IN LATE SUMMER of 1784 John Wesley sent three ordained clergymen to America—Thomas Coke, Richard Whatcoat, Thomas Vasey. The peace, then recently concluded between Britain and the American Colonies, had established complete freedom for America in things ecclesiastical as well as political. In the new situation Wesley at last felt free to agree to, and to assist in, the establishment of an independent American Methodist denomination. Accordingly he sent the delegation of ordained clergymen, representing the Methodist Movement under his direction, with authority to aid the American group in such action as might appear wise and proper. His declaration was: "As our American brethren are now totally disentangled both from the State and the English hierarchy, ... we dare not entangle them again either with the one or the other." ¹

Dr. Coke and his party arrived at New York, November 3, 1784. He took close counsel with John Dickins, the experienced and able preacher at Wesley Chapel (John Street Church), and then proceeded to Philadelphia. Moving into Delaware on the 14th, Coke met Asbury (apparently by appointment) at Barratt’s Chapel, where a conference was in process. In his *Journal* for that date Asbury wrote: “The design of organizing the Methodists into an independent Episcopal Church was opened to the preachers present, and it was agreed to call a general conference, to meet at Baltimore the ensuing Christmas.”

Freeborn Garrettson rode south “like an arrow” to summon the preachers from the outlying circuits. Others passed the call west and north. On Christmas Eve, 1784, as many of the American Methodist preachers as could complete the journey assembled at Lovely Lane Chapel, Baltimore, selected for the conference as the point most readily accessible for all. At least sixty of the eighty-two preachers of the connection were present. At this organizing Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, our comity and Discipline were determined, our Orders established, our Rituals and procedures adopted, and our first Bishops were consecrated—Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury.

There were moments of quick insight and inspiration, of significant decision, of rich spiritual import. Chief among these was the Ordination of Francis Asbury. It is difficult for us to realize that none of the American Methodist preachers then possessed any ecclesiastical ordination. All were lay-preachers. By action of the Christmas Conference twelve were elected elders, and four others deacons. As their eagerly acknowledged leader, Francis Asbury was ordained deacon on Christmas day, December 25th, elder the following day, and was consecrated Superintendent (Bishop) on the 27th. At Asbury’s specific request, Coke, Whatcoat and Vasey were joined, in the laying on of hands, by the Rev. Philip Otterbein, noted German Lutheran clergyman.

Across the years a number of artists have been inspired by the historic significance and the spiritual meaning of this Ordination. Each strove in his own way to portray the ageless moment. Photography was as yet unknown. However, portraits of the chief participants were available, as well as of many others who witnessed the investiture. The very building—Lovely Lane Chapel—soon passed from the new denomination’s holding; and only the memory remained to say what it was like. The problem of idealized reconstruction faced each artist, as he planned the use of such basic material as he could command.

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3 *Journal*, I, 474 and footnote.
One of these artists achieved quite remarkable success. His concept of the cramped interior of the chapel is opened enough to give a certain sense of spacious repose, adequate to the great moment. His ability in portraying people was evidenced in the use of the various portraits he found. An identification chart reveals how cleverly he preserved the likenesses of many distinguished leaders of our early church. Particularly noteworthy are the portraits of Asbury kneeling, and of Coke, Whatcoat, Vasey and Otterbein imposing their hands in ordination. Each is individual, the faces glowing with the ardor and consecration of the solemn act.

Thomas Coke Ruckle (1808-1891) painted the classic representation of Asbury's Ordination. He was a grandson of John Ruckle, whose sister, Barbara (Ruckle) Heck is revered by all American Methodists as one of the founders of the New York Society (John Street Church). Barbara Heck had four brothers—Paul, Henry, John and Daniel Ruckle. They, or certain of their children, came to this country following the arrival of the original Embury-Heck group in 1760. Our artist, grand-nephew of Barbara Heck, was of a family imbued with the religious fervor of our founders, closely connected with the early leaders of the denomination.

Born in Baltimore in 1808, son of Thomas H. Ruckle, who had settled there in 1798, the young Thomas Coke Ruckle, inherited from his father a rich love of art and unusual skill. The older Thomas Ruckle was a house-painter by trade, but gained a considerable reputation as an artist, painting a number of well-known large canvases. His “Battle of North Point” (Baltimore), War of 1812, is in the collection of the Maryland Historical Society. Also there is his painting of St. Paul's Church (Anglican), Baltimore, where Francis Asbury occasionally worshipped.

The son, Thomas Coke Ruckle, was recognized in Baltimore as a young artist of promise as early as 1833. He spent 1839 and 1840 in Europe, studying at the Royal Academy in London, also in Rome, and working at the major galleries of other European art centers. Although he produced numerous large scenic works, notably a series of “Western Scenes” and a panorama of “Pilgrim’s Progress,” his finest work was in the field of portraits and miniatures. He made the drawings for the lithographs in “The Early History of Methodism in Maryland,” published in 1866, some of which were reproduced in later works. He exhibited at the Maryland Historical Society, the Royal Academy and the American Academy of Fine Arts. His death came at Catonsville, Maryland, December 17, 1891.

Thomas Coke Ruckle’s most noted work is “The Ordination of

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4 Genealogical, biographical and art data have been secured from The Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, and Mr. C. Walter Ruckle, Valparaiso, Florida, archivist of the Ruckel family.

5 Journal, December 14, 1773, I, 99; and March 28, 1774, I, 111.
Francis Asbury.” The original canvas was destroyed in a fire, but copies of an engraving that the artist had supervised are known to us. The copy on display at John Street Church, New York, was presented to that church by the artist. The coat of arms of the Ruckle Family is included within the title below the engraving.

The given name—Thomas Coke—reflects the influence of that stalwart leader from Wesley upon the elder Ruckel resident in Baltimore after 1798. The younger artist’s eager interest was as great in depicting the dignity of Dr. Coke in the act of administering the ordination as it was in presenting Asbury humbly receiving it.

The superb painting worthily represents the Christmas Conference at Lovely Lane Chapel, 1784, and the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church. It will always be treasured by American Methodism.