Joseph A. Bennett: An American Tragedy
by Milton Loyer, 2008

(editor’s note: This article may seem out of place in a volume whose theme is United Methodist persons who labored in the shadows or background of a significant person and/or event. Its inclusion may be justified if the theme is expanded to include potentially significant persons or events. Joseph Bennett was a troubled and tragic figure laboring in the shadows of his own potential significance. He was a talented and charismatic individual with the potential for significant ministry for the cause of Christ. He struggled with his calling and with the demons that pursued him in that struggle. Unfortunately, it appears that the demons won the struggle.]

The Anderson’s Detective Agency poster on the following page gives the March 1902 facts concerning the disappearance of Rev. Joseph A. Bennett of the Philadelphia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In short, the facts concerning the missing reverend were as follows.

1. He left home to attend annual conference in Columbia PA
2. He arrived in Harrisburg and registered in a hotel as J.S. Burnett of Tamaqua.
3. He wrote letters to his wife and others expressing suicidal intentions.
4. He was in possession of $200 or more belonging to the church.
5. He never arrived in Columbia and his whereabouts are unknown.

A search of the journals of the Philadelphia Conference before and after 1902, plus some other genealogical sources, allows the following reconstruction of the Methodist ministerial career of Rev. Bennett.

The son of Joseph T. and Ellen (Cox) Bennett, Joseph Alexander Bennett was born May 8, 1870 – probably in northern New Jersey. Philadelphia Conference records state that he received a local preacher’s license in 1890 – but fail to name the authorizing charge conference, or even whether it was within the Philadelphia Conference. The reliable documentation of his life begins in 1892, when he is first listed in the West District of the Philadelphia Conference as a licensed local pastor attending Dickinson College.

Dickinson College records indicate he entered as freshman in 1890, having done preparatory work at Methodism’s Centenary Collegiate Institute in Hackettstown NJ, and graduated with the A.B. degree in 1894. His home address is given as 53 Brinkerhoff Street in Jersey City NJ. The Dickinson College archives have copies of his bachelor’s paper “Co-education, a Barrier” and his master’s paper,¹ “The Negro Problem.” In the former paper he argues for separate

¹ Colleges in those days routinely issued an A.M. “master’s degree” in cursu following three years of successful post-baccalaureate employment and some minimal paperwork.
colleges for males and females, and in the later paper he makes the case for returning Negroes to Africa or other places where they could develop their own cities and societies.

The photograph on the following page shows Joseph Bennett (middle row, second from the left) as a member of his freshman class' football team. Also in the picture is Joseph Clemens (back row, middle person), Methodist pastor and chaplain and missionary whose story the entire 2000 volume of *The Chronicle* was dedicated to telling. Other local persons and future pastors on the team are identified in the accompanying footnotes.
Joseph A. Bennett served Bainbridge and Falmouth, along the Susquehanna River near the Lancaster-Dauphin county line, as a student supply pastor his during his final year at Dickinson. His first year at Rawlinsville &

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2 Alpheus Maurice Morgan (1864-1938) did his preparatory work at Methodism’s Pennington School in Pennington NJ and became a pastor in the New York Conference.
3 William Stees Snyder (1870-) was born in Millerstown and became a prominent Harrisburg attorney and a member of that city’s Grace Methodist Episcopal Church. Also an active Mason, he is the namesake of Harrisburg’s William S. Snyder Lodge 756.
4 Clarence Grant Cleaver (1868-1943) was born in Catawissa and went on to be a school principal in Milton and lock Haven.
5 Norton Thomas Houser (1872-) did his preparatory work at Methodism’s Centenary Collegiate Institute in Hackettstown NJ. He became an educator and Episcopal priest, serving that denomination’s Blossburg congregation.
6 William Henry Ford (1869-1962) did his preparatory work at Methodism’s Pennington School in Pennington NJ and became a pastor in the Philadelphia Conference.
7 William Alfred DeHaven (1875-) was born in Harrisburg, raised in that city’s Grace Methodist Episcopal Church, and returned there to become a deputy prothonotary of Dauphin County and a business administrator.
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Bethesda, while he was still officially a supply pastor and not yet admitted as a probationary member of conference, he reported 50 conversions and the reception of 50 members. In 1895 he was ordained a deacon and admitted to conference as a probationary member. He became as a full member of conference in 1897. In 1899 he completed the conference course of study and was ordained an elder.

