METHODISM'S STRUGGLE FOR A PERMANENT FOOTHOLD IN PITTSBURGH

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Anniversaries marking the beginning of Pittsburgh Methodism have been determined by the length of time since the organization of the Pittsburgh Circuit in 1788. For example, "Old Smithfield" celebrated in 1938 what was known as the sesquicentennial of Pittsburgh Methodism. The establishment of the Pittsburgh Circuit, however, did not mean the simultaneous introduction of Methodism in the village protected by Fort Pitt. For some years, its preachers accomplished no more here than had been done while the community was within the bounds of the Redstone Circuit. Merely because the circuit was given the name of the little community, it has been the policy to consider the history of Pittsburgh Methodism as identical with that of the circuit.

It would be more accurate, in reckoning the number of anniversaries to which we are entitled, to count from the date of organization of the first permanent Methodist class in Pittsburgh or from the time of the creation of the first circuit which not only included the village, but also had preachers who visited the place as within their jurisdiction. We are inclined to accept the history of the Redstone Circuit as embracing that of Pittsburgh Methodism. Since John Cooper and Samuel Breeze were appointed to this circuit in May, 1784, they were serving in western Pennsylvania before there was a Methodist Episcopal Church, whose organization occurred just before the end of the year. The Pittsburgh Circuit was the name given to one of a number of the Redstone Circuit's

1 Presented as part of the program provided by the Historical Society of the Pittsburgh Conference of the Methodist Church at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on January 2, 1940. Mr. Magruder has written an "Official Encyclopedic History of Pittsburgh Methodism, 1784-1825," or the first of a projected series of volumes intended to cover the subject to date. Ed.
later divisions, which were made necessary by the expansion of Methodism within the original circuit.

The year following the close of the American Revolution, 1784, may seem at first too remote for us to feel more than an antiquary's interest; but seven active members of "Old Smithfield" today provide very tangible links with this early period of local Methodism. They cannot qualify as "the oldest inhabitants"; but in their youth they had the thrilling experience of hearing from venerable pastors of earlier years whose reminiscences put the listeners in intimate contact with the beginning of Methodism in Pittsburgh.

Indeed, the Reverend Peter M. McGowan, who served the church in 1833, was able to carry the story back to 1784, the year that William Penn's two grandsons named John Penn (one of whom was lieutenant governor of Pennsylvania immediately prior to the War of the Revolution) ordered the first of the sales of the 5,766 acres comprising the "Manor of Pittsburgh," and arranged for Colonel George Woods's division of the subsequent "Golden Triangle" into town lots. McGowan "knew well" Mrs. Wigfield, the first person converted to Methodism in Pittsburgh.

By coincidence, the Redstone Circuit's inception was in the same year that Mrs. Wigfield's aunt, Mrs. Gant, planted Methodism at the Forks of the Ohio. This circuit was continued with various alterations in boundaries until 1915; but the exodus of Mrs. Gant and her family from Pittsburgh removed all trace of her work here, necessitating replanting at a later date, which proved to be 1796, when John Wrenshall undertook the responsibility.

Peter Moriarty was the preacher in charge of the Redstone Circuit in 1785; but to Wilson Lee, one of his two associates, is accorded the distinction of preaching in the autumn of this year what was apparently the first Methodist sermon delivered in Pittsburgh. His meeting was held in a tavern located on Water Street near Ferry Street. Fifteen years earlier, George Washington had stopped at Water and Ferry Streets, in Samuel Semple's tavern, where his final act before departing on the next day, never to return, had been his entertainment of Fort Pitt's officers and certain other guests.
Robert Ayres' "Journal, 2nd Year's Travel" contains the story of his year, 1786-7, on the Redstone Circuit, where he and Stephen Deakins were John Smith's assistants. In it, we read:

March 25 [1787] Set out for Fort Pitt & Rod 2 m. But hearing there was no appointment I tarried & preachd to Smart Company . . . . Monday Rode into Ft. Pitt and Conversd wt. Mr. Barr Who Seemd Very Dry and Rather Discouragd me from Coming Into the Town to preach which Causd Some Exercise of mind. Returnd to Frd. Quinn's & tarried.

Dr. Samuel Barr, sent to Pittsburgh by the Presbytery of Londonderry, had been serving as minister both the village and Pitt Township since the autumn of 1785. Wilson Lee's success in preaching the first Methodist sermon here during that year may have been because there had been no regular Presbyterian preacher in Pittsburgh before Barr. In other words, not at that time was there anyone established enough to assert complete possession of the field and to ban a mere Methodist itinerant as an interloper.

