FROM QUARTERLY TO CAMP MEETING:
A RECONSIDERATION OF EARLY AMERICAN METHODISM

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In a letter to Ezekiel Cooper dated 1795, Bishop Thomas Coke evoked various pleasures of America, including "the congregations in your forests."

A journal entry of four years earlier recalled:

At each of our Conferences, before we parted every Preacher gave an account of his experience from the first strivings of the Spirit of God, as far as he could remember: and also of his call to preach, and the success the Lord had given to his labours. It was quite new, but was made a blessing I am persuaded, to us all.

What struck the British Dr. Coke as novelty—congregating in the wood and the spiritually communal and revivalistic character of conferences were but two images of early American Methodist vitality. Their conjunction some time later in the camp meeting provided Methodism with a metaphor of itself. The camp meeting, as a self-image, as a reflection, as an intricate and highly stylized recapitulation of the American Methodist experience, allowed Methodism to change while seeming to remain the same.

2Thomas Coke, Extracts of the Journals of Thomas Coke (Dublin, 1816), April 2, 1791, p. 174. Compare this response to the North Carolina conference with those for Georgia of March 16, p. 171 and of Virginia, April 20, p. 175; see also similar remarks on conferences for 1796, pp. 232, 235.
3On the dating of the camp meeting see Charles A. Johnson, The Frontier Camp Meeting. Religion's Harvest Time (Dallas, 1955), pp. 25-32. After reviewing various claimants, Johnson remarks, "Part of the difficulty is, of course, one of definition." (p. 30). He concludes by observing: "Yet the dispute about dates is relatively unimportant; many camp meetings may have taken place in the back country prior to the Second Great Awakening. The significant point is that they did not achieve universal popularity or standard form until after 1799." (31-32). We would concur but add that one set of precedents (which Johnson treats fully) does explain why the camp meeting became the Methodist religious expression.
4For perceptive commentary on the difficulties in Methodism's transition from an "eschatologically oriented mission" to one "subtly bent into a civilizing mission," see Lester B. Scherer, Ezekiel Cooper, 1763-1847 (Commission on Archives and History, 1968), pp. 190 ff. American Methodism inherited from Wesley and British Methodism a preoccupation with the old ways. The power of these trans-Atlantic frequencies may well have minimized the capacity of the American leadership to monitor and respond to domestic signals. I am indebted to Donald G. Mathews for the notion of the camp meeting as metaphor. See his essay in a forthcoming volume on Methodist history edited by Kenneth E. Rowe and Russell E. Richey.
The camp meeting was at once something new and yet richly continuous with earlier American Methodism. Sufficiently a novelty to require promotion, it quickly spread over Methodism to become a national institution. Frontier weapon perhaps it was. But some of the camp meeting's power to create frontier community derived from its ritual reenactment of earlier Methodist community. It was a new way of reliving the old and an old way for living in the new.

**The “Frontier” Camp Meeting**

To place the camp meeting in the economy of Methodism is to deny that it was exclusively a frontier affair. Ironically, those most responsible for so imprinting it, did so by allowing the rubrics and limits of their studies to overwhelm their evidence and commentary. The statement in Charles A. Johnson’s title, *The Frontier Camp Meeting*, probably is the major culprit. When endorsed and appropriated by the then dean of American church historians, William Warren Sweet, and worked into his frontier reading of American religion, “the frontier camp meeting” became a historical common place.

Johnson clearly conceives the camp meeting as a frontier affair. A “weapon . . . forged by the West in its struggle against lawlessness and immorality,” a “natural product of a frontier environment,” a religious expression suited to the frontier mentality, the camp meeting evolved “with

4Religion the Development of American Culture. 1765-1840 (New York, 1952). The camp meeting is analyzed within a section on revivalism of a chapter devoted to “Barbarism vs. Revivalism.” What makes these pages, 148-153, of more than just passing significance is a set of hypotheses to which this book is devoted: religion has laid the foundations of American culture; that office was performed by the religious conquest of the successive American frontiers; in this survival of the moralizers, adaptation to frontier conditions was key to the culture-forming capacity and hence growth of religious groups; the Protestantism that reached the masses was not the eastern, elitist, Presbyterian-Congregational variety but the Baptist-Methodist-Disciple-Cumberland-Presbyterian type; this second, American culture-forming, typical, expression of Protestantism Sweet illustrates with the camp meeting. See also Sweet’s assessment in Religion on the American Frontier. 1783-1840. Vol. IV. The Methodists (New York, 1946), pp. 68-69; The Story of Religion in America, rev. ed. (New York, 1939), pp. 327-335; and Revivalism in America (New York, 1944), pp. 129-33; in all of which the camp meeting is treated as frontier phenomenon. In Methodism in American History, rev. ed. (New York, 1954), on the other hand the camp meeting is given scant attention and viewed as a national Methodist institution, pp. 159-60, 333.

