THE PORTRAIT OF CAPTAIN THOMAS WEBB

by Arthur Bruce Moss

The noted portrait of Captain Thomas Webb is an important element in the Ezra S. Tipple Collection, displayed in the Rose Memorial Library, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. It is a pastel, commissioned by Mrs. Webb some time before the Captain's death, which occurred December 20, 1796. The portrait hangs amid several paintings related to the founding of Methodism in America. A plaque is mounted with the portrait, reading:

Lieut. (Captain) Webb, 17 —1796.
Lay preacher in America and England.
Pastel by L. Vaslet, drawn for Mrs. Webb,
And brought to America in 1894
by Rev. A. G. Harrison of West Wisconsin
Conference, from whom Dr. Tipple acquired it.

In the portrait, Captain Webb stands beside a table, about to preach. He is in profile, facing towards the viewer’s left. His left hand rests upon an open Bible on the table; the right hand is held over his heart. He is in regulation officer’s uniform; the hat and sword lie beside the Bible.

1 Items on the plaque: (a) In his youth Thomas Webb had enlisted in the British Army as a common soldier. By dint of effort he rose through the ranks, receiving commission as Lieutenant. It was in this capacity that he was wounded in the Battle of Montmorency, August 31, 1759, during the prolonged Siege of Quebec, losing his right eye. When his regiment was returned to England, he elected to remain in the Colonies, as did other officers. He thus deprived himself of the right to promotion to Captain, and retirement in that rank. He was retired as Lieutenant, but was given the honorific title of Captain (without commission), by which he became commonly known. (Correspondence from Rev. E. Ralph Bates, Warden of Wesley Chapel, Bristol, England, including reference to data held by Public Record Office.) (b) Date of birth of Webb is May 31, 1725. (Bates, ibid.) (c) Lewis Vaslet, artist in London in late 1700’s. (d) Mrs. Webb had been Miss Grace Gilbert, sister of Nathaniel Gilbert, founder of the Methodist society and enclave on Antigua in the Caribbean, the earliest Methodist penetration into the Western world. (e) Alfred G. Harrison was received on trial in the West Wisconsin Conference in 1888, and in full connection in 1890, with appropriate ordinations. He served a number of charges, including new Lisbon, Poyette, Verona, Delton. In 1894, while at Delton, he withdrew from the M. E. Church and ministry to enter the Protestant Episcopal Church, wherein he became a clergyman, serving churches in the Colorado Diocese. The 1885 Minutes of the West Wisconsin Conference present this statement in the report of Rev. W. J. McKay, Presiding Elder of the Madison District: “Rev. Alfred G. Harrison, who has been among us for seven years, an effective elder, withdrew from our ministry and membership, intending to join the Episcopal Church, in which he was born and bred. Brother Harrison made no complaint of his treatment among us, but says it was generous and brotherly. He goes because of scriptural conviction of duty. We are sorry to part with him and his good wife. Their record among us has been one of efficiency and commendation.” (Minutes of West Wisconsin Conference, 1888-1895; Official Clergy Records of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1896, ff.)
The provenance of the portrait is fascinating. Mrs. Webb retained the painting throughout her life, and did not give it to either of the Captain's sons, Charles and Gilbert, who had settled in America. She died at Bristol in January 1820, being buried in the vault with Captain Webb at the Portland Chapel, Bristol. Family tradition declares that she walked to chapel for the Sunday service the week before she died. Upon her death, the portrait came into the possession of her nephew, Surgeon General Chake (Cheke) of the British Army, who resided at Evesham, Worcestershire. He treasured it, keeping it in prominent display in his home. In accordance with his will the portrait passed to his daughter, Miss Louisa Chake.

In turn, Miss Chake bequeathed the pastel to her niece, a Mrs. Harrison, living nearby. However, in the settlement of Louisa Chake's affairs, the painting was packed by mistake with other items to be sent to a nephew in Australia, where it remained for several years.

