LEWIS MYERS’ REMINISCENCES OF FRANCIS ASBURY

by Robert J. Bull

Francis Asbury’s last entry in his Journal was on Thursday, December 7, 1815, while he was at the home of William Baker in Granby, South Carolina. As a result, details of the bishop’s life from that date until the time of his death three and one-half months later, on March 31, 1816 in Spottsylvania, Virginia are generally lacking. Francis Hollingsworth’s brief account of Asbury’s death, plus a limited number of letters and other sources supply only a few details of these last weeks.

Below is a letter by Lewis Myers written to Samuel K. Jennings, President of Asbury College and the person employed by the Baltimore Conference to write a Life of Bishop Asbury, which sheds a little new light on the bishop’s life including an event which occurred in his last days. The letter is dated July 20, 1820. Internal evidence indicates that it is the second of two letters written two years apart, each bearing Asbury biographical information and each addressed to Jennings. The first letter, for reasons not known, was never received. Jennings began work with the Baltimore Conference committee on or about March 20, 1817, and in spite of the fact that on June 15, 1819 a committee reported Jennings’ manuscript as not publishable, Jennings assured the Baltimore Conference on February 1, 1820 that he would “continue to compile and finish the life of Bishop Asbury.” The Journal of the 1820 General Conference, which met in May of that year at Baltimore, Maryland, contains a resolution that the General Conference “assist Dr. Jennings in furnishing such further facts and information as may be obtained, respecting Bishop Asbury.” Two months after this conference the letter written by Myers, given below, was sent, probably in response to a second request by Jennings. Four years later the

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relationship between the "compiler" of the life of Bishop Asbury and the General Conference had been greatly altered. The 1824 General Conference, which convened on May 1 in Baltimore, "moved that Dr. Samuel K. Jennings be respectfully requested to deliver the materials in his possession together with the manuscripts of Bishop Asbury's life, as far as he has written it, into the hand of Reverend William Beauchamp." It may be assumed then that the requests for biographical materials sent to Lewis Myers and his two letters in response were all written between March, 1817 and July 20, 1820. During this period Lewis Myers served as preacher and presiding elder in the South Carolina Conference and from 1818 through 1820 resided in Charleston, the city from which the letter given below was sent.

A notation penned in a second hand on page one of the manuscript letter of Lewis Myers reads, "Lewis Myer's First Letter, July 28, 1820." This notation probably indicates the date the letter was received by Jennings and is to be construed as referring to the first letter which Jennings received, not the first letter (indicated as lost in the letter below) written by Lewis Myers. A stamped postmark on the letter reads "July 22," no year being given.

Lewis Myers was born at Indian Fields, South Carolina, May 7, 1775. Early in his life he heard the preaching of Methodist circuit riders including Henry Willis in 1786. At twenty years of age he became a private teacher in the family of General Jacob Rumph near Orangeburg, South Carolina. He was admitted on trial in the South Carolina Conference in 1799 and served on circuits and districts with that body of preachers until 1824. After retirement and a period in which he taught at a school which he established in Goshen, Georgia, he died November 16, 1851.

Bishop Asbury wrote to Lewis Myers and regularly mentions him in his Journal. The two were good friends and on several occasions rode together when the bishop visited South Carolina.

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5 Ibid., p. 348.
8 General Jacob Rumph lived in Orangeburg County approximately five miles north of Orangeburg, South Carolina. He was an officer in the American Revolutionary War and had two sons (Jacob and Christian) who became Methodist preachers. Francis Asbury was early welcomed into the Rumph home. See FAJL, Vol. I, p. 564 (South Carolina, March 17, 1778).
The letter of Lewis Myers is one of three newly discovered reminiscences of Bishop Asbury found together in the Collins Collection of Matthew Simpson Papers. This valuable collection, brought together by Clarence True Wilson, contained also the manuscript of John Wesley Bond’s Anecdotes and George Roberts’ Remembrances of Bishop Asbury. All three of these reminiscences have now been placed in the Drew University Library.

The text of the letter, with certain necessary corrections and emendations noted, is given below.

Charleston, [South Carolina] July 20, 1820

[Dr. Samuel K. Jennings]
Dear Doctor,

I now sit down to gather a few fragments of history relative to Brother Asbury. This I did two years ago while my memory was in better plight—but you did not get the letter.

I have frequently travelled with him through my District in his annual visits—frequently have we dined on a log or at the root of a tree, when he never failed to ask God’s blessing on our morsels when I have always found him as cheerful as at the table of a friend with every necessary accommodation.

The poor blacks were objects of his peculiar attentions—he appear’d to feel the weight of our Lords words in all their force when applied to them—namely—“Unto the poor, the Gospel is preached.” He frequently advised us by no means to neglect them in our circuits, stations, & districts. When in Charleston in his annual visits, he never failed to attend to the state of the classes among the coloured people: & gave such counsel & left such directions as were calculated to further the work of God among them—all which numbers have requited, by retiring from the bosom of the Church & setting up for themselves! But many remain with us, & are faithful, zealous, useful & happy in God.

He was strictly attentive to the economy of time, & rose frequently at 4 hardly ever laid in bed beyond 5 in the morning when he was

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The first letter has not been preserved.

The word “this” has been crossed out.

This word is uncertain. It may perhaps be “form.”


The word “not” has been crossed out.

The word “neglected” has been crossed out.
well. Though not adept in the financing system—he would frequently solicit aid from those preachers who could spare a little to aid those who were needy—and used to say, he always succeeded best in collecting from among the preachers. In the latter part of his life he instituted what he called a Mite Subscription, which he carried with him and had presented among his friends. The needy among the local preachers also drew his attention and sympathy—and in 1807 he recommended to the South Carolina Conference the erecting a fund to be termed, “A Fund of Special Relief” embracing the most needy cases of travelling & local preachers, their widows & orphans. This plan was adopted & a few enjoy its benefits. The fund is gradually growing.

