Discussion of the relationship between Moravians and Methodists has focused largely on their eighteenth century encounter. Little has been said or written about what followed the abortive Coke-LaTrobe unity initiative of 1785-86. For the next hundred years there is no record of serious conversations between the two American denominations with regard to matters of doctrine or mission, intercommunion or mutual recognition of each other's ministry and membership. Sister American denominations they have been from the beginning, yet their paths crossed as much on the mission field as in their adopted homeland—as much at the ends of the earth as in North Carolina or eastern Pennsylvania.

From the outset the two denominations had much in common. Both were stifled when religious revival met political revolution in the American colonies in the 1770s. Patterns of Moravian piety and mission were seriously disrupted when the Moravians and Moravian buildings were pressed into military service as Bethlehem, Pennsylvania became General Washington's principal supply depot. Patterns of Methodist piety and mission were also severely strained when war broke out and the religious movement was labeled a Tory plot. Methodism's leaders, Wesley's American assistants, quickly returned to England or fled to Canada and their converts either followed them or went in hiding, especially in the war-torn middle colonies. The war brought Methodists and Moravians together in a special way when in 1777 Methodism's leading lay preacher, Thomas Webb, was arrested as a British spy and sent to Bethlehem where he spent fifteen months as a prisoner of war. Two Moravian families—the Lindemeyers and the Böhlers of Aldersgate fame—gave shelter to Webb's wife and children, refugees from their home in Burlington, New Jersey.

The pioneer bishops of both churches in America—Moravian John Ettwein and Methodist Francis Asbury—apparently never met to drink tea or talk shop. Consecrated bishops within six months of each other

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Methodist History

in 1784, both were suspected as loyalists during the war and were temporarily imprisoned, Ettwein at Easton and Asbury in Delaware. Both had missionary fever: Ettwein helped revive the moribund Moravian "Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen"; Asbury considered the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church as a whole to be a society for propagating the gospel among the heathen—European transplant and native American alike. Both travelled widely throughout the colonies.

From the time of his arrival in the American colonies as a young preacher in 1771, Francis Asbury was bent on implementing Mr. Wesley's plan of an itinerant evangelical preaching order in and for the Church of England. During the war he hid out in Delaware for almost two years on Judge White's farm because every able-bodied young man was expected to be in military uniform. After the war, he came out of the attic, hit the road, preached up a storm, gained popularity among the leaderless Methodists and as a Christmas present in 1784 he was ordained preacher one day and bishop the next. He proceeded to command the Methodist troops newly organized into an independent church in a superb strategy of missionary expansion. Up and down the seaboard and out to the mountains and beyond he rode, and appointed the preachers to ride on ever widening circuits. Within a month of his inauguration Asbury shrewdly arranged to hand deliver to President George Washington a letter assuring him of the loyal support and earnest prayers of the people called Methodists.

For most of his active years Bishop Asbury kept a journal which was first published in 1821, five years after his death. Notices of encounters with Moravians in his journal are few, and—apart from the early ones—disparaging if not downright hostile! During his first few years as an unordained missionary in the colonies Asbury seemed to recognize the kinship of Methodists and Moravians. "I drank tea this afternoon with an old Moravian who belonged to their fraternity in Fetter Lane at the time when Mr. Wesley was so intimate with them," he wrote in October of 1774. "My heart was much taken up with God," he concludes. Three years later, April of 1776, Asbury thought the Moravians had gone to seed, at least in Philadelphia: "I heard a Moravian preach, but it was only a historical faith." Seven years later, 1783, while visiting the Moravian town of Salem in North Carolina he admired the industry of the Moravians: "Every one appeared to be in business." But he did not feel among friends: "We lodged at Mr. Thomson's... Neither was the cabin comfortable nor our host pleasing." Thirty years later, in 1811, in Warren County, New Jersey on

2Ibid. I:182.
3Ibid. 1:438.
his way to preach at Union Chapel near the Moravian village of Hope he boasts triumphantly: "Twenty-three years ago I preached here to a handful. Today I preached to a crowded house. The Moravian brethren are almost extinct."

