Historians Russell Richey and Nathan Hatch, among others, have argued that for early Methodists (unlike Anglicans or Congregationalists), social class offered no special advantages. In his analysis of language among early Methodists, Richey has discussed the use of the title “brother”:

The terms ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ distinguished those with whom one shared intense Christian bonds from those with whom one did not. . . . The journals of the period evidence the selective employment of the terms . . . . That very selectivity accented Methodism’s radical spiritual egalitarianism. ‘Brother’ and ‘sister’ shattered the lines drawn by the world—lines of race, class, family, language—by drawing a line between Methodism and the world.¹

To be an Anglican cleric one needed to have some formal education (preferably seminary training) and an ability to get along with the wealthy members of the parish vestry; significant personal finances were almost a formal prerequisite. By contrast, to be a Methodist preacher poverty and a lack of formal training were not impediments.

The veracity of this view is born out in the primary source material. The humble background of Francis Asbury and a number of the early American preachers is ample evidence that a lack of family resources and even academic training did not prevent one from rising within the Methodist hierarchy. Nevertheless, although class played no official role in the activities of the early Methodists, it did have an unofficial role in the young church as it strove for legitimacy and resources in a class-conscious society. This can be seen in the life of Freeborn Garrettson, particularly through his interactions with Francis Asbury.

Over the course of his life, Freeborn Garrettson accumulated an impressive array of “firsts” in the nascent Methodist Episcopal Church. Garrettson was an eyewitness or key participant in pivotal events of its early life. He was in the first set of elders ordained at the church’s founding conference; he was one of the first overseas missionaries; his autobiography was the first “American” book published by the Methodist Episcopal Church; he introduced American Methodism to Boston; pioneered Methodism in upper New York State; was a founding member of the Methodist Missionary Society; and was probably the first to deliver—and even publish—a “semi-centennial sermon.”

At the time of his death at the age of seventy-four, Freeborn Garrettson was the oldest traveling preacher in the American Methodist connection. His fifty-two years as an itinerant surpassed the forty-nine year tenure of even the venerable Francis Asbury, and no doubt set a long-standing record for such service. Throughout his career, Garrettson was personally acquainted with the prominent persons of “white” and African Methodism: Robert Strawbridge, Francis Asbury, Thomas Coke, James O’Kelly, Richard Allen, James Varick, and Harry Hosier, to name a few. He played a key role in preventing an early schism over the administration of the sacraments, suffered persecution during the Revolutionary War, was indispensable in the forming of the founding Christmas Conference, and was more than a close observer of the critical episodes that led to the formation of distinct African Methodist denominations. As one nineteenth century Methodist historian has noted, “For more than half a century the record of his life is to be substantially a history of his denomination.”

When Freeborn Garrettson was born on August 15, 1752, he arrived into

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4 It has been estimated that between 1780 and 1818, sixty percent of all Methodist preachers died before age forty, and over seventy percent served for less than ten years. (Nathan O. Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1989], 87-88).

the third generation of Garrettsons born in the North America colonies. Although precise data on the financial holdings of his family have not yet surfaced, the available evidence makes clear that the Garrettson family was no less than upper middle class by the standards of the time.

Garrettson’s great-grandfather emigrated from England and was, undoubtedly, one of Maryland’s early settlers. The family, as a benefit of its early settler opportunity, acquired a substantial amount of land on the northwestern shore of the Chesapeake Bay, near the mouth of the Susquehanna River. The level of education Garrettson attained was possible for only the wealthiest of families, and that he was not needed at home to assist with the management of his family’s property—which included a store and a blacksmith shop—is a reliable indication of considerable family resources.

Intermarriage, a practice commonly found among the gentry of the time, was a practice of the Garrettson clan. In 1824 Garrettson wrote, “He [Ruthen Garrettson] has the richest farm I have seen in the Neck. His mother was my mother’s sister and my father was his father’s brother; he married my eldest sister’s daughter . . . .”

