

APPENDIX: What Ever Happened to the Combs Brothers?

added by Milton Loyer, 2012

The stories of David and Daniel Combs, two early itinerants in the area now covered by the Susquehanna Conference, are representative of struggles faced by circuit riders in the formative years of American Methodism. This appendix is divided into three sections: the first describes their ministerial careers, including brief accounts of the circuits they served; the second relates some of difficulties encountered by researchers investigating the lives of early itinerants; and the third attempts to reconstruct their lives before and after their Methodist itinerancy.

THE MINISTERIAL CAREERS

Originally there were no distinct geographical annual conferences. Any itinerant could be assigned anywhere on the continent where Methodism had made inroads or had the potential to make inroads.

The Minutes of the Annual Conferences¹ indicate that David and Daniel Combs were admitted on trial in 1787 – David being assigned (alone) to Little York [PA], and Daniel (alone) to Bladen [SC].

- Little York – in 1787 this and the two-man Bath [Berkley Springs WV] circuit were the only appointments within the boundaries of the present Susquehanna Conference. Since the Bath circuit picked up only the southern portions of Franklin, Fulton and Bedford counties, David Comb's mission field was essentially the entire conference. There were scattered Methodist families and/or appointments in several counties (most notably in York, Juniata, Huntingdon and Centre), but he certainly had one large circuit to ride would be fortunate to make four complete rounds in a single year.

- Bladen – in 1787 this included the entire coastal area and piedmont plateau of South Carolina and southern North Carolina.

The Minutes for 1788 indicate that both David and Daniel Combs are continued on trial – David being assigned (with Barnabas McHenry) to Cumberland [KY], and Daniel (with Samuel Breeze) to Huntingdon [PA].

- Cumberland – in 1788 this circuit covered western Kentucky, and middle Tennessee. At this time the bulk of the appointments were in Kentucky, and it wasn't until 1803 that the Nashville circuit was created. Two quotes from McFerrins' authoritative regional history² describe the situation. On page 40, "In the year 1788, Combs and McHenry were appointed to the Cumberland Circuit. These were good men, faithful and laborious." On page 517, "B. Ogden had good

¹ Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the years 1773-1828, printed in 1840 by J. Collard.

² History of Methodism in Tennessee by John B. McFerrin (1910).

success [in 1787], considering the inconvenience under which he labored: returned the first year fifty-nine in Society. David Combs and Barnabas McHenry were stationed in Cumberland in 1788. The number in Society was increased to two hundred and twenty-five.”

- Huntingdon – in 1788 this was a brand-new two-man circuit created to cover the northern and western portion of the Little York circuit. It included essentially the area drained by the Juniata River and the area north of the Juniata drained by the west and north branches of The Susquehanna. And so Daniel and another man were sent to cover part of what his brother David had covered (and apparently covered very well) by himself the year before.

The Minutes for 1789 indicate that Daniel is continued on trial – assigned (with Aaron Hutchinson) to Flanders [NJ]. David is not mentioned in any category.

- Flanders – in 1789 this circuit covered most of northwestern New Jersey.

The Minutes for 1790 do not mention David or Daniel Combs in any category, nor do their names appear in any subsequent Minutes.

THE IMPERFECT RECORDS

The following story³ about David Combs was discovered by Charles Berkheimer in the 1960’s. It relates to the beginnings of what is now Fells United Methodist Church in Westmoreland County PA.

On a certain Sunday of that year a congregation gathered at the home of Mrs. Casner, where the town of Donora now stands, to hear David Combs, a local preacher from Bucks⁴ County, who was on his way to Kentucky... In the congregation were Benjamin Fell and his son John. The latter was amazed to discover in the preacher an old friend whom he had last met at an Eastern ball. The change in his friend, the sermon, with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, soon resulted in John Fell’s conversion. At the invitation of Benjamin Fell, David Combs crossed the river and preached to a large congregation at the Fell homestead. A few days later near Wheeling, he was murdered by the Indians. His untimely death, so soon after he had preached to them, made a deep impression upon the congregation.

Berkheimer decided that this explained why such a promising young itinerant as David Combs had mysteriously disappeared from the Minutes and

³ From Our Fathers Have Told Us, The Story of the Founding of Methodism in Western Pennsylvania, by Jacob Simpson Payton (1938), pages 113-114.

⁴ David Combs was not from Bucks County PA. But, as shown in the next section, he was originally from Hunterdon County NJ – which is directly across the Delaware River from Bucks County PA. Apparently the previous meeting of David Combs and John Fells took place in Bucks County, and that may have been the location of the original Fells homestead.

attributed its lack of mention in wider Methodist history to the poor communication of the day. Noting that there was no official Kentucky circuit at that time, he also attributed the mission to one of Asbury's infamous mid-year change of appointments and reasoned that the timing of the appointment (mid-year changes not being reported in the Minutes) might be another reason the event went unnoticed.

