

FRANCIS ASBURY, METHODISM, AND MONEY

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This wonderful book is a gift to all of us who toil in the vineyards of Methodist history and for our colleagues in U. S. history, as well. Francis Asbury finally got the biography he deserves and I am grateful to John Wigger for making that happen. One of the most important contributions this book makes is to take the life of Francis Asbury out of the realm of hagiography and bring it into the realm of serious history. Given the significance of Asbury's role in American history, that is a great service to the profession and to Asbury himself.

A second important contribution that Wigger makes with this book is to demonstrate the realities of what it meant to be a Methodist circuit rider. His treatment of Asbury's everyday life is very rich. It carries a real sense of how deeply committed Asbury and his circuit riders were to their mission and the difficulties of daily existence.

One of the most significant issues in *American Saint* has to do with Methodism and money. Many are acquainted with the Wesleyan litany: earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.¹ Some of the most poignant and eloquent passages in Wigger's book are those about Asbury's life of voluntary poverty. Wigger successfully argues that Asbury regarded poverty as a virtue and set himself apart as an example of the ascetic life, and that he "took solace in his poverty."² Asbury wrote to John Wesley in 1784 that "We must suffer with if we labour for the poor,"³ which sometimes meant sleeping in the rudimentary accommodations of the modest cabins of settlers on the Trans-Allegheny frontier. For much of his life, Asbury was wracked with illnesses either caused or worsened by his extreme asceticism.

As he grew older, Asbury increasingly worried about growing affluence among Methodists. Donald Dayton appropriated the term *embourgeoisement* to describe the movement of Methodism's social location toward the bourgeoisie and away from identification with the working class where it began.⁴ As Wigger points out, Asbury initially worried that the end of the American Revolution would produce too much prosperity, which would re-

¹ John Wesley, "The Use of Money," in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991), 347-357.

² John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 132.

³ As quoted in Wigger, 127.

⁴ Donald W. Dayton, "Presidential Address: The Wesleyan Option for the Poor," *Wesley Theological Journal* 26 (Spring 1991), available on-line at <http://wesley.nnu.edu/WesleyanTheology/theojnl/26-30/26-1-01.htm>.

duce Methodist zeal. Later, he worried that the availability of cheap land west of the Alleghenies would produce too much prosperity. And he was right. Methodists became more prosperous and their prosperity reduced their concerns about the temptations of wealth.

American Methodism changed dramatically as the first generation of high-intensity believers gave way to a second generation of institution builders. The transition from first generation Methodism to second generation began with the Christmas Conference in 1784, when the Methodist movement became an independent denomination and control was transferred from John Wesley to Francis Asbury. The development of denominational American Methodism accelerated after Asbury's death in March 1816—so it is the period between 1784 and 1816 in which we see this generational change taking place.

First generation Methodism in North America needed few of the trappings of an institutional church: no ordained clergy nor the colleges in which to educate them, no clergy pension plans or health insurance, few chapels or the funds to maintain them, no bureaucracy to oversee personnel, assets, and resources. It required, rather, a group of enthusiastic young men, mostly celibate, mostly without too much in the way of formal education or economic prospects, aflame with the desire to save souls. Those early circuit riders achieved success beyond their wildest dreams. In 1773, the ten Methodist itinerant preachers reported 1,160 members; forty-three years later, the 1816 Conference, held just weeks after Asbury's death, reported nearly 215,000 members.⁵

The success of Francis Asbury and his traveling preachers dramatically altered the nature of their business. A complex denominational structure sprang up to manage the seemingly endless numbers of new converts: regional annual conferences, districts, and presiding elders—a new layer of bureaucrat who sat between the bishop and the preachers. The accoutrements of an institutional church do not come without a price. In order for American Methodism to have churches, pensions, missionary societies and colleges, they needed money to pay for them. The construction of second generation Methodist institutions provides numerous examples of the growth of financial entitlements, to which Methodism's wealthier members generously responded.

As Methodist converts absorbed John Wesley's gospel of continual improvement, simultaneous, dramatic changes in economic conditions in Great Britain and the United States—the industrial revolution and the market revolution—offered them unprecedented opportunities for social and economic mobility. Methodists remembered John Wesley's teachings about gaining and saving all they could, but not all remained committed to the principle of giving all they could. Two processes intertwined to create a second generation Methodism interested in middle-class respectability: the dramatic mem-

⁵ Charles W. Ferguson, *Organizing to Beat the Devil: Methodists and the Making of America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 54.

bership growth that led to Methodist institution-building and the economic revolutions of industry and market that provided the fluid social space for self-improvement and the generation of wealth.

