haselby, *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 126-27.

<sup>41</sup> See chapter 1 above. Also, Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the People of America on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 421-26.

Cumberland Valley community and introduced Wesleyan religion to new parts of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (established in 1784). It also forced church leaders of the newly created Methodist Episcopal Church to pay attention to the Maritime colonies. At the Christmas conference of 1784, Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke appointed two itinerant preachers for Nova Scotia. Jesse Cromwell, the younger of the two preachers, was appointed to Port Roseway; the other, stationed at Shelburne, was Freeborn Garrettson, whose relentless preaching in the face of ongoing adversity and key role in helping maintain Methodist unity amidst threats schism had won him the trust and admiration of both Francis Asbury and John Wesley.

Garrettson and Cromwell, assisted by local preachers William Black and John Mann, set out to bring some order to the suddenly large number of Methodists inhabiting the peninsula and to proselytize the remaining population. “There seems to be a loud call for the gospel in Halifax, Shelburne, and many other places in Nova Scotia,” wrote Garrettson to a friend just before setting out for the province. “I am willing, and want to go in the power of the blessed Spirit.” Their efforts were met with some success, and official membership in Nova Scotia grew to over one thousand by the early 1790s, with perhaps four to five times that number regularly attending Methodist meetings, making the region an unexpected stronghold in the Methodist Episcopal Church’s earliest years.<sup>42</sup>

The sudden growth of Methodism in Nova Scotia occurred as Methodist leaders on both sides of the Atlantic adjusted to the newly independent status of

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<sup>42</sup> On Garrettson’s time in Nova Scotia, see Robert Drew Simpson, “Biographical Essay,” in Garrettson, *American Methodist Pioneer*, 7-9.

the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. Indeed, what occurred in the Maritime (and later, Canadian) provinces of British North America in the decades following the 1784 formation of the MEC was crucial to the development of institutional Methodism and the relationship of Methodists in Britain and America. The decision to dispatch American preachers to the remaining British colonies in America came initially in response to the petitions of William Black, who had immigrated with his parents to Nova Scotia as a fifteen-year-old in 1775 and then, following his conversion four years later, began preaching. On the advice of John Wesley, Black “set off to visit the States” in September 1784, in hopes of obtaining “some help from our brethren there.”<sup>43</sup> Three months later, Black attended the famed Christmas conference, petitioning for preachers and successfully returning with Garrettson and Cromwell. Their appointment appears to have been largely a pragmatic move – it was simply easier to supply Nova Scotia and New Brunswick with American preachers. The justifications beyond that, though, are tenuous. They are certainly difficult to reconcile with Wesley’s stated reasons for the establishment of an independent Methodist church in the United States. Wesley wrote the following in September 1784:

As our American brethren are now totally disentangled both from the state and from the English hierarchy, we dare not entangle them again either with the one or the other. They are now at full liberty simply to follow the Scriptures and the primitive church. And we judge it best that they should stand fast in that liberty wherewith God has so strangely made them free.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas Jackson, *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers, Chiefly Written by Themselves* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1865), 5:283.

<sup>44</sup> Wesley to “Our Brethren in America,” 10 September 1784, in Telford, *Letters*, 7:239.

In Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Quebec, however, Methodists were not “totally disentangled” from either the state or the Church of England. Like Wesley and the remaining Methodists throughout the British Isles, they were members of the Established Church. And in spite of Wesley’s urging American leaders to send preachers to the provinces, it does not appear that he understood the Methodist population and preachers there to be outside of his own ecclesiastical supervision.

In 1785, almost immediately after Garrettson’s arrival in Nova Scotia, Wesley initiated correspondence with the American preacher, expressing his desire that “God may find out a way for you to visit England,” which he expected would “be the means of receiving more strength, as well as more light.” Writing again a little more than a year later, Wesley advised Garrettson to work with Anglicans in the colony. “Wherever there is any church service, I do not approve of any appointment the same hour,” he wrote, “because I love the Church of England, and would assist, not oppose it, all I can.”<sup>45</sup> Garrettson was flattered by the attention from the founder of the Methodist movement, sending Wesley an account of his own spiritual journey. Though he did not share Wesley’s continued affinity for Anglicanism, he kept his feelings to himself, and used the opportunity of conversing with Wesley to the advantage of Methodism in Nova Scotia. Unable to secure financial support from the MEC toward the erection of church buildings in Nova Scotia, Garrettson turned to Wesley. He and Methodist merchant Philip Marchington requested 500-600 pounds “to build houses in

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<sup>45</sup> Wesley to Garrettson, 26 June 1785; Wesley to Garrettson, 30 November 1786, in Telford, *Letters*, 7:276, 354.

America.” When Wesley demurred, claiming that “English Methodists ... do not roll in money like many of the American Methodists,” Garrettson persisted, sending additional requests for books, tracts, and hymnals, which he ultimately secured.<sup>46</sup>

Garrettson also requested English preachers be sent. “It is impossible for us to supply half the places where [the people] want us,” he wrote to Wesley in April 1786. “I have written to Mr. Asbury for help, but with no certainty of obtaining it, as the work seems to be spreading among them.”<sup>47</sup> This was request was partially fulfilled. In September 1786, Thomas Coke, who had returned to England after spending nearly eight months traveling throughout the United States the previous year, set sail for Halifax, Nova Scotia. Coke was accompanied by William Warrener, John Clarke, and William Hammet, three newly ordained preachers. None of the three, though, were assigned to Nova Scotia; Warrener was to continue on to the West Indies, and the latter two to the geographically and culturally isolated island of Newfoundland, where Methodist preaching had begun in 1774.<sup>48</sup> Garrettson hoped Coke’s visit to the Maritimes,

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<sup>46</sup> Wesley to Garrettson, 26 June 1785, in Telford, Letters, 7:276. Garrettson to Wesley, 25 April 1786, Garrettson Family Papers, Methodist Collection – Drew University, Madison, New Jersey (hereafter cited as Garrettson Papers, GCAH). Transcriptions of both letters are included in *American Methodist Pioneer*, 245-47. I have chosen to cite the original MS of each letter for the sake of accuracy, but include reference to Simpson’s transcription in parentheses.

<sup>47</sup> Garrettson to Wesley, 25 April 1786, Garrettson Family Papers, GCAH.

<sup>48</sup> It does not appear that American Methodists ever entertained any interest in Newfoundland, which was significantly further from the Middle Atlantic base of Baltimore than Nova Scotia and Quebec. Garrettson noted in a 1786 letter to Francis Asbury that “Dr. Coke wrote me to visit Newfoundland last fall, but it was not practicable.” See Garrettson to Asbury, 1786, Garrettson Family Papers, GCAH (*American Methodist Pioneer*, 250). On Methodism in Newfoundland, see Calvin Hollett, *Shouting, Embracing, and Dancing with Ecstasy: The Growth of Methodism in Newfoundland, 1774-1874* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010).



though, would demonstrate the need for more preachers there, but Coke and the additional preachers never arrived. Encountering a violent storm shortly after setting sail from England in September, they were forced to reorient their journey to Antigua, initiating the first of Coke's several tours of the West Indies and inspiring in him a devotion to the islands that never abated.

If Garrettson's request for preachers came in response to the demand for Methodist preachers in Nova Scotia, his specific appeal for English preachers came in response to the demands of the Methodist community there. In a 1786 letter to Francis Asbury, Garrettson revealed that "a number of people would prefer an Englishman to an American. Many have refused hearing me on this account." While he expressed confidence that "this prejudice would soon wear away," Garrettson and the other Methodist preachers encountered increasing opposition.<sup>49</sup> Upon arrival, he was summoned to meet with colonial officials, and he briefly wondered (likely with real fear, given his earlier wartime experience in Virginia and Maryland) "whether it would not be expedient for me to take the oath of allegiance to his majesty." He was relieved at the assurances of both the colony's governor and secretary that "there was not the least necessity" of such a step and the promises that "if there should happen any disorders in our meeting, to apply to a magistrate, and I should find favour."<sup>50</sup> As Garrettson soon learned, not all Nova Scotians agreed with the governor and his secretary.

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<sup>49</sup> Garrettson to Asbury, 1786, Garrettson Family Papers, GCAH (*American Methodist Pioneer*, 251).

<sup>50</sup> Garrettson to Coke, Halifax, 1785, Garrettson Family Papers, GCAH (*American Methodist Pioneer*, 243) See also Garrettson to Coke, undated, Garrettson Papers, GCAH.

Colonial officials could hardly help stem the rising tide of anti-Methodist opposition in the colony. Much of the opposition was theological in nature – the Arminian Methodists rhetorically battled with Calvinist New Lights and Huntingdonians for converts, while Anglican authorities treated all three evangelical sects as threats to the established order.<sup>51</sup> And in the minds of many Anglican leaders, Methodists represented not only a religious, but also a political threat. Indeed, at the very same time that Methodists in Virginia were accused of being enemies to the ideals of the American Revolution, enemies in Nova Scotia alleged that Methodist preachers were seeking to spread those dangerous Revolutionary ideals further north.

