

**“THE COLLISIONS BETWEEN US AND THEM”:
METHODISM’S INTERNAL DIVISIONS ON THE
CANADIAN BORDER DURING THE WAR OF 1812**

SAMUEL ALONZO DODGE

In April of 1815, the Reverend William Black wrote an anxious letter to his colleague Daniel Smith. “It is now a long time since I had a line from you,” he wrote. “I am solicitous to hear of your welfare, and the state of religion in the States, and more especially of the state of the Methodists.” Black then proceeded to inundate his American counterpart with questions: “Is Bro Asbury still able to travel? Are preachers & members increasing in numbers and graces? Is the mode and discipline of the church as formerly? Are the preachers united?”¹ Black had emigrated to Canada in 1774 and spent most of his ministry in that region, whereas Smith began preaching in New England in 1791 before moving his work to South Carolina.² Both Black and Smith were veterans of the evangelical crucible in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Both had seen Methodism pass through years of persecution, suspicion, and marginalization, eventually to emerge as the single largest denomination in North America.³

The fact that both Black and Smith were at the center of Methodism’s rise makes the apparent concern found in Black’s letter more intriguing. Black wrote his letter shortly after news of the Treaty of Ghent reached North America. Indeed, Black had opened his letter by congratulating Smith “on the return of peace, the restoration of commerce and friendly offers between the different nations lately so hostile to each other.”⁴ Black’s litany of questions indicates that the War of 1812 disrupted the communication between Methodist colleagues to some degree. Furthermore, Black’s concern regarding preacher unity suggests that the war may have had repercussions for Methodists beyond mere logistical concerns.

Prior to the war, Methodists across the United States and Upper Canada displayed a coordination of missionary efforts that had led to so much growth

¹ Reverend William Black to Reverend Dan Smith, April 17, 1815: Correspondence, Drew University Methodist Collection, 1646-5-1:25.

² Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America*, vol. II *The Planning and Training of American Methodism* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1867), 42-45, 380-382, 438-439.

³ The growth was so rapid that in 1775 less than one out of every 800 Americans was a Methodist, whereas by 1812 one out of every 36 Americans claimed the faith. See Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 236-237; John Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 3.

⁴ William Black to Dan Smith, April 17, 1815.

that subsequent generations referred to the post-Revolutionary period as the “Methodist Age.”⁵ After the war, Methodist congregations across Western New York and Canada bickered with one another, threatened unpopular preachers, and divided along British and American nationalistic lines.

The influence of the United States’ second war with Britain is often difficult to determine. At the end of the conflict, the principal grievances stated by the Madison administration—the impressment of American sailors, British aggression along the frontier, and the right to free and open trade with France—remained unresolved. Furthermore, the War of 1812 was a relatively short conflict with relatively few casualties.⁶ However, the war was not without significance, especially regarding the intersections of multiple national and cultural identities. The wartime experiences of Black and Smith constituted more than the hardships of simple Methodist preachers caught in the middle of an international conflict; both men were parts of larger political cultures. Their statuses as citizen and subject intersected with their identities as Methodists in ways that shaped the meaning of the war for them and those with whom they came in contact.

Common men and women across North America held multiple facets of identity that intersected in the War of 1812. Any comprehensive study of the effects of the War of 1812 should address the multiple vectors of identity where the greatest effects of the conflict were most acutely manifested; religion is one such vector. In the case of the Methodists, the War of 1812 brought a rise in nationalist sentiments in Western New York, Canada, and Britain that in turn introduced fissures into the denomination that took years to repair.

Unfortunately, most studies of the War of 1812 fail to acknowledge its relationship to historical religious practice and instead focus on larger political or national culture issues. Alan Taylor’s otherwise excellent 2010 work, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, & Indian Allies*, is one such study. Taylor examines the war in relation to nineteenth-century political and national identity as it unfolded in Western New York and Upper Canada. Taylor’s selection of Upper Canada and Western New York as the center of his study is a good choice. That area experienced a greater portion of the war’s campaigns than any other geographical region. Furthermore, Upper Canada and Western New York’s populations were heavily mixed between British subjects and American transplants; settlers of both areas frequently crossed the border to settle.

According to Taylor, the concept of naturalization and choosing inherent citizenship in the new American Republic struck British minds as irrational; Brits regarded subjecthood as a permanent condition that could not be aban-

⁵ Donald Mathew, “Evangelical America: The Methodist Ideology,” in *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Russell Richey, Kenneth Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1993), 17.

⁶ From the American side, out of a nation of 7.2 million people, the war took only 2,260 lives. See Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 2012), x.

doned, independent of crown sanction. Nevertheless, in Upper Canada and Western New York, “allegiance was slippery and suspect where so many people had crossed boundaries in geography and identity.”⁷ The allegiance demanded by the War of 1812, Taylor argues, “raised the stakes in the conflict over subjects and citizens,” and when peace came, the hardened identifying loyalties remained.⁸ Curiously, even though Methodism flourished in the region, Taylor spends little time discussing religion’s relationship with the conflict. When he does devote some attention to the topic, he reduces religious expression to an extension of political contention. Similar to the position taken by Neil Semple, Taylor argues that the largely Anglican politicians and military commanders from Britain publicly tolerated Methodists, while in private they voiced their suspicions that the sect was subversive to crown rule. Methodists in turn resented unaccommodating British officials and self-righteously continued to assert their political and social legitimacy.⁹ Because Taylor guides his study primarily with political questions concerning identity, he sees religion as an expression of political motives, rather than a motivator in itself or an epistemological paradigm that shaped how Americans, the British, and Canadians would have interpreted the conflict.

