"AN IMPERIOUS SENSE OF DUTY": Documents Illustrating an Episode in the Methodist Reaction to the Nat Turner Revolt

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Introduction

Following Nat Turner’s attempt to overthrow slavery, much of the southern white population became very apprehensive about the activities of all black preachers. Governor John Floyd of Virginia maintained that preachers were most responsible for “stirring up the spirit of revolt” and advised that “the public good requires the negro preachers to be silenced.” The actions taken by state governments to restrict or curtail the activities of black preachers are well known, but little attention has been given to how religious bodies responded to the crisis.

Thomas Crowder, a presiding elder of the Methodist Episcopal Church, revealed one aspect of that response at a meeting of the Norfolk Quarterly Conference in December 1831. Crowder agreed to let the licenses of three slave preachers lapse and to adopt a policy that made it unlikely that any blacks would be able to secure licenses thenceforward. Given the near-hysterical temper of the times, it is interesting that seven white Methodists fought the elder’s rulings until they had exhausted every level of appeal. Maintaining that they were motivated by “an imperious sense of duty from which it would be cowardice to shrink,” those seven men put forward impassioned, eloquent and straightforward egalitarian arguments in the two memorials of protest that follow.

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A Memorial to the Virginia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church²

[c. Feb. 23, 1832]

To the Presiding Bishop and members of the Virginia Annual Conference now in Session in the Borough of Norfolk.

Feby 24. 1832
Dr. Brethren

This memorial of a minority of the Quartily Meeting Conference,³ &
others of the Methodist Episcopal Church for Norfolk Station respectfully Sheweth: That at an adjourned meeting of said Quarterly Conference, held in the Methodist Episcopal Church on the [blank] day of December 1831, a majority of said Conference, after having examined and passed the moral character of Laban Sheppard & Jeffery Tatem,4 (nothing whatever having been alledged against the same) did refuse to renew their Licences as Exhorters,5 for no other cause than that they were Slaves;6 and also, that said conference at an adjourned meeting, held on the [blank] Day of December 1831, did reconsider the case of Lewis Sheppard,7 (whose moral character they had examined and passed, and whose license as a Local preacher8 they had received at their former meeting and took away his License as a Local preacher for no other Cause than that they supposed he was a slave: thereby violating in the opinion of your memorialist[s], not only the discipline9 of our church, but that fundamental law of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, which commands us "To do unto all men as we would they should do unto us."

Your memorialists, Sincerely regret the necessity they are under, of opposing the decision of a majority of our Quarterly conference; but an imperious sense of Duty from which it would be cowardice to Shrink; as well as our undiminis[h]led affection for the doctrines & Discipline of our church, Compel us however reluctantly to bring the same before you, holding as we believe appellate Jurisdiction in the case. In doing which, believe us when we say, that we are actuated by no unfriendly feelings whatever to the presiding officer (Bro Crowder)10 or members of the Conference; but on the contrary believe, that they were honest & sincere in what they did, but at the same time mistaken in their views, and the course they adopted.

Your memorialists protest against the above proceedings, from the following Considerations, First, It's unconstitutionality. The conference by this act, have made a test, vizt Slavery, which we think is not recognized by our Discipline.

By a reference to Chapter 1st, Sect. 10 of our discipline,11 the standard is there laid down, for ascertaining those who are moved by the Holy Ghost to preach; in all of which not one word is said about Slavery as a disqualification. This being the Standard, and only standard established by the General Conference, we contend that no subordinate power has a right to alter or amend it: and we will further add, that no Conference has a right to refuse licenses to any man whatever, who they believe possesses those qualifications.

If they have, and are not responsible for the exercise of this power, we foresee that not only much Evil may grow out of it, but that even the Itinerancy itself may be prostrated thereby.
For instance, suppose the Quarterly Conferences should determine not to license or recommend any person who cannot parse a sentence grammatically in Greek or Latin, (and they certainly have as much right, to make a Classical Education a test, as Slavery; and indeed we would say it would be more just, (for one is voluntary or may be acquired, while the other is not,) or forsooth he may be a married man; or does not wear a plain breast Coat; what would become of the Itinerancy in such a case? Would not its wheels be stopped at once?

The above considerations, must in the opinion of your memorialists, carry conviction to Every unpredjudiced mind, that the General Conference never intended to vest Quarterly Meeting Conferences, with such a controlling and irresponsible power or if they did, that it is absolutely necessary to petition them, at their next meeting in Philadelphia, to circumscribe such power, and define more particularly the powers and duties of Quarterly Conferences.

In applying the test of the General Conference Chap 1 Sect 10 to the persons aforenamed, though their Skins be black, it holds good in all its particulars — and indeed, the fact that they have for many years held licenses under the solemn Sanction of this very conference, is prima facia Evidence, that they were moved by the Holy Ghost to preach, and therefore had the necessary qualifications.

We would then respectfully, but solemnly, in the face of High Heaven ask, How dare any man or set of men, stop or hinder one who is thus chosen of God to call Sinners to repentance? For our parts, we feel determined to clear our Skirts, and not to be accessory either directly or indirectly in such an act.

Secondly, In the opinion of your memorialists it is unjust and Cruel. Shall the Methodist Episcopal church, exalted in the Estimation of Every Philanthropist for her untiring exertions in ameliorating the condition of the poor unfortunate Slave, descend from her lofty Eminence & be the first to unite with heartless Politicians and interested Slave holders, in depriving them of their few Religious rights & privileges?

Shall we, because a few desperadoes in Southampton have inhumanly butchered our fellow Citizens, spurn from our bosom those innocent but unfortunate blacks who have taken Shelter under our protection? Rather, would it not redound to the honor of our church, to rise in the majesty of her Strength, and unite with that noble band of Patriots in our Legislature, in extirpating this Hydra headed monster from our State? Have our hearts remained Cold & insensible, whilst reading those soul Stiring appeals to all the finer feelings of our nature; when, with all the glowing warmth of
Philanthropy, and an Eloquence almost superhuman, they have plead
the cause of the unhappy Slave? at the same time, stripping Slavery of
all its artificial covering, and exposing it to the gaze of the world in all
its naked and disgusting deformity? We ask again, shall the Methodist
Episcopal Church at this time, and under such circumstances, lend
herself to rivetting faster the chains of Slavery; and thus become ac-
cessary to the crime of punishing those who are innocent; who have
violated no laws; but on the contrary have demeaned themselves in an
orderly and Christian manner, because Public opinion is against them?
We ask, is this “doing as we would be done by”? Would we do so in
the case of a white man? If not, we leave it to God & conscience to
determine, how far such are guiltless of injustice.