Leading the charge in leveling those accusations was Jacob Bailey, an Anglican minister in Cornwallis and a Loyalist refugee, who had been forced from his home in Maine in 1779. Bitter over the war's outcome and horrified at both the success of religious dissenters in Nova Scotia and their attacks—both perceived and real—on the Church of England, he launched a number of rhetorical assaults right back. Bailey's preferred mode of expression was poetry—biting, satiric verse in the Hudibrastic tradition—and he seemingly held

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<sup>51</sup> Judith Fingard, *The Anglican Design in Loyalist Nova Scotia, 1783-1816* (London: Church Historical Society, 1972), 114-134. The "New Lights" in Nova Scotia were the followers and successors of Henry Aline, a popular preacher who died in 1784. The Huntingdonians were Calvinist Methodists patronized by Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, from whom they received their nickname. In contrast to George Whitefield and other Calvinist Methodists, John Wesley subscribed to Arminian theology, which rejected Calvinist doctrines of election and reprobation and emphasized unlimited atonement and the possibility of falling from grace. On the theological battles between the various groups in Nova Scotia, see George A. Rawlyk, *Radical Evangelicalism in British North America, 1775-1812* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994); and Joanna Brooks and John Saillant, eds., *"Face Zion Forward": First Writers of the Black Atlantic, 1785-1798* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 5-12, which, as its title implies, focuses on the theological battles between black preachers in Nova Scotia.

nothing back, denouncing New Lights, Methodists, and atheist freethinkers alike. Most of his poetry remained unpublished, though some of it was shared with and circulated among friends. While Methodists were not the only object of Bailey's derision, they were among the most recent and over the course of the 1780s, became the target of some of his most acerbic accusations. New Light Presbyterians and Freethinkers he had encountered in New England before being forced out of his home, and they each received their fair share of the blame for the Revolution. Methodists, by contrast, were largely unknown by Bailey prior to his time in Nova Scotia. But their rapid advance and the American origin of their preachers made them immediately suspect. If the former were responsible for starting the Revolutionary conflict, the Methodists were accused of perpetuating it.<sup>52</sup>

Shortly after the arrival of Garrettson and Cromwell in 1785, Bailey began work on an extended narrative poem entitled, "The Adventures of Jack Ramble, the Methodist Preacher." He added to the poem periodically over the next ten or so years, each new book reflecting the ongoing advances of Methodism in the province. The result was a 31-book satirical assault on the sect. It chronicles the life and (mis)adventures of the fictional Jack Ramble, a Revolutionary War drummer-turned-itinerant preacher sent to Nova Scotia. The poem tapped into the much longer tradition of anti-Methodist polemic, decrying Ramble's humble origins and lack of theological training and assaulting both the sincerity of his

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<sup>52</sup> On Bailey, see James S. Leamon, *The Reverend Jacob Bailey, Maine Loyalist: For God, King, Country, and for Self* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010); and Thomas B. Vincent, *Narrative Verse Satire in Maritime Canada, 1779-1814* (Ottawa: The Tecumseh Press, 1978), which includes a transcription of the first seven books of "Jack Ramble."

conversion and his motives for becoming a preacher. While Ramble was a clearly fictitious figure, Bailey included several real life Methodists by name, including John Wesley, Thomas Coke, and “Parson Og”—the Reverend Uzal Ogden, an Episcopal rector in New Jersey who sympathized with and supported Methodist preachers there. Near the opening of the poem’s first book, Bailey takes direct aim at the foundations of both the Methodist Episcopal Church and their untrained preacher’s authority:

Thus, by a transportation base,  
The tail above the head takes place,  
And members lately deem’d superiors  
Submit themselves to vile posteriors,  
And for a truth the story passes  
That certain men are rul’d by asses.<sup>53</sup>

Methodists’ lack of refinement and illegitimate authority were only the beginning of Bailey’s concerns, though. Their unrestrained enthusiasm, rejection of common sense morality and tradition, and never-ending hypocrisy made them dangerous to not only Nova Scotia’s religious order, but the political stability of the whole British Empire. At his ordination, Methodist leaders revealed to Ramble what Bailey imagined their real intentions to be in venturing north of the newly-established borders of the United States:

The parson vers’d in all the tricks  
Of state reveal’d his politicks:  
“By right the congress ought to reign

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<sup>53</sup> Jacob Bailey, “The Adventures of Jack Ramble, the Methodist Preacher,” Book 1, Jacob Bailey Papers, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, Halifax, Nova Scotia. See also, Vincent, *Narrative Verse Satire*, 44. The final two lines of the stanza above are possibly a reference to Charles Wesley’s own poetic mocking of Francis Asbury’s ordination: “A Roman emperor ‘tis said / His favourite horse a consul made. / But Coke brings greater things to pass / He makes a bishop of an ass.” See Charles Wesley, *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley*, ed. S.T. Kimbrough, Jr. and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1992), 3:81.

“O’er Britains proud usurped domain.  
“And, to extend its mighty power  
“Thro’ all the vast Columbian shore.

They intended “to drive the Britons forth / From the cast regions of the north,” and  
“To make our states wide as our souls / To grasp in all between the poles.”<sup>54</sup>

While American critics of Methodism saw in the Methodist Episcopal Church’s episcopal form of government evidence of their anti-democratic ideals, Bailey flipped that formulation on its head, drawing parallels between Methodism’s ministerial conferences and the rebelling colonies’ Committees of Correspondence. Both were antithetical to British constitutional ideals, claimed Bailey: “Committees once were dreadful things, / More haughty far than Europe’s kings; / But circumstances alter cases, / We know, at different times and places.” Methodism’s “grand committees,” somewhat incongruously made up of ignorant and unlettered men, planned to use their army of itinerant preachers to rhetorically “muster schism and sedition.” While their aims extended far beyond Nova Scotia, the Maritimes served as the front line of their initial efforts. As Parson Og informs the excited Ramble,

“With Britons led us then engage  
“And make them feel our vengeful rage;  
“To work their downfall and perdition  
“Arouse them up to mad sedition.  
“Tis our intent first to command  
“New Brunswic and the Acadian land. ...

The Methodist preachers’ emotional excesses made them the ideal agents of spreading that sedition:

“Some noisy men of our vocation  
“Can raise a mighty inflammation,

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<sup>54</sup> Bailey, “Jack Ramble,” Book 1, Bailey Papers, NSARM.

“And with enthusiastic ire  
“Set both provinces on fire.  
“Men have besides a powerful lurch  
“To quarrel with th’ established church;  
“They’ll rush thro’ ruin, death, and murder  
“To level all religious order.  
“Our Bishop Coke, that godly man,  
“Approves most highly of our plan.  
“For he his pious zeal extends  
“Around the earth’s remotest ends  
“To make the Methodist rever’d  
“Where’er the human voice is heard.”<sup>55</sup>

While Bailey’s critique of Coke’s ambition rings true, there is no evidence that either Coke or any other Methodist leader envisioned themselves as agents of the American state. But in the minds of Bailey and his fellow Anglican clergy, it did not matter: Religious and political enthusiasm were two sides of the same coin, and the currency was American democracy.

“The Adventures of Jack Ramble” is both unfinished and undated. A close reading of the text suggests that Bailey began writing sometime after 1786 and penned the last entries approximately a decade later. That timeline coincides almost exactly with the rapid rise and then gradual decline of Methodist strength in the Maritimes. Freeborn Garrettson’s departure from Nova Scotia in 1787 left a major hole in the leadership, one that was not filled until 1789, when William Black was finally ordained and set apart as the general superintendent of eastern British North America. Black’s title points to the unclear place Nova Scotian Methodism occupied in the larger Wesleyan community. No other American minister possessed the title of general superintendent. Those in charge of conferences within the United States were called Presiding Elders. Furthermore,

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<sup>55</sup> Bailey, “Jack Ramble,” Book 1, Bailey Papers, NSARM.

in spite of the fact that Black was ordained by American bishop Francis Asbury, and although no British preachers served in Nova Scotia or New Brunswick, Nova Scotian membership reports were submitted to both MEC leaders and to John Wesley in England.

If Black's ordination and appointment (along with the ordination of John and James Mann) were intended to satiate the demand for English preachers, they were offset by the continued refusal of Wesley to send any additional preachers and Black's continued ties with MEC leaders. In 1792, Black wrote to Asbury, informing him that "it is now a subject of consideration amongst us whether we ought not to put ourselves under the direction of the American bishops." He admitted that "such a union would excite the jealousies of our Civil Governors," but with few other options, persisted.<sup>56</sup> But Francis Asbury struggled to find preachers willing to accept assignments to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. At the 1792 Annual Conference in Baltimore, "it was mentioned ... that preachers were wanting as misaneries for several places," including "especialy" Nova Scotia. William Black was in attendance and "spacke very pressive to Conferance for preachers" to the Maritimes. Black was successful in his petition for preachers, but those who volunteered did so "with great reluctance."<sup>57</sup> Nova Scotia's harsh climate and remote location discouraged American preachers from volunteering for the station, and Methodism's strength

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<sup>56</sup> Matthew Richey, *A Memoir of the Late Rev. William Black, Wesleyan Minister, Halifax, N.S., Including an Account of the Rise and Progress of Methodism in Nova Scotia* (Halifax: William Cunnabell, 1839), 309-10.

<sup>57</sup> Isaac Lunford Journal, 1791-1795, Microfilm Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

and influence in the region began to decline following the departure of the several hundred black Methodists for Sierra Leone in 1792.