Fortunately, the records in the Philadelphia Conference annual journals allow a complete reconstruction of his ministerial service as follows.

1893-94 Bainbridge & Falmouth
1894-96 Rawlinsville & Bethesda
1896-99 Mountain Home
1899-00 Delaware Water Gap
1900-02 Lansford
1902-03 on leave, living in Lansford
1903-04 Safe Harbor
1904-05 on leave, living at 1018 Arch Street in Philadelphia
1905 expelled, page 15

Prior to 1902, Rev. Bennett appeared to be making normal progress as a Methodist pastor. He graduated from college, completed the conference course of study, moved on schedule through his probationary membership, and was ordained deacon and elder in timely fashion. His appointments, too, indicate the usual gradual progression toward more urban, more populous, and better-paying positions within the conference. Even the strange events associated with his disappearance on the way to the 1902 conference seem to be dealt with in stride. That there is no mention of the incident in the 1902 journal is not surprising. Apparently our subject was still missing when the conference concluded, another pastor was assigned to Lansford, and the errant Rev. Bennett was moved to a leave of absence until things could be sorted out.

It is however, a little surprising that no mention of the incident is made in the 1903 journal. Apparently Joseph A. Bennett reappeared, gave an adequate explanation for his absence, and was assigned to the Safe Harbor charge. While one would assume there must have been some official conversations and evaluations, none of this is mentioned in the journal. Everything considered, the lack of attention paid to the matter probably speaks well of the confidence the conference had in the Reverend Mr. Bennett – although his new assignment in the rural southeast corner of the conference was definitely not a step forward in his ministerial career.

At the 1904 annual conference in Philadelphia, Joseph A. Bennett is again placed on a leave of absence. This time the journal is not silent, and the following statements appear as indicated.

- page 29: On motion of A.G. Kynett, the names of J.A. Bennett and Richard Harcourt were referred to the Committee on Conference Relations.
On the motion of A.G. Kynett, J.A. Bennett was transferred from effective to supernumerary, on recommendation of the Committee on Conference Relations.

A collection was taken for Mrs. J.A. Bennett, of which Frank Mack was made the treasurer, amounting to $228.38 in cash and $9.00 in subscriptions.

Your Committee on Relations would respectfully report that they have deliberated concerning the case of Joseph A. Bennett, referred to them, and unanimously recommend –

First, that the said Joseph A. Bennett be requested by the Conference to locate.
Second, that the Presiding Elder be requested to appoint a committee of investigation to examine into the truth of certain rumors reflecting upon the moral character of Brother Bennett.

The Rev. Alpa G. Kynett making several of the motions was the presiding elder (modern term = district superintendent) of the South District, which included the Safe Harbor charge. The classification supernumerary (modern equivalent = leave of absence) was used in a variety of situations and does not necessarily point to a problem with the pastor. In fact at this point no one probably knew for certain what had happened – except that the “disappearing act” of the 1902 Columbia conference (minus the church funds to be delivered at conference) seemed to happening all over again. Consider the following article, for example, from the font page of The New York Times for March 19, 1904:

METHODIST MINISTER LOST
The Rev. J.A. Bennett Started a Week Ago for Philadelphia
Special to The New York Times

PHILADELPHIA, March 18 – The Methodist Conference in session here has a mystery to solve. One of its members who left his home in apparently good health has failed to make his appearance in this city, and the visiting clergy and laymen express anxiety as to his whereabouts. The missing member is the Rev. Joseph A. Bennett of Conestoga, Lancaster County, Penn. Mr. Bennett let Conestoga last Friday, ostensibly to attend the conference here. Since that time neither his family nor the members of the Conference have received any tidings of him.

Messages sent to the pastor’s home elicited no information concerning him, other than that he started for Philadelphia, but did not take with him any of the conference money. Mr. Bennett’s present church was part of the village of Safe Harbor, which was wholly destroyed by the recent flood in the Susquehanna River. He is married.

