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WILLIAM WATTERS
The First American Circuit Rider

Compiled, Edited, and Arranged
By Duane V. Maxey

From
"History of the M. E. Church" by Abel Stevens
"A History of the M. E. Church" by Nathan Bangs
"Cyclopedia of Methodism" by Matthew Simpson

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Part 1
FROM THE CYCLOPEDIA OF METHODISM BY MATTHEW SIMPSON

William Watters was the first American to join the ranks of Methodist itinerant preachers. After his conversion, one of Wesley's sermons, published by Robert Williams, led him into a still deeper spiritual experience, and he became a strong advocate, by his life as well as his exhortations, of entire sanctification. There is but a brief account of this Methodist pioneer in the 1882 edition of the Cyclopedia of Methodism, but it presents some of the dated milestones of his life and ministry:

At the first Annual Conference of American Methodism in 1773, William Watters became the first native American to receive an itinerant appointment. He was born Oct. 16, 1751, in Baltimore Co., Md. He heard the early Methodists preach when about nineteen years of age, and was converted in his twentieth year. He commenced his ministerial work by assisting the Rev. Robert Williams, at Norfolk, and was received into the Conference on trial in 1773. In 1782, on account of pressing pecuniary matters he obtained a location. He returned to the Conference in 1786; was afterwards located again, but re-entered the Conference in 1801, and continued to labor until 1805, when his health became too feeble for the ministerial work. He died in 1833, and was buried at Falls Church, Va. He was diligent, deeply pious, and very useful."

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Part 2

THE WATTERS COMPILATION FROM STEVENS AND BANGS

I have compiled and arranged the following material on William Watters from the histories of both Abel Stevens and Nathan Bangs. I have purposely refrained from enclosing the Watters material from these authors in quotation marks, and I have amalgamated the selections from both into a chronological whole. Lastly, I have written in a few words in several places to facilitate the smooth flow of the conjoined materials, and I have also inserted the subheadings. This united and edited Stevens-Bangs account of William Watters immediately follows:

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Part 3

THE FIRST APPEARANCE WATTERS' NAME ON THE ITINERANT LIST

William Watters' name appears in the list of appointments made at the first American conference in 1773, and to him is now universally conceded the peculiar distinction of being the first native American itinerant of Methodism; an honor never to be shared, never impaired. He has left us an unpretentious "Short Account" of his "Christian experience and ministerial labors." [A Short Account of the Christian Experience and Ministerial Labors Of William Watters. Drawn up by himself. Alexandria. Printed by S. Snowden. The imprint has no date, but the preface is dated Fairfax, May 14, 1806.]

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Part 4

HIS BIRTH IN 1751 AND EARLY LIFE

He was born in Baltimore county, Maryland on the 10th of October, 1751. His parents were strict members of the English Church, and from his infancy he was addicted to religious reflections. "At a very early period," he writes, "I well remember to have been under serious impressions at various times, but when about twelve or fourteen years old he took, he says, "great delight in dancing, card-playing, horse-racing, and such pernicious practices, though often terrified with thoughts of eternity in the midst of them. Thus did my precious time roll away while I was held in the chains of my sins, too often a willing captive of the devil. I had no one to tell me the evil of sin, or to teach me the way of life and salvation. The two ministers in the two parishes, with whom I was acquainted, were both immoral men, and had no gifts for the ministry; if they received their salary they appeared to think but little about the souls of the people. The blind were evidently leading the blind, and it was by the mere mercy of God that we did not all fall into hell altogether."

When sixteen or seventeen years of age he was considered by his associates "a very good Christian," but he thought of himself quite otherwise. "It was," he says, "my constant practice to

attend the church with my prayer book, and to often read my Bible and other good books, and sometimes I attempted to say my prayers in private. Many times, when I have been sinning against God, I have felt much inward uneasiness, and often, on reflection, a hell within, till I could invent something to divert my mind from such reflections. Hence, strange as it may appear, I have left the dancing-room to pray to God that he might not be offended with me, and have then returned to it again with as much delight as ever."

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Part 5

FIRST CONTACT WITH THE METHODISTS

Strawbridge, King, and Williams were abroad around him, preaching in private houses, and in 1770 he had frequent opportunities of hearing them. "I could not conceive," he writes, "what they meant by saying we must be born again, and, though I thought but little of all I heard, for some time, yet I dared not despise and revile them, as many then did. By frequently being in company with several of my old acquaintances, who had professed Methodism, among whom was my oldest brother and his wife, (who I thought equal to any religious people in the world,) and hearing them all declare, as with one voice, that they knew nothing of heart-religion, the religion of the Bible, till since they had heard the Methodists preach, I was utterly confounded; and I could not but say with Nicodemus, 'How can these things be?' While I was marveling at the unheard-of things that these strange people were spreading wherever they came, and before I was aware, I found my heart inclined to forsake many of my vain practices, and at the last place of merriment I ever attended, I remember well I was hardly even a looker-on. So vain did all their mirth appear to me, as did also their dancing, which I was formerly so fond of, that now no arguments could prevail on me to be seen on the floor. I had my reflections, though I was on the devil's ground; and, among others, while I was looking at a young man of property, who was beastly drunk and scarcely able to sit in his chair, a dog passed by, and I deliberately thought I would rather be that dog than a drunkard. Some, even of my friends, began to fear that I should become a Methodist; but I had no such thought, and yet I often found my poor heart drawn to them, as a people that lived in a manner I never had known any to live before."

