LEARNER BLACKMAN (1781-1815)

By Robert Bevis Steelman

Learner Blackman's forebears were living in Monmouth County, New Jersey as early as 1690. Andrew Blackman, Learner's grandfather, moved from Monmouth County and settled at Great Egg Harbor in Gloucester, now Atlantic County, in the early 1700's. He was a Presbyterian and his name is mentioned in the journals of John Brainerd and Philip Vickers Fithian, early Presbyterian divines. In 1764 Andrew Blackman deeded an acre of land for a Presbyterian meeting house. When Methodist circuit riders first appeared in the community, they were allowed to preach in the Presbyterian edifice, and later it came into the possession of the Methodists. The Zion Methodist Church of Bargaintown, New Jersey, now stands on the site originally given for the Presbyterian meeting house.

Andrew Blackman's son David (1747-1821) inherited his father's land along Powell's Creek in English Creek. Learner Blackman, the fourth in a family of nine children, was born in 1781 to David and Mary (Clark) Blackman, in a house that stood just west of Nells Run, and less than 100 feet from the old road leading from Mays Landing to Cedar Bridge at English Creek. Today the old homestead is gone, but in the spring of the year one can make out its location. Apparently Learner's parents were members of the Presbyterian congregation which worshiped at the Blackman Meeting House some four miles from their home.

Methodism was brought into the Blackman community in 1778 by Benjamin Abbott, a fiery Methodist preacher. Abbott's preaching tour took him into Cumberland, Cape May, Atlantic, and Old Monmouth counties. David Blackman soon opened his home to the preaching of the Methodists. It seems that the Methodist doctrine of free grace appealed to the settlers of Great Egg Harbor. It is reported that the service at Champions on the west side of the river near Mays Landing "began at eleven o'clock in the morning and

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1 The name is also spelled Launer and Larner.
3 Bennett (ibid.) lists some of the preaching stations of John Brainerd in 1761, p. 11.
4 Ibid., p. 2.
lasted until about midnight; before it was over, seven found peace with God, and joined the society." Apparently Abbott's procedure was to keep the meeting going until he won some converts!

Other Methodist preachers, including Francis Asbury in 1783, came into the Blackman community. David Blackman was appointed a class leader, and his home was a preaching place when the Salem Circuit was organized in 1789. Another class in the same locality met in the English home. The two classes combined to form a society, and the members built a meeting house on the English farm; Richard Sneath preached there in 1799. That meeting house was Learner Blackman's home church. Also, it was the predecessor of the present Asbury Methodist Church.

Two members of Learner Blackman's family contributed to Methodism beyond the English Creek community. Nehemiah Blackman, an older brother, was said to have been converted under the preaching of Francis Asbury on Asbury's visit to the community in 1783. Nehemiah later married Sarah Smith and moved to Wrangleboro, now known as Port Republic. He became a class leader, a trustee, and a leading member of the Methodist church which he helped to organize at Wrangleboro.

Learner's older sister Sarah married John Collins in 1793. Collins' father was the first medical doctor in Atlantic County. As a young man prior to his marriage, Collins traveled widely; he spent a year in Charleston, South Carolina. Sarah was a deeply religious woman "whose amiable disposition and pious life filled his home with domestic bliss." Collins was converted under the preachers who rode the Bethel Circuit in Smithville. Urged by friends to begin preaching himself, Collins at first hesitated, doubting that he had proper gifts. In time, however, he agreed to preach once, saying that if the effort converted anyone he would interpret it as evidence of a call to preach. An appointment was arranged for him either at the English Meeting House or at the home of David Blackman. While at his father-in-law's home, Collins heard Learner Blackman read a scripture passage including the words, "Many are called but few are chosen." Collins asked for the Bible and preached his first sermon from that text. There was a conversion, as indicated below, and Collins became a Methodist preacher. Collins and his wife later moved to Ohio where he served as a circuit rider and a

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9 Firth, op. cit., p. 51.
10 The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958) Vol. I, p. 446. The footnote indicates that Asbury preached in the Blackman Meeting House. He may also have preached or stayed at David Blackman's.
11 A copy of the Steward's Book of the Salem Circuit is in the possession of Mr. John W. Zelley of Burlington, New Jersey.
13 Bennett, op. cit., p. 5.
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presiding elder. To Collins belongs the honor of preaching the first Methodist sermon in Cincinnati.¹⁴

Little is known about Learner Blackman’s education in his youth. One writer says that it was the best “afforded by the Country where he was reared,” ¹⁵ but it is doubtful that he received more than the rudiments of formal schooling.

