
African American Methodism in the M. E. Tradition: The Case of Sharp Street (Baltimore)

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The role of African Americans in the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) in the decades prior to the Civil War remains one of the most neglected areas of African American religious studies. This neglect has persisted in spite of the fact that the MEC was the largest denomination among America's several religious communities during these years and included in its membership more African Americans than any other group. The problem became evident as the new discipline of African American religious studies appeared in the 1960s. Significant studies had and were appearing concerning white attitudes toward African Americans and the changing positions of Methodists regarding slavery.¹

The life and role of Black Methodists, however, were rarely considered in such discussions. The subsequent attempts to discuss Black ME Methodists were largely limited to celebrating the careers of several preachers—Harry Hosier, John Charleston, Henry Evans, John Stewart. Only in the last decade has some effort to move beyond this situation been made.² Thus all the questions remain—why did the majority of African Americans who identified themselves as Methodists remain in the MEC through the Antebellum Period, rather than join one of the several independent Black denominations? What were the issues that split the Black Methodist community into four groups, especially what issues divided those that left the MEC and those that stayed? What role did Black Methodists play

¹ Cf. Donald G. Matthews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965); William B. Gravely, William B., "Early Methodism and Slavery: The Roots of a Tradition," *Wesleyan Quarterly Review* 2 (May 1965): 301-15; Lewis B. Purifoy, "The Methodist Anti-Slavery Tradition, 1784-1844," *Methodist History* 4 (July 1966): 3-16; William B. Gravely, "Methodist Preachers, Slavery, and Caste: Types of Social Concern in Antebellum America," *Duke Divinity School Review* 34 (Autumn 1969): 209-29; David H. Bradley, "Francis Asbury and the Development of African Churches in America," *Methodist History* (1971): 3-29; W.

Harrison Daniel, "The Methodist Episcopal Church and the Negro in the Early National period," *Methodist History* (1973).

² Cf., for example, Grant Shockley, "Negro Leaders in American Methodism." *The Garrett Tower* 12, 1 (December 1966): 3-12; J. H. Graham, J. H., *Black United Methodists: Retrospect and Prospect* (New York: Vantage Press, 1979); and Julius E. Del Pino, "Blacks in the United Methodist Church from Its Beginning to 1968," *Methodist History* 19, 1 (October 1980): 3-20.

in the development of the MEC? These are the questions this essay will attempt to probe?

The neglect of the MEC's African American membership has been largely attributed to the paucity of documentation. That has been to date a valid argument. Thus, this paper is also, in part, an attempt to address that problem. It is the first of a proposed series of papers that have grown out of a three-decade attempt to assemble all of the records on ME Black Methodists that have survived from the period under consideration. Those three decades have also seen the significant expansion of knowledge of the African American community in general meaning that we can now tease out much more information from the Methodist records.³ The examination of the Methodist sources seems now to have reached a point that a

fresh perspective on the MEC's Black membership can begin to emerge. Since that story begins in Maryland, the story of the Sharp Street Church seems a logical place to begin.

Recasting the Story

The story of American Methodism is anchored in three events—all three of which integrally involve African Americans. The very first thing we know about American Methodists is that in June of 1765, an Irish American Methodist preacher named Robert Strawbridge (d.1781) came to Baltimore, Maryland, to deliver what appears to be the first Methodist sermon in the New World. Before he preached, however, a young Black man, Caleb Hyland (spelled differently in various sources), arranged a speaking stand from which Strawbridge spoke.⁴ As J. A. Handy later observed, Strawbridge's ". . . first pulpit was a block in front of a blacksmith shop, at what is now the corner of Front and Bath Street. The next Sunday he preached from a table at the corner of Baltimore and Calvert street, at which time he was mobbed."⁵ Hyland, a free Black man, owned the Boot black shop in front of which Strawbridge preached and supplied him with

³ Among the more general items of particular relevance to the situation in Baltimore are: J. Thomas Scharf, *The Chronicles of Baltimore: Being a Complete History of "Baltimore Town" and "Baltimore City" from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (Baltimore: Turnbull Brothers, 1874); James M. Wright, *The Free Negro in Maryland, 1634-1860* (New York; Colombia University, 1921, rpt.: New York: Octagon Books, 1971); T. Stephen Whitman, *The Price of Freedom: Slavery and Manumission in Baltimore and Early National Maryland* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997); Christopher Phillips, *Freedom's Port: The African American Community of Baltimore, 1790-1860* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997); and Leroy Graham, *Baltimore: The Nineteenth Century Black Capital* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982).

⁴ This story is recounted in James A. Handy, *Scraps of African Methodist Episcopal History* (Philadelphia: A. M. E. Book Concern, 1902). Posted at: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/handy/menu.html>.

⁵ Handy, J. A. "On the Introduction of African Methodism in Maryland." In Benjamin W. Arnett, ed. *The Centennial Budget* (N.P.: Benjamin W. Arnett, 1888): 273.

the table. He would be an active person in the Baltimore Black Methodist community for the next half century.

