

Francis Asbury and Robert Strawbridge

Reexamining their influence on, and relationship to, one another

by

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It is a commonplace view that Robert Strawbridge, impetuous, free wheeling Irishman, and Francis Asbury, staid, rule abiding Englishman, did not, as we would say today “get along” with one another. I will confess to having fostered this opinion myself. Thomas Coke Ruckle (1808-1891), painter *extra ordinaire* of early Methodist sites and events, created his famous painting of “The Ordination of Francis Asbury” in the mid 19th century. It was copied as a lithographic print. Among the many Methodist luminaries carefully portrayed as witnesses to the momentous event is Robert Strawbridge. On more than one occasion I have glibly pointed out that Strawbridge was already dead by the time of the Christmas Conference, but had he been alive and been invited, he probably would not have attended—such was his dislike of Asbury. When pointing out to visitors at Lovely Lane that the first two pastors listed in the sanctuary windows are Francis Asbury and Robert Strawbridge (1773), I usually state that this was the first year preachers were “appointed” in America and then add: “They probably spent the year staying out of each other’s way.” Of course the lynch pin to the prevailing opinion of the mutual antipathy of these two pioneers is Asbury’s seemingly hostile entry in his *Journal* (Sept. 3, 1781) about a month after Strawbridge’s death: “He is now no more: upon the whole, I am inclined to think the Lord took him away in judgment, because he was in a way to do hurt to his cause; . . .” [I, 411]

The purpose of this little excursion into early American Methodist history will be to examine the relationship of these two remarkable men and in the course of that undertaking to re-evaluate and perhaps even change the prevailing opinion concerning their influence on one another.

Robert Strawbridge was born in what was then called Drummernave (now Drumsna) County Leitrim, Ireland, somewhere close to the year 1732. The River Shannon flows near the town and widens to form a beautiful lake which the Strawbridge home would overlook. The family, while neither nobility nor gentry, were possessed of what one writer calls “a noble farm, a short distance from the village, and lived in considerable comfort, if not affluence.” [William Crook, *Ireland and the Centenary of American Methodism*, 154] Because his father was also named Robert, some writers have assumed that young Robert was the eldest son—although there is no particular evidence of this and, given the Irish practice of passing property to the first male child, it seems unlikely. Another assumption sometimes made is that the family were Roman Catholics [see Edwin Schell, “Beginnings in Maryland and America,” in *Those Incredible Methodists*, 11], but it is more likely they were part of the Protestant Ascendancy and attended the local Church of Ireland in Annaduff Parish. Methodist preachers penetrated into the region around Drummernave in the early 1750s, and John Wesley himself even paid visits to the town in 1758 and 1760, but there is no evidence that Robert Strawbridge and John Wesley actually encountered one another at either time. Instead the honor of awakening Strawbridge to the joys and responsibilities of “experimental religion” rests with Lawrence Coughlan who had become an ardent Methodist. Coughlan introduced Leonard Strawbridge, Robert’s brother, who in turn inspired Robert to become a Methodist. In any case, Robert seems almost immediately to have begun preaching and sharing his new-found conviction with others. He was not kindly received in his hometown, so he adopted what would become a life-long solution—he traveled. After itinerating in Ireland—and marrying another devoted Methodist, Elizabeth Piper—he decided to really travel, this time to America. There has been speculation about just what route the immigrant family followed, but the conclusions of Ruthella Bibbins in her book, *How Methodism Came*, seem most plausible. Although she could not locate the

passenger manifests, Bibbins concluded that the Strawbridge family arrived at Annapolis, Maryland, on the grain ship "Salford" on either "November 28, 1759 or November 26, 1761 or on the return of the "Sharpe" September 24, 1760." [Ruthella Mory Bibbins, *How Methodism Came: The Beginnings of Methodism in America*, Edwin Schell, ed. 1987, 5]

Once in America and out on Sam's Creek in the western borderlands of settlement in Maryland and having arranged his log home [He had occasionally worked as a carpenter before leaving Ireland.], Robert picked up where he had left off in Ireland. He began to travel and to share the message of salvation by grace through faith. By 1764, John Evans had been converted and the beginnings of the first Methodist Class in America began to meet in Strawbridge's home. Edwin Schell has clearly documented the "transfer" of John England, Robert Strawbridge's landlord and neighbor, from the Society of Friends to another society "of some other persuasion of people" in June, 1766. Thus we know Strawbridge's "society" was functioning before, probably well before, that date.

