People flock to summer camp meetings, wrote one commentator in the New York Christian Advocate in 1872, “half in search of health and half in quest of religion. . . . [They] mix Christianity and sea-bathing a little too confusedly.” ¹ This appraisal seems a far cry from the enthusiasm for the camp meeting expressed by Francis Asbury seventy years earlier, although Asbury, too, could not resist a metaphor associated with water, albeit mixing it with a militaristic one. The camp meeting “field fighting,” he wrote to Pittsburgh District Presiding Elder Thornton Fleming in December 1802, “this is fishing with a large net.” ² Both men had high personal esteem for camp meetings which, in the view of many historians, had led to Methodist dominance in American Protestantism in the nineteenth century. ³ But by 1872, the camp meeting seemed to be losing some of its luster; its viability as a device for bringing souls into the Methodist fold had started to diminish, even though thousands continued to attend such meetings each year.

What had happened in the intervening years to cause a shift in popular perception of the camp meeting? How and why had it changed? I shall argue that the camp meetings of the later nineteenth century, fueled largely by the burgeoning Holiness movement, served as a transition between the frontier camp meetings that so inspired Asbury and others and the later movement in the twentieth century to establish summer camps and conferences. The burden of my argument lies in demonstrating that the camp meetings of the later nineteenth century were essentially different in their focus than those of the antebellum period, that the factors making them attractive to the devout had changed significantly from those bringing hundreds to frontier groves, and that both internal and external forces challenging the viability of the camp meeting as a religious phenomenon were paving the way for a very different understanding of the camp experience that came to prevail by the mid-twentieth century.

¹New York Christian Advocate, August 29, 1872, 276.
³A contemporary appreciation of the import of the frontier camp meeting for American Methodism is found in Nathan Bangs, A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church 3 vols. (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 2:98–119.
The story of the Holiness movement and its impact on the Wesleyan traditions in the United States is well known. Rooted in John Wesley's notion of entire sanctification, Holiness people sought what Methodist laywoman Phoebe Palmer called the "second blessing." At the famous Tuesday Meetings for the Promotion of Holiness promoted by Palmer and her sister Sarah Lankford starting in the 1830s, Phoebe Palmer expounded on her conviction that the Christian should seek and expect an experience of the presence of Christ as intense as that felt in initial justification or conversion. It was no less than an abiding awareness that the whole self consecrated to God had been made holy. As interest in holiness mounted and mingled with other religious currents advocating Christian perfection in one form or another, what has become known as the Holiness Revival of 1857–58 swept urban centers of the nation, particularly in the north and northeast.

Many who were drawn into the orbit of the antebellum Holiness movement had long been involved in camp meetings; many traced their experience of conversion to the fervent preaching of itinerant evangelists who stoked the fires of revivals year after year. Such evangelists, mobile agents who went where the people were with the gospel message, were responsible for carrying Methodism across the country. In Methodist circles the camp meeting had already become an institution when fascination with holiness captured the hearts of the faithful, with many districts regularly sponsoring annual meetings or having their own camp grounds where the faithful would come and pitch tents each August for a week or so of preaching services, often held in conjunction with quarterly conferences.


5 Developments in southern New Jersey were not atypical. There, by the 1830s, larger circuits routinely held a summer quarterly conference as a camp meeting; having them at a fixed location became common by the time of the Civil War. See Robert B. Steelman, *What God Has Wrought: A History of the Southern New Jersey Conference of the United Methodist Church* (Pennington, NJ: United Methodist Church Southern New Jersey Conference Commission on Archives and History, 1986), 110.
The Camp Meeting in Transition

But antebellum holiness took hold primarily in urban areas, while the camp meeting remained a rural phenomenon before the Civil War.\(^6\)