Several months after Strawbridge's inaugural sermon, he would organize a Methodist class at Sam's Creek, Frederick County, Maryland, some 50 miles from Baltimore. That class included at least one African American, known only as Aunt Annie, a servant in the Switzer family. A short time later, early in 1766, at the instigation of Barbara Heck (1734-1804), another immigrant from Ireland, the first class in New York City was formed. One member of that class was a servant woman, remembered only as Betty. Betty would go on to become a charter member of John Street Church, the first Methodist Church in the city, and one of the original members of the first Methodist church in Canada (organized after the American Revolution).⁶

These historical notes remind us of what has become a truism in Methodist Studies: African Americans have formed an important minority group within what is now the United Methodist Church over the centuries. However, they do somewhat more, in pointing out that African Americans were present from the very

beginning and were present in every geographical region into which the church penetrated. From the beginning, not only were no obstacles placed in the way of their joining, they were, in fact, welcomed into membership, and, more importantly for the story, would soon be actively recruited. Methodism was unique among American denominations for its systematic recruitment of African Americans.

African Methodists were thus already an integral part of the Methodist movement when the preachers commissioned by Methodist founder John Wesley for the care of the American members arrived from England. Actually, the first contemporaneous records we have of African members come from the journals and letters written by that first wave of preachers. The initial mention of Black Methodists dates to November 4, 1769, in this entry from the journal of Richard Boardman (1738-1782):

The number of blacks that attend the preaching affects me much. One of them came to tell me she could neither eat nor sleep, because her master would not suffer her to come to hear the word. She wept exceedingly, saying, "I told my master I would do more work than ever I used to do if he would but let me come; nay, that I

⁶ Cf. John Atkinson, *The Beginnings of the Wesleyan Movement in America and the Establishment Therein of Methodism* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1896); J. B. Wakeley, *Lost Chapters Recovered from the Early History of American Methodism* (New York: Wilbur B. Ketcham, 1889).

would do everything in my power to be a good servant."⁷

In Maryland several years later, Joseph Pilmoor (1739-1825) recorded a similar incident:

While we were on our knees wrestling with God, I observed one of the Negroes go out, and thought he was afflicted [in?] his mind and so it happened, for we heard him calling loudly upon God to bless him and save his soul from sin. How many of these poor slaves will rise up in judgment against their Masters, and, perhaps, enter into life, while they are shut out.⁸

In November 1774, Thomas Rankin (1738-1810) noted during the quarterly meeting of the Baltimore Circuit Quarterly Conference:

Near the close of the meeting, I stood up and called upon all the people to look towards that part of the chapel where the poor blacks were. I then said, "See the number of black Africans, who have stretched out their hands and hearts to God." While I was addressing the people thus, it seemed as if the very house shook with the

mighty power and glory of Sinai's God. Many of the people were so overcome, that they were ready to faint, and die under His almighty hand. For about three hours the gale of the spirit thus continued to break upon the dry bones, and they did live, the life of the glorious love. As for myself, I scarce knew whether I was in the body or not; and so it was with all my brethren. . .⁹

The most famous story of this time, of course, concerns one Henry Dorsey Gough (d.1808), the wealthy owner of several plantations near Baltimore and friend of the Methodist preachers. He had initially developed a positive attitude toward the Methodists after hearing Francis Asbury (1745-1816) speak, but the critical event occasioning his actual conversion came later when, roaming on his vast estate, he chanced to overhear someone praying. He then discovered that the praying man was one of his slaves, who was actually leading a small gathering of his peers. This prayer of thanksgiving offered by one devoid of all material wealth became the catalyst of Gough's subsequent conversion. His residence became the key Methodist center in the area.¹⁰

⁷ Letter from Boardman to John Wesley, November 4, 1769, reproduced in Atkinson, op. cit., p. 248-49.

⁸ Joseph Pilmore, *The Journal of Joseph Pilmore: Methodist Itinerant*. ed. by Frederick E. Maser and Howard T. Maag (Philadelphia, PA: Historical Society of the Philadelphia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1969): 137.

⁹ Quoted from Rankin's unpublished journal, the original of which is located in the Library of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary.

¹⁰ Gough's story is recounted in John Lednum, *A History of the Rise of Methodism in America* (Philadelphia, PA: The Author, 1859).

In many passing comments scattered throughout the journals and letters of Wesley's American preachers, we learn of the attraction of Africans (free Blacks, indentured servants, and slaves) to Methodism, and of the constant emotional impact that their presence had on the British preachers. The effect would be demonstrated in an oft-repeated theme first voiced by Pilmoor in 1770:

Even some of the poor despised children of Ham are striving to wash their robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb. We have a number of black women who meet together every week; many of whom are happy in the love of God. This evinces the truth that "God is no respecter of persons but in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of Him."¹¹

The evidence of the attraction of Methodism to African Americans was everywhere present, and that Black people usually formed the most religiously fervent segment of Methodist congregations would become a problem for Pilmoor, Asbury, and their colleagues. They made it obvious that African Methodists had not been part of their British experience, and their frequent mention of the Africans points to their initial perplexity. It was a variation of Gough's quandary—the Africans have the

least materially—they are the "poor" Africans—but they manifested what the Methodists preachers expected of the entire church. It is of interest, that Acts 10:34 ("God is no respecter of persons. . . ") comes to mind for these biblically trained ministers, rather than, for example, Galatians 3:28 (In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free).

The example of the African members certainly reinforced the anti-slavery stance soon to be officially articulated by Wesley in his 1774 "Thoughts on Slavery," but it was contributing forcefully to the major change of direction that Methodism was undergoing in the New World. Methodism had begun as a revitalization movement in a Christian country, a land where virtually everyone was baptized and raised in some relationship with the church. It viewed itself as bringing new life to Anglicans, bringing personal faith to people who already identified themselves as Christian. The Africans were, however, a radically new phenomenon—they lacked any such Christian background. They were new converts to the faith in a land where, the Methodists were gradually discovering, the great majority of people had nothing to do with Christianity. The colonies were being populated by people who had the least to lose by becoming pioneers, those most disconnected—economically, politically, religiously—from the dominant social structures in England. The Africans would lead the way as American Methodism transformed from a revitalization movement to an evangelizing church.

