

**“SO SHALL THEIR CHAINS FALL OFF”
BISHOP LEVI SCOTT AND
NINETEENTH-CENTURY BLACK METHODISM**

JOSEPH F. DiPAOLO

On July 20, 1882, just one week after the death of Levi Scott, senior bishop of the Methodist Episcopal (ME) Church, delegates of the Delaware Conference convened for their annual session in Centreville, Maryland. Founded in 1864, the Delaware Conference had been the first within the ME Church in America to allow full ordination and conference membership for African-American preachers. During the session, the body adopted a resolution expressing its esteem for the departed bishop. The tribute declared Scott, “from the beginning to the end . . . a friend of the colored race,” who in the 1850s, despite “vigorous objections offered by some of the leading men of the Church,” had organized the church’s first official conferences of black preachers. The delegates added that

Bishop Scott will not be forgotten when the names of John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, Gen. U. S. Grant and Gen. James A Garfield are being read and thought of as the heroes of national freedom in this country.¹

Within that constellation of national stars, however, the memory of Bishop Scott quickly faded. He has been largely forgotten by the church he helped to shape, and all but ignored by Methodist historians. Apart from a biography published by his son-in-law three years after his death, and a few contemporary sketches, there has been not a single serious article or book written to explore his life and ministry during the last one hundred and thirty years.² Levi Scott nonetheless helped to shape the Methodism

¹ *Minutes of the Delaware Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1879-1882* (Bound, handwritten volume, in possession of Zoar United Methodist Church, Philadelphia), 196-197.

² The primary source for Scott’s life is James Mitchell, *The Life and Times of Levi Scott, DD* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1885). Mitchell, who married Scott’s daughter Emma, had access to Scott’s personal papers, much of which has disappeared, including an 1859 autobiographical sketch found on pages 24-38. Sketches of Scott include J. A. Roche, “Bishop Levi Scott,” in *Methodist Review* 68.2 (July, 1886): 489-511; “Bishop” Scott,” in *Christian Advocate* (New York), July 20, 1882; J. B. McCullough, “Death of Bishop Scott,” in *Philadelphia Methodist* (July 20, 1882); “Bishop Levi Scott” in *Wilmington Conference Minutes* (1883), 45-46; “Bishop Levi Scott,” in *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1884), 510-515; and “Levi Scott,” in *Biographical and Genealogical History of the State of Delaware* (Chambersburg, PA: J. M. Runk & Co., 1899), 1232-1234. A collection of Scott’s letters are in the Manuscript Letters and Documents Collection, Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University (Dallas, TX); and a small collection of papers, including letters, an 1853 journal, and a book of sermon briefs, are in the collection at Barratt’s Chapel and Museum (Frederica, DE). Other letters of Scott are scattered among papers in the archives at St. George’s (Philadelphia), The General Commission on Archives and History (Madison, NJ), Lovely Lane Museum and Library (Baltimore), and Boston University School of Theology Archive (Boston).

of the nineteenth century, especially as it struggled with the empowerment of African Americans. Scott was the first bishop to ordain black preachers as deacons and elders to full membership in an annual conference, which he did in Liberia in 1853. Scott was instrumental in creating the office of missionary bishop, and in the appointment of the first black bishop in the ME Church. He was the first bishop to preside over an official conference of African-American preachers, in 1857, laying the groundwork for the establishment of the Delaware and Washington Conferences, in which African Americans enjoyed full clergy status for the first time.

A farm boy with little formal education, Scott became self-educated in literature, history, theology, and classical languages, developed into an eloquent and able writer, and advanced so far as to serve as a teacher, college administrator and book publisher. His unlikely origins render all the more extraordinary his leadership in elevating the status and role of black Methodists, and call for a fresh look at his life and ministry.

Early Life and Conversion

Levi Scott was born October 11, 1802, on his family's farm near Odessa, Delaware, then called Cantwell Bridge, the youngest of Thomas and Anne Scott's three children. A class leader and local preacher, Thomas Scott joined the Philadelphia Conference as an itinerant preacher in 1803, but his public ministry was short. When Levi was eight months old, Thomas took ill and died, barely a month into his first appointment, and was buried in Centreville, Maryland.³

It fell to Levi's remarkable mother, Anne, to nurture young Levi's faith. Twice widowed, she found herself left with three young sons to care for, along with a farm encumbered with debt. In time, Anne's capable management cleared the property of debt, and even enlarged the farm. But it was her spiritual leadership which so impacted Levi and his brothers. Bishop Scott credited his faith to "the strong religious training to which, from infancy, I was subjected by my own sainted mother." He wrote of a nightly ritual before bed, which consisted of Anne leading her boys in the singing of a hymn and prayer, and then having them recite the Lord's Prayer. And Sunday worship was non-negotiable:

. . . she took us regularly to meeting, at the old Union Meeting-house, on Sabbath morning, and required us to read portions of the Bible to her in the afternoon and evening. Scarcely any state of the weather could keep her from the house of God. How certain and familiar that sound on Sabbath morning: "Come boys, and put the horse to the carriage, and let us go to meeting."⁴

Growing up, Levi Scott was happy, energetic, and popular among his peers; in his own words, "buoyant in spirit . . . [and] fond of fun and frolic."

³ Mitchell, 14, 26; Thomas Scott (1772-1803) was received on trial in 1803, and assigned to the Queen Anne (Maryland) Circuit, as an assistant to Rev. James Moore; no memoir of Thomas was published after his death.

⁴ Mitchell, 31.

He also evinced a talent for music, and took up the violin. He became quite proficient at it and was “in much request at the social gatherings of his young friends . . . playing the fiddle for dancing parties at quiltings, corn-huskings, and weddings.” There are hints Scott was more rowdy as a youth than his Victorian biographers wanted to reveal. His friend and Philadelphia Conference colleague, Rev. J. B. McCullough, reported that before his conversion, Scott “was as profuse and original in his use of profanity as Andrew Jackson . . . [which] was saying a great deal.” He also enjoyed going to camp meetings with other local youths to mock the participants and disrupt the meetings. Writing about one he attended while inwardly struggling with God’s call to faith, Scott wrote that he was led “to behave worse at that camp meeting than I had ever done before.”⁵

Sometime in late 1821 or early 1822, a Presbyterian preacher named Ogden came to town to hold a weeknight preaching service at the local schoolhouse. Levi, serving as the sexton, heard Ogden preach on Acts 24:25, the story of Felix’s procrastination in responding to the gospel. The future bishop recalled, “The preacher swept away all the refuge of lies in which sinners trust, and made me feel that I had not one solid and reasonable excuse for postponing the work of salvation another hour.”⁶

Young Levi now began earnestly seeking after a saving faith, reading his Bible, giving up sinful habits (including his violin, trading it in for a more acceptable English flute) and attending services, but for months did not find peace. On the night of October 16, 1822, he attended a prayer meeting at the home of Isaac and Betsy Carter, a free black couple who lived about two miles from Scott’s home, in the neighborhood called Fieldsborough. While Methodism was rapidly segregating during this period, it was still not unknown for blacks and whites to worship and pray together. It appears that Betsy was in charge of the gathering that October evening. “This prayer meeting was conducted by Christian ladies,” Scott recalled, “They gathered around me, and sung and prayed, and counseled me.” Soon, the breakthrough came:

In the twinkle of an eye my burden was gone, my cry of agony was hushed . . . O it was an ecstatic moment! I seemed flying through the midst of heaven, my body and my clothing as white as the driven snow, and angel bands around me, gently touching me, and singing as I had never heard before. It was not of long duration. I came to myself, and the people seemed the most beautiful and the most happy I had ever seen.⁷

As colleague John A. Roche later put it, Scott had “a good Presbyterian conviction, [and] . . . a grand Methodist conversion—a most happy combination.”⁸ Scott immersed himself in the faith, joining Union ME Church,

⁵ Mitchell, 32-33; *Philadelphia Methodist*, July 20, 1882.

⁶ Mitchell, 32-33.

