

**SETTLING THE “PRINTING BUSINESS”: JOHN DICKINS
AND THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL BOOK CONCERN
FROM 1789 TO 1798**

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We have now settled our Printing business, I trust, on an advantageous footing both for the people individually and for the connection, at large; as it is fixed on a secure basis, and on a very large scale. The people will thereby be amply supplied with Books of pure divinity for their reading, which is of next importance to preaching.¹

In 1789, members of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church met in New York and “settled . . . [the] printing business.” The small cadre of Methodist itinerants officially titled their publishing organization the Methodist Episcopal Book Concern. The establishment of the Book Concern, the Conference hoped, would enable them to provide “books of pure divinity” for the rapidly increasing ranks of American Methodists.

The Conference’s decision to create a publishing agency was fueled by a conviction that book production and dissemination was an integral part of the Methodists’ larger ministerial effort. The impetus and development of this conviction is, however, not found entirely within the pages of American Methodism. Rather, the story of American Methodist publishing begins in the narrative of John Wesley. Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, authored, edited, published and sponsored the publication of at least 532 individual titles by his death in 1791.² As Wesley devoted an energetic effort to writing, editing, and publishing, he quietly established an appreciation for printed materials among the members of the early Methodist movement. As the American Methodists determined to publish titles in the United States, they adopted, yet adapted, the plan of their “Spiritual Father,” John Wesley.

The publishing work of John Wesley has received significant academic attention in recent years through the work of Albert Outler, Richard Heitzenrater, Frank Baker, and others. American Methodist publishing, however, remains under-researched.³ As a result, historians have been ill-

¹ Thomas Coke, *The Journals of Thomas Coke*, ed. John A. Vickers (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2005), 127.

² Frank Baker, *Union Catalogue of the Publications of John and Charles Wesley* (Stone Mountain, GA: G. Zimmermann, 1991).

³ Two scholars, James Penn Pilkington and Leland D. Case, have, however, provided research on Methodist print communication in the early United States rooted in primary source material. See James Penn Pilkington, *The Methodist Publishing House: A History from its Beginnings to 1870*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1961); and Leland D. Case, “Origins of Methodist Publishing in America,” in *Methodist History* 4 (April, 1966): 29-41.

equipped to answer qualitatively fundamental questions regarding the content and character of early American Methodist publishing. How regularly did Americans utilize Wesley's authorial and editorial work? Did American Methodists print as many titles as Wesley? Did American Methodists adopt Wesley's administrative practices surrounding book production and distribution? These questions, and others like them, hint at the more fundamental question: How did the Americans, unique in context and character, enact Wesley's publishing plan so far from the shores of England?

This article will detail the administration of John Dickins, the first Book Steward of the Methodist Episcopal Book Concern. Specifically, this article will consider the selection, production, and dissemination of print materials published by the early American Methodists from 1789 to 1798. In these years, it is argued, the Methodist Episcopal Book Concern acquired a unique shape. This shape, though similar to that of Wesley's publishing organization, was particularly suited to the American context.

John Dickins: Methodist Episcopal Book Steward 1789-1798

At the 1789 Conference, John Dickins was commissioned to assume official leadership of the publishing effort. London-born, Dickins sailed to the colonies in 1774.⁴ Following his conversion, likely in 1774,⁵ Dickins quickly became an important itinerant in Virginia and North Carolina and caught the attention of Asbury. A "man of great piety, [and] great skill in learning," yet enmeshed in the ecclesiastical controversy of the southern preachers, Asbury penned, "I hope John Dickins will ever after this be a friend to me and Methodism."⁶ In 1783, Dickins and his wife Betsy moved to New York,⁷ where he helped publish several titles for dissemination among the Methodists before 1789,⁸ when he became Book Steward and thus became more focused on the "book business."⁹ His official appointment, however,

⁴ Donald M. Lewis, ed., *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 311. See also Ezekiel Cooper, *A Funeral Discourse on the Death of that Eminent Man, the Late Rev. John Dickins* (Philadelphia: Printed by H. Maxwell, for Asbury Dickins, Bookseller No. 41 Market Street, 1799), 11.