The 1905 journal reports that Joseph A. Bennett has been expelled from the ministry. The following two journal entries give the last records of the incident in the official records:

The select number appointed to try the charges preferred against Joseph A. Bennett reported as follows:
To the Presiding Bishop and Members of the Philadelphia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church: Your select number appointed to try the case of Joseph A. Bennett, a member of this body, charged with highly imprudent, unministerial and immoral conduct, would respectfully report that they have tried the case on the evidences submitted, and find the said Joseph A. Bennett guilty as charged. And their verdict is that he be and hereby is expelled from the ministry and membership of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Frank B. Lynch, chairman

Attested by Amos E. Crowell, secretary

- page 36: The treasurer of the contributions taken by the Philadelphia Conference for Mrs. Gertrude R. Bennett herewith submits the following report:

received from the collection taken March 21, 1904 ....$228.38
received from later subscriptions .........................14.25
total............................................................$242.63

forwarded to Mrs. Gertrude R. Bennett
during the year in monthly payments ........$242.38
postage..........................................................0.25

respectfully submitted, Frank Mack, treasurer

This ends the official involvement of the Philadelphia Conference with Joseph A. Bennett and the strange incidents of 1902 and 1904. Descendants of Joseph and Gertrude have no additional documentation of the family. In fact, almost all that is known about the family is that

1. Joseph and Gertrude and 3 daughters are listed in the 1900 census in Lansford, Carbon County.
2. A 1906 family photograph made in Lancaster pictures Gertrude (but not Joseph) and 5 daughters.
3. Gertrude (but not Joseph) and 5 daughters are listed in the 1910 census in Lancaster City, Lancaster County.
4. Gertrude and her 5 daughters lived at 12 E. Farnum Street and worshiped at St. Paul’s Methodist Episcopal Church at 10 W. Farnum Street.

Just what happened to Joseph and whether there was actually a divorce was never (until the preparation of this article) known by any of the descendants.

Fortunately, additional sources can be used to bring about some closure to the case. We begin by supplying some details about the woman identified, and probably consciously so, as “Mrs. J.A. Bennett” in 1904 and as “Mrs. Gertrude R. Bennett” in 1905. The daughter of Mark and Ann Eliza (Brandow) Roe, Gertrude Roe was born December 5, 1868, in Greenville NY. She attended Centenary Collegiate Institute, a Methodist preparatory school in Hackettstown NJ, where she met Joseph Bennett and from which they both graduated in 1890. It is believed that they married in 1894, following Joseph’s graduation from Dickinson College. The five Bennett daughters appear on the next page with their mother, and are listed in birth order following the 1906 photograph.
Mary K. (b. 1896) – married a chemist, J. Donald Rohrer of Manheim PA.
Ellen G. (b. 1897) – married (1) a fruit wholesaler, Norfleet Johnson and (2) James W. Woodworth of Halifax NS. She taught school in Lancaster County for many years.
Dorothy R. (b. 1899) – married a postal employee, Joseph Gallagher of Lancaster PA
Anne A. (b. 1900) – married a salesman, Clarence M. Slack and eventually moved to Mill Cove ME
Ruth E. (b. 1904) – married a carpenter, Raub E. Brode and moved to Lewistown PA.

Gertrude supported the family, and saw that her daughters received piano lessons and other amenities, by sewing and taking in boarders. She also received support from Joseph’s older sister Anna F. Bennett Van Blarcom, a woman of means in Jersey City who helped the family financially after the departure of Joseph. Gertrude was diabetic and died February 28, 1940, from the trauma having both legs amputated due to complications from an infected mosquito bite. She is buried with her parents in the family plot in the cemetery at Greenville NY. Most of the girls reported attended Millersville Normal School [now Millersville University] at least one semester. The educational accomplishments and family stability achieved by Gertrude’s children and grandchildren speak volumes about her spiritual and emotional depth.

Additional family information is given in a composition book of notes written by daughter Dorothy – probably when she was a young teenager. It is from this book that we know the names of the parents and the birthdates of Joseph and Gertrude. Because they give such poignant insight into the family and their
dealing with the departure of their father, the notes for the years 1900-1906 are given in the appendix.

The final piece to the puzzle is the following article from The Lancaster Inquirer for Saturday, April 15, 1911. Despite all his problems, and the low opinion expressed of him by the newspaper, it appears that Joseph A. Bennett still tried to live out his calling as a minister of Gospel – however flawed his personal life became.

