editor’s introduction: The following letter is kept in the Methodist Protestant collection of the conference archives. It was written in 1827 by a ministerial member of the Baltimore Conference serving in Baltimore to a former colleague then serving in the Pittsburgh Conference. The letter is significant because it discusses preliminary events that led to the 1830 split in American Methodism that created the Methodist Protestant denomination.

Both James M. Hanson, the author of the letter, and the events referred to in the letter are given more than passing attention in Edward J. Drinkhouse’s 1899 two-volume History of Methodist Reform and the Methodist Protestant Church. To set the stage, the actual letter will be preceded by a brief historical background – gleaned mostly from Drinkhouse’s definitive history.

The letter is followed by an aftermath, an appendix giving the obituary of James M. Hanson, and endnotes on the entire article – persons and items named in the historical background, the letter, and the appendix. As the historical background section is brief, and the letter assumes knowledge of all the background information, the interested reader is encouraged to refer to the end notes to gain a more complete appreciation of the dynamics and personalities involved.

Historical Background

While the Methodist Protestant Church was formally organized in Baltimore in 1830, the split had been brewing for at least a decade— with much of the activity and agitation taking place in Baltimore. When James M. Hanson was assigned to one of the Baltimore city churches in April 1827, he found himself in the middle of the controversy. As with most political, religious and intellectual battles of the day, the warfare of attacks and counter-attacks was conducted using the printed page.

At its April 1827 annual session, the Baltimore Conference suspended pastor Dennis B. Dorsey (1799-1860) for one year for circulating Mutual Rights, the periodical of the Reformers. In May 1827 Alexander McCaine (1768-1856) of Baltimore, an associate of the late Bishop Asbury published the pro-reform pamphlet “The History and Mystery of the Methodist Episcopacy.” This was countered by “An Appeal to the Methodists in Opposition to the Changes Proposed in their Church Government” by local pastor (and future Christian Advocate editor) and physician Dr. Thomas E. Bond (1872-1856), also of Baltimore.
Following the tumultuous 1824 General Conference, the Reformers had begun organizing Union Societies. Intended to promote renewal rather than division, these societies were similar to Wesley’s Methodist classes within the eighteenth century Church of England and the Good News movement within the present United Methodist Church. Dr. Bond’s “Appeal” prompted the organization of more local Union Societies – as well as some regional meetings, particularly in the Chesapeake Bay area.

On August 12, 1827, the Reformers received written notification as follows from a group Drinkhouse refers to as a “self-appointed committee of seven”:

The undersigned, believing that the members of the Baltimore Union Society have violated the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and being desirous of having a friendly interview with them individually, previous to instituting charges against them, if necessary, respectfully request to be furnished with the names of the members of said Union Society.

It was decided there would be a church trial, and that elder James M. Hanson was to be the presiding judge. Drinkhouse claims that the trial was not fair for several reasons – not the least of which was that Hanson had his mind made up even before the proceedings began.

One of the more prominent persons to side with the Reformers was Baltimore’s Dr. Samuel K. Jennings (1771-1854), a physician and ordained local pastor. The only president (1816-19) of Baltimore’s short-lived Asbury College, he was also chosen to write the first official biography of the late Bishop Asbury. But by 1821 he had become a patron of and contributor to the Reformer’s Mutual Rights and was one of the members of the Union Society of Baltimore that was put on trial. The following paragraphs from Drinkhouse relate the experience and perspective of Dr. Jennings.

The prosecutions were inaugurated by the following summons sent to Dr. Jennings:

Baltimore, September 8, 1827

Dear Sir: You are hereby informed that charges have been preferred against you by the following persons: J. Rodgers, S. Harden, J. Berry, I.N. Toy, A. Yearley, G. Earnest, and F. Israel. As it is desirable for the satisfaction of all who feel an interest in the matter, that a hearing should be had as soon as practicable, it is hoped that Tuesday evening next, at 7 o’clock, will suit your convenience.

Yours respectfully, James M. Hanson

Dr. Jennings wrote for a copy of the charges. They were sent on Monday, the 10th, one day before the date of the trial. They were as follows: “The Rev. Samuel K. Jennings is charged with endeavoring to sow dissensions in the society or church in this station or city known by the name of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and with the violation of the general rule of the discipline of said church or society, which
prohibits its members from doing harm, and requires them to avoid evil of every kind; and especially the violating of that clause of said general rule which prohibits speaking evil of ministers.”

The specifications were three in number, and are briefly stated:

1st. Becoming a member of the Union Society.