About the end of 1815 sensible that his end was hastening, he appeared to have a great concern on his mind as to what would be the state of the Church after his decease. When at the house of Bro. Eckles near the Cypress So[uth] Car[olin]a he received a letter giving an account of Dr. Coke’s death. He had known the Doctor’s great concern, & his extraordinary exertions to support the missions abroad [and] that he had spent his own fortune, which was considerable, in carrying on the work of God that frequently had been in arrears. But that since his death, the British Conference had caught his fire & their liberal contributions were made in all the circuits & stations for this purpose & that, in London Circuit alone a 1000 pounds had been collected & subscribed in the course of one year for this purpose. At this he lifted his hands & eyes toward heaven, & said, “It is enough—let me go—God will take care of his Church—I am easy.”

\[17\] By contrast Francis Asbury said of Lewis Myers, “Lewis Myers is an economist.” See FAIL, Vol. II, p. 520 (South Carolina, October 29, 1806).


\[19\] The word “have” is crossed out.

\[20\] Uncertain word crossed out.

\[21\] Having taken refuge from a storm at William Baker’s at Granby, South Carolina on Thursday, December 7, 1815 (the last entry in the Journal) Asbury traveled on to the home of the widow of General Rumph near Orangeburg, (see footnotes 8 and 27) and then on to the home of Squire Eccles at Beach Hill below Givhan’s Ferry some thirty miles from Charleston. Bishop James O. Andrew in his account of the last days of Asbury in The Southern Christian Advocate (Charleston, South Carolina) Thursday, July 29, 1858 (Volume XXII, No. 9) says

“He [Asbury] made an effort to visit us (South Carolina Conference) next winter (1815) in Charleston, but was unable to reach the city. He reached the house of brother Eccles on Cypress Swamp, some thirty miles from the city where he remained till the close of Conference, when he wended his way to Virginia to die.”

The “letter giving an account of Dr. Coke’s death” received at the Eccles home has not been preserved.
As he entered Bro. Eckle's house, he said—"I have come perhaps to die with you" Tho[ugh] so sensible of the nearness of death his mind continued to fly round the continent & actually had a plan of 5 or 6000 miles a head, reaching down to 1817. His unfinished address to the Gen[era]l Conference of 1816 ought to be in your possession to furnish[22] his closing views of our church which if you can get no other way, let me know & I will send you a copy.23 I think the original must be among the Gen[era]l Conference papers, likely, Bro. Tho[ma]s Mason also has a copy.24 May the Lord direct your mind, heart and pen thro[ugh] the whole of this interesting work.

Yours in Christian Bonds,
Lewis Myers

P.S. It seems to me, if you or the Committee were to write to Bro. Henry Boehm25 asking him certain questions, relative to his knowledge of the Bishop, you would get some useful materials, as he was with him for years—

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P.S.26 It is just stated to me by one of our Preachers in good standing—that when Bishop A[sbury] was last thro[ugh] So[uth] Car[olina] in 1815 at the house of the widow of the late Gen[era]l Rumph,27 tho[ugh] he could hardly speak & unable to stand, he sat in a chair, preached with unusual animation, & declared the terrors of the Law in more terrific strains, than he had ever heard him. When by themselves the old gentleman remarked, that he regretted

22 A hole in the manuscript makes this word conjectural.
24 Thomas Mason was elected Assistant Book Agent by the General Conference of 1816 and again from 1832 to 1836. He became Book Agent from 1836 to 1844.
25 Henry Boehm was born June 8, 1775 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He united with the Methodist Church in 1798 and was received on trial in the Philadelphia Conference in 1801. At Baltimore he was appointed to be the traveling companion of Francis Asbury in 1808, and rode with the Bishop for five years. He died December 28, 1875.
26 The second postscript is on page one of the manuscript letter and due to the constricted space in which it is written it is very difficult to read. Another hand has written on page one of the manuscript "Lewis Myers First Letter, July 28, 1820."
27 Asbury's last entry in his Journal (FAIL, Vol. III, p. 797--South Carolina, December 7, 1815) indicates that a storm caused him to stop at William Baker's in Granby, South Carolina. At that time he was probably headed for the "house of the widow of the late General Rumph" a short distance south of Granby, a place where he had stayed before (see footnote 8) and the next place where he did in fact stop after his journal record closes. The evidence for this is to be found in an account given by Bishop James Andrew in The Southern Christian Advocate (Charleston, South Carolina) Thursday, July 28, 1858 (Volume XXII, No. 9).
he had not through his life thundered out the Law more against sin, & that he saw & felt more & more the majesty of declaring, the whole counsel of God in plain and pointed terms. Connected with this, he related an anecdote of 2 preachers in England on one circuit, one possessing smooth & engaging eloquence, the other, plain, blunt, pointed & zealous, rough in his manners. Some of the more tasty spoke to the former to have the latter removed. He said he would see about it. There was at that time a great work in the circuit. He inquired of the new converts how they became awakened & converted. Almost the uniform answer was, "By the plain, blunt Brother's ministry." The other then returned for answer—if any ought to be moved, it ought to be himself. I relate this as the old man's last views of preaching etc. etc.

L. Myers

Dr. Samuel K. Jennings
Baltimore, Maryland

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25 The two words "the one" have been blotted out.
26 The word "but" has been crossed out and is followed by one or two in-distinct words.
29 The word "ministry" has been crossed out.