COKESBURY COLLEGE: KINGSWOOD IN AMERICA

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I. BEGINNINGS

American Methodists, in addition to gathering their revival harvest and establishing their version of an episcopal church for the United States, joined their national revolution by founding schools. Since 1740 John Wesley had been experimenting with evangelical education at Kingswood near Bristol, but the colonial mission exhibited little interest in his example until independence appeared likely. Then, Wesley's American followers inaugurated Cokesbury College, their first institutional venture, and played their role in the educational movement of the 1780s and 1790s, which tripled the number of permanent colleges in the United States and added untold other schools. Cokesbury itself was short-lived—a victim of inadequate resources and denominational ambivalence—but American Methodists renewed their educational interest again and again in constructing the largest and most cohesive Protestant system of higher education in the United States.

Cokesbury's story divides naturally into two parts—its beginnings along the lines of Wesley's Kingswood School and its transformation into an academy operated first in Abingdon, Maryland, and then in Baltimore before fires consumed both efforts.

Often attributed to the Christmas Conference of 1784, which created Methodist denominational organization in America, Cokesbury College seems actually to have originated several years earlier when Francis Asbury, Wesley's American lieutenant, caught a vision of "great prospects for schools" in the new republic. More than anyone, Asbury deserves to be known as the denomination's educational pioneer. He often blamed Cokesbury's troubles on Thomas Coke, the Oxford doctor of laws Wesley consecrated as bishop or "superintendent" for American service. Asbury lacked formal training, having served an apprenticeship as a boy and having undertaken reading and study only after becoming a Wesleyan preacher. During two years in Delaware as a refugee from Maryland's "Patriot oath," he became convinced, however, of the need for "a Kingswood school" in America and launched a five-year campaign to achieve his goal.

Before resuming his travels in November, 1779, Asbury discussed the possibility with Samuel Magaw, a friendly Angelican priest. Although their institution bore little resemblance to Kingswood, Asbury and Magaw joined in supporting an academy near Dover, headed by John Coleman, an evangelical Angelican and Methodist preacher from Virginia. Asbury last visited the school in October just before the Christmas Conference.  

According to manuscript, if not printed, minutes, Asbury soon proposed his new world Kingswood to the northern wing of the American conference, then temporarily divided by Revolutionary fighting and schism over sacramental administration. Northern preachers were more concerned with issues of ordination than education and left Asbury to promote his project alone although apparently giving their approval, if not in 1780, then soon thereafter.  

In North Carolina, after a charity sermon by John Dickins, eventual head of the American “book concern,” Asbury suggested the young Eton graduate draw a prospectus for the institution to be erected for “the glory of God and the good of thousands.” The prospectus produced initial contributions by Gabriel Long and another Methodist named Bustion. According to nineteenth century sources, a closer school, Ebenezer Academy, opened in 1784 near Merritts’ Meetinghouse in Brunswick County, Virginia, but evidence drawn from O’Kelly controversy is that Ebenezer did not antedate 1789 and had no relationship to Dickins’ prospectus. Asbury, indeed, retrospectively linked Long’s and Bustion’s contributions with Cokesbury.  

Despite the silence of early minutes, it would appear that northern and southern preachers, who resolved differences by referring the sacramental question to Wesley, joined in endorsing Asbury’s project before November, 1782, when Thomas Haskins reported a visit to Abingdon, Maryland, where “the Conference is about to erect an academy and Chappel, a noble design if accomplished.”  

Fundraising was far advanced. Haskins noted £1000 subscribed although predicting twice the sum “and more” might be required for a 135’ building with 22’ wings on both sides—even more imposing than Cokesbury turned out. Early in 1785 Coke and Asbury published the names of 160 subscribers

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of £1079, 17s., including Long though not Bustion. Because so large a campaign could scarcely have been conducted after Coke’s arrival in November, 1784, it seems obvious these were the subscribers mentioned by Haskins and mobilized by Dickins’ prospectus. If any reason is needed for the site, it can be found in £150 promised by the Abingdon resident, Richard Dallam, whose gift was matched, according to Coke, by Henry D. Gough, master of nearby Perry Hall.\(^6\)

Little more was accomplished, however, until Coke met Asbury at Barratt’s Chapel, Delaware. There, according to Coke, the two men concurred on the need for an educational institution “on the plan of Kingswood,” but this was probably the extent of agreement. “I wished only for schools—Dr. Coke wanted a college,” Asbury recalled bitterly, echoing Coke, who also admitted their differences.\(^7\)

“College” was, of course, an ambiguous designation until defined for Americans by twentieth-century accreditors. Wesley thought the name pretentious, and even Coke admitted with embarrassment, “We give high names to things in America.”\(^8\) Originally corporate entities, colleges came to be identified with Oxford and Cambridge although the name persisted in such places as Westminster or, more formally, St. Peter’s College—one of England’s renowned “public schools.” Like university colleges, Westminster was marked by its classical curriculum—schools with practical courses were academies. Cokesbury probably embodied this sense because it, like Kingswood, admitted students at seven and never awarded degrees although, as Coke noted, the name mainly reflected American aspirations.

