Laymen, Bring Your Money:
Lee Claflin, Methodist Philanthropist, 1791-1871
by Donald B. Marti

In 1863 Matthew Simpson, a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, advocated the admission of laymen to the General Conference of his denomination. He told a convention organized on behalf of the reform that it would resolve the one “chronic irritation” tending to divide Methodist laymen from their clergy and that it would encourage laymen to increase their support of the church. Laymen, “bring your money, and endow your theological schools, and universities,” the Bishop urged. “God bless the Bishop,” cheered his loyal audience.1

Bishop Simpson saw great potential in laymen and their money. That potential had developed during the preceding half of the nineteenth century. Some of the “plain men” attracted to Methodism early in its American career had become less plain.2 They had risen, but remained socially distant from older elites and fiercely loyal to the church of their humble beginnings.3 They remembered, as former Massachusetts Governor William Claflin was able to do in 1888, that Methodists “were not always welcome” among the proud adherents of older denominations and their identification with the church was strengthened by that memory.4 Their devoted philanthropy fueled the growth of Methodism’s institutions and helped to change its polity.5

The Claflin family of Massachusetts was conspicuous among the newly rich and deeply committed Methodists of the nineteenth century. Its American history began with Robert Mackclothlan, who probably came to Massachusetts as an indentured servant after being captured with other

5. Smith, Revivalism and Social Reform, p. 80; Sylvanus Milne Duvall, The Methodist Episcopal Church and Education up to 1869 (New York: Teachers' College, Columbia University, 1928), p. 23; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 678n. Ahlstrom suggests that the service and philanthropic activities of “intensely evangelical businessmen” in nineteenth century America deserve more scholarly attention than they have received.
Scotch soldiers by Oliver Cromwell. He was admitted as a townsman of Wenham in 1661 and his offspring lived in modest industry until Daniel Claflin created a prosperous little tanning business and became a town officer of Hopkinton early in the eighteenth century. Daniel Claflin's grandson Ebenezer achieved some local fame as a sergeant in Captain John Holmes' militia company, which responded to the Lexington alarm of April 19, 1775. Hopkinton gave him a term in the Massachusetts House of Representatives, but he lost his grandfather's estate and in 1797 left his widow and eleven orphans in care of the town. 6

Lee Claflin was the tenth of those children, five years old at his father's death. He was placed with the farmer Aaron Smith who gave him "long days and short commons" for the next five years. 7 An unsympathetic historian has called Smith "soulless," but his rugged approach to life and labor was probably typical of Hopkinton. 8 Even in the affectationate memory of Mary Claflin, Hopkinton native and wife of Lee's son William, Hopkinton was a poor place marked by "austere monotony." Her grandfather, a medical doctor, was one of three educated men among the "honest, upright, God-fearing" but regrettably "narrow" townspeople. 9 They enjoyed few opportunities until the 1840's, when Lee Claflin and a few others led an expansion of the boot business. Then their numbers doubled, exceeding 4,000 by 1860, despite the secession of Unionville's 1,000 folk in 1850. 10

When Lee Claflin was ten years old Smith allowed him to break the turf around some fence corners to grow potatoes on his own account. The harvest realized seventy-five cents, the first money Claflin possessed. He is also said to have tanned a squirrel skin, which brought six and a quarter cents and an interest in the leather trade. Alert to new opportunities, he took a "silent and unceremonious departure" from Smith's farm and began an apprenticeship at a Framingham tannery, where he remained for ten years. 11

7. Sherman, History of the Wesleyan Academy, p. 304.
At age eighteen, while working in Framingham, Claflin joined the little Methodist church at Weston. His mother had been a devoted Methodist, but he later remembered himself as a "wicked boy" who required "innumerable mercies" from God before his conversion was effected. The evangelists of the Needham Circuit were most immediately responsible for bringing him into the church and through the remainder of his residence at Framingham he faithfully walked twelve miles, back and forth, from his home to the Weston church for Sunday services and midweek social meetings.

His church associations were helpful when Claflin began his own tannery at Milford. Small loans from brother Methodists kept the business going in its early stages and the Rev. Isaac Bonney helped even more importantly by encouraging Claflin's courtship of Sarah Adams. Her prosperous Hopkinton family gave the couple a $1,000 wedding present in 1815 and more large gifts soon after. With that stimulus, Claflin's business grew and within a few years included boot and shoe manufacture as well as tanning. His finished products, heavy men's boots in particular, were first sent by horsecart to Providence and then entered the western trade by way of New Orleans and St. Louis. His son William joined the business in 1834 and in 1838 went to buy hides and sell boots in St. Louis. A year later, Lee Claflin moved his factory to Hopkinton and began to spend much of his time supervising marketing operations from a headquarters in Boston while his friend L. H. Bowker looked after production.

While Claflin's business left a paucity of records, it was evidently complex and generally prosperous. He ruefully observed that the leather trade demanded "nerve," sometimes complained of his debts, and found resources to branch out into western land, banking, coal mining, and shipping. He may have earned as much as a million dollars.

12. Zion's Herald, March 2, 1871.
15. Ibid., pp. 307-8; Seth Bryant, Shoe and Leather Trade of the Last Hundred Years (Boston: Seth Bryant, 1891), pp. 39, 41.
Building his business left him little time or money for other activities until shortly after he moved back to Hopkinton. While he represented Milford in the General Court of 1834, he did not receive a committee assignment and found no other means of becoming conspicuous among the 563 men who served in the lower house that year. As for the church, his interest was "seldom drawn" to its enterprises until 1834, when he gave $500 to Wesleyan University. At about the same time the Rev. Dr. Hascall moved him to contribute toward the building of a Methodist church at Shrewsbury, and he began making large gifts to the church at Milford. Then, in his mid-fifties, as his business took its mature form, he became a self-conscious and highly disciplined philanthropist.

