ROBERT STRAWBRIDGE  
Founder of Methodism in Maryland  

By Frederick E. Maser

Robert Strawbridge never knew that one day historians would vehemently debate the date of his arrival in America and the year he first organized a Methodist society on Sam’s Creek, Frederick County, Maryland. Had he been endowed with prescience, he probably would have said that men could spend their time more profitably than in arguing the priority of New York or Maryland in American Methodist origins.

Unfortunately for Methodist historians, Strawbridge left no journal, wrote no letters that are extant, published no sermons, and seemed totally unconcerned about carving a niche for himself in American Methodist history. His work apparently took precedence over every other consideration with him. For him the things that mattered were preaching the gospel, organizing Methodist societies, administering the sacraments to the people, and enlisting young men in the Methodist itineracy.

Who was this man who apparently cared so little for recognition or fame, and about whom every Methodist historian would like to know more?

Most of the facts about Strawbridge’s life in Ireland before he came to America were gathered by nineteenth century Methodist historians, and practically all that has been added in more recent years is in the way of conjecture. Much material was collected by Mrs. Arthur Barneveld Bibbins, and after her death it was published in a small volume entitled How Methodism Came. But it adds little to what was already known about Strawbridge. Mrs. Bibbins’ interesting deductions are authenticated only in part.

Strawbridge’s Early Life

We do not know when Robert Strawbridge was born. William Crook went to Ireland and assembled material for a book, Ireland and the Centenary of American Methodism. The volume gives an interesting picture of the country where Strawbridge was born, but it does not verify names, dates, and places.

It is generally believed that Robert Strawbridge was born at Drumsna not far from Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim. Crook describes the Strawbridge home and its surroundings:

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The Strawbridge family had a noble farm within a short distance of the village, and lived in considerable comfort, if not affluence. A famous spa well was on their property, which attracted visitors from all over the land. The house is totally destroyed but its site can be distinctly traced. The noble elms are still standing, unimpaired by age, which surrounded the beautiful homestead which gave birth to Robert Strawbridge. A more charming site for a home could not be found in Ireland. The house stood on a gentle eminence in a spacious lawn of richest emerald hue. Away in the distance can be seen the serpentine windings of the noble Shannon as it proudly rolls on its course, its bosom dotted with many a little island of surpassing beauty. All around lie the Leitrim mountains, sustaining the surrounding loveliness. Here Robert Strawbridge was born.

According to C. H. Crookshank, "The Methodist preachers first found their way to Drummersnave, in the County of Leitrim" in the year 1753. John Wesley visited the place in 1758 and in 1760, but he makes no mention of Robert Strawbridge. Crookshank says that among the fruits of the labors of the Methodist preachers was:

Lawrence Coughlan, who had previously been a devoted and zealous member of the Church of Rome. Soon after, meeting with Leonard Strawbridge (a brother of Robert) then a young man of sixteen, he told him that the Lord had brought him out of gross darkness, and for Christ's sake had forgiven his sins. The relation of this religious experience made a deep impression on the mind of young Strawbridge, and aroused him to a sense of his sinfulness, until at length he was enabled to receive and rest on the Lord Jesus Christ as his Saviour. In this way it is probable that his brother Robert was led to give his heart to God, and enter upon a course of usefulness, which culminated in his glorious work in America, as the Apostle of Methodism in Maryland.

It is characteristic of the confusion surrounding our knowledge of the life of Robert Strawbridge that William Crook, who went to Ireland to learn about Robert Strawbridge's early life, says nothing about a brother named Leonard. But he does speak of an uncle "Linny" (Leonard) who as a bachelor lived to a venerable age. However, Lawrence Coughlan, the converted Catholic who influenced the Strawbridges, is known to Methodist historians. Charles Atmore refers to Coughlan in his Memorials, and John Wesley corresponded with him and mentions him several times in his Journal. Nehemiah Curnock, the editor of Wesley's Journal, says of Coughlan:

This Irish preacher dates from an early period. Atmore describes him as "a deeply pious man, and a very lively, zealous preacher... owned of God, especially at Colchester." In 1764 he was "ordained, with some other Methodist preachers, by a Greek Bishop... on which account, I am informed," says Atmore, "he was put away from the Methodist connexion." In 1768 "he procured ordination from the Bishop of London, and was sent as a missionary to Newfoundland." In 1772 he wrote a remarkable letter to Wesley describing his work, claiming to be a Methodist, announcing his return to England, and asking Wesley's advice as to his future. For a short time he was minister of the Chapel at Holy-well-mount, London. He earnestly desired to resume

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his place as an itinerant preacher; but, one day, whilst conversing with Wesley in his study he was seized with paralysis, and so ended his useful life.4

Apparently John Wesley was unaware that Lawrence Coughlan directly or indirectly was responsible for the conversion of Robert Strawbridge. But in view of Coughlan’s influence on the Strawbridges, his name deserves mention in any history of early American Methodism.

It is said that Robert Strawbridge began to preach in the predominantly Catholic community where he was born, and that his straightforward message aroused persecution which drove him to the county of Sligo where “his labors were signally blessed of God through a considerable district.” He is next heard of in the county of Cavan where he was “recognized ... as a man of more than ordinary usefulness. He was very ardent and evangelical in his spirit.”5 In the county of Armagh he was employed in erecting some buildings, but even so he continued his work as a preacher. In time he made Terryhugan his headquarters, and from there he itinerated throughout the neighborhood. Strawbridge married Elizabeth Piper, a worthy Methodist of the Terryhugan community, and with her he emigrated to America, settling on Sam’s Creek, Frederick County, Maryland.