A month later Coke and Asbury met in Abingdon to inspect the proposed location. Twenty-four miles north of Baltimore on the Philadelphia stage road, the small but thriving Harford County community was located on sharply rising ground a mile inland from the Bush River inlet of Chesapeake Bay amid the largest Methodist concentration in the United States. Coke, “much overseen” with the site as Asbury later alleged, found Abingdon, although close to sea level, a particularly healthy spot, enjoying “fine air and very extensive Prospect.” He thought the waterfront “one of the most beautiful views” in America.\(^9\)

Cokesbury’s pace, nevertheless, remained slow, reflecting denominational uncertainty. The first Discipline repeated English requirements that

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\(^7\)Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, January 5, 1796; *Extracts of the Journal of the Late Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D.* (Dublin: Methodist Book Room, 1816), November 15, 1784.

\(^8\)Coke to Heath, January 23, 1786, in Lovely Lane Museum, Baltimore.

pastors instruct congregations, especially children, and charged preachers with promoting education "else you are not called to be a Methodist." The Discipline warned, however, that while "gaining knowledge is a good thing . . . saving souls is better." Coke and Asbury apparently asked reaffirmation of the educational project by the December conference, which received Coke, named Asbury bishop and created the Methodist Episcopal Church. Thomas Ware confirms the vote, which seems to have occurred just before adjournment.¹⁰

Details were left to Coke and Asbury, who quickly issued a new prospectus. Under their joint presidency, American Methodism’s college would, like Wesley’s, be the "noblest" charity and advance religion and the denominations. Methodists had obvious need for ministerial supply since they could no longer depend on Anglican leaders. The bishops clearly intended to train "our young men who are called to preach" although Coke insisted they were less concerned with raising "Gospel-ministers" than serving "our pious Friends and our married preachers in the proper Education of their sons." Cokesbury would be no theological school but, like Oxford and colonial imitators, would offer laypersons and clergy alike liberal education and "that improvement which is preparative for public service."¹¹

Although welcoming middle-class children with ability to pay, the bishops proposed that Cokesbury, like Kingswood, would care for preachers’ sons and poor orphans, who would be "taught and boarded, and if our finances will allow it, clothed, gratis." Clergy, they envisioned, would serve as agents, preaching charity sermons on circuits and channeling funds to Abingdon. They also hoped for endowments from denominational members and friends.

The bishops proposed a mixed curriculum with features of both a grammar school and academy—a teacher and assistant for the classical languages as well as an English master to train students to speak and read their native tongue. In addition, they suggested the need for instruction in other modern languages. Above all, they proposed to focus on religion and morals and promised expulsion of the "ungovernable."

The prospectus optimistically targeted completion of a building by late spring, but ground was only broken on June 5. Coke ordered materials

¹⁰Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D., the Rev. Francis Asbury and Others at a Conference Begun in Baltimore in the State of Maryland on Monday, the 27th of December, in the Year 1784, Composing a Form of Discipline for the Ministers, Preachers and Other Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America (Philadelphia: Charles Cist, 1785), 17; Sketches of the Life and Travels of Rev. Thomas Ware . . . Written by Himself (New York: G. Lane and P. P. Sanford, 1842), 112-113.
during January, but he and Asbury were both traveling until May. Little happened in the interim. Two lots next to the Methodist chapel—six acres including some church grounds—were not purchased from Dallam and Aquila Paca for £60 until May nor deeded until spring, 1787—only a few months before instruction began.\footnote{Asbury, \textit{Journal and Letters}, May 30, and June 5, 1785, May 7, 1787; Coke, \textit{Journal}, January 5, and May 30, 1785, January 5, 1788; copy of deed from Paca and Dallam to Trustees of Cokesbury College, May 9, 1787, in Lovely Lane Museum.}

By the time construction got underway, the school had a name. According to tradition, the Maryland conference rejected “New Kingswood,” then deadlocked over naming the college for Coke or Asbury. Before returning home, Coke himself broke the impasse, coining “Cokesbury” for American Methodism.\footnote{Emory, \textit{A Defense of 'Our Fathers' and of the Original Organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church against Alexander McCaine and Others} (New York: N. Bangs and J. Emory, 1827), 56.}

Cokesbury might honor the bishops, but their five months absence on episcopal rounds suggested need for local supervision. Local leadership may have been in place since 1782 and was certainly established by 1786 when Asbury lamented “our managers . . . [are] almost out of breath,” and subsequently met them as “trustees.” Although the bishops’ presidency lasted until Levi Heath came from England, nine trustees—seven Methodists from Baltimore County and two from the Eastern Shore—emerged during property negotiations. The absence of local residents has led to speculation that trustees appointed in 1784 for Abingdon’s church also served the college or, perhaps, the two bodies met together, drafting a constitution and filling vacancies, as Asbury reported, although the deed and 1787 \textit{Discipline} reserved decisions to the conference.\footnote{Copy of deed from John Paca to Trustees of Preaching House, July 3, 1784, in Lovely Lane Museum; Asbury, \textit{Journal and Letters}, August 21, and December 23, 1786; George W. Archer, \textit{An Authentic History of Cokesbury College with Sketches of its Founders and Teachers} (Bel Air, Md.: N. N. Nock, 1894), 7; \textit{A Form of Discipline for the Ministers, Preachers, and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America} (New York: W. Ross, 1877), 43.}