Similar to Taylor’s work, a 1994 Canadian history by George Sheppard entitled *Plunder, Profit, and Paroles: A Social History of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada* examines the effect of the war upon Canadian nationalism. Like Taylor, Sheppard finds a fluidity of identity in Upper Canada at the coming of the war. However, where Taylor finds a hardening of national sentiments as a result of the war, Sheppard places that identity consolidation further into the nineteenth century. Sheppard argues that the inhabitants of the Upper Canadian province did not embrace the war effort in any substantial way. Upper Canada was a society bitterly divided by class, origins, language, and religion. “Most Upper Canadian males,” Sheppard argues, “although obligated to fight, did not do so Many inhabitants expressed little enthusiasm to shoulder arms and . . . they employed an amazing array of excuses and tricks to evade military service.”¹⁰ In Sheppard’s telling, it was ultimately British regulars who rescued Upper Canada after the American invasion, but they did so at a price. Large foraging armies of British soldiers did as much damage to Upper Canadian farms as did American invaders. Given the bitter feelings that ensued, Sheppard argues that there was no rise in pro-British sentiment in the region after the war and that the 1815 ban on American immigration into the province was an administrative decision not supported by Upper Canadian settlers.¹¹

An additional difference between Taylor and Sheppard’s works is one of focus. Americans are passing characters in Sheppard’s work, whereas

⁷ Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 7.

⁸ Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 4, 444-445.

⁹ Neil Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (London: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1996), 45-47; Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 63-65.

¹⁰ George Sheppard, *Plunder, Profit, and Paroles: A Social History of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1994), 5.

¹¹ Sheppard, *Plunder, Profit, and Paroles*, 9.

they are central to Taylor’s argument. Sheppard’s book falls into the new military history school that is mostly concerned with wartime impacts on societal structures and class conflicts, thus giving small attention to culture. Taylor also downplays the cultural themes of Upper Canada and Western New York that are not directly tied to politics. This is unfortunate, because when examining the hardening (or lack thereof) concerning national identity, non-political circumstances played an important role. Religion was a crucial component of culture in the Western New York and Upper Canadian regions. In the case of Upper Canada, Methodist circuit riders in the region had long been hailing from Western New York towns. Both Upper Canada and Western New York were part of the same Methodist conference, and the religious communities in both regions shared literature and church information. As Semple points out, from 1790 to 1812 at least seventy-six different missionaries served in Upper Canada, only seven were native-born Canadians.¹²

An examination of warfare, in particular, shows how Methodist theology could fuse with politics to affect the region. American Methodists were inheritors of the British intellectual tradition that combined Protestant notions of civilization with republican political theory. Methodists, who could at times be apathetic regarding imperial wars, in Semple’s estimation, could support violent struggle when it came to defending these ideologies.¹³ Because neither Taylor nor Sheppard devotes enough time to examine the shared religious culture of Upper Canada and Western New York, neither one is able adequately to discuss the cultural significance the War of 1812 had on national and religious identity.

Of recent scholarship the best demonstrating the cultural significance of the war is Nicole Eustace’s *1812: War and the Passion of Patriotism* (2012). Eustace argues that the most important effects of the war were cultural, as the conflict created “a model of patriotism based in romantic love.”¹⁴ According to Eustace, in a conflict where so few actually served and where the majority of battles and wartime hardships were distant from most Americans, pro- and anti-war advocates had to rely on emotional appeal and sensational media to win over the populace. It was a political contest not for the minds but for the hearts of Americans.¹⁵ The emotional appeals driven by the war largely took on a romantic fervor; patriotic men fought for the hearts and protection of virtuous republican daughters.¹⁶ Implicit in Eustace’s argument is the idea that Republicans were better able to employ and exploit emotion than were the anti-war Federalists, thus paving the way for the Federalists’ increasing

¹² Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion*, 45. Though Semple does not specify how many of these were American preachers (as opposed to British) he does note that two thirds of those sampled retired to the United States upon completing their service, suggesting a profound American connection if not origin.

¹³ Andrew Wood, “Methodists and War,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism*, ed. Jason Vickers (New York: Cambridge UP, 2013), 335-336.

¹⁴ Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 2012), 227.

¹⁵ Eustace, *1812*, xi, 220.

¹⁶ Eustace, *1812*, 220-224.

political irrelevance. For a work so focused on the emotional influence upon culture, it is surprising that Eustace does not mention religion in the early republic. The increasingly popular evangelicalism of the early United States focused upon a personal, emotional, and experiential relationship with the Divine. This was especially true in Methodism, whose explosive growth can be attributed in part to its ability to provide profound religious experiences for its adherents. This “one needful thing,” as Dee Andrews has described, “gave shape and often tangible reality to otherwise abstruse theological doctrines,” giving energy and depth to the movement and its surrounding culture.¹⁷ Overlooking religion in a study that placed so much importance upon emotional appeal hampers Eustace’s study, in spite of its numerous strengths, with an enormous blind spot.