⁵ Cooper, *Funeral Discourse*, 11. See also *The Methodist* magazine, for the year 1798; being a continuation of *The Arminian* magazine, first published by the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. consisting chiefly of extracts and original treatises on general redemption, vol. 2 (London: printed for G. Whitefield, City-Road, and sold at the Methodist Preaching-House in town and country, 1798), 512-513.

⁶ Francis Asbury, *The Journal of the Rev. Francis Asbury, Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, from August 7, 1771, to December 7, 1815*, vol. 1 (New York: Lane and Scott, 1852), 377.

⁷ The Dickins' moved at the request of Francis Asbury. See Asbury, *Journal*, vol. 1, 458. See also Nathan Bangs, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (T. Mason and G. Lane, 1839), 67-71.

⁸ Lucas Endicott, *The Methodist Episcopal Book Concern 1789-1820: Adopting and Adapting John Wesley's Publishing Practice* (MCS Thesis, Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 2008), 53-55.

⁹ Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, annually held in America from 1773 to 1794 (Philadelphia: Printed by Henry Tuckniss, sold by John Dickins, 1795), 130.

was to serve as the preacher of St. George's Church.¹⁰ As the first American book steward, Dickins was commissioned to oversee the daily operations of the publishing effort. He was entrusted to order the "temporal business" of collecting materials, editing the works, securing printers, and officiating distribution for the Book Concern. With this charge, the Dickins family moved to Philadelphia, the American center of publishing at the time.

Appointment and Administration

From 1789 to 1798, Dickins and the Conference established a pattern of cooperative leadership that would define the organization of the Book Concern for the next several decades. Dickins, as the elected book steward, was entrusted to operate the Book Concern as outlined by the Conference. Conference instruction regarding the Book Concern was predominantly delivered at successive General Conferences. Three Conferences proved pivotal during Dickins' time as book steward: the second Bishops' Council in 1790, and the General Conferences of 1792 and 1796.

In 1790, the second Bishops' Council outlined a series of details for the Concern that involved titles to print, prices, and distribution strategies. Most importantly, however, the Council appointed a committee to oversee the operations of the Concern. Together with Dickins, three men elected by the Conference¹¹ were charged to determine what the Book Concern would publish over the next two years. Once a work was approved, Dickins was empowered to have the work printed "according to the state of finances." The Book Concern's printing work was outsourced to local printers throughout Dickins' administration and indeed until 1820.

In 1792 the Conference voted to provide Dickins more money and personnel support,¹² as well as more power and responsibility, charging him:

1. To regulate the publications according to the state of the finances.
2. To complain to the district conferences, if any preachers shall neglect to make due payments for books.
3. To publish from time to time such books or treatises, as he and the other members of the Book-Committee shall unanimously judge proper.¹³

With two of the three powers granted Dickins at this time involving money, finances emerged as a central matter for the young Concern.

The itinerants who met for the General Conference of 1796 spent more time outlining the operation of the Book Concern. In addition to discussing

¹⁰ All of the Book Stewards in the period under review were itinerant ministers within the Methodist Episcopal Church. Initially, stewards were appointed both to the Concern and a local church. In 1808, the Conference designated the position of steward as a full-time appointment (Bangs, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, vol. 4, 428).

¹¹ All in Philadelphia, "They were Richard Whatcoat . . . ; Henry Willis, one of the most popular of the early preachers, who located in Philadelphia when his health failed; and Thomas Haskins, another former itinerant who had left the ministry, as many did when they were married, to become a grocer in Philadelphia" (Pilkington, *Methodist Publishing House*, 94).

¹² See Minutes from 1773 to 1794, 57.