Here there is space for more research, in response to and in conversation with John Wigger. He argues that Methodist prosperity became important only after a sizable number of Methodists “obtained the kind of wealth they could only dream of in the 1780s. Methodism already had a few wealthy members, families like the Goughs of Perry Hall, but as yet they didn’t define the culture of the church.”⁶ That is true.

But perhaps we need to take a closer look at Asbury’s relationships with the rich. If Asbury was as fearful of wealth as John Wesley had been—and Wigger certainly makes the case that he was—Asbury nonetheless *was* willing to use affluent Methodists for the church’s purposes. From the very beginnings of American Methodism, Asbury leaned upon the rich. Asbury and Thomas Coke planned the Christmas Conference from Harry Dorsey Gough’s palatial estate, Perry Hall, near Baltimore. It might be argued that in this one event the influence of the affluent entered American Methodism.

Wigger draws to our attention that the Goughs not only hosted Asbury at Perry Hall, but they also took him more than once to Berkeley Springs, Virginia (now West Virginia) to take the waters of those mineral springs for his health. This spa was a fashionable retreat from the Chesapeake’s oppressive summer heat and humidity. Asbury seemed ambivalent about going to Berkeley Springs. During one of his visits, he wrote that “I am led to thank God that I was not born to riches.”⁷ Berkeley Springs represented to Asbury the perils of prosperity; yet he returned more than once, for weeks at a time, when his shattered body insisted on some respite.⁸

The Goughs were not Asbury’s only rich friends who funded the church’s institutional development and looked after the weary bishop’s exhausted body. In New York, Asbury slept at George Suckley’s elegant home in Greenwich Village. Suckley commissioned the Paradise portrait of Asbury that graces the jacket of Wigger’s book. He was an importer, who was in business with another wealthy Methodist back in England. Suckley and his wife were traveling to England with Thomas Coke in 1797 when their sailing vessel was captured by a French privateer. Coke reported that the Suckleys lost more than £400 in money and goods—a sum equivalent to about \$20,000 US dollars—and that’s the money they were carrying to fund their trip to England.⁹

The list of Asbury’s wealthy friends continues: Judge Thomas White of Delaware, at whose considerable estate Asbury lodged during the Revolutionary War; Jacob Hoffman, the mayor of Alexandria, Virginia, and

⁶ Wigger, 176.

⁷ Wigger, 175.

⁸ Wigger, 92-93.

⁹ Thomas Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. John Vickers (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2005), 237-251.

the wealthy proprietor of a sugar refinery and tobacco factory; Delaware Governor Richard Bassett; and, of course, Freeborn Garrettson, a member of a well-off Maryland family, whose wife Catherine Livingston was New York aristocracy, a member of a family of wealthy political leaders who socialized with George Washington and Alexander Hamilton.

The first few times Asbury preached in Georgetown, which is now a neighborhood in Washington, D.C., but was then an industrial village, he stayed in the home of the town's mayor, Revolutionary War hero Lloyd Beall. But after 1800, he always stayed with Henry Foxall during his nearly annual visits to Georgetown. Foxall was an iron founder who earned a significant fortune supplying cannon and shot to the U.S. Navy during the War of 1812.

We should note that all these wealthy Methodists lived in or near cities on the East Coast. There is no doubt that when Asbury was out on the frontier, which was a majority of the time, he lodged in far more modest circumstances and Wigger describes the privations of those settlers in some detail. Whenever possible, however, Asbury returned to his wealthy friends, and always to the home of Henry Foxall. To be fair: if I had just ridden on horseback across the Appalachian Mountains and my choices were to sleep on the floor of a blacksmith's hut or to rest comfortably in Henry Foxall's mansion, I would choose Foxall, too. We can hardly criticize Asbury for these choices. However, we must recognize that such choices affected him and consequently they affected the development of American Methodism.

Asbury and Foxall knew each other from their childhoods back in England. Some older biographies have argued that Asbury was apprenticed to Foxall's father for a time, but despite many efforts to confirm or deny that relationship, all we can say with any certainty is that the Asburys and Foxalls lived within a few miles of each other and were well-acquainted. Henry Foxall's mother and Francis Asbury's mother were in Methodist Society together for twenty-five years.¹⁰ One of Eliza Asbury's letters to her son included extensive news of Henry Foxall's siblings back in England and a request that Asbury cajole Foxall into writing to his sister.¹¹

Foxall came to the U.S. in 1795 and initially settled in Philadelphia, where he went into business with Robert Morris, Jr., the son of the Robert Morris who was the financier of the American Revolution and at one time had been one of the richest men in America. When the U.S. government decamped for Washington, D.C., in 1800, Foxall went with it, carrying \$23,000 in contracts for military armaments, which he parlayed into a fortune, becoming one of the most important American defense contractors of the early National period. Following John Wesley's instructions, he certainly earned all he could. But in his choice of occupation, Foxall rejected Wesley's teach-

¹⁰ Henry Foxall, *Journal*, August 25, 1816, privately owned.

