"THROUGH THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE":
THE RELIGIOUS CULTURE OF BALTIMORE METHODISTS
IN THE 1840s
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By studying material culture, we can learn much about the religious and social conditions of antebellum Methodism. The primary lens that I will use for viewing Methodism in the 1840s consists of four quilts made for clergymen by Baltimore Methodist women. The first quilt was made as a good-bye gift for the Reverend and Mrs. Robert M. Lipscomb as they left his itinerant assignment at the recently constructed High Street Methodist Episcopal Church in East Baltimore. Another was made by many long-time class members of the popular local preacher and well-known gynecologist, the Rev. Dr. George C. M. Roberts. A third was made for the Reverend Hezekiah Best as a thank-you gift for his service as a chaplain to the Seaman's Bethel from 1844–47. The fourth was made for the Reverend Peter L. Wilson, an itinerant assigned in 1848 to the recently constructed Greene Street Methodist Protestant Church in West Baltimore.

These quilts were made in the “album” style, which means that they have a different design in each block, and are signed and inscribed with messages like the page of autograph album. The majority of quilt blocks are sewn with appliqué techniques, which means that pieces of fabric are sewn on top of other fabrics. They are particularly fine representatives of the style made in and around Baltimore in the 1840s and 1850s called “Baltimore album,” which included designs made or inspired by Mary Simon with layered fabric designs (Figures 2, 4) and one-of-a-kind pictorial blocks (Figures 6, 8).

Figure 2. Block c4 of Lipscomb quilt, Photograph by Norman Watkins.
Figure 4. Block d2 of Roberts quilt, Photograph by Norman Watkins.

Figure 6. Block c3 of Best quilt, Photograph by Norman Watkins.

Figure 8. Block c3 of Wilson quilt, Photograph by Norman Watkins.
These highly graphic and historically interesting textiles are housed in the vault of the United Methodist Historical Society of the Baltimore-Washington Conference located in the Lovely Lane Church of Baltimore. They have only been publicly exhibited together in the 1981 "Baltimore Album Quilt" exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art. From these quilts, made by four communities of women, I will add details to the cultural picture of 1840s Baltimore Methodism. This is not an extensive decorative and technical analysis of the quilts; such analysis has been done in several other studies of Baltimore album quilts.¹

I

The number of Baltimore Methodist churches increased by ninety percent during the 1840s, from twenty to thirty-eight, out-pacing the phenomenal sixty-four percent population growth to 169,000 during this decade.²

The traveling preachers of the Methodist Episcopal Church (hereinafter referred to as ME), called itinerants, received an annual stipend, had a regular circuit of places where they preached and ministered, and were reassigned every two years. In a large city like Baltimore, itinerants were assigned to stations, with a station being a church large enough to support at least one full-time itinerant.

In addition to itinerant ministers, there were many unordained lay workers called "local preachers," who had regular preaching assignments, but because they chose not to be itinerating, they did not receive church compensation or attend annual regional conferences as voting delegates. As we will see in the discussion of the Rev. Dr. George C. M. Roberts quilt, these local preachers were very important to the stability and growth of Methodism in Baltimore, and their active involvement was enhanced by the 1831 organization of the Local Preachers and Exhorters Society, which oversaw this body of committed churchmen and scheduled their annual preaching assignments.

An ecclesiological development in Baltimore Methodism was the formation of the Methodist Protestant Church (hereinafter referred to as MP Church), which split from the ME Church in 1828 over issues of church governance. The Methodist Protestants wanted a church without an episcopacy, congregational election of local church officers, and lay representation at conferences. They established the MP Church with a more democratic church governance in 1828. The MP Church will figure prominently in the discussion of the Rev. Peter L. Wilson quilt.

Up to the 1840s, most Methodists built simple meeting houses with little adornment. The buildings had separate entrances and seating for men and

women, simple pulpits, and plain benches. They were following John Wesley’s instructions: “Let all our Chapels be built plain and decent; but not more expensively than is absolutely avoidable; otherwise the Necessity of raising Money will make Rich Men necessary to us.”