Asbury's most extended comment on the Moravians was written shortly after an overnight visit to Moravian headquarters, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Tuesday, July 20, 1807:

Seventeen miles farther brought us to far-famed Bethlehem, which I had long wished to see. The stream that runs west of the town is pretty and useful, as it works a machine which raises the water one hundred and fifty feet into two reservoirs, for the use of the inhabitants. We found ourselves at the grand tavern at the north end, the property of the brethren: the house is large, but a plain building: the entertainment good at a dollar a night for man and horse. On the second step of the high grounds on the main street, which begins on the hill above, stand the church buildings: on the east and west are rooms appropriate to the institution, and certainly the west end has a grand appearance. On the same street below stands the brethren's house, one hundred feet front, five stories high, very plain, and much German taste discoverable everywhere; add to this the majestic Lehigh, and you have the most striking features of this celebrated place.

Following this extended geographical and architectural description, Asbury turns to matters religious:

But, ah! religion—Reader, I am a Methodist. I asked the young man who managed the tavern, if they ever permitted any minister to preach amongst the brethren; he could not answer—he was a servant, and knew not how to answer. Next day came the master of ceremonies, the cicerone of the establishment, who shows the wonders of the place; I asked him—I was told that on that night there was private worship in the church—the minister must perform himselbst.

Strangely enough Asbury decided not to join the lonely Moravian pastor. However three other members of his party did. Asbury wrote in his journal:

And what did they see and hear? A man read in German they knew not what, sung and played upon the four thousand dollar organ: sermon or prayer they heard not. I doubt much if there is any prayer here, public or private, except the stated prayers of the minister on the Sabbath day.

Even the Moravian commitment to education was called into question by the curious Methodist bishop in the concluding section of his visitation to the Moravian city.

The brethren have a school for boys at Nazareth, and one for girls at Bethlehem; and they have a store and a tavern; the society have worldly wealth and worldly wisdom: it is no wonder that men of the world who would not have their children spoiled by religion, send them to so decent a place.
The next day Asbury hustles across the Lehigh River and heads west through more "enemy" territory—from Allentown and Kutztown to Reading and Lancaster. It was all too "Dutchified" and worldly to please him. Like the churches of the German Lutherans and German Reformed he counted Moravian churches "citadels of formality—fortifications erected against the apostolic itinerancy of a more evangelical ministry."  

Not only did Asbury not hit it off with Moravians, Lutherans and German Reformed, he didn’t even hit it off with the two German movements closest to the Methodists—Albright’s “Evangelicals” and Otterbein’s “United Brethren.” In his funeral sermon for United Brethren founding father Martin Boehm in April of 1812, Asbury paused to reflect on the heart of their disagreement:

> Why was the German reformation in the middle states, that sprang up with Boehm, Otterbein and their helpers not more perfect? . . . There was no master-spirit to rise up and organize and lead them. Some of the ministers located . . . and added to their charge partial travelling labors, and all were independent. It remains to be proved whether a reformation, in any country, or under any circumstances, can be perpetuated without a well-directed itinerancy [i.e., without a bishop like me!].

Asbury took one more occasion to maul the Moravians. This time in an 1807 letter to a Methodist colleague Nelson Reed. The subject was polity not piety. The style of episcopacy among the Methodists was not yet settled. All agreed Asbury needed help on the episcopal bench, but disagreed whether the bishops should travel at large as Asbury had done or be assigned to regions, diocesan style. After reminding Reed that episcopacy in the primitive church was itinerant not diocesan and died with the last apostle, Asbury boldly suggests that “the pure apostolical form of episcopacy” was restored for the first time in sixteen centuries by the Methodists at their organizing general conference in Baltimore in 1784. To those who propose abandoning the itinerant plan Asbury vows he “never never will act” under such a “hideous” form of episcopacy as “Roman, English or Moravian.”  

True bishops, like the apostles of old, ride a wide circuit, appoint every pastor, preside at every conference, have no university degree, and pray with their eyes shut. Moravians no more than the Lutherans, Reformed or even United Brethren were viable models for the Methodists on this crucial point.