But our opponents may and no doubt will urge, that Scripture and
our Discipline, both Enjoin on us to submit to the laws of the land,
and the powers that be. In reply we answer, we are bound so far as
those laws do not contravene the laws of God, and no farther. When
they do conflict we would say like St. Peter “We ought to obey God
rather than man.”

When the laws of our land would compel us to do an act which
our reason and conscience tell us is in opposition to the laws of God,
we think there is no principle more sound, nor Duty more imperious,
than that we should oppose them; and if needful, to [go] to prison and
to death in support of our principles. This was the noble principle that
acted a Daniel, The Hebrew children, and apostles & martyrs, not
only to oppose the unrighteous laws of their Country, but heroically to
maintain their principles, though Death stared them in the face. T’was
this that Enabled a Wesley, the Father of Methodism, not only to meet
the Scoffs the Sneers & the contempt of the world, but to bear the
opprobrious Epithets, & missile weapons of an infuriated mob. And we
will add, tis this which now supports a Wooster & his compeer in a
Georgia Penitentiary, whilst suffering all the degradation that an
unrighteous & unjust State would heap upon them, rather than take an
Oath their consciences forbade. Of such men we would say, that in
our Estimation, those badges of disgrace they now wear, are more
honorable than those worn by royalty itself.

To them we would say, Ye champions of the Cross! who have
nobly dared to maintain your principles, though bonds and im-
prisonment awaited you, be not discouraged. Your cause is the cause
of God, of justice & humanity. The Eyes of all the good and virtuous
are upon you. Whilst they sympathize in your sufferings, they admire
your firmness of character and independence of Soul. Their prayers in
your behalf continually ascend the Hill of the Lord. and no doubt will
be answered in the avenging of your cause, not only by the Great Head
of the Church but by the justice of your Country. Your names will be recorded with honor in the Archives of Eternity, while infamy and Contempt will register those of your persecutors.

We would respectfully ask, Is it just to allow our members to trade in human Souls, inhumanly to separate Husbands & wives, parents & Children, and with their clanking irons & heart rending Shrieks, to be forced on board those floating Hells, to be conveyed to a distant land, and there sold in perpetual Slavery in Direct opposition to our discipline; and not allow a black man license to preach when no discipline forbids it? Such inconsistency and partiality we feel Compelled to say is unjust.

3rd, It is impolitic. By courting the favour of the world by a surrender of our principles, we render ourselves contemptible. We injure our Cold friends and do ourselves no good. It is tacitly saying, Gentlemen we acknowledge we have done wrong in licensing these men, notwithstanding it is acknowledged by our discipline; and since you are determined to stop them from preaching, we, in order to gain your confidence and good opinion, will do it ourselves and save you the trouble & disgrace: and indeed, if you insist on it, and will only pass a law, we will expel them all from the church. We will not Even allow them to Enter our doors to hear the gospel preached, but give them up to the wicked one, or at least to get to Heaven as well as they can. We acknowledge your supremacy, and as good citizens will obey any laws you may think proper to pass.

We respectfully ask would not such principles lead those who Entertain them, to become Mahometans, Pagans or any thing Else that the country in which they might live called for.

On the Contrary would it not be more honorable & in the Estimation of all reflecting men considered so; for us faithfully & rigidly to adhere to our discipline & principles, and if our legislature will pass laws in opposition thereto, let them take the responsibility. If we believe a Coloured man to be chosen of God, to call sinners to repentance, we ought fearlessly and independently to license him; then if the legislature pass laws forbidding them to preach, we are clear, we have delivered our souls, and the curse of opposing God Almighty, must rest on their heads.

In licensing men under present Circumstances, we however violate no law. The constitution of our country protects us in our religious liberties; and no legislature has a right to interfere, or say whom we shall receive as members, or whom we shall vest with ministerial character. The internal government of our church we have a right to arrange as we think proper, and as free born Sons of America we never intend to allow any interference.
We think it is high time for the Christian world, to be on the alert with respect to their religious rights and privileges. We have been too long deluded with the Bugbear of "Union of Church & State" a cry raised by Infidels to blind the votaries of religion while they are secretly undermining it.

We believe much more danger is to [be] apprehended of a Combination against Religion by the great men of our nation, than a Union of Church and State. Indeed we think we see Evidences of it already. Every exertion made on an extended Scale to promote Religion by suppressing vice or Enlightening the ignorant is handed with this; whilst Every exertion is made to array the leading denominations against each other, and thus prevent the accomplishment of those noble designs now in successful operation for extending the Redeemer's Kingdom, and bringing about the Grand Millenium when the whole Earth shall be converted to God.

Your memorialists having they trust proved that the decision of a majority of our Quarterly Conference is unconstitutional, unjust & impolitic respectfully call upon your body to interpose your authority (having appellate jurisdiction in the case) by annulling the decision of said Quarterly Conference and ordering them to renew the licenses of said Col. preachers & Exhorters unless in the judgement of said Quarterly Conference they have not the qualifications as laid down in our discipline Chap 1 Sect 10 and further we would respectfully ask that the Conference give their views explicitly of the powers possessed by Quarterly Conferences relative to the licensing & recommending of preachers & instruct the Presiding Elders accordingly

Sincerely praying the Great Head of the church that peace & harmony may prevail in your Conference, and that all your deliberations & decisions may be in accordance with his will and the prosperity of our Spiritual Zion we Subscribe ourselves your Brethren

Ethelred Drake18 Horatio N. Bucktrout21 Frans Butt Jr.24
Carey W. Butt19 Joshua Williamson22 W. McKenney23
Jas Bryan20

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A Memorial to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church

[c. May 1832]

To the Bishops25 and members of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church now in Session in Philadelphia May 11th 1832.