Progress was slow on the massive building, which was not under roof before spring, 1787, nor complete in 1792 if, indeed, it was ever finished. The project was ambitious, given denominational resources and the unsettled economy. The school, Coke acknowledged, was built “on a much larger plan” than Kingswood. Asbury admitted it was “great too soon.” Construction was plagued with overruns, and during its dozen years Cokesbury consumed £10,000. After initial pledges, contributions were slow. “Money is scarce,” Asbury complained in 1786, admitting that £900 of £2000 expended represented indebtedness. After he changed the Maryland Conference to Abingdon to drum up support, annual collec-
tions rose above £800. Still contributions lagged behind need, and after Coke returned from England, both bishops estimated £4000 more might be required. 15

The center of the three-story, 40' × 108' Georgian structure near Abingdon's summit was a square hall sometimes used as a chapel. Upstairs were two large classrooms and above them two sleeping quarters. The west end consisted of two 20' × 25' classrooms on each of three floors. The east wing was a 100-student dormitory. As at Kingswood, a fence surrounded the property, enclosing a vegetable garden, which, along with a woodworking shed, provided recreation and, doubtless, the first manual training in American higher education.

When almost completed, Cokesbury was said by Jedidiah Morse to be "handsomely built" although Devereux Jarratt, a friendly Anglican during Virginia revivals, recalled a "vast pile." Nineteenth-century Methodists remembered it as "equal if not superior" to other college edifices. In 1795, not long before its disastrous fire, its value, along with other college assets, was calculated at £7104, 12s., 9d. 16

Despite financial pressures, Asbury agreed in December, 1786, to finish two rooms and begin classes. Cokesbury was initially divided into day and boarding schools. On September 19, 1787, Asbury attended an "examination"—evidence the day school was in operation. The teacher was probably Truman Marsh, a nineteen-year-old Quaker with a Yale baccalaureate, engaged for £80 annual, who established himself also as the boarding school's best Latinist. 17

Although insisting he had "no more to do with Cokesbury than with the [English Catholic] college of Douay," Wesley did not long remain aloof. He castigated Coke and Asbury for "strut[ting] about," calling themselves "bishop" instead of "superintendent" and founding a "college" named for

15 [Dickins], "The State and Description of Cokesbury College, Situated in the State of Maryland," Arminian Magazine, I (1789), 589-590; Coke and Asbury, An Address to the Annual Subscribers for the Support of Cokesbury College and to the Members of the Methodist Society, to Which Are Added the Rules and Regulations of the College (New York: W. Ross, 1787); Asbury to Ezekiel Cooper, January 2, 1795, Journal and Letters, III, 133; to Jasper Winscom, August 15, 1788, ibid., III, 62; ibid., May 8 and 13, 1786, September 12, 1787; The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, Revised and Approved at the General Conference Held at Baltimore in the State of Maryland, in November, 1792 (Philadelphia: Parry Hall, 1792), 59.

16 Asbury, Journal and Letters, October 14, 1795; Morse, the American Geography, (Elizabeth Town, N.J.: Shepherd Kollock, 1789), 355; Jarratt to John Coleman, January 28, 1796, in The Life of the Reverend Devereux Jarratt . . . Written by Himself (Bath, Va.: Warner and Hanna, 1806), 181.

themselves as opposed to his more modest "school." At Coke's request and in absence of adequately trained Americans, Wesley recommended Heath as Cokesbury's president. A middle-aged but recently ordained priest, although probably not a university graduate, Heath was then teaching in the ancient grammar school at All Saints, Kidderminster.  

Early in 1786 Coke persuaded Heath to go to America for $60 annually plus expenses, but not for a year did American trustees agree. By then, as Frank Baker observes, Coke was "too busy running around" to attend to details. Having resigned his educational post and curacy early in 1787, Heath waited with his family through a penniless summer supported only by Wesley's advances. Finally, upon return from the West Indies, Coke paid the passage and headed the Heaths toward Maryland where they presumably arrived in late September. Patrick McCloskey supposedly came out with them. 

Americans were meanwhile proceeding on their own more or less along lines laid down by Asbury. A September circular announced that Haskins, who read law before entering ministry, would teach for £100 annual and that until Heath arrived, Phillip William Otterbein, the bishop's Reformed friend and a graduate of Herborn Academy in Germany, would examine students frequently. Otterbein did visit, but Haskins probably never taught at Cokesbury. By the Heaths' arrival, however, Asbury had already set dates for opening exercises and fixed fees. Tuition was £10. Since the dormitory was not ready, Abingdon's citizens had to board students for £20, which Asbury hoped would include laundry, but apparently did not, since board immediately climbed to £23, although tuition dropped to £7. 