Relations between Moravians and Methodists in the nineteenth century ended as they began—with Methodism’s leading bishop proudly disclaiming any kinship. Three events toward the end of the century provided for a fresh telling of the Methodist story—the end of the Civil War, the national centennial in 1876 and American Methodism’s own centen-

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11Ibid. II:550.

12Methodist Magazine (New York) 6 (July, 1823) 253.

nial in 1884. Little notice was taken in any of these tellings of Methodism's story of their eighteenth century encounter with the Moravians, let alone any suggestion of partnership or indebtedness. By the end of their first century as a new church in a new nation, Methodists understood themselves to be the vanguard of the Protestant establishment in the nation. Only the Baptists were breathing down their necks. The Roman Catholics were gaining on them, but were hopelessly un-American and ought to be converted. No longer suspect economically, politically or religiously, Methodists were now solid citizens of the republic who could proudly point to their patriotic support of Lincoln and the Union cause. Lincoln himself acknowledged their preeminence in his response to an 1864 letter of support from the church's general conference: "It is no fault in others that the Methodist Church sends more soldiers to the field, more nurses to the hospital, and more prayers to heaven than any. God bless the Methodist Church!"  

No one personified mid-century Methodism better than Matthew Simpson. Born on the western frontier shortly before Asbury's death, young Simpson attended Allegheny College in western Pennsylvania, settled on medicine as a career and practiced a short time before deciding in 1834 to enter the ordained ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church. After riding circuits in the Pittsburgh area for only a few years, he was called back to Allegheny College to teach natural sciences. Following a scant two years in the classroom, he was invited by the trustees of Indiana Asbury College, now DePauw University, in Greencastle, Indiana, to become its president. Ten years later at the Methodist Episcopal General Conference of 1848 he was elected editor of the church's most important western weekly, The Western Christian Advocate. He made his editorial office in Cincinnati the command post for northern Methodism's energetic anti-slavery caucus. Four years later in 1852 at the next Methodist Episcopal General Conference he was elected to the highest clergy office in his denomination. When the General Conference of 1860 reversed Asbury's policy and assigned bishops to episcopal areas, Simpson was sent to Philadelphia where the church's layfolk, grateful for his leadership during the trying war years, erected a handsome residence which became his home until his death in 1884.  

Simpson was noted for his pulpit powers, and along with his contemporary Henry Ward Beecher, was the best known Protestant clergyman in the north. Like Beecher, he was also in great demand as a public lec-

turer. A combination of his varied background and extensive travels gave the bishop acquaintance with the rich and famous of the time. Each time he preached in Washington during Lincoln's administration, with but a single exception, the President was in the pew. On one occasion Simpson preached such a rousing missionary sermon that Lincoln coughed up five hundred dollars and became a life-member of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Simpson first met Lincoln during his days as a college president in Indiana. They came to be fast friends. Simpson was at Lincoln's home in Springfield to see him depart for his inauguration. The association continued in Washington where Simpson was a regular White House visitor. On the eve of the 1864 election the Republican Party hired New York's Academy of Music and invited Simpson to deliver the key-note address on behalf of the President. Lincoln's campaign was in difficulty; his opponent McClellan was taking full advantage of a disheartened and war-weary nation. The purpose of Simpson's speech was to infuse new faith in the nation, to elevate spirits by affirming the glory and greatness of the Union, and to assure the audience and the nation that God had not forsaken America. The nation's democracy and religious freedom, her education of the masses, and her hospitality to the oppressed were indications of her election to fulfill a great national destiny:

This nation has the sympathy of the masses all over the earth [said the bishop], and if the world is to be raised to its proper place I would say it with all reverence, God cannot do without America. 16

According to the various press reports of the speech, the Bishop did not make one partisan statement on behalf of Lincoln, but the people could not miss the point. If “God cannot do without America,” certainly the people were being asked to conclude “America cannot do without Lincoln.” And by extension, “Lincoln cannot do without the Methodists.”

Simpson's reward was an invitation to preach at Lincoln's festive second inaugural. There were other rewards as well in store for the Methodists. The story of Methodism's involvement in politics and patronage of the time has been well documented and exemplifies beyond a shadow of a doubt its power and influence along the Potomac. The various positions obtained by Methodist layfolk and clergy ranged from minor clerkships and postmasterships in small towns to several generals of the army and two seats on the Supreme Court. No wonder their contemporaries began to call the Methodists the “most American” of churches!

