THE SOUTHERN ACCENT OF AMERICAN METHODISM

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Deeply embedded in Methodist self-consciousness lies a dispute about origins. Did American Methodism begin with Philip Embury in New York or with Robert Strawbridge in Maryland? From the beginning, this controversy over priority has haunted episcopal Methodism. When reworked in 1787 to suit American conditions, Methodism’s constitution, the Discipline, even provided what looks very much like a compromise formulation. It gave Methodism an American shape by posing a question about its origins. After an initial query concerning “the Rise of Methodism” in Europe, the Discipline asked, “What was the Rise of Methodism, so called, in America?” It answered:

About twenty Years ago, Philip Embury, a local preacher from Ireland, began to preach in the city of New-York, and formed a society of his own Countrymen and the Citizens. About the same time, Robert Strawbridge, a local preacher from Ireland, settled in Frederic County, in the State of Maryland, and preaching there, formed some Societies.

With only minor variations, successive Disciplines down to the latest, that of 1984, have repeated that formulation. It is the purpose of this paper to propose that the contest over priority and efforts to mediate it have diverted attention from the more important and underlying question of how region and regional factors shaped Methodism.

Discomfort with Parity

The compromise in the Discipline did not suit all concerned with Methodist origins. In 1807 in the first history of American Methodism, “A Comprehensive History of American Methodism,” rendered in only 20 pages, an English emigrant, southern resident but zealous abolitionist, George Bourne conceded the case for New York’s priority. Another southerner, Jesse Lee concurred. In his more modestly titled but far more significant and far longer (394 pages), A Short History of the Methodists, he insisted that “the first permanent Methodist society was formed in the city of New York” and the “first Methodist meeting house . . . built in the United States, was that in New-York.”

Other southerners have sought at least the parity achieved in the Discipline. In 1859, George C. M. Roberts, then with the American Methodist Historical Society in Baltimore, resolved the issue by pushing both New York and Baltimore origins back to 1760. More typically, Hilary Hudson, in an 1882 volume with the telling title, The Methodist Armor; Or, A Popular Exposition of the Doctrines, Peculiar Usages, and Ec-

1Because of the excessive length of many of the footnotes they will be found at the end of the article rather than in the normal location.
clesiastical Machinery of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South retained the formulation of the Discipline.4

Southern discomfort with parity came to most pointed and forceful expression in the first great history of Methodism from a southern angle, Holland McTyeire's A History of Methodism. He insisted:

Robert Strawbridge, both in order of time and talent and service, stands at the head of the noble 'irregulars' who founded Arminian Methodism in America. Em­bury is worthy of much honor, but the builder of the Log Meeting-house of more.5

In 1916 that southern view triumphed. Then a Joint Commission on the Origin of American Methodism created by the preceding General Con­ference of The Methodist Episcopal Church, the (predominantly) northern body of a sectionally divided Methodism, but composed of representatives of that body and The Methodist Episcopal Church, South and The Methodist Protestant Church, reported back that "to the work of Robert Strawbridge in Maryland belongs the distinction of priority." The New York representatives on this commission complained, quite accurately, that the Church had established procedures that insured a southern or Baltimore majority and a southern conclusion.6

Nevertheless, the debate continues. Its continuing salience is indicated in the subtitles Edwin Schell chose for his chapter in the modestly titled Baltimore Conference history, Those Incredible Methodists:

- The First Class of American Methodism
- The First Dated Transfer of Membership
- The First Meeting House
- Bush—the Second Meeting House
- The First American Methodist Deed—Leesburg
- The First Recorded Quarterly Conference
- The First Methodist Baptism in the World
- The First Native Local Preacher
- The First Traveling Preacher7

This tedious Methodist triumphalism, regional competition and quar­rel over origins both indicates and masks an important issue. The contest over priority trivializes a much more substantive question about the shaping of early American Methodism. As the title indicates, this essay wishes to ask, not where Methodism started, but where it was decisively molded. The sparring by New York and Baltimore serves to confuse the important issue. The critical matter is not whether Embury preceded Strawbridge, but where Methodism evolved and how its environment affected that evolu­tion. This essay argues for serious reflection about the obvious—that American Methodism developed in the South and has had a southern ac­cent ever since.
Methodism a Southern Religion?

To term Methodism a southern religion makes a claim about Methodism as a whole. It is argued here that American Methodism has lived for much of its history, perhaps even to this day, with a southern pedigree, which for various reasons it has chosen to ignore. Such a thesis diverges from accepted findings in both Methodist and southern historiography. Southern religious history has prospered over the last decade, and has done so by breaking with earlier historiographical traditions which had accentuated the more passive dimensions of southern religion, its culturally determined character, its shaping by an imported evangelicalism, by region, by slavery, by culture. While not obscuring these realities, recent readings also note culturally formative facets of southern religion. Yet none of this more recent literature, as far as I can discern, argues that the South shaped American religion as a whole. Here that note is sounded—southern religion, at least in its Methodist form, may be difficult to distinguish because it imprinted American Methodism as a whole.

Similarly, Methodist historians have tended to observe but pass lightly over the southern character of early Methodism, except to remark upon its deleterious effect on the Methodist conscience and anti-slavery impulse. They do, generally, recognize the southern prominence of early Methodism. Beyond that they tend not to go. One group of historians, however, has recognized Methodism's southern character, conference historians.