Arrival in America

When did Robert Strawbridge arrive in America? On this question the storm centering in Strawbridge’s name rises to hurricane proportions. Until recently most authorities dated Strawbridge’s immigration between 1760 and 1766. But recent research by the Rev. Melvin L. Steadman, Jr. and the Rev. Edwin A. Schell shows that a Robert Strawbridge was in the Sam’s Creek vicinity as early as 1753.6 The question immediately arises as to whether this was Robert Strawbridge, the Methodist preacher. Briefly stated:

Court records in Frederick County show that in November of that year [1753] there was a grand jury presentment against a Robert Strawbridge for stealing a pig. The person who brought the charge was a cantankerous individual who frequently vented his spleen on his neighbors by “taking them to law.” He may have been antagonized by Strawbridge’s preaching. Once in Ireland (as we have seen) because of his forthright preaching, Strawbridge was driven out of the neighborhood where he was born. But whether the pig stealing Strawbridge and the preaching Strawbridge are one and the same it is difficult to say.7

5 A manuscript letter from John Shillington, Esq. of Ireland, recorded in History of the M. E. Church, by Abel Stevens, New York, 1864, Vol. I, p. 71.
6 Melvin L. Steadman, Jr., Leesburg’s Old Stone Church, pamphlet prepared by direction of Virginia Conference Historical Society, June, 1960.
Concerning the question as to whether the pig stealer and the preacher are the same, Mr. Schell says in a letter to Mrs. Laura Gronemeyer, Wilmington, Delaware, "In checking this I have discovered that the name [Strawbridge] was not unknown in Maryland long before this time inasmuch as... in 1698 a woman of this name [Strawbridge] inherited property in Baltimore County, so we cannot absolutely bar a coincidence of name, although it seems unlikely." Thus this question, like many others concerning Strawbridge's life and work, remains unresolved.

In debating the time of Strawbridge's arrival in America, various nineteenth century Methodist historians ably defended their views. William Hamilton, George Roberts, William Fort, John Lednum, Edward J. Drinkhouse, Holland N. McTyeire, and others insisted that Strawbridge came over in the early 1760's. Jesse Lee, J. B. Wakeley, Matthew Simpson, James M. Buckley, the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church in their summary of Methodist history in the Disciplines, and several others, favored the date of 1765 or later. Francis Asbury was frequently quoted by both sides. Abel Stevens and John Fletcher Hurst were neutral on the subject.

In 1916 a Joint Commission on the Origin of American Methodism, representing the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church, brought a report to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. This document, among other items, placed Strawbridge on Sam's Creek about 1761, claimed that he had baptized Henry Maynard as early as 1762 or 1763, and said that he began forming Methodist societies as early as 1763 or 1764. A minority report strongly objected to these conclusions. The dispute was not settled, and the Commission recommended the creation of a tribunal to report to the General Conference of 1920. Apparently the matter was dropped. In any event, there was no report on the subject to the 1920 General Conference.

In 1928 and 1929 four articles appeared in the Methodist Review, two defending the priority of Philip Embury and New York in the beginning of American Methodism and two upholding Robert Straw-
Robert Strawbridge, Founder of Methodism in Maryland

Robert Strawbridge emigrated to America seeking a more secure livelihood. It is believed that, having seen large cargoes of wheat which were shipped from Annapolis to his community in Ireland, he sailed for Maryland and not New York. From Annapolis he went to Frederick County which at the time was attracting many settlers because the area had been retrieved from the Indians who overran it in 1755, and because a good road had been built to the county from Baltimore. The names of some of the families who, in addition to the Strawbridges, settled in Frederick County were Evans, Cassell, Poulson, Durbin, and Warfield.

Shortly after coming to Sam's Creek, Strawbridge began to preach to his neighbors in his own home. He soon organized a Methodist class meeting. John Bowen names the group. "It was composed of seven or eight members, of whom we have the names of John

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11 William Warren Sweet, Methodism in American History, Abingdon, 1933, p. 51. The fact is that the interesting original documents supporting the Maryland position seem to have disappeared. Mr. Schell of Baltimore believes they were lost when the baggage of John Goucher sank with the ship, The Republic, in 1912.
13 Bibbins, op. cit.
Evans, who died in the 92nd year of his age, his wife, Eleanor Evans, who died in her 82nd year, and Job Evans, the nephew of John, his wife, Mary Evans, and Nancy Murphy and Mrs. Hoy. They met regularly every week, either at Mr. Strawbridge's house or at John England's whose farm adjoined Mr. Strawbridge's. A second class was formed at Andrew Poulson's house on Pipe Creek about a mile away.

Sometime later Strawbridge built a log meetinghouse on Sam's Creek about a mile from his home. He buried two of his six children beneath its pulpit. For many years the log meetinghouse echoed to Methodist singing and Methodist preaching. Eventually a subsequent owner of the property dismantled it and used the logs in building his barn. John Thomas Scharf says, "During 1866, the centennial year of American Methodism, denominational relic hunters removed these logs, and thus every vestige of the building disappeared. The last was presented by the Rev. Charles A. Reid to the Rev. Frank S. De Hass, D. D., to be placed in the Metropolitan Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, where it was converted into an ornament." Scharf declares that the logs were carefully measured. It is estimated that the original building was 24 feet square.

