

## **Lorenzo Dow: A Rare Archival Acquisition**

Lorenzo Dow (1777-1834) is one of the most fascinating persons associated with American Methodism. The entire 1990 inaugural volume of *The Chronicle* was devoted to publishing an annotated version of the diary of his wife, Peggy Holcombe Dow (1780-1820), describing their evangelistic travels throughout the Eastern United States.

Acquired last year by the archives of the Central Pennsylvania Conference, this letter is only the second known one surviving in Lorenzo's own hand. It is especially valuable because it gives insights into his second (and final) chance for an appointment in the Methodist Episcopal Church. The following chronology of events outlines Lorenzo Dow's association with Methodism prior to the time of the letter.

- January 1796 – begins to travel/preach unofficially under supervision of circuit pastors and the presiding elder.
- July 1796 – presiding elder Jesse Lee issues a letter about Lorenzo Dow which reads in part: “In several places he was liked by a great many people, at other places he was not liked so well, and at a few places they were unwilling he should preach at all. We have therefore thought it necessary to advise him to return home for a season, until further recommendation can be obtained from the society and preachers of that circuit.”
- September 1796 – refused admission to Conference, continues to travel/preach unofficially under supervision of supportive circuit preachers and as he felt led
- September 1797 – permitted to be employed, but not admitted on trial. Despite poor health, he preaches much.
- September 1798 – comes to Conference with letter of recommendation signed by 30+ preachers, class leaders and stewards. He is admitted on trial and assigned as the junior pastor on Cambridge NY circuit. At this time preachers were often moved every six months, and he finished the year on the Pittsfield MA circuit. Despite continuing poor health, he preaches much. The date of annual conference moves from September to June.
- June 1799 – continued on trial. He had requested a leave of absence to travel at sea for health reasons, but was assigned Essex VT circuit on the Canadian border.
- October 1799 – leaves his circuit to travel to Ireland, where he preaches at will.
- June 1800 – his name does not appear in the minutes in any context.
- June 1801 – returns to America, is reinstated to his former status of continued on trial and assigned to the Dutchess and Columbia circuit. The Conference apparently concluded his previous desertion of Cambridge circuit was justified for health reasons. He writes the following letter to his parents and the conclusion of this Conference.

Mr. Humphrey Dow  
Coventry, Connecticut

My Dear Parents,

At present the door does not seem open for my coming home immediately. I have my feelings. I received a letter from you dated June 5. Am sorry for your sorrows. Seeing all is well we should not borrow trouble but submit, trusting in God. Remember affliction arises not out of the dust, and the tender care of God is over all his works.

The Conference agreed to receive and restore me to my place as I was when going to Europe – before I offered to join them at all to take a circuit. My station is Dutchess and Columbia. Brother Garrettson is my presiding elder and will help me to a house, etc. Brother B. Wood will tell you about this.

Tomorrow I expect to sail up the Hudson River. I intend to come home and stay near 3 weeks, and 'tis probable I shall again before the year is up. I understand Mirza has come to some consideration. I feel concerned about Tabithay in that ungodly place – I am told Brother Bridgman is going off next winter.

Soon as the door opens I shall come to Coventry, not short of 5 nor exceeding 10 weeks. I expect the first. I am a short-sighted creature. I can't see far before me. I only proceed as the door opens, with my trust in God who is my comfort provider, protector and support. O his goodness to me, an unworthy one. Surely I have cause indeed to love and adore him, and O who would not be willing to serve so good and kind a God as this.

I am very confident that we do lose many spiritual blessings by not relying ourselves and trusting Providence enough – and temporal blessings and favors likewise, by not asking enough for them.

Don't be anxious concerning me, for all is well now. I remember you in my devotions to God. Remember me to all enquiring friends.

Farewell,  
Lorenzo Dow  
New York, June 23

Write to me direct to Rhinebeck, Dutchess County, at Freeborn Garrettson's.

The following persons are named in the letter as ordered below.

**Humphrey Bean Dow** (1742-?)– Lorenzo’s father. He married Tabitha Parker (?-1804) on 10/8/1767. They had 6 children: Ulysses (1768), Ethelinda (1770), Mirza (1771), Orelana (1774), Lorenzo (1777), and Tabitha (1779). Humphrey Dow had a small farm in Coventry, but depended on his trade of shoe making – tanning and currying his own leather. An amiable and honest man who saw considerable action in the French and Indian War, he occupied a higher position in Coventry than depended on the mere possession of money. He had a keen intellect and acquired on his own an unusual education for the time – especially in Latin, which he apparently was qualified to teach. His surplus income went wholly for books, his library finally being divided among his children. They all received an excellent education, and all four daughters taught school before they married.

**Freeborn Garrettson** (1752-1827) – very prominent early circuit rider and major figure in the 1784 Christmas Conference that created the Methodist Episcopal denomination. A member of a distinguished Maryland family, Freeborn married Katherine Livingston of THE New York Livingtons and in 1799 built and settled in an estate named Wildercliffe overlooking the Hudson near Rhinebeck NY.

**B. Wood** – unknown. Considering the context, the reference may be to Abner Wood, an itinerant who was assigned to the nearby (to Coventry) Chesterfield circuit in 1801.

**Mirza Dow** (1771-1855) – one of Lorenzo’s older sisters. She had been married Coventry native Joseph Huntington in 1788. He died in Charleston SC 8/19/1794, leaving Mirza with two small sons (Flavius Josephus Huntington, born in Coventry; Edward G. Huntington, born in NC). Mirza and the boys returned to Coventry following the death of Mr. Huntington. The “consideration” mentioned in the letter could refer to money from the final settlement of his estate.

