

# **Methodism in Microcosm:**

**Methodist History in Caswell County,  
North Carolina, 1780-1905**

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## Introduction

This paper surveys the development of Methodist frontier societies in Caswell County, North Carolina, into modern institutional churches during their first 125 years. Methodists have been in Caswell County longer than there has been a Methodist Church in the United States – longer even than there has been a United States. Asbury, Coke, Whatcoat, Lee, Polythress: the lions of early Methodism prowled these hills, and some had their manes singed by the natives. Caswell Methodism proves to be a useful microcosm of American Methodism in which some broad historical trends can be demonstrated in local practice (and with some great stories along the way!):

1. The planting of frontier Methodism.
2. The slow erosion of Wesleyan hallmarks like societies and classes, conversion-oriented preaching, and the model deed.
3. And, the incremental shift to nurture-oriented Sunday Schools and an institutional emphasis on buildings and bureaucracies.

Before beginning, some background information on Caswell County would be helpful. Caswell is located in the rolling north central Piedmont area of North Carolina, above Hillsborough and about 50 miles northwest of the Raleigh-Durham area. The county was formed in 1777 from Orange County; in 1792 the eastern part of the county became Person County. To the west is Rockingham County. Across the northern boundary lies Pittsylvania County, Virginia. The Dan River meanders along the state line, dipping south into Caswell near the town of Blanch. Leasburg, one of two early towns, was the county seat until Person County calved off. Milton, a port on the Dan River, was

the other important early town. By 1833 the county seat moved to Yanceyville in the middle of the county, which remains the primary town today with a population of just over 2,000 people. Caswell County has been and remains a rural agricultural community.<sup>1</sup>

A comment on the nature of the historical record is also necessary. Because the original documentation is so fragmentary,<sup>2</sup> this survey can only provide snapshots of the intervals for which records exist, rather than a smooth and continuous overview. The original source material will be sometimes be supplemented by contemporary reports of Methodism in nearby areas. Secondary sources will be used to provide the larger context for comparison, or when they alone can shine light into a dark crevice of history.

### **The origins of Methodism in North Carolina before the Revolution**

Not much information exists about the origins of Methodism in North Carolina. Although George Whitefield differed from John Wesley on the matter of predestination, he was probably the first to carry the name Methodist into the state. Frank Baker identifies six times that George Whitefield passed through North Carolina between 1739 and 1765.<sup>3</sup> These travels were usually along the coastline. According to Baker, Whitefield didn't much care for the 300 miles of swamps, uncertain roads, and unreliable ferries of the North Carolina wilderness.<sup>4</sup> Only a few times did he set aside time to go "hunting after sinners in the North Carolina woods."<sup>5</sup>

On his penultimate trip to North Carolina in 1764, Whitefield preached at New Bern.

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<sup>1</sup> William Stephens Powell, *When the Past Refused To Die: A History of Caswell County, North Carolina, 1777-1977* (Durham, NC: Moore Publishing Co., 1977). This information is extracted from several parts of Powell's book.

<sup>2</sup> I was often tantalized during my research by the hint of records that were destroyed through disaster or neglect over the years. These will be noted as the paper progresses.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Baker, "The British Background of North Carolina Methodism," in *Methodism Alive in North Carolina*, ed. by Kelly O. Ingram (Durham, NC: Duke Divinity School, 1976), 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Baker, 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> Baker, 3. Baker is citing Whitefield's journal for 1747. Although Whitefield had dedicated a month for this expedition, he returned to Wilmington in just two weeks, less than ebullient about the results of his trip.

Rev. James Reed, the pastor of the established Church of England in that city and for 100 miles around, wrote an acerbic letter that may suggest others besides Whitefield claimed the name

Methodist in pre-Revolutionary North Carolina:

"...(Whitefield) mentioned the particular number of small tracts, which the Society had sent me, & seemed to intimate that in my letter to the Society, I had improperly called the enthusiastic sect in these parts, by the name of Methodists, for that none were properly called by that name, but the followers of himself & Mr. Wesley, Tho' with submission to Mr. Whitfield, granting they were not his immediate disciples and followers I do affirm, they sprung from the seed which he first planted in New England..."<sup>6</sup>

Reed had first complained about Methodists in June 1761, writing to the Society for Promoting the Gospel (S.P.G.) to request those tracts that so annoyed Whitefield.<sup>7</sup> A second time in December 1761, he asked for "a few small tracts wrote on purpose to confute & expose such visionaries," calling the Methodists "strolling teachers... first imported here from New England from whence we have received the greatest part of the dissenters."<sup>8</sup> Whether the strolling teachers who irritated Reed identified themselves Methodists is uncertain, but his comment that they came from the north discerns a pattern that would be repeated.

