

The University of Northern Pennsylvania A Short-Lived Methodist Institution

Located in Wayne County along PA route 570, 3 miles northwest of Honesdale, the borough of Bethany, named for the Biblical town that was the residence of Mary and Martha, is home to about 250 persons. Its secular claim to fame arises from its being the home of David Wilmot¹ and the original county seat of Wayne County, but it has a place in Methodist history that should not be overlooked.

Asbury visited the area when he traveled through the Wyoming Valley in the summer of 1807, and he assigned Gideon Draper to spend the balance of the year on what became the Canaan circuit and included the village of Bethany. Unfortunately, Methodism seemed to have constant opposition in Bethany – which later had an adverse effect on their attempts to establish an educational institution there. When Draper arrived, for example, he found that the local Baptist elder had told the people that he was an English spy and a horse thief. Confronted by Draper and given the choice between recanting or facing prosecution, the Baptist elder chose the former.²

There was also much controversy with Universalism in those days. In 1828, for example, John Parker and V.M. Coryell were the itinerants assigned to Canaan circuit. Parker published in the *Christian Advocate* an article titled “Universalism Renounced Under the Gallows” – the account of a man named Mathews executed in Bethany on October 24, 1828, for the murder of Colonel Jonathan Brooks. The following excerpt gives some detail.

During Matthews's trial and imprisonment, Rev. John Parker visited him several times, in order, if possible, to convert him from the error of his ways, but found him fearfully hardened, and seeking miserable refuge in Universalism. No Gospel reasoning seemed to touch his feelings in the least. But on the day of execution Brother Parker, having been appointed by the sheriff to preach on the awful occasion, went early to the courthouse, and learned that a change had taken place in the prisoner's mind... In prison, and just before he was taken out for execution, he lamented that Universalism had so long deceived him; and on the scaffold, when addressing the thousands before him, he declared that Universalism had deluded him, and that it was a 'doctrine of the devil.' Brother Coryell, on the occasion, addressed the people by way of exhortation... some votaries of Universalism taking high offense at some of his statements.³

¹ David Wilmot (1814-1868), a US Representative and Senator from Pennsylvania, was the author of the Wilmot Proviso, a failed proposal to ban the expansion of slavery to western lands gained by the Mexican Cession. Originally elected as a Democrat, he was instrumental in organizing the Republican Party in Pennsylvania. Both the Wilmot House (his birthplace) and the Wilmot Mansion (his boyhood home) are Bethany landmarks on the National Register of Historic Places.

² *History of the Wyoming Conference*, by Amasa F. Chaffee, 1904, page 605.

³ *History of the Genesee Annual Conference*, by F.W. Conable, 1876, page 271.

After the county seat was relocated from Bethany to Honesdale in 1841, the courthouse was used by Beech Wood Academy, a local school. In 1848, the University of Northern Pennsylvania⁴ was chartered and the building was modified for such purposes. The University began its work in the fall of 1850⁵, and the next year John F. Stoddard⁶ was elected principal. One official account⁷ reflects favorably on the school as follows.

This institution of learning, annually patronized by over two hundred pupils, many of whom were being trained expressly for teachers, infused in Wayne county new life in the cause of education. Its influence was felt in every valley and on every hill-side, as its graduates went forth to teach.

In 1854, as noted in the following statement⁸, the school, was transferred to the Wyoming Conference.

A proposition was received from the trustees of the University of Northern Pennsylvania, at Bethany, Wayne county, for a transfer of that institution to the Wyoming Conference of the M.E. Church. The property is valued at \$8,000 and is almost free from debt. The committee recommended the acceptance of the institution, with the understanding that its college charter and title should be modified to make them conform to those of our conference seminaries and that it should be free from debt. A board of Commissioners was appointed to effect the transfer, which has since been done, and Rev. N. Rounds⁹ was elected principal.

In his first written report to the Conference, Rounds believed that the “...undertaking is possible and is destined to be successful, though it has been attended thus far with a number of embarrassments: From a mean and dishonorable course on the part of the former principal... From sectarian and anti-religious jealousy in the neighborhood consequent upon the school passing into the hand of our denomination. An inscrutable Providence which in the form of sickness... took away our excellent Preceptress and three of our students by death.” In spite of these

⁴ Despite its imposing title, the University was a preparatory school similar to other academies – like Wyoming Seminary in Kingston PA, that was opened by the Oneida Conference in 1844.

⁵ *Reports of the Heads of Departments of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Part 2, 1878*, hereafter cited as *Reports*, gives valuable information about this short-lived school. On page 591 it states the 1850 opening took place with “Professor Curtis as principal and Misses Penfield and Perkins as assistants” – but no further information appears available on those individuals.

⁶ John Fair Stoddard (1825-1873) was a noted educator in the area. Pennsylvania passed a law in 1854 creating the position of county superintendent of schools, which person was responsible for examining teachers, granting certificates, and verifying certain standards were met before schools received state apportionments. In 1854, Stoddard had been named Wayne County’s first superintendent. He died at his home in Newark NJ and is buried in Brooklyn NY.

⁷ *Reports*, page 591.

⁸ *Minutes of the Wyoming Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1854*, page 17.