Coke hoped to begin with 50 students, but initial enrollment was 25 although day students may not have been included. In preparation for opening, the bishops derived the rules from Kingswood's. Sons of traveling clergy were to have first preference and, then, sons of annual subscribers. If subscribers had no sons, they had the right to nominate scholars. Other Methodists' sons were next in line, and then, orphans without support. 

Cokesbury's regimen, like Wesley's, was strict. "Play" was expressly forbidden, but so were whipping and striking. Punishment was solitary

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confinement until students were repentant. Scholars were expected to rise at 5 a.m. and attend morning prayer. The class day lasted seven hours, broken by dinner at 1 p.m. Supper was followed by evening prayer. Bed was at 9 p.m. “without fail.” Despite disapproving play, the rules commanded recreation after morning prayer, after lunch and between evening prayer and bedtime when students might choose among gardening, wood-working, walking, riding or bathing outdoors—possibly in tanyard vats since Bush River was proscribed and even with supervision only one student was allowed in the water for a minute at a time.

The bishops did not insist on their curriculum but deferred to Heath, whom Wesley exhorted to follow Kingswood’s methods. In establishing his school, Wesley had prepared textbooks for an eight-year course providing competency in Latin, small doses of Greek and Hebrew, a smattering of arithmetic, geography and history and considerable exposure to devotional literature. In the first class students learned to read and write English, and in the second they began Latin grammar by translating between English and Latin versions of his compendium, Instructions for Children. Subsequently, scholars read post-Augustan and early Christian authors, a little Plato and some Greek New Testament and began Genesis. Except for Virgil’s Aeneid during the eighth year, Wesley avoided Latin poetry and other pagan works. He encouraged spiritual formation through such books as John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress and William Law’s Christian Perfection. He admitted that Heath might at first find the sequence “awkward,” but assured him that “after a year or two you will be repaid abundantly.” Heath complied although initially only the first three years seem to have been installed.20

Despite enthusiastic beginnings, Cokesbury fell apart in less than six months when Heath was forced out by charges of “neglect.” He was early disenchanted because Wesley responded, “Perhaps you was to unhinged and discouraged by finding things otherwise than you expected that you had not the heart to apply yourself to anything as diligently as you was used to do.” The end came when he undertook recitations in the absence of Marsh, who, rather than the President, had charge of the most advanced students. Attending to younger scholars, he twice brushed off a Philadelphia boy, probably William Doughty, who requested help with Wesley’s anthology, Selectae Profanis. The student concluded the President was incapable of immediately translating the text and so informed Marsh. Rumors circulated about Heath’s incompetence, perhaps fueled by Marsh, who seems otherwise to have regarded him as a mentor.21

From West Virginia Asbury reported "heavy tidings": "Both our teachers have left; one for incompetency, and the other for riches and honours." The former has traditionally been identified as Heath and the latter as McCloskey, who purchased land on Gunpowder River, because Asbury added, "had they cost us nothing, the mistake we made in employing them might be the less regretted." Baker, however, has proposed as the former, McCloskey, and, as the latter, Marsh, who soon accepted Episcopal ordination. If McCloskey's case is considered, there may be truth in both theories. Harford probate records indicate he was dismissed, probably for drunkenness, just before his death in June, 1791. As sometimes suggested, McCloskey may have departed and then returned, but more logically, Heath left for incompetency and Marsh for riches in 1788 and McCloskey continued, however unsatisfactorily, for three more years.22

"Whether he has behaved well or ill," Wesley felt obliged to make amends for luring Heath from a secure livelihood. Still picqued over Coke's management of the family's departure, he thought the bishop should share responsibility, but added a clause in his will, setting aside £60 for passage. Heath, like Marsh, elected, instead, to become an Episcopal priest, having apparently served, while at Cokesbury, as curate at St. John's or another nearby parish.23

The sudden departure of Cokesbury's teachers left the American Methodists' educational endeavor in shambles. Cokesbury survived the debacle, but as a rather different institution under the direction of Jacob Hall, a local physician, who infused its curriculum with the spirit of the American Enlightenment. Although supporting a belated drive to create a real institution of higher education with degree-granting authority, Hall more successfully transformed Cokesbury into an eighteenth-century academy—far more the school Asbury wanted than the college Coke tried to develop.

II. COKESBURY AS ACADEMY: THE LATER YEARS

"I expect there has been some unfavorable reports . . ., but it may be relied on that things are not so bad," John Hagerty assured about Cokesbury College in July, 1788. By then Levi Heath, the president Thomas Coke brought from England on John Wesley's recommendation, and young Truman Marsh had both left, and Jacob Hall, a Harford

22Asbury, Journal and Letters, August 10, 1788; Archer, Authentic History of Cokesbury College, 16; Baker, "John Wesley and Cokesbury College's First President," Methodist History, XII, 58.