As with so much else in American life, the Civil War had an impact on the camp meeting. Although meetings were held as usual during the war years, attendance was not always what it had been because so many were caught up in the war effort. As well, numerous camp meeting evangelists and urban advocates of holiness had fused evangelicalism and perfectionism with abolitionism, immersing themselves in the social issues that divided the nation.\(^7\) Consequently, it was not until after the war that the camp meeting phenomenon and the quest for holiness formed a marriage that altered the shape of the camp meeting and turned it in a new direction, although Phoebe Palmer and other early advocates of holiness had traveled the camp meeting circuit before the Civil War and countless Methodist preachers and lay persons reported that they had received the second blessing of holiness at antebellum camp meetings.\(^8\) At the center of the Holiness camp meeting movement was the Rev. John S. Inskip, appointed pastor of the Green Street Methodist Episcopal church in New York City in 1866.\(^9\)

Inskip’s interest in holiness came first from his wife, who in 1864 had experienced the second blessing. Subsequently, the possibility of attaining entire sanctification became central to Inskip’s preaching. Hence when New Jersey Methodist pastor William B. Osborn in 1867 approached Inskip about organizing a camp meeting devoted to holiness, Inskip enthusiastically endorsed the idea and joined with several others to plan for such a gathering in Vineland, New Jersey July 17–26, 1867. Vineland was destined to be different. Organizers were not content to have a camp meeting for just a single district or Annual Conference; they called theirs a “national” camp meeting. And although all the leadership came from the ranks of Methodism, Vineland was billed as interdenominational. Organizers were not disappointed in the response; attendance, aided by access to the camp meeting by railroad, reached into the thousands.\(^10\) As a result, Inskip spearheaded formation of the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness and would serve as its president from 1867 until his death in 1884. The following year, the National Holiness Camp Meeting was held at Manheim, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where

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\(^6\) See Jones, *Perfectionist Persuasion*, 63.

\(^7\) Timothy Smith emphasized this connection in *Revivalism and Social Reform*.

\(^8\) Dieter, 111. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 118, noted, for example, that several Methodist clergy received the second blessing at the Plattsburgh, New York, district camp meeting in 1854.

\(^9\) The only biography of Inskip is William McDonald and John E. Searles, *The Life of the Rev. John Inskip* (Boston: McDonald and Gill, 1885).

\(^10\) The closest contemporary account of the Vineland camp meeting is Alexander A. McLean and Joel W. Eaton, eds., *Penuel; or, Face to Face with God* (New York: W. C. Palmer, Jr., 1869). See esp. 3–20, 148–57.
once again rail access boosted attendance. Still interdenominational in theory, this second national gathering received a symbolic imprimatur from official Methodism when Bishop Matthew Simpson preached the opening sermon. As one commentator described the meeting at Manheim, "No one who witnessed that scene need regret not being present at Pentecost. [Manheim] was Pentecost repeated." 11 At the third national camp meeting, held at the Troy Conference camp grounds at Round Lake, New York, the next year, some fifteen Methodist clergy led the opening service which had a reported attendance in excess of 20,000. 12 Soon the Association began sponsoring multiple camp meetings each year in different locations in order to accommodate the demand.

Holiness camp meetings were not the only ones that witnessed rapid growth in attendance in the decade and one-half after the close of the Civil War. The well-known camp meeting at Martha’s Vineyard established in 1835, for example, reported a daily attendance in excess of 10,000 in 1867, with more coming the following year. 13 Soon countless associations, some affiliated with the National Association, but many independent, sprang up. 14 Not all were dedicated to holiness, yet none escaped its influence. Most had Methodist connections; indeed, many local associations designated presiding elders or district superintendents as presidents and required Methodist clergy on their boards. Yet virtually none was controlled by an Annual Conference or other denominational institution. A common pattern quickly emerged, with chartered associations purchasing land in a rural or coastal area that was accessible by train, building a central auditorium and auxiliary structures, and leasing or selling land to shareholders who in turn constructed cottages on them. Gone was the simple forest clearing of the frontier camp meeting; the Holiness camp grounds were meant to endure through the ages.

While it is tempting to attribute to religious zeal alone the popularity of the Holiness camp meetings, their institutionalization into associations,
and the parallel establishment of permanent camp grounds, several other forces were operative, including the urbanization of the northeast where the camp meetings were strong, a concomitant intrigue with nature as the locus of purity, and the location of religion primarily in the domestic sphere in the Victorian era. All three would remain forces that prompted interest in offering summer religious programs at rural or coastal camps well into the later twentieth century.

