METHODIST WORSHIP ON
THE DELMARVA PENINSULA, 1800–1850
AS WITNESSED IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF
JOSHUA THOMAS, “PARSON OF THE ISLANDS”

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Students of Methodist history have long debated the origins of American Methodism. Was it Philip Embury who began the first society in New York, or does the honor lie with Robert Strawbridge and his fellow Methodist in Frederick County, Maryland? This dispute has overshadowed a more important question, argues Russell Richey, namely, how Methodism has been shaped by regional particularities.¹

In Richey’s view, it was the Chesapeake region—the Delmarva (Delaware-Maryland-Virginia) Peninsula as well as the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay, including Baltimore—that “gave color to the whole movement.” Noting that Freeborn Garrettson, whose western shore society was one of the first on the continent, called the area “a nursery” of Methodism, Richey asserts that an exploration of Chesapeake religion is essential to understand how the movement took shape and spread in the American context.² Denying the commonly held assumptions that (1) American religion has only Puritan roots, (2) that southern religion (which he argues Methodism is) was primarily individualistic in focus, and that (3) American Methodism was a monolithic movement from the start, Richey claims that Methodism in the United States was shaped in a particular way because of its Chesapeake roots. He proposes “nine facets of Chesapeake religion and later of American Methodism”—pluralism, revivalism, pietism, holiness, ambivalence about race, bi-raciality, denominationalism, roles of women, and itinerancy—and asserts that each facet expressed characteristics of Wesleyanism in a uniquely Chesapeake way.³

In 1784, 31% of American Methodists lived on the Delmarva Peninsula. While this percentage dropped over the next four decades, the sta-

¹Russell E. Richey, Early American Methodism (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 47.
⁴Richey, “Chesapeake Coloration,” 114ff.
tistical change reflects not so much a loss of membership as a transplanting of Methodists from the Chesapeake region to areas west, south, and north. In this way, Chesapeake Methodism shaped the movement as Chesapeake Methodists migrated outward to found churches in other parts of the country. Furthermore, prominent Methodist leaders were natives of the region and leaders from other locales were shaped by the time spent in and around the Bay country.5

Henry Boehm, who as a young man accompanied the aged Asbury on his travels throughout the region,6 wrote in his memoirs that "the Peninsula that lies between the Delaware and Chesapeake bays . . . was the garden of Methodism in America."7 William H. Williams, whose study, The Garden of American Methodism: The Delmarva Peninsula 1769–1820,8 takes its title from Boehm’s metaphor, and discusses the rise of the movement due to the early efforts of Whitefield, Nichols, Asbury, Garrettson, and others who labored in the region. He points out that this land of fertile soil and teeming waters was ripe for cultivation by the Methodists:

Wesley’s itinerancy system seemed ideally suited for reaching isolated farmers and watermen as they worked the flat land and the creeks and sounds of the Chesapeake and Delaware bays. Riding his horse over fields, through forests, around marshes, and across rivers, the circuit rider made himself available to most of the rural folks of Delmarva. Where his horse wouldn’t carry him, a waterman’s log canoe would.9

On the peninsula, itinerants visited the Methodist societies every two or three weeks, while local preachers conducted most of the services in addition to their work as farmers, craftsmen, or shopkeepers. These local preachers were licensed by the quarterly conference. Some were ordained as deacons and were allowed to perform weddings and baptisms. It was the itinerants who were in authority, however, and the local preachers took their directions from them. While there was sometimes resentment on the part of the local preachers against the itinerants, in some cases, warm and collegial relationships developed between those who traveled and those who lived and served in their communities.10

Local and itinerant preachers joined forces at the quarterly meetings. It was on the peninsula that quarterly conferences first expanded from a one-day to a two-day format, where the meeting was held over a Saturday and Sunday. The first weekend meeting was apparently held in Virginia in 1777.