In 1834 he explained that development in a long letter to his son William, then about to return from St. Louis to Massachusetts. Lee Claflin's previous letters to William were short, full of business, and sometimes scathingly critical. He excused himself from sending more and better letters because "you know writing is quite a burden to me." In 1845, however, he thought William was taking a critical step and should be guided by paternal wisdom. He asked William to keep the letter "as long as you live" and read it regularly.

He told his son that Christ requires his disciples to renounce the world and follow Him. If William were to obey that injunction he must give all of his time to Christ, avoid company in which nothing was said of religion, and study the Bible twice daily "to know the will of God that you may do it." Biblical guidance would make him a "Steward of the Christ," aware that none of his time or income was properly his own. "If you spend the Lord's property imprudently or for needless things then you must give an account to God." William should follow John Wesley's call to get all that he could, save, and give for "benevolent purposes." Never hoarding his wealth, he should remember that the "Lord loveth the chearfull giver." Four years later, on New Year's Day, 1849, Lee Claflin adopted a new and severe means of enforcing good stewardship upon himself. Uncomfortable in the act of writing, he resolved to keep a weekly journal of his "feeling and progress in the Divine Life."

Faith was a struggle for him, requiring discipline, and even after hearing three sermons and attending

20. *Ibid.*, March 6, 1844; March 22, 1854; March 2, 1871.
evening prayer meeting he could complain of feeling “cold.” 25 Lacking assurance in his faith, needing to work for it, he ended his Sundays for the next twenty years by writing painful little paragraphs on his spiritual experiences and deeply felt shortcomings. 26

His journal entries record sermons he had heard, the worthy ministers who preached them, and their texts. He reported Sunday school classes, and his failure to speak when he should have said something. 27 He enjoyed love feasts and camp meetings, but came away feeling that he needed to be “more given up to God.” 28 Those were the significant events, worth recording in his journal, and business matters were allowed to intrude on the record only when they demonstrated some failing of his spirit. 29

Politics received little more attention, though his abhorrence of the Fugitive Slave Law inspired a few entries, and he welcomed the election of Charles Sumner to the United States Senate as a “triumph for liberty.” It was a step in God’s work against “oppression.” 30 So also the Civil War was divine punishment for the sin of slavery in which the whole nation, including Lee Claflin, shared guilt. 31

After religious services, he wrote most about death. His friends were passing, he read of disasters, and wrote, “Oh how important to be prepared to meet God.” 32 In 1853 he predicted that his death would come “soon” and he lived with that heavy sense of mortality until he died eighteen years later. 33 It goaded him in his struggle for faith and gave urgency to his prayer for “help to be up and doing while the day lasts.” 34

After keeping his journal for seven months, he devised another self-discipline. Sure that he had enough property for his own needs and those of his family, he resolved to devote his “increase” or at least twelve dollars a day to benevolence. 35 Then the back pages of his journals were filled with lists of gifts. Cords of wood for poor folk, fifty dollars toward a manual labor school, five dollars to help a fugitive slave, twenty dollars for a black man trying to buy his wife, $250 to assist the preachers at Providence: all but his largest gifts were listed in the brown leather books, making a detailed, if often cryptic, record of diverse philanthropies. 36

25. Ibid., September 17, 1860.
26. Ibid., August 31, 1856.
27. Ibid., October 50, 1859.
28. Ibid., June 2, 1850; September 9, 1855; April 11, 1858.
29. Ibid., April 28 and May 5, 1861.
30. Ibid., April 27 and March 2, 1851.
31. Ibid., March 2, 1851; July 20, 1861.
32. Ibid., September 2, 1849; June 23 and September 25, 1853.
33. Ibid., September 25, 1853.
34. Ibid., March 11, 1855.
35. Ibid., August 12, 1849.
36. Ibid., various gifts listed for 1849-1852.
Lee Claflin's record accounts for more than two hundred and fifty thousand dollars given during the twenty years from 1849 to 1869. It omits some of his more important educational endeavors but includes tax payments, which he seemed to consider philanthropic. It is not, as his obituary in *Zion's Herald* stressed, a complete or accurate account of his giving. That obituary estimated that he had given half a million dollars, all told, more than any contemporary Methodist except Daniel Drew.\(^{37}\) The historian of the Wesleyan Academy at Wilbraham, Massachusetts, a major recipient of his gifts, offered the same estimate of Claflin's philanthropy.\(^{38}\)

If Lee Claflin's list of gifts fails to measure the size of his philanthropic effort, it does illustrate his method of giving. *Zion's Herald* observed that philanthropists, as preachers, have distinctive styles and Claflin's was to give in ways that might lead others to give. "How much do you absolutely need?" he asked petitioners. Presented with a figure, he would promise to give some major portion of it when the rest had been pledged. "Undoubtedly," *Zion's Herald* reckoned, "not a few brethren are busy now, building up their subscriptions to the height required for his cap-stone."\(^{39}\) William Claflin learned the truth of that when a college president came to him for $5,000 with which his father, not long before dying, had promised to crown the president's fund drive.\(^{40}\)

Lee Claflin's "cap-stone" tactic was frequently employed in his giving to churches. Thus, he attended a service to dedicate a new church at Mendon and arose to say that he would pay the last $100 of its debt.\(^{41}\) In similar fashion he told the struggling little church at Milford, six years after he left the town, that if local people could raise $200 to support preaching there for a year, he would contribute whatever more might be needed. He continued his subsidies to the Milford church in later years and during Joseph Whitman's pastorate of 1848 and 1849, contributed toward the building of a meeting house and parsonage.\(^{42}\) At about the same time, he contracted to give $2,000 toward a building for the Hopkinton Methodists if they would raise another $500.\(^ {43}\)

His record of gifts shows many smaller contributions to churches. In

\(^{37}\) *Zion's Herald*, March 2, 1871.


