

THE JUDGE THOMAS WHITE HOME: Refuge of Bishop Asbury

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The location of Judge White's home and chapel has been approved as a historic site by the Peninsula Conference of the United Methodist Church. Although the home was demolished in 1978 and the location of the chapel site was only recently discovered, there is still much local interest in this once prominent Methodist family and home.¹

It was at Thomas White's home that Asbury hid for about six months during the worst of the persecution of the Methodists during the middle years of the American Revolution. Even after he felt free to travel in the nearby area, he spent many days there during the next year. Asbury first went to Judge White's on December 11, 1777, and for over two years made that his headquarters. On April 12, 1780, Asbury said, "I am going from my home, Thomas White's."² Asbury's journal lists sixty-three references to Thomas White. He visited the White's forty-three times, preaching or exhorting there at least twenty-five times.³ At that home he conducted two special conferences for the northern preachers -- the first on April 28, 1779, and again in April 1781, with twenty preachers present.⁴ He also held three quarterly conferences there and twice met the preachers for the six-month stationing of the itinerants for Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. In White's home the funeral sermon of an elderly neighbor, Mrs. Peterkin, was preached by Asbury. A few weeks later Mr. Peterkin died and Asbury assisted the Episcopal minister, Dr. Samuel Magaw, in conducting a memorial service for the two of them in Judge White's barn with 400 present. Asbury commented, "At the solicitation of Mrs. M. White. I attended these old people in life and death."⁵ His journal contains twelve references to the Peterkins, and yet there is no evidence that he ever stayed in their home.

Information gathered at three Maryland repositories has brought new insights concerning the White family. Since much of Judge White's land was acquired before the Mason and Dixon boundary dispute was settled, White was considered a resident of Maryland until just before the Revolutionary War. According to A Biographical Dictionary of the Maryland Legislature, 1635-1789, Mrs. White was the stepdaughter of James Peterkin.⁶ Therefore, Mrs. Peterkin was Mrs. White's mother. A 1755 deed indicates that Mr. Peterkin had married the widow of William Nutter who had two children. The deed named only William Nutter, Jr.⁷ However, in 1784, when William Nutter, Jr., made his will he named "Thomas White, my brother-in-law of Kent Co.," as one of his executors.⁸ This is why Mrs. White was so anxious for Mr. Asbury to visit the Peterkins in their illness

and why the busy circuit rider spent so much time ministering to them. It also explains why the funeral was held in White's barn.

Apparently Mr. Peterkin had no children. In his will he left his third best bed to his cousin and his fourth best feather bed to his sister. To his sister's husband, John Scott, and son James Scott, he left his clothes and the money that they owed him. But to his friend Thomas White he left the residue of his estate.⁹ Before her marriage Mrs. White was known as Mary or Margaret Nutter, the same name as William Nutter's grandmother. John Lednum reported that Mrs. Peterkin, a relative of the Whites, was born again at 70 years of age and that the Peterkins were buried alongside Mr. and Mrs. White.¹⁰

It is well known that Bishop Asbury was a pilgrim wandering up and down the newly developing United States. Restlessness exudes from the pages of his cryptic journal. Yet he claimed as "my home" the home of Judge White near Whiteleysburg, which today seems like an out-of-the-way place. Through the years several historians have described this property. In 1948, E.C. Hallman, Peninsula Conference historian, observed that "Judge White's was an ideal place to hide. Off the beaten track, a comfortable brick house, a heavy forest to slip into, in case of need, and a warm hearted, high minded, socially prominent family to assist. In addition, it was close to the state line."¹¹

In January of 1846, only fifty-one years after Thomas White's death, John D. Long, a circuit rider from Denton, Maryland, while holding a protracted meeting (revival) in the immediate vicinity, decided to visit what he called "this classic ground of ancient Methodism" guided by Francis Chilton, a steward of the circuit. (About two miles south of White's home was the old Chilton Methodist Campground, one of the oldest camps in the county.) The Reverend Long observed:

*The farm has passed out of the White family, and is tenanted out. It is poor compared to its former productiveness, and wears a gloomy aspect. Only a part of the old mansion house is standing which existed in the days of the revolution... Time, the great destroyer of the works of men, has done its faithful work here. You would scarcely suppose that this was the place where once assembled nearly all of the Methodist preachers in America.*¹²