the prevailing intellectual climate" of the region. As the frontier dis­
appeared so also the camp meeting. These judgments prevail. Yet lurking
throughout Johnson’s interpretation are the qualifications that would sabot­age it.

He concedes that after its adoption by Asbury, the camp meeting was
promoted in the East; that promotion, population density and receptivity
governed frequency and size; that camp meetings became popular in areas
that were not frontiers demographically or frontiers for Methodism.

Johnson contents himself with such qualification because it is not his
purpose to treat either American Protestantism or Methodism on a
national basis. “The scope of the book,” he indicates, “is limited to the
trans-Allegheny West in the first four decades of the nineteenth century.”

This protective delimitation and qualification, however, fails to
counterbalance the forceful assertions: “The camp meeting fires previ­
sely lighted in Kentucky continued to burn brightly in section after section
of the new nation as the traveling ministry followed migrants toward other
frontiers.”

The energy of his images stamped the camp meeting as a frontier
affair. That, we shall suggest, misconstrues its orientation and function.

The “Methodist” Camp Meeting

To place the camp meeting in the economy of Methodism is to
remove it, rather arbitrarily, from its premier place in “the great revival,”
from its continuing role as a largely Methodist undertaking in 19th cen­
tury revivalistic procedures that were largely shared, and from its part in
the production of an Evangelical ethos intended by Protestantism as the
vehicle for the national establishment of Christianity. For appropriate
analysis of the camp meeting in these contexts see the valuable recent
works by John B. Boles, Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. and Donald G. Mathews.
The value of these larger perspectives is so obvious that the resort to a denominational view may seem a scholarly retreat. We think this estimate of the camp meeting in Methodist perspective will prove quite complementary. It will address the question why Methodism found the camp meeting congenial. Not at issue is authorship. Our attention to the continuities between the camp meeting and prior Methodist experience is not intended as a restatement of Methodist claims of creation. Nor would it jeopardize the attempt to link the camp meeting with prior religious experience in other denominations. And it certainly is not intended to obscure the fact that in its first several years the camp meeting was a catholic endeavor, joining the creative energies of Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists. The claims of James McGready, the Presbyterians and the state of Kentucky are not challenged. Rather we pursue possible historical grounds for this 1802 episcopal directive:

The campmeetings have been blessed in North and South Carolina, and Georgia. Hundreds have fallen and have felt the power of God. I wish most sincerely that we could have a campmeeting at Duck Creek out in the plain south of the town, and let the people come with their tents, wagons, provisions and so on. Let them keep at it night and day, during the conference; that ought to sit in the meeting.¹⁴

What prompted Asbury’s design to put conference and camp meeting together, and to do so not in the wilderness but in Methodism’s citadel, Baltimore? Was there more than pragmatism in Asbury’s adoption of this “fishing with a large net”?¹⁶

What might dispose Methodist preachers and people to structure their community in sylvan settings? Why did Methodism adopt the camp meeting?¹⁶

Southern religious experience, an important part of frontier society. He is concerned with its choreography.


¹⁶JLFA, III, p. 251. Letter to Thornton Fleming, dated Dec. 2, 1802. Utilitarianism or pragmatism is clearly at play. Asbury said, “I wish you would also hold campmeetings; they have never been tried without success. To collect such a number of God’s people together to pray, and the ministers to preach, and the longer they stay, generally, the better—this is field fighting, this is fishing with a large net.” Ibid. Compare this June 3, 1803 account to Charles Atmore: “The present year is marked with great grace to the inhabitants of the United States. Great things have been done in the western states of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio, by meetings held by encampments for several days and nights together. These meetings have obtained in Georgia, South and North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware.” JLFA, III, p. 261.