\(^{39}\) *Zion's Herald*, March 2, 1871.

\(^{40}\) E. W. Hall to William Claflin, Philadelphia, May 9, 1871. Claflin Collection, Hayes Library.

\(^{41}\) A. Caldwell to Rev. J. Williams, Cherry Valley, Massachusetts, February 19, 1873. Claflin Collection, Hayes Library.

\(^{42}\) *A History of the Milford Methodist Episcopal Church*, pp. 18, 23, 28, 32; *Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, March 22, 1854.

1849 he gave to an "African Baptist" church, the Canton Street Church in Boston, a "colored church" in Boston, the Methodist Church in Topsfield and, repeatedly, to the Methodist Church at Worcester.\(^{44}\) He also gave freely to ministers. Everett O. Fisk, who grew up in a family of six children supported by a Methodist preacher often paid less than $500 a year, remembered that Lee Claflin often visited the homes of such needy ministers. Fisk knew of no wealthy laymen, before or after Lee Claflin, who equaled his generosity to poor ministers and their families.\(^{45}\)

Making many small gifts, and trying to involve others in giving, demanded time and care. With that in mind, Lee Claflin began his record of contributions with a prayer for "wisdom" in administering his funds.\(^{46}\) His prudently calculated philanthropy also involved him with societies intended to organize church giving. He demonstrated his support of organized benevolence by frequent donations to the Tract Society, the Bible Society, the missionary societies of his denomination, and the American Missionary Association.\(^{47}\) In a few cases he accepted leadership in benevolent societies, as he did in 1859 when the New England Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church established the Church Aid Society to provide systematic help for new and poor churches. Known for his interest in that endeavor, Lee Claflin was chosen President of the Society with the Reverend Gilbert Haven, later bishop, as Corresponding Secretary. The Society was to collect money from local churches in the conference and distribute it in amounts no greater than $400.\(^{48}\) Contributions during Claflin's presidency were disappointing. Many churches failed to give and those that did averaged only seven dollars.\(^{49}\)

Lee Claflin had very much the same frustrating experience with the Preachers' Aid Society, the New England Conference's arm for assisting superannuated ministers. Profoundly respectful of the clergy, Claflin particularly venerated the "Old veterans of the Cross," and so gave to the society and served in several of its offices.\(^{50}\) As President in 1866, he had to report that it was giving annual grants of only fifty dollars to some retired ministers. He thought that was poor care for "those whose lives were given

\(^{44}\) Lee Claflin's Sunday Journal, gift list for 1849. Claflin Collection, Hayes Library.
\(^{45}\) Marsh, *The Founders of Boston University*, pp. 16-17.
\(^{46}\) Lee Claflin's Sunday Journal, January 1, 1849. Claflin Collection, Hayes Library.
\(^{48}\) *Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, May 18, 1859.
\(^{50}\) Lee Claflin's Sunday Journal, April 3, 1864 and 1851 gift list. Claflin Collection, Hayes Library; *Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, April 4, 1860 and April 50, 1862.
Organized benevolence in the ranks of Methodism was plainly not sufficient to lift much responsibility from individual philanthropists. A stronger but still limited organization in which Claflin served was the New England Education Society. Begun in 1855 to assist indigent students preparing for ministry in the several New England conferences, its officers included men active in the support of Wesleyan University and the Wesleyan Academy at Wilbraham. Lee Claflin served as a director of the society during its first year and held other offices at later times. In 1859 Secretary William Warren, later President of Boston University, reported that the society was assisting twenty-six men and that its quarterly expenditure was $300. In the four years of its existence it had helped thirty-two men.

By that time New England Methodists had developed educational institutions in which would-be ministers could study. It had been slow to do so. New England Methodism had no educational institution until the academy at Wilbraham opened its doors in 1825. Its founding principal was Wilbur Fisk, an 1815 Brown University graduate who may have been the first New England Methodist minister educated at that level. Fisk left Wilbraham in 1830 to become the first President of Wesleyan University. The two institutions were the whole of the New England Conference's educational establishment for another decade, and Wesleyan remained its only college or university until another was founded at Boston in 1869.

Lee Claflin was drawn to those institutions because he loved preaching. "O how good to have the gospel," and how high was the calling to spread it throughout the world. He tried to participate in the great work by conversing "with some during the week on the all important concerns of the soul," but he had no calling or ability to preach. Therefore, as he told a clerical friend, he wanted to "do all I can to help others to preach." The proper function of universities was to train preachers. His son William's withdrawal from Brown University in 1834, after a year of study,
may have resulted from his failure to receive ministerial calling and his father’s fear that remaining at Brown might turn him into a lawyer. 60 Wesleyan University produced ministers, chiefly, as Lee Claflin was glad to confirm when he attended the 1852 commencement. 61 That made it an inspiring place to visit and be associated with. “O what great things God has done for me today,” he wrote after the 1858 commencement, and in 1862 he rejoiced particularly because he had seen a black man graduate. “God bless him and make him useful in his vineyard.” 62