The first known Wesleyan Methodist sermon in North Carolina was delivered by Joseph Pilmore<sup>9</sup> at Currituck Courthouse in the northeast corner of the state, Tuesday, September 28, 1772 to a congregation consisting of "Churchmen, Baptists, and Presbyterians."<sup>10</sup> By churchmen, Pilmore meant members of the official Church of England. Pilmore made a brief foray into the state from Virginia, then passed to and fro along the coast in 1772-1773, but like Whitefield he

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<sup>6</sup> Rev. James Reed, "Letter to the Secretary of the S.P.G., Newbern, North Carolina, Dec. 21, 1764," in *The Colonial Records of North Carolina, Vol. VI*, ed. by William L. Saunders (Raleigh, NC: Josephus Daniels, 1888), 1060-1061.

<sup>7</sup> Rev. James Reed, "Letter to the Secretary of the S.P.G., Newbern, North Carolina, June 25, 1761," in *The Colonial Records of North Carolina, Vol. VI*, ed. by William L. Saunders (Raleigh, NC: Josephus Daniels, 1888), 565.

<sup>8</sup> Rev. James Reed, "Letter to the Secretary of the S.P.G., Newbern, North Carolina, Dec. 26, 1761," in *The Colonial Records of North Carolina, Vol. VI*, ed. by William L. Saunders (Raleigh, NC: Josephus Daniels, 1888), 594-595.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Pilmore, *The Journal of Joseph Pilmore*, ed. Frederick E. Maser and Howard T. Maag (Philadelphia: Message Publishing Co., 1969), 166. Pilmore's claim of precedence is stated in the footnote by Maser and Maag.

<sup>10</sup> Pilmore, 156.

never penetrated very far inland. On Pilmore's first venture to North Carolina he also preached at Narrows Chapel and another "a small Chapel."<sup>11</sup> Maser and Maag suggest, "This small Chapel may have been Coinjock Chapel, Currituck County. An Anglican Chapel, it was often used by the Methodists."<sup>12</sup> Pilmore's entry from the north and his use of an Anglican chapel would also prove to be a prototype for the Methodists who followed him.

When war finally came between the colonies and England, suspicion fell on Church of England clergymen as Tory sympathizers. Most of them returned to England. This created an opportunity for Methodists. Baker writes that the Methodist Episcopal Church in North Carolina followed in the footsteps of "the widely discredited Anglicans, taking over much of their missionary work, and succeeding to many of their church buildings."<sup>13</sup> The American Church of England didn't look that much different from the Methodists – both relied on a handful of clergy who preached at a number of places on a circuit, aided by lay assistants. In the vacuum created by war, Church of England folks made room in the pews for their Methodist brethren and welcomed Methodist preachers to their empty pulpits in a "fairly natural" transition.<sup>14</sup>

### **Methodism enters Caswell County, 1770s to 1800**

The shift from Anglican to Methodist led directly to one toehold of Methodism in Caswell County. The Lea family of Leasburg had established a chapel in the 1750s, as reported in the journal of Hugh McAden, an early Presbyterian minister who wrote of preaching "to a number of church people and some Presbyterians" at the chapel on South Hico August 5, 1755.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Pilmore, 156-157.

<sup>12</sup> Pilmore, 166.

<sup>13</sup> Baker, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Baker, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Lacy Rose and Preston Satterfield III, *Chapel on South Hico: The Story of Lea's Chapel United Methodist Church* (Richmond, VA: Robert Schreiber Printing, 2000), 10. Rose and Satterfield's history of Lea's Chapel is written to a higher standard than most small church histories, which is fortunate for two reasons. First, I ran out of time to follow up on the leads in their book. And second, after the completion of the book thieves stole much of the

Again, by church people McAden meant members of the established Church of England. The Lea family was Anglican, and their church was probably associated with St. Matthew's Parish in Hillsborough and served (from 1767 until the outbreak of war) by Rev. George Micklejohn. However, as a plantation chapel it was privately owned and thus the family could open the pulpit to any passing minister that pleased them.<sup>16</sup>

The next minister known to have filled this nominally Anglican Caswell pulpit was Francis Asbury, who came to the county on his first visit to North Carolina in 1780. With the colonies at war with England, Rev. Micklejohn had ceased his ministry, though he remained in the area.<sup>17</sup> Per Baker, it was probably natural for the Methodist lay preachers, still nominally part of the Church of England, to fill the empty Anglican pulpit. Asbury writes,