We now have access to more information about the circuits distant to Pennsylvania than was available to Berkheimer in the 1960's, and we know that Combs' 1788 appointment to Cumberland was indeed an appointment to Kentucky. But if Combs was murdered by Indians on the way from his 1787 assignment in Pennsylvania to his 1788 assignment in Kentucky, how does that reconcile with the previously cited reports from McFerrin's history that Combs and McHenry performed well on the Cumberland circuit?

The truth is that McFerrin's history is self-contradictory. The previously cited reports were constructed from a casual reading of the Minutes and without checking local sources. First of all, careful reading of the Minutes reveals that in 1786 all of Kentucky and middle and western Tennessee were covered by one circuit: Kentucky (served by Benjamin Ogden). In 1787 the work was split into two circuits: Kentucky (Thomas Williamson and Wilson Lee) and Cumberland (Ogden). For both 1786 and 1787, the presiding elder (superintendent) of the district was James Haw. In 1788, the work was further split into three circuits: Lexington (Williamson, Peter Massie, Benjamin Snelling), Danville (Lee), Cumberland [covering western Kentucky and middle Tennessee] (David Combs and Barnabas McHenry). For 1788 there are two presiding elders (superintendents) for the district: Haw and Francis Poythress. All of the preceding is according to the Minutes.

But McFerrin's history also includes the following statement on pages 55-56 that tell a different story:

In the printed Minutes for the year [1788], it will be seen that David Combs and Barnabas McHenry are placed on the Cumberland Circuit. This is an error, and is thus explained by Mr. McHenry, in a letter published in the Western Methodist, dated May 15, 1823. He says: "Soon after I reached the Kentucky settlement, which was on the 11th of June, 1788, Brother Haw formed the design of placing me on Cumberland Circuit, to which he then intended to accompany me and make a short stay, but before he had executed his purpose he was superseded by Brother Poythress. The consequence was, that Brothers Haw and Massie went to Cumberland and I continued in Kentucky that year, according to the original intention of that appointment. Brother Haw, it would seem, communicated his arrangements previous to the printing of the Minutes, which occasioned my name to be

inserted as appointed to Cumberland Circuit. Brother Combs never went there. He was taken sick, and desisted from traveling."

According to McHenry's own statement, it was Haw and Massie (and not Combs and McHenry) who served Cumberland Circuit in 1788. Furthermore, the increase on the Cumberland Circuit in white members from 1788 to 1789 was not from 59 to 225 as previously reported by McFerrin, but from 59 to 394 – the 225 figure being for a different Cumberland Circuit in a different part of the county. That McFerrin's authoritative book contains contradictory statements, that the "official" Minutes do not reflect what actually occurred in the field, that a casual reading of the Minutes may overlook changing and duplicate names for circuits, and that local tradition can create an such an inspiring story by erroneously connecting the apparent disappearance of a circuit rider with a coincident Indian attack, remind the researcher of the imperfection of printed records and the necessity of checking multiple sources. This is especially true in an age which allows anyone to state anything on the Internet. This author faced that difficulty and responsibility while pouring over contradictory accounts of various Combs families in order to present the following section of this paper.

BEFORE AND AFTER

David and Daniel are sons of Thomas Combs of Hampshire⁵ County VA (now WV) whose September 17, 1791, will lists a surviving second wife Martha and nine children. Thomas died within a month. The executors of the will were Joseph White (his son-in-law) of Hunterdon County NJ and Joshua Calvin of Hampshire County VA.

Thomas' first wife was Susannah Pettit, daughter of Jonathan and Mary Pettit of Hunterdon County NJ. Susannah was "baptized and received into the Kingwood Baptist Church⁶ aka the Church of Christ at Bethlehem" in 1749.⁷ In 1768, Thomas Combs was listed as an executor of this father-in-law's estate and a resident of Hunterdon County NJ. In 1789, Thomas Combs was listed as an executor of his mother-in-law's estate and living in Hampshire County VA. Evidence indicates the family made the move from New Jersey to Virginia in 1783⁸, with the eldest son Jonas perhaps joining the family a year or two later.⁹

⁵ Hampshire County, county seat Romney, is south of Cumberland Maryland.

⁶ Kingwood Baptist Church in Baptistown, Hunterdon County NJ, was founded in 1715. In 1742 a number of members erected another building known as the Church of Christ at Bethlehem, and the congregation(s) occupied various buildings over the years. The remaining successor to these buildings appears to be the historic Locktown Stone Church, a restored structure with no active congregation.