The energy and enterprise of Strawbridge's achievement are astounding. He preached out of doors under the famed "Strawbridge Oak." He built a Log Meeting House about a mile off from his home and preached there. He traveled about preaching, teaching, and even baptizing amongst his neighbors. He traveled as far away as the Eastern Shore of Maryland into Delaware and organized societies there and at points in between. He planted Methodism in Georgetown on the Potomac River, before there was any thought of the Federal City. He founded societies all about what is now Carroll County—including the class meeting which became the congregation in whose house of worship, the Stone Chapel, we meet today. After sixteen years on his rented farm, he moved eastward to the Long Green Valley onto a farm offered to him as a life tenant by Captain Charles Ridgely, one of the wealthiest and most influential men in the Baltimore region and indeed in all of Maryland. At least one of his sons, apparently adept at his father's talent for carpentry, helped to construct Ridgely's magnificent mansion, Hampton—which is now a National Historic Site. He was responsible for the erection and founding of several other churches across Baltimore County and Harford County, Maryland, including Bush Forest Chapel, the second in Maryland (1769) [Edwin Schell, *Those Incredible Methodists*, 9-10] after the log meeting on Pipe's Creek (1764) on the grounds of what is now Aberdeen Proving Grounds. His travels carried him into Northern Virginia especially into the region of Leesburg and Fairfax, where societies were also organized.

When the first Methodist Conference was convened in 1773 in Philadelphia at [Old] St. George's Chapel, the official statistics reported 1,160 total members. Of these 600 were located in Maryland and Virginia [*Minutes*, 1773-1794, 5] Almost all of these with the exception of a few in Baltimore Town and just outside it at Fell's Point, more than half of the Methodists in America, could be attributed to the work of Robert Strawbridge and his growing band of followers. In 1774, Strawbridge's name was dropped from the list of itinerant members of the connection. It reappears in 1775 for the last time. After that date he appears to have become the more or less "resident" pastor of the Sam's Creek and Bush Forest societies until his death. In the summer of 1781, while out preaching and on a pastoral visit at the home of his old friend, Joseph Wheeler, near the present Hunt's Church in Riderwood, Baltimore County, Maryland, Robert Strawbridge was taken ill and died suddenly. At most he was probably just fifty years of age. One of his "sons in the Gospel," Richard Owings, preached the funeral sermon. A large crowd attended as he was buried beneath yet another "Strawbridge Oak" on the Wheeler Farm. Members of the Log Meeting and other "western" congregations along with the Bush Forest and Baltimore County societies came to honor him. Strawbridge's influence spread like the ripples from a stone tossed in still water through the various individuals he inspired to become preachers. He was directly responsible for the awakening and call of Freeborn Garrettson, Richard Owings, Sater Stephenson, Nathan Parigau, Daniel Ruff, Richard Webster, Joseph Presbury, and John Hagerty. Through the spiritual life he stimulated he indirectly led into the ministry Philip Gatch (Pioneer of

Methodism in Ohio) and William Watters (the first native born American to enter the itineracy) among others. Despite the strains which we shall examine later, James H. Staughn's comment remains true:

Strawbridge's popularity, however, was tremendous, and in the early days of Methodism and for long afterward, in the region where Robert Strawbridge labored, more converts were won for the Societies, and more young men were inspired to become itinerant preachers, than in any other section of the country. [James H. Straughn, "Robert Strawbridge," in Nolan B. Harmon, ed., *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, II 2263]