7Henry Boehm, Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical, of Sixty-Four Years in the Ministry (New York, 1865), 57.
9Williams, 91.
10Williams, 141–142.
By 1780, the practice had spread throughout the peninsula, though meetings on the western shore of Maryland and in New Jersey continued with the one-day (Tuesday) format for a few more years. The Saturday-Sunday format spread quickly throughout Methodism in America, however, and by the 1790s, it was common for several thousand people to be in attendance at such quarterly meetings in Maryland.\footnote{Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below: Worship at Early Methodist Quarterly Meetings* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000), 28, 32.}

Quarterly meetings on the peninsula were marked by revivalism. In a letter to Thomas Coke written from Stone Chapel, Maryland on August 20, 1801, Francis Asbury reported that “every circuit upon the Eastern and Western shores appears to have a revival.”\footnote{The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, Vol. III, Elmer T. Clark, ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1958), 222; hereafter cited as *JLFA*.} Camp meetings began to be held in Maryland in 1803,\footnote{Ruth, 191–192.} and within a few years, revivalism had begun to shift from the quarterly conferences to camp meetings.\footnote{Richey, *Early American Methodism*, 30–31.}

The Rev. Robert W. Todd, writing in 1886, reported that the first camp meetings on the peninsula were held in 1805, and to great effect. Henry Boehm, who was a young itinerant at the time, recorded the “tangible and visible results” of the meetings as part of his duties as the secretary of the first camp-meeting association. His reports indicate that hundreds were converted and even more were sanctified. “When we consider the disparity between the population of these rural districts and that of Jerusalem at the solemn festive gathering of Pentecost,” remarked Todd, “. . . we are constrained to the declaration that the spiritual results above given, have never been exceeded in the history of the Christian Church.”\footnote{Todd, 35.}

The Rev. William P. Chandler, presiding elder of the Delaware District, showed similar enthusiasm in his letter to Francis Asbury, written from Dover in August of 1805.\footnote{JLFA, III, 327–331.} His letter is “an account of the state of the district” in which he described the proceedings of quarterly meetings throughout Delaware and Maryland in the months of May, June, and July. Particularly informative is his description of a six-day camp meeting held on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. The meeting began on Thursday, July 25, with a trumpet signal at sunrise to call the people to morning prayer. At eight o’clock, the trumpets gave the signal that preaching was to begin. The rules of the meeting were read before Jesse Lee rose to preach the first sermon. In the days that followed, “there was no intermission in the cries of the mourners, the singing of the joyful, the praying with the distressed, except in the time of public preaching.”\footnote{JLFA, III, 331.}
By Saturday, July 27, Chandler reports that there were on the grounds "189 tents, covered carts, and waggons; 32 travelling preachers, 37 local preachers, 15 exhorters, and 24 leaders, with about 1,000 carriages, and from 7 to 8,000 people." On Sunday, Chandler estimates there were 9 or 10,000 people, with preaching going on in two different places. "It was judged by some that in the course of the last 24 hours, from 150 to 200 persons, tasted that the Lord is gracious," he writes. "At five o’clock the Sacrament was administered, and great grace followed. At 8 o’clock, after the usual ceremony, brother Sneath preached . . . and the work of conviction and conversion continued without intermission throughout the night." The meeting ended the next day amid trumpet blasts and tears.18

Camp meeting revivalism thrived on the Delmarva peninsula in the first decade of the 19th century. By the summer of 1806, Francis Asbury reported that “on the Eastern shore of Delaware and Maryland . . . about four thousand have been converted at the camp and quarterly meetings since the Philadelphia Conference in May, and one thousand sanctified. . . . [The] Eastern Shore excels all.”19 One of the many people who experienced a spiritual awakening at camp meetings throughout the Eastern Shore was Joshua Thomas, a farmer and waterman from Tangier Island, one of the several small islands in the Chesapeake Bay off the coast of Somerset County, Maryland and Accomack County, Virginia. The story of his conversion and the preaching vocation that subsequently developed is told in Adam Wallace’s The Parson of the Islands, published in 1861.20 Thomas’ life and ministry embody several of the regional particularities pointed out by Richey, and Wallace’s biography (the only written source on Thomas’ life) provides a window into Methodism on the Peninsula in the 19th Century.