The story of the rapid urbanization and industrialization of the northeast in the decades following the Civil War is well-known and need not be repeated here. Hoping to gain a better life with jobs in factories and related industry, thousands moved from rural America to the cities, and millions of immigrants, especially from central, eastern, and southern Europe swelled the ranks of the laboring classes between 1870 and World War I. The United States quickly saw its demographics shift from the agrarian ideal of Thomas Jefferson and others of the founding generation of the Republic to one centered in cities. By 1920, the decennial census revealed that a majority of the U.S. population lived in the nation’s cities. For our purposes, several consequences of that shift are important.

One result was the movement of American Methodism into the ranks of the middle class and, in some cases, into the upper class. Church life in the cities became more formal; even worship took on more structured form. While the emphasis on some inner experience of the presence of Christ remained strong, the enthusiasm and spontaneity that marked much of earlier Methodism seemed muted. Little wonder, then, that the intrigue with holiness cascaded across urban Methodism, since its call for a direct experience of sanctification betokened the intensity of religious experience of a more rural, if not frontier, style that was rapidly becoming more a memory than the norm. As well, the immigrants who flooded the cities brought other perceived threats, for the vast majority of those who came to American shores between 1870 and World War I were Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Jewish. The pluralism which late twentieth century Americans accept as a given at the time signalled the infiltration of alien religious forces that could infect, if not destroy, the hegemony of evangelical Protestantism. Congregationalist Josiah Strong’s *Our Country* (1885) offered both an appraisal of the distinct dangers to Protestantism of urbanization and immigration and a call to arms to new forms of evangelism, for Strong believed that only an aggressive effort to convert new immigrants to evangelical Protestant ways offered hope for the continued greatness of the American people. Hence were born the institutional church, as it was called, the settlement house, the city mission, the

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rescue mission, and a host of other agencies that sought to keep urban Protestants uncontaminated by the dangers of the city and to persuade immigrants that becoming an authentic American meant becoming evangelical Protestants. Charles Parker has also noted that the overwhelmingly Protestant urban middle class, thanks to some of the benefits of industrialization, now had leisure time. The summer vacation was born in the Victorian era, and then as now, vacation meant a change of venue for refreshment of both body and spirit.

The happy marriage of holiness and the camp meeting resulted in part from the desire to recapture the intensity of religious experience associated with the past (entire sanctification) through a mechanism that was physically removed from the dangers posed by the city (the camp meeting). The distance between city and camp ground was more than mileage; it was a symbolic move to an environment perceived as purer and more holy. Without the intrusion of business and urban bustle, true religion could flourish. If such also revived body and spirit, if religious experience and vacation were combined, so much the better. As an early historian of the Wesleyan Grove camp ground on Martha's Vineyard noted, "It is fully proved that neither comfortable cottages, ample provisions for comfortable living, nor yet coming here for weeks of relaxation from business and for the improvement of health, prevents the original objects of a camp-meeting from being attained, if we come here trusting in God, and if ministers and people enter into Christian labors as the fathers did, and as we should do." It comes as no surprise to historians that the Methodist camp ground became one parent of the summer resort.

Scholars have also called attention to the many ways fascination with nature, the idealizing of the bucolic and its equation with simplicity and purity, was an undercurrent of the Victorian age. While most see the

18Rev. H. Vincent, _History of the Camp-Meeting and Grounds at Wesleyan Grove, Martha's Vineyard, for the Eleven Years Ending with the Meeting of 1869, with Glances at the Earlier Years_ (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1870), 242-43.
retreat to nature as a reaction to the plight of urbanizing America, we should not forget that nature itself held possibilities for enriching Protestant sensibilities generally and the Methodist pursuit of holiness in particular. One need look only to popular hymnody to find nature elevated to the space where the Divine is revealed. Some popular hymns had explicit holiness connections; many did not. Among the latter are Mary A. Lathbury’s “Day Is Dying in the West,” written at Chautauqua in 1877; Maltbie D. Babcock’s “This Is My Father’s World” in which “all nature sings” while the devout bask in the divine presence amid “rocks and trees, . . . skies and seas” and hear God pass by “in the rustling grass”; and Henry Van Dyke’s paean to “Field and forest, vale and mountain, flowery meadow, flashing sea” as believers joyfully adore God. Charles E. Jones and Jean Miller Schmidt have both called attention to how the Holiness camp ground became the modern equivalent of Israel’s promised land, an image captured well in Edgar Page Stites’ “Beulah Land” where the faithful moved “far away” from “the noise of strife” of urban America to the rural “land of corn and wine.”

