THE GARDEN OF AMERICAN METHODISM

The Delmarva Peninsula, 1769–1820

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The Peninsula Conference of the
United Methodist Church

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three times to large gatherings. The Methodist chapel could hold but half of the afternoon crowd and Coke was forced to preach standing at the chapel's door. Leaving Chestertown, Coke preached and administered the sacraments at Kent and Worton chapels to large audiences. On December 14 he crossed the Chesapeake on his way to the Christmas Conference.[23] Coke's itinerancy fell short of the eight hundred to a thousand miles projected, but he did get to see and to be seen by a considerable part of the Peninsula populace. Many who came to see Coke were thinking of moving west.

Westward Migration

As the end of the eighteenth century approached, much of the Peninsula had been under cultivation for well over a century. Much of the soil was exhausted from years of single-crop agriculture. Some crop changes, such as the substitution of wheat for tobacco, helped put off the day of reckoning, but the remarkable revolution in farming techniques and fertilizer use that marked the antebellum period in the Chesapeake region was still a development of the future.[24]

Riding through Maryland's upper Eastern Shore in 1799, Nathaniel Luff was unimpressed with the region's winter wheat crop. Luff mentioned the Hessian fly as one factor but felt that the greatest problem was the "excessive tillage and want of manure." He also noted a concomitant decline in houses and industry. As Eastern Shoremen became increasingly aware of their region's decline in economic vitality, they went so far as to propose breaking away from the more successful Western Shore to join with Delaware in setting up a new state formed by the Peninsula.

Combined with the natural population increase, the exhausted soil led many to move westward beyond the Appalachians to the Ohio country. A precise quantitative estimate is impossible, but out-migration from the Peninsula during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries must have been considerable. The impact of this out-migration is reflected in comparative census statistics. From 1790 to 1820 the Peninsula's population increased by only 16 percent while the nation as a whole increased 144 percent.

Methodists were particularly tempted to join the westward migration. Those Methodists who were land-poor, like some at Brown's Chapel in western Sussex, were encouraged by Asbury to go west where "the means of rearing a family and advancing in the world were in the reach of the inhabitants." Ohio was a good

place for them to live in a slave-free economy. Some Peninsula Methodists who weren't poor but had manumitted their slaves also preferred living in slave-free Ohio. For some reason many of the latter group, led by White Brown of western Sussex, were particularly drawn about 1800 to Ross County in south central Ohio.[25]

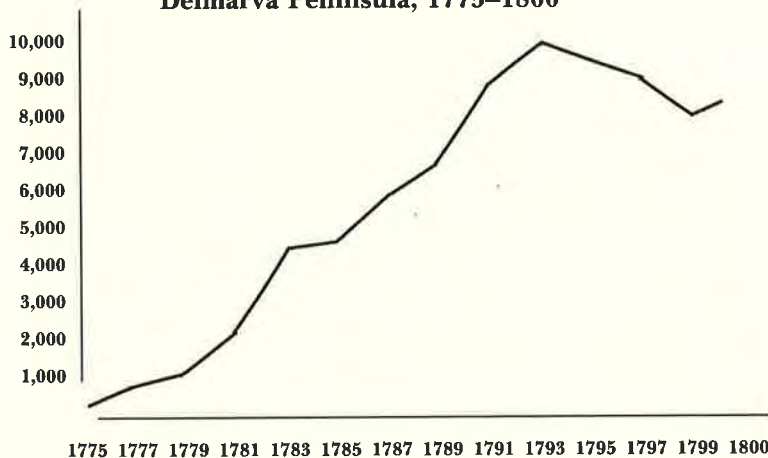
Growth/Stagnation, 1784–1800

The out-migration to the West seemed to drain the Peninsula of religious vitality as well as population. Delmarva Methodists, numbering 4,604 in 1784, more than doubled to 9,911 by 1792. But then, after maintaining that level for a few years, the number declined. By 1800, there were 8,705 Methodists on the Peninsula, almost double the 1784 figure but 1,206 less than the high point reached in 1792.

In 1784, almost one out of three American Methodists lived on Delmarva. Over the next sixteen years, the national Methodist total quadrupled, while on the Peninsula, Methodists did not quite double their number. As a result, by 1800 only 13 percent of the nation's Methodists lived on Delmarva.[26]

Methodist momentum, built up over the war years, explains the upward membership surge into the early 1790s. The newly established Protestant Episcopal Church, despite its claim to be successor to the Anglican Church, lacked both the manpower and the appeal to bring large numbers of nominal Anglicans back into

Number of Methodists on the Delmarva Peninsula, 1775–1800



created considerable friction among the trustees and particular consternation among those who submitted the unpaid bills.[17]

Poor Whites

The Methodist message in both England and America was particularly aimed at the downtrodden, the impoverished, and the unfortunate. Methodism offered the "lower sort" the same possibilities sought by the Parisian mobs during the French Revolution—liberty, equality, and fraternity—but in a religious rather than a political context. Understandably, poor whites were stirred by the circuit rider's message of hope for this world as well as for the world to come.

