



DISCOVERY

Edited by
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The Lost Letters of Bishop Asbury

More than 40 years ago while doing research for my Ph.D. dissertation on the life of Freeborn Garrettson, I found a tantalizing note in Abel Stevens' *Sketches From the Study of a Superannuated Itinerant*, published in 1853. The note referred to a collection of letters Stevens had seen in the Garrettson mansion at Rhinebeck, New York. These letters were from 33 early Methodist leaders including John Wesley and Francis Asbury.

To have hitherto unknown letters from early Methodist leaders would obviously be a significant resource. But after careful research, I concluded that this collection had either been broken up or lost.

Eight years ago the archivist at Olin Library, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut told me of a collection of Garrettson letters at their library. These letters proved to be the lost collection which had not been seen for 125 years. Of special interest were 9 unpublished letters from Bishop Asbury to Garrettson. They spanned a period of 29 years, and are especially significant because they reveal Asbury's personal attitudes and actions respecting several aspects of church and ministry. Garrettson was one of Asbury's close friends. Therefore, the letters are particularly useful because of the frank and intimate manner in which he wrote.

I begin in this issue of *Discovery* the publication for the first time of the lost Asbury letters. Succeeding issues will carry the remaining letters.

The first two Asbury letters to Freeborn Garrettson were written to Garrettson while on mission to Nova Scotia. He and Joseph Cromwell were sent as mis-

sionaries from the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church, and were the first Methodist missionaries to a territory outside America.

I

New York September 2, 1785

My Dear Brother

I have received two letters from you. We must expect to meet with difficulties in planting the pure Gospel in a new country when the tares have been scattered first. You have nothing to do but to maintain the purity and power of the doctrine of Christ with as little controversy as possible both in publick and in private. We have comfortable assurances in many places that God will not cast us off as a people, nor ceased to work for us. The gentle breezes pass over the Peninsula. Brother Tigman hath great hope and some pleasing prospects of good in Calvert, Charles and St. Mary's Counties. There is a growing, and great gathering together for good in the Back parts, Redstone and beyond. Br, Everett (sentence lost) has had some gracious displays of the divine power, and great prospects in the Northern — of Virginia to which he was appointed. We have had a blessed opening in South Carolina which began in Charleston and from thence is spreading through the state. Brs. Willis, Tunnel, Allen, and Hickson are on that station.

Perhaps it might be well for you to meet together, and sit in a little Conference, lay out your work in circuits, take the numbers, send a regular account to our Conference to be printed with our Minutes. Our last Minutes were incomplete. The Dr. (Coke) went off in such haste that he carried away some of the papers. We have good prospects in the City of Philadelphia and New York as also in East Jersey. I have not seen Richard Garrettson. I saw Thomas not long since. Mrs. C— is dead, as also Sister Lynch. Br. Lambert is returned in a very low state of Body. James Thomas is unable to Labor at all. We have had much sickness. I have been stopt near a month which is more than I have been for some years. I had an attack of inflammation in my throat, and one of a Belious kind. We are building a new church in Baltimoretown 70 feet long 46 feet wide. Our college is raised one story High. If we have any wealthy friends that can spare a little it will be very acceptable. I have paid for the Books you carried with you. We received and expended near, yea upwards of 300 pounds last Conference, and we're greatly strayhtened onn account of Eighty pounds expended in Missions. If they want preachers for the future in Nova Scotia they must support them, or they must come Home. We cannot pay their expenses, and support them while there. I am sorry you should still bear in mind anything of what has past, and ought to be forgotten. God is witness that I love you, and daily bear you on my heart before the Lord..

I don't know anything in reason you can desire of me. Or anything you wish to be informed of I would not tell you if I knew. With respect to slavery, I am clear, and always was, that if every Preacher would do his duty we should not need to make any Minutes, use no force, but only loving and argumentative persuasion. With respect to Bro. Black and Bro. Cromwell with you, and it is the desire of the people concurring with your —; I will gain him, if possible, an election in the Conference, and he will meet me here this time twelve months. I will ordain him provided he will give himself up to the work and a proper provision can be made for his wife. Any expense he may be at in coming we will make up in York. If you think it will not do say nothing about it. If it [is] well Let them one or both bring testamonials from the principal members and also recommendatory Letters from you and Brother Cromwell, because as I can not see with my own eyes and hear

with my own Ears I wish to use all precaution possible, and not lay hands suddenly or improperly on any Man. I shall depend in a good measure on your judgment in this matter. I hope it will be well informed, deliberate and —. I am clear we must make as many Deacons and Elders as we can with propriety and consistent with our form of Church government. Every Deacon should have the special charge of one circuit an Elder of three, a Bishop a diocese of six Circuits then everything would be in place, and the people well supplied with ordinances.

