

THE TELL-TALE SHOES

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Methodist history is littered with accounts of ferocious storms and fearsome lightning strikes. Elements of death, injury, property destruction and the ensuing chaos create nightmarish memories for years to come. Perhaps one the most infamous lightning strikes in Methodism occurred in a small central New Jersey village called Quakertown. Normally such an event would pass into local lore, but Quakertown's lightning strike reverberates to this day because of a pair of ravaged shoes which survive in the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference archives. The tale involves a twenty-four year-old woman named Minnie Florence Frace, whose shoes, melted hairpins, and a hapless steel-ribbed corset would become legendary.¹

Quakertown Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in 1836 with nine class members meeting at Daniel Green's home. The church grew through local revival services and by 1838 an old school house was purchased in Quakertown proper. By 1840, the congregation outgrew the building and a new church was constructed on a donated lot.² The congregation's growth continued and in 1878 another church was built, with elements of Queen Anne styling including a beautiful steeple containing a six hundred-pound bell. The sanctuary was now situated at the highest point in town. Thus, the stage was set for Minnie Frace, her shoes, and fellow Quakertown Methodists to make meteorological history.

On Sunday, August 4, 1895, the day started like any other midsummer day in central New Jersey. It was sunny, hot, and muggy. Locals called this time of year the "Dog Days of Summer." The phrase in its folksy way intended to convey the idea that the humidity and temperature were so oppressive that both humankind and animal sought shade to rest during the mid-afternoon heat. The season also produced weather instability manifested as intense thunderstorm activity. These fast and furious thunderstorms lit up the sky dragging in its wake a temporary refreshing drop in temperature and humidity. Most storms in central Jersey are more bark than bite. Our storm, however, had a crocodilian bite.

The Reverend Louis F. Bowman, his wife and son, William, went about their usual routine before the 11:00 A.M. service. The Newark Annual Conference had appointed Bowman to the Quakertown church only a few

¹ The account continues to fascinate even today. See Len Fisher's book, *Scientific Discovery from the Brilliant to the Bizarre* (New York City: Arcade Publishing, 2013). He uses her corset as an introduction to the chapter on lightning.

² James P. Snell, *History of Hunterdon and Somerset Counties, New Jersey, of its Prominent Men and Pioneers* (Philadelphia: Everts and Peck, 1881), 439-440.

months prior.³ Carriages, horseback riders and locals started to arrive at the church anticipating the upcoming morning worship. W. J. Case and Martin Force watched over the horses in the carriage shed behind the church during the service.⁴ Many dressed in their Sunday best including Ms. Minnie Frace.⁵ Her shoes would eventually become the focus of moribund curiosity.

In typical Methodist fashion, the worship service took about an hour or so but with a fast-moving storm approaching Pastor Bowman ended the service with a quick benediction just before noon thereby allowing worshipers to exit the church.⁶ Being good Methodists, they took their time leaving and mingled together in the sanctuary and vestibule. Immediately the storm was upon them.⁷ What followed next became a nightmare of terror, pandemonium, destruction, injuries and death. Children screamed and adults howled in desperation. *The Atlanta Constitution* newspaper describes what happened:

. . . there came a blinding flash of lightning and a terrific burst of thunder . . . there was a stampede of frightened horses under the sheds outside. A number of them broke their tethers and ran away, wrecking the carriages to which they were attached and dashing down sections of fences.⁸

The Washington Star, a local paper in neighboring Warren County, picks up the story:

The lightning first hit the spire, where only one piece of slate was off, and passing down the inside of the belfry, it swung the large bell from its fastenings.⁹ Following the edge of the north side of the roof, it took out thirty or forty feet of clapboards. The upper part of the porch¹⁰ took fire, and the non-injured men of the congregation went to work with a will and had it under control before it gained headway.¹¹

The lightning continued under the floor boards until it exploded upwards into the sanctuary sounding like a cannon shot.¹² The flooring between the walls and pews were demolished and damage to the center aisle suffered a similar fate.¹³ Of those struck in the sanctuary James Hoff suffered the most serious

³ Service Record, "Bowman, Louis F." *Journal of the Newark Annual Conference* [1929]: 108. Bowman was ordained by the annual conference in 1886. His tenure at Quakertown lasted two years.

⁴ Clint Wilson, "Terror in Quakertown," Publisher Unknown. The incomplete article was found in the box which contains Frace's shoes.

⁵ One report estimated that one hundred attended the service whereas another upped the total to three-hundred. As more newspapers picked up the story off various news wires the tale becomes either modified or outright wrong. The newspapers whose source was either the *Philadelphia Inquirer* or *Record* assumed the church was in Quakertown, Pennsylvania.

⁶ "A Church Hit by Lightning," *New York Times*, August 5, 1895.

⁷ A survey of newspaper weather reports from Rhode Island to Altoona, Pennsylvania, suggests this storm was part of a larger one that wreaked havoc across the area.

⁸ *Atlanta Constitution*, August 5, 1895.

⁹ If the 600-pound bell had fallen through to the vestibule many others would have been seriously injured or killed.

¹⁰ Perhaps the writer meant the upper part of the bell tower.

¹¹ "Lightening Hits A Church," *The Washington Star*, August 8, 1895. It should be noted that in other parts the reporting is incorrect.

¹² *Atlanta Constitution*, August 5, 1895.

¹³ "Queerest Lightning," *Kutztown Patriot*, August 10, 1895. The center aisle damage did not quite reach the altar area.

injuries.¹⁴ Some had their clothes shredded and some received skin injuries. Metal in more than a few shoes melted from the electrical current. Others were “shocked” but not seriously hurt. Those affected would later complain their joints hurt like a bad case of rheumatism. Many would be using canes in the immediate future.