¹¹ Eliza Asbury to Francis Asbury, April 29, 1800, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. J. Manning Potts, Elmer T. Clark, and Jacob S. Payton (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1958), 3:184-185.

ings. As Manfred Marquardt points out,

Wesley's primary criterion for selecting an occupation was not the consideration of one's abilities and inclinations, but the possibilities of service that is pleasing to God The Christian must exclude all ways of earning money that would injure a neighbor's possessions, body, or soul Anyone who injures his neighbor for the sake of personal gain deserves the punishment of hell.¹²

I suspect that manufacturing weapons might qualify as an occupation that Wesley would interpret as injuring one's neighbor for the sake of personal gain. Foxall was not unaware of the moral contradiction. He once admitted to a friend that although he did indeed make weapons to destroy the body, he assuaged his conscience by building churches to save souls.¹³

So what of Francis Asbury's relationship with Henry Foxall? Asbury stayed in Foxall's home at least twelve times. He clearly regarded Foxall's residence as a refuge where he could gain some respite from his overwhelming responsibilities and hard travels. Henry Boehm, for a time Asbury's traveling companion, described Asbury and Foxall as "like two brothers."¹⁴

Asbury called on Foxall for financial support of various Methodist causes. Foxall's generous contributions to the building of a number of Methodist institutions illustrates the kind of financial dependence Methodism developed on its prosperous members. Foxall funded structural improvements to the Methodist meeting house in Georgetown, and may have encouraged Asbury to grant that congregation a stationed preacher—which happened soon after Foxall moved to town. He sent generous donations to the building funds of churches around the country, from New Orleans to Washington, D.C. to Maine. He was among the initial contributors to the Chartered Fund, established in January, 1797, by Asbury, for "the relief and support of the itinerant, superannuated, and worn out ministers and preachers of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America, their wives and children, widows and orphans"¹⁵—American Methodism's clergy pension plan. In 1798, Foxall gave the Chartered Fund \$120—enough to fund a year's pension for a married preacher or two years for a preacher's widow, which compared favorably with the \$58 contributed by the entire Federal Circuit that year. Foxall served as a trustee of the Chartered Fund for 23 years, and left the Fund \$5,000 in his will.¹⁶ That \$5,000 in 1823 would be equivalent to about \$100,000 in 2010, a generous bequest.

What did Henry Foxall receive in return for his generosity? While we trust that he gave all this money and service out of gratitude for God's grace

¹² Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*, trans. John E. Steely and W. Stephen Gunter (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1992), 39.

¹³ Grace Dunlop Ecker, *A Portrait of Old George Town* (Richmond, VA: Dietz Press, 1951), 72.

¹⁴ Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical, of Sixty-Four Years in the Ministry* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1866), 413n.

¹⁵ "The Chartered Fund," *Methodist Magazine* (New York) 6:6 (June 1823), 228.

¹⁶ Henry Foxall, Will, Register 270, I.A.B., No. 1, Archives of the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C.

acting in his life, he also received something else that, as far as I can tell, no other Methodist lay person did: ordination. In March, 1814, with Bishop Francis Asbury presiding, the Baltimore Conference elected Henry Foxall, who was then a “local deacon,” to elder’s orders.¹⁷ Though he held the status of an “elder,” Foxall never itinerated, nor was he appointed. He never left his highly successful iron foundry and other businesses to preach at a local church for longer than a day or two. But he gained the title “Reverend,” which he used for the rest of his life, and he gained entry to the Methodist conferences in the United States and England. His clergy status and insider relationship with Asbury confirmed a certain respectability for Foxall, the child of forge and industry made millionaire in America. He was a prime example of *bourgeois*, institutional, second-generation Methodism: all that Asbury needed, yet all that Asbury ultimately feared.

Does Asbury’s relationship with Henry Foxall imply endorsement of his wealth and the means by which he gained it? Not necessarily. After all, Foxall represented the English home and parents that Asbury had left behind. Even for Asbury, whose childhood was less than idyllic, Foxall’s friendship carried an emotional resonance because of their shared origins. What it does imply is that Asbury’s relationship with wealth was perhaps more complex than we are willing to admit. John Wigger is absolutely correct when he argues that Francis Asbury remained untouched by the temptations of personal wealth. But Asbury willingly used the riches of respectable Methodists to accomplish his goals for the church. Does that make Francis Asbury something less than a saint? No. It just makes him human.

¹⁷ *Journal of the Baltimore Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1800-1833*; typed transcript, Wesley Theological Seminary Library, Washington, D.C.