County physician recently come to Abingdon, had been persuaded to accept the presidency. Hall recalled that "after the most pressing solicitation, I flew to [Cokesbury's] relief and brought it into life, when almost strangled in birth." He served six years, stabilizing the institution, raising enrollment to 80 and making Abingdon, according to Coke, an educational center for Methodists, especially from the South. 24

A Pennsylvania native and cousin of Benjamin Rush, America's leading physician, Hall received his bachelor's degree and served a tutorship at the College of Philadelphia before going to Edinburgh, Europe's foremost medical center. He returned home at the Revolution, probably without a Scottish degree although family tradition credits him with one. Like Heath, he was not Methodist but a member of St. George's parish, which included Abingdon, although reports of service as vestryman and diocesan representative likely confuse him with a relative. Hall was touted for his classical scholarship, but knew his limitations and resumed studies in Philadelphia between Cokesbury's sessions, receiving an M.A. in 1790. 25

Hall did not find Cokesbury's management easy. A few months after he assumed office, students extinguished the first of the school's fires, hidden away in a closet and almost certainly an incendiary act. Appointment of a new classical tutor renewed controversy. In May, 1789, Coke noted that the new teacher, probably John Hargrove, an Englishman who joined the traveling clergy, was a "promising," if not "polished," scholar. Although Cokesbury's first Methodist schoolmaster, Hargrove soon left under pressure after embracing Swedenborgianism. 26

Other instructors turned out better. Joseph Toy, a silversmith, whom Asbury may have lured to Abingdon when the school was first considered, joined the faculty and became Cokesbury's most faithful employee, following the institution to Baltimore in 1796. Late in 1790 Asbury hired two new teachers, probably Daniel Ruff, a former traveling preacher; and young Charles Tait from Georgia, who had charge of charity students and lived with his family at Cokesbury to keep order. Early in 1791 Asbury employed a French teacher, cryptically identified as "R.I.," reportedly from

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North Carolina. In 1793 the Bishop stationed rough-hewn Joseph Everett as Abingdon's pastor and college chaplain.27

As evident in appointment, Hall broadened the curriculum and began to transform Cokesbury into an eighteenth-century academy. Although continuing Latin, he abandoned the instructional scheme Heath had borrowed from Wesley's Kingswood School. Coke helped by giving a library and philosophical apparatus, as scientific instruments were known. Hall continued medical investigations, sending the results to Rush, who published his work. In Enlightenment fashion Hall gave "philosophical" lectures, which, Coke claimed, were appreciated by local gentry. In 1789 Jedidiah Morse reported that, in addition to the learned languages, Cokesbury offered instruction in logic, rhetoric, history, geography, natural philosophy, astronomy, English, French and German. At an examination that year students recited Livy and Sheridan—neither part of Wesley's scheme—and in 1793 when imploring Hall to steer Cokesbury's brightest toward teaching, Asbury recommended grounding them in "English grammar, arithmetick and mathematicks."

For a time at least, Hall continued Wesley's experiment with physical and manual activities as replacements for play in student recreation. He gained endorsement of the scheme's "happiest effects" from Rush, otherwise a patron of Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, then under Presbyterian control. Gardening seems to have been the most important enterprise. According to Rush's description, the ground was divided among students, who were rewarded for the best vegetables or plots. In 1789, in addition to other awards, Asbury gave coins to three student for gardening excellence. Jealous of Rush's interest, Charles Nisbet, Dickinson's president, replied testily that agriculture was Cokesbury's only science. Nisbet was too judgmental, but manual training as a substitute for play remained controversial.29

In May 1788, Coke, echoing Charles Wesley's Kingswood hymn, defined Cokesbury's purpose as uniting "Genuine Religion and Extensive Learning." In December, Asbury complained that its "promising" scholars "want[ed] religion." By spring, however, after a timely expulsion he found

27Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Years 1773-1828, 2 vols. (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), I, 55; Asbury to Ezekiel Cooper, November 12, 1790, Journal and Letters, III, 88; ibid., January 4, 1791.


29Rush, "Thoughts upon the Amusements and Punishments which Are Proper for Schools," Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine, V (1790), 67; Nisbet to Alexander Addison, May 11, 1792, in Addison Mss., Darlington Library, University of Pittsburgh.
“God was working among [them].” Several were “under gracious Impressions,” and others “truly converted.” Although in 1791 William Colbert complained Cokesbury’s examinations were too “theatrical” for a denomination making “so high a profession of religion,” Asbury still reported several students “under awakenings.” The next year Coke judged that “the fear of God” pervaded the college. Cokesbury’s prides were Valentine Cook and John Chalmers, Jr., admitted as traveling clergy after leaving school, and even Thomas Droomgoole, who was sent home if not expelled, became a local preacher.30

