By 1947 racially based lynching had diminished in the United States partly because of campaigns by reformers like the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching and partly because capital punishment was swiftly and frequently applied. As with lynching, black men were disproportionately the victims of state sponsored executions. Just after World War II, however, there emerged a new round of illegal atrocities against African-Americans in southern “killing fields,” to use the metaphor of one recent historian. Fueled by “fear and ignorance,” he concludes, “an epidemic of random murder and mayhem was sweeping like a fever through the region,” and no southern state was exempt.¹

One lynching eighteen months after the war ended attracted considerable national and international attention. The killing of Willie Earle began before daybreak on Monday morning, February 17, 1947 with his abduction from the Pickens, South Carolina county jail where he had been placed the previous afternoon. He had not yet been formally charged with allegedly stabbing a white taxi-driver from Greenville on Saturday night in the town of Liberty. Earle’s mutilated body, with his face blown apart by shotgun blasts, was found just after sunrise at the edge of West Greenville nearly twenty miles from the jail. The corpse was on the ground near an animal slaughter pen. The stabbing victim, Thomas Watson Brown, died in a Greenville hospital before noon on the same morning.²

By early afternoon FBI agents from Charlotte, North Carolina were in Greenville to cooperate with state, county, and city law enforcement officials and to help arrest by week’s end thirty-one white men. In the largest trial for a lynching in southern history that May, they were, despite signed confessions by twenty-six of the defendants, acquitted by the white, male jury. The clerk of court read their names and four charges and announced “not guilty” ninety-six times³.


Federal investigators of the Earle lynching did not go behind the scenes in Pickens County to inquire carefully how the abduction could have taken place without any resistance by the jailer, nor how the lynching could have been planned in front of the Yellow Cab Company office hardly fifty feet from the Greenville County Sheriff’s office. Lacking requisite congressional legislative authority to be more aggressive on civil rights issues, John C. Bills, head of the Charlotte office, removed his federal agents from the scene as soon as all the arrests were made. Following the trial jury’s acquittal, U. S. Attorney-General Tom C. Clark threatened to, but did not reopen the case on violations of civil rights.

To go behind the scenes in Pickens, a county-seat town of less than two thousand people, would have alerted the FBI to the courageous story of a white Methodist minister, Hawley Barnwell Lynn. Pastor of Grace Methodist Church for the previous two years, Lynn was a widower raising, with the assistance of the women of his congregation, an infant daughter, Katherine. His wife, Margaret Gault Lynn had died following childbirth March 29, 1946. He lived in the brick Methodist parsonage two and a half blocks from the county jail where his sometime parishioner, J. Ed Gilstrap, resided with his family on the west side of the building.

Hawley Lynn had come to Pickens after graduating from Yale Divinity School in 1943 and after serving as an associate at Myers Park Methodist in Charlotte. A South Carolina native raised in Chesterfield County in a family with minimal resources, he was educated from 1933–1935 at Spartanburg Textile Institute, now Spartanburg Methodist College. Like the other students at the manual labor school, he alternately worked in the cotton mills and took classes. His associate’s degree transcript in 1935 from the two-year institution was the first of its kind ever accepted by the University of South Carolina in Columbia. Working as a security guard at the State House, he finished his degree at USC in 1939.

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1 The FBI file on the lynching of Willie Earle at the Department of Justice is a summary report which is available only in expurgated form despite efforts from 1985 to 1994 to obtain the full record.
2 The lynching was the first to be faced by President Harry Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights, formed in December 1946. Committee member and Methodist activist, Mrs. M. E. (Dorothy) Tilly from Atlanta had even come to Greenville for part of the trial in May 1947. See Helena Huntington Smith, “Mrs. Tilly’s Crusade,” Colliers, 126/2 (December 30, 1950), 29, 66–67 and reprinted in The Negro Digest, IX/9 (July 1951), 3–11.
3 Greenville News, March 31, 1946. Mrs. Lynn died on March 30. Mr. Lynn’s appointment included the Mt. Bethel Methodist Church in a rural area of the county as well as the town church, Grace.
4 The jailer and his family were members of Bethlehem Methodist Church out in the county, but they sometimes attended Grace Church. Oral history interview with Hawley Lynn, June 28, 1983. Used by permission of George Westbrook Lynn, executor of Hawley Lynn estate.
5 The Myers Park congregation sent a collection of $778.50 to the Board of Stewards of Grace Church as an expression of their sympathy over the death of Margaret Lynn. See [Rev.] James G. Huggin to Mr. [Allen? Hanselle?] Bivens, April 13, 1946 in the possession of the author.
In response to the lynching of Earle, the thirty-one year old minister undertook several actions to protest. Immediately, he called together "public spirited citizens, both men and women" for a town meeting at the local Pickens High School building for Thursday evening, February 20. Announced in the weekly papers of Pickens and Easley (a town seven miles away), the gathering intended "to discuss and draft a statement with regard to the mob violence which took a prisoner from the county jail and took his life." 10