¹³ Minutes from 1773 to 1794, 58.

how to consolidate and recover debts incurred in the developing system, the Conference spent most of its time more directly systematizing organizational matters. The Conference constrained Dickins' power slightly, outlining: "The general book-steward shall print no books or tracts, of any kind, without the consent of a bishop and two-thirds of the Philadelphia conference."¹⁴ The Conference called for a renewal of the *Methodist Magazine* and closed its discussion of the Book Concern with the strongest collective statement involving the importance of print in American Methodism to this time. The Conference expanded Thomas Coke's 1789 statement, saying:

The propagation of religious knowledge by the means of press, is next in importance to the preaching of the gospel. To supply the people, therefore, with the most pious and useful books, in order that they may fill up their leisure hours in the most profitable ways, is an object worthy the deepest attention of their pastors. On this account we are determined to move in the most cautious manner in respect to our publications.¹⁵

The itinerants meeting in 1796 reiterated that publishing was the responsibility of the Conference collectively, saying, "We have great esteem for our general book-steward, and are much obliged to him for his fidelity and usefulness in his important office; but we shall in the future submit our publications to the judgment of no single person."¹⁶ The Conference, it was clear, was to assume more direct leadership for "propagation of religious knowledge by the means of press."¹⁷

Finances

Administratively, finances proved the most challenging obstacle to the adolescent Concern. The Concern's financial problems were intensified by Conference decisions surrounding the distribution of profits arising from the sale of works. The members of the 1792 Conference resolved, as James Pilkington has summarized:

From the money of the book business, payments were authorized for the education and board of the boys attending Cokesbury College as charity students; for the debts and building fund of Cokesbury College; \$266.33 a year for 'distressed preachers'; and \$64 to the bishop for the district schools. The remainder, hopefully, was to be used "to the forming of a capital stock for the carrying on of the concerns of the books."¹⁸

These decisions, however, left the Concern with very limited means to form "a capital stock."

This was not the first time American Methodists aimed to disburse profits arising from book sales to other causes. In 1773, Jesse Lee recorded that the

¹⁴ Minutes from 1773 to 1794, 68.

¹⁵ Minutes from 1773 to 1794, 68-69.

¹⁶ Minutes from 1773 to 1794, 69.

¹⁷ Minutes from 1773 to 1794, 68-69.

¹⁸ Pilkington, *Methodist Publishing House*, 101. See also *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Philadelphia: Printed by Parry Hall and sold by John Dickins, 1792), 59.

preachers decided, "the profits arising therefrom [the selling of books], might be divided among the preachers, or applied to some charitable purpose."¹⁹ It is not completely clear why the Conference joined the Book Concern to these philanthropic promises. Certainly, leaders in the Conference thought book publishing might provide important revenue to support other areas of the Methodist ministry.²⁰ However, there may have been other stimuli beyond this most obvious motivation. It is possible that the Conference was wary of the appearance of financial exploitation. Prefaces throughout Dickins' tenure often described how the profits from the purchased title would be used. Coke and Asbury recorded, for example, in the preface of the 1790 *Form of Discipline*, "This present edition is small and cheap, and we can assure you that the profits of the sale of it shall be applied to charitable purposes."²¹ Likewise, in the preface of the first American edition of the *Arminian Magazine*, Coke and Asbury conveyed, "The profits arising therefrom shall be applied as the wisdom of the Conference shall direct; in carrying on, for instance, our plan of Christian education, or in sending missionaries among the Indians and opening schools for their children."²² Whatever the Conference's motivations, it is clear that remaining committed to this financial structure retarded the growth of the early Book Concern.

Dickins operated the Concern after 1792 without any substantive financial changes. Though the number and names of titles changed from year to year, prices remained consistent. To assist sales, in 1798 Dickins opened a bookshop on Market Street in Philadelphia. However, during his tenure, the financial problems of the Concern would not be resolved. Dickins displayed his frustration with the Concern's financial plight in a letter to Asbury in 1797 "it is very difficult to manage the business, for I can get no paper but for cash, which comes in very slowly, & when I get it, it ought in reason to go towards paying debts which have been a long time due. However, I must do the best I can."²³

Printings: Titles and Costs

Though financial troubles plagued Dickins' tenure, the works he produced as the first book steward would prove remarkably representative of the Book Concern corpus printed over the next twenty years.²⁴ As Dickins published hymnbooks, tracts, sermons, books and the *Arminian Magazine*,

¹⁹ Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists in the United States* (Baltimore: Magill and Cline, 1810), 49.

²⁰ See Thomas Ware, *Sketches of the Life and Travels of Thomas Ware* (New York: Mason & Lane, 1839), 214.