Dear Brethren

We the undersigned members of the Quarterly Conference of the
Methodist Episcopal church for Norfolk Station in Virginia do hereby appeal from the decision of the Virginia Annual Conference held in the Borough on February last in favour of the Reverend Thomas Crowder Presiding Elder of Norfolk District against whom we preferred a charge of maladministration. In doing which believe us when we solemnly declare that we are not actuated by selfish motives prompted by the mortification of a defeat, but by a sincere desire to preserve inviolate the constitution of our church as handed down to us by our Fathers.

In order therefore to bring the case fairly before you we deem it our duty to state all the particulars connected therewith that you may be able to form a correct opinion and decide impartially between us. This will appear more necessary when we state that the Secretary of the Quarterly Conference has not made a record of all the proceedings in the case but has omitted the most important particularly the Resolution of the Rev. Wm. A. Smith—a circumstance which we sincerely regret as we are thereby prevented from sending up a copy of the proceedings of the Quarterly Conference. As Brothers Crowder and Smith are both members of your body we hope no difficulty will arise from this circumstance and therefore refer to them to Confirm our statement.

An adjourned meeting of the Quarterly Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church for Norfolk Station was held in the Church on [blank] Evening the [blank] of December 1831 at which time the conference proceeded to the examination of the characters & the renewing of the licenses of the Coloured Local Preachers and Exhorters. The first one examined was Beverly Wilson a free black man and a Local Preacher. His character being examined was unanimously passed. The Conference then renewed his License without a dissenting Voice. The next was Lewis Sheppard a Local Preacher. His character being examined was unanimously passed. The Conference then examined and unanimously passed the characters of Laban Sheppard and Jeffrey Tatam Exhorters, but on ascertaining that they were Slaves refused to renew their licenses by a majority of one vote—see document A. The Conference then adjourned and met again on the [blank] Inst. At this meeting the Revd. Wm. A. Smith preacher in charge of Norfolk Station moved a reconsideration of the Cases of the Coloured preachers and exhorters and then introduced a Resolution as follows. "Whereas the law of this State has long prohibited the exercise of ministerial authority by coloured Persons, and the late occurrences in South Hampton have raised the public opinion and sentiment to so
fixed a determination to sustain and enforce these Laws, as to render ministerial authority in the hands of Coloured persons Entirely useless for the present; and whereas further we feel ourselves authorized and required by the discipline of our church to exercise a prudent discretion in regard to the above circumstances and all others in Conferring ministerial authority (except those relating to moral character and the Sowing of dissention in our church either in doctrine or discipline which are otherwise provided for than by our discretion) therefore [:]

Resolved that in Consideration of the premises we will for the present neither license or renew the license of any Coloured man (either Free man or Slave) who does not give us satisfactory assurances of his determination & ability to remove to some state or Country before the time of the session of our next Quarterly meeting Conference for this station, where he will probably be at liberty to exercise the ministerial authority unmolested."

The Presiding Elder (Bro Crowder) having received and acknowledged the above Resolution as law and directed the Conference to consider it as such, they (the Conference) then refused to renew the licenses of Lewis Sheppard, Laban Sheppard & Jeffery Tatam, therby depriving them of that ministerial character which they had Enjoyed for many years, without any offence or charge of improper conduct on their parts.

We believing it not only unconstitutional but cruelly unjust to receive any Resolution as law and to direct the Conference to consider and act on it as such, whose object and penalty was to deprive a member of our church of those rights guaranteed by the Discipline — and also that it was equally unconstitutional & unjust in the Conference to take away the license of any local preacher without cause addressed the memorial marked B³⁶ to the Virginia Annual Conference, protesting against such proceedings as said memorial will more fully shew.

This memorial being considered informal by the Annual Conference and no redress being granted by them²¹ we then preferred a charge of maladministration against the Revd. Thomas Crowder Presiding Elder with two Specifications, the purport of which was, "That he had violated the Discipline by allowing the Revd. Wm. A Smith to introduce a Resolution in the Quarterly Conference which resolution was received and acknowledged by him as law (thereby assuming legislative powers) and by so receiving and acknowledging said Resolution as law and directing the Conference to consider and act on it as such, deprived a Local preacher of his ministerial character" (we sincerely regret our inability to furnish an exact Copy of the charges and specifications not having retained one. A letter
however was addressed to the Revd. John Early\textsuperscript{32} Secretary of the Conference for a copy and also the decision of the annual conference but no answer has been received.) Appended to the above charge and Specifications was a request that if consistent with the rules of the Conference we might be permitted to support our charge on their floor, pledging ourselves at the same time to substantiate by living witnesses all we had asserted in our memorial marked B.

Our request was not granted, and the Conference we are informed sustained the proceedings of Brother Crowder as consistent with discipline.\textsuperscript{33}

From the foregoing Statement of facts it will appear that we are at issue with the Virginia Annual Conference on a constitutional question, vizt. the Power or right of a Quarterly Conference to pass a Resolution annexing a penalty thereto (thereby assuming legislative powers by making it law) whereby a member of the church may be deprived of his rights.

By a reference to our memorial marked B (which we present and hope the Conference will receive as a part of this appeal and to which we would call your particular attention as we have therein expressed our views and opinions more fully than we shall in this) it will be perceived that we have taken the ground, "That no Conference has a right to refuse licenses to any man who they believe has the qualifications contained in chapter 1 Sect 10 of our discipline" much less to take them away without charges being preferred against him.

This position we think perfectly tenable and in accordance with a known principle of Methodism which holds it Essential that a man must be called of God to preach the Gospel otherwise he is not fit, however great his other acquirements. To ascertain this fact the General Conference in chap 1 Sect 10 of our discipline has defined the rule and fixed the only standard and one too which we contend no subordinate Conference has a right to alter or amend. If then a man come up to this Standard he according to that rule is called of God to preach and if so we hope none will so far infringe on the Sovereignty of Almighty God as to say he ought not or he shall not.

