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**JOHN KING, ZEALOUS MISSIONARY TO AMERICA**  
**By Duane V. Maxey**

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**PART 1 -- INTRODUCTION**

The following publications in the HDM Digital Library were used as sources in the  
compilation, editing, and writing of this sketch of John King:

hdm0008.tex, M. E. History, Vol. 1, by Nathan Bangs

hdm0013.tex, The Life of Freeborn Garrettson, by Nathan Bangs

hdm0074.tex Autobiography of Adam Clarke

hdm0085.tex, The Life of Adam Clarke, by John Wesley Etheridge

hdm0168.tex, Freeborn Garrettson, by Ezra Squier Tipple

hdm0118.tex, A History of the Methodists, by Jesse Lee

hdm0216.tex, History of the M. E. Church, Vol. I, by Abel Stevens

hdm0219.tex, History of the M. E. Church, Vol. II, by Abel Stevens

hdm0298.tex, Methodist Character Sketches, Letter H, by Matthew Simpson

hdm0324.tex, A History of The Rise of Methodism in America, by John Lednum

hdm0381.tex, Methodist Char. Sketches Letters S-V, by Matthew Simpson

hdm0410.tex New Testament Holiness, by Thomas Cook

hdm0428.tex, History of Methodist Reform, by Edward J. Drinkhouse

hdm0520.tex, Memoirs of Mr. Wesley's Missionaries to America, by P. P. Sandford

hdm0560.tex, The Heart of Asbury's Journal, by Ezra Squier Tipple

hdm0562.tex, Francis Asbury, The Prophet of the Long Road, by Ezra Squier Tipple

hdm0575.tex, William McKendree, A Biographical Study, by E. E. Hoss

In creating this sketch, I have freely used the writings of various authors shown above, and I have also inserted my own compositions here and there. Those wishing to do further research on John King, the subject of this sketch are referred to the hdm files listed above. -- DVM

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## PART 2 -- THE OTHER JOHN KING

John King, the subject of this sketch, should not be confused with another English Methodist preacher of the same name. Adam Clarke wrote his autobiography in the third person, as if writing of someone else. In 1785, Clarke was sent to Plymouth Dock Circuit, and, in his Autobiography, hdm0074.tex, Clarke mentioned having there as co-laborers John King and John Mason: "The preachers were John Mason, Adam Clarke, and John King: with Messrs. Mason and King he lived and labored in the utmost harmony, and Methodism prospered greatly; as in the course of that year they doubled the society." This John King was not the John King who is the subject of this sketch.

I am not sure which John King is meant in Thomas Cook's book, "New Testament Holiness," hdm0410.tex. Concerning a letter from John Wesley to a John King, he wrote: "At first Mr. Wesley advised that great caution should be exercised in making definite confession of heart purity, but as the doctrine and experience became more generally known and appreciated, he changed his attitude, and constantly urged the duty to confess it upon ministers and people. Writing to John King, one of his preachers, in 1787, he said, 'It requires a great deal of watchfulness to retain the perfect love of God; and one great means of retaining it is, frankly to declare what God has given you, and earnestly to exhort all the believers you meet to follow after full salvation.'" According to Edward J. Drinkhouse, hdm0428.tex, the John King who is the subject of this sketch, died in 1794. Thus, it is conceivable that Wesley's remarks above were written to him who is the subject of this sketch. However, John King, the subject of this sketch, could not have been the one with whom Adam Clarke labored, for at the time Clarke says he was laboring with John King, the John King of whom this sketch is written was in America, and I have found no intimation in any of my source material that he ever returned to England after having come to this continent.

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### PART 3 -- JOHN KING, EARLY METHODIST MISSIONARY TO AMERICA -- UNDER-RATED?

Perhaps no other early Methodist Missionary to America was more under-estimated or under-rated than was John King. Chastised by Wesley, and apparently looked upon by Asbury with a bit of disdain, yet through his unselfish and zealous efforts, this man's spiritual impact in America was mighty. While perhaps enduring some undeserved censure from Wesley and lack of total appreciation from Asbury, this man was obviously owned of God, Who gave him many seals of his apostleship and much fruit from his labors.

