Philip Embury, Founder of Methodism in New York
by Samuel J. Fanning

Methodism will officially celebrate the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the founding of the first Methodist societies (churches) in America in 1966. As this significant anniversary approaches, there may be some question as to just when Robert Strawbridge organized his first Methodist society in Maryland, but all agree that Philip Embury established Methodism in New York City in 1766.

Philip Embury, an ethnic German, was born in County Limerick, Ireland, in 1728 and emigrated to New York in 1760. Embury is the anglicized version of the German name Emmerich. To explain Embury's birth and early life in Ireland, it is necessary to note briefly conditions on the continent of Europe in the latter part of the seventeenth century.

France under King Louis XIV was the greatest power in Europe. Louis ascended the throne in 1661 following the death of his great mentor, Cardinal Mazarin. Before his passing, the adroit cardinal had smashed the power of the nobility in France; Colbert worked wonders for the country's finances; and Louvois was providing Louis with the largest and best trained army Europe had seen since the days of the Roman Empire. All of this set the stage for Louis to indulge his inordinate passion for "military fame, beside which every other kind of reputation seemed to him to be of little value."¹ Between 1667 and the close of his reign in 1715, Louis' armies fought four wars for the sole purpose of expanding the borders of France. To the east of France lay the Palatinate of the Rhine, one of the seven ancient electorates of Germany. Desirous of incorporating this territory in his own domain, Louis launched the War of the Palatinate in 1688. A long indecisive conflict ensued. It was settled in 1697 when both sides agreed to mutual restitutions at the Peace of Ryswick.

Although Louis' aims were not fulfilled, his armies wrought havoc in the Palatinate, and following Ryswick there was great suffering among the people. As a remedial measure several thousands of the inhabitants were moved from the ravaged territory.

During Queen Anne's reign (1702-1714) about 6,000 Palatines were brought to England where some found homes while others were sent on to America by the British government. Other Palatines...

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were brought to southern Ireland in 1710 "by a few considerable landlords assisted by a small grant from the Irish parliament." 2 Referred to as the "Irish Palatines," this group was resettled in the counties of Kerry and Limerick. Within a seven-mile radius in the vicinity of the town of Rathkeale in County Limerick, four Palatine communities were established, in the following locations: Court­matrix, twenty families; Killeheen, twenty families; Pallas, twenty families; and Ballingarane, fifty families. The last named group was provided land and homes on the estate of Lord Southwell. Into one of these Palatine families at Ballingarane Philip Embury was born in 1728.

Eighteenth century Ireland was a wretched abode for its native populace, and it proved to be the same for the Palatines even though they excelled the Irish in diligence and in agricultural techniques. Through a series of confiscations dating back to Tudor days, Englishmen and Scotchmen acquired estates in Ireland. By the beginning of the eighteenth century most of the owners leased their Irish estates to agents or middlemen while they themselves lived in Britain. As many as four or five agents might intervene between the oppressed tenant and the owner. This meant that the poor tenant paid exorbitant rents. In addition, during Queen Anne's reign a harsh penal code was enacted against the Catholics. Since the Palatines were Protestants, they were spared the disabilities of the penal code, but as tenants they like their neighbors were mercilessly exploited.

Little is known about Philip Embury's early life. He was baptized on September 29, 1728. He received part of his education under Philip Guier, the German schoolmaster at Ballingarane, and part of it in an English school at nearby Rathkeale. He was apprenticed to a carpenter.

The Emburys and all of the Irish Palatines were Lutherans. But apparently no provision was made for their spiritual welfare in Ireland, and "they became thoroughly demoralized, noted for drunkenness, profanity, and utter neglect of religion." 3 However, since moral apathy and religious indifference were widespread at the time, it may be assumed that the Irish Palatines were only similar to other groups in these respects. The Roman Catholic religion suffered restrictions, while the Anglican Church was to some extent at least a political pawn. "At no time in our history was the Anglican Church, both in England and in Ireland, so completely Erastian and so entirely subservient to the purposes of civil government as in the eighteenth century." 4 Since there was corruption in the

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Anglican Church, and since the clergy were few in number, poorly paid, ill-fitted for their work, and in some instances, vicious in their habits, it was not surprising that drunkenness, profanity, and other forms of godlessness were evident among the laity.