Do not fail to meet together, tho it should be attended with difficulties, act by united councils, strive to be in common, let not Satan divide, don't Lord it over one another, but live and love as brethren, bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the Law of Love. Fear nothing so much as a division among yourselves continually guard against it.

I am as ever your Friend and Brother.

Francis A sbury

II

New York Sept. 1786

My dear Brother

You will wonder why I have not wrote more letters and sent you Preachers. I expect you will be supplied from England. My infirmities come on fast. I am often sick and lame. Since Conference I have hobbled out as far as the Ohio. The prospect of religion softened all my toil and greatly — my fainting spirit. We have various spots of a revival in Redstone. Northern — Calvert Eastern Shore we keep up the spirit. In Fairfax in Virginia the great and glorious work of Sanctification grows. Bro. Bruce informs that is as common for the people to profess that Blessing now as justification some years ago — in South Carolina and Georgia as also North, the Lord displays his power. My soul has been big by faith, in prayer that this would be a great year, but my own indisposition with that of many of my dear Brethren who are obliged to leave the work is painful. Br. Sterns (?) is gone home in deep consumption. Dear Bro. Willis is far gone and can preach but little. Br. Lambert dead. Br. Boyer has got a Rupture is low. Br. Sam Thomas dead. Br. Curtis I fear will not stand long. Br. Tigman? and Hagerty talk of not labouring so much as they have done. Br. Wyeth gone and I fear many of our preachers have and preached themselves out.

I give it as my advice for you not to be anxious about building Houses you will find it easier to get in debt than to pay and you will make richmen necessary and they will rule you and impede your discipline if you are not well aware. We groan under a heavy debt in York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore and it weakens the hands of the poor among us and strengthens the hands of the few Rich, to oppose our strictness of discipline. And I wish you to be well on your guard, or you will repent it too late, don't be hurried into anything of the kind. If you do not take care you or your successors will repent it.

The work grows some in Jersey and also in the City. I expect by the time this reaches you the Doctor with you, and you must take counsel with him what will be best. My general counsel is Preach the pure Gospel in all its parts, and keep up a strict discipline among both Preachers and people that is the way to do good. I do not know how matters will go with me. I am afraid that some of our preachers have

been — and improved and have — of doing anything in the old church they will go. Those that are faithful will hold fellowship with us, and those that are otherwise will not. There is such an instability in men and things that stand amazed and wonder there is among us who seek their own. But you have fully known my doctrine, manner of life purpose, faith and affections.

Twenty-three years I have been a free and willing servant and slave to the Methodist interest. I hope to live and die so. All I can show are debts, old age and many infirmities. I am at present very unwell but must embrace this opportunity to write you. I should be very glad if you and Br. Cromwell could return to the states. We want preachers very much. Georgia and Kentucky will call for great attention and we must support our Brethren we have there. I expect Br. Pilmoor will do all he can to draw a party of the most acceptable after him. But I feel no malice or bitterness in my heart. Bro. Spraggs I hope is devoted to God (as is) also Br. Colman. Bro. Roe has left (Burlington) and is gone to Dover and (Duck Creek). Our college is almost at a dead stand. Dear Bro (Mosely) is dead. We have a large new house in Baltimore town. The work is — dead in the town and circuit. My dear Brother above all things keep close to God in prayer, keep the — hour morning and evening. Let nothing prevent. Bear your charge and preachers faithfully on your heart before God. I left the letter at the Goughs for your Brother. I expect they were well. I heard nothing to the contrary. Br. Glendenning I expect continues much as he was. Brs. Gill and Tunnell are in the work faint like me yet excelling. Harry the wonderful Black has been my faithful companion this summer is with me here. I expect to try to get out if possible this winter to Charleston. I shall leave Baltimore about Christmas. I think it is quite out of the question for me to think of visiting Nova Scotia unless I should find a land passage. I know not what the Lord will do with me whether he will lay me aside or employ me, and this I am not anxious about. I leave it all to him. I want to live all to him to be always holy. You will do well to press sanctification on all believers, and promote as much as may be the spirit of prayer in Societies, in families, in private, then God will bless you. I expect we shall shortly see each other in heaven if we are faithful. Write me by the Doctor. I do not know what you want to know. I can say I love you as ever. Oh keep close to God and walk humbly at all times with the Lord. I am as ever thine in the bowels of Christ.