Garrettson’s religious rearing was in the Church of England, and he attended school from age fourteen to the completion of his formal education at the age of seventeen or eighteen, concentrating in mathematics, bookkeeping, and astronomy. Robert Simpson reports that Garrettson then became the manager of a farm ten miles from his home. According to Garrettson, he “lived a retired life,” which left him much time for prayer and reflection after

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6 The name “Freeborn” first appears in the family record as the maiden name of his paternal grandmother, and was also the given name of his father’s youngest brother, in that instance the name was apparently spelled “Freebourne.” For details of the Garrettson family genealogy I have relied on the work of Robert Simpson, see Robert Drew Simpson, ed., American Methodist Pioneer: The Life and Journals of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson, 1752-1827 (Rutland, VT: Academy, 1984), 145. Clark notes an Aquila Garrettson as a younger brother of Freeborn, who is not mentioned by Simpson. It may be that Clark is mistaken due to the frequent repetition of given names in all branches of the Garrettson clan. See Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton, eds., The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury In Three Volumes (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1958), Vol. II, 666.

7 Simpson cites The Early Settlers of Maryland by Skordas as listing Richard Garrettson as an immigrant from England in 1665; Simpson, American Methodist Pioneer, 145. It is interesting to note that Thomas Ware (1758-1848) notes that “a farmer named Garrettson” rescued his maternal grandfather when he was shipwrecked “off the capes of Delaware” on his immigrant voyage from Scotland. Ware certainly knew Freeborn Garrettson as a fellow itinerant preacher, but did not specify any connection between the two Garrettsons. Ware’s grandfather was housed by his benefactor and eventually married one of the Garrettson daughters (Thomas Ware, Sketches of the Life and travels of the Rev. Thomas Ware, Who Has Been An Itinerant Methodist Preacher For More Than Fifty Years [New York: 1839], as found in William R. Phinney, Kenneth E. Rowe, and, Robert B. Steelman, eds., Thomas Ware, a Spectator at the Christmas Conference: A Miscellany on Thomas Ware and the Methodist Christmas Conference [Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1984], 11).

8 For information on the lives of the gentry in Chesapeake region of the eighteenth century, see Allan Kulikoff, Tobacco and Slaves: the Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800 (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1986), 165-313.

the first promptings of the Holy Spirit. His self-described leisurely existence and the circumstances of his inheritance attest further to his family’s affluence. Indeed, upon the death of his father, Garrettson was “left in the entire charge of a family, and the settlement of my father’s business.”

Early Methodists did include a number of prominent families; as Dee Andrews has reported, “one of the surprises of American Methodism was its social as well as racial heterogeneity.” Nevertheless, the majority of Methodists were farmers, artisans and laborers. This was to be expected, given the distribution of income among the colonial population. According to Jackson Turner Main’s analysis,

The revolutionary lower class, consisting of one-fifth of the white population, was made up of the rural and urban laborers together with some artisans and a few farmers. These were usually landless and owned little property of any sort. The middle class of small property owners included over half of the whites. They were principally artisans and farmers, though a few professional men (especially schoolteachers) and shopkeepers must be added. An upper middle class of substantial property owners included the larger farmers, most professional men and shopkeepers, and some merchants; while the upper class was made up primarily of merchants, lawyers, and large landowners.

It is possible that Garrettson’s extended family may once have qualified as upper class, but that the property he inherited upon his father’s death qualified him as a member of the upper middle class.

Garrettson’s high social status was an indispensable asset in a crucial episode in the life of the American Methodist movement: the Fluvanna Controversy. To make a longer and interesting story too short, the Methodist church almost split before it was actually born over a conflict with the administration of the sacraments. Good Methodists were to go to the Anglican

