

CAPTAIN THOMAS WEBB

The First Apostle of American Methodism

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From the writings of:

Nathan Bangs in "A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church,"

Abel Stevens in "History of the Methodist Episcopal Church,"

and Matthew Simpson in "Cyclopaedia of Methodism".

(Complete in 13 pages)



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Francis Asbury was the key human instrument used of God for the early spread and organization of Methodism in America. Stirred by that pious "Mother in Israel," Barbara Heck, Philip Embury became the pastor of the first Methodist Society in America, and his John Street Church was soon after followed by the Log Meeting-house of Robert Strawbridge. Thus, Barbara Heck, Philip Embury, and Robert Strawbridge were very much involved in the planting of Methodism in America.

However, the recognition of being the primary human instrument in the planting of Methodism on this continent should, perhaps, go to Captain Thomas Webb. He, it appears, can be accurately called: "The First Apostle of American Methodism."

Methodist historian Abel Stevens says: "To Embury unquestionably belongs chronological precedence, by a few months, as the founder of American Methodism, but to Webb belongs the honor of a more prominent agency in the great event; of more extensive and more effective services; of the outspread of the denomination into Long Island, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware; the erection of its first chapels, and the introduction of Wesleyan itinerants. Aside from the mere question of priority, he must be considered the principal founder of the American Methodist Church ... He devoted at least nine years to the promotion of American Methodism, the periods of his absence in Europe being spent there in its behalf. I have not hesitated to pronounce him the principal founder of the denomination in the United States. No trace of his life can, therefore, fail to be interesting to American readers."

His Birth, First Visit to America, and Loss of His Right Eye

Thomas Webb was born about 1724. He became a Captain in the English army, and came to this

continent where he served under General Wolfe. During the siege and battle of Louisburg [1758-9] He lost his right eye: "A ball hit him on the bone which guards the right eye, and taking an oblique direction, burst the eyeball, and passing through the palate into his mouth, he swallowed it. His only recollection was a flash of light, which accompanied the destruction of the eye. The wounded were put into a boat, and having crossed the water, all were assisted to land excepting Webb, of whom one of the men said, 'He needs no help; he is dead enough.' His senses had returned, and he was just able to reply, 'No, I am not dead.' Had the ball struck him a hair's breadth higher or lower it would have taken his life! He had yet a great work to do for his heavenly Master, and for this he was preserved. -- Wes. Mag., 1849, p. 880. -- Ever after this, he wore a green shade over his right eye lid.

Captain Webb was also with General Wolfe in the taking of Quebec, in 1759 [One source dates the conquest of Quebec as 1758], and in that battle he was wounded in the right arm. When with Wolfe's army he scaled the Heights of Abraham and fought in the battle of Quebec, Captain Webb took part in what one writer called, "the most important military event, before the Revolution, in the history of the continent; for by it the Papal domination of France was overthrown in the North, and the country, from Hudson's Bay to the Gulf of Mexico, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, placed under Protestant control, and opened for its great career in Christian civilization."

His First Return To England, Conversion, and Beginning Ministry

Captain Webb returned to England in 1764. He became acquainted with an evangelical minister of the Church of England, and through him he also became acquainted with the Methodists. He was awakened under the preaching of Mr. Wesley, and after a severe mental conflict of nearly a year, he obtained the consciousness of the forgiveness of sin. In 1765 he joined a Methodist Society. Being present in the city of Bath where a circuit preacher was expected, who failed to attend, the captain was requested to speak to the people. He advanced to the altar in his regimentals, addressed them with great effect, chiefly narrating his own Christian experience, and his effort was made a blessing to many. Wesley, ever vigilant for "helpers," licensed him to preach, and through the remainder of his life he was indefatigable in Christian labors both in the New World and in the Old; preaching, giving his money, founding societies, and attending Conferences.

A soldier in the English army, Thomas Webb enlisted in the Lord's army, and thenceforth, as "a good soldier of Jesus Christ," he helped to advance the banner of Christ both zealously and victoriously. The importance of the military victory at Quebec in which he took part, pales in comparison to the importance of the spiritual beachhead he helped to make for God and Methodism on the American shores.