Lee Claflin was not among the earliest contributors to Wesleyan University, but his five hundred dollar gift of 1844 was one of the two largest received that year. 63 When serious efforts to build an endowment began in 1847, he made larger gifts. The $18,000 accumulated for the university by 1855 included a $1,000 railroad bond from Lee Claflin and his personal record of gifts shows an $850 donation for 1851. 64 The Centum Millia Fund drive, begun in 1855, fell short of its $100,000 goal, but attracted $10,000 from Lee Claflin. His was one of the three largest donations to that drive, being half of Isaac Rich’s gift and equal to that of the State of Connecticut. 65

In 1853 he was elected to the Wesleyan Board of Trustees, joining Jacob Sleeper and Isaac Rich, future collaborators in the foundation of Boston University. 66 That later venture would conflict with their Middletown loyalties, but the three men remained on the Wesleyan board for the rest of their lives. 67 Apart from commencements and annual board meetings on the same day, Lee Calflin probably engaged in little activity at Wesleyan, but his interest in at least some of its students is suggested by letters he received in 1862 and 1863 from a senior asking “Father Claflin” for advice on ministerial appointments in the New England Conference. 68

Lee Claflin’s contributions to the Wesleyan Academy at Wilbraham probably began in 1850, when his son, Wilbur Fisk Claflin, enrolled there. 69 He visited Wilbraham, remarked the “good priviledges” it of-

60. Ibid., September 24, 1868.
62. Ibid., August 8, 1858 and July 20, 1862.
63. Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal, March 6, 1844.
67. Ibid.; Zion’s Herald, February 8, 1872.
68. Francis J. Wagner to Lee Claflin, Middletown, December 1, 1862 and January 26, 1863. Claflin Collection, Hayes Library.
ferred, hoped that many of its students would experience conversion, and rejoiced when Wilbur found “the Pearl of great Price” after a year there.\(^70\) In 1850 he also served as an examiner at the academy, appointed by the New England Conference, and joined its board of trustees. He remained on the board until succeeded by Wilbur Fisk Claflin in 1859.\(^71\)

In 1857 the academy met financial disaster. Its boarding house, just completed for $50,000, was destroyed by arson. Only $20,000 of the loss was covered by insurance. Within two weeks of the fire a committee of eleven, including Lee Claflin, the Reverend Gilbert Haven, Isaac Rich, and Jacob Sleeper, called a meeting at the Bromfield Street Church in Boston. That meeting established a committee to raise money from alumni and another, including Claflin, Rich and Sleeper, to solicit the general public. An appeal, including a brief history of the academy, was speedily published in *Zion’s Herald*.\(^72\) Then a two-day “Festival” was held at Faneuil Hall, where the sale of “fancy articles” raised $1,500 and Lee Claflin offered $10,000. Another gentleman, probably Isaac Rich, pledged twice that amount.\(^73\)

Not yet on solid financial ground, the academy made an unsuccessful bid for state aid in 1858. Its request was renewed in 1859 with support from William Claflin, then serving in the state senate. After some bargaining, the General Court allocated income from the sale of Back Bay land to a number of educational institutions, including Louis Agassiz’ new Museum of Comparative Zoology, Tufts College, Williams, Amherst, and the Wesleyan Academy at Wilbraham. The academy’s allocation was not to exceed twenty-five thousand dollars, half of that allowed Tufts and one quarter of the grant to Agassiz’ museum.\(^74\)

In 1862 a new boarding house capable of housing two hundred students was dedicated with special thanks to “those noble spirited men, Isaac Rich and Lee Claflin, who have so munificently contributed to the erection.”\(^75\) That, apparently, ended their major services to the academy. When funds for a new chapel were collected in 1866, Rich and Claflin were publicly excused from making large donations.\(^76\) The academy’s historian believed that Claflin’s important gifts totaled $12,000, suggesting that he

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\(^70\). *Ibid.*, June 30, 1850 and October 19, 1851.
\(^72\). *Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, October 14, 1857, October 21, 1857, and November 4, 1857.
\(^75\). *Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, July 22, 1862.
accepted the leave offered him in 1866. 77

Lee Claflin was then deeply involved in plans to transfer the Biblical Institute supported by the several New England conferences from Concord, New Hampshire to the neighborhood of Boston. The seminary had lived in poverty since 1839, when it was begun by a joint committee of the New England and New Hampshire conferences. First located in Newbury, Vermont, on the site of a defunct seminary, it was hampered by its remote location, "the anti-slavery battle, the Millerite frenzy," and lack of financial support from the "generally poor" Methodists of New England. The first problem was partially remedied when the North Congregational Society of Concord, New Hampshire, having built a new church, offered its old building to the Biblical Institute. The historian of the New England Conference considered that a landmark in the improvement of Methodist relations with the formerly unfriendly Congregationalists. Then citizens of Concord offered to adapt the old church to academic uses if the Institute would promise to remain in the town for twenty years. Finally, in 1847, the Concord Biblical Institute opened with seven students and a New Hampshire state charter. 78

Bishop Elijah Hedding was nominally President of the Institute until his death in 1852 and the three original professors included John Dempster, who left in 1854 to found the Garrett Biblical Institute in Evanston, Illinois. 79 Dempster involved Lee Claflin in the small beginnings at Concord by opening a $2,500 fund to be made up of five hundred dollars from five individuals. Claflin subscribed to the fund and in 1850 joined the Institute's Board of Trustees. 80

One of the longer entries in Lee Claflin's journal for 1850 concerns his November visit to Concord for the Trustees' meeting. It was a "privilege" making him "thankful that God has given me the ability to assist in some measure his servants in preparing for his service." 81 He pledged the last $500 required for a student boarding house and thereafter made annual pilgrimages to Concord, combined with visits to the Reverend Orlando Hines, an old friend living nearby. 82