Conversion and Call to Preach

As Learner Blackman listened to the first sermon ever preached by his brother-in-law John Collins, he was awakened to his need of salvation and was soon soundly converted. Learner was then 16 years of age. In time he felt called to preach and asked permission of his father to leave home and enter the work. At first his father refused, saying that Learner as the oldest son then at home was needed there. However, after praying about the matter, the older man said, “My son, I release you in the name of the Lord that you may go and be an Ambassador of Christ. My duty is now made plain to me, and I will do it. Everything necessary to your outfit as a traveling preacher, I will provide for you.” ¹⁶ Thus on May 27, 1800, at 19 years of age, Learner Blackman left home, went to the Philadelphia Conference meeting in Smyrna, Delaware, was admitted on trial, and began his work as an itinerant Methodist preacher.

Ministry on the Eastern Shore

Thomas Ware, Learner Blackman’s presiding elder, said the conference in 1800 was a time of unprecedented revival. At the close of the session no fewer than 100 persons were received into the church on probation.¹⁷ Blackman’s first appointment was the Kent Circuit in Maryland. This work was organized in 1774 by Abraham Whitworth, and it probably took in most of the Eastern Shore. Just how large it was in 1800 is not known, but it certainly included all of Kent County, Maryland, with such preaching places as the Kent Meeting House, the first church on the Peninsula, Rock Hall, Still Pond, and Peniel or Sassafras Neck.

There is an interesting story about Blackman’s reception at his first preaching appointment when he went to his charge. Mistakenly the people had gotten word in advance that the new preacher was to be a black man, not a man named Blackman, and they did not want a Negro preacher. Relieved to learn that he was a white man, when

¹⁴ A biography of John Collins was written by Justice John McLellan of the U.S. Supreme Court. Sketch of the Life of the Rev. John Collins (Cincinnati: Swarmstedt & Poe, 1854).
¹⁷ Thomas Ware, Sketches of the Life & Travels of Rev. Thomas Ware (New York: T. Mason & G. Lane, 1839), p. 233.
he arrived they were disturbed to note that he was a mere youth. Refusing to let one so young enter the pulpit, they asked an old local preacher in the congregation to deliver a sermon and then call on Blackman to exhort. When Blackman was finally allowed to take the floor, he made a favorable impression and the people decided to accept him as the preacher in charge.18

At the beginning of his second year in the conference, Blackman was appointed to the Dover Circuit in Delaware. Dover was the second circuit to be organized on the Eastern Shore, having been formed in 1779 to include territory taken from the Kent Circuit. In 1801 the circuit was probably limited to Dover County. Dover County was and still is historic Methodist territory. There Blackman preached in White’s Chapel which was organized by Judge Thomas White, Asbury’s friend and protector during the Revolution. There too was Barratt’s Chapel, called “the cradle of Methodism.” Camden, Dover, Milford, and Smyrna were preaching points on the circuit, and by 1801 all of them had church buildings.

Since Blackman had never been away from home more than a few days at a time before joining the conference, adjustment to the life of a Methodist circuit rider was not easy for him. His journal mentions homesickness, misgivings, and trials. “I was tempted to doubt my call to preach.” “My painful exercise for about six weeks or two months after I reached my station ... is indescribable.” “I was awfully afraid that I would injure the best cause in the world.” “I well know that the people among whom I was appointed had serious doubt as to whether I would ever be a preacher.” As time passed, however, his inner doubts and troubles vanished and he found joy in the work.