Important to early 19th century American Methodism was the class meeting. This network of small groups, led by class leaders and meeting weekly, had been developed by John Wesley to support people in their disciplined lives. According to one study of class meetings, which looked at Bishop Francis Asbury’s records, class sizes averaged around seventeen members in the early 19th century. Class membership and not participation determined an individual’s membership in the ME Churches in 1840s Baltimore, but with significant increases in class sizes and little written about them in Conference records, there is some question about what was going on in these classes. The written records of these classes were kept by the Baltimore Conference and were very helpful in locating many of the people involved in this study.

II

The twenty-five block Lipscomb quilt with sashing and borders of three expensive furnishing cloths, sewn with very fine appliqué and quilting stitches, was made for the third itinerant preacher of the High Street ME Church and his wife, who served from 1846 to 1847. (Figure 1) Sixteen of the twenty-five blocks are made of expensive chintzes and rainbow fabrics, and seven of these were probably purchased from a professional block designer, such as Mary Simon. Twenty-one of the twenty-five blocks are signed with full names; nine of these names can be identified from a variety of records including census and Methodist class meeting lists. The majority of the nine women identified with the quilt had husbands who were employed in craft or commercial trades, such as painter, grocer, cooper, cabinetmaker, tailor, or shipbuilder. Most had real estate valued between $1,300 and $2,500. The signers had growing families, and their ages ranged from the late twenties to the early forties. Most of the households not only included the nuclear family of husband, wife, and several children, but also one or two live-in servants, another family member and/or several unrelated individuals who were probably boarders.

1Franch, 202.
Figure 1. Quilt made for The Rev. and Mrs. Robert M. Lipscomb, 1847, Collection of UMHS, Lovely Lane Museum, Baltimore, Photograph by Norman Watkins.

The good-bye gift nature of this quilt is seen in the 1847 date written on several places on this quilt, and correlates with the date on which the Lipscombs left this itinerant assignment. It is also evident in inscriptions like “where parting changes are no more” (d3), “To/Rev. Robert Lipscomb” (d3), and “A tribute to thee/To Rev. Robert Lipscomb” (c2). Of particular interest are messages directed to Mrs. Lipscomb: “Presented to Mrs. Lipscomb” (b1),

When I refer to a particular block by a number and letter, it is based on the following number and letter scheme identification:

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and “Presents/to/Mrs. Lipscomb/by/Mrs. Catherine Higgins” (d5). Leaving a church was particularly hard on the wives of itinerant ministers, who moved with their husbands every one to two years and did not have the opportunity to renew old acquaintances as their husbands did at quarterly and annual conferences. The d3 inscription shows the poignancy and finality of such parting: “As pilgrims wander to and fro/Thro this sad world of care and woe/Soon shall we reach that happier shore/Where parting changes are no more/To Mrs. E. L./From S. E. Bond.”

The High Street ME Church grew rapidly from a Sunday school organized in 1842 in a frame house on Pratt Street in East Baltimore to the erection of the church at the corner of High and Stiles Streets in 1844. Several of the church organizers were related to signers of the quilt, including John Meredith (whose wife Margaret D. Meredith signed c3), James Hagerty (possibly related to E. Hagerty of d4), and George Sanders (possibly related to b3 signer Ann K. Saunders and the Ann Sanders listed in the Monday, East Baltimore station class).

The rapid development of the High Street ME Church in the 1840s from a simple Sunday school to a fully organized church had many similarities to the following description of the Jefferson Street ME Church during the same period:

In the year 1841 three men, members of the East Baltimore Station M.E. Church . . . for some time had been talking about opening a Sabbath School out in the north end . . . one evening . . . Bro. Mettee remarked, “We have been talking about this matter long enough; let us do something” . . . it was decided to meet next Sunday and go to work . . . All were there at the appointed time . . . by the end of the afternoon they had secured the names of fifty scholars . . . The next Sunday at 9 o’clock the school was organized . . . at a little schoolhouse . . . with fifty scholars and a full corps of teachers . . . In 1844 . . . Jefferson Chapel was erected.9