The Rev. Alfred G. Harrison, mentioned on the plaque, was the son of the Mrs. Harrison to whom the portrait had been bequeathed, but not delivered. Coming to America, he had entered the Methodist ministry, joining the West Wisconsin Conference. In 1893 he visited his mother in England, who related the history of the portrait, explaining the mischance that had sent it to Australia. Harrison expressed the hope that the cousin might return the painting, so that he might possess it as "the only Methodist in the family." Mrs. Harrison wrote to her cousin, Theophilus Mann, at St. Leonard's, South Australia. He graciously sent the portrait to her in England, and she promptly relayed it to her son in Wisconsin. He received it early in 1894. Anticipating its arrival, Harrison prepared a brief statement for the *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, which appeared in the February 28, 1894 issue.

Coming upon financial difficulties in his older years, in 1934 Harrison decided to offer the portrait for sale to some Methodist institution. James R. Joy, editor of *The Christian Advocate* in New York, learned of this through the courtesy of the office of J. C. Penney, the philanthropist, with whom Harrison had apparently become acquainted during his residence at "The Penney Farms" in Florida following retirement. Joy advised President Ezra S. Tipple at Drew, and he examined the portrait at the Penney office. Tipple decided to purchase it for his extensive collection of Wesleyana.

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2 The Webb file in Manuscript Section, Drew Library, contains several letters dated in 1934, to Dr. James R. Joy, editor of *The Christian Advocate*, together with documents and material directly related to the history of the portrait. The Bates correspondence has clarified important points.

and early American Methodistica. The purchase was completed in December 1934, with Joy acting as intermediary. Under the terms of President Tipple's gift of his Collection to Drew, the Webb portrait found its resting place in the Rose Memorial Library.

Within a few weeks of the Captain's decease, Mrs. Webb gave permission for an engraving to be made and published by Richard Edwards of Bristol, for the benefit of the Wesleyan Bookroom at City Road, London. The engraving was excellent, and good copies come up for sale occasionally even to this day.

In this engraving, the name "R. Edwards, Bristol" appears in very small type under the lower right of the portrait. A coat-of-arms stands below the portrait. Above the traditional shield a typical two-headed eagle perches on a crown. The shield is divided into four quadrants by a simple square cross. A dove-like bird stands in each quadrant, facing to the left. A ribbon is folded below the shield, with the legend "I Have Fought A Good Fight." It is believed that this heraldic device is the Captain's own personal escutcheon, and not the coat-of-arms of the family.

The engraving is entitled: "Thomas Webb, Esqr., Founder of the Methodist Societies in America." Below the escutcheon a statement appears in small type: "Published as the Act directs—April 27, 1797—by Rich'd Edwards, and sold by G. Whitfield, City Road, London." This "G. Whitfield" is not to be confused with the famous preacher, George Whitefield, of a generation or two earlier.

Another engraving, date not clear, was made in America, derived from the British engraving. There are slight differences in detail. The same coat-of-arms is displayed. The title reads: "Captain Thomas Webb of the British Army, One of the first British preachers in America." Below the portrait in very small type is the statement: "From an original print in possession of G. P. Disosway, Esqr." This American engraving has appeared in many of our historical works—J. B. Wakeley, Lost Chapters Recovered from the Early History of American Methodism, New York, 1858, op. p. 141; Abel Stevens, History of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 4 vols., New

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4 The portrait was for a time on view at the Christian Advocate office prior to transfer to Dr. Tipple at Drew, Christian Advocate, December 13, 1934, p. 1001.

5 G. Whitfield was one of Wesley's preachers, accepted by Conference in 1785, living until 1832. He was Book Steward at the City Road Book Room, London, 1793-1804. (Bates, ibid.)

6 Gabriel Poillon Disosway (1799-1868) was prominent in New York Methodism during the second and third quarters of the 1800's, a son of Israel Disosway who had assisted Asbury in establishing the first circuit on Staten Island, New York. Gabriel was received into John Street Church, New York, in 1815. In later years he was a manager of the Missionary Society, a founder of Randolph Macon College, supported Melville Cox in his mission to Liberia in 1833, and aided the Oregon Mission to the Indians. (Wade C. Barclay, Early American Methodism, Board of Missions, New York, 1949, I, p. 291.)