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### PART 4 -- WHY WESLEY CRITICIZED JOHN KING

A proper assessment of John Wesley's criticisms of John King should take into consideration the very formalistic background in the Church of England from whence the Wesleys came. Born, raised, and schooled as members of the Church of England, both John and Charles Wesley continued to cling to some of its formalities long after the beginning of Methodism. I think that if John Wesley had been suddenly thrown into a present day holiness meeting with lots of loud "Amens!" and some shouting and demonstration as often occurs today, he would have been shocked! astounded! appalled! When he first sent to have the M. E. Church in America organized at the "Christmas Conference" of 1784, part of his instructions for their worship included various prayers to be read and robes to be worn by the higher clergy.

I think John King was one of those zealous, effervescent, outwardly demonstrative souls who (ahead of his time) felt it proper to give vent with some vehemence and some volume in his preaching and his praises! Following John Wesley's death, and apart from his restraints, a healthy "freedom of the Spirit" did evolve in Methodist worship which probably would have been just the sort of atmosphere in which John King would have been at home. "Shouting Methodists" were taking their liberty long before the days of Inskip. But, the following letter written by Wesley to John King in about 1775 shows just how greatly John Wesley's view of loud and demonstrative preaching and worship differed from that of the later "Shouting Methodists," and how averse Wesley was to those types of demonstration that came to their fore after his death:

"I advised you once, and you took it as an affront; nevertheless, I will do it once more. Scream no more, at the peril of your soul. God now warns you by me, whom he has set over you. Speak as earnestly as you can, but do not scream. Speak with all your heart, but with a moderate voice. It was said of our Lord, 'He shall not cry;' the word properly means, he shall not scream. Herein be a follower of me, as I am of Christ. I often speak loud, often vehemently; but I never scream. I never strain myself; I dare not; I know it would be a sin against God and my own soul. Perhaps one reason why that good man, Thomas Walsh, yea, and John Manners, too, were in such grievous darkness before they died, was because they shortened their own lives. O, John! pray for an advisable and teachable temper. By nature you are very far from it; you are stubborn and headstrong. Your last letter was written in a very wrong spirit. If you cannot take advice from others, surely you might take it from your affectionate brother,

"J. Wesley."

Taken apart from the record of the marvelous results of John King's ministry in America, Wesley's letter above would tend to make one think that King was not the sort of person whom God would honor and bless with much fruit and many seals of his apostleship. But, because God did greatly bless and use this man, I am inclined to believe that perhaps much of Wesley's criticism of him was not justified. I do not accuse Wesley of being intentionally unfair, but feeling as he did about demonstration and "volume" I think Wesley probably tended too much to label as "out of place" in worship what was actually done "in the Spirit."

Another reason for part of Wesley's criticism involves the way Wesley governed. As a leader Wesley "ran a tight ship." He wanted close control over all Methodist preachers. Therefore, I think Wesley's whole judgment of John King was perhaps quite colored with the frustration of feeling that he could not control this man. Drinkhouse wrote: "While he was yet in England, Wesley thought him 'headstrong and stubborn,' and often kindly reproved him." Wesley seems to have thought King was a maverick. He could not always tug the reign and get King to turn as he wanted him to turn. But, -- again, it seems to me that while John King would not be as quiet as Wesley wanted, would not always turn the direction Wesley wanted him to turn, and would not always heed Wesley's advice -- still, God had sufficient control of John King to use him mightily in His Kingdom!

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#### PART 5 -- ASBURY'S "LESS THAN HIGH ESTIMATION" OF JOHN KING'S PREACHING

After the springing up of Campmeetings, Asbury no doubt was around a lot of loud demonstrations in the Spirit in which Methodists took part. And, as during his life Methodists began to be more and more free in their vocalizations during services, perhaps Asbury changed his views. However, the following quotation, taken from Lednum's history, shows that Asbury also thought that John King preached too loudly: "Mr. Asbury heard him preach in Baltimore the same year, and says, 'J. K. preached a good and profitable sermon; but long and loud enough.'" Well, maybe John King preached both long and loud, but he sounds to me in that way to be a lot like a number of present-day holiness preachers! And, if that was all there was wrong with his ministry, then one can see how God could mightily bless and use him anyway -- just as much, and maybe more, than many who preferred "blessed quietness."