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Part 6

HIS CONVERSION

By the religious care of his early education and the natural tenderness of his conscience, it was impossible that he could long resist the Methodist influences which now met him on every side. "I seldom, if ever," he adds, "omitted bowing my sinful knees before the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, four or five times a day. It was daily my prayer that God would teach the way of life and salvation, and not suffer me to be deceived. After being uncommonly uneasy for several days concerning the state of my soul, I went with my eldest brother and family to a prayer-meeting in his neighborhood on a Sabbath day; and while one was at prayer I saw a man near me, whom I knew to be a poor sinner, trembling, weeping, and praying, as though His all depended on the present moment; his soul and body were in an agony. The gracious Lord, who

works by what means he pleases, blessed this circumstance greatly to my conviction; so that I felt, in a manner which I have not words fully to express, that I must be internally changed, that I must be born of the Spirit, or never see the face of God. Without this, I was deeply sensible that all I had done or could do was vain. I went home much distressed, and fully determined, by the grace of God, to seek the salvation of my soul with my whole heart. In this frame of mind, I soon got by myself and full upon my knees. But, alas! my sinful heart felt as a rock, and though I believed myself in the 'gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity,' and, of course, that if I died in that state I must die eternally, yet I could not shed one tear, neither could I find words to express my wretchedness before my merciful high Priest; I could only bemoan my forlorn state, and I wandered about through the afternoon in solitary places, seeking rest but finding none."

That night, however, in another prayer-meeting, both his heart and eyes melted. "I was so melted down and blessed with such a praying heart, that I should have been glad if they would have continued on their knees all night in prayer for me, a poor, helpless wretch."

The next day he was unfit for any business: he spent it in retirement. "I refused to be comforted but by the Friend of sinners. My cry was, day and night, Save, Lord, or I perish; give me Christ, or else I die. In this state I loved nothing better than weeping, mourning, and prayer, humbly hoping, waiting, and longing for the coming of the Lord. For three days and nights eating, drinking, and sleeping in a measure fled from me while my flesh wasted away and my strength failed in such a manner that I found it was not without cause that it is asked, 'A wounded spirit who can heal?' Having returned in the afternoon from the woods to my chamber, my eldest brother (at whose house I was) knowing my distress, entered my room with all the sympathy of a brother and a Christian. To my great astonishment he informed me that God had that day blessed him with his pardoning love. After giving me all the advice in his power, he kneeled down with me, and with a low, soft voice (which was frequently interrupted by tears) he offered up a fervent prayer to God for my present salvation." He received "a gleam of hope," but was not content with it. The next day several "praying persons," who knew his distress, visited him. He requested them to pray with him, and the family was called in, though it was about the middle of the day. "While they all joined in singing, my face," he says, "was turned to the wall, with my eyes lifted upward in a flood of tears and I felt a lively hope that the Lord whom I sought would suddenly come to his temple. My good friends sung with the spirit and in faith. The Lord heard and appeared spiritually in the midst of us A divine light beamed through my inmost soul and in few minutes encircled me around, surpassing the brightness of the noonday sun. Of this divine glory, with the holy glow that I felt within my soul, I have still as distinct an idea as that I ever saw the light of the natural sun, but know not how fully to express myself so as to be understood by those who are in a state of nature, inexperienced in the things of God; for 'the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, for they are spiritually discerned.' My burden was gone, my sorrow fled, all that was within me rejoiced in hope of the glory God; while I beheld such fullness and willingness in the Lord Jesus to save lost sinners, and my soul so rested in him, that I could now, for the first time, call Jesus Christ 'Lord, by the Holy Ghost given unto me.' The hymn being concluded, we all fell upon our knees, but my prayers were all turned into praises."

Such was the spiritual birth of the first regular Methodist preacher of the new world. This "memorable change," he says, took place in May, 1771, in the twentieth year of his age. In the same

house where he was born "a child of wrath," he was also "born a child of grace." He immediately joined a Methodist class. All Methodists were, in those days, laborers in the evangelical vineyard. On the Lord's day, he says, they commonly divided into little bands and went out into different neighborhoods, wherever there was a door open to receive them, two, three, or four in company, and would sing their hymns, pray, read, talk to the people, "and some soon began to add a word of exhortation." "We were weak, but we lived in a dark day, and the Lord greatly owned our labors; for though we were not full of wisdom, we were blessed with a good degree of faith and power. The little flock was of one mind, and the Lord spread the leaven of his grace from heart to heart, from house to house, and from one neighborhood to another. It was astonishing to see how rapidly the work extended all around us, bearing down opposition as chaff before the wind. Many will praise God forever for our prayer meetings. In many neighborhoods they soon became respectable and were considerably attended. Two of his brothers were converted through his instrumentality, one of them became a zealous Local Preacher, and later, a Traveling Preacher.