"Monday, 7 [August 1780]... At ten I preached in Lee's (sic) chapel, in Caswell county, to about sixty people, on Matt. Vii, 21: 'Not every one that saith, Lord, Lord, &c.' I possessed clearness of ideas, liberty of speech, and the people serious: the preachers are under great difficulties here for want of places of study; most places but one room, or if a chamber, they cannot live there, it is so hot..."<sup>18</sup>

Asbury's comment about the preachers lacking places of study is significant because it indicates that there were already Methodist preachers in the area in 1780. Asbury had been staying with John Lea since August 3 and led a quarterly meeting at Henley's preaching house Saturday and Sunday. Lack of study areas was not the only trial facing the local preachers: Asbury described Henley's preaching house as a log house with the hot sun beating through the shingles. Despite the scorching weather, in good Wesleyan fashion the quarterly meeting included prayer and a love feast, and Asbury records preaching to 500 people at one o'clock on

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original source material during a house robbery and dumped "the worthless old junk" into Hyco Lake (per a conversation with Lea's Chapel pastor Jim Jones, November 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Rose and Satterfield, 11. Lea's Chapel is not listed in the records of St. Matthew's Parish, but Lea family records document the link. These include a bible recording the baptism of several Lea babies by "the Rev'd Geo. Mickle John, minister of the Gospel of the cot'y of Orange of Parish of St. Matthews."

<sup>17</sup> Baker, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Francis Asbury, *The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury In Three Volumes: Volume I, The Journal, 1771 to 1793*, ed. by Elmer T. Clark et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1958), 372.

Sunday.<sup>19</sup> Clark states that Asbury was "probably" in Caswell County at this time.<sup>20</sup> A manuscript in the Duke Special Collections indicates that Henley's was within the pre-1792 boundaries of Caswell County, not far from Lea's Chapel.<sup>21</sup>

There were other groups of Methodists in the area, as well as curiosity seekers. Asbury preached again on this first visit to Caswell County. Following his debut at Lea's Chapel, on Tuesday Asbury preached at Baxter's to around 80 people on 1 John 1:8-9, and wrote that "many came that never attended at other times."<sup>22</sup> The location of Baxter's is unknown, but the 1790 census lists two Baxter families in Caswell County.<sup>23</sup> It is possible this was the class meeting that became New Hope Methodist Church; family and church tradition<sup>24</sup> say that Asbury preached to a group of people who met near the home of John B. Davis in the area.<sup>25</sup>

Asbury's first tour of North Carolina was complete. Reflecting on his experiences and

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<sup>19</sup> Asbury, 371-372.

<sup>20</sup> Asbury, 371. Asbury mentions riding through Hillsboro en route to Pittsylvania. The Pittsylvania Circuit was first listed in the Conference *Minutes* of 1776 and probably included Caswell County; see discussion of the formation of Caswell Circuit below.

<sup>21</sup> William Jordan, *Papers, 1852-1857*, manuscript. Jordan wrote some notes about Hilary T. Hudson's "History of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in N.C." (found elsewhere in the Special Collections material on North Carolina History) circa 1870-1880. Jordan was a link to an earlier generation of Caswell Methodists (see below). Jordan says, "Henley Meeting House was in what is now Person County, near the site of Concord Church one of the appointments in Leasburg Circuit. It took its name from the family with which Rev. Edmund Henley was connected." Jordan adds that in 1852 the old Lea's Chapel was still standing, but was replaced that year.

<sup>22</sup> Asbury, 372.

<sup>23</sup> Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, "Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790: North Carolina," Director, S.N.D. North (Washington, DC: Government Printing House, 1908), 79.

<sup>24</sup> Anne Taylor Daniel, "New Hope United Methodist Church," in *In the Beginning... The Churches of Caswell County*, ed. by Jean B. Scott (Yanceyville, NC: Caswell County Historical Society, 2001), 65. Jay Johnson, the current Davis family historian, repeated this story in an email to the author dated November 16, 2008. Of course, the family and church traditions also claim that Asbury and Davis met in Hillsborough circa 1777-1779, which is not supported by Asbury's *Journal*. Johnson has a theory about Asbury and Davis that will be mentioned below.