One of the few works that examine the significance of the war in the context of American religiosity is a 1973 study by William Gribbin, *The Churches Militant: The War of 1812 and American Religion*. Gribbin argues that inherent divisions among religious denominations grew in the absence of an established church. The coming of war in June of 1812 exacerbated these divisions as the various denominations struggled to demonstrate not only doctrinal purity but patriotic legitimacy as well. Few scholars have utilized Gribbin’s work since its initial publication. Gribbin also makes sweeping assumptions that he does not follow up with supporting evidence. For example, Gribbin asserts that Protestantism and democracy were so intertwined in the early nineteenth century that the period “yields its meaning more readily to theologians than to secular sages,” but offers nothing to show why secular students of the War of 1812 could not grapple with the war’s religious aspects. Moreover, his assumption that “human reactions to war and civil disruption change little from one decade or century to another,” is an ahistorical assumption that gives undeserved privilege to denominational responses to war.¹⁸

In spite of its limitations, *The Churches Militant* stands out as one of the few works that directly examines the significance of the War of 1812 through its impact on religion. Methodism is only one of several denominations Gribbin examines in his work and as such does not fit neatly into any Methodist historiography. Much of Gribbin’s discussion of Methodism seems incidental, such as his observation that like other Americans, Methodists thought of the war as a “holy endeavor.” However, Gribbin goes on to argue that Methodism was at a unique place in its development as a sect. Already having shown remarkable growth, Methodism was poised to take over the American evangelical landscape, and in Gribbin’s estimation, the

¹⁷ Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 6-7. It should be noted that a variety of historians have explained Methodism’s growth in terms that contradict Andrews’ analysis in favor of resonance with Democratic ideology or market displacement. I do not believe that one must completely discount these arguments still to draw from Andrews’ observations. See Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm* and Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978).

¹⁸ William Gribbin, *The Churches Militant: The War of 1812 and American Religion* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1973), 3, 7, 8, 9, 11.

War of 1812 gave them the American pedigree to do so. Gribbin points out that during the American Revolution, Methodists were apathetic towards the Patriot cause, but during the War of 1812, they were zealous for the fight. Methodist laymen enlisted in the army while their ministers preached to the troops and nation’s leaders. When confronted with criticism regarding his church’s support for the war, the venerable Methodist bishop Francis Asbury retorted that the American Methodist Episcopal Church was the first denomination to organize after Independence was won. In that sense, the denomination was more American than other sects could claim to be. Methodism’s embrace and use of its Revolutionary heritage, Gribbin argues, showed that it was ideally suited to adapt to republican life; Methodism’s explosive growth throughout the nineteenth century illustrated as much.¹⁹ However, Gribbin’s argument that Methodism drew its particular success in North America from its Revolutionary heritage ignores the success of Methodism in the British provinces of Canada. Methodism was a multinational denomination, and by connecting its success to an American Revolutionary ethos, Gribbin overlooks a large part of its significance.

Gribbin’s analysis of Early American Methodism is fairly optimistic, and while other studies examine the less savory aspects of Methodism—such as its relationship to slavery—few examine how Methodists reacted to the adverse circumstances found in war. Jeffery Williams’ *Religion and Violence in Early American Methodism: Taking the Kingdom by Force* takes a darker approach to Methodism than has been discussed by other authors. Williams argues that the love feasts and melting times of optimism promoted by A. Gregory Schneider and John H. Wigger, obscure a more militant aspect of Methodism.²⁰ In the material Williams examines, Methodists spoke about violence and conflict frequently. Primarily, they spoke of a spiritual conflict for one’s soul, but it was a violent struggle nonetheless. The spiritual nature of Methodism’s preoccupation with violence originally led Methodists to either neutrality or moderate support for the Revolutionary War. But as Methodism became increasingly acculturated to the republicanism of the early United States, Methodists increasingly sacralized any secular cause. Williams sees the War of 1812 as crucial to Methodism’s transformation from a spiritual violence to a spiritual and physical violence that manifested God’s work in the American story. Thus, the War of 1812 “moved them beyond their earlier view of the nation falling under the providence of God to a view of the nation as privileged by God to serve a unique role in the battle against sin and evil Violence itself became a usable tool for American Methodists to achieve divine purposes.”²¹ However, Methodism’s embrace of violence due to the War of 1812 was a short-lived episode. By the mid-nineteenth century, Williams argues, Methodism had moved beyond the violent

¹⁹ Gribbin, *The Churches Militant*, 89, 91-95.

²⁰ See A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1993); Wigger, *Taking Heaven By Storm*.

²¹ Jeffrey Williams, *Religion and Violence in Early American Methodism: Taking the Kingdom By Force* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 2010), 105.

rhetoric that it used in the years after the war to a more respectable tone. As a result, the War of 1812 itself is only a small segment of Williams' larger study. Williams' interests lie with the trajectory that violence took in Methodist rhetoric up until the eve of the Civil War, when they had abandoned it in favor of more domestic themes. The transformation from the violent rhetoric of the early nineteenth century to the mid-century moderation was, in Williams' estimation, a true struggle for the heart and mind of Methodism; but that struggle largely unfolded after 1815.²²

One aspect that Gribbin and William's work does not address, however, is the variation within Methodism itself as a historical movement. David Hempton offers an important corrective in this regard: that Methodist reactions to the War of 1812 could vary across time, space, and in relation to various nationalities. In his book, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*, Hempton argues that Methodism must be understood as a movement of internal and external contradictions that were geographically and temporally contingent. Methodism thrived in this opposition that in turn made it a multifaceted movement that adapted to suit the environments in which it grew. "Methodism," Hempton insists, is "not the same kind of plant wherever it takes root"; rural English Methodists set themselves against Anglicanism, their urban counterparts against class hegemony. Irish Methodists opposed Catholicism and Anglicanism, and American Methodists appropriated the new nation's rhetoric of liberty of conscience, personal responsibility, and an opposition to planter elitism and slavery.²³ Through these variations, opposition and internal conflict strengthened Methodism as it spread along the lines of empire and migration.