¹¹ Originally printed in 1784 in the *Arminian Magazine*, the Methodist magazine printed in London, and was reprinted in Atkinson, *op.cit.*, p. 192-93.

Baltimore's First Church

Nine years after Strawbridge's sermon in Baltimore, White and Black Methodists in Baltimore joined together in the erection of the first Methodist Chapel in the City. It was located on Lovely Lane. This building would become the scene of one of the more heralded events in the church, the 1784 consecration of Francis Asbury as the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church's first bishop. When statistics of African members were first reported, in 1787, there were 111 members in Baltimore, approximately 17% of the total membership.

The Black members looked on as the movement's leadership passed very strong policy statements concerning slavery in 1780 and 1784. The newly founded ME Church moved to excommunicate slaveholders who did not free their slaves. They also watched as these rules were first ignored, then quietly placed on the table, and then beginning in 1787, effectively withdrawn.¹² That same year, 1787, some of the African members at Lovely Lane began to request permission to hold separate worship services. Their actions preceded by a few weeks (or a few years)¹³

the move by some of the Philadelphia members associated with Richard Allen (1760-1831) and Absalom Jones (1746-1818) to establish separate worship services, in effect setting up a separate congregation. The move in Baltimore was somewhat less dramatic than the separation that occurred in Philadelphia.

The issue in Baltimore was essentially the same as that in Philadelphia. Several years after the Methodist Church was formally organized, the leadership of the two predominantly white congregations that met on Lovely Lane and Strawberry Alley moved to segregate the congregations during the worship hour. The Black members were also smarting over the fact that no Black preachers had been ordained as elders in the new church. The logical first candidate for such ordination would have been Harry Hosier (c.1750-1806), by far the most prominent preacher in American Methodism, black or white. Though Hosier traveled the land, always in the company of one of the white ministers, and drew the largest crowds, he would never be more than a licensed lay preacher. He would never be admitted to what was termed the "traveling

occur until 1792. Dating the problem to June 1792 also fits the incident into other related occurrences. Cf. Milton C. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975) and Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹² For the complete story, see Donald G. Matthews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965).

¹³ The dating of Allen's walkout in Philadelphia has been challenged in recent years following the discovery that the changes in the seating arrangement at St. George's that provoked the problem did not

ministry." When the first ordination of several Black men as deacons were made, Hosier was quietly passed over.

In 1787, some of the Black members in Baltimore, mostly free Blacks, began to meet in Caleb Hyland's boot black cellar in what was an independent prayer meeting. This gathering was in partial response to the placing of white leaders over all of the Black classes. Jacob Fortie [also spelled Forty] assumed leadership of the group. The names of a number of the attendees at these prayer meetings are known—Henry Harden, Thomas Clare, Munday Janey, Jacob Gillard, George Douglas, Daniel Buster, and Caleb Guilly. This prayer group grew and evolved through the 1780s. Not financially able to afford a meetinghouse, for a brief period they rented facilities on Fish Street, but through most of the 1790s met in members' homes or wherever they could.¹⁴

¹⁴ At this point one encounters a significant problem because of the manner in which American Methodism was organized at this time. Officially, through the first decades of the nineteenth century, Methodists recognized one church (or charge) in Baltimore, and records were kept with that understanding. The MEC Conference annually assigned two ministers to Baltimore. In Baltimore, there were several buildings that served as preaching points and worship centers, the oldest being the Lovely Lane church. Through the 1890s the African members met together for worship and were known informally as the "Colored Methodist Society." After 1802, the church building on Sharp Street became the society's home base, but there were always groups meeting in other locations. Through the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Black membership in Baltimore also began to be referred to as the African Methodist Episcopal

In 1797, the Maryland Society for the Abolishment of Slavery, whose leadership included a number of Methodists, purchased a lot on Sharp Street from James Carey, a Quaker. Upon this parcel of land, the city's first African-American school was opened. It lasted only two years, and in 1801 Carey reclaimed his land. In 1802, the African American Methodists purchased the land which became the meeting site for the Sharp Street congregation and later the site for another school. In 1811, an additional lot on Sharp Street, adjacent to the first, was also purchased.¹⁵ At some time prior to the

Church, a designation that appears on the 1802 deed for the Sharp Street property.

In writing about African Methodists, a confusion arises because the official designation of the Baltimore Methodists in the official Church literature leaves unclear that various groups in the church were organized around a meetinghouse, while other groups met regularly in members' homes or places of business. This confusion is particularly evident in the efforts of various partisan histories tracing the origins of Sharp Street or Bethel AME in Baltimore. Both churches share a common history prior to 1814, but draw on slightly different aspects of that history in presenting their credentials. See, for example, Bettye C. Thomas, "History of the Sharp Street Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church, 1987-1920," in *One Hundred Seventy-fifth Anniversary Journal of Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church* (Baltimore, 1977).

