

**Beginnings and Early Developments of Methodism  
in the Territory Now Comprised by  
the Central Pennsylvania Conference**

*by Alfred S. Bowman, 1918*

[*editor's note:* Alfred Steck Bowman (1847-1931) was born near Mifflinville and fought in the Battle of Gettysburg. He joined the East Baltimore Conference in 1868 and immediately became a charter member of the newly-formed Central Pennsylvania Conference. He retired in 1913 and assumed the position of conference historian.]

**Historical Preface**

At the General Conference held in Chicago, May 1868, the Central Pennsylvania Conference came into existence. It was formed of the territory in Pennsylvania which had belonged to the East Baltimore Conference, while the Maryland portion of that Conference was restored to a Baltimore Conference which had been much depleted by the Civil War. The boundaries of the Central Pennsylvania Conference, as at first defined, have undergone but little change in the half century of its existence – Harrisburg, which was transferred to us from the Philadelphia Conference in 1872, being our most valuable acquisition.

The celebration of our Semi-Centennial would fail in its purpose if the progress and achievements which have marked our Conference history were not included in its program. Happily such omission has not occurred, and the next address of the evening will set them forth with telling vividness.

As eminently fitting the program of the hour, and in keeping with the emphasis which, from the inception of this commemorative observance, has been given to its historic features, I shall speak to you tonight on “beginnings and early developments of Methodism in the territory now comprised by our great Conference.”

But why, in view of world-war conditions and the multiplied needs which they have created and shall inevitably impose, speak in terms of history at all? Why should our “Golden Jubilee” take the form of carousal in past achievements when every talent and resource must be devoted to the winning of the war and to the healing and betterment of the nations?

History, it has been said, is philosophy teaching by example. From the deeds, integrity and sacrifices of those who have lived before us, we gather the priceless lessons and the loftiest incentives to do our best for God in the work of the world. “I make do doubt,” exclaims Bishop Asbury, “that the Methodists are and will be a numerous and wealthy people, and their preachers who follow us will not know our struggles.” Shall Bishop Asbury’s apprehensions be realized?

Shall the privations, hardships, struggles and successes of early Methodist pioneers cease to have grateful and appreciative recognition?

*Lord God of Hosts be with us yet,  
Lest we forget, lest we forget.*

### **The Address**

The epoch of Methodism within our bounds dates from A.D. 1781. While here and there an immigrant had put Methodist leaven at work in the sparse settlements, it was not until that year that a full-fledged Methodist itinerant had set foot on its fruitful soil. Freeborn Garrettson, a bright light in early American Methodism, has that distinction. Admitted to Conference five years previously on trial, and traveling that year with two other ministers on the Baltimore circuit, he set off Monday, January 24, 1781 for Little York, Pennsylvania. On his journey he stopped at a tavern where he lectured on the seventh chapter of Matthew's gospel, and a young man, James Worley by name, was powerfully awakened. The next day he preached in the Dutch [German] Church at York, and the wife of the awakened man was similarly wrought upon by the spirit of God.

About three months thereafter, on April 19, Mr. Garrettson was again in the vicinity of York, and in his autobiography says, "Thursday evening I held forth to my York friends with great freedom." Almost coincident with Rev. Garrettson's latter visit into Pennsylvania, the Little York circuit was formed at the Conference in Baltimore and Philip Cox was appointed its first preacher. This circuit, as subsequent events show, embraced the lower reaches of the Susquehanna river north of the state line and extended well up the Juniata.

What the region was at that time it is not easy to adequately picture or describe. Canals, railroads, telegraphs, telephones, bicycles, automobiles, airships and other present day conveniences were unknown. The cities and towns which loom large today in our section of the state, with few exceptions, had not been founded. The whole Susquehanna country was a dense wilderness frequented by wild beasts and Indians who, as the tide of the Revolution turned against the British, fled toward the mountain vastness of the Alleghenies. The smoke circled upward from the huts and log cabins in the wilderness, but the settlers seldom saw the face of strangers. Roads for public travel were scarcely worthy of the name, and they were ill-adapted to the use of vehicles, rude and primitive as they were. A blazed path in the woods, an Indian trail, or a difficult roadway was all the Methodist pioneer preacher had to follow.

We can imagine Philip Cox, a typical Methodist itinerant of his day, clad in quaint costume, on horseback or on foot, pressing forward along the wilderness trail, fording rivers and creeks, clambering mountains, singing as he journeyed what Methodists were singing for a quarter of a century afterward:

*I'm happy, I'm happy, O wondrous account;  
My joys are immortal, I stand on the mount,  
I gaze on my treasure and long to be there,  
With angels, my kindred, and Jesus so dear.*

Undaunted, the preacher-heroes of that early Methodist time pressed on little thinking and caring less whether they were within prescribed limits, their saving common sense governing their evangelistic adventures. Human habitations, however isolated and humble, they looked upon as their parish and, like Paul, regarded their sufferings as “filling up, on their part, that which was lacking in the affliction of Christ” and the work in which they were engaged as fulfilling the word of God which he commanded to be preached in “all creation under heaven.”

