COKESBURY COLLEGE EXCAVATION

By Dewey M. Beegle

The 7th of December is a fateful day for recent American history, but it was tragic also for early American Methodism. On that day in 1795 Cokesbury College burned to the ground.

In 1895, John L. Goucher, President, and other members of the Methodist Historical Society of the Baltimore Conference conducted a centennial pilgrimage to the site. Celebrants rode the Baltimore and Ohio Railroads to Sewell Station and then they took carriages and wagons to Abingdon, Maryland, where the ruins lay under the cemetery of the Cokesbury Memorial Chapel. Four foot-square granite markers inscribed "Cokesbury 1785-95" were set out to indicate the corners of the college building.

The American University Courier of December, 1895, notes that the Vice-Chancellor, Samuel L. Beiler, had "the privilege of planting, in the name of the American University, one of the four corner stones that mark the site of Cokesbury College." An additional comment indicates that Dr. Goucher provided the granite markers. Detailed records of the Centennial were part of the Methodist Historical Society collection housed over the Methodist Book Depository in Baltimore, but these were consumed in the great fire of February 7, 1904. The Cokesbury bell and a few other objects were spared, fortunately, because Dr. Goucher, founder and president of the Baltimore Woman's College (now Goucher College), had borrowed them for exhibit at the College.

At present the Cokesbury Memorial Chapel, constructed in 1896 on the foundations of the 1784 chapel, is one of three charges on the East Hartford Circuit. The pastor, R. Dennis Schulze, has taken great interest in the history of the College and, at the suggestion of his wife Suzanne, he decided to cast a bronze model of the three-story building and place it on a pedestal at the site so that visitors could get a better idea of the size and beauty of Cokesbury College. In consultation with Edwin Schell, executive secretary, and other members of the Methodist Historical Society of the Baltimore Conference, the dedication of the model was set for May 25, 1968.

There were no known records of any excavation of the site, and in order to check the accuracy of the corner markers as well as to find any objects which might remain, Kenneth Jones, minister at Faith Methodist Church, Rockville, Maryland, had been suggesting for some time that Cokesbury be excavated. Dennis Schulze picked up the hint and asked President John L. Knight whether it would be possible for Wesley Theological Seminary to conduct the dig. Dr. Knight consulted the author of this article, since he had some field experience in archaeology, and it was agreed that Cokesbury College had such historic interest that an excavation of the site would be of prime importance.

On March 2, 1968, the author and his wife accompanied Dr. and Mrs. Knight on a preliminary trip to the Cokesbury site. Turning off of the John F. Kennedy Memorial Highway at the Edgewood
Arsenal exit, we went east one mile to Route 7, the Old Post Road, and then north two miles to Abingdon. (Fig. 1). It was the first visit for each of us and we felt that it was a pilgrimage. The four corner markers were still in place, and since the line between the two northern markers was clear of graves, it was decided to begin excavation there.

Work began on March 16, and it continued on successive Saturdays as well as during the Easter vacation, April 8-13. The surveyor for the dig was Richard Tustin of Baltimore, who took great personal interest in the project. The volunteer excavation team consisted of Dennis Schulze, members of the author's classes in Biblical Archaeology, and some of their families. It was an excellent opportunity for theory to come alive with practice. Mrs. Beegle and the student wives assisted wherever possible, especially in preparing food for the hungry diggers. Among the highlights of the excavation were the times of fun and fellowship at meals served in the Education Building of the Cokesbury Memorial Chapel.

A nine by fifteen foot area (called a “square” for convenience) was lined out midway between the two northern markers with the expectation of uncovering the main north wall and of sifting the debris inside the wall for objects which survived the fire. First, section “a,” a yard-wide trench, was dug on the east side of the square. Beneath the turf and top soil appeared two layers of earthen fill with fragments of broken red brick and many oyster shells. Lower still was found a thin layer of debris with hand-wrought iron nails and a spike, ashes, pieces of charcoal, glass, burnt oyster shell, and some fragments (sherds) of eighteenth century pottery. Thus it was clear that the debris layer resulted from the destruction of the 1795 fire.