After the first quarter the Lord was pleased to deliver me from many powerful temptations. He gave me liberty to speak boldly in his name. Saw some fruit of my labors in different parts of the circuit, and before the end of the year felt established in the idea that I was called to the great work of the ministry. I then went on my way rejoicing—happy by night and by day, happy while preaching, and happy on the road.19

Blackman’s one-year ministry on the Dover Circuit was remarkably successful; he received about 500 new members into the societies. He preached six to eleven times a week. Prayer meetings often lasted until midnight. He loved the people and enjoyed the work. Some years later he wrote, “I am now well convinced after traveling through most of the United States, that the people on the Eastern Shore of Maryland are among the most hospitable and kind I have ever been among.”20

18 Sprague, op. cit., p. 323.
20 Ibid.
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On to the West

At the conference in 1802 Blackman was ordained deacon. Also, he responded to the call to go as a missionary to the Western Conference which at that time included Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi. After a brief visit with his family in New Jersey, he headed west in company with Lowther Taylor, another young recruit. Following is Blackman's account of the journey.

We only reached Baltimore the first week, where I was sick for several days. There we met Wilson Lee, who had been several years in the West. He found out we were scarce of money, and having been in the West, knew how to sympathize, and gave each of us ten dollars out of his own pocket. The second week we rode as far as Harrisonburg, Virginia. Spent the Sabbath, and both of us preached in the course of the day. The third week, on Saturday night, we reached the top of the Alleghany Mountains, and spent two or three days at brother McDonald's. Rode on to New River Circuit in the bounds of the Holston District.²¹

The Holston country is the mountainous area of southwestern Virginia and northeastern Tennessee. The Edward Cox House, one of the national shrines of American Methodism, near what is now Bluff City, Tennessee; Abingdon, Virginia; and King's Salt Works were all in the region when Blackman arrived. Blackman served two years in the Holston country, first on the Russell and then on the New River and Holston circuits. Later he returned as presiding elder of the Holston District. Very little has come to light about his first two years in Holston. But apparently he soon adjusted himself to the rigors of the climate and the terrain, and he did good work, winning many converts.

At the conference in 1804 at Benjamin Coleman's in Harrison County, Kentucky, Blackman was ordained elder and appointed to the Lexington Circuit in the heart of Kentucky. It was a good year; revival fires burned everywhere, and about 200 joined the societies on the circuit. Writing to his bishop on March 20, 1804, Blackman said:

I have seen some very wonderful displays of divine power in this circuit since Conference . . . I now had a gracious time preaching, the fire was kindled, sinners wept, saints rejoiced . . . The work is still spreading in that part of the circuit. The old professors in general are stirred up to seek for perfect love. I have frequently tried to preach on it latterly. Numbers have obtained it, and are now flaming in religion, while others are pressing after it.²²

Blackman was agreeably surprised at the type of people he found in Kentucky. Contrary to his expectation, they were not ignorant and uncouth; they were intelligent; they took religion

²¹ Ibid., 865.
²² Ezekiel Cooper and John Wilson, Extracts of Letters, "Containing some account of the Work of God since the year 1800, written by the Preachers and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, to their Bishops (J. C. Totten, Printer, 1805).
seriously and they felt themselves capable of debating theology. He said of them in his journal:

Enterprising men from every part of the continent and from Europe are here. And many have their own views much enlarged by emigrating to the West. A general spirit of inquiry and thirsting after knowledge is more manifest among all grades of society in Kentucky than any other state through which I have traveled . . . A preacher needs all the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove to do much good in Kentucky.\textsuperscript{23}

Blackman’s encounter with controversy and what he considered erudition in Kentucky moved him to study, with the result that he became an apologist for Methodism as well as a revivalist. The year in Kentucky prepared Blackman for greater usefulness as a Methodist preacher.

\textit{Down the Natchez Trace}

At the session of the Western Conference at Mount Gerizim, Harrison County, Kentucky, in October, 1805, Blackman and Nathan Barnes volunteered to go to the Natchez Circuit in Mississippi Territory.\textsuperscript{24} Tobias Gibson had formed that circuit in 1799 as a missionary project; at the time it was some 500 miles from the nearest Methodist work. Gibson labored alone on the circuit until his death in 1804. Blackman and Barnes were the successors of Gibson on the circuit.