⁹ Nelson Rounds (1807-1874) was doing double-duty, as he was also superintendent of the Honesdale District. A charter member of the Wyoming Conference, he had previously served in the Oneida Conference as a pastor, superintendent, faculty member at Oneida Conference Seminary, and editor of the Northern Christian Advocate. In 1868, he transferred to the Oregon Conference and served as the president of Willamette University.

disasters, the school had an average of 75 students in the first session and 45 in the summer session.¹⁰

The acceptance of the University and the ensuing difficulties were confirmed in the following 1855 statement.¹¹

The transfer was duly made and the School has passed through one term and entered upon a second. The Report of the Trustees indicates that they have had several formidable obstacles to contend with and that a strong effort will be necessary on the part of all their friends both in and out of Conference to establish the Institution in its new relation and upon a firm basis. It is thoroughly officered and in actual operation under the principalship of Rev. S.S. Milborne, A.B.¹²

Rounds wrote the second and last report of the school in June 1856. The student enrollment was a little under the year before and the institution was threatened with “the seizure of moveable property” because of liabilities “mostly in the form of judgment notes entered against the concern.” The former principal J.F. Stoddard evidently held the notes.¹³

This situation and the resulting action are confirmed in the following 1856 statement.¹⁴

Whereas it appears from the report of the Trustees of the Seminary at Bethany, the corporate name of which is “The University of Northern Pennsylvania,” and from facts gathered from other reliable sources, that the financial and other embarrassments of the institution are so serious as to preclude all hope of its final success, therefore

1. Resolved – That we recommend the Trustees of the University of Northern Pennsylvania to close the concern, and by sale or otherwise, as they may deem best, liquidate the debts due from the institution.
2. Resolved – That henceforth all relation of this conference to the said institution shall cease.

The final result was that the buildings were returned to John F. Stoddard, who tried to continue the school. On the night of April 19, 1857, less than a year later, the buildings were destroyed by fire – except for one fireproof structure that survived the disaster. Stoddard then gave the remaining building and the public square to the borough to be used as a common school.

¹⁰ *He Hold the Stars in His Hands: The Centennial History of the Wyoming Conference*, by Leroy G. Bugbee, 1952, page 121. For the material in this paragraph, Bugbee cites “First Report of Nelson Rounds of Bethany Seminary, 1855 (longhand)” – a document which appears not to have survived and may have been lost in the flood of 1972.

¹¹ *Minutes of the Wyoming Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1855, page 16.

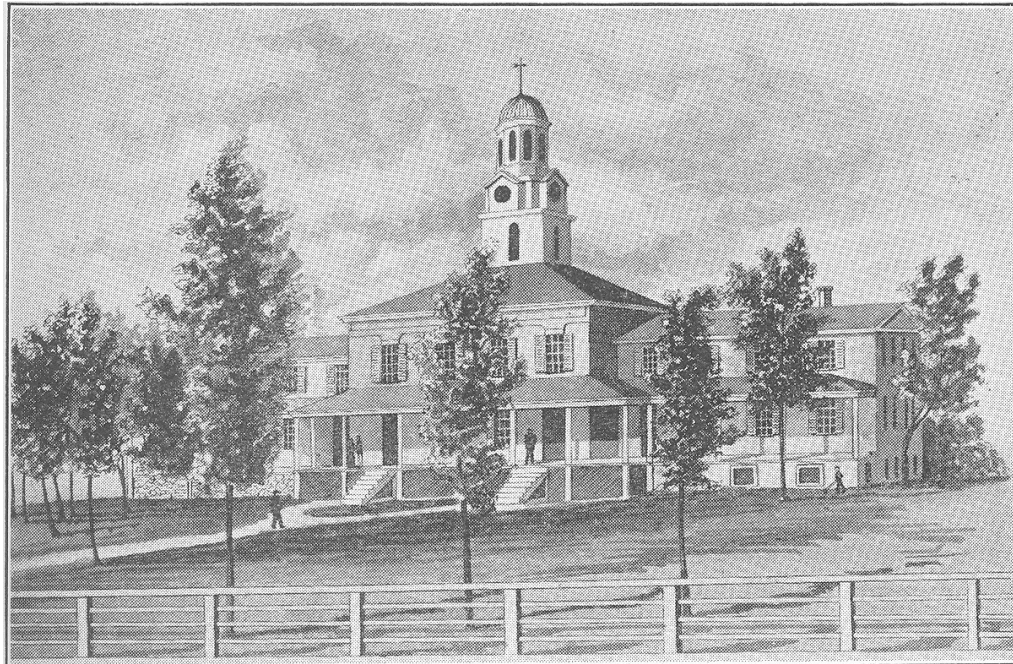
¹² Extensive research has failed to further identify “S.S. Milborne” in this or any variant spelling.

¹³ *He Hold the Stars in His Hands: The Centennial History of the Wyoming Conference*, by Leroy G. Bugbee, 1952, page 121. For the material in this paragraph, Bugbee cites “Second Report of Nelson Rounds of Bethany Seminary, 1856 (longhand)” – a document which appears not to have survived and may have been lost in the flood of 1972.

¹⁴ *Minutes of the Wyoming Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1856, page 25.

The image¹⁵ below of the main building is one of the few existing artifacts from the University of Northern Pennsylvania. Other items that verify there ever was such an institution include the title pages of many of the books in J.F. Stoddard's popular *Practical Arithmetic* series which identify him as the principal of the University of Northern Pennsylvania.

While the school is documented as has been noted in the two "official" histories of the Wyoming Conference – by Chaffee in 1904 and Bugbee in 1952 – it fails to appear in the definitive 1976 publication¹⁶ of the National Commission on United Methodist Higher Education that purports to give the chronological histories of all known educational institutions affiliated with the United Methodist Church and its predecessor denominations – whether they are currently United Methodist, still operating but no longer United Methodist, or no longer operating.



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¹⁵ *History of the Wyoming Conference*, by Amasa F. Chaffee, 1904, page 85.

¹⁶ *To Give the Key of Knowledge: United Methodists and Education, 1784-1976*