

SHADY GROVE, GARDEN, AND WILDERNESS: METHODISM AND THE AMERICAN WOODLAND

RUSSELL E. RICHEY

In his journal for Sunday, September 23, 1759, John Wesley, after preaching to a “vast multitude of the immense congregation in Moorfields and noting the “expediency of *field preaching*” commented “By repeated observations I find I can command thrice the number in the open air [that] I can under a roof. And who can say the time for field preaching is over while (1) greater numbers than ever attend, (2) the converting as well as convincing power of God is eminently present with them?”¹

The preachers commissioned by Wesley to take his movement to the new world doubtless came intent on honoring his field-preaching imperative. They soon discovered that only a fool would stand in a field under the blistering American summer sun or expect a congregation to endure such folly. Instead, the preachers gathered congregations in the shade of a stately forest or under an oak’s spreading branches. Relishing these natural cathedrals, the preachers also found the woods a place for solitude, prayer, and devotions. And as they took Methodism west, they found forests to be wilderness, full of dangers, some life-threatening. All three experiences of the American woodland proved important. So Methodists sacralized American woodlands as cathedral, as confessional, as challenge—as shady grove (nature’s cathedral), as garden (a Gethsemane where temptations might be fought and spiritual solace sought), and as wilderness (a challenge through and into which the Methodist ‘gospel’ must be taken). All three of these spiritualizations of the woodland would eventually come together in the dramas known as camp meetings, staged revivals that became a Methodist signature.

“What can shake Satan’s kingdom like *field preaching!*”²

¹ *The Works of John Wesley*; begun as “The Oxford Edition of The Works of John Wesley” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975-1983); continued as “The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley” (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984-) 34 vols. projected; *Works 21: Journals and Diaries*, IV (1755-1765), 230.

² Wesley, *Works 21, Journals and Diaries*, IV (1755-1765), 479, for July 17, 1764. Context for this statement: after preaching on the square in Chester to a gathering that included “many wild, rude people,” Wesley noted, “they were outnumbered by those who were civil and attentive. And I believe some impression was made on the wildest. What can shake Satan’s kingdom like *field preaching!*”

Methodism—the Pietist,³ revivalistic evangelistic renewal movement, led by John and Charles Wesley in Britain, by George Whitefield on both sides of the Atlantic, and later by Francis Asbury in the colonies and new nation—prospered in the open-air. Methodists discovered that they could best reach the unchurched and the religiously indifferent if they resorted to unconventional, non-ecclesiastical space and preached in market squares, on commons, outside mines, in graveyards and in the fields. Theatrically-gifted Whitefield drew huge crowds in the American colonies and across Britain.⁴

In 1739, George Whitefield invited John Wesley to Bristol so that he (George) might move on to evangelize Wales. Wesley witnessed a Whitefield gathering of something like thirty thousand. Though reluctant, Wesley gave in and began preaching in and around Bristol, taking advantage of any space made available—parish churches, the few buildings that Methodists had acquired and various outdoor sites. He experimented with outside or field preaching also around London. Wesley did not draw quite the numbers of the flamboyant Whitefield but claimed crowds of ten and fifteen thousand. Evangelistic success with this adopted practice, in Wesley's understanding, stamped field preaching as providential. Indeed, he made field preaching a program, a key strategy in his endeavor to reform the Church of England.⁵

In his various publications—another of his successful stratagems to advance the Methodist renewal cause—Wesley explained that he had resorted to programmatic field preaching when frustrated in efforts to preach in church settings.⁶ In *A Short History of the People Called Methodists* (1781) Wesley insisted that he preached in the open air “which I did at first, not out of choice, but necessity” because blocked by the clergy from many churches and committed to reaching the people.⁷ Wesley drove himself to this practice, expected field preaching from his preachers as well, and came to see

³ On Pietism as a trans-Atlantic movement, see Ted A. Campbell, *The Religion of the Heart: A Study of European Religious Life in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia: U South Carolina P, 1991); W. Reginald Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) and *Early Evangelicalism: A Global Intellectual History, 1670-1789* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge UP, 2006).

⁴ Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, c1991); Jerome Dean Mahaffey, *The Accidental Revolutionary: George Whitefield and the Creation of America* (Waco: Baylor UP, c2011); Frank Lambert, *Pedlar in Divinity: George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737-1770* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994).

⁵ On the Wesley program, see Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 99-100, 113-114, 144-145, 149-151, 153, 161-163, 165, 172, 176-177, 179, 185, 194, 225, 231.

⁶ In “a short state of the case between the clergy and us,” dated March 11, 1745, Wesley outlined in some detail the frustrated attempts to preach in church settings that led to the fields, squares and other outdoor venues (*Works* 20, *Journals and Diaries*, V (1743-1754), 55-58). There are some thirty references to field preaching in his journals.

⁷ *Works* 9, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, 431. Similarly *Thoughts upon Methodism* (1786), in describing the Methodist revival and not being allowed to preach in churches, Wesley insisted he “began preach in the fields” (*Works* 9, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, 528). Compare *Works* 21, *Journals and Diaries*, IV (1755-1765), 203, for June 25-26, 1759, and 333, for Sunday, July 5, 1761.

inattention to it as a source of weakness in the movement.

About seven, I preached at the Gins, and the people flocked together from all quarters. The want of field preaching has been one cause of deadness here. I do not find any great increase of the work of God without it. If ever this is laid aside, I expect the whole work will gradually die away.”⁸

Field preaching came then to be part of a complex of practices, gatherings, beliefs and structures by which the Wesleys, led really by John, sought to renew and revitalize the Church of England. Indeed, the Methodist purpose statement, enunciated in conferences of preachers whom Wesley called together, insisted that the movement belonged with and oriented its work toward the Church. The *Minutes* of Wesley’s conferences, from 1744 onward, consolidated into “*Large*” *Minutes* in 1763, conceived of Methodism as a renewal effort within the Church:

Quest. 4. What may we reasonably believe to be God’s Design, in raising up the Preachers called *Methodists*?