But there was no trace of the wall or any indication that it had been “robbed out” after the fire. Therefore, section “b,” another yard-wide trench, was dug to the west. Just under the turf appeared some brick rubble and then a small brick wall two rows wide. Asbury could hardly have preached from it, as one tradition claims, and neither could it have supported three stories and an attic. Further excavation showed that the remnant of the wall was only about nine feet long and that from its deepest point (eight courses at the center) it sloped up to two or three courses at the ends. (Fig. 2). It was certain, moreover, that although it was made of old red brick (with some pebbles and stones mixed in with the clay), it had to date after the 1795 fire because it was built on earthen fill which covered the thin layer of destruction debris. The purpose of the wall was not apparent, but two facts were obvious: the northern face of the wall was in

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Fig. 1. A reproduction of the surveyor's plat for the Cokesbury College excavation. The inset in the upper left corner shows the Chesapeake Bay area and the sign on Rt. 7, the old Post Road, telling about Cokesbury College. In the upper right corner the site of the ruins is indicated in relation to Rt. 7, the Edgewood Asrenal exit on Rt. 24, and the John F. Kennedy Memorial Highway (Interstate 95). The dotted lines in the plat indicate the excavation trenches and the assumed position of the walls. The approximate location of the walls and the position of the relocated markers are indicated by the solid, heavy lines. Note that the face of the north wall was in line with the south wall of the Chapel.
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line with the northern markers and the center of the wall was midpoint between them. In short, this wall had been taken to be the college wall and the corner markers set out accordingly. While the deceptive little wall was not much, it was the only early structure uncovered at that point, and so in order to keep souvenir hunters from walking off with the bricks, the wall was dismantled and stored with the expectation that some of the bricks would be used in the pedestal for the bronze model. The Washington Post for March 28, 1968, carried a little notice about the excavation. The heading read, "Cokesbury: Where Are You?" The excavation team felt that the editor was a prophet because what started out as a simple excavation turned into an archaeological search.

The American University Courier of September, 1893, refers to a notice in the Christian Advocate (presumably of New York) and comments, "The Trustees of the American University have been presented with 'a marble slab from the ruins at Cousin's Run, Ind., where Asbury made several attempts to found a university.'" Apparently the reference is to Carsin's Run, Md., a town a few miles north of Abingdon, but someone on the editorial staff of the Advocate misread the source of his information because he did not know Methodist history and geography. Furthermore, the slab was probably granite, not marble, since other known foundation stones are of the gray-black type of granite quarried in the Port Deposit area of Maryland.

The June, 1895, issue of The American University Courier carried the following item: "Some time ago, Rev. Charles W. Baldwin, M.A., Secretary of the Board of Trustees, visited the memorable (Cokesbury) ruins, and through the courtesy of Mr. C. W. Baker, of Aberdeen, Md., secured one of the foundation stones, weighing about 300 pounds, for the Asbury Memorial Hall." Drawings of early plans for American University locate Asbury Hall along Massachusetts Avenue, near the present site of Wesley Theological Seminary, but the plans never matured. The stone rested in the College of History (later named Hurst Hall) from about 1909-13 as part of a museum housed there. No record of the disposition of the stone has been found, but a similar stone appears as a sundial base in a class picture of 1931. A limited examination of the stone (in storage due to recent construction) indicates that it has many of the characteristics of the stone in question, even a charred section on one side.

In any case, it was clear that one of the Cokesbury foundation stones had been presented to American University in 1893 or 1894. From the tone of the Courier article it seemed that the stone had been removed from the ruins shortly before its presentation. It was this assumption which resulted in giving the benefit of doubt to the granite corner markers. As it turned out, however, the markers were wrong: either the persons responsible for removing the stone did not inform Dr. Goucher and the Historical Society, or, more probably, the granite footing stones had been removed earlier and the exact location of the wall lost in the meantime. Undoubtedly the fact that Cokesbury was moved to Baltimore in 1796 led the local
inhabitants to feel that they were free to remove the usable brick and granite, and probably the practice continued for years.

The meaningful clue for the lost wall was the layer of destruction debris, and so it was decided to continue a trench further south. Section “a” was selected in order to avoid graves and as many tree roots as possible. In the first two extensions the destruction layer gradually thickened until a large pile of brick appeared. Since this was rubble on the outside of the building, the main wall had to be very close. Fortunately, there was space between some graves to make a third extension.