His Second Visit to the American Continent in 1766

Near the year 1766 Captain Webb was appointed Barrack-Master of the English troops at Albany.

Upon arriving at his post of duty in Albany, Captain Webb set up family prayer in his own house, which some of his neighbors frequently attended, to whom he gave a word of exhortation and advice.

The blessing of God attending these incipient efforts to do good, he was induced to extend his labors, and He began holding meetings among his fellow-soldiers and others who wished to attend.

His Move From Albany to Long Island

About 1767 Webb's service as Barracks-Master at Albany, New York apparently concluded his time in the English army. One writer says: "Being at last on the retired list, with the title and pay of a captain for his honorable services, he had leisure for travel. The kindred of his wife lived at Jamaica, L. I. He went thither, hired a house, and preached in it, and 'twenty-four persons received justifying grace.'" Speaking of this same move from Albany to Long Island, Thomas Taylor wrote: "About this period Mr. Webb, whose wife's relations lived at Jamaica, Long Island, took a house in that neighborhood, and began to preach in his own house, and several other places on Long Island. Within six months, about twenty-four persons received justifying grace.

About four months before Captain Webb's arrival in New York, Philip Embury, at the urging of Barbara Heck, had begun to preach. The first meetings were conducted in Embury's house, but it would appear that shortly thereafter the meeting place was moved to a rented room. Thomas Taylor wrote: "They then rented an empty room in their neighborhood, which was in the most infamous street in the city, adjoining the barracks. For some time few thought it worth their while to hear: but God so ordered it by his providence." It would appear from this that there was some discouragement in the first American Methodist Society during the time between its commencement in 1766 until Captain Webb's arrival among them in about 1767. Whatever their frame of mind may have been, a fresh spiritual invigoration and blessing from God came their way with the arrival of Thomas Webb.

His Introduction to the Fledgling New York Methodist Society

Sometime, perhaps quite shortly after his move to Long Island, Captain Webb heard of the Methodist meetings being conducted by Embury in New York, and, of course, he paid them a visit. His first appearance among them was in the public assembly, and as he wore the uniform of a British captain, the little society were fearful at first, that he had come to "spy out their liberties in Christ" but, when they saw him kneel in prayer and devoutly participate with them in their acts of devotion, their fears were exchanged for joy, and they hailed "him as a brother beloved." He was therefore soon invited to preach, which he did with great energy and acceptance. His appearance in the pulpit in the costume of a military officer, with his sword either lying by his side or swinging in its scabbard, was a novelty that attracted much attention and excited no little surprise among the citizens who attended the meetings. His preaching, however, was in demonstration and power, and he generally related his own experience as an evidence of the truth of his doctrine respecting experimental religion. His conversion experience was very deep. He had a severe struggle while passing from death to life before he obtained a bright and unclouded witness of his acceptance in the Beloved. However, it is stated by those who heard him in those days, that he always took care to guard weak believers against "casting away their confidence," because their experience was not the same as his.

His Impact on the New York Society

Captain Webb's impact upon the fledgling New York Methodist Society was profound. He became their most active preacher, and the novelty of his appearance in the badges of a military officer excited no little surprise. This, together with the energy with which he spoke in the name of the Lord, drew many to the place of worship, and the room where they assembled soon became too small to accommodate all who wished to hear. But what greatly encouraged them in their "work of faith and labor of love" was, that sinners were awakened and converted to God, and added to the society. These, continuing to walk in the "fellowship of the Holy Ghost," were much strengthened

and comforted, while others who beheld their godly conversation were convinced of the power and excellence of their religion.

In a letter to John Wesley, Thomas Taylor remarked thus about the impact of Webb's ministry among the New York Society: "Captain Webb, barrack-master at Albany, (who was converted three years since at Bristol,) found them out, and preached in his regimentals. The novelty of a man preaching in a scarlet coat soon brought greater numbers to hear than the room could contain. But his doctrines were quite new to the hearers; for he told them point-blank, 'that all their knowledge and religion were not worth a rush, unless their sins were forgiven, and they had "the witness of God's Spirit with theirs that they were the children of God."' ' This strange doctrine, with some peculiarities in his person, made him soon taken notice of; and obliged the little society to look out for a larger house to preach in. They soon found a place that had been built for a rigging house, sixty feet in length and eighteen in breadth."

