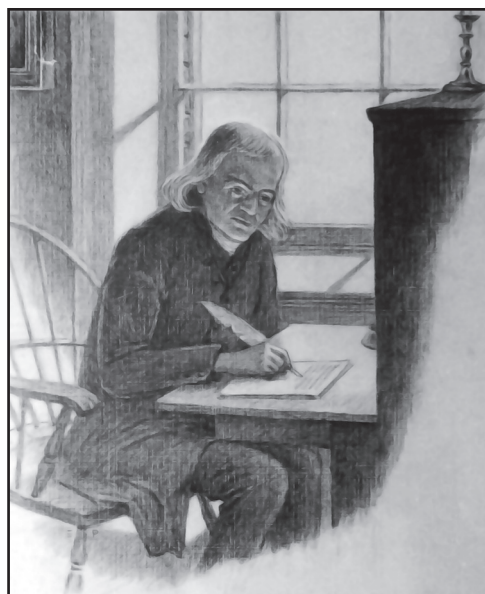


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Alfred T. Day III, Editor

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GUEST EDITOR'S NOTE

This issue of *Methodist History* commemorates the 200th anniversary of the death of Francis Asbury. When Asbury died in 1816 few doubted his importance. Under his leadership American Methodism had grown from a few hundred members into a church of more than 200,000, and there seemed no limit to its potential. In 1876 Methodism had more than 53,000 itinerant and local preachers and more than 2.9 million members. By the turn of the century there were more Methodist churches than post offices in the U.S. Yet even as Methodism continued to expand and shape American culture into the twentieth century, Asbury slipped into near invisibility, from which he has never emerged.

Why is it that historians of Methodism have had so little use for Asbury? I would suggest that it has less to do with Asbury than with our current interests. Asbury led a fascinating life, and in the process helped to shape American religious culture in lasting ways. Yet there are basic elements of his story that few Methodists know. He could be funny and stories about his humor abound in a time when joking and laughing were usually considered beneath the dignity of a minister. He was not a good preacher in a period when Methodist preachers were largely defined by their ability to move an audience. He essentially lived as a houseguest in the homes of countless Methodists as he crisscrossed the nation for 45 years. He had a remarkable gift for drawing people to him in small groups and they loved to have him in their homes. He spent countless hours talking to preachers, members and strangers as he rode from place to place or sat by the fire at night. In the process he developed a subtle feel for the needs of the church and the nation. More than perhaps anyone else, Asbury defined Methodism in its formative and most volatile years.

The essays by Russell Richey, Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, and Jonathan Rodell reprinted in this edition are each brilliant in their own way, helping us to understand important elements of Asbury's life and career. But it is worth noting that the pool of articles on Asbury was not very deep. Selecting a group of articles on the legacy of John Wesley would have resulted in a much fiercer competition. Revisiting these essays will hopefully help us to rediscover the significance of Asbury's life.

Russell E. Richey's article traces the connections between early American Methodism and the wooded landscape. Much of early Methodism took place outdoors, as itinerant preachers rode their circuits and then prayed and preached under the trees. Asbury and his preachers incorporated the forest into their ministry, discovering that the woods opened up new possibilities to reach the faithful and the unchurched. Richey further developed these

themes in *Methodism in the American Forest* (Oxford, 2015).

Cynthia Lynn Lyerly's article explores the opposition that Asbury and early American Methodists faced, particularly from elites in the South, as they challenged deeply entrenched ideas about slavery, patriarchy and divisions between rich and poor. Lyerly further developed many of these themes in her brilliant book, *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770-1810* (Oxford, 1998).

Jonathan Rodell's article examines the first circuit that Asbury rode in England as a new itinerant preacher. The strength of Rodell's analysis is the care with which he sketches the social and religious contours of the Bedfordshire circuit. When I wrote my biography of Asbury, I found this description fascinating. Asbury was no quitter, which was evident from the start.

John Wigger

EDITOR'S NOTE

It would have been enough honor and privilege that the most recent and respected scholar to study and produce a biography about Francis Asbury agreed to be Guest Editor for an issue dedicated to the architect and organizer of the American Methodist Church. Ah, but there's more. Dr. Wigger has shared this essay that first appeared in *Perfecting Perfection: Essays in Honor of Henry D. Rack* (Pickwick Publications, 2015). What's not to delight in, be inspired by and gain new insights from a dream conversation between Asbury and the man whose movement gave him both rise and *raison d'être*, John Wesley. Get out your highlighter and enjoy.

Alfred T. Day III