They had but one Book. Its sayings were woven into their very souls, and they were rapt by words like those of Isaiah:

*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace, that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation. Isaiah 52:7*

*The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them.*  
Isaiah 35:1

*The Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving and the voice of melody. Isaiah 51:3*

At the end of the year on Little York circuit Philip Cox no doubt answered joyously and with a will to his name at the conference at Ellis Meeting House in Virginia, for he was enabled to report 166 members, many of whom were perhaps new converts or other sheep of Christ in the wilderness whom he had gathered into the Methodist fold.

Nelson Reed and John Major were assigned to Little York in 1782. During the year, “Jacob Settler, who had become a friend of the movement, bought a lot west of the Codorus and upon it erected a small frame church and presented it to the Methodists.” Little York charge was under the supervision of William Gill in 1783. In 1784 and 1785 the territory was split into two charges: Little York and Juniata. The former was served in those years by Michael Ellis and John Cooper respectively, and the later by Simon Pile succeeded by James Riggin.

For the next two years, Little York and Juniata were again one charge, Matthew Greentree being the minister in 1786 and Daniel Combs in 1787. The following year, 1788, two circuits again dignify the minutes: Little York and Huntingdon. The appointments for the next three years were as follows.

|      |                        |                                  |                                 |
|------|------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|      | <u>presiding elder</u> | <u>Little York</u>               | <u>Huntingdon</u>               |
| 1788 | Nelson Reed            | John Hill                        | Samuel Breeze<br>Daniel Combs   |
| 1789 | Nelson Reed            | Jonathan Forrest                 | Michael Leard<br>Thomas Workman |
| 1790 | Nelson Reed            | Michael Leard<br>Richard Parrott | John Rowen                      |

Huntingdon circuit embraced, for the most part, the territory in the present Juniata and Altoona Districts and had 49 members in society. Methodism in that early day did not gain friends and adherents without arduous and persistent labor. Bishop Asbury made this entry in his journal when in Philadelphia on July 3, 1789: *My soul longs for more religion in this city; I am distressed for these people. Twenty years we have been laboring in Pennsylvania, and there are not one thousand in society; how many of them are truly converted God knows.*

Of less than 1000 Methodists in the state at that time, 197 were in the Little York and Juniata sections – a meager increase of 31 in seven years of strenuous Gospel toil. Light, however, is soon to break upon this dark background. By the close of the year in which Bishop Asbury penned his lament, on Huntingdon circuit alone – under the ministerial labors of Samuel Breeze and Daniel Coombs – there were reported 130 new accessions to the societies in 1788.

An expansive movement, Methodism had in 1791 in the territory of which we speak a third circuit which bore the far-famed name Northumberland. The previous year Richard Parrott had made, at his own expense, a tour of exploration in the north – more particularly, in the West Branch valley of the Susquehanna. His report of this tour to the Conference at Baltimore, if not glowing, was favorable – for he and Lewis Browning were appointed to the newly-formed Northumberland circuit. These men of God doubtless went over this new field in all directions – preaching, forming classes, and (as far as primitive conditions permitted) organizing the work.

William Colbert

Of the places where they preached and were entertained we have no authentic information. On these points, however, the voluminous journal of the Reverend William Colbert, who was on Northumberland circuit the following year, bears strong presumptive testimony as he and his colleague James Campbell no doubt closely conformed their rounds of the charge to those of their predecessors. The following glances into the journal of Mr. Colbert paint a picture of the circuit.

“Friday, May 25, 1792 – I got into Northumberland circuit at Henry Moore’s, near Juniata.” He had a long journey from his former appointment at Harford, Maryland – and he preached along the way at Carlisle, which he described as a “fine inland town.” From Moore’s his destination was Northumberland itself, where he arrived on Sunday in time to lead the class in the afternoon and preach in the evening “with uncommon liberty.”

On Monday, May 28, after a long and tedious ride from Northumberland, he put ups at Adam Harper’s, “a Dutchman in Penn’s Valley.” Tuesday he went to Henry Benn’s where he preached the next day – and where Lewis Browning, who had not yet left for his new appointment, met him. Thursday he crossed the mountain “over one of the worst roads I have even seen” to Henry Collins’ in Kishacoquillas valley. While he was preaching at Collins’ the next day, his horse ran off and was lost in the deep woods. The formidable Shade mountain now must be crossed, and in his plight some friends helped him over it to Henry Moore’s, where he had an engagement to preach on Sunday.

On Monday, June 4, as he was passing through the Juniata Narrows, he learned to his great joy that his horse, for whose finding he had offered a reward, was being brought to him over the mountain. Four days thereafter Mr. Colbert was in the North Branch region of the Susquehanna – having preached successively at Patterson’s, at John Thompson’s, at Thomas Rees’ and at William Searches’. From the latter place, after a long and disagreeable ride, stopping to preach at William Peggs’, he arrived at midnight, Saturday, June 9, at Joseph Ogden’s in Fishing Creek.