Hempton's observations are helpful in considering how Methodism developed along the New York and Canadian border. These same geographical contingencies were manifest in the region, making Methodism of the interior distinct from its other variants around the Atlantic. Those contingencies and variations grew starker as the War of 1812 unfolded. What was once a unified Methodist community that transcended the national border became more fractious and divided as wartime hostilities introduced fissures into congregations. This is a theme that Hempton does not directly explore, though his model gives it depth.

Following Hempton in exploring the geographical component of Methodism's evolution is Todd Webb's work, *Transatlantic Methodists: British Wesleyanism and the Formation of an Evangelical Culture in Nineteenth-Century Ontario and Quebec*. In this work, Webb seeks to counter Canadian histories of Methodism that stress an emerging notion of Canadian identity that came in the wake of the War of 1812. In Webb's estimation, such arguments are teleological. Canadian Methodism was not a native creation that emerged from the pre-war evangelizing missions of American preachers. Rather, in the sixty years following the War of 1812, Canadian Methodists "became increasingly integrated in a British world. They came to see them-

²² Williams, *Religion and Violence*, 144.

²³ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005), 6-7, 80, 82-83.

selves not as the forerunners of the modern Canadian nation, but as Britons and Wesleyans transplanted into the New World."²⁴

Webb is careful to distinguish among the multiple schools of Methodist thought in the Canadas. Episcopal Methodists occupied Upper Canada where American preachers did most of their work; Wesleyan Methodists were converts from British preachers mostly in Lower Canada; and British Wesleyans were comprised of transplanted British Methodists who had settled in the region. Each of these groups held complicated relationships with the British Methodist Conference in the British Isles, and each negotiated these relationships in different ways after the war. Nevertheless, Webb argues for a steady incorporation of all schools of Canadian Methodism into the British world.²⁵ It was not until the late nineteenth century that Canadian and British Methodists went their separate ways.

Presented in this way, Webb's analysis minimizes the schismatic nature of American Methodism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Methodists embraced a range of social and political positions, from patriot rebellion, to loyalism, and neutrality: each position affecting their overall world view of Methodism's role in the world. These various positions often erupted into fractures within the movement, such as the 1792 O'Kelly Schism and the Primitivist movement. Methodism's rapid growth and continual migration from the American frontier only exacerbated the inchoate nature of the movement, making each Methodist society distinct in its form and application of doctrine.²⁶ These variations make geographical and temporal particulars even more important in scholarly analysis.

By emphasizing a long-lasting British connection, Webb directly counters Sheppard who emphasizes a latent pro-American sentiment in the region. Webb's argument is for a more complex picture of national identity in Upper Canada and Western New York following the War of 1812. According to Webb a continual United States presence, an emerging Canadian identity, and integration into the British Empire were all political options Canadians entertained after the war. For Webb, because Canadian Methodism was a transnational denomination located in the central theater of the war, the religion provided a way to balance the competing nationalist arguments. The balancing effort failed, and the War of 1812 introduced fissures into Methodism, forcing Canadian Methodists more closely to affiliate with the British Empire in the years following the war. However, British influence was not able to overcome the strong ties Upper-Canadian Methodists had with their American counterparts, which resulted in the region's fractious and unstable national and religious identity.

From its beginnings, Methodism's relationship with the Anglican Church,

²⁴ Todd Webb, *Transatlantic Methodists: British Wesleyanism and the Formation of an Evangelical Culture in Nineteenth-Century Ontario and Quebec* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2013), 6, 8, 9, 13.

²⁵ Webb, *Transatlantic Methodists*, 15.

²⁶ Russell Richey, "Methodism in North America," in *T & T Clark Companion to Methodism*, ed. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. (London: T & T Clark International, 2010), 98-100.

and by extension, the British state, was uncomfortable. When John Wesley first began organizing his fellow churchmen into an evangelically-driven missionary force, he did so within the confines of his ordination as an Anglican priest. He did not intend for Methodism to supplant the King's church in either divine authority or social position. When other Methodist preachers pressured him to allow the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to be administered outside of Anglican churches, Wesley consistently refused. Nevertheless, many Britons looked upon Methodism with suspicion. When Wesley died in 1791, his conservative resistance no longer impeded those who desired an official separation from Anglicanism. In 1795, the Plan of Pacification effectively created the Methodists as an independent sect. For non-Methodists, their suspicions increased when revolution consumed France. British authorities feared that Methodist congregations served as subversive nests hosting Jacobins and other seditious types. Methodists' opponents leveled accusations of sedition against Methodists in pamphlet literature that circulated throughout Britain. To counter the slander, British Methodists threw themselves into a patriotic frenzy in a desperate attempt to prove their loyalty, but such opposition hindered the church from expanding.²⁷