Meanwhile, ongoing international conflict placed the preachers in a difficult predicament. As early as 1786, John Wesley expressed his fears of “another American revolution” to Freeborn Garrettson, wondering how it might have an impact upon the Methodist movement. Those worries picked up steam with the outbreak of war between Britain and France in 1793. Isaac Lunsford, one of the American preachers who, “after a few Hours consideration & deliberation ... consented to go” to Nova Scotia, wrote in his journal on April 13, 1793 of receiving “certin news today by a packit from Urope, that war is declared between France & Ingland.” He was especially concerned with rumors of a potential “war, between Great Britian and The United States.” If that occurred, he explained, “I cannot stay heare unless They put me like The People of old, did Jeramiah in Prison.” He also received alarming reports of the British Navy impressing Americans into service. “Some friends advised me to be carfull in how I walked The streats,” he wrote in 1793, “for Thare was avery hot press gang going about town.”<sup>58</sup> Lunsford safely returned to the U.S. in 1795, avoiding both imprisonment and impressment. But the scarcity of preachers willing to follow in his footsteps, together with the loss of some Nova Scotian Methodist preachers to competing denominations, led William Black to appeal to British church

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<sup>58</sup> Lunsford Journal, entries for April 13, 1793; April 25, 1793; March 30, 1794, Swem. On Naval impressment in Nova Scotia, including during the Napoleonic Wars, see Keith Mercer, “Sailors and Citizens: Press Gangs and Naval-Civilian Relations in Nova Scotia, 1756-1815,” *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society*, 10 (2007): 87-113; and Mercer, “Northern Exposure: Resistance to Naval Impressment in British North America, 1775-1815,” *Canadian Historical Review* 91:2 (June 2010): 199-232.



leaders once again for aid.<sup>59</sup> This time he was successful, and in 1799 the first English preachers arrived, bringing Nova Scotian Methodism under the umbrella of the British Methodist Church and ending its formal ties with the MEC.

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The arrival of Wesleyan missionaries from England did not end the Methodist Episcopal Church's presence in British North America. At the very same time that Methodism's numbers in Nova Scotia began to decline in the mid 1790s, its presence further west in Canada was expanding. The first American Methodist preacher to arrive was William Losee, who was assigned to travel to visit the Bay of Quinte in 1790. There he went to work overseeing the congregation of approximately 200 Methodists in Adolphustown, a group composed almost entirely of Loyalists from New York's Camden Valley, including the Methodist matriarch Barbara Heck and others instrumental in establishing the first Methodist class in North America in 1760. Within two years, Losee had helped double the size of the congregation and overseen the construction of the first Methodist chapel in the region. That growth was spurred by the influx of immigrants that followed the creation of Lower and Upper Canada in 1791 from the province of Quebec. Additional preachers were soon assigned, and Methodism in Upper Canada continued to flourish. By 1800, it counted 936 members in congregations located in the Bay of Quinte, Niagara, and

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<sup>59</sup> Among the preachers who left Methodism were Nova Scotian born Theodore Seth Harding and John Craig, who arrived in Nova Scotia after serving in the British army during the American Revolution. See Theodore Seth Harding, Certificate of Baptism and Ordination (1796), Theodore Seth Harding Papers, 1796-1806; and John Craig, Certificate of Ordination (1803), John Craig Papers, both in Esther Clark Wright Archives, Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

Oswegatchie, ministered to by six itinerant preachers, all Americans from the Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>60</sup>

The inroads made by Methodist preachers irritated Anglican authorities in Upper Canada much as they had a decade earlier in Nova Scotia. Shortly after Losee arrived in Adolphustown, the Reverend John Stuart, an Anglican minister in Kingston, wrote to Charles Ingliss, the Bishop in Nova Scotia. He complained that “Two itinerant Preachers of the Methodist Class, are now in this Settlement.” In addition to the recently-arrived Losee, he identified another, “called McCarty, the Person I mentioned to you [earlier].” Stuart described him as “an illiterate Irishman; and a Man of an infamous private Character,” cryptically concluding that “I think, we will be able to banish him for Crimes of a heinous Nature.” Charles Justin McCarty, in actuality, claimed no affiliation with the Methodist Episcopal Church at all; he was a convert of George Whitefield, a Calvinist, and an independent itinerant preacher. But he was an American and he called himself a Methodist. In April, McCarty was found guilty of preaching without a license and charged as “a vagabond, imposture, and disturber of the peace.” He ventured back to the United States briefly before crossing the border into Canada one more two months later. In July, he was apprehended and committed by the Sheriff for having returned to this district,” jailed, and exiled once again.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *Minutes* (1840), 1:92-93; J. William Lamb, *William Losee: Ontario's Pioneer Methodist Preacher* (Adolphustown, Ontario: Board of Trustees for the Old Hay Bay Church, 1974); Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 42-43. William Losee abruptly left the Methodist itinerancy in 1792 after a fallout with fellow preacher Darius Dunham, evidently over a shared love interest. See Rawlyk, *The Canada Fire*, 107.

<sup>61</sup> “John Stuart to the Bishop of Nova Scotia,” March 5, 1790; and “Quarter Sessions Held at Kingston,” April 13, 1790, in Richard A. Preston, ed., *Kingston Before the War of*

As in Nova Scotia, the Anglican response to Methodism was colored by their own inability to assert ecclesiastical control over the colony. John Stuart was concerned not only about American Methodist preachers in Upper Canada, but also fellow Anglicans he deemed too evangelical. John Langhorn, a missionary dispatched by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Part, was “Stuart’s Anglican nemesis.” His lack of theological training, “uncouth manners and illiberal Conduct” made him as irritating as the Methodists. In fact, Stuart accused Langhorn’s preaching of driving “his parishioners into the welcoming arms of Methodists and other sectarians.”<sup>62</sup> But Langhorn hated the Methodists as much as his more refined colleague, refusing to interact with them at all and, in the tradition of Jacob Bailey, putting his frustrations to paper in the form of poetry. Though he sought to dismiss the Methodist threat (“what an empty insignificant clamour these Gentry make”), he reluctantly admitted that fewer than twenty percent of the local population was Anglican. John Stuart placed the figure even lower, at ten percent.<sup>63</sup>

Methodism continued its impressive growth as the nineteenth century dawned, nearly tripling its membership numbers in the first decade, from just over 900 in 1800 to more than 2,600 ten years later, and approximately 3,300 at the outbreak of war in 1812. And Methodists for the first time made inroads into

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*1812: A Collection of Documents* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1959), 157-158; 159-160.

<sup>62</sup> Rawlyk, *The Canada Fire*, 104-05.

<sup>63</sup> As cited in H. E. Turner, “John Langhorn,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 5, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed January 14, 2016, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/langhorn\\_john\\_5E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/langhorn_john_5E.html); Norman James Knowles, *Inventing the Loyalists: The Ontario Loyalist Tradition and the Creation of Usable Past* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 54; Rawlyk, *The Canada Fire*, 105.

Lower Canada, too, forming congregations and classes in Ottawa, Montreal, Quebec, and Three Rivers.<sup>64</sup> Methodists were not the largest denomination in the colony, but they were the fastest growing. As elsewhere, official membership figures grossly underestimate the number who actively attended Methodist meetings. This was especially true with the introduction of camp meetings to Canada in 1805. Nathan Bangs, a Connecticut-born school teacher-turned itinerant preacher, recorded in his journal on October 5, “I have been to attend a Camp-Meeting at the bay of Quintie and it was glorious time to my own Soul and the Souls of many others.” The meeting lasted for four days, from September 27 to September 30, and Bangs left “certain that Camp Meeting is an institution of God for he honors them with his living presence.” The minutes kept (by Bangs) over the four successive days reveal that while the meeting started out modestly—the first day of preaching, prayers, and exhortation yielded meager results: “4 sinners were Justified and 2 Backsliders reclaimed”—it gradually increased in intensity and size. A larger group assembled the second day, with preaching beginning at “5 o’C” in the morning and continuing all day before giving way to “a prayer meeting which continued all night without intermission.” This time, “5 Souls were Justified, 8 Backslider reclaimed and 25 Sanctified.” The protracted meeting culminated with the Sunday service. Bangs reported with delight that “the people flocked together from different Quarters until we judged there were at least 2000, some supposed there was 2500” in attendance.

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<sup>64</sup> *Minutes, 1773-1828*, 1:92-93; 182-84; Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion*, 44-45. That growth rate is on par with the rapid growth of the Methodist Episcopal Church more generally, which grew from ~64,000 in 1800 to ~174,000 in 1810. See Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 197-99.

Following morning sermons, the sacrament was administered, and then “the meeting was carried on with exhortation, prayer, and singing, shouting and praising without any intermission til next morning.” Bangs himself was overcome to such a degree “that his shouts pierced the heavens, while his body was sustained by some of his friends.” Eventually he fainted, and “at length [was] carried out of the Camp into a tent where he lay speechless, being overwhelmed for a considerable time with the mighty power of God.” At the conclusion of the meeting the following meeting, Bangs added another 21 Justified, 18 Backsliders reclaimed and 23 Sanctified” to the camp meeting’s totals, noting that “we doubt not but there were many more.”<sup>65</sup> The introduction of camp meetings to Upper Canada provided Methodists with an effective recruiting tool to further their reach in the territory, but the timing of that introduction also heightened tensions between them and their neighbors.