It is not simply that the pursuit of holiness paralleled Israel’s march to Canaan, but that nature itself represented a realm of purity. Only in space that was pure could the individual become pure. Only where one could “look away across the sea,” as Stites rhapsodized, could one glimpse “heav’n, my home for evermore.” And only those blessed with holiness could lay claim to that vision. Where could one find that vision? Not in the cities, but in rural and coastal areas where one could still hear “birds their carols sing.” The removal to camp grounds was not just a retreat from the realm of factory and slum, but a positive affirmation of nature as the arena where God not only “shines in all that’s fair,” but remains “the ruler yet.”

Nature and rural imagery carried over into the changing understanding of the family unit in late nineteenth century that also made the camp meetings pervaded by holiness plausible. Kirk Jeffrey some years ago argued that the family unit became a form of utopian retreat from the vagaries of urban life, albeit a sentimentalized one, and Colleen McDannell has meticulously demonstrated that among Americans, both Protestant and Catholic, family and home become a vital locus of authentic religiosity in the Victorian Age. Family and home became symbols not
only of the shifting sensibility that saw religion as a domestic matter under the aegis of wife and mother, but also of both physical and psychological space where the naiveté lost in the city could be regained by those who were genuine children of God. By the 1880s camp grounds generally saw rows of tents replaced by streets of cottages inhabited by families often for the entire summer, not just when the camp meeting was in full swing. The extension of home to camp ground meant that the latter became a place where nature and nurture, especially the religious nurture of children, became one.

This last point also illuminates reasons why the camp meetings of the later nineteenth century, even those dedicated to holiness, finally moved in quite a different direction from the frontier camp meetings of an earlier era. The early camp meetings fixed their attention on the conversion of the lost; those of the later period first on those already converted and then on those who were being nurtured in the faith. Of secondary import to the later camp meetings in practice, but not necessarily in theory, were those being introduced to Christian experience. It is one matter to proclaim the gospel to those who are outside the circle of the righteous; it is another to prod the righteous to seek a second blessing of sanctification. It is one matter to urge the unconverted to come literally and figuratively to the altar; it is another to nourish seeds of faith already planted in the young at the family altar in the home. As the cliché has it, holiness revivalists who worked the camp meeting circuit were “preaching to the choir.” And what would remain to be done once all the converted were sanctified? The appraisal of the secretary of the Wyoming (Pennsylvania) Camp Ground of the 1887 meetings exhibits a typical shift in tone: “Many old camp meeting folks spoke of 1887 as their very best meeting. Perhaps not more than a dozen converted but a great work was accomplished for the church. Because of the scarcity of sinners, the sermons and exhortations were almost entirely directed to the church.”

Simply put, the emphasis on holiness and on nurture moved the camp meeting away from its original focus on conversion.

This same reorientation can be seen in two other movements developing at the same time that the Holiness movement wedded itself to the camp meeting: the tremendous growth of the Sunday school and the introduction of an educational element into the camp meeting that is associated first and foremost with Chautauqua. Central to both is Methodist pastor and later bishop John Heyl Vincent. Both had ramifications not only for the late nineteenth century camp meetings, but also for the assumptions that would come to underlie Methodist church work with children and youth.