Inviting a well-known Presbyterian layman, J. T. Black, to chair the meeting, Lynn also recruited as leaders O. T. Hinton, Sr., a noted Baptist deacon, and Mrs. T. J. (Miss Queenie) Mauldin, widow of a judge and community matron from his own congregation. By choosing such representative citizens in Pickens, he hoped that the meeting would permit everyone to discuss the event and select a committee to draft the statement disassociating the town from the lynching.11

Among those who attended the protest meeting, however, was a contingent from near Dacusville, where thirty-five years earlier some whites lynched Brooks Gordon, "a colored boy about 17 years old" for allegedly shooting at but not injuring a white woman as she got water from a spring. The event of 1912, reported locally but not tabulated in any national compilation of statistics on lynching, was retold at the meeting. The lynching of Gordon was already a topic of conversation on Main Street in 1947, since an account of it appeared in three newspapers prior to the protest meeting.12 When it was clear that the mood of the gathering had changed by evoking the memory of the last lynching in the county, Hinton promptly moved, and Lynn seconded a motion to adjourn.13

Admitting later that he had been naive to ignore the understandable sympathy for Thomas Watson Brown, Lynn also underestimated the white supremacist beliefs of his neighbors. It had already been demonstrated by the action of the Pickens County coroner’s jury on Tuesday, February 18, assessing the death of Brown. Unlike the Greenville coroner’s jury two weeks later which protected the anonymity of the white Lynchers, its members believed questionable circumstantial evidence, accepted only the testimony of two police officers, and named Earle as Brown’s killer. They then turned their fifty cent stipends over to Brown’s widow as an act of solidarity.14

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10Pickens Sentinel, February 20, 1947; Easley Progress, February 20, 1947.
13Lynn taped interview; Gravely taped interview.
14Ibid.; Minutes of the County Coroner, State of South Carolina, County of Pickens, Book 4, pp. 331–34, recorded on February 20, 1947; Pickens Sentinel, February 20, 1947; Greenville News, February 19, 1947.
Refusing to let the outcome of the protest meeting deter him, Hawley Lynn next developed a sermon around the question which obsessed the law enforcement officials that first week—"Who Lynched Willie Earle?" He had to wait until March 2 to deliver it, since Laymen's Sunday had already been planned for February 23. He preached the sermon to his all white congregation which met in the local high school, displaced when their Akron Plan building from 1911-1912 had been totally destroyed in a fire October 14-15, 1945. Funds were being raised and plans for a new building drawn up, but Lynn apparently did not consider whether his message would disrupt the momentum of the fiscal campaign. He later confided that no one directly confronted him or criticized him for preaching the controversial sermon, whose text becomes the document transcribed below. It contained an account of what had happened ten days earlier when the protest meeting backfired and summarized what had driven the preacher to his activism on the matter.

Not content for his protest to remain local, Lynn next exercised his talent for composing lyrical pastoral prayers for worship by writing "A Prayer for the Sin of Lynching." He sent it off first to the Southern Christian Advocate, the state's Methodist weekly in Columbia. After it appeared on the front page of the March 6 issue, the weekly Pickens Sentinel, reprinted it on March 27. Its text is on the cover of this issue of Methodist History.

Lynn's fourth action was to submit the sermon to Charles Clayton Morrison, editor of The Pulpit—a monthly publication of The Christian Century Foundation. Appropriately revised, it appeared in 1950 under the title "The Religious Roots of Democracy."

