

## **What Ever Happened to... James D. Mathews**

James D. Mathews supplied the Rays Hill charge of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church from March 1911 to March 1913. His name appears in the journal in no context before or after those dates, nor does he or any of his congregations receive special mention in the journal during those years.

The Rays Hill charge, which covered a very rugged section of Bedford and Fulton counties, was not an easy assignment – and it appears that the two years that Mathews spent on the charge were not marked with success, at least from a statistical standpoint. In 1911 he inherited from his predecessor 466 members, 5 church buildings valued at \$13,500 and 1 parsonage valued at \$2,500. In 1913 he passed on to his successor 352 members, 5 church buildings valued at \$10,000 and 1 parsonage valued at \$1,000. The Sunday Schools on the circuit reflected those same numbers, going from 5 schools with 100 teachers and 575 pupils to 5 schools with 60 teachers and 526 pupils.

On the surface James D. Mathews appears to be one of a host of local preachers, perhaps with aspirations of one day entering into the itinerancy, who supplied a charge for one or two years and then, perhaps under a cloud of discouragement, departed from the pulpit never to be heard from again. But what more can and should be said about this local pastor? What was his life before 1911? after 1913?

### **Family Background**

James Davenport Mathews was born November 16, 1869, in Huntersville, Hardin County OH, to Joseph (1841-1905) and Margaret [Davenport] (1840-1869) Mathews. Huntersville is about 80 miles south of Toledo. It was founded in 1836, became a prosperous town, was by-passed by the railroad, lost its post office in 1875, and now consists of only a Presbyterian Church, a graveyard, and a few houses. But Huntersville was home to this branch of the Mathews family, and the village cemetery includes the earthly remains of at least 36 persons associated with that surname – including James' parents and grandparents.

Grandparents Jonathan (1808-1874) and Rebecca [Donaldson] (1816-1904) Mathews settled in Huntsville, along with Jonathan's brother and sister-in-law Smiley (1807-1868) and Phebe [Donaldson] (1812-1895) Mathews. The Mathews brothers had married Donaldson sisters. The families were Presbyterian. The

following passages from a family history<sup>1</sup> tell the story of Rebecca Donaldson Mathews and the extended family's conversion to Methodism.

Rebecca Donaldson was born July 9, 1816, in Ohio County VA, now WV. In 1823, her father bought land in Richland County OH and removed to that place with his family. Before she was seventeen, April 30, 1833, she married Jonathan Mathews – her sister, Phebe, being married at the same time to Smiley Mathews, a brother to Jonathan.

They moved the next year to Hardin County OH, then an unbroken wilderness without church or school. They located in August on 160 acres in Section 7, which Jonathan had previously bought at \$1.25 per acre – but finding the life a little too strenuous, they removed to Mt. Blanchard, Hancock County OH., where they conducted a general store until about 1837 – when sufficient clearing having been made on their farm to enable them to begin to till a part of the land, they moved back and remained until a few years before Mr. Mathews' death in 1875, retiring from the farm to spend their remaining days in the village of Ada OH.

In a few years the pioneer Methodist preachers reached Hardin County, and began preaching in private houses. There were four families of the Mathewses grouped together: the father Isaac Mathews, Smiley Mathews, Levi Mathews, and Jonathan Mathews – all of staunch old Presbyterian stock.

The preaching of these pioneer preachers was with power and with demonstration of the Spirit. About 1840 there was a great revival. Phebe Mathews was the first of the family to be converted to the new faith, and soon the whole connection became shouting Methodists and charter members of the first Methodist church in Hardin County. For many years they and their descendants have been pillars in the church, and their influence fanned the flames of revival in all the quarterly meetings and revivals in the county round about. They had an aggressive type of religion and the religious life of the entire county has felt their impress since that day.

When the Modern Holiness revival began under Rev. J. S. Inskeep and others, Rebecca fell into line and many of her family became believers in the doctrine of full salvation from all sin and sinning. She was a woman of attractive personality and great beauty of character; fond of music and with a sweet voice of her own; kind and generous to all; vivacious and sprightly even in her old age. She died at Ada, loved and respected by the whole community, on May 11, 1904.

Joseph Donaldson Mathews, the father of our local preacher James, was born to Jonathan and Rebecca in Huntersville on September 2, 1841, and married Margaret Davenport October 25, 1865. Two children were born to this union: Jonathan Finley Mathews (8/11/1867) and James Davenport Mathews (11/16/1869). Margaret died November 29, 1869 of what was called “childbirth fever” and his father married again on December 26, 1871, to a Rosa Sparks – who

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<sup>1</sup> *A Genealogical Record of One Branch of the Donaldson Family in America: Descendants of Moses Donaldson who lived in Huntingdon County, Penna., in 1770* compiled by May Donaldson McKittrick, 1916, selected text beginning on page 59.

would bare him 3 more children. This is what the Donaldson history<sup>2</sup> notes about James' father.

He received his education in the district school near his home, and at the breaking out of the Civil War, volunteered and went to the front, being made Second Lieutenant of his company in the 135th Regt., O.N.G. Overcome with heat during a battle on a hot day, his eyes never recovered from its effects and later total blindness resulted and he sat in darkness for the last twenty years of his life.