While there were scattered efforts to organize Sunday schools early in the nineteenth century, with the Sunday School Union of the Methodist Episcopal Church having its founding in 1827, it was not until 1840, just four years before the main body of Methodism in the United States divided regionally, that the General Conference created a Committee on Sunday Schools and appointed an editor to oversee preparation of instructional materials.25 In the following two decades, many city churches, primarily in the north, established Sunday schools, but the Civil War retarded what had been fairly steady growth, especially in the south. Following the war, however, Sunday schools rapidly gained ground in many Protestant denominations, with the first National Sunday School Convention being held in 1869, the same year the Ocean Grove, New Jersey camp meeting association organized. One year earlier John Heyl Vincent had become editor and corresponding secretary of the Methodist Sunday School Union.26

Vincent aggressively advocated the use of graded lesson plans as a more effective way to minister to children and youth.27 As well, cognizant of the gains made in training school teachers, he also called for programs to instruct Sunday school teachers in pedagogical techniques. In the southern church, many of Vincent's concerns were echoed by leaders such as Atticus Haygood, A. G. E. Cunyngham, and James Atkins. Use of such graded materials and providing training for teachers were, of course, optional; formal adoption of graded curricula did not come until 1910 in both the northern and southern branches of episcopal Methodism. Vincent promoted his views through the Sunday-School Journal that he edited; its subscription list mushroomed from 18,000 when he took over in 1868–69 to 60,000 by 1872 and more than 100,000 two years later when Vincent organized the first two-week assembly for training Sunday school teachers at Chautauqua.

The idea of holding a Sunday school camp meeting stemmed from at least two sources. Vincent had held institutes for Sunday school teachers


27 An early manual promoting this view is Simeon Gilbert, The Lesson System (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1879).
in Illinois in the 1860s and was eager to expand the movement on an interdenominational basis. Similar thoughts came to Lewis Miller, who began to explore the possibility of a camp meeting that would focus on education rather than evangelism while he was attending the Ohio State Camp Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness in 1872. Vincent, Miller, and others of like mind began looking for a site for such a gathering and settled on Fair Point, the location of the Erie Conference camp ground in New York where camp meetings had been held starting in 1870. The first assembly was such a success that organizers not only projected an annual event to train Sunday school teachers, but within a few years expanded the Chautauqua idea to include an array of educational and cultural activities, giving birth to a widespread movement that endures in modified form to the present.

Both of Vincent's passions had implications for the camp meeting phenomenon of the late nineteenth century. On the one hand, the introduction of graded Sunday school materials represented a shift in the assumption behind children's ministry. Formerly work with children had largely reflected the conviction that the Sunday school should prepare children for a subsequent experience of conversion. Now the assumption was that the Sunday school should nurture children in the development of Christian faith and identity. Those properly nurtured would never think of themselves as being anything other than Christian and hence less likely to have a dramatic turning point in life that conversion traditionally denoted. When children trained in Sunday schools accompanied families to camp meetings, they would be less likely to seek conversion and more likely to respond to efforts that would enrich the nurture already underway. This change in the rationale for working with children and youth dovetailed nicely with the orientation of the Holiness camp meeting away from calls for conversion and toward an intensification of faith and spiritual edification.

On the other hand, the positive response to offering education for teachers at the first Chautauqua assembly in 1874 prompted organizers of other camp meetings to include as part of their regular programs first some training opportunities for leaders and then some educational events that were open to all, not just to Sunday school teachers. "Chautauqua


29 On this point, see Boylan, chap. 5, "Conversion & Christian Nurture: Children and Childhood in Sunday Schools."
days" became common features of camp meetings; Vincent himself proudly catalogued more than thirty camp meetings that had adopted some of the Chautauqua approach in his history of the movement published in 1886. The impact was to accelerate the change in the character of the camp meeting that was already underway because of the very nature of holiness as an experience subsequent to conversion and the Victorian assumption that family and home were the proper sphere of authentic religion. The expectation that the camp experience in a rural environment should be educational and nurturing remains central even today.

Historians have long noted that the vitality of the camp meeting, despite the fresh energy injected into the movement by holiness and the intrigue with nature, began to dissipate in the early decades of the twentieth century. Some have concluded that the type of camp meeting examined here was so inextricably wedded to the Victorian ethos that its fate was sealed once that age had ended. I have already suggested that the shift in assumptions undergirding the camp meeting meant that the phenomenon itself had taken on a different character. But other forces contributed to the demise of the "old" camp meeting and subsequently to the birth of a rather different understanding of the church-related camp.