Just after lunch on Monday, April 8, some granite stones were found under the rubble! A large tree root, which seemed to guard the stones, was removed and then the wall was cleaned and photographed. (Fig. 3.) The clean-cut face of the granite slab on the north part of the wall was fifteen and one-half inches thick and twenty-four and one-half inches across. Other stones were mortared to it to form a foundation wall thirty-one and one-half inches thick. Thin granite slabs set in mortar were used to shim the lower stones so as to make a level base for the two-foot-thick brick wall.

Lowell B. Hazzard, Old Testament colleague of the author, had spurred on the difficult trenching operation with his tongue-in-cheek comments that he doubted that there ever was a Cokesbury College. Dr. and Mrs. Hazzard visited the excavation on April 9, and it was a pleasure to show them the granite footing stones set in mortar on the virgin soil.

In order to check the extent of the foundation, trenches were dug on both sides of the stones along the line of the wall. None of the footing stones remained on the west side and only about three feet more on the east side. (Fig. 4.) Had any of the other trenches of the original square been extended it would have missed the wall! Archaeology, like other areas of research, is sometimes a combination of luck and skill.

Excavation in a trench near the northwest corner marker had also uncovered a layer of debris under two layers of fill, but no wall. An extension, dug in line with the wall found in the central square, revealed more of the destruction layer, but still no wall. Since graves did not permit trenching to locate the northwest corner, it was decided to move to the northeast section.

An early article about Cokesbury noted that the Chapel was only thirty feet from the College. Accordingly, a three-foot trench was dug starting at the base of a large tombstone thirty feet from the Chapel, and running nine feet along the line of the foundation wall found in the first square. (Fig. 5.) After working through layers of earthen fill interwoven with roots from an old locust tree, a huge pile of broken red brick appeared. Due to the danger of undercutting the pile of brick and the tomb stone, only the western six feet of the trench were continued on down. Beneath another fill under the rubble of brick appeared patches of mortar lying on the same sandy, orange and tan virgin soil found in the first square. In fact, the level of the top of the mortar was only one-half inch
higher than the base of the granite stone in trench "a." In other words, the granite footing stones had been removed, earth filled in, and then bricks on top of the next section of stones thrown back over the fill.

It had been hoped to find the northeast corner and thus fix the location of the east wall, but this was impossible because the patches of mortar were seven feet below the present surface and any further excavation east would have endangered those in the trench. The thick pile of broken brick made it certain, however, that the corner was not much further east than two or three feet. There were a few places among the graves where trenching might uncover more of the foundation wall, but time was running short and the chances of success were not great.

The two basic objectives of the excavation had been to uncover some objects from the debris and to locate the main walls. The former had been accomplished and the latter was possible approximately with the information at hand. The reported dimensions of the building were one hundred eight by forty feet, and since the excavation had fixed the exact line of the north wall and the approximate northeast corner, it was easy to determine the approximate location of the four corners. (See Fig. 1.) Inasmuch the the granite markers were off sixteen and a half feet to the north and about thirty feet to the west, they were relocated.

The culmination of the excavation came on May 25, 1968, with the dedication of the Cokesbury College Monument. Objects found in the debris were on display. (Fig. 6.) Part of the excavation trench was open so that visitors could see the various layers of fill and debris and view the foundation stones in place. Just north of the main wall was the monument of the College (Fig. 7) prepared by Dennis Schulze and his father R. Burt Schulze.

Another feature of the dedication ceremony was the historic Cokesbury bell. This valuable antique, like many Methodist ministers, has had quite an itinerary. It was salvaged from the 1795 fire and housed in various places until 1896 when it was given to the Methodist Historical Society. Since it was on exhibition at the Baltimore Woman's College, it was spared the Baltimore fire of 1904. Goucher College continued to exhibit the bell until March 8, 1959, when it was presented to the Wesley Theological Seminary. President Knight brought the bell to the dedication service and displayed it on a smaller pedestal north of the monument. On the face of the pedestal, set between two Cokesbury bricks, was a plaque reading, “The Cokesbury Bell which once called students to their classes now rests at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D. C. On special occasions it is brought to its original home.”

After the unveiling of the bronze medal of the College, Gerald O. McCulloh gave the dedication address, which is included in this publication. It was quite evident that Cokesbury was the beginning of a dream. The challenge of this and the following generations of educational leaders is to highlight the relevance of this dream and bring the goal closer to its realization.