In the effort to accommodate all who wished to hear, they next hired the above-mentioned rigging loft on William Street, and fitted it up for a place of public worship. Here they assembled for a considerable time, edified in faith and holiness by the labors of Mr. Embury, who was occasionally assisted by Capt. Webb. Still later, in consequence of the accession of numbers to the New York society, and hearers of the word, the rigging loft also became too small. Bangs wrote: "A rigging loft, sixty feet by eighteen, on William Street, was rented in 1767. Here Webb and Embury preached thrice a week to crowded assemblies. 'It could not contain half the people who desired to hear the word of the Lord.' "

Webb's Enthusiastic Help in Building Wesley Chapel

Hence they began to consult together on the propriety of building a house of worship. Thomas Webb was the leading spirit in obtaining the site for the John Street church, and headed the subscription with £30, being the largest amount then contributed by any individual.

The chapel was built of stone, faced with blue plaster. It was sixty feet in length, forty-two in breadth. Dissenters were not yet allowed to erect "regular churches" in the city; the new building was therefore provided with "a fireplace and chimney" to avoid "the difficulty of the law." Though long unfinished in its interior, it was "very neat and clean, and the floor was sprinkled over with sand as white as snow." Embury, being a skillful carpenter, "wrought" diligently upon the structure. He constructed with his own hands its pulpit; and on the memorable 30th of October, 1768, mounted the desk he had made, and dedicated the humble temple by a sermon on Hosea x, 12: "Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord, till he come and reign righteousness upon you." The house was soon thronged. Within two years from its consecration we have reports of at least a thousand hearers crowding it and the area in its front. It was named Wesley Chapel, and was the first in the world that bore that title. Seven months after its dedication a letter to Wesley, concerning Embury and Webb, said, "The Lord carries on a very great work by these two men."

Webb saw the importance of this its first material fortification in the colonies, and zealously endeavored to render it secure. His personal generosity was infectious. He could not admit the Christian character of an avaricious man. "Is his purse converted?" was his inquiry when hearing a report of the conversion of a capitalist. Besides his liberal donation, he lent the trustees three hundred

pounds, and gave them the interest of the loan. During the building of Wesley Chapel Webb visited Philadelphia, and not only organized a Methodist society but collected £32 to aid the church in New York. Like Wesley and his itinerants, he scattered religious books, and gave the profits for the debt of the church. Meanwhile he was practically an itinerant preacher.

His Spiritual Impact Along the East Coast.

While the society was thus going forward in their work in New York, Capt. Webb made excursions upon Long Island, and even went as far as Philadelphia, preaching, wherever he could find an opening, the gospel of the Son of God, and success attended his labors, many being awakened to a sense of their sinfulness through his pointed ministry, and brought to the knowledge of the truth.

Captain Webb was the founder of Methodism in Philadelphia, where he first preached in sail loft and formed a class of seven members in 1768. He sent out urgent letters to Wesley to obtain missionary helpers for America, and in response, Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoor were sent.

The good Captain continued to preach in Philadelphia more or less until Boardman and Pilmoor arrived on the 24th of October, 1769, and he was there to welcome them in person. The "large church" in which Asbury heard Pilmoor preach on the evening of his arrival was St. George's, still standing, and revered as the "Old Cathedral" of Methodism in Philadelphia. It had been built by a German Reformed Society, but its projectors failed, and sold it in 1770 to Miles Pennington, one of the first members of the first class, of seven persons, formed in the city by Captain Webb in 1768.

It was probably at the instance of Webb that Pennington obtained it, for the veteran soldier knew the value of fortified fields. He gave liberally from his own funds toward it. The following letter of Pilmoor to Wesley reveals some of the mighty impact Webb had in Philadelphia prior to Pilmoor's arrival there:

"Philadelphia, Oct. 31, 1769.