Sunday, June 10, he preached at Fishing Creek at Captain Joseph Salmon’s, and in the afternoon some eight or nine miles distant in “a beautiful little town called Berwick.” The following day he preached at Christian Bowman’s at Briar Creek “in the woods to a few people who came out.” He rested at Joseph Ogden’s on Tuesday, preached at William Cox’s on Wednesday, exhorted at old Mr. Carr’s on Thursday, and preached at old Mr. Wilkerson’s on Friday. He rested Saturday and preached morning and evening at Northumberland on Sunday, June 17.

Monday, June 18, he went to Mill Town [Milton] expecting to preach, but no notice had been given. “This,” he say, “is a town with three stores, three taverns, and two bowling alleys; agreeable to its size, it seems to be the most dissipated place I ever saw.” He preached in localities not far from Milton, and by Saturday and Sunday he and Richard Parrott and John Hill, who had come to take Parrott’s place, were at Northumberland engaged in joyous quarterly meeting services. Sunday, July 15, after traveling up the North Branch as far as Berwick and into Buffalo Valley in the other direction, Mr. Colbert is again in Northumberland preaching morning and evening – and in the Court House in Sunbury in the afternoon.

We now come to Mr. Colbert's first journey into the West Branch Valley. From the usual starting point of Northumberland, he goes up the river to preach Monday at Stephen Fields', Tuesday at Joshua Farley's, Wednesday at Joshua White's, Thursday at Peter Kunkle's at Loyalsock, and Friday, July 20, at Amariah Sutton's in present Williamsport from the text "Pray without ceasing."

It would be unpardonable if, at this historic conference, a brief but richly merited tribute were not paid to Amariah Sutton. Early historians of these parts record that Mr. Sutton, along with other colonists, emigrated from New Jersey, and that he located on the east bank of the Lycoming creek, a short half mile from where we are assembled. There he erected a cabin, made a clearing, and began to till the soil. In 1776 Mr. Sutton donated for church, school and burial purposes an acre and a half of ground where the Fourth Street Methodist Episcopal Church now stands.<sup>1</sup> In his humble abode the voice of prayer was heard, and into it Methodist itinerants were welcomed for preaching and entertainment. There the class meetings and quarterly meetings were also held – until about 1805, when the Lycoming Chapel, which stood on the site of the Fourth Street church, was erected. This was an honored meeting-house in those early days – the first that had been built and set apart by the Methodist Episcopal denomination for divine worship in both the North and West Branch valleys of the Susquehanna.

Mr. Sutton's cabin sheltered him and his household – but he lived in the palace of hope, and confidence in God. The spot where his ashes repose is sacredly venerated, and his name is held in everlasting remembrance. A plain marble slab in the shadow of the Fourth Street church marks his final resting place. What time more opportune than now to visit the grove of Amariah Sutton, whose very name is significant – Amariah: "whom Jehovah hath promised." Yes, it was Amariah Sutton whom God had promised and set apart to be the father of our Methodist Israel in Newberry and Williamsport. I know not what inscription is on his tomb – but if no suitable one is there, I suggest, in view of what his log cabin was for the faith of the gospel, that there be engraved on it the words of scripture: "The law of his house was holy."

From Lycoming, Mr. Colbert passed to Richard Manning's, thence to John Hamilton's, Richard Antis', Henry Benn's, and Mr. Marsdon's – preaching at each of these places. At the latter's house, when the services were over, Messrs. Marsdon and Dixon took him aside and said "they should be glad if preaching should be continued among them and insisted on his taking two dollars." After that Colbert again faced toward Northumberland, where he arrived five days later.

Mr. Colbert made two or three more rounds of the Northumberland circuit before the year closed – covering the Buffalo, Penn's, Nittany West and North

---

<sup>1</sup> That 1888 structure at Fourth and Cemetery streets was replaced in 1923 by the stone Calvary building, which now houses the Cathedral Apartments.

Branch valleys. While in the North Branch valley he preached for the first time at Catawissa on August 7, 1792, to a company of “well behaved people under a shed” and reports: “In this little town a woman treated me with kindness. She told me that she had heard the Methodists were a strange kind of people, that they carried knives about them to fight the devil.”

Having met at Northumberland, William Colbert started on Thursday, October 18, 1792, with James Campbell and John Hull for the conference at Annapolis MD. They had a delightful sojourn at Carlisle on Sunday, October 21, where each of them preached. At the Annapolis conference, Mr. Colbert was ordained a deacon by Francis Asbury. Before going to his new appointment, the Tioga circuit, Colbert also attended the first General Conference of the church in Baltimore on November 11.

Enduring extraordinary hardships amid the severities of winter, Mr. Colbert spend four months exploring the Tioga wilderness region but gained only three converts. In April 1793, he was appointed to Wyoming. While in charge of this field, he made the rounds of both Northumberland and Wyoming circuits and mentions for the first time such places as Amos Parks’ at Salem<sup>2</sup>, Shamokin Valley, Great Island, Pine Creek, and Dunnsburg. In 1798 he was assigned again to Wyoming and traversed that year two or three times in the Northumberland territory: Huntington in Luzerne County, Roaring Creek, Muncy, Blackhole, Larry’s Creek, Bald Eagle, Robert Pennington’s and others are places noted in his journal where religious services were held. Amos Parks’ at Salem and Briar Creek were included in Wyoming until 1806 when they were incorporated with Northumberland.