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Part 7

HIS ENTRY INTO THE ITINERANCY -- 1772-3

In 1772, when he was twenty-one years old, he began to preach. Robert Williams perceived his capacity for usefulness, and took him, in the autumn, to Norfolk, Va. Thus was William Watters ushered into the ministry, and has ever since been honored as the first native American itinerant.

The scene of his departure for an itinerant life was deeply affecting. His mother, whom he loved tenderly, offered him all her possessions if he would abandon his purpose. Many of his friends "wept and hung around" him; "but," he adds, "I found such resignation and so clear a conviction that my way was of the Lord, that I was enabled to commit them and myself to the care of our heavenly Father, in humble confidence, that if we never met again in this vale of tears, we should soon meet where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest. Calling at one of my brothers on my way to take my leave of them at parting my fortitude seemed all banished, and I was so exceedingly affected that it was with the greatest difficulty I could find any utterance to commit them in prayer to the Divine protection. O for a continual preparation to meet where all tears shall be wiped away. Even so Lord Jesus. Amen." And now he began in earnest his itinerant career. The two evangelists journeyed and preached, almost daily, through Baltimore, Georgetown, and other places, and arrived at last in Norfolk, where, under many discouragements, Watters soon formed a circuit, extending some distance among the neighboring towns. He was seized with the measles, but continued his labors. To my inexpressible consolation," he says, "several, both in town and country, were brought to know the Lord, which gave a fresh spring to my humble endeavors. I felt liberty and power to speak the words of eternal life, and often resolved to be more faithful in the important work, and to labor while it was called today."

Pilmoor had been preaching in Norfolk; he was now released by Watters to pursue his southern tour to Charleston. Williams also left the young itinerant and hastened to Portsmouth and further. Jarratt and McRoberts, "two English clergymen," received him with open arms, and welcomed him to their parishes. Jarratt became a staunch friend to the Methodist itinerants and the

confidential friend of Asbury. [Later] In the absence of Williams, on His visit to Jarratt, Watters was prostrated with nervous fever, and for some time he seemed suspended between life and death. It tested and proved his faith. Coming forth from the attack he exclaims, "O what inexpressible desires did I feel to devote the remnant of my days to the honor of God, who had done great things for such a poor worm!" He returned to his home after an absence of eleven months, in which he had been thoroughly initiated into the hardships and triumphs of the itinerancy. He met Asbury for the first time, and journeyed on horseback with him some miles; Rankin also came across his path, and he saw in these apostolic men the highest models of ministerial character.

At the Conference of 1773, which he did not attend, he was appointed, as we have seen, with John King, to New Jersey; but neither of them traveled that long circuit; another native preacher was to take his place there. Watters' sickness had detained him away, and Rankin altered his appointment to Kent, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. The young itinerant again took affecting leave of his home, and rode forth on his evangelical adventures:

"On my way," he says, "I felt a humiliating sense of my littleness of faith, and my unprofitableness in the Lord's vineyard; and, from my inmost soul, promised from that I would set out afresh both to live and preach the Gospel, and, through infinite mercy, I felt a divine evidence that he would be with me and bring me to the people to whom I was going in the fullness of the blessing of the Gospel of peace. In this circuit, which was a two weeks' one, and the only one then between the two bays, I continued four or five months with greater freedom and success in preaching than ever before. Many, in different places, attended our meetings, and I had one invitation after another into new neighborhoods. Though I had but a few places, when I first went into the circuit, in a short time I was not able to go through them all in two weeks, and before I left it the circuit might have been readily enlarged to four weeks. Many were awakened and soundly converted, and we had as powerful times, for the number of people, as I have generally seen. I was much blest in my own soul, and confirmed in my call to the work of the ministry. Day and night the salvation of the people was uppermost in my mind. Our little number was daily increased, and great were our rejoicings in the Lord our righteousness. The prospect was such, and our attachment to each other so great, that it was with some reluctance I returned home in the forepart of the spring following."