That conferences are confined to the above Rule in licensing or renewing licenses we think may be proved by Chap 1 Sect. 20 Answ 2 where it reads "The District Conference shall have authority to license proper persons to preach and renew their licenses annually when in the judgement of the said conference their gifts graces and usefulness will warrant such renewal." The 'judgement' of the Conference in the above rule is strictly confined to 'Gifts Graces and usefulness,' and those gifts graces & usefulness are of that class which belong to the ministerial character alone (for a lay man may have them but not be
called to Preach). How then are these Gifts graces and usefulness to be ascertained? Evidently and plainly as laid down and particularly specified in chapter 1 Sect. 10 and no other for no other standard is given or known to the church. Leave this and we are at open sea without a rudder or a chart. Every quarterly Conference yea Every different member of them may have his own Standard and this Standard is to be subjected to his whims caprices or prejudices. Does not Everyone see that such a loose, vague, & indefinite manner of governing the church would open wide the door to anarchy & confusion — Indeed was not this very principal endeavoured to be acted on by some who professing great anxiety to reform the church were introducing Resolutions in District & other conferences for the purpose of trammeling the intinerancy?31

In applying the above Rule and standard to the case of Lewis Sheppard they hold good in Every particular and indeed the conference by unanimously passing his character virtually said he had Gifts, Graces, and usefulness. For it must be recollected that his character was examined and passed as a Local preacher and not as a Layman, he did not come before the conference as such, neither had they a right to examine him as a private member, that belonged to his Class Leader.35 His relation to the Conference was that of a Local Preacher and as such alone he was amenable.

No objection having been made to his gifts graces & usefulness his character was passed we contend he was entitled to the renewal of his license. Indeed the Resolution of the Conference which deprived him of his ministerial character shews that it was not on account of his Gifts graces or past usefulness but merely his noncompliance with the Conditions or penalty (vizt. “to leave the State before the next meeting of the Quarterly Conference”, so strangely introduced by Bro Smith & sustained by Bro Crowder as law.

But perhaps our opponents may urge that he could not be useful for the future, as the legislature had passed laws forbidding his preaching — this we think was not the case at the time the Conference took away his license though the legislature has since done it.36 They were allowed to hold public meetings in the daytime under the superintendence of white men. We will however examine the objection. The term usefulness is certainly synononous with having fruit in Chap 1 Sect 10. Having fruit or being useful must be retrospective and not prospective and refers in our opinion solely to his past success in preaching the Gospel and getting souls converted and not to any contingency that might possibly arise whereby his usefulness might be destroyed.

We cannot believe that the General Conference by using that term
Ever intended that a minister might preach until the injustice or oppression of Enemies might hinder or stop him by throwing him in a Penitentiary or otherwise and then make that injustice & oppression a plea for depriving him of his ministerial character. Such a thought never Entered the mind of a Methodist conference that the Rev'd. Freeborn Garretson ought to be stopped from preaching the Gospel because he was unjustly thrown in a Cambridge jail, and we would ask ought the Georgia Missionaries in addition to their present sufferings to be deprived of their ministerial character, because they could not conscienciously take the oath prescribed by the State of Georgia? Rather do not such men deserve the admiration insted of the injustice of mankind?

We next proceed to examine the argument used in the preamble of Bro Smith and which will probably be maintained by our opponents vizt, a 'prudent discretion would dictate the propriety of submitting to the laws of the land &c.

This argument is plausible at first view but on examination will be found weak & untenable as our arguments in memorial B to which we again refer will think satisfactorily prove.

We will however examine it a little farther & by merely changing its phraselogy so far as to read "white men" instead of "coloured Persons" present it to your view & to the view even of our opponents in such a light that we conscientiously believe they would never acknowledge such a Resolution to be consistent with a "prudent discretion." No, having received their authority to preach the Gospel from the Great Head of the church, they would rather go to prison and to death than submit to such oppression.

And we would ask is the case altered because it is a black man? Are there two Scales of justice one for the white & the other for the black! Or will any one dare say that God does not call black men to preach his Gospel? If he does (and we trust none are so presumptuous to deny) we would solemnly ask, How can we how dare refuse him that authority which as a church we possess and which our own conscience and discipline say he is entitled to? But here we may again be met with the "Prudent Discretion" of our opponents. We reply it never can be prudent to do wrong. It never can be prudent to violate our consciences or shrink from discharging those responsibilities the Almighty has placed upon us with regard to doing impartial justice to all men. When the laws of men contravene the laws of God a "prudent discretion" would say "it is better to obey God than man" though our lives should be the penalty.

Prudence would say "maintain your principles inviolate and you will command the respect of your enemies. This has been exemplified in the case of the Quakers in this state who had the independence and
the magnanimity to send in that petition for a Gradual Emancipation, which has given an impetus to the ball which we trust will never cease its roll till Slavery be extirpated from our land. Had they been governed by this worldly prudence, the walls of Virginia’s Capital never would have rung with those bursts of Eloquence in favour of Emancipation which now command the admiration of the nation and will no doubt hand down the names of those champions of freedom with as much honor as the signers of the Declaration of independence.

T’was this noble Spirit of independence that prompted Wilberforce to declare in a British parliament “That he had determined from this time whatever were the consequences, that he would never rest till he had effected the abolition of the Slave trade.” Would to Heaven that the Methodist Episcopal Church was governed by this philanthropic and Heaven born principle believing as we do that She can do more to the abolition of Slavery than any other body either civil or religious in the United States.

Having we hope satisfactorily proved that the decisions both of the Virginia & Quarterly Conferences are unconstitutional and directly opposed to the Spirit of our discipline we submit the cause into your hands with pleasure and shall patiently wait your award which whether favourable or not will not deprive us of the heartfelt satisfaction of knowing that we have done all that we could to preserve the purity of our discipline and to protect the rights and priviledges of our unfortunate Coloured Brethren. We feel that our Skirts are clear of the fearful responsibility (which should belong to the legislature of Virginia alone) of stopping or hindering any one whom God has called to preach his Gospel and should the Curse of the Almighty fall on us a Church for being accescory with the legislature of Virginia in thus Stopping or hindering those whom he has called to preach his Gospel we feel the sin will not lie at our door. We have delivered our souls.

We will now conclude by respectfully urging that should our appeal be sustained by your body that you will annul the proceedings of the Virginia Annual Conference and also direct the quarterly Conference to renew the licenses of the aforenamed Coloured preachers and Exhorters unless they conscientiously believe they have not the qualifications as laid down in chap 1st Sect. 10th of our discipline. 38

Praying the Almighty to direct you aright in all your deliberations and decisions we subscribe ourselves your brethren in the Lord.