**Tabitha Dow** (1779-?) – Lorenzo’s younger sister. She married Samuel French (1779-1848) and settled in Hardwick VT, where she lived the remainder of her life. Hardwick had a reputation for being a rough town and apparently is the “ungodly place” to which Lorenzo refers – although Tabitha and Samuel seem to have been instrumental in the “French Meeting House” erected there.

**Bridgman** – this reference is made in connection Tabitha and Hardwick VT. It likely refers to Captain John C. Bridgman, who founded the town in 1797 and whose descendants later achieved prominence there.

The letter is particularly valuable to historians because it is a primary document that sheds some interesting light on several questions about Dow.

Considering Lorenzo's fierce independence, there has always been some doubt about his sincerity and motivation in re-entering the Methodist itinerancy. This letter seems to display genuine enthusiasm and sense of expectancy regarding his re-acceptance into the itinerancy. The only other account we have of Lorenzo's experience at this conference is what appears in his published journal. Lorenzo undoubtedly did some editing of his handwritten journal before it went to the printer, and how much the words that now appear were shaped and/or adjusted by later events is difficult to tell. The following June 1801 entries from the published journal certainly give a different account of what transpired.

*Conference came on, and some of my old friends were minded I should take a circuit – but did not blame me for going to Europe, considering the advantage I got to my health, etc. I could not feel my mind free to comply, feeling it my duty to travel more extensively. Their entreaties were hard to resist... I was brought to halt between two opinions, thinking it was easier for one to be mistaken than twenty – yet, I felt it my duty to travel the continent at large... And being under great trials of mind, I concluded to give up my judgment to theirs and take a circuit – which I had no sooner consented to try for a year, the Lord being my helper, than an awful distress came over my mind. But I could not recall my words.*

The journal entries immediately following the Conference also paint a less than positive picture – almost as if they are deliberately setting up Lorenzo's ultimate break with Methodism.

*My station was on the Dutchess and Columbia circuit, with David Brown and William Thatcher – Freeborn Garrettson presiding elder. Thus distressed, I sailed to Rhinebeck... When I arrived at the Flats, I called at a Methodist's and got meeting appointed for the night. One of the principal Methodists came to enquire, "Who is stationed on our circuit?" I replied, "Brown, Thatcher and Dow." Said he, "Dow! I thought he had gone to Ireland!" I replied, "He has been there, but has lately come back." Said he, "Dow! Dow! Why, he is a crazy man. He will break up the circuit." So we parted... They, not knowing who I was, supposed I was a local preacher... Next day, some desired to know my name, which I desired to be excused from telling. I held a number of meetings in this place, mostly cold and lifeless...*

Many remarkable experiences, both positive and negative, on the circuit are recorded in the published journal, to which interested readers are encouraged to refer. In October, Freeborn Garrettson moved Dow to the Litchfield circuit – where similar experiences continued to occur. But Dow's health was marginal, and he recorded in his journal that *of late it hath laid upon my mind that I should not recover whilst I continued in this sphere of action, and that my ill health came in consequence of my not doing what I had felt to be my duty – viz., to travel the continent more at large.*

At the November quarterly meeting, Lorenzo shared “that my mind was under the above trials” and asked for liberty to travel to Georgia. His journal describes what ensued as follows:*But Garrettson, my spiritual grandfather, would not consent – but offered me a location on the circuit if I would say I could travel no longer. But he would not consent that I should leave it on any condition... He said I must then labor not in my usual way, but like the other preachers – the regular appointments only. And thus indirectly it was left.*

In December Lorenzo sailed for Savannah. In the words of the published journal: *There being no probability of obtaining Garrettson’s consent, I was now brought into a strait. Being unable to fulfill the appointments with propriety any longer, I got brother Fox to take them in my stead.* All things considered, the incident is noted with surprisingly little drama – even though it probably severed Lorenzo’s official connection with Methodism. It appears, however, that he may not have seen it that way at the time. For a while, Lorenzo continued to associate with Methodists and Methodism as he traveled the South setting up his own itinerary and appointments. The journal never identifies a particular point at which Lorenzo felt he broke with the Methodist denomination.

Another particular area in which the letter sheds some light concerns the relationship between Lorenzo Dow and Freeborn Garrettson. The letter betrays no ill feelings, and notes that Garrettson will help him find a house and will receive his mail for him while he rides the circuit. In the rest of Lorenzo’s published journal, however, Freeborn Garrettson is conspicuous by his absence. Dow traveled frequently up and down the Hudson Valley as he journeyed between his home in Coventry CT and the South. The large Garrettson home in Rhinebeck was a well-known center of warm hospitality for traveling preachers in a variety of situations. Yet during all Lorenzo’s travels through the area there is not even a mention, let alone a visit, involving Garrettson.

It may be assumed that the Conference of 1801 assigned Dow to the Dutchess and Columbia circuit precisely because it was the circuit that included Rhinebeck – so that presiding elder Freeborn Garrettson could keep a watchful eye out for any eccentricities or irregularities. Furthermore, Dow’s license seems to have been carefully written to match his reputation. When he departed for Savannah, he makes the following comments about his license. *My license being wrote in such form by Mr. Garrettson, it would only serve for the Dutchess and Columbia circuits... It was good for nothing, so I destroyed it, and of course now had no credentials to aid me in a strange land. The thought of going away under the above difficult circumstances was trying to both my natural desire and my faith. Yet it appeared to me I was brought to this situation by my disobedience, and the only way would be to obey in future.*

The original letter is now part of the Lorenzo Dow collection in the Central Pennsylvania Conference archives and may be viewed by appointment.