Strawbridge did not confine his preaching to the log meetinghouse. Abel Stevens says, "He became virtually an itinerant, journeying to and fro in not only his own county (then comprehending three large counties) but in Eastern Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania and Virginia." While on his preaching tours Strawbridge inevitably neglected his farm. Kindly neighbors lent a hand, plowing and planting his fields while he was away preaching. Stevens writes, "During his life he was poor and his family were often straitened for food; but he was a man of strong faith, and would say to them on leaving, 'Meat will be sent here today.'" Stevens does not tell us whether the meat actually arrived, but there is no record that any of the Strawbridge family starved.

Several eye-witness accounts of Strawbridge's physical appearance and personality traits have come down to us. One Mrs. Bennett, a daughter of John Evans who was a member of Strawbridge's first class, was eleven years old when Strawbridge died. She heard him preach and described him as "of medium size, dark complexion, black hair, had a very beautiful voice and was an excellent singer."

John Bowen writes, "From Mrs. Sarah Porter who is a daughter

14 John Bowen, The Rise and Progress of Methodism on Sam's and Pipe Creek, Maryland from the Year 1764. Baltimore, 1856, p. 10.
of John Evans . . . now in her 84th year, I have the following de-
scription of Robert Strawbridge: 'As of strong, muscular frame,
about medium size, lean of flesh, black hair, dark, thin visage, the
bones of his face projecting prominently, a pleasant voice, a melodi-
ous singer, and a great favorite among the children.'” 18

In his Reminiscences, written in 1875, Henry Boehm says:

I heard Strawbridge preach at my father's house in 1781, and am the only
man now living that has a personal recollection of him. Though I was then
quite small, his image is still before me. He was a stout, heavy man and
looked as if he was built for service. [Apparently his so-called poverty did
not prevent Strawbridge from putting on weight.] My father was much
pleased with him and his preaching. He was agreeable company, full of
interesting anecdotes. Many times I have been to the old log meetinghouse
he erected in Maryland, concerning which so much has been said and written
and around which so many interests cluster.19

Freeborn Garrettson left an interesting account of Strawbridge:

.... Mr. Strawbridge came to the house of a gentleman near where I lived
to stay all night; I had never heard him preach, but as I had a great desire
to be in company with a person who had caused so much talk in the country,
I went over and sat and heard him converse until nearly midnight, and when
I retired, it was with these thoughts, I have never spent a few hours so
agreeably in my life. He spent most of the time in explaining scripture and
in giving interesting anecdotes, and perhaps one of them would do to relate
here: “A congregation came together at a certain place and a gentleman who
was hearing thought that the preacher had directed his whole sermon to
him, and retired home after service in disgust. However, he concluded he
would hear him once more, and hide himself behind the people so that the
preacher should not see him: it was the old story; his character was de-
lineated. He retired dejected, but concluded, ‘Possibly the preacher saw me,
and I will try him once more’: he did so and hid himself behind a door. The
preacher happened to take his text from Isaiah, ‘And a man shall be as a
hiding place, etc.’ In the midst of the sermon the preacher cried out, ‘Sinner
come from your scouting hole!’ The poor fellow came forward, looked the
preacher in the face, and said, ‘You are a wizard, and the devil is in you; I
will hear you no more.’” 20

Apparently Strawbridge was a delightful man to know.

Where Strawbridge Preached

In the vicinity of Sam's Creek and Pipe Creek, Strawbridge
preached at the homes of Andrew Poulson, John Evans, Henry
Willis, and others. As stated above, the Poulson house was the meet-
ing place for the second Methodist class which Strawbridge organ-
ized. When the crowds became too large for the house, Strawbridge
preached under what became known as the Strawbridge Oak. This
giant tree, 34 feet in circumference at the base, was preserved until
1907. When it was cut down its wood produced many souvenir
gavels.

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18 John Bowen, op. cit., pp. 7 and 8.
19 The Patriarch of One Hundred Years: being Reminiscences, Historical
20 Nathan Bangs, The Life of the Rev.
21.
John Evans, one of the members of Strawbridge's first class, built his log cabin home in 1764. Evans assisted with the plowing on Strawbridge's farm, and through Strawbridge's ministry or that of his wife was converted. Thereafter his house became a regular preaching place. It is interesting to note in passing that the Strawbridge Pulpit in the possession of the Baltimore Annual Conference Historical Society came from the Evans house, and according to some accounts, Strawbridge himself built the sturdy platform on which the pulpit stands. The John Evans house is now owned and preserved by the Conference Historical Society as a historical shrine.

Strawbridge also preached at the home of Henry Willis in the picturesque Wakefield Valley. At one time the Willis farm contained 600 acres. It was in the Willis house that Asbury made the plain entry in his Journal, "Here Mr. Strawbridge formed the first society in Maryland—and America." 21

Since Strawbridge left no journal, it is not possible to reconstruct his wide travels in detail. References to his journeys and his preaching in the letters and journals of his contemporaries are necessarily sketchy. But even so they help us to understand and appreciate the indefatigable labors and the widespread influence of the man.