Captain Webb was a noted leader of early American Methodism. His business expertise and generosity place him in the forefront of those who secured our first physical property. It is doubtful whether St. George’s Church, Philadelphia, and the New York John Street property and the construction of the first chapel there, could have been secured and established without his guidance and aid. And in a dozen locations—near New York, in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Maryland—the impact of his effort still abides.

It was, however, in Webb’s preaching that the first societies found the ardor of his faith and the warmth of his personality. Without benefit of much formal schooling, he was by nature a true prophet and preacher. Crowds came when he was scheduled to preach. His message may have been “irregular,” as some well-schooled pulpiteers may have thought, but his utter devotion to his Saviour, the clear and forceful utterance, the glow of love in his heart, and the rich evangelism that pervaded all he had to say, made his witness amazingly effective. Not only did he help construct the first buildings; he built the living body of the Church. Wesley admired him, and spoke of his preaching with eager praise. The comment of John Adams, no mean critic, has often been quoted: “. . . the old soldier, one of the most eloquent men I ever heard; he reaches the imagination and touches the passions very well, and expresses himself with great propriety.” In his Journal, Joseph Pilmore often refers to Webb’s preaching, always with keen appreciation of the effectiveness of his word. In the entry of December 7, 1769, Pilmore writes: “His preaching is always attended with wonderful power, and many are greatly blessed under his ministry. He has the great Seal of God’s approbation to his Commission, and that is far more than all the human authority under heaven.”

Writing from Trenton, New Jersey, to Daniel Montgomery in Philadelphia, November 25, 1771, Webb makes this comment: “I suppose you are informed by this that I am layd [sic] up with the gout—however thank God notwithstanding this I have been able to preach at my lodgings . . . I have a large congregation and Sinners are convinced and turn from the evil of their ways; and indeed without Sinners are convinced and converted the most elaborate preaching is not worth a rusk.”

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8 Letter in Webb file, Drew University Library. Daniel Montgomery was trustee and leader at St. George’s Church, Philadelphia. Gout became chronic with Webb, severe enough in later years as to require use of crutches on occasion. (Bates, ibid.) This affliction was prevalent in all levels of society, due to excess of protein in the customary diet.
Vaslet's pastel depicts Captain Webb about to begin a sermon, the supreme act of his consecration and ministry. It is of great significance that this portrait hangs in the Library of one of our distinguished universities—an incentive and inspiration to many students, who tomorrow will be our preachers in the meaningful days ahead of American Methodism.

(The writer would express his earnest appreciation of the courtesies extended by Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe, Methodist Librarian at Drew, and by the Rev. E. Ralph Bates, Warden of the Wesley Chapel, Bristol, England, for their cordial aid in making available many basic items related to the classic portrait of Captain Thomas Webb.)

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**Captain Webb**

After many years in which the remains of Captain Thomas Webb and his wife were entombed in Portland Chapel, British Methodists reinterred them in the forecourt of Wesley's Chapel, Bristol, "the New Room in the Horsefair." A very fitting service of Thanksgiving was conducted Monday, May 22, 1972, in the Chapel. Those who participated in the program were: Dr. John C. Bowmer, archivist of the British Methodist Conference; the Rev. J. R. Bailey, chairman of Portland Chapel, Bristol; the Rev. E. Ralph Bates, Warden of the New Room; Dr. Maldwyn L. Edwards, past president of the World Methodist Historical Society; the Rev. Leslie M. Wollen, chairman of the New Room Committee and Local Trust; Dr. Frederick E. Maser, executive secretary of the World Methodist Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pa.; Dr. Arthur Bruce Moss, New York Methodist historian; and Dr. John H. Ness, Jr., executive secretary of the United Methodist Commission on Archives and History, Lake Junaluska, N.C.

The Commission on Archives and History has designated the site of the reinterment as the official registered United Methodist Historic Site number 19. A marker will be placed nearby indicating this official designation.