2nd. Directly or indirectly supporting the Mutual Rights, and the evils consequent upon its publication.

3rd. Approving the “History and Mystery” written by Alexander McCaine, which contains assertions made without proper proof or just foundation, calculated to disgrace and bring reproach upon the Church, and to produce, increase, and heighten the disagreements, strife, contention, and breach of union alluded to in the second specification.

Jennings demurred to the shortness of the time allowed him, to which the preacher, James M. Hanson, answered by expressing astonishment that he should want further time, as the evidence was all published to the world and speaks for itself. Five days of grace were granted.

McCaine’s “History and Mystery” was specially dwelt upon in the trials, and with reason. Its disclosures were startling to the Methodists wherever they became known. He had trodden a new path, and the discoveries made in the esoteric of Methodist history were such as to make his euphonious title pertinent – Mystery as well as History.

Alexander Yearly, a reputable merchant and leading official in the Church, next to Fielder Israel, who was the spokesman of the Committee of Seven, furnishes the keynote of their underlying character. At the trial of Daniel E. Reese he ventured at its conclusion to make this deliverance: “I have been a Methodist ever since the days of Wesley, and have lived happy under the Discipline which our brother has though so despotic, until this political scheme of liberty (a liberty to do wrong, I suppose) was got up; I thank God for the privilege of belonging to a church which brings us up to a strict discipline. They have as much right to take up arms against the state and consider themselves good citizens, as to rise up against the Discipline of the Church and call themselves good Methodists.”

At the conclusion of the trials, all 11 local pastors and 22 of the 25 laymen who had been tried were convicted and expelled. Drinkhouse summarizes the matter by stating that “the dragnet had included three more than could be inculpated, even under such charges as were laid.”

The Central Pennsylvania Conference archives considers itself extremely fortunate to have recently acquired the following heretofore unpublished letter written by James M. Hanson so soon after these events – and even before the final verdict on local preacher Alexander McCaine had been announced.
The Letter

Rev. Henry Furlong
Waynesburg
Green County, Pa.

My dear Brother Furlong,

Your truly satisfactory letter written soon after the breaking up of your conference was received, and my design then was to answer it immediately; but so completely has my time been occupied by the business of this overgrown station, that I have scarcely written to any body beyond the limits of the corporation. But as I know you will pardon me, without my taking up my paper with apologies, I hasten to state that our religious prospects here continue to be flattering; we have had, and continue to have, gracious meetings.

There never was a time perhaps when the genuine Methodists in this city were more deeply engaged with God, or manifested a greater eagerness to hear the Gospel preached. Our houses are generally filled with attentive hearers, and we have since the first of May last received nearly two hundred whites on probation, and more than half that number of coloured persons.

This statement in all probability would hardly be received as true by some persons on you side of the mountain, for I doubt not they have received very different statements from some of our disaffected brethren in this city. Indeed I cannot help thinking that we have men here who still bear the appellation of Methodist, who would rejoice to see our meeting houses deserted, and our classes broken up, and the names of the stationed preachers buried in infamy. But God is with His ark, and it is still moving forward, and I hope it never will be in danger of falling into the hands of the Philistines.

The great Radical convention commenced its session on the 15th of last month, and broke up on the 20th. If I can I will procure and transmit to you a copy of their proceedings, that you may see what a mighty dust was raised about nothing, or what is next to nothing.

Ten local preachers have been suspended: viz, Dr. Jennings, James R. Williams, Daniel E. Reese, John S. Reese, Thomas McCormick, William Kesley, Reuben T. Boyd, Luther J. Cox, John C. French and John Valiant. McCaine’s case has been taken up, but the committee have not yet reported. 22 laymen have been tried, and the charges and 1st and 2nd specifications have been sustained by the unanimous voice of the committee. I have written each of them a mild and friendly letter, proposing to them to abandon the Union Society, and to give assurances that they would not in the future give their aid to any measure or publication calculated to cast reproach upon our members.
But so far as I can learn, it has only tended to raise their prejudices against me to a higher pitch, and they have in a note appended to the proceedings of their convention given a most wretchedly mutilated and unfair account of the letter. What seems to gall and goad them most is that the people whose great friends they profess to be should have called them to account for their conduct. This is a grievous fact on which they would cast, if possible, a cloud of Egyptian darkness. For a considerable time they blamed the Bishops; this they found to be untenable ground, and hence they have determined right or wrong that I shall be the main mark for their poisoned arrows – and they are not sparing of them, I assure you.