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11 “Idleness, leisure, or what was best described as not exerting oneself for profit” was a defining characteristic of the gentry. Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 36. It is interesting to note the family responsibilities Garrettson inherited. Upon the death of his father, he was “left in the entire charge of a family, and the settlement of my father’s business” (Simpson, *American Methodist Pioneer*, 42). From his narrative we know that he and five of his siblings lived to adulthood, and that he was not his father’s oldest son. If his two older sisters had not yet married, they and his two younger brothers composed the family he took charge of at his father’s death. If at that time neither of his older brothers inherited property or became executors of their father’s estate, it would indicate that they had already received fully-stocked plantations from their father upon reaching the age of twenty-one; see Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 192, 200, 242. (It is also possible that one or both of his sisters had married and already received an inheritance as a dowry.) Given these likely assumptions, the wealth of Garrettson’s nuclear family was quite substantial, as was the influence of the Garrettson clan (his father had eleven siblings) on the region.
Church (or other denomination) on Sunday in order to receive communion. With the Revolutionary War, the overwhelming majority of Anglican clergy in the middle and southern colonies returned to England (as did all of John Wesley’s Methodist missionaries, with the exception of Francis Asbury). The loss of clergy produced a loss of all sacraments. The issue of how to provide Methodists with the essential means of grace was debated in conference in 1777. Action was deferred until 1778, and then deferred again until 1779. The conference scheduled to be held that year in Fluvanna County, Virginia, would be an important time of decision.

The ongoing war restricted Asbury’s travel, and he knew he would be unable to attend the 1779 meeting of the southern preachers in Fluvanna. He did meet with the northern preachers and got them to agree that John Wesley’s instructions would be followed and that Methodist preachers would refrain from administering the sacraments. Their consensus was conveyed to the larger assembly of preachers meeting one month later in Fluvanna. The southern brethren ignored the information, voting to have four of their senior preachers ordain each other and thereby make provision for the sacraments to be made available to their members. With strong feelings on both sides, north and south, conditions were ripe for a permanent schism within the young religious movement.

Much was at stake. If Strawbridge and company were to successfully press ahead with ordination and the sacraments, a major break with historic Methodism, the Anglican Church, and John Wesley would take place, and with it, the authority of Asbury. The structure, organization, and future of Methodism would be in doubt. Up to that time, Methodism was definitely not a church; even though it was officially a reform movement under the Anglican umbrella, membership in Methodist classes and societies was open to persons of all denominations. Ordination and the administration of the sacraments would substantially change the character of Methodism, but to what? And was that new entity to be determined without the guiding hand and theological direction of Wesley? Robert Strawbridge, the senior and headstrong leader of the southern contingent was evidently not one for structure and organization, and if a group of preachers could decide to chart their own course with a significant group of their colleagues absent, the table

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17 Jesse Lee said the Methodists of that time “were only a religious society, and not a church: and any member of any church, who would conform to our rules, and meet in a class, had liberty to continue in their own church” (Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists, in the United States of America; Beginning in 1766, and Continued ill 1809. To Which is Prefixed, A Brief Account of Their Rise in England, in the Year 1729, &c.* [Baltimore, 1810], 41).
would be set for each group of preachers to do the same. Asbury’s attempt to enforce historic Methodist discipline and tightly organize the work for maximum effectiveness would end. And Asbury’s leadership would be rendered irrelevant. The conferences of 1780 would be decisive in determining Methodism’s future.

At the northern conference in 1780 the assembled preachers voted to continue “old Methodism” by refraining from administering the sacraments and decided firmly “to renounce” the actions of their southern colleagues. In addition, they strongly affirmed Asbury’s leadership (most likely due to his seniority at the age of thirty-three and his prior relationship with Wesley), giving him broad powers to assign preachers to circuits and to decide any issue after hearing debate from all sides. In an attempt to avert an irrevocable separation, Asbury offered “conditions of union,” including stipulations that the southerners cease and desist from ordination and the administration of the sacraments. A delegation was formed to convey the conditions and sentiments of the Baltimore Conference to the southern conference in Virginia, and, if possible, effect reconciliation. The three chosen were Asbury, Watters, and Freeborn Garrettson.