¹⁵ In 1801, for the sum of \$870, Jacob Gillard and Richard Russell purchased land at Forrest Lane and Conwago Street for the use of the African Methodist Episcopal church, the term "African" being the designation for all the local Black members of the Baltimore Methodist community. It appears that this

purchase of the land on Sharp Street, the Baltimore Black Methodists had divided themselves into several groups. It appears that initially the division was purely functional, their number having swelled to nearly 500, plus an uncounted number of people who attended but were not formally members. After 1802, the building on Sharp Street became the center of the Black Methodist community.

Also, about this same Daniel Coker (c.1780-1846), soon to be one of the most important figures in the development of Baltimore Black Methodism, arrived in the city. Born into slavery on a Maryland plantation, his mother was white, and he had skin light enough to pass as white. He escaped his home on the plantation, where he had been allowed to receive an education, moved to New York, and there became a Methodist. He changed his name and returned to Maryland in 1801 as Daniel Coker. For some months he lived a clandestine life awaiting his formal emancipation. That having been accomplished by some Quakers pooling money to purchase his freedom, in 1802 Coker became a teacher in the school established on Sharp Street and quickly emerged as the leader of the African American Methodist community.¹⁶ He

purchase was a venture in real estate speculation, the purchasers hoping to resale the land at a later date for a profit.

¹⁶ Little information is actually available on Coker from 1801 until he reemerges in 1808 and is ordained by Asbury. At some point in this period, probably closer to 1802 than 1808, he was bale to surface and

preached regularly, and his abilities were finally recognized in 1808 when Bishop Asbury welcomed him into the small circle of Black preachers ordained as deacons. (In the Methodist system, deacon's orders were usually a step to ordination as elder and admission to conference membership). Coker would further solidify his leadership position in 1810 with the publishing of a 43-page pamphlet, *A Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister*,¹⁷ in which he would make his case for the emancipation of the slaves.

While Coker was the most famous of the Sharp Street ministers, his life is by no means the best documented. That honor belongs to David Smith who toward the end of his long life published his autobiography.¹⁸ Born in 1784, Smith was raised on a farm owned by a Roman Catholic family. Gaining his freedom by

become the school's primary instructor. See Graham, *op cit.*, pp. 63-77.

¹⁷ Daniel Coker, *A Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister* (Baltimore: Benjamin Edes, 1810). Text reproduced in Dorothy Porter, comp. & ed., *Negro Protest Pamphlets; a Compendium* (New York, Arno Press, 1969) and Richard Newman and Patrick Rael, eds. *Pamphlets of Protest: an Anthology of Early African-American Protest Literature, 1790-1860* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁸ [David Smith], *Biography of the Rev. David Smith, of the A. M. E. Church Being a Complete History, Embracing Over Sixty Year's Labor in the Advancement of the Redeemer's Kingdom on Earth Including "The History of the Origin and Development of Wilberforce University."* (Xenia, OH: Xenia Gazette Office, 1881).

some fortuitous circumstances, he became a Methodist, in 1796. As he later remembered it:

According to the rules and discipline of the Church, I joined on six month's probation. As nearly as I can recollect, I was about twelve years old. The Rev. Nasey Schin was then pastor of Sharp and Light street Churches, the only colored Churches in Baltimore at that time. When my probation was out (the six months) I was then received into full membership, and very soon after I requested the Rev. Schin to give me a permit to hold prayer-meetings in private houses, which he consented to do.¹⁹

Though a youth, he enjoyed success in preaching and was soon rewarded with an exhorter's license. He later was able to travel in the region around the city and preach on the plantations.

Another prominent leader at Sharp Street was Edward Waters. Born in Missouri in 1780, as a young man he had moved to Baltimore and in 1798 converted to Christianity. He joined the Methodists and in 1810 was licensed as an exhorter at Sharp Street.

From 1802 onward, there was at least one African Methodist congregation in

Baltimore, whose members gathered at the building on Sharp Street. Its classes were led by white members from Lovely Lane, but increasingly through the decade, Black class leaders were assigned. In addition, an informal prayer group of Sharp Street members was also meeting, under black leadership. The second group met in various locations over the years. Both groups were formally a part of the White-controlled organization, which grew to include four predominantly white congregations—Light Street (the former Lovely Lane church), Strawberry Alley, Green Street, and Wilk Street. Some Black members continued to worship at these churches. Then in 1810 land was published for the building of a second African congregation, which in 1812 first appeared in the records as Asbury Church (now Christ United Methodist Church). By 1815, at least three classes were meeting in its building, and other nearby.

Throughout this period (1802-1815), Black members were counted as members of the single white charge and were formally under the authority of the two white ministers annually assigned to the city by the Methodist conference. Baltimore was one of Methodism's strongest centers and Methodism became and remained a force in the city through the nineteenth century. Sharp Street and its school were the center of the Black Methodist community.

The primary event affecting Sharp Street during this period occurred in 1812 as the war with Britain (that would lead to the invasion of nearby Washington). During the

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 15.

summer months, anger focused on perceived pro-British elements in the city and in scattered riots several whites were killed. Then, the mob redirected its anger to the Free Black community and several homes were destroyed before someone presented the idea of burning Sharp Street, a symbol of Free Black Baltimoreans. An angry confrontation in front of the church was only ended when members inside the building threatened to use force to defend the building. The incident prompted the mayor to send out troops to create a visible presence throughout the city and stop any further violence.²⁰

Dividing Methodism

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, it had become obvious to all that the deacon's orders to which a cadre of African American preachers had been admitted were not preparatory to their further ordination as elders and admission into the traveling ministry. The implication was that while the various black congregations had a significant amount of autonomy, ultimately their affairs remained in the hands of the white ministers and the lay leaders who controlled the white congregations. Blacks served as unordained local preachers, exhorters (lay preachers), and class leaders, but in each case were beholden to the white leadership for the regular annual renewal of

their authority. Over time some restlessness with this arrangement became visible.