PREACHER WHO WENT WRONG IS NOW DEAD
Shot by the Woman He Betrayed, Ex-Rev. Joseph A. Bennett is No More
“HE DIED AS THE FOOL DIETH”
Formerly Had Charge at Safe Harbor, Conestoga Centre and Colemanville
Eloped with Young Parishioner There

Seven years ago, readers of the Inquirer were told about the doings of Rev. Joseph A. Bennett of Conestoga Centre. Two years before that, when the Philadelphia Conference preachers assembled in the Columbia Methodist Church, for the annual work of their organization, Bennett, who was then stationed at Lansford, failed to answer the roll call, and his non-appearance caused inquiry to be made.

It was learned that he had left his home for Columbia on March 18, having in his possession the sum of $300 which he was to turn over to conference. He never reached Columbia, and this caused rumors of foul play and suicide. Several weeks later he returned to his home a wreck in mind and body. He gave as an excuse that he was taken ill while en route to Columbia, and had wandered over the country. His mind was apparently blank as to his wanderings.

A committee had been appointed by conference to look up his record. It was found to be clear, and at the following meeting of conference in Philadelphia he was again taken up and appointed to the circuit comprising Safe Harbor, Conestoga Centre and Colemanville.

Although a married man with five small children, Bennett’s name soon became connected with that of a young woman who resided near Shenk’s Ferry and was a member of the pastor’s congregation at Colemanville. When the next session of conference came around in March, 1904, Bennett left his home for Philadelphia, as he had two years before left Lansford, ostensibly to attend the sessions of the governing body.

When he boarded the train at Lancaster for Philadelphia his companion was this girl, who it was said at the time had $1700 in her possession. That was the last seen of either by their friends, and the sequel of their elopement has just reached friends and relatives at Safe Harbor.

Some years after the departure of Bennett and the girl it was learned that they were living in Chicago, were members of the Salvation Army, and doing evangelistic work in the slums. Finally tiring of her, Bennett deserted her and married another girl.

The next heard of the wayward minister, after deserting his second wife, was that he had landed in Los Angeles, California, where he had taken up evangelistic work with the Salvation Army. Finally he married a young woman of the Army.

When she learned of her husband’s former episodes, she fired a bullet into his brain, killing him instantly. No further facts concerning the tragedy have been received. Soon after Bennett’s elopement his first wife secured a divorce. Some time after the elopement the Colemanville girl returned home and was forgiven.
Appendix: Notes of Dorothy R. Bennett

1899 – I was born in the M.E. parsonage in Delaware Water Gap at 5 o’clock in the morning of June 13, 1899. The doctor attending was J.B. Shaw. Mrs. Kunkle was the nurse, and Minnie Metzgar was working for us. I was a pretty baby with long black hair. I was quite cross, they say.

When I was ten weeks old I went down to Ocean Grove, stopping in Jersey City to see Grandma and Aunt Annie. We stayed at the Grove for 10 days or so. Katie Coslar went with us and helped take care of me. They took my carriage along and took me out on the board walk nearly every day. Before the end of the year I was a badly spoiled baby.

1900 – Early in this year I went with papa and mamma to Little Swartswood Lake, near Blair N.J., where we stayed 10 days. In March papa moved to Lansford, Carbon County, Pa. This was a town of good people, about half of whom were foreigners. It was in the coal region. We had a fairly nice house but hardly any front yard. They let me play on the porch or swung me in the hammock.

The people took a fancy to me, and Mrs. Woodbridge used to take me up to her house and Sue and Kate Kline took me out in my go-cart. While I was teething this year I was very cross and nervous. One evening I had a convulsion while papa was holding me. We went down to see Grandma this year, too. In December a little baby sister, Annie, came to our house, so I wasn’t the baby any more. I was an awful cross child while mamma was sick.

1901 – Papa still lived in Lansford, and as everybody knew me now I had a nicer time. Everybody made a lot of me, and as a result I was more spoiled than ever. This year I was very sick for a few days with a threatened attack of pneumonia, but Dr. Kistler brought me around all right. This summer we would go on the trolley to Manila Park for all day prices. We would take my go-cart and the hammock along with us.

Papa was sick in April, and after he was better we all went up mamma’s old house in Greenville, N.Y., to see Uncle Lannie and Aunt Cora and Eva. They have a large farm, but it rained nearly all the time we were there. On our way we saw Grandma and Aunt Annie and also Aunt Alice.