The Eastern Shore was thenceforth to be a "fruitful garden of Methodism." At the next Conference "Kent" was reported in the Minutes as a circuit, the first formed on the Peninsula, and in the same year its first church, Kent Meeting-house," was erected. The chapel rose amid hostility; the timbers prepared for it were carried away at night and burned; but the Society persisted, and at last entered, with prayer and praise, their humble temple. It has since been known as "Hinson's Chapel." "At this chapel," says an authority familiar with the locality, "rests the dust of John Smith, the first itinerant that came into the work from Kent county, Md. Here, also, sleep the remains of the Christian philosopher, William Gill, who with his fingers closed his own eyes as he was sinking into the long sleep of the grave; and were it said that he, while yet able, preached his own funeral sermon, we should receive it as characteristic of this man, who was so fully freed from the fear of death. It would seem at the first Society in Kent was formed in the beginning of 1773, and that it was in the neighborhood of the present Hinson's Chapel; nor does it appear that there was more than one Society at this time in the county."

On retiring from the Eastern Shore, Watters labored, till the next Conference, in Baltimore and its vicinity. His success was not remarkable there, but he passed through inward experiences which tended to fit him for his future career. "I did not," he says, "find that life, power, and liberty in my ministrations as among the people I had left on the other shore. I frequently found, to my great grief, that my religion was too superficial, and that though sin did not reign in me, yet it remained and marred my happiness. I often mourned, wept, fasted, prayed, and truly longed to be sanctified throughout soul, body, and spirit, that I might be able to serve the Lord without interruption." He was still seeking for that "deep recollection and constant communion with the Lord which nothing for a moment should interrupt."

Such was William Watters, the first of the thousands, the tens of thousands, of American Methodist itinerants who have spread the Gospel over the North American continent, a man fervent in spirit, prudent in counsel, indefatigable in labor, saintly in piety.

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Part 8 HIS ADMISSION INTO FULL CONNECTION IN 1774

Young Watters attended the Conference of 1774, the first that he witnessed; and small as it was, it was an imposing spectacle to him. He was "much edified by the conversation of his elder brethren," and preached before them, and a large congregation, in St. George's, with an awe which amounted to embarrassment.

At this Conference of 1774 William Watters was admitted into full connection. Bangs writes: "On the 25th of May, of this year, the second conference was held in the city of Philadelphia. From the minutes it appears that seven preachers, namely, William Duke, John Wade, Daniel Ruff, Edward Drumgole, Isaac Rollins, Robert Lindsay, and Samuel Spragg were admitted on trial; and William Watters, Abraham Whitforth, Joseph Yearbry, Philip Gatch, and Philip Ebert were admitted into full connection."

Most of the ecclesiastical year Watters was abroad in New Jersey. "The latter part of the winter," he says, "and through the spring, many in the upper end of the circuit were greatly wrought on, and our meetings were lively and powerful. The cries of the people, for mercy, were frequently loud and earnest. Several who had long rested in a form of godliness were brought under pressing concern and found the Lord, and many of the most serious were greatly quickened. I was often much blessed in my own soul, and my hands lifted up, which were too apt to hang down. O how sweet to labor where the Lord gives his blessing, and 'sets open a door which no man can shut!' "

Still, the ominous threat of the Revolutionary War was on his mind: "The dreadful cloud," writes Watters, "that had been hanging over us continued to gather, thicker and thicker, so that I was often bowed down before the God of the whole earth."

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Part 9

HIS LABORS DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

Young Watters was abroad, abundant in labors and patient in trials, during this troubled period. He went from the Philadelphia Conference of 1775 to the Frederick Circuit, Md. It extended over a region which might still be called the frontier. The roads were difficult, the settlements very scattered, the habitations mostly log-cabins, without conveniences for the sojourner. Watters went to proclaim his message through this wilderness, desponding often on his route, but he was refreshed at last by unexpected success. About midsummer a spiritual awakening appeared in almost every appointment of his circuit. He records that it was affecting to see how the people turned out, by day and by night, from their secluded homes with "earnest looks and many tears," inquiring "about the things of the kingdom." Every week he was cheered with conversions -- several often at a single meeting. His own earnest spirit was kindled with the extending interest, and reconciled to all the labors and privations of his hard field. "I often preached, prayed, and exhorted," he says, "till I was so exhausted that I was scarcely able to stand. This flame not only spread among sinners, but among professors of religion also, and even reached my poor heart, so that I could not but bless and praise God's holy name that though I was deprived of many conveniences, yet he made all up unto me, and I was contented to sleep in cabins, to eat a dry morsel, and frequently to retire into the woods to read, to meditate, and pray. My Lord and Master had not on earth a place to lay his head, and shall not I be thankful for the meanest place? He was hated, spit upon, condemned, crucified; and shall such a worm as I look for anything better?"

The changes of preachers from circuit to circuit were still semi-annual. After six months unremitted labors, during which scores of converts were gathered into the Church, Watters departed for Fairfax Circuit, Va., where, notwithstanding the prevalent political and military agitations, his powerful ministrations bore down all before him over at least two thirds of his circuit, a flame of "revival kindling and spreading from appointment to appointment." "In less than a quarter," he writes, "we had the greatest revival I had ever seen in any place. If ever I was enabled to labor for the salvation of souls, it was now." There were some "very astonishing instances of the mighty power of God in the conversion of respectable persons;" among whom he mentions, as one of his trophies, Nelson Reed, destined to be a standard-bearer in the itinerant ministry. "So gloriously," he adds, "did the word of the Lord prevail, that though there was preaching but once in three weeks in the same place," he being the only preacher on the circuit, "yet in five or six months there were added to the Society upward of one hundred souls. Though wars and rumors of wars were all around us, we were permitted to dwell in peace, while every man sat under his own vine and under his own fig-tree, none daring to make him afraid."