The first real sign of trouble had emerged at Wilmington, Delaware, another center of Methodist strength. In 1813, Peter Spencer (1782-1843) led a group out of the predominantly white church and organized the Union Church of Africans. This church was not only independent of the local white congregation, but autonomous relative to the Methodist Episcopal Church. That congregation soon grew into a new denomination that continues today as the African Union First Methodist Protestant Church.²¹ A similar restlessness appeared among the Black members in Baltimore. Thus it was that, as James A. Handy notes:

In November of that year, 1814, Henry Harden, Stephen Hill, Daniel Coker, Jacob Gilliard,²² George Douglas, Don C. Hall and Daniel Brister, met at Mr.

²¹ On the situation in Wilmington, see Lewis V. Baldwin, *Invisible Strands in African Methodism: A History of the African Union Methodist Protestant and Union American Methodist Episcopal Churches, 1805-1980* (Methuen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983) and Joseph R. Waters, "Ezion Methodist Episcopal Church," in John D. C. Hanna, ed., *The Centennial Services of Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church, Wilmington, Delaware, October 13-20, 1889* (Wilmington, DE: Delaware Printing Company, 1889): 172-77. Spencer would consider but reject joining his work to that of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

²² Gillard was Coker's father-in-law. See Graham, *op. cit.*, 72.

²⁰ Graham, *op. cit.* 71.

Harden's residence, in what is now known as Raborg street, corner of New-Alley, now Arch street, and resolved to purchase this property; (this street at that time was called Fish street, on account on the large Catfish which at high water came up from the Falls), which resolution was immediately put in operation, and on the 5th of April, 1815, they organized the Society. Five weeks after, that is to say on the 9th of May, 1815, in Society meeting assembled, Mr. Stephen Hill submitted the following name for the new society: The African Methodist Bethel Church Society, of the city of Baltimore; which name was adopted. Early in the year 1816, an invitation was received, soliciting this society to be represented in a convention, to meet in Philadelphia, April 1816. Delegates were sent, and the subsequent history you know.²³

As of 1814, though tracing its origin to the original independent prayer meetings begun in 1787 and through the congregation that had met at various locations through the years, a new entity had come into being, a congregation whose building was not under

the control of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Knowledge of the existence of this congregation, to be called the African Methodist Bethel Church Society, circulated thru African American Methodist circles around the country, and when the group that gathered around Richard Allen in Philadelphia moved two years later to form the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, they sent an invitation to the Bethel group in Baltimore to join them.

David Smith sheds much light upon the situation leading to the organization of the Bethel congregation. He notes that a number of Black exhorters manifested a significant amount of talent as preachers and that as a result the white exhorters became jealous of them. It was also the case that Coker, the only ordained minister among them, had the job of making the regular reports to the white elders on the condition of the Black leaders. Based on those reports, the elders often made far-reaching decisions without what today would be termed due process. Those who felt wronged by such decisions (and their friends) harbored a growing resentment against the church's leadership.

Coker, the deacon who was not invited into elder's orders, while continuing to preach and teach at Sharp Street, began quietly to talk about schism. As he felt out the exhorters, he found those who were ready to consider leaving the MEC. Smith mentions that the break was somewhat along geographical lines. Namely, the ones who had been longtime residents of Baltimore tended to favor the break (Jacob Fortie, at that time a

²³ This account by J. A. Handy was reprinted by Benjamin W. Arnett in the *Centennial Budget* (1887), p.272-273. Handy was a prominent member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and a member of it Baltimore Conference. A more expanded account of these events is found in Handy's *Scraps of African Methodist Episcopal History* (Philadelphia: M. E. Book Concern, 1902).

local preacher, being a prominent exception) and those who had in recent years migrated to Baltimore from the Eastern Shore of Maryland tended to remain attached to the MEC. Many former slaves from the Eastern Shore had moved to Baltimore as there were few jobs for a free Black person at the time in the largely agricultural region.²⁴

An analysis of the African American Methodist class membership lists for Baltimore also shed further light on the schism. Close to 200 of the 1400 African members in Baltimore left to form Bethel. Interestingly enough, it was the several classes that met at Asbury that were hardest hit by the withdrawal of members. Two of the ministers who left, Richard Williams and Charles Pierce were also class leaders at Asbury. Certainly, members left Sharp Street, but it appears that the newer Asbury congregation was the real source of the schism. Among the losses to Sharp street were one preacher, Henry Harden,²⁵ and the exhorter Edward Waters, the latter destined to become an AME bishop.²⁶

Important to the group if it broke with the

²⁴ A copy of the classes and leadership of the Black members in Baltimore in 1815 has survived. It indicates that of six local preachers, three (including Coker) left, as did two of the ten exhorters and but a single class leader.

²⁵ Harden would later become an AME minister in New York City.

²⁶ Harden, Pierce, Waters and Williams, along with David Smith, constituted the core of the soon to be organized Baltimore Conference of the AME Church.