Francis Asbury, some twelve years younger than Strawbridge was destined to live on some thirty-five years after him. Their careers in America would overlap only ten years, but the years would prove momentous for the future of Methodism. Asbury was born August 20/21, 1745, to Joseph and Elizabeth Asbury of Handsworth Parish, near Birmingham, England. While not the industrial center it would become, the area was already heavily dominated by the iron working trades. Francis was an only child after the death of an infant sister. He received little formal education, but through his mother's turn to religion for consolation following her bereavement, the young boy learned to read the Bible by age seven. His youth was difficult, working long hours as an apprentice at the forge and iron works of the Foxall family. He befriended the owner's son, Henry Foxall, who like Asbury would become a Methodist and emigrate to America where their paths would cross in Washington, DC. [Henry Foxall built the Foundry Church in Washington which Asbury dedicated in 1814.] At about the time he entered the apprenticeship, Asbury was converted to Methodism, became a local preacher, then joined the conference, and served as an assistant on five rural English circuits. In August, 1771, at the conference held in Bristol, John Wesley asked for volunteers to serve in America, and Francis Asbury responded to the call. Almost immediately, he found himself on shipboard with another volunteer, Richard Wright. They arrived together at Philadelphia on October 27, 1771. After ten days in the "City of Brotherly Love," he headed to New York where he met with Richard Boardman, another of Wesley's missionaries who had arrived in America in 1769. Boardman advocated a "settled ministry" operating from urban hubs, but Asbury considered this as poor strategy and a betrayal of the genius of Wesley. Instead he insisted that the preachers should itinerate and that their "circulation" would work best to enlarge and spread the Methodist Movement. [Elmer T. Clark, "Francis Asbury," in Nolan B. Harmon, *Encyclopedia*, I 159]

Eventually this concept of itineracy was firmly embedded by agreement of the Methodist conferences (beginning in 1773) and was the beginning of Asbury's life work of creating in America his vision of Wesleyan Methodist order and practice. Frank Baker, the great Anglo-American Wesley scholar, has expressed this in his book *From Wesley to Asbury* as Asbury's great undertaking. [Frank Baker, *From Wesley to Asbury*, passim] The caveat, of course, is that Asbury's views of British Methodism were arrested at the year 1771. He never returned to England. What he did do was mount his horse and proceed to travel, logging in a quarter of a million miles by the time of his death in 1816 and surpassing even Wesley's own record. [Elmer T. Clark, in *Encyclopedia*, I 159]

Doubtless, soon after his arrival in America Asbury began to hear the name Strawbridge mentioned and to hear of the work in the South. He must also have been aware that the Irish Evangelist had a strong and loyal set of followers. Wesley designated Asbury to be the "General Assistant" in America only to supersede him by appointing a new General Assistant in the person of Thomas Rankin in 1773. Upon his arrival in America, Rankin convened a conference of the preachers in Philadelphia attended by ten preachers. Robert Strawbridge was conspicuously absent from the little assembly. Nonetheless, Strawbridge was listed as appointed to Baltimore along with Francis Asbury.

As Richard Boardman was departing for England, he appointed Asbury to Baltimore. This delighted Asbury, who had heard of the progress of the Methodist work in the South. He anxiously crossed the

Sesquehanna and entered territory where numerous people made it clear that they had been “awakened” through the ministry of Robert Strawbridge. He also became acutely aware that Strawbridge had started a controversy which seemed to be growing in intensity by his practice of administering the sacraments and his urging that the other local preachers also do so. This was clearly against the Methodist practice that Asbury had learned from Wesley. [see John Wigger, *American Saint*, 57ff]

