

## THE AFRICAN AND CARIBBEAN ORIGINS OF METHODISM IN THE BAHAMAS

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The Bahamas offers a case study of the expansion of Methodism at the beginning of the transformation of European Christianity into World Christianity. Narratives of the initial development of World Methodism has normally focused on the missionaries sent from Europe. This essay argues that Methodism in the Bahamas began as an African-American initiative and that the first successful non-Bahamian “official” missionary came from elsewhere in the Caribbean. Methodism in the Bahamas was not initially a missionary project, despite the histories of Coke and G. G. Findlay and W. W. Holdsworth.<sup>1</sup>

This essay depends upon, and supports the tendencies of Bahamian scholars who have done significant research on Bahamian Methodist origins.<sup>2</sup> The method is to discuss extant evidence for the early Methodist community and its leaders: Joseph and Sussanah Paul; Anthony Wallace and his wife (I have been unable to find her name); William Turton; and others. It argues for the distinctly African and Caribbean history of early Bahamian Methodism. During its first two decades, it had no leaders with direct experience of the British homeland of the Methodist Church.

### Joseph and Sussanah Paul

Joseph Paul (in some sources Paull) was the first Methodist evangelist and society leader whose ministry in the Bahamas can be documented. The Paul family arrived in the Bahamas in 1783 landing on Abaco Island, settling

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History of each Island: with an Account of the Missions instituted in those Islands, from the Commencement of their Civilization; but more especially the Missions which have been established in that Archipelago by the Society Late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley* (Vol. 1: Liverpool: Printed by Nuttall, Fisher, and Dixon, Duke Street, 1808; Vol. II: London: A. Paris, Printer, Printed for the Author and to be had of the Rev. Mr. Blanchard, 1810; Vol. III: London: Printed for the Author, 1811); G. G. Findlay and W. W. Holdsworth, *The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society* (Vol. 2; London: The Epworth Press, 1924).

<sup>2</sup> See especially: Colbert Williams, *The Methodist Contribution to Education in the Bahamas* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1982), D. Gail Saunders *Bahamian Loyalists and their Slaves* (London, Oxford: Macmillan, 1983); Sandra Riley, *Homeward Bound. A History of the Bahama Islands to 1850, with a Definitive Study of Abaco in the American Loyalist Plantation Period* (Miami: Island Research, 1983) and Carl Campbell (cited below).

at Carlton Point.<sup>3</sup> They had converted to the Methodist Church in the English colonies of North America and chose to leave as British forces left the thirteen American colonies. That the Pauls were willing to indenture themselves to pay passage from New York probably indicates that they supported the British. Abaco Island was primarily inhabited by Loyalists who had been granted land after the American Revolution, and passage to it after the American Revolution. African American Loyalists were allowed to migrate to the British colony but were given neither land nor passage.

The earliest mention of the Paul family found so far is in a 1783 ship's manifest in the collection of "British Headquarters Papers" in the New York Public Library. There is preserved a "Book of Negroes Registered and Certified after Having Been Inspected by Commissioners Appointed by His Excellency Sir Guy Carleton K. B. General and Commander in Chief." This document reveals that when the *Nautilus* sailed from New York on August 21, 1783, the Paul family was among the passengers. Joseph Paul ("stout low man"), Sussanah Paul ("stout wench"), both thirty years of age, and their three children ages thirteen, five and two. The Pauls were indentured to the ship's captain, Patrick Kennedy who had been granted land on Abaco Island.<sup>4</sup> The document indicates Joseph Paul reported that he had purchased his freedom from Laurence Cartwright of New York and that Sussanah had purchased hers from an unidentifiable Mr. Brown of the same city.<sup>5</sup> While it is possible that the Pauls hosted a class meeting or conducted worship in Abaco, no records have been found. Oral traditions of a thousand member congregation are certainly exaggerated. Current congregations on Abaco trace their origins to later mission efforts.