He was born and reared in a Christian home. The genuine piety of his godly father and mother did not fail to draw their children to Christ. Converted in young manhood, he at once became an active member of the M.E. church at Huntersville, from which church he transferred his membership to the Epworth church at Lima during the last year of his life. He died at Lima OH May 26, 1905.

One of James's children has written a book,<sup>3</sup> hereafter referred to as the Mathews family history, which gives a very honest account of his father's early life. He relates that James always felt responsible for his mother's death and that his stepmother was so abusive that James and his brother Finley ran away to Iowa to live with an aunt – only to later hitch a freight train back to Ada to be raised by their grandmother. The Donaldson family history<sup>4</sup> provides this information about James.

He was reared by his grandmother, Mrs. Rebecca (Donaldson) Mathews at Ada, Ohio, where he attended the public schools and later Ohio Northern University. After teaching school for several terms, he entered the ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in which calling he is still engaged. He married September 4, 1899, Leona Mertz,<sup>5</sup> who died a few months later. October 1, 1902, he married Laura M. Wilson. His address [1916] is 218 18th St., Wellsville, Ohio. Children:

1. Mary Margaret, b. Dec. 6, 1906.
2. Elizabeth Wilson, b. August 14, 1908.
3. Hugh Donaldson, b. Dec. 5, 1909.
4. Joseph Wesley, b. Oct. 8, 1911.
5. James Kenneth, b. Feb. 10. 1913.

There is one interesting piece of information not appearing in the above paragraph. James D. Mathews was admitted as a cadet to the United States Military Academy at West Point NY in June 1889.<sup>6</sup> It was later reported<sup>7</sup> that “the resignation of Cadet James D. Mathews, 4<sup>th</sup> class, is accepted by the Secretary of War, to take effect December 31, 1889.” The Mathews family history<sup>8</sup> gives more detail about this event.

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<sup>2</sup> Selected text from page 108.

<sup>3</sup> *A Global Odyssey: The Autobiography of James K. Mathews*, page 23.

<sup>4</sup> Selected text from pages 195 and 196.

<sup>5</sup> Leona B. Mertz Mathews (1875-1900) is buried in Woodlawn Cemetery, Ada OH.

<sup>6</sup> *The Executive Documents of the House of Representatives for the First Session of the Fifty-First Congress 1889-90*, page 1102.

<sup>7</sup> *Army and Navy Journal*, December 21, 1889, page 333.

<sup>8</sup> Selected text from pages 24 and 25.

Papa excelled in English and mathematics. He was far better educated than most of his contemporaries. For example, one of the Ohio congressmen determined to make appointments to the United States Military Academy based on a statewide competition. As a Civil War veteran, Papa's father insisted on his sitting for the examination, although Papa had no particular interest in the military. He came out first and received an appointment to West Point. Papa liked the higher math he was exposed to, but he did not like the severe discipline of West Point and resigned after a year. Late in life he did attend class reunions and was well treated by his erstwhile classmates, most of whom by that time were high officers in the army.

While it is now clear that James D. Mathews was not a local Central Pennsylvania Conference layperson who supplied the Rays Hill appointment for two years and then went back his secular vocation, there are still some unanswered questions. What brought him to Rays Hill in Pennsylvania? Since he has no recorded obituary in any conference, why and when did he leave the ministry?

### **Life before Rays Hill**

The adult life of James Mathews really began when, at about 28 years of age, he entered Ohio Northern University at Ada. In 1899, while still a student, he married a young lady a few years his junior who died within a few months. This was a devastating blow to a young man finally reaching for stability and maturity after suffering decades of guilt over the death of his mother, rejection by his stepmother, and a succession of temporary jobs.

After two years, Mathews began noticing another young woman named Laura May Wilson who was also studying at Ohio Northern while working in a student boarding house kept by her sister and brother-in-law, Ida and Rev. Franklin Ernsberger.<sup>9</sup> He continued his studies and graduated from Ohio Northern in the spring of 1902. In October 1902 James and Laura were married.

Just prior to his marriage, at the September 1902 sessions of the annual conference, James D. Mathews was admitted on trial to the North Ohio Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and appointed to Conesville. After serving at Conesville for two years, he was appointed in September 1904 to Mt. Hope. All this time James, as he was not pursuing a seminary education, was listed as a first year participant in the conference course of studies. Because of his lack of progress in the course of studies and/or his uncertainty about his calling in general, in 1905 he was discontinued as a member of the North Ohio Conference.

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<sup>9</sup> William Franklin Ernsberger (1865-1952) was a Methodist preacher. He and Ida Olive Wilson (1867-1948) were married in 1887 and spent most of their ministry in Ohio before transferring to the Saint John's River Conference (Florida) in 1924.

At this point the trail turns cold for a few years. Part of the time the family lived in Delphos OH (the hometown of Laura), part of the time in Ada OH (the hometown of James) and part of the time in Whitehall WI (where daughter Elizabeth was born, and where James reportedly served as a supply pastor). James' occupation during those years is unclear. What is clear is that in March 1911 James made himself available as a supply pastor to the Central Pennsylvania Conference. Why central Pennsylvania? – possibly because his grandmother Donaldson had been from Huntingdon County and he had known relatives in the area.