But the eighteenth century that witnessed moral laxity and religious indifference also experienced a revival of religion. It started among a group of dedicated students at Oxford University in 1729. Under the leadership of Charles Wesley they formed a Holy Club. The Club soon included young Wesley's more famous brother John, who was a fellow of Lincoln College, and George Whitefield of Pembroke College. From the time he entered the Club, John Wesley's powerful intellect and strong personality dominated the group, and in retrospect it is evident that the Methodist movement which was to come had already found its leader. Between 1729 and 1735 the "Methodists," as the young men were called in derision, met together for mutual improvement. "They were accustomed," writes Lecky, "to communicate every week, to fast regularly on Wednesdays and Fridays and on most days during Lent; to read and discuss the Bible in common, to abstain from most forms of amusement and luxury, and to visit sick persons, and prisoners in gaol." 5

In 1735 the Wesleys accompanied General James Oglethorpe to the new colony of Georgia, Charles as the General's secretary and John as chaplain to the colony and missionary to the Indians. Indifferent success attended their efforts in America and in less than three years they had returned to England. However, the Georgia venture was significant for John Wesley in several ways, not the least of which was his association with some members of the Herrnhut Moravian community of Berthelsdorf, Saxony, who went to Georgia to found a mission among the Indians and to find a place of refuge in case hostility on the part of church and state authorities should compel the dissolution of the Herrnhut settlement established by Count Zinzendorf in 1722.

Shortly after his return to England, John Wesley came into intimate contact with Peter Boehler, a famous Moravian preacher. Though Wesley had been a priest in the Church of England for some years, it was from Boehler that he first learned to believe that every man, no matter how moral, how pious, or how orthodox he may be, is in a state of damnation, until, by a supernatural and instantaneous process wholly unlike that of human reasoning, the conviction flashes upon his mind that the sacrifice of Christ has been applied to and has expiated his sins; that this supernatural and personal conviction or illumination is what is meant by saving faith, and that it is inseparably accompanied by an absolute assurance of salvation, and by a complete dominion over sin. 6

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5 Lecky, op. cit., p. 598.
6 Ibid., p. 605.
This, in brief, was the essence of the new religious experience which John Wesley and his followers would preach in England.

But now in addition to the Erastian influence already mentioned, the moral precepts of the Established Church had undergone considerable adulteration from the rationalist, materialist teachings of the deists. In large measure the deists substituted a rationalist cult for a supernatural religion. Wesleyanism, suffused as it was with the fervor of living faith and the enthusiasm of assured salvation, scandalized these practitioners of respectable morality. Displeased by Wesley's preaching, the clergy soon closed their pulpits to him. Declaring that the world was his parish, Wesley began preaching in the open. At times his outdoor services roused the hatred of the mob. But neither ecclesiastical opposition nor mob violence could discourage Wesley and the lay preachers he enlisted in his revival movement. They preached at the pit heads, at the factory gates, on the village greens, in the open fields, anywhere that men would listen. Their message was the availability of salvation for all through the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice.

Wesley, a devoted and loyal priest in the Anglican Church since his ordination in 1725, had no intention of starting a new denomination; his aim was to revive religion and save souls. But time and circumstances decreed otherwise. Methodism became a church in America before Wesley's death, and it organized as a separate denomination in England after his passing.

The Irish Palatines first encountered Methodism in the summer of 1749 when Thomas Williams, a Welshman who had been associated with the Wesleys since 1741, preached in the city of Limerick. Several of the Palatines from the Rathkeale area who were in the city for the assizes, heard Williams with interest and edification. Williams accepted an invitation from the Palatine group to visit their community, and from that time onward Philip Guier, the village schoolmaster in Ballingarane, remained closely associated with the Methodist movement. Between 1747 and 1750 John Wesley himself made annual visits to Ireland, but it was not until 1752 that he went to Limerick where on August 15 he presided over the first Irish Conference. At this conference Ireland was divided into six circuits, and local preachers, one of whom was Philip Guier, were given appointments. Guier was highly esteemed among his religious friends and neighbors for his consistent piety, fidelity, and zeal, and even "Romanists as well as Protestants were accustomed to salute the Methodist minister as he jogged along on his horse, and to say 'there goes Philip Guier, who drove the devil out of Ballingarane.'"