But the focus of our story resides in the vestibule where part of the lightning split off endangering everyone in the space. Sexton Asa Bannon, Reverend Bowman and Minnie Frace faced the gravest danger. When lightning struck Bannon’s “coat . . . [it]was tattered as though riddled with bullets, or as an eye witness to the catastrophe said . . . looked as if it had gone through a corn sheller. Bannon’s shoes were a sight to behold. They were shredded like bits of leather, while the shoe strings were picked apart like so much cotton.”¹⁵ Others standing nearby experienced burns and stripped clothing as well.

Standing next to Minnie was Pastor Bowman, who had been greeting the congregation as they exited the church. When Bowman was “shocked,” it knocked him to the floor, stripping most of his clothing from his badly burned body.¹⁶ Surprisingly Bowman quickly recovered and began helping those who were in dire need. *The Freethinker*, a British humanist publication, quotes Bowman saying, “When I got up there was but one person standing, and, curiously enough, he was not a Christian. Probably he was the only person who was not afraid of the Devil” to which the editor quipped, “for this useful scapegoat the accident is attributed.”¹⁷

Minnie Frace suffered the worst injuries above all else. *The New York Times* reported the following gruesome account of her ordeal.¹⁸

Miss Minnie Frace was standing close to the side wall of the vestibule, with her back to the wall. The bolt struck her body on the back of the head, passed around her body and down her back and legs to the floor. Her clothing was torn to shreds and stripped from her. Even her shoes and stockings were torn apart and away from her feet. So intense was the heat that her chatelaine watch was found on the floor, with the glass, gold, and works fused into a single mass.

The burns on the young woman’s body were terrible. The course of the fluid could be traced from the time it entered her body till it left it. There was a red and black streak, showing the course of the current. The blood in some of the veins seemed to have coagulated, and to remain stationary. After a time it turned black. Miss Frace was unconscious when picked up a few minutes later, and remained so. It is not thought she will live.

Minnie would die four days later and would be buried in her Clinton hometown. She was the only causality from the strike. Len Fisher notes that the melted hairpins and steel ribs in her corset acted as a lightning rod.¹⁹ It

¹⁴ Miss K. Hoffman was also seriously hurt.

¹⁵ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 5, 1895. The *Atlanta Constitution* reproduces the *Inquirer*’s account giving evidence that the story was lifted from a news wire service.

¹⁶ *New York Times*, August 5, 1895.

¹⁷ *The Freethinker*, September 8, 1895. A week before the paper ran a small story on the event which also brought another sardonic quote, “He is a *rum un* (mischievous child), is Providence.”

¹⁸ *New York Times*, August 5, 1885.

¹⁹ Fisher, *Scientific Discovery*, 87.

should be noted there is another twist to this story which had an immediate effect on her extended family.

A man drove to Pittstown and thence telephoned to Clinton for medical assistance. Drs. Frace,²⁰ Snyder and Warrington were carried at once to the scene by a special train on the Lehigh Valley Railroad. They ministered restoratives to the unconscious and people from nearby houses flocked to the church with bedding on which they placed the injured and carried them to their respective homes. The crew of the train also helped. The three physicians were kept busy all the afternoon driving from one patient to another.²¹

Reporters from New York City and Philadelphia newspapers rushed to the scene the next day. Their filed stories, along with *The Washington Star* account, would fly across news service wires to the four corners of the country and be picked up by secular and Christian newspapers but also a medical journal.²² Despite all the press coverage only one Methodist Episcopal Church paper reported the story. *The New York Christian Advocate*, in a laconic report stated, “Lightning strikes a tower of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Quakertown, N.J.; several persons badly injured; one will probably die from the shock.”²³ One wonders why such an infamous event would be reported as such by the denominational newspaper. Perhaps the presiding district superintendent’s report to the 1896 Annual Conference answers the question. It illuminates a general mindset among New Jersey Methodists at that time. After a very brief account of the lightning strike he goes on to say:

The building was greatly damaged, but the \$1,500.00²⁴ since spent in renovation has made the building far more attractive in appearance than it ever was. For thirteen consecutive weeks after the reopening, on November 26, the devoted pastor held special services, and another kind of lightning from heaven—the kind that only kills to make alive—has been prostrating the people. Ninety in all have accepted Christ, and of those eighty-four have united with our Church. Of course, benevolences are in advance, not by any trick of artificial galvanism, but by the quickening impulse of a spiritual life.²⁵

The epilogue to this dreadful story of Quakertown’s church as house of God to a house of horror and back to a house of God is manifested in a singular artifact that has passed down through generations. Despite the human cost the shoes became a symbol of a momentary time of terror and tribulation followed by acts of redemption. The shoes having lost their physical context are now viewed with gruesome curiosity. But if the shoes could tell the tale of its infamy what a story it would be!

²⁰ Some newspaper accounts incorrectly identify Dr. John McCormack Frace as Minnie’s father. Her parents were Martin and Elizabeth Frace. No doubt Dr. Frace was a close relative in some fashion as to what is unknown. Clinton is another small town and had more than one Frace family as residents. One can imagine Dr. Frace’s horror when he saw Minnie’s physical condition.

²¹ *The Washington Star*, August 8, 1895. The parsonage was immediately set up as a field hospital.

²² “A Congregation Struck by Lightning,” *Medical Record: A Weekly Journal of Medicine and Surgery*, August 10, 1895.

²³ *The Christian Advocate New York*, Thursday, August 8, 1895, Vol. LXX No. 32, p.16 (520).

²⁴ The inflation rate would be \$46,644.07 in 2019 dollars.

²⁵ Newark Annual Conference Journal, 1896, 39.