Professor Stephen M. Vail, who served the Institute from 1849 to 1867, later remembered that Claflin allowed him one hundred dollars every quarter to help poor students and also assisted the professors, who were paid $500 a year and who were all $1,000 behind in their salary by

77. Sherman, History of the Wesleyan Academy, p. 310.
79. Ibid., p. 340.
80 Zion's Herald, August 31, 1871.
82. Zion's Herald, August 31, 1871.
1862. Vail believed that the professors “would have given up in despair on more than one occasion” without Claflin’s personal help. 83 He made a scattering of other donations for additional rooms, a bell, and the purchase of a library. 84 Plainly Claflin enjoyed visiting the Institute, counting its graduates — twelve in 1857, fifteen in 1863 — and hearing its professors preach. He thought it was “doing well.” 85

In 1863, when Lee Claflin was President of the Institute’s Board of Trustees, planning began for a move to the neighborhood of Boston. The Board estimated that its capital would have to be increased by $50,000, to a total of $100,000, to make the move feasible, but it was clearly desirable despite that difficulty. 86 Boston had no Methodist educational institution and so the Institute could hope for ready support from generous brethren there. Moreover, location in or near New England’s population center was expected to increase enrollments. 87 The move from Concord, then, was conceived as a bid for growth.

In 1866 the Boston Theological School was chartered by the State of Massachusetts and the task of selecting a location was given a committee chaired by Lee Claflin. The committee also elected a Board of Trustees including Lee and William Claflin, Jacob Sleeper, Isaac Rich, and Bishop Osmon Baker. The trustees elected Lee Claflin as their President and assigned both Lee and William Claflin to the prudential committee. 88 Later in the same year Zion’s Herald announced that the Institute would be located within three miles of the capital and would take advantage of Methodism’s centennial year to raise an endowment of $300,000. That much money would keep it from being “a sickly institution ... beginning for toleration, an object of pity among ourselves, and of contempt among other denominations.” In 1875 the Institute’s successor institution still sought that amount of endowment. 89

After some negotiation with Lewis Tappan for a site in Brookline, the Theological School located at 23 Pinckney Street, on Beacon Hill. 90 Very soon thereafter a movement to expand Methodism’s educational presence

83. Ibid.
84. Ibid., November 23, 1853 and April 1, 1863.
86. Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal, December 9, 1863.
88. Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal, January 17, 1866.
89. Ibid., October 14, 1866; William F. Warren to William Claflin, Wilbraham, August 10, 1875. Claflin Collection, Hayes Library.
90. L. Tappan to William Claflin, Brooklyn, New York, January 17, 1867. Claflin Collection, Hayes Library; Records of Trustees of Boston University, p. 12 of typescript. Special Collections Department, Boston University Library.
in Boston began. William F. Warren, who became President of the Theological School when it opened in 1867, wrote that Lee Claflin was "the first known proposer and advocate" of a university to be associated with the School, but that assertion of Claflin's priority was denied by the Reverend J. H. Twombly in a posthumous article claiming that the idea of a Methodist university in Boston was "floating in the air" immediately after the Theological School located in the city.91 Nothing serious was done about it in 1867, but Twombly, who had been a mathematics teacher at Wilbraham and would later be President of the University of Wisconsin, was distressed by the "very inferior" educational position of New England Methodists and their small representation in the learned professions. He thought that a Methodist university in the capital would overcome those evils, and "after a season of fervent supplication to God for direction and help, I solemnly promised him to work for a Methodist college or university in Boston till I saw the institution or died." Jacob Sleeper was first to encourage Twombly, he remembered, and Lee Claflin, once found with leisure to talk, promised substantial help.92

Whoever may have taken the first initiative, a group of prominent Methodists sought to found a university in the spring of 1869. Jacob Sleeper, the Reverend Gilbert Haven, Dr. Warren, Isaac Rich, Lee Claflin and William Claflin all supported the movement. Isaac Rich, who was expected to be the most important donor to the university, at first doubted whether he should divert much of his giving from Wesleyan University to the new foundation in Boston and may have been enlisted for the project by Lee Claflin, who "steadily pressed" the merits of a Boston university "upon his wealthier friend and brother."93

The General Court granted a charter for Boston University which was signed by Governor William Claflin on May 26, 1869. Isaac Rich, Lee Claflin and Jacob Sleeper were the named incorporators, having power to elect other members of the corporation, to receive income up to $100,000 a year, and to expend funds for the promotion of "virtue and piety, and learning...."94

The first official meeting of the Boston University corporation, held at the *Zion's Herald* office on July 22, 1869, elected eleven additional

94. Records of Trustees of Boston University, pp. 1-3 of Typescript. Special Collections Department, Boston University Library.
members, including William Claflin, the Methodist publisher H. O. Houghton, and several ministers, including John H. Twombly, Gilbert Haven, and William F. Warren. Isaac Rich was elected President of the corporation and William Claflin Vice-President. The second meeting, in October, chose a committee to negotiate with the Boston Theological School for a merger of the two institutions. The merger was finally completed in March, 1871, by a legislative act signed by retiring Governor William Claflin. That gave the University its first active department and its first substantial capital. The Theological School funds included $31,000 in notes from Lee Claflin and $10,000 in notes from William Claflin, as well as 2,000 acres of Iowa land, probably a gift from the Claflins, and more than $6,000 worth of stock in Lee Claflin’s Hopkinton Bank. Lee Claflin died only weeks before the merger was completed and, as a last contribution to the establishment of Boston University, joined Isaac Rich and Jacob Sleeper in guaranteeing a $40,000 loan from the Boston Five Cents Saving Bank, of which William Claflin was a trustee. 95