“The Garden of Methodism”

“The Peninsula that lies between the Delaware and Chesapeake bays ... was the garden of Methodism in America.” Citing that claim by Henry Boehm, William Williams entitles his superb history of Delmarva Methodism, The Garden of American Methodism. Not to be outdone, Edwin Schell enters a counter-claim for Baltimore, calling that area “a fountainhead of the expanding Methodist work.” Speaking for Virginia Methodism, in a book of that title, Paul Neff Garber affirmed: “It was on the soil of Virginia that much of the American and Methodist tradition was born.” Here again, Methodist triumphalism and conference posturing obscure historical patterns. Rather than entering or resolving this squabble, we suggest that all three claims be accepted. For it was there indeed that Methodism took root and the Methodism of these three areas, perhaps with the addition of that of North Carolina, then expanded to the nation. By early southern Methodism we intend that of the upper South, really that bounded by the Mason-Dixon line, the Methodism which emerged in Chesapeake culture.
Methodism's Southern Contours

In 1775, out of a total Methodist membership of 3,148, 2,384 lived below the Mason-Dixon line. In 1780, owing to the British disruption of the little northern Methodist wing, 7,808 of the movement's 8,504 was southern. By 1784, when the church organized, 13,331 of the total 14,983 was southern. In 1800 the proportions had shifted, but still 45,282 of a total 63,958 was southern. And 122,561 of a total 195,357 Methodists was southern in 1812.

The contours of early Methodism can also be seen in terms of where the church chose to meet. For the first forty years of its organized life, from 1784 to 1824, whenever the church met in a single general conference, whether official or unofficial, it did so in Baltimore. 1812 saw an exception to this pattern. The church met that year in New York. During the period in which Methodism experimented with the multiple-session conference, it held those sessions predominantly in the South. In 1785, the first year of this venture, all three sessions convened in the South—at Green Hill's home near Louisburg, North Carolina; in Brunswick county, Virginia; and in Baltimore. In 1788, the conference moved north in seven jumps, Charleston, Georgia, Holstein, Petersburg, Beeson Town, Baltimore and Philadelphia. 1790 saw fourteen sessions, only the last three of which lay outside the South—Charleston, Georgia, Kentucky, Holstein, North Carolina, Lane's Chapel, Union Town, Leesburg, Baltimore, Cokesbury, Duck Creek, Philadelphia, Burlington and New York. In 1796, the church legislated specific boundaries to conferences, thereby giving itself organizational coherence and continuity in territorial terms. The conferences created, once again, illustrate how southern Methodism remained—New England, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Virginia, South Carolina and Western.15

Other structures of Methodist work bear the same message. A map of circuits for the year 1790, in Lester Cappon's *Atlas of Early American History*, shows us the southern proportions of Methodism. A thin stream of circuits reached up the Hudson, with a slight branch, as it were, over to Boston. The major current of Methodism flowed from Trenton in the north due west and from Savannah in the south, northwest.16 The same proportions appear in data Jesse Lee collected in 1799 about the number of local preachers. These numbers indicate where Methodism possessed leadership strength and potential. Of the 850 total, 671 were southern.17 The obituaries in the *Minutes* disclose the lavish spending of that southern contribution. Of the 245 ministers who had died by 1829, the nativity of 212 is clearly indicated. Virginia produced 45, Maryland 33 and North Carolina 23, almost half the total.18
Migration of Southern Methodism

Actually the southern accent in Methodism would have been even greater than the data above would indicate. The proportion of southerners to northerners altered less than the raw statistics imply and the church slipped northward demographically (rather than simply geographically) more gradually than the additional northern conferences and circuits northward suggest. The numbers and contours of organizational life understate the southern ethos of Methodism. For just before and after the turn of the century, Virginia, Maryland, the Peninsula—the Methodist stronghold—lost people, Methodists among them, who fled slavery and spent soil. Many of these southerners moved into areas that would be counted on the northern side of the ledger, Ohio, later Indiana and Illinois.

Asbury's journal provides vivid, personal meaning to this movement. In 1807, he wrote of finding lodging in Ohio with “Andrew M'Grew, lately from Baltimore county, Maryland.”19 Two years later he dined at “Philip Davis’s: This is an old Virginia family, and here as brethren and sisters whom I have known, some twenty, others above thirty years.”20 He called this area “New Virginia.” For example, in 1812, in the context of reflections about charges lodged against him for ordaining a slave and a Virginian's refusal to manumit, Asbury mused, “Old Virginia, because of the great emigrations westward, and deaths, decreases in the numbers she gives to the Methodists; but new Virginia gains.”21 He seemed to reflect about Old Virginia when in New and about New Virginia when in Old.22 Similarly, Asbury found that original southern Methodism in western parts of the South proper. For instance, in 1805, in Kentucky, he noted:

Saturday, 21 September . . . We visited Daniel Grigg. I found several of my old friends at this place—among them Colonel Barratt of Alleghany, and his wife; Mrs. Tittle, and some from Baltimore county, and the State of Delaware—and thus our people are scattered abroad; but, thank the Lord! they are still in the fold, and on their way to glory. . . .

Monday, 23 September. I visited John Vernon, an early member of society, at Lewis Afree's, near Duck Creek, State of Delaware. I must look up our old sheep and lambs.23

So Asbury visited the just mentioned Col. Barratt again in 1811, in the state of Ohio.24 Patterns of communication also disclose the southern movement west and the continuing power of the ties to old Virginia. Those larger dimensions of the South pervade that remarkable collection of letters between the Virginian, Edward Dromgoole, and his network, many of whom had moved to Ohio.25

When Asbury and Dromgoole observed on a personal level, we can see on a corporate scale in the leadership of the conference created to gather in the wandering southerners. In 1804 the secretary of this Western con-
ference (comprised of Ohio, Kentucky, Cumberland and Holston districts) caught the southern character of the Methodist west. He minuted states of origin for some of those taken in on trial (for others listing only the quarterly meeting making the recommendation). Two thirds came from the South.\textsuperscript{26}

The states of origin should indicate that we must think of this early southern Methodism as dynamic and expanding. The church as a whole moved west—lay folk, exhorters, local preachers and those aspiring to the itinerancy. That hoary Methodist commonplace that the itinerant won the west distorts the picture. The itinerant found Methodism already there but receptive to leadership and to the Methodist connectional system. We need a re-written version of Methodist history, seen from the bottom up. From that grass-roots vantage, as the above indicates, the South provided leadership for the expanding church.