Methodism had much greater success growing on the fringes of the Empire. Sparsely populated regions created spaces of "pastoral neglect" which Methodist itinerants exploited for their own proselytizing.²⁸ Most of these preachers shared their message in homes and small village buildings. Rarely did they stay in one place for long. This made "Methodist Societies" lively locally-based phenomena, playing out in households more often than large revivals.²⁹ Methodists first began preaching in North America in the 1760s. By 1791, the same year Wesley died, North America had 252 itinerant preachers supervising 129 circuits. That same year, Methodists established their first circuit in Canada. Most settlers in Upper Canada were American by birth. Seeing their common origins as a justification for action, the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States took it upon themselves to expand their missionary efforts to the American settlers in Canada.³⁰ Many settlers crossing into Canada after the Revolution carried the name "Late Loyalists" under the presumption that they were former subjects, still loyal to the king, and not able to enter the region until after the Revolution had ended. In spite of their supposed loyalty, British officials suspected American settlers in Canada and their Methodist preachers of bringing dangerous republican ideologies into the region. As a result, the colonial government of Canada established a series of laws designed to create a "counterrevolutionary polity" and thus to limit the potential subversion.³¹ Similar to perceived associations with French Jacobins at home, a too-familiar relationship with American Republicanism could present problems for the British Conference.

²⁷ Webb, *Transatlantic Methodists*, 45-40.

²⁸ Hempton, *Empire of the Spirit*, 19.

²⁹ Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 6-7.

³⁰ Webb, *Transatlantic Methodists*, 21, 50.

³¹ Alan Taylor, "The Late Loyalists: Northern Reflections of the Early American Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27.1 (Spring, 2007): 1-2, 5.

The British Conference kept the North American missionary field at arm’s length by relegating all administrative duties concerning Canadian Methodism to the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society.³² Often British missionaries struggled to win converts with little or no support from the conference in the Mother Country. Samuel Coate, for example, was a British missionary laboring in Montreal. Coate longed to bring Methodism from the modest “societies” on the fringes and establish it with strong symbols for the community, such as permanent structures. He had a small measure of success, and in 1805, the Montreal Methodists proposed the erection of a stone chapel that would serve their needs as a congregation and present an image of stability.³³ Coate immediately recognized that the Montreal members would be unable to finance the project themselves and solicited for the needed funds throughout the region. His search for money to build the chapel took him across the Upper Province and down into the United States. Still unable to raise sufficient funds, Coate traveled to England to solicit money from the British Conference directly. In England, Coate was finally able to secure enough money to build the Montreal chapel, but not before becoming disaffected with the British Conference. After raising the money for the Montreal Methodists, Coate left the Methodist Church to accept a preaching position as an Anglican minister.³⁴ Before 1812, Canadian Methodists still looked to Britain for aid, but the relationship to the mother country was cold and full of suspicion.

American Methodists picked up the slack where the British Conference lagged. The membership reports from the *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church* show the incredible growth that happened in Canada and Western New York as a result of American missionary efforts at the opening of the nineteenth century. In 1810 the church organized the Genesee conference that officially brought Canadian Methodists into the American church’s administration. From 1810 to 1820, the Genesee conference grew from 10,632 members to 23,813, an increase of over 223%. American Methodist bishops presided over the Canadian conferences while presiding elders directed the work within the districts. Individual preachers worked the circuits. Often two preachers labored in one circuit, sometimes as a companionship with an experienced preacher and a preacher “on trial” as he learned his responsibilities. Individual circuits consisted of several towns, often covering hundreds of miles in both New York and Canada.³⁵ Gideon Lanning recalled that when he was assigned to labor in the New Amsterdam circuit in 1813 his field of labor extended “from Batavia to Niagara River, and from the mouth of Tonawanda to some twenty miles south of Buffalo . . . containing twenty-eight appointments to be filled once in two weeks.

³² Webb, *Transatlantic Methodists*, 25.

³³ Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 6-7.

³⁴ George Playter, *The History of Methodism in Canada: With an Account of the Rise and Progress of the Work of God Among the Canadian Indian Tribes, and Occasional Notices of the Civil Affairs of the Province* (Toronto, Canada: Wesleyan Printing Establishment, 1862), 100-101.

³⁵ John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 8-10.

I found[ed] classes in Pembroke, Clarence, West Batavia, Willink, Eden, and Hamburg.”³⁶ Lanning worked his circuit without a companion, more or less living out of the saddle as he spread the Methodist gospel. By combining the circuit details from the *Minutes* with descriptive travel accounts like Lanning’s, a rough geographical picture of the early Genesee conference emerges. Upon organization in 1810, the Genesee conference had ten circuits in Canada and eighteen in the United States, stretching across Western and Central New York, south into Northern Pennsylvania.

The unity of Methodist congregations along the frontier transcended national boundaries. The majority of itinerant preachers serving in Canada were American citizens, and Canadian districts reported to conference bishops and presiding elders who resided in the United States. People from both nations regularly crossed the border to settle on welcoming—but technically foreign—soil.³⁷ The outbreak of war in June of 1812 disrupted the Canadian and New York Methodist relationship. Less than a month earlier, the Methodist General Conference had appointed Nathan Bangs, a preacher who had spent years ministering through Canada and New York, to be the presiding elder over the Lower Canada District and the pastor of Montreal, but he was prevented from filling his post.³⁸ Most of the American preachers working in Canada returned to the United States, and all communication with the Canadian districts ceased. The *Minutes of the Annual Conferences* illustrate the severity of the break that had taken place. The Upper Canada district reported the exact same numbers for both 1811 and 1812, suggesting that recorders simply repeated the previous years’ numbers when communication broke down with the eruption of hostilities. For the years 1813 and 1814, Upper Canada did not report to the annual conference at all. Lower Canada did not report to the conference again until 1816. As Methodist preachers fled their appointments with the approach of war, American and British soldiers arrived to fill the void and exacerbated the fissures within the church. Some preachers, like Learner Blackman, left their assignments to take up teaching opportunities with the army as chaplains.³⁹

