

## **Reading Between the Lines** **An Interesting Letter from Methodism's Past**

by Robert Wilson, 1832

editor's note: The conference archives is always on the lookout for materials with the potential to shed some light on the early years of Methodism in Central Pennsylvania. Any 1832 letter containing references to quarterly meetings and a board of trustees almost certainly belongs within one of the predecessor denominations of United Methodism. When such a letter was offered for sale last year, a careful look at the full description of the document was definitely warranted.

The letter was reportedly sent from Williamsport PA by an R. Wilson to a Rev. Henry Smith in Hagerstown MD. A check of the 1832 General Minutes of the Methodist Episcopal Church found Rev. Henry Smith of the Baltimore Conference as the pastor assigned to Hagerstown circuit. Methodism's Central Pennsylvania Conference was not formed until 1869, and in 1832 most of the Methodist work within our present conference was still part of the Baltimore Conference. On the surface, the letter appeared to be an appropriate and perfectly normal item to be purchased for the archives – provided, of course, that the document could be procured at a reasonable price.

But one fact made the letter especially intriguing – the distance between Williamsport and Hagerstown. Why would a lay person in Williamsport PA be writing to the pastor in Hagerstown MD? The only apparent connection is that Henry Smith had served as presiding elder of the Northumberland District 1821-25. But that was 7 years ago – and since the Northumberland District at that time extended all the way from Northumberland to Bedford, there would have been little chance for Rev. Smith to build a relationship with a layperson in Williamsport.

Could Rev. Smith have stayed at the Wilson home when he passed through Williamsport while taking care of his large district? What church business involving trustees and quarterly meetings would Mr. Wilson want to discuss via mail with a man so far removed, even if he were a distinguished member of the Conference? The only way to answer these questions would be to purchase the letter, examine the complete text, and be prepared to do significant research.

When the letter arrived from the manuscript dealer in Massachusetts, the first obvious clue that something was amiss was the lack of county and state designations for Williamsport or Hagerstown in the addresses on the envelope or the inside address. Not only was such information the norm for postal correspondence in the 1800's, but it would also be absolutely necessary to ensure that the letter was properly delivered over such a distance.

Close examination of tone and content of the text provided the answer. The letter had been mis-identified by the dealer. It was sent from Williamsport MD (not PA) to Hagerstown MD. Williamsport was on the Hagerstown circuit, and R. Wilson was writing to his own pastor concerning a situation in Williamsport. While the nature of the concern is not specified in the letter, one can only assume that the fact that the letter was preserved and found its way to a collector means that it had significance to someone. Having the letter in hand, the task now becomes to identify the nature and significance of the concern that R. Wilson was raising with Rev. Henry Smith.

The Methodist Protestant Church was organized in Baltimore MD in 1830 over dissatisfaction with the power of the episcopacy and the lack of lay representation in the conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Once the new denomination actually came into existence as a legitimate organization that apparently was here to stay, it began to arouse the interest of previously noncommittal Methodists – particularly in Maryland. This is what happened in Williamsport MD.

Apparently there was interest in the congregation in identifying with the Methodist Protestants, particularly on the part of Mr. Wilson and some of the trustees. But no matter what proportion of the congregation wanted to become Methodist Protestant, Rev. Smith had made it clear that the building was held in trust for the Methodist Episcopal Conference and would not be surrendered. This January 1832 letter seems to be an effort to convince Rev. Smith to meet with the dissidents before the final quarterly meeting of the 1831-32 church year.

In August 1832, after much soul-searching, a sizeable number of members finally seceded from three Methodist Episcopal Churches in the Williamsport area – Prather's Chapel on Clear Spring circuit, Williamsport on Hagerstown circuit, and Harmony on Berkeley circuit. The following month a meeting was held in the Presbyterian Church, the building now known as the Improved Order of Red Men home. It was resolved to form a circuit under the leadership of Robert Wilson, writer of the January 1832 letter, and assisted by Jeremiah Mason. The circuit would be composed of three classes – namely Prathers, Harmony and Williamsport.