The same pattern can be seen in terms of national elites. There as at all other levels the South dominated. The South provided the national leadership for Methodism. The presiding elders—the effective supervisors, educators, justices, administrators for the church—overwhelmingly hailed from the South. In 1800, for instance, seventeen presiding elders superintended the itinerating preachers across the nation. Their origins:

- Benjamin Blanton, southern (according to Asbury)
- Francis Poythress, Virginia
- Jonathan Jackson, North Carolina
- William McKendree, Virginia
- Enoch George, Virginia
- Daniel Hitt, Virginia
- Christopher Spry, Virginia or Maryland
- Thomas Ware, New Jersey
- Joseph Everett, Maryland
- Solomon Sharp, Maryland
- William McLenahan, Ireland
- Freeborn Garrettson, Maryland
- Shadrach Bostwick, Maryland
- John Brodhead, Pennsylvania
- Joseph Jewell, apparently Delaware, where made deacon
- George Pickering, Maryland
- Joshua Taylor, New Jersey\textsuperscript{27}

The southern character of the leadership cadre is unmistakable. Thirteen of the presiding elders came from the South, three from the North and one from Ireland.

Perhaps, we might think of Methodism as the religious culture which southerners took to the continent—
as what Freeborn Garrettson took from Maryland to Nova Scotia and New York;
as what Jesse Lee took from Virginia to New England;
as what Richard Allen took from Delaware to Philadelphia;
as what William McKendree took from Virginia west;
as what Ezekiel Cooper took from the Peninsula to Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York;
as what Philip Gatch took from Maryland to Ohio;
as what Peter Cartwright took from Virginia into Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois.

Admittedly, we only discern a dominant tone, one that had to com­pete with other notes, both from within and without the Wesleyan tradition and from various sources in the culture. So it must be conceded that Methodism was also what Thomas Ware took from New Jersey to Tennessee. Still to speak metaphorically, southerners wrote early Methodist history. And to speak literally rather than metaphorically, it was quite fitting that the Virginian and national leader, Jesse Lee, wrote the first fullscale Methodist history. Methodism belonged in a rather special sense to the South.

**The Southern Shape of American Methodism: Some Hypotheses**

This argument varies from and yet ultimately contributes to three im­portant trends in the recent historiography of southern Methodism. All three trends are integrative or wholistic. One views southern Methodism within the larger Methodist or Wesleyan tradition. A second treats Methodism as part of the distinctive southern interplay of religion and culture. The third attends to the manifold complexity and interconnectedness of evangelicalism as a national phenomenon, and includes southern religion. Here we begin by isolating Methodism in the South from its northern (as well as British) expression but conclude with a na­tional Methodism, albeit with one far more ‘southern’ than the traditional estimate. Second, for purposes of viewing the way in which a southern ethos permeates a distinct tradition, we isolate Methodism somewhat arbitrary from other variants of southern religion. Third, by positing its role in shaping Methodism nationally, we may open up again the issue of what constitutes evangelical culture and question the long-standing habit of tracing American religious patterns to New England origins.

What then may be said about early southern Methodism? Five things. Early southern Methodism offered an anti-patriarchal, evangelical Anglicanism; evidenced a deep ambivalence over slavery; constructed the church on a bi-racial basis; conceived of Methodist purpose in territorial terms; and dramatized grace in large, public events.
An Evangelical Alternative to Patriarchal Anglicanism

First, as Rhys Isaac and Donald Mathews clearly show, the 18th-century evangelicalism of Baptists and Methodists defined itself over against the norms, beliefs and folkways of the patriarchal culture of Anglican, slave-holding gentility. This excerpt from Stith Mead's route to Methodism dramatizes that new self-definition:

Jan. 1790—Mr. Samuel Mead, a brother next youngest to me, who appears to be a sincere penitent for his sins, and myself travelled to the State of Georgia, to see our relations, whose god is in this world, with the rich and fashionable gay. I strove to encourage my brother, as I was a believer unto salvation, and he was only a seeker of religion. In Feb. we arrived in Georgia, and was received with much persecution from many of our relations, who soon raised a dancing party, when my brother was caught in the snare of Satan—I was much persuaded to stay and partake with them, but refused; having several miles to ride to Col. A. Gordon's, a brother-in-law, where I lived. My sisters often danced before me, others suggested I was deranged, and soon would be raving mad—but blessed be God, in the midst of all my temptations and trials, I find him to be a “friend that sticketh by me, nigher than a brother.” I often took up my cross with a trembling hand, to pray in my father's family.

Today we would dismiss as petty, individualistic moralism Mead's portrayal of central features of genteel culture—like dancing—as the snare of Satan. That posture struck his relations as madness. Isaac and Mathews recover the force but invert the contemporary valuation. They construe this defiance of gentility as explosive, radical, Christian egalitarianism empowering the lowly of the society to defy the dominant power structure. The combative, anti-worldly, anti-gentry, anti-patriarchal rhetoric functioned, argue Mathews and Isaac, to create and sustain a powerful, alternative community. Within this new community, women and men, the lowly and the mighty, Blacks and whites experienced a grace that made it possible to affirm one another. Mathews employs the text preached on by Freeborn Garrettson and reported by Asbury, “Disallowed Indeed of Men, but Chosen of God and Precious,” as theme and chapter title through which to capture this radical phase of evangelicalism.