The first Methodist society in what was then Baltimore County, but which is now in the City of Baltimore, was begun by Strawbridge and Samuel Merryman. The latter, a churchman of great respectability, lived on his farm located four miles from Baltimore on Hookstown Road. Merryman visited Pipe Creek because of a report that a preacher there could preach without a manuscript and pray without a book. There he was converted, and he invited Strawbridge to come to his home and preach to his family and his neighbors. Strawbridge accepted the invitation, and Merryman’s home was a Methodist preaching place for many years.

Strawbridge organized the first Methodist society in what is now Roland Park, Baltimore, at the home of David Evans. To accommodate the group, a chapel, one of the first in that section, was erected.

At the invitation of Edward Dromgoole, Strawbridge introduced Methodism in Fredericktown near Frederick City about 1770. Dromgoole, born in Sligo, Ireland, in 1751, was reared a Roman Catholic. His public recantation of Catholicism after his conversion to Methodism alienated his family. On coming to America he settled in Fredericktown. Since he had a letter of introduction to Strawbridge, he visited him, heard him preach, and extended the invitation to come to Fredericktown. Strawbridge was the first Methodist to preach in that community.

Strawbridge preceded Asbury by several years as a preacher in

21 Francis Asbury, Journal, April 30, 1801.
Kent County, Maryland. About 1769 or 1770 Strawbridge delivered a sermon at the home of John Randle in Worton and thus was the first Methodist to preach on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. A chapel was erected there in 1774, the first in what are now the bounds of the Peninsula Annual Conference.

Assisted by his spiritual son, Richard Owen (or Owings), Strawbridge planted Methodism in Georgetown on the Potomac River and in several places in Fairfax County, Virginia.

A society founded by Strawbridge erected the Bush Forest Chapel some six miles from Aberdeen, Maryland. Asbury said it was the second house built for Methodists in the state. Seven or eight chapels erected by Strawbridge or his followers dotted this area before Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoor, John Wesley's first official missionaries to America, arrived in 1769.

In his Journal, Asbury records his pleasure on seeing “our new church begun on Back River Neck.” The editor's footnote says, “This was the Back River Meetinghouse about ten miles from Patapsco Neck and one mile east of Nathan Perigau's farm, near the present Eastern Avenue and North Point Road, Baltimore. The society was organized and the edifice begun by Robert Strawbridge.

The home of James J. Baker, father of James Baker, adjacent to the forks of Gunpowder Falls near Fallston, Harford County, Maryland, was one of Strawbridge's preaching places. Strawbridge organized a Methodist society there, and in 1773 a chapel known as the Forks Meetinghouse was erected on land donated by James J. Baker. Thomas Rankin preached in this meetinghouse in 1775.

Historians often cite the appeals which the Methodists in New York made to John Wesley in 1768 and 1769 to send over some Methodist preachers. It is enlightening to note that, at the same time, the Methodists in Maryland were also asking for Methodist preachers from England. Joseph Pilmoor in his unpublished Journal says that the people “who had lately been awakened under the ministry of Mr. Robert Strawbridge, a local preacher from Ireland, sent a pressing call to the Bristol Conference in 1768 entreatng us to send

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22 Asbury’s Journal, November 16, 1791.
24 James Baker was deputy surveyor of Harford County. As a young man of about 28 he was converted when he heard John King, one of the unofficial Methodist missionaries who came over from England on his own in 1769, preach at the corner of Front and French Streets in Baltimore. King became associated with Strawbridge in spreading Methodism. The sermon which Baker heard was the first to be delivered by a Methodist in Baltimore, and Baker was the first Methodist convert in the city. See Abel Stevens, History of the M. E. Church, Vol. I, p. 69.
them over some preachers to help them.” He adds that the Conference postponed consideration of the matter “until the next yearly conference.”

Strawbridge’s ministry was not confined to Maryland and Virginia. On Sunday, January 14, 1770, he preached at St. George’s Church, Philadelphia. Pilmoor noted the event in his Journal, “On this Lord’s Day, Mr. Robert Strawbridge, a local preacher from Maryland, gave us a plain useful sermon at seven in the morning.” Henry Boehm said that Strawbridge also preached in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. An extant record book shows that in 1774 he was paid traveling expenses by the Methodist society in Trenton, New Jersey.

Thus, as one reads the record of Strawbridge’s work, one is impressed that the man had but a single purpose, namely, to proclaim Christ. He was ready and eager to preach the gospel whenever and wherever men were willing to listen.

**Strawbridge’s Influence**

If a man’s influence for good is to be measured by the number and the quality of the leaders he raises up to carry on the work he initiates, then Robert Strawbridge was an influential man in early American Methodism. The roll of able men who felt the call and began to preach as a result of Strawbridge’s work is impressive—Freeborn Garrettson, Richard Owen, Sater Stephenson, Nathan Perigau, Daniel Ruff, Richard Webster, Joseph Presbury, John Hagerty, and others. In their own right several of them became notable leaders of Methodism.

*Freeborn Garrettson* was one of the strongest and most prominent of all the native-born early American Methodist preachers. It was Garrettson who at the request of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury went off “like an arrow” to call the preachers to the Christmas Conference in 1784 for the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Garrettson was ordained at that conference and volunteered as a missionary for Nova Scotia. Laboring in that province three years, he left some 600 members in the Methodist connection. If John Wesley’s instruction had been carried out by the General Conference at Baltimore in May, 1787, Garrettson would have been designated as general superintendents for Nova Scotia. Instead he was appointed a presiding elder, and he together with twelve young preachers extended the Methodist work up the Hudson River. During his career he traveled extensively through Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey. Garrettson’s first contact with Methodism came about through

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the ministry of Robert Strawbridge, though some credit must also
be given to Asbury and other preachers for his entry into the Meth­
odist itineracy.

