



DISCOVERY

Edited by
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The Discovery column for this issue is devoted to two letters. The first is the last of the nine unpublished letters written by Bishop Francis Asbury to the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson. The earlier letters appeared in the previous issues of *Methodist History*. The second letter is a fragment of a letter from Bishop Thomas Coke to Garrettson.

The Asbury letter written in 1814 presents a picture of Asbury who is weary in his work, and is two years from his death. I suggest you read this letter with this time frame in mind.

Asbury's greeting to Garrettson—"My dearly beloved and venerable Brother"—is more than a formal salutation. It is another expression of the deep affection in which he held Garrettson. As you read the substance of the letter, observe in the early sentences the indication of the pastoral trouble Garrettson was apparently having with two persons in his city ministry. None of Garrettson's records are available for this period so "The City" being referred to remains a mystery. James and John are named and it appears that James is the culprit. The reference to "the poor Africans" may indicate that James was one of the African leaders.

In the later sentences of the letter Asbury expressed concern for Coke's ministry as well as for the strength of the church in London. I was especially interested in Asbury's expression of serious concern for Garrettson's daughter, Mary. He had always been close to her. Her health was poor, and here Asbury asks about her spiritual health.

Finally, as if his concern for Mary overflowed into concern for himself, Asbury writes, "Oh there is no cure for old age." His work is overwhelming and he says, "I am so weak. . . . Sometimes I can hardly pray in families. I feel and fear like being in the way."

The last paragraph is a puzzle with its references to Virginia, marriage, and the subject of color. I would appreciate any responses from readers who might have some ideas regarding what is being said between the lines.

The fragment of the letter from Coke to Garrettson is also in the Wesleyan University collection. I include it because in 1787 the new church was struggling with its relationship with Wesley's assumed authority over the American Methodists. The background of this letter is the appointment of Garrettson at the 1784 Christmas Conference to go as missionary to Nova Scotia. In fact, he and Joseph Cromwell were the first missionaries to be sent from the Methodist Episcopal Church. Garrettson was extremely successful. The plan mentioned by Coke from the hand of Wesley was already in the works. In May when Conference received Wesley's plan for Garrettson, it was unanimously approved. Garrettson expressed his tentative agreement to the plan, if he be given opportunity to tour the area for one year. If all was well, he would return the next year to be consecrated as General Superintendent. The mystery is what happened overnight? The Conference reversed itself, and Asbury appointed Garrettson to the Del-Marva Peninsula. Garrettson, in his semi-centennial sermon years later, apparently was still puzzled for he said, "What transpired in the Conference during my absence, I know not; but I was astonished when the appointments were read, to hear my name mentioned to preside in the Peninsula."

Note Coke's words in his letter to Garrettson, "Mr. Wesley has given me ORDERS to consecrate you for the Office of Superintendent, etc." Is it possible that the May Conference, after approving the appointment, had trouble abiding by Wesley giving orders to the new church? Was this in part a gesture from the American Methodists that the days of Mr. Wesley giving orders to them was passing? When I annotated the Garrettson Journal for publication, I discovered a manuscript note never published where Garrettson wrote, "I am not ashamed to own Mr. Wesley under God, as the head and founder of the Methodist Church." I submit that the authority of Wesley was at the root of the matter. This point of view, I believe, is further substantiated by the response of the Conference to the other order mentioned in this letter respecting Whatcoat being made Joint-Superintendent with Asbury. Jesse Lee's *A Short History of the Methodist* (pp. 126, 127) discusses the Conference debate about the fitness of Whatcoat for the appointment as well as the concern of Wesley over the American church.

Norfolk Feb. 15, 1814

My dearly beloved and venerable Brother—

Great grace, great Temptations, Great Labours, Great consolations, Great Glory awaits us. In your affliction I sympathize with you. In your City difficulties I feel for you. Dear Daniel, your friend and mine, had hoped you had made peace between *Joseph & James*. I am truly sorry for all these things, but anticipated the troubles we have had with James. If he does not calm himself we must tell him we

won't be pleased he would go to the — —; or go to the —. I feel for the poor Africans nevertheless, they do not know what is right. In fact they ought to do all things under the oversight of the Elder that has charge of them. I have had several serious attacks in the breast this winter; and you being so far north exposed upon water, must have suffered. We have had little or no snow, but most severe frosts. The Tennessee Conference believed it their duty to take up our — to the Mississippi, in a Conference—to act for the other eight and determined the time too short to go and return 600 miles wilderness, the desperate— of the Creeks, the most desperate of any Indian tribe; and that the sacrifice was too great, only for a small half of the 10th Conference compared with the other—. Our time has been taken up in visiting Georgia, south and North Carolina, and Virginia, [and] most of the Districts in these states. Of the work we can not say, we know very little, there has been a very serious visibility of the work of God in the encampments of Israel. The Ears of the unbelievers are generally open to the Gospel.

Is Dr. Coke gone to Asia with 7 or 10 missionaries? Is there the foundation of the church laid in London? for converts — and — — opened for them in various places in that great City? Glory to God for those that have triumphantly died in the Lord. You my Br. will praise God for another — in your Family Connection? Does Mary weep? does she pray? I have been afraid that child should be taken away in Judgement, and saved in mercy. Surely she will not live to dishonour such parents that have been praying so many years? and praying for her? Not to love our Saviour would dishonour! Oh shall a child of so many prayers live with Jesus? Oh my Br. there is no cure for old age. We ought to visit Annually Conferences and 51 Districts and a 1000 families, and to be perfection. I am so weak. Sometimes I can hardly pray in families. I feel, and fear like being in the way, a meer Bill of cost!

Excellent union and order in our Conferences, great zeal in many of the Traveling and Local ministry. The worst is there is— — —, but more especially in Virginia; a practical sentiment that it is proper for single preachers to travel but not married; because they generally marry the white connections, and a Family of Color hence the virgin[a] Conference is weak. I hope, I fear peace is to great a Blessing for us and those that contend with us.

Am ever yours in the Gospel,

F. Asbury

Eustatia, Jan. 26, 1787

My very dear Brother

After various Distresses, & endeavouring to the utmost to reach the Port of Halifax, I was obliged to submit to be carried with my three Brethren (two of whom were designed for Nova Scotia) to the West Indies.

Mr. Wesley has given me orders to consecrate you for the Office of Superintendent over our Societies in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, & also over any Societies which may in future be formed in the Province of Canada.

The glorious openings for the Propagation of the Gospel with which the Lord has favoured us, are so great in the Islands of Antigua, St. Vincent's, St. Christopher's, & Eustatia that they oblige me to leave my three Brethren in this part of the World. To do otherwise would be to resist the revealed arm of God. We have now about two thousand in Society on the Island of Antigua. But I must

reserve the particulars of our great success in these Islands, till I have the pleasure of seeing you.

Mr. Wesley has given me orders to hold a General Conference at Baltimore on the first of next May, & to consecrate Br. Whatcoat as Joint-Superintendent with Mr. Asbury.

(End of letter fragment)