¹⁴Johnson points out that the adoption was never formalized, “that the camp meeting was never an official institution of that denomination but only an “extra occasion in the economy of Methodism.” (Frontier Camp Meeting, 6). It was, he says, “never an ‘official’ practice of
Reenactment

The camp meeting was a ritual recovery of unities, openness, inclusiveness and flexibility that had characterized early American Methodism at a point when some, at least, were sensitive to lines drawn within. The camp meeting vividly reenacted the early preachers' encounter with the American landscape, (an encounter that to be sure continued). In its action it recalled the intense community and the dramatic revivalistic response that characterized Methodist conferences—quarterly and annual. Yet by its staging, locale and purpose—even when combined with quarterly and annual conferences—the camp meeting permitted conferences to occupy themselves with the business of the denomination. Encampments could not be an official Methodist institution for that would have forced Methodists to recognize the profound changes that numerical growth, time, distance, diversity and aging produced. Instead it was an historical drama, a play that Methodists performed for themselves and the world, a staging of their own history by which they drew upon and shared the vitalities that had created them. Methodists were too preoccupied with the Holy Spirit to recognize the dilemmas of institutionalization. They had discovered what for a time seemed to be a device for circumventing them. The camp meeting allowed Methodism to change while seeming to remain the same.17

What Methodism in the early 19th century would reenact was well described in 1810 by Jesse Lee. Speaking of 1776, he wrote:

On Tuesday and Wednesday, the 30th and 31st day of July, quarterly-meeting was held at Mabury's dwelling house in Brunswick (now Greenville) county. No meeting-house in Virginia could have held the people. We had a large arbour in the yard, which would shade from the sun, two or three thousand people. The first day was a blessed season; but the second day was a day never to be forgotten. We held the love-feast under the arbour in the open air; the members of society took their seats, and other people stood all around them by hundreds. The place was truly awful, by reason of the presence of the Lord. Many of the members spake; and while some declared how the Lord had justified them freely, others declared how, and when the blood of Jesus had cleansed them from all sin. So clear, so full, and so strong was their testimony, that while some were speaking their experience, hundreds were in tears, and others vehemently crying to God, for pardon or holiness.

Such a work of God as that was, I had never seen, or heard of before. It continued to spread through the south parts of Virginia, and the adjacent parts of North-Carolina, all that summer and autumn.18

the Methodist Episcopal Church. No church body ever adopted it; no laws were ever passed concerning it. There is no mention of this revival weapon in the Journal indexes of the general conferences, and but few references to it are to be found in the annual conference reports between 1800 and 1845. Nor do the many editions of the Methodist Discipline contain any rules to govern the camp meetings. Circuit riders never answered any formal questions concerning it in the quarterly conference. " (Ibid., p. 81).

For all the novelty of camping, the stylizing of time by rules and of space by camp design and the prolongation of meeting itself, the camp meeting was highly evocative of patterns with which Methodists were very familiar. For the preachers especially, they called to mind what Lee described, the communal gatherings that had symbolized a new order of existence.

Conference as Revival

The Minutes for 1780 query: “Shall we recommend our quarterly meetings to be held on Saturdays and Sundays when convenient?” and answer: “Agreed.” This legislation regularized what was apparently already practice and placed them so as to make them popularly accessible. The two-day events had acquired a definite pattern but one that permitted variation. The first day was devoted to quarterly meeting and preaching. The second day love feast began at 9:00, followed perhaps by communion around 11:00, then “public preaching” at noon. Memorial services, marriages, baptisms might be interspersed or follow. Three communities gathered. The one most remarked upon was the general populace. Of a 1780 meeting at Thomas Chapel, Delaware, Freeborn Garrettson noted: “Blest be God it appeared as if the whole country came together.” He reiterated those words for a quarterly meeting at Bolingbroke. At others that year he estimated crowds of 2,000, 1,500 and “near 4,000.”


See preceding quotation from Lee and virtually any Methodist journal of the period. Lee observed, “Before this plan was adopted the quarterly meetings were generally held on the week days.” (Short History, 71.) The British pattern seems to have been more varied. The quarterly meetings and love feasts noted by Wesley are typically one-day affairs. See The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (9 vols. London, 1909-1916), III, p. 491 (Aug. 22, 1750); VI, p. 31 (July 12, 1774), p. 282 (June 6, 1780); and VII, p. 181 (July 3, 1786), p. 290 (June, 1787).