<sup>25</sup> Asbury, 372, writes, "*Tuesday*, 8 [August 1780]. I rode to Baxter's sixteen miles... was tried in getting there; we crossed the Line Creek. After preaching, rode six miles, but was an hour too late. About eight o'clock, came to a cabin, an earthen floor, and damp bed." William Jordan, in the manuscript mentioned above, writes, "By Line Creek, I take it [Asbury] means Country Line, a large creek passing through Caswell County." In support of the New Hope tradition, the distance from Lea's Chapel to Country Line Creek near the site of present New Hope Church and the old Davis family homestead is eleven miles as the crow flies – pretty close to Asbury's seat-of-the-horse estimate of sixteen miles. Country Line Creek empties into the Dan River at the town of Milton 3-4 miles north of New Hope, again close to Asbury's six mile estimate. With Leasburg, Milton was the only other settled town in Caswell County at the time and the most logical place to cross the Dan River into Virginia. Against the New Hope tradition is the fact that the earliest records of the church (from the 1830s and 1840s) don't mention any Baxters.

with Caswell County fresh in his mind, Asbury wrote,

"Wednesday, 9 [August 1780]. I rode sixteen miles to White's, came in about three o'clock; no preaching appointed. I had time to write, and plan for another trip through Carolina. I have had little time or place for prayer till I came here: the roads are so bad, I have my carriage to refit almost every week. This is Caswell County; the poor people have been much put to it, the year past for bread; the present year they have exceeding fine growing corn: Lord, remember the poor!"<sup>26</sup>

On a later visit, Asbury's personal touch probably led to the foundation of another Methodist church in Caswell County. In March 1782, Asbury preached the funeral of Mrs. Harrison on Dan River. Asbury's *Journal* says, "Mr. Harrison appears to be deeply distressed at the loss of his wife; I hope it will terminate in a concern for his own soul... I have great affection for C. Kennon, one of the most sensible Calvinists in these parts."<sup>27</sup> Clark includes this entry under the Virginia section of the narrative, and his footnote incorrectly suggests Harrison lived in Rockingham County or Virginia. In reality, Major Thomas Harrison lived about two miles south of the Dan River where it dips into North Carolina near the town of Blanch, Caswell County.<sup>28</sup>

Harrison apparently became a Methodist and hosted meetings. His home became a favorite stopping point for Asbury, who recorded preaching at "Brother Harrison's on the Dan River" Friday, May 23, 1788, in the company of Polythress and Tunnell.<sup>29</sup> They probably stayed to have a love feast and eucharist on Sunday. Asbury returned to T. Harrison's again April 9, 1791.<sup>30</sup> When Harrison died in 1799 his son Thomas Jr. received the land where Harrison's Camp

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<sup>26</sup> Asbury, 372.

<sup>27</sup> Asbury, 422.

<sup>28</sup> Pauline Hatchett, *History: Purley United Methodist Church* (Self-published, 1989), 4-6. Hatchett's book is another unusually well-documented local church history. Hatchett's primary evidence is a marriage bond between Thomas Harrison and his first wife, Mary Kennon of Virginia. Charles Kennon of Pittsylvania County was her brother and the namesake of her youngest child. Harrison's estate records listed several books on Methodist theology. Copies of the 1768 Harrison-Kannon (sic) marriage license and Harrison family bible transcripts showing an association with the Methodists stretching back into the 1830s can be found in Edmund DuVal Duckett, Jr., *Harrison: Some Caswell County Genealogy Prepared Especially for the Hyconeechee Regional Library, Yancyville, North Carolina* (Self-published, 1984), #80. Also, Thomas Harrison is listed as head of a Caswell County family in the *1790 Census*, 81.

<sup>29</sup> Asbury, 573.

<sup>30</sup> Asbury, 671. Asbury's entry here is further evidence that his T. Harrison is the Thomas Harrison of Caswell County. Asbury writes, "We rode seven miles to the banks of the Dan River, but knew not where to cross. At length



Ground, Meeting House, or Church (various names were used over the years) was built.<sup>31</sup>

In Caswell County and throughout North Carolina, Asbury encountered many vibrant Methodist societies already planted in the wilderness. Writing about North Carolina in the period from 1784-1803, Larry Tise says, "Within the circuits, Methodism consisted of dozens of tiny societies and preaching places, each with its leader who served as the contact individual and local head of Methodist affairs."<sup>32</sup> Where did these leaders, who were apparently there before Asbury, come from? Tise suggests, "In 1780 Methodists from Virginia were spilling over into North Carolina."<sup>33</sup> Pilmore and Asbury had entered from the Old Dominion. But Reed's 1760s complaint about strolling teachers from further north also finds support in early Caswell history.