II

There was no regular worship or preaching on the islands of the Chesapeake at the beginning of the 19th century, although Protestant Episcopal ministers from the mainland occasionally visited and islanders would sometimes attend services in Annamessex, Maryland and at Pongoteague, Virginia. On the mainland, revivals were happening and Methodist societies were forming, but islanders initially resisted Methodism, “believing that it might endanger their peace, and that it threatened destruction to the church of their fathers.”21

18JLFA, III 331.
19JLFA, III,346, 350.
21Wallace, 67.
Like his fellow islanders, Joshua Thomas grew up under the influence of the Episcopal church. Although there were few opportunities to participate in corporate worship when he was a young man, he procured a prayerbook in order to lead his family in prayer. This was no easy task for Thomas. He had little education and was barely able to read, but he was determined to provide some religious leadership for his wife and young children.

Thomas fell in with the Methodists by accident—or by providence. He was fishing with several neighbors one day when three boats full of travelers stopped to buy fish from them and to ask for guidance up the Pungoteague Creek. Their destination was a camp meeting, where Thomas first heard the singing that would captivate him for the rest of his life. He also heard the preaching of Lorenzo Dow, a well-known itinerant, and of Dr. Chandler, the presiding elder, and witnessed people crying, clapping, and shouting. He and his friend soon left, but not without being affected by what they had seen and heard.

When word reached Tangier that a camp meeting was to be held in Annamessex (Somerset County), Maryland, Thomas resolved to go, despite the protests of family and friends. Wallace explained his desire:

> How people could pray without a book, or preach without a sermon written out before them, or exhort with words unstudied and intelligible, that thrilled him in a manner to which he was, up to that time, an entire stranger; and, especially, how people became as happy as they seemed, there in the woods, with hundreds looking on, and listening to their exclamations of hope and joy—this was, to the man Joshua, a phenomenon, an unaccountable mystery. 22

Thomas went to Annamessex wanting to be converted. He reached the campground on Friday, and listened and watched intently. He witnessed others experience conversion but felt nothing himself. He knelt at the mourner's bench with fellow penitents. He tried going into the woods alone and falling to the ground as he had seen others do, but to no avail. On Sunday evening, resigned to his lack of spiritual experience, he went to hear one Mr. Wiltbank preach the final sermon of the meeting. It was during that time when he felt himself drawn to Jesus. He went to the altar when the invitation was given and began to pray in earnest.

> Blessed be his name! I did not wait long before I felt a gracious change run through my whole being. I did not say a word about what I felt then to those about me, nor rise from my knees, but continued kneeling and wondering at the mercy and goodness of God. . . . I was so filled with the Spirit of life and love, I could not help shouting to the glory of God with all my might. It struck me in a moment, as quick as a flash of lightning, and my soul was filled unutterably with heavenly transport. 23

Thomas’ own vocation as an exhorter and preacher began that very day. Even before he left the grounds of the camp meeting he was telling the story of his conversion. That story would become the basis of his ministry.

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22 Wallace, 83–84.
23 Wallace, 90.
When Joshua Thomas returned to his island home, he immediately began organizing prayer meetings. He gathered his neighbors together the next Sabbath to read from the Bible, to sing, and to pray for the salvation of souls. On the third Sunday that they met, Thomas witnessed the conversion of some of his neighbors, beginning with one Thomas Crocket, who fell to his knees and wept bitterly until he experienced “converting grace.” Wallace wrote:

the converts now began to multiply, and it was a subject of new astonishment to Joshua, that souls should be saved, in the absence of regular preachers, and under such circumstances as then surround them. He thought a minister of the gospel, a necessary instrument in saving souls, and none were likely to be converted unless in this legitimate way. It now occurred to him, however, that God could use, and would bless any and every instrumentality employed for this end, and do the work when, and wherever sinners believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. 24

This was the beginning of a particularly Methodist experience, where divisions of class and education are overcome by an egalitarian fellowship. Thomas became the spiritual leader of his community not because of any special education, social standing, or ecclesial authority. He was an uneducated laborer. The strength of his conversion experience and the depth of his personal piety were keys to his inspiring others.