Boston University set out to be a distinctive institution. The founders did not intend it to be “a college in the ordinary sense of that term, but...a group of collegiate and post-collegiate schools, in which, in the process of time, all forms of higher professional and general education might be conferred.” 96 Faithful to that intention, the corporation planned Schools of Law, Medicine, and Universal Science to accompany the School of Theology. All were to enroll graduate students and award advanced degrees. The School of Universal Science was to award the Doctorate of Philosophy. Recipients of such degrees would be eligible for fellowships supporting study at foreign universities and would be preferred for faculty appointments in Boston University. At the same time, the corporation planned a set of undergraduate colleges offering programs in liberal arts, agriculture, mining and engineering, commerce, painting and sculpture, pharmacy, dentistry, music, and architecture. Parts of the grand outline were deliberately abandoned, as was the college of agriculture, and much of it was long delayed, but the idea of Boston University was clear and ambitious. 97

The university was also intended to be a pioneer of co-education. Accepting women students from the outset, which was already usual for Methodist institutions, it also included women among the officers of the university. 98 In 1878 it accepted a “Women’s Professorship” as a gift from

95. Ibid., pp. 1, 7-10, 39, 148-151, and 184. 
96. Ibid., p. 138. 
97. Ibid., pp. 56-58, 312-313. 
98. Duvall, The Methodist Episcopal Church and Education, p. 73; Moses Coit Tyler, quoted in a Boston University pamphlet enclosed with William F. Warren to William Claflin, Wilbraham, October 22, 1875. Claflin Collection, Hayes Library.
the Massachusetts Society for the University Education of Women, in which Mary Claflin and President Warren played important roles, and in the same year elected Mary Claflin and Mrs. Augustus Hemenway to the corporation. Whatever relationship those developments had to the founders' intentions, they owed much to the Claflin family. 99

Lee Claflin's educational philanthropies were not limited to his own neighborhood. He contributed to colleges in Ohio, New Jersey, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, and Wisconsin. 100 His most important western philanthropies were probably Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, and Wilberforce University in Xenia Springs, Ohio.

Lawrence University began in 1848 with a charter from the State of Wisconsin and a promise from A. A. Lawrence that he would give $10,000 if the same sum could be raised in the Methodist church. A few years later Lee Claflin gave some land in Kenosha, Wisconsin, from which $10,000 was realized for endowment of the President's chair. His material interest in Lawrence University continued at least through 1862, and his son William also gave money to the institution. 101

The endeavor which produced Wilberforce University began at the 1853 meeting of the Cincinnati Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The Reverend A. Lowrey initiated a successful motion that a committee be formed to devise some way of helping black people. That committee's very general report, with an appended resolution calling specifically for the organization of a "literary institution," was adopted by the conference in 1854 and in 1855 it appointed a committee to start organizing such a college. The committee included the Reverend Mansfield French, President of Xenia Female Seminary, who was later active in educational work among South Carolina freedmen during the Civil War. The committee bought a property at Xenia Springs, Ohio, for $13,500 and in 1856 Wilberforce University was chartered by the state. 102

In 1858 the Reverend French, acting as the University's agent in the eastern states, reported that Lee Claflin had increased his original pledge

99. Records of Trustees of Boston University, pp. 448-450 of typescript. Special Collections Department, Boston University Library; William Claflin, then President of the Board, shared his wife's interest in women's rights and opportunities. See Lucy Stone to William Claflin, Boston, January 12, 1871, Claflin Collection, Hayes Library.

100. A. S. (Rollins?) to Lee Claflin, Macon, Missouri, August 27, 1869; James Harlan to William Claflin, Mount Pleasant, Iowa, June 20, 1871; (S. A.?) Cooley to Lee Claflin, Dixon, Illinois, November 28, 1862; R. H. Stinchfield to Lee Claflin, New Jersey, June 20, 1870. The above, and many other letters on Lee Claflin's gifts to colleges, are in the Claflin Collection, Hayes Library.

101. Zion's Herald, October 8, 1874, August 10, 1852; R. Z. Mason to A. A. Lawrence, Appleton, Wisconsin, October 9, 1862. A. A. Lawrence Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

to $10,000. The Board of Trustees passed resolutions of thanksgiving and promised to establish a Claflin professorship. 103 In February, 1859, Claflin sent an additional $150 to French for the assistance of poor students at Wilberforce. He told French that he felt "it a privilege to be able to help some of those of our unfortunate friends, that are not able to prepare themselves for usefulness." He asked French to pray "that I may have grace and wisdom to do all I can in the cause of Christ." 104

Claflin's $10,000 was greeted as a crucial contribution, much enhancing the University's chance of survival. By 1862, however, Wilberforce was deeply in debt. It closed for a year and then President Richard S. Rust, later Secretary of the Freedmen's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, told Bishop Alexander Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal Church that his denomination might have the property in return for assuming the school's $10,000 debt. Bishop Payne soon raised the money and acquired the University for an amount equal to Claflin's major gift. 105

Lee Claflin's support of Wilberforce University expressed his consistent interest in "our colored friends" to whom, he wrote Lewis Tappan in 1864, "we are under great obligation." 106 He used a similar phrase in his 1852 journal after hearing a sermon on the plight of blacks who had fled New England for Canada after passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. He felt "indebted to the poor fugitives," and prayed for help "to do to them as I would that they do to me." 107 He saw a judgment hanging over "this wicked country" because of its "cruell laws." 108 Only repentance could prevent "wrath from being poured out upon us for we are a wicked people." 109 Part of repentence, Claflin appeared to believe, was a serious effort to settle white America's debt to the wronged blacks.