According to Jay Johnson, Davis family historian, records kept by the Daughters of the American Revolution indicate John B. Davis, the traditional founder of New Hope Church, was born in Maryland in 1756 and migrated to North Carolina in his teens.<sup>34</sup> It is possible that Davis came under the influence of Methodism in Maryland, an overflowing cauldron of early Methodist activity stirred by Robert Strawbridge. Strawbridge had been leading class meetings since the 1760s and influenced a generation of men who went on to leadership in the fledgling Methodist movement.<sup>35</sup> Johnson wonders if, as a teenager during the early 1770s, John B. Davis might have become a Methodist, met Asbury in Maryland, then transplanted Methodism to the

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we came to the Fishery, crossed in a canoe, and walked two miles, in the night, to T. Harrison's: thus ended the labours of the day." As already noted, Harrison lived two miles south of the Dan River's loop into Caswell County. Near this bend in the river the remains of an ancient stone fishing weir are still present underwater.

<sup>31</sup> Hatchett, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Larry E. Tise, "North Carolina Methodism from the Revolution to the War of 1812," in *Methodism Alive in North Carolina*, ed. by Kelly O. Ingram (Durham, NC: Duke Divinity School, 1976) 37.

<sup>33</sup> Tise, 39.

<sup>34</sup> Jay Johnson, email to the author, dated November 17, 2008

<sup>35</sup> Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1974), 65-67.

Norwood writes, "(Strawbridge) left his mark wherever he went, and some of the most important native leaders of the Methodist Episcopal Church first heard a call to Christ and to ministry under his preaching" (p. 66-67).

North Carolina frontier and later invited the traveling Asbury to visit his home in 1780.<sup>36</sup>

Another Maryland transplant provides a slightly later, better-documented example of the same pattern. Like John B. Davis, Thomas T. Humphreys served in the Revolutionary War. After the war he returned to Maryland, where he became a trial member of the Fairfax Circuit of the Baltimore Conference in 1783. In 1785, Humphreys was given full connection in MEC and became a circuit-riding preacher. However, Humphreys had married in 1781 and the births of six children soon drew him out of the itinerancy.<sup>37</sup> By 1790 he had moved and settled in southwestern Caswell County.<sup>38</sup> Humphreys became the core around which Camp Springs Methodist Church coalesced, providing leadership for the next 40 years.<sup>39</sup>

Humphreys and perhaps Davis offer a hint at the many pioneering society organizers and class leaders whose names are unknown, but who prepared the way for Asbury and other itinerant ministers who followed. In 1776, the conference minutes first listed Pittsylvania Circuit with just 100 members.<sup>40</sup> Pittsylvania probably included Caswell County, for when Caswell and other new circuits appeared on the minutes in May 1783, Pittsylvania disappeared the following year.<sup>41</sup> The Caswell Circuit thus predates both the United States' formal status as a nation granted through the Treaty of Paris in September 1783, and the formation of the Methodist Episcopal

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<sup>36</sup> Johnson, November 17, 2008 email. Although Asbury does not record meeting John B. Davis in his journal, he spent a very large amount of time in Maryland from 1772-1777 (*Journal*, 49-255). According to the 1773 *Minutes* of the American Methodists, there were only 500 members in Maryland that year. That number had roughly tripled by the 1777 *Minutes*. Given Asbury's vigorous style of itinerancy it is not unlikely that Davis, if he was in a Methodist society in Maryland, met Asbury. This would explain the Davis family tradition that John B. Davis knew Francis Asbury. Further research on this matter would involve trying to locate Davis's home in Maryland, finding out exactly when he moved to North Carolina, and whether there were any Methodist societies in the area.

<sup>37</sup> Eugene Wright, *Camp Springs United Methodist Church* (Danville, VA: McCain Printing, 1984), 10. In a November 2008 phone conversation with the author, Wright said that a second Thomas Humphreys who was ordained in the Georgia and South Carolina conferences in the 1790s was most likely unrelated.

<sup>38</sup> *1790 Census*, 82.

<sup>39</sup> Wright, 10. Humphreys is listed as one of the trustees on the 1809 deed of the church.

<sup>40</sup> Anonymous, *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences Annually Held in America; From 1773 to 1813, Inclusive, Volume the First*, ed. by Hitt and Ware (New York: John C. Totten, 1813), 12.