Methodists had long drawn the disdain of Anglican clergy and civil authorities in British North America, whose suspicions of the links between evangelicalism and republicanism only increased in the years leading up to the War of 1812. As early as 1798, Methodist preachers were denied rights afforded other Protestant clergy in Upper Canada. Non-Anglican ministers had never enjoyed the authority to marry their congregants in the colony, but at the second session of Upper Canada’s parliamentary proceedings in 1798, “other denominations than the Church of England” were “extend[ed] the privilege of

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<sup>65</sup> Nathan Bangs Journal, Nathan Bangs Collection, General Commission on Archives and History, Drew University Methodist Collection, Madison, New Jersey. A transcription of Bangs journal is available online at <http://www.yorku.ca/scottm/journals/index.htm>. Accessed January 14, 2016.

solemnizing matrimony.” The minister had to go through a rigorous process to receive approval, paying a small registration fee, providing evidence of both ordination and good character, and taking an oath of allegiance to the Crown and Colony. This excluded almost all Methodist preachers, who were ineligible (and in most instances, unwilling) to take the oath of allegiance. In the minds of Methodists, who were characterized by one local judiciary as “the weakest, the most ignorant & in some instances the most depraved of Mankind,” the limits of the new law were specifically intended to damage their standing and stop their spread in the region.<sup>66</sup> In February 1806, a group of 238 Methodists submitted a petition to Upper Canada’s House of Assembly “for the relief of the People called Methodists.” Invoking their British credentials (“a large majority of the principal ones are of those people called U.E. Loyalists”) the petitioners claimed that they lacked “an equal participation” with “other religious societies in this Province,” and requested “that an Act may be passed in our favor, giving authority to our preachers ... to solemnize the religious rites of Marriage, as well as to confirm all past marriages performed by them.” The House passed the bill on February 15 and was sent “to the Honorable Legislative Council.” The Legislative Council took up the bill and referred it to committee, who recommended “that the said Bill be

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<sup>66</sup> George F. Playter, *The History of Methodism in Canada: With an Account of the Rise and Progress of the Work of God Among the Canadian Indian Tribes, and Occasional Notices of the Civil Affairs of the Province* (Toronto: Anson Green, 1862), 56; Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 64-66.

read a third time in three months,” effectively tabling the proposal for good.

Methodist preachers remained barred from performing religious rites.<sup>67</sup>

The validity of Canadian officials’ concerns over the perceived affinity between Methodists and the Democratic-Republican Party in the United States has been a matter of some debate among historians. The reality is that American Methodists could be found across the political spectrum. Some, including several prominent leaders and their well-to-do patrons, supported the Federalists. In the months leading up to the heated presidential election of 1800, Thomas Coke remarked that “political disputes run very high in this country; and I have considerable fears that the Democratic party gains strength.” Meanwhile, a Democratic-run newspaper in Delaware claimed that “several methodist preachers have already commenced political preaching” in the state. “Among other things,” the paper ominously editorialized, the preachers taught “that no salvation is to be expected by those who support the election of *Thomas Jefferson*, to be President of the United States.” That the governor of Delaware at the time, Richard Bassett, was a devout Methodist only heightened suspicions of a Methodist-Republican alliance.<sup>68</sup> But in both the upper Mid-Atlantic and New England, several Methodists publicly backed Jefferson and the Republican Party,

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<sup>67</sup> “Journal of the House of Assembly of Upper Canada, 1806,” in Alexander Fraser, *Eighth Report of the Bureau of Archives for the Province of Ontario, 1911, Printed by Order of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario* (Toronto: L.K. Cameron, 1912), 63-64, 73-74; “Journal and Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Province of Upper Canada, 1806,” in Alexander Fraser, *Seventh Report of the Bureau of Archives for the Province of Ontario, 1910, Printed by Order of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario* (Toronto: L.K. Cameron, 1911), 262-63.

<sup>68</sup> Thomas Coke to Alexander Knox, 12 April 1800, in Thomas Coke, *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. by John A. Vickers (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2013), 278; *Aurora General Advertiser*, 8 April 1800; Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 193-95.

championing disestablishment in opposition to the Federalist-backed Congregationalists of Massachusetts and Connecticut.<sup>69</sup>

But the strongest Methodist supporters of Republicanism emerged further west, in Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee, where both Jeffersonians and Methodists enjoyed a growing numerical strength. As John Wigger has noted, the emerging alliance between the upstart Methodists and the Republicans was powerful enough to “help propel a number of Methodist candidates into office.”<sup>70</sup> Their number included several of the Methodist migrants from Virginia who left the state in protest of the expansion of slavery there (and the MEC’s retreat from its earlier opposition to slavery). Philip Gatch was elected as a delegate to Ohio’s constitutional convention in 1802, and was afterward appointed associate judge in Clermont County, serving three seven-year terms from 1803-1824. Gatch was joined at the constitutional convention by fellow Methodists Thomas Scott and Edward Tiffin, both of whom enjoyed lengthy and successful political careers. Scott, who served as secretary at the convention, was afterward elected Justice of the Peace in Ross County and served as the Ohio Senate’s clerk from 1803-1809, when he was elected by the state’s General Assembly to Ohio’s Supreme Court. Tiffin, an ordained Methodist Deacon and local preacher, was elected

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<sup>69</sup> Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 194-195. On Congregationalist-Federalist ties in New England, see Jonathan J. Den Hartog, *Patriotism and Piety: Federalist Politics and Religious Struggle in the New American Nation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015). Amanda Porterfield has argued recently “that the Methodist system was slowly transforming to align with the economic and political liberalism of Republican politics” at the same time “[r]epublican politics was slowly transforming to accommodate evangelical religion.” See Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 166-171.

<sup>70</sup> Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 178.



Ohio's first governor (1803) and later to the United States Senate (1807).

Another prominent Ohio politician, Thomas Worthington, though not "attached ... to any society of professing Christians," regularly attended Methodist services and was a close friend of Francis Asbury and often hosted the Methodist bishop during his travels to Ohio. In 1803, Worthington was elected one of Ohio's first United States Senators, a position he held until 1807, when his brother-in-law Edward Tiffin replaced him. He would later serve as the state's sixth governor. In contrast to claims that Methodism "pioneered the settlement of the frontier for religious [and not political] reasons," the lives of Philip Gatch, Thomas Scott, and Edward Tiffin suggest instead that those categories of analysis are not so easily separated. Far from exhibiting "indifference to the United States of America, as a nationalist movement," many Methodists in early America, both Republican and Federalist, melded *religion* and *politics* to achieve their aims.<sup>71</sup>

Not all Methodists were pleased with the newly achieved political power in Ohio and elsewhere, however. Francis Asbury, who had long maintained that "political subjects ... are out of my province," scoffed at the idea of a minister holding elected office: "Methodist preachers politicians! what a curse!" Asbury maintained close friends with Edward Tiffin, visiting and staying with him on several of his trips to Ohio. In September 1809, the aging Methodist bishop remarked, "O what a charming view presents itself from Doctor Tiffin's house!"

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<sup>71</sup> Haselby, *The Origins of American Religious*, 120. On Methodism in Ohio and the political careers of the Methodists cited above, see John Wigger, "Ohio Gospel: Methodism in Early Ohio," in Andrew R.L. Cayton and Stuart D. Hobbs, eds., *Center of a Great Empire: The Ohio Country in the Early Republic* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 62-80. See also Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt*, 172.

and then added, lamentingly, “but these long talks about land and politics suit me not; I take little interest in either subject.”<sup>72</sup>

Although it is a stretch too far to claim that “all early-nineteenth-century preachers boasted elaborately and often of their loyalty to the new republic” (Asbury alone refutes that), the MEC and its members had become undeniably more comfortable with the United States and its imperial ambitions in the years since the Revolution.<sup>73</sup> In the wake of George Washington’s death in 1799, several Methodists—including Ezekiel Cooper, Thomas Morrell, and Richard Allen—joined other Americans in eulogizing the president. Morrell, a Revolutionary War veteran whose father was among the early members of the John Street Methodist congregation in New York City, praised the deceased president as “the great, the virtuous Washington” and recounted his celebrated military career. “As a soldier and commander he was intrepid and brave, he was cool and determined. ... He fought—He conquered—The morning sun cheered the American world—Our country *rose* on the event.” Cooper focused his remarks on the “civil and religious rights and liberties ... obtained and improved under the military and civil administration of Washington,” and Richard Allen concluded his eulogy with a petition for “a double portion of [Washington’s] spirit to rest on all the officers of the government in the United States.” In joining other

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<sup>72</sup> *JLFA* 1:138 (November 14, 1774); 2:614 (September 10, 1809); 2:634 (April 8, 1810).

<sup>73</sup> Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 241.

Americans in eulogizing Washington and invoking his name to support their respective projects, Methodists were asserting their own American identity.<sup>74</sup>

Such efforts, though, only served to heighten the concerns of Upper Canadians. Fears of Methodism's continuing encroachment into their colony were furthered by renewed efforts in the first decade of the nineteenth century to expand the number of itinerants laboring in the Canadas. In 1810, Bishops Francis Asbury and William McKendree "deemed it necessary to constitute the Susquehanah, Cayuga, and Upper Canada Districts a separate and independent conference." At the inaugural meeting of the new Genesee Conference on July 24, 1810, the committee charged with executing its formation explained their justification for doing so. The new conference would cut down on travel time for preachers and permit a more "proper exercise of Discipline," they reasoned. But "we shall not only save much labor, time, and expence, we shall place ourselves and people under the immediate inspection of our superintendence; and this no doubt, will have the happy tendency of more cordially uniting our Northern Methodists to the main body of Methodists on the Continent, and of giving them a tone and respectability hitherto unexperienced." The committee concluded with a

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas Morrell, *A Sermon on the Death of General George Washington* (Baltimore: Warner and Hannah, 1800), 3, 19; Ezekiel Cooper, "Brethren, Friends, & Fellow Citizens" (1800), as cited in Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 195; Richard Allen, "Eulogy of George Washington," *Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Daily Advertiser*, 31 December 1799, as cited in Richard S. Newman, "'We Participate in Common': Richard Allen's Eulogy of Washington and the Challenge of Interracial Appeals," *William and Mary Quarterly* 64:1 (Jan. 2007): 117-28. For more on public commemorations of Washington, see François Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father: Washington's Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

rhetorical flourish that was sure to raise suspicions of those who worried the Methodists might be emissaries of American imperialism:

We look for the rich effections of gospel grace. For the Wilderness and solitary places to be glad, and the deserts to rejoice and blossom as the rose. For the great head of the church to display his bloodstained banners, and lead us on from conquering to conquest, untill our number becomes innumerable, and the whole of this Northern country filled with the glory of God.<sup>75</sup>

Upper Canadians could hardly be blamed for worrying that Methodist expansion was a harbinger of American invasion, especially as tensions grew in the months and years leading up to the War of 1812. As early as 1808, Methodist preachers assigned to Canada expressed reservations “for fear of war.” William Case, assigned “to take a tour of Canada” as part of his appointment that year, was initially “determined not to go.” Only “after mature thought and consideration and prayer” did he resolve to “joyfully [give] up myself ... for the profit of souls.” Fearing that violence might break out, the unmarried minister assured himself that “if I suffer it is for the cause of God, and if I die, perhaps, better than those who have families to leave behind them unprovided for.”<sup>76</sup> In 1810, the elections of two Methodist members of the colony’s House of Assembly (John Robin and John Wilson) were contested on the grounds that they were “public Preachers and Teachers in that Society or Community of people called Methodists.” The accusation rested on a reading of a clause in the Constitution Act “forbidding

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<sup>75</sup> Minutes of the Genesee Conference, 1810-1824, Methodist Library, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey, 13-14.

<sup>76</sup> Entry for April 6, 1808, Journal of William Case (Methodist Preacher), 6 April 1808 – 30 Sept. 1809, Typescript. Archives of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario.

clergymen from sitting in the House.”<sup>77</sup> Upper Canadians’ fears were stoked further by the arrival in 1811 of Francis Asbury, the aging Methodist bishop who had, over the course of his extensive travels throughout the continent, never before ventured across the Saint Lawrence River. Asbury’s travels beyond America’s borders elicited an unexpected response. “My strong affection for the people of the United States came with strange power upon me whilst I was crossing the line,” he remarked in his journal, evidently surprised. But Asbury’s “strong affection” for Americans did not translate into a parallel affection for America. The following day, on July 4, he saw from across the river that “on the opposite shore they are firing for the fourth of July. What have I to do with this waste of powder? I pass the pageantry of the day unheeded on the other side: why should I have new feelings in Canada?” Asbury’s affection was reserved for people, not places. Calling on several old friends now living in Upper Canada, including “father Dulmadge,” the Heck family, and Catherine Delter—all of whom were members of the early John Street Congregation in New York City—he remarked, “here is a decent, loving people; my soul is much united with them.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> “Journal of the House of Assembly of Upper Canada, 1810,” in Fraser, *Seventh Report of the Bureau of Archives for the Province of Ontario*, 293, 351-52, 359-61; J.K. Johnson, *Becoming Prominent: Regional Leadership in Upper Canada, 1791-1841* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989), 102, 128. See also Christopher Adamson, “God’s Continent Divided: Politics and Religion in Upper Canada and the Northern and Western United States, 1775 to 1841,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36:3 (July 1994): 434.

<sup>78</sup> *JLFA* 2:677-68 (July 1811); A couple of months later, he repeated this impression, telling Jacob Gruber, “I never knew how well I loved the Americans, when out on the other side of the St. Lawrence, in sight of the opposite shore. I never knew how well I loved the Canadians till present with them.” See Asbury to Jacob Gruber, 1 September 1811, *JLFA* 3:454.

Those themes were repeated the following year in Bishop McKendree's Episcopal Address to the General Conference. After providing an overview of Methodist membership "widely scattered over seventeen states, besides the several territorial settlements and the Canadas," McKendree counseled the assembled preachers that "in order to enjoy the comforts of peace and union, we must 'love one another.'" Though he made no further mention of Canada, the prospects of Methodism there were clearly on his mind. "I feel it a part of my duty to submit to your consideration the appointment of the Genesee Conference ... keeping in view not only the traveling, but the relation and situation also of our local brethren, and to pursue that plan which may render the whole more useful."<sup>79</sup> As tensions between the United States and Britain escalated, it proved increasingly difficult for Methodist preachers in Upper Canada to maintain friendly relations not only with civil and religious authorities in the region, but also with fellow Methodists.

Dating back to Nova Scotia in the 1780s, at least some lay Methodist men and women voiced their opposition to American preachers. In William Black's 1792 petition to American leaders for the formal inclusion of the Nova Scotia Conference in the Methodist Episcopal Church, he revealed that the idea was opposed by some. "It is objected that such a union would excite the jealousies of our Civil Governors," he noted, while expressing his confidence that "there would be nothing to fear from that quarter" as long as "the preachers who might come

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<sup>79</sup> "Bishop William McKendree Delivers First Episcopal Address to the General Conference," in Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, eds., *The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 178-79.

from the United States should be prudent men, and let politics alone.”<sup>80</sup> At least some Methodists in Canada felt the American preachers had fallen short of that goal.

On May 26, 1812, a group of Methodists in Montreal petitioned British leaders to supply them with preachers. The American preachers, they lamented, “[judge us to be] Strangers & Foreigners” living in “a miserable Country ... under a Despotic government amongst poor people.” Because each preacher “cannot be so agreeable to us as we could desire, We have plainly to inform him, that we believe our Government is of God (a thing hard for an American to conceive much more believe) that our Governor and Council, with the regular Magistrates, are his Ministers for our good.” The Montreal Methodists were not blameless, however. They admitted that they required each Methodist preacher “to pray for ... His Majesty King George by Name.” Lamenting that the preachers “are in general bitter Enemies to our good old King & Government, and ...zealous admirers of the Democratic Republican form of Government established amongst themselves,” the writers found themselves trapped “in the Serbonian Bog of Democracy which we abhor.” And perhaps worst of all, this political preaching caused problems with neighbors and local authorities, “defil[ing] and corrupting” their reputation in the community. They referenced a law “expressly forbid[ding] any Majistys subjects in Canada to receive or even to acknowledge the Ministers belonging to or sent out by any Preacher who is a foreigner,” and worried that things would only get worse “as the United States Government are now so very much opposed to Britain & her dependancies, and are manifestly bent to favor

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<sup>80</sup> Richey, *Memoir of William Black*, 310.

our enemies.” “On these accounts,” they concluded, “we have long wished, and most affectionately desire a Union with you who are our Fathers & Brothers, who dwell in a Country we are united to by every sacred tie of love and Gratitude as well as by an union of sentiment and pious regard for that blessed Constitution & Government under which we both live.” Pledging to “pay the sum of £25, on the arrival of a preacher here for his passage,” they requested “a Minister[,] a single Man of [faith] & piety who loves this Country as his own.”<sup>81</sup> Three weeks later, on June 18, the United States declared war on Great Britain.

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Until recently, Methodism’s response to the War of 1812 and its impact on the movement have received comparatively little attention from historians of American religion, especially when contrasted with the large outpouring of scholarship on Methodists in the American Revolution.<sup>82</sup> The Methodist Episcopal Church maintained an official policy of neutrality in political matters, but far from manifesting “an indifference to the War of 1812,” many Methodists weighed in on the conflict and its significance.<sup>83</sup> Views among individual Methodists leaders and laity varied, with some outspoken in support of the war and others in opposition. Methodists also participated in the conflict, some as soldiers and others as chaplains. And the War predictably altered the course of

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<sup>81</sup> Letter, May 26, 1812, Methodist Missionary Society Fonds, A-258, LAC.

<sup>82</sup> Two recent books each discuss the Methodist experience in the War of 1812, each reaching different conclusions. See Jeffrey Williams, *Religion and Violence in Early American Methodism: Taking the Kingdom by Force* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 99-106; and Haselby, *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism*, 145-60.

<sup>83</sup> Haselby, *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism*, 149.



Methodism in North America, disrupting those conferences that straddled the U.S.-Canadian border and forcing many American-born preachers to return to the United States. The departing American preachers were eventually replaced with Methodist missionaries from England, the first group of which arrived in Lower Canada in 1814. They were assisted by a cadre of native-born Canadian preachers, as the exigencies of war forced them from their roles as local preachers and class leaders into the ranks of the itinerancy.<sup>84</sup> Methodism on either side of the border would never be the same again.

Word “that there is a war between our people and the English people” first reached Francis Asbury as he presided over the proceedings of the New England Annual Conference in Lynn, Massachusetts. Asbury’s initial response was short and to the point: “My trust is in the living God.”<sup>85</sup> But such platitudes did little to resolve the realities the war wrought on the Methodist community. The Genesee Conference was forced to relocate its annual meeting in July. “In consequence of war having been declared between the U. States & Great Britain,” the minutes read, “it Assembled in Lyons (N.Y.) instead of Niagara in Canada.” Asbury noted disappointingly in his journal that “our brethren of Canada were all absent.” Two weeks later, while traveling through Pennsylvania, the bishop remarked further “on this unhappy subject.” “I feel a deep concern for the Old and New World,” he wrote, somewhat ominously. “Calamity and suffering are coming upon them both.” Though Asbury felt the subject “is one on which the

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<sup>84</sup> Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion*, 44-46.

<sup>85</sup> *JLFA* 2:701

prudent will remain silent,” he nevertheless “must needs say it is an evil day.”<sup>86</sup>

The following year, in a “valedictory statement” on “primitive Church government and ordination,” Asbury reiterated the Church’s official neutrality. After reflecting on the growth and geographical expansion of the Methodist Episcopal Church over the last 30 years, he asked, rhetorically, “As to temporal power, what have we to do with that in this country?”

