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ROBERT WILLIAMS
Apostle of Virginia and N.C. Methodism

Compiled and Edited by Duane V. Maxey

From the following sources:

"A History of the M. E. Church, Vol. I" by Nathan Bangs

"History of the M. E. Church, Vol. I," by Abel Stevens,

"Cyclopedia of Methodism, 1882 Fifth Edition," by Matthew Simpson

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Part 1

MANY AWAKENED THROUGH WILLIAMS' WORK IN AMERICA

Robert Williams was a man who made a mighty contribution to the planting and establishment of Methodism on the North American Continent. At the time of Williams' death in 1775, Asbury said that "probably no man in America had been equally successful in awakening souls."

Of his birth, conversion, sanctification, the above listed sources make no comment, but it appear quite clear that he was both saved and sanctified and a strong advocate of scriptural holiness. Both the Bangs and Simpson accounts record that prior to his American ministry Robert Williams had been a Local Preacher. And, the account of Williams in the Cyclopedia of Methodism also states that prior to his American ministry he had been a business man. From all accounts, it is clear that he was a single man who married after he came to America.

Williams ministry in America was brief, but it was both wide and deep. He became known as the apostle of Methodism in both Virginia and North Carolina, and, through the conversion and work of Jesse Lee, Williams' ministry indirectly influenced the founding of Methodism in New England. The depth of Williams' ministry may be discerned by the second-blessing holiness revival that began on the Brunswick Circuit that he formed. And, both William Watters, the first American Circuit Rider, and Philip Gatch, the second, were led into the experience of entire

sanctification through literature received from Robert Williams. The available facts on Williams' life appear to be scanty, but the impact of his ministry on Early Methodism in America was mighty!

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Part 2

WILLIAMS' PERMISSION FROM WESLEY TO PREACH IN AMERICA

The news of the dawn of their cause in the New World spread among Methodists in England before the Annual Conference was called upon to recognize and provide for it; and before the itinerant missionaries [Boardman and Pilmoor] could be dispatched across the Atlantic, humbler men, imbued with the enthusiasm of the new movement, were ready to throw themselves upon the hazards of the distant field, that they might share in its first combats. One of these, Robert Williams, applied to Wesley for authority to preach there; permission was given him on condition that he should labor in subordination to the missionaries who were about to be sent out.

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Part 3

VOYAGE TO AMERICA IN 1769

Williams' impatient zeal could not wait for the missionaries; he appealed to his friend Ashton, who afterward became an important member of Embury's society. Ashton was induced to emigrate by the promise of Williams to accompany him. Williams was poor, but hearing that his friend was ready to embark he hastened to the port, sold his horse to pay his debts, and, carrying his saddle-bags on his arm, set off for the ship with a loaf of bread, a bottle of milk, but no money for his passage. Ashton "paid the expense of his voyage, and they landed in New York [1769] before the missionaries arrived."

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Part 4

MINISTRY AT JOHN STREET CHURCH AND ELSEWHERE 1769-1771

Sailing after the appointment of Boardman and Pilmoor, Williams and Ashton reached New York in advance of them. Williams labored efficiently for more than a month with Embury at the John Street Church, as the records of that society show. Apparently he was anxious to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land, for soon it is plain that he began to minister elsewhere.

Under date of Nov. 1, 1769, Mr. Pilmoor, then in Philadelphia, writes: "Robert Williams called on his way from New York to Maryland. He came over about business, and being a local preacher in England, Mr. Wesley gave him a license to preach occasionally under the direction of the regular preachers."

He was officially stationed at John Street Church some time in 1771, but again, it is quite easily discerned that Williams burden and vision extended far beyond that location. One source says: "He labored successfully with Strawbridge in founding the new cause in Baltimore county."

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Part 5
BECOMES THE APOSTLE OF VIRGINIA METHODISM IN 1772

In the first published Conference Minutes he is appointed to Petersburg, Va. "He was the apostle of Methodism in Virginia." He followed Strawbridge in founding it in 1772 on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. In the same year he appeared in Norfolk, Va. Without giving any public notice, he stood on the steps of the court house and began to sing, which soon collected a number of people around him, to whom he preached, not, however, without considerable interruption from some disorderly persons. They seemed to think, indeed, that the preacher was mad, for as they had not been accustomed to hear a minister pronounce the words hell and devil in his sermons, from the frequent use Mr. Williams made of these terms they concluded he was a wicked, swearing preacher, though in some parts of his discourse they thought he preached the gospel. From this first impression of the man, no one was inclined to invite him to his house. But on hearing him a second time at the same place, they so far altered their opinion respecting his sanity that he was invited to their houses; and not long after, a society was formed in Norfolk, which has continued to this day, gradually increasing in number and usefulness -- the germ of the denomination in the state.