It is not clear whether Philip Embury came into personal contact

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7 Crookshank, op. cit., p. 57.
with Wesley during his initial visit to Limerick. If he did not, most of the credit for Embury’s conversion to Methodism must be attributed to the zeal of his erstwhile schoolmaster, Guier. In describing the memorable event, Embury says, “On Christmas day: being Monday ye 25th of December in the year 1752; the Lord shone into my soul by a glimpse of his redeeming love: by being an earnest of my redemption in Christ Jesus to whom be glory for ever and ever—amen.”

During his visit to Ireland in 1756, Wesley preached in Embury’s community at Ballingarane. Two years later Wesley went to Courtmatrix and preached in a “preaching house” which had been erected largely under the leadership and by the physical labors of Philip Embury. On this visit Wesley held the third Irish Conference on June 21 in Limerick City. Embury was made a class leader and a local preacher. Also, he was recommended for the itineracy and was placed on Wesley’s reserve list. Embury married Margaret Switzer of Courtmatrix on November 27, 1752.

Due to the extortionate rents exacted by the rapacious land agents the lot of the Palatines in Ireland became steadily worse. Accounts of various individuals who traveled through southern Ireland during the period mention the dreadful condition of the unfortunate tenantry. While on a visit to Limerick John Wesley himself wrote in his journal on July 16, 1760:

I rode to Newmarket which was another German settlement; but the poor settlers with all their diligence and frugality could not procure even the coarsest food to eat and the meanest raiment to put on, under their merciful landlords, so that most of these as well as those at Ballingarane, have been forced to break bread in other places, some of them in distant parts of Ireland, but the greater part in America.

At the time Wesley made that entry in his journal Philip Embury and his wife were already en route to the New World. In June 1760 they sailed from Limerick on the little ship Perry captained by one Richard Hogan. Accompanying them were two of Embury’s brothers, his cousin Barbara (Ruckle) Heck and her husband Paul. Barbara Heck, who with Embury was to play an important role in launching Methodism in New York, was a native of Ballingarane; she was born in 1734 at Ruckle Hill, a place named for her family.

The Perry arrived in New York August 10, 1760. Very little is known about Embury’s activities during his first six years in America. Probably he supported himself by working at his trade as a carpenter, and judging by the following notice in the New York

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Gazette, April 20 (25?), 1761, he also taught school: “Philip Embury, School-Master, Gives Notice that on the first day of May next, he intends to teach Reading, Writing, and Arithmetick, in English; in the New School-House, now building in Little Queen-street, next door to the Lutheran Ministers.”

On leaving Ireland, Embury and several other men had hopes of establishing a linen manufacturing business in America. In February, 1763, twenty-five of them, including Embury’s three brothers, David, John, and Peter, and Paul Heck, petitioned Robert Monkton, Governor of New York, for a grant of land in Albany County for such a purpose. All except one of the men, William Folk, were natives of Ireland. The petition said that eight of the men had been bred to the linen manufacturing business. In May, 1763 each of the 25 petitioners was granted 400 acres of land on condition that he would settle 25 families on the land within three years. The tract turned out to be unsuitable, and nothing came of the proposed project.

In 1765, in response to another petition, Lieutenant Governor Cadwallader Colden granted 8,000 acres of land in Albany County to Philip Embury, his brother Peter, Moses Cowen, Thomas Proctor, and James, George, and John Wilson. There is no information as to how this tract was divided among the grantees or for what purposes it was used. Embury himself continued to live in New York until 1770, when he moved to a farm belonging to a relative in Albany County.

Some historians claim that soon after Embury arrived in New York he tried to conduct Methodist services, but since there was no Methodist society and no facilities for Methodist worship he abandoned the idea. He and his wife attended Trinity Lutheran Church. While not very active in the Lutheran congregation, apparently there was a close bond between Embury and the Lutheran pastor, Johann Albert Weygand, after whom Embury named his eldest son. The child was baptized at Trinity Church and died in 1765 at the age of three. A second son, Samuel, born in 1765, was also baptized in Trinity Church.