MEC would be a meeting place. Initially, they rented a Presbyterian church not far from Sharp Street, and then purchased a large building on Fish Street that became the new church's permanent home. These actions set the Bethel congregation in place to participate in the founding of the AME Church. Coker attended the founding conference in Philadelphia in April 1816, and was actually elected by the attendees as the church's new bishop, however, Coker refused to accept the post that was subsequently given to Allen.²⁷

When the dust settled following the organization of the AMEC, the Methodist community in Baltimore could be found in three locations. Those who had left the MEC worshipped at Bethel. The great majority of those who remained in the MEC could be found at Sharp Street, a smaller number at Asbury, with a small minority still occupying space at Light Street and the other predominantly white congregations. In the aftermath of the schism, the Black membership required some reorganization, especially of the class structure. Several classes that met at Asbury had been gutted, with a majority of their members leaving. The encouragement to rebuild at Asbury seems the most likely rationale behind the

²⁷ There has been much speculation about why Coker refused the bishop's chair. Some have attributed to his relatively light skin, others to his perception that it was Allen's right as the instigator of the national organizational effort. See Graham, *op. cit.*, 73; Phillips, *op. cit.*, 134-35.

resolution passed by the white leadership on April 9, 1817, that requested the Black members to "retire from the Light Street, Eutaw, and old Town churches."²⁸

In discussing the establishment of AME Church, attention has been almost totally directed to the break of the AMEs from the predominantly white leadership of the MEC. Meanwhile, no consideration has been given to the equally important split within the Black Methodist community itself. The formation of the AME Church forced a choice upon all of Baltimore's Black Methodists. And it would appear that, at least initially, the majority chose to remain with the Sharp Street Church. The split was largely a division among the Free Blacks. The majority of members were, however, still slaves having less choice about their religious allegiance, and of course, many Free Blacks had family who remained in slavery.

There is every reason to believe that almost all the Black members would have favored the full ordination of their ministers and freedom from the arbitrary control of the church's white leadership. At the same time, there were strong arguments favoring their staying with the Methodist Episcopal Church. Most importantly, breaking with the Methodist Episcopal Church meant breaking of a number of long-term relationships. This issue must have weighed most heavily

among those who had close friends and relatives who remained in slavery. Further, leaving Sharp Street would mean reorienting one's access to power, much of which now came through the Methodist hierarchy. White ministers gave individuals an immediate avenue for the amelioration of various practical problems.

It was also the case that, even with the backing away from the very strong policies against slavery articulated in the 1780s, the ME Church remained one of the stronger loci of anti-slavery sentiment. Even the southern conferences were calling slavery a moral evil. Hope persisted among many Black people that the church would revert to its earlier position and that the opportunity to call the church to account for its shortcomings relative to its African members would arise. Finally, it was the case that many Black members felt that their participation in the church from its American beginnings gave them a birthright that they refused to abandon.

Possibly the major reason for the African members remaining with Sharp Street was their response to a persistent message they had heard from the white ministers and other friendly voices—that it was important that they show the larger white community that Black people did not conform to the derogatory stereotypes. They were hard working, prosperous, sober, intelligent, and potentially ready to assume any position in the community held by a white person. Sharp Street, and its school, was to many the primary demonstration of the truth of their

²⁸ Cited in Phillips, *op.cit.*, 125, and Graham, *op.cit.*, 74-75.

life and would be the avenue of their integration into the mainstream of American society. This argument would actually reappear during debates at the General Conference of the United Methodist Church in 1970 when the status of the remaining Black conferences was decided.

The issues that divided them aside, both groups had a prosperous future ahead of them. They held a high status in what was a growing Black community and both would soon see additional sister congregations form, a sign of their burgeoning membership. Soon after the split, in 1825, Sharp Street and Asbury churches became the seed from which the Orchard Street Church (now Metropolitan UMC) would begin to take shape.

The members at Sharp Street were also justly proud of their school. Coker continued to teach at the school until he readied himself to leave for Africa. He would be succeeded as the primary instructor by William Watkins (c.1800-1858), one of his pupils and a leader in the Sharp Street congregation. He would go on to marry the daughter of Richard Russell, a Sharp Street trustee, and emerge as a preacher.

Sharp Street and Bethel were tied together somewhat by their common origin and would remain more or less friendly rivals over the succeeding decades and to the present. Once the immediate impact of the schism was put behind them, the two congregations would share the same needs to respond to common issues. For example, in

1830, a young Virginia slave, Nat Turner (1800-1831), who had been nurtured in the Methodist chapel built by his master Benjamin Turner for the plantation's slaves, organized a following and killed a number of people in a rampage that sent shudders through the white community.²⁹ In reaction, many states passed new laws relative to the African American community. Maryland legislators, for example, passed a series of laws that, among other provisions, prohibited free Blacks from other states residing in Maryland and required any newly freed Black people to leave the state. The new law also spoke directly to Bethel, Sharp Street, Asbury and Orchard Street, in that it prohibited Blacks from attending religious meetings unless whites were present.

The impact of the Nat Turner incident was being felt just as a new movement for the immediate emancipation of the slaves began to spread from New England. The new abolitionist movement is generally dated from the efforts of a lay member of the May Street Methodist Episcopal Church, David Walker (1785-1830). In 1829, Walker, a tailor in Boston's relatively small Free Black community, issued *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*,³⁰ calling for an

²⁹ On Nat Turner's Methodist roots and the role the church played in his revolt, see Randolph Lewis, "Nathaniel Turner: Christian Martyrdom in Southampton," posted at <http://www.nathanielturner.com/nathanielturner2.htm>.