James Bryan
Cary W. Butt
W. MKenney
Horatio N. Bucktrout
Joshua Williamson
Francis Butt Jr [?]
FOOTNOTES


2 Wm. MS. Drew University, Madison, New Jersey (NJMD), General Conference Papers. This session of the conference, which met in Norfolk, was presided over by Bishop Elijah Hedding (1780-1852) who had been a prominent member of the New England Conference prior to his election to the episcopacy in 1824. Hedding’s biographer notes that “from his soul he abhorred the entire system of slavery,” yet the Bishop opposed insistent abolitionism within the denomination because he feared its disruptive effect. “Minutes of the Virginia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1832.” Wm. bound minute book, Virginia Conference Records, Randolph-Macon College, Ashland, Va.; D. W. Clark, Life and Times of Rev. Elijah Hedding, D.D. (New York, 1855), pp. 290-1, 482; see also New York Christian Advocate, 15 April 1855.

At the time that this memorial was presented, the boundaries of the Virginia Annual Conference were defined as follows: “circuits situated on the Yadkin river and that part of North Carolina lying north of Cape Fear river, except the town of Wilmington; and that part of Virginia lying south of Rappahannock and east of the Blue Ridge except Fredericksburg and Port Royal.” Methodist Episcopal Church, The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church (New York, 1828), p. 154.

3 Next to local congregations, quarterly conferences were the lowest level in the organizational hierarchy of Methodism. Presiding elders usually conducted quarterly conferences for each church or circuit (two or more congregations administered by one pastor). They also issued licenses to exhorters and preachers at these meetings. In ascending order, the other administrative units were district conferences, annual conferences, and the General Conference. According to Douglas R. Chandler, district conferences were not of much importance at the time that this protest was made. They were instituted in 1820 to placate local preachers who were agitating to gain membership in annual conferences. Presiding elders could issue exhorter’s and preacher’s licenses at these meetings which convened annually. The ordination of itinerant deacons and elders took place at annual conferences, and it was at this level that bishops assigned itinerants to churches or circuits. Annual conference boundaries were roughly equivalent to metropolitan areas (Baltimore Conference), states (Virginia Conference) or regions (New England Conference). Meeting only quadrennially, the General Conference was the supreme policy making body for the entire denomination. The election and ordination of bishops took place at this level. M. E. Church, Discipline, pp. 19-24, 28, 65-68, 151-55; Douglas R. Chandler, “The Formation of the Methodist Protestant Church,” in The History of American Methodism, ed. Emory S. Bucke, 3 vols. (New York, 1964) I:640.

4 The editor has been unable to find any biographical information on Laban Sheppard or Jeffery Tatem.

5 Exhorters held the lowest rank in the clerical hierarchy of Methodism. Their function was to preach at places where and on occasions when ordained clergy were unavailable. Exhorters could not administer the sacraments. According to Theodore L. Agnew, they “might be likely young men being tried out for future ministerial life.” Exhorters had to pass an “annual examination of character” by their quarterly conference before their licenses could be renewed. In ascending order of importance, the other clerical ranks were preacher, deacon, elder, presiding elder, and bishop. The duties of preachers included preaching, meeting with church groups, and visiting the sick. Preachers could not
administer the sacraments. Their licenses were renewed annually if warranted by their “gifts, grace, and usefulness.” Neither exhorters nor preachers could officially take charge of congregations. After ordination by a bishop, deacons could conduct the ceremonies of the church and assist elders in administering the sacraments. Ordained elders (the men generally thought of as regular pastors) could administer the sacraments and conduct the ceremonies of the church. Deacons and elders were either local or itinerant. Locals could not belong to an annual conference and therefore could not officially take charge of congregations. In most cases, bishops assigned itinerants (regular pastors) to congregations during the meeting of the annual conference to which they belonged. Bishops also appointed presiding elders to supervise the clergy in a district. Presiding elders were also responsible for conducting quarterly and district conferences. Delegates to the General Conference elected bishops who were then ordained by the “laying on of hands of three bishops, or at least of one bishop and two elders.” Bishops presided at annual and General Conferences and were responsible for the supervision of all the clergy and the general operation of the denomination. Theodore L. Agnew, “Methodism on the Frontier,” in Bucke, 1:504; M. E. Church Discipline, pp. 24-33, 43, 65.

It was not uncommon for slaves and free blacks to serve as licensed exhorters and preachers. Unfortunately, the names of local exhorters and preachers do not appear on annual conference records and, as a result, it is difficult to determine how many blacks served in those capacities or where they were stationed. Ordination as deacons or elders was a rarity for blacks in the North and the South. Admission to the itinerancy was virtually unheard of, even in New England, although black clergymen such as Richard Allen in Philadelphia, Daniel Coker in Baltimore, and Henry Evans in Fayetteville, North Carolina, did in fact organize and administer large congregations while technically serving as assistants to white ministers who were officially in charge. It should be noted that Kenneth K. Bailey points out that a “few” blacks were “regularly ordained,” in the South although he also observes that “Methodist black preachers were all local” (italics in original). William B Gravely, Gilbert Haven, Methodist Abolitionist: A Study in Race, Religion and Reform, 1850-1880 (New York, 1973), p. 129; Charles H. Wesley, Richard Allen, Apostle of Freedom (Washington, 1935), pp. 138-140; Milton C. Sernett, Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1787-1865 (Metuchen, N. J., 1975), p. 120; Carter G. Woodson, The History of the Negro Church (Washington, 1921), pp. 47-48; M. E. Church, Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the Years 1773-1828 (New York, 1840), pp. 172-73 and passim; Kenneth K. Bailey, “Protestantism and Afro-Americans in the Old South: Another Look,” Journal of Southern History 41 (November 1975), p. 463.

The editor has been unable to find any biographical information on Lewis Sheppard.

*The official policy of the denomination concerning the privileges of colored preachers was as follows:

Our coloured preachers and official members shall have all the privileges which are usual to others in the district and quarterly conferences, where the usages of the country do not forbid it. And the presiding elder may hold for them a separate district conference, where the number of coloured local preachers will justify it.

The annual conferences may employ coloured preachers to travel and preach where their services are judged necessary; provided that no one shall be so employed without having been recommended according to the form of discipline. M.E. Church, Discipline, p. 188.