⁷ Mitchell, 36-38.

⁸ John A. Roche, “Bishop Levi Scott,” op. cit., 509. Scott often spoke of that night in the years ahead, and ever afterward regarded it as his spiritual birthday.

near Odessa, where his mother had brought him as a boy. Scott soon rose to leadership, and sensed a call to preach; in August, 1823, he received his exhorter's license, and in February, 1825, his local preacher's license.⁹

Scott's conversion sparked an intellectual awakening. He borrowed books, which he propped up over his work bench to study while on the job, and progressed so rapidly that within three years was asked to take a job as a private tutor with a local family. A few years later, when stationed in Philadelphia as a circuit preacher, he took on formalized studies in Latin and Greek. Still later, he would be awarded two honorary degrees, a Master of Arts by Wesleyan University in 1840, and a Doctor of Divinity by Delaware College in 1846. His friend J. B McCullough later said that Scott was "one of the best self-educated men we have ever known."¹⁰

While serving in Philadelphia in 1828, Levi came to know the family of Ralph and Grace Smith, members of St. George's Church. Their daughter, Sarah Ann, caught the young preacher's eye, and his heart, and the couple was married in November, 1830. They would have seven children, though tragically five would pre-decease them, and Sarah would be plagued with chronic health problems for most of their married life.

Rising Ministry Star

In 1826, Levi Scott was accepted on trial in the Philadelphia Conference as an itinerant preacher, and soon rose rapidly through the ranks. In 1828, he was ordained a deacon, and in 1830, an Elder. In April, 1834, when just 31 years old, Scott was appointed presiding elder of the Delaware District, which encompassed the southern half of the Delmarva Peninsula. In 1840, he accepted a position at Dickinson College, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, serving as principal of Dickinson's grammar school, then a preparatory institution for those seeking admission to the college. For three years, he shepherded forty to fifty students per year in their education.

Scott returned to pastoral ministry in 1843 to serve as senior pastor of the Philadelphia's Union ME Church, then the preeminent pulpit in the Philadelphia Conference, with a membership of nearly 1,000. After two years at Union, Scott was again appointed presiding elder, this time to the South Philadelphia District, which included the southern portion of the city, and extended west all the way to Harrisburg on the Susquehanna River.

While serving in this role, Scott took a special interest in the only black congregation on his district, Philadelphia's John Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church. The congregation had endured a split several years before, many of its members going to the AME Church. Those who remained found themselves with an unfinished building on Shippen Street, encumbered with nearly \$2,000 in debt. Scott issued an appeal across the conference, which eventually made its way to the denominational paper, the New York-based *Christian Advocate*. "In recommending them to the benevolent public for

⁹ Mitchell, 43-44.

¹⁰ *Philadelphia Methodist*, July 20, 1882.

assistance,” Scott wrote, “I do think that if any people here or elsewhere deserve assistance, the people of ‘John Wesley’ Chapel do If you cannot give them much, give a little. Drops, it is said, form the ocean; grains of sand the earth.” The congregation survived, and is the direct ancestor of today’s Tindley Temple United Methodist Church.¹¹

Assistant Book Agent

At the General Conference of 1848, Scott was elected Assistant Book Agent for the Methodist Episcopal Church, an administrative post with offices in New York City, where he moved his family that summer. Scott was second in command of the publishing arm of the denomination, working under the leadership of George Lane; all official publications of the church from 1848 to 1852 bear the imprint of “Lane and Scott.”

It was a difficult time for the publishing house, because of the schism that had occurred in American Methodism four years earlier at the General Conference of 1844. Deadlocked over what to do about slaveholding Bishop James O. Andrew, the conference had adopted a formal “Plan of Separation,” to allow the southern conferences to form their own ecclesiastical organization. Part of the plan called for an equitable division of the assets of the publishing house. However, ensuing bitterness and controversy in the wake of the schism created a backlash. Delegates to the 1848 General Conference pronounced the 1844 plan “null and void,” essentially declaring that the southern conferences had seceded, and therefore not entitled either to a share of the assets, or to receive annual dividends from the profits.

In response, the southern church sued the Book Concern. The case dragged on throughout Scott’s tenure, requiring much time and energy, both from him and George Lane. As it turned out, a New York District Court found in favor of the south, and directed the publishing house to divide the assets. While Lane and Scott considered an appeal to the US Supreme Court, one of its justices, John McLean (who was also a Methodist layman), intervened and arranged for a negotiated settlement, which was finalized in 1853.¹²

Despite the ongoing conflict, the publishing house grew; sales in 1850 topped \$250,000, prompting Lane and Scott to set a goal of \$1,000,000 in sales by 1856—a goal that was met by their successors, Thomas Carlton and Zebulon Phillips. Of Scott’s four-year tenure as Assistant Book Editor, a colleague who worked under him, Daniel P. Kidder, later wrote that Scott was not thrilled with the post, the duties of which, had been “submitted to by him, rather than enjoyed.” Nonetheless, Kidder praised Scott as having “faithfully and discreetly performed,” his work, “with a breadth of view that

¹¹ “John Wesley ME Church,” *Christian Advocate* (New York), February 11, 1846.

¹² For the story of the conflict and lawsuit, see James Penn Pilkington, *The Methodist Publishing House: A History, Volume 1; Beginnings to 1870* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 294-326; and also R. Sutton, *The Methodist Property Case: The Report of the Suit of Henry B. Bascom and Others vs. George Lane and Others* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1851).

took in the full responsibility of providing a wholesome religious literature for a growing Church and her children.”¹³

Bishop of the Church

By the spring of 1852, the Methodist Episcopal Church, numbering nearly 750,000 members across the north, was down to just three effective bishops: Thomas A. Morris, Edmund S. Janes and Beverly Waugh. The rapidly growing church needed new episcopal leadership, and Levi Scott had grown in stature and reputation across the church during his four years as Assistant Book Agent. To the 1852 General Conference, held in Boston, Scott came as the favored son of the Philadelphia Conference, and strongly supported by New York, where he had lived, worked and preached for four years. On the first ballot, held on May 25, four new bishops were elected. Scott was at the head of the list with 113 votes (out of 173 cast), followed by Matthew Simpson (110), Osmond G. Baker of New England (90) and Edward R. Ames of Ohio (89).¹⁴

Scott moved his family to Wilmington, Delaware, but he would spend long periods away from home in the exercise of his duties. Like the preachers they supervised, Methodist bishops were also itinerants, traveling around the country to superintend annual conference sessions, dedicate churches, and speak at camp meetings and special events. The traveling could be hard. Roads often were poor, and travel by rail or sail was hazardous. In 1858, while on an episcopal tour of the West Coast, he was aboard the steamer *Sierra Nevada* bound from San Francisco to Port Townsend, Washington Territory, when a storm severely damaged the ship, drowning one passenger and a number of livestock, and prompting the bishop to write his wife, “For four days it was doubtful whether any of us would ever see the land again.” On the next leg of his journey, he was aboard the steamer *Constitution*, when it ran aground in the Bay of Victoria.¹⁵

Compounding the risks of travel was the bishop’s delicate health. From an early age, he showed a susceptibility to sickness. Scott’s extant letters often speak of his being “prostrated” with illness for weeks or months at a time. Friends and colleagues marveled not only that he lived as long as he did, but that he was able to serve so long as an effective itinerant bishop. A colleague who knew him fifty years remarked that, in answer to questions about health, he never once recalled hearing “I am well” come from Scott’s lips. “He was never well,” the colleague continued; “[and] it was a perpetual doubt . . . whether his health was sufficient for the work. This was the weighty question when he was named for bishop.”¹⁶

¹³ Mitchell, 7-8; Kidder was Sunday school and tract editor in New York, 1848-1852.

¹⁴ The vote totals are not recorded in the official minutes, but may be found in *Fox and Hoyt’s Quadrennial Register of the Methodist Episcopal Church and Universal Church Gazetteer* (Hartford, CT: Case, Tiffany & Co., 1852), 130.