We are not senators, congressmen, or chaplains; neither do we hold any civil offices. We neither have, nor wish to have, anything to do with the government of the States, nor, as I conceive, do the States fear us. Our kingdom is not of this world. For near half a century we have never grasped at power.<sup>87</sup>

Asbury’s outspoken denunciation of the war, and of politics more generally, has led some to conclude that “Methodists refused to take sides” and cared about the conflict only inasmuch as it affected their membership rolls.<sup>88</sup> But while Methodists did regret the negative impact the war had on religiosity and some other prominent leaders joined Asbury in denouncing the war “as utterly and irreconcilably opposed to the gospel of peace,” others came out strongly in support of the American cause. In addition to the unknown number of Methodists who took up arms, a number of prominent preachers expressed their support for the cause. Freeborn Garrettson, who had earlier refused to take an oath of allegiance to any nation, now confessed to William McKendree that “I profess to love both Church and State; and if I knew I had a little finger to raise again the

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<sup>86</sup> Minutes of the Genesee Conference, 1810-1824, Methodist Library (Drew), 23; *JLFA* 2:703, 705.

<sup>87</sup> *JLFA* 2:739-40; 3:480.

<sup>88</sup> Haselby, *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism*, 150-51. “Mostly, they worried about the impact of the war on Church membership, as ‘war spirit was ... harmful to their work.’”

order or union of either, I would cut it off.”<sup>89</sup> David Lewis, a traveling preacher in the New York Conference, went even further. Though he believed war was “antagonistic to the gospel,” he nevertheless invoked God’s support on behalf of the American armies. Referencing “the noble blood of patriot martyrs” that “consecrated this whole land of freedom,” Lewis prayed that “the God of power, who sustained our fathers in the Revolutionary struggle, would give us the victory.”<sup>90</sup> Far from being indifferent to the conflict, then, Methodists throughout America weighed in on the war.

In his 1813 valedictory address, Asbury insisted that Methodist preachers “are not senators, congressmen, or chaplains; neither do we hold any civil offices.” While he was technically correct that no Methodist preacher currently served in either the United States House or the Senate, other Methodists, including several local preachers, did hold civil office in local and state governments. And though no Methodist was appointed as chaplain to any regular units in the United States military, at least fourteen traveling preachers assumed that role for volunteer militias over the course of the conflict. Their number included Learner Blackman, who in December 1812 was invited by Andrew Jackson to “go down the Mississippi with the Army ... as Chaplain.” “I hesitated to know what was my duty in such a case—I paused,” wrote Blackman in his

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<sup>89</sup> Williams, *Religion and Violence*, 100, quoting “one partisan chronicler” of the New England Conference; Freeborn Garrettson to William McKendree, 29 June 1813, in Robert Paine, *Life and Times of William M’Kendree, Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South, 1896), 243.

<sup>90</sup> David Lewis, *Recollections of a Superannuate: or, Sketches of Life, Labor, and Experience in the Methodist Itinerancy*, edited by Rev. S.M. Merrill (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1857), 76, 99. For a fuller analysis of Lewis’s writings on the War, see Williams, *Religion and Violence*, 102-04.

journal. "I ultimately concluded I could be of some use to the Army especially that part of them that are Methodists." The several chaplains preached and prayed to the soldiers and, when necessary, took commanding officers to task. After suggesting to General Jackson that "he not tell a seriously ill soldier that he was about to die," Learner Blackman took to his journal. "I find the General cannot bear much opposition. He is a good General but a very incorrect divine."<sup>91</sup> More significantly still, Jesse Lee, a prominent Methodist preacher and close associate of Francis Asbury, spent the entirety of the War serving as a congressional chaplain, first in the United States House of Representatives (1812-1814) and then as Chaplain of the United States Senate (1814-1815).<sup>92</sup> The first Methodist to serve in the latter position, Lee's appointment was yet another sign of a growing comfort with America and its political institutions among Methodists.

Methodist views on the war may have been inconsistent and varied, but their active participation in the conflict is undeniable. The impact of the War on the Methodist community in North America was greater still. Membership fell in

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<sup>91</sup> Learner Blackman Journal, 28 December 1812, 27 January 1813, as cited in Robert Bevis Steelman, "Learner Blackman (1781-1815)," *Methodist History* 5 (1967): 11-12. The other thirteen Methodist chaplains were Lovick Pierce, Joshua Oglesby, Thomas Mitchell, Billy Hibbard, Enoch Mudge, Joseph A. Merrill, Joshua Soule, Jesse Jennett, Augustus Jocelyn, Lemuel Smith, Lewis Anderson, James Gwin, and William Rogers. See Kenneth E. Lawson, *Reliable and Religious: U.S. Army Chaplains in the War of 1812* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Chaplains, Department of the Army, 2012), 290-95.

<sup>92</sup> Lee was initially appointed Chaplain to the U.S. House of Representatives on May 22, 1809, and was reappointed shortly after the outbreak of war, in November 1812. He was appointed Chaplain of the United States Senate on September 27, 1814. Lee was the first Methodist to serve as U.S. Senate Chaplain and the second to serve as House Chaplain. Thomas Lyell had served in that position from 1800-1801. See "Chaplains of the House," <http://history.house.gov/People/Office/Chaplains/> (accessed 15 April 2016); and "Senate Chaplains," [http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Senate\\_Chaplain.htm](http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Senate_Chaplain.htm) (accessed 15 April 2016).

almost every conference in the War's early years, and preachers throughout the United States complained of an increase in "reckless, licentious feeling, and a depravation of public morals."<sup>93</sup> The congregations and classes of Upper and Lower Canada felt the impact of the War most forcefully. Membership in the Upper and Lower Canada Districts was nearly cut in half, plunging from just shy of 3,000 in 1812 to 1,765 by 1815. As in America, Methodists north of the border took up arms, with one estimate suggesting that a full quarter of Methodist men in the Niagara region were "militia men, or otherwise employed in the service."<sup>94</sup>

In addition to the inability of preachers in Canada to attend Annual Conferences, those newly assigned to the regions north of the border were unable to take up their charges. By 1813, almost all of the American preachers traveling Canadian circuits had returned to the United States, unwilling to sign an oath of allegiance to Great Britain.<sup>95</sup> The most notable exception was Henry Ryan, a Massachusetts-born preacher who had served in Canada since 1805 and was appointed Presiding Elder of the Upper Canada District in 1811. Ryan functionally served the role in Upper Canada that Francis Asbury did during the American Revolution a generation earlier. Evidently on the basis of his Irish ancestry, he "had become a British subject or was regarded as such." Under his leadership, a band of local lay preachers continued the work throughout the

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<sup>93</sup> D.W. Clark, *Life and Times of Rev. Elijah Hedding, Late Senior Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1856), 222.

<sup>94</sup> Playter, *History of Methodism in Canada*, 113. Membership figures in *Minutes, 1773-1828*, 1:211, 260.

<sup>95</sup> Semple, *The Lord's Dominion*, 45. For a case-by-case look at each preacher, see John Carroll, *Case and his Cotemporaries; or, the Canadian Itinerants' Memorial: Constituting a Biographical History of Methodism in Canada, From its Introduction into the Province, till the Death of the Rev. Wm. Case in 1855* (Toronto: Samuel Rose, 1867), 1:258-302.

colony, fighting off suspicions of disloyalty and establishing the groundwork for a new era of Canadian Methodism.<sup>96</sup>

Most significantly, the War of 1812 caused a breakdown in relations between British and American church leaders. In response to the request of Methodist laity in Montreal, Kingston, and elsewhere, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) dispatched its first agents to Lower Canada in 1814, with additional missionaries arriving in subsequent years. When hostilities ended and Methodist preachers from America returned to their former stations in Canada, they discovered that British preachers had assumed oversight of several classes and congregations. On December 31, 1815, the WMMS Committee wrote to Francis Asbury. “To preserve a mutual good understanding and the unity of the Spirit and so far as possible co-operation in promoting the good work of the Lord,” they wrote, “we feel it our Duty to state to you a subject of local difference, which to us has been painful.” After explaining their reasons for first sending a missionary to Montreal, they explained “we are sorry to learn that some misunderstanding has taken place between B<sup>rs</sup> Strong and Williams, our Missionaries and B<sup>r</sup> Ryan, your presiding Elder for lower Canada.” After reviewing letters from both parties, the committee was “led to conclude that” it would be best “for our Brethren to occupy those Stations.” Their claims rested on both national ties (“the relative situation of the inhabitants of Montreal and of Canada, to this county”) and the desires of Methodists in those regions (“a

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<sup>96</sup> Goldwin French, “RYAN, HENRY,” Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 6, University of Toronto/ Université Laval, 2003—, accessed 14 April 2016, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/ryan\\_henry\\_6E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/ryan_henry_6E.html).

principal part of the People appear to be in Favour of our Missionaries”).<sup>97</sup> The uneasy alliance that had earlier broken down in Nova Scotia now threatened to do the same in the Canadas.