Ans. To reform the Nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scripture holiness over the land.⁹

The pretense that the Methodists did not separate became less and less plausible as the Wesleys generated quite an array of renewal features, field preaching among them, that sufficiently engaged and paralleled comparable elements of the Church of England as to constitute what looked to critics like another ecclesial body altogether. Nevertheless, despite building up church-infrastructure, including their own buildings, regularized times of worship, ethical guidelines for daily living and structures for order and discipline, the Wesleys insisted that they were not separating from the Church. That commitment or pretense extended to the New World insofar as the Wesleys could direct Methodist efforts there.

“I . . . trust you . . . will not forget the church in this wilderness.”¹⁰

The Wesleyan movement in the colonies did not grow out of the disastrous sojourn of the two Wesleys in Georgia in the 1730s or from the seven dramatically popular preaching tours of Whitefield up and down the coast over the next three decades. Nor did John Wesley launch Methodism by deputizing preachers to come over. Instead, Methodists who had migrated on their own—Robert and Elizabeth Strawbridge in Maryland and Barbara

⁸ *Works* 21, *Journals and Diaries*, IV (1755-1765), 473, for Sunday June 24, 1764. Compare *Works* 22, *Journals and Diaries*, V (1765-1775), 8, for June 18, 1765; 106, for September 30, 1767; 153, for August 21, 1768; 190, for June 26, 1769; 196, for July 23, 1769; 348, for Sunday, September 6, 1772.

⁹ *Works* 10, *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*, 845.

¹⁰ Thomas Taylor’s April, 1768, letter asking Wesley to send preachers to America, in Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America*, 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000, 2010), 2, *A Sourcebook*, 50. Hereinafter, the two volumes, the 2010 *History* and 2000 *Sourcebook* are abbreviated MEA 1 and MEA 2, with a date or page number indicating the document for the latter.

Heck, Philip Embury and Thomas Webb in New York—took the initiative to start classes and organize societies (the local structures of Wesleyanism) and to begin the missionary itinerating that spread the movement.

Members of the infant Methodist societies in North America, while appreciative of the beginning efforts, wrote Wesley pleading for stronger leadership. That from Thomas Taylor, which provides the header for this section, described those then working in New York and recalled earlier efforts by Whitefield. He concluded:

We want an able, experienced preacher—one who has both gifts and graces necessary for the work. God has not despised the day of small things

[W]e must have a man of wisdom, of sound faith, and a good disciplinarian, one whose heart and soul are in the work, and I doubt not but by the goodness of God such a flame would be soon kindled as would never stop until it reached the great South Sea.¹¹

In response, John Wesley sent over successive pairs of itinerants. Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore came in 1769. Francis Asbury and Richard Wright followed in 1771, Thomas Rankin and George Shadford in 1773, and James Dempster and Martin Rodda in 1774. Several preachers came to the colonies on their own, including John King, Joseph Yearbry, and William Glendenning. Those whom Wesley sent came with orders.

Pilmore and Boardman and successors knew themselves to be under explicit directives about implementing the Wesley system—open-air preaching, itineration on a planned basis, making and meeting appointments, inviting into connection all of any confession who would “flee the wrath the come,” admitting the same as probationers, organizing classes, holding love feasts, maintaining the society’s boundaries, establishing circuits, and cultivating good relations with the churches and their clergy. Implementing the Wesleyan system meant also discerning those who could serve in key leadership posts—steward, class leader, exhorter, local preacher—and appointing them to these key local posts.

“I was glad to stand up in the Wood & the people were finely sheltered from the extreme heat of the sun by the spreading branches of the Trees.”¹²

The manifold efforts that Pilmore and successors made in bringing colonial Methodist initiatives into conformity with the Wesleyan system lie beyond the purview of this paper.¹³ From the start Americans had their own ideas about how best to adapt Wesleyanism to a new society. Whether and how much to itinerate would become one area of struggle and Pilmore

¹¹ MEA 2: 50.

¹² Frederick E. Maser and Howard T. Maag, eds., *The Journal of Joseph Pilmore: Methodist Itinerant. For the Years August 1, 1769 to January 2, 1774* (Philadelphia: Message Publishing Co., for the Historical Society of the Philadelphia annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1969), 141.

¹³ See MEA 1, chapters 1-3.

among those with their own ideas. But Pilmore started out itinerating widely and provided one of the few instances of actually preaching in a field. In and around New York in June, 1771, he recorded “preaching to a vast multitude of people in the Fields near the City.” And again a year later in early July in and around Baltimore, Pilmore reported that after “an abundance of rain” had “refreshed the ground and cooled the air,” he preached “on the Green in the Evening where a large congregation attended.”¹⁴

More typically Pilmore took to the woods. In mid-September, 1771, he encountered

a vast congregation assembled at Chestnut-hill, (a place about ten miles from Philadelphia) so I began immediately, and discoursed to them on the words of the Baptist *Flee from the Wrath to come* (Matt. 3:7). The fine spreading Oaks formed a noble Canopy over us, and we were as happy in the Grove as if we had been in the most pompous Temple.

A month later, on October 12, Pilmore headed toward Chestnut-hill, the “new Chapel would not hear contain the congregation,” so he preached in the Wood. “The stately trees extended their branches and afforded us a fine refreshing shade, while I called upon the listening multitude to look unto the Lord, whose wings are ever stretched out to cover and defend the upright in heart.” The next day, at Chestnut-hill, he again drew upon a Biblical image apt for the wood. He

found a vast concourse of people assembled in the Grove where I preached before, I began immediately and was greatly assisted from above while I explained the Parable of the fruitless fig tree. It was one of the most solemn seasons I ever knew in preaching abroad (abroad) and had great reason to beli(e)ve the word of the Lord was made the savour of life to many of the people.