¹⁵ Levi Scott to Sarah Scott, July 24, 1858, Barratt’s Chapel Museum (Frederica, DE).

¹⁶ Mitchell, 268.

The Problem of Slavery

Yet another weighty question facing Scott upon his consecration as bishop was that of slavery, over which the nation—and the Methodist Episcopal Church—grew increasingly polarized in the 1850s. Of the four bishops elected in 1852, Levi Scott was the only one who had been reared in a slave state. The unique way slavery evolved in Delaware, coupled with Scott’s personal experiences, produced in him a genuine empathy toward free and enslaved blacks, while at the same time preventing him from embracing a full-fledged abolitionism.

In the 1600s, the early colonial settlements in Delaware were among the first of the future states of the Union to become heavily dependent on African slave labor. Indeed, in British-dominated North America, Delaware and New York became “the first significant homes of American slavery north of Spanish Florida.”¹⁷ With the American Revolution came the assertion of those self-evident truths of liberty, equality, and the natural rights of all people. The contradiction between slavery and the rhetoric of liberty was not lost on the founding generation; northern states which were not as heavily dependent on slave labor for their economy began passing laws allowing for a process of gradual emancipation, beginning with Pennsylvania in 1780. Delaware, however, would retain legally protected slavery, along with the states of the deep South, until the Civil War forced an end to the institution.¹⁸

Nevertheless, in Delaware slavery developed in a very different manner than it did elsewhere, and was already withering in Levi Scott’s youth. The state’s climate was not suited to growing cotton, nor did its land produce the best quality tobacco, the two most labor-intensive crops for which slavery was most profitably employed. Delaware’s primary cash crops were corn and wheat, grown largely for sale in the Philadelphia market. Farmers often found that it was cheaper to hire temporary workers than to house, feed and clothe slaves year-round.

In addition, the typical Delaware slave owner possessed a relative handful of slaves on a small family farm, and by necessity slave and master often worked the fields together. In the Delaware that Levi Scott knew growing up, blacks and whites, slave and free, worked, lived, and worshipped in close proximity, developing complex, even intimate, relationships across lines of race, as Scott’s conversion story demonstrates. Another blow to slavery came in the form of laws passed in Delaware, beginning in 1787, that effectively banned the sale of Delaware slaves beyond the state border. Over time this greatly reduced the economic value of the state’s enslaved population,

¹⁷ William H. Williams, *Slavery and Freedom in Delaware, 1639-1865* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1996), 9-10. The transatlantic slave trade, of course, was by this point more than a century old, and well established in the Caribbean and South America.

¹⁸ After Pennsylvania, the states which abolished slavery or provided for gradual emancipation were Vermont (1782), Massachusetts (1783), Rhode Island (1784), Connecticut (1784, 1787), New York (1784, 1817), and New Jersey (1804) (Williams, *Slavery*, 16-17, 162-163, 180).

undermining the long-term viability of slavery.¹⁹

There was also the influence of Methodism, which in its early days was second only to the Quakers in its outspoken opposition to slavery. Though later accommodating themselves to the institution, for years Methodist ministers preached against slavery, encouraged lay members to free their slaves, and even lobbied state legislatures to pass laws of emancipation.²⁰ In Delaware, the influence of early anti-slavery Methodism was profound, especially since the movement made early and significant inroads in converting the upper classes. Lay Methodists among the gentry, like Andrew Barratt and Richard Bassett, emancipated their slaves and became active in efforts to abolish the institution. Historian William Williams stated flatly, “most Delaware Methodists freed their slaves during the years 1775 to 1810.” By 1810, when Levi Scott was 8 years old, 76% of the black population of Delaware was free.²¹

In addition, African Americans had been the agents of Scott’s early faith formation. Already noted was his conversion in the home of free blacks Isaac and Betsey Carter. Scott also likely was present the summer after his conversion experience when evangelist Jarena Lee preached in the school house in Cantwell Bridge. The first black female preacher in the United States, Lee frequently crossed racial and denominational lines and was acclaimed by whites and blacks alike. In her 1849 autobiography, she describes preaching in Scott’s home town in July, 1823.²² Scott’s experiences at this formative stage of his faith instilled in him a respect for the spiritual and leadership capacities of blacks, which would be borne out in his work as a bishop in the 1850s and 1860s.

An incident from 1854 sheds light on his sympathies. A young preacher named Adam Wallace was in charge of the Northampton Circuit on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, during a time of increasing polarization over slavery and race. Wallace antagonized white members by reviving the customary quarterly reading of the General Rules of the ME Church, which included a prohibition against “the buying or selling the bodies and souls of men, women or children, with an intention to enslave them.” Worse, Wallace insisted that

¹⁹ Williams, *Slavery*, 13, 45-46, 88-89.

²⁰ On Methodism’s changing anti-slavery stance see Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton UP, 1965); see also Gordon Melton, *A Will to Choose: The Origins of African American Methodism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 23-32; and Richard K. MacMaster, “Liberty or Property? The Methodist Petition for Emancipation in Virginia, 1785,” *Methodist History* 10.3 (October, 1971): 44-55.

²¹ Williams, *Slavery*, 69-70, 150-152; John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 137-138. Richard Bassett, later a governor of Delaware and US Senator, convinced friends to free their slaves, and was a founder of the Delaware Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery (1788). Andrew Barratt was a leading attorney who held a variety of political leadership positions from 1780 to 1820.

²² Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee Giving Her Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia: For the Author, 1849), 27. She was on a preaching tour in Delaware that took her through Wilmington, New Castle, Christiana, Odessa/Canton Bridge (which she calls “Canton Bride”) and Smyrna.

black members of the churches come down from the galleries to the same altar as whites during communion services, and declared that “at this one point, all social distinction must vanish.” Congregants stormed out, and leading members pressured Wallace to change his ways, with the implied threat that he might be driven from town. Just then, Bishop Scott happened to visit the area during a tour of the Peninsula, and the question was put to him whether Wallace should send the elements to the galleries, as leading members demanded. As Wallace recalled it, Bishop Scott, “in his usually deliberative way, [said] ‘I would not do it.’” Such was the respect with which Scott was held by Methodists of the lower Peninsula that his decision stood, and Wallace remained at his post.²³

Gradual Emancipationist

Yet Scott was not an abolitionist, at least not a “modern abolitionist,” as detractors often described those aligned with the movement that William Lloyd Garrison and others brought to prominence in the 1830s. Scott’s attitude reflected the culture of the Philadelphia Conference in the antebellum period. In the 1830s and 1840s, as Garrisonian abolitionism pressed for immediate and uncompensated emancipation, the Philadelphia Conference found itself in a delicate position. Until after the end of the Civil War, the conference contained within its bounds both slave and free territory. Pennsylvania, of course, was a free state; and Philadelphia, home to the nation’s largest population of free blacks, was a center of refuge and relief for fugitives seeking liberty. But the conference also included the state of Delaware and the Eastern Shore territories of the slave states of Maryland and Virginia.

Scott had been a delegate to the General Conference of 1844, which ended in schism between northern and southern bodies. In the aftermath of the split, the Philadelphia Conference became a “border conference,” in which spiritual jurisdiction of its southernmost territories was bitterly contested by both branches of Methodism. Local churches divided, preachers were sometimes driven from town, and even mob violence marked church life among Methodists on the Delmarva Peninsula in the 1840s.²⁴ To retain the loyalty of its churches there, the Philadelphia Conference tried to steer a moderate course, rejecting both the pro-slavery theology that was becoming more strident and sophisticated in the south, and the abolitionist movement which was generating controversy in the north. By 1842, the conference developed a policy of excluding from its ministerial ranks both slave owners and outspoken abolitionists, thus avoiding both extremes in the debate: the “proslaveryists” on the one hand, and the “Ultra-abolitionists” on the other,

²³ Adam Wallace, *My Business Was to Fight the Devil: Recollections of Rev. Adam Wallace, Peninsula Circuit Rider, 1847-1865*, ed. Joseph F. DiPaolo (Acton, MA: Tapestry, 1998), 140-142.