From the seat of the conference at Mount Gerizim, Kentucky, to Natchez was some 800 miles. The two circuit riders met the eccentric Lorenzo Dow, world traveler and erstwhile Methodist preacher, at Franklin, Tennessee, and on October 23, 1804, the three men started down the old Natchez Trace through hostile Indian territory to the new appointment.\textsuperscript{25} They arrived in Natchez exactly one month after the adjournment of the conference.\textsuperscript{26} In his journal Lorenzo Dow recorded the following account of the trip down the Trace:

\begin{quote}
Tues. 23rd [October, 1804] We started from Franklin and rode 32 miles in the woods . . .
24th. Traveled about 35 miles and saw one Company of Indians on the way.
25th. The Post and a Traveler passed us by early . . . Continued to Tennessee River.
36th. Crossed the Tennessee River. One dollar each. Small garrison and a few half-bred Indians. [Colbert’s Ferry].
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{23} Go lane y, op. cit., 867.
\textsuperscript{24} John G. Jones, \textit{A Complete History of Methodism in Mississippi} (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1897), 1, 1799-1817, pp. 170-183. Mississippi were admitted to the union in 1817.
\textsuperscript{25} The Natchez Trace followed old Indian trails through the wilderness for the 500 miles between Nashville, Tennessee, and Natchez, Mississippi. Some travelers, but no Methodist preachers among them, lost their lives on the Trace. The Trace became a post road and was an important overland route between the two outposts of civilization which it connected. During his brief career as a Methodist itinerant Blackman traversed the Trace at least nine times.
\textsuperscript{26} I. B. Coin, \textit{Tents and Tabernacles, Methodist Camp Meetings in the Mississippi Conference}, 1804-1856 (Mississippi Conference Historical Society, 1956), 1.
27th. Gained suburbs of Bigtown of the Chickasaws.
Sunday, 28th. Two horses missing, but returned by negro and Indian to get reward. We were hungry.

At length we came to another village where some whites lived, and one Mr. Gunn (who was touched under the word, when I was here before) received us kindly. Stayed two days—held meetings—killed some turkeys—saw bears, wolves and deer. The canopy of heaven was our covenant by night, except the blankets we were rolled in. We kept fires to prevent the wild beasts from approaching too near.

Nov. 4th. Arrived at Natchez. We were glad to see white people, and get out of the woods once more; staid at the first house all night.²⁷

Wasting little time, Blackman and Barnes started a camp meeting shortly after arriving in Natchez. It was the first camp meeting ever held in Mississippi or the Old Southwest. Barnes, Blackman, and Dow were the preachers. Blackman wrote:

We appointed a camp meeting at Washington in Adams County. It commenced last Friday [December 14] and ended today [December 17]. On the Sabbath I suppose it was attended by near two thousand people. I have reason to believe that five were converted and twenty or thirty powerfully awakened at this camp meeting.²⁸

Blackman and Barnes enlarged the original four-week Natchez Circuit, and by the end of the year it required eight or nine weeks for them to travel it. Many converts were added to the societies. In view of the growth of the Natchez work, the conference of 1805 divided it into four circuits—Wilkinson, Natchez, and Claiborne on the east side of the Mississippi River, and Opelousas on the west. Opelousas was the first Methodist circuit to be organized west of the Mississippi. Learner Blackman was made presiding elder, the first one ever appointed in Mississippi.

That Blackman and the preachers associated with him encountered hardship and discouragement is evident from an entry in his journal. "Experience taught me that more grace was necessary to reconcile me to the hardships that were unavoidable in the [Mississippi] Territory, and I prayed and prayed mightily, to God for a deeper work in my heart, and blessed be the Lord, I had reason to believe that he did deepen his work of grace in my heart."²⁹ On a tour of the Opelousas Circuit Blackman found that the preaching stations were 50 to 100 miles apart with only wilderness in between. Moreover, he learned that many of the people had never before seen a Protestant minister. On a trip into Louisiana in 1806, Blackman complained of the laziness of the people and the "multiplied millions" of flies, gnats, and mosquitoes. Since he had been brought up in the mosquito country of South Jersey, his comment indicates that the insects were really bad in Louisiana. But in spite of the difficulties Blackman rejoiced that some were "brought to the knowledge of

²⁷ Lorenzo Dow, Travels, Providential Experience, etc. (Dublin: John Jones, 1806), II, 58, 59.
²⁸ Cain, op. cit., I.
the truth as it is in Jesus, and were ready to praise God that he ever sent the Methodist preachers among them.”