The journals of itinerants document the pattern. Among the best descriptions are those given by Ezekiel Cooper, some of which are reproduced by Phoebus in Beams of Light. Something of the pattern and the power of the second day is indicated in this statement: “Love-feast began between nine and ten o’clock, and held till after eleven o’clock; then the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper was administered; public preaching began after twelve o’clock. We had a glorious time, especially in the close of our meeting. The power of God came down in the most powerful manner that I have ever seen in the state of New Jersey. It is said to have been the greatest time that has ever been known in this circuit. All ranks appeared to be in tears; many were overcome in such a manner that they could scarcely stand; some found Jesus, one man crying out to the congregation to help him to praise the Lord, for he had found him whom his soul loved. This increased the flame, and it ran through the house as fire among stubble. Soon as he ceased to speak a boy of about sixteen years of age broke out in prayer, after which we concluded our meeting.” (78-79). See also for the year 1785, pp. 27, 36, 38; for 1786, pp. 61-63; for 1787, pp. 78-90. For a decade later see the “Journal of
Particularly for the areas of Methodist strength—Delaware, Maryland, Virginia—the significance of such gathering cannot be stressed too much. In these gentry-dominated societies, laced together by waterways and largely wanting the towns that provided communal coherence in New England, community quite literally occurred. Community defined itself by act rather than space. Ceremonies which exhibited and reinforced the values and preoccupations of the gentry were the community. Court days, quarter races, cock fights, dances, musters, elections and Anglican services occasioned social interaction. The established religion of this society was patriarchy; it demanded deference rather than prayers, and it took the Church of England as servant. The evangelicalism of Presbyterians, then Baptists and finally Methodists that penetrated this patriarchal world in the second half of the 18th century preforce offered counter-creed, counter-culture and counter-community. The quarterly meeting in a society which dramatized and actualized community in ceremony was a striking alternative. The quarterly meeting staged, as it were, the free grace that Methodists preached. Christian community quite literally offered itself in public. After ordering and nourishing themselves, those who loved one another opened their community to the public. Freeborn Garrettson caught the drama. After "a crowded audience" on August 5, 1781, Sunday began at 9:00 in "a comfortable feast of love." Then from 12 to 4 "many happy souls feasted with us." The quarterly meeting, then, was a public ceremony, like those familiar to Chesapeake society, the basis of community. However, it countered those hierarchial deferential gentry expressions of patriarchal community with an inclusive and spiritually egalitarian alternative. Further, the public first witnessed and then was invited to join that new community. A 1792 quarterly meeting reported by Cooper captures its embracive quality:

Saturday, February 18, 1792. We went on to quarterly meeting. The house was crowded. We had a tolerable time.


See in the Simpson edition, the entry for April 18-19, 1780. Asbury, who attended, converted Garrettson's claim into statistics. "Our little chapel with galleries, held about seven hundred; but there were I judge near one thousand people." *JLFA*, I, p. 345. The Anglican clergy Samuel Magaw and Hugh Neill also participated. See Aug. 12-13, Aug. 19-20, Nov. 11-12 for estimates.


*The Journals of Freeborn Garrettson*, Simpson ed., Aug. 5, 6, 1781. Garrettson continued, "The evening was spent in preaching and exhorting."
Sunday, 19. In love-feast the Lord was previous, but in the time of preaching he opened the windows of heaven and poured down blessings upon us. Sinners were struck as with hammer and fire, or like as if thunder flashes had smitten them. A general cry began, so that I was forced to stop preaching. I stood upon the stand and looked on, and saw them in every part of the congregation with streaming eyes, and groaning for mercy, while others were shouting praises to God for delivering grace. Numbers were converted—the season was truly glorious and very refreshing to God’s dear people. The meeting never broke up till about sundown.25

In the quarterly meeting, Methodism dramatically opened its community, opened its windows, to attest the sincerity and dependability of the grace promised and so freely assured.