Now the fact is, I have had no more to do in getting up the charges than you or any other brother in your conference had, but because I would not receive their groundless and foolish objections against the committees, and construe both Law and Gospel according to their own whim a prejudice, I am a tyrant, a tool, an underhanded dealer, and what else you please – except an honest man. But I trust none of those things will move me. My God has wonderfully preserved me in spirit, and will I trust continue to preserve me from the wrath and hatred of unreasonable men.

I expect a plain and circumstantial account will in a few weeks be given by our brethren here, which I will send you as soon as it issues from the press. In the mean time write to me, and any information that I can communicate in a letter I will send you forthwith.

On last Monday we buried our old friend Dr. Roberts. His death was the most triumphant one perhaps we witnessed in the city of Baltimore. I wish I had room to insert some of his expressions, but you will see them ere long in the Christian Advocate.

It is now 11 o’clock at night, and I am weary from the labours of the day. I must therefore close by telling you we are all well. God grant that this imperfect scroll may find you and yours in the full enjoyment of the choicest blessings of Heaven. My respects to sister F and the family – and believe me as ever your sincere friend and fellow servant in Christ.

James M. Hanson

P.S. The Radicals are striving to make the people believe that they have been tried merely for wishing some change in our government. This is utterly and altogether false. They are charged first with endeavoring to sow dissensions in the church, and second with speaking evil of ministers.
Aftermath

The preceding letter was written by James M. Hanson on December 7, 1827. On December 23, the expelled members met and formulated the following instrument – which may well be considered to represent the formation of the very first Methodist Protestant congregation.

We the undersigned, formerly members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the city of Baltimore, having been excluded from the fellowship of that body, by what we consider to be an unjustifiable process based on insufficient charges, and those charges not sustained by competent testimony, have, for the present, agreed to unite together as a society of original Methodists, under the “General Rules of the United Societies” prepared by the Reverends John and Charles Wesley. Our object is to wait and see whether the present abuses in the administration of the government will be corrected. If they should, and freedom of inquiry and public discussion be permitted in the Methodist Episcopal Church, it will afford us pleasure to return, provided we can do so without relinquishing the opinions for which we were excluded – namely, an honest and, as we believe, an enlightened conviction that the present form of government in the Methodist Episcopal Church, so far as it precludes the grand principle of representation and confines all legislative, executive and judicial powers to the itinerant ministry, is unscriptural and anti-Christian, and that reform in the government of said Church is necessary, in order to its essential and permanent prosperity.

On December 31, 1827, the wives and friends of the expelled members met at the Baltimore home of Dr. Jennings and, on motion, “resolved that the members of this meeting deeply regret the necessity of withdrawing from the Methodist Episcopal Church, yet from a conviction of duty we do hereby resolve to withdraw from said Church when our husbands, fathers, or friends shall have been expelled.

Drinkhouse then gives the entire text of a two-page letter signed by 47 “heroic and godly women” that was sent to James M. Hanson on January 7, 1828, to announce their withdrawal from the Methodist Episcopal Church and state that “to this painful resort we are driven by the measures you have taken against our friends and brethren.” He ends his account of this portion of Methodist Protestant history by declaring that “nothing need be added to this touching story.”

Truly the original manuscript letter of Hanson recently secured and preserved by our archives, and published here for the first time, is a valuable piece of our United Methodist heritage. While the name James M. Hanson may be known to but a few serious historians, he is certainly one who falls within the “Intersecting History” theme of this volume of The Chronicle.
Appendix  Obituary of James M. Hanson: from the 1861 journal of the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, page 61, meeting March 13-25 in the M.E. church in Staunton VA.

Rev. James M. Hanson departed this life on the 15th of March, 1860, at the residence of his son-in-law, Mr. Ephraim Berryman, in Reisterstown, Baltimore County, Maryland. He was born in Hampshire County, Virginia, in the year 1783. At a very early period he gave his heart to God, and united with the M.E. Church. He had not long been a member, before his youthful zeal and devotion so favorably impressed the society with which he was connected, that he was invited upon several occasions, in the absence of the preacher, to conduct the public services of the temple, which he did with great profit to the people and credit to himself.

Such was the confidence of the church in his piety and talent, and so satisfied were they of his call to the work of the ministry that, at a quarterly meeting held in the town of Cumberland, Maryland, in the year 1808, he was licensed to preach and recommended to the Baltimore Conference as a suitable person to be received on trial. He was accordingly admitted at the session of 1809 and appointed to a circuit. His years of active service are as follows.