Blackman remained in Mississippi until January 18, 1808, when he left for home and the General Conference in Baltimore. He estimated that in his six years in the Western Conference he had traveled 30,000 miles, and said, “I suppose I must have preached more than 1,200 times.”

**Presiding Elder, Army Chaplain, Marriage, Untimely Death**

Blackman’s first appointment as a presiding elder was on the Mississippi District in 1806, as indicated above. Though only 25 years old when given the responsibility of a district, his work seems to have been very acceptable. On going east in 1808 he felt that he had completed his tour of duty in the Western Conference, and he expected thereafter to serve the church near his home in New Jersey. But though he did not realize it at the time, he was destined to return to the West. At the 1808 General Conference Blackman’s friend William McKendree was elected bishop, and when the conference was over Blackman accompanied the bishop and Frederick Stier to his new appointment as presiding elder of the Holston District, the district in which he had served as a circuit rider beginning in 1802. He remained on the Holston District two years, traveling through seven circuits and holding camp meetings. Attendance at the camp meetings was good; he speaks of as many as 2,000 at one of them; many were converted and brought into the Methodist fold. He wrote:

> The Holston Country will never be very populous, it is so broken with hills and awful mountains; but the Methodists have gained great influence in East Tennessee and West Virginia. I think I may say with safety a large majority of the religious people are Methodists, and thousands in the Holston Country are partial to the doctrines of our Church who are not willing to come under the restrictions of our Discipline.

In 1810 Blackman was appointed to the Cumberland District in Kentucky where he served two years. Not much is known about his work there, except that A. H. Redford gives him credit for riding more than 5,000 miles and preaching 341 sermons to some 95,071 persons during his first year on the district. Bishop Charles B. Galloway’s article on Blackman says that what the man wrote in his journal during these years makes up “as thrilling an account of knightly service for his Lord, and evidence as saintly consecration, as can be found in all annals of the ages.”

More is known about Blackman’s work on the Nashville District
to which he was appointed in 1812.\textsuperscript{35} Blackman started his work on this district after a six-months’ absence from the West during which he attended the General Conference in New York, visited his family in New Jersey, and engaged in a preaching tour through Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. It was a 3,000-mile journey on horseback, and most of what he entered in his journal about it pertained to the opportunities afforded him to preach.

Once Blackman began his work on the Nashville District, almost every page of his journal speaks of great meetings with the “power of the Lord” descending and people seeking religion and being converted. Referring to a camp meeting at Ebenezer on the Lebanon Circuit, Blackman said the meeting began on Friday night and concluded on Tuesday and “our calculation on Tuesday morning was that 52 was [sic] converted through the preaching of the meeting.”\textsuperscript{36}

During his three years on the Nashville District Blackman served for a time as an army chaplain under General Andrew Jackson. On December 28, 1812, he wrote in his journal:

Contrary to my expectation a messenger came to see if I would go down the Mississippi with the Army commanded by Major General [Jackson] as Chaplain. I hesitated to know what was my duty in such a case—I paused. I ultimately concluded I could be of some use to the Army especially that part of them that are Methodists. Secondly I have for a long time desired to visit my friends my extensive acquaintance I formed in the Mississippi and to visit New Orleans.