The next year he brought from the Conference a fellow-laborer to this field, and enlarged it to a four-weeks' circuit. He extended his travels into Frederick and Berkeley Counties, breaking up new ground, and preaching with success where a Methodist itinerant had never been heard. "This tour," he says, "through different neighborhoods and among all sorts of people, was much blessed to my soul. I had many powerful seasons, and labored day and night, while the people came from all quarters to hear the words of eternal life." He seldom preached in any place without "seals to his ministry." On Berkeley Circuit especially, "the work increased a every hand." He closed the year among the cabins of Frederick Circuit, praying and studying in the woods, preaching in the

barns, and rejoicing with "a simple hearted, loving people," "happy in being of one heart and one mind -- with few disputes," and "few falling off -- the most growing in grace."

The next year he set off from the Conference, in company with several preachers, for the noted Brunswick Circuit in Southern Virginia. His companions on the route were destined to different and difficult fields between the James and Roanoke Rivers. They rode forth with the consciousness of the responsibility and the sure success of apostles. "Their conversation was," he writes, "such as became the Gospel, edifying and strengthening, while most of us were entire strangers to all we met. We all appeared to breathe the same spirit, and I verily believe our sole desire, in leaving our little all, was that we might be instrumental, in the hands of God, in bringing lost sinners into the fold of Christ." On the route he heard McRoberts, the friend of Jarratt, preach a genuinely evangelical sermon. "It was the first example," he says, of such a discourse heard by him from a clergyman of the Church of England. McRoberts, impatient of the secular, not to say profane spirit of his clerical associates, subsequently left the Church and became a Presbyterian pastor, but never lost his evangelical zeal and usefulness. Jarratt's home was on Watters' circuit, and the zealous rector received the itinerant as a brother, beloved not only in the faith, but in its apostleship, esteeming him worthy of more than ordinary honor for the humility and hardships of his labors. "Weak, and hardly able to sit on my horse," writes Watters, "I at last came to the house of Mr. Jarratt, with whom I stayed a night, as I did every time I came round my circuit. His barn, well fitted up with seats and a pulpit, was one of our preaching places, and I found him very friendly and attentive to me while I stayed in these parts." It required six weeks, with almost daily preaching, to pass round the circuit. There were already large societies in almost every neighborhood, the fruits of the ministrations of Jarratt, Williams, Asbury, and other laborers. Watters had two colleagues, but he says his "hands were full."

He expected greater success than he realized on this lively circuit, but he records, "The Lord evidently owned us, in every neighborhood, both in and out of our Societies. We labored to the utmost of our abilities in the cause of our glorious Master, and daily found his service perfect freedom." The military troubles of the times reached the evangelists even in this remote region. At a Quarterly Meeting at Maybery's Chapel in the summer of 1777, attended by all the Circuit and many Local Preachers, as well as a large assembly of the people, they were interrupted by a magistrate as suspicious men from beyond the limits of the state. Watters, however, and one of his brethren, took the oath of allegiance, as proof of their loyalty, and the threatening storm passed away. "Our preaching," he says, "commenced immediately. The Lord was present and gave utterance, and the Word was as 'a hammer and fire, that break the rock in pieces.' The little seeming opposition roused the minds of some of our friends, and several appeared to possess a good degree of the spirit of martyrs. The God of Daniel was in our midst, and many, on both days of our meeting, shouted aloud the praises of our Immanuel. We parted filled with love, and more than ever determined to follow the Lord fully."

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Part 10
HIS ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION

He spent some time on the Pittsylvania Circuit, and the next year traveled with remarkable success that of Sussex. While passing the second time around this circuit his word had unusual power -- "the windows of heaven were opened, and the Lord poured out such a blessing as our hearts were not able to contain." Some of the rustic assemblies were overwhelmed with the truth. "We were so filled," he says on one occasion, "with the love of God, and overawed with his divine majesty, that we lay prostrate at his footstool, scarcely able to rise from our knees for a considerable time, while there were strong cries and tears from every part of the house for that perfect love which casteth out fear." Jarratt and the devoted Methodist itinerants had preached faithfully, in these parts of Virginia, Paul's doctrine of "perfection," John's doctrine of "perfect love;" and Watters records that he had never met before with so many living examples of it as in the societies of this circuit. He caught from them the same spirit. "O my God! when shall I awake with thy likeness, and be filled with thy fullness!" was his constant prayer.