A number of the blocks have biblical and other religious references. The particularly charming c2 block shows a bird over a Bible and depicts graphically the centrality for Protestants of both the word (the Bible) and the Spirit (the bird). This block inscription notes “the Bible . . . this holy book, on every line Mark’d with the seal of divinity. On every leaf bedew’d with drops of love Devine . . . And signature of God, Almighty stamped from first to last, this ray of sacred light . . . casting on the dark her gracious bow; and evermore beseech my men with tears, to read, Believe, and live,” emphasizing the evangelical Protestant focus on the scripture’s authority and its important relationship to the Spirit. One can almost hear in these inscriptions the weekly question of the class leader to the members, “Have you been reading the scripture this week?” as he helped them to become firmer disciples.

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9Isaac P. Cook, Early History of Methodist Sabbath Schools in Baltimore (Baltimore: Henry F. Cook, 1877), 29.
9Alfred Z. Hartman, “History of Methodism in Maryland, 1710–1912” (unpublished manuscript at the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore), 73.
Blocks a4, b3, and d3 depict a dove with a sprig in its mouth, a standard reference to the dove that returned at the end of the flood to Noah's ark, symbolizing peace. Of particular note is the one-of-a-kind block, c4, showing two angels, floral sprays, and two birds with an inscription from Luke 2:10, where the angel announces Jesus' birth to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." Although it is not clear if the two sprays and birds have any religious significance and perhaps are simply decorative, the angels probably represent the messenger angels bringing the good news of Jesus' birth. (Figure 2)

The combination of information from quilt and written historical records seems to suggest that these quilt makers/signers were a community of young to middle-aged, middle-class matrons with growing families. They were committed evangelical Methodists, as evidenced by their attendance at class meetings, their focus on the Bible, and their use of religious motifs and messages. This community was part of the hard-working, growing middle-class of Baltimore that had gained bourgeois status. They demonstrated their religious commitments by giving a beautifully made present to a beloved assistant minister and wife leaving for another itinerant assignment. The quality of workmanship, the purchasing of the latest style blocks, the use of expensive cloth, the careful arrangement of the blocks, and the placement of purchased blocks in the quilt center facing outward, all indicate care, affection, and financial strength.

III

This forty-two block Roberts quilt with a pieced zig-zag border was made for an active and beloved obstetrician/gynecologist and Methodist local preacher. His ministerial activities included being a class leader for over thirty years, preaching most Sundays, active involvement in the Asbury Sunday School, Biblical lecturer at the Methodist Baltimore Female College in 1849, Manager of the Preacher's Aid Society from 1855 to 1867, chairing a Sunday school convention at the 1844 General Conference in New York, and in 1855 forming the Methodist Historical Society. He was greatly mourned at the time of his death in 1870; when over four thousand people crowded into and around the Charles Street ME Church for his funeral.

This quilt, with dates of 1847-48, has eleven appliquéd English-style furnishing cloth blocks, twenty-five Germanically influenced blocks, and two Mary Simon style blocks. (Figure 3) Thirty-five blocks have full signatures, and fifteen border names are signed with a first initial and last name. Twenty-five names can be located in historical, census, and/or Methodist historical records. Most of the addresses related to these names were in the neighborhood of the Light Street ME Church.


11Katzenberg, 94.
The information about these twenty-five names suggests an affluent group of people, ranging in age from twenty-one to seventy-nine. Seven of these persons belonged to male-headed households of merchants who owned real estate valued up to $100,000. Five other persons were part of male-headed households consisting of a variety of professional people—two ministers, a doctor, a clerk, and a harbormaster. Three came from female-headed households of older women. One had real estate valued at $166,000 in 1850; another gave $1,000 to purchase a Charles Street pew; the third woman ran a boarding house. Thus, this family information gives a profile of mostly middle-class to wealthy, educated professionals and merchants with only two households (the clerk and boarding house matron) headed by people of more modest means.