"Rev. Sir, -- By the blessing of God we are safely arrived here, after a tedious passage of nine weeks. We were not a little surprised to find Captain Webb in town, a society of about one hundred members, who desire to be in close connection with you. 'This is the Lord's doings, and it is marvellous in our eyes.' "

This letter shows that Captain Webb had been instrumental in collecting not less than one hundred souls into the Methodist Society of Philadelphia previously to the arrival of Mr. Pilmoor. Ever boosting and advancing the cause of God, Webb also aided in the purchase of the first Methodist church of Philadelphia, St. George's, in 1770, contributing liberally for it. He introduced Methodism into Delaware in 1769, preaching in Newcastle, Wilmington, and in the woods on the shores of the Brandywine. Still later he labored in Baltimore, Maryland.

Up and down the eastern seaboard, Captain Webb mightily wielded "the Sword of the Lord." New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, all felt the heavenly impact of his zealous ministry. He passed repeatedly through New Jersey, forming societies at Pemberton, Trenton, Burlington, and other places. While preaching in the market-place at Burlington in 1770, a young man in the throng, Joseph Toy, was awakened. Webb soon after formed there a class, and appointed him its leader. He

became one of the first teachers in the first college of Methodism and died at last a veteran of the Itinerancy.

While one of Wesley's assistants who was traveling through a large town in New Jersey "(Trenton most probably) he saw a barrack, and inquired of a soldier if any Methodists were there. "Yes, we are all Methodists; that is, would be glad to hear a Methodist preach," was the prompt reply, for Captain Webb had been there, and military men were always proud of both his regimentals and his eloquence. The trooper hastened to the barracks, spread the word among his comrades, and soon the inn where the evangelist had stopped was surrounded. "Where can I preach?" he asked them. "We will get you the Presbyterian church," they replied. The bell was quickly ringing, informing the whole town of the impromptu service. A "great company" assembled, and "were much affected" by the sudden appeal.

His Second Return to England in 1772 To Recruit Methodist Missionaries To America

The veteran Captain Webb having labored about six years, the principal founder of Methodism from New York to Baltimore, returned again to England in 1772 to appeal to Wesley and his Conference for more missionaries. We catch frequent glimpses of him in the contemporary records, as going to and fro in the land, preaching in Dublin, in London, and other places. Wesley this year wrote to a friend in Ireland, "Captain Webb is now in Dublin: invite him to Limerick. He is a man of fire, and the power of God constantly attends his word." It was in the same year also that Wesley heard him with "admiration" in the Old Foundry, London. "He was all life and fire." He was the right man to appeal to British Methodism for America, for he could tell his own story about it, and his military ardor gave a singular inspiration to his words.

He made vast calculations for American Methodism, and the timid Charles Wesley gazed at him with surprise, pronouncing him fanatical. More precisely, Charles Wesley said: "He is an inexperienced, honest, zealous, loving enthusiast." But, while Charles Wesley was himself greatly used of God in his own divinely appointed realm, his human judgments and opinions, like those of all others, were not always correct, and, it was next to impossible to exaggerate the moral and social prospects of the new world. Webb, it would appear, had a much better grasp of the urgent needs and opportunities for advancing the cause of God in America than did the great Methodist Hymnist. He demanded two of the ablest men of the British Conference, Christopher Hopper and Joseph Benson. Charles Wesley opposed the claim; but the zealous captain was not to be altogether defeated.

Captain Webb went to the Conference, which began on August 4, 1772, at Leeds, and there addressed the preachers with an eloquence that kindled the assembly into enthusiasm. George Shadford heard him, and says, "I went to the Leeds Conference, where I first saw Captain Webb. When he warmly exhorted preachers to go to America I felt my spirit stirred within me to go; more especially when I understood that many hundreds of precious souls were perishing through lack of knowledge, scattered up and down in various parts of the country, and had none to warn them of their danger. When I considered that we had in England many men of grace and gifts far superior to mine, but few seemed to offer themselves willingly, I saw my call the more clearly. Accordingly Mr. Rankin and I offered ourselves to go the spring following."

Having earlier, by letter, influenced the sending of Boardman and Pilmoor to the American shores, now by his enthusiastic appeals in England Captain Webb influenced Thomas Rankin,

George Shadford, and Joseph Yearbry to accompany him back to America.