In 1766, Philip Embury resumed in New York the role of a local Methodist preacher which he had begun in Limerick eight years earlier. Much if not all of the credit for his renewed preaching activity goes to his cousin, Barbara Heck. In 1765 a group of Palatines, including some relatives of both the Emburys and the Hecks, came over from Ireland. While calling on some of her kinsmen among the new arrivals, Barbara found them engrossed in a card game. Outraged, she seized the cards, threw them into the fire, and

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10 The Historical Records Survey, Inventory of the Church Archives of New York City—The Methodist Church (New York, 1940).
scolded the players. Then she went to Embury and said, "Philip, you must preach to us or we will all go to hell, and God will require our blood at your hands." 11 Embury asked how he could preach when he had neither a house nor a congregation. Barbara replied, "Preach in your own house and to your own company first." 12 Hence the jest that Methodism in America originated at a card table.

Prompted by Barbara Heck's plea, Philip Embury soon began preaching in his own home at 10 Augustus Street, New York. The five members of his first congregation were Paul and Barbara Heck, their African servant Betty, Embury's wife Margaret, and John Laurence, one of the men involved in the card game who was later to marry Embury's widow. The congregation grew and larger accommodations were necessary. In 1767 they rented a rigging loft in Horse and Cart Street, now 120 William Street. The rent was nominal, and the loft, 60 by 18 feet, served the Methodists well for a time. They held two services on Sunday and one on Thursday evening.

At an evening service in February, 1767, the congregation was surprised and pleased by the appearance of a man in the uniform of a British officer, Captain Thomas Webb, retired, formerly barracks master at Albany. Born in England in 1724, Webb had been converted under John Wesley's preaching. He was a good speaker. In 1774, John Adams, who had listened to Webb preach in Philadelphia, said he was one of the most fluent and eloquent men he had ever heard. The little group in New York was glad to know that Webb was willing to assist in the Methodist cause. He and Embury took turns at preaching. Dressed in his regimentals, a patch over one empty eye socket, his sword resting on the pulpit, Webb was an impressive preacher. "Here," (in the rigging loft) writes Wakeley, "Embury preached and Captain Webb wielded 'the sword of the spirit,' here the 'sons of God' presented themselves before the Lord, and 'devout women' wrestled with God in prayer, and the fires of Pentecost were rekindled in many hearts." 13

We may note in passing that rigging lofts in Philadelphia and Baltimore also served as places of worship for the early Methodists. The rigging loft on William Street, New York, stood until 1854 when like many other historic landmarks in America, it was obliterated. However, somebody with a feeling for history used some of the solid timbers to make walking sticks fitted with ivory heads and bearing the inscription, "Rigging Loft, 1766, Philip Embury."

Like the parable of the seed that fell on good ground, Embury's

12 Ibid.
labors in the rigging loft bore fruit a hundredfold. Still larger accommodations were needed. In February, 1768, Embury appointed a board of eight trustees to consider buying property on which to build a chapel. The board included Paul Heck, Captain Webb, William Lupton, Henry Newton, Charles White, Richard Sause, Thomas Taylor, and Embury himself. On March 29, 1768, the trustees leased lots 112 and 113 on "Golden Hill" (now John Street) in an area then known as "Shoemakers' Ground." The site was between Nassau and William Streets. The price of the two lots was 600 pounds. A subscription campaign was initiated to raise money for the proposed chapel. Some 250 people, including citizens of wealth and non-Methodist clergy, contributed 418 pounds for the building.

By October, 1768 the chapel had been completed and was ready for worship. Embury designed the building, and since he was a carpenter by trade, he did much of the work, including the construction of the pulpit. In view of Embury's versatile talents and numerous responsibilities during the critical years when Methodism was getting started in New York, he has been called "not only the first Methodist preacher in America, but the first class leader, trustee, architect, and builder of the chapel now called 'the cradle of American Methodism.'" 14

Interesting features of the new chapel were a fireplace and a chimney, not primarily for heating the building but for the purpose of circumventing the law regarding edifices used for public worship. At the time only the Reformed Church and the Anglican Church enjoyed full worship rights in New York. In the event of any difficulty with the law, the Methodists could say that the fireplace and the chimney made the chapel technically a dwelling house. The chapel was formally dedicated October 30, 1768, with Philip Embury delivering the sermon. In addition to its claim to distinction as the first Methodist meetinghouse in America, it was also the first to be named Wesley Chapel in honor of the founder of Methodism.