The Paul family moved to Nassau, New Providence Island, probably by 1784. Social conditions would have made it expedient for the family to leave Abaco as soon as possible; roles of free people of color in Bahamian society were ambiguous.<sup>6</sup> It is also unclear when Paul began evangelistic work. It has been argued that the description of a field preacher by Samuel Kelly, who visited Nassau in 1784, was of Paul. Kelly reported:

The inhabitants of Nassau were dissipated in the extreme, and from night revels many had injured their health. I saw little appearance of any religion, but heard

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, D. Gail Saunders, "The Loyalists: General Influences," *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society* 5.1 (1983): 3-10; Michael Craton, "Loyalists Mainly to themselves: The 'Black Loyalist' Diaspora to the Bahamas, 1783-c. 1820," *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives from the Caribbean, Africa and the African Diaspora* ed. Verene A. Shepherd (New York: Palgrave, 2001); and Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in a Revolutionary World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Susan Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 272.

<sup>5</sup> "Book of Negroes Registered and Certified After Having Been Inspected by Commissioners Appointed by His Excellency Sir Guy Carleton K. B. General and Commander in Chief," British Headquarters Papers, New York Public Library, # 10427, 98-99, published in Susan Riley, *Homeward Bound. A History of the Bahama Islands to 1850, with a Definitive Study of Abaco in the American Loyalist Plantation Period* (Miami: Island Research, 1983), 266.

<sup>6</sup> David E. Wood, "The Free People of Colour in Bahamian Society," *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society* 12.1 (1990): 20-24.

that a man of colour frequently preached to the eastward of the town under a large spreading tree.<sup>7</sup>

A Canadian writer, George Huxtable, reported that Paul regularly preached to a congregation of three hundred and that he had led the construction of a chapel at the corner of Augusta and Heathtree streets, built by some of the participants in the Methodist meetings, most of whom were African slaves. It was, he said, a well-constructed stone structure seating about 300 persons.<sup>8</sup> This Methodist ministry attracted about ten percent of the African Bahamian population on New Providence Island.

Paul does not appear in any pre-1793 records related to the development of Nassau. However his evangelistic work led to the formation of a congregation, which he served as pastor. The church grew large enough to warrant construction of a Methodist Chapel. Paul led (perhaps paid for) the above mentioned building in West Nassau built on land purchased on May 5, 1794,<sup>9</sup> where he also lived and conducted the first Bahamian school for Free Black children.<sup>10</sup> On March 25, 1794, Paul was hired by the (Anglican) Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to lead and teach in a school established by “Dr. Bray’s Associates,” a trust established to instruct “the Negroes in the Christian religion.”<sup>11</sup>

### **The Hammett Missionaries from South Carolina**

The congregation was nearly destroyed by Primitive Methodist missionaries sent from the USA, beginning in 1794.<sup>12</sup> Apparently Paul or one of his associates importuned William Hammett in the USA. Hammett would have been remembered as Thomas Coke’s colleague in the Caribbean. He accompanied Coke to the USA, but there became alienated from Asbury and Coke. Alienation led to schism and the founding of the Primitive Methodist Connection in Charleston. The focus on the Bahamas was logical because of (1) its proximity to the USA coast; (2) the presence of many Loyalists and Free Blacks from the former colonies; and (3) Coke and the Wesleyan Methodists had not yet sent missionaries there. To have been successful in the Bahamas would have given Hammett political capital in his struggle against the evolving USA Methodist episcopacy. It is doubtful that Coke was even

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Sandra Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 140, citing *Samuel Kelly: An Eighteenth Century Seaman Whose Days Have Been Few and Evil* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1925).

<sup>8</sup> George Gellard Huxtable, *Reminiscences of Missionary Life in the West Indies* (Kemptville, Ontario: Huxtable and Seily, 1902), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Carl C. Campbell, “Joseph Paul: Faceless but not Trackless. Outstanding Contributions to Bahamian Society,” *Anniversary Celebrations* (Nassau: Nassau Methodist Church, 2007), 8, provides the names of the other Trustees: Henry Sutton, William Mitchell, Charles Randall, Thomas Tanyard, and the Reverend James Johnson, one of the Hammett missionaries.