²⁴ On violence among Methodists of the Eastern Shore after the split, see Emory Stevens Buck, gen. ed., *The History of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), 2:162-164.

as conference members often referenced the antagonists.²⁵

This position reflected the prevailing attitude among the preachers of the conference, who saw themselves as anti-slavery, but not abolitionist. Most would have voiced the view that slavery was an evil blight upon the land which ought to be abolished; yet they could not embrace “modern abolitionism,” which was thought too radical in its demand for immediate, uncompensated emancipation, and could only result in further schism and violence. Like many clergy and lay of that period, they believed that, as both slaves and owners were brought into the fold of the church, the influence of the gospel, coupled with the national ideals of liberty and equality, would eventually dismantle the institution. That Scott shared this perspective is confirmed by his son-in-law, who wrote:

The nation had seen the workings of gradual emancipation in the case of the Northern Slave States, and supposed that like policy would succeed in relieving the territory yet encumbered with slavery . . . The large majority of the nation were in that day gradual emancipationists . . . This was the position and view of Mr. Scott, and with him stood multitudes of the best men of the nation.²⁶

The problem was that, by the 1840s, slavery was growing more entrenched, not less. There had been a sea change in public opinion and in church culture between 1810 and 1850. Racial theories positing African inferiority were given pseudo-scientific bases that had not existed before. Anti-slavery societies in the south evaporated and northern states passed laws restricting or revoking black voting rights—including Pennsylvania, which disenfranchised its free black population in 1838. Pro-slavery theology acquired influential, intellectual spokesmen such as William Capers of South Carolina (later a bishop), and William A. Smith, president of Randolph-Macon College. On the Delmarva peninsula, blacks and whites ceased worshipping together as members of the same congregation, with African-Americans increasingly founding their own separate congregations. Men like Levi Scott, who had been reared in a border state and witnessed progress toward the elimination of slavery, did not seem to fully grasp how attitudes were hardening. They found themselves seeking to occupy a moderate, middle ground during an era of polarization in which the middle was fast dropping out.²⁷

²⁵ James Mayland McCarter, *Border Methodism and Border Slavery* (Philadelphia: Collins, 1858), 25-26. On antebellum attitudes within Methodism at large, see Matthews, *Slavery and Methodism*, op. cit.

²⁶ Mitchell, 61-62.

²⁷ As an example of the cultural shift, in 1826 the leadership of the circuit centered in Cambridge, Maryland, sent a resolution to the Philadelphia Conference declaring slavery a “national evil . . . [and] a most evident violation of the fundamental principles of Christianity,” and calling for an end to slavery. In 1861, the same quarterly conference called for a separation from the Pennsylvania portion of the conference to protect the “peculiar institution” (*Religious Messenger*, March 23, 1826; and petition dated March 24, 1861, in “Conference Papers,” in the Archive at St. George’s United Methodist Church [Philadelphia]).

The Colonization Movement

One way Scott funneled his anti-slavery impulses was through support for the colonization movement, which advocated that free blacks in America emigrate to Africa and create there a democratic republic which would demonstrate their competence for freedom and fitness for full citizenship in America. Largely through the efforts of the American Colonization Society (ACS), founded in 1816, the colony of Liberia was founded on the west coast of Africa in the 1820s, and soon established its capital at Monrovia (named for US President James Monroe). Between 1820 and 1860, some 10,000 African Americans relocated to Liberia, which adopted an American-style constitution in 1847, and elected its first president that same year.

The colonization movement has been criticized sharply, both during the nineteenth century and by modern historians, as simply providing cover for slaveholders whose real agenda was to rid themselves of troublesome free blacks. Other critics have dismissed the movement as salve for the guilty consciences of whites who sympathized with the enslaved, but could not bring themselves to embrace abolitionism. During the antebellum period, however, the picture was more complicated. Most African-Americans rejected colonization; not long after the ACS was founded, prominent African Methodist leader Richard Allen led a meeting in Philadelphia of 2,000 free blacks who publicly condemned the ACS, convinced that its agenda actually would prolong slavery. Some blacks, however, did support colonization, notably Daniel Coker, who along with Allen had been among the principal founders of the AME Church.²⁸

For many anti-slavery whites, colonization offered a way to demonstrate the capacity of African Americans for self-government, free from the fetters of slavery and discrimination so endemic in America. For other anti-slavery whites, the racism of society was so intractable that the only hope for a life of dignity and opportunity was to leave the United States.²⁹ This last line of thinking resonated within the black community for another reason: the tenuous nature of the liberty which even free blacks enjoyed in antebellum America. There was always the danger of being kidnapped, treated as fugitives and sold into bondage. In Delaware, the infamous Patty Cannon gang abducted scores of free blacks in the early decades of the century. Richard Allen himself was once abducted on a Philadelphia street, and nearly re-enslaved, only avoiding that fate because of his prominence in the city.³⁰

²⁸ Coker sailed to Liberia himself in 1820 among the first shipload of colonists. See Melton, *Will to Choose*, 72-24; and Rhonda R. Thomas, “Exodus and Colonization: Charting the Journey in the Journals of Daniel Coker, A Descendent of Africa,” *African American Review* 41.3 (2017): 507-520.

²⁹ Two recent histories of the colonization movement which differ in their assessment are: Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville: UP Florida, 2005); and Ousamane K. Power-Greene, *Against Wind and Tide: the African American Struggle against the Colonization Movement* (New York: New York UP, 2014).

³⁰ Williams, *Slavery*, 238-239; and Richard Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 159.

Bishop Scott supported the colonization movement, holding membership in the ACS for decades and supporting it financially. Several annual conferences endorsed the colonization movement, among them the Philadelphia Conference, which in 1834 appointed the fourth of July as the annual date for a conference-wide offering to benefit the ACS and affiliated bodies.³¹ The colonization movement continued to garner widespread support into the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln was an advocate, and appointed none other than Bishop Scott's son-in-law (and later biographer), Thomas Mitchell, as head of the Federal Emigration Office, charged with overseeing the administration's colonization policy. Mitchell spent two years in frustrating and unsuccessful efforts to resettle free blacks to colonies in the Caribbean and Latin America.³² Looking back years later at his and Bishop Scott's support of colonization, Mitchell admitted that the movement had been an attempt to "heal with half-measures," yet asserted—no doubt with some defensiveness—that it had been undertaken "in an unselfish spirit to avoid the evils of civil war, relieve the oppressed slave, and give Christian civilization to Africa."³³

Trip to Liberia

However we evaluate Scott's support of colonization, there can be no question of his concern for the men and women of color who emigrated to Africa. Among the first challenges he took on as a newly-elected bishop was a transatlantic trip to Liberia, to superintend the church's mission conference there. Many of the colonists were Methodists. Lay leaders among the settlers soon began asking for help from America, to support and staff congregations, and assist outreach efforts to the native population. In late 1832, the Missionary Society of the ME Church sent Rev. Melvin B. Cox as its first missionary to Liberia. Of frail health, Cox died of illness just months after arriving, but managed in that short time to establish a rudimentary conference structure, employing lay preachers already there. In 1836, the General Conference officially recognized the work in Liberia as a Mission Conference, the first to be so designated.³⁴

³¹ *Philadelphia Conference Minutes* (1834), 27-28.

³² Rev. James Mitchell (1808-1903) had married Bishop Scott's daughter Emma. Before the war, Mitchell worked full-time as Colonization Agent for the state of Indiana, and first met Abraham Lincoln in 1853. See Phillip W. Magness, "James Mitchell and the Mystery of the Emigration Office Papers," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 32.2 (September, 2011): 50-62; see also Philip W. Magness and Sebastian N. Page, *Colonization after Emancipation: Lincoln and the Movement for Black Resettlement* (Columbia: U Missouri P, 2011); and *Georgia Conference Minutes* (1904), 30.

³³ Mitchell, 247.