Soon, two local preachers from the Virginia mainland heard of the meetings on Tangier Island and came with their tent to conduct a meeting. Invitations were sent to the residents of nearby Smith Island to join those of Tangier the following Sunday. It was, said Thomas, “the most glorious day the island people had ever seen! Indeed, it was like paradise below—a heaven on earth”. 25 The two preachers, William Seymour and William Lee, returned to the island a number of times after that occasion. Methodism had made its beginnings in the islands.

Joshua Thomas took it upon himself to organize camp meetings on Tangier Island from then on. The first was held in 1808. By 1809 news of that first meeting had traveled up and down both sides of the Bay, and as far away as Baltimore and Norfolk. It was estimated that ten thousand people came to the island that second year. At any given time over two hundred boats of various kinds could be seen in the harbor. Thomas attended to the preachers, the worshipers, the vacationers, the curiosity seekers (of whom there were plenty), and the vendors (who came in droves), doing everything possible to keep people’s attention directed away from the distractions of booths and bottles and toward the preaching, singing, and praying.

Between the annual camp meetings, Thomas worked to establish and strengthen Methodist societies throughout the islands. Wallace describes Thomas’ efforts in the years between 1808 and 1812, when war broke out:

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24Wallace, 97.
25Wallace, 98.
He became the acknowledged leader in that religious movement which spread over the islands, and firmly established Methodism as the system best adapted and most useful to that people. Societies were organized, and taken in charge by the circuit preachers, who, about this time, began to visit the islands regularly in their itinerant rounds. The Accomac [Virginia] preachers included the lower islands in their preaching plan, and the brethren laboring on Annamessex [Maryland] circuit took charge of Smith’s and Holland’s Islands.²⁶

Preaching took place in private homes, or out of doors, until churches were built. Joshua Thomas was involved at every level. He carried preachers between the islands in his log canoe, “The Methodist.” He attended meetings in his own community as well as on other islands and the mainland and became known to many in the region as “a powerful exhorter, and a successful manager of the meetings.” In fact, Thomas began his own sort of itinerant rounds, which he continued throughout his life, and he became known not only for his dedication but for his distinctive personality and style.²⁷

Thomas was particularly well-known for his exuberance. The shouting which bubbled forth from him at the time of his conversion remained part of his public and private worship. He took the Scriptures literally and justified his joyfully raucous behavior to critics, as Wallace explains:

> That his Bible justified a redeemed sinner in “walking, leaping, and praising God,” and exclaimed, “O clap your hands;” and that his hymn book corroborated the authority, in many of its exultant strains, was to his mind conclusive, not only as it regarded the privilege, but a positive duty, to shout.²⁸

He particularly loved the “experience meetings” that were part of the camp meetings on Tangier where people told stories of God’s working in their lives. Testimonies were interspersed with singing. Strangers became friends. In Wallace’s words:

> The most effective preaching was on the occasion of the love feasts and experience meetings. Then, words were uttered that were as fire in dry stubble. Skeptics stood trembling like Belshazzar when he saw the handwriting on the wall; no sophistry could invalidate the force and genuineness of a faith that made the feeble mighty, the weak strong, and the convert of yesterday “Bold to take up, firm to maintain / The consecrated cross.”