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#### PART 6 -- LATE 1769 -- JOHN KING'S DIFFICULT BEGINNING IN PHILADELPHIA

John King's name will never die in the records of the Church in the Middle States. Soon after the arrival of Messrs. Boardman and Pilmoor, he came from London to America in the latter part of 1769, whether attracted hither by the claims of the new Church or not is now not ascertainable. His enthusiastic sympathy with the pioneer Methodists led him, however, to throw himself immediately into their ranks, persisting even against severe discouragements. He was not authorized to preach when he came; but, feeling it to be his duty, he applied to Mr. Pilmoor for

permission to travel and preach, which was not then granted. Concerning why John King was not at first licensed to preach, Jesse Lee wrote: "having no license from Mr. Wesley, nor any recommendation from the preachers in Europe, he could not be admitted."

Still, while in Philadelphia, King felt inspired with what he deemed an inward call to preach the Gospel. He was burdened with the apostolic sense of the "woe" that would be to him if he did not preach it. Though he had been denied a license to preach, he was still determined to answer his divine call. On his own, he made an appointment to preach "in the Potter's Field." Here he humbly but courageously delivered his first message in that humblest of sanctuaries, over the graves of the poor, and thus began a career of eminent usefulness.

Drinkhouse in describing John King's arrival in America wrote: "He first appeared in Philadelphia like a stray evangelical comet. He offered himself for license, but the officary hesitated. He announced preaching in the Potters' Field, over the graves of the poor." Some of his Methodist brethren heard him, and urged his authorization by the Society as a preacher. He was permitted to deliver a 'trial sermon' before them, was licensed."

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#### PART 7 -- SENT FIRST TO WILMINGTON DELAWARE

After he had been licensed to preach, Mr. Pilmoor then sent him to Wilmington, Delaware, to labor in that region. The first Methodist preacher that labored at Wilmington was Captain Webb. After him, in 1770, came John King. In Wilmington he was noted as: "among a few people who were there earnestly seeking the Lord."

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#### PART 8 -- KING'S POWERFUL MINISTRY IN MARYLAND

Thence we trace him into Maryland, where Strawbridge greets him with hearty welcome, and they work zealously together in Baltimore county, Robert Williams sharing their toils and sufferings. Apparently concerning an early part of King's work in Maryland, Stevens wrote: "King was a man of invincible zeal. His manners were imbued with his piety, and preached it. On his first visit to Harford county, before he began the services, in a large congregation, he stood some time in silent prayer, covering his face with his hands. The spectacle struck the attention of a young man with such effect that he was awakened, and was soon after converted under the ministry of the stranger, and lived and died a devoted Methodist."

Lednum, in describing the same things wrote: "By this time, John King had gone into Maryland, and was operating with Mr. Strawbridge. He seems to have been the first of the four preachers who [had come] over [to America] in 1769 [Boardman, Pilmoor, Williams and King], who entered into the Maryland field, then the most fruitful field cultivated by the Methodists. On his [John King's] first visit to Harford county this year, Henry Bowman came to hear him, full of prejudice against the Methodists. King appeared in the midst of a large congregation. Before he began the service, he put his hands over his face while he engaged in silent prayer. This apparently

small circumstance was the cause of bringing conviction to Bowman's mind before the preaching began; he was thus prepared to receive the truth in the love thereof; he was soon after converted under King's ministry, and lived and died a happy Methodist."