³⁴ On the Liberian Mission, see Wade Crawford Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions, Vol. 1: Missionary Motivation and Expansion* (New York: Board of Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Church, 1949), 1:325-344; and Wade Crawford Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions, Vol. 3: Widening Horizons* (New York: Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, 1957), 869-880; on Melville Cox, see Gershom F. Cox, ed., *Remains of Melville B. Cox, Late Missionary to Liberia: With a Memoir* (Boston: Light and Horton, 1835). Cox was famous for saying, "Let a thousand fall before Africa be given up!"

The mission in Liberia advanced fitfully over the years, hampered by lack of resources, frequent leadership changes (often due to disease), and complicated relations with native tribes. By the 1850s, the conference was without adequate leadership and direction from the mother Church, and was pressing for help. The 1852 General Conference gave considerable attention to the situation in Liberia. At its close, the board of bishops determined to send one of their number to Africa to personally inspect the work, offer guidance, and report back with recommendations. Newly-elected Bishop Levi Scott offered himself for the task, and plans were made for him to leave in the fall, to be present during the dryer, cooler, winter months.

Travel by sea was perilous, and the Liberian mission had already proven notoriously deadly to American missionaries, so Scott prepared to leave fully aware he might never return. After a tearful farewell to his family, he embarked from Baltimore on November 27, and spent six weeks aboard the bark *Shirley*, arriving at the harbor near Monrovia on January 6.³⁵ After his arrival, Scott toured the country, often in the company of Rev. Francis Burns, an émigré who was serving as a presiding elder, and had been in *de facto* charge of the conference. Scott remained in the country two months, touring its settlements, preaching in its churches, meeting with native leaders, examining financial and property matters, and inaugurating changes in the organization of the conference. Among his innovations was a reworking of the educational system for the children of both settlers and natives. Instead of American-style schools, which had difficulty retaining both students and teachers, Scott proposed a mentoring system in which not more than five children would lodge with a married preacher and his family for not less than four years, with funding and accountability to come through the office of the presiding elder. This system was followed successfully, and known for years as the “Scott Schools.”³⁶

On Monday, March 7, 1853, in Monrovia, Bishop Scott convened the annual session of the Liberia Annual Conference, with fifteen preachers in attendance the first day. The conference lasted eight days, and was the first presided over by a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church outside the continental United States. On the second day of the conference, Scott received into full conference membership ordained elders of the AME Church, ruling that “the spirit of the *Discipline*, though not the letter,” allowed for this precedent. On Sunday, March 13, “under the shade of tamarind and mango-plum trees . . . [before] a large and attentive congregation,” he ordained thirteen deacons and eight elders—the first time that black preachers in the ME Church were ordained and received into full membership during

³⁵ Scott kept a journal of his voyage, much of which is transcribed and included verbatim in Mitchell’s biography, covering 80 of its 272 pages. A date book for 1853 with daily notes, probably used by Scott as a basis for his journal narrative, as well as a portion of the original handwritten journal itself which Mitchell transcribed, are in the collection at Barratt’s Chapel Museum (Frederica, DE).

³⁶ Barclay, 3:877-878.

an annual conference session.³⁷

Scott departed from Liberia on March 18, again aboard the *Shirley*, this time accompanied by a pet monkey he was given on shore, whom he named “Afric.” The monkey apparently helped relieve the monotony of the voyage for the good bishop, who writes of nursing the animal through a bout of sickness—which included “a half-gill of port wine” that left the monkey somewhat tipsy. Scott arrived in Baltimore harbor on May 10.³⁸ According to historian Wade Crawford Barclay, Scott’s visit to Liberia “served in large part to revitalize the work and hearten the workers.”³⁹ To this day, the Mount Scott United Methodist Church, in Maryland County, Liberia, is named in honor of Bishop Scott. For his part, Scott seems to have been profoundly affected by the visit. In a speech before the Missionary Society after his return, Scott said,

I preached at all the different settlements, and I found there the same God and the same religion which I enjoyed in my native land. I spent many joyous and happy days among these sons of Ham. I confess frankly, that while there, I lost all prejudice on account of color, and had not the peculiarity of the climate been such as to require me to sleep on board the vessel, I would have lodged with them most cheerfully.⁴⁰

Upon his return, Scott made several recommendations. Among them was a call for stronger supervision of the conference from among the colonists themselves, rather than by appointed white missionaries. While still in Liberia, Scott had written in his journal:

There is a great need of firm, vigorous and judicious [church] government here. We must have a superintendent, white or colored, and I incline strongly to the latter Before a white superintendent can get his plans fully matured or carried into practical effect, his health declines, and he dies or leaves the country. Then, after a longer or shorter interval, another comes, and some new measures are adopted and carried into half effect; then another, etc I find, too, that our people here desire a colored superintendent. They cannot see why this may not be when all their civil and military officers are colored men.⁴¹

Accordingly, delegates to the next General Conference, held in 1856, voted to create the office of Missionary Bishop, to allow the Liberian Conference to elect its own episcopal leader, whose authority to preside would be limited to the continent of Africa. Because this required a constitutional

³⁷ The 1853 Liberia conference session is covered in Mitchell, 135-139; also *Journals of the Liberian Annual Conference, M.E. Church, 1851-1853* (Typescript copy at GCAH, Madison, NJ), 15-29. The latter also includes a transcript of Scott’s opening address on March 7.

³⁸ Mitchell, 140-149, contains Scott’s journal of his return voyage. He also was given a parrot. It is not clear what Bishop Scott did with either the monkey or the parrot after returning the United States.

³⁹ Barclay, 3:878

⁴⁰ “Remarks of Bishop Scott,” *African Repository*, vol. 30 (Washington: C. Alexander, 1854), 180-182.

⁴¹ Mitchell, 105. Excerpts of Scott’s report to the Society may be found in *Thirty-Fifth Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: 1854), 105-110.

change, concurring votes of the annual conferences were required. Once these were obtained, the Liberian Conference elected to the episcopacy Francis Burns, who had been singled out for his faithfulness and competence by Bishop Scott. Burns came to the United States for his consecration at the hands of his fellow bishops in 1858, and was the first African-American bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church.⁴²

Convention of Colored Preachers

The 1856 General Conference took yet another significant action that would affect the status of black preachers in the Methodist Episcopal Church, and in which Scott would play an important role. In its 1848 session, a petition had been presented to authorize bishops to convene and preside over annual conferences of black preachers. Delegates demurred that year, but authorized bishops to “employ colored preachers . . . where their services are considered necessary.” Four years later, a similar petition was received, and the General Conference again declined to create annual conferences in which black preachers could enjoy full clergy status. However, it did authorize bishops to convene an annual assembly of black lay preachers, for the purpose of “promoting . . . and . . . assigning them their work.” No bishop did so, though a “Convention of Colored Pastors” was held in Philadelphia’s Zoar ME Church that year, without episcopal supervision.⁴³

Pressure was building to raise the status of African-American ministers because of competition from the AME, AME Zion, and other black denominations, in which congregations enjoyed self-governance, and preachers were eligible for full ordination as clergy, and for service as presiding elders, bishops and denominational officials. Put simply, the MEC was in danger of losing its black members. In 1856, delegates added a paragraph to the *Discipline*, “Of the Rights and Privileges of our Colored Members,” affirming the full and equal privileges of black members in quarterly conference meetings, the basic administrative unit for local churches. They also reaffirmed the authorization for gatherings of black lay preachers, passed four years before.⁴⁴

This time, just such a convention was held, presided over by none other than Bishop Levi Scott. On August 5, 1857, Scott convened a “Conference of Colored Local Preachers,” in Philadelphia’s Zoar ME Church. Nineteen black preachers were present for the two-day conference, hailing from eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and the Delmarva Peninsula. In attendance

⁴² Barclay, 3:880-881; James M. Buckley, *Constitutional and Parliamentary History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1912), 222-227; and William R. Phinney, *From Chore Boy to Bishop: The Story of Francis Burns, First Missionary Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Commission on Archives and History, 1970).