The doctrines and policies of the denomination were codified and published after each quadrennial meeting of the General Conference in a volume entitled, The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which was commonly referred to as the
"discipline." At the time that this memorial was presented the edition of the discipline that was published in 1823 was operative.

10Thomas Crowder, a relatively young man of thirty-four, was completing his second year as presiding elder of the Norfolk District at the time that this memorial was presented. Crowder had been ordained an elder in 1825 and had served as pastor of several churches, including the one at Norfolk, before being appointed presiding elder in 1830. He was described by one historian of the Virginia Conference as "an earnest and successful preacher" and as a "strict but kind" disciplinarian. Crowder died in December 1852 while serving as presiding elder of the Charlottesville District of the Virginia Conference. M.E. Church, Minutes, 1829-1839, pp. 20, 58, 95, 140; M.E. Church, Minutes, 1773-1828, pp. 400-61, 491, 525, 559; William W. Bennett, Memorials of Methodism in Virginia From Its Introduction into the State, in the Year 1772, to the Year 1829 (Richmond, Va., 1871, pp. 671-72; M. E. Church, South, Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the M.E. Church, South (Richmond, 1852), pp. 445-46.

Chapter I, Section 10 of the Discipline reads as follows:

How shall we try those who profess to be moved by the Holy Ghost to preach?

Let the following questions be asked, viz. Do they know God as a pardoning God? Have they the love of God abiding in them? Do they desire nothing but God? And are they holy in all manner of conversation?

Have they gifts (as well as grace) for the work? Have they (in some tolerable degree) a clear, sound understanding, a right judgment in the things of God, a just conception of salvation by faith? And has God given them any degree of utterance? Do they speak justly, readily, clearly?

Have they any fruit? Are any truly convinced of sin, and converted to God, by their preaching?

As long as these three marks concur in any one, we believe he is called of God to preach. These we receive as sufficient proof that he is moved by the Holy Ghost.

M.E. Church, Discipline, pp. 43-44.

The General Conference convened on Tuesday, May 1, 1832, in Philadelphia.

This is a reference to the debate on slavery that took place in the Virginia legislature from January 16 to January 25, 1832. The debate provided the occasion for an unusual public airing of southern anti-slavery sentiment, particularly by representatives from the western part of the state. In the course of the debate, a motion expressing the view that it would be "expedient" to legislate on the subject of manumission was defeated by a vote of fifty-eight to seventy-three in the House of Delegates. The House did pass a measure that would have made state funds available for the expatriation of free blacks and slaves who might be manumitted in the future, but the proposal failed in the Senate by a vote of eighteen to fourteen. Joseph C. Robert, The Road From Monticello: A Study of the Virginia Debate of 1832 (Durham, N.C., 1941); Carl N. Degler, The Other South: Southern Dissenters, in the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1974), pp. 14-17; Aptheker, pp. 83-86.

This is a reference to Samuel Austin Worcester, who, along with his "compeer" and fellow Congregationalist missionary, Elizur Butler, was serving a sentence of four years at hard labor in Georgia's Milledgeville Penitentiary after having been convicted on September 15, 1831 of residing among the Cherokee Indians "without a license or permit from his excellency the governor... and without having taken the oath to support and defend the constitution of the state of Georgia." By agreeing to secure the sanction of the state, the missionaries would have been tacitly recognizing Georgia's sovereignty over the Cherokees and its right to effect the Indians' removal. It should be noted that James Trott, a Methodist missionary, and eight other men were also convicted of the same offense. The two Congregationalists contested Georgia's right to regulate their activities, before the Supreme Court in the case of Worcester v. Georgia which was heard on February 20, 1832. On March 3, Chief Justice John Marshall read the Court's decision in which the Georgia statute in
question was declared "repugnant to the constitution." The actual release of Worcester and Butler was not secured until January 14, 1833, after much behind the scenes maneuvering by Vice-President Martin Van Buren, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Governor Wilson Lumpkin of Georgia, and the missionaries themselves. Worcester, a native of Massachusetts, was ordained in 1825. From 1825 until 1827 he served at the Brainard Mission in the Cherokee county of eastern Tennessee. At age twenty-five, the young cleric moved to New Echota, Georgia, where he was serving at the time of his arrest six years later. After his release from prison, Worcester established Park Hill Mission for the Cherokees in the western territory to which they had been forced to move. He died at Park Hill on April 20, 1859. B. R. Curtis, *Reports of Decisions in the Supreme Court of the United States*, 22 vols. (Boston, 1855), 10:214-17; Edwin A. Miles, "After John Marshall's Decision: Worcester v. Georgia and the Nullification Crisis," *Journal of Southern History* 39 (November 1973): 519-44; *Missionary Herald*, 27 September 1831; *Dictionary of American Biography*, XX, (New York, 1936), pp. 530-31.

As the legal importation of slaves had ended in 1808, this is probably a reference to the sale of slaves from Virginia to the lower South and the Southwest. Frederick Bancroft estimated that during the 1830s an average of 11,800 slaves were sold annually from Virginia although during the early part of the decade the number was probably lower. In 1831, the secretary of the Virginia Annual Conference reported a decrease of 823 in the number of colored members, which he attributed to "the great numbers lately sent to the south and west." Frederick Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (Baltimore, 1931), p. 385; *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion's Herald*, 25 March 1831.

The *Discipline* does not contain a specific reference to slave trading. The denomination's official antislavery position was as follows:

We declare that we are as much as ever convinced of the great evil of slavery; therefore no slave holder shall be eligible to any official station in our church hereafter, where the laws of the state in which he lives will admit of emancipation, and permit the liberated slave to enjoy freedom.

When any travelling preacher becomes an owner of a slave or slaves, by any means, he shall forfeit his ministerial character in our church, unless he execute, if it be practicable, a legal emancipation of such slaves, conformably to the laws of the state in which he lives.


In 1831, Norfolk Station reported having 296 colored members and 314 white members. The figures for the Virginia Conference as a whole were 9,144 colored and 30,311 white. In 1832, Norfolk Station reported 305 colored and 346 white, while the conference reported 8,210 colored and 32,536 white. M.E. Church, *Minutes*, 1829-1839, pp. 95, 140.