Edwin Schell attributes Strawbridge’s attitude to his supposed Roman Catholic upbringing. [Edwin Schell, in *Those Incredible Methodists*, 11] I have suggested, however, that the Strawbridge Family in Ireland were most likely part of the Established [Protestant] Church. One of the attitudes which may have contributed to young Robert’s unpopularity in his hometown could easily have been that the Methodists [unlike their more contemporary successors] insisted upon—even clamored for—more frequent administration of the Lord’s Supper. As Frank Baker put it, writing of the English Methodist experience: “There existed a pressure from within the societies themselves to extend their communal activities to the inner sacramental mysteries and this under the ministrations of their Methodist leaders. For many Methodists, indeed, sacramental spirituality was a by-product of the rich and vigorous fellowship into which they had been introduced” [Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 86-87] Both Strawbridge and Asbury presumably had experienced this sacramental desire in their respective homelands and carried it with them to America. Asbury, at this stage in his career, seemed to search out every opportunity to receive communion in the Church of England that he could find. It is not necessary to posit a real difference in heart and mind between them. Clearly there was difference in method. The General Assistant felt duty bound to enforce rules until they changed; Strawbridge felt duty bound to honor the sacramental hunger of his followers.

Let us note the interactions of the two—albeit all from Asbury’s accounts as Strawbridge has left us no record at all. On December 23, 1772, Asbury attended and presided at a quarterly meeting held at the home of Joseph Presbury near Aberdeen. Strawbridge was present. After Asbury preached, he conducted the business session and ended with appointing the preachers. The fifth point of business was:

Will the people be contented without our administering the sacrament? John King was neuter; brother Strawbridge pleaded much for the ordinances; and so did the people, who appeared to be much biased by him. I told them I would not agree to it at that time, and insisted on our abiding by our rules. But Mr. Boardman had given them their way at the quarterly meeting held there before, and I was obliged to connive at some things for the sake of peace. [Asbury, *Journal*, I 60]

Asbury was face to face with the clear fact that not only did Strawbridge advocate administering the sacraments but he was actually doing so. Furthermore, the people, “Many people attended, and several friends came many miles,” approved and indeed “pleaded” for the sacraments [Asbury, *Journal*, I 59] Much as he disapproved, Asbury was obliged to give in. Indeed, as Asbury’s preeminent biographer, John Wigger, makes clear, Asbury decided to tread carefully so as to preserve unity. [Wigger, *American Saint*, 59ff] The archaic meaning of “connive” means: “to shut one’s eyes to a thing that one dislikes but cannot help, to pretend ignorance, to take no notice.” [Oxford English Dictionary, II 840a]

As the preachers each received their support or “quarterage,” (Strawbridge’s was the largest) Asbury’s summation of the quarterly meeting was: “Great love subsisted among us at this meeting, and we parted in peace.” [Asbury, *Journal*, I 60] Almost immediately after the adjournment of the meeting, on Christmas Day, Asbury notes that he went to church and received the sacrament. Nonetheless, he expresses irritation with Strawbridge for failing to give notice of Asbury’s preaching at Bush Chapel the

following Sunday which delayed the service and wonders if it could be a deliberate slight “to prevent my going to church.” [Asbury, *Journal*, I 60] The lines of disagreement were clearly drawn.

When the first American Conference was convened at Philadelphia by the new, replacement General Assistant, Thomas Rankin, in mid-July, 1773, Robert Strawbridge was not present. The conference clearly prohibited the administration of the sacraments by any of the preachers. When recording the actions of the conference, Asbury added the caveat to the prohibition, “except Mr. Strawbridge, and he under the particular direction of the assistant.” [Asbury, *Journal*, I 85] The appointments listed Asbury and Strawbridge for Baltimore. While one might presume that Asbury, as the assistant, was supposed to “direct” Strawbridge, there is no evidence that Robert Strawbridge changed his ways at all. In fact, Asbury notes at the next quarterly meeting when he tried to get Strawbridge to comply, “he appeared inflexible. He would not administer the ordinances under our direction at all. Many things were said on the subject; and a few of the people took part with him.” [Asbury, *Journal*, I 88] Edward J. Drinkhouse, the very thorough but highly polemical Methodist Protestant scholar, in his two volume *History of Methodist Reform*, says of Strawbridge: “He was one of three men whom Asbury could neither command nor cajole, the other two being James O’Kelly and Nicholas Snethen, . . .” [Drinkhouse, *History of Methodist Reform and of the Methodist Protestant Church*, I 179]