Though Ayres departed from this community "Rather Discouragd," he sought compensations not far away:

Mar 29 Set out again in Search of M–ds [Methodists] and was fortunately Conducted to M. Wigfield's where I found 4 precious Souls Encompassd by Cal–sts [Calvinists] all around. One of them was almost led astray (I hope she has Renewd her Covenant).

These "precious Souls" were the first Methodist class members in Pittsburgh, reported in 1888 by the Reverend Peter M. McGowan. "They removed to a home on the Frankstown Road," he revealed. "Robert Ayres, the first preacher they saw, found them, and they had him preach to them." Ayres, himself, showed that before leaving this family, he gave the service as stated: "Frid 30 Preachd to a Small Cong. with Liberty & tarried."

Even after the lapse of about fifteen more years, in spite of John Wrenshall's fostering care of "the little flock" gathered by himself, there was not yet complete stability, as he showed:

2 The originals and bound typewritten copies of the Ayres journals are in the collections of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.
Our society consisted of from sixteen to twenty four members; not more, and seldom less. It was chiefly composed of old members traveling westward, and detained here for a short time, while enquiring for a situation on which to fix permanently; and when a situation was found, they obtained a certificate; which was generally, and from necessity, my province to give, and left us. This was the ground of our fluctuation, as a society, for a considerable length of time.

Writing about the society after the arrival of the Coopers in 1803, Wrenshall gave a vivid picture:

Our meetings... were continued, at my own dwelling, every Sabbath day; and being assisted by Mr. Thomas Cooper, and his son (Thomas Cooper Junier) who were both men of piety, prudence, and excellent singers, were attended with pleasing and profitable effects both to ourselves, and many of those, who, every sabbath evening, flocked in crowds, to join us in the worship of God. These meetings, were generally conducted in the following order.

Mr. Cooper senior commenced with singing and prayer: after him, his son, who was frequently followed by another. It was then, from necessity my province to continue in the same way, with this addition. I selected a portion of scripture and made such remarks as I thought best calculated to promote the practice of piety, virtue, peace of conscience, and a fitness for the Kingdom of Glory: nor did I forget to point out the absurdity of those awful doctrins which reflect so egregiously on the moral Attributes of the God of Love.

Sometime previously to this, the Revd. John Pitts, who was in a weak state of health, and who had been advized to travel for the benefit of the Mountain air, paid us a short visit. During his stay, we prevailed with him to preach to us one Sabbath evening. To accomodate a larger congregation we procured the use of the Court House, which was crowded with attentive hearers: and just when he had introduced his discourse, and entered on the first head; an alarm of fier—fier, resounded through the streets and was soon vociferated through the house. Instantly therefore, all was in confusion, and in a short time every individual had left the house, except Mr. Pitts, the two Mr. Coopers and myself. Mr. Pitts occupied the seat of the Judges, and we, that of the Prothonotary because we had to lead the singing. Soon therefore, as the house was empty, and the streets in confusion, Mr. Pitts leaned down and asked me what course he should pursue? To this I replyed, Keep your mind composed, and sit down a little, and we will rally them in a short time. I then took the hymn book, selected this hymn

"Praise ye the Lord ye immortal choirs
That fill the realms above." &c

We sung this to a tune which was entirely new to them, and added to it a chorus—Hallalujah, with which we were very familiar—and truth which jus-

* John Wrenshall, Autobiography, 4:122, in the Methodist Collection at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. This manuscript, in five bound volumes, is sometimes referred to as a diary, but it is chiefly a reminiscent account.
tifies me in saying, that before we had sung the hymn half through, the house was more crowded than before, and Mr. Pitts finished one of the best discourses, that I had ever heared in Pittsburg. Mr. Pitts preached from 6 Jerh. 16 Verse—This was in the month of Sepr. 1803.

In person, Pitts was described as plain in manner and in language. His chief effectiveness as a preacher was in his readiness to weep for unregenerate people. His hearers cried in sympathy—and repentance irresistibly followed. Thus he experienced several revivals during his ministry.

The Reverend William Page reported at the end of the conference year of 1803-4 a membership totaling more than six hundred for the first time on the Pittsburgh Circuit. He continued in this territory in 1804-5, though with the assistance of William Knox, in the place of Lewis Sutton.