Ethelred Drake was not an ordained member of the conference although he was a preacher. A little more than a month before the memorial was presented, Drake had been elected president of the Norfolk Methodist Missionary Society, which was an auxiliary of the Virginia Conference Missionary Society. According to the federal census for 1830, he was a resident of Southampton County and the head of a household that included three children under five years old. Drake himself was listed as being between twenty and thirty years old. Interestingly enough, he owned two male slaves, one small boy under ten and a young man between ten and twenty. *Minutes of the Virginia Annual Conference: Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion's Herald*, 17 February 1832; U.S. Office of the Census, Fifth Census of the United States, 1830, vol. 9 Population Schedules for Virginia, pt. 19 (Washington: File Microcopies of Records in National Archives, Roll 197), p. 289.

Cary W. Butt was elected treasurer of the Norfolk Missionary Society on January 23, 1832. He was not an ordained member of the Virginia Annual Conference. The federal
census for 1830 indicates that he was a resident of Princess Anne County and the head of a household of six, which included four children ranging in age from under five to between ten and fifteen. Butt himself was between twenty and thirty years old. Princess Anne County records indicate that in 1820 he owned one slave. In 1830, he owned three slaves, one man between thirty-six and fifty-five, one young woman between ten and twenty-four, and one child under ten. Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion's Herald, 17 February 1832; U.S. Census, 1830, Roll 26, p. 296; Lower Norfolk County Virginia Antiquity, 5 vols. (Baltimore, 1897-1904). 5:56.

This memorial, and the one that follows, was written in the hand of James Bryan, who was elected secretary of the Norfolk Missionary Society on January 23, 1832. Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion's Herald, 17 February 1832.

Horatio N. Bucktrout was a local preacher, who had begun the process of seeking full ordination as an itinerant in 1829. In that year he was “admitted on trial” to the Virginia Annual Conference and was assigned to assist the pastor of Gates and Bertie circuit. After having served in that position for one year, he “passed in examination of character” at the next conference and was assigned to assist the pastor of the church in Princess Anne. In 1831, Bucktrout’s character was again found to be satisfactory and he was scheduled to be ordained, but the minutes note that he was “dropped at his own request made in consequence of his afflictions.” In 1833, his name appears in the manuscript minutes of the conference as a local preacher at Norfolk. M.E. Church, Minutes, 1829-1839, pp. 19, 20, 56, 58; Minutes of the Virginia Annual Conference.

The editor has been unable to find any information about Joshua Williamson.

William McKenney was elected to the Board of Managers of the Norfolk Missionary Society on January 23, 1832. He was a preacher, although he was not an ordained member of the Virginia Annual Conference. McKenney was probably the proprietor of “W. McKenney & Co.”, an establishment in Norfolk which specialized in “Negro Clothing.” He was also the correspondent of at least one settler in the infant colony of Liberia, although he was not an officer of the American Colonization Society or any of its local societies or auxiliaries. Norfolk Herald, 7 December 1831, 17 February 1832; Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion’s Herald, 17 February 1830; Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald, 7 December 1831.

According to the federal census for 1830, Francis Butt, Jr., was a resident of Norfolk and the head of a household of five. Butt himself was between the ages of twenty and thirty. He owned one slave, a little girl, under ten. Butt’s father, who was a carpenter, had served as commissioner of streets for Norfolk’s first ward in 1806. U.S. Census, 1830, Roll 27, p. 396; Norfolk Directory (Norfolk, 1806), pp. 10, 72. Hw Ms Drew University, Madison, New Jersey (NJMD), General Conference Papers.

The bishops of the M.E. Church at this General Conference were Elijah Hedding, William McKendree, Robert R. Roberts, and Joshua Soule.

The editor has been unable to identify the secretary of the Quarterly Conference for Norfolk Station.

William Andrew Smith, age twenty-nine, had been pastor of the church at Norfolk for nine months when he wrote the resolution referred to here. A native Virginian, Smith was ordained in 1827 and had been pastor of churches in Petersburg, Lynchburg, and Richmond before his appointment to Norfolk. This incident was not Smith’s first brush with local preachers. In 1828, while serving in Lynchburg, he brought charges against two local preachers and nine laymen for “enveighing against the discipline” and “endeavoring to sow dissention.” Smith became a leader of the Virginia Conference and was noted for being “the most able defender of Southern Methodism’s stand on slavery.” He served as president of Randolph-Macon College from 1846 to 1866. He also held the position of professor of “moral and intellectual philosophy” and gave an annual series of lectures on slavery. His complex defense of the institution was published in 1856 under the title, Lectures on the
Philosophy and Practice of Slavery as Exhibited in the Institution of Domestic Slavery in the United States, with the Duties of Masters to Slaves. Smith maintained that slavery had "the unqualified approbation of Holy Scripture," and that it was not in conflict with the principle of natural rights. He argued that "mental imbecility, moral degradation, and physical inferiority" suited blacks for slavery. Nevertheless he believed that "God hath made of one blood all nations of men" and that slaves were "entitled to the rights belonging to religious beings in their circumstance." Smith served as pastor of a church in St. Louis from 1866 until 1868, when he became president of Central College in Fayette, Missouri. He died in Richmond on March 1, 1870. M. E. Church, Minutes, 1773-1828, pp. 524, 525, 558; M. E. Church, Minutes, 1829-1839, pp. 20, 57, 95, 140; William Warren Sweet, Virginia Methodism: A History (Richmond, 1955), pp. 184-85, 238, 321; William Andrew Smith, Lectures on the Philosophy and Practice of Slavery as Exhibited in the Institution of Domestic Slavery in the United States, with the Duties of Masters to Slaves (Nashville, 1856), pp. 151, 156, 182, 321; Dictionary of American Biography, XXVII, pp. 361-62.

28 Not long after the renewal of his license, Beverly R. Wilson went to Liberia where he became a "pioneer" of the Methodist mission there, which was organized in 1832. In 1835, Wilson, who was described as "a pious man of colour," returned to the United States to be ordained as an elder. The ordination service took place at the sixteenth anniversary observance of the denomination's Missionary Society, on Monday, May 11, near midnight at the Greene Street Church in New York City. It was conducted by Bishop Elijah Hedding. The ordination was reported to have been "particularly solemn and impressive." Wilson served in Liberia until his death on October 8, 1864. M. E. Church, Sixteenth Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church (New York, 1865), p. 3: M. E. Church, Forty-Sixth Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Year 1864 (New York, 1865), pp. 110-11.