Francis Asbury

The following 1791 letter includes an interesting reference to Dr. Coke's willingness to come to America to serve under Asbury in any capacity. Note that Asbury refers to Coke as Dr. Coke and not as bishop.

Another interesting reference is to the establishment of "Female school" under the leadership of several women "to teach anything and everything a Female ought to learn and do." Clearly Asbury supported the project.

The references to "Br. O'Kelley and his men" is historic. In this letter Asbury is declaring that he will not further provoke a "convulsion" among the preachers. Obviously it was too late, for in 1792 O'Kelley broke with the Methodist connection. It should be noted that Garrettson was one of O'Kelley's supporters.

The fragment letter of 1803 reveals the positive growth of the church. But the centerpiece is the mention of the Dover meeting. No doubt this was a week-long camp meeting where thousands attended. Note also that Asbury

was especially committed to camp meeting as a most effective method of evangelism.

III

Judge Whites Nov. 6, 1791

My very dear Brother,

I received thy kind letter am pleased to hear all things look promising. By a late packet from England, Thompson is President, Doctor Coke Secretary. The kingdom is divided into districts, committees to govern these, general conference of one hundred I suppose to manage for two or three hundred. Dr. Coke has made uncommon acknowledgements to me. And wishes to come to be anything under me here. but there is no need of all this. We have had a searching time on the peninsula, close love feasts, not a single person admitted great meeting times. I heard of but did not see Thomas. I am afraid he is wrapt in the world. Keep close to God, watch and strive and pray. I have sent two young [preachers] I think you may use for good. If you have no need of them give them a recommendation to Br. Mills or Allen. It may be advisable to send some of the young men to Mass. from Conn. and place some from your district into Conn. and employ the young men with you, that we have sent, they are well recommended to me, and we have been drained in such a manner, we cannot send men of more experience. Br. Foster has settled himself. And some have lost the spirit of preaching and are a dead weight to the work and our people must have gifts —?— or life. I have no doubt but we could employ Br. Ellison if he was in Phil. We are all on the wing to Establish a Female school to teach anything and everything a Female ought to learn or do. Between [Emmalls] Ferry and Cambridge. Two sisters Emmalls, sister Jones, Sister Ward and Sister Aerey. Main agents. A grand design as ever was set on foot in this country and doubt but it will go on and prosper. Make what provision you can for the house, but build on a most frugal plan. My dear friend push prayer meetings as much as possible. Keep close love feasts and be very searching in Band meetings, of the preachers at the Quarter meetings. Local and traveling preachers. the exhorters and steward leaders also. O my dear Brother let us purge the sanctuary. Good tidings from North Carolina, Kentucky and some stir on the Eastern Shore. We have had about 40 souls brought to God in Northhampton Circuit.

I shall do nothing in subscription sent by Br. Lee unless it is perfectly agreeable to Br. O'Kelley and his men. I am fully resolved to put the connection into such another convulsion. Let us pray for a uniting loving spirit. I wish very much if it was possible to train up Stephen Sands a Christian and a teacher and station him at Rhinbeck or some part of the state of York. I judge Mr. Sands would gladly further a school in his neighborhood. There is no doubt but Stephen Sands will make one of the best scholars we have ever sent out of Cokesbury. In your next letter let me (?)— I — in company of 4 or 5 men send to me at Charleston from York if you can meet me in February. I am as ever thine.

Francis Asbury

IV

Wilmington, N.C. Feb. 1803

My very dear Brother and Sister,

Grace and peace be with your spirits. I have waiting for a letter till I am disappointed but I recollect you wrote last. The latter end of the last year was glorious, and we are looking for greater displays this year.

Our Western Conference increase, 3250. Our Southern Conference increase, 3271. So that we may safely calculate upon twenty-one thousand annually by allowing three thousand to a Conference by an average. The Dover meeting was a memorable one; that continued from Friday night till Friday morning week, and we hope, as thousands were present, hundreds were blest. At a meeting I opened in Rockingham County, and at Rocktown in New Virginia, that held 9 days, at the close 107 came forward and joined Society, the subjects of Grace in the town and vicinity; and the County shared equally; the Postman carrying the news to a [] town 60 miles distant gave fire to the Society of Stephensburg and when I had the information 50 had found redemption in that place. In the West tis true the great meetings have not been so great and []; and yet the work is [] blessedly. In Georgia, and North and South Carolina (end of fragment of letter).