⁴³ *Journals of the General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Vol. III: 1848-1856* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1856), 1848: 35, 130 and 1852:65; and *Minutes of the Convention of Colored Pastors of the Methodist Episcopal Church Convened in Zoar Church, Philadelphia* (1852), reprinted in Lewis Y. Cox, *Pioneer Footsteps* (Cape May, NJ: Star and Wave Press, 1917), 5-10.

⁴⁴ *Journals of the General Conferences*, op. cit., 1856:183.

also were six white presiding elders from the Philadelphia and New Jersey Conferences. On the second day, Scott was called upon to rule whether the convention had authority to elect and ordain men as deacons and elders. Scott ruled that it did not, as “the General Conference had conferred no such power, and that election to orders would be attended to by the Annual Conferences as heretofore.”

Save ordination, the assembly had all the hallmarks of an annual conference session: the appointment of officers, including a secretary to keep an official journal of proceedings; committee reports; worship and preaching; establishment of a course of study for preachers under appointment; and a directive that an annual collection be taken to support needy and ailing preachers. “The greatest harmony and good feeling prevailed,” Scott reported to the New York *Christian Advocate*; and he also sent a list of the appointments of the preachers to their circuits, as with any other conference session.⁴⁵ Six more such conventions would be held annually through 1863, all under the care of Bishop Scott, and either presided over by him, or delegated to another minister in his stead.

The conventions represented a step forward for black preachers within the Methodist Episcopal Church, but still did not allow for full conference membership and clergy rights. This would come sooner than most imagined possible, but only amid the massive changes brought on by the Civil War. Once again, Bishop Scott would play a leading role.

Divisions in Church and State

By the beginning of 1861, the Union was coming apart. The election of Abraham Lincoln the previous November was regarded by the southern states as a threat to an economic system based on unfree labor. In December, South Carolina passed an ordinance of secession, paving the way for the ten other states that would soon coalesce as the Confederate States of America. Even as various national leaders attempted compromise, and many predicted a bloodless division (or reconciliation) of the nation, Bishop Scott’s assessment was more sober and realistic. In a letter to his friend Henry Slicer in January he wrote:

Our loved and boasted Union is no more! I cannot realize it, but it is in my judgment true. Compromises would avail almost nothing. The South do[es] not want compromises—would laugh at the North if she should make them and the North is not likely to make them. So here we are. A Southern Confederacy or war—or a Southern Confederacy and war. Either way, war in my judgment is inevitable. The only rest I can find for the sole of my foot is just here: “The Lord reigneth” and the “wrath of man shall praise him.”⁴⁶

In the Methodist Episcopal Church, the same centrifugal forces were threatening to divide the denomination for a second time in less than twenty years. The focus of the controversy this time was the so-called “New Chap-

⁴⁵ *Christian Advocate*, August 13, 1857.

⁴⁶ Levi Scott to Henry Slicer, January 10, 1861, Bridwell Library (Dallas).

ter” on slavery, added to the *Book of Discipline* at the General Conference of 1860. The General Rules of the ME Church had since 1784 prohibited “the buying or selling the bodies and souls of men, women or children, with an intention to enslave them”—but did not mention “mere” ownership. This omission allowed both members and preachers to remain in good standing with the church, if they had inherited slaves, or bought them before being converted, or purchased them to rescue them from a cruel master. Anti-slavery activists pressed the General Conference of 1860 to amend the rules to prohibit “holding” slaves—which would subject slave owners in border areas like the Eastern Shore to disciplinary action. They were not able to muster quite enough votes to change the General Rule itself (which required a supermajority), but did persuade a majority of delegates to add a paragraph which became known as the “New Chapter:”

We believe that the buying, selling, or holding of human beings, to be used as chattels, is contrary to the laws of God and nature, and is inconsistent with the Golden Rule and with that Rule in our Discipline which requires all who desire to continue among us to “do no harm,” and to “avoid evil of every kind.” We therefore affectionately admonish all our Preachers and People to keep themselves pure from this great evil, and to seek its extirpation by all lawful and Christian means.⁴⁷

There was an immediate reaction from the border conferences in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Western Virginia, Kentucky and Missouri. Fearing the new language meant a change in the terms of membership, and possible church trials of slave-owning members, churches and circuits sent petitions to their upcoming conference sessions, demanding the repeal of the New Chapter—and threatening secession. For their part, the bishops sought to reassure members in the border conferences that the new language was advisory, and not juridical, in nature. Scott’s own views, published in the *Christian Advocate* that spring, stated flatly, “the New Chapter . . . has *no administrative force as law*.” However, Scott also made it clear that the language was intended to instruct and guide the church forward: “The substituted chapter . . . proclaims the belief, doctrine or sentiment of the Church . . . [which], taken in connection with the following affectionate admonition, as also with its position in the Discipline, cannot fail to have great effect. The nature and extent of that effect time alone can reveal.”⁴⁸

For now, however, the effect was to further divide the Methodist Episcopal Church. By the time the Philadelphia Conference convened for its March, 1861 session, more than a thousand members on its southernmost district had withdrawn their membership, and all its churches below the Virginia State line had seceded to set up an independent “convention.”⁴⁹ But all eyes were on the Baltimore Conference, which included territory in north-

⁴⁷ *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (1860), 266.

⁴⁸ Levi Scott, “The New Chapter,” *Christian Advocate* (New York), May 9, 1861; italics original.

⁴⁹ *Christian Advocate*, April 4, 1861. For an account of church secessions on the Virginia shore see Kirk Mariner, *Revival’s Children: A Religious History of Virginia’s Eastern Shore* (Salisbury, MD: Peninsula Press, 1979), 115-121.

ern Virginia, and which seemed poised to vote itself out of the ME Church *en masse*. It fell to Bishop Scott to superintend the annual session, which opened on March 13, 1861, in Staunton, Virginia.

On the first day, petitions of protest were presented, including one declaring that Baltimore could no longer remain under the jurisdiction of the General Conference. Regular business began the next morning, and for two days, members submitted one question of law after another to Bishop Scott, to clarify the meaning and implications of the New Chapter for the life of the conference. Scott's answers were consistent with his interpretation that nothing had changed regarding the rules on membership or ordination.⁵⁰

On the following Wednesday, however, Scott refused to ordain a young man named E. F. Heterick who said that his willingness to take on vows of ordination would not include submission to the New Chapter on slavery. Scott ruled that he could not ordain anyone who took his vows "with protest or exception, whether that protest or exception refers to the New Chapter or any other Chapter of the Discipline." The major challenge came on Saturday, March 23, amid great emotion. "Virginia state flags . . . [were] waving over the hotels and many private residences," a participant later recalled. "Political and ecclesiastical excitement . . . [was] at white heat at Staunton."⁵¹ A resolution was put forward protesting the New Chapter, and severing relations between the Baltimore Conference and the ME Church. Bishop Scott refused to put the resolution to a vote, or to adjourn the session to allow it meet as a "convention" to endorse the petition. The secretary of the conference, John S. Martin, called for a vote anyway. The measure passed overwhelmingly, after which Bishop Scott declared,

The whole action just had on what is called Rev. N. Wilson's proposition, is, in my judgment, in violation of the order and Discipline of the ME Church, and, therefore, is null and void regarded as Conference action. I therefore do not recognize said action as infracting the integrity of this body, and so I proceed to finish the business of the present session.⁵²

And so he did, completing its business, reading the preachers' appointments for the coming year, and adjourning the body on Monday, March 25. Despite the contentious nature of the session, a majority passed a resolution of thanks to Bishop Scott for "the ability, impartiality and kindness with which he has presided over our deliberations, during the embarrassments of the present session." During the next year, 66 clergy members and most of the churches in Northern Virginia withdrew from the Baltimore conference, which saw its membership numbers drop from 43,581 in 1861 to just 18,679

⁵⁰ S. V. Leech, "Bishop Scott's Memorable Conference at Staunton, Virginia, in *Christian Advocate*, July 29, 1886; *Baltimore Conference Minutes* (1861), 5-9; and "Proceedings of the Baltimore Conference," in *Christian Advocate*, March 21, 28, and April 4, 1861. For an account of Baltimore Conference's secession movement see Homer L. Clakin, "The Slavery Struggle, 1780-1865," *Those Incredible Methodists: A History of the Baltimore Conference of the United Methodist Church* (Baltimore: Commission on Archives and History, 1972), 218-224.