<sup>10</sup> SPG, *Journal*, vol. 26: 280. *Bicentenary Souvenir: Bahamas-Antigua. Methodism in the West Indies, 1760-1960* ed. Mrs. R. P. Dyer (Nassau: Methodist Church, 1960), 10.

<sup>11</sup> SPG, *Journal*, vol. 25: 290; *Dr. Bray’s Associates Minute Book, 1788-1806*, entries for July 4, 1793, and March 6, 1794. Note that as instituted by Wesley, sacraments for Society members were at the nearby Anglican Church.

<sup>12</sup> Colbert Williams, *Methodist Contribution*, 36.

aware of the decision of Hammett to send missionaries. Three missionaries were sent, one after the other.

This first was James Johnson (in some sources, Johnstone). According to some writers he was of African descent. However, the "Minute Book of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel" (SPG), transcribed by Colbert Williams makes that doubtful.<sup>13</sup> It would probably have noted his racial identity in the summary of Johnson's relationship with Paul. After arriving, Johnson requested and received a license to preach in the Methodist Chapel from the Governor. Johnson came into conflict with Joseph Paul, excluding Paul from the existing Methodist meeting place built by Paul to also serve as an education center. If Johnson had been Black, it is unlikely that he would have been given preference by the Governor over Paul.<sup>14</sup>

According to Reily, Johnson wrote to Hammett taking credit for constructing the building, attempted to raise money in South Carolina to pay for the building, and claimed to have started a school on the property.<sup>15</sup> There is no evidence that funds were sent. Johnson married a Bahamian woman, but within six weeks that relationship deteriorated. Johnson severely beat his wife and was imprisoned by civil authorities for the abuse.<sup>16</sup> Johnson returned to the USA where he ministered in Hammett's Primitive Methodist Connection.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the conflict, a portion of the congregation remained loyal to Paul.<sup>18</sup>

With Johnson disgraced in the Bahamas, Hammett sent two additional missionaries. The one known only as Mr. Rushton may have become a privateer after being disgraced in Nassau.<sup>19</sup> The third Hammett missionary was Rev. Meredith (in some sources and historians Mr. Melody, Meriday or Meridith). After problems in Nassau, he returned to the USA where he ministered both as an independent Methodist and under Hammett.<sup>20</sup> Of Rushton and Meredith it was said they "fell into disgraceful sin."<sup>21</sup>

These missionaries were, in some secondary sources, African Americans, although their racial identity is not mentioned in the earliest documents, but

<sup>13</sup> Colbert Williams, *Methodist Contribution*, 30-32.

<sup>14</sup> Colbert Williams, *Methodist Contribution*, 31, citing SPG, *Journal*, Vol. 26: 280.

<sup>15</sup> D. A. Reily, "William Hammett: Missionary and Founder of the Primitive Methodist Connection," *Methodist History* 10 (1971): 39. The letter discussed is preserved in the Hammett Collection of the Duke University Library.

<sup>16</sup> Colbert Williams, *Methodist Contribution*, 36-33, citing Letter of John Richards to SPG, August 15, 1794, SPG, *Journal*, vol. 26: 280.

<sup>17</sup> D. A. Reily, "William Hammett," 30-43.

<sup>18</sup> SPG, *Journal*, vol. 26: 280. The SPG *Journal* states that Paul was forced from his home; it is more probable that he was forced to give up the Methodist Chapel, perhaps because he was also living as an Anglican in order to teach for the SPG.

<sup>19</sup> William Turton to Rev. Fathers and Brothers, March 22, 1817, in William Dowson, *A Mission to the West India Islands: Dowson's Journal for 1810-1817* ed. A. Deans Peggs (Nassau: Deans Peggs Research Fund, 1960), 48; reprinted in *Celebrating 200 Years of Methodism at Ebenezer 1802-2002* (Nassau: Ebenezer Methodist Church, 2002), 14.

<sup>20</sup> D. A. Reily, "William Hammett," 31, 39-40. I am following Reily on the name Merideth.