Cook has been called Cokesbury’s “most distinguished alumnus,” probably because of his brief teaching stints in two Methodist schools and reputation as a frontier controversialist. Cokesbury’s laymen, however, experienced more success. Because records burned in 1795, only 14 students are known. In addition to Cook, Chalmers and Droomgoole, one boy, I. Stewart, died at Cokesbury, and James Cresaps was apparently expelled. Little is known about George McClaskey, Thomas Waller and students named Gibbs and Quarter. The remainder, however, are an impressive lot. Samuel White served as Senator from Delaware, and Asbury Dickins as Senate secretary for over 25 years. Doughty was a naval colonel and long-time constructor. Abel Bliss of Massachusetts, who, Asbury testified, was “educated, but not spoiled” at Cokesbury, became a trustee of Wesleyan Academy in Massachusetts and, eventually, Wesleyan University in Connecticut. He reared a daughter who was a pioneer Methodist educator. William Dallam became a physician as likely did James Cocke, whom Hall commended to Rush as a student.31

Encouraged by Dickins’ publishing profits, Asbury envisioned an end to Cokesbury’s poverty and possibility of a denominational educational system. Despite the need to share with invalid preachers, he thought enough money would be available from printing, land donations and collections to include 2,000 children “under the best plan of education” in the United States. “The Lord begins to smile on our Kingswood,” he wrote exuberantly. He appealed for either schoolhouses next to churches or district schools, fostering at least seven new institutions. Although


31On White, Dickins, Doughty, Dallam, Cook and Chalmers, see Hamilton, “Some Account of Cokesbury College,” Methodist Quarterly Review, XLII, 186-187; on Stewart, Waller, Bliss and Cresaps, see Asbury, Journal and Letters, September 21, 1789, December 14, 1790, September 4, 1794, November 4, 1804; on Gibbs and McClaskey, see Asbury to Hall, November 10, 1793; on Droomgoole, see Hagerty to Edward Droomgoole, October 27, 1793, in Sweet, Methodists, 144; on Cocke, see Hall to Rush, December 9, 1796, Rush Mss., XXXIII, 101. On Cook and Bliss, see Anson W. Cummins, The Early Schools of Methodism (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1886), 31.
primitive, these schools, like Cokesbury, extended educational opportunity and trained American leaders.32

Despite momentum, Methodist educational thrust disintegrated, however, even more rapidly than it began. Wesley early undercut its promise by suggesting Cokesbury's pretentions, and during the opening exercises Asbury preached despondently on collegiate dangers, presaging, in opponents' retrospect, the institution's future. Antagonism solidified in 1792 following James O'Kelly's break from the denomination after rejection of his plan for peer review of appointments. O'Kelly and his followers launched a bitter crusade, bringing the college under attack. "It is wickedly reported . . . [that] I collect money from the printing concern and college and send it home to my friends in large sums," Asbury wrote in 1795.33

O'Kellyite opposition only exacerbated difficulties. Wesley's discipline did not wear well in America. In 1789 Coke and Asbury advertised an expulsion as evidence they were drawing "the Reins of godly Discipline closer and closer." Coke explained that a 15-year-old student had openly ridiculed "experimental religion"—intolerable because "we are determined to have a College in which religion and learning shall go hand in hand, or to have none at all." Visiting Cresaps, who was probably the unfortunate student (although in 1804 he welcomed the bishop "as a father"), Asbury admitted "the matter might have been managed better" and recalled that "we were to have the boys to become all angels." Hall tried to enforce Cokesbury's rules, which were gradually relaxed, but ultimately found them "repugnant to human nature and the customs of the world."34

Cokesbury was never stable financially, and annual collections seem to have ended after the school's opening. In December, 1790, to keep Cokesbury afloat, Asbury's short-lived governing Council advanced a two-year £1000 loan, which was probably never repaid. In the spring Asbury found a "vast demand" with £700 required the previous five months. The situation continued to deteriorate, and in June, 1792, after reviewing accounts, Asbury concluded he had a "weighty concern." A year later the "poor state" included new indebtedness of £500 and employees' salaries £700 in arrears. In October, 1794, after Cokesbury's program was curtailed and Hall forced from office, the debt stood at £1200 with one-fourth due immediately. Accounts receivable of £500 to £600 seemed remote.35

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32 Asbury, "To the Brethren of the United Societies of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America," in Minutes Taken at the Several Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America for the Year 1791 (Philadelphia: Parry Hall, 1791), 15-16.
33 Asbury to Parents [Joseph and Elizabeth Asbury], October 30, 1795, Journal and Letters, III, 134; ibid., December 9, 1787; Cummings, Early Schools of Methodism, 29.
35 Asbury to Edward Droomgoole, May 9, 1791, Journal and Letters, 106; ibid., December 9, 1790, June 29, 1792, October 4, 1793, October 16, 1794.
The charity school was a particular drain. The first charity students were probably admitted in December, 1788. In the spring Coke and Asbury reported seven receiving free education with four paying no board as well. The bishops’ goal was to make two-thirds to three-fourths of Cokesbury's enterprise charitable. In November when charity cases numbered 11—a fourth of the student body—Asbury calculated the annual expenditure at £200. Two years later the amount was £500.36

Trustees, Asbury reported, seemed to “resent” charity scholars, who made fundraising imperative even when results were “trifling.” “The poverty of the people, and the general scarcity of money, is the great source of our difficulties,” he lamented, explaining that “the support of preachers, who have families, absorbs our collections, so that neither do our elders nor the charity school get much.” “We have the poor, but they have no money,” he wrote, “and the worldly, wicked rich we’d not choose to ask.”