⁵¹ Leech, *op. cit.*

⁵² *Baltimore Conference Minutes* (1861), 21.

in 1862.⁵³

In a letter he sent shortly afterward to his friend Henry Slicer, who was present at the Staunton conference, Scott offered his own assessment of the episode. “The Baltimore Conference on the back view seems . . . an instance [that] . . . will stand in history when fact was stranger than fiction. It has no parallel in the past; the future only can reveal whether it will have its like [again].” Nonetheless, Scott reported with gratitude, “the singular kindness with which I was treated both by the members of the body & by the citizens of Staunton, who yet generally I believe sympathized strongly with those who desired immediate separation.” He then mused darkly, “I cannot bear the thought that the ploughshare of confusion and war should be driven through the fair fields of the Baltimore Conference and of the Border.”⁵⁴ Less than two weeks later, with the confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter, the war came.

War Bishop

With the outbreak of hostilities, the bishops, along with the great mass of the lay and clergy of the northern church, were swept up in the ensuing tide of indignation, patriotism, and war fever. Bishop Scott’s public support of the war effort, however, was more muted than that of his colleagues, especially Bishops Simpson and Ames. Perhaps due in part to his southern roots, Scott appears to have more anguished over the bloodletting, and far less optimistic than many at this early period for a speedy end to the conflict. “I cannot but think that the North and the South are moving under a mutual mistake,” he wrote in May, 1861: “Neither appreciates the other at its full value for purpose, valor, [and] resources. The future looks very dark to me—full of confusion, suffering [and] blood.”⁵⁵

Scott was also not enthusiastic about a policy instituted by Ames and Simpson capitalizing on Union army advances to reassert the Methodist Episcopal Church’s position in the South. By 1863, the war had devastated the southern branch of Methodism. As Union armies occupied ever larger portions of southern territory, many congregations of the ME Church, South scattered, its clergy either serving with the Confederate army or in self-imposed exile. Church buildings in many places lay empty, or were used as barracks or hospitals by the army. To many leaders of the northern church who had never accepted the legitimacy of the 1844 split, the advance of Union armies was an opportunity to re-establish a presence in the South. As Mathew Simpson put it: “There is no such Church as the Methodist Church North. Ours is the Methodist Episcopal Church. We are not sectional.” The South, therefore, was a legitimate mission field, and its abandoned churches

⁵³ *Baltimore Conference Minutes* (1861), 22; and William Warren Sweet, *The Methodist Episcopal Church and the Civil War* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1912), 49.

⁵⁴ Levi Scott to Henry Slicer, April 1, 1861, Lovely Lane Museum (Baltimore).

⁵⁵ Levi Scott to Henry Slicer, May 24, 1861, Bridwell Library (Dallas); and Mitchell, 168.

fair game for the bishops to reclaim.⁵⁶

In 1863, Bishop Ames met with Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, to enlist the aid of military authorities. Ames managed to obtain an order directing generals in the departments of Missouri, Tennessee, and the Gulf to turn over to him “all houses of worship belonging to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in which a loyal minister, who has been appointed by a loyal bishop of said church . . . does not officiate.” By the end of the year similar orders were issued in other military departments on behalf of Bishops Janes and Simpson, and by war’s end several dozen northern preachers were under appointment to mission churches in the south.⁵⁷ Few other acts served more to embitter relations between the two branches of Episcopal Methodism. Not all in the northern church, however, were in favor of the seizures, among them Bishop Scott. In a letter to Bishop Simpson about mission efforts in the Norfolk and Portsmouth, Virginia, areas, Scott indicated his disapproval of seizing southern churches. “We might by aid of [the] military take the church,” he wrote, “but I can have no part in that policy.”⁵⁸

Although he opposed using military authorities as allies, Scott nonetheless supported efforts to establish mission churches and conferences in the South, especially among the newly freed slaves. The 1864 General Conference, held in Philadelphia, empowered the bishops “when in their judgment they deem it expedient . . . to organize a conference or conferences in the southern states and in the territories.”⁵⁹ The General Conference also allocated funds for the mission to the south, and elected three new bishops to help manage its expanded territorial ambitions: Edward Thomson, Calvin Kingsley, and Davis W. Clark. The first to be created was the Holston Conference, established in Tennessee in June, 1865, by Bishop Clark. In December, 1866, in Portsmouth, Virginia, Levi Scott organized the Virginia and North Carolina Conference with just fourteen elders, the fifth southern mission conference established in the subjugated south by the Methodist Episcopal Church.⁶⁰ By the time the 1868 General Conference convened, nine such mission conferences had been created in the south—and were integrated affairs, served by both black and white preachers and presiding elders.⁶¹

Clergy Status for African Americans

Amid the excitements and dislocations caused by the war, the internal debate over slavery, race and the status of blacks within the ME Church faded into the background for a time. With the advance of the armies, however,

⁵⁶ Simpson is quoted in James Kirby, “The McKendree Chapel Affair,” in *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 25.4 (Winter, 1966): 360. On the story of the MEC’s mission to the South, see Barclay, 3:299-324; and Emory S. Bucke, gen. ed., *The History of American Methodism*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), 2:247-251.

⁵⁷ Barclay, 3:302, and Kirby, 361-362.

⁵⁸ Levi Scott to Matthew Simpson, March 10, 1864, St. George’s UMC Archive (Philadelphia).

⁵⁹ Barclay, 304.

⁶⁰ The conference was formally organized January 3, 1867; Mitchell, 175, 218-219.

⁶¹ Barclay, 3:309.

and especially with the advent of emancipation in 1863, pressure increased to extend full clergy status to black preachers. When the quadrennial General Conference convened in Philadelphia in May, 1864, a major focus of its deliberations was outreach and ministry among African Americans, both the newly freed slaves of the south, and the free blacks of the border conferences.

The body finally amended the General Rules to prohibit slaveholding, as well as the buying and selling of slaves, something the abolitionist wing had sought for years. It also created a “Committee on the State of the Work Among People of Color,” which recommended that “the bishops be . . . authorized to organize among our colored ministers, for the benefit of our colored members and population, Mission Conferences—one or more—where in their godly judgement the exigencies of the work may demand it.” The plan was approved by delegates, who also created and outlined the boundaries of the first two: the Washington Conference, covering “Western Maryland, the District of Columbia, Virginia, and the territory south”; and the Delaware Conference, taking in the area “north and west of the Washington Conference.”⁶²

The first to convene was the Delaware Conference, which met for its founding session in Philadelphia, July 28-31, 1864, superintended by Bishop Edmund S. Janes, and assisted by Bishop Simpson. For the first time in the United States, black preachers were ordained, made full members of an annual conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and appointed to serve as presiding elders. Though Bishop Scott was not part of the proceedings, the Delaware Conference was built directly upon the structures and procedures he had established during his supervision of the previous seven annual sessions of the Conventions of Colored Local Preachers.⁶³

Scott undoubtedly would have been present but for another bout of debilitating illness. In a letter to Rev. N. J. B. Morgan of Baltimore dated July 30, he wrote that he had been “very sick—am convalescing, but feeble.” Nonetheless, the formation of the new conferences was very much on his mind, and he told Morgan of his intention to open the Washington Conference in Baltimore in late October.⁶⁴ The situation in Maryland was quite different than that of Pennsylvania, which had long been a free state. Since Maryland had remained loyal to the Union, its slaves had not been freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, which applied only to territory controlled by the Confederacy. Nevertheless, under pressure from the Lincoln Administration, Maryland political leaders saw the handwriting on the wall, and in

⁶² *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Held in Philadelphia, Pa., 1864* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1864), 167, 217, 224, 440, 487.