It was significant to note that thirty-eight of the fifty quilt names were listed members of the Rev. Dr. Roberts’ classes. A look at his class records from

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1836 to 1864 shows that the class size ranged between forty and fifty members. This was significantly larger than the average size of seventeen for the classes noted in the Asbury records forty years earlier. Perhaps the transition to Sunday school class structure was occurring through a transformation and enlargement of what was still called a class meeting. In any case, the size of the class did not seem to affect the longevity of membership in Dr. Roberts’ classes; the thirty-eight class members belonged for an average of twelve years.

Seven members of Dr. Roberts’ Monday 3:00 class were noted as leaving his class in 1844 to attend the newly constructed Charles Street Church; two of these people were quilt signers. Another signer donated $1,000 for the Charles Street ME Church property purchase. This more expensive, Greek revival style Charles Street ME Church was the first ME church in Baltimore to have family proprietary pews, rather than having gender-segregated free seating, and was severely criticized for these changes. By December 22, 1850, this wealthier church had installed an organ, adding further to its cost and breaking another Methodist tradition of having only vocal music without accompaniment.

These changes, occurring within the religious culture of Baltimore Methodism, can be seen in the life of one of the quilt signers, Achsah Wilkins. Achsah embraced Methodism at eighteen and married a Methodist in the 1790s; her wealthy merchant father, with an estimated fortune of $500,000, disowned her; Achsah’s daughter noted that in the late 18th century, “the Methodists old and young were expected to adopt a costume and wear a particular bonnet . . . this was obnoxious to her mother’s family as it invited public attention upon the wearer, who was not infrequently pointed out by the finer of derision as a Methodist.” By the 1840s, Achsah had recouped her financial status sufficiently to be able to donate $1,000 to the Charles Street ME Church.

Several of the women associated with Dr. Roberts’ quilt played significant leadership roles in the ME Church. Rachel Colvin, a border name, gave $10,000 to found the Colvin Institute, the first school for the free education of girls in Baltimore. Anna L. Davidson, another border name, did much of the preliminary work to organize the Ladies China Missionary Society in 1848. Mary Hewitt of block a4, with some other women, presented a petition at the Baltimore Conference requesting that the Female Benevolent Society be formed to provide support for preachers and their families, at a time when women were not supposed to be recognized at the conference.

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1Dunton, 203.
2Franch, 205.
4Dunton, 203.
5Apsley, 124.
The faith of these women deeply imbued their perspectives and ways of expressing themselves. General phrases written on the quilt demonstrate this orientation: “We live by faith” and “God bless thee.” The central place that prayer played in their lives shows in the block c2 inscription, “Remember me; the effectual foremost prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” The conviction that faith brings serenity is found in a4, “Peace, I leave with you.” Two of the blocks have Bibles with birds showing the strong emphasis in Protestantism on the word (Bible) with the Spirit (birds). (Figure 4) The Methodist focus on the importance of holiness in this life and a belief in an after-life is seen in the a5 inscription, “Holiness and Heaven” and the d6 message, “May we be guided by his council and received with him into Glory.”

The signers of this quilt, made for a popular local preacher/doctor, were part of a community of financially comfortable, varying-aged women, who met together for many years with a beloved class leader who helped them focus on their need for regular prayer, scripture reading, leading a holier life on this earth, and a strong belief in an after-life in heaven. Several of the women contributed time and money to help found and support organizations to educate women, organize overseas missions, and provide for clergymen and their families, which propelled them into leadership roles in a church where leadership roles had been exclusively held by men. In addition, some of the women used expensive materials to construct their blocks, and several supported an expensive and architecturally more fashionable church. These evidences of a more consumer-oriented life-style would suggest less separation from the broader society than a generation earlier, when plain clothes, unadorned churches, and frugal life-styles characterized most Baltimore Methodists.