During Coke’s absences Asbury alone bore responsibility for charity students. More than once he became a mendicant, notably in Baltimore in 1791 when he “went from house to house through the snow and cold begging money for support of the poor orphans at Cokesbury.” Trustees advised him to “cease begging and admit no more wholly on charity.” In 1792 the new General Conference agreed to support existing charity students from publishing proceeds, provided no more were admitted for four years. Even this income was insufficient since Hall noted among the causes of Cokesbury’s demise “the want of an ample and permanent fund, which at first was supplied by charitable donations.”37

Cokesbury’s bitterest controversy involved incorporation by Maryland’s legislature. In 1782 the legislature chartered Washington College on the eastern shore and two years later St. John’s in Annapolis. A non-teaching, regulatory university was created to oversee both. In 1792, following organizational efforts, Coke reported that state officials, probably to gain Methodist support, were willing to charter Cokesbury with degree-granting authority provided it had the shape of a public corporation with self-perpetuating trustees and its presidency open to all denominations.38

Both provisions were practically in effect since neither president had been Methodist and trustees rather than the Conference made most decisions. Trustee loyalty was, nonetheless, a real or imagined problem with the 1787 Discipline restricting trusteeship of churches and schools to class leaders and others “in constant communion.” Incorporation, according

36Ibid., December 8, 1788, November 3, 1789, November 27, 1790.
37Ibid., September 4, 1789, December 5, 1791; The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, Revised and Approved at the General Conference Held at Baltimore in the State of Maryland, in November, 1792 (Philadelphia: Parry Hall, 1792), 59.
38Steiner, The History of University Education in Maryland (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1891), 9-11.
to Jesse Lee, raised the specter of loss of control, alienating those who wanted Cokesbury under Conference direction. 39

Asbury, if not Coke, was reluctant, but Hall favored incorporation. During Cokesbury’s crisis in 1794 Hall confessed “serious apprehension” about the school’s fate “unless Bishop Asbury will consent to have it incorporated upon liberal principles, and ‘cursed with public money.’” Because Washington and St. John’s received state funds until 1805, Hall reasoned that, if chartered, Cokesbury might also become “an object of legislative bounty.” The debate was doubtless raucous because Hall lamented the absence “of men of Learning and influence” among Cokesbury’s patrons and Devereux Jarrett concluded that no “considerate man could expect any great things from a seminary of learning, while under the supreme direction of tinkerers and taylors, weavers, shoemakers and country mechanics of all kinds.” 40

Cokesbury’s decline was swift. During spring, 1794, enrollment was halved, creating a “critical state” since most losses were apparently paying customers. In June Asbury held a meeting to deal with teachers’ salaries and student board, doubtless cutting the former and raising the latter although without positive result. Charity boys were likely sent home, and Tait probably left for his governmental career in Georgia and then Alabama. Except for Everett and Toy, other teachers, if any remained, resigned also. When the situation worsened in the fall, Asbury presented the problem to the New York Conference, which terminated the boarding operation and resolved to keep “nothing but an English free day school.” 41

Hall came under attack for excessive absences because he increased medical practice, probably to make ends meet. He resigned on October 17. Although arguing he was worthy of pay, he declined £120 back salary, but requested “an honorable and public Testimonial” since “the fall of Cokesbury has raised a rumor in the earth, and excited the curiosity of the public mind [concerning] the causes of her Declension.” Asbury accepted his resignation and, joined by four clergy, attested that Hall had reserved the right to practice medicine, explaining that “although it had indeed caused him sometimes to be absent, [his practice] was extremely convenient and beneficial to students.” He declared “satisfaction” with Hall’s service, character and abilities. 42

39 A Form of Discipline for the Ministers, Preachers and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America (New York: W. Ross, 1787), 39; Lee, A Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America (Baltimore: Magill and Kline, 1810), 117.
41 Asbury, Journal and Letters, June 18, 1794, September 28, 1794; [O’Kelly], The Author’s Apology for Protesting against Methodist Episcopal Government (Richmond: John Dixon, 1798), 65.
Despite the presence of Everett, who lived at the college, and Toy, not even a day school was maintained. "We now make a sudden and dead pause," Asbury wrote, adding "if we cannot have a Christian school (that is, one with Christian discipline and pious teachers) we will have none." Rather than renewing full-time medical practice, Hall contributed to Cokesbury's difficulties by stealing students for the new school he established for his sons and a few other boarders.43