The invitation to serve as a chaplain with the Tennessee Volunteers, as Jackson’s unit was called, was no doubt due to the fact that Blackman was well and favorably known to the General. He had visited in Jackson’s home near Nashville many times. After one visit Blackman wrote, “Lodged with General Jackson, he used us well. The Lord grant that he may embrace religion. His wife seems to be seeking religion.”\textsuperscript{37}

Jackson and his soldiers traveled by boat from Nashville to Natchez. As chaplain Blackman went from boat to boat preaching and praying with the soldiers. He discouraged swearing among the officers and men. On reaching Natchez, the army set up camp at nearby Washington and remained there some weeks. Blackman admired and respected General Jackson, but he did not hesitate to disagree with him. While discussing with Blackman his ministry to the sick, Jackson suggested that he not tell a seriously ill soldier that he was about to die. In regard to that matter Blackman confided to his journal, “I let him know on that point that I should be independent and that I should do as I thought best . . . I find the

\textsuperscript{35} Blackman’s Journal for 1812 is in the archives of the Mississippi Annual Conference, Jackson, Mississippi.
\textsuperscript{36} Journal, 8.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., September 29, 1812.
General cannot bear much opposition. He is a good General but a very incorrect divine." 38

While performing his duties as chaplain to the soldiers during their encampment at Washington, Blackman also found time to visit and preach among his civilian friends in Mississippi. When Jackson received orders to take his army back home, Blackman accompanied the troops on their march up the Natchez Trace to Nashville.39

On June 22, 1813, while on the Nashville District, Blackman was married to Elizabeth Odom Eliott, a widow of Sumner County, Tennessee. If there was an extended period of courtship, Blackman makes no mention of it in his journal. Indeed, until the day before the wedding there is no hint in the written record that matrimony for him was imminent. The entry for June 21 reads, "Started over to Sumner to Mr. Adams. Met with Mrs. E. E. ________. We had some talk about our business, which was shortly to be consummated." The next day the journal entry reads:

At night I was married to Mrs. Elizabeth Eliott by Parson McClure. Mrs. E., now Mrs. B., the only person I ever addressed on the subject of matrimony. I believe she is among the best of women. She is a gift of the Lord. I now have entered the 33rd year of my natural life, the 17 of my religious life, the 14 of my itinerant life, and the 1 of my married life.

Unlike some other Methodist preachers of the time, marriage did not mean location for Blackman, nor did it weaken his zeal for the Methodist itineracy. Three days after his marriage he wrote, "We started, that is, myself and my dearest companion for quarterly meeting on the Lebanon Circuit." 40

In 1815 Blackman was again appointed to the Cumberland District in Kentucky. But his work had hardly begun before he met an untimely death in June of that year. With his wife he visited his brother-in-law and sister, John and Sarah Collins, in Ohio. En route back to Kentucky, Blackman preached in Cincinnati on Sunday, June 5.41 A day or two later he and his wife started across the Ohio River on a flat-bottomed ferry which was operated with sails and paddles. A short distance from the shore as the sails were hoisted, the horses became frightened and plunged overboard, taking Blackman with them. Though he was said to be a good swimmer, he was immediately drowned.42 The body was recovered and returned to Cincinnati where Oliver M. Spencer, a local preacher, officiated at the service in Old Stone Church, Wesley Chapel. Burial was in the rear of the church.43 Apparently no permanent marker or monument was placed over the grave and today its exact location is not known.

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38 Ibid., January 27, 1813.
39 It was nearly two years later that Jackson led another army south and won the Battle of New Orleans, January 8, 1815.
40 Galloway, op. cit., 875, 876.
41 Redford, op. cit., 446.
42 Sprague, op. cit., 326.
Blackman’s widow later married Joseph T. Elliston of Nashville. Their home was always open to Methodist preachers, and one room in the house known as the bishop’s room was especially set aside for Bishop McKendree.\(^{44}\)

**Physical Appearance**

So far as is known, there is no portrait of Learner Blackman. But there are accounts of his physical appearance. Richard Price, historian of the Holston Conference, says that Blackman was a man of medium height and size and that he was unusually attractive.\(^{45}\) Laban Clark wrote:

> He was of middle height, not corpulent but well-formed, with a pretty full face, and an uncommon expressive eye. When he spoke, not only his lips but his whole face was put in requisition for the utterance of his thoughts ... His manners were easy and graceful, and betokened familiarity with good society. In short, his whole appearance was that of an accomplished Christian gentleman.\(^{46}\)

Clark also said that Blackman was a man who “was much more than ordinarily attired,” that he possessed a strong mind and character and manifested a genial spirit and pleasing manners.