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Circuit</th>
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<tr>
<td>1809-10</td>
<td>Lake Erie circuit</td>
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<tr>
<td>1810-11</td>
<td>Monongahela circuit</td>
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<tr>
<td>1811-12</td>
<td>Pittsburgh</td>
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<td>1812-13</td>
<td>Ohio circuit</td>
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<tr>
<td>1813-14</td>
<td>Baltimore city</td>
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<tr>
<td>1814-15</td>
<td>Frederick circuit</td>
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<td>1815-19</td>
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<tr>
<td>1819-21</td>
<td>Loudon circuit</td>
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<td>1821-23</td>
<td>Jefferson circuit</td>
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<td>1823-25</td>
<td>Hagerstown circuit</td>
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<td>1825-27</td>
<td>Jefferson circuit</td>
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<tr>
<td>1827-29</td>
<td>Baltimore city station</td>
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<tr>
<td>1820-31</td>
<td>East Baltimore</td>
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<tr>
<td>1831-33</td>
<td>Foundry station, Washington city</td>
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<tr>
<td>1833-35</td>
<td>Georgetown</td>
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At the conference of 1835 he retired from the active work, in which station he continued to the close of life.

Brother Hanson was a man of superior ability, both as a preacher and an administrator of ecclesiastical law. He naturally possessed an active and inquiring mind; and though his early educational advantages were limited, he nevertheless, by industrious effort and studious devotion, so triumphed over discouragements as to achieve an enviable reputation for intelligence, as well as for piety.

For many years he was a prominent member of the Baltimore Conference. Such was the estimation in which he was held by his brethren, that he was frequently chosen as their representative in the General Conference, and upon one occasion was unanimously elected.

Toward the close of his life his mind became very much impaired, which was no less a source of regret to the church than of affliction to his family. He was, however, favored by a kind Providence, during his final affliction, with lucid intervals, when he gave satisfactory evidence of his confidence in the atonement of Christ.
Endnotes

1 The key issues were the authoritarian rule of the bishops and the lack of lay representation in the conferences. At the General Conferences of 1816 and 1820, there was an attempt to make the presiding eldership an elective position. A resolution to that effect was actually passed by the 1820 General Conference by a 65-25 vote – and then the same Conference suspended by a 45-35 vote its implementation for four years. But the 1824 General Conference declared that the resolution calling for the elections was void, because it had not been sustained by a majority of the annual conferences. Many saw this as the final straw. The suspicions of the Reformers became convictions, that episcopal power had worked behind the scenes to defeat the will of the General Conference. Following the “episcopal manipulation” of the 1824 General Conference, a group of Reformers held their own convention and began publishing the periodical Mutual Rights (officially, Mutual Rights of the Ministers and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church).

2 When he failed to amend his ways the following year, he (along with others) was expelled “for spreading incendiary publications.”

3 One of the seven, whom even Drinkhouse acknowledges to be “reputable and leading laymen of the Church,” was Fielder Israel – the son of Beal Israel, one of the leaders of the Union Society of Baltimore. This indicates how sentiment regarding the Reform Movement divided families – and that the movement was far from only a rebellion of the young, as it was the father who sided with the Reformers.

4 In volume ii, page 125, for example, Drinkhouse states: Their cases were prejudged, so that nothing was required but to get up charges and specifications in accord with the prejudgment. Hanson had written a letter … “I am disposed to view the greater part of them as holding a relation the Church, to which in justice and propriety, nay, even in charity itself, they are no longer entitled.” And this was the position of the judge.

5 This quoted material is selected from the text beginning in volume ii, page 128.

6 Henry Furlong (1797-1874) was born in Baltimore, itinerated in the Methodist ministry for 45 years, and is buried near the Bishop’s Lot in Baltimore’s Mt. Olivet Cemetery. He was a delegate to the General Conferences of 1828 and 1832 and was a personal friend of Bishops McKendree, George, Roberts, Soule, Waugh and Bascom – in fact he named his son, also a ministerial member of the of Baltimore Conference, Henry Bascom Furlong. The Baltimore Conference originally extended to western Pennsylvania and Eastern Ohio, and it was there Furlong was serving when the Pittsburgh Conference was organized in 1824. Remaining there for several years before returning to the Baltimore Conference, he was serving Greenfield circuit in the Monongahela District of the Pittsburgh Conference when he received this letter from his friend James M. Hanson in 1827.

7 The letter and the names of the 47 signers are given in volume ii, beginning on page 150.