Claflin gave to individual black people, to their churches, and to funds aiding them in Canadian exile. 110 Everett O. Fisk claimed that the Claflin home was a "well-known station on the 'underground railroad.'" 111 More certainly, Claflin contributed to the American Missionary Association and regularly attended its meetings in Boston. 112

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103. Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal, December 1, 1858.
104. Ibid., March 2, 1859.
105. Payne, History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, p. 422.
108. Ibid., July 4, 1852 and March 15, 1851.
109. Ibid., February 16, 1862.
110. Ibid., gift lists for 1849, 1850, and 1851.
111. Marsh. The Founders of Boston University, p. 17.
Politically, he participated in a drive to raise money from the Boston leather trade for the New England Emigrant Aid Company's work in Kansas. Having raised $20,000, the leather men were entitled to name two Kansas towns, one of which they called Claflin. Finally, Claflin was an early supporter of the Liberty Party and then remained loyal to the Republican Party until 1870, when he permitted his name to appear as a vice-president of the Prohibition Party convention which nominated Wendell Phillips to run for Governor — against William Claflin.

*Zion's Herald,* in an article probably written by Gilbert Haven, said that Claflin combined "radicalism and religion." That wholesome outlook, with his consistent interest in higher education, involved him in the education of Southern freedmen. In 1866 he supported Gilbert Haven's abortive proposal for an integrated college in Tennessee. Then his attention was drawn to South Carolina through the Reverend Timothy Willard Lewis.

Lewis became acquainted with Lee Claflin while filling the Methodist pulpit at Hopkinton in 1851, 1860, and 1861. In 1864 Lewis went to Beaufort, South Carolina, as a missionary from the New England Conference, having charge of its work throughout South Carolina and Florida. He entered Charleston with the Union Army in February, 1865, and for a period of at least several weeks served the city's Methodists singlehandedly. Though he won few of the local white people for his connection, his commitment to racial equality earned the confidence of blacks. In 1866 he became Presiding Elder of the Charleston District and spent the next three years traveling on horseback and shoe leather, living with black Methodists, eating their "hog and hominy," for which he had a natural loathing, and suffering insults from the local whites. Lewis died of a fever in October, 1871, and was buried in Charleston.

On Friday evening, March 30, 1866, Lewis and the Reverend Alonzo Webster, former editor of the *Vermont Christian Messenger,* then serving as pastor of the Charleston churches, greeted distinguished visitors from

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117. *Zion’s Herald,* October 12, 1871.


119. *Zion’s Herald,* December 28, 1871.
the New England Conference. Bishop Osmon Baker, formerly a professor at the Biblical Institute in Newbury, Vermont and Concord, New Hampshire, was accompanied by the Reverend D. P. Leavitt and Lee Claflin. They spent Saturday "going about Zion," inspecting the work in progress, and on Sunday Bishop Baker preached to at least 2,500 people and ordained six local men who had been elected deacons by the New England Conference. On Monday the Bishop did what Lewis and Webster had hoped he might. He pronounced their work sufficiently advanced to justify organization of the South Carolina Mission Conference. The work of organization continued through Tuesday and concluded with expressions of optimism, and a gift of $1,000 from Lee Claflin. Leavitt observed that the South Carolina brethren saw the wisdom of lay participation in conferences, "taking Bro. Claflin for a specimen." 120

The New England visitors gave special attention to the Baker Theological Institute. Lewis organized the seminary and served as President, Webster taught theology and elocution, and two other men, one a former slave, taught courses in science. Begun with seven students, it had nineteen when the South Carolina Mission Conference was organized and fifteen a year later. Neither Lewis nor Webster could give adequate attention to the institution, outside monetary aid stopped in 1868, and it then seemed likely to die. 121

In 1869 Lewis and Webster had an opportunity to rescue the Institute and simultaneously expand the Methodist educational ministry in South Carolina. The Orangeburg Female College, a Presbyterian property valued at $40,000, was offered to Lewis for $5,000. With that property they could organize a college eligible for help from the Methodist Freedmen's Aid Society with Baker Institute as its theological department. They made the purchase in July, 1869, thanks largely to gifts totaling $2,500 from Lee Claflin and his sons. More contributions, making $2,200 by July, 1873, flowed from the family to the college. 122 Lewis and Webster, therefore, named it Claflin University.

Alonzo Webster served as President and suffered criticism and disappointment until succeeded by the Reverend Edward Cooke, formerly President of Lawrence University, in 1874. Webster thought that support from the Freedmen's Aid Society, which paid his faculty, was inadequate and he plainly resented what he took to be interference from the Reverend Richard Rust, the Society's Secretary. 123 Webster had large ambitions for

120. Ibid., April 11, 1866 and April 18, 1866: Lee Claflin's Sunday Journal, April 1, 1866. Claflin Collection, Hayes Library.
121. Zion's Herald, April 11, 1866 and January 2, 1868.
122. Ibid., October 14, 1869; Alonzo Webster to William Claflin, Orangeburg, July 11, 1873. Claflin Collection, Hayes Library.
123. Alonzo Webster to William Claflin, Orangeburg, July 24, 1873; July 17, 1874; July 29, 1874. Claflin Collection, Hayes Library.
Claflin University, wanted it to be a great, integrated, regional institution, "on the plan of your Boston University," and he grieved in the failure of those ambitions. 124