IV

This thirty-six square, unbordered Best quilt with inscribed dates of 1846–47, was given to the Reverend Hezekiah Best, possibly as a going away gift at the time of his leaving the Seaman’s Bethel where he had been chaplain since 1844. (Figure 5) This interdenominational mission to seamen began in a sail loft sometime between 1829 and 1834; by 1845, it had moved to a structure built for its use at Bethel and Aliceanna Streets and dedicated on February 23, 1845.20

Twenty of the blocks are made from less expensive fabrics in the simpler paper-cut Germanically inspired designs, nine blocks are in the Mary Simon purchased block style, and four blocks are folk inspired pictorial designs. Of particular note is the appliquéd and chain stitched two-story Bethel facade that appears in block c3. (Figure 6) Showing a three door entry on the ground floor, one suspects that the traditional pattern of right-side entry for men and left-side entry for women leading to separate gendered seating was still practiced, but with a middle door there is the possibility that both sexes entered and sat together. In any case, all of these doors probably led into an above ground basement with fairly low ceilings containing room for Sunday school
activities and other meetings. The much higher ceilinged first floor contained a well-lit meeting room, probably with a raised centrally placed pulpit and a communion table beneath it.

According to Reverend Best’s grandson, Bethel’s chaplain had established a Seaman’s Home, and ran a training school for boys on board the ship Hope, which had been purchased by the Mission trustees and is pictured on block f2 of this quilt.21

From the extensive journal kept by the Methodist itinerant minister, Henry Slicer, which includes several years of his Bethel chaplaincy, one gains a picture of Bethel activities between 1861 and 1863. He describes Sunday school activities, morning and evening services, class meetings, love feasts,

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21 Katzenberg, 82 and Hartman, 21.
22 Katzenberg, 82.
revivals, a Juvenile Temperance Society, a Society for the Relief of the Widows and Orphans of Sailors, the passing out of tracts, and a sewing society which made and distributed clothes and shoes to needy children. From this journal we also learn that Bethel's Board of Managers was made up of people from the mariner trades and that financial support came from Bethel and other church collections, particularly from the wealthy Charles Street Church.

The layman-preacher, Isaac P. Cook, describes his address to the Bethel Mizpah Band on May 7, 1860. A band in the Methodist tradition was a small group which met for a closer union to help people "unbosom" themselves, and mizpah refers to the Genesis 31:49 citation where Laban spoke the following leave-taking words: "The Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another." Perhaps this was a place where seamen supported each other in lives which included many difficult leave-takings affecting themselves and their families.

The following nine of twenty-one women signer/makers are identified through family data. Three signers had husbands who were members of East Baltimore classes, including a savings bank treasurer, and two very active laymen. Two other signers lived in the immediate Bethel neighborhood, with captain and carpenter husbands, and may easily have been regular Bethel attendees. Three other signers were possibly related to merchant/tradesmen husbands living in the Charles Street Church neighborhood, and could possibly have close family/business ties with each other.

The information gained from textile and other sources suggests the following picture of this church mission. People were actively involved in attending services, handing out tracts, working in the Sunday school, and participating with the women's sewing group. The Bethel Board was made up of close-by neighbors with mariner-related occupations, and Bethel fundraising was supported significantly by wealthier congregations, especially the Charles Street Church.

One pictures this group of church women from several parts of the city deciding to make a good-bye gift for this itinerant minister as he finished a three-year Bethel chaplaincy. This quilt documents his chaplaincy and the construction of the Bethel chapel during his watch, which is depicted with flag flying in the quilt center.

This twenty block sashed and bordered Wilson quilt was made for the Rev. Peter L. Wilson, a young clergyman, who had spent a year in the newly erected Greene Street Church (aka West Baltimore Station) of the Methodist Protestant denomination. (Figure 7) The West Baltimore Station had been

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23Slicer, "Journal."
24Cook, "Memorandum."
251850 census and Hartman, 21.
26Dielman-Hayward file at the Maryland Historical Society.
formed in 1842 when a group of parishioners disagreed with the decision of St. John’s MP Church to convert to a pewed church. This break-up seemed to be fairly amicable for they received $6,000 from St. John’s to build their new church. The list of original church stewards included Henry Wigart, whose name and wife’s name are inscribed on the quilt.