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Part 6
COLLABORATION WITH JARRATT IN 1773

Williams also traveled in Virginia during this "Conference year," having been appointed to Petersburg Circuit. It extended into North Carolina, and took the title of Brunswick Circuit at the next Conference, a name of renown in the early Methodist annals. He reported from it at the Conference 218 members. About a year had passed since his first introduction to Jarratt, and his hospitable reception under the roof of the good rector; the wide-spread excitement which then attended his labors had continued with increasing intensity.

Jarratt wrote, later, an account of "the work of God in these parts" -- Sussex and Brunswick counties -- and says: "It was chiefly carried on by the Methodists. The first of them who appeared there was Robert Williams, who was a plain, artless, indefatigable preacher of the Gospel. He was greatly blessed in detecting the hypocrite, razing false foundations, and stirring believers up to press after a present salvation from the remains of sin. He came to my house in the month of March, in the year 1773. The next year others of his brethren came, who gathered many Societies both in this neighborhood and in other places as far as North Carolina. They now began to ride the circuit, and to take care of the Societies already formed, which were rendered a happy means both of deepening and spreading the work of God."

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Part 7

INSTRUMENTAL IN THE CONVERSION OF JESSE LEE IN 1773

It was about the present time Nathaniel Lee and his wife, who were on William's Circuit, opened their doors for him to preach. They were converted, and joined the Methodists. Two of their sons, John and Jesse, became Methodist ministers, and their other children shared largely in the blessings of the Gospel, which Williams proclaimed with such flaming zeal, holy ardor, and great success. Jesse Lee, was converted in 1773, and the next year his name was enrolled among the members of Williams' Societies. Thus Williams was instrumental in the conversion of Jesse Lee, who himself later became the founder of Methodism in New England."

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Part 8

FORMATION OF THE BRUNSWICK CIRCUIT BY WILLIAMS IN 1774

Williams formed, in 1774, the old Brunswick Circuit, extending from Petersburg into North Carolina, the first reported in Virginia. Jarratt requested that his parish might be included in this circuit, that all who chose it might have the privilege of meeting in Class and of being members of the Society." He soon, "saw the salutary effects. Many that had but small desires before began to be much alarmed, and labored earnestly after eternal life. In a little time numbers were deeply awakened, and many tasted of the pardoning love of God. In a few months he saw more fruit of his labors than he had for many years. And he went on with the preachers, hand in hand, both in, doctrine and discipline."

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Part 9

THE APOSTLE OF NORTH CAROLINA METHODISM

The religious interest excited by Williams' labors soon extended into North Carolina, and opened the way for the southward advancement of Methodism. He bore back to Philadelphia, says Asbury, a "flaming account of the work in Virginia -- many of the people were ripe for the Gospel and ready to receive us." He returned, taking with him a young man named William Watters, who was thus ushered into the ministry, and has ever since been honored as the first native American itinerant. Leaving him in the field already opened, Williams went himself southwestward, "as Providence opened the way." Subsequently he bore the cross into North Carolina. He formed a six weeks' circuit from Petersburg southward over the Roanoke River some distance into that state, and thus became the "apostle of Methodism" in North Carolina, as well as Virginia.

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Part 10

HOLY FIRE SPREAD WHEREVER WILLIAMS WENT

Apparently Williams spread holy fire wherever he went. In the autumn of 1774, Rankin went into Maryland to hold a Quarterly Conference. Shadford, and several of his fellow-laborers in the state, were present, and Williams had come two hundred miles from Virginia to encourage them with the good news with which he had refreshed Asbury. On the first of November they held their first Quarterly Meeting for the season. "We had our general love-feast," says Rankin, "in the forenoon, and finished the business of the Circuit after dinner. In the evening we had our watchnight. This was a day to be remembered, and I hope it will be by some to all eternity. The heavens were opened, and the skies poured down righteousness. The Lord spoke to many hearts with a mighty voice, and the shout of the King of Glory was heard in our camp. Blessed be the name of our God forever and for evermore!"