Two years later Methodist historian John Lednum gave a similar report. "In 1848, after considerable inquiry, and travelling a comparatively private road, much overhung with limbs of trees for about two miles, we came to Judge White's old homestead."¹³

On three different occasions Asbury referred to White's as his home or lodging, and three other times he called White his best friend. On May 21, 1795, Asbury recorded in his journal, "This day I heard of the death of one, among my best friends in America, Judge Thomas White. I have lived days, weeks and months in

this home. He was about 65 years of age." Before a month had passed, he called on widow Mary White, who had led her husband to the Methodists, and observed, "I came to the dwelling of my dear friend Judge White (whose death I have already mentioned). It was like a funeral to me."¹⁴

In his Rise of Methodism in America, John Lednum gives detailed information on the White family, their conversion, and their home. Lednum was born near Bridgeville, Delaware, in 1797.¹⁵ Both Mary Nutter White and her nephew, White Brown, were from the same area. He began his ministry on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in 1823 and during that year spent a night in Cambridge with Judge White's nephew, Dr. Edward White, who during the eighteenth century had lived about a mile west of Thomas on a farm in Maryland. He was told that the two families frequently united in family prayer, one family walking over to the other, not only in the evening, but sometimes in the early morning.¹⁶ Lednum's direct contacts with the White family gives his history more credibility than any of the other records except Asbury's. Abel Stevens called Lednum "the best chronicler of these early times."¹⁷ Lednum also reports that a longtime member of the White family told him how Mrs. White first went to hear the Methodists one Sunday over her husband's objections. When he said he did not wish to furnish the "means of conveyance," she said that she could walk. The next Sunday he went to the Church of England at Chapel Branch and she to hear a Methodist preacher at a neighbor's home; they found that both ministers had used the same text. Soon the Judge accompanied his wife to a Methodist service and invited the English minister, Martin Rodda, to their home.

Lednum called Mary White "one of the excellent of the earth" when he heard how she defended her husband who was being arrested by the light-horsemen. He described another occasion when she knelt on the ground to pray for a company of drafted soldiers as they passed her home. Lednum also reported that "if a preacher missed his appointment, she took up the cross, led the religious exercise, and met the class -- and she would have gone further and preached if Mr. Asbury had encouraged her."¹⁸ When Benjamin Abbot stopped by the White's on the way to a quarterly conference at Barratt's Chapel, he reported, "Sister While came to me as I sat on my horse, and took hold of my hand, exhorting me for some time. I felt very happy under her wholesome admonitions."¹⁹

According to Judge Isaac Davis, who lived at Dover and Smyrna and was present when Coke and Asbury met at Barratt's, it was Mrs. White who introduced Bishop Asbury to Lawyer Bassett. Bassett later became governor of Delaware. Davis tells how Bassett, who owned considerable property in both Maryland and Delaware and practiced law in both states, was in the habit of spending the night with his friend Judge White on his way to court in Denton, Maryland. On this particular occasion Judge White was not home and, as Mrs. White was about to serve supper and while the family was passing through the house opening and shutting doors (their son Samuel was eight at the time), Bassett noticed that some

men dressed in sable garments were keeping to themselves in a private room. He asked who the men dressed in black were. Mrs White, knowing that Methodist preachers were not in very high repute, answered evasively, "They are gentlemen here on very important business."²⁰ When Bassett persisted, Mrs. White finally said that they were Mr. Asbury and his preachers. At that point Bassett prepared to leave. Though he twice demanded his horse, Mrs. White replied, "You must stay -- they will not hurt you."²¹ Bassett reluctantly conceded, was charmed by Asbury's conversation and, as was customary, invited Mr. Asbury to call on him when he visited Dover. Upon returning home, he quieted his wife's fears by assuring her that Asbury probably would not come.