While Methodists joined with Baptists in defiance of this Anglican patriarchalism, they differed in strategy. Baptists offered ritual, creed, polity and ethnic which virtually inverted Anglicanism. Methodists defied the Anglican culture of patriarchalism in more insidious fashion. Methodism countered Anglican patriarchy by offering itself as a surrogate, before 1784 as a reform movement within the Anglican church, after 1784 as a clear alternative. Here was an Anglican cultus which symbolized independence not the crown, equality not patriarchy, freedom not slavery. Methodists advanced, as William Williams has argued, because they provided southerners brought up with the Prayer Book, “a second 'English' church.” “It is no accident, says Williams, “that on the Peninsula and elsewhere in early America, Methodism had its greatest success in areas
previously dominated by the Church of England and the descendants of Englishmen.  
Williams helps put into proper perspective the argument advanced by Frank Baker and others that American Methodism continued far more of the belief and cultus of Wesleyanism and Anglicanism than Americans have appreciated. Conceding that, we then need to recognize that however continuous in substance early Methodism was with British Wesleyanism and with Anglicanism on either side of the Atlantic, Americans employed this British religious system to differentiate themselves from the world of slave-holding, patriarchal Anglicanism. Hence we need to view the Methodist system and Methodist strictures together as a complex code of alternative belief and alternative behavior defining a new community. That code, given initially to the slave culture of the Chesapeake, became a national pattern.

It must be conceded, however, that the code transmitted both in time and space while the alternative community that it was intended to create did not. In the South, as Mathews has shown, evangelicanism eventually captured the elites and the genteel culture it had once despised. In that accommodation to culture, it preserved style not substance—the moralistic life-style but not the radical, egalitarian community. A similar accommodation, we suspect, occurred, perhaps even more rapidly, in the transmission of this evangelicalism north and northwest. Away from its primary referent, the patriarchal culture; grounded in Wesley’s rules of The Discipline; and cohering with the pronounced legalism of American culture as a whole, Methodist moralism readily became an end in itself. Furthermore, early Methodist aversion to genteel patriarchalism did not automatically translate itself into egalitarian authority structures within Methodism, though some within the movement thought it should. The secession of the Republican Methodists drained out some of these folk, the later departure of the Methodist Protestants others. Both attested the continuing appeal of these sentiments and their minority status within Methodism as a whole.

Yet Methodists could never divorce themselves entirely from the radical messages latent in this life-style. Black Methodists never did. For whites, these impulses would resurface, albeit in different form, in reform movements, the holiness cause and women’s organizations.

Ambivalence Over Slavery

Second, American Methodism derived from its southern beginnings a deep ambivalence about slavery and the Black. This has to be one of the most canvassed of all Methodist topics. Much of the specifically Methodist discussion has been structured around conference legislation on slavery. Northern and Black historians have read this story as Methodist principle compromised and southern interest honored. Southerners have
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construed that legislation, as did A. T. Bledsoe in 1871, as an expression of a "British conscience . . . sensitive, if not morbid," on the subject of slavery and as imposed by the British leadership.38 Both interpretations tend to locate the commitment to anti-slavery outside the South and to depict southerners as quite ready to embrace slavery. Early statements by Jesse Lee and others do lend themselves to such constructions. However, such viewpoints, standard in Methodist historiography, overlook the overwhelmingly southern character of the church during this early period and fail to recognize early anti-slavery as itself a southern impulse. They also fail therefore to appreciate the complexity of Methodist anti-slavery sentiment. It came laced with racism. Journal entries, however, clearly illustrate both an inclusion and an exclusion of Blacks, anti-slavery commitment and racism. For a quarterly meeting in 1785, Ezekiel Cooper recorded, 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.39

Four years later James Meacham complained of "the prejudice of Education. We can't have the privilege of meeting the blacks in the Church." He noted that they listened at the window. A couple of years later he recorded his hope to see the poor slaves in Heaven and "their cruel bloody oppressive Masters . . . burn in Hell fire for ever & ever."40 How should we construe such entries? Initially southern Methodists (and Methodists outside the South) found slavery and the treatment of the slave to be a metaphor of the world as ruled by Satan. Not surprisingly, some Methodists, southerners included, attacked slavery and called the Black to draw near. From that impulse derived the important 18th century public pronouncements and conference legislation on slavery. However, the same folk had difficulty in welcoming the Black fully into the household of faith and left the Blacks to listen through the window. Or, as Cooper reported for the Calvert quarterly meeting in 1791, they were sent to the barn. Entries from personal journals—from Joseph Pilmore in 1771 onward—depict this strange ambivalence.41 So also does correspondence. A probing letter from an ex-Virginian in Ohio answering his friend, Edward Dromgoole, in Virginia illustrates that troubled inner state, its southern rootage and its transmission north. The friend noted Droomgoole's "pilgrimage to the Land of reste," but probed his dissatisfaction with "the land where you now are." Weighing reasons for relocation to "the Land of Liberty," the friend thought financial considerations insufficient. However, if it is,

... because you live in a land of Slavery and have you(r) doubts whether it be right in the sight of God for you to die there and live (leave) your children and grand ch(i)l(dren) In that land of opression, When there is a fare (far) more excellent place provided and that you might be the happy instrument under God to plant them in
this good land Where that evil is not and from every possible circumstance the free born sons Of Ohio will never admit it (slavery). If this be the cause I say Come in the Name of the Lorde.\textsuperscript{42}

So what southern Methodists transmitted to the nation was not a British conscience, nor a compromise-prone conscience, nor a racism-free conscience, but a troubled conscience.