The second community gathered in the quarterly meeting was that of the Methodist circuit. Both before 1784 and for a long time thereafter for many circuits, the quarterly meeting was the point at which Methodist people experienced the fullness of Christian community. Before 1784 when its itinerants were not ordained and were (with some notable exceptions) not celebrating the Eucharist, the Love Feast with its intense sharing of Christian experience must have been the liturgical heart of the two days. After 1784, Love Feast and Lord’s Supper must have vied in some fashion for liturgical primacy.26 At any rate, the quarterly meeting was the event in the calendar of Methodism when these expressions of the whole church were made available. The quarterly meeting also brought face-to-face those knit by administrative duties, financial obligations and leadership. It was the time when the people who shared itinerants, local preachers, exhorters were together. They had a certain amount of business to do and certain duties that could only be done legally when gathered quarterly.27

But the two days surrounded those administrative tasks with the full range of Methodist religious experiences. The faithful needed no book of services; quarterly meeting dramatized them. Even the class meeting,

25Phoebus, Beams of Light, 142. It is important to accent the “spiritual” quality of the egalitarian message of Methodism. In another quarterly meeting that same year which drew a large crowd, the blacks were sent to the barn. (p. 137) The outdoor meetings, spatially open, compromised the inclusive and universal message of Methodism less than the confined quarters of a meeting house which for a variety of reasons fostered not only segregation, which came very early, but the drawing of all sorts of lines. A building as private space invited division into us and them; field or forest as public space permitted “trespass.”


which was not replicated, was in a sense represented since its acts of inclusion or exclusion pointed toward the events of quarterly meeting. The quarterly meeting was, then, the occasion when the Methodists who belonged together were gathered, with all their leaders, to enjoy the feast of Methodist religious offerings and to perform those offices incumbent upon a church. In the quarterly meeting, Methodism was distinctively itself, most fully church.

Methodist people experienced fully what it meant to be the Church because of the third community gathered by the quarterly meeting. The quarterly meeting brought the ministry together. Asbury noted of one in 1781, "We had twelve preachers, and about one thousand people at quarterly meeting." While by no means as large or regionally inclusive as the annual conference, the quarterly meeting partook of its fraternal character. Cooper, more discerning and attentive to detail than many of his compatriots, reported of a Kent Circuit, Delaware quarterly meeting of 1785 that after love-feast at 9:00:

Then preaching, in and out of doors, began at twelve o'clock. Brother Whatcoat preached within, Brother Cloud outside. George Moore gave an exhortation in, and Harry, a black man, exhorted without. It was a good time. In fact, the quarterly meeting could be, on occasion, far more inclusive than the annual conference for in attendance (after 1784) might be representatives of every level of Methodist leadership: bishop, presiding elder, elder, deacon, local preacher, exhorter, class leader, steward. It must have been unusual to have the numbers of traveling preachers that Asbury occasionally records, "a dozen preachers besides others," he noted in 1786. But the fact is that when conference—quarterly, annual or later general—was the destination, Methodists often travelled in entourage. The traveling together might have mitigated both the exercise and the perception of Methodist authority. At any rate, on the way to quarterly meeting, the bishop or presiding elder would gather in traveling and local preachers, exhorters and class leaders and meet others at the destination.

Their gathering had a very special quality—one now suspect because of our programatic and historical sensitivity to the ministry of all

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28JLFA, I, p. 413, Nov. 3, 1781.
29Phoebus, Beams of Light, p. 27.
30JLFA, I, 525, Nov. 1786. Unfortunately, the journals tend to record only the names of the principals at these occasions. Where travel and weather conditions permitted, a quarterly meeting for which Asbury was intended would have tended to draw heavily. Others were doubtless much smaller. But it was not unusual for there to be a handful of preachers plus other leaders. Ezekiel Cooper was somewhat more careful about names than others. See, for instance, Phoebus, p. 62, for his account of a quarterly meeting in Feb. 11-12 of 1787 at which Whatcoat, Abbott, Sparks and Cooper preached and Brush also participated.
31The Journal of Bishop Richard Whatcoat," in Sweet, The Methodist, pp. 73-122, because it is so spare, illustrates nicely the "collective" character of Methodist Ministry.
Christians and the inclusion of women. Garrettson caught its intensely spiritual dimension when he affirmed of a 1777 gathering: "I was greatly refreshed among the servants of God." The preachers experienced that renewal on the various occasions when they were together. James Meacham proclaimed, "Sweet is the Company of the preachers." He frequently employed the phrase "sweet Christian Conference" to register the depth of inter-personal engagement among Methodists. "We had Sweet conferences together," he affirmed after meeting with an individual, with a family, with several ministers and especially in quarterly conference.