²¹ A Form of Discipline, for the ministers, preachers and members, now comprehending the principles and doctrines, of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America . . . 6th Edition. (Philadelphia, Aitken for Dickins 1790), Introduction.

²² Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, *Arminian Magazine* (Philadelphia: Prichard & Hall, 1789), vi.

²³ Pilkington, *Methodist Publishing House*, 111.

²⁴ Endicott, *Methodist Publishing*, 115-123.

his years as steward demonstrate continuity with the publishing operations of John Wesley and later American Methodists. The titles produced by John Dickins, catalogued annually, provide a qualitative examination of the earliest years of the Book Concern.²⁵

Dickins printed fifty-five different titles from 1789-1798.²⁶ The *Pocket Hymn Book* was reprinted the most often with Dickins producing nine editions during his time as steward. Wesley's abridgment of Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* was reprinted nearly as often appearing in six editions in this period. Besides these, Dickins directed much of his attention to producing documents central to the emerging American Methodist movement generating five editions of *The Form of Discipline*, and five editions of various *Minutes Taken at Several Annual Conferences*.

Dickins published books from a variety of authors. Indebted to Wesley's earlier authorial and editorial work, Dickins reproduced at least seventeen titles originally shaped by Wesley.²⁷ As such, thirty percent of the works produced by Dickins had, in some qualitative way, been personally shaped by Wesley. British authors and editors produced fifteen other titles Dickins published.²⁸ In total, over half of the titles produced by Dickins demonstrated a reliance on European sources.

Dickins also produced works arising from authors and editors in the United States—works that both shaped and displayed the emerging American Methodist identity.²⁹ Twenty-four titles came from American authors, led by prominent American Methodists like John Dickins, Francis Asbury, and Freeborn Garretson. Collectively, the Conference proved an important authorial source and increased its influence through Dickins' fourteen printings that conveyed Methodist doctrine and polity. Similarly, works that had been previously edited by Wesley, like the *Pocket Hymn Book* and *Primitive Physic*, were altered for an American readership.³⁰

²⁵ Endicott, *Methodist Publishing*, 115-123.

²⁶ This number does not include reprints of the same title. This number does, however, consider each edition of the *Minutes* and *Discipline* as a separate title due to the unique content of each edition. *Primitive Physic* and *Family Advisor* were also considered separately again due to differing content. The *Arminian* and *Methodist* magazines were counted as two titles.

²⁷ Discerning Wesley's editorial influence is difficult at times. In this investigation every effort has been made to corroborate Wesley's influence by determining where the works were first printed by examining library catalogues world-wide, establishing connections between the author and Wesley, and when possible, examining prefaces and editorial comments of works in question. Utilizing these methods, while relying on the scholarship provided by the Wesley Works project and Baker's 1991 catalogue, relative confidence can be asserted in relation to Wesley's influence to the works accorded him in this investigation.

²⁸ Endicott, *Methodist Publishing*, 115-123.

²⁹ This number does not include American authors found only in the *Arminian Magazine*. Though regrettable, discerning the authorship of varying poems and hymns in the magazine remains a largely unexplored and complicated issue. Due to the complicated production issues surrounding the periodical, in this examination the magazine has been analyzed at a bird's eye view leaving the detail of its unique contributions for later research. See Coke and Asbury, *Arminian Magazine* (1789), 80.

³⁰ See *Pocket Hymn-Book*, iv. John Wesley, *Primitive Physic, or an Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases*, (Philadelphia, Prichard and Hall for Dickins, 1789), xxvii-xxviii.

Methodist Episcopal Book Concern: 1789-1798

In 1798, Philadelphia was besieged by yellow fever. Dickins and his family had remained in the city during previous plagues; they again decided to stay. This time, however, Dickins acquired the sickness, fell ill, and died.³¹ Upon hearing word of his friend's death, Asbury wrote, "Dickins, the generous, the just, the skillful Dickins, is dead!"³²

Ezekiel Cooper eulogized Dickins in part by discussing his importance in developing the fledgling Book Concern, saying:

He [Dickins] was for many years, the Agent of our connection in the publication and circulation of religious books and pamphlets, through the United States. He superintended the printing, binding, and distribution of the various and numerous publications, which we, for years past, have been sending into the world.