Asbury went south with credentials as the indisputable leader of northern Methodism, as well as the senior itinerant with direct ties to Wesley. In 1772, eleven months after his arrival in the colonies, Wesley had appointed him as his assistant for the Methodist work there. He had proven his loyalty to colonial Methodism by steadfastly refusing to return to England, even when summoned home by Wesley. However, his war-time seclusion limited his travel and may have helped the southern preachers feel free to exercise independent judgment. After all, by 1779 they knew better than Asbury the local state of Anglican parishes and the needs and desires of the people for the holy ordinances.

Watters, a southerner by station who was in agreement with the decisions of the 1779 and 1780 northern conferences, was an obvious but perhaps risky choice to help heal the widening breach. In later reflections he wrote:

I had, by several leading characters on both sides, been suspected of leaning to the opposite. Could all have agreed to the administering [of] the ordinances I should have had no objection. But until that was the case, I could not view ourselves ripe for so great a change.

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18 In a footnote about Strawbridge, Clark, et al., state, “For about five years Strawbridge had asserted his customary independence by taking charge of the societies on Sam’s Creek and at Bush Forest without recognizing any authority” (Clark, The Life and Journals of the Rev. Francis Asbury, Vol. I, 411).
Nevertheless, he not only represented the sentiments of Asbury’s northern conference to the preachers in Fluvanna, once there he also voted against the decisions to pursue ordination and the sacraments.

The reasons for the choice of Garrettson are less evident. At the ripe old age of twenty-seven and with four years of experience, he counted as a senior itinerant. By 1780 he had served as an Assistant for two years. Perhaps his service on the Brunswick, Virginia, circuit in 1777 brought him into close acquaintance with key members of the southern contingent of preachers. However, it was his class status, his background as a southern gentleman, which added a subtle but powerful dimension to his stature and influence among the wayward preachers. Asbury would not have been unaware of those dynamics in his choice of Garrettson.

Gordon Wood argues that the American Revolution was “radical” in overturning a centuries-old culture of social stratification derived from the British monarchy that required deference to persons of higher status.24 Quoting from the autobiography of an older contemporary of Asbury and Garrettson, Wood writes:

> The awareness of the “difference between gentle and simple,” recalled the Anglican minister Devereaux Jarrett [sic.] of his humble youth in colonial Virginia, was “universal among all of my rank and age.” . . . People in lowly stations, Jarrett [sic.] remembered, were apt to be filled with consternation and awe when confronted with “what were called gentle folks . . . beings of a superior order.”25

The social dynamics described by Jarrett would have been somewhat muted by the 1780s but still evident to a noticeable degree. As Asbury, a British citizen of humble origins, needed to find a way to convey with some authority his wishes for the restoration of “old Methodism,” traveling south with Garrettson would have been a subtle means of insuring his message would be heard—and acceded to. Beginning in March of 1780, Asbury began to make plans for the upcoming conference. His journal entry for March 18, 1780, states in part, “Brother Garrettson took my place and appointments: we drew some outlines for our conference while together.”26 Asbury relied on Garrettson’s counsel, determining that he possessed the correct combination of status, personality, piety, and persuasion that would make his presence on this sensitive mission a help and not a hindrance.

According to Asbury, Watters and Garrettson lobbied some of the southern preachers before the Virginia conference began, but “found them inflexible.”27 In his unpublished journal Garrettson reported that the conference began with much affection, but that although union seemed possible, hope soon decreased while distress increased.28 Asbury’s last-minute compro-

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28 Simpson, American Methodist Pioneer, 176.
mise, that the decisions of the Fluvanna conference be suspended for a year until Wesley could be consulted, was initially rejected, and the northern delegation prepared to depart. Asbury reported the resolution of the affair as follows:

I returned to take leave of conference, and to go off immediately to the North; but found they were brought to an agreement while I had been praying, as with a broken heart, in the house we went to lodge at; and brother Watters and Garrettson had been praying upstairs where the conference sat.29