A month later, on November 17, back again at Chestnut-hill and again finding “a vast concourse of people gathered from all quarters,” he reported “I took my old stand in the wood, and explained the Parable of the tares of the field.”¹⁵ The next summer found Pilmore again going sylvan. For Sunday, June 21, 1772, he noted going to “Baltimore Forrest where I found about five hundred people assembled in the Wood, so I immediately took my stand under a shady Tree, and had great liberty to explain the parable of the Wheat and the Tares.” A week later, near Deer-Creek he intended to preach in the “new Chapel” but “found four times as many people as it would contain, so they made me a place in the Wood, and stood beneath the spreading branches of a stately Oak.” When the people would not go away, he promised to preach again and so returned to that Wood. On June 30, he “found a noble congregation” at the Forks off Gunpowder and as “no house . . . would near contain them, I was glad to stand up in the Wood & the people were finely sheltered from the extreme heat of the sun by the spreading branches of the

¹⁴ *Journal of Joseph Pilmore*, 91, 142.

¹⁵ *Journal of Joseph Pilmore*, 101, 104, 108.

Trees.”¹⁶

Sun-adverse Englishmen were not the only Methodists to forget “fields” and seek shade. Indeed, for decades until they began to build cathedral-style churches that would accommodate and shelter crowds, Methodists—American and British—reflexively took to the woods. So American-born Freeborn Garrettson, one of the movement’s most important leaders, an almost-bishop, recorded in late 1775, “preaching under the trees.” Again in October, 1778, he reported “preaching in a forest, to hundreds who gathered, both morning and afternoon.” In late Spring, 1779, he spoke “to a thousand, or fifteen hundred souls assembled under the trees.” And on July 6, 1779, he remarked on “a listening multitude under the trees in Mother Kill.”¹⁷ Other sylvan worship services did not make it into Garrettson’s published journal—April 17, 1783; May 18, 1783; August 18, 1783; September 8, 1784; January 5, 1790.¹⁸ Looking back from 1810, Jesse Lee recalled a 1776 quarterly conference that required outdoor accommodations:

On Tuesday and Wednesday, the 30th and 31st day of July, quarterly-meeting was held at Mabury’s dwelling house in Brunswick (now Greenville) county. No meeting-house in Virginia could have held the people. We had a large arbour in the yard, which would shade from the sun, two or three thousand people. The first day was a blessed season; but the second day was a day never to be forgotten. We held the love-feast under the arbour in the open air; the members of society took their seats, and other people stood all around them by hundreds. The place was truly awful, by reason of the presence of the Lord. Many of the members spake; and while some declared how the Lord had justified them freely, others declared how, and when the blood of Jesus had cleansed them from all sin. So clear, so full, and so strong was their testimony, that while some were speaking their experience, hundreds were in tears, and others vehemently crying to God, for pardon or holiness

Such a work of God as that was, I had never seen, or heard of before. It continued to spread through the south parts of Virginia, and the adjacent parts of North-Carolina, all that summer and autumn.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Journal of Joseph Pilmore*, 140-142. See entries also for May 17, 1772; June 8, 1772; June 16, 1772; the two instances already cited follow; then also July 26, 1772; September 15, 1772.

¹⁷ *The Experience and Travels of Mr. Freeborn Garrettson, Minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church in North America* (Philadelphia: Printed by Perry Hall, 1791) as reprinted in Robert D. Simpson, ed., *American Methodist Pioneer: The Life and Journals of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson, 1752-1827* (Rutland, VT: Academy Books for Drew University Library, 1984), 77, 80, 86.

¹⁸ *American Methodist Pioneer*, 219, 221, 228, 242, 266.

¹⁹ Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists* (Baltimore, 1810: facsimile ed. Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1974), 59. Similarly Francis Asbury reported on a Sept. 5-6, 1801 qm: “Saturday and Sabbath day were spent at Rockingham quarterly meeting, held in Harrisonburg: the brethren were lively in the sacramental meeting. Many came from far, although the heat was very great. N. Sneathen preached on Saturday upon Rom. xii, 17, and Sabbath day, Rom. xii, 1. My subject was 1 Pet. iv, 17. The house could not at all contain the people, we therefore took to the woods; but we failed in shade, and felt some inconvenience in the sun.” Francis Asbury, *Journal of Rev. Francis Asbury: Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church* 3 vols. (New York and Cincinnati: Eaton & Mains; Jennings & Pye, 1821) 3: 33; cf. *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. Elmer T. Clark, 3 vols. (London: Epworth, and Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 2: 305. Hereinafter Asbury, *Journal* and JLF respectively. Cf. accounts by Devereux Jarratt, Thomas Saunders, John Dickens, and Thomas Rankin in JLF 1: 207-224.

Four years later, American Methodism regularized the two-day quarterly conference, preferably as a Saturday-Sunday affair, and so “institutionalized” its crowd-gathering function and tendency to require a sylvan setting.²⁰

To be sure, like their English counterparts, American Methodists used whatever space they could commandeer—chapels, homes, churches belonging to other denominations, public buildings, and barns as well as forests, shady groves, and spreading oaks. So another itinerant, John Kobler, sent out from a conference in “Petersburgh,” spent three weeks reaching his mountain appointment, the Bedford Circuit. He reported for May 15 [1791]: “Sund. 15. I preached for the first time to a crowded company in a barn. I never shall forget what a weeping there was. Poor old greyheaded sinners was bathed in sweat and tears.” A little later he noted, “one Sunday, the congregation exceeded the capacity of house so went to the woods “where I stood upon a table and preached” And again, “Sunday, June 12, preached at . . . to a large company in a barn At night I gave an exhortation at the same place to a stout company of whites and blacks.”²¹

Preachers and those who gathered to hear them chose the most suitable and comfortable venues available. But sylvan settings seemed to elicit emotionally-charged treatment in Methodist journals, diaries and autobiographies, those of the preachers especially. Because they itinerated, because they must honor an appointment and itinerate, because a horse and strong lungs constituted requisites for ministry, because their circuits could be four or six weeks around, because they were sent out in exploratory assignments to evangelize and convert, the preachers experienced the American landscape in remarkably distinctive if not unique fashion. They filled their journals with geographical adversities—getting lost, falling into rivers, weathering snowstorms, worrying about Indian attack, losing their mounts, begging accommodations. The land, the forest, the continent came to have special meaning for American Methodism.