Cooper estimated that in the last four years of Dickins' appointment as book steward, American Methodists were supplied with 114,000 books and pamphlets.³³ Dickins successfully established an organizational framework for the Concern and managed the ancillary duties of securing printers, binders, equipment, and storage; systematizing invoicing; and developing a distribution system.

The Emergence of an American Methodist Publishing Ethos

The Methodist Episcopal Book Concern activities from 1789 to 1798 demonstrated an expansion beyond John Wesley's publishing practice. The aim of American Methodist publishing, as with Wesley's practice, was to provide books to as many readers as possible. Fundamentally, American Methodists valued reading as Wesley had—reading was a means of grace through which "awakening is both continued and increased."³⁴ The American Conference asserted, "the books of infidelity and profaneness with which the states at present abound, demand our strongest exertions to counteract their pernicious influence: and every step shall be taken, which is consistent with our finances, to furnish our friends, from time to time, with the most useful treatises on every branch of religious knowledge."³⁵

Wesley valued economy in language, size and price in the works he sup-

³¹ *The Methodist magazine, for the year . . . ; being a continuation of The Arminian magazine, first published by the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. consisting chiefly of extracts and original treatises on general redemption*, vol. 2 (London: printed for G. Whitfield, City-Road, and sold at the Methodist Preaching-House in town and country, 1798), 513; Bangs, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, vol. 2, 70.

³² Francis Asbury, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury in Three Volumes*, vol. 3 (Elmer T. Clark, 1958), 173.

³³ Cooper, Funeral Discourse, 21.

³⁴ Wesley, *Letters*, vol. 7, ed. Telford, 294.

³⁵ The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal . . . 1792 . . . to which are added, the Minutes of the General Conference held at Baltimore, October 20th, 1796, (Philadelphia: Printed by Henry Tuckniss, 1797), 69.

plied to the bulk of mankind.³⁶ The American Methodists likewise labored to keep their publications in this period concise, portable and inexpensive. Asbury's comment "our Americans are not fools, no books sell like those on plain, practical subjects," proves revealing.³⁷ Dickins often published lettered and unlettered editions of the same work in an attempt to keep prices low. Noting his 7s.6d. publication of *The Rev. John Wesley's Life* in a book list in 1792, Dickins wrote, "Some of the British copies of this Life, in a large type, have been found in America, bound, at 15s."³⁸ Indeed, Dickins did not raise the price of a single title during his tenure as steward.³⁹

The examination of print materials has also helped identify American innovation on the Wesleyan model. Whereas John Wesley's "sons in the commands" adopted many elements of his ministerial plan, the American Methodist Conference agreed to modify elements of Wesley's ministerial organization in light of the context of the early republic. Some of the adaptations made by the early American Conference were forced by practical difficulties. However, certain adaptations reveal ideological stimuli, which identify a developing American Methodist identity by 1798.

Adaptations Made in Response to Practical Stimuli

The American geography demanded a different functional approach to publishing than Wesley experienced in Great Britain. The first census of the United States, taken in 1790, recorded a population of 3,929,214 people living in 867,980 square miles.⁴⁰ Though only five percent of the population lived west of the Appalachian Mountains, poor roads and seasonally navigable rivers characterized the transportation infrastructure of the United States in this period.⁴¹ These conditions challenged the American Methodists to adapt book production and dissemination to suit the unique context of North America. One notable example of a functional adaptation made by the Concern in response to infrastructure challenges is evidenced in the 1789 printing of the *Arminian Magazine*. In the preface of the completed work, Coke and Asbury noted, "The difficulty of communication on this extensive continent obliges us to move on slowly; we shall therefore only publish a volume every other year."⁴²

Likewise, the ecclesiastical context of the United States encouraged

³⁶ See Richard P. Heitzenrater, "John Wesley's *A Christian Library*, Then and Now," *American Theological Association: Proceedings* 55 (2001): 134.

³⁷ Asbury, *Journal*, vol. 2, 208.

³⁸ Elizabeth Singer Rowe, *Devout Exercises of the Heart: In Meditation and Soliloquy, Prayer and Praise*. (Philadelphia: Printed by Parry Hall, no. 149 Chestnut Street, 1792), Book List.