Soon after this incident, in 1779, Bassett was looking out his window over the Dover Green when he observed Asbury heading toward his door. Desiring company to help with the conversation, he stepped out and invited Episcopal cleric Dr. Samuel Magaw, Governor Caesar Rodney, and some others to tea. The conversation continued until a late hour and a thirty-six year friendship ensued.²² The end of this chain of events which Mrs. White initiated was that first Mrs. Bassett and soon Lawyer Bassett were converted and it was they who sponsored the building of Wesley Chapel, the first Methodist church in Dover, Delaware.²³

About a year later Freeborn Garrettson was placed in the Cambridge, Maryland, jail for his preaching. It was Governor Rodney of Delaware who used his influence to bring about Garrettson's release and soon afterward gave Asbury the Delaware citizenship which made it possible for him to travel again.²⁴

Lesser known is the fact that Mr. White also used his influence to aid Garrettson while the latter was in the Cambridge jail. Garrettson's brother brought a letter from Judge White which greatly changed his situation and the attitude of his greatest enemy.²⁵ The following deposition of Thomas White was dated February 19, 1780:

*I hereby certify to whom it may concern that I am well acquainted with Mr. Freeborn Garrettson and that he has been an inhabitant of this state for near 18 months last past during which time he has supported an unblemished character and generally supposed to be a man of great piety, and I believe has complyd [sic] with the laws of the State in every instance so far as related to a preacher of the gospel.*²⁶

Some recently discovered information helps to explain how a Kent County, Delaware, judge could have so much influence sixty-five miles away at Cambridge, Maryland. In 1768, Thomas White purchased Holbourn, a 1,000 acre tract of land next to his plantation and across the Maryland line in what is now Caroline County. This land was owned by Samuel and Walter Dickinson, cousins of John Dickinson's father. Thus Thomas White became a large landholder in Dorchester County, for Caroline was not carved out of Dorchester until 1774.²⁷

Thomas White's Maryland biography indicates that by 1755 he was a planter, by 1762 a gentleman, by 1773 Esquire. He was a justice for Dorchester County 1764-1773, and a land commissioner by 1773. In 1773 he also became a member of the Lower House of the State Legislature for Dorchester County. The picture which emerges is that Judge White of Delaware had previously been both a justice (a form of judge) and a state legislator from Dorchester County, Maryland. Thus he was well known by the Cambridge authorities, and his letter of recommendation carried considerable weight.

At a time when the lines were being changed, Judge White owned land in Kent County, Delaware, and in Dorchester and Caroline Counties in Maryland. He was also buying and selling land in such a way that it is difficult to know the size of his estate at any given time. When he was elected to the legislature, he had 1,379 acres in Dorchester County, having inherited 391 from his father. There were significant changes by the time of his death in 1795, but he still had 559 acres in Caroline County, Maryland.²⁸

Judge White willed his Maryland land to be divided between two of his daughters, and his home plantation in Delaware to his son. He owned well over 1,000 acres at the time of his death.²⁹ His father, also a large landowner in the same area, had divided his land among three sons and three daughters. The will specified 1,364 acres plus seven tracts named without acreage. Apparently the father owned approximately 2,000 acres of land.³⁰

In addition to extensive landholdings, Thomas White listed an inventory of goods and chattels that was very large for the eighteenth century. It totaled 631 pounds, 10 shillings, and 4 pence. Included are several items of interest to Methodists, particularly the books. He had one book of martyrs valued at ten shillings, the same value that was placed on four volumes of Wesley history. The highest value, twenty-two shillings and six pence, was placed upon the family Bible. Other religious books were three volumes of Fletcher's works, the Arminian Magazine, the Disciplines and one volume of sermons on the millennium, a subject that was of particular interest to eighteenth century Methodist laymen. (In 1797, Governor Bassett, Ezekiel Cooper, James Moore and Dr. Coke spent an evening at Cooper's boarding house disputing whether Christ's reign will be personal or spiritual.)³¹ Books of a more practical nature included a dictionary, a commissary guide and a book on surveying.