One need only examine the accounts of his history to see that Thomas Webb may be rightly designated as "The First Apostle of American Methodism." Far and wide, on both sides of the Atlantic, he preached, he supported, he funded, he appealed, he was on hand, and he went in person to advance the cause of God and American Methodism. It is no surprise then, to learn that he was not willing that his new recruits go to America without him. He must be there at the port to greet them and to accompany them back to America. The following is a letter from John Wesley to George Shadford as the time neared for his embarkation to America:

"Dear George, the time has arrived for you to embark for America. You must go down to Bristol, where you will meet with Thomas Rankin, Captain Webb, and his wife. I let you loose, George, on the great continent of America. Publish your message in the open face of the sun, and do all the good you can. I am, dear George, yours affectionately."

Captain Webb's Third Voyage to America in 1773

When Shadford arrived at the dock in Bristol, Captain Webb and his wife were on the deck, and had made all necessary provisions for the little band. On Good Friday, April 9, 1773, accompanied by Joseph Yearbry (another preacher) and other passengers, they set sail. Both the missionaries and Webb kept up daily prayers, and preached often on the voyage with much effect. "The Lord was in the midst of us," writes Rankin, "and attended our meetings with power from on high." Webb especially seemed to enjoy with zest these devotions, for he could not fail to feel that his errand had been successful. Rankin's Journal repeatedly records that "Captain Webb exhorted, and was attended with the divine blessing; the word seemed to lay hold on some hearts, and they began to show it by their tears." On the 18th they had a special day. Prayers were read by Rankin, an exhortation delivered by Webb, a sermon from the quarter-deck by Shadford; the evening was spent in exhortation, singing, and prayer. "We were led out," says Rankin, "in earnest prayer for our friends and Christian brethren in England, as also that God would open a great and an effectual door for the spreading of his Gospel among those to whom his mercy and providence were now sending us. Indeed, we felt the gracious influence of the divine presence so among us that we could scarce conclude. The Lord did indeed open the windows of heaven, and the skies poured down righteousness."

His Third Arrival in America

On the 1st of June, 1773 Captain Webb and his new missionary recruits came to anchor in the Delaware, "opposite Chester, about sixteen miles south of Philadelphia," after a passage of seven and a half weeks. On the 3d they were cordially received by Asbury and the Methodists of the city.

His Labors in America to The Outbreak of the Revolutionary War

Following his third voyage to the American continent, Thomas Webb continued his travels and labors with unabated zeal till the breaking out of the Revolutionary War between England and the Colonies. In 1774, John Adams, of Massachusetts, heard him preach in St. George's, and says, "In the evening I went to the Methodist meeting, and heard Mr. Webb, the old soldier, who first came to America in the character of a quartermaster under General Braddock. He is one of the most fluent, eloquent men I have ever heard. He reaches the imagination and touches the passions very well, and expresses himself with great propriety."

However, Webb's burden for America was for its spiritual, not political, revolution, and it is doubtful that he sympathized with, nor desired to have any part in, the rebellion of the Colonists against England. Indeed, he may have voiced his disapproval of the Colonial rebellion against England. One writer said: "I feel no disposition to conceal that a few of the preachers were imprudent and reprehensible in some things, and gave too much cause for such suspicions. Rodda, in particular, acted improperly, and left the country under circumstances unfavorable to his reputation, and hurtful to the cause of religion. Captain Webb also did not act so well as he ought to have done. Rankin likewise had spoken so freely and imprudently on public affairs as to excite the jealous fear that his influence would be dangerous to the American cause. So it was that the way of the preachers on every side was almost hedged up; and for a considerable time it was with the utmost difficulty, and at the greatest risk of personal safety, that they could travel and preach at all."

Whatever the dear Captain may have said and done regarding the American Revolution, it is apparent that his motives were right, and his burden was for the advancement of God's cause on this continent. The Revolutionary War posed problems for virtually all of the English preachers on American soil, and even for some of the native American preachers who shunned involvement in this political conflict suffered persecution as a result. It was a difficult time for Methodism and for the advancement of God's cause in America.