It was Strawbridge who won Richard Owen, the first native-born
American to become a Methodist preacher. William Watters gave
this account of the life and labors of Owen:

On my way home I saw my old friend and fellow laborer, Richard Owen,
in Leesburg, dangerously ill, and it proved the last time of my seeing him,
for in a few days he resigned up his soul into the hands of his merciful God.
He was the first American Methodist preacher, though for many years he
acted only as a local preacher. He was awakened under the preaching of
Robert Strawbridge, a local preacher from Ireland. . . . He was a man of
respectable family, of good natural parts, and of considerable utterance.
Though encumbered with a family, he often left wife, and children, and a
comfortable living, and went into many distant parts, before we had any
traveling preachers among us, and without fee or reward, freely published
the gospel to others which he had happily found to be the power of God to
his own salvation. After we had regular circuit preachers amongst us, he as
a local preacher was ever ready to fill up a gap, and by his continuing to go
into neighborhoods where they had no preaching, he was often the means
of opening the way for enlarging old or forming new circuits in different
places. Several years before his dissolution, after his children were grown
up, and able to attend to his family concern, he gave himself up entirely to
the work of the ministry, and finished his course in Leesburg, Fairfax circuit,
in the midst of many kind friends, but some distance from his family. . . .
Plain in dress—plain in manners—industrious and frugal, he bore a good part
of the burthen and heat of the day, in the beginning of that work which
has since so gloriously spread through this happy continent. . . .

Sater Stephenson was living in Baltimore County when he was
converted under the preaching of Robert Strawbridge. He soon be-
came a local preacher and received the commendation of no less a
man than Francis Asbury. In his Journal under the date of March
30, 1773, Asbury, after stating that “Mr. Strawbridge preached a
good and useful sermon from Joel 2: 17” and that “Brother Owings
preached a very alarming sermon,” adds that “brother Stephenson
gave a moving exhortation.” The choice of words suggests that
Asbury found Stephenson’s preaching more persuasive and effective
than that of the other two men who were themselves powerful
preachers. Lednum refers to Stephenson as “one of the first local
preachers in Baltimore County.” Nathan Perigau was the spiritual
father of Philip Gatch. Matthew Simpson said of Gatch, “He was
the means, in the hands of Providence, in adding hundreds, probably
thousands to the church.” Richard Webster was commended by
Asbury on delivering a “moving exhortation.” One of the earliest
preachers in Harford County, Maryland, Webster faithfully served
Methodism for fifty years. Joseph Presbury served as leader of a
class at Deer Creek, Maryland, which had been formed by Straw-

28 William Watters, A Short Account
Drawn up by Himself, Alexandria, 1806.
29 Lednum, op. cit., p. 117.
30 Cyclopaedia of Methodism, edited by
Matthew Simpson, p. 391.
bridge, King, and Robert Williams. Presbury won the family of William Watters to the Methodist way; while he was praying at a meeting in the Watters' house, William Watters gave his heart to the Lord. Watters became the first native-born American to join the Methodist itineracy, and he may have been the first to preside over an American Methodist conference. The first quarterly conference whose minutes are extant was held in Presbury's home. Presbury served simultaneously as a trustee of three Methodist chapels. John Hagerty should be mentioned as a preacher who could conduct services in both English and German. Abel Stevens adds to this list Thomas E. Bond of Harford County, Maryland, one of whose sons, John Wesley Bond, was Asbury's traveling companion during the last two years of the bishop's life and who was with him when he died. Another son, Thomas E. Bond, became editor of the New York Christian Advocate and Journal. Such are a few of the Methodist preachers, not to mention scores of laymen, who were influenced for Christ and the Methodist movement by Robert Strawbridge.

Francis Asbury on first entering the Strawbridge country in Maryland in October, 1772, wrote in his Journal, "The Lord hath done great things for these people, notwithstanding the weakness of the instruments, and some little irregularities. Men, who neither feared God, nor regarded man—swearers, liars, cockfighters, card-players, horse-racers, drunkards, etc., are now so changed as to become new men; and they are filled with the praise of God. This is the Lord's work, and it is marvelous in our eyes. . . ."

The Sacramental Controversy

No article on Robert Strawbridge would be complete without touching on the sacramental controversy which agitated American Methodism during and immediately after the Revolutionary War. Perhaps Strawbridge more than any other man was responsible for that dispute which almost disrupted and divided the Methodist movement in America before it was well started.

It should be borne in mind that none of the official Methodist missionaries sent over by John Wesley and none of the native-born preachers prior to the Christmas Conference in 1784 were ordained clergymen. This meant that during that period no Methodist preacher in the land was qualified to administer the sacraments to the people in the societies.