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Part 11

WILLIAMS AND HIS MINISTRY CHARACTERIZED

Of Robert Williams, Mr. Asbury says in his Journal, "He is a singular man, but honest in his intentions, and sincerely engaged for the prosperity of the work." In the same connection he says, "I met brother W. from Virginia, who gave me a great account of the work of God in these parts; five or six hundred souls justified by faith, and five or six circuits formed, so that we now have fourteen circuits in America, and about twenty-two preachers are required to supply them." Elsewhere, Asbury said of Williams: "He has been a very useful, laborious man, and the Lord gave him many souls to his ministry; perhaps no man in America has ministered to awakening so many souls as God has awakened by him."

Bangs wrote of Williams and his ministry: "He was a plain, pointed preacher, indefatigable in his labors, and many were awakened and converted to God through his public and private exhortations; and it is said that the name of Robert Williams was long remembered by many who were his spiritual children in those parts."

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Part 12

JOSEPH PILMOOR SAID OF HIM: "HE IS VERY SINCERE AND ZEALOUS."

Abel Stevens wrote: "One of -- the most effective pioneers of American Methodism -- "the first Methodist minister in America that published a book, the first that married, the first that located, and the first that died." We have but little knowledge of his career, but sufficient to show that he had the fire and heroism of the original itinerancy."

"That pious servant of the Lord," says Watters, his young fellow traveler in the South. "The name of Robert Williams," says our earliest annalist, "still lives in the minds of many of his spiritual children. He proved the goodness of his doctrine by his tears in public and by his life in private. He spared no pains in order to do good -- standing on a stump, block, or log, he sung, prayed, and preached to hundreds" as they passed along from their public -- resorts or churches. "It

was common with him after preaching to ask most of the people whom he spoke to some question about the welfare of their souls, and to encourage them to serve God."

Benjamin Abbott alluded to the past impact of Williams' ministry thus: "I arose, took my text and preached with great liberty; before the meeting was over I saw many tears drop from their eyes, and the head of the mob said that he had never heard such preaching since Robert Williams went away."

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Part 13

PUBLICATION AND CIRCULATION OF WESLEY'S MESSAGES

Robert Williams had been an active business man, and on coming to America found the need of religious books, and at once began to publish some of Mr. Wesley's Sermons, which he circulated extensively, and they were the means of accomplishing much good -- they opened the way in many places for our preachers, where these had never been before. Though dead, he yet speaketh by his faithful preaching and holy walk

One of Wesley's sermons, published by Robert Williams, led William Watters into a still deeper spiritual experience, and he became an advocate, by his life as well as his exhortations, of entire sanctification.

Another of Robert Williams' cheap publications -- Wesley's Sermon on Salvation by Faith -- led young Philip Gatch into the second work of grace. While attending family worship, "the Spirit of the Lord," Gatch writes, "came down upon me, and the opening heavens shone around me. By faith I saw Jesus at the right hand of the Father. I felt such a weight of glory that I fell with my face to the floor, and the Lord said by his Spirit, 'You are now sanctified, seek to grow in the fruit of the Spirit.' Gal. v, 22, 23. This work and the instruction of Divine truth were sealed on my soul by the Holy Ghost. My joy was full. This was in, July, a little more than two months after I had received justification."

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Part 14

LOCATION AND DEATH IN 1775

Asbury was now in the scene of Robert Williams' labors, the founder of Methodism in Virginia. Williams had married in the preceding year, and settled on the road between Norfolk and Suffolk. He continued to preach far and near, and his house was a home and preaching place for Asbury. In the autumn of 1775 he died; Asbury laid him to rest, with a funeral sermon, and pronounced upon him, as we have seen, the emphatic eulogy "that probably no man in America had been equally successful in awakening souls." The loss of this useful man was a saddening addition to the calamities of the times in the little communion of the Virginia Methodists. Asbury felt it.

Like most of the itinerants of that day, he located after his marriage, and settled between Norfolk and Suffolk, where, and in all the surrounding regions, he continued to preach till his death, which occurred on the 26th of September, 1775. Asbury was now in the country, and at hand to bury the zealous pioneer. He preached his funeral sermon, and records in his Journal the highest possible eulogy on him. "He has been a very useful, laborious man. The Lord gave many seals to his ministry. Perhaps no one in America has been an instrument of awakening so many souls as God has awakened by him."

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Part 15 CONCLUSION

Such are the scanty intimations that remain of the evangelist who was the first practically to respond to the appeals from America to England. His grave is unknown, but he will live in the history of the Church forever, associated with Embury, Webb, and Strawbridge. He did for it in Virginia and North Carolina what Embury did for it in New York, Webb in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, and Strawbridge in Maryland.

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THE END