⁷ The website www.combs-families.org/combs/records/nj/hunterdon.htm provided this and other information about the Combs family in New Jersey.

⁸ It was likely in Hampshire County that the family made its Methodist connections – recall that the David Combs that John Fells knew from Bucks County did not profess religion. The Berkeley

The nine children of Thomas Combs listed in his will are as follows, the last two believed to be sons with his second wife Martha.

1. Jonas, born about 1751, the eldest, ultimate owner of 205 acres of the Thomas Combs farm
2. Jonathan, born about 1752, remained in New Jersey
3. Mary, born about 1753, married to a Joseph White of Hunterdon County NJ and remained in New Jersey
4. David, born about 1754, moved with his parents and younger siblings in 1783
5. Daniel, born about 1756
6. Francis, born about 1760
7. Thomas, born about 1761
8. Moses, less than 21 years of age and provided for accordingly
9. John, less than 21 years of age and provided for accordingly

While the Combs family historians make no mention of the time David and Daniel spent itinerating for the Methodist Episcopal Church, what is recorded about their later lives matches perfectly with the time frames of their service as circuit riders.

●David – married Nancy Simpson on Mar 15, 1789, in Nelson County KY.¹⁰ The ceremony was performed by Rev. Thomas Williamson of the Baptist Church.¹¹ This agrees with the report that he traveled to Kentucky as a circuit rider only to resign from the itinerancy in the spring of 1788. In 1792 he is listed as owning 88 acres in Nelson County KY.¹² Apparently David never lost his Wesleyan compassion for the least and the lost, as the November 1794 Nelson

Circuit was formed in 1778 and included Hampshire County. After 1783 local preacher John Jeremiah Jacob was active in the area. Francis Asbury passed directly through the area on his rounds in 1784, 1785, and 1786. His diary mentions specific hosts and local preachers, but none named Combs.

Thomas Combs purchased 425 acres “on the drains of Palmer Run” that became the family farm on 8/9/1785 from a Francis and Lucy Taggart. The witness to the transaction was Samuel Dew, who lived a few miles from Romney and at whose house Asbury spent the night in July 1784 and June 1785. Dew was an active Methodist who moved out of the area in 1788 and built Dew’s Chapel in Botetourt County VA (near Roanoke) about 1790. While Dew might have been responsible for introducing the Combs family to Methodism, he witnessed this deed as deputy clerk of Hampshire County and not as a family friend.

⁹ The website www.combs-families.org/combs/records/va/hampshire/#earliest provided this and other information about the Combs family in Hampshire County VA (now WV).

¹⁰ Nelson County, county seat Bardstown, is southeast of Louisville.

¹¹ The website www.combs-families.org/combs/records/ky/nelson/ provided this and other information about the Combs family in Nelson County KY.

¹² David may have had some thoughts about returning to Virginia with his new bride. The wedding occurred in Kentucky on 3/15/1789. Two days prior on 3/13/1789 he had purchased 400 acres on the Little Cacapon River in Hampshire County VA (WV), and is listed as a resident of Hampshire County. On 4/17/1797 he sold those 400 acres, and he is listed as a resident of Nelson County KY. While he clearly settled in Kentucky eventually, it is unclear whether he ever resided in Virginia after his marriage.

County Order Book grants him 40 shillings “for taking care of Daniel Johnson, a poor child.” David Combs died in January 1801 leaving a wife and two unnamed children. As some records refer to him as David Combs Sr., it appears that he left a son named David.

- Daniel – first appears on the property and tax rolls in Hampshire County VA (now VW) when he acquired 30 acres of land in September 1793. His 1787-90 involvement as a circuit rider explains his absence from the area’s tax and census rolls for at least part of that period. Since his last appointment in Northern New Jersey was adjacent to his original Hunterdon County homestead and his siblings that remained in that area, it is possible that he spent a year or two in New Jersey before returning to his family in Hampshire County.

CONCLUSION

David and Daniel Combs were dedicated circuit riders who played an important role in establishing and nurturing Methodist classes in Central Pennsylvania. They are typical of the many itinerants whose service over extremely large circuits and under trying conditions lasted for only a few years – until they opted to leave the itinerancy for marriage, health or finances.

Because such circuit riders were typically accepted and assigned on the basis of their personal testimony, and without having to provide documentation about education or other personal information, little is known about their background – or even what state they called home. Because such circuit riders did not remain itinerant members of their Conferences, no conference obituary exists. As a consequence, the lists of early riders includes many brave and faithful soldiers of Christ whose stories have fallen through the cracks, who will not receive the earthly credit they deserve, and whose service in the name of Jesus will likely never encourage and inspire those of us who follow after them in the manner that it could.