29 The editor has been unable to locate the document referred to here.

30 Memorial "B" is the preceding document.

31 Memorial "B" was presented to the conference at its afternoon session, March 1, 1832. The following account appears in the manuscript minutes:

A memorial was received from a minority of a Q. M. conference held in the Norfolk Station — complaining that the majority of that conference had refused to renew the license of certain coloured men because they were slaves when it was resolved that the conference has not sufficient evidence before them to justify any decision in the case. Minutes of the Virginia Annual Conference.

32 At the time that this memorial was presented, John Early was presiding elder of the Meherrin District and a highly respected leader of the Virginia Conference. One of his biographers observed that "the welfare of Negroes was one of his chief interests throughout his life." As a young man he had ministered to the slaves of Thomas Jefferson. In 1831 he was president of the Lynchburg Auxiliary of the American Colonization Society, a position that he held for several years. In 1854 he was elected to the episcopacy of the M. E. Church, South. He died in Lynchburg on November 5, 1873. M. E. Church, Minutes, 1829-39, pp. 95, 140; Dictionary of American Biography, V, 597; American Colonization Society, Fourteenth Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States (Washington, 1831), p. 35; M. E. Church, South, Minutes, 1873, pp. 914-16; also see J. Rives Childs, "Bishop John Early." John P. Branch Historical Papers of Randolph-Macon College 4 (June 1913): 50-66.

33 The Virginia Conference heard this charge of maladministration on the morning of March 2, 1832. The following account appears in the manuscript minutes:

Another memorial was received from E. Drake and others of Norfolk, charging Thomas Crowder P. E. of the district with maladministration — which was read and after examination and discussion, it was resolved that the charge is not sustained, when the secretary was directed to communicate to the parties the causes as a result
of this decision.

On the afternoon after that decision was made, the presiding officer of the conference, Bishop Elijah Hedding, underscored his confidence in the Reverends Crowder and Smith by appointing them to the committee that examined the qualifications of preachers seeking ordination and admission to the itinerancy. Minutes of the Virginia Annual Conference.

33This is a reference to an unsuccessful movement to democratize the government of the denomination that took place during the 1820's and culminated in the withdrawal of a significant number of frustrated reformers and in the founding of the Methodist Protestant Church in 1830. The principal reforms advocated by the insurgents were to make the presiding eldership an elective position, and to admit local preachers and laymen to General Conferences. The Baltimore Conference was the focal point of the reform movement, but according to William Warren Sweet, Virginia was also one of its “principal centers”. The fact that the signers of this document chose to remain within the traditional mainstream of the church instead of joining the new reform denomination, which offered them greater powers and privileges, would seem to indicate that they were not radicals or habitual iconoclasts. Chandler, pp. 636-65; Sweet, pp. 177-85; Bennett, pp. 733-41.

34Every church member belonged to a group called a class, which was supervised by a class leader, who was responsible for monitoring and aiding the spiritual development of his charges. Class leaders were expected to “carefully inquire how every soul in his class prosper: not only how each person observes the outward rules, but how he grows in the knowledge and love of God.” M.E. Church, Discipline, p. 79.

35During the session of the Virginia legislature that convened in December 1831, a number of proposals to prevent the outbreak of another slave uprising were put forward. The first section of the bill that was drafted to encompass those proposals was devoted to proscriptions on the activities of black preachers. It contained the following provisions:

Be it enacted by the general assembly. That no slave, free negro, or mulatto, whether he shall have been ordained, or licensed, or otherwise, shall hereafter undertake to preach, exhort, or conduct, or hold any assembly, or meeting, for religious or other purposes, either in the day time, or at night; and any slave, free negro, or mulatto, so offending, shall for the first offence be punished with stripes, at the discretion of any justice of the peace, not exceeding lashes; and any person desiring so to do, shall have authority, without any previous written precept or otherwise, to apprehend any such offender and carry him before such justice.

A second offense would be considered a felony if committed by a slave and as grounds for enslavement and deportation if committed by a free black. Virginia House of Delegates, “A Bill,” in Tragle, p. 455.

36On Sunday morning, February 27, 1780. Freeborn Garrettson was imprisoned by civil authorities in Cambridge, Maryland, after attempting to conduct a Methodist worship service. During this period in its development in North America, the fledgling Methodist denomination often encountered the hostility of established churches as well as the scorn of the unchurched. During the Revolution it was not uncommon for Methodists to be suspected of harboring British sympathies and Garrettson’s pacifism compounded his difficulties. After being incarcerated, without trial, for about a month, his release was secured through the efforts of Francis Asbury, whose high-level intercession resulted in the Governor of Delaware assuring the Governor and Council of Maryland that Garrettson was of reputable character. Garrettson was born in Maryland in 1732. In 1775 he became an itinerant Methodist minister. During his career he served congregations and helped establish the denomination in Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Vermont and Nova Scotia. He died at age 76 in New York City on September 26, 1827. At the time of his death he was reported to have been “the oldest itinerant minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church in America.” Nathan Bangs, The Life of Freeborn Garrettson (New York, 1830), pp. 111-114.
The memorial was considered by the Committee on the Itinerancy, which was composed of one representative from each annual conference in the denomination. The committee issued a report which was approved by the General Conference on Saturday, May 26, 1832. The following account appears in the minutes:

The Committee on the Itinerancy to whom were referred certain papers complaining of the administration of Thomas Crowder and the acts of the Virginia Annual Conference, by which the administration of the said Thomas Crowder was sustained, beg leave to report the following as the result of their deliberations, viz.:

Resolved. 1. That the appellants, being the minority of a quarterly conference, can have no appeal in the case, nor should they have carried their protest beyond the limits of their own journals.

Resolved. 2. That the person or persons who may enter a complaint against a member of an annual conference, and not sustain such complaints, cannot be admitted to appeal; and the General Conference can have no appellate jurisdiction in such case.

Whereas the acts and administration of our annual conferences do come under the supervision of the General Conference, therefore.

Resolved. 3. That in the opinion of your committee, the decision of the Virginia Conference, sustaining the administration of brother Thomas Crowder, was correct.