A visitation of three weeks in Northumberland circuit in 1797 and a journey through the North Branch in March 1804, when his term as superintendent on the Albany District had expired, complete Mr. Colbert’s labors within our conference. Fifty type-written pages which we have procured from his journal chronicle his activities and adventures and are treasured as being of much historic value to the Conference.

#### Local Preachers

In the societies within the bounds of the present Central Pennsylvania Conference in 1792 there were 665 members: 200 in the Little York circuit, 215 in the Huntingdon circuit, and 250 in the Northumberland circuit. The entire territory, so far as it was inhabited, was covered by these three circuits and was in a measure prepared for the coming of the Methodist itinerants. People in remote parts had felt the influence of the “phenomenal revival” under George Whitefield. Colonists from New Jersey, Maryland and Delaware, where Methodism had

---

<sup>2</sup> This is Salem township in Luzerne County. Parks sold lots to the Beach family, for whom Beach Haven is named, and his home was probably near present Beach Haven.

scored its earliest and greatest successes, had pushed towards the Pennsylvania frontiers. Some of them no doubt were of the Methodist faith. Among them were local preachers whose names exhale a blessed fragrance.

*Thomas Lakin*, ever busy preaching and doing good, had moved into Bedford County as early as 1784. Nine years prior to that time, *Isaac Cryder* had located about a mile and a half from Huntingdon and ministered to the people in that neighborhood. *Robert Pennington* had taken up his abode in Penn's valley at an early date and is recognized as the apostle of Methodism in that region. Later, in 1792, the two brother *Thomas and Christian Bowman* emigrated from New Jersey to Briar Creek – which, to quote from the noted Methodist historian Abel Stevens, was a “place quite famous for Methodism.”

Still later, about 1835 when anthracite coal was first developed at Beaver Meadow, *Robert Moister*, an Englishman by birth, felt impelled to remove from Wilkes-Barre to that place to preach the Gospel to the miners. He formed Methodist classes in 1836 at both Beaver Meadow and Hazleton. He preached in that vicinity for several years while at the same time filling a responsible secular position. Everybody in that new and rapidly developing coal field knew him as “Father Moister” – and for many years afterward his name was a household word there.

These local preachers were John the Baptists preparing the hearts of the people for Methodism, welcoming the men who were appointed expounders of its teachings, and fortifying them in their work. They belonged to that noble host to whom Methodism in both hemispheres owes a lasting debt as instruments in its early founding and development. Although relatively fewer in numbers, and less urgent their calls for ministering, local preachers of today are the faithful allies of the regular ministry.

### Church Buildings

When a number of Methodists lived in the same neighborhood, they were formed into a class or society. Here and there, a number of classes existed before the coming of the Methodist itinerant. These classes or societies, however, were generally organized by the appointed preacher to whom Conference had entrusted the oversight of the field. Mr. Colbert led classes several times in 1792 while at different places on the Northumberland circuit. Long before they had church edifices, these societies prospered in many localities.

Preaching and other services were conducted in the huts and cabins of the settlers, in taverns, in the few school houses and chapels that had been erected, and frequently in Court Houses. By 1800, the congregations in attendance at the quarterly meetings were so large that the gatherings were often held in barns and in the “temple of the woods.”

The first Methodist meetings houses or church building in our territory deserve particular interest. Rock Chapel on York Springs charge, a stone structure commenced in 1775 and finished some years after, is, as to time of erection, the honor church of the conference. The second honor belongs to the frame church in York which Jacob Settler presented to the Methodists in 1782. The “log chapel among the mountains” which Robert Pennington, the founder of Methodism in Penn’s Valley, built – and which was long known as “Father Pennington’s church” – is entitled, presumably, to third place.

Shippensburg boasts of a little log meeting house built as early as 1791. Of Northumberland in 1793 we have this record: “It has a little chapel, that serves as a school house, belonging to the Methodists.” The first church in Carlisle, built of stone about 1794, and the first church in Chambersburg, erected in 1798, close the eighteenth century for the erection of Methodist edifices within our bounds.

Huntingdon’s first chapel, 25x30 and “consisting of hewed log,” was built in 1802; Lycoming chapel in 1805; Milton’s log chapel in 1807; the stone church at Briar Creek, four miles from Berwick, in 1808 – and still standing. Among the first chapels and churches of the conference down to 1839 and the centenary of British Methodism we list the following:

- 1810 or earlier Fort Littleton and Antes
- 1810 Shirleysburg
- 1815 Lewistown
- 1816 Berwick
- 1817 Center Hall
- 1820 Harrisburg and Horne’s, on the Alum Bank charge
- 1822 Gettysburg
- 1823 Bellefonte
- 1825 Milroy
- 1826 Bedford and Williamsport Pine Street
- 1827 Light Street
- 1828 Gearhart’s, opposite Danville
- 1829 New Oxford
- 1830 Hanover
- 1831 Mifflinville and Petersburg
- 1836 Espy 1836
- 1839 Sunbury, Danville and Clearfield

Centre, midway between Clearfield and Curwensville, stood the first Methodist church in that region. As to the year of its erection, and of many other rural churches at an early day, we have no information.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Subsequent research indicates that the first log church at Centre was erected about 1827 near the present cemetery, with the first building at the site of the marker in the cemetery being erected in 1834. The list given above is presented as stated by A.S. Bowman in 1918 and should not be taken as being definitive or complete.

