

Robert Strawbridge's Outreach

We remember Robert Strawbridge for establishing the first Methodist Class and Methodist Society in the new world. But just as important is his work in spreading the Methodist movement throughout the colonies in the Wesleyan model. Strawbridge traveled widely, but left no Journal or letters or even his signature. So we are dependent on the letters and Journals of his contemporaries for information concerning his work. But these records tell an inspiring story of communities of disciples planted, and witness of the faith raised up. Although he would not live to see it, Strawbridge's work was the foundation on which the famous Christmas Conference at Lovely Lane in 1784 would create a new denomination – a new church.

The First Class and First Methodist Society

Immediately after arriving in the American colonies and renting a home in 1760 or 1761, Robert began the work of Methodist preaching. He established a Class Meeting (or house church) in his home. Alternatively, this class would meet in the home of his landlord, John England.

As this Class Meeting grew and raised funds, Strawbridge built a Log Meeting House circa 1764 in a large meadow on a private farm about a mile from his home near the tributaries of Sam's Creek and Pipe Creek. This Meeting House was used for Methodist preaching and singing. A later owner of the farm dismantled it and used the logs to erect a barn. During the centennial celebration of Methodism in 1866, relic hunters removed the remaining logs and the building disappeared. Based on measurements of the foundation, it was estimated that the building was 24 ft. by 24 ft. A replica of the Log Meeting House, the first Methodist House of Worship built in America, has been erected on the Strawbridge Shrine grounds. The present day Bethel Church on Hooper Road at Sam's Creek Road is a successor to the Log Meeting House.

In 1768, the First Society began to meet at John Evan's House under the leadership of John Evans – the first recorded American convert. It continued to meet there until 1809, well after the death of Robert Strawbridge in 1781. During those 41 years, the John Evans House became a conference appointment. Francis Asbury preached there in 1777. The Strawbridge Pulpit was found in this house and is now in the Lovely Lane Museum in Baltimore. A replica of the pulpit is in the Log Meeting House replica at the Shrine. The Evans house itself was move by truck to the Shrine grounds in 1979.

The Second Class

Strawbridge expanded his ministry; preaching at the homes of Andrew Poulson, John Evans, John Maynard, and others in the Pipe Creek and Sam's Creek Area.

He formed a second Class Meeting at the home of Andrew Poulson, brother-in-law of John Evans. The Poulson house is about one mile from the Strawbridge House. Although Poulson's home was spacious, it was not always large enough to accommodate the crowds who came to hear Strawbridge. So the meeting would be moved outdoors under a tree later designated as the Strawbridge Oak.

This tree was cut down in 1907. The Strawbridge Shrine Association purchased at auction a part of this tree on which there is a bronze plaque stating:

STRAWBRIDGE OAK
POULSON'S MEADOW
CUT DOWN 1907
34 FT. IN CIRCUMFERENCE
(ROBT. STRAWBRIDGE PREACHED
UNDER THE TREE UNTIL 1780)

Expanding Methodist Ministry

In the early 1760's, in what is now Roland Park, Baltimore City (at that time part of Baltimore County), Strawbridge organized a society at the home of Daniel Evans, probably a relative of the first Strawbridge convert, John Evans. This is purported to be the first Methodist Society in Baltimore County. A fine chapel was built to accommodate the crowds there. Today, there is still a street off Cold Spring Lane near Roland Park Avenue called Evans Chapel Road. The successor to this chapel is Govans UMC.

Also in Baltimore County (now Baltimore City), a Methodist Society was formed by Robert Strawbridge and Samuel Merryman circa 1763. Merryman had heard Strawbridge at Pipe Creek and was later converted. He invited Strawbridge to his home in the area of Reisterstown Road and Patterson Avenue to organize this society. The present day Arlington UMC is an outgrowth of this society.

It is possible that Strawbridge introduced Methodism into Leesburg, Virginia in 1766 when a society was formed there. A Chapel was built in 1768 (finished in 1770) on ground that had been deeded for "*no other purpose but a church or meetinghouse or graveyard*". This deed is considered by Methodist historians to be the oldest deed in American Methodism.

In 1769, Strawbridge formed a society at Bush Chapel, some six miles from Aberdeen, Maryland, in Harford County. This was the second meeting house built for Methodists in the state of Maryland

Strawbridge preached in Frederick, Maryland in 1770. He also preceded Asbury by several years preaching in Kent County, Maryland in 1769 or 1770, thus becoming the first Methodist to preach on the Eastern Shore.