The charge was formally received into the Maryland Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church in 1833. Meanwhile, the congregation in Williamsport continued to meet in the Presbyterian Church while developing plans for their own building. Peter Light of Berkeley County VA purchased a lot in 1833, erected a church building in 1834, and presented it to the congregation. The building was named Rehobeth, and has kept that name ever since. Robert Wilson was the congregation's delegate to the 1835 annual meeting of the Maryland Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church, went on to become licensed by that denomination, and served as the congregation's pastor 1836-39.

The Rehobeth Methodist Protestant congregation continued until 1880, when the charge was left unsupplied for several years and the building stood idle. In 1887 the Williamsport United Brethren congregation, which had been formally

organized in 1886 and was worshipping in the Good Templar's Hall, purchased the property for \$1200. The Rehobeth United Brethren congregation, adopting the name from the building they purchased, endured to become Evangelical United Brethren in 1946 and United Methodist in 1968. Today the United Methodist Church has two large Williamsport MD congregations: the original Methodist Episcopal congregation that Robert Wilson and other dissenters left, and the former EUB Rehobeth congregation which purchased the building the dissenters erected.

After selling the property in 1887, the Methodist Protestants revived the Williamsport circuit – albeit without a congregation in Williamsport proper. The circuit struggled until 1916, when it was re-named the Harmony (WV) circuit and the 3-point charge of 141 members began to concentrate its efforts in that community. At the 1939 re-union of the Methodist Episcopal, Methodist Protestant and Methodist Episcopal South denominations to form the Methodist Church, Harmony was a station appointment with 169 members. The Harmony WV congregation is now part of a 2-point United Methodist charge in the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

When the Maryland Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church ceased to exist as a result of the 1939 union, its 3-point Concord charge (Doyleburg, Amberson and Roxbury) became part of the Central Pennsylvania Conference. Three other Pennsylvania charges (Delta, Fawn Grove and Mt. Nebo) became part of the Baltimore Conference until 1962, when the conference boundaries were adjusted to follow the state line.

The 1832 letter is given on the next page, followed by additional comments on the recipient and the author. After publication of *The Chronicle*, the letter will be donated to the Rehobeth United Methodist Church in Williamsport MD – which maintains its own local archives and is very appreciative of its rich spiritual heritage.

Rev. Henry Smith  
Hagers Town

Williams Port  
January 24, 1832

Brother Smith,

Since you left us I have thought that you should have granted the plan suggested by me at our last meeting if you could make the arrangements to do so. That was to call a meeting of the board of trustees in this place – previous to Quarterly Meeting. And I hereby repeat my suggestion. If you can with propriety pay us a visit shortly, or before Quarterly Meeting, I think it the best, as it is the last Quarterly Meeting. And should you after the meeting of the board of trustees find it necessary to have any reference to the official body, you will then have an opportunity to do so and to close the business of the circuit.

However I only mention it to you again. Should you do so, you can drop me a few lines and the time, and I will notify the board accordingly.

I hope, my dear brother, you will not let what has occurred afflict your mind. We are sorry to afflict you in any way. As an individual, were I in your place and seeing as you see, I would act as you have done. May grace sustain you.

R. Wilson

**Appendix I.** Rev. Henry Smith, the recipient  
Baltimore Conference<sup>1</sup> of the Methodist Episcopal Church

Service Record  
the “West”

1794-96 Clarksburg  
1796-97 Limestone  
1797-98 Salt River  
1798-99 Green  
1799-00 Miami  
1800-01 Scioto  
1801-02 Scioto and Miami  
1802-03 Limestone

Baltimore Conference

1803-05 Winchester  
1805-06 Calvert  
1806-07 Baltimore circuit  
1807-08 Fells Point  
1808-09 ?  
1809-10 Annapolis  
1810-12 Fredericksburg  
1812-14 Calvert  
1814-15 Great Falls  
1815-16 Baltimore circuit  
1816-17 Prince George’s  
1817-18 Severn  
1818-19 Great Falls  
1819-20 Winchester  
1820-21 Fells Point  
1821-25 presiding elder, Northumberland District  
1825-26 Berkley  
1826-28 Loudon  
1828-29 ?  
1829-31 York  
1831-33 Hagerstown  
1833-35 Baltimore circuit  
1835 retired

Henry Smith was born near Frederick MD in 1869. His parents were from Germany and were members of the German Reformed Church, into which faith Henry was baptized as an infant. When Henry was 4, the family moved to Long

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<sup>1</sup> There were no specific Conferences until about 1800. At that time Henry Smith is listed in the “Western Conference” – which included approximately Tennessee, Kentucky and Ohio. From 1803 on he is listed in the Baltimore Conference. One biographical sketch states that he was “a pioneer in the West” and “did in later years his labors in the Baltimore Conference.”