## Francis Asbury

Our story of Methodism would be incomplete were no mention made of Bishop Asbury. His presidency of the steadily increasing number of Conferences kept him constantly on the move. July 10, 1789, he passed through York and on Saturday arrived in Carlisle where he preached Sunday morning in the Presbyterian church and Sunday evening in the Court House. By Wednesday he was at the Juniata river, the next day near Bedford, and thence by way of Greensburg to Uniontown – where the year before he had held the first Methodist Conference beyond the Allegheny mountains.

In June 1793, traveling northward, the Bishop crossed the Alleghenies and passed through Fort Littleton, Juniata, Mifflintown and Penn's Valley to get to Northumberland on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June. He preached there twice on Sunday – and in the afternoon at Sunbury where the people, he said, “are almost all Dutch<sup>4</sup>.” Monday July 1<sup>st</sup> the Bishop writes in his journal: “From Northumberland we wrought up the hills and narrows to Wyoming<sup>5</sup>. We stopped at a poor house, nevertheless they were rich enough to sell us half a bushel of oats and had sense enough to make us pay well for them.”

The Bishop next preached at Joseph Ogden's, Fishing creek, and the following day at Isaac Hall's, Berwick, to a “considerable congregation.” Late that night they arrived at Rose Hill, midway between Plymouth and Kingston. This place seems to have been their immediate objective, for here was a flourishing class of 50 members – and about 50 more numbered all the Methodists that were in that vast region, nearly all of whom had been won to Christ by the “converted blacksmith” Anning Owen.<sup>6</sup>

By way of Carlisle and Bedford our pioneer bishop several times crossed the Alleghenies. In 1803 he was accompanied by Henry Boehm as far as Berlin in Somerset County. En route, he preached once in York, twice in Carlisle at a quarterly meeting, and once in Shippensburg. In 1807, the journey made four years before was duplicated in almost every respect. After crossing the three mountains<sup>7</sup> with his traveling companion Henry Boehm in 1809, the bishop

---

<sup>4</sup> i.e., German.

<sup>5</sup> This is not to be confused with the town of Wyoming or the Wyoming valley as it is usually defined. In 1793 Methodism, Wyoming was a District with 4 circuits – stretching from Northumberland PA to Seneca Lake NY. Bishop Asbury was entering the Wyoming District, over which Valentine Cook was the presiding elder.

<sup>6</sup> The site of the Anning Owen house and shop is one of the historical sites of the Susquehanna Conference from the former Wyoming Conference.

<sup>7</sup> The three mountains were Blue, Kittatinny and Tuscarora – which correspond to the first tunnels on the Pennsylvania turnpike as one travels west from Carlisle. Francis Asbury was now two weeks away from his 64<sup>th</sup> birthday, while Henry Boehm was 30 years younger. Boehm's

preached at Ft. Littleton on Friday and on Sunday afternoon, August 6, in the Court House at Bedford. Boehm preached at Berlin in high German.

They traveled over the same route in 1810. The Bishop held forth the word of life at Carlisle and “drew a plan for a new chapel.” He preached the next day in the improved chapel at Shippensburg, and on the Sabbath, August 12<sup>th</sup>, he administered the sacrament in the chapel at Ft. Littleton. The next stop was Bloody Run, now Everett, about which Asbury records: “Bloody Run is henceforth New Hope. I preached at Barndollar’s tavern. The Lord has seven in this family who fear and worship him. This was a very wicked place, but what hath God wrought!” Being straitened for time he did not preach in Bedford but wrote in his journal: “I am grieved to find that little promising Bedford is likely to be injured by one I was afraid would not do his duty. Feeble in mind and body, small things are to be hoped from him, and the poor Germans are as sheep without a shepherd.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1815, the year before his death, Bishop Asbury spoke in the new chapel at Carlisle, passed over the three mountains near Shippensburg, preached at James Hunter’s at Ft. Littleton, and preached at Bloody Run.

Now we note, somewhat out of chronological order, Mr. Asbury’s journey and adventures in the wilderness of Lycoming. He and Henry Boehm both narrate the extraordinary dangers and perils to which they had been exposed and their gratitude for faring as well as they did under the circumstances. Upon adjournment of the first session of the Genesee Conference at Lyons NY, they came on August 28, 1820, to Tioga Point and from there “must needs take the Northumberland road.” They got lost in the forest. “It’s awful wilderness,” one of them says. A man by the name of Coles piloted them, and afterwards a hermit by the name of John Brown went with them a distance of five miles.<sup>9</sup>

The Bishop vividly describes their experience: “In the last three days and a half we have ridden one hundred and forty miles. What mountains, hills and rocks. Brother Boehm was thrown from the sulky, but providentially not a bone was broken. Sunday, August 28, 1810: In the wilderness, but God is with us. John Brown came and took us to his cabin. We forded the swollen and rapid

---

youth was necessary for physical support and protection – and his fluency in German, both high German and Pennsylvania Dutch, was an added benefit to Asbury.