**A Bi-Racial Church**

Third, and in consequence of the overtures to Blacks, early southern Methodism launched itself as a bi-racial movement. Despite the segregation, the racism and the rapid capitulation to the slave interests, early Methodism made a sufficiently credible appeal to Blacks for them to continue in uneasy relation with the movement. William McKendree said of a 1790 quarterly meeting what so many other preachers echoed, "Brother Paup preached to the white congregation; I went into the grove with the black people, and of a truth Jesus was there."\textsuperscript{43} Such entries suggest that something quite dramatic happened when Blacks heard the Methodist gospel. At any rate, Blacks responded. In 1786, the first year of count by race, the *Minutes* show 1,890 Black members. By 1797, 12,215 Blacks belonged, 5,106 in Maryland, 2,490 in Virginia and 2,071 in North Carolina, approximately one-quarter of total membership. Blacks both appropriated and transformed Methodism. In early leaders like Harry Hosier, Richard Allen and Henry Evans, we see the standard bearers of an unnumbered line of Black religious leaders, who, in the slave South as well as in the North, became the effective transmitters of Methodism to the Black folk. In that appropriation and transmission, as Albert Raboteau has sensitively shown, Blacks nuanced evangelicalism with African religious culture.\textsuperscript{44}

To this obvious pattern, we would append a somewhat less obvious implication. To recognize the denomination as bi-racial, confers legitimacy, perhaps even primary legitimacy, on black Methodism. What Donald Mathews has suggested for southern religion generally then applies obviously to Methodism, namely that southern Methodism and Methodism nationally have to be seen as both Black and white. While the two forms diverged, they did so from share origins.\textsuperscript{45} The point is made with white Methodists in mind; others will doubtless concede it readily. In important respects, black Methodists—AME, AME Zion, CME as well as those within United Methodism—may preserve and represent Methodism more faithfully than white.

**Purpose in Territorial Terms**

The fourth characteristic can be seen in relation to the purpose American Methodists, following Wesley, set for themselves. The first *Discipline* asked
What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists? A. To reform the Continent, and to spread scriptural Holiness over these lands.

After 1790, the bishops incorporated this statement of purpose into their prefatory address. There it remained through much of the 19th century, carrying the endorsement of subsequent bishops. In another place I have argued that historians have seriously misled us by anachronistically reading into that language understandings of reform applicable more to the reformers of the 1830s, 1890s or 1970s. They have done so by constructing Methodist anti-slavery, and perhaps the abortive attempts to lobby the Virginia legislature, as emblematic of the reformist dimensions of a Wesleyan commitment to social holiness. Then they chart a retreat from this Methodist reforming program and spirit, grumbling about individualism, and citing perhaps William McKendree's episcopal statement which by changing the “and” of the answer into “by” made reforming the continent ancillary to spreading scriptural holiness.

However, had one asked an early Methodist, particularly a southerner fervidly committed to rooting out slavery, what he or she meant by reforming the continent, I think one would have heard familiar rhetoric about piety, discipline, and godly behavior—touching both corporate and individual life and certainly touching both slave and slave-holder. One would not have heard what we would now think of as reform. The reason for this has much to do with the southern and Anglican origins of Methodism (it also had much to do with their deeper origin in Mr. Wesley's political sensitivities). Put most directly and in comparative terms, southern Methodists lacked what was prominent in the religious discourse of both New England and the upper Middle Colonies, namely a public theology. Eventually, Methodists adopted one, thanks in no small measure to the critics of episcopacy and interpreters of the Methodist legacy like Nathan Bangs. By the middle third of the 19th century they would speak in eloquent terms about a Christian nation, God's purposes therein, how Methodists might re-form America so as to bring it into accord with God's will, and how such reforms could be achieved educationally, socially and politically. For the most part, early Methodists did not theorize in such terms. And again the largely southern and Anglican dimensions of Methodism have much to do with this.

The easiest way to explain Methodist reform is to say that Methodists were neither Commonwealthmen nor Calvinists. Such discourse, after all, derived from New England Puritanism and radical Whiggery. Methodists experienced this rhetoric in the Revolution, in confrontations with Presbyterians and in the Enlightenment wing of colonial Anglicanism. None of those encounters was, for Methodists, positive. Hence we do not find Methodists preaching anything like the election sermons of New England. Instead, they conceived of their purposes in territorial not political terms. They spoke of continent not nation. To view them as con-
cerned only with the individual and only with his/her spiritual life, however, badly misconstrues them. They had a very powerful corporate purpose and did, in fact, offer a model of a reformed continent. They sustained it with no theory and they gave it a name we would never use for reform—conference.

Grace Dramatized in Public Events

The fifth, and final, characteristic gave sustenance to that vision for a reformed continent, but also to other Methodist patterns. The 'conference' that Methodists offered southerners and then Americans generally functioned initially as the institutionalization of radical egalitarian community, as a context within which to deal with slavery, as a social form permitting two races to live together, as a way for reforming a continent. Here, too, the social reality has been much examined. For what early southern Methodism offered Americans as its model of the church, its vision of the corporate life, its foretaste of a reformed continent, would survive transformed in the 19th century camp meeting. This system of Methodist conferences and, particularly, the quarterly meeting take on great significance, and not just administrative significance, when viewed in their southern context. The quarterly meeting served as a corporate drama in which Methodist acted out for themselves and the world, God's gracious invitation to Christian discipleship.

The pattern before 1784, Freeborn Garrettson described for a Bolingbroke quarterly meeting of August 19, 20, 1780: preaching and quarterly business on the 19th, then love feast at 9:00 and preaching at 11:00 on the 20th. He noted:

"It appeared as if the whole country came together at 11:00 o'clock. I think at least there was between two and three thousand. Four of us preached and one exhorted. Glory be to God, Bolinbroke never saw such a day before. I think the devil's kingdom was well shaken."

The preaching continued for the next two days. After 1784, the newly organized Methodist Episcopal Church began the second day with love feast; followed with eucharist, preaching, sometimes baptisms or memorial services (following or interspersed as appropriate); and concluded with more preaching. The other Garrettson, Richard, captured some of the drama of the second day of a Petersburg quarterly meeting of 1788:

The next day we met at nine o'clock to administer the sacrament, and whilst this was doing in the house, we went into the woods to preach to those that did not communicate. I suppose we had about one thousand and five hundred... (T)he power of God fell down on the people, and such bitter lamentations were heard, that I was obliged to desist...