<sup>21</sup> Theophilus Pugh, "Bahamas," Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Archives, London, Box 1835.

in later Methodist mission histories. The racial identity of the Hammett missionaries is not mentioned in the Bahamian or American Methodist sources examined. Given sensitivities about race, and the possibilities for using race in anti-Methodist rhetoric, and the easy permission received to preach freely in the colony, it is probable that they were White. Later attribution of African identity may have been to attribute race as the cause for their failures.

Some of the local Methodists were able to distinguish between the problems of the three missionaries and the possibilities of the Methodist tradition. It is unclear how many Bahamian Methodists adhered to which evangelists or to Paul during the conflict. It would appear that Paul had no further involvement with the Methodists after these encounters. After the departure of the Hammett missionaries, he regained control of the Chapel and led Anglican services for persons of African descent there as an annex to Christ Church until his death in 1802. The civil courts returned the chapel to the Methodists in 1844.

### **Anthony Wallace**

When the North American missions of Hammett ended, Bahamian Methodists did not reunite under Paul, who they may have held responsible for the fiascos. Instead some chose Anthony Wallace and his wife as leaders. Turton reported: "Old Mrs. Wallace, a leader in our society, first met in class with Paul."<sup>22</sup> Colbert Williams opined that Wallace was the true "founder of the continuing Methodist Church . . . who shepherded the 'holy remnant' from his home on Augusta Street."<sup>23</sup> Wallace and his wife hosted meetings of the Methodists in their house, about 300 feet north of the disputed chapel.<sup>24</sup>

Wallace wrote Coke in 1796 asking that he appoint a missionary to assist the Society. This was considered at the USA Virginia Annual Conference in 1797, where it was decided to station a Mr. Brownell in New Providence, Bahama Islands, but he never arrived.<sup>25</sup> Again Wallace importuned Coke and at the 1799 Methodist Conference at Manchester, it was decided to appoint William Turton to New Providence.

Turton arrived in the Bahamas fatigued from the voyage, "extremely ill of a fever and ague, and reduced to a mere skeleton."<sup>26</sup> It was Wallace who took him into his home, provided nursing care, and who gave over leadership of the small congregation to Turton. A house owned by Wallace became a center of worship and education for the Methodists. One can hardly imagine Turton or the Methodist congregation surviving but for the support of

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<sup>22</sup> William Turton to Rev. Fathers and Brothers, March 22, 1817, in William Dowson, *Mission to the West India Islands*, 49; reprinted in *Celebrating 200 Years of Methodism at Ebenezer*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Colbert Williams, *Methodist Contribution*, 36.

<sup>24</sup> See Colbert Williams, *Methodist Contribution*, 36, who identified the location on period maps. Bahamian scholar and pastor, Carl C. Campbell, informed me that he has seen a deed from the early period that deeded the property to the Methodist Church. I have not seen the document.

<sup>25</sup> Colbert Williams, *Methodist Contribution*, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Coke, *History of the West Indies*, III, 202.

Wallace.

### William Turton in Nassau

Thus the first British Wesleyan Methodist missionary to the Bahama Islands was Turton, born in 1761, in Barbados, the son of a planter. He was taken into Conference in 1795 and appointed first to Tobago and then to St. Kitts and Antigua. He arrived at Nassau on October 22, 1800. He remained in the Bahamas, except for an excursion to the USA. (1808-1809). He died in Nassau on May 10, 1818, at age 57.<sup>27</sup> He was forced to retire from the ministry because of failing health in 1816.

The racial identity of Turton is an important issue. In earlier sources, his racial identity is never mentioned. In the obituary in the Wesleyan Conference Record (1818), published in England, he was identified as “Colored.” After the publication of that obituary his second wife wrote a letter to editor protesting that identification. Findlay and Holdsworth looked for other evidence for the claim of “Color” and found none.<sup>28</sup> Given the preoccupation with racial identity in the sources for the period, it seems unlikely to this writer that his racial status, if not White, would not have been mentioned. It is also unlikely it would not be mentioned in reports. It also seems unlikely that in this period he would have been able to marry two White women (including one in the USA where this would have been illegal) and to receive the easy permissions to preach and build chapels from the government. However, most modern Bahamian writers, with important exceptions, describe him as “Colored.”<sup>29</sup> If he were “Colored,” the narrative of mission in The Bahamas would be a better story, indicative of the repression of the “Colored” identity of the first Wesleyan Methodist missionary.