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## PART 9 -- KING INTRODUCED METHODISM INTO BALTIMORE COUNTY AND CITY

Drinkhouse, in describing King's success, in spite of his lack of refinement wrote: "Despite his uncultivated style and peculiar manners as a preacher, he had notable converts." When in 1770 King preached at the Forks of Gunpowder in Baltimore county, Mr. James J. Baker, deputy surveyor of the county, was awakened under his powerful preaching, and three days after was converted. With his tongue, Baker made confession of the fact to his neighbors, and it was not long before many of them were converted. He at once united with the Methodists -- received the preachers into his house -- a respectable class was raised up which met in his house, and of which he was leader -- the preaching was also under his roof; until a house of worship was built on his own land, in 1773, which was the third Methodist chapel founded in Maryland. James J. Baker ended his days in Baltimore, in 1835, at the age of ninety-one years, having adorned Methodism for sixty-four years.

It was also in 1770 that John King introduced Methodist preaching into the city of Baltimore. Mr. Strawbridge had preached in the country not very far from Baltimore; but it was the indomitable and enterprising King who first threw the banners of Methodism to the people of Baltimore. His first pulpit in Baltimore was a blacksmith's block at the intersection of Front and French streets. His next sermon was from a table at the junction of Baltimore and Calvert streets. His courage was tested on this occasion, for it was the militia training-day, and the drunken crowd charged upon him so effectually as to upset the table and lay him prostrate on the earth. He knew, however, that the noblest preachers of Methodism had suffered like trials in England, and he maintained his ground courageously. The commander of the troops, an Englishman, recognized him as a fellow countryman, and defending him, restored order, and allowed him to proceed. Victorious over the mob, he made so favorable an impression as to be invited to preach in the English Church of St. Paul's, but improved that opportunity with such fervor as to receive no repetition of the courtesy. Why King was not invited back can be seen in the following remark: "He used his stentorian voice to its utmost capacity, and it is said that when he preached in St. Paul's, Baltimore, he "made the dust fly from the old velvet cushion." Nevertheless, whether the starchy enjoyed his preaching or not, in five years after King stood there on the blacksmith's block, Methodism was strong enough in Baltimore to entertain the Annual Conference of the denomination.

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## PART 10 -- KING'S INFLUENCE TOWARD WILLIAM WATTERS' CONVERSION

William Watters, who was to become the first American-born Methodist Circuit-Rider, was influenced partly by John King. In 1770, Strawbridge, King, and Williams were abroad around William Watters, preaching in private houses, 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." It was not long before Watters did indeed become a Methodist -- the first American-born Methodist Itinerant, a co-worker with King and the others, and eventually a witness of entire sanctification.

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#### PART 11 -- KING MADE A REGULAR ITINERANT AND MEMBER OF THE FIRST CONFERENCE

The First American Annual Conference assembled at St. George's Church in Philadelphia, Wednesday, July 14, 1773, and continued to Friday, July 16, 1773. Apparently some time prior to this Conference, John King was brought into the regular itinerancy, for he was a member of the Conference. All of the members of this Conference were Europeans: Thomas Rankin, Richard Boardman, Joseph Pilmoor, Francis Asbury, Richard Wright, George Shadford, Thomas Webb, John King, Abraham Whitworth, and Joseph Yearbry who had accompanied Rankin and Shadford from England.

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#### PART 12 -- KING ESCORTS GATCH INTO NEW JERSEY -- HAS GREAT SUCCESS IN VIRGINIA

The Minutes of the Conference for 1773 set down John King and William Watters to the New Jersey appointment. But this is supposed to be an error in the record. It is certain that neither of them traveled in that state at the time specified. Instead, King met Philip Gatch to introduce him to the New Jersey field. Philip Gatch became the second American-born M. E. Circuit-Rider. In his introduction of Philip Gatch into the New Jersey arena, John King was prompt and energetic, pausing not for ceremonious attentions. "In company with Mr. King," says Gatch, "I crossed the Delaware. He preached and held a love-feast. On the following morning, he pursued his journey, leaving me a stranger in a strange land." In spite of his misgivings, Gatch overcame the difficulties

that lay ahead of him, and went on to become a widely used and successful Methodist itinerant. John King traveled, this year [1773], the Norfolk Circuit, Va., and nearly doubled its members.

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## PART 13 -- GREAT REVIVAL IN 1774

May 25, 1774, the second Conference began in Philadelphia, and lasted three days. The Minutes show ten circuits, and eighteen preachers to serve them. Mr. Asbury was stationed in New York; at Trenton, N.J., W. Watters; on Greenwich, N.J., Philip Ebert; Philadelphia; Mr. Rankin; Chester, Pa., Daniel Ruff and Joseph Yearbry; Kent, Md., Abraham Whitworth; Baltimore Circuit, George Shadford, Edward Drumgole, Richard Webster, and Robert Lindsay; Frederick Circuit, Philip Gatch and William Duke; Norfolk, John King; Brunswick, Va., Robert Williams, John Wade, Isaac Rollins, and Samuel Spragg.

In the beginning of the year 1774, Robert Williams began to form societies in Virginia, and made out a plan for a six weeks circuit, which extended from Petersburg, to the south over Roanoke River, some distance into North Carolina. From the conference, three preachers came to that circuit, John King, John Wade, and Isaac Rollings: these preachers were blessed among the people and were made a blessing to them in their turn; and in the latter part of the year, there was a most remarkable revival of religion in most parts of the circuit. Christians were much united, and much devoted to God; and sinners were greatly alarmed, and many of them truly changed both in heart and life. The preachers had not only large congregations to hear them in the day time, but also in the night when meetings were appointed.

"Indeed, the Lord wrought wonders among us during that year," writes the early historian, Jesse Lee. He wrote from his own observation, for it was in this year that the house of his father, Nathaniel Lee, was opened as a "preaching place" for the itinerants. The father became a Class Leader, and two of his sons, John and Jesse, traveling Preachers, taking rank among the most effective itinerants of their day. Young Jesse Lee was now going "many miles on foot," by night and by day, to attend the meetings of the circuit. Jarratt, the evangelical Rector, was active in this revival; it was, in fact, but a continuance, with increased intensity, of that extraordinary religious excitement which has already been noticed as prevailing the preceding year throughout this part of the state.

"In the spring of 1774, it was," says Jarratt, "more remarkable than ever. The word preached was attended with such energy that many were pierced to the heart. Tears fell plentifully from the eyes of the hearers, and some were constrained to cry out. A goodly number were gathered in, this year, both in my parish and in many of the neighboring counties. I formed several societies of those which were convinced or converted." The power of this "Great Revival" was seen in the return of members from Virginia, at the end of the ecclesiastical year. The two circuits of the province became three; its less than three hundred Methodists multiplied to nearly a thousand. The members on Brunswick Circuit, the chief scene of the revival, increased, from less than two hundred and twenty, to eight hundred.



In 1774, the Methodists had their greatest success south of the Potomac, where their increase was 664. The increase north of the Potomac was 411, making a gain of 1075 throughout the work. The whole number of Methodists returned at this Conference was 3148.

In May, 1775, the third Conference was held in Philadelphia. The Minutes show ten stations, and there were twenty traveling preachers. There were three preachers -- John King, Daniel Ruff, and William Duke -- stationed in New Jersey this year.

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#### PART 14 -- KING'S MARRIAGE IN 1775 -- WRITTEN REBUKE FROM WESLEY -- LOCATION

Mr. King, in December of this year, went to Virginia, and took a wife; he was the second itinerant that married, and, it seems, married a Virginian. Following King's marked success in the work of the Lord, it was also during this year that John Wesley wrote him the letter admonishing him "not to scream". Though no doubt Wesley felt it best to write him thus, from this perspective at least to me it seems to have been a rebuke not really deserved nor necessary. Perhaps, had I better information, I would think otherwise, but that is how it strikes me now. The scripture says that "Great men are not always wise," Job 32:9, and it seems altogether possible that this may have been a mistake on Wesley's part.

During the Revolutionary War, John King was located, which given the amount of suspicion directed toward emissaries from England, may have been a wise thing for him to do. Having married a Virginian, it would appear that he had decided to spend the rest of his life in this country, but such decision on his part would not necessarily have exempted him from suspicion as an English sympathizer during the War -- especially if he was out and about much.

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#### PART 15 -- CONFLICTING REPORTS CONCERNING KING'S LAST DAYS

Historians did not record the same dates about the events of John King's last days.

Lednum wrote: "In 1777, his name appears for the last time in the Minutes, when he stands for North Carolina. He located and lived near Raleigh, in this state, where he died, not long afterwards."

Drinkhouse wrote: "He located about 1777; practiced medicine and preached; died at New Berne in 1794; buried in Wake County, N. C."

Perhaps Abel Stevens is the historian we should take as most accurate concerning John King's last days.

Stevens wrote: "He located during the Revolution, but in 1801 reappeared in the itinerant ranks in Virginia. He located finally in 1808. One of our historical authorities assures us that "he

was a truly pious, zealous, and useful man, and so continued till his death, which occurred a few years since, at a very advanced age, in the vicinity of Raleigh, N. C. He was probably the only survivor, at the time of his decease, of all the Preachers of ante-revolutionary date."

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#### PART 16 -- THE REMARRIAGE OF JOHN KING'S WIDOW

In his Journal, dated November 25, 1814, Asbury wrote: "Rode twenty-five miles to Widow King's, Pendleton District..." Again, in his Journal dated January 23, 1814, Asbury records: "I preached in our chapel, fifty by sixty feet, to a small congregation ... I visited Sister Perry, the former wife of John King, one of the first Methodist preachers..."

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#### PART 17 -- THE LOW AND THE HIGH BOTH REACHED BY JOHN KING'S MINISTRY

Even though John King may have been mistakenly criticized by John Wesley and may have been less appreciated than he deserved by some others, the fruit of his ministry speaks volumes. He was no doubt a man approved of God and who had a mighty impact for good on American Methodism. He was an humble man, and yet his ministry reached both the humble and the gifted.

Asbury records an example of how John King's ministry helped spiritually raise those on the low end of the social spectrum. Concerning an execution at Chester, Asbury wrote: "John King went with me. We found the prisoners penitent, and two of the four obtained peace with God, and seemed very thankful. I preached with liberty to a great number of people under the jail wall. John King preached at the gallows to a vast multitude; after which I prayed with them."

Quite apparently, John King was burdened for men regardless of their station in life. In addition to those already mentioned among the noble and gifted who were converted under John King's ministry were:

John Hagerty, born in Prince George County, Md., February 18, 1747. He was a convert of the ministry of John King about in 1771. In 1772 King lodged at his house, preached in the market place, and formed a class, consisting of Hagerty and thirteen others. Hagerty began to preach, among his neighbors, the same year, could preach in both English and German. He continued to labor diligently for the Church, under the direction of Strawbridge, Rankin, and King, till he entered the regular itinerancy. He began to travel in 1779, and located in 1792 or 1794, when, owing to the illness of his wife, he located in Baltimore, where he continued to labor effectively, no sacrifice being too much for him, until 1823, when he triumphantly expired in his seventy-seventh year.

John Littlejohn was a distinguished man, an Englishman whose parents brought him to this country and settled in Virginia, about his eleventh year. In his seventeenth year he was converted under the ministry of John King. In 1774 he was one of twelve Methodists who formed the first Society in Alexandria, on the Potomac.

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## PART 18 -- CONCLUSION

It would appear that, in spite of all criticisms, John King made a mark for God in America that was both deep and abiding. Jesus said, "by their fruits ye shall know them," and by his fruits this zealous missionary to America should be known as one whom God owned and mightily used for His glory.

Sandford, in his book "Memoirs of Mr. Wesley's Missionaries to America," wrote: "From the best information received concerning him, Mr. King, while acting as a traveling preacher, was a good, a zealous, and a useful man; and we understand that he continued a faithful and zealous local preacher until his death, which took place several years ago, within a few miles of Raleigh, North Carolina.

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THE END