As the time for the trial of the Greenville lynchers approached in the spring of 1947, Hawley Lynn was concerned that the lynchers would be exonerated in some way. He had already faced locally the pro-lyncher sentiment when a public defense fund was arranged in behalf of the accused, mostly in the form of fruit jar collections in country stores and small town businesses throughout upstate South Carolina. In Pickens when he was shopping at Batson's Meat Market, Lynn confronted the owner over having one of the fruit jars in his store with the sign "for the defense fund for the taxi drivers." Embarrassed over the preacher's reproach of his alliance with the lynchers, the butcher, who had also been on the Pickens Coroner's jury convicting Earle, took the position that the men deserved to be defended whether or not they were guilty. Lynn left precipitously, but later returned and apologized, saying, he recalled in 1982, "I just want you to know that while I still disagree with what you are doing, I have no special rights to castigate you for what you're doing."

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11The manuscript text of the sermon, used by permission of George Westbrook Lynn, was kept over the years by the preacher who gave a photocopy to the author in 1982.
12Southern Christian Advocate, March 6, 1947; Pickens Sentinel, March 27, 1947.
14Lynn taped interview.
As Hawley Lynn struggled to find further ways to witness to a Christian condemnation of lynching and its rationalization by the general public, he found three persons in authority who earned his respect. He wrote on May 7 to presiding Judge J. Robert Martin, Jr., praising him for "the uncompromising manner in which [he] had ruled upon the motions to delay trial." Lynn told Martin how proud he was of "the honest and efficient way ... this case has been investigated and brought to trial," and he singled out Greenville County Sheriff Homer Bearden and Solicitor Robert Ashmore for their roles. Unfortunately, in Lynn's view, the jurors did not give "the same kind of cooperation," as he had hoped in his letter to the judge. He must have been heartened by the action of Martin on May 21, when, after advising the jury where they could pick up their fees, he refused to thank them for their service, turned his back and walked out of the court in disgust over the mass acquittals. Lynn may have been affected as well that the Methodist college he could not afford to attend, Wofford, had produced some students led by Charles Crenshaw to go into the streets of Spartanburg the same night when the verdict came in and protest the trial's outcome.

By the time Hawley Lynn had completed his pastorate in Pickens, his congregation dedicated debt-free a new sanctuary and education building in 1948–1949. The next year he moved to Columbia to take the position as Director of Adult Work for the South Carolina Methodist Conference. Later he served as Director of the Wesley Foundation at USC and held pastorates in Rock Hill, Greer, and Easley. He was also Superintendent of the Hartsville District, assisting in the integration of the churches and pastors of the formerly Central Jurisdiction South Carolina Conference (1866) with the all-white Conference (1785). Retiring in Easley with his wife, Lona Cooper Lynn whom he married in 1948, he died at age 73 on June 27, 1989. Mrs. Lynn died one month and one day later.

Scripture: Malachi 2:10–13
Acts 10:34–35

Who Lynched Willie Earle[?]?

I should like, this morning, to express my gratitude to this congregation for two things: first for the patient endurance with which you sit in those chairs and listen, silent and uncomplaining each Sunday. I didn't know until I sat in them last Sunday just how much you can endure. I am more convinced than ever that you are saintly in your patience. Second, and more seriously, I want to express my appreciation for the freedom of utterance which you have always allowed from your pulpit. I know I have said, at least a few

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22 The text is in typescript except where handwritten insertions are noted, along with any significant deletions. Typographical errors and changes in the style of using quotation marks have been made to regularize the text.
23 The title is handwritten.
things with which you did not agree, and perhaps a lot of things which you considered insignificant, but our disagreement, so far as I can determine, has not meant a rupture in our friendship, nor has it resulted in any breach in the fellowship of our congregation.

That is as it should be in any Christian congregation. There are times when members within the fold disagree\textsuperscript{30}, or members and minister may not see eye to eye. It is possible that even a Methodist preacher is wrong—sometime. Not even the Pope claims to be infallible on all issues, ONLY ON MATTERS OF FAITH AND MORALS, and that when he speaks EX CATHEDRA, from the papal throne. I am afraid of a man who is ALWAYS RIGHT, and I am also afraid of the person who thinks he must break fellowship and friendship merely because he has opinions which differ from those of another.