The divisions that would hamper the Methodist communities along the Canadian-American border were not immediately apparent. The Methodist doctor, Fetch Reed, described a large building built directly on the Canada-Vermont border for the purposes of smuggling contraband across hostile boundaries. A literal line drawn along the floor marked the division between the two nations. According to Reed, the local societies decided to hold a quarterly meeting in the building so as to accommodate both Canadian and American brethren. “No one crossed the line” during the meeting, Reed reported, but “passed very closely on both sides, and never was there a

³⁶ Sandford Hunt, *Methodism in Buffalo: From its Origins to the Close of 1892* (Buffalo, New York: H. H. Otis & Sons, 1893), 11-13.

³⁷ Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 8-9.

³⁸ Wade Crawford Barclay, *History of Methodism*, vol. 2 of *Early American Methodism 1769-1844: Missionary Motivation and Expansion* (New York: The Board of Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Church, 1949), n184.

³⁹ Learner Blackman, *Journal Manuscript*, Drew University Collection: 1646-5-1:26

heartier hand-shaking than on that occasion. Nominal belligerents, but real, heartfelt friends and brethren.”⁴⁰ This fascinating account shows that the political hostilities did not immediately divide Methodist societies. Both Canadian and American Methodists were willing to go to great lengths to meet and worship together. However, it is important to note that nationalist identification had begun to infiltrate the Methodist community. American and Canadian Methodists, though friendly, stayed segregated on one side of the building or the other. They shook hands, but only across a visible and artificial boundary.

Closer to the hostilities, the fractures were more disruptive. Gideon Lanning recalled that in Western New York, “a sanguinary war was raging all along the frontier. The cannon’s roar by day and by night, the marching and countermarching of soldiers, gave everything a martial appearance.”⁴¹ Not all was mere appearance. In February, 1813, American forces crossed the ice on the St. Lawrence and raided Elizabethtown, freeing American prisoners, terrorizing residents, and taking British soldiers prisoner. In May of that year, British and Canadian forces attacked the American fort at Sackett’s Harbor.

Reverend William Case was in Rutland, about ten miles from the harbor, where he and two other preachers were preparing for a camp meeting. Upon hearing the sound of cannon fire, Case and the others prayed for the safety of the town and then mounted their horses and rode towards the battle. In a letter to Nathan Bangs, Case reported that upon arrival at the harbor, he and his companion were horrified at the sight of British “dead and wounded [left] on the field of battle” as their army withdrew. Making their way among the wounded and dying, Case reported British and American soldiers “pierced through the body, others through the head,” and one “whose face was shot away (save with his jaw) by a grape shot,” who was still breathing as Case tended to him. Among the wounded, Case found Methodist soldiers from England, Ireland, Canada, and the United States.⁴² Shortly afterward, American forces took Stony Creek and there occupied the Methodist Chapel. When British forces counter-attacked to dislodge the Americans, the Methodist chapel was destroyed.⁴³

The carnage Case witnessed at Sackett’s Harbor greatly affected him. He turned his ministry to greater service among the soldiers. While visiting prisoners of war in October of 1813, Case met with several Canadian Methodists who reported that the war had put a virtual stop to all preaching in their area.⁴⁴ On April 27, 1813, American forces invaded the Canadian city of York, and after defeating British forces there, looted the town and set

⁴⁰ John Carroll, *Case and His Contemporaries or, the Canadian Itinerants Memorial: Constituting a Biographical History of Methodism in Canada*, 278-279; Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion*, 41.

⁴¹ Hunt, *Methodism in Buffalo*, 11-13.

⁴² Letter from William Case to Nathan Bangs, Utica, May 29, 1813; See Playter, *The History of Methodism in Canada*, 115-117.

⁴³ Playter, *The History of Methodism in Canada*, 118.

⁴⁴ Playter, *The History of Methodism in Canada*, 124.

fire to several government buildings.⁴⁵ The British responded in kind, and on December 31, 1813, His Majesty's soldiers invaded New York and burnt Buffalo to the ground, forcing local inhabitants to seek shelter in neighboring communities.⁴⁶ Both York and Buffalo had Methodist communities and were situated within the Genesee conference.

The communities of Western New York and Canada did not recover from the war as quickly as other locations. The War of 1812 lasted just over two and a half years and inflicted 2,260 American casualties.⁴⁷ The treaty of Ghent ended hostilities but did not resolve any of the political disputes that led to war. While most Americans, and to a lesser extent Canadians, did not directly feel the impact of the war, the same was not true for those living in Western New York and Upper Canada. The abortive American invasions of Canada, and the British response, made much of the Genesee conference the principle theatre of the land conflict of an otherwise marginal military struggle. Many of their homes had been destroyed, and their lives were certainly disrupted. As both Americans and Canadians displaced by the war returned home, Methodist preachers too started afresh by revisiting their circuits and preaching the gospel.