<sup>8</sup> The reference here apparently is to Jesse Pinnell, the itinerant appointed to Bedford circuit in 1810. He was given “worn out” status the following year and died February 3, 1812, at the age of 28. His obituary states that he was “a young man of blameless and harmless character, and gave satisfactory proof of the soundness of his conversion” and adds that “his affliction being lingering, he testified constantly to his intimate friends that God’s grace was sufficient for him, and he declared while he could whisper that he was happy.”

<sup>9</sup> This name was incorrectly remembered and should be John Bown. A complete account of this adventure, along with additional footnotes, is given Adona Sick’s article “Bishop Asbury’s Rock” in the 1999 volume of THE CHRONICLE, pages 44-48.

streams, the Loyalsock was the worst. We have spent the remainder of the day in reading, singing and prayer. The rains had increased the streams, so we kept our retreat Monday and Tuesday. Wednesday: At the fordings we found drift-logs obstructing the way. The stream was very full and our toil through it great. The active bold men, with the aid of a canoe, got us and the horses and a carriage safe over. Thunder and rain and an awful mountain were now before us. But God brought us safe to Muddy Creek. Deep roads and swollen streams we have had enough of on our way to Northumberland.”

Boehm, who had traveled several years with the bishop, says: “For difficulty and danger, the trip from the first Genesee Conference to Northumberland excelled them all!” Their three days sojourn in the hospitable cabin of John Brown they regarded a mercy, for the two dollars they had between them was insufficient for their accommodation at an Inn. Boehm says: “I have put up before in palaces, but never felt more comfortable and grateful than in the humble cabin of John Brown.”

The 270,000 miles which, despite much physical affliction, Bishop Asbury traveled in his thirty-one years of administrative work for the church, to say nothing of his other labors, was a herculean task. Very felicitously indeed has the noted Dr. Ezra Squier Tipple called our hero “The Prophet of the Long Road.”

### Circuits and Districts

We now trace the development of the work down to 1831 – fifty years after the formation of the first circuit, Little York. By divisions and sub-divisions, all our present circuits have sprung from the trio I have already named: Little York, Huntingdon and Northumberland.

- 1781 Little York
- 1784 Juniata [two years]
- 1788 Huntingdon
- 1791 Northumberland
- 1794 Carlisle
- 1797 Little York disappears from the minutes
- 1803 Littleton
- 1804 Juniata
- 1806 Lycoming College
- 1807 Bald Eagle
- 1808 Aughwick
- 1809 Bedford
- 1810 Moshannon, [replaces Bald Eagle]
- 1812 Shamokin; Chambersburg
- 1819 York made a station
- 1823 Carlisle made a station

1825 Lewistown; Concord; Clearfield [one year]

1826 Bellefonte; Philipsburg

1827 Clear Spring; Gettysburg

1830 Sunbury; Shrewsbury

1831 Trough Creek; Berwick

From 1831 to 1866, the Centennial year of American Methodism, the pastoral charges had increased from the above list to nearly one hundred.

The first designation and appointment of Presiding Elders<sup>10</sup> was made in 1797. A few ordained ministers, however, had for some years been assigned to similar duties under the title of Elder. Originally, all of American Methodism was one administrative unit. Districts were named in 1801, and Conferences were organized in 1802.

The work within our bounds as related to districts and conferences was, prior to 1821, marked by frequent changes. The Baltimore, Philadelphia and Genesee Conferences had certain portions at different times. The era of territorial stability dates from 1821. In that year the Northumberland District was formed from parts of the Susquehanna District of the Genesee Conference and the Carlisle District in the Baltimore Conference – and the district was placed in the Baltimore Conference. Districts within our bounds as to the time of their organization are as follows:

1808 Carlisle

1821 Northumberland

1832 Chambersburg

1842 Huntingdon [replaces Chambersburg]

1850 Cumberland

1854 Bellefonte [replaces Huntingdon]

1858 Juniata [replaces Cumberland]

The Baltimore Conference, to which we belonged for many years, has always been recognized as the mother conference. From 1858 to 1868 we were part of the short-lived East Baltimore Conference. In 1868, which Golden Jubilee we now celebrate, the Central Pennsylvania Conference was created by action of the General Conference.

### Revivals and Camp Meetings

The revivals meetings, quarterly meetings and camp meetings of the earlier years awakened wide interest and attention, and are worthy of mention. Thomas Ware, who superintended the Philadelphia area in 1797, for example says: “Revivals at Strasburg and Chester circuits exceeded everything I have ever witnessed. This revival embraced all classes – governors, judges, lawyers and

---

<sup>10</sup> Presiding Elders are now called District Superintendents.

statesmen, old and young, rich and poor, including many of the African race. In the North, also, the influence was felt. Sparks were kindled in Middletown, Northumberland, Wilkes-Barre and quite up in the Genesee and Lake country of Western New York.”

