Methodist Records and History at the Grassroots in Northern Virginia

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IN NORTHERN VIRGINIA, from the grassroots of the hunt country to tidewater, three and one-half centuries of ebb and flow have not obliterated many of the hallmarks of American culture, although moldering fields and windowless hulks are occasional reminders of silted economies and the misfortunes of war.

This seven-county neighborhood—self-consciously different from other parts of Virginia and now straining itself to be both suburban bedroom and seat of nuclear age decision, finds the old estates buried by the brusque hand of Le Tourneau while from the mud Alcoa and Eero Saarinen have raised new landmarks. In this, the southwestern tip of Megalopolis, where yesterday is being pushed back fast and far into the countryside, in 1960 there lived 670,000 persons, of whom 1 in 10—or 68,500 in 1962—is a full or preparatory member in one of the 125 Methodist congregations ranging in size from 20 to 3,000 members and in age from 6 months to 197 years. The 108 churches of the Virginia Conference have 67,000 members. The 1,500 Negro Methodists living in the area are for the most part members of churches in the Washington Conference.

Before turning to the interesting story of the records and history being unearthed by the Northern Virginia Methodist Historical Society, we must notice Methodist recordkeeping in general and the ecclesiastical complexity of the Methodist past in northern Virginia.

Characteristic of American Methodism has been its passion for souls, but—sad for the archivist and the historian—a relative lack of archival concern beyond the enumeration of its members. Itinerant circuit riders, more than once referred to by the unlettered as "circus riders," making the rounds of their 2-, 3-, or 4-week circuits, often without any parsonage in which to keep their own or their churches' possessions, may have represented the sharpest American

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scythe for gathering in the sheaves but were perhaps the dullest quill for writing a legible and lasting archival testimony.

Not that some records creation has not been attempted. Possibly the unbroken series from 1773 of the record of preachers assigned and of the "numbers in connection" exceeds that of any other American denomination for statistical continuity.[1] Other early efforts to methodize records creation took place before the formal organization in 1784 of a denomination, soon to be represented in every county of the Nation. Among these efforts were provision in 1780 for trustees of each "preaching house" to "keep a register"[2] and the injunction in 1781 that each assistant should give his successor "a circumstantial account of the circuit in writing, both of societies and local preachers, with a [preaching] plan."[3] Class papers, which were the earliest (and for years the only usual) membership record, were ordered in 1775 to be obtained from the general book steward in Philadelphia,[4] but it was not until an ordained clergy emerged from the Christmas Conference of 1784 that marriage and baptismal records were needed. These were to be provided by all the societies after 1787, "that the elders and deacons may enter the marriages and baptisms regularly . . . also a general register book . . . in which the contents of all the private register books in the circuit may be inserted at convenient times."[5]

Not until 1800 were the annual conference bodies (then six in number) required to keep a record of proceedings, and not until 1804 did the General Conference order that quarterly meeting (*i.e.*, circuit and station) conference record books be kept.[6]

Laments of the 19th century clearly demonstrate that even these limited directives for record creation often went unheeded; and, sad to relate, more than one pastor to this day finds not so much as a membership book on filling a new charge.

The picture from the area under consideration is further darkened by the fact that in northern Virginia the usual records attrition by fire, flood, vandalism, and disappearance into private hands was augmented by the toll of the Civil War—when member was set against member, church buildings were converted to military use,

[1] [*General*] *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, vol. 1 *et seq.* (New York, 1840-).

[2] *Ibid.*, 1:12.

[3] *Ibid.*, 1:14.

[4] Manuscript minutes of William Duke, 1774-77, in the diocesan collection, Peabody Institute, Baltimore.

[5] [*General*] *Minutes*, 1:29.

[6] *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1:43, 55 (New York, 1855).

and more than one campfire was fueled with church records. Compounding the distress was the postwar fragmentation of Methodism into three bodies, now merged—Methodist Episcopal, Methodist Episcopal South, and Methodist Protestant. Further realignments from 1864 to 1867 found both Negro and white Methodist Episcopal members in separate and new conferences. Other changes between 1870 and 1940 included the transfer of churches to different districts, denominations, and conferences. Even to look up the pastors and statistics for the older congregations is quite a chore.

A quarter-century ago the three Methodist bodies mentioned above merged into one, with but two conferences. Almost at once the Virginia Conference churches became a part of the increasing sprawl of wartime Washington, sharing in the new affluence and embracing a host of new congregations.

In 1958 a movement to recover as much as possible of the long Methodist past was begun under the leadership of Dr. Roland Riddick, already busily involved as superintendent of the district, which had the second largest membership in the United States. In 1958 there was held the first of 42 public meetings on Methodist history, at which more than 85 speakers have given talks. The host churches have been scattered all the way from Fredericksburg to Baltimore. At the initial meeting in the present Leesburg Church, just two blocks from the original church site of 1766, the plan of the Committee on the History of Methodism in Northern Virginia, as the committee was then known, was sketched. The plan was to involve the gathering of materials for three volumes of history: the first, Northern Virginia Methodism in General; the second, Local Church Histories; and the third, Methodist Biography. Editors were also named. The Reverend Raymond Fitzhugh Wrenn, decendant of the Virginia Fitzhughs and of Sir Christopher Wren, is editor of Volume 1. As executive secretary of the District Board of Missions he is in a central position to gather and to husband information. Volume 2 was undertaken by Mrs. Alger, who later became a missionary and was succeeded by Dr. Hazel Davis. The editor for Volume 3 is the Reverend Melvin Lee Steadman, a young pastor already possessed of an editorial background in genealogy, a vast fund of knowledge, and wide family connections. Each editor was instructed to report at every meeting. The papers presented at each meeting from the first meeting have been preserved, and the more recent public lectures have been taped.