Strawbridge along with the first American born local preacher, Richard Owings (sometimes spelled Owens) traveled to Georgetown as well as other places in Fairfax County, Virginia and preached.

Francis Asbury arrived in America in 1772. In his Journal, he records that a society had been formed at Back River Neck by Strawbridge.

Strawbridge also formed a society at the home of James J. Baker, adjacent to the forks of Gunpowder Falls near Fallston, Harford County, Maryland. In 1773, a chapel was erected on land donated by James T. Baker; this chapel was known as the Fork Meeting House.

On January 14, 1770, Strawbridge preached at St. George's Church in Philadelphia. He also preached at Trenton, New Jersey, February 22, 1774.

Edwin Schell, longtime Executive Director of the United Methodist Historical Society, from his research wrote that: "*Robert Strawbridge, pioneer preacher in the Frederick-Baltimore area, organized Methodist classes in Huntingdon County (Pennsylvania) about 1774. He and other Marylanders were attracted to the south part of the county. Strawbridge owned 183 acres near Maddensville, now Springfield Twp., Huntingdon Co., earlier Dublin Twp., Bedford County.*"

Robert was appointed to the Baltimore City Station in 1772, along with Francis Asbury. While conference minutes show that he had appointments in 1773 and 1775, he had none in 1774.

Robert Ayres, when organizing Huntingdon Circuit in Pennsylvania in June 1788, found "old members" near Shirleysburg and near Cassville. In 1790, a church was built near Three Springs. Maddensville is 40 miles from Bath (now Berkley Springs, WV), 12 miles from Cassville, and 21 miles from Shirleysburg.

Preachers Raised Up

During his years of forming classes and preaching, Strawbridge raised up many leaders to carry on his work. The list of these gifted men is impressive – Freeborn Garrettson, Richard Owings, Sater Stephenson, Nathan Perigau, Daniel Ruff, Richard Webster, Joseph Presbury and others.

Freeborn Garrettson was one of the most prominent of the early American Methodist preachers. At the request of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, he went "like an arrow" to call the preachers to the 1784 Christmas Conference where the Methodist Episcopal Church was organized. He was ordained at that conference and volunteered as a missionary in Nova Scotia.

Robert Strawbridge persuaded Richard Owings to become the first native-born American Methodist local preacher. Owings assisted Strawbridge in planting Methodism in Georgetown.

Sater Stephenson was living in Baltimore County at the time of his conversion under Robert Strawbridge. Francis Asbury, upon hearing him preach, wrote in his Journal, March 30, 1773, "*Brother Stephenson gave a moving exhortation.*"

Nathan Perigau, converted by Robert Strawbridge, became the spiritual father of Philip Gatch, an outstanding preacher who drew many to the church.

Richard Webster, another Strawbridge convert, spent 50 years in the ministry in Harford County, Maryland

Joseph Presbury served as leader of a class organized by Strawbridge and others at Deer Creek, Maryland. He was responsible for winning the family of William Watters who became the first native-born American to join the Methodist itineracy.

Numerous lay persons were influenced by Strawbridge for Christ and the Methodist movement. Some of these were slaves, and one or two of them began to preach. Jacob Toogood was a slave of John Maynard, whose home was often used for the meeting of the First Class of Methodism. Toogood, began preaching in the community. He is the first black preacher mentioned in American Methodism.

To understand fully the significance of Strawbridge's ministry, one has only to look at the number of Methodists who attended the early conferences of Methodists. The First Annual Conference was held 1773 at St. George's Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. New York reported 180 in attendance at that conference, Philadelphia reported 180, and Maryland reported 500. At that time, there were 2,073 members of the Methodist Classes in the colonies and, of these, 1063 were from Maryland. By the time of Strawbridge's death in 1781, the number of Methodists had grown to 11,000.

At the time of the Christmas Conference in 1784 (three years after Strawbridge's death), there were 15,000 members of Methodist Societies, of which 13,350 were from Maryland. Also, there were 23 chapels in Maryland, 15 in Virginia, 9 each in Delaware and North Carolina, 5 in Pennsylvania, 4 in New Jersey, and 1 in New York – 66 in all. All of this is a testimony to the vast extent of Robert Strawbridge's labors.