Francis Asbury was indignant. “We have planted, we have watered, we have taken a most sacred charge of Upper and Lower Canada for about 22 years,” he wrote in response the following month. “They form two respectable districts in the Genesee Conference. They lie side by side on the northern banks of the St. Lawrence, and the United States’ districts and circuits on the south. The souls of our people in Canada are exceedingly precious to us.” In Asbury’s mind, the Methodist Episcopal Church’s claims to the region rested on both history and proximity. Noting that he had taken care to assign to Montreal Samuel Montgomery, “one of His Majesty’s Subjects, late from Ireland,” Asbury expressed his irritation he “should be prevented from taking his charge by the British missionary!” Doubling down on the MEC’s claims to minister there, he pointed out the difficulties facing church leaders so far away. “And who is to examine Mr. Williams’s conduct? Mr. Bennett, of the province of Nova Scotia? The British Conference or the Directors of the Missionary Society?” But worst of all to Asbury was the threat the intrusions posed to Methodist unity in the North American borderlands. “We, as ministers of Christ, think it a sin of sins to divide the body of Christ,” he concluded before promising patience. “We shall bear long, suffer long, and make every explanation, till the charge is given up to us.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Committee to Francis Asbury, 31 December 1815, WMMS Papers, SOAS.

<sup>98</sup> Francis Asbury to Joseph Benson, 15 January 1816, *JLFA* 3:550-51. Part of the dispute arose over the question of ownership of a chapel in Montreal. The WMMS

The charge never was fully given back to the Episcopal Methodists, and the promised patience would be put to the test over the next four years, as British and American church leaders reached an uneasy agreement to share responsibility for the work in the region. Each group of missionaries dispatched from England were “instructed not to occupy any station, alternately occupied by our American Brethren; but to employ their labours in those parts of the Two provinces ... most destitute of the means of instruction & salvation.” American Methodist leaders, meanwhile, made an effort to only assign to their Canadian stations British and Canadian-born preachers, and when that was not an option, “Americans ... of moderate politics.”<sup>99</sup> Tensions persisted, as missionaries and preachers regularly encroached on one another’s territory. When ownership of a Montreal chapel came under dispute in August 1816, the WMMS reluctantly relented, resolving “that, un unless the American Conference in consideration of the assistance received from England towards the erection of the Montreal Chapel, shall voluntarily allow the use of that Chapel & the adjoining premises to our Missionary & the Society in connexion with him, we recommend to our Friends quietly to resign the American Brethren & to procure other

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Committee reluctantly gave up that fight in August 1816, resolving “that, un unless the American Conference in consideration of the assistance received from England towards the erection of the Montreal Chapel, shall voluntarily allow the use of that Chapel & the adjoining premises to our Missionary & the Society in connexion with him, we recommend to our Friends quietly to resign the American Brethren & to procure other accommodations for themselves.”

<sup>99</sup> Todd Webb, *Transatlantic Methodists: British Wesleyanism and the Formation of an Evangelical Culture in Nineteenth-Century Ontario and Quebec* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013), 50-51. See also J.I. Little, *Borderland Religion: The Emergence of an English-Canadian Identity, 1792-1852* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).



accommodations for themselves.”<sup>100</sup> In 1818, William Case, Presiding Elder of the Lower Canada District, wrote to Nathan Bangs, complaining of “troubles ... with our European Brethren.” He told “of a party among us who declare themselves ‘Independant of the American Conference,’” who “for two years ... have been endeavoring to urge this among our friends.” “O! the Affliction, of our distressed Zion in Canada!” he concluded. “Where shall we find balm for her pain?”<sup>101</sup>

The balm came in 1820, when an agreement was brokered giving the Methodist Episcopal Church oversight of the work in Upper Canada and the WMMS control of Lower Canada. As Todd Webb has recently argued, this July 10 accord marked a decisive moment in Canadian Methodist history. According to Webb, it marked the moment “Wesleyan missionaries and their lay supporters in the colonies began to elaborate a distinctly British and Wesleyan identity – one that took shape in opposition to both the home connexion and the American Methodists.”<sup>102</sup> It also marked the beginning of the end of Methodist cooperation in the Canadas, and within a decade, American Methodists had withdrawn from the region altogether. Soon after, Canadian Methodists would assert their own independence of English ministerial control, as well.

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The War of 1812 thus left a profound impact on the future of Methodism in North America, prompting many Methodists to take a more self-consciously

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<sup>100</sup> Minutes, August 10, 1816, Methodist Missionary Society Fonds, A-251, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Ontario.

<sup>101</sup> William Case to Nathan Bangs, March 30, 1818. Nathan Bangs Collection, Methodist Library, Drew University.

<sup>102</sup> Webb, *Transatlantic Methodists*, 55.

participatory role in America's political, military, and civil ambitions than ever before. It also exacerbated lingering tensions between American preachers and their audiences in Canada, ultimately forcing Episcopal Methodists from the region altogether. In doing so, the War and its aftermath reoriented the movement away from its British roots across the Atlantic and westward toward the American frontier. By 1820, the Ohio Conference had grown to become the MEC's largest, totaling over 35,000 adherents.<sup>103</sup> With their passing in 1814 and 1816, respectively, Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury's earlier plea to "reform the Continent" and "spread scriptural holiness of the lands" came to be redefined once more, this time more closely in line with America's imperial ambitions in the western country.

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<sup>103</sup> *Minutes, 1773-1828*, 346.

## CONCLUSION

On Wednesday, May 1, 1816 delegates gathered in Baltimore, Maryland for the Methodist Episcopal Church's quadrennial General Conference. Since their previous meeting four years earlier, much had changed: the United States and Great Britain had initiated and then concluded a war. American Methodist preachers had withdrawn from Canada, their former pulpits beginning to be occupied by newly arrived missionaries from England. Richard Allen's Bethel Congregation in Philadelphia won its legal independence from white jurisdiction after a prolonged legal battle, and in April 1816, formally organized the African Methodist Episcopal Church. And Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, the Methodist Episcopal Church's first two bishops, had each died. The meeting in Baltimore represented the end of one era in the history of American Methodism and the beginning of another.

On March 31, just one month prior to the General Conference, Francis Asbury died at the home of George Arnold in Spotsylvania County, Virginia. The 70-year-old bishop had been battling various ailments for several years, but insisted on continuing his almost non-stop travel schedule until the end of his life. When he passed away at Arnold's home, he was en route to Baltimore to attend the conference. During the course of his travels the previous year, he had not only continued to preach and regulate the affairs of the church he had led for more than three decades, but also to visit several friends. In February 1815, Asbury preached in the home of Edward Dromgoole in Brunswick County, Virginia, ordaining the longtime local preacher "an elder in the Church of God." In

his journal, Asbury praised Dromgoole as a “faithful local preacher, respected and beloved,” noting that “he has six children living, two of whom, Edward and Thomas, are local deacons.” He made no mention of the 11 slaves then owned by Dromgoole. Four months later, while passing through Rhinebeck, New York, Asbury stayed with Freeborn and Catherine Garrettson, who had never wavered in their commitment to antislavery, before continuing on to New York City, where he “spoke a few words at the African chapel.” While traveling through Delaware, Asbury “called a meeting at Richard Bassett’s,” the former governor and prominent Federalist politician. In Ohio, he visited several “old friends” in Chillicothe, exhorting the Republican-dominated congregation to “take heed that party and politics do not drive out our piety.” His hopes of visiting Canada once more were made impossible by war, though he expressed “thanks to the God of peace!” when he received word “that a treaty has been made between the United States and Great Britain.” Until his dying day, Francis Asbury was committed to keeping the Methodist Episcopal connection alive, in spite of its members’ disagreements and divisions.<sup>1</sup>

At several stops along the way during that final tour, Asbury eulogized the recently deceased Thomas Coke, preaching a “funeral sermon” in New York and a “memorial sermon” in Ohio. In spite of the disagreements, Asbury praised his episcopal companion as “a gentleman, a scholar, and a bishop” and “as a minister of Christ, in zeal, in labours, and in services, the greatest man in the last

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<sup>1</sup> *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, in Three Volumes*, ed. by Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton (London and Nashville: Epworth Press and Abingdon Press, 1958), 2:774-75, 778, 780, 792. On Asbury’s final years and his death, see John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 391-400.

century.”<sup>2</sup> Thomas Coke last visited the United States in 1804. He arrived in the hopes that he would make his permanent home there, telling Richard Whatcoat shortly after his arrival in November 1803 that “every shackle, every engagement, every obligation, in Europe, has been loosed or discharged.”<sup>3</sup> He set out to meet Asbury in time for the South Carolina Conference’s annual meeting, scheduled for January 1, 1804. Upon his arrival, Coke quickly sensed that Asbury had little interest in Coke making America his permanent home or sharing the day-to-day duties of the episcopacy with him. “Far from my having any opportunity of strengthening the Episcopacy,” Coke reported sorrowfully, “I was not to be consulted on the station of a single Preacher.” Only then, after being spurned by the man he had ordained two decades earlier, did Coke see “the will of God concerning me.” “I ought not to labour in America,” he explained, “unless the General Conference would consent to comply in some degree with its engagements. ... [E]very bishop ought to have a right of giving his judgment on every point, or he is but the shadow of a bishop.”<sup>4</sup> Thomas Coke returned to England in July, never again to cross the Atlantic Ocean. He remained a bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church (in name only) for another four years, when, in 1808, the General Conference of the MEC voted to include the following addendum to the minutes:

Dr. Coke, at the request of the British Conference, and by consent of our General Conference, resides in Europe. He is not to exercise

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<sup>2</sup> *JLFA* 2:780, 792.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Coke to Richard Whatcoat, 2 November 1803, in *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. John A. Vickers (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2013), 334-36.