“At full liberty, simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church”²²

With this guidance, John Wesley exhorted his offspring in a 1784 letter and conferred his blessing on the translation of the movement, till then ostensibly a renewal effort within colonial Anglicanism, into a church for the new nation. Indeed, Wesley created a new Anglicanism:

- ordaining fellow-priest the Rev. Thomas Coke a superintendent (bishop) and directing that Francis Asbury be also so ordained;
- providing in a *Sunday Service* a revised *Book of Common Prayer*;
- reducing the “Articles of Religion” to suit the American scene;

²⁰ *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the years 1773-1828* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1840), 12.

²¹ John Kobler, *Journal and Sermons*, Lovely Lane, I. *Journal 1789-1792*: 79, 86.

²² “To Dr. COKE, Mr. ASBURY, and our Brethren in *NORTH-AMERICA*. BRISTOL, Sept. 10, 1784,” John Telford, ed. *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*: 8 vols. London: Epworth Press, 1931. 7: 237-238; MEA 2, 1784a.

- sending the “Large Minutes” to constitute a *Discipline* for the new church; and
- expecting the Americans to rely on his “Sermons” as the Church of England did the *Homilies*.

Fittingly, the Americans in their organizing “Christmas Conference” of 1784 chose to give themselves an Anglican name, the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC).²³ In its *Discipline*, the MEC Americanized Wesley’s purpose statement:

Quest. 3. What may we reasonably believe to be God’s Design, in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?

Answ. To reform the Continent, and spread scripture Holiness over these Lands. As a Proof hereof, we have seen in the Course of fifteen Years a great a glorious Work of God, from New-York through the Jersies, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, even to Georgia.²⁴

The American answer to Wesley’s query mentioned reform but not of nation or church and it pluralized land to lands. The Christmas Conference of young preachers who finalized the editing of Wesley’s “Large Minutes” into a *Discipline* could hardly have foreseen Methodism’s spread across the continent and growth to become the country’s largest denomination. Rather the linguistic changes adjusted purpose to the amorphous political and social realities of revolutionary America. But the preachers had roamed the continent or at least the seaboard portions for two decades seeking to convert, renew and reform those who would hear them. They had surveyed the American lands mile after mile on horseback? “To reform the Continent” then both described and prescribed. And to “spread scripture Holiness over these Lands” the preachers would continue to wander through the American forests and to gather people in its shady groves (except in winter).

Often the preachers experienced land and continent together as Francis Asbury’s journal dramatically attests. His preachers also ranged widely as this account from 1792 and 1793 by Freeborn Garrettson also indicates:

Thursday 27—After an agreeable time with Brother and Sister M ____ Y The young preacher rode with me to Sharon (Conn.) . . .

Saturday 28 and Sunday 29—was our Quarterly Meeting in Pittsfield (Mass.) . . .

Monday, December 31—was a remarkably stormy day. I rode in a sleigh accompanied by three preachers and others, to Lanes-Borough . . .

Tuesday evening, January 1, 1793—We rode to Adams, (Mass.) . . .

Monday 7—We rode 15 miles and there were four preachers with me. . . .

Wednesday 16—I was accompanied in a sleigh by two preachers, and one young convert 30 miles to Springfield

Thursday 17—We are now five in number, four in the sleigh and one on horseback. We

²³ For a first-hand account of the 1784 conference and the naming of the new church, see *Sketches of The Life and Travels of Rev. Thomas Ware . . . Written by Himself* (New York: G. Lane & P. P. Sandford for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1842), 104-125.

²⁴ *Discipline/MEC* 1787, 3-7. This short form of notation standardizes reference to a book of discipline (variously titled) to the church (in this case the Methodist Episcopal Church or MEC) and to the date. So a reference to the *Discipline* of the United Methodist Church for 2008 would be cited; e.g., *Discipline/UMC* 2008.

traveled through a severe snow storm about 11 miles

Saturday 19—We still pursue our journey to the west, our number has increased to seven . . .

Thursday 24—I have only preacher with me, and we turned our faces toward the Delaware . . .

Friday 25—Nine of us set out for Quarterly Meeting²⁵

Methodists traversed the American landscape, a feat that they insisted on glamorizing and dramatizing when narrating it later. The Methodist itinerant—so it went, so it goes—showed up at cabins in the wilderness before settlers had finished building. Accordingly, James B. Finley began the first chapter, “Introduction of Methodism into the West,” of *Sketches of Western Methodism*:

Many years ago, during the Revolutionary struggle, and before the bloody scenes of Lexington or Bunker Hill were enacted; before these states were declared independent, and before there was a President in the chair of the Union; when all the western country was a waste, howling wilderness, untenanted except by the savage who roamed over its broad prairies, or through its dense forests, or sped his light canoe over the surface of its mighty rivers, the pioneer Methodist preacher might have been seen urging his way along the war-path of the Indian, the trail of the hunter, or the blazed track of the backwoodsman, seeking the lost sheep of the house of Israel in these far-off, distant wilds. Before the sun of civilization shone upon these mountains or in these vales, or over these prairies, or over these rivers, the herald of the cross, with his messages of mercy, was seen wending his way to the desolate haunts of savage man.²⁶

The wilderness of the old northwest was Finley’s theme. He used the word eighty-five times and described the ordeal of itinerant preachers braving the wilderness when not actually invoking the term.