Even Asbury, the most "American" of all of the English Methodist preachers, was compelled to "take refuge" during the Revolution. In the beginning of 1775 Asbury writes, "I am once more able to write, and feel a solemn, grateful sense of God's goodness. My all of body, soul, and time, are his due; and should be devoted, without the least reserve, to his service and glory. O that he may give me grace sufficient! I am still getting better, but am not able to speak in public; though the word of the Lord is like fire within me, and I am almost weary of forbearing. My mind is filled with pure, evangelical peace. I had some conversation with Captain Webb, an Israelite indeed, and we both concluded that it was my duty to go to Baltimore. I feel willing to go, if it is even to die there."

His Final Return to England in about 1775

While Asbury felt constrained to remain in America during the Revolutionary War, come what may, virtually all of the other Methodist missionaries, including Captain Webb, finally felt that it was best for them to return to England. He lingered in the Colonies a year more after the departure of Boardman and Pilmoor, laboring with his might to extend and fortify the young Societies, notwithstanding the increasing tumults of politics and war. Then, about 1775, his beneficent labors in America were apparently cut short, and he too returned to England.

His Life and Labors in England After His Final Return from America.

On his return to England he secured a home for his family in Portland, on the heights of Bristol, but still traveled, and preached extensively in chapels, in market-places, and in the open air, attended by immense congregations. "How did he live the remainder of his life?" asks a British itinerant who knew him through most of his career; and he answers: "We add with pleasure that to him the promise was sure, 'He that hath clean hands shall grow stronger and stronger.' Having escaped so many dangers and deaths, he believed, like Jacob, that his 'Goel,' the good angel of the Lord, had redeemed him from all mischief. To the end of his days he was persuaded that a ministering spirit, a guardian angel, had, through divine mercy attended him all the way in his diversified pilgrimage. He left

everywhere a high example of persevering diligence and zeal. From the year 1776 to 1782, a time of war by land and sea, he annually made a summer's visit to the French prisoners at Winchester, addressing them in their own language, which he had studied while in Canada. He proceeded thence to Portsmouth, where crowded auditories of soldiers and sailors listened to him with all possible veneration. In Bristol and the neighboring country, wherever he preached, spiritual good was effected." In 1792 he was liberal and active in erecting the Portland Church at Bristol, "one of the most elegant chapels," says a Wesleyan author, "in the Methodist connection, if not in the kingdom." He preached his last sermon in it.

His Final Days and Death in 1796

Captain Webb died suddenly on December 20, 1796 when he was about 72 years of age. "He appeared," says the same authority, "to have had a presentiment for some time of his approaching dissolution, and shortly before his death he spoke to an intimate friend of the place and manner of his interment, observing: "I should prefer a triumphant death; but I may be taken away suddenly. However, I know I am happy in the Lord, and shall be with him whenever he calls me hence, and that is sufficient." In the autobiography of one of the leading contemporary preachers we read: "Dec. 8th, 1796. I spent a profitable hour with that excellent man, Captain Webb, of Bristol. He is indeed truly devoted to God, and has maintained a consistent profession for many years. He is now in his seventy-second year and as active as many who have only attained their fiftieth. He gives to the cause of God and to the poor of Christ's flock the greater part of his income. He is waiting with cheerful anticipation for his great and full reward. He bids fair to go to the grave like a shock of corn, fully ripe."

Again we read: "Wednesday, Dec. 21st. Last night, about eleven o'clock, Captain Webb suddenly entered into the joy of his Lord. He partook of his supper, and retired to rest about ten o'clock in his usual health. In less than an hour his spirit left the tenement of clay to enter the realms of eternal bliss. He professed to have had some presentiment that he should change worlds during the present year, and that his departure would be sudden."

[Of his passing, a different writer records: "A little after 10 o'clock, on the 20th of December, 1796, after taking his supper and praying with his family, he went to his bed in apparent good health; but shortly his breathing became difficult; he arose and sat at the foot of the bed; but while Mrs. Webb was standing by him, he fell back on the bed, and before any other person could be called, he sunk into the arms of death without any apparent pain, aged 72 years.]