> The interchange of feeling and experience, by persons so widely separated in their residence and pursuits, gave to these hours of holy intercourse, an increasing and absorbing interest. A Christian from the far south would speak of his conversion, telling when and where it occurred. Then would follow an experience by some one from the mountains of Pennsylvania, the City of Baltimore, the fervent soil of Accomac, or the Islander at home amid the very scenes of his spiritual birth, saying, “Whereas I was once blind; now I see,” and, referring to the goodness and love of the God-man, proclaim, “He hath opened mine eyes.”

²⁶Wallace, 116.
²⁷Wallace, 117–118.
²⁸Wallace, 119.
In these exercises Father Thomas took the greatest possible delight. His own simple and ever interesting story, of the past and present in his life, and the kindling hopes which filled his expanding soul, when the fire burned around him, was related; and his usual shout, or, indeed, several spells of shouting, attested the measure of his religious joy.  

The "shout tradition" was well established among Chesapeake Methodists in the early years of their experience, and Joshua Thomas was one of its most ardent practitioners. On one occasion, when Thomas was visiting the Methodists at Church Creek in Dorchester County, he was called on to exhort after the preacher had finished his sermon. Having just arrived, he took off his hat and coat, laid them aside, then turned to the people and said, "It comes to me, I must first shout!" He thereupon began to jump, and clap his hands, saying 'Glory!' 'Glory!' and continued thus until he was in a fine glow of religious fervor. At first people thought him rather odd, but after some time, many joined in and shouted along with him. Eventually, though, he quieted and exhorted earnestly, "full of good sense, and commanding the eager attention of his congregation."

Thomas was so caught up in this form of praise that he sometimes would shout when he was alone. Witnesses reported seeing him leaping and shouting while gathering bait in the marsh, working in the cornfield, and even while in his canoe!

Wallace recorded an exchange between Thomas and a preacher at a camp meeting that gives insight into the meaning of this practice of shouting. When the preacher criticized him for his lack of restraint and suggested that he sometimes shouted without being prompted by any feeling, Thomas replied:

"Feeling, I do not wait for feeling. I am prompted by a sense of duty."
"How can you make it appear," said the preacher, "that it is a duty to shout, or rather, leap as you do?"
"Because," replied he, "I regard it to be a means of grace!"
He then turned inquisitor, and asked, "Why do you pray?"
"To receive good, and to be made happy.
"Why do you preach? Is it not that you may do and get good?" 
"Certainly."
"And do you not sing for the same purpose?"
"Yes."
"Well, do you become happy while praying?"
"Often."
"And in preaching?"
"Yes."
"Do you sing yourself happy?"
"Oh, yes, very frequently."
"Good, Now understand, I shout myself happy; and if you use these means, when you feel dull and uncomfortable, to obtain, through them, light and joy—I shout for the same

Ruth, 75.
Wallace, 222.
Joshua Thomas, "Parson of the Islands"

pursue. Often when I sing, and pray, and preach, I fail to get my own soul blessed; but when I try a good shout, the clouds clear away, and my hope is brightened for immortality and eternal life."

The preacher turned off with a smile [remarks Wallace], confessing himself to be enlightened in an unexpected manner, and acknowledging himself outdone in the argument.32

Thomas' shouting was apparently not only a blessing to him, but to others who witnessed his passionate piety. His vocalizing took other forms as well. He often interjected affirmations and encouragements as preachers gave their sermons, chiming in the "True brother!" or "You're right!" or "That's a fact!" "If feeling ran high," reports Wallace, "he would say, 'Hold on, brother, and let us shout a while!'") At certain times, "a sensitive preacher could hardly maintain the connected links in his chain of ideas, when Brother Thomas sat behind or near him; the latter was so much in the habit of responding like all his Island brethren. When an emphatic sentence fell, he would startle all by saying, "That's good! Give us more! Lord bless the brother!"")33

Joshua Thomas was licensed as an exhorter not long after his conversion, and became a member of the circuit that included Tangier Island. He was content to remain in that role, but a number of people, including the esteemed itinerant preacher Lawrence Lawrenson, urged him to become a local preacher. He was authorized to preach in 1814. In 1824, he was ordained a deacon and was thereby authorized to "administer the ordinances of Baptism, Marriage, and the Burial of the Dead, in the absence of an Elder; and to feed the flock of Christ, so long as his spirit and practice are such as become the gospel."