“We followed you to the wilderness”

The experience of wilderness, of forested landscape, of the American woodland—as ordeal, as challenge, as expectation, as “charge” as they came to name “appointments”—underlay the Methodist preachers taming of it into cathedral and resorting to it for confession. The threefold relation to the American woodland rested on the Wesleyan imperative to honor an appointment, to go where sent, even if sent into the challenge of the frontier. That Methodism lived by the imperative to deploy its ministry west tracking the population Bishop Francis Asbury reminded a western gathering (old north-western):

“We followed you to the wilderness,” said he, “when the earth was our only resting place, and the sky our canopy; when your own subsistence depended on the precarious success of the chase, and consequently you had little to bestow on us. We sought not yours but you. And now show us the people who have no preacher, and whose language we understand, and we will send them one; yet, we will send them

²⁵ *American Methodist Pioneer*, 282-288, reproduced from Garrettson’s manuscript. In the omitted entries, Garrettson did not indicate whether others traveled with him.

²⁶ James B. Finley, *Sketches of Western Methodism: Biographical, Historical and Miscellaneous, Illustrative of Pioneer Life* (Cincinnati: the Methodist Book Concern, 1854), 17.

one: for the Methodist preachers are not militia, who will not cross the lines; they are regulars, and they must go."²⁷

Asbury's own journal evidences that engagement with the wilderness on page after page. Here, for instance, he described traveling on what is now the Virginia-West Virginia border in July of 1781:

Monday, 16. We set out through the mountains for quarterly meeting. It was a very warm day, and part of our company stopped after thirty miles' travelling; brother William Partridge and myself kept on until night overtook us in the mountain, among rocks, and woods, and dangers on all sides surrounding us: we concluded it most safe to secure our horses and quietly await the return of day; so we lay down and slept among the rocks, although much annoyed by the gnats. Next day I met with several preachers, with whom I spent some time in conversation about the work of God. At twelve o'clock the people at Perrill's met, and we all exhorted.
Friday, 20. I had some liberty on 2 Cor. vi, 2. I have been obliged to sleep on the floor every night since I slept in the mountains. Yesterday I rode twenty-seven miles, and to-day thirty.²⁸

A successor bishop, Thomas Morris, described this first experience, challenge, as evidencing "the spirit of enterprise":

[W]e were continually on the lookout for chances to enlarge our work. If we heard of any neighborhood that was destitute of the Gospel, we went directly to it and talked with the people; and, if one man in the settlement would open his house for preaching, we made it an appointment, and the next time we came around we were there. When we had an appointment we filled it; not if it was convenient, or if the weather was pleasant, and we could do it without sacrifice, but always, unless providential circumstances, over which we had no control, prevented us. If we wanted to gather a congregation, we had to be punctual; and if we wanted to hold a congregation, we could not disappoint them. When the streams were swollen, we sometimes found great difficulty in crossing them. If we could find a bridge or a boat, it was well; but if we could not, we committed ourselves to Providence, and, plunging in with our horse, forded or swam the stream. This is what we mean by the spirit of enterprise.²⁹

Illustrating such enterprise and its challenges, James Quinn headed alone in 1801 to establish an Erie Circuit:

[H]e went forth with his Bible, Hymn-Book, and Discipline, visiting the various settlements, and, from cabin to cabin, preaching Christ and him crucified, and praying most fervently for the salvation of the people. His labors were greatly blessed of God, and he finally succeeded in permanently forming a circuit between three and four hundred miles round, embracing about twenty preaching-places, and eight or ten small classes.³⁰

²⁷ "An Appeal to the Methodists, in Opposition to the Changes Proposed in Their Church Government," (1827) in Thomas E. Bond, *The Economy of Methodism Illustrated and Defended* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1852), 9-56, 19.

²⁸ Asbury, *Journal* 1: 429; cf. JLEA 408-409. Compare Asbury, *Journal* 1: 448; cf. JLEA 1: 427.

²⁹ John F. Marlay, *The Life of Rev. Thomas A. Morris, D.D., Late Senior Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Cincinnati: Hitchcock and Walden; New York: Nelson and Phillips, 1875), 344-345. This was one of ten such "spirits" by which Morris characterized Methodism.

³⁰ John F. Wright, *Sketches of the Life and Labors of James Quinn* (Cincinnati: The Methodist Book Concern, 1851), 58.

Following settlers to the wilderness had meant entrusting huge areas (charges) to the two circuit preachers and even larger assignments to the presiding elders who oversaw several such teams (yokefellows they called themselves). So when Quinn assumed the role of presiding elder of Muskingum (Ohio) district, in 1808 comprising seven charges, his biographer noted the progress: “For many years the whole of Ohio formed but one district, and for the three preceding years John Sale, as presiding elder, had charge of all the circuits in Ohio, and two in Virginia.”³¹

No one faced the challenges of the American landscape more consistently and heroically than Francis Asbury, who as bishop drove himself relentlessly across the entire expanse of Methodist outreach, yearly going south to north, east to west, to attend the annual conferences, successively staged to that he could personally assign the preachers to their circuits. His biographer, John Wigger, estimates Asbury’s circling covered some 130,000 miles and took him across the Alleghenies sixty times.³² Note, for instance, Asbury’s account for July, 1810, traveling to the Genesee Conference:

Saturday. We must needs come the Northumberland road; it is through an awful wilderness.

Sabbath, 29. In the wilderness; but God is with us. Wretched lodging, and two dollars! Whilst busy in writing, John Brown came and took us to his cabin. We forded the swollen and rapid streams three times; the Loyalsock was the worst. We have spent the remainder of the day in reading, singing, and prayer. The rains had increased the streams, so that we kept our retreat on Monday. Tuesday. At the fordings we found drift logs obstructing the way: the stream was very full, and our toil through it great. Two active, bold men, with the aid of a canoe, got us and the horses safe over. Thunder and rain, and an awful mountain, were now before us; but God brought us safe to Muddy Creek. Deep roads and swollen streams we had enough of on our route to Northumberland on Wednesday. After waiting two hours at Morehead’s ferry, on Thursday morning, we got over the Susquehannah . . .³³

“[A]bout 1,500 gathered and the Lord made bare his arm under the spreading trees”

American Methodists did not typically name sylvan preaching as cathedral-like or employ Pilmore’s pejorative image of “the most pompous Temple.” None of them, save for the few English preachers that Wesley had sent over (and almost all of whom returned home during the Revolution), had entered a cathedral or a temple or perhaps even seen either depicted. But when the American preachers gathered a congregation in woods or shady grove or under the spreading limbs of a stately oak, they imaged the experience in reverent terms. For June 21, 1779, Garrettson noted: “I was to preach at the Sound. In the morning I intended meeting the society at eight o’clock; but such a croud[sic] gathered that I declined it; and preached a sermon. At twelve about 1,500 gathered and the Lord made bare his arm

³¹ Wright, *James Quinn*, 100.