### **1911-13 Rays Hill Charge of the Central Pennsylvania Conference**

The 1911 Rays Hill charge consisted of 6 appointments, 5 church buildings owned by the Methodists and 1 union building, as follows:

1. Akersville – Brush Creek township, Fulton County  
discontinued in 1972, sold to Cemetery Association
2. Asbury – East Providence township, Bedford County  
discontinued about 1950, sold to Cemetery Association
3. Breezewood – East Providence township, Bedford County  
now Breezewood UMC
4. McKendree – Brush Creek township, Fulton County  
discontinued in 1998
5. Providence (union) – West Providence township, Bedford County  
Methodist interest terminated about 1957, now independent
6. Wesley – East Providence township, Bedford County  
now Wesley Chapel UMC

Even today these sites, except perhaps for Breezewood, are isolated and well off the beaten path. The district superintendent's report for 1912 notes "the almost unprecedented zero weather of January and February, and the almost impassable roads in the country districts" that Mathews had to face. While the Akersville building was just torn down in 2015, the other 5 buildings remain much as they were in 1911 – except for Breezewood, which has been modified, bricked over, and added to. The superintendent's report for 1913 states that \$100 worth of improvements were made to the structures on the charge. A trip to the sites today gives a hint of the travel difficulties a pastor on horseback or in a wagon would have faced in 1911.

Whatever Mathews' motivations were for bringing his family from Ohio to the Pennsylvania mountains of Bedford and Fulton counties for two years, they appear to have been rewarded, as the family (now increased from 3 to 5 children) returned to Ohio willing to continue in service to the church.

### **Life after Rays Hill**

Again, the trail grows cold, and documentation is hard to come by – although he apparently returned to Ohio and served as a supply pastor. The Mathews family history<sup>10</sup> simply reports the following.

We moved frequently; first to nearby Wellsville, Ohio, then to Upper Sandusky, then to Ada, where my father had grown up. Why these moves? First of all, Papa was an itinerant preacher<sup>11</sup> – subject to frequent moves – after the Methodist Episcopal manner. Then his health deteriorated, and doctors recommended outside work. For a time he worked as a salesman. Finally, during World War I, since he was too old to serve in the army, he was employed by the Pennsylvania Railroad, where he worked, interrupted by periodic illness, until his retirement.

One of those interruptions in railroad employment occurred in 1925, when Mathews moved the family from Ada OH to Houston TX, where his brother Finley was a physician. Those were two years of emotional and financial struggles, and in 1927 the family moved back to Ohio, this time to Mansfield.

Census records give only the bare facts

1920 – Ada OH – railroad flagman

1930 – Madison OH – railroad conductor

1940 – Mansfield OH – retired

James Davenport Mathews died November 9, 1961, at the age of 91 in Sharon CT.

### **Epilogue**

On the surface, the story of James D. Mathews does not seem to be a happy one. The son who wrote the Mathews family history sums it up as follows.

Now it is clear to us that he suffered from severe, debilitating, and recurring episodes of depression that nowadays, alas, can be controlled by rather simple medical means.

He did not continue in the ministry, for his health broke. The doctors advised that he seek outdoor work. He eventually became a conductor on the railway, which was respectable but beneath his abilities. He must have thought himself a failure. I could never bring myself to talk to my father about this, but I think he must have suffered considerable inner hurt by the realization that he had somehow not made the fullest use of his abilities and did not attain success as the world might count it.

On the other hand, if one casts aside conventional values, he did instill a great deal into his children, and maybe in some final reckoning that might count more than what this world would consider to be important, or successful.

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<sup>10</sup> page 35

<sup>11</sup> Technically, James D. Mathews was not an itinerant under appointment, and any ministerial service would have been as a local or supply pastor. The Mathews family history states that the family lived in Wellsville OH in September 1916, for example, but Wellsville at that time was being served by a regular member of the North-East Ohio Conference.

The reader may have determined by now that the writer of what has been called the Mathews family history was one of the two sons born to James and Laura Mathews in Breezewood PA – Bishop James Kenneth Mathews (1913-2010), arguably the most significant Methodist bishop of the twentieth century. When he died at the age of 97, his service to Methodism had spanned three denominations (the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church, and the United Methodist Church) and three continents (North America, Asia, and Africa). While serving in India he met and married his wife of 70 years – Eunice Jones, daughter of prominent Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones. Active in the Civil Rights movement, he participated in the 1963 March on Washington – where he witnessed the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

And the other son born to James and Laura Mathews in Breezewood PA was also a significant figure in Methodism – Dr. Joseph Wesley Mathews (1911-1977), chaplain, seminary professor at Perkins School of Theology, and Dean of the Ecumenical Institute in Evanston IL.

What ever happened to supply pastor James Davenport Mathews of Breezewood? While there, despite the physical hardships and his own personal struggles, he fathered two Methodist statesmen that helped shape the current United Methodist Church.



Akersville Methodist Church  
erected 1858 – dismantled 2015  
served by James D. Mathews 1911-13