Marsh, 12 miles east of Winchester VA. He was awakened under the preaching of Rev. Thomas Scott in 1790 and admitted into the Methodist Episcopal Church as “a seeker of religion.” Two weeks later, while discussing his experience with his recently converted father, he professed salvation. He immediately entered into Christian work and was given a license to exhort, and then to preach. He was received on trial by the Baltimore Conference in 1793. He retired in 1835 and died at the age of 94 in 1863.

Rev. Smith knew Bishop Asbury. He labored in the very early days of Methodism, when the work was difficult and few circuit riders amassed long service records. Consider the following excerpts from his 1864 Baltimore Conference obituary.<sup>2</sup>

*At a conference held in Baltimore, October 29, 1793, he was admitted on trial as a traveling preacher and appointed to Talbot circuit, Eastern Shore, Maryland. From some unaccountable neglect, or the want of means, perhaps, to convey the information, he remained ignorant of his destination till winter had set in, when it was deemed inexpedient for him to cross the bay. Nevertheless he was not idle. The presiding elder of the district employed him on Berkley circuit until the meeting of the conference at Harrisonburg, Rockingham County, Virginia, June 3, 1794, when he was appointed to Clarksburg circuit, Western Virginia.*

*While laboring here and subsequently for nine years as a missionary in the Northwestern Territory, his young manhood was brought under the severest tests. Well did those who followed the tide of emigration, and who planted the Gospel west of the mountains, deserve the honored name of itinerants. Theirs were toils carried on in the face of dangers, loss, and extreme hardships. The inhabitants were still liable to Indian incursions.*

*The homesteads of the settlers lay far apart from one another, severed by forests, across which, in many places, no better roads were yet carried than an Indian path, with all its uncertainty and danger. In many places also dangerous rivers had to be encountered, with no bridges and few ferries. “I had to cross,” says Mr. Smith, “the Monongahela seven times every round.”*

Most of the early itinerants were single – in fact marriage often meant one would no longer receive an appointment. Paragraphs like those above suggest that Henry Smith never married. And the envelope of the 1832 letter carries the following notation, apparently added after the letter was received at the Hagerstown post office: *Received January 26. Care of Mr. G. Feeleigh.* This

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<sup>2</sup> In the division of 1844, the Methodist churches in the Shenandoah Valley remained in the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church (ME) and did not join the Virginia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MES). From 1862 to 1865, the Civil War prevented free travel between the north and the south and the Baltimore Conference held two annual conferences each year – one for its northern charges, and one for its charges in Virginia. The 1864 southern conference began March 10 in Bridgewater VA. The obituary of Rev. Henry Smith starts on page 30 of the journal of the 1864 northern conference which began March 2 in Washington DC. After the War, the Shenandoah Valley churches and their pastors transferred to the Virginia Conference of the MES – which explains why more than a few early pastors of some of our Central Pennsylvania Conference congregations finished their careers in the MES.

suggests that Rev. Smith was boarding with a family, and not in a rented home of his own – and there were certainly no Methodist parsonages at that time. But the closing sentence of the conference obituary indicates both that Rev. Henry Smith was married and that he was truly considered one of the founding fathers of Methodism: *By order of the Baltimore Conference, held at Georgetown, D.C., March 4, 1863, with the consent of the pious and sorrowing widow, the venerable remains of Mr. Smith are to be removed from their temporary resting place at Hookstown to Mount Olivet Cemetery [in Baltimore], there to repose, in company with the precious dust of Bishops Asbury, George, Waugh, and Emory, till Christ shall come to revive them, and beautify and clothe them with immortality.*

This portion of the cemetery called the Bishops' Lot is reserved for persons of distinction. One of the more recent giants of the faith to be interred there was the well-known missionary, evangelist and author E. Stanley Jones<sup>3</sup> (1884-1973).