While in the seminary [at Yale], a group of us students had an interview with Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick in his [Riverside] church [in New York City]. Someone asked, "Dr. Fosdick, how is it that you have been able to hold your position in one church for so long in spite of the fact that what you think and preach has caused a great deal of controversy?" Dr. Fosdick replied, "I have a clear and distinct understanding with my laymen that they are at perfect liberty to disagree with me at any time. Though we think separately on some issues, on the things essential to salvation, we can always walk together." I feel that you also have that attitude, as we have walked together for almost two years.

I want to talk this morning on a subject which I should have used last Sunday had we not already made plans for the Laymen's Day program. This morning I want to answer ONE question, and in answering that question, I wish to establish a fact which will become my subject for today. The question is this: "Who lynched Willie Earle?" The subject: "The Religious Roots of Democracy."

I know there are some of us who would like to say, "Let's have no more talk of lynching: it has been talked about the streets, on the buses, discussed in stores and beer halls and factories, and at least skirted around in the home and Sunday School, and it's no subject for church." Well let us say at the beginning that all the evidence indicates that Willie Earle was guilty of a crime as fiendish and as brutal as that which was committed upon him. But I believe that the crime which was committed against this prisoner of the state, awaiting trial for justice, is such a grievous violation of the laws of God and of man, and we ourselves are so bound up in its causes and its consequences that eventually it must be brought into the minds and hearts of us who make up the Church of Christ. We must look at this deed squarely in the presence of Him who spoke to his people through the mouth of the Prophet Isaiah\textsuperscript{26}: "... when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you, yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood." Whose hands are full of blood?\textsuperscript{27}

WHO LYNCHED WILLIE EARLE? Quickly some loyal citizens of our county answers "CITIZENS OF ANOTHER COUNTY." That is the answer which gave me all the comfort as the evidence trickled out to the public. Like many of you I resented the radio and newspaper references to "the Pickens Lynching." This does not represent us! I insisted, and with indignation and annoyance I saw my friends in business and on the streets, and called on them to gather in this building to draw up their statement of repudiation of lynch law and mob violence, so that the world might know that we Pickens County folk were outraged. Citizens from our county came: many of them with bitter words and vengeful souls. Under this root I saw and heard citizens of Pickens county, OUR community, tram-\textsuperscript{26}Isaiah 1:15.
\textsuperscript{27}This interrogative sentence was handwritten into the text.
\textsuperscript{30}"Disagree" is inserted by hand.
\textsuperscript{28}There is a handwritten insertion which cannot be deciphered here.
ple the rights of human beings underfoot and commit a lynching in their hearts. And with a few others I went home with a depressed mind and a sick soul. To

think that a public announcement of a gathering of public spirited citizens would get more response from men who came with vicious purposes than it did from those who have most to be thankful for in our free land! Citizens from another county? Not at all. I quote an official in our community, one who knows it better than I. "The only reason why it was not done by Pickens County people," he said, "was that the first victim was not a citizen of this county, and our citizens didn't know the lynching was taking place." If we judge by the words of the most outspoken members who came to the meeting which called for "public spirited citizens," this official is right, and a few more of us will have to hang our head and make no defense. I commend Mr. Gary Hiott, Jr. upon his editorial "Does a Man-Made Boundary Remove a Responsibility?" I didn't realize how deep was his wisdom.

But there are the GOOD people of the community. We ask them, "Who Lynched Willie Earle?". With a little more accuracy they reply, A LAWLESS MOB!!! But did 31 one [sic] men do it on their own? Would they have dared come unmasked and undisguised if they had known that the whole weight of our moral disapproval would have fallen upon them? Would 31 men have taken a prisoner from the state and dealt out their own brand of vengeance if they had known BEYOND QUESTION that we GOOD people, the solid people would have backed up our courts in bringing them to justice? Ask the good [people] eligible for jury service what their verdict would be if they should be chosen to sit in judgment upon the lynchers. Too many have already answered, "I'd turn them loose." And in those words they became accessory to murder. With a kind of logic which I cannot fathom in this world, I heard men stand and say, "Of course I want to see our laws in this democracy work, BUT I'M GLAD THE PRISONER WAS RELEASED TO THE MOB!" With those words a man perverted the truth and sealed the death [of] democratic justice.