³⁹ See Endicott, *Methodist Publishing*, 134-137.

⁴⁰ Caroline MacGill, *History of Transportation in the United before 1860* (Washington: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1917), 5.

⁴¹ Isaac Weld, "Travels through the States of North America," in MacGill, *History of Transportation*, 55.

⁴² Coke and Asbury, *Arminian Magazine*, (1789), v. This was in fact not accomplished. Though briefly revived from January of 1797 to December, 1798, under the new title *Methodist Magazine*, the American Methodists would be unable to successfully produce a financially viable periodical until 1818. See Endicott, *Methodist Publishing*, 115-123.

adaptation of American Methodist publishing. Wesley himself had been obliged to readdress his thoughts on church government and ordination in response to the unique context of post-revolutionary America. As American Methodists articulated their independence in the years following the Christmas Conference of 1784, the Conference was granted "supreme electoral, disciplinary and legislative power."⁴³

Fundamentally, the decision to locate final authority in the Conference dramatically shaped American Methodist publishing in this period. Simply stated, the Book Concern was created and sustained by the authority of the Conference. Whereas Methodist book publishing in Britain remained under the sole authority of Wesley,⁴⁴ in 1789 the Book Concern became the collective responsibility of the connection of itinerants. Though John Dickins oversaw the daily operations of the Book Concern, the Conference was ultimately responsible for decisions surrounding the administration, funding, and title selection of the publishing effort throughout this period.

The Book Concern strengthened the authority of the Conference in this period.⁴⁵ The title pages of works through 1798 carried variations of the subtle but important statement "Published by John Dickins for the Methodist Connexion in the United States." Many of the titles printed by the Concern from 1789-1798 were written to organize and formalize the polity and theology of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Multiple editions of the *Discipline*, *Minutes*, and *Scriptural Catechism* helped to comprise the fourteen titles whose content the Conference produced. The American Conference labored to develop an ecclesiastical polity in a way Wesley had not, and the Book Concern worked in concert with the American Conference to forge a Methodist identity in the United States.

Adaptations Made in Response to Ideological Stimuli

As the British Methodists affirmed, "No books are to be published without Mr. Wesley's sanction," the American Conference founded the Book Concern and assumed the role for themselves.⁴⁶ The Americans, it was decided in 1789, would no longer rely on Wesley to provide them print materials; this task was now the responsibility of the young Conference. The Americans, it was decided in 1789, would no longer rely on Wesley to provide them print materials; this task was now the responsibility of the young Conference. Creating a leadership structure outside of Wesley's control, the Conference began to "supervise the entire literacy of [their] connection by establishing a sort of . . . canon beyond which [their] followers were encour-

⁴³ Russell E. Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1996), 36.

⁴⁴ See Rogal, *Methodist Book Stock*, 10, 150; Wesley, *Letters*, vol. 8, ed. Telford, 108.

⁴⁵ See David Hempton, "Methodist Growth in Transatlantic Perspective, ca. 1770-1850," in *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*, ed. Nathan Hatch and John Wigger (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001), 55.

⁴⁶ *Minutes of some late conversations, between the Rev. Mr. Wesley, and others* (Leeds, 1789), 27-28.

aged not to go.”⁴⁷

Economic historians have determined that “by the early 1790s, imports from Britain had reached about the same absolute levels as before the [Revolutionary] war.”⁴⁸ Even more directly, Thomas M. Doerflinger has demonstrated that in Philadelphia, the center of American Methodist publishing during Dickins’ tenure, “English firms freely granted credit to American traders, who ranged in stature from ambitious shopkeepers to ‘merchant princes’” in the 1780s and 1790s.⁴⁹ Dickins’ note in book lists beginning in 1792 regarding British copies of *The Rev. John Wesley’s Life* testifies to the continued importation of British books.⁵⁰ It seems American Methodists could reasonably have continued to import their books from England throughout Dickins’ tenure. Indeed, in this period American Baptists and Episcopalians continued to rely on British printers to supply their American churches.⁵¹ Yet the Methodist Episcopal Church demonstrated a sense of autonomy from British Methodism and entrusted their Book Concern to the American industry “long held [in] disrepute as younger sibling to the British book trades.”⁵²