**Studious Preacher**

It is claimed that Blackman was a diligent student, that he had “a great thirst for knowledge.”\(^{47}\) Over a period of a few months while doing the work of a traveling preacher he managed to read forty to fifty books. It is apparent that he loved books and that though his formal education was limited, he on his own became an educated man. Apparently he soon learned the vital connection between hard study and good preaching. He wrote, “A man can no more preach without ideas than he can walk without feet.” Receiving some instruction from one Dr. Walkers in Latin, he wrote that he was studying it in his leisure moments because “I felt an uncommon desire to understand that language.”\(^{48}\) As a Methodist itinerant his study centered mainly on the Bible, Wesley’s *Notes and Sermons*, and Fletcher’s *Checks*. The latter work was of particular help to Methodist circuit riders when they were engaged in controversy with preachers of other denominations over baptism and other points in theology.

Only one of Blackman’s sermons, a funeral message, is known to have been preserved.\(^{49}\) Among his favorite texts were John 3:16

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\(^{45}\) Price, op. cit., 133.

\(^{46}\) Price, op. cit., 129.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 134.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 134.

and Matthew 16:26, "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" Since he was in frequent controversy with the Baptists, he preached on baptism again and again. Other sermon subjects were faith, the atonement, experimental and practical religion, peace, and holiness. He declared that holiness is "a precious Doctrine to preach to professors." 50 He preached for, expected, and won converts. There are indications that he was effective in the pulpit. It is claimed that "whenever he preached, he expected immediate results; and he was but seldom disappointed." 51 He "bent every energy and availed himself of every opportunity to save men from hell and lead them to Christ and heaven." 52

Esteemed Among Men

Blackman seems to have been widely and highly esteemed. Rich and poor, great and small, preachers and laymen thought well of him. As indicated above, he knew General Andrew Jackson well, was frequently in his home near Nashville, and was asked by Jackson to serve as chaplain to his army. While William Henry Harrison, who later was president of the United States, was governor of Indiana, Blackman became acquainted with him and referred to him as "the best unconverted man I ever met." 53 It is claimed that Blackman persuaded officers and soldiers to quit swearing, a sure sign that they liked and respected him.

Blackman seemed to be as much at home among the poor people he found in Louisiana as with the men who were destined to become national leaders. Jacob Young, who followed Blackman on the Mississippi District in 1808, wrote of him:

Blackman was highly esteemed in that Country, and deservedly so, for he had done more for the religious welfare of the people than all that had gone before him. Though he had been preceded by good men, they had done comparatively little. I say not this by way of reflection, for I believe that they had done as much as any one could under the circumstances. They had to grapple with many difficulties, which were removed out of the way before Blackman came to the Country. He was a man of extraordinary natural and moral courage ... He feared no danger, dreaded not the tongue of slander, while he was doing and suffering for the glory of God. Whatever he thought ought to be done, he thought could be done ... He was a very genteel man, of fine person, of refined manners, and mind well stored with general knowledge ... He was perfectly at home among the middle class, he never neglected the poor, he loved both the slave and the slave-holder, and in return was honored and loved by them both ... I found it hard work to follow him ... He was truly a wise man, turning many to righteousness.54

Apparently Blackman had the uncommon capacity to "walk with kings nor lose the common touch."

Bishop Asbury, who was known for his capacity to judge the
character and ability of men, while on a visit to the home of Blackman’s father in 1809, said, “Learner Blackman has been raised up from small appearances—possibly, to very considerable consequences.” 55 Henry Boehm, Asbury’s traveling companion, added, “There can be no doubt of this if he had not been drowned in the Ohio River.” Boehm referred to Blackman as “that distinctive minister of the Western Conference.” 56

Blackman was popular with the preachers in the itinerancy. Laban Clark said, “Mr. Blackman, during his whole ministry, possessed in high degree, the confidence and affection of his brethren.” 57 In the conference “he spoke with freedom and pertinence and was always sure to have a respectful hearing.” Clark said the man had a strong mind and character, a genial spirit, and pleasing manners.