The history of the so called “Sacramental Controversy,” with its series of conferences and counter-conferences can be summarized quickly. As the Revolutionary War drew ever closer, it seemed ever more clear that the British preachers, including Rankin, would be returning to England. In fact, all of them did so except for Asbury who weathered the storm hidden in Delaware. The question of sacraments seemed even more critical. In 1777, after considerable debate, the sacramental question was “laid over” to 1778. When this conference convened in Leesburg, VA, all the other English preachers were gone, and Asbury was pent up in Delaware, and William Watters, the senior itinerant (aged 24) and a product of Strawbridge’s ministry was in the chair. With great difficulty they agreed to postpone action one more year and to meet in Fluvanna County, Virginia, at the picturesquely named Broken Back Church. In 1779, there were effectively two conferences. The first was in Delaware with Asbury of the “northern stations” which upheld the ban on administration of the sacraments. The second met three weeks later and agreed to form a presbytery and to ordain each other and to administer the sacraments complete with directions for how to do so, etc. Effectively the Methodist Movement had divided into two bodies. The next year there were again two conferences, but this time the war made it as much a convenience as a doctrinaire decision. Asbury and his sympathizers adroitly managed to persuade the southerners to suspend their actions in order to allow Asbury to write to Wesley for directions. He did so, along with other leaders like John Dickins, and the result was the now famous Christmas Conference of 1784, which can be viewed as the solution to the sacramental controversy. [I have followed Edwin Schell’s summary of the machinations of the controversy: *Those Incredible Methodists*, 52-56; see also John Wigger, *American Saint*, 65-125, for lively detail]

Conspicuously absent from any of the records of the 1777-1780 controversy is Robert Strawbridge. While perhaps the generator of the movement for the sacraments, after 1775 he was largely settled as the resident pastor at Pipe Creek and Bush Forest and presumably administering the sacraments independently of any outside body. By 1781, he was dead.

While Asbury “connived” and let Strawbridge go his way, they did, in fact meet and even on occasion enjoy one another’s company. Tuesday, March 30, 1773, Asbury held another quarterly meeting “somewhere on the Suquehanna” in Baltimore or Harford County, Maryland, where: “All was settled in a most amicable manner. Mr. Strawbridge preached a good and useful sermon from Joel ii, 17; . . . The whole ended in great peace. And we all went, in the strength of the Lord, to our several appointments.” [Asbury, *Journal*, 75] In August, 1773, Asbury recounts riding into Baltimore from a preaching

engagement outside the Town in the company of “Brother Whitworth and Brother Strawbridge” during which they discussed the lack of truly well-qualified preachers. The next morning he rebuked himself for “levity” on the occasion, which means they were having a really good time together. [Asbury, *Journal*, I 92] On March 12, 1775, Asbury met and consulted with Strawbridge in Baltimore. He “entered into a free conversation with him. His sentiments relative to Mr. Rankin correspond with mine.” [Asbury, *Journal*, I 151] On April 11, of that same year, Asbury and Strawbridge again crossed paths in Baltimore. He writes: “Here I met with brother Strawbridge, and found we were of one heart and of one mind. Lord, grant that all the preachers may be thus united in sentiment and affection!” [Asbury, *Journal*, I 154] By August 28, 1775, Strawbridge was near ending his connection, probably as a result of the friction with Rankin which he and Asbury had discussed in March. Asbury noted that at the quarterly meeting held at Mill Creek, Virginia: “Mr. Strawbridge discovered his independent principles, in objecting to our discipline. He appears to want no preachers: he can do as well or better than they. But it is likely self-sufficiency is the spring of all this.” [Asbury, *Journal*, 163] Still by the next year, Asbury and Strawbridge were back together again on Monday, October 21, 1776: “William Lynch, James Foster, brother Strawbridge and myself, held a watch night at the Point; and my soul was much quickened, though many of the people appeared to be dull.” [Asbury, *Journal*, I 203]