Beginning in 1789, Book Concern prefaces implored, “buy only our books, which are recommended by the conference; and as we intend to print our books in future *within the States*, and on a much larger scale than we have hitherto done, we trust we shall be able soon to supply you with as many of the choicest of our publications . . . you require.”⁵³ By 1792, books published by the Book Concern in the United States admonished readers to purchase only the genuine article:

As the Profits of these Books are for the general Benefit of the Methodist Societies, it is humbly recommended to the Members of the said Societies, that they will purchase no Books we publish, of any other person than the aforesaid JOHN DICKINS, or the Methodist Ministers and Preachers in the several Circuits, or such Persons as sell them by their Consent.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Hempton, *Methodism*, 59. Hempton is here describing Wesley’s action; however, in light of evidence emerging from the Dickins’ years, the statement proves equally apt here and signifies the independent thinking of Wesley’s “sons” in the American Conference.

⁴⁸ James F. Shepherd, “British America and the Atlantic Economy,” in *The Economy of Early America: The Revolutionary Period, 1763-1790*, ed. Ronal Hoffman, John McCusker, Russell Menard, and Peter Albert (Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1988), 26.

⁴⁹ Winifred B. Rothenberg, “Farmers and Dry Goods in the Philadelphia Market Area, 1750-1800,” in *The Economy of Early America*, edited by Ronald Hoffman, (Charlottesville, VA: Published for the United States Capitol Historical Society by the UP of Virginia, 1988), 168.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Singer Rowe, *Devout Exercises of the Heart: In Meditation and Soliloquy, Prayer and Praise* (Philadelphia: Printed by Parry Hall, no. 149 Chestnut Street, 1792), Book List.

⁵¹ See Daniel Gurden Stevens, *The First Hundred Years of the American Baptist Publication Society* (Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publication Society, n.d.), 3-10; and Clifton Hartwell Brewer, *A History of Religious Education in the Episcopal Church to 1835* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1924), 117-122.

⁵² Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina UP, 2004), 47.

⁵³ Wesley, *Primitive Physic* (1789), xviii.

⁵⁴ For example see Rowe, *Devout Exercises*, Book List.

In these ways, the American Methodist Conference encouraged members of the societies to promote their cause through the purchase of officially American Methodist sanctioned books.

Conclusion

On December 8, 1789, Francis Asbury paused to write a letter to the subscribers of the *Arminian Magazine*. As it neared its second year of production, the magazine, as American Methodism more broadly, was still trying to find its voice among the populace of the United States. In Asbury's estimation, the first volume of the magazine printed in America had "like all human compilations, both its excellencies and defects."⁵⁵ Asbury was certain, however, that as production and distribution of the magazine improved, the pages of the magazine would be capable of recording the "progress of Methodism, step by step, through the continent of America."⁵⁶

As Methodism advanced step-by-step through the continent, the people called American Methodists developed a unique identity. The development of this identity, however, is as complex as it is interesting. As students of American Methodism struggle to find data and methods suitable to elucidate the character of the movement in these early years, print material proves a qualitative and quantitative source.

The Methodist Episcopal Book Concern, forged during John Dickins' tenure and tested by later stewards, demonstrates that members of the American Conference from 1789 to 1798 accepted John Wesley's paradigmatic valuation of print but adapted elements of his publishing practice in response to the unique context of the United States in this period. Adopting John Wesley's commitment to publish, yet adapting elements of his plan in response to practical and ideological stimuli, the Conference created an agency through which they hoped they would counteract, "The books of infidelity and profaneness with which the states at present abound."⁵⁷ In so doing, the Book Concern demonstrated a unique synthesis of Wesleyan inheritance and American innovation.

⁵⁵ In particular, Asbury hoped that the inclusion of selections from his journal in the second volume of the magazine would help trace the advancement of Methodism in America. "To the Subscribers for the *Arminian Magazine*," *Arminian Magazine* (January, 1790), iii.

⁵⁶ *Arminian Magazine* (January, 1790), iii.

⁵⁷ Minutes from 1773 to 1794, 69.