³⁰ David Walker, *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, To the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly,*

immediate end to American slavery. The circulation of the pamphlet in northern antislavery circles called a new effort toward abolition into being. But Walker also found an ingenious method of circulating the pamphlet in the South: he sewed it into the linings of the suits he made and had it shipped as contraband.³¹ Of course, when it fell into the hands of southern legislators, it added to the reaction from the Nat Turner incident.

Colonization

Even before the Nat Turner incident and the new abolitionist movement, however, Baltimore Methodists were asked to decide about a possible future posed to them by the Colonization movement. Founded at the end of 1816, the American Colonization Society included a number of prominent founders, including former president James Monroe (1758-1831), War of 1812 hero Francis Scott Key (1779-1843), and the notable lawyer Daniel Webster (1782-1852). Their program was designed to provide passage of Free Blacks to Africa. The more altruistic members felt that African Americans would never be able to assimilate into the society,

and thought repatriation to their ancestor's homeland was the best option. At the same time, slave owners were quite aware of the threat that Free Blacks offered, by their very existence, to the institution of slavery.

Free Blacks, including Free Black Methodists, aligned themselves along a broad spectrum of opinion concerning colonization. For example, in January 1817, just one month after the formation of the Colonization Society, Richard Allen helped organize an anti-colonization rally that would be attended by some 3,000 Philadelphians. At that rally, Allen and others drafted a letter protesting the idea of colonization, which they viewed as merely an attempt to strengthen slavery, hiding under the illusion of ameliorating the burdens on African Americans in general. But while deploring colonization, Allen flirted with the very similar idea of emigration. Rather than simply accept the failure of their not having found a place in American life, emigrationists suggested that their peers should seize opportunities to better their lives whenever they presented themselves. Such an opportunity appeared in 1824 when the president of Haiti (where slaves had recently revolted and taken control of the government) invited American Blacks to come help build a free country in the Caribbean. Allen organized a group of 58 people who sailed for Haiti in August of that year. Allen's son John accompanied the group and delivered a letter to the Haitian president from his father that noted, "My heart burns affectionately in acknowledging the kind offers you have made to these poor

to Those of the United States of America. Third and Last Edition, with Additional Notes, Corrections, &c. (Boston: The Author, 1830).

³¹ A summary of the Story of the May Street congregation is found at the Boston African-American National Historic Site posted by the U.S. Park Service at <http://www.nps.gov/boaf/topics.htm>.

oppressed people here in the United States, by offering them an asylum where they can enjoy liberty and equality."³²

Amid the debate that followed the introduction of the colonization program, Baltimore (and Washington, D.C.) became centers of its support in the Black community. This support was nowhere more fully illustrated than by Daniel Coker's agreement to become the chaplain for one of the first ships of colonists who sailed for West Africa. In 1820 Coker would settle in Sierra Leone where he lived the rest of his life. According to David Smith, Coker was initially opposed to the Colonization scheme, but was recruited heavily by the Society's leaders and finally consented to go from the inducements he was offered.³³

While members at Bethel considered Africa, George R. McGill, a prominent lay member at Sharp Street organized the Maryland Haitian Company that in 1819 chartered a ship, the *Dromo*, which would carry a group of Baltimoreans to the Caribbean island.

³² The *U.S. Gazette* (Philadelphia): August 24, 1824; Quoted in Gérard Alphonse Férère, "Haiti and the Diaspora: New historical, Cultural and Economic Frontiers." 1999. Posted at <http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti-archive/msg00868.html>.

³³ Coker's relationship to the church is somewhat obscure for the next few years. In 1817, he was not given an appointment as a preacher by the Baltimore Conference because of "rumors" about his conduct. He was reinstated in 1818, but was still in obvious tension with the leadership in both Baltimore and in Philadelphia (over the episcopal election).

McGill had previously made a trip to meet with the Haitian president, and see firsthand the conditions that colonists would encounter. Upon his return he devoted much time overcoming rumors as to the poor state of Haiti since its independence. In the meantime, the Methodist Episcopal Church threw some support (though not funding) behind the colonization effort.³⁴

The colonization cause, which waxed and waned throughout the nineteenth century, received new support at the end of 1826 when following meetings at Bethel and Sharp Street, supporters issued "A Memorial of the Free People of Colour." The memorial, actually written by two white men with local political ambitions, did not receive the support of a majority of the conferences' attendees, and quickly drew the ire of William Watkins, the head of the Sharp Street school, and another lay leader/activist Jacob Greener, who pointed out the anti-Black statements in the document. In his writings, Watkins emphasized the Americanization of the African community and noted that as a groups Black people had no knowledge of Africa and no desire to go there.

A minority in the several Methodist churches did hold some hope for a future in Africa, among them George McGill, who had not joined the Haitian group in 1819 because of an illness that had temporarily taken him out. Several months prior to the

³⁴ Cf. Smith, *op. cit.*

conferences, McGill had begun to organize a group to go to Africa, and he was instrumental in setting up the December conferences. In the end, however, only a small group joined McGill in the move to Liberia. The first would, however, be joined by a second group led by Sharp Street schoolteacher Remus Harvey, which departed for Liberia in October 1827.