One was the controversy that came to surround holiness by the 1890s, if not earlier. The potential for dissension was built into the very idea of holiness; every quest for purity and sanctification carries with it the conviction that the impure and the unholy are to be avoided at all costs. What brings conflict is determining who and what are so impure and so unholy as to be dangerous. As well, holiness readily leads to dividing the community of believers into two categories, those who have experienced holiness and those who have not, with the former perceived as somehow spiritually superior to the latter. The results within the Methodist family are well-known. As advocates of holiness began to assert the primacy, if not necessity, of an experience of entire sanctification, leaders began to hedge on their support for the holiness cause because they were fearful of its divisiveness. In 1894, for example, bishops of the southern church issued a strong statement expressing concern over the disruption that emerged when holiness became a byword. The more dissidents harbored reservations about institutional Methodism's commitment to holiness, the more Methodist clergy and laity who controlled association camp meeting boards and kindred bodies began to recruit preachers and evangelists who downplayed the centrality of holiness. Several holiness denominations owe their genesis to the controversy, for they split away from established Methodist denominations to form new ones that still identified with the

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30 John H. Vincent, 289-301.
broader Wesleyan heritage but stridently emphasized holiness. Other controversy came when Pentecostal currents fused with holiness, and healing and speaking in tongues became part of the story. The upshot was that those camp meetings most securely under Methodist influence moved even more resolutely in the direction of nurture, edification, and education.

Then, too, there developed competition. In some areas adjacent to camp meeting grounds and in others located nearby, but generally in a rural or coastal setting, the summer resort, as already noted, paralleled the Holiness camp meetings in terms of development. Those who came to the resorts reaped the same benefits of revitalization and retreat from urban life that the camp meeting offered; many participated in some of the religious activities of the camp meetings, but without the sense of obligation that often went with owning a cottage on the camp grounds. But competition came not just from secular alternatives. The first of the Niagara Conferences devoted to exploration of biblical prophetic texts from a premillennialist perspective was held in 1878. Although the prophetic conferences were not always held in bucolic surroundings (large gatherings were held, for example, in New York and Philadelphia in 1918), they began to attract persons from a variety of denominations at least as much because they offered intense examination of scripture in a time when the emerging higher criticism seemed to challenge the authority of the Bible as because they promulgated a premillennialist ideology. Closely related to them were the Northfield Conferences sponsored by Dwight L. Moody beginning in 1880 that also proffered a premillennialist fare and the brand of holiness associated with the Keswick movement in England. These alternatives indirectly spurred the "mainline" camp meetings away further from anything controversial and even more towards emphasizing nurture and spiritual growth.32

Other theological currents of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also left their mark on Methodism, particularly the inroads made by what became known as Modernism and the Social Gospel. While neither had an obvious impact on the institution of the camp meeting, both contributed to an ethos that directed attention away from the intense personal religious experience associated with the camp meetings. By offering different theological foundations for Christian belief, especially in emphasizing Christ as the model for ethical behavior more than as the source of individual salvation, the liberal thrust of Modernism gave implicit support for the growing stress on nurture in religious education. When the Social Gospel movement began to celebrate the possibilities of urban life as the locus of the kingdom of God and to highlight the need for redemption of

the very structures of the social order (politics, labor, economics, and the like), the city with all its problems became less a threat to faith. Concomitantly there was less a need to retreat to the camp ground to find religious sustenance, although there remained the idea that refreshment of body and spirit by removal from daily routines was beneficial. Authentic faith expressed itself in service to humanity, not necessarily in inner religious experience. Methodist Frank Mason North in 1903 trumpeted both the problems and new possibilities of the city in his well-known hymn:

Where cross the crowded ways of life,
where sound the cries of race and clan,
above the noise of selfish strife,
we hear your voice, O Son of man.33

Beulah Land was no longer restricted to the groves of the camp ground; it could be found in the heart of urban America as well.