Other items valued highly were his silver watch, looking glasses and sheets. A barrel with a little brandy was listed with twenty Queens' plates and was valued at four shillings above the value of the plates; its value probably stemmed from its highly regarded medicinal qualities. Finally, there was a weaver's loom and a flax brake -- reminders of the time when the circuit rider Philip Cox was so poor he had to travel on foot carrying his scanty wardrobe and library in a linen wallet slung across his shoulder. The daughters of Judge White took pity on him and spun thread

which they wove into linen cloth and made undergarments for him!³²

The inventory also reveals that Judge White maintained quarters in Dover where he had an office with a fireplace, a dining room and sleeping facilities.³³ This explains why Asbury could say on December 1, 1781, "I left my brother Thomas White's: I felt the pain of parting with him at Dover; he had the most real affection for me of any man I ever met with."³⁴ Although it was common practice for judges who had to do considerable traveling to maintain more than one residence, no historians mention this facility. His continued absence from home may help to explain Mrs. White's aggressiveness, which seems to go beyond the average Methodist lady of her time.

Freeborn Garrettson recorded five visits to the White's house before the 1784 Baltimore Christmas Conference.³⁵ Young Thomas Haskins, who studied law under Governor Bassett, was a frequent guest at the White's. After meeting with Dr. Coke at Barratt's Chapel, he went south to his circuit; two weeks later he stopped by the White's and stated, "Was glad to see them once more." He journeyed on thirty-five miles above Wilmington, into Pennsylvania, to meet Miss Potter, with whom he was madly in love. Being a young circuit rider and knowing Asbury's objections to married preachers, he exclaimed, "Spent my time between hope and fear. Oh, what a cruel thing to get so much in love as I am." Several days later he was reading a letter he had composed to Dr. Coke, Vasey and Whatcoat expressing his fears about the new plan for an independent church. A week after the Baltimore Christmas Conference he was back at Thomas White's, no doubt discussing both of his fears.³⁶

Both the White family and their property were significant in early Methodism. Dr. Coke's first appointment after Barratt's was White's Chapel, where he baptized many children. He reported that White was the general steward of the circuit.³⁷ Edward White, Judge White's nephew and neighbor, was one of the fifteen laymen appointed chartered trustees of Cokesbury College, which Judge White's son Samuel attended.³⁸ Samuel later became a United States Senator. Ezekiel Cooper met the class at White's during the second month of his itinerancy.³⁹ Thomas Smith also recorded preaching at White's three years after the death of the Judge.⁴⁰

None of the Whites lived to an advanced age. Judge White died in 1795 at the age of sixty-five and his wife, who was reportedly six years younger, died shortly afterward. One year later the only one of his four children to leave heirs, Margaret Nutter Polk, died, and her husband Daniel died the same year. Sarah, who married Dr. Robert Cook and lived in nearby Smyrna, died sometime between 1803 when Asbury last visited her and 1806 when her husband's remarriage was recorded. Samuel, the only son, sold the 667.5 acre farm containing the mansion house in 1806.⁴¹ This was only three years before he died as a bachelor, at the age of 39, and the remaining 546 acres of his holdings were sold.⁴⁶ Anna, who never married, lived near Smyrna, about thirty-five miles from the old home place. Thus, by 1810

all of the immediate Thomas White family were gone from the old mansion and chapel. From 1810, when the property was sold to medical doctor in Smyrna, until 1885, when Anna R. Dupont sold the property to Albert Harrington, it was in the hands of absentee landlords who had little interest in the buildings or their history.⁴³

Methodist clergymen and historians who occasionally went there on a pilgrimage were appalled at what they saw. When the Reverend J.D. Long visited in February of 1846, he exclaimed, " It is an old-fashioned, low, hip-roofed house, and is now in a miserable state of dilapidation. Many of the out-houses are gone, and the negro quarters have been torn down and not a vestige of it is to be seen."⁴⁴

John Lednum made similar observations in 1848, when he also referred to an old hip-roofed, two-story house which was still standing. He was introduced to a former slave, Leanna, who lived nearby. "She could point to the spot where the house stood where the preachers were secreted, though the house, as well as the wood that stood between it and the dwelling-house had long since disappeared." Lednum noticed that "near-by the old homestead, the bricks that arched their graves, now sunk into the earth, mark the spot where their heaven-watched dust reposes."⁴⁵ Thus it would seem that there were no tombstones.

