



The Saddlebag



Containing the latest dispatches from The First Home of American Methodism

February 2025

Robert Strawbridge, The First American Methodist Circuit Rider

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Annual Meeting Draws on Touchstones of Methodism to Look Ahead

Anyone familiar with history knows the great strengths of Methodism rest on the partnership between laity and clergy, guided by the Holy Spirit, to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the world. That great strength was on display during the 2024 Annual Meeting of the Strawbridge Shrine Association. About 25 people gathered on the morning of January 18 at Ward's Chapel UMC to celebrate the accomplishments of 2024, and to look ahead to new ventures in telling the story of American Methodism.



We opened the meeting with worship and a reflection on the evangelistic work of the Methodists during the American Revolution. "We often stress the important work done by the circuit riders who travelled from place to place to preach and establish classes, and we're right to do that," said Shrine Vice President Rev. Bob Kells. "But we don't give enough credit to the members of the first Methodist classes who took the gospel to their neighbors when the circuit riders weren't in town." Rev. Kells shared a passage from the recollections of William Watters, the first American-born itinerant Methodist preacher, on how those Methodists spread the good news about Jesus in their day: *"On the Lord's day we commonly divided into little bands, and went out into different neighbourhoods, wherever there was a door open to receive us, two, three, or four in company, and would sing our hymns, pray, read, talk to the people, and some soon began to add a word of exhortation."* Meeting people where they were was key to growing the first Methodist societies.



Rev. Bonnie McCubbin with Frederick District Superintendent Eliezer Valentin Castañón

Rev. Dr. Bonnie McCubbin, Director of Museums and Pilgrimage for the Baltimore-Washington Conference, followed with a message about the spiritual component of class meetings. Methodist classes of seven to 12 people would meet regularly to pray and to study the Bible. A class leader guided them through a series of questions like, "How is it with your soul?" and "What sins have you committed since last we met?" While seemingly intrusive by modern standards, these questions strengthened people in their Christian walk. Rev. McCubbin then directed those gathered for the meeting to talk in groups of three or four about where they were with their spiritual walk today, what challenges they face, and what resources they use to nourish their souls. This exercise demonstrated how small groups of Christians, meeting together for spiritual edification, formed the backbone of the Methodist movement.

The business portion of the meeting highlighted progress made in several areas. Our Colonial Day in June 2024 featured more variety in activities, especially those for children. The addition

¹ William Watters, *A Short Account of the Christian Experience, and Ministerial Labours, of William Watters*, (Alexandria, VA: S. Snowden, 1806, reprint edition by Sabin Americana, Print Editions, 1500-1926), 19.

"The mission of the Strawbridge Shrine Association is to preserve, interpret, and share the founding story of American Methodism through the life and legacy of Robert Strawbridge."

of another Advent service gave those with busy weekends a choice of days to attend. Financially, the Association did well in 2024, finishing the year about \$14,000 to the plus side. This follows a year (2023) of negative cashflow. Curator Helen Kemp reported the number of visitors to the Shrine was down in 2024, very likely due to some hotter than normal weather and recent changes in the denomination. Still, she gave tours to several visiting groups, and she was able to connect with a number of locally-minded history groups where she promoted the unique story of the Strawbridge Shrine.

Challenges for the Shrine remain, of course, especially in property maintenance, fundraising, and promoting membership. Nonetheless, the year just ended marked a hopeful step toward a more vital future, one that stresses greater vitality for the Association, and the promise of more opportunities to engage the public with the story of Robert and Elizabeth Strawbridge.

Museum Assessment Program Helps Set 2025 Priorities

Last year, the Shrine Association took part in an organizational assessment through the American Alliance of Museums to help us identify areas where we can grow. After completing a detailed survey about the Shrine, we received a visit from a peer reviewer, Ms. Vivian Lea Solek, Archivist for the Connecticut Knights of Columbus. Her final report contained many recommendations to help us improve our operations as an organization, and to create engaging experiences for visitors. Some of the key recommendations are listed here. The Development Committee will be working to turn these suggestions into clearly defined and attainable goals. There is a lot to do, but the time and effort, and the changes they bring, will strengthen the Shrine and help us reach more people with the founding story of American Methodism. Here's to a good start on this in 2025!

Key Recommendations from the Museum Assessment Program

Governance: Create a Board Handbook containing job descriptions, responsibilities, policies & procedures. Create code of ethics and policy for emergency procedures.

Mission & Planning: Focus on "sustaining and transforming the Shrine Association" as a first step toward improving preservation, education, and collections.

Finances: Establish a sound budgeting process and clarify finance policies.

Collections, Displays & Visitor Experience: Begin cataloging the entire Shrine collection. Create rotating displays, something new each year. Develop more content about colonial life and times in order to broaden appeal to the public.

Your Giving Supports Methodist History

The Strawbridge Shrine Association has some big plans for the future, but we cannot make them a reality without your help. Creating new visitor experiences, hosting public events, and using technology will help us share the Strawbridges' story with audiences old and new. At the same time, we need to preserve our buildings and meet the costs of day-to-day operating expenses. We can only do these things with your help. Below are links to the donation page of our website. We ask you to prayerfully consider supporting the "First Home of American Methodism" by making a contribution to the Strawbridge Shrine today. Thank you!

[Membership](#)

[General Donation](#)

Strawbridge Shrine Calendar of Events

Apr 1	Opening Day
Jun 21	Colonial Day
Oct 31	Closing Day
Dec 7 & 14	Annual Advent services
Jan 17, 2025	Annual Meeting

The Strawbridge Shrine is located at 2650 Strawbridge Lane, New Windsor, MD 21776

Visit our website www.strawbridgeshrine.org, or call 443-289-0191 to learn more about the first home of American Methodism.