The commitment to nurture that lay behind the Sunday school movement also had more enduring ramifications in the expansion and changing focus of youth ministry, not just in the religious instruction of children. In 1889, five youth organizations within the Methodist Episcopal church were reorganized into the Epworth League; the following year, Epworth League structures were set up in both the Methodist Episcopal Church, South and the Methodist Church in Canada. The Methodist Protestant church continued to use the Christian Endeavor designation for its formal youth ministry. It was not long before those who spearheaded work with the Epworth League began to look to some sort of summer experience to offer spiritual enrichment as well as training for persons who would in turn become leaders in Epworth League organizations on the local level. At first, these summer institutes found homes on campuses of schools and colleges. But by the era of World War I, some were combined with camp meeting programs or using facilities of camp ground associations. Indeed, in a handful of cases, as general participation in camp meetings dwindled, it was the use of buildings and grounds by Epworth League groups that kept maintenance of camp meeting grounds viable. This approach to youth ministry is important to the present analysis for two reasons. First, it represents yet another example of the growing emphasis on nurture and education rather than conversion per se that already marked shifts in the assumptions that buttressed the camp meetings. Second, by making a major element in the training of youth leadership some summer experience held in a separate setting, increasingly a rural or coastal retreat camp ground, the work of the Epworth League represented another step away from the Holiness camp meeting and toward the later twentieth century notion of the church camp.

Yet another factor nudging the camp experience away from its roots in revivalism came with World War I, or, more precisely, with the pressures on the camp meeting that resulted from societal accommodation to the war effort and then the Depression and finally World War II. Attendance at camp meetings, already on the decline, plummeted during the years of World War I; with the Depression, many who might have once spent a week or two at a Methodist-related camp ground no longer had the financial resources to do so. What transpired in New Hampshire is representative. There, according to Charles Kern, by 1920 at least three camp grounds that had links to the Annual Conference had been closed or sold; numerous independent ones folded as well. The war was the "death knell" of the old camp meeting. The largest one remaining that had Methodist ties, named for Bishop Elijah Hedding, had adopted the Chautauqua format in 1886; others had followed suit. Hedding struggled along in the early Depression years, partly by becoming the site for summer youth institutes of the Epworth League sort. Its legacy endures through the Hedding Camp Meeting Association, although there has not been any financial assistance from the Annual Conference since the 1960s.

As the nation moved from the Depression into World War II, the once flourishing camp grounds had no time to recover. Yet the early 1940s did rekindle visions of the potential for ministry in a camp setting. The story of the various threads that led to a rebirth of church camps after the war, ones clearly designed to provide education and nurture, awaits careful explication and analysis. One of those threads is a direct result of attempts to minister to the military during the war years. The Commission on Chaplains, organized in 1941 and coming under the aegis of the General Conference in 1944, saw much of its work centered in military camps where troops underwent training before leaving for combat. Many recognized the opportunities for ministry that came when large numbers of persons were gathered in a single location without external distractions, an ongoing rationale for camp experiences of all sorts. Another thread was the Bishops' Crusade for Christ, an ambitious program of evangelism and education launched in 1944. One result was a thorough-going examination at all levels of the formal educational ministry of the denomination. Soon many Annual Conferences, even those where camp meeting grounds that had served thousands in earlier decades were located, began the search for new sites and facilities, sometimes because those already existing were in such disrepair. These new camp grounds would be geared toward educating children and youth in the Christian way. Thus many forces joined with the legacy of the camp meeting to give birth to a new format for the church camp in the years following the war.

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The frontier camp meetings provided Methodism's initial harvest; those of the later nineteenth century sustained Methodism's adolescence. Both cemented in American Methodism the Wesleyan understanding of the importance of inner experience. But just as those who received justification with God through the revivals and camp meetings of the earlier nineteenth century began to seek a fuller experience in the Holiness meetings of the later nineteenth century, so those Holiness camp meetings paved the way for yet other approaches for sustaining the Methodist gospel. Camp experience remains central to Methodism's self-understanding as a people called to a holy life, largely because of the historical centrality of camp meetings to Methodism's identity in the United States.