Throughout this period, and indeed for the rest of his life, Watkins took the lead in denouncing colonization. This would cause him some discomfort in the 1830s when David Walker's *Appeal* appeared, in that the *Appeal* cited Watkins' arguments against colonization with approval. Watkins thus became unwittingly associated with Walker's approval of violence as a means to end slavery. However, the *Appeal* only slowed him momentarily from his picking up the attacks on colonization, which he published sporadically in the *Liberator* published by William Lloyd Garrison. At the same time, closer to home, he had to deal with the supporters of colonization and gradual emancipation that included two preachers, John Fortie at Sharp Street and Nathaniel Peck at Bethel.³⁵

³⁵ Watkins continued as a leader at Sharp Street into the 1840s, but around 1844 he was caught up in the Millerite enthusiasm concerning the predicted end of the world. He was dropped from the role of preachers at Sharp Street and gradually faded into obscurity. In 1852 he moved to Canada and died there in 1858. Watkins eventual fate may be one reason that he was largely forgotten in later years at Sharp Street. See Graham, *op.cit.*, 93-146.

To those African Americans who weighed the pros and cons of colonization and abolitionism, one issue often tipped the balance in its favor, namely the fragile nature of the liberty experienced by Free Blacks. In places like Baltimore, Free Blacks lived with the fear that they could be returned to a state of slavery, and once a slave, the possibility of being relocated from the relatively permissive atmosphere of the urban North to labor on a plantation in the Deep South. Even a well-known and prominent Black leader like Richard Allen was not exempt, and in 1806 he was detained for a period under charges that he was a fugitive slave.

The anxieties precipitated by their precarious situation in Baltimore and other urban centers are vividly illustrated in the so-called Pearl Incident instigated by some members of the Asbury MEC in Washington, D. C. By 1848, market changes had created a situation in which there was a perceived over abundance of slaves in the Washington-Baltimore region. The most talked about solution to the problem was the sale of a number of slaves to the Deep South. Reacting to this new situation, Paul Edmonson, a free Black man married to Emily, a slave; his slave son Samuel; Paul Jennings; and Daniel Bell, also a free man married to a slave wife, developed an escape plan that aimed to move their families and other slave acquaintances north, away from the southern slave traders. With other

members of Asbury church, the men hired a ship, *The Pearl*, to pick up a group of 77 African Americans, and sail down the Potomac to the Atlantic. Unfortunately, as the ship moved into Chesapeake Bay it was overtaken. All those on board, including the six Edmonson children, were sold and sent south. Paul Edmonson would spend the rest of his life buying their freedom.³⁶

Progress of Baltimore ME Black Methodism to the War

In spite of personal anxieties concerning slavery, through the last decades prior to the Civil War, the members of Sharp Street and its sister congregation in Baltimore who chose to continue their struggles within the ME Church focused considerable attention on developing Black leadership. Through this period, though Black ministers assumed considerably more roles in pastoral leadership, they were still not ordained as elders, nor were they admitted to the conference. Officially, the Baltimore Annual Conference would annually assign a white elder as the minister in charge of each of the Black congregations.

Through the 1820s, both Sharp Street and Asbury remained as the African churches attached to the one Baltimore charge. Then in 1830, one of the three Baltimore ministers, Joseph Frey, was given the specific charge of serving the two Black congregations. Two years later, the two churches were set aside as the "African Methodist Episcopal Church in the City of Baltimore" and incorporated as a single entity. The members of Sharp Street reacted to these events by annually petitioning the Baltimore conference to assign a Black preacher as the minister in charge. Their petition was annually tabled.

Eventually, in reaction to the failure of their annual petitions, beginning in 1848 (at the first MEC general conference after the Southern conferences had departed), Black Methodists from Sharp Street and other Black congregations began to lobby for the organization of an all-Black Conference to include the churches in the care of the Baltimore Conference. Their colleagues further north had greater success. On August 23, 1852, they convened the first Convention of Colored Local Preachers and Laymen, a kind of proto-conference, at Zoar Church in Philadelphia. Following a second such conference in 1855, the African American preachers met annually into the 1860s. These conferences considered such issues as salaries for Black ministers, the development of an itinerant ministry, and future ordination.

The Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Lincoln

³⁶ The Edmonson family story is told in John H. Paynter, *Fugitives of the Pearl* (Washington DC: Associated Publishers 1930) and summarized in Mary Kay Ricks, "A Passage to Freedom," *The Washington Post Magazine* (February 17, 2002): 21-36, posted at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/horizon/aug98/pearl.htm>.

considerably changed the demeanor of the leadership of the Methodist Episcopal Church by making, among other things, the older distinction between the abolitionists and anti-slavery positions somewhat obsolete. Thus it was that the 1864 General Conference accepted petitions to organize the African American congregations into Annual conferences (albeit segregated ones). Beginning 1864 with the Delaware and Washington Conferences, The MEC organized a set of conferences for Black members across the nation. With the organization of these conferences, and the end of the slave era, the first period of African American life in the MEC comes to an end and another begins.

The Sharp Street story is but one of a number that arise from Methodism's Antebellum century. It merely opens the door to the diverse situation encountered by African American Methodists in other parts of the country. Far different stories arise from Philadelphia, New York, and New England, which differ radically from those of South Carolina or Texas. But those are topics for future consideration.

The story of antebellum Sharp Street can only artificially be disconnected from the continuing story in the years after the Civil War. Through the school and other activities it supported, the church became a major training ground for the generation of leaders that emerged immediately after the war when the opportunities and resulting demands on the Black greatly expanded. The role of the church in that endeavor remains

one of its yet untold stories.

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