Only when the American preachers returned to their old charges across the border would the church recognize the severity of the fractures that the war had brought to their community. When Montreal Methodists rebuilt and returned to their homes after the war, they found themselves without a preacher. British Methodists wrote to the British Conference asking them to send new preachers to Montreal. The American Methodists dwelling in the region were suspicious of British motives and wrote to the American General Conference requesting that they again send American preachers to Canada, thus splitting the congregation into British and American camps.⁴⁸ On February 7, 1816, the British Conference wrote to the American conference and sent Reverends Black and Bennett, of Nova Scotia, to present the letter at the General Conference in May. After a lengthy introduction praising the shared "Christian affection" between the British and American churches, the letter addressed the controversy concerning the Montreal chapel. According to the British Conference, due to a want of suitable preachers, Montreal laymen had requested British missionaries. The British Conference readily complied, only to be "sorry to learn that some misunderstanding has taken place between brothers Strong and Williams, our missionaries, and brother Ryan, your presiding elder for Lower Canada." Ryan had written the British Conference, protesting their interference. In response, the British Conference assured the American Conference that they had taken Ryan's complaints seriously, and after having "reviewed the whole" considered that the "situation

⁴⁵ Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 214-217.

⁴⁶ Peck, *Early Methodism*, 349-350; Hunt, *Methodism in Buffalo*, 19.

⁴⁷ Eustace, x.

⁴⁸ Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, vol. 3 (New York: G. Lane & C. B. Tippet, 1845), 36; *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1796-1836*, vol. 1 (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1855), 152.

of the inhabitants of Montreal and of Canada to this country and particularly as a principle, part of the people appear to be in favor of" British missionaries. Furthermore, citing the support for the Montreal chapel that Samuel Coate had collected in England eleven years previously, the British Conference asserted that they had a claim to the Canadian missionary grounds. Expressing a hope that the American Conference would "see the propriety" of complying with their wishes, the British Conference concluded their letter by reminding the Americans that the "political relation [Canadians had] to this country" was "not of little importance."⁴⁹

Though the February 7 letter began with friendly greetings and an insistence on Christian unity, the tone and content projected a clear message of British strength and privilege; the war had changed sentiments too much. The British church emphasized the relationship "inhabitants of Montreal and of Canada [had] to this country." According to the British, they had a "claim" to work in Canada, given the monetary investment British subjects had made. The British were uninterested in acknowledging that American preachers had labored in Montreal since at least 1803.⁵⁰ In its place was a reaffirmation that, although Canadian Methodists may be united with their American peers in faith, they are still British subjects with a "political relation" to Britain. After the war, political identity was as important as religious identity.

When the American General Conference received the letter on May 17, 1816, they did not respond with much enthusiasm. Reverends Black and Bennett presented the letter to the entire conference, and a debate ensued. The conference immediately adjourned while a specially-appointed committee considered a response. The next morning, the committee presented their report to the conference body, claiming that all involved seemed to have "earnest desire to have all existing difficulties terminated to the peace and mutual satisfaction of both parties, and to perpetuate the Christian union and good understanding." However, in spite of the recent war American preachers had regularly served in Upper Canada. Furthermore, the committee argued that the written communications they had received indicated "it is the desire of the great majority of the people in Upper and Lower Canada to be supplied, as heretofore, with preachers from the United States." In anticipation of the impending conflict with the British Conference, the American Conference resolved that it was their "duty to the societies in our charge in the Canadas" to resist the encroachment of British missionaries and maintain their own preachers in the region. The American Conference adjourned after deciding to send a missive to the British informing them of their resolve.⁵¹

The American Conference found themselves in a bind concerning their Canadian circuits. Unable to appeal to a shared political loyalty with the Canadian Methodists, the American church instead chose to emphasize their historic relationship. Though somewhat softer in tone than the British com-

⁴⁹ Bangs, *History*, vol. 3, 39-40.

⁵⁰ *Minutes*, 110, 113, 118.

⁵¹ *Journal*, 151, 152.

munication, the American response was nonetheless partisan. The American church would not give up its claim to missionary operations in Canada, nor would it cede over congregations lying outside of the political stewardship of the United States. Following the resolutions of the special committee, the General Conference appointed John Emory, Thomas L. Douglass, and Nathan Bangs to draft a letter to the British conference. Four days later, John Emory read the letter to the General Conference and was then appointed to carry the letter to Britain.⁵²

This exchange between the British and American conferences uncovered the multiple divisions that vexed North American Methodists after the War of 1812. The hostilities between American and Canadian Methodists in New York and Canada were clear, but there was also an effort at genuine reconciliation pursued officially by Methodist leaders. Methodist leadership worked consistently to resolve the bitter feuds among its Canadian and New York congregations. In 1820, John Emory again delivered a letter to the British conference. No doubt impressed with the conduct of Reverends Black and Bennett while delivering their message to the May conference, the letter Emory presented to the British conference claimed that the American conference had adopted measures to ensure a consistent, and hopefully mutual, correspondence with the British Conference. The Americans hoped to exchange not only letters, but also representative ministers with the British Conference. The British agreed to the desired exchange, and from that point the two conferences shared a steady correspondence.⁵³

In August of 1820, the British conference again discussed the problems still hindering the work in Canada. After considering a proposal presented by the American conference representatives, the British Conference agreed that because “the American Methodists and ourselves are but one body” in Christ’s gospel, it would be prudent to prevent different Methodist societies from existing in the same place where they could potentially bring factionalism and disunity. Therefore, the British Conference agreed “to accede to the suggestion of the American conference, that the American brethren shall have the occupation of Upper Canada, and the British missionaries that of Lower Canada.” By dividing the regions of labor, the British Conference hoped to avoid further exacerbating the ill feelings that the war had brought to North American Methodism. However, the British reserved the right to intervene in the future, should circumstance require it. “Should insuperable difficulties occur in the attempt to execute this plan,” they argued, “either party shall be at liberty to propose any other mode of accommodation.”⁵⁴

In the four years from when the British conference first decided to send new missionaries to Montreal to when the American and British bodies decided to split the Canadian fields of labor, a gradual but significant change had transpired. The British no longer insisted upon patriotic justification for their seizing control of the Canadian circuits, nor did they claim a special

⁵² *Journal*, 152, 164; Bangs, *History* vol. 3, 113-115.