Well let's ask another group. Surely the church people of the community would know who is responsible for the lynching of Willie Earle, and they can give us an unbiased answer. "Christian friends, who lynched Willie Earle?" And they reply, "WICKED MEN, UNGODLY SOULS, MEN WITHOUT THE LOVE OF CHRIST!" 32

And immediately we want to ask, WHICH MEN WITHOUT THE LOVE OF CHRIST? The 31 who took a Negro prisoner from his cell when his guilt was uncertain and mutilated his body, or those WITHOUT THE LOVE OF CHRIST who hold men with skin like Willie Earle's in such LOW REGARD that they count their life as worthless? In a community where mobs do not appear to take white prisoners from jail cells to lynch them, who is really responsible for the lynching of a Negro prisoner, the band who actually blew out his brain or those of us in the church who say of Willie Earle and his kind, "RACA"—you're an empty-headed, worthless nigger! (That's about the meaning of the word "Raca" as Jesus used it in the 5th Chapter of Matthew [verse 22].)

The lynching of Willie Earle didn't begin on February 17; it began a long time ago: It began when his father and mother taught him that he was "black folks" and must always tip his hat and get out of the way of white folks. It began when he walked to school, because there were no buses for his kind, and hurried home to hoe cotton or pick it on a

28 These last three words were inserted by hand.
29 The editorial was in The Pickens Sentinel, February 19, 1947.
30 This phrase inserted by hand replaced a crossed out passage, "church people."
31 The typed passage "church people" was crossed over again.
32 There are five and a half typed lines here which are crossed out and unreadable.
tenant farm. It began when he learned that there were only certain kinds of jobs that black men could fill, and certain foods that he could afford, chiefly the 3 M's, fat meat, meal and molasses. It developed as Willie Earle learned that in a world where men of power and achievement rode in their own automobiles, the only way a Negro man could feel important was to get drunk on liquor from the white man's store and hire the white man's taxi. Then one night when the alcohol made him feel important and masterful, and when he was one man against one man, Willie Earle showed how important a black man could be in a world where he felt the white man's foot upon his neck, and so he took a white man's life.

That's OUR world, the world of good Christians and good church people. We are helping to make Willie Earles, just as we, by our indifference to human needs, are setting up environments which men feel free to get rid of Willie Earles which they help to create. What is the answer?

Well, I heard one answer a few nights ago under this roof. "WE HAVE GOT TO PUT OUR FOOT ON THEM, AND KEEP THEM DOWN!!" That has been tried, [is] still being tried in some sections of our world. For centuries strong men ruled their fellows by the weight of superior might. Tribal Chieftains, witch doctors, princes and kings held over their subjects the power of life and death. Eventually there was established what was known as THE DIVINE RIGHT OF KINGS. Rulers were counted to hold their inherited positions of power by the authority of God. But there was something in the mind and soul of man, regimented and restricted as he was, which gave him the feeling that he should have some voice in choosing his rulers and to make the laws by which he lived with other men.

There is something miraculous in the fact that the masses, the LITTLE MAN, taught and trained to respect kingly authority as Divine, should ever lift up his head and say to himself, "The God who made kings also made me."

The rise of democratic government has been a thrilling story, though sometimes a bloody one. Through great revolutions and the unceasing toil and spiritual devotion of countless individuals, the ideas of liberty and equality and fraternity have taken shape in men's minds and possessed their spirits. The ancient Greeks were first to try democratic government. But their efforts failed because there existed within the Greek city states the institution of slavery. According to one authority, Democracy failed in Athens for a reason which sounds as modern as next week and as rational as the legislatures of Georgia and South Carolina: THE ATHENIANS RESTRICTED THE RIGHT TO VOTE TO MEN OF ATHENAI [ATHENIAN] DESCENT. In modern language, they were so interested in establishing the white primary and white supremacy, they lost their democratic government. Our own state is so bent upon keeping the black man from voting that we have stricken from our statute books which give us the secret ballot, and locked ballot boxes, and [created] rules regarding the printing of ballots in all primary elections.