<sup>4</sup> Coke to the New York Conference, 6 January 1806, as cited in John Vickers, *Thomas Coke: Apostle of Methodism* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1969), 246.

the office of superintendent among us, in the United States, until he be recalled by the General Conference, or by all the annual Conferences respectively.<sup>5</sup>

The minute remained in place for the next six years. After returning to England, Coke's attention was increasingly diverted away from America. Having successfully pioneered Methodist missions in the West Indies, he had since turned over management of the Caribbean stations to the Missionary Committee, allowing him to begin exploring new fields. From 1804-1814, he successfully established Methodist missions in Gibraltar, Sierra Leone, and the Cape of Good Hope. The crowning jewel in Thomas Coke's ministry was to be a mission to Asia. The idea of a Methodist mission in the East had occupied his thoughts since at least 1784, and by 1813, Coke had made arrangements for a small band of Methodist missionaries and him to introduce Methodism to Ceylon, a small island off the southern coast of India. Departing on December 30, Coke never reached his intended destination. On May 2, 1814, he passed away from apoplexy aboard ship, somewhere in the middle of the Indian Ocean.<sup>6</sup>

With the passing of their church's founding bishops, then, the 1816 General Conference marked a crucial turning point in the history of American Methodism. A number of imperative issues confronted the assembled delegates in Baltimore, not least the election of Asbury's replacement. William McKendree, the first American-born preacher elected to the bishopric of the Methodist Episcopal Church, had served in that capacity since 1808. He now oversaw not only the funeral procession and burial of his mentor and the Father of American

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<sup>5</sup> *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the Years 1773-1828* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 154-55, 167, 178, 191, 205, 219.

<sup>6</sup> On Coke's final voyage and death at sea, see Vickers, *Thomas Coke*, 335-354.

Methodism, but also the election of two new preachers to the superintendency of the church Asbury had led for 32 years. On Tuesday, May 14, the conference took up “the business of the election of two additional bishops.” Enoch George, a Virginia-born preacher who has served in the itinerant ministry since 1790, was elected by a narrow majority (57 out of 106 votes) on the first ballot, and Robert Richford Roberts, a 38-year old preacher from Frederick County, Maryland, by 55 out of 106 votes on the second.<sup>7</sup> Their election marked several significant firsts for the Methodist Episcopal Church. In addition to comprising the first all American-born bishopric of the church, Roberts was also the first married minister to serve in that station, a decision that proudly single Asbury almost certainly would have opposed.

More significantly, still, all three members of the MEC’s bishopric were southern-born. And while each was nominally opposed to slavery, none evidenced any interest in resurrecting the significantly more strict terms of communion from the 1780s, content to leave the enforcement (or lack thereof) of the church’s continued (but largely hollow) insistence that “we are as much as ever convinced of the great evil of slavery” in the hands of each individual conference. Four years earlier, northern preacher Dan Young requested “the conference to inquire into the nature and moral tendency of slavery” at the 1816 meeting, with the hope of forcing church leaders to once again enforce a general rule opposing slavery. But the committee charged with following through on “the unfinished business of the last General Conference, so far as it relates to slavery,

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<sup>7</sup> *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Volume 1: 1796-1836, Published by Order of the Conference* (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1855), 142.

could only offer the following after more than a week of “serious consideration” and “mature deliberation.” “Under the present existing circumstances in relation to slavery, little can be done to abolish a practice so contrary to the principles of moral justice.” While they “deplore[d] the destructive consequences” of slavery, they nevertheless found “that in the South and West the civil authorities render emancipation impracticable.” In place of the previous rule encouraging all members to manumit their slaves where legally permitted, the committee now proposed instead to forbid any “slaveholder” to “be eligible to any official station in our Church hereafter where the laws of the state in which he lives will admit of emancipation,” thus removing even the recommendation for church members to emancipate their slaves and merely restating an earlier prohibition imposed on itinerant preachers.<sup>8</sup> As historian Donald Mathews concluded, with Francis Asbury’s death “came the final gasp of ecclesiastical determination to oppose slavery throughout the nation. ... There was no talk of hoping that the Gospel would gradually eradicate slavery—only a sense of failure and regret for having to compromise great principles.”<sup>9</sup>

The minutes of the 1816 General Conference make no mention of Richard Allen or the newly established African Methodist Episcopal Church. Just one month earlier, that body had been organized in Philadelphia, with constitutive congregations in Maryland and New York. Richard Allen was ordained Bishop of the new church, making him “the acknowledged leader of the most influential black church in the Western world.” Where the MEC’s General Conference

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<sup>8</sup> *Journals of the General Conference*, 1:121, 139, 169-70.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 28-29.



solidified their retreat from earlier antislavery policies, Allen's AME church took care to reiterate its opposition to slavery and its refusal to allow slaveholders as members. As Allen's biographer Richard Newman has suggested, the inclusion of the antislavery minute in the AME *Discipline* was likely intended for "white readers" as "a commentary on their own iniquitous position."<sup>10</sup> Tensions between Allen's AME Church and the MEC were heightened further by the election of Robert Richford Roberts to the episcopacy. In 1813, Roberts had been transferred from the Baltimore Conference to Philadelphia, where he quickly became embroiled in the escalating conflict between white and black Methodists in the city. In 1814, he was assigned the St. George's station, which included oversight of the black Bethel congregation. In the spring of 1815, Roberts announced his intention to preach in Bethel, an overt power play aimed at establishing his authority. According to David Smith, an early member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Roberts arrived one Sunday morning and found his way to the pulpit blocked. "The white Elder tried to force himself on them as their pastor," Smith recalled. When he arrived at the church building, it "was filled and all the aisles were crowded, so much so the ministers and pastors were unable to reach the pulpit," leaving Roberts "much displeased."<sup>11</sup> The

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<sup>10</sup> Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 178.

<sup>11</sup> David Smith, *Biography of Rev. David Smith of the A.M.E. Church; Being a Complete History, Embracing over Sixty Years' Labor in the Advancement of the Redeemer's Kingdom on Earth, Including "The History of the Origin and Development of Wilberforce University* (Xenia, Ohio: Xenia Gazette Office, 1881), 29. See also Carol V.R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Rise of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 81-83; and Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 228-29.

subsequent election of Robert R. Roberts to the bishopric of the Methodist Episcopal Church helped ensure that the breach separating black and white Methodists in Philadelphia was final and firm. Independent black Methodism was here to stay, and it continued to grow in the coming decades, with the establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in New York City in 1821 and the continued incorporation of black MEC congregations throughout the nation.

The delegates to the 1816 General Conference did briefly take up the subject of the postwar work in Canada. In attendance at Baltimore were the Maritime Methodist preachers William Black and William Bennett, there on assignment as representatives of the London Methodist Missionary Society “to make an amicable adjustment of certain differences between our Church and the British connexion relative to Upper and Lower Canada.” Though initially headstrong in their refusal to “give up any part” of the Canadas, “or any of our chapels in those provinces, to the superintendence of the British connexion,” the General Conference altered its position just four years later, ceding ecclesiastical control of Lower Canada to the British Methodists.<sup>12</sup> But that compromise proved short-lived, too. The Methodist Episcopal Church’s efforts to solidify its hold on Upper Canada by creating a separate Canadian Conference in 1824 were undermined by petitions from Methodists in Upper Canada to initiate their independence from the Methodist Episcopal Church. The 1828 General Conference took up their petition, and in a vote of 104 to 43, passed a resolution

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<sup>12</sup> *Journals of the General Conference*, 1:151-52. See also Neil Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), 49-52.

declaring “that the compact existing between the Canada Annual Conference and the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States be, and hereby is dissolved by mutual consent, and that they are at liberty to form themselves into a separate Church establishment.” The Methodist Episcopal Church’s presence in the Canadas had ended. Their connection was now aligned with the borders of the United States.<sup>13</sup>

One final motion proposed at the 1816 General Conference symbolized each of the changes discussed above. According to the minutes, on Thursday, May 23, just one day before the Conference adjourned, “William Phoebus moved, that the word ‘connexion’ be expunged from our Discipline, and the words ‘Church,’ ‘community,’ and ‘itinerancy’ be inserted, as the grammatical construction may require.” The proposal passed, with no apparent opposition.<sup>14</sup> Though likely not intended to signify such, the proposal rhetorically confirmed the severance of ties with various groups within the broader Methodist fold, including some black Methodists and adherents beyond the boundaries of the United

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<sup>13</sup> *Journals of the General Conference*, 1:338. While Episcopal Methodists withdrew from the province, several schismatic Methodist groups continued to send missionaries to the Canadas (the Reformed Methodist Church and Methodist Protestant Church both maintained a presence in Upper Canada), as well as new religious movements made up primarily of former Methodists, including the Millerites and Mormons. See J.I. Little, *Borderland Religion: The Emergence of an English-Canadian Identity, 1792-1852* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 202, 220, 283-84. On Mormonism in Upper Canada, see Richard E. Bennett, “‘Plucking not Planting’: Mormonism in Eastern Canada, 1830-1850,” in Brigham Y. Card, Herbert C. Northcott, John E. Foster, Howard Palmer, and George K. Jarvis, eds. *The Mormon Presence in Canada* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1990), 19-34; and Darren Ferry, “The Politicization of Religious Dissent: Mormonism in Upper Canada, 1833-1843,” *Ontario History* 89 (1997): 285-301.

<sup>14</sup> *Journals of the General Conference*, 1:173. On the many meanings of connection/connexion in Methodist polity and practice, see Russell E. Richey, “Connection and Connectionalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, ed. by William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 211-28.

States. The transition of American Methodism from a movement of like-minded pietists spread across the Anglo-Atlantic World to an independent American church, begun with the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784, was rapidly approaching completion.

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