1902 – The first few months we lived in Lansford. Then papa was taken sick and went away and we couldn’t find him for a month. After we found him we moved to Greenville and lived in the Evans house. Here we had a nice house with lots of play rooms upstairs, a big yard with trees and a swing, and also a big barn with an old stage in it. Papa kept a horse part of the time and we went around visiting my relations. We had such a time this Christmas. We all went to Uncle Lannie’s and had a tree there.

1903 – From here we moved to Colemanville, a small village in Lancaster County. We lived in a large house across from the church where father preached. It was rather lonesome, for our house was quite a distance from that of anyone else. We did not live

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8 This is Joseph’s mother Ellen Cox Bennett and his sister Anna F. Bennett Van Blarcom. Some living grandchildren of Joseph and Gertrude remember visiting Mrs. Van Blarcom in Jersey City and report that she left them shares of stock in her will.

9 Lansing P. Roe (1860-1922) was a brother to Gertrude Roe Bennett. He married Cora L. Turner (1862-1945) and their daughter Eva was born in 1886. Eva Roe (1886-1980) later married Charles W. Hoose (1886-1978). They are all buried in the cemetery at Greenville NY.
here very long – only for a few months. Then we moved to Conestoga Centre, another small village about 5 miles from Colemanville, and about 9 miles from Lancaster (the nearest town). Father preached at Conestoga, Safe Harbor and Colemanville. The parsonage was small and dreary. Across the road Marion Charles lived. Marion was a little girl with whom I played.

1904 – On January 25, 1904, a little sister was born. We called her Ruth Elizabeth. Ruth was the first of the family not named for some relative. No relative I remember had Ruth or Elizabeth for a name. Dr. Morris Kendig was the doctor and Ida Hookey was the nurse. Ruth was a good baby, although older sisters rarely think that of a baby.

Father went away in March of this year and left mother with 5 children. Ruth was 6 weeks old and Mary (eldest) was 8. I remember trying to make a bed this year. I put the covers on the best I could, and then crawled all over the counterpane till I had it smooth. I don’t imagine it looked very good when I had it finished. Mary and Ellen went to school about one-half mile from home. Their school-teacher was A.R. Caldwell.

Next, we moved two doors further up the road. Here we lived with another woman. Her name was Mary Eckman and we all liked her. We only lived here until we found a vacant house, for we needed more room. If we wanted more room we certainly found it when we moved to the Clinger house. This was a huge brick house with a pretty lawn and garden. Back of the house we had a nice orchard. Between the house proper and the orchard was a building which had been used as a tenant house when Dr. Clinger lived there. This we used as a play-house. It had 5 rooms in it. We played house keeping with the neighbor’s children in it, or at least pretended to do so, about once a week.

1905 – It was while we lived here that I started school. The school was a one story frame building and my first school teacher was Leah LeFenre. I liked her, although I often disagreed with her as most children do. A.J. Zercher, an undertaker, lived across the road from us and they took quite a fancy to Ruth. Ruth would go over there, sometimes, for almost a day at a time.

I don’t remember how long we lived there, but I don’t think it was very long. It was at this house that I had the whooping cough. Mother certainly had lots of work, for Ruth, Annie and I had whooping cough at the same time. All of us had chicken pox this winter. They were not nearly so severe as the whooping chough though. Mr. Polak, a missionary, boarded with us here for a short time. He sold Bibles to the foreigners who lived on the railroad, about 2 miles from our home. When he left, he gave each of us a Slavish New testament with our names written in Slavish on the title page. This winter we had our first party. Mother told us to invite about a dozen of our school-friends. We were so enthusiastic about it that we invited about 60, but we certainly did have a jolly time.

1906 – We moved to the other end of the village. Here we had a nice little house with a garden and yard. We had a chicken yard with a big swing in it and also a few chickens. We certainly had nice neighbors. Fickes lives on one side of us, and there were as nice a family as you can find anywhere. Kreiders lived across the street and we bought our milk and butter from them. Henry Martin and his sister-in-law Vinnie Pennypacker kept a store near us. The house stood a few feet from the store, and you had to go to the store and ring a little bell on the shutter – and if they heard it they came to the store, and if not they didn’t. Annie started to school while we lived here. Mary, Ellen, Annie and I all went to the same school and Ruth stayed home with mother.