The collective prayers of the northern preachers were answered, no doubt aided by the prayers offered by Garrettson at the meeting, and the compromise was accepted. A love feast followed that both Garrettson and Asbury cited as effecting the healing process. The decision to obey Wesley and continue “old Methodism” was followed without significant incident in 1781, and the first major threat to the fledgling movement was averted.30

Garrettson’s pedigree served him and the church well a decade later as he was pursuing his work in New York State. It was generally thought at the time that poor people were more receptive to the Methodist message and manner of worship than were people of above average means. In 1789 Garrettson stated, “I am fully convinced (and it is an observation which I have made these many years) that poor people in general are more fond of the gospel than the rich.”31

In spite of expectations, early in the New York campaign Garrettson and Methodism made significant inroads with prominent families. In 1789 Garrettson lodged in “Peakskill” with Governor Van Courtlandt, and near Rhinebeck with the Tillotson and Livingston families. All three families

30 A good summary of the sacramental controversy is found in William A. Williams, The Garden of American Methodism: The Delmarva Peninsula, 1769-1820 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1984), 53-56. Overall, it may have been helpful that Strawbridge passed away in the summer of 1781. Of his passing Asbury remarked, “I am inclined to think the Lord took him away in judgment because he was in a way to do hurt to his cause. . .” (Clark, The Life and Journals of the Rev. Francis Asbury, Vol. I, 411).
31 Wesley also observed that “they that have the most money have usually the least grace.” Simpson, American Methodist Pioneer, 137, 246.
were related through marriage: the wife of “Governor” Van Courtlandt was the former Joanna Livingston, who was related as well (possibly an aunt) to Margaret Livingston Tillotson, the wife of Thomas Tillotson, Esq. Margaret Livingston Tillotson and Catherine Livingston were sisters. The Livingston children, among other resources, stood to inherit over “three quarters of a million acres of prime Hudson River Valley real estate,” and, like the southern aristocracy, how those resources would be consumed or enhanced through marriage was a family concern.

Thomas Tillotson was a Marylander by birth, and it is probable that old family ties helped Garrettson gain access to these prominent families who may otherwise have been less open to Methodist preaching. His manner and status undoubtedly made the Methodist message more acceptable to New York’s upper class, and helped dispel the prevailing stereotypes of Methodist members and clergy.

Through these contacts Garrettson met Catherine Livingston, and they were married in 1793. Asbury was not unaware of the financial resources this marriage might make available to the work of the church. In 1795 he remarked in his journal:

> God once put into brother Garrettson’s hands great riches of a spiritual nature, and he labored much; if he now does equal good according to his temporal ability, he will be blessed by the Lord, and by men.

The Garrettsons’ resources were a blessing to the church. They built a home in 1799 in Rhinebeck, New York, which they called Wildercliffe, and which Asbury renamed “Traveller’s Rest.” He and many other Methodist preachers made the home a regular stop on their way through New York State, and came to enjoy the hospitality or the ministry—if you will—of Catherine Garrettson as a respite from the toils of constant travel. On a visit there in 1802 Asbury proclaimed, “I do believe God dwells in this house.”

In regard to Garrettson’s finances, Bangs reports the following:

> it may be observed here, that Mr. Garrettson, during the whole course of his ministry, never received any pecuniary recompense, or if at some times, through the solicitation of his friends, he received any, it was given either to necessitous individuals, or

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32 “Governor” Van Courtlandt was actually Lt. Governor of the State of New York, 1777-1795. The Van Courtlandts were wealthy, and welcomed Methodist preachers as they had welcomed Washington, Whitefield, and others. It has been reported that they never formally became Methodists, (in spite of concerted efforts by Asbury and others), but donated land for a meeting house in Croton and allowed use of their land for a camp meeting (Clark, *The Life and Journals of the Rev. Francis Asbury*, Vol I, 727; Vol. III, 162-163; Annonymous, “Mary Rutherford Garrettson,” as found in Daniel Curry, ed., *National Repository Devoted to General and Religious Literature, Criticism and Art, Vol. VI*. [Cincinnati, OH: Hitchcock and Walden, 1879], 339; Simpson, ed., *American Methodist Pioneer*, 380-381).


deposited with the funds of the conference.\textsuperscript{36}

This is an extraordinary claim even if one considers only the approximately eighteen years Garrettson traveled without the benefit of his wife’s wealth. If true, it bolsters the earlier assertion that Garrettson’s personal inheritance was substantial.