34 He then became the local minister on Deal's Island, off Somerset County, Maryland, where a Methodist church had already been established.

At the May 24, 1828 quarterly conference at Curtis Chapel, Thomas requested that a camp meeting be held on Deal's Island in July. His request was granted, and the Deal's Island camp meeting quickly became known far and wide. People came from Virginia and from Dorchester and Somerset Counties in Maryland—so many that the meetings on Tangier's Island paled in comparison to those held on Deal's.35 Again, Thomas served as organizer, exhorter, and general manager.

In his role of local preacher, Thomas continued to attend meetings all around the region, traveling as far as Baltimore to hear other preachers and even preach himself at the urging of others who knew his reputa-

32Wallace, 225–226.
33Wallace, 345, 363.
34Thomas' certificate of ordination is displayed at the Barratt's Chapel Museum near Frederica, Delaware. It is signed by Enoch George, a Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church of America, and dated May 4, 1824.
Only once did Thomas try to imitate a preacher with more learning and polish (his friend and mentor Lawrenson). He failed miserably, unable to speak without stammering, and never again tried to be someone he was not. His preaching was plain and to the point. He relied on stories from his own life and used illustrations that the watermen and farmers of the peninsula would already understand. At one particular camp meeting, after Bishop Scott had preached "one of his very clear, convincing, and effective discourses," it fell to Thomas to follow the sermon with an exhortation. Says Wallace,

it evidently made the Island preacher feel his own littleness in comparison. "But," said he, rising to speak, "there must needs be great preachers, and small fry, like our fishing lines down yonder on the islands. Some are great long ones, and some are little short ones. I once went out with a neighbor to fish; he had one of those big lines, and would swing it and throw it (suiting the action) way off yonder. I had a short line, and dropped it out near the canoe, and I caught as many fish as he did! His line would sometimes become tangled and his fish escape, but I had no trouble in pulling them in. So with preachers and exhorters; the great point is to catch the fish; and, brethren, if some of us cannot throw out as long a line as others, let us not be discouraged; for, if we are faithful and holy, our Master will bless our labors, and give us souls for our hire." 37

His analogy not only shows something of how he thought of himself, but also illustrates his folksy—and effective—style. An exchange overheard in Baltimore offers a glimpse of his power:

Two gentlemen met in the street and engaged in conversation. One inquired of the other:—

"Have you been to hear Mr. Thomas?"
"No," was the reply, "who is he?"
"An old gentleman from the Islands who is visiting the churches and making people cry and laugh every time he talks!"
"Ah! A preacher, is he?"
"Well, I am not sure that he is a preacher."
"One of their 'exhorters,' then, I reckon."
"Don't know about that; but, preacher, exhorter, or whatever he may be, I never listened to a more interesting man in my life."
"I must try and hear him too."
"Do, for what he says is first rate!" 38

Not everyone was enamored of Thomas' style, however. At one camp meeting a particular gentleman asked why he had to tell the story of his impoverished childhood so often, and why he insisted on shouting so much.

36 Thomas had achieved some notoriety for exhorting and praying with the British troops encamped on Tangier Island during the War of 1812. When the commander of the fleet asked him to address them before they left to attack Baltimore, Thomas predicted that they would fail and that many of them would lose their lives. His prediction was proven true, and he was remembered by British and Americans alike as the preacher who warned the royal navy to stay away from Baltimore!