And again "Saturday, Dec. 24th. This afternoon the remains of the good old captain were deposited in a vault under the communion table of Portland Chapel. He was carried by six local preachers, and the pall was supported by the Rev. Messrs. Bradford, Pritchard, Roberts, Davies, Mayer, and McGeary. I conducted the funeral service, and Mr. Pritchard preached from Acts xx, 24. It was a solemn season, and will long be remembered by those who were present."

The venerable soldier and evangelist was thus laid to rest by "a crowded, weeping audience." The "Society showed him a great respect; the chapel was hung in mourning;" and the trustees erected a marble monument to his memory within its walls, pronouncing him "Brave, Active, Courageous, -- Faithful, Zealous, Successful, -- the principal instrument in erecting this chapel." His name must be forever illustrious in the ecclesiastical history of the New World, and American Methodists will

close this final account of a character so historically important and so intrinsically interesting, with regret that the record must present such a paucity of facts.

Estimations of His Life and Character, Etc.

It is matter of gratitude to God that Capt. Webb, as well as Mr. Embury, "held fast his confidence steadfast unto the end," and therefore "received the full reward" of his labors. Mr. Embury, after laboring successfully in the cause of Christ in New York, removed to Ashgrove, where he ended his days in the service of his God, and where he lies entombed, mingling his ashes with his relatives who have followed him to the grave, waiting for the "final doom," when the trump of God shall awaken him to life and immortality. Capt. Webb, after "sowing the good seed of the kingdom" in various places in this country, returned to Europe, and spent the remainder of his days in "kindling the fire" of divine love in the hearts of God's people, in warning sinners of their impending danger, and pointing penitent mourners to the "Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world." While therefore the one shall arise at the voice of the Son of God" from his "dusty bed" in America, and receive the plaudits of those of her sons and daughters who were brought to God by his ministry, the other shall come forth in obedience to the same mandate from his resting-place in England, and hail each other blessed amid the shouts of the redeemed, while all, whether white or black, whether from the eastern or western continent, shall unitedly, and with one voice, ascribe the GLORY OF THEIR SALVATION TO GOD AND HIS LAMB FOR EVER.

In the meanwhile, were the happy spirits of these individuals, so obscure in their life time, and by some considered as merely "honest and loving enthusiasts," permitted to look down on this American continent, and behold the thousands which have been "taken out of the horrible pit and miry clay," and had "their robes washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb," since they commenced their humble efforts in the city of New York, would not their souls exult in praises to God and the Lamb for having redeemed them from the earth, and placed them among the princes of his people!

Captain Webb was no doubt somewhat eccentric in his movements, limited in his knowledge, and of moderate talents as a preacher of the gospel; but, from the testimony of Mr. Wesley and others who knew him well, his soul was fired with an ardent zeal for God, and was drawn out with an unquenchable thirst for the salvation of his fellow-men, and the building up of the Redeemer's kingdom. As such, God honored him with his blessing -- and as such we honor his memory, and record this feeble tribute of respect to him, as one of the first Wesleyan preachers who published the gospel on these American shores.

Asbury characterized him as "an Israelite indeed." Wesley, delighted in the disciplinary regularity, the obedience and courage of military men, not a few of whom entered his itinerant ranks, evidently loved the good captain. "He is a man of fire," wrote the great founder, "and the power of God constantly accompanies his word." In 1773 Mr. Wesley speaks of his preaching at the Foundry in London, and says, "I admire the wisdom of God in still raising up various preachers, according to the various tastes of men. The captain is all life and fire; therefore, although he is not deep or regular, yet many, who would not hear a better preacher, flock together to hear him. And many are convinced under his preaching; some justified; a few built up in love."

Ten years after this, in 1783, Wesley speaks of Capt. Webb, having "lately kindled a flame here,"

(in the neighborhood of Bath,) "and it is not yet gone out. Several persons were still rejoicing in God.

I found his preaching in the street of Winchester had been blessed greatly. Many were more or less convinced of sin, and several had found peace with God. I never saw the house before so crowded with serious and attentive hearers." In 1785 he bears a similar testimony to his usefulness, in kindling up the fire of devotion among the people.