A revival of great interest and power occurred in the third story of the stone dwelling of Thomas Bowman Sr. at Briar Creek in 1805. As reported in Rev. M.L. Smyser’s *History of Berwick Methodism*: “The country for 30 or 40 miles felt the impulse of this wondrous spirit baptism. As the direct and immediate result of this religious awakening, a Methodist class was organized in Berwick.” Not Briar Creek only, but Huntington in Luzerne County and Roaring Creek in Columbia County and other nearby places had notable revivals that year.

In the days of George Harmon’s presiding eldership on the Susquehanna District there was a great revival in the log meeting-house at Antis. During his term on this district, a quarterly meeting was held in 1812 in a barn on Lycoming circuit that was “highly favored of the Lord.” There was seldom a quarterly meeting in those days where there were not souls converted. “To these quarterly meetings,” Mr. Harmon says, “people would come twenty, thirty and even fifty miles – and counted it a great privilege. They would come on horseback through the woods and from the settlements and towns in their great old-fashioned wagons, very often drawn by oxen and crowded full. Sometimes they would come down the river in canoes. They came with their hearts alive to God, and every one was ambitious of excelling – of getting nearest to, and in doing the most for God and truth.”

Camp meetings from 1800, the time of their origin in Kentucky, waxed more and more until about the middle of the nineteenth century. Jesse Lee in his history says “they were allowed, never authorized.” The rapidity with which they spread northward, and the extent of their influence were wonderful. The first Methodist camp meeting was held in Virginia in 1803, in Delaware on 1805, and in Maryland on the Eastern Shore in 1806 – where there were more than a thousand converts. In 1806 the first camp meeting in this section of the state was held at Chillisquaque creek, near Northumberland, and a year or two later Briar Creek entered upon its useful career. Bishop Asbury as early as 1809 said: “We must attend to camp meetings; they make our harvest times.”

Camp meetings were held on the Huntingdon and Carlisle circuits in 1810. Of the latter, Rev. W.R. Picken writes: “It was held just outside Shippensburg. James Reid was the preacher. He was badly abused by some ruffians until the father of Rev. Reuben E. Wilson came to his defense.” We have accounts of successful camp meetings in 1820 and 1821 near Howard, and in the latter 1820’s on Lycoming, Shamokin, Northumberland, Clear Spring, Carlisle and Gettysburg charges.

### Founding Fathers

A word-sketch, in closing, of some of the makers of our history – the men who laid the foundations of the conference and made possible its achievements. We saw **Freeborn Garrettson** at Little York 137 years ago, but he never ministered again so far as we know in our territory. He was born in Maryland, was taught mathematics and bookkeeping, and was extravagantly fond of astronomy. In 1775 he was converted, manumitted his slaves, and in 1776 joined the conference on trial. In 1784 he volunteered as a missionary to Nova Scotia and served the church afterward many years in New York and New Jersey as a presiding elder and conference missionary. It was believed he would be chosen in 1807 as superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Nova Scotia and British America, but the conference decided not to create the office.

**Caleb Boyer**<sup>11</sup> in 1786 succeeded Thomas Vasey on the district that included Little York. He and Ignatius Pigman were compared to the apostles: Boyer the Paul, Pigman the Apollos. Whatcoat and Vasey, who heard them, said: “They hadn’t their equal in the British connection, except Wesley and Fletcher.”

The first presiding elder over Methodism in the Susquehanna region was **Nelson Reed**. From 1788 to 1796 he traveled virtually the entire conference and had much to do with the early organization of the work. Though small of stature,

---

<sup>11</sup> The definitive story of Caleb Boyer has yet to be written. He was born and raised in Kent County, Delaware. His home was near the old cemetery on the road from Dover to Magnolia. He was converted under Freeborn Garrettson in 1778 and began to itinerate in 1780. He was a powerful preacher. According to Thomas Ware, “there have been few in any age or country” who could extemporize with Caleb Boyer. And Ware goes on to say that “in preaching, Boyer was the Paul of the Methodist connection at that time.” At the Christmas Conference of 1784, Caleb Boyer was elected to the office of deacon – making him one of the first ordained preachers in the entire denomination. But none of the early historians knew anything else about Caleb Boyer. They simply record that he located in 1788, served as a local preacher for 25 years, and was believed to be buried at Wesley Chapel in Dover – although no one seems to be able to locate his grave.

The fact is that Rev. Caleb Boyer was one of the first white settlers in what is now Wellsboro, Pennsylvania. In 1801 he led his family and several others from Delaware and Maryland to what later became Tioga County. To this day the township in which they settled is called Delmar, after their Delaware and Maryland roots. Without connection to or authority from any conference, Caleb Boyer held meetings in his home and those of his neighbors. He became the first Methodist preacher in Tioga County and laid the groundwork for the existing congregations in that area. But what happened after that remains a mystery. A brief article in the 1998 volume of THE CHRONICLE is titled “Caleb Boyer: the Disappearing Preacher.” He was elected to Tioga County’s first board of commissioners in October 1808, and there exists a June 23, 1809, document signed by Boyer and two other commissioners. But that document is the last earthly evidence of the life of Caleb Boyer. It appears that he returned to Delaware soon after signing that document and died there about 1813, but none of that can be verified.

he was strong of body, vigorous in intellect, a thorough theologian, a debater of uncommon ability, a forceful and edifying preacher, and a man of transparent purity. He died in Baltimore at the age of 89, having been a minister of the Gospel 65 years – in which time he had seen the church grow from 3000 scattered members to a denomination 800,000 strong.