At quarterly meeting, then, Methodist people and the public witnessed the deep engagement of ministers with ministers. The drama that unfolded derived some of its intensity from the heightened sensitivity and mutual stimulation of the ministers. Their proclamation and praise had the strength of numbers, the intensity a support group provides and the creative nurture afforded by peer review. At quarterly meeting the collegium performed.

Methodists struggled for adequate language to convey what occurred. Asbury noted for a 1779 quarterly meeting:

Our love feast began at nine, and public worship at twelve o'clock. The operations of the Holy Spirit were very powerful in the congregation; so that there was a general melting; and amongst the young people, there were outcries and deep distress. Here was a blessed prospect, God is gracious beyond the power of language to describe. Both preachers and people were exceedingly quickened. The public labours of the day were too much for my feeble frame.

What captured the meaning of the quarterly meeting more than their rhetoric was a consequent revival. For the revival attested what Methodist words could not. When revivals followed quarterly meetings in July and August of 1789, Garrettson recorded, a "great meeting, perhaps the greatest that we have ever known in this side of the North River." Mere superlatives could not say that when Methodism was most fully itself; when it ordered itself as a gracious vessel; when the leaders and people who belonged together gathered; when its most precious and exciting offices were observed; when it presented itself to the world as an open, inclusive

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82Experience and Travels of Mr. Freeborn Garrettson, p. 67.
84JLFA, I, 295, Feb. 2, 1779. Compare an entry for Aug. 4, 1777 (I, 245) for the Frederick quarterly meeting: "The next day our meeting began with a love feast; and we had a powerful melting time." Or of a Maryland quarterly meeting Nov. 3-4, 177 (I, 251) at which there "were many friends from Virginia, and the congregation was very large." "It was a powerful, melting time, and concluded in the spirit of love." The estimation was an exceedingly common one and was, of course, used for other occasions than the quarterly meeting.
85Journals for July 11, 12, 1789 and Aug. 1, 2, 1789. Compare the quarterly meeting—revivals of 1787 described by Lee, Short History, pp. 130-34.
Christian fellowship—then the Holy Spirit was poured out. Revival following quarterly meeting proclaimed that when Methodists were knit in common purpose and deeply felt unity, their community was the message. The quarterly meeting revival was Methodism blessed in being itself. Organization and revival, inner life and public testimony cohered.

At times the annual conferences and later even General Conferences had such a revivalistic thrust. Of the General Conference of 1800 it is reported:

[A] great revival began during the Conference and perhaps near 50 were converted mostly young persons...Conference broke up on the 20th...More than 100 Souls were awakened & converted & the revival Continues.  

Annual conferences possessed and continued to possess that potential. Lee ascribed 1788 revivals in Maryland, both eastern and western shores, to conference preaching. Asbury credits one of the conferences in 1789 and one in 1790 with that result. Although annual conferences (and General Conferences) were highly important in the furthering of ministerial fraternity, their potential as agencies of conversion was minimized by both their closed nature and the burden of issues, conflict and business they increasingly bore. The judgments that Asbury levies, “peace and love,” “peace and union,” “peace and order,” project a fraternal ideal. The ideal contended with the reality that the conference (annual and General) served also as legislature, administration, judiciary. Furthermore, conference struggled to understand its functions while tugged simultaneously by the republican ideals of American society and the spiritually concentrated patterns exercised by Wesley and inherited by Asbury. This is not the place to review these developments. Here it is only important to observe that in the annual conference as in the quarterly—in early Methodism—spirituality and business lay side by side. Indeed to shift the image they could be the two sides of one coin. Hearing the testimony of the persons at the various stages of candidacy—the consuming task of annual conference—was administration that could be inspiring, instructive, renewing and certainly community-building.

But as Methodism prospered; as numbers of circuits, preachers and members increased; as the number of conferences grew

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87 Lee, *Short History,* 138-40. JLFA, I, p. 537, April 18, 1787 and I, p. 625, Feb. 15, 1790. For many more he speaks of the public preaching without speculating about the long-term effects thereof.

88 JLFA, I, pp. 594, 595-96, 598.
dramatically—from one in 1781 to fourteen by the end of the decade—and, as divisive issues preoccupied the attendees, the spirituality of conference suffered.