Forty years later when J. Thomas Scharf did his History of Delaware, he noted that "the ruins of the old house are still standing." He also stated that "here Asbury took refuge from his enemies, who would have captured him, had he not hid in the shrubbery."⁴⁶ This was the year that the new owner, Albert Harrington, moved to the house on his farm. He Victorianized it, raising the roof and adding the back wing. His son, writing in 1950, said, "The house now has some addition."⁴⁷

In 1930 when Dr. E.C. Hallman hosted the fifth annual meeting of the Association of Methodist Historical Societies at Dover, he took the historians from several states on a pilgrimage to Judge White's old home. In the words of the secretary for the meeting, "We went into the old brick house, and stood in the room where Asbury in exile called his preachers to a conference... To our chagrin we were pointed to the spot where Judge White lies buried...now covered by a chicken house."⁴⁸

In a newspaper article in 1950 Harrington stated, "In back of the house was a graveyard in which Judge White was buried in 1795. This resting place has been tilled over. The farm is owned by Alfred Raughly."⁴⁹ Mr. Raughly was a large Caroline County property owner, and the land was rented. The use of large tractors rendered the house unnecessary to house persons to till the land, and it was no longer occupied. This led to the rapid decline of the structure and its ultimately being demolished in 1978.

The story of the life of Thomas White would not be complete without looking into the issue of slavery as it related to Methodism. During the twenty years prior to his contact with the Methodists, White was an Eastern Shore of Maryland

planter tilling hundreds of acres. This was the same geographic area from which Harriett Tubman and Frederick Douglas escaped. The institution of slavery was deeply entrenched and considered a necessary way of life on the large plantations. When Thomas was only twenty-seven, his father's will divided the family's Negroes among the three sons.⁵⁰ In 1755, Judge White took custody of several slaves for Mrs. White's minor brother, William Nutter, who had inherited them from their deceased father and grandmother.⁵¹ At the same time, he purchased one man, one boy and two girl slaves from James Peterkin, his wife's step-father.⁵² In 1756, he sold to Mr. Peterkin one Negro man named Sapio and one boy named Samson for 100 pounds.⁵³ That same year he purchased Pegg, a young girl, for 39 pounds, 10 shillings and 10 pence. Thirty-nine years later he freed her.⁵⁴

For the "love and goodwill and natural affection" which Judge White had for his two daughters, Margaret and Anna, he gave them each a Negro girl. The girls were about ten to twelve years of age when they received their gift.⁵⁵ The maternal grandparents remembered Sarah, the other daughter, by giving her a girl called Sall in 1771.⁵⁶ Four years after this transaction, Methodist circuit riders began visiting the White plantation and there were no more slave deeds.

In all fairness to the Whites it should be noted that all of the slave transactions were between relatives, and thus they could not be considered slave traders in the usual sense. It was, however, only just before his death that Judge White wrote the will that set his slaves free. In the words of Lednum, "he was the friend of the poor and oppressed; and left no one in bondage whom he could make free."⁵⁷ The rather unusual wording in Thomas White's will makes this clear. At the end of that will he added a paragraph beginning with the following introduction, which no doubt reflects Asbury's influence: "And whereas I think it wrong and offensive and not doing as I would be willing to be done by to keep negroes in bondage or perpetual slavery I therefore manumit and set free those that are or have been in bondage to me..."

He then proceeded to declare free at the time of his death seven adults -- two men and five women. Three males were to be free when they became twenty-three, and two females at twenty-one. Also, a very young child was to be free with his mother and considered as born free. He then noted that although Mr. Peterkin had in his will manumitted his nine slaves, the document was not "agreeable to the laws of Maryland and doubts may arise whether the said negroes are free... I do hereby set them all free." Mr. Peterkin had said that his minor males slaves were to be free at age twenty-five. Thus by his will Judge White made certain that twenty-two individuals would be legally free. This generous act which, thanks to his friend Asbury, he considered his religious duty probably brought the plantation to an early end and helped to scatter the White family.⁵⁸