⁵³ Bangs, *History*, vol. 3, 114, 118.

⁵⁴ Bangs, *History*, vol. 3, 119-120.

bond with the Canadian members that the Americans lacked. Instead they stressed a unified body in Christ that had been central to the work before the war's disruption. However, for the partition of Canada to succeed, the British needed to overcome the opposition still held by British and American preachers serving in the field.

Richard Pope, for example, described laboring in the same region where Fetch Reed had described the cordial meeting held in the smuggling house years earlier. By the time Pope made his report, the war had long smothered any warm feelings that had remained between Canadian and American Methodists. "Religion once flourished in the neighborhood," he wrote, "but the late and unnatural destructive war gave it a dreadful blow Since the peace, the American preachers have been sent to some of the circuits as before, but in vain, the people retain their former prejudices and by far the greater part will not come to hear them."⁵⁵

To aid in that process, the British conference wrote a letter to R. Williams, one of their presiding elders in Canada. In their letter, the British conference encouraged Williams to put aside his personal prejudices and focus on the work of the church. The British conference reiterated that the resolution of the British Conference was made of "general" decisions that applied to the British Methodist Church across the globe. "The collisions between us and them gave us serious concern," they reiterated. The dispute over the Montreal Chapel was a minor misunderstanding resulting from inaccurate knowledge of the Methodist situation in Canada. "The information we have had for two years [1818-1820] past" they explained, "has all served to show that the number of preachers employed there by American brethren was greater than we first supposed, and was constantly increasing."⁵⁶

The British conference tried to alleviate the hesitations of Williams by abandoning their previous notions that Canadians desired preachers with whom they were politically united and instead acknowledged the standing relationship that American itinerants had been cultivating in Upper Canada before the war. Still, anticipating Williams' and others' political protestations, the British conference downplayed political affiliations and instead emphasized the potential for religious ministry that Lower Canada had to offer. "The lower province," they insisted, needed their missionary efforts, "where much less help exists, and a great part of the population is involved in popish superstition." In case Williams did not recognize the division of Canada was a result of religious concerns taking priority over political ones, the letter continued by recognizing "that political reasons exist in many minds for supplying even Upper Canada, as far as possible, with British missionaries." However, the British Conference warned Williams that they "cannot act . . . [u]pon any political feeling that may exist, either in your minds or in the minds of a party in any place." If the Methodists in Britain and North America were truly to act as "one body of Christians," political identities must be subordinate to spiritual ones. American, Canadian, and

⁵⁵ As quoted in Semple, *The Lord's Dominion*, 49.

⁵⁶ Bangs, *History*, vol. 3, 121-122.

British Methodists had “sprung from a common stock,” and were “striving in common to spread the light of true religion through the world.”⁵⁷ They needed to treat each other as such.

The British used such couching language to make the partition of Canada more palatable to Canadian preachers devoted to their own nationalist sentiments. By citing manpower as the primary motivator for abandoning Upper Canada, the British Conference was making it easier for Canadian preachers to relocate without feeling like they were questioning the devotion to the King.

The American Methodist leadership too felt that they had to give clear instructions to their members that hostility towards their British counterparts was to cease. In October of 1820, Bishop William M’Kendree wrote to Reverend William Case, the presiding elder in Upper Canada. M’Kendree noted:

It now devolves upon me, to enjoin it upon you . . . to remove the prejudices and allay the unpleasant excitements existing will, no doubt, require much prudent care . . . Remember, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” “*Seek peace, then and ensue it.*” . . . “Looking *diligently*, lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness, springing up, trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.”⁵⁸

By 1820 Methodists in the United States, Britain, and Canada had finally begun to put the war behind them, but many still held bitter grudges against those whom they saw as aggressors who burned their towns and drove them out as refugees in winter. The War of 1812 was a small conflict militarily with little political significance. Nevertheless, the impact that war had upon individual communities was profound. This was especially true for those communities that had ties to both the United States and Great Britain. Methodism was one such organization.

The growth of Methodism in Western New York and Canada astonished onlookers in the first ten years of the nineteenth century. That growth was abruptly halted by a war that unfolded to large measure in the region Methodists called the Genesee conference. Canadian and New York Methodists nursed wartime anger and political prejudices. It was only through the diplomatic process at the highest levels of church leadership and a formal and permanent division of missionary labors that British and American Methodists were able to achieve a lasting reconciliation. This difficult process took several years to move past the War of 1812 and into the new century that held greater dangers and opportunities.

⁵⁷ Bangs, *History*, vol. 3, 122-123.

⁵⁸ Bangs, *History*, vol. 3, 128.