The brave captain's word "in the street in Winchester" was to sound further than Wesley supposed when he made this entry in his journal. There were soldiers in the town, and Webb always drew such to his congregations; some of them were converted, and their regiment was afterward sent to the Norman Isles in the Channel. They wrote back for a Methodist Preacher; if one were sent who could speak both French and English they predicted that "the Gospel would shine over the islands." The sainted Robert Carr Brackenbury, "gentleman" and "Local Preacher," Alexander Killham, (founder of the "New Connection Methodists,") and, later, Adam Clarke, were sent, and Methodism was founded in the beautiful Channel Islands, where it has ever since flourished, and whence it sent forth at last the evangelists who have founded it in France.

For eleven or twelve years we catch glimpses of the military evangelist in the Journals of Wesley.

The last of them is in 1785, when, being at Salisbury, where the captain had recently preached, he "endeavored to avail himself of the fire which" that veteran "seldom fails to kindle." Fletcher of Madeley appreciated him, and tried hard with him to induce Benson, the commentator, to throw himself into the Methodistic movement in America. Fletcher himself; doubtless by the influence of Webb, had strong thoughts of doing so, but his health forbade it. The allusions to Webb in the contemporary publications of Methodism show that he was a man of profound piety. "He experienced much of the power of religion in his own soul," says an itinerant who usually lodged at his home in Bath. "He wrestled day and night with God for that degree of grace which he stood in need of that he might stand firm as the beaten anvil to the stroke, and he was favored with those communications from above which made him bold to declare the whole counsel of God. His evidence of the favor of God was so bright that he never lost a sense of that blessed truth, 'the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin.' For him to live was Christ, to die was gain."

There must have been an eminent power of natural eloquence in the preaching of this zealous man. John Adams, the statesman of the American Revolution and President of the Republic, heard him with admiration, and describes him as "the old soldier -- one of the most eloquent men I ever heard; he reaches the imagination and touches the passions very well, and expresses himself with great propriety." By another hearer he is spoken of as "a perfect Whitefield in declamation." His discourses were very effective, as has been remarked, with military men. They admired his noble mien and commanding voice. One of them, John Parsons, heard him in the open air at Salisbury, and has left us a brief representation of his manner.

"With all that reverence," says the account, "which he had been wont to pay to his superiors, he stood before the preacher, (whose piercing eye he thought scrutinized every individual present,) prepared to listen with deep attention." The service commenced by the singing of a hymn, with which, we are told, the military hearer was highly delighted; an earnest prayer was then offered up in behalf of the assembled multitude; and, another hymn having been sung, the preacher read his text

from his pocket Bible, and addressed the people in an extemporaneous discourse of considerable length, during which "the admiration of Parsons was excited to the highest pitch by the earnestness of his manner and his powerful voice, which so wrought upon the military feelings of the soldier that he thought the word of command, by such an excellent officer, could distinctly be heard throughout the line, from right to left."

The sermon being ended another hymn was sung, and a short prayer concluded the meeting. John Parsons's favorable opinion was won for the Methodists by this sermon. He afterward himself became a powerful Local Preacher, and, having done much good in various parts of England during forty-five years, he departed to the hosts above, in his seventieth year, shouting as he went, "When I get to glory I will make heaven ring with my voice, and wave my palm over the heads of the saints, crying, 'Victory! victory in the blood of the Lamb!'"

A high Methodist authority, who knew the captain well, says, "They saw the warrior in his face, and heard the missionary in his voice. Under his holy eloquence they trembled, they wept, and fell down under his mighty word."

The native talent of Webb was sustained by considerable intelligence. He had seen much of human life, and had some knowledge of books. He read the Scriptures in the Greek language, and his Greek Testament is still a precious relic in America.

One of Wesley's veterans, who was intimate with the captain, and who read the funeral service over his coffin, says, "Great multitudes crowded to hear him, and a vast number in different places owned him for their spiritual father. His ministry was plain, but remarkably powerful; he was truly a Boanerges, and often made the stouthearted tremble."



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