With Cokesbury suspended, Asbury agreed to legislative charter. "We mean to incorporate, and breathe, and take some better plan," he wrote. Lee believed the bishop insured the school's death by not consulting the conferences. On December 26 the charter was granted with five clergy and 10 lay trustees from Maryland and Delaware—except for two, a new group. Richard Whatcoat, whose education was similar to Asbury's and who had to be naturalized to serve as trustee, was a leader in reconstruction, which, Lee believed, was mismanaged. After organizing in June, 1795, trustees spent the summer inventorying property and paying bills. Following the Maryland conference, presiding elders read a "college address" at winter quarterly meetings, asking new subscriptions. Yet old issues refused to die as evident in Asbury's letter to Nelson Reed, local presiding elder and trustee, cautioning "against corrupt Latin authors" and recommending a return to Wesley's curriculum. Obviously wearying, however, the bishop turned to Dickins to procure "some pure elegant Latin authors fit to read."44

Asbury might have saved his ink. Subscriptions were never received, nor instruction revived. On December 7, 1795, tragedy struck. Cokesbury, the bishop reported, was "consumed to ashes." The interior and roof were gutted although the local chapel was spared and the brick walls stood for several years, inviting reconstruction. The closet fire in 1788 was not unexpected since Asbury noted some "disagreeable impressions about the college being burnt" and then "an attempt to do it." Arson was again suspected in 1795. "I shall ever believe [the burning] was done wickedly," Asbury wrote. Coke agreed the fire was set "on purpose." Despite $1,000 reward from Maryland's governor, the charge was never proved although nineteenth-century Methodists insisted they knew the arsonist.45

Reopening was prompt although Abingdon was abandoned for Baltimore where local fundraising was undertaken. The local society gave

43 Asbury, Journal and Letters, October 21, 1794; notice in Maryland Journal, November 11, 1794, 3; Hall to Rush, December 1, 1794, Rush Mss., XXXIII, 100.
£700, and a house-to-house campaign produced £600 more for the city's first school. Seventeen Methodists then pledged an additional £1700 and went security for enough more to purchase a building. They chose a large brick edifice near the Light Street Church, which had replaced Lovely Lane, as well as the presiding elder's residence and "elegant" mansions of denominational social climbers such as William Hawkins. Originally built for "balls, concerts and card parties," the building had been a contention between the neighborhood tavern keeper and denominational members, who delighted in turning it to constructive uses.46

Except for Toy, there was little connection between the first Cokesbury and the second, more frequently called the "Baltimore Academy." The new school opened on May 2 with male and female departments headed by James Priestly and Levi Norton. Whatever remained of Cokesbury's original curriculum was jettisoned in favor of an even more extreme version of an eighteenth-century academy with natural and moral philosophy, globes for teaching geography and the usual mathematical mixture of navigation, surveying and astronomy. Baltimoreans, according to Coke, took "pleasure in sending their young people to this seminary, which soon flourished beyond what Cokesbury had ever done." By June the school had five teachers and 200 scholars.47

Prosperity did not, however, last long. On December 4, 1796—a year after the Abingdon fire—delinquent boys ignited shavings in a nearby building. Spreading flames threatened the school and city. Mourners at Patrick Colvin's funeral heard frantic cries, "The church is on fire. Bear away your dead." Firemen contained the blaze by pulling down roofs, but denominational structures and Hawkins' dwelling were destroyed. Asbury estimated the new loss at £15,000 to £20,000 although the Baltimore Equitable Society made a small reimbursement among its first claims. Despite furtive talks, neither Cokesbury nor any other college was immediately rebuilt. In 1799 trustees sold the property to pay outstanding debts.48

Jarratt wrote caustically about Methodist failure: "When men, like those on Shimar's plain have determined to build that they might get

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48Asbury, Journal and Letters, December 30, 1796; "Burning of the Baltimore Academy," Federal Gazette and Baltimore Advertiser, December 5, 1796, quoted in Scharf, The Chronicles of Baltimore (Baltimore: Turnbull Brothers, 1874), 279; Scharf, History of Baltimore, 238, 261; Cummins, Early Schools of Methodism, 33; copies of Baltimore Equitable Society documents, in Lovely Lane Museum; Laws of Maryland, 1798, ch. 61, cited in Steiner, History of Education in Maryland, 244.
themselves a name, the Lord has frequently blasted the design.” Asbury was distraught, admitting his mind was “affected.” He fancied personal responsibility for the loss of the Abingdon building, confessing he had “prayed if it was not for his glory it might be destroyed.” He hoped the Baltimore fire would work to the “humiliation” of local Methodists, whom God so loved he would “keep them poor, to make them pure.”

Discouraged, Asbury withdrew support for college enterprise. “The Lord called not Mr. Whitefield, not the Methodists to build colleges,” he wrote, resolving to devote his attention “toward the spiritual interests of our Society.” A year later Coke lost optimism. After the Baltimore conflagration, he concluded, “Methodists ought not to enter into such popular undertakings, but bend their whole force to the salvation of souls.” He soon left America for good. Although Asbury maintained support for local and district schools, most experienced similar problems and closed their doors. A few continued, but Methodists’ first educational drive was over. Two decades were required to renew it.