Blackman attended and participated in the General Conference of 1808, the one which elected his friend William McKendree bishop and which adopted the constitution making the General Conference henceforth a delegated body. Blackman’s brethren in the Western Conference elected him to lead their delegation to the 1812 General Conference, a tribute to the esteem in which they held him. 58 Apparently his untimely death at 33 cut short a career of outstanding leadership in American Methodism.

**Later Appraisals of the Man**

In the century and a half since Learner Blackman’s death Methodist historians have spoken well of him. Abel Stevens said, “He ranks as one of the great men of early Methodism.” 59 Reviewing the man’s work in Mississippi, John G. Jones wrote, “Mr. Blackman furnishes one of the most perfect examples found among the early Western Methodist itinerants. The more we study its unbroken symmetry the more we admire and love its beauty.” 60 In 1861 William Sprague lamented, “By this fatal casualty [Blackman’s death], the Church was deprived of one of its most gifted and every way promising young men.” 61 In his *Cyclopaedia of Methodism* Matthew Simpson called Blackman “one of the most eminent pioneers of American Methodism.” 62 Writing nearly a hundred years after Blackman’s death, Bishop Charles B. Galloway of Mississippi said in his ornate style:

Sincere and widespread was the sorrow when the sad news was published that this truly apostolic chieftan of the Church had so early and tragically ceased from his labors. Among the mightiest of the mighty who wrought in

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57 *Sprague, op. cit.*, 327.
58 *Boehm, op. cit.*, 364.
59 *Stevens, History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 4 volumes (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1867), IV, 135.
60 *Jones, op. cit.*, 183.
61 *Sprague, op. cit.*, 327.
the great West during the early years of this new expiring century [19th], there must ever be given conspicuous and grateful space to the name of Learner Blackman.

In 1961 Cullen T. Carter listed Blackman as one of the founders of the Tennessee Conference and said of him, “Judging by all available records, and in the light of all the factors, he was one of the most effective and efficient itinerants in the Wilderness.” Speaking of the contributions of the Southern New Jersey Conference, F. Elwood Perkins called Learner Blackman a “great pioneer” who belongs in the “Line of Splendor.”

In October, 1965, the Southern New Jersey Conference Historical Society took the lead in placing a memorial plaque in Asbury Methodist Church, English Creek, Blackman’s home church. The inscription reads:

REV. LEARNER BLACKMAN
(1781-1815)

Pioneer Methodist Circuit Rider and Presiding Elder. Born, raised, converted in English Creek. Became a preacher in 1800. Served on Circuits and Districts in Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi. Chaplain War of 1812. Drowned in Ohio River. Bishop Francis Asbury said of him, “He has been raised up from small appearances—possibly to very considerable consequences.”

The saga of the Methodist circuit rider is a thrilling one. Learner Blackman was the circuit rider at his best.

From his humble home in English Creek, New Jersey, to the eastern shore of Delaware and Maryland, the rugged mountains of the Holston country, the Cumberland region of middle Tennessee and Kentucky, down the wilderness Natchez Trace, to the outposts along the lower Mississippi, Blackman took the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Preaching free grace for sinners and holiness for Christians, he won converts and pointed Christians to holiness of life.

Learner Blackman was a great pioneer. He ranks with the ablest in early American Methodism. He served well his church, his country, and above all his Lord.

What do we owe to those,
That brave and patient band,
Who blazed the wilderness for Christ
And followed His command?
By lonesome trails that led
O'er hill and rolling river,
Their spirits still go marching on
Forever and forever.

Galloway, op. cit., 876.
To cabin homes they went,
To give the living bread,
They left their own and journeyed forth
As they were Spirit led,
And counted not the cost,
Constrained by love to be
The heralds of the living God
The spokesmen of the free.

In perils oft by land,
In hunger and in cold,
It mattered not, as messengers
The story must be told.
The pioneers of peace,
The builders of the years,
Upon foundations they have laid
The finished work appears.

I see them ride at last
Before the great white throne,
A gallant company of Christ,
His faithful and His own,
With saddlebags laid down,
And every hardship done,
And followed by a mighty host,
The souls they had won.66