³² John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 3.

³³ Asbury, *Journal* 3: 342-343; cf. JLFA 2: 643-645.

under the spreading trees.”³⁴ That same summer, Asbury, while confined in Delaware, noted for July: “I preached at G. Bradley’s, in the woods, to about two hundred people, on Acts xiii, 26. Had considerable freedom. In the evening, at G. Moore’s, on Rev. xxi, 6-8. Great liberty; the serious people much affected.” The next month, he reported, “*Sunday morning*, 15. Read the law delivered by Moses, and our Lord’s sermon on the mount; preached at nine o’clock at Boyer’s; then went to the church at Dover; and preached in the woods at three o’clock on Acts xvii, 30. I was plain and faithful; but the people will, and will not. Our own people do not keep so close to God as they ought; this injures the work.” And in September, Asbury noted, “*Sunday*, 12. I preached to the people, who came to church, at Mr. Bassett’s door, on Gal. ii, 19. In the afternoon, in the woods, to the most people I ever saw here, and had liberty. . . .”³⁵

Jesse Lee, like Garrettson a key leader and an almost-bishop, recorded that on Sunday June 20, 1784, “I preached at Coles, but the congregation was so large, that the house would not hold them, of course we had to look for another place; we got under the shade of some trees, where I spoke with great freedom, and with a heart drawn out in love to the souls of the people; and I felt a longing desire to be instrumental in bringing their souls to God.”³⁶ William Colbert, who left ten journal volumes extending from 1790 to 1838, recorded numerous instances of preaching to congregations in the woods, typically rendered in emotionally positive terms. On Sunday, September 20, 1801, he indicated that much of a quarterly meeting had been conducted “under the beautiful trees ... at Bowen Meetinghouse.”³⁷ For a July, 1802, quarterly conference on the Herkemer Circuit (the judicatory level for a circuit and below that of annual conferences), he entered this description:

Sunday 4. A glorious morning. Many of the friend[s] spoke with life and power in the Love-feast. The Lord displayed his power. One man who had been under conviction was so wrought upon, that he lost the use of his limbs, and was brought to experience the goodness of God, (I trust) in the conversion of his soul. After the Love-feast we took the congregation into the woods. To me it was pleasingly romantic, to Behold the people seated on the old logs, and in their waggons[sic], Beneath the lovely shades of the stately Maple and Beach Trees listening to the joyful sound of salvation. I stood in the Waggon[sic], and preached to them from Acts 16 ch 30, 31.³⁸

³⁴ *American Methodist Pioneer*, 85.

³⁵ Asbury, *Journal* 1: 317; cf. JLFA 1: 306-307; Asbury, *Journal* 1: 321; cf. JLFA 1: 310. Note here the out of doors Biblical references—to Moses and Jesus (Asbury, *Journal* 1: 325; cf. JLFA 1: 312-313).

³⁶ Minton Thrift, *Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee, with Extracts from his Journals* (New York, Published by N. Bangs and T. Mason for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1823), 65-66.

³⁷ *Journal of the Travels of William Colbert, Methodist Preacher: thro' parts of Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, Delaware and Virginia in 1790 to 1838*, 10 vols. Typescripts examined at Drew University. Typescript IV, 35.

³⁸ *Journal of the Travels of William Colbert, Methodist Preacher: thro' parts of Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, Delaware and Virginia in 1790 to 1838*, 10 vols. Typescripts examined at Drew University, IV, 97-98. The woman wept, then went motionless, rose up testifying, and was knocked over by another who though opposed to shouting went stiff and fell on the first.

A month later for the Albany Circuit, Colbert reported:

Su 22. This morning in the Love-feast we have had a blessed time, many spoke feelingly: and at the close of my account of the work of God round the District, which I gave them according to promise, the Lord made bare his arm . . . five were brought to rejoice in the God of their salvation. As our friends nearly fill'd the house, we had to take a large congregation into the woods. It is truly delightful[sic] to see hundreds worshipping the Majesty of heaven beneath the lofty shades.³⁹

By this time, as we will note below, Methodism had adopted the camp meeting. The preachers often positioned a warm weather quarterly conference (sometimes termed a quarterly meeting) in a camp meeting. And so sylvan congregations became a common, indeed in many places, a regular feature of Methodist life.

One feature of the camp meeting had already been institutionalized in the earlier outdoor quarterly conferences—they were bi-racial. Colbert described the segregated character of indoor services and the space made for both white and black when the congregation moved under the trees. For the quarterly meeting held May 22-23, 1790 (typically two days, with business affairs and preaching on the first day and multiple services on the second), Colbert noted, “Sunday 23d Brother Childs and I went out into the woods and preach'd[sic] to a number of black and white people. . . .”⁴⁰ For a July 18-19, 1801, Salisbury quarterly conference with five preachers laboring, Colbert reported, “Sunday 19. This morning the black peoples Love-feast was held and after theirs the white peoples—it was a blessed time in both Love-feast's. Brother Ware preached in the woods . . . Brothers Larkins, and Milbourne Exhorted . . .”⁴¹ On October 3-4 of the same year, Colbert presided at the Somerset quarterly conference, “Sunday 4. This morning the house was crouded[sic] with white friends I was sorry there was no room the poor blacks. We had a good Love-feast. The people spoke well, after which I preachd[sic] to a large congregation under the trees . . .”⁴² In the cathedral-like, forest or woodland gathering, whites and blacks could worship together, much as they trafficked together in other public spaces.