Lee Claflin died in February, 1871, and so had little opportunity to observe progress in Orangeburg. He seemed content with what he saw of it when he visited the school in June, 1870. It then had just over one hundred students, a six-acre campus, and inadequate boarding facilities, which Claflin would help to improve. Its four departments had no more than the same number of faculty, but the students were said to be "ambitious" and they seemed pleased to meet their benefactor. 125 Claflin honored them with a little speech, or sermon, on his own early poverty and the possibility, under God, of success through "diligence, temperance, and economy." When the Reverend Lewis asked the students to give Claflin a vote of thanks, the seventy-eight year old philanthropist asked their pledges not to indulge in tobacco or whiskey. He was pleased by their "cheerful response." 126 Claflin knew that virtue could triumph over poverty; it would have many opportunities to do so at Claflin University.

That concluded Claflin's career in philanthropy. Zion's Herald marked his death with a front page obituary, a rarity for the journal, saying that he was one of the most famous Methodists in America. 127 He was certainly among the richest and most generous. With a few others of his generation he had risen from poverty to a degree of wealth then rare in his denomination. Loyally sharing his success with the church, he acquired a position of leadership in its affairs. Ministers sought his help and involved him in their projects. He filled offices in denominational societies and institutions. Thus he helped to expand the role of laymen in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The Church had been troubled with questions about the role since 1792, when James O'Kelley's "Republican Methodism" movement had protested the clerical monopoly of authority. In 1824 a movement for lay representation in the General Conference of the church had produced the Methodist Protestant schism and in 1852 the question of lay representation was raised again by a group of Philadelphia laymen. 128 By that time the Virginia and South Carolina Conferences were allowing laymen to attend their annual meetings and speak on questions of finance. Zion's Herald recommended that practice to the New England Conference because

124. Alonzo Webster to William Claflin, Orangeburg, February 26, 1873; February 27, 1873. Claflin Collection, Hayes Library.
125. Zion's Herald, January 20, 1870; May 19, 1870; February 23, 1871.
126. Ibid., June 16, 1870.
127. Ibid., March 2, 1871.
128. Ibid., February 18, 1852.
“preachers are undeniably not the best financiers in the world.” 129

In 1855 the New England Conference adopted a similarly practical compromise. It allowed its several committees to admit such laymen as they thought likely to be helpful. Six laymen, including Lee Claflin, Jacob Sleeper and Isaac Rich, were then admitted to the committee on education. The largest conference committee, it was the only one of the twenty-four to admit laymen. 130

The New England Conference moved to expand lay participation in 1857 by requesting the District Stewards to elect five lay delegates from each district to the next annual conference. Lee Claflin and Jacob Sleeper were among the eleven laymen who served under that authority in 1858, when a conference committee on lay participation recommended that the arrangement be continued. The committee, for which the Reverend J. H. Twombly signed, argued that laymen had a “right” to be consulted on monetary affairs, though probably not on clerical appointments. Further, acceptance of lay participation would resolve the one issue which had created dissension between Methodist clergy and laity, and would answer the chief criticism of Methodist polity heard from without the denomination. Lay participation would also enlist “men of extensive practical business” in the growing educational and philanthropic enterprises of the church. Presumably “men have more interest in an enterprise when they help control it, than when they do not.” 131

The New England Conference admitted lay delegates continuously until 1871, when lay interest waned, “there not being found much of importance for the delegates to do.” 132 At the same time enthusiasm for lay representation in the General Conference of the church was rising. It began at a low point when the General Conference of 1860 asked laymen to vote on the reform. The national vote was heavily negative and the New England Conference poll, while favorable, attracted only 1,100 voters. 133 Pressure for the reform continued, with conspicuous support from Bishop Matthew Simpson, and in 1864 Lee Claflin presided over a Boston meeting which elected delegates to a lay convention to be held coincidently with the General Conference in Philadelphia. William Claflin and James Woolson, a business associate of the Claflins, were among the delegates chosen. 134

The Conference received the laymen cordially enough, declared in favor of lay representation in principle, but concluded that the church as a whole had not yet shown support for the reform. 135

129. Ibid., February 11, 1852.
130. Ibid., April 18, 1855.
131. Ibid., May 5, 1858; Mudge, History of the New England Conference, pp. 243-244.
133. Ibid., p. 245.
134. Zion’s Herald, May 18, 1864.
135. Ibid., June 8, 1864.
Another lay convention met at Boston in 1867, with William Claflin as president and Lee Claflin among the vice-presidents. William Claflin's keynote speech celebrated the adaptability of the church authorities, who "have not waited until the demands of the people were sounded on their doors" but had always made timely changes. Encouraged by the positive attitude of the 1864 General Conference, and probably by the presence of Bishops Baker and Simpson at the Boston convention, Claflin said that the 1868 General Conference would be ready to act and should be called upon to do so.136

William Claflin attended the 1868 General Conference. It met in Chicago, where he had also to attend the Republican National Convention. He addressed the Conference, which refused to authorize lay representation on its own initiative, but waited upon the vote of the membership.137 The vote was favorably concluded in 1870 and in 1872 William Claflin was one of the New England Conference's two lay delegates to the General Conference.138

That was formal recognition of the Claflins' importance to their church. Lee Claflin and his sons had brought their money, as Bishop Simpson asked in 1863, and they had contributed significantly to the rapid mid-nineteenth century development of Methodist institutions. Their stewardship brought growth to the Methodist Episcopal Church and, by dint of sheer usefulness, altered its polity.

136. Ibid., November 28, 1867 (supplement).