The failure of Athenian Democracy was followed by 16\textsuperscript{th} centuries of monarchy and tyranny over the lives of men until the English barons and bishops wrested from King John, the Magna Carta in 1215. Then for 5 centuries more, the rights of the common people were gained only by difficult struggle. From 1640 to the present, the influence of the
Bible, especially the teachings of the Prophets and of Jesus has given men of all walks of life a new sense of their worth and dignity as children of one God. John Milton, whose religious devotion no one questions, wrote in those early days of the struggle for the rights of the common men, “Give me liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.” And later Milton stated, “No man who knows anything can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were born free, being the image and resemblance of God himself . . . .”

From these roots in England, from the hands of men who read their Bibles and believed me[...] to be equal before God, from men who remembered the words of Jesus on behalf of the poor and the dispossessed, democracy began to grow in the soil of America. In this pioneer world where there were no classes, men struggled for their liberties and freed themselves from the restrictions of England. It is one of the strangest facts in American life that we who are so proud of winning our liberties from England and so certain that it is man’s destiny to govern himself, should try to deny self government to a tenth of our population. We have seen through the ages that man will not forever be content with the heel of restriction upon his neck, but in this house in 1947, the answer given to our problem of the races is that WE MUST PUT OUR FOOT UPON THEM. Men who think anything of themselves, or their worth and dignity, shall always want what their fellow men deny them, especially if they feel they have a right to it. The strength of our nation has sprung from its idealism and the hope of every individual that he may become all that his diligence and intelligence will allow. But in an enlightened age we hold ourselves back, we check our own progress by giving so much attention to restricting the Negro’s rights as a citizen. James W[eldon] Johnson in a poem has asked us a searching question about members of his race How will you have us, men or things? Rising, or falling; powerful or weak. Strong, willing pinions to your wings. Or binding chains about your feet.”

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"A Man Lynched in Inhuman Lawlessness" 79

How would you have us, as we are? Or sinking ’neath the load we bear? Our eyes fixed forward on a star? Or gazing empty at despair? Rising or falling? Men or things? With dragging pace or footsteps fleet? Strong, willing sinews in your wings? Or tightening chains about your feet?

_Fifty Years & Other Poems_ (Boston: Cornhill Company, 1917), 5.
It is no accident that men have struggled through 24 centuries to stand erect, and to call his body and his soul his own. Somewhere there was breathed into his consciousness an assurance that the God who made him made all men, and that God is no respecter of persons. In all our inconsistencies of pledging our allegiance to “One nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all,” I am glad, it is encouraging that we have the decency to attach no moral or spiritual justification for the discriminations which we practice. It is some encouragement to see that those who would deny any man his rights do not pretend it to be the voice of Conscience or of Christ,

[page 7]

or devotion to the will of God. In his image he made us all, made us as living souls breathing his free air and drawing our sustenance freely from His earth. It is not by pride, or arrogance that we shall again behold his glory, whether it be black arrogance or white pride.

WHERE IS THE ANSWER, O Christ of Galilee, save at thy wounded feet?

I slept, I dreamed, I seemed
To climb a hard ascending track;
And just behind me labored one
Whose skin was black.
I pitied him, but hour by hour
He gained upon my path.
He stood beside me; stood upright!
And then I turned in wrath.
“Go back,” I cried, “what right
Have you to stand beside me here?”
I paused, struck dumb with fear;
For lo, the black man was not there.
But Christ stood in his place.
And oh! the pain, the pain, the pain
That looked from that dear face.

While John Greenleaf Whittier was visiting in India, he witnessed the pagan ritual of a primitive Indian religious sect. He watched the priest as he brewed his potion, then drank it and in a drunken madness stormed about the village.

Then calling attention to some of the pagan practices of his own day, Whittier wrote the verses of that beautiful hymn, which we ought to make our closing prayer

Dear Lord and Father of mankind
Forgive our foolish ways
Reclothed us in our rightful minds,
In purer lives thy service find,
In deeper reverence praise.

Hymn No 342

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9Two words, “of speaking,” have been stricken here.
10This three word phrase was added by hand.
11This last word added by hand.
12The author and title of this poem have not been found.
13The typed word “Once” was stricken through here.
14This word handwritten into the text replaced a phrase “pagan drink” which was stricken.
15There is a handwritten insertion here which cannot be deciphered.
16These last eight words were added by hand.
17This hymn number in The Methodist Hymnal of 1939 “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind” was Whittier’s poem quoted above.