A new epoch here occurred in his personal history. He had been remarkable for his devotion, the transparent purity and simplicity of his religious life, and the benignity of his temper; but he had seen, especially by the aid of Wesley's Writings, that there were "deep things of God" which he had not fathomed, and he consecrated himself to an absolute devotion. In a little circle of praying friends, "I was," he says, "in an agony of prayer, and my heart was ready to burst with longing after the blessing, expecting every moment to hear the kind release, 'go in peace, sin no more.' My cry was incessant. 'Father, glorify thy name, pour out thy Spirit.' " Then "followed a deep and awful sense of the divine presence, an inward calm, which words cannot express. I was in my own eyes less than the least of God's people, and knew that all was of grace." But he dare not yet "confidently conclude" that his "soul was renewed in love."

Subsequently he "found that it is by faith we stand in every state of grace," that sanctification, like justification, is by faith. Walking with a friend, they retired into a solitary place, and on their knees most "earnestly desired not to rise till every doubt were removed." There, in the calm solitude, he was "most graciously and powerfully blessed and filled with confidence and peace." Powerful as his earnest ministry had hitherto been, it now took a new tone; its energy, if more calm, was more effective. The "most glorious work" that ever he "had seen was on this circuit among believers. Scores professed to be sanctified to the Lord;" he "could not be satisfied without pressing upon Christians their privilege "in this respect, and he records that wherever "they were exhorted to go on to perfection the Word was blessed."

His next circuit was Fairfax, where, he says, the truth prevailed mightily, notwithstanding the war; he remarks, indeed, that this was generally the case throughout the country. "It is not more astonishing than true, that the work continued to spread in all those parts where we had preachers to labor, and I doubt whether, at any time before or since, it has been more genuine among us than during the war." This is an anomalous fact, but it has its explanation in that providential relation of the Methodistic movement to the national destiny which has already been discussed.

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Part 11

HIS EFFORTS TO HELP RESOLVE THE SACRAMENTAL CONTROVERSY

About this time a controversy arose concerning whether the American Methodist preachers should, or should not, be allowed to administer the sacraments. Asbury resolutely held to Wesley's requirement that they not do so. Robert Strawbridge, and others who agreed with him maintained that they should do so. This sacramental controversy menaced the infant Church with perilous if not fatal results. Watters, as we shall hereafter see, had important connections with that disturbance; he trembled for its probable consequences. Being the first and most prominent native itinerant, his influence among the disputants was unequalled, and he became the chief conciliator between the opposing parties. "I finally," he says, "came to the determination to endeavor, by every means in my power, to prevent a division; or, if that could not be done, to stand in the gap as long as possible." He was successful, and thus averted a disaster which might, at this early period in the history of the denomination, have proved ruinous.

At the Conference held in Leesburgh, Va., May 19, 1778, Mr. Asbury not being present on account of ill health, and Mr. Rankin and his British brethren having departed for England, Mr. William Watters, being the oldest American preacher, was called upon to preside. Here the question, "Shall we administer the ordinances?" was again discussed, and it was finally decided to "lay it over until the next conference."

At the next conference the arguments in favor of administering the ordinances came up with double force. The war had separated them from Mr. Wesley; all the English preachers, except Mr. Asbury, had returned to England, and nearly all the ministers of the establishment, being unfriendly to the American cause, had also left their flocks and gone home; and most of those who remained were irregular in their lives and not evangelical in their preaching. In these circumstances, the children were left unbaptized and the people were destitute of the Lord's supper. They furthermore said, that as God had made them instrumental in the conversion of the souls of the people, so he had given them authority to administer his ordinances; and the people were exceedingly desirous "to have it so."

It was under these views and feelings that the brethren assembled in Fluvanna county, Va. on the 18th of May, 1779. Knowing something of the disposition which prevailed there on this subject, Mr. Watters was sent from the conference which had been held at Judge White's, to endeavor to dissuade them from carrying their design into execution. His efforts, however, were unavailing; for after deliberating upon the subject, they appointed a committee of some of the oldest brethren to ordain ministers. The members of this committee first ordained each other, and then proceeded to ordain others by imposition of hands. Those who were thus ordained, went out preaching and administering the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper to all who desired them, either for themselves or for their children; and thus was a breach made between the northern and southern preachers. These men, however, being pious and zealous, and withal much favored by the people for complying with their wishes, were very successful in their labors; but the preachers at the north mourned over them on account of their departure from what they very justly considered Wesleyan Methodism.

