

DISCOVERY

edited by
Kenneth E. Rowe

David Creamer and the Baltimore Mob Riot, April 19, 1861

by Thomas L. Shanklin

The place of David Creamer (1812-1887) in American Methodist history is secure as the denomination's first hymnologist. However, the story of his active involvement and commentary on the great social and political questions of his day is little known and appreciated. His *Methodist Hymnology* (1848) and later articles on the subject display his characteristic zest for thorough research and argumentative journalism. His dispatches to several newspapers as Civil War correspondent disclose his passionate eagerness to lay before Methodist layfolk and the general public the "truth" about the unfolding events of the nation's agonizing civil war.

The two letters presented here illustrate Creamer's support for the union cause at a time when Methodists in Baltimore were bitterly divided. Throughout the war Creamer addressed himself to the issues of a war-torn nation and church, speaking eloquently to the issues of racism and slavery, union and secession, battles and border conflicts. One such border incident, the first of the war, occurred in Baltimore on the 19th of April in 1861. Creamer sent to George Richard Crooks, editor of *The Methodist*, a newly launched independent Methodist weekly in New York, the first of several vivid eye-witness reports of the Baltimore mob riot which was published in the April 26th issue.

This bloody event followed on the heels of President Lincoln's April 15 proclamation to the nation calling up 75,000 militia and appealing "to all loyal citizens to favor facilitate and aid [the] effort to maintain the honor, integrity and existence of [the] National Union."¹ Feelings in the border state of Maryland were greatly intensified by this proclamation. Mayor George William Brown of Baltimore described the state of affairs as follows:

The position of Maryland was most critical, this state was especially important because the capital of the nation lay within her borders, and all the roads from the North leading to it passed through her territory. After the President's proclamation was issued, no doubt a large majority of her people sympathized with the South; but even had that sentiment been far more preponderating, there was an underlying feeling that by a sort of geographical necessity, her lot

¹ Brown, George William, *Baltimore and the 19th April, 1861*, Baltimore, 1887, p. 33.

was with the North, that the larger stronger half of the nation would not allow its capital to be quietly disintegrated away by her secession.²

Militia from the states of Massachusetts and Pennsylvania were called to Washington. When the Massachusetts militia reached the Baltimore city limits by rail, they left their coaches and marched through the city streets to waiting trains across town. While making their way through the heart of the city the militia was brutally attacked by a mob. Several soldiers from Massachusetts were killed. The war had begun!

Creamer not only watched the incidents in the streets that April day but also served as foreman of the jury in the murder trial which followed.³

In the following letter Creamer reports to Editor Crooks the arrest of ex-governor Pratt and Mr. Merryman of Baltimore County and labels the city fathers as "disloyal and in open collusion with our enemies."

Baltimore, June 1, 1861⁴

Rev. Dr. Crooks,

Ed. of "The Methodist,"

Dr. Bro:—I see by the "Methodist" of to-day that you have omitted my last letter. In this matter I do not doubt your judgment, as I should have considerably qualified or modified some of my language if I had kept the letter by me long enough to give it a revision. It was however sent off *immediately* after writing it, or it would have been submitted to a cautious confidential friend. But I have nothing to retreat; and if I were to tell all I know, and *have good reason to believe*, about what is going on in our midst, there would be revealed stranger things than anything I have yet written. When I wrote my last letter, I had not heard of the arrest of Mr. Merryman (of Balto. Co.)—and Ex-Gov. Pratt, has since been arrested—and yet were I a prophet or the son of a prophet, my remarks at the conclusion of my letter could not have been more appropriate. And I now give it as my decided opinion, that, conservative and loyal as the great majority of the citizens (of Baltimore) are, and as I believe the (large) majority of the people of Maryland to be, that we shall have to be put under *Martial*

² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³ Creamer's notebook on this trial has survived. Creamer Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴ Original in Drew University Library.

Law before two weeks from this date—unless the decision of the coming Congressional election should be such, as again to frustrate the hopes and schemes of the secessionists in our midst. Again I repeat the fact—our “Authorities” are *disloyal* and in almost *open collusion with our enemies* . . . If you do not desire to publish my letter (with such omissions & modifications as you may see fit to make) please re-mail it immediately; & if you should again desire my services you shall have them. When do you intend to pub. my deferred arts. on Whitefield, &c,—Let me hear from you—Respectfully—D. Creamer

Two years later Creamer is in Norfolk, Virginia, serving as an assistant tax assessor of the Excise or War Tax for the 4th Collection District of Virginia at Fort Monroe.⁵ In the following letter Creamer again offers his journalistic services to Dr. Crooks of *The Methodist*. He refers back to the Mob Riot of 1861 and the trial and shows his determination to support the cause of union to the bitter end.

D. Creamer
Norfolk, Va.⁶
Sep 20/63

Rev. Doctor Crooks—

It has been a long time since I have written for the M—until yesterday when I sent you a letter from Fort Monroe—If you desire it, I will send you a letter weekly, or fortnightly, on the old terms. If not, please pub. the letter I sent (yesterday) *with my name or initials*, which, I think, I shall do always hereafter.—As I believe I have already informed you, I am the *Asst. Assessor of the Excise or War Tax, of the 4th Collection District of Va.*, comprising about 20 counties including the cities (or towns) of Norfolk and Portsmouth—My division of the Disct. is the 4th & my office at Fort Monroe, from which centre I journey or voyage into such parts of Elizabeth City, Warwick, York, (James City,) and Gloucester Counties as are accessible, & having already visited in my official capacity, all the principal Military

⁵ Throughout the war years Creamer was employed by the Federal Government in several different locations. Letters are extant from Fort Monroe, Va., Harve de Grace, Md., and Washington. After the war he returned to his native Baltimore, where he died in 1887. For a full study of Creamer's work as hymnologist, historian and social critic see the author's 1974 S.T.M. thesis at Drew University, "American Methodism's First Hymnologist: Studies in the Life and Work of David Creamer, 1812-1887."

⁶ Original in Drew University Library.

points in these counties, I have seen & learned much of the condition of this part of Virginia.

(Overleaf)

In accordance with your request I sent you My bill the last time I was in Baltimore & had access to my acct. book. The bal. due me I think is about \$20—If correct, please send me the amt.,—or such bal. as you may find to be due me—

At all events let me hear from you immediately, and direct to, Yrs: very Truly—

David Creamer,
Asst., Assessor,
Care Kimberly Brothers,
Fort Monroe, Va.

I would like to receive the M. at Fort Monroe while I remain here—
If you pub. my letter be sure & send me a copy—early!

The office of the 4th. Col. Disct. of Va. is at Norfolk.

John M. Donn, of Washington, D.C. Assessor

Dr. Geo. C. Tyler, of Acconniae, E. S. Va. Collector.

There are four or five other Asst. Assessors beside myself.

If you should wish to speak editorially of my letter of yesterday, or of this, you are at liberty to do, or of myself by name, or otherwise, for although the Rebels wd probably *hang* me if they caught me, I am not "possessed with the spirit of fear," was not on the 19th. of April 1861, when I sat as the foreman of the Jury of Inquest in Baltimore on the bodies of the first two military murdered in our streets by the mob, nor do I even expect to experience that feeling in the presence of the enemies of my country. But I defer entirely to yr. own judgment—You may name me, if you chose, as yr: *Agent for these parts—D.C.*