Then great wonder of wonders, a miracle. Methodism discovered how to have its cake and eat it too. Methodism discovered how to change while remaining unchanged. Methodism discovered how to have *conference as business* without sacrificing *conference as revival*. Methodism discovered the camp meeting. Or perhaps better, the camp meeting discovered Methodism. For the camp meeting was a miraculous mirror, a wonderful looking glass that allowed Methodism to see itself just as it wanted to be. The camp meeting was Methodism *all in spirit*, organization made once again to serve life, conference as revival. Yet it could not be adopted. Then the illusion would be shattered.

**Revival: From Quarterly to Camp Meeting**

There are three rather remarkable contemporaneous literary documentations of Methodism’s discovery of itself in the camp meeting. All three have some claim to an official stamp. The first to appear were accounts in *The Methodist Magazine* (London), which in the absence of an American Methodist publication carried some American religious intelligence. These seem to have an official American anchor at one or both ends. Bishop Coke was the recipient of some. Ezekiel Cooper, superintendent of the Book Concern, wrote some and may well have sent others.\(^9\)

The second to appear was a volume entitled *Extracts of Letters Containing Some Account of the Work of God Since the Year 1800. Written by the Preachers and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, to their Bishops*\(^40\) which appeared in 1805, also, it might be noted, under Cooper’s agency. The third was Lee’s *Short-History* finished in 1809 but published in 1810.

Lee’s has a longer view than the other two but all three have revival as their basic motif. And in all three revival is borne first by the quarterly meeting and then by the camp meeting. In the period leading up to 1801, when he recognized the first camp meeting, Lee accounts all Methodist growth as revival. His own successes in gathering Methodists out of Congregationalist New England have that designation. But five revivals

\(^9\)These begin with volume 25 (1802) and abate in volume 28 (1805). Included are letters from Methodists (Asbury, Cooper, Stith Mead, Thomas Ware, Daniel Hall, Richard Sneath, William Colbert, Hamilton Jefferson, John Hagerty, Seely Bunn and James Jenkins) to Coke, letters between other Methodist acquaintances and reprints of accounts from non-Methodists.

\(^40\)(New York: Published by Ezekiel Cooper and John Wilson for the Methodist Connection in the United States, 1805). Many are from presiding elders and constitute the religious state of the district so frequently demanded by Asbury. Except for the Kentucky meetings the quarterly and camp meetings are in territory that Methodism worked. It would be difficult to read this volume attentively and argue that the camp meeting was a frontier affair.
Lee describes. In three of these the quarterly conference is the dramatic center; in the other two annual or General Conference. In 1801 and after when camp meetings loom large, many of the accounts feature the quarterly meeting or quarterly meeting in some conjunction with camp meeting. Until re-seated in the camp meeting, revival has a conference and typically a quarterly meeting foundation.

The letters in both *The Methodist Magazine* and *Extracts* are themselves a barometer of the revival. Asbury writes Coke in August of 1801 that revivals among Methodists and Presbyterians have occurred in Tennessee but also on “every Circuit upon the Eastern and Western Shores;” there is even “a stir in Jersey.” Another correspondent informs an English Methodist of “the revival of Religion in America.” “It is said there never was such an out-pouring of the Spirit, as there is at present thro’ most parts of the Continent.” After reporting first hand on the revivals in the Baltimore circuit, he details the Kentucky and Tennessee Presbyterian-Methodist encampments, relying on and citing correspondence from there. In the letters that follow attention is on the camp meetings, doubtless intriguing to the largely English readership, but quarterly meetings and great meetings are also featured. It is difficult to read through these without sensing first, that the camp meetings are ex-

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41 For characterization of Lee’s history and discussion of Lee’s publication after being denied a Methodist imprimatur, see Kenneth E. Rowe, “Counting the Converts: Progress Reports as Church History,” in forthcoming volume edited by Rowe and Richey.

42 The first of these in 1776 is cited above, p. 6. A subsequent revival in the same area occurred in 1787. Read in its entirety, pp. 129-33, it is a striking attestation of the quarterly meeting as revival. Just to illustrate: “The most remarkable work of all was in Sussex, and Brunswick circuits, where the meetings would frequently continue for five or six hours together, and some times all night.