When Lincoln was assassinated three months after his inauguration, no one was surprised when Bishop Simpson was asked to preside at the White House funeral. A few days later he spoke for the shocked nation at the graveside in Springfield.

16Excerpts from reconstructed text in Crooks, op cit., 379-383.
National anniversaries as well as national mournings are natural occasions for reflection on the interrelationships between piety and patriotism. During the celebration of the nation's centennial of independence in 1876 no church was more anxious to acknowledge and glad to celebrate the close partnership in mission with the American republic than the Methodists. In 1876 Methodism's bishops led by Simpson issued a pastoral address to the Methodist people:

Gladly admitting the great usefulness of other churches [like the Moravians] and attempting no exact estimate of the service of Methodism [wrote the Bishops unabashedly,] we yet believe that God has given to it this honor, that by its direct and indirect influence upon the national sentiment and character, it has been a powerful auxiliary of the Republic, and perhaps the indispensable condition of its success.¹⁷

This was not simply a burst of triumphalism on the part of American Methodists, for when the prestigious national Centennial Commission selected a clergyman to bless the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, they chose Methodism's leading bishop, Matthew Simpson.¹⁸

Eight years later, 1884, it was the Methodists turn to have their own centennial celebration. An aging Bishop Simpson was asked by the church's publishing house to prepare a commemorative volume which cluttered countless coffee tables in countless Victorian parlors in countless Methodist homes. In his book titled *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, Bishop Simpson acknowledged American Methodism to be the child of both Anglicanism and Moravianism which grows up to outshine both of its distinguished parents.

The Moravian Church [wrote the bishop] preceded Methodism in America; it has episcopacy, acknowledged by the English Parliament to be as valid as that of the Anglican Church; it avows the favorite doctrines of Methodism, and, indeed, like the latter to the right appreciation of those doctrines. . . . Yet, while the American representative of Anglicanism (the Episcopal Church) has had small comparative success, Moravianism (admirable for its piety and missionary spirit) has been even less successful. It has, in all the republic, but 101 churches, 114 ministers, and 11,358 communicants. This, in the vast arena of the 'New World' must be pronounced but little short of an absolute failure.¹⁹

Bishop Simpson went on to tell the story of a small, unprepossessing band of Christians called Methodists who became America's largest church. Lacking all the normal attributes of success, he could only trace their fortune to the blessing of God. To Simpson a shrinking church or a slow-

grower, like the Moravian Church, signaled God's disfavor. A rapidly growing church like his own was obviously God's favorite American church. Simpson's rhetoric, in pep talk and popular book alike, gave Methodists in the Victorian era a tremendous sense of identity and importance. They were part of a dynamic church whose labors God abundantly blessed.

Counting the converts has long been a favorite Methodist pasttime. Since Moravians in America never numbered many, colonial Methodists like Asbury and Victorian Methodists like Simpson saw no reason to take much notice of them. There was no question about the grand design in God's mind to "spread Scriptural holiness over the land" by means of the Methodists. Both Asbury and Simpson used history to demonstrate this end. Protestant Christianity, typified in mainstream Methodism, was the defender of democracy, the guarantor of social stability, the foundation of morality, the provider of education, in short the bearer of American culture.

Moravians taught Wesley the true meaning of faith and helped him put his natural bent to reliance on good works in proper perspective. When Wesley's American disciples like Asbury and Simpson got the hang of that faith, they tended to go on their merry way with little word of thanks. Through the years Methodists have given Moravians little credit and even less notice. Few remembered the brief but fruitful encounter in the eighteenth century. Few want to remember a century and more of estrangement. At the end of the twentieth century both churches have a rich past to celebrate and an uncertain future to contemplate. Both long for a major overhaul, spiritual and institutional, like the revival which marked the century of Methodism's birth and Moravianism's rebirth. An important first step for the Methodists would be less attention to divergent body counts and more attention to what we have in common—one Lord, one faith, one mission.