The initial meeting brought forward, besides those already mentioned, an unusual array of interested historical talent, including Dr.

Jacob S. Payton, one of the editors of *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*;[7] Erle Prior, the illustrator of those volumes; Dr. H. H. Hughes, longtime student of Methodist history; and others. Negro Methodists were included from the beginning as members of the executive committee and as speakers.

Thus was initiated a project that for 5 years has reached into every church of a tightly organized district. Among the results have been the following:

1. Seventy-five churches have submitted histories, which have been inserted into the binders of Volume 2. Copies are on deposit at Wesley Theological Seminary, at the Falls Church Public Library, and at the district office. Most of the histories were written as a direct result of prodding by the area subcommittees. About half of them have been presented in whole or in part at the public meetings, where each program includes presentation of the history of the host church, usually by a local layman. As with all amateur writing, the pieces vary widely in length, comprehensiveness, and quality. Some have unusual objectivity but, as is common with church history, there is usually a high degree of subjectivity.

2. Records have been turned up, repaired, and put into use in local churches and in the district as a whole. At many of the "Evenings with History," displays of earlier records and other artifacts illustrate a growing concern with preserving the past and using it to inform and inspire the present. In general, however, the care and use of records has been a byproduct, for no program—occasional or otherwise—has as yet laid particular stress on this aspect. Discoveries of records, however, have been more than occasional. At the September meeting this year two newly found record books were presented. The Leesburg 1873-1910 membership, marriage, and baptismal record has been returned to its source after a 30-year sojourn in the attic of a Maryland parsonage; and, newly rebound, the East Fairfax Circuit steward's book, 1869-81, is destined for the growing collection in the district office. Cultivation of an atmosphere of awareness was responsible for these and other finds.

3. The Methodist Historical Society has inspired the Virginia Conference to reacquire the site of the Old Stone Church at Leesburg. As the earliest known deeded site occupied by a Methodist church in the United States and as the burial place of the first native-born local preacher, Richard Owings, it probably will be designated as a shrine by the 1964 General Conference. Plans —or dreams, at least—include reerection of the Old Stone Church as a museum and archives and acquisition of the adjacent parsonage, built in 1816, as living quarters for a caretaker.

4. Some other preservation projects have not met with complete success. In Fairfax County a move to save the Adams House, first preaching place in the county and frequent stopping place of Bishop Asbury, was thwarted in 1962; but much paneling was saved when the building was demolished. An earlier

[7] London and Nashville, 1958.

project to move the frail old house of William Watters, first Methodist traveling preacher born in the United States, had to be abandoned, but again much valuable millwork was donated by the wreckers. Now, once more, consideration is being given to Watters' neglected grave.

5. A valuable library and a manuscript collection complement the records acquired. In 1959 the society was able to buy, with contributions made at public meetings, some of the papers of the Reverend John S. Martin, longtime secretary of the Baltimore Annual Conference. In September 1963 the discovery of the minute book of the Methodist Annual Conferences, 1775-83, was announced. As a more complete text than that standard since 1794, it will add to general understanding of early Methodism. As a logical development, the last meeting of the Methodist Historical Society saw the appropriation of $200 and the promise of matching funds toward furnishing and equipping an 11′ × 17′ room in the new Northern Virginia Methodist Headquarters Building at 5001 Echols Ave., Alexandria. This new museum–library–archives room may well encourage development of voluntary services, for the Headquarters Building is adjacent to The Hermitage, the new and commodious Methodist home for the aged.

6. Discouraging—and indicative of the difficult path of archival and historical concerns in Methodism—has been the uniformly poor participation in the historical meetings by members of the host churches. Despite the scheduling of a talk by one of their own and a second address by a well-informed outside speaker—with topics having now touched practically every concern of the denomination—almost never has the executive committee failed to preponderate in the public sessions. In fairness, however, it should be said that for several years eight churches each year were willing to feed the executive committee! Perhaps this generosity is more indicative than attendance. As the executive committee has grown to 73 members, voluntary supper offerings have become the rule. Interest on the part of the leading group seems heightened; at a recent meeting over 60 were present, some of whom had come from 75 miles away. In a busy age this indicates considerable interest and hope for further advance.

Archivists and church historians viewing the substantial achievements of this group may well ponder whether such a pattern is transplantable and, if so, what essential factors must be present. It seems to the writer that this grassroots scheme—an "action history," if you will, to complement the "action research" pioneered a decade ago by the Massachusetts Council of Churches—requires at the least a cohesive group of churches, an alert interest by two or three persons with superior historical talents, and continuing support from the denominational hierarchy. It may also require a region that is historically conscious. Free meals for the committee are no drawback, either. Who will be the next to set the people to digging?