“And often the wilderness was my closet, where I had many sweet hours converse with my dear Lord.”

In April, 1779, Freeborn Garrettson reported extending his circuit into wilderness areas, in “places, I had none to converse with, at first, who knew the Lord; yet Jesus was sweet company to me in my retirements. And often the wilderness was my closet, where I had many sweet hours converse with my dear Lord.”⁴³ By early 1780, sharing with other Methodists the suspi-

³⁹ Typescript IV, 112-13.

⁴⁰ Typescript I, 10.

⁴¹ Typescript IV, 25. Colbert then commented on the power of the devil in that place, seemingly referencing racial tensions.

⁴² Typescript IV, 37.

⁴³ Garrettson, “Experience and Travels, in *American Methodist Pioneer*, 79.

cion, harassment, and persecution awarded the movement on suspicion of collaboration with the British troops, Garrettson experienced dreams, nightmares and visions and sought solace where he could find it. To be arrested that very evening, he recorded for February 25, "Saturday 25, my spirit was solemn and weighty: expecting something uncommon would turn up. I withdrew to the woods, and spent much time before the Lord. I preached with freedom to a weeping flock"⁴⁴ The same year, Asbury recorded while in North Carolina:

Tuesday, 18. Rode to Kimborough's, sixteen miles, crossed Neuse River. Many Baptists to hear; they were serious, and I spoke feelingly, and aimed at their hearts, from Romans viii, 24-26. I met brother Poythress, much cast down; the people are lifeless in religion; but, bless the Lord, I have had a good entrance, and a comfortable sense of the divine presence. After dinner, I was alone in the woods an hour, had sweet meltings, came back and wrote these lines for future consolation.⁴⁵

"Wrestling Jacob," one of Charles Wesley's most important hymns, a favorite of John and esteemed by fellow hymnist, Isaac Watts, well might have been similarly claimed by the preachers who, like Jacob, had to fight spiritually to find favor with God while outside. Asbury recorded many such spiritual episodes, typically in the woods. Similarly, Stith Mead tracked his conversion experience in sylvan terms. He reported, "walking together with a friend in a grove to converse about salvation." He recalled that a little later he prayed in "a lonesome thicket of the woods." And after his conversion he found himself and direction for his life "one evening as I was kneeling by a tree in the wood."⁴⁶

Similarly, John Kobler resorted to the woods for spiritual nourishment. In late December, 1790, he reported, "I retired into a wood where I had deep impressions of Divine things." In June, Kobler noted, "Wednesday. June 15. This morning I feel a great hunger and thirst after righteousness. I retired into a wood where I found the Lord to be very precious to my soul, the very trees of the wood is praising of him, much more reason honor I who am a Brand plucked out of the fire." And for "Tuesday, Sept. 23. This morning I retired into the wood, where I had sweetness in communing with my beloved Savior." He read scripture, notably Timothy. Perhaps, the woods served as a place for reverence because it served so well as resource for collective praise. Between these latter two times of personal communion, Kobler had transformed woodland into cathedral: "Monday, July 11 at (Js-Ns) here preached to a large congregation on a hill side under a cluster of peach-trees."⁴⁷

William Colbert took to the woods in mid-August, 1799, to prepare him-

⁴⁴ Garrettson, "Experience and Travels, in *American Methodist Pioneer*, 96.

⁴⁵ Asbury, *Journal* 1: 385; cf. JLF 1: 367.

⁴⁶ Stith Mead, *A Short Account of the Experience and Labors of the Rev. Stith Mead: Preacher of the Gospel, and an Elder in the Methodist Episcopal Church: to which are added, extracts of letters from himself and others in a religious correspondence/ written by himself, in a plain style.* (Lynchburg, VA: Published for, and sold by, the author, 1829), 36, 37, 45.

⁴⁷ John Kobler. *Journal and Sermons*, Lovely Lane, I. *Journal* 1789-1792, 56, 93, 133, 103.

self to deal with the death of David Griffiths' daughter, Grace Griffiths, who had died "after a long and painful affliction." "Thursday 15. This morning retired into a little copes of woods, and spent a few moments in composing the few following lines on the departure of the unblemished Grace Griffith: (after which I went preached her funeral . . .)"⁴⁸ In late 1813, Thomas Morris, newly appointed to be a class leader, (an office that led him to the preaching ministry) resorted to the woods to prepare himself for the task:

This appointment was received with much fear and trembling. During the week he retired into the woods, kneeled by the side of a fallen tree, spread out the class-book before him, read the first name, and prayed for him, and so on through the entire list, asking for grace and wisdom to say profitable words to them all on the ensuing Sabbath.⁴⁹

The same year, another bishop-to-be, Henry Bascom, also found the woods important in steeling himself for ministerial tasks. Appointed to the Deer Creek Circuit in the fall of 1813 in the Western [Ohio] Conference, he "felt very low in spirits, the people being dull and dead." So he "Resorted to the woods and prayed, though sorely tempted to believe the Lord had no work for me to do here." Praying with his host family that evening and the next morning, he then again "retired to the woods, where I found the Lord precious." He "read the Bible, and some of Fletcher's masterly productions—wrote some letters, and so spent the morning before preaching. Help me, Lord, to-day." Three days later, he reported:

Oct. 13. Rose very early—fled to the woods and prayed—fed my horse, prayed with the family—ate my breakfast, and started for my next preaching place
Next morning was sorely tempted, wrestled in prayer at my bedside, then went to the woods and prayed until I felt better, returned and prayed in the family; read some in the Bible, my old companion, also a sermon of Rev. Freeborn Garrettson on the union of the graces, an excellent piece of work. At twelve o'clock tried to preach to about a dozen people, and believe good was done.⁵⁰

His biographer indicated that Bascom frequently resorted to the woods to prepare himself for ministerial duties.⁵¹ Yet another preacher-in-training, Jacob Lanius, explained that the resort to the woods sometimes had to do with

⁴⁸ *A Journal of the Travels of William Colbert*, typescript III, 75.