To be poor—that is, to be a tenant farmer, laborer, or owner of only a few acres—left one particularly receptive to "true religion." Francis Asbury shared this view with evangelists of many faiths. Wealth, by contrast, sometimes caused men to "forget that they are Methodists." On a nostalgic trip through the Peninsula in 1810, Asbury admitted that now the houses of some of the rich were open to him, but prayed, "O God, give us the poor." At Brown's Chapel on the Sussex-Caroline border, even some of the principal leaders "had not been financially successful." Then again, "had they prospered in their pursuits, perhaps they never would have sought God."

Because membership records for Peninsula Methodism prior to 1820 have almost completely disappeared, it is impossible to give a precise estimate of the number and percentages of Peninsula Methodists who were of the "better," the "middling," and the "lower sort." There is considerable evidence, however, that sizeable numbers of Delmarva Methodists were found in all three socioeconomic classes. There is no doubt that poor whites represented a very significant percentage of the Methodist total. On the Eastern Shore of Virginia in 1789, a concerned Francis Asbury lamented the difficulty Methodism had in raising money. "We have the poor but they have no money, and the worldly wicked rich, we do not choose to ask." Indeed, Methodism on the Peninsula, as elsewhere, attracted large numbers of whites who "have no money."[18]

Poverty, however, wasn't necessarily viewed as a virtue in itself. When Asbury encountered the economically deprived members of Brown's Chapel, he did not tell them to feel blessed by their unfortunate economic circumstances. Rather, he advised that they break the shackles of poverty by migrating "to the western country

[Ohio], where the means of . . . advancing in the world, were within the reach of the inhabitants."

To those unwilling or unable to move westward, Methodism offered escape from economic destitution through the adoption of a religious life-style that rejected the old, poverty-inducing habits. The Methodist regime called for rising before the sun, working hard and long, and showing little interest in and even less patience with idle chatter, amusements, and other forms of self-indulgence. The type of family that needed Methodism most to set its economic house in order was that found by Asbury in Delaware in 1781, "lying in bed until sunrise, and drinking a dram after they are up."

George Morgan lived in poverty in Northwest Fork Hundred, western Sussex County. His son, William Morgan, realized at an early age that his father's weakness for alcohol "made him poor and kept him poor indeed." Determined not to follow his father's path, the son decided to avoid intemperance and gambling and to work hard at learning a trade. But Morgan also realized that he needed membership in a Methodist society to help himself avoid his father's fate.

Far to the southwest on Tangier Island in the Chesapeake, Joshua Thomas also grew up in poverty. He too recognized that personal vices—in this case alcoholism and idleness—were the buttresses of economic destitution. Thomas, as he grew older, understandably loathed intemperance and was considered remarkably industrious. It seemed only natural that Thomas became a Methodist, a faith in which he found support for the temperance and industry necessary to lift himself from the depths of poverty.[19]

Belonging to a Methodist society also offered crucial economic insurance. The basic units making up the local Methodist society were the class meetings, each having anywhere from ten to thirty-five members. The purpose of the class meeting was to encourage and to monitor spiritual growth through soul-revealing testimonies directed by the class leader, who demanded every member's participation. Because members aired their most private thoughts at class meeting, economic concerns of an urgent nature were bound to surface. In the process, material sharing became a natural extension of spiritual sharing. At times, aid might even come from Methodists outside the local society. In 1796, for example, a sick member of the Georgetown, Delaware, society received money donated by Methodists belonging to other societies on the same circuit.

As the years went by and Methodist congregations became more formal in their organizational structure, financial aid to poor

Methodists became a more structured undertaking. In 1822 in Wilmington, for example, Methodists established a benevolent society to offer aid to indigent and distressed Methodists in the city.

Poor whites must have also valued the egalitarian way in which Methodists addressed each other. Certainly, French revolutionaries were no more democratic in their demand that all Frenchmen be addressed with the common prefix "citizen" than were Methodists who cheerfully called each other "brother" and "sister." Although most local lay leadership positions on the Peninsula may have been filled by the "middling and better sort," this still didn't detract from the heady feeling produced when a poor farmer heard himself called "brother" by a wealthy and esteemed member of the gentry.[20]

White Women

Like other movements in early American history, Peninsula Methodism was male dominated. All clerical and lay leadership positions were reserved for men. White women weren't even allowed to vote for local church trustees and were segregated from men at religious services. Paradoxically, the same white women who had so little overt power probably represented, according to fragementary sources, a clear majority of Peninsula Methodism's white membership.

There is evidence that in some regions of the United States, a few women may have been exhorters—lay speakers who encouraged the congregation to heed the sermon just delivered—but there is no evidence of this on the Peninsula. Perhaps the closest was Mary White, wife of Judge Thomas White, who on occasion led class meetings and religious exercises, and probably would have preached had Francis Asbury been more encouraging.

Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church, Wilmington, gives an example of the sexual segregation that characterized Peninsula Methodism. Husbands and wives arrived together for Sunday worship, but outside the brick wall in front of the church they parted company. They entered through separate gates, through separate doors, to a sanctuary divided down the middle by a four-foot-high partition that prevented either sex from viewing the other while seated. Husband and wife might not see each other again until meeting outside in the street after the service. It wasn't until 1832 that Asbury's husbands and wives were allowed to enter the sanctuary by the same door, and not until 1845 that they could sit