Many of the early Methodists belonged to denominations which were already established in America—Anglican, Congregationalist,

Methodist History, October, 1965.
New Light Presbyterian, etc. Mary Thorne of Philadelphia, the first woman to be appointed a class leader in this country, was a Baptist. When these persons desired the sacraments they went to their own churches for them. Until after the Revolution, both John Wesley and Francis Asbury considered this way of securing the sacraments as adequate for the Methodists in England and America. With the passage of time, however, acute problems arose, especially in America both during and after the Revolution. Some persons, like Mary Thorne, because of their Methodist connections, were barred from the sacraments in their own churches. Others were at too great a distance from their parish churches conveniently to go to them for the sacraments. Some Methodists objected to accepting the sacraments at the hands of Anglican priests whom they considered worldly if not godless in their daily lives. A certain Bennet Allen, for example, became the priest at All Saints Parish, Frederick County, Maryland, in 1768. He was said to be a controversialist, a brawler, a duelist, and a sot. Possibly the contrast between his conduct and that of Robert Strawbridge accounted in some measure for the success of the latter's ministry. Another serious difficulty arose during the Revolutionary War when most of the Anglican clergymen returned to England leaving the parish churches without ministers.

Annie Leakin Sioussat says that in "The Bond Papers," to which she was given access through the kindness of Christiana Bond, she found "a document which reveals much of the reason for the growth of Methodism—a petition from a settlement in Caswell County, North Carolina, to the Right Reverend Fathers in God assembled in Conference in Baltimore, calling for the administration of the sacraments and the word of God, for which they must travel to other provinces, signed 'by the unanimous consent' of the locality." Unfortunately it is not clear in Sioussat's book what was the exact date of this document or to whom exactly it was addressed, although on the surface it appears to be addressed to the Anglicans. Sioussat does indicate that it is comparatively early, probably shortly after the Revolutionary War. The Bond Papers to which she refers should be tracked down and the whole matter thoroughly investigated. For the purposes of this present paper, her reference is only used to point up the truth that the Methodists were not alone in their need and desire for the sacraments which, because of the circumstances of the times, were being denied to many. Such an appeal suggests, too, that the Methodists were supplying what the Anglicans failed to give their people—preaching and the sacraments. Methodism met these needs of the people, and the result was phenomenal growth for the Methodist movement.

Recognition of the religious needs of the people, and prompt, direct action to meet them, characterized the ministry of Robert Strawbridge. He preached to the people, and in addition, though he had no episcopal ordination and no authority from an ecclesiastical organization, he also administered the sacraments to them.

When Joseph Pilmoor and Richard Boardman, the first missionaries sent over by John Wesley, observed Strawbridge administering the sacraments, they did not object. But Francis Asbury, arriving two years later, looked on Strawbridge’s practice as “irregular.” At a quarterly meeting which Asbury conducted in the home of Joseph Presbury, December 23, 1772, Strawbridge and a number of local preachers and exhorters were present. Quickly disposing of routine matters, Asbury put the question, “Will the people be contented without our administering the sacraments?” Afterward Asbury wrote in his Journal, “John King was neuter; brother Strawbridge pleaded much for the ordinances; and so did the people, who appeared to be much biased by him. I told them I would not agree to it at that time, and insisted on our abiding by our rules. But Mr. Boardman had given them their way at the quarterly meeting held here before, and I was obliged to connive at some things for the sake of peace.”

It may have been at this meeting that an incident recorded by William Guirey took place, although Guirey gives another date for it. Guirey says that John King, whom Asbury classed as “neuter,” suggested that the matter be put to a vote of the people. Asbury replied, “I came to teach the people and not to be taught by them.”

While this was the first public cleavage between Strawbridge and Asbury over the matter of the sacraments, Asbury had faced the issue a month before and had taken a stand against administration of the ordinances by unordained Methodist preachers. On November 22, 1772, he wrote in his Journal, “... met with a German minister, Mr. Benedict Swope, who he...ed me preach at both places. We had some conversation about the ordinances administered by Mr. Strawbridge. He advanced some reasons to urge the necessity of them, and said Mr. Wesley did not do well to hinder us from the administration of them. I told him they did not appear to me as essential to salvation; and that it did not appear to be my duty to administer the ordinances at that time.”

In June, 1773, Thomas Rankin and George Shadford arrived as the fifth and sixth of the missionaries appointed to America by John Wesley. Rankin was clothed with authority as Wesley’s “General

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85 William Guirey, History of the Episcopacy, no date, no place of publication.
Assistant,” and as such he immediately superseded Asbury as the leader of American Methodism. Rankin called a conference of the preachers at once; they met in Philadelphia in July with Rankin presiding. One rule adopted by the conference read, “Every preacher who acts in connection with Mr. Wesley and the brethren who labor in America, is strictly to avoid administering the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.” Asbury says that a qualifying clause was added to the rule—“Except Mr. Strawbridge, and he under the particular direction of the Assistant.” 37

Since Robert Strawbridge did not attend the conference of the preachers in Philadelphia, Asbury was given the unenviable assignment of explaining to him and the people, at the next quarterly meeting in the home of Joseph Presbury, the rule against administering the sacraments. Strawbridge was inflexible; he would not abide by the conference rule. There is no record that Strawbridge lost his temper or that he berated Rankin or Asbury; he simply went on administering the sacraments to the people as he had always done. Apparently he purposed to follow his own conscience or judgment; he would not be subject to any restrictions by Wesley’s assistant in regard to the administration of the ordinances.