In the evening we got as many of the mourners together as we could, and put them under an arbour. I went into the pulpit, and looked down through a window (they being under it).
We better understand these large crowds, the cadre of preachers, the feast of Methodist events, the dramatic encounter of church with world, the consequent revivals, if we see them in Chesapeake context. For as Rhys Isaac and John Stilgoe have shown us, community there differed radically from that of New England or the Pennsylvania-New Jersey area. The Puritans defined community spatially in towns built around church and commons. The diverse communities of the middle colonies legitimated themselves and recognized pluralism by defining community in neighborhoods. In the Chesapeake, community quite literally occurred. Events rather than towns or affinity-group neighborhoods served to establish and legitimate southern life together. Southerners defined and dramatized their community by dances, musters, elections, court days, services, cock fights, horse races and the like. In quarterly meeting, Methodists offered southerners an alternative to the worldly forms of community.

The southern marks on conference have been largely overlooked primarily because of the way in which conference evolved. First, when nationalized and ritualized, this southern form of community became known as camp meeting. And the 'western' camp meeting rather than the southeastern quarterly meeting has been traditionally recognized as the typical Methodist drama. Second, as the conference system evolved into the primary modality of Methodist administration, it lost many of its 'southern' communal features. By its transformation from a model of Christian community into an administrative system on the one hand and staged camp meetings on the other, conference masked its southern origins.

**Conclusions: The Loss of the Southern Accent**

Here, then, are five important accents of early southern Methodism, accents later of Methodism nationally—

- an Evangelical Anglicanism, defined over against but continuing and transforming the Anglicanism of patriarchy and gentility;
- a deep ambivalence over slavery;
- bi-racial church membership;
- the conception of Methodist purposes in territorial rather than political terms; and
- the offering of religious community as a large public event in which God's offer of salvation could be dramatized.

Readers of Mathews' *Religion in the Old South* know that this radical phase of evangelicalism was a casualty of its own successes. In winning the southern elites, it came to terms with power, culture, caste. And white southerners not only lost their accent, they forgot they ever heard it. Later racial and regional church politics further dimmed the memory. For their part, northern Methodists had no interest in discovering the southern roots
of their commitments. And southerns who bitterly condemned the Northern political church had even less interest in recovering their prepolitical but radical past. Only the Blacks remembered; they did so by putting it to song.

The Methodist Episcopal Church, South preserved in its first and early *Disciplines* the episcopal address which set forth "a brief account of the rise of Methodism both in Europe and America" and also Section I "Of the Origin of the Methodist Episcopal Church." These functioned to sustain the South's claim to be in legitimate continuity with early Methodism, a point repeated *ad nauseam* in southern apologetics. The Church added a section on the origin of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The former covered the saga leading up to 1784; the latter concerned the division of the church North and South in 1844. The juxtaposed treatments achieved the desired result of connecting the 1844 church with primitive Methodism. It did so by obliterating 60 years of southern Methodist history. And with it went the southern accent of American Methodism. All that remained was a contest over priorities, as between Strawbridge and Embury.


2The hold that this contest has had over the Methodist historical imagination is well illustrated in the priority given the issue in George Bourne's "A Comprehensive History of American Methodism," a section subjoined to his *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (Baltimore: George Dobbin & Murphy, 1807), 321-51. Bourne recounted the endeavors of Embury and Webb and then affirmed:

"At this period Mr. Strawbridge, a local preacher from Ireland, settled in Frederick county, Maryland, and formed several societies. It has long been a question the curious who are anxious to know every circumstance which is connected with the commencement of Methodism in the United States; whether the first society was established, and whether the first house of worship was erected in Maryland or in New-York; whether the old log house in which Mr. Strawbridge preached on Pipe Creek, was not antecedent to the building which was used by captain Webb and Mr. Embury? After the most accurate research, the information which I have procured induces me to believe, that a Methodist society was formed at New-York at least nine or twelve months previous to the first which was collected by Mr. Strawbridge; and there can be no doubt, that the room, and even the rigging house were
devoted to the publick worship of God in New-York, prior to the use of the log house of Pipe Creek." (322) He then reproduced letters to Wesley by T.T. of April 11, 1768, and by T.B. of May 1, 1769, supporting that claim.


4 *Journal of the Twenty-Seventh Delegated General Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1916, 1503-1505. The triumph occurred in the following fashion:

In 1912, J. F. Goucher presented a memorial on behalf of the Baltimore Conference to the General Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church, "proposing an inquiry into the origin of American Methodism and providing for the sesquicentennial of American Methodism." *(Journal of the Twenty-Sixth Delegated General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1912, 277).* The Committee on itinerancy, to which the memorial was referred, proposed:

WHEREAS, The time and place of the origin of American Methodism is in dispute, as between Sam's Creek, Maryland, and New York City; and,

WHEREAS, The sesquicentennial of that event is approach; therefore,

Resolved, ... That the General Conference appoint a Commission of seven members, at least three of whom shall come from the vicinity of New York, and three from the vicinity of Baltimore, and one at large, who, together with similar Commissions from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church (if such be appointed), shall inquire carefully into and, if possible, determine whether the priority belongs to Maryland or to New York. *(Ibid.,* pp. 591-92. A second resolution called for "the proper observance of this greatest event in the religious life of the Republic."

Four years later, in 1916, a Joint Commission on the Origin of American Methodism reported back to General Conference on "the question of Priority as between Philip Embury and Robert Strawbridge—New York and Maryland." The report indicated that by personal request and published notice, the Commission had solicited evidence and argument. Some "two hundred volumes, typewritten papers and manuscripts" had been submitted. Though without two members who had declined to participate, a quorum from the three churches had examined and discussed the evidence. By written ballot, the Commission voted 14 to 0 in favor of Robert Strawbridge's priority. "The Joint Commission then proceeded to vote separately upon various historic facts," unanimously determining the following:
1. That Philip Embury began to preach and formed a Society in the City of New York, some time during the year 1766.
2. That Robert Strawbridge came to Maryland and settled on Sam's Creek, Frederick County, about 1761.
3. That Mr. Strawbridge began to preach as soon thereafter as he had 'arranged' his home.
4. That Mr. Strawbridge baptized Henry Maynard as early as 1762 or 1763.
5. That John Evans was converted as early as 1763 or 1764.
6. That Mr. Strawbridge began forming societies as early as 1763 or 1764.
7. That among all those who have wrought constructively in the development of Methodism in America, to the work of Robert Strawbridge in Maryland belongs the distinction of priority. (Journal of the Twenty-Seventh Delegated General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1916, 1503-1505.)