Those in Virginia who favored the administration of the sacraments by the Methodist clergymen themselves held a separate conference their in 1780. The regular conference, conducted by Asbury met on April 24, 1780 in Baltimore. This conference voted their disapproval of the actions taken by the Virginia group, and a delegation including Asbury, Garrettson, and Watters,

journeyed to the Virginia Conference in an effort once again to resolve the issue and heal the breach if possible. Nathan Bangs, in his Methodist history quotes from Asbury's account of this journey to Virginia:

"We rode to Granger's, fifteen miles, stopped and fed our horses. These people are full of the ordinances; we talked and prayed with them, then rode on to the Manakin-town ferry, much fatigued with the ride; went to friend Smith's, where all the preachers were met. I conducted myself with cheerful freedom, but found there was a separation in heart and practice. I spoke with my countryman, John Dickins, and found him opposed to our continuance in union with the Episcopal Church. Brother Watters and Garrettson tried their men, and found them inflexible.

"Tuesday 9. -- The conference was called: brother Watters, Garrettson, and myself stood back, and being afterward joined by brother Dromgoole, we were desired to come in, and I was permitted to speak. I read Mr. Wesley's thoughts against a separation -- showed my private letters of instructions from Mr. Wesley -- set before them the sentiments of the Delaware and Baltimore conferences -- read our epistles, and read my letter to brother Gatch, and Dickins's letter in answer. After some time spent this way, it was proposed to me, if I would get the circuits supplied, they would desist; but that I could not do. We went to preaching; I spoke on Ruth ii, 4, and spoke as though nothing had been the matter among the preachers or people; and we were greatly pleased and comforted -- there was some moving among the people. In the afternoon we met; the preachers appeared to me to be farther off; there had been, I thought, some talking out of door. When we, Asbury, Garrettson, Watters and Dromgoole, could not come to a conclusion with them we withdrew, and left them to deliberate on the condition I offered, which was to suspend the measures they had taken for one year. After an hour's conference, we were called to receive their answer, which was, they could not submit to the terms of union. I then prepared to leave the house, to go to a near neighbor's to lodge, under the heaviest cloud I ever felt in America -- O! what I felt! -- nor I alone, but the agents on both sides! -- they wept like children, but kept their opinions.

"Wednesday 10. -- I returned to take leave of conference, and to go off immediately to the north; but found they were brought to an agreement while I had been praying, as with a broken heart, in the house we went to lodge at; and brothers Watters and Garrettson had been praying up stairs where the conference sat. We heard what they had to say -- surely the hand of God has been greatly seen in all this: there might have been twenty promising preachers, and three thousand people, seriously affected by this separation; but the Lord would not suffer this -- we then had preaching by brother Watters on, 'Come thou with us, and we will do thee good:' afterward we had a love-feast; preachers and people wept, prayed, and talked, so that the spirit of dissension was powerfully weakened, and I hoped it would never take again."

This unhappy affair being thus amicably adjusted, the preachers went to their respective fields of labor with renewed courage

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Part 12

WATTERS' CONTINUED LABORS TO 1783

In 1778 and 1779 William Watters was on Baltimore Circuit. "I never," he writes, "traveled a circuit with more satisfaction." "There was a general movement and quickening among the members of the Societies. The ungodly, in many places, stood astonished, and could not but acknowledge that the arm of the Lord was revealed." Sanctification was now his almost habitual theme, and many were the witnesses of its power throughout his extensive field of labor. Years later he says: "Many, I am fully persuaded, to this day recollect those divine seasons with grateful hearts, and have ever since felt their happy effects."

Down to the end of 1783 William Watters continued to travel in Maryland and Virginia, with a zeal that knew no abatement and a success hardly excelled by any evangelist of the denomination -- often in new circuits in mountainous regions, his lodgings in log-cabins, his chapels barns, his health broken so much that, three or four times, his brethren expected to bury him, a martyr to his work. He was one of the few itinerants who had families.

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Part 13

HIS LOCATION PRIOR TO THE M. E. CHURCH ORGANIZATION

In 1783 he was compelled to locate, but he still labored indefatigably, one of his regular appointments being at least forty miles distant from his home; another, thirty. "I have never," he wrote, "since I knew the Lord, seen anything in this world worth living for an hour, but to prepare, and assist others to prepare, for that glorious kingdom which shall be revealed at the appearing of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." Not only many, but most of the itinerants of those early times had, sooner or later, to locate, on account of their worn-out health or domestic embarrassments; but they continued to perform more laborious service in the ministry than most of their itinerant successors, and the early outspread of Methodism through the land is scarcely less attributable to their zeal than to that of the "regular" Preachers.

Hardly had Watters located when he was cheered by news of the arrival of Coke, with authority from Wesley to organize the Church. On December 25, 1784, sixty out of the eighty-three preachers then in the traveling connection, assembled in the city of Baltimore for the "Christmas Conference" at which the Methodist Episcopal Church was organized. Commenting on this organization in his memoirs, Watters says, "We became, instead of a religious society, a separate Church. This gave great satisfaction through all the societies." The first native itinerant had served faithfully through most of the forming period of the young denomination: he now saw it take organic and permanent form.