The arrival of Turton in The Bahamas was complicated by illness and by inadequate worship facilities. Wallace solved both problems initially. But, Turton (and Coke) kept in mind the chapel which they did not control which served as the seat for the Pauls’s congregation. The cryptic comments of Coke makes it clear that he and Turton knew some of this history related to Joseph Paul and the chapel:

On the chapel which had been already built they had an unquestionable claim, by furnishing the sources through which it had been erected, and from a formal surrender of it which had previously been made. But it was held in possession by a

<sup>27</sup> A photograph of the gravestone outside Ebenezer Methodist Church was published *Celebrating 200 Years of Methodism at Ebenezer*, 14. Also on Turton, see Martha Lund Smalley, Turton, William,” in Gerald Anderson, ed. *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (New York: MacMillan, 1998), 685-686.

<sup>28</sup> G. G. Findlay and W. W. Holdsworth, *History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, II, 226-227.

<sup>29</sup> See for example, Michael Craton and Gail Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream*, 331, “Barbadian colored man;” Bernard Johnson Whittington, *Race Relations in the Bahamas, 1784-1834: The Non-Violent Transformation from a Slave to a Free Society* (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 2000), 106, “Mulatto;” Donald M. McCartney, *Bahamian Culture and Factors which Impact Upon It: A Compilation of Two Essays* (Pittsburg: Dorrance Publishing Company, 2004), 18, “coloured barbadian.”

theological usurper, who could only be dispossessed through the medium of the law, and not touched without danger of contamination.

Coke/Turton continued: “Under these circumstances, it was thought advisable to erect a new one, as soon as money could be procured.”<sup>30</sup> In the meantime, they continued to use the house of Anthony Wallace, who removed walls to enlarge the meeting space.<sup>31</sup> Two years after the arrival of Turton in Nassau, in 1802, information on the Bahamas first appeared in the *Methodist Minutes*. At that time the New Providence Society claimed 100 souls, all Black, a significant decrease from the number who were involved in Paul’s earlier ministry, but an increase of forty from the time of Turton’s arrival.<sup>32</sup> On July 6, 1803, three of the leaders of the Nassau congregation, Anthony Wallace, James Jones and John Moore wrote to Thomas Coke thanking him for sending Turton to minister among them and reported on the completion of a new Methodist chapel:

Our Society was in a weak state, ‘til Mr. Turton came to us. But, blessed be God, we have been brought into a more enlightened state, thro’ the means of his perseverance and good attention. [We] have erected a new Meeting-house easterly of Town called Ebenezer.<sup>33</sup>

These three New Providence Methodists remained leaders of the Society throughout their lives. Turton’s colleague William Dowson, in his diary, August 1, 1814, described the aged and frail James Jones as “one of the most pious, zealous, active, steady and affectionate men I ever knew.” He continued, “He came from America with the Loyalists or Refugees and was a slave for some time and I believe purchased his freedom.”<sup>34</sup>

Also in 1803, Turton married his first White convert.<sup>35</sup> Acting on a suggestion made by Anthony Wallace at the time of his arrival in Nassau, Turton opened a school to teach Free Black children and provide an income:

When my chapel [Ebenezer] was finished, I found myself much in debt and, having petitioned the Governor and Council to teach a school for instructing the black children in order to catechize them, I obtained liberty. Then I taught the children for pay which greatly succeeded, and through the channel with the assistance of a few

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<sup>30</sup> Coke, *History of the West Indies*, III, 205.

<sup>31</sup> William Turton to Rev. Fathers and Brothers, March 22, 1817, in William Dowson, *Mission to the West India Island*, 49; reprinted in *Celebrating 200 Years of Methodism at Ebenezer*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Minutes, 1802, cited in G. G. Findlay and W. W. Holdsworth, *History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, II, 227.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Coke, *An Account of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the Methodist Missions* (London: Conference Office, 1804), 28.