Should the august forum of General Conference, the exacting scholarly procedures, and a balloted conclusion not assure the finality of Baltimore's claims, the Commission submitted a report of 116 pages summarizing the evidence and sustaining its conclusion. (The Origin of Methodism in America)

A minority of two, representing New York, nevertheless protested these findings. They said, in effect, "We've been had." Like the majority, they buttressed their report with a small book, also of about 100 pages. H. K. Carroll's title stated the matter grimly, The First Methodist Society in America. When and Where Was it Formed? By Embury or Strawbridge? In report and book, he argued that the case remained open and the majority's decision a sham. The Joint Commission, Carroll inferred, had been stacked. Ten of its fourteen members came from Baltimore. Most of them, alleged Carroll, had "participated in a celebration in the fall of 1914, at Sams Creek, of what was called the sesquicentennial of the beginning of Methodism in America." (9) The members of the Joint Commission, then, had voted by ritual act before they had looked at the evidence. The minority report further pointed out the obvious. No New York representative had participated. Why? The New Yorkers had absented themselves in deference to episcopal recommendation that action be delayed. Also, in the spirit of the originating MEC resolution, MEC commissioners should have reached their own conclusions before meeting with representatives of the other two churches. Thus the conclusions, they asserted, "seem to us quite inconclusive." the definiteness of Embury's claims should be preferred to the indefiniteness of Strawbridge's.

For these and other reasons we earnestly recommend that the whole matter be committed to an impartial committee, to be nominated by the American Historical Association, and appointed by our Bishops, which Committee shall include one or two members of the legal profession, the hearings of this Committee to be conducted with open doors and its decision to be final. (Journal, 1916, 1505-1507)

The irony here is delightful—southern Methodists (traditionally committed to a strong episcopacy and wary of the power of more democratic power of General Conference) resolving historical issues by the democratic process and the northerners (characteristically wary of episcopacy and committed to a strong General Conference) appealing desperately to highest authority—the AHA, the ABA, the episcopacy.


Perforce, historians continue the long debate about whether and how southern religion differs from American religion as a whole, and if different, in what ways. Note David E. Harrell's
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remarks in his “Introduction” to the volume he edited, Varieties of Southern Evangelicalism (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1981):

“With the exception of the distinctive black religious experience in the South, there is little that is qualitatively unique about southern Evangelicalism. Southern evangelical churches and sects have parallels elsewhere in the country; southern religious thought is not marked by distinctive theological beliefs; southern religion addresses the same basic human problems as other religions.

“But if the southern religious experience is not qualitatively distinct, it is quantitatively. Almost every student of the South has so asserted, often as a personal, subjective observation; recent surveys of public opinion lend objective support to this assumption. Southern Evangelicals have been more individualistic, less confident in social reform, more literal in their views of the Bible, more moved by personal religious experience; southern religion has been more given to sectarianism in the twentieth-century—or so it is argued in this book. More obvious, the South has been the most solidly evangelical section of the country.” p. 2. For further efforts to define southern religion, see Samuel S. Hill’s essay in that volume, “The Shape and Shapes of Popular Southern Piety,” 89-14 and Donald Mathew’s entry on “Evangelicalism,” in Hill’s Encyclopedia, op. cit., 243-44.

Frederick Norwood provides a most discerning discussion of what he terms “the peculiar pattern of growth,” the “irregular and sporadic” spread of Methodism. For him as for many northern Methodists, the southern character of early Methodism is a problem to be explained. (Frederick A. Norwood, The Story of American Methodism (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 74-75.) Norwood assigns these reasons: that the Revolution disrupted Methodist life unevenly, heavily in NY; that in the North, Methodism competed with an established Congregationalism and an intrenched Presbyterianism; that Methodism prospered within the Anglican network and particularly where Anglican leadership welcomed it; that various demographic factors affected Methodist advances.

Nor was Lawrence Sherwood, author of the chapter on “Growth and Spread, 1785-1804,” in History of American Methodism, concerned with how southern origins may have affected the movement as a whole. Instead, like so many historians before and after, he presents Methodism as a national movement. (Lawrence Sherwood, “Growth and Spread, 1785-1804,” in Emory S. Bucke, ed., The History of American Methodism, 3 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), I, 360-418.) The governing sentiment is indicated in the following: “The growth of the Methodist Episcopal Church during its first twenty years of existence is phenomenal. From its rather limited beginning in 1785, the church expanded in geographical area and in membership until it became a major influence in both the religious and social aspects of the new nation,” I, 361.


Schell, op. cit., 2.

William Warren Sweet, Virginia Methodism. A History (Richmond: Whittet & Shepper- son, 1955), v, ix, 44. The author of that volume, William Warren Sweet, concurred, affirming, “Colonial Virginia was the first important seed plot of American Methodism.” The sponsoring Committee on the Preparation of the History of the Virginia Annual Conference found one metaphor inadequate:

Virginia was the cradle of American Methodism, the original fertile seedplot from which John Wesley’s disciples in America eventually spread Methodism into every state and almost every county of this great American nation.

Including Delaware and Maryland in the South (and perhaps even the area of Pennsylvania immediately adjacent) will seem questionable to persons accustomed to thinking of the Old South in terms of those colonies/states that adhered to the Confederacy. Alternatively we might term this Methodism, eastern or Middle Atlantic. Two reasons suggest the southern designation. First, as William Williams has shown, the demographic, social and cultural
realities that Methodism encountered in Delmarva peninsula closely resemble those described by Rhys Isaac and others for Virginia. This whole region was a slave culture, a factor to which this paper turns much attention. Second, in the period during which Methodism planted itself, the regional identities and regional boundaries that would split the Union were not completely formed. Hence our use has a certain anachronistic quality. However, we judge it important, despite its imprecision, to employ the designation. See Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), Williams, *op. cit.* Mathews, *op. cit.*.