Asbury was always displeased by “irregularity” among the preachers or the people. He insisted on discipline in the conferences and in the societies. He expected the preachers to accept the rules adopted by the conference and to follow the instructions of their superiors. He was never able to think well of a preacher who “got out of line.” At New York in June, 1774, Asbury received communications from George Shadford and Robert Lindsay in Maryland, and wrote in his Journal, “One of these letters informed me that Mr. Strawbridge was very officious in administering the ordinances. What strange infatuation attends that man! Why will he run before Providence?” 38

Robert Strawbridge’s name was dropped from the conference minutes in 1774, probably because he defied the rule mentioned above and kept on administering the sacraments. His name was printed in the minutes again in 1775, but that was the last time. Apparently this form of rejection or exclusion did not discourage or embitter Strawbridge. He continued his work as the permanent pastor of the Sam’s Creek and Bush Forest societies until his death in the summer of 1781.

Strawbridge was greatly beloved both by the preachers and by his people. All the itinerants of the time who mention his name refer to him in the highest terms. After he was gone only Francis Asbury was critical of him, and the criticism pertained to his unwillingness

to refrain from administering the sacraments as directed by the conference. Shortly after Strawbridge’s death, Asbury wrote in his *Journal*, “I visited the Bush Chapel. The people here once left us to follow another: [he means Strawbridge] time was when the labors of their leader were made a blessing to them; but pride is a busy sin. He is now no more: upon the whole I am inclined to think the Lord took him away in judgment, because he was in a way to do hurt to his cause; and that he saved him in mercy, because from his death-bed conversation he appears to have had hope in the end.”

Some observations are apropos. Since Strawbridge left no journal, sermons, or letters, we cannot be sure of his reasons for the position he adopted regarding the sacraments. We must rely on deduction and on the statements of men like Philip Gatch, William Watters, Richard Owen, and others who knew him and were influenced by him.

There is little doubt in my mind that men like Gatch and Watters would have argued that since God had called Robert Strawbridge and later themselves to preach he had also called them to perform all the duties of the ministry. In other words, they believed that the call qualified them to administer the sacraments as well as to preach the word. Since the sacraments are the dramatic portrayal of the truths the minister preaches, it is difficult for some to see how God would call a man to preach and then forbid him the authority or the right to administer the ordinances.

Asbury refers to Strawbridge as “officious.” But aside from this derogatory statement, there is no evidence that in administering the sacraments Strawbridge was seeking prestige, power, or special recognition. He seems to have been characterized by sincerity, self-control, and modesty. The fact that the people were ready to receive the ordinances at his hands suggests that they held him in high esteem. Also, the way they cared for his farm and helped his family leader of the entire American Methodist movement, and as such he continued until Wesley sent over Thomas Coke in 1784 to arrange for ordaining the preachers and for the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Since Strawbridge’s name did not appear in the conference minutes during the last five years of his life, apparently Asbury did not consider him as a preacher in the Methodist connection during that time. Hence the nature of his comments on Strawbridge and the people of Bush Chapel after Strawbridge’s death.

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39 Asbury’s *Journal*, Sept. 3, 1781, Vol. I, pp. 410-411. It should be remembered that by this time Asbury had fought and won the battle against the preachers in Virginia and Maryland who in 1779 set up a committee to ordain all who desired ordination, and then proceeded for a year to administer the sacraments to the people. In 1780, at Asbury’s insistence, they agreed to refrain from administering the ordinances while they appealed to John Wesley for advice and guidance. Also, they invited Asbury to travel among the circuits throughout the connection, which meant that he was then the accepted leader of the entire American Methodist movement, and as such he continued until Wesley sent over Thomas Coke in 1784 to arrange for ordaining the preachers and for the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Since Strawbridge’s name did not appear in the conference minutes during the last five years of his life, apparently Asbury did not consider him as a preacher in the Methodist connection during that time. Hence the nature of his comments on Strawbridge and the people of Bush Chapel after Strawbridge’s death.
while he was away preaching and administering the ordinances says something meaningful about what they thought of him. It would appear that while Asbury was concerned about the authority and discipline of the church, Strawbridge was moved to direct action by the needs of the people.

It should be said in passing that when John Wesley finally resolved the problem of how to provide the sacraments for the American Methodists, he took into account the points of view of both Strawbridge and Asbury. Like Strawbridge he saw that the people must have the sacraments. Like Asbury he wanted to arrange for the proper ordination of the preachers before permitting them to administer the sacraments. A discussion of how well Wesley succeeded in his undertaking is not within the scope of this article; but the solution he arrived at is a part of Methodist history.

In the next place, Strawbridge's forthright action in regard to the ordinances directed the thinking of the Methodist people and the preachers toward the true value and the importance of the sacraments. Apparently he implanted in the people a desire for these services. As Asbury said, when Strawbridge in the quarterly meeting pleaded much for the ordinances "so did the people." From Strawbridge they had learned to appreciate the sacraments.

Beyond this, there is a tradition that Strawbridge received ordination from the German Reformed pastor, Benedict Swope. If such was the case, that ordination gave him authority as valid as that which the Methodist preachers have had through the years to administer the sacraments, because they can trace their ordination back only to an Anglican pastor or churchman named John Wesley.