<sup>34</sup> William Dowson, *Mission to the West India Islands*, 81-82.

<sup>35</sup> The marriage was not mentioned in Coke, *History of the West Indies*, III, or by Turton in his 1817 missive: William Turton to Rev. Fathers and Brothers, 22 March 1817 in William Dowson, *A Mission to the West India Islands*, 49; reprinted in *Celebrating 200 Years of Methodism at Ebenezer*, 15-16. It is possible that the “serious White woman” who moved into the Ebenezer church manse, in late 1801, “whose heart was engaged in the work, to pray occasionally with those who might assemble in the intervals between preaching, and otherwise employ her time in keeping a school” described by Coke, *History of the West Indies*, III, 206, later became Turton’s wife.

friends, and two hundred and forty dollars of my own money, which I brought to the island with me, I paid for my chapel.<sup>36</sup>

Coke suggested the school was not financially successful: “Mr. Turton established a school for the instruction of youth, and found in this a temporary resource to supply his wants . . . .” Coke noted that because of the costs of the ministry, “. . . the missionary fund in England was obliged to afford temporary relief.”<sup>37</sup> The Society was too poor to sustain Turton. In December, 1803, Turton apologized for needing to draw again on the mission fund for 1804:

The Members of the Society, on whom God has wrought a wonderful change, and who are much united to each other, are willing to do what they can; but being mostly poor, have not been able to give me any quarterage for a year and a half. They are in number 162 and among them are many that love God and rejoice in the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

Coke reported the statistics from an earlier missive: “New Providence” no Whites and 160 Blacks/Colored. The population of the Bahamas at that point was listed at 1,632 White and 14,163 “Black/Colored.”<sup>38</sup> Turton became sick again and “his pious wife . . . in some measure supplied his lack of service; and in conjunction with the leaders, met the members regularly; by which means they were kept together, and urged to press toward the mark for the prize of their high calling.” High praise indeed and the only mention in Coke of Turton’s wife.<sup>39</sup>

All crises were not due to ministry decisions or illness. The international colonial struggles made The Bahamas an uncertain place. In 1804, there was the threat of an invasion and more direct involvement in the European and Haitian wars. Turton wrote:

We are at present in great confusion being threatened by an invasion by the French, who it is said are near upon us. Nothing scarcely can be done; the people are all under *arms* so that our situation is rather disagreeable . . . . Just before the news which has put us in confusion our congregation was enlarging very fast which gave me great hope the word would sink in the hearts of some, and our Society would flourish as prejudice was removed, but the confusion hinders the work a little.

I believe among our Society in this Island, there are some sincere Christians, others saved by the fear of God, and some who are rather careless.

I would like at this time to send my accounts of Receipts and Disbursements, but our Stewards are both under arms and I am nothing without them.<sup>40</sup>

On February 9, 1805, he wrote, “We have been graciously preserved from our enemies.” However, he lamented the isolation from other missionaries: “since my being in the Bahamas, which is about four years and four months,

<sup>36</sup> William Turton to Rev. Fathers and Brothers, March 22, 1817, in William Dowson, *Mission to the West India Islands*, 50; reprinted in *Celebrating 200 Years of Methodism at Ebenezer*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> Coke, *History of the West Indies*, III, 207.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Coke, *Account of the Rise*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Coke, *History of the West Indies*, III, 208-209.

<sup>40</sup> William Turton to Thomas Coke, January 22, 1804, New Providence. WMMS Archives Box 111-1804.