⁴⁹ Marlay, *Life of Rev. Thomas A. Morris*, 1875), 22-23.

⁵⁰ M. M. Henkle, *The Life of Henry Bidleman Bascom, D. D., LL.D., Late Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Louisville: Published by Morton & Griswold and sold by the Southern Methodist Book Concern, 1854), 46, 47, 48-49, 49-50.

⁵¹ "It was always his custom to walk and study. It would seem that his mind became so surcharged with thought, that his body was impelled to action. He generally betook himself to the woods for mental preparation. I remember an amusing incident in this connection. In 1816, he had gone into a skirt of woods near to where an Irishman was laboring, and it so happened that he discovered Bascom in his retired promenade. He came running to the house under excitement, and declared there was a 'crazy man in the woods.' How do you know he is crazy? I asked. 'Why sir,' he replied, 'he is quite in a *doldrum*, he has been walking for an hour between two trees, and seems to be wonderfully taken with a deep study; do you think he is quite right in his mind?' Go to church to-morrow, said I, and you may judge whether he is crazy" (Henkle, *The Life of Henry Bidleman Bascom*, 351-352n).

convenience as well as its accommodation of the spiritual life:

After dinner I took Dr. Mosheims *History of the Church* and went to the grove and spent the remainder of the evening in reading meditation and prayer. We often find it necessary in this new and frontier country thus to retire because the people have but one room in the general and a fortune of children who surround us crying and hollering to such an extent as to render it impossible to read and understand and very often we are interrupted by a question or a statement from a good brother or sister which the rules of ministerial and Christian etiquette require us to attend to.⁵²

Asbury had made the same point much earlier, in late June and early July of 1781. And in entries for prior days he seemed to bring the three sylvan experiences into a vision of a continent indeed reformed and overspread with scripture Holiness:

In journeying through this mountainous district I have been greatly blessed, my soul enjoying constant peace. I find a few humble, happy souls in my course; and although present appearances are gloomy, I have no doubt but that there will be a glorious Gospel-day in this and every other part of America. There are but two men in the society at Lost River able to bear arms; they were both drafted to go into the army: I gave them what comfort I could, and prayed for them.

Saturday, 30. I got alone into a barn to read and pray. The people here appear unengaged: the preaching of unconditional election, and its usual attendant, Antinomianism, seems to have hardened their hearts. Sunday, July 1. More people attended preaching than I expected: I had some liberty in speaking, but no great fervour; neither seemed there much effect produced. I retired to read and pray in the woods, the houses being small, and the families large.⁵³

To “me the wilderness and the solitary places were made as the garden of God, and as the presence-chambers of the King of kings and Lord of lords”

In the above (1781) wilderness statement, Asbury brought together the challenging, confessional and cathedral dimensions of his experience of the American forest, recognized that the unseeing eye would find “present appearances” to be “gloomy,” but looked with his spiritual vision to “a glorious Gospel-day in this and every other part of America.” In other places as well, Asbury hinted that the ordeal of the wilderness, the Word preached in arbor or shady wood and sylvan devotional solitude had become one complex spiritual and redemptive reality for himself, for the people called Methodist, and for all who responded to a redemptive Wesleyan message. Writing not from the Alleghenies, but from Georgia in November, 1799, Asbury observed:

Thursday, 21. We rode sixteen miles, sometimes through the naked woods, to Redwine’s; where we had an unexpected congregation in the solitary woods. I held forth on, “The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.” The house

⁵² *The Journal of The Reverend Jacob Lanius. An Itinerant Preacher of the Missouri Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1831 A.D. to 1851 A.D.*, Elmer T. Clark, ed., 1918 (Manuscript then in possession of his son, James A. Lanius, of Palmyra, Missouri) 143, entry for Mar. 31, 1835.

⁵³ Asbury, *Journal* 1: 428-429; cf. *JLFA* 1: 408—June-July, 1781.

was open, but the people were simple-hearted, and very kind.⁵⁴

Here, Asbury seemed to theologize a wilderness ride, the solitude that beckoned to prayer and the congregation in the wood by preaching the doctrine that Christ came to save the lost. Too much the evangelist and too committed to call congregations to conversion and holiness, Asbury did not frequently resort to the outdoor scenes of Old and New Testament, contemporize them, and employ scripture's places and events typologically in his preaching.⁵⁵ Asbury lived too much in the present, too much for the future, too much in saving souls, too much for his people, too much committed to bringing in others, to wander in the Scriptures away from redemptive texts. Instead, he knew himself and the Methodist preachers to be Spirit-led in his and their wandering over the continent, across the American landscape, and through its wilderness. So traveling—itinerating to preach—prompted his spiritual musings. In Tennessee, in October, 1800, he observed:

Thursday, 30. We rode slowly on to Starr's, twenty-two miles, and had a heavy shower of rain on our way. From Monday morning to Thursday afternoon we have made one hundred and thirty miles; we have experienced no stoppage by water-courses, and have found the roads of the wilderness, their unevenness excepted, pretty good. And here let me record the gracious dealings of God to my soul in this journey: I have had uncommon peace of mind, and spiritual consolations every day, notwithstanding the long rides I have endured, and the frequent privations of good water and proper food to which I have been subjected; to me the wilderness and the solitary places were made as the garden of God, and as the presence-chambers of the King of kings and Lord of lords.⁵⁶

Asbury had lived by, embodied, actualized the Methodist mission statement: 'What may we reasonably believe to be God's Design, in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?' *Ans.* To reform the Continent, and spread scripture Holiness over these Lands. As a Proof hereof, we have seen . . . a great a glorious Work of God" for the decades, across the states, and through the woodlands where Asbury had rode, preached and prayed.

⁵⁴ Asbury, *Journal* 2: 433-434; cf. JLFA 2: 214.

⁵⁵ But see Asbury's statement in note 38 and comments thereon.

⁵⁶ Asbury, *Journal* 2: 479; cf. JLFA 2: 260. The underscoring is mine.