“At one quarterly meeting held at Mabry’s chapel in Brunswick circuit, on the 25th and 26th of July, the power of God was among the people in an extraordinary manner: some hundreds were awakened; and it was supposed that above one hundred souls were converted at the meeting which continued for two days, i.e., on Thursday and Friday. Some thousands of people attended meeting at that place on that occasion.

“The next quarterly-meeting was held at Jones’s chapel in Sussex county. . . .” The revival narrative continues. For the 1789 quarterly meeting revival see pp. 145-55. Annual conference in 1788 and the General Conference in 1800 are the narrative center of the other two accounts (pp. 138-40, 271-75). Others mentioned, not described and for which a quarterly meeting role is neither affirmed nor denied, are Jarratt’s 1770-71 (pp. 43-44), a 1774 Maryland eastern shore (p. 49), one in 1781 affecting the Peninsula, Va. and N.C. (p. 77), a 1784 frontier revival (p. 89) and those associated with Lee’s own labors in N.E. (p. 216 ff.)


45 For revival report from an annual meeting see below. On the revival role of quarterly meetings see *The Methodist Magazine*, 25, pp. 521-23, Stith Mead to Coke; vol. 26, pp. 370 ff. for reports by Thomas Ware and Daniel Hall to Coke on Delaware and Albemarle respectively, Richard Sneath’s to Coke and Hamilton Jefferson to Coke. Camp meeting reports abound, including one reported in a subsequent letter of Stith Mead, vol. 26, p. 419.
experienced as a novelty, but second, that they are immediately adopted as an expansion in time and scale of the quarterly meeting. The same conclusion is to be drawn from the Extracts which report quarterly meetings, annual meetings, quarterly meetings as camp meetings, encampments, nine-day and six-day quarterly meetings and many camp meetings.\textsuperscript{46} This is Methodism as a whole reporting itself in transition. The role of Asbury in the appropriation of the camp meeting cannot be minimized. However, the task was made easy because Methodism saw itself in the camp meeting. A Cooper who experienced the following Dover annual meeting could embrace the camp meeting as his own:

The week previous to the Conference there was a great meeting at Dover. It began on Whitsunday, and continued a whole week. It was a glorious time indeed. I was there four or five days. Thousands attended; people came near a hundred miles to that meeting, and many were there from thirty, forty and fifty miles distant. Our preaching house could not hold much more than a tenth of them. And surely it was a pentecost indeed! On Whitsunday I preached . . . I stood in a waggon, and was surrounded by thousands of attentive souls. . . .\textsuperscript{47}

And a Thomas Ware looking back from the vantage of the 1840s on the same phenomenon, the Dover annual meeting and its consequent revival, could observe:

Camp meetings had not yet been introduced; and we knew not what to do with the thousands who attended our quarterly meetings. Sometimes we were forced to resort to the woods, and even to hold our love-feasts in the grove.\textsuperscript{48}

Conclusions

The testimony of Cooper and Ware point to the following conclusions:

1) The most important factor in the emergence of the camp meetings as a national, quasi-official institution was their essential continuity with quarterly meeting and annual conference, especially the former. 2) That continuity calls attention to an insufficiently stressed characteristic of early Methodist revivals. They were seated in conference, in quarterly meeting and annual conference. 3) That unity of revival and machinery, of evangelism and organization, of life and order proved difficult to sustain as

\textsuperscript{46}Quarterly Meetings, pp. 9, 17-18; annual meetings, pp. 24-26, 28-30; encampment, pp. 37-39; nine-day quarterly meeting, pp. 49-50; six-day quarterly meeting, pp. 101-102, quarterly meetings as camp meetings, pp. 54-55, 108-109. A single report that juxtaposes quarterly meetings and camp meetings is William P. Chandler's of Aug. 1805. See JLFA, III, pp. 327-31.

\textsuperscript{47}The Methodist Magazine, 25, pp. 422-23.

Methodism grew in numbers, area, complexity. 4) The camp meeting caught on as a revitalization measure which mirrored or replicated early patterns (i.e., the quarterly meeting). 5) Its ability to safeguard Methodist ethos permitted the evolution of order into organization, of conference into business, of *Discipline* into constitution to proceed. In short, the camp meeting allowed Methodism to change while appearing to remain the same.