⁶³ Lewis W. Baldwin, “The Convention of Colored Local Preachers: Forerunner of the Delaware Annual Conference,” in *Commemorative Booklet: Delaware Annual Conference, 1864-1965* (Dover: Peninsula Conference Commission on Archives and History, 1990), 10-15; *Delaware Conference Minutes* (1864); David W. Brown, *Freedom From Within: A History of the Delaware Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church* ([Philadelphia]: 2010).

⁶⁴ Levi Scott to N. J. B. Morgan, July 30, 1864, Lovely Lane Archive (Baltimore).

1864 adopted a new constitution that abolished the “peculiar institution,” to take effect on November 1 of that year.

On October 27, Bishop Scott convened the founding session of the Washington Conference, in Baltimore’s Sharp Street ME Church. For the first time in a slave state, black preachers were welcomed into full membership in an annual conference, and ordained deacons and elders, with full rights as clergy members of the Methodist Episcopal Church. On October 30 and 31, Scott ordained four deacons and two elders, and at the session’s close read the appointments for the coming year, which included two black presiding elders: Benjamin Brown, assigned to oversee twelve charges on the Chesapeake District; and James H. Harper, superintending nine more on the Potomac District.⁶⁵

Deeply aware of the historic nature of the event, Bishop Scott addressed the body at the close of the session on October 31, a synopsis of which was recorded by the secretary, Benjamin Brown. Scott began by noting how, “for the first time, they [the African Americans of Maryland] had exercised the function of a conference, . . . elected men to orders, and admitted preachers on trial and had, in their midst, the first transferred colored preacher . . . The beginning of a conference, it is true, is small, but who can tell what, by the blessing of God, it may become?” He then went on reflect on the fact that the new State Constitution would take effect on the same day the body would disperse to fan out across the state to proclaim the glad tidings of salvation:

the day on which the first Annual Conference of Colored Preachers of the Methodist Episcopal Church, ever held in the state of Maryland, closes, is the day on which the dominion of slavery ceases. Ninety thousand of your brethren . . . will lie down tonight—if indeed they do lie down—with the Manacles of Slavery upon them; but when the midnight hour shall strike, even as the angel came and unloosed Peter, and he arose a free man, so shall their chains fall off, and these thousands shall rise to the dignity of free men.

Scott then encouraged the assembly “to prove to the world their capacity for self-government, and their worthiness of the great boon which God had so mercifully granted them.”

While the Delaware and Washington Conferences brought full ordination and conference membership for black preachers, they still were segregated by race, and under the care of white bishops. Not all were in favor of this approach. Rev. Gilbert Haven of New England (later a bishop) argued against separate conferences in favor of full integration, and called for rejecting any “doctrine of caste” within the church.⁶⁶ Though sources are scant, it does appear that most black Methodists welcomed these bodies as a first step on the road to eventual full integration; for them, and for Bishop Scott, it was a matter of advancing principle in a pragmatic manner. In the face of deep-seated societal racism, many believed it impossible to integrate black and white

⁶⁵ *Washington Conference Minutes* (1864).

⁶⁶ William B. Gravely, *Gilbert Haven, Methodist Abolitionist* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 129-132.

preachers within the existing structures of the church. Black preachers serving black congregations would be the most effective and fruitful way to retain and serve its black membership, and segregated conferences the only way to full clergy status for blacks in a communion where many of its clergy and laity, especially in the border conferences, were not yet willing to accept it.

While Scott’s approach did elevate the status of African Americans within the church, it did, in the end, have the effect of institutionalizing segregation, and delaying for a century a fully integrated denomination. In fact, the precedent of the Washington and Delaware Conferences was used to introduce segregation among the southern mission conferences, which initially had been composed of black and white preachers serving in the same bodies.⁶⁷

Post-War Era

In the years following the war, Scott continued to suffer from periodic episodes of confinement due to poor health, but remained remarkably active nonetheless. In fact, his responsibilities actually increased, as the number of southern mission conferences grew—and especially after the deaths of four of his episcopal colleagues in 1870 and 1871, reducing the number of effective bishops to just four. At age 69, Bishop Scott was responsible in 1871 to superintend sixteen annual conference sessions all around the country. Relief came at the General Conference of 1872, which elected eight new bishops to help lead the church.⁶⁸

During this period, Bishop Scott continued to support the development of the newly established conferences for its black constituency. He presided over the annual sessions of the Delaware Conference in 1865, 1870, 1871, 1872, 1877 and 1879, and the Washington Conference in 1866. In a letter he sent to Bishop Simpson in February, 1867, Scott wrote, “I organized on Christmas Day the Centenary Biblical Institute in Balt[imore] for the education of col[ore]d ministers.”⁶⁹ The new school opened its doors in January, 1867, with twenty students, under the instruction of two conference ministers, Revs. James H. Brown and William Hardin. In 1875, the school began admitting women, and expanded its mission to train teachers. This is the origin of today’s Morgan State University, the largest historically black university in Maryland.⁷⁰

Bishop Levi Scott died at his home on morning of July 13, 1882. His

⁶⁷ In the years after the Civil War, the mission conferences established in the south were systematically divided by race, a process that was completed by 1895, at which time the more than 226,000 black members of the ME Church were entirely organized into segregated conferences. Barclay, 3:314-321.

⁶⁸ Mitchell, 182-183. Bishops Edward Thomson and Calvin Kingsley died in 1870; and 1871 saw the passing of Davis W. Clark and Osman C. Baker (Baker had been on limited duty since suffering debilitating illness in 1866). In addition, Bishop Thomas Morris had retired due to poor health in 1864.

⁶⁹ Levi Scott to Matthew Simpson, February 22, 1867, St. George’s UMC Archive (Philadelphia).

⁷⁰ Wanda E. Gill, *The History of Maryland’s Historically Black Colleges* (1992), 32-37; full text online at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED347887.pdf>; and Edward N. Wilson, *The History of Morgan State College: A Century of Purpose in Action, 1867-1967* (New York: Vantage Press, 1975).

last words reportedly were “Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.” His funeral was held four days later, led by Bishops Matthew Simpson and Edward G. Andrews. The principal address was delivered by Bishop Simpson, with whom Scott had been elected to the episcopacy 29 years before. Simpson paid tribute to the quiet, steady leadership of his colleague, especially during the turmoil of the 1850s and 1860s, calling Scott “a wise, careful, and judicious overseer of God’s Church.” Simpson also spent a significant portion of his tribute focusing on Scott’s concern for and commitment to the uplift of African Americans in the church and beyond, declaring that Bishop Scott “had wide views and a loving heart.”⁷¹ Bishop Scott was laid to rest beside his beloved Sarah in the cemetery of Old Union Church near Odessa, where he had first worshipped as a child. A marble obelisk marks the spot where Levi Scott awaits the last trumpet call.

Conclusion

Though hardly remembered today, Levi Scott had a significant impact on the development of American Methodism, especially as it dealt with issues of color, caste and inclusion. While other leaders preached, lectured or wrote in support of emancipation and the empowerment of people of color, Scott was directly and consistently engaged with free and enslaved African Americans throughout his career as an institutional leader. The term “social justice” was not then in vogue, yet it could fairly be said to describe the actual conduct of Scott’s ministry. In the context of his times, Scott acted on behalf of African Americans in the church in ways that no persons of color were able to do, and few other white leaders did. He helped raise the status, standing and educational opportunities for African Americans, though admittedly in a manner that helped perpetuate segregation for decades. An active participant in the controversies that divided the church in the 1840s, he also provided steady and determined leadership to his church during the tumultuous days of the Civil War and reconstruction. Scott’s leadership skills, eloquence, and sober judgment made him an effective preacher, administrator and episcopal leader for more than fifty years. Levi Scott deserves a larger place in the collective memory of the people called Methodist.

⁷¹ Mitchell, 260-261.