In addition to receiving this appointment in 1804, during the annual session of the Baltimore Conference, to which Pittsburgh belonged until the General Conference twenty years later voted for the creation of the Pittsburgh Conference, Knox was ordained elder by Bishop Francis Asbury. On April 2, 1802, the latter had ordained him as deacon at the conference in Baltimore. The original certificates, bearing the bishop's signature, are in the possession of a descendant, William Francis Knox, Esq., of Pittsburgh.

The Reverend Thomas M. Hudson, a fellow member of the Baltimore Conference, wrote of his friend:

Rev. William Knox was born in the county of Tyrone, Ireland, June 8, 1767. In his seventeenth year he became a member of the Methodist Church in his native land. In 1787 he was authorized to preach; and, during a period of thirteen years, he was faithfully engaged as a local preacher in calling sinners to repentance. About the year 1791 he emigrated to the United States, and in 1800 commenced his itinerant ministry as a probationer in Baltimore Conference.

So much progress was made in Pittsburgh in 1807 during the ministry of Robert Richford Roberts, later bishop, that the community no longer could be ignored by the circuit's preachers as a regular appointment. John Wrenshall wrote about the improved situation:

5 Wrenshall, Autobiography, 4:158.
6 Thomas M. Hudson, _Life and Times of Rev. Thomas M. Hudson_ (Cincinnati and New York, 1871).
Our friend Cooper, being now married... removed to the large stone house, on the banks of the monongahela river; and as our Preachers had got pretty well satisfied, that it had become necessary for a more eligable situation to be selected for publick preaching, not only on account of room, but also by reason of the confused state of the society, since its removal from my dwelling. Brother Cooper too, who, with his wife, being hearty in the cause, made an offer of his house for that purpose, of which we thankfully accepted. Therefore, in the year 1808 regular preaching was established at his house every Sabbath day, nearly half of which necessarily devolved on me, which I attended too as well as I could, and when the perplexed state of my affairs at this time are taken into view, I may venture to add, as well as could be expected. Be this as it may, we began to increase in number, our meetings were more lively, and the attention of our citizens began also to be more excited, and their curiosity raised. Many, who had not been accustomed, came to hear for themselves, and some few cast in their lot among us; but the chief part of our society was still made up of Emigrants from Europe, and strangers from the East of the mountains.7

Pittsburgh Methodists were anticipating the pleasure of Asbury's presence after the general conference of this year, but had to be disappointed. "I had an awfully severe ride," he noted in his journal. "I am fairly arrested in my course." For that reason, said Henry Boehm, "I went to fill the appointment of the bishop there."

On this occasion, Asbury's companion met for the first time the Father of Pittsburgh Methodism; and it is interesting to observe his erroneous assumption, the same that others made, about John Wrenshall's formal educational background: "I lodged at Brother Wrenshall's, a local preacher. He was an Englishman, of excellent education and fine mind. He preached a great deal, and preached well, and helped give tone and character to Methodism in that section."

Boehm's report of his visit in the community seems to be the only one extant. Therefore, we quote him in full:

There were but few Methodists in Pittsburgh, and they had no house of worship, so I preached in the Court-house to about a thousand people who had come out to hear the bishop and saw but a plain German youth from their own State. They listened with attention while I expounded Matt. v, 20. In the afternoon I preached in the jury-room, in German, to one hundred hearers, from Acts X, 35. Some felt the weight of truth. Thus for the benefit of the Germans in Pittsburgh I preached the Gospel in their own vernacular fifty-seven years ago. Then, at six o'clock, in brother Wrenshall's door-yard, I

7 Wrenshall, Autobiography, 5:16.
preached 'deliverance to the captives.' This was my first visit to Pittsburgh, a place so full of historic interest. And here, for the first time, I beheld the Ohio. In after years I became very familiar with it by crossing it so frequently with the pioneer bishop.\(^8\)

Boehm seems to have been the first Methodist preacher who delivered in Pittsburgh a sermon in the German language.

In August, 1809, about ten days after Bishop William McKendree preached at Thomas Cooper's, both Asbury and Boehm arrived and preached at the same place. In addition, the Presbyterians departed from Dr. Barr's precedent and invited Asbury to preach in their own church, to the astonishment and joy of the bishop.

One year later, when William Knox was in charge of the circuit, the episcopal leader had the further satisfaction of delivering a sermon on the foundation of Pittsburgh Methodism's first house of worship. A permanent foothold had been won at last!

\(^8\) Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical, of Sixty-Four Years in the Ministry*, edited by Dr. James B. Wakeley (New York, 1866).