For conferences and statistics, see *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences Annually Held in America from 1773 to 1813 Inclusive* (New York, 1813). Jesse Lee, *op. cit.*, provides much the same information as would virtually any Methodist history. See, for instance, Bucke, *op. cit.*.


See annual entries in *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences Annually Held in America from 1773 to 1813 Inclusive*. This analysis utilizes *Crowned Victors. The Memoirs of Over Four Hundred Methodist Preachers, Including The First Two Hundred and Fifty Who Died on This Continent*. Compiled by J. W. Hedges (Baltimore: Methodist Episcopal Book Depository, 1878) which gathered the memoirs down to 1829 from the *Annual Minutes* (thereafter confining itself to those of the Baltimore Conference). Of the 245 memoirs for national Methodism, 33 did not include a reference to place of nativity. The numbers are striking:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>New Jersey</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Maine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri, Kentucky, Wales, Scotland, Europe</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those not given a nativity can be assumed to distribute themselves along the proportions indicated above, but probably derived overwhelmingly from the South because they were, for the most part, admitted on trial in the 18th century.


*JLFA*, II, 615, Sept. 10, 1809.

*JLFA*, II, 694, Feb. 16, 1812.

*JLFA*, II, 554, Sept. 4, 1807; 573, July 3, 1808; 615, Sept. 10, 1809.

*JLFA*, II, 481, Sept. 21, 23, 1805.


"William Ellington, born in the State of Georgia"
"Samuel Parker, a native of New Jersey"
"Joshua Oglesby"
"William Thompson, a native of Maryland"
"Abdel Coleman, a native of New York"
"William Houstin, a native of Virginia"
"Richard Browning"
"Peter Cartwright, a native of Virginia"
"Joseph Williams, a native of Pennsylvania"
"Miles Harper, a native of Virginia"
"Edmond Wilcox, a native of Virginia"
"Joshua Barnes"
"James Axley"
"Joshua Riggin"
"Thomas Lasley, a native of Virginia"
"Caleb Wesley Cloud, born . . . in the state of Delaware"
"Benjamin Edge"
"Obed Noland, a native of Virginia"

Of those unidentified by the conference secretary, I can find a state of origin only for Barnes. He came from Maryland (Axley is identified as from Ia. but this may be a mistake); for the others cards do exist in the ministerial cardfile in the Archives Center, Drew University, but these cards and the brief memorials to which they lead provide no further information on states of origin.


28Perhaps, we shall argue, evangelical (and Methodist) hold in the South is far more natural than we are sometimes taught.

The paper's burden is threefold: to identify features of religious culture that first, have a clear southern ambience; that second, at least initially, typify southern Methodism (even if shared with other forms of evangelicalism and other denominations); and that third, appear subsequently as continuing patterns in the national Methodist ethos. We look, then, for aspects of southern Methodism that are regionally characteristic, distinguishing, and defining of the movement nationally. Two caveats. First, as will be patent to any who have worked this turf, we present in sharp relief features that shade into one another. None of the points here made cannot be applied, perhaps with some qualification, to northern Methodists in the early period, to evangelicals generally, to British Wesleyans. I think we would find, however, that as a constellation they do not epitomize other movements. Second, since we look for distinctive aspects of southern Methodism, we cannot and shall not
treat dimensions of southern Methodism which, though vital, were largely shared. So, much that we know to be essential to early Methodism is intentionally omitted.


33Mathews, *op. cit.*, 1, 35. The citation is taken from *JLFA*, I, 346, April 23, 1780.

34Williams, *op. cit.*, 90.


36See the third point in this discussion.


40James Meacham, Journals, II, May 10, 1789 and VI, Aug. 21, 1792, in James Meacham Papers, 1788-1797, Manuscript Department, Duke University Library, Durham, N.C. Used with permission. Spelling and punctuation of original are retained. For Meacham's efforts to convince a slaveholder to manumit, see III, Ap. 17, 1790, Ap. 30, 1790, May 16, 1790, May 26, 1790, May 29, 1790 and IV, July 3, 1790. He expressed concern about slavery and slaves throughout the journals.


44Raboteau, *op. cit.*

45Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 185.

46*Discipline*, 1785, p. 3. Q. 4; 1790, p. iii.


48John B. Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972). Charles A. Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1955). Boles and Johnson perceive the connection that we are making but construe as antecedents what is here treated as essence. However, one assesses the relation, the vital point is the southern elaboration of what would become a national institution. Boles affirms: "(T)he theology and techniques of the Kentucky Revival were developed, and the personnel trained in the East." (p. x) And
after Kentucky caught fire, the blaze "swept back over the entire South with amazing rapidity, even seeping into the contiguous portions of the Ohio territory, western Pennsylvania, and Maryland. By almost instantaneously overrunning the South, the Great Revival proved itself to be more than a mere frontier aberration." (p. 70).

49 *American Methodist Pioneer, The Life and Journals of Freeborn Garrettson*, Robert D. Simpson version, recently published and available through the Drew University Library, but used in manuscript. See Aug. 19, 20, 1780 and similar entries throughout.


52 For further development of this argument, see Russell E. Richey, "From Quarterly to Camp Meeting: A Reconsideration of Early American Methodism, *Methodist History*, 23 (July, 1985), 199-213.

53 *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 1846, vii, 9-12. I wish to express appreciation to my former colleagues in the Drew University Library and on the staff of The General Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church for their always cordial assistance and for the use of the collections and to Elmer and Betty O'Brien who shared insights from their indexing of the *Quarterly Review* which guided my research.