Bangs’s claim, extraordinary though it may be about someone who labored in the traveling ministry for over fifty years, is bolstered by the claims of Billy Hibbard, who served in New York under Garrettson’s leadership. Hibbard did not have access to an independent source of income, and perhaps for that reason was not at liberty to ignore the subject of finances in his memoir. He remarked that the annual clergy salary of eighty dollars per year plus traveling expenses was not being raised among the circuits, creating quite a hardship for the preachers.\textsuperscript{37} He wrote:

\begin{quote}
However, this small sum was not raised by quarterly contributions; and as our presiding elder, brother Garrettson, received nothing for expenses or salary, which made it lighter for the circuits to make out the collections, yet they fell short nearly one-half, and some circuits more than half.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

In another entry, he notes how “Father Garrettson and Esquire Sands” supplied his family with food and clothes in a time of acute need.\textsuperscript{39} While “Father” Garrettson may have ignored his own finances, he seems to have been sensitive to the material plight of his preachers. He allowed the money earned by Hibbard’s wife to not be counted towards the stipulated family allowance, and even offered $1,000 and clothing towards the college education of Hibbard’s son, John.

The Methodist Charity School in New York City, the American Bible Society, the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Tract and Sunday School Societies, and the Methodist Church in Rhinebeck were among the recipients of Garrettson’s philanthropic efforts. Garrettson was a founder of the Missionary Society, “its first annual contributor,” and, in “one of the last acts of his life . . . [made] a bequest of an amount annually sufficient to support a single missionary, as he expressed it, until the millennium.”\textsuperscript{40} He was also reported to have forgiven the debt that accrued when he advanced funds to the Rhinebeck Church for construction costs “uncover-

\textsuperscript{36} Nathan Bangs, \textit{The Life of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson; Compiled from his Printed and Manuscript Journals, and Other Authentic Documents, Second Edition} (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1830), 325.

\textsuperscript{37} Married preachers were also allotted an additional eighty dollars for their wife, and sixteen dollars per child.

\textsuperscript{38} Billy Hibbard, \textit{Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard, Minister of the Gospel, Containing an Account of his Experience of Religion; and of his Call To and Labors in the Ministry for Nearly Fifty Years, Second Edition} (New York, 1843), 232.

\textsuperscript{39} Hibbard, \textit{Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard}, 221.

\textsuperscript{40} Bangs, \textit{The Life of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson}, 306, 330. Perhaps Garrettson never forgot his financial hardships as a missionary in Nova Scotia; see also 256, 280.
ered by subscription.”41 Asbury would certainly have been pleased.

It would be wrong to assert that Freeborn Garrettson’s prominence among the first group of American Methodist church leaders was due entirely or even significantly to the financial resources at his disposal and the status this allowed him in his day. There were a number of early Methodists who did not rise to positions of leadership within the church hierarchy who had blessed the church financially by building chapels and funding and housing preachers. Those of humble means who had hearts, heads, and hands for the grueling work of a circuit rider rose through the ranks because of their piety and longevity; Garrettson had to meet the same standard.42 With the possible exception of the Fluvanna controversy in which a largely untested Garrettson was called to play a critical leadership role, class status was but one of several qualities that allowed him to excel in his work. By examining Garrettson’s life we get a glimpse of how class status, though officially not a criteria for leadership, played a role in the development of the new church.

41 The Garrettson family contributed $1,500 of the $3,559.88 total; $324.12 was the balance remitted upon Garrettson’s death; see “Mary Rutherford Garrettson,” 347-348.
42 In all fairness, it can be ably argued that financial independence greatly supported one’s ability to endure the life of a Methodist preacher long enough to claim longevity!