From the very outset of his ministry in Maryland, Asbury had tried to befriend Strawbridge. Partly this was politic, since Strawbridge had such a devoted band of grateful followers, but partly it was out of great respect for the genuine success of the work the older man had accomplished. On Wednesday, November 18, 1772, he writes: “I went to friend Strawbridge’s, and found his family well. Here we had Dr. Warfield and several polite people to dine with us.” [Asbury, *Journal*, I 53] Evidently Robert was abroad, but in his absence Asbury was treated to lunch by the formidable Elizabeth. He records that he managed to offend the ladies present by admonishing them about head-dresses! Dr. Warfield, a member of Strawbridge’s first class, defended them. After quoting some passages from St. Peter concerning dress, Asbury departed after about an hour.

But it is during this early excursion that we are introduced to the Melchizedekian figure of Benedict Swope. Like the mystical King of Salem and Priest of the Most High God who brought the blessing of bread and wine to Abraham [Genesis 14: 18-20], Swope drifts into our story here. Asbury met with him first in Frederick in November, 1772, a few days after his lunch at the Strawbridge home. The topic of the sacraments immediately came to hand. Asbury states:

Then went about two miles, to preach at Mr. Durbin’s; and met with a German minister, Mr. Benedict Swope, who heard me preach at both places. We had a conversation about the ordinances administered by Mr. Strawbridge. He advanced some reasons to urge the necessity of them, and said Mr. Wesley did not do well to hinder us in the administration of them. I told him they did not appear to me as essential to salvation; [and that it did not appear to be my duty to administer the ordinances at *that time*]. [Asbury, *Journal*, I 54]

Who is Benedict Swope, and why might he be important to the thesis of this paper? Born in 1730/31 in York, Pennsylvania, his parents had immigrated to America from Germany in 1727. In 1752 he was a member of the York, Pennsylvania, Reformed Congregation and befriended William Otterbein. By 1763 he was a ruling elder at the Pipe Creek Dutch Reformed Church also known as St. Benjamin’s and also as Krider’s Church. He became a follower of the pietistic or evangelical movement and was called to come to Pipe Creek and minister to them, but more conservative reformed leaders tried to block his ordination. The Independent German Reformed Congregation which had been formed by a secession from the First Reformed Church in Baltimore also called Swope to be pastor. In 1770 he was hurriedly ordained without the usual approval of the Dutch Reformed Coetus—the properly designated body in Reformed polity to approve all ordinations—and for a time served both in Baltimore and at Pipe Creek.

In 1774, Swope persuaded Otterbein to take over the pastorate of the Baltimore congregation. In June, 1772, Swope had opened his Baltimore Church to Joseph Pilmore for the organization of the first Methodist society in the city. Eventually, he and much of his family moved to Kentucky where he was active in land development and politics and religion. Swope died in 1810 in Kentucky. [Gary Farley, MOGenWeb Project, <http://projects.cousin-collector.com/index.php/pettis-county/biographies/122-swope-sr-reverend-benedict>; and Paul E. Holdcraft, *History of the Pennsylvania Conference of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ*, 309]

One of the sources for Swope's biographical information states:

1772—Discussed with Asbury the possibility that his friend and neighbor, Robert Strawbridge, the first Methodist preacher in America, might be ordained. According to some Methodist historians, Swope did in fact ordain Strawbridge which, given his own unusual ordination would be an interesting fact. [Gary Farley, web citation above]

One repeatedly meets this expression “according to some Methodist historians” the ordination may have taken place. Who might they be? In 1856, John Bowen, a member of the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, published a short book under the title *Robert Strawbridge and the Rise and Progress of Methodism on Sam's and Pipe Creeks, Md., from the year 1764*. In preparing his survey, Bowen consulted many individuals who, if not actual actors in the events being detailed, were either children of or knew the original participants. On the basis of these conversations Bowen writes:

In the year 1762 and '63 Mr. Strawbridge appears to have had a regular appointment at Mr. John Maynards, about five miles from the present Bethel Church, and in one of those years baptized Henry Maynard, who died in the year 1837. Tradition says that Mr. Strawbridge was ordained by Benedict Swope, who is mentioned by Bishop Asbury as residing in that region. [John Bowen, *The Rise and Progress of Methodism*, 9]

If this ordination did take place, it would explain Asbury's deference toward Strawbridge in not pressing down too harshly with the rules against administering the sacraments. While not approving, he could understand Strawbridge's feeling that he could act for himself, and furthermore, he could understand how he might chafe under the “particular direction of the assistant.” Obviously Strawbridge had a great many followers, indeed over half the work in America was the result of his endeavors and loyal to him. To directly oppose him would rupture the fragile nascent “connection.” Knowledge of this—albeit clandestine—ordination might also explain why Strawbridge is the only exception. It is odd that there is no documentation, but then there is no documentation of Strawbridge at all

John Bowen could say in the middle of the nineteenth century that there was still a persisting “tradition” of the ordination of Strawbridge. Almost independent of the reality, if that “tradition” were believed by his followers, Strawbridge would have had virtually his own separate church, which could explain Asbury's comment at Mill Creek that he is independent: “He appears to want no preachers: he can do as well or better than they. But it is likely self-sufficiency is the spring of all this.” [Asbury, *Journal*, I 63] Accordingly, Asbury used great tact in an attempt to hold the Methodists together.

The Christmas Conference of 1784 was Asbury's idea along with the concept of some sort of consensus building by election of himself and acceptance of Coke by vote. By calling the conference the American Methodists were established as an independent church—even independent of Wesley himself. [See John J. Tigert, *Original Status of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America*, 3-6] The ultimate compliment to Strawbridge may have come during this famous General Conference. At his ordination Asbury included William Otterbein—who looks directly at the viewer in Ruckle's famous print—out of

friendship, surely, but by doing so he would also consolidate Strawbridge's followers, i.e. believers in the "tradition" and make the new Superintendent, soon to be bishop, acceptable to them now that Strawbridge was out of the picture—even if Thomas Coke Ruckle included him in the picture.

Asbury's comment when he visited Strawbridge's old parish may have been less a criticism than a recognition of his power and influence.

Monday, September 3. [1781] I visited Bush chapel. The people here once left us to follow another: time was when the labours of their leader were made a blessing to them; but pride is a *busy* sin. He is now no more: upon the whole, I am inclined to think the Lord took him away in judgment, because he was in a way to do hurt to his cause; and that he saved him in mercy, because from his death-bed conversation he appears to have had hope in his end. [Asbury, *Journal*, I 410-411]

Twenty years later Asbury found himself again in "Strawbridge Country" for the 1801 session of the Baltimore Conference. On April 30, he writes: "We arrived to dine at Alexander Warfield's, on Sam's Creek, and pushed on to Henry Willis's, on Pipe Creek, where it had been our intention to open conference." On the Sunday during the session, Asbury preached on "the Great Commission" found in Matthew 28:18-20. One can only wonder if his mind wandered back to the struggles and debates before 1784 as Asbury expatiated on: "The branches of duty appointed to his ministers: to preach the Gospel in all its essential points; to administer the ordinances; and to rule the Church of Christ." He concludes by noting: "This settlement of Pipe Creek is the richest in the state: here Mr. Strawbridge formed the first society in Maryland—and *America*." [Asbury, *Journal*, II 294]

POSTSCRIPT:

In the 1860s, the remains of **Robert Strawbridge** and his wife, **Elizabeth Piper Strawbridge** were moved to the Bishops' Lot in Mt. Olivet Cemetery, Baltimore, where they rest next to those of Francis Asbury.

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