I have not received one letter from any preacher in these parts.” He noted that ministry was progressing well but complained: “In this Island, we live quite to ourselves.”<sup>41</sup> Coke reported that at “New Providence . . . we have a fine prospect of a rich harvest of souls.”<sup>42</sup>

### **The Arrival of John Rutledge and the Turtons’ Role in the Expansion of Methodism to Other Islands**

In early 1805, Turton received the assistance of John Rutledge, an Irish Methodist preacher, the first missionary formed in the British Isles.<sup>43</sup> Later Turton remembered, “When he [Rutledge] arrived I was much afflicted and his service was very acceptable.”<sup>44</sup> Financial concerns continued at Nassau, and Anthony Wallace decreased the rent on the house used for Methodist services from half its rental value to free.<sup>45</sup> Advised by doctors to leave Nassau, Turton traveled in March, 1805, to Harbor Island via Currant and Eleuthera as well as the town of Spanish Wells.<sup>46</sup>

In May, 1805, Turton was in Eleuthera, focusing on Wreck Sound and Tarpum Bay. Important contacts were Hannah Sands, a married White woman, and Thomas Hilton, colonial magistrate, who led a congregation in Sunday worship. Despite this, Turton asserted in a letter written a year later, “They were a people destitute of any Mark of Religion when I arrived among them.” He discounted in that same letter the significance of the efforts of Hilton and took total credit for a revival and changes happening in the town.<sup>47</sup> He did allow that Hilton was a “leader.”

Turton reported his wife was, at the importunity of the people, a class leader. She clearly had an important role in the evolving Methodist community.<sup>48</sup> In Wreck Sound, a school was started to help fund the ministry;

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<sup>41</sup> William Turton to Thomas Coke, February 9, 1805, New Providence. WMMS Archives Box 111:1804-1805 [fiche 5].

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Coke, *An Account of the Progress of the Methodist Missions in the West Indies, and the British Dominions in America, in Ireland, and in North Wales. With a Statement of the Receipts and Disbursements* (London: Conference Office, 1805), 5.

<sup>43</sup> Coke, *History of the West Indies*, III, 210, citing a letter of William Turton, February, 1805.

<sup>44</sup> William Turton to Rev. Fathers and Brothers, March 22, 1817, in William Dowson, *Mission to the West India Islands*, 50; reprinted in *Celebrating 200 Years of Methodism at Ebenezer*, 16.

<sup>45</sup> Coke, *History of the West Indies*, III, 204-205 (half-price rent), 218 (free rent).

<sup>46</sup> Turton gave different descriptions of the trip in Coke, *History of the West Indies*, III, 210, citing a letter of William Turton, April, 1805; and William Turton to Rev. Fathers and Brothers, March 22, 1817, in William Dowson, *Mission to the West India Islands*, 50-51; reprinted in *Celebrating 200 Years of Methodism at Ebenezer*, 16.

<sup>47</sup> William Turton to Thomas Coke, Eleuthera, March 31, 1806, WMMS Archives Box 111: 1805-1806 [fiche 6]. This letter is cited by Coke, *History of the West Indies*, III, 214, with an incorrect date.

<sup>48</sup> Turton is the source of three different descriptions of the situation in Eleuthera: (1) Coke, *History of the West Indies*, III, 212-213, citing a letter of William Turton, April, 1805; (2) William Turton to Thomas Coke, Eleuthera, March 31, 1806, WMMS Archives Box 111: 1805-1806 [fiche 6]; and (3) William Turton to Rev. Fathers and Brothers, March 22, 1817, in William Dowson, *Mission to the West India Islands*, 50-51; reprinted in *Celebrating 200 Years of Methodism at Ebenezer*, 16.

the Bahamians provided a home for the couple.<sup>49</sup> Important to Turton was the change in celebrating Christmas. Under his influence it was transformed from a time of “decadent behavior” to “clean living and worship.” John Rutledge confirmed this analysis.<sup>50</sup>

Problems continued for the Bahamians. Turton reported that a series of hurricanes had swept over the Bahamas leaving death and destruction and devastated crops in their wake, with Eleuthera being hit especially hard. This wind and rain came after a severe drought that also had a high cost for humans, flora, and fauna. Fishing and commerce languished: most boats were wrecked in the gales. Turton’s house withstood the elements: “I believe it was protected by a powerful hand . . . served as a refuge for many.” He noted that “The people in this place seem much engaged with God, several having joined the society since the Gales, notwithstanding we have little else than distress.” In an effort to relieve the situation, Turton took action:

Soon after the first Gale, finding there was no prospect for the inhabitants of these Islands but starvation, Mr. Hilton and myself concluded to petition Government for relief for them, and the merchants at New Providence for credit. This we did and received from the merchants a supply by way of charity, which has greatly relieved them . . . We have not heard from the Government.”