37 Wallace, 304-305.

38 Wallace, 269-270.
"Why don't you preach to us like the other ministers, Brother Thomas? We would rather hear that, than have you going over your anecdotes, or jumping about in the pulpit," the Captain would say.

"Well," rejoined Brother T., "I do not know how to preach like anybody but Joshua; but to please you, I will not do what you dislike, if I can possibly avoid it."

He went on to give "a very impressive exhortation," following his friend's advice and limiting himself to one topic: eternity and the human condition. Wallace's account of his message shows not only Thomas' home-grown eloquence, but also his awareness of the plight of the African Americans in his community's midst: "Who is that yonder in a shining robe, among the company of the 'blood besprinkled bands. . . ? See! Jesus smiles upon that spirit! . . . Who can it be?" Then, turning to point at one whom Wallace calls "one of the pious old colored persons, who, with flowing tears were listening to his talk about 'glory,'" he continued:

In may be some one who was a poor, neglected, suffering saint of God here on earth, like one of these! In this world of woe she had afflictions and persecutions, but she loved her Lord, and though often, it may be, was hungry and weary, she held fast to the hope set before her, believed the promises, and died well!

Her sufferings in this present life were more than many others, and—understand—her joy is now greater, her song sweeter, and her mansion more glorious than some who did not live so faithful. . . .

What is the worth of a world, in comparison with yonder crown! What signifies, it, colored people, if you are laughed at, and scorned, if you but learn the way to Jesus, and He, at the last 'great day,' shall say to you, 'Well done!' Be faithful; live holy; sing on: "Give me Jesus, give me Jesus./You may have all this world, I give me Jesus."

In addition to shouting and exhorting, Thomas loved to sing hymns and considered the Methodist hymnal as "'the clearest and most comprehensive expositor' of God's revelation," even over the Bible. According to Williams, it was common to sing three or four hymns at worship services and two at class meetings. Often an itinerant preacher would interrupt the singing to ask, "Now, do you know what you said last?" or "Did you speak no more than you felt?" So, too, did Thomas use hymns in his preaching to help underscore his points.

Thomas was also known for his fervent praying and his unshakable belief in God's promise to answer prayer. Numerous accounts are given of people who experienced healing as the result of his prayers. Thomas made prayer an integral part of his ministry. He would often visit the homes of people in his community as well as those he met in his travel and would never leave a home without gathering the family for prayer. Wallace reports that he was known to pray with entire households, including domestic help:  

40Williams, 138.
41Williams, 138
Many happy nights did our Parson spend with the family of Brother John Fontaine, when bound for Quarterly Meetings or passing on business.

His custom, we are informed, was to assemble the entire household in the large kitchen, and preach or exhort until they were all made happy. Good sister F. and her servants have had many a shout with the old gentleman on these occasions.

Whether he was with thousands at a camp meeting or with a family by the kitchen hearth, Joshua Thomas exhibited the same fervency in his shouting, exhorting, and praying.

Thomas was ordained Elder at the Philadelphia Annual Conference in 1835. When those in attendance heard that he was the one who had preached to the British army on Tangier Island (see note 36), they welcomed him warmly. The following account of his ordination ceremony shows Thomas' characteristic humility:

When called in to answer the usual questions propounded by the Presiding Bishop, as to his faith and obedience, with reference to doctrine and discipline, he appeared for the moment to be under considerable embarrassment, but put the brethren in great good humor by his simple and emphatic answer: “I don’t understand as much about these matters as my beloved brother ministers here, but as far as I know, to the best of my ability I will conform to all the rules of the Methodist Church; you may depend on it.”

Thomas labored until illness prevented him from traveling or attending public services. He preached his last sermon at the 1850 camp meeting on Deal’s Island. He was brought to the tent in his wheelbarrow and helped to the stand. After prayer and the singing of a hymn, Thomas read his text. “Now you need not look for much of a sermon,” he began.

