



DISCOVERY

edited by

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NEW LIGHT ON ROBERT STRAWBRIDGE

For many years Methodist historians have debated the date of the organization of the first Wesleyan-type Methodist Society in America. Linked with this debate is the question of the arrival of Robert Strawbridge in this country. In his little volume *The Dramatic Story of Early American Methodism*, Frederick E. Maser writes, "The final decision concerning priorities, or where, when and who organized the First Methodist Society in America must await further research and information." (p. 23) The Rev. Edwin Schell, Methodist researcher and historian, recently **DISCOVERED** more information on this problem. He described his recent search and findings in a letter to the Editor of **DISCOVERY**. His manuscript, with one or two unimportant omissions, follows as he wrote it:

Robert Strawbridge

*Proven to Have Been the Earliest Founder of Wesleyan Methodism
in the Thirteen Colonies*

An ancient letterbook begun by the Baltimore Conference Historical Society shortly after 1855, and with no entries much after 1870, contains a reminiscence (p. 184) suggesting that Strawbridge's Log Meeting House had to be abandoned, apparently during the Revolution, because while it had been thought to be located on the property of Crawford, a Methodist whose house was later used for meetings, it was found to be on land owned by Solomon Miller, a Quaker who "was opposed to the war and refused to pay taxes."

In 1967 the Maryland Hall of Records published the "Quaker Records of Maryland," and received permission to microfilm all of the large body of records which have since been deposited at, I think, Swarthmore College. About ten years ago I had tried to secure access to those records, but it was not then possible. Reference to the minutes of the Fairfax (Va.) Monthly Meeting, 1746-76, shows that the Pipe Creek Preparative Meeting was granted a meeting date and was

"settled" January 26, 1760 (*Minutes*, p. 108). Earlier, however, on March 28, 1757, William Farquehar (whose name appears in Quaker records) sold a piece of land called Unity, comprising twenty-five acres on the head of Muddy Run descending into Little Pipe Creek. This was conveyed to Solomon Miller and N. Haines and immediately re-deeded by them in trust for Quakers inhabiting Frederick County to build "such and so many meeting houses, schoolhouses and yards or places of burial as they from time to time forever shall think necessary." (Land Records of Frederick County, Maryland, Liber F, 205, 207).

While I have not yet run down this deed completely, the lay of the land as described suggests that, as this ancient recollection says, it was the piece on which the log meeting house was built. So far as Quaker records show, they did not ever build a meeting house there, but in 1772 had their Pipe Creek meeting house several miles away near the present Union Bridge.

While looking in the Quaker records for the Solomon Miller mentioned above, I discovered:

1. The Virginia and Maryland Quakers in the 1750's and 1760's were strenuously opposed to the payment of what they called "priests wages and church rates," these being the tobacco taxes levied for support of the Established Church of England. Frequently they took strong measures of discipline if repeated remonstrances failed to bring their members in line with the non-payment of these taxes.

2. John England, from whom Robert Strawbridge rented his farm and from whom in 1776 he purchased it, was a member of the Pipe Creek Preparative Meeting of Quakers. On May 31, 1760, he and two others were appointed by the Fairfax Monthly Meeting to "stir up" remiss Friends to more diligence in attending "religious meetings especially on week days" (*Minutes*, p. 112). On October 25, 1760, he was appointed to inquire concerning the proposed marriage of James Megrin and Mary Ridgeway (*Minutes*, p. 118). On May 30, 1761, the Fairfax meeting was informed that at a non-Quaker wedding England had fought and beaten a neighbor severely and that he was not sorry. William Farquehar and Solomon Miller were appointed to treat further with him (*Minutes*, p. 126) and the next month the Minutes report that he wrote that he was sorry for his "scandalous conduct."

However, in June 1766 the Pipe Creek Preparative Meeting informed the Fairfax Monthly Meeting that "John England had left Friends and joined in Society with some other persuasion of people and desired not to be looked upon as a member of our Society" (*Minutes*, p. 245).

To find what other Society it was which England had joined, we turn to the reminiscences of a daughter of Strawbridge's first convert, John Evans. These were gathered in the 1850's by the Rev. John Bowen and published in his booklet, "The Rise and Progress of Methodism on Sam's and Pipe Creeks, Maryland from the year 1764."

Mrs. Sarah Porter told Mr. Bowen that the first Society met regularly every week either at Mr. Strawbridge's house or at Mr. John England's, whose farm adjoined Mr. Strawbridge's. Obviously, after an acquaintance of some standing with Robert Strawbridge, John England, the Quaker, became prior to June 1766 John England, the Methodist. Other testimony of long standing, as incorporated in the plaque unveiled in 1924 on the porch of the Strawbridge house, lists John England as one of these earliest members.

The June 1766 date for the word from the Pipe Creek Society of Friends concerning the renunciation of Quakerism by John England, together with the other evidence of England's conversion to Methodism and membership in Strawbridge's Society, for the first time documents from an independent source the assertion of Bishop Asbury that Strawbridge formed the first Society in Maryland and America. After a controversy of at least 120 years duration, the fact is now established that there was a Methodist Society at Pipe Creek sufficiently inspiring to claim the allegiance of one who previously had been a convinced Quaker. John England was not the only Quaker in Maryland who subsequently became a Methodist. The record shows, however, especially through his assignment in 1760 to stir up backsliders, that he had borne a repute in the Society of Friends.