<sup>41</sup> *Minutes*, 39-41 and 44-46. While the appointments for each circuit in the *Minutes* are for the coming year, the membership numbers are for the year just concluded. Thus Caswell Circuit lists no members in 1783, but 165 in 1784 after Peter Moriarty and Jesse Lee (appointed in 1783) had been there a year. More on Lee's tenure below.

Church at the Christmas Conference of December, 1784.<sup>42</sup>

Methodism in Caswell County, in North Carolina, and in the nation grew astonishingly in the years following Asbury's visit in 1780. From 165 members in 1784 the Caswell Circuit grew to 515 whites and 120 "colored" members reported in 1800.<sup>43</sup> Methodism in the United States grew from 13,740 members to 51,442 white and 13,452 black members during the same period. The Pittsylvania Circuit was one of eleven circuits when it was formed in 1776. The Caswell Circuit was one of 39 in its first year of 1783; by 1800 there were 177 circuits listed.<sup>44</sup> About 1% of all American Methodists lived in Caswell County throughout this period. For more detailed statistics, see Appendix A.

### **Lions Among the Lambs, 1780-1800**

The giants of the church tended their Caswell County flock regularly throughout this formative period. Through their eyes we can glimpse Caswell Methodism at this early stage. Asbury visited or passed near Caswell nine times from 1782 through 1791; see Appendix B for a summary of these visits.<sup>45</sup> According to Asbury's *Journal*, Richard Whatcoat accompanied him in 1791.<sup>46</sup> Thomas Coke traveled with Asbury in 1787 and 1791. Coke's reflection on the 1787 trip through North Carolina gives a perhaps overly rosy picture of frontier itinerancy:

"Since I left *Charleston*, I have got into my old romantic way of life, of preaching in the midst of great forests, with scores, and sometimes hundreds of horses tied to the

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<sup>42</sup> Asbury, 473-479. Also 1785 *Minutes*, 49-51.

<sup>43</sup> *Minutes*, 240. The categories of "Whites." and "Col." were first used in 1786, indicating the erosion of the anti-slavery ideal advocated by early Methodists like Coke.

<sup>44</sup> *Minutes*, 46, 240-243

<sup>45</sup> Asbury, 422, 438-439, 457, 508-510, 537, 573, 621-622, 642, and 671.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Whatcoat, *To Go and Serve the Desolate Sheep in America: the Diary/Journal of Bishop Richard Whatcoat 1789-1800*, ed. Samuel J. Rogal (Bethesda, MD: Academica Press, 2001), 9. Rogal notes that Whatcoat began his *Journal* in 1789, but the pages through the end of 1790 are missing. This includes Whatcoat's record of his visit to Caswell with Asbury January 22, 1790. Another sad loss of original documents. Whatcoat was elected the third Methodist Episcopal bishop after Coke and Asbury in 1800, narrowly edging out Jesse Lee (Norwood, 143).

trees, which adds much solemnity to the scene."<sup>47</sup>

In other cases, Coke recalls the grimmer aspects of frontier ministry: being drenched by rain, wandering lost through the woods for miles, finding no one to meet him at churches, sleeping three to a bed, and being the subject of pranks and persecution.<sup>48</sup> Sometimes the only indication for the road would be the "Preacher's mark – *the split bush*."<sup>49</sup> According to Coke, the first preacher to travel a circuit would split two or three bushes on the right side of the correct path at each junction to guide later preachers.

Coke's *Journal* does not give the same daily detail as Asbury's, but often provides more extended descriptions of the landscape and people. Coke was with Asbury in 1791 when they arrived at Thomas Harrison's at night, April 9<sup>th</sup>. Coke does not mention Harrison by name, but does describe the following journey through Caswell County to the Virginia state line:

"On Monday, the 11<sup>th</sup> of April, we arrived at *Dicke's Ferry* in *Virginia*. Our ride on that day was remarkably pleasing. The variety arising from the intermixture of woods and plantations along the sides of the broad, rocky river *Dan*, near which we rode most part of the time, could not but be a source of great pleasure to an admirer of the beauties of nature. Indeed, all was delightful, except the sight of a great, cruel hawk, who was devouring a little squirrel on a rock."<sup>50</sup>

On another occasion Coke probably offers us a glimpse of C. Kennon, the "sensible

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<sup>47</sup> Dr. Thomas Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. John A. Vickers (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2005), 86. In 1785, Coke provided an excellent description of North Carolina frontier life: "The people in this part of the country, and also in the back parts of North Carolina, eat only two meals a day; the first about nine in the morning, and the second about four or five in the afternoon. They eat flesh at both meals. Our people in general drink coffee with the first