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Part 14

HIS RE-ENTRY INTO THE ITINERANCY AFTER AN 18-YEAR LOCATION

William Watters, the first native American Methodist preacher, reappears in the appointments for the year 1801, after having been located about eighteen years. During his location he preached habitually, and often at distances of many miles from his home. He was now fifty

years old, mature in health and character, of extreme amiability, good sense, self-possession, and soundness of judgment. During most of our present period he labored at Alexandria, Georgetown, and Washington. "I enjoyed," he writes, "good health and great enlargement of heart for the ingathering of souls to the Lord's kingdom, with considerable life and liberty in all the ordinances of his house, but in none more than in dispensing the words of eternal life. It was to me more than the increase of corn, wine, or oil. I often enjoyed through the silent hours of the Sabbath nights, after laboring all the day and part of the night, such a sacred sense of the divine presence and nearness to the throne of grace by the precious blood of the covenant, that all sleep has been banished from my eyes, while I have felt

'That solemn awe that dares not move,
And all the silent heaven of love.' "

He had been gradually gathering members into the societies of his appointments, when the great revival of these times swept over his field. "Many," he says, "were certainly reformed and converted to the Lord, but many made a great noise and ado that knew too little of what they were about, and from the greatness of the work, the spirit of the times, as well as from several other causes that then existed, which I do not think proper to mention, I never found more difficulty in separating the chaff from the wheat without endangering the real work. There were many in the course of twelve months added unto the Church, numbers of whom continue to adorn their profession, yet the spirit and genius of the revival was not so congenial to my feelings as the less revival with which we had been blessed two years before. But I am sensible, and wish to be more so, that there are diversities of operations, the same God which working all in all, and that it belongeth not unto me to dictate, but to follow the leadings of a kind Providence, and that word of inspiration that gives us infallible instructions in all such matters, so that however things may turn up from the enemy, from sinners, or the injudicious among us, all will end well if we do but with patience and perseverance pursue the work given us to do." These are characteristic remarks.

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Part 15

HIS FINAL LOCATION IN 1806 AND DEATH IN 1833

He located again in 1806, and we get but few later glimpses of him. Boehm, the traveling companion of Asbury, says that in February, 1811, while in Virginia, they "rode to William Watters'. He retired from the regular work in 1806, but this heart was always in it. He was now living in dignified retirement on his farm on the Virginia side of the Potomac, opposite Georgetown. He was the first traveling preacher raised up in America. Philip Gatch commenced nearly the same time. They were intimate, and in their declining years corresponded with each other. Watters was a stout man, of medium height, of very venerable and solemn appearance. Bishop Asbury and he were lifetime friends. The bishop was acquainted with him before he was licensed to preach. When these aged men met on this occasion they embraced and saluted each other with 'a holy kiss;' and the bishop, writing of this visit in his journal, speaks of him as 'my dear old friend, William Watters.' He was distinguished for humility, simplicity, and purity. Few holier ministers has the Methodist Church ever had than William Watters. I rejoice that I was permitted to hear him preach, and to be his guest; to eat at his table, to sit at his fireside, to enjoy

his friendship and hospitality. His house was for years a regular preaching-place on the circuit. In 1833, at the age of eighty-two, he died in holy triumph. His name will go down to the end of time, bearing the honored title of "The First American Traveling Preacher."

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Part 16

COMMENTS ABOUT WILLIAM WATTERS AND HIS FAMILY

"It is strange that so little is known of the latter years of so great and good a man. He was once of the most holy and useful men of the many who have adorned Methodism -- a Virginian Christian gentleman of the right type. His upright walk and sterling character were proverbial." -- Letter of D. Creamer to Abel Stevens

The biographer of his friend Gatch, who commenced preaching in the same year with him, but joined the itinerancy a little later, describes Watters in 1813 as a venerable looking man; his head white, his form erect, his countenance full of benevolence. For some time before his death he was totally blind.

One of our best Church antiquarians says: "The family to which Watters belonged was perhaps one of the most remarkable in the early annals of American Methodism. His mother died in her ninety-second year. There were seven brothers and two sisters. They were among the first of those whose hearts and houses were opened to receive the Methodist preachers when the latter came into Harford County, Md.; and several of the brothers, at an early period, became official members of the Methodist Societies. Stephen was a local preacher, Nicholas entered upon the itinerant work in 1786, and closed his useful life stationed in Charleston, S. C., in 1805. One of the earliest Methodist churches in Maryland was erected on the farm of Henry Watters, and was only removed a few years since in order to give place to a larger one. It was there that the famous Conference was held in 1777, when the English preachers, with the exception of Asbury, gave up the field, and returned to their native country. The old homestead is still in possession of the family; Henry Watters, Esq., the oldest son of his father, and Class Leader in the Church, is the proprietor. What imperishable memories cluster around the sweet rural mansion where Pilmoor and Boardman, Coke and Asbury, so often lodged and prayed! Verily, 'the righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance.' " [Dr. Hamilton, in Sprague, p. 49.]

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