Figure 7. Quilt made for The Reverend Peter L. Wilson, 1848, Collection of UMHS, Lovely Lane Museum, Baltimore, Photograph by Norman Watkins.


Iva Wehland, telephone interview by author, summer, 1995.
The majority of blocks were made from expensive chintz and rainbow shaded fabrics and probably purchased in ready-to-sew state, evidencing a community that could both afford to make this kind of investment and wanted the most fashionable fabrics and block styles. Most of the blocks are sewn with very fine, even stitches suggesting a group of people who had been trained to care about meticulous workmanship.

The church building depicted on block c2 shows a relatively plain building without stained glass windows, belfry or steeple. (Figure 8) Two doors lead to free seating for women on the left and men on the right, indicating that this congregation wanted to maintain the traditional, early Methodist plan. The church probably had a simple interior with a raised pulpit in the center and the communion table below, similar to early 19th century Methodist churches. Yet the basement windows indicate that this church had adapted a bit to mid-19th century church building patterns which had greater ventilation and Sunday school rooms on the ground floor. The church was probably heated by a coal burning furnace and lit by gas lights, amenities one would not have found earlier in the century.

The placement of the church in a central position of the quilt surrounded by blocks with Bibles and birds shows clearly the Protestant emphasis on the priority of the biblical word and the Spirit.

Conclusions

The inclusion of material culture along with other written source material like class lists, church histories, and census data provides a social history of individual church members and, in particular, of Methodist women in the 1840s. This research approach is in contrast to much of the secondary church history of the period, which focuses on the activities and decisions of the paid professionals of the church, the male itinerant preachers.

This study has provided information on a transitional period, when Methodism was beginning to move from the frugal, sect-like life-style of the early period to becoming a large church in which some members were increasingly influenced by popular consumer culture. The simple meeting hall church buildings were now sporting more elaborate architectural details on their facades (e.g., Seaman’s Bethel) or were built in the current architectural style (e.g., the Greek Revival style Charles Street ME Church). These newer churches indicate the shift in emphasis to buildings with better ventilation, heating, lighting, and basements to accommodate varied church activities like Sunday schools and society meetings. Although we do not have any pictures of the quilt makers, we can speculate that many were no longer wearing the plain dress and bonnets of the early Methodists, but were not dressed in the latest style fashions made from printed cottons and soft wools, like the expensive fabrics and fashionable designs they chose to use in many of the quilt blocks.

The activities of several of the signers and clergymen associated with these quilts show the growing number of church and quasi-church organi-
tions being formed to meet societal needs. Of particular note are several of the wealthier Methodist signers of the Roberts quilt, who were involved in the initiation and running of organizations for the good of society.

Like Methodists earlier in the century, church membership was still determined by attendance at a weekly class meeting, but many classes were ranging between forty to fifty persons each. There is reason to question how much individual attention to discipleship development could be given in an hour by the leader of these larger classes. There is the strong possibility that weekly class participation was no longer strictly required, since very little mention is made about class attendance issues in the church records. There is also the possibility that the class meeting structure was in transition to the larger and less accountable structure of the Sunday school.

The Sunday school movement energized many people during this decade. Clergy and lay-people initiated, raised money for, and taught in them. Many of these Sunday schools were no longer separate organizational and physical structures and during this decade were being incorporated into the body of the church’s life. In contrast to an occasional mention of class meetings, there is much discussion of Sunday school organization and events in the church literature of this decade.

Finally, it is evident from these quilts that Methodist women in the 1840s spent money to purchase expensive fabrics and blocks and took time to make these special quilts for revered clergymen and their wives, inscribed with personal messages. Many of the designs and inscribed messages show that biblical and other religious understandings were central in their lives. Three of the quilts have block designs with a bird over a Bible depicting graphically the centrality for Protestants of the word (the Bible) and the Spirit (the bird). Other inscriptions focus on the centrality of prayer in a believer’s life, the serenity that faith brings, and good tidings of Jesus’ birth. We also see the desire to live more Christ-centered lives on earth and the centrality of a belief in a better world to come.