The building of Wesley Chapel was the climax of Embury's pioneer efforts on behalf of Methodism in New York. Thanks to the labors of Captain Thomas Webb in Philadelphia and Robert Strawbridge in Maryland, the Methodist movement was rapidly becoming established in the American colonies. But thus far Methodism in the colonies was so to speak a spontaneous movement. These men were local preachers working on their own initiative; they were not regular Methodist preachers or missionaries sent out under and by the authority of John Wesley in England. Therefore, interested persons soon began sending letters and petitions to Wesley requesting him to assign some able regular preachers to America. Consequently in 1769, one year after Embury built Wesley Chapel in New

14 Ibid., p. 49.
York, Wesley sent over Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoor, and by 1773 a total of eight preachers commissioned by Wesley had arrived. In the spring of 1770 Embury relinquished the care of the Methodist society in New York to other hands and he moved to Albany County. Political considerations as well as the arrival of Methodist preachers commissioned by John Wesley influenced Embury's action, for Embury, like most of the Irish Palatines, was a loyalist and was therefore not in sympathy with the growing sentiment for independence in New York.

Now the tract of land granted to the Emburys and their associates in 1765 was located in the Camden Valley area, and by 1770 the nucleus of an Irish Palatine community had been established there. It was considerably enlarged when Embury and several of his relatives—his brother David, Paul and Barbara Heck, the Dulmidges, the Tettlers, the Laurences, the Morgans, and some others—moved there in 1770 and afterward. Embury settled his family on a farm owned by his brother-in-law Peter Switzer. It was located in a section of Salem township known as West Camden. The farm was a little to the west and south of Camden Valley and some six miles north of Ashgrove. The Ashgrove community was established in 1769 by Thomas Ashton who emigrated from Dublin that year and at Embury's suggestion moved to that region.

In his new surroundings Embury worked at his trade, acted as a civil magistrate (his friends dubbed him "the Squire"), and served as a local Methodist preacher. At Ashgrove he established a Methodist society, the first to be organized north of New York City.

A noteworthy feature of Embury's last years at West Camden was his friendship with the Moravian missionary, Abraham Bininger. In 1734, when Bininger was a lad of fourteen, his parents left their native Switzerland, and in 1735 they sailed for Georgia on the ship that carried John and Charles Wesley. Two days out from Georgia Bininger's parents died and were buried at sea. John Wesley's exceptional kindness and solace left a lasting impression on the young orphan. Young Abraham went to a Swiss settlement on the Savannah River where he came under the influence of Moravian missionaries. Later he drifted north to a Moravian settlement at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. In time Bininger was ordained a deacon, and for some years he and his wife served as missionaries in several places including the West Indies, where he ministered particularly to the spiritual needs of the Negro slaves.

In 1770, Bininger and his wife went to New York where they met Philip Embury. After a brief stay in the city the Biningers moved to Camden Valley. Presumably Embury told Bininger of his own imminent move to that locality and this prompted Bininger to go there too. The Emburys and the Biningers were close friends. In
time Bininge’s son, Abraham, married Catherine Embury, the niece of Philip and the daughter of his brother Peter.

Philip Embury died in August, 1773, at the age of 45, as the result of overwork in the hot sun. Abraham Bininge, devoted friend, attended Embury during his last illness and was holding him in his arms when he died. Bininge officiated at Embury’s funeral and provided a grave for him on his own farm.

In 1832 Embury’s remains were reinterred in the cemetery at Ashgrove. In 1866 his dust was once again removed to a permanent grave in Woodland Cemetery, Cambridge, New York. There in 1873, the centenary of his death, a monument was erected to his memory.

Thirteen years to the month after his emigration from Ireland, Philip Embury was dead. His years were few, but the fruits of his endeavors were significant for American Methodism. Once goaded by his cousin Barbara Heck into renewing his labors as a local Methodist preacher, he more than compensated for the previous six years of silence. He broke new ground in the American colonies for the Wesleyan acorn which was destined to grow into the mighty Methodist oak.

In 1966 when American Methodists review the events of the past two centuries, they will no doubt remember the early Methodists who worshipped in the rigging loft on Horse and Cart Street, New York City. They will recall the contribution to Methodist beginnings made by Barbara Heck and Captain Thomas Webb. But especially will they remember Philip Embury, the Palatine from Limerick, who established Methodism in New York and who was truly one of the founders of American Methodism.