Upon finding that there were many Germans in Sunbury and other places in that part of the state, Asbury promptly appointed **Valentine Cook** to superintend the Seneca, Tioga, Wyoming and Northumberland circuits. He was a young man who could preach fluently in the German tongue. Cook is described as being “6 feet high and of dark complexion” and having “long arms, dark hair coarse and curly, fine cultivated intellect, and a powerful voice.” He was reported to be a “preacher of extraordinary ability, wonderful in prayer, very fond of hunting, fond of music instrumental and vocal, and a good singer.” After three years of faithful oversight over this vast field, other places were favored with the ministrations of this extraordinarily gifted divine.

Of **Joseph Everett**, a soldier in the Revolutionary army and a man who abhorred slavery, we have meager information. He filled for three years the responsible position of presiding elder of the Baltimore District, which included Little York and Huntingdon circuits. In 1800 he was appointed the Philadelphia District, which then included the Wyoming and Northumberland circuits.

**Thomas Ware** was also a Revolutionary soldier and just prior to his conversion, which occurred in 1778, he was bent on going to sea. Useful as a class leader and exhorter for some time, in 1783 he joined the conference as an itinerant. Two years later Bishop Asbury chose him and some other young men to accompany John Tunnell to Tennessee. In the first year they gathered in the Holston country, which was at that time menaced by Indians, 300 members and erected several log chapels. In 1796 he succeeded Valentine Cook as presiding elder and rendered long and notable service in that office. Ware was the first to advocate that the Book Concern be incorporated and to hold its proceeds sacred for the retired preachers. In 1812 he was elected agent of the Book Concern, which position he held four years. The work and worth of Thomas Ware were manifest in his day, and he has secure place in the annals of the church.

In July 1803 **Wilson Lee**, presiding elder of the Baltimore District, and Henry Boehm were in attendance at a quarterly meeting at Ft. Littleton. Lee was ill, and at his request Boehm preached. Of Wilson Lee, whose death followed two months later, Boehm says: “He was a tall slender man, had a musical voice, and his delivery was very agreeable. He was one of the great men of Methodism and a great favorite of Bishop Asbury.”

**James Smith** was presiding elder of the famous Susquehanna District in 1803 and 1804 – at which time it included virtually our entire conference plus

Dauphin circuit. **Robert Burch** labored in our bounds about this time, and in 1811 he began a four year's superintendency of the Carlisle District. James Smith and Robert Burch, whose brother Thomas was also a preacher, were Irishmen. James Smith was brilliant; Robert Burch was "a man of fine talent, great simplicity of character, and honest integrity."

Of fascinating interest is the story of **Anning Owen**, the converted blacksmith. He became presiding elder of the Susquehanna District in 1805, a position he held for four years. The district was comprised at that time of virtually all of conference territory plus the Tioga circuit. Anning Owen was one of the few who escaped the "Wyoming Massacre." During his flight, through some Methodists, he was converted and came back to the Wyoming valley resolved to do all he could for God. He hammered away at his forge and exhorted his neighbors in his own house and in other nearby places. Two years before a regular Methodist preacher was seen in the Wyoming valley, he had gathered nearly 100 souls into a Methodist class. Authorized by the church a few years later to preach the Gospel, he kept his coals in God's altar burning as brightly as the fires of his smithery. Abel Stevens says in his history: "After joining the itinerant ranks, 'the converted blacksmith' Anning Owen labored successfully from the Delaware to the Chesapeake, from the Hudson to the interior settlements of New York and Pennsylvania. He retired at last a worn out veteran. His motto was 'Work, work, work! This world is no place for rest.'"

**Gideon Draper** and **George Harman** were on the Susquehanna District when it belonged to the Genesee Conference, with which much of our conference was connected for ten years. Both were men of mark, and safe guides and counselors of the church.

**William Colbert** was an adventurous man, a born pioneer, and a wonderful revivalist. His early colleague Henry Boehm says: "Colbert's sermons would often move the masses as the wind does the wheat in summer" and adds "he was a man of low stature, but of high usefulness, indefatigable in labor, and the first in success." One morning after Thomas Ware had slept on a chest with a torn pillow and he on a bundle of hay, Colbert writes in his journal: "Though the life of a Methodist preacher is laborious and fatiguing, it is my glory."

Of Nathaniel B. Mills, Chrystopher Frye, Jacob Gruber, Stephen G. Rozell, Marmaduke Pearce, Alfred Griffith, John Davis, John Boer and others who were prominent in the church a hundred years ago, time would fail me to tell. The fathers who laid the foundations of our Conference wrought well and endured hardships. All honor to the fathers! But at the celebration of this "our golden jubilee" – and "my golden jubilee," for fifty years ago I joined the East Baltimore Conference – I want to say that you have a heavier burden that was ever borne by the fathers and that you deserve equal, yea greater, honor for "lifting high the banner of the cross and bearing it on to new and greater victories."