When Lednum visited the site in 1848 and met Leanna, the former slave of the White family who was then in her eighty-eighth year, he said that "she lived in a

little home given to her by one of Judge White's daughters." She was probably the girl called Leah whom the Judge gave to his oldest daughter Margaret Nutter Polk. It was reported that she and her husband Daniel moved from Sussex County to Kent County "presumably on part of the White land."⁵⁹

New details concerning Asbury's hiding can be learned from two visits paid to this elderly former servant of the White family. It had been said that he hid in the house, some presuming in the basement and others in the attic. According to Lednum, it was in a house in the woods behind the White mansion.⁶⁰ The Reverend Long said that Leanna referred to her master as Tommy White and that for a time he "hid Bishop Asbury in an out-house, and used to carry his victuals to him; that the bishop used to come to the house late at night and hold prayers with the White family upstairs, in a low tone of voice." Long found Leanna living in a little hut at the head of Chilton's mill pond.⁶¹ This was a distance of nearly two miles from the White mansion. This seems like a great distance, but at one point the Holbourne tract measured two miles. In 1813, Henry Boehm said that he "attended a campmeeting in the Chesapeake District, on land that belonged to Thomas White, Bishop Asbury's early friend."⁶² This was probably the site of the Old Chilton Camp Ground near Leanna's little hut.

A recently discovered deed has cleared much of the confusion about the original location of White's Chapel. It was on the west side of the road that went past the White farm on the way to Burrsville. The one-acre plot was on the east side of a small branch that separated White's dwelling plantation from his farm in Maryland where Mr. Peterkin lived. It was also on the south side of the road that connected the two farms.⁶³ Mr. Leonard Harrington who moved onto the farm in 1888 said that he remember plowing up bricks from the foundation of the church and that it was approximately one-fourth mile from the farmhouse toward Burrsville. He also noted that the building was replaced by a new one in 1839 and moved to Whiteleysburg, then moved into Maryland, and the name was changed to Lee's Chapel.⁶⁴ A footnote in Thomas Smith's journal, published in 1848, explains, "The chapel was near Mr. White's dwelling not far from Whiteleysburg. At last falling into decay, it was substituted by a new house, built some distance from the old one, which is not known by the old name. It is called Lee's Chapel."⁶⁵

In 1903, Henry Conrad, writing a pamphlet on Samuel and Thomas White for the Historical Society of Delaware, stated,

The original Whites Chapel falling into disuse, went to decay. But years afterwards, the framework that remained was removed a mile or more westward across the State line into Maryland, and there it was used as part of the superstructure of what was called Lee's Chapel, and for many years was regularly used for Methodist services. In course of time it was supplanted by Shepherd's Chapel and the building, still in a good state of preservation, is used as a

*barn or storehouse on the Carter farm, adjoining the location of Lee's Chapel.*⁶⁶

The deed to White's Chapel lists as trustees Thomas White's two nephews Dr. Edward White, who soon moved to Cambridge, Maryland, and White Brown, who was already living in Sussex County nearly twenty miles away.⁶⁷ Dr. White is mentioned by Asbury twenty-four times, and White Brown ten times. In addition, Judge White's brother Edward White, Sr., was a trustee. The original White's Chapel may have been too closely allied with one family to last long into the nineteenth century, but four country churches within a five-mile radius were spun off from the original, one of which bore the White name.

Thus the original White's Chapel and home which stood near the present corner of Delaware routes 59 and 291 are no more, but the site still bears many precious and significant memories for local history buffs and for United Methodists.

NOTES

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43. Deed, Albert Harrington from Anna R. Dupont et al, T06, 257. Kent County Courthouse, Dover, Delaware.
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45. Lednum, 271.
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EDITOR'S POSTSCRIPT

Allen B. Clark is Professor Emeritus of History at Wesley College in Dover Delaware, former curator of the United Methodist collection at historic Barratt's Chapel, and current president of the Peninsula Conference Historical Society. In the photograph below, taken at the October 12, 1991, dedication of the Delaware state highway marker, Professor Clark stands to the left of the sign.

The Judge White site, one mile east of Whiteleysburg on State Highway 59, is indicated near the lower left hand corner of the map on page 19.



MAP OF DELAWARE

Showing the Dover Vicinity
and the Site of the
JUDGE THOMAS WHITE HOUSE