You see my situation, I cannot preach like these good brothers in the stand—never could. But as many of them have told me, “Brother Thomas, you preach in your own way, and say whatever the Holy Spirit gives you, and the Lord will use your instrumentality for his own good pleasure.”

As his health declined, Thomas became restricted to the easy chair that had been a gift from a Methodist admirer. Even as an invalid, however, he received visitors, prayed with them, exhorted them, and often had them kneel to receive a blessing from him. He died in his home one Deal’s Island in 1853, at the age of 77.

III

In his discussion of “the four languages of early American Methodism,” Russell Richey points out that there is much to be learned from the popular expressions of piety found in journals and letters. Adam Wallace’s
account of the life of Joshua Thomas is an example of that vernacular, evangelical language that reflects both the substance and manner of religious expression of ordinary Chesapeake island people. One might call his work a combination of “folk biography” and oral history, since it is based not on documents and artifacts but rather on the personal testimonies and recollections of those who knew his subject.

From Wallace’s portrait of the “Parson of the Islands,” it is possible to see a glimpse of life in an early Methodist society on the Delmarva peninsula and thus gain insight into the “coloration” of Chesapeake Methodism that influenced the movement as it spread throughout the country. In the story of the life and work of Joshua Thomas, one can see illustrated several of the facets of Methodism to which Richey points, as they are refracted through the lens of Peninsula culture.46

(1) The early camp meeting experience brought together Chesapeake Methodists from Virginia and Maryland on both sides of the Bay in unique (and beautiful) island settings as well as on the mainland. The meetings Thomas organized and ran on the islands attracted Methodist vacationers looking for a time of religious renewal and helped to shift the locus of revivalism from the quarterly conference to the camp meeting.

(2) Methodist piety offered a form of religious expression to the farmers and watermen of the Delmarva peninsula that was more suited to their level of education and social standing than the Anglican ways they had inherited.

(3) The egalitarian nature of Methodist societies allowed for a Joshua Thomas to be an effective and esteemed leader. These new communities of faith were entered by conversion alone and brought together the wealthy and the humble, the free person and the slave, women and men in one worshipping body.

(4) The Chesapeake region was on the north-south border and was ambivalent about issues of race and slavery. Methodist societies allowed for the association of blacks and whites, Methodist converts who were landowners often freed their slaves. On the peninsula Methodists of different races were able to form communities of faith not based on color or class.

The picture of Methodism on the Delmarva peninsula that is presented in the account of the life of Joshua Thomas provides a slice of life that adds to the understanding of the whole of Chesapeake Methodism in the early 19th century. Wallace’s biography also enlightens the reader as to why the spirit of Joshua Thomas still lives on in the islands of the Chesapeake where Methodism remains the dominant religion and camp meetings are still held regularly. As one pastor of Smith Island has explained it:

46 See Richey, “Chesapeake Coloration,” 117–125, for a more detailed explanation of these nine facets as he sees them.
The Camp Meeting by 1857 was fading from mainland Methodism, but it still occupies a full week here in late July and early August, and it is the high point of the island’s religious year. It is a combination of spiritual revival, entertainment, feasting, and the whole island coming together in a way it seldom does any more. It is a pretty sight, of a summer morning or evening, to see the marsh creeks humming with little skiffs and workboats carrying families, all dressed for church, to and from the tabernacle in Ewell. . . .

Originally, people spent the whole week in tents gathered around the campground. That gave way to permanent wooden cabins and sleeping aboard boats. A wooden picket fence used to surround the whole place, and there would be ice cream and lemonade stands, even a barber and a shoeshine stand, set up to accommodate the people. Nowadays, with modern transportation, the camping part is gone, and it’s just the tabernacle there; but it is still a scene to behold. . . .

All week long there is preaching and Bible school for the children, and testimony. It is no longer the “shouting” meeting of Joshua Thomas’s time, but there is still a heavy emphasis on conversion of souls at the altar, and there is no telling how many have walked down that sawdust aisle to salvation.47