At the end of this catastrophic and trying period, in October, 1806, Turton reflected on the spiritual gains in the face of environmental and economic disaster. He wrote:

I have reason to think the Society in this place is growing in grace, or at least a great part of them. I often have great comfort among them, notwithstanding that they are in very great distress. The Lord has visited the Bahamas in a manner never before known to the oldest inhabitants.”<sup>51</sup>

He continued as a traveling pastor for Methodist congregations on the island of Eleuthera, always with problems of health experienced by both he and his wife. On September 10, 1807, his wife, whose name I have been unable to find, died after about four years of marriage.<sup>52</sup>

Coke wrote in 1808 to commend the work of Turton and to lament his need to withdraw from the Bahamas to recover his health. From the statistics reported by Coke, it is clear that the congregation had not had an easy time and had even lost ground among the Black/Colored population. Coke reported (1808):

XI. The Bahama Islands. Whole number: 91 Whites, 148 Blacks, increase 70%. But

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<sup>49</sup> Coke, *History of the West Indies*, III, 215.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Coke, *The Annual Report of the Spiritual and Financial State of the Missions Carried on in the West-Indies, Nova Scotia, New-found-land, Ireland, and Wales under the Direction of the Methodist Conference* (London: Conference Office, 1806), 7-8.

<sup>51</sup> William Turton to Thomas Coke, October 20, 1806, Wreck Sound, Eleuthera. WMMS Archives Box 111:1806-1807 [fiche 8].

<sup>52</sup> William Turton to Rev. Fathers and Brothers, March 22, 1817, in William Dowson, *Mission to the West India Islands*, 51; reprinted in *Celebrating 200 Years of Methodism at Ebenezer*, 16. Her illness, but not her death was mentioned by Coke, *History of the West Indies*, III, 217.

amidst this appearance of prosperity we have to lament that Mr. Turton, our superintending missionary is nearly worn out with his labors. To such a weak state has he been reduced that, during the great part of the year, the congregations were deprived of his ministry. He has now gone to visit the United States, for the recovery of his health by the urgent advice of his Physician, whose testimony on the propriety of this step, Mr. Turton transmitted to us.<sup>53</sup>

The visit to the USA lasted from April, 1808, to May, 1809. When he returned it was with his second wife, Sarah Short.<sup>54</sup> During his absence, Turton reported in 1817, that the community had maintained itself without his preaching and had even accepted four new members. Thomas Coke quoted him and concluded that “His absence . . . though severely felt, did not prevent the work of God from going onward.”<sup>55</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The early leadership of the Bahamian Methodists were persons of African descent, through the experience of slavery in the British colonies (later USA) and the son of a Caribbean planter who renounced that profession to become a Methodist preacher. The Pauls, Turton, Wallaces, and many others of shared experience, gave Bahamian Methodism a distinctive history during its first two decades. The early leaders were not traditional missionaries. They had either no or indirect contact with the British homeland of the Methodist Church. It was a church born in political, personal and missional adversity. In that crucible, it developed an independent Methodism rooted in its experience.

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas Coke, *The Annual Report of the State of Missions Which are Carried on Both at Home and Abroad by the Society late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley addressed in particular to those generous subscribers who have contributed to their support and to the benevolent public at large* (London: Conference Office, 1808), 21-22.

<sup>54</sup> Colbert Williams, *The Methodist Contribution*, 127.

<sup>55</sup> Coke, *History of the West Indies*, III, 217. William Turton to Rev. Fathers and Brothers, March 22, 1817, in William Dowson, *Mission to the West India Islands*, 51; reprinted in *Celebrating 200 Years of Methodism at Ebenezer*, 16.