

## Papers Relating to Jacob Gruber

This section begins with an adaptation of a brief biography of Jacob Gruber prepared for the 1984 History of the New Cumberland District. Written in non-technical language for the casual reader, it introduces Mr. Gruber and sets the stage for the papers that follow.

The Berkheimer paper on the former Harrisburg District of the Methodist Church contains more references to Gruber than to any other single early itinerant. It is clear that Berkheimer considers Gruber the father of the Harrisburg District.

The articles on Bishop Wiley expand on one of the many persons introduced in the Berkheimer paper. They also connect to Gruber in that both claimed Lewistown as their home – Wiley by birth, and Gruber by choice. As their life spans intersected, they undoubtedly interacted on numerous occasions – including the one reported by Stroup when blunt Gruber urged Wiley to “give up ideas of marriage and medicine” to enter the itinerant ministry.

The connection between Robert Wilson and Jacob Gruber, although they were certainly contemporaries, is not obvious from the letter or the main body of comments about Williamsport (MD) Methodism. The article’s concluding remarks concerning Robert Wilson, however, reveal a significant direct connection involving a matter of national and denominational importance. The reader will enjoy discovering that connection for himself in the final paragraphs.

There are general references to Jacob Gruber in most books on Methodist history. Those wishing to do additional specific reading on Jacob Gruber are referred to W.P. Strickland’s classic 1860 biography *The Life of Jacob Gruber* (New York: Carlton & Porter). Another valuable source of information is Brand Eaton’s July 1999 (37:242-252) article “Jacob Gruber’s 1818 Campmeeting Sermon” in *Methodist History* (Madison NJ: General Commission on Archives and History), the denominational equivalent of *The Chronicle*.

Taken together, the articles in this section present an excellent picture of the life and times of Jacob Gruber and the development of the Harrisburg District Methodism which he helped to birth and to provide with significant nurture.

## **Rev. Jacob Gruber (1778-1850)**

by Milton Loyer, 1984

Jacob Gruber was converted in 1797 at the age of 19 and united with the local Methodist Episcopal body of believers. His parents were strict German Lutherans, however, and drove him from home for becoming a Methodist – but they were later reconciled. Hearing of a vacancy on one of the circuits, Gruber immediately secured a horse and started itinerating. He was such a zealous worker that some observers predicted he would drive himself to the grave within a year.

Finally formally accepted as a Methodist Episcopal itinerant in 1800, he spent the rest of his days laboring in Central Pennsylvania. In 1802 he began the first regular Methodist preaching in Harrisburg. He and Henry Boehm, two of the very few Methodist preachers proficient in both English and German, were assigned to Dauphin circuit 1803-04 and had several opportunities to conduct union meetings with the United Brethren – including Henry's father Bishop Martin Boehm. Gruber was assigned to Carlisle circuit in 1804, was presiding elder (district superintendent) for the Carlisle District 1815-18, and was assigned Carlisle circuit again in 1837.

Gruber never slowed down. At the age of 60 he married Perry County widow Rachel Gillespie Martin, and at the age of 63 he was the organizing pastor of the New Cumberland District's Port Royal charge.

A colorful and witty speaker, Gruber was frequently called upon to address missionary meetings, conduct special services, and (despite his lack of formal education) speak at Dickinson College. The following incident, which occurred on Dauphin circuit, is typical of the many, many available Gruber anecdotes. It is taken from Wakely's 1856 *The Heroes of Methodism*, page 462.

*A young lady who had been converted under Gruber's preaching, and whom he had received into the church, approached him smiling one day. Dressed very fashionably, she introduced herself to Gruber as one of his converts. "I thought you were one of MY converts," the preacher replied. "If you were THE LORD'S, you would not be dressed so fine nor have those posies in your hat."*

On another occasion Gruber is reported to have answered a heckler at a camp meeting by asserting, "Sir, I refuse to argue with a man who has holes in his stockings." When the taken-back heckler responded indignantly, "There are no holes in my stockings," the pastor simply asked, "Then how did you get them on your feet?"

The staunchly conservative Gruber was notorious for his effective and disarming attacks on tobacco, modern fashions, profaning the Lord's Day, and any thing else he felt incompatible with holiness, the Discipline, and plain Methodist living. Strickland's 1860 *Life of Jacob Gruber* freely interjects such "Gruberisms" throughout the text. On page 92 is the account of Gruber's reaction

to finding that some pastors had lit up cigars during his brief absence from their after-dinner meeting.

*On the return of Brother Gruber he exclaimed, "Dear me, what a smoke," adding: "Tobacco is an evil weed,  
And from the devil did proceed.  
It spoils your breath and burns your clothes,  
And makes a chimney of your nose."*

*Brother Lybrand said to him, "Brother Gruber, that is pretty good poetry, but I doubt its theology. I do not believe that the devil made tobacco, and you must make your assertion true."*

*"Well," responded he, "I guess I can. I read in the Scriptures that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds – that is, the smallest of all seeds that the Lord has made. And everybody knows that the tobacco seed is smaller than the mustard seed – and therefore the devil must have made it."*

Gruber's most significant contribution to American church history was his involvement in a landmark court decision concerning religious freedom of speech – when he was arrested in 1818 for preaching a camp meeting sermon that was a strong indictment of slavery.

According to Maser's 1971 *Methodism in Central Pennsylvania 1771-1969*, page 58, the official charge was inciting slaves "to resist the lawful authority of their... respective masters and lawful owners." If a sermon against slavery could be thus interpreted, no preacher could henceforth speak out against that evil practice. He was tried in Frederick County MD with Roger B. Taney, who later became Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, as one of his defense counsels. A large number of witnesses were called to testify exactly what Gruber had or had not said, and Taney gave an exceedingly effective closing speech. The verdict was "not guilty."

Perhaps the best assessment of this unique man of God was given by Henry Boehm (1775-1875) – son of United Brethren co-founder Martin Boehm, Methodist circuit rider, traveling companion of Francis Asbury, and colleague of Gruber. According to Harmon's 1974 *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, page 1046, Boehm commented on Gruber as follows: "A more honest man never lived; a bolder soldier of the cross never wielded the sword of the Spirit. As a preacher he was original and eccentric; his powers of irony, sarcasm, and ridicule were tremendous."

Jacob Gruber died in Lewistown on May 25, 1850, and is buried in the Methodist cemetery there. Having no children, and living by rigid economy and careful investment, he was able to bequeath no small sum to the work of the Lord in various missionary, educational, and church-related ministries.