**Strawbridge, the Property Owner**

Strawbridge's contemporaries believed that he lived and died a poor man. But there is evidence that he was not destitute. "Rev. Robert Strawbridge died intestate, but his widow, Elizabeth Strawbridge, applied to the Orphans Court of Baltimore, Maryland in September, 1781 for letters of administration on her husband's estate. The court appointed her as administrator, with John Long and Thomas Dew as bondsmen. On June 19, 1782 she returned to the court an inventory of all Robert Strawbridge left behind." 40 The inventory listed numerous household articles, harness, saddles, horses, hogs, sheep, and fifteen pounds in cash. There were "sundry books of sundry kinds" worth 2 pounds 10 shillings. The whole

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40 This and other information relating to Strawbridge's estate was gathered by George Roberts. The manuscript may be found in the Library of the Historical Society of the Baltimore Conference. Roberts says that all facts pertaining to the estate are in Inventories, No. M 1777 to 1778, Liber W. B. 12, page 358, Records of the Orphans Court, Baltimore County, Maryland.
estate was valued at 107 pounds 10 shillings 6 pence. Since the purchasing power of a pound or a shilling in 1782 was greater than now, Strawbridge was not penniless.

Moreover, there is ground for believing that Strawbridge owned considerable land. “Mr. Strawbridge did not own any land until March 8, 1773 when according to the county records he purchased the fifty acres on which he resided for thirteen years from John England. The property was known as ‘Brothers Inheritance’ and ‘England’s Chance,’ nor did he ever sell it. Nearly six years after his decease his only heir, Robert Strawbridge, conveyed it to Richard Stevenson. The deed is dated January 23, 1784.”

At the time of his death, Strawbridge was living in a house on the “Hampton” estate of Captain Charles Ridgely. Mrs. Bibbins located this residence, which is no longer standing, near the present intersection of the Baltimore Beltway and Cromwell Bridge Road. According to Abel Stevens, Ridgely admired Strawbridge’s “character and sympathized with his poverty.” The farm was his, free of rent, for life.

Methodist historians say little about Captain Ridgely. They seem to suggest that he was a man of at least average piety who was moved to generosity by the personality or the preaching power of Strawbridge. However, Henry Ridgely Evans’ estimate of the Captain is different:

Captain Charles Ridgely (1733-1790), a son of Charles Ridgely II was in the House of Burgesses 1773-1789. He served with distinction in the Revolutionary War and was one of the framers of the State Constitution. In 1760 Captain Ridgely married Rebecca Dorsey, daughter of Caleb, of "Belmont." It was Captain Ridgely who built the magnificent mansion “Hampton,” Baltimore County, which has been called “the show place of Maryland.” Begun in 1783 it was seven years in construction. The architect and builder was John Howell. When the grand house warming took place, the Chatelaine of the Manor, Rebecca Ridgely, who was an ardent Methodist, held a prayer meeting in the parlors for the spiritual edification of her particular lady friends; while her husband, the good natured Captain, who loved his pipe and a game of cards, [and] followed the hounds like his English ancestors, held high carnival in a different part of the building. . . .

Another account throws further light on Captain Ridgely’s character. Always interested in politics, the Captain “made for many years, almost a pocket borough of his immediate section of Baltimore County. His most formidable opponent was Thomas Cockey Dye, a man of the people. . . .” Apparently Dye contested the Captain’s seat in the General Assembly, but “the Captain drove his enemy from the field completely routed, by giving a most abundant and generous ‘love feast’ to the powerful Methodist body in this district.


42 Henry Ridgely Evans, Founders of the Colonial Families of Ridgely, Dorsey and Greenberg of Maryland, p. 21.
Nothing had ever been seen like it. The country people flocked from far and near, and Captain Ridgely was thenceforth the most popular man in the county."

Was the rent-free accommodation given to Strawbridge the result of intercession on the preacher's behalf by the Captain's wife? Was the gift made because the Captain, realizing the tremendous popularity of Strawbridge among the Methodists, knew that such an act of generosity would redound to his own benefit politically? Was Ridgely moved to generosity because he like many others truly admired Strawbridge, the humble man, the persuasive preacher, the entertaining conversationalist? Who can say with certainty what motivated the Captain?

Robert Strawbridge died in 1781. Abel Stevens gives an account of his death and burial:

It was while resting here under the shadow of Hampton, his benefactor's mansion, that in one of his visiting rounds to his spiritual children, he was taken sick at the house of Joseph Wheeler, and died in great peace; probably in the summer of 1781. Owen . . . preached his funeral sermon in the open air to a great throng, "under a tree at the northwest corner of the house." Among the concourse were a number of his old Christian neighbors, worshippers in the Log Chapel, to whom he had been a pastor in the wilderness; they bore him to the tomb, singing as they marched one of those rapturous lyrics with which Charles Wesley taught the primitive Methodists to triumph over the grave. He sleeps in the orchard of the friend at whose house he died—one of his own converts—under a tree, from the foot of which can be seen the great city which claims him as its Methodist apostle, and which, ever since his day, has been prominent among American communities for its Methodist strength and zeal.

In 1866, George C. M. Roberts, founder of the American Methodist Historical Society, was instrumental in having the ashes of Robert Strawbridge and his wife, who had been laid to rest beside him, removed and reinterred near the grave of Francis Asbury in Mount Olivet Cemetery, Baltimore.

Thus ends the story of one of the best and most useful products of Irish Methodism. As American Methodism celebrates the Two Hundredth Anniversary of its Beginning, it should remember that in the early days and for long afterward, in the region where Robert Strawbridge labored, more converts were won for the societies, and more young men were inspired to become itinerant preachers, than in any other section of the country. Surely, in the early days of the Methodist movement in America, few if any other men proved more useful to the cause of Christ than this plain, sturdy Irish immigrant, Robert Strawbridge, who cared little or nothing for recognition, place, or power, but who cared greatly for Methodism and the kingdom of God.