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<sup>3</sup> A native of Baltimore, Jones died in India and was cremated. It was his ashes that were returned to the United States for burial in the Bishops' Lot.

**Appendix II.** Rev. Robert Wilson, the writer  
Maryland Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church

Service Record

1835-36 Anne Arundel  
1836-38 Williamsport  
1838-39 Williamsport, assistant  
1839-40 “with the conference President”  
1840 unstationed

A distinguishing feature of the Methodist Protestant Church, and one of the reasons for its creation, was its insistence on equal lay-clergy representation at the annual conferences. Prior to 1879, however, the Maryland Conference journal published only the names of the lay delegates and did not indicate what charges they represented. Consequently it is not possible to make completely accurate identifications.

There is an R. Wilson listed as a lay delegate to the annual conferences of 1835, 1841, 1843 and 1868. It is reasonable to assume that the first three of these are references to Robert Wilson of Williamsport. Reading between the lines, he attended the 1835 conference as an active layperson from Williamsport and accepted an appointment to serve the Anne Arundel charge. For the next few years he served his home charge as a pastor and was not eligible to be a lay delegate. After he was no longer under appointment, he was elected lay delegate in 1841 and 1843. The 1868 lay delegate is likely a different R. Wilson.

The Robert Wilson who wrote the letter to Henry Smith in 1832 was not a newcomer to Methodism. He was not a young enthusiast looking to stir up trouble. We know from court documents that Robert Wilson and his 1832 assistant Jeremiah Mason were committed and respected Methodists as early as 1818, for it was these men who pledged the bail for Jacob Gruber when he was arrested for his famous anti-slavery camp meeting sermon of 1818.

The camp meeting was held in mid-August, between Williamsport and Hagerstown, on the Jonas Hogmire farm. It was a large affair – attended by about 3000 whites and some 400 African Americans, both slave and free. Gruber preached his sermon on Sunday afternoon, August 16. When formal complaints were filed, Gruber was warned that he would be arrested if he returned to Washington County MD. This occurred a few months later, when Gruber’s duties as acting presiding elder brought him to Williamsport to conduct a quarterly meeting. He was forced to post bail – a pledge that he would, if released for the present, return for a formal court appearance.

The court document detailing the terms of the bail and identifying Robert Wilson and Jeremiah Mason as those pledged to ensure Gruber's return reads as follows.

STATE OF MARYLAND, WASHINGTON COUNTY

Be it remembered, that on this thirty-first day of October, one thousand eight hundred and eighteen, Jacob Gruber, a traveling preacher, and Robert Wilson, of the county aforesaid, and Jeremiah Mason, of the same place, came before me the subscriber, a justice of the peace in and for the county aforesaid, and acknowledged themselves to owe to the state of Maryland, to wit:

the said Jacob Gruber, one hundred dollars

and the said Robert Wilson, the sum of fifty dollars

and the said Jeremiah Mason, the sum of fifty dollars,

good and lawful money, to be respectively made and levied of their several goods and chattels, land and tenements, to the use of said state of Maryland, if the said Jacob Gruber shall fail in performing the conditions underwritten.

Acknowledged before me,

Robert M'Culloh

THE CONDITION OF THIS RECOGNIZANCE

is such, that if the above bounden Jacob Gruber shall personally appear at the next court in Hagers Town, for the aforesaid county, on the third Monday in November next, to do and receive what shall then and there be enjoined on him by the court, then this recognizance shall be void, or else remain in its full force.

Upon the advice of legal counsel, Gruber petitioned for a change of venue to the Frederick County MD courts. His petition was granted and the trial opened in Frederick on March 10, 1819. A complete transcript of the trial is on file in the conference archives.

That Robert Wilson and Jeremiah Mason pledged their personal goods to ensure Gruber's court appearance leads to at least two conclusions. First, Wilson and Mason were likely the key lay persons in the Williamsport congregation – as well as being respected persons of means within the community. And second, they likely were in agreement with Gruber's stand against slavery – and his generally conservative approach to holiness and practical religion, which were later to be distinctives of the Methodist Protestant movement against the perceived increasing liberalism of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In addition, it may be said that Wilson and Mason showed no lack of fortitude and Christian principles in taking such a public and potentially vulnerable position.