Silas Comfort Swallow

Silas Comfort (1808-1868) was a courageous anti-slavery member of the Genesee, Oneida and Missouri Conferences. While serving in St. Louis, he admitted as evidence in a church trial the testimony of a Negro – which was forbidden in public trials in Missouri. He was censured by his Conference, but that censure was overturned by the 1840 General Conference – which then bowed to Southern pressure and passed a resolution prohibiting the testimony of Negroes in church trials within states which forbade such testimony in public trials. That resolution was rescinded in 1844.

Courageous anti-alcohol member of the Central Pennsylvania Conference Silas Comfort Swallow (1839-1930) could not have been any better or more prophetically named. He was born of staunch Methodist parents, his father being a trustee of Wyoming Seminary. Before entering the ministry he taught school, studied law, and served as a lieutenant in the Civil War. Having entered the Baltimore Conference in 1863, he became a charter member of the Central Pennsylvania Conference upon its organization in 1869. An eloquent and forceful preacher and revivalist, he was eminently successful as a church builder, presiding elder, and editor of *The Central Pennsylvania Methodist*. In that latter position he vigorously attacked alcohol, spiritual indifference, and corruption in state government. His enemies led a campaign to have him prosecuted and convicted of slander, which verdict was later reversed by the State Superior Court.

Dr. Swallow’s official conference service record lists the following appointments.

- **1863-64** Milton circuit
- **1864-66** Berwick
- **1866-68** Catawissa
- **1868-71** Newberry
- **1871-73** Williamsport Third Street
- **1873-75** Milton
- **1875-77** Altoona Eighth Avenue
- **1877-81** presiding elder, Altoona district

1864-66    Berwick    1881-84    York First
1866-68    Catawissa    1884-86    Williamsport Grace
1868-71    Newberry    1886-87    agent, Dickinson College
1871-73    Williamsport Third Street    1887-92    Harrisburg Ridge Avenue
1873-75    Milton    1892-02    superintendent, Harrisburg
1875-77    Altoona Eighth Avenue    1902-08    no appointment, by request
1877-81    presiding elder, Altoona district    1908-30    retired

He was the Prohibition Party’s candidate for mayor of Harrisburg, state legislature, State Treasurer, Governor and in 1904 for President of the United States. Although without equal as an controversial and uncompromising figure, he was Christian brother in the best sense and very generous to the Conference. The Swallows provided the finances to plant the churches at Summerdale and Camp Hill, and they gave their Camp Hill mansion to the Conference to be used as a home for retired ministers. While that vision was never realized, the 17th and Market Street site is occupied today by the Manor Health Care nursing and convalescent home.
Being an editor, Swallow made certain that his life story was recorded for posterity. Upon reaching his 70th birthday in 1909, he published a 482 page hardback autobiography *III Score and X – Selections, Collections, Recollections of Seventy Busy Years*. This proved to be so successful that he came out with periodic updates as follows.

*Toasts and Roasts of III Score and X*, 1911  
*Then and Now – Some Reminiscences of an Octogenarian*, 1919  
*IV Score and More*, 1922

Other booklets and pamphlets by Swallow, all of which are preserved at the conference archives, range in date and content from his 1879 *Camp Meetings and the Sabbath* to his 1917 *A Sermon on Thanksgiving and Thanksliving*.

For this volume dedicated to forgotten stories and personalities of United Methodism, it is appropriate to step back and see what secular writers have said about Dr. Swallow. In such a spirit we close this introduction with an article from the Friday October 22, 1897, *Independent Republican* of Montrose, Susquehanna County – primary source material from an area outside our Conference. Finally, we are pleased to present 1965 and 1999 articles reprinted with permission of *The Patriot-News* of Harrisburg as objective assessments from an historical perspective of this unique individual.

**Dr. Swallow in Montrose**

Dr. Swallow, the Prohibition candidate for State Treasurer, arrived in Montrose via the afternoon train on the Narrow Gauge last Monday. He was accompanied by Quincy Lee Morrow, of Maryland. The coming of the two gentlemen had been previously announced by dodgers which had been liberally distributed throughout the town, and the Keystone Band had been employed in the hope of attracting a large audience.

When the carriage containing the speakers reached the Court House, where the meeting was to be held in the open air, an exceedingly cold reception awaited them. No committee – no, not even a solitary cold-water advocate – advanced to extend the glad hand to Dr. Swallow. For several minutes the preacher-candidate stood upon the steps of the county capitol – sad-visaged and alone. The scene was so pathetic that it appealed to the tender sensibilities of some of the bystanders who, though not in political sympathy with Dr. Swallow’s grotesque canvass, felt that it was not flattering to Montrose hospitality to turn the marble heart to any stranger. And so one and another, Republicans and Democrats and Populists, pressed forward and spoke a few words of consolation to the Doctor. Upon the tardy arrival of the Band, and the opportune adjournment of the Teacher’s Institute, the assemblage was sufficiently augmented to warrant the speakers to proceed.

Mr. Morrow spoke first and dealt not in argument, but in wholesale and virulent abuse of the Republican party. His remarks were received with as much warmth as such senseless tirades are ever received by intelligent thinking people – and that is not much.

Dr. Swallow was more temperate in his remarks and gave one the impression that he is a real nice gentleman who had doubtless been a successful minister of the gospel and done much good in the pulpit. But having become afflicted with an itch for office, he has now assumed the role of a professional office-seeker – in which he does not appear to the best advantage.
He dealt almost entirely with the “Capitol fire” platform on which he is running. And even if all his charges were true (and he has been unable to sustain them in a court of law), just why he above all other men should be made State Treasurer he failed to make clear—though he did make clear that he was hankering after the “handling of that money” and the “keeping of those books.” And his colleague Mr. Morrow assured his hearers that, “if Dr. Swallow once gets inside the Treasury, there’ll be a bigger sensation within thirty days than any we have had yet”—which statement, if true, is pretty hard on the Doctor.

It was a note-worthy fact that the speakers steered clear of the subjects of Temperance and Prohibition, Dr. Swallow taking especial pains to make it known in the present campaign he has been promised and expects the support of “many liquor dealers and liquor drinkers. In this connection he explained that “politics makes strange bedfellows.”

At the close of the speaking the Band played and the people dispersed. Mr. Gill escorted the speakers to supper, after which they left on the 6:05 train for Hallstead, where a mass-meeting was held that evening.

Preacher, Politician, Prohibitionist: Here was a Colorful Pennsylvanian
by Paul Beers, 1965

If you said they make clergymen like him now, you would be insulting the name of the Rev. Dr. Silas Comfort Swallow. Dr. Swallow is one of the great characters in Central Pennsylvania history. The churches of all faiths in this area have had vivid leaders—and have them still, for that matter—but there was only one Silas Comfort Swallow. It is amazing how seldom one hears his name mentioned today.

He was proud of his religious faith. “I am a Methodist by adoption, by primogeniture, by regeneration and by flagellation,” he boasted. You can’t be any more Methodist than that. His mother, he said, was an “old-time shouting Methodist,” and he gladly followed in her footsteps. He didn’t smoke, he didn’t drink, he didn’t even use public conveyances on Sundays. He didn’t like dancing, he didn’t like the theater, and he abhorred the “roller-skating mania.”

He was minister for a time of a Methodist church on Harrisburg’s North Sixth Street, and one day he saw a beer wagon going up the street. It stopped at the home of a fellow parson. In true brother’s-keeper spirit old Silas hurried over, but he was told by the parson in no uncertain terms that the doctor had prescribed the use of malt. Swallow, tall and thin, was an ardent Prohibitionist and was the national candidate for President in 1904 on that party’s ticket.

His name fitted him perfectly, though he actually was named for a nationally known minister of the 1840’s, Silas Comfort. Swallow was born on
March 5, 1839, five miles north of Wilkes-Barre. He grew up on a farm, attended Wyoming Seminary, taught school, studied law, served as a young lieutenant in the Civil War, and then entered the ministry. He was a circuit preacher with churches in Hazelton, Sunbury, Milton, Berwick, Catawissa, Williamsport, Altoona and York. On April Fool’s Day of 1864 he was in Berwick and a revelation told him of the evils of tobacco. Characteristically, he went outside and tossed his tobacco can clear over the house. He never smoked again.

He was married to Miss Rebecca Louise Robins, of Elysburg, in 1886. A Swallow-Robins marriage may not sound particularly amusing today, but the two of them laughed about that name combination their whole life together. Other people sometimes got confused. When veteran newspaperman Bill Britsch was a youngster on *The Evening News*, one of his first assignments was to rewrite a story about the Rev. Dr. Swallow. Britsch got his birds mixed up, and the name came out Rev. Dr. Sparrow.

Swallow took his bride to Philadelphia for their honeymoon. They saw the classic comedy “She Stoops to Conquer,” and before it was over Swallow was complaining, “I’ll be damned.” He never went to the theater again.

Swallow undoubtedly was a great preacher and minister. He built churches, made them financially stable, gave rip-roaring sermons, and followed his calling with his whole heart. Many members of his congregation loved him, though not everybody did. He once accused a prominent Harrisburg minister of hiring thugs to beat him up. It was never proved that the minister did, but he may have harbored such a desire in his heart. In 1901 the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Church suspended Swallow for a year for “highly imprudent and un-ministerial conduct.”

A few years before, Swallow had accused politicians of deliberately setting fire to the old State Capitol. The accusation was never taken seriously. When the Legislature was moved to Grace Methodist Church and State funds were used to furnish the church for the legislative sessions, Swallow accused a member of Governor Hastings’ Cabinet of misappropriating public funds. For this Swallow was hit with a libel suit. He lost his case in county court, then publicly said he wouldn’t pay, and was let off the hook when the State Supreme Court reversed the verdict.

Swallow ran for mayor, for the legislature, for State Treasurer, for Governor and for the Presidency. He never won. In 1898 he received 132,931 votes as the Prohibition candidate for Governor. Only one third-party candidate, William H. Berry, ever garnered more votes in a Pennsylvania gubernatorial election. In 1902, however, Swallow again ran for Governor, but got only 23,327 votes. In 1904 he received 258,787 votes nationwide for President.

The humorist Peter Finley Dunne once wrote an article about the three Prohibition Presidential candidates between 1896 and 1904 – Joshua Levering, John G. Woolley and Swallow. “Cillybrated names,” Dunne had his character Dooley say. “They were a fine lot iv ol’ fellows, comin’ out year after year to lead their little forces to certain defeat, an’ ca’mly carryin’ on their campaign with
ivrybody laughin’ at thim. That was th’ hardest thing f’r th’ old heroes… But they didn’t mind, these inthrepid old geezers with their spectacles an’ their throat whiskers. They smiled serenely, put for’ard argyments that no wan cud answer, sung ‘Where Is My Wandhrin’ Boy Tonight,’ paid out their own money f’r hall rent, niver held a polytical job an’ were niver heard about between ilictions.”

Agitator though Swallow could be, he also was a tolerant man. “Human nature is about the same whether found in Jew or Gentile, in Protestant or Catholic,” he once said. Swallow tithed all his life, raised orphaned children, built bird feeders and, when he retired, held hands with his wife while attending services at Grace Methodist Church. He took pleasure in saying that in his lifetime he had seen all his major goals accomplished – slavery abolished, lotteries outlawed, Prohibition in effect, and polygamy made illegal.

When he was 70, he invited all his enemies to the old Commonwealth Hotel in Harrisburg to make peace. It was a great occasion, and there Swallow promised he would engage in no more rancor the rest of his life. “From that to his dying day nobody ever heard an unkind word from Dr. Swallow with regard to any individual,” The Harrisburg Telegraph reported.

Swallow, who last lived at 25 South Front Street, died August 13, 1930, at age 91. He is buried in the Paxtang Cemetery. “He was, in many ways, an outstanding man of his generation,” The Telegraph editorialized. The editors of the highly regarded “Dictionary of American Biography” thought so, too, for a short account of his life can be found there among the other greats.

It Was Dr. Swallow vs. Demon Rum

by Mary O. Bradley, 1999

The Rev. Dr. Silas Comfort Swallow was a colorful, two-fisted reformer who campaigned against slavery and booze. He was steadfast in his beliefs and fiery in his rhetoric, but he always was generous in his heart and whimsical in spirit. In November 1918 he and his wife, Rebecca Louise Robins Swallow, embarked on a campaign to resurrect the fine art of letter writing. Dr. Swallow felt that real, honest-to-goodness correspondence was being eclipsed by the postcard. (One wonders what he would think of e-mail!)

On Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, the Swallows, who lived at 23 S. Front Street, Harrisburg, sent $3,000 worth of Liberty Bonds, $50 each to 60 young nephews and nieces and other relatives scattered countrywide. The gesture was in celebration of the end of World War I, but it carried a codicil. If relatives agreed to accept the bonds, they had to write to Dr. and Mrs. Swallow the
following April and October. “We wish to initiate into and familiarize our younger relatives with a practice in correspondence,” they wrote.

Dr. Swallow was a Methodist leader, editor, abolitionist, prohibitionist and government-reform advocate. He ran for governor and president on the Prohibition Party ticket. He had principles. On January 20, 1891, he was invited to offer the prayer at the inauguration of Pennsylvania Gov. Robert E. Pattison, a Democrat. Swallow did so, but he flatly refused to ride in a carriage in the inaugural parade, declaring bluntly that he was “always ready to pray for sinners like Republicans and Democrats – but only parade with Prohibitionists.”

On another occasion, Swallow was delivering a speech against alcohol when the local-option issue of wet or dry was at stake. During the speech, his barn was supposedly torched by enemies. While the barn burned within view of his pulpit, Swallow continued with his revival meeting.

Born in Plains Township, near Wilkes-Barre in Luzerne County, on March 5, 1839, he was named after the Rev. Silas Comfort, an influential Methodist minister whose admission of the testimony of an African American in a church trial brought the slavery controversy within the Methodist church to such a crisis that it resulted in a separation of the Northern and Southern churches.

Educated at the Wyoming Seminary in Kingston and Susquehanna University, Dr. Swallow taught school for a time. Initially planning a career in law and apprenticed to a lawyer, he decided the ministry was his calling. He was licensed as a preacher in the Methodist Episcopal Church at Hazleton in 1860. Championing the cause of abolition of slavery, he enlisted in 1862 in the Union Army as a first lieutenant in Company E, 18th Regiment, PA Volunteers.

After the Civil War, he served churches in Northumberland, Columbia and Lycoming counties. From 1887-91, he served Ridge Avenue Methodist Church at North Sixth and Herr Streets, Harrisburg. (The church became Bethel AME Church in the early 1950’s. It was destroyed by fire in November 1995.) From 1892-1905, he was superintendent of the Central Pennsylvania Conference Methodist Publishing House on the northwest corner of Market Square.

He was the Prohibition Party nominee at various times for mayor, assemblyman, state treasurer and governor. In the 1904 presidential race won by Theodore Roosevelt, Swallow was the party’s nominee. He polled the second-largest vote ever cast for a Prohibition candidate for president, receiving 258,536 votes – 1.9% of the total. (The party’s highest vote-getter was rancher John Bidwell of California with 271,058 votes in 1892, according to historical information from the Prohibition Party.)

“Recognizing that intemperance is the most active and dangerous vice in this land and the one that leads to an endless array of crimes, diseases and family and local evils, Dr. Swallow is an outspoken champion of the cause of prohibition of the sale of ardent spirits,” according to the *Commemorative Biographical Encyclopedia of Dauphin County, Pennsylvania*, published in 1896. “Dr. Swallow is an able and fluent orator and wields the editorial pen with a trenchant power which has given him a widespread influence, not only in Harrisburg... but
throughout the state. He is indeed favorably known throughout the nation…” the biographical sketch in the encyclopedia continued.

Through his writing, he exposed state graft, and his political enemies brought libel and other charges against him. He was acquitted on one charge but ordered to pay court costs. He refused. He was convicted of the second charge and fined $500, but the state Superior Court overturned the conviction and exonerated him. He continued his fight against capital graft until several people were tried and imprisoned.

Swallow and his wife were married January 30, 1866. Mrs. Swallow was born in Elysburg, Northumberland County, on January 12, 1844. The couple were well-known for their philanthropy. The Swallow-Robins Ladies’ Dormitory of Taylor University, Upland, Indiana, was named after them. (Now called the Swallow-Robins Hall, the dormitory is coed and remains in use.) In 1888, Taylor University conferred upon Dr. Swallow the honorary degree of doctor of divinity.

The couple helped to establish the Leah Robins Memorial Church at Summerdale. It was named after Mrs. Swallow’s mother and was the forerunner of today’s Summerdale United Methodist Church. Dr. Swallow was instrumental in founding Epworth Methodist Church, 21st and Derry streets, Harrisburg. He assisted in the organization of Camp Hill Methodist Church.

For a time, the Swallows lived in three-story brick-and-brownstone house at North Sixth and Boas streets, Harrisburg. The house, which later served as the Curtis Funeral Home until the late 1950’s, was donated in 1997 to Historic Harrisburg Association by the estate and family of the late Abe Cramer, realty developer. The board of Historic Harrisburg Association is studying options for its use, according to Ted Martin, executive director.

In a bit of whimsy, Swallow erected a pretty drinking fountain in 1904 on Market Street in Camp Hill, because there was no place between Mechanicsburg and Harrisburg where “God’s only beverage, pure water is served free and conveniently to man and beast,” according to a plaque that hung on the fountain.

Dr. and Mrs. Swallow designed and built a home at 16th and Market streets in Camp Hill and moved there in 1907. They sold the house in 1918 and returned to Harrisburg, settling into the South Front Street apartment. Dr. Swallow died August 13, 1930, at age 91. His widow died June 25, 1937. She was 93. Their gravesites are in Paxtang Cemetery.

“There was something distinctly impressive and admirable about both the physical and mental poise of the fighting man, for Dr. Swallow was distinctly a fighter of the fearless, aggressive type who gave or asked no quarter when battling for a principle,” The Evening News editorialized on August 14, 1930.

“Whether a soldier, minister or editor, he was ever the vigorous foe of the forces of evil, and he is recalled perhaps more particularly as the relentless enemy of the rum evil and of public graft. With all his unbending militancy, however, Dr. Swallow had a distinctly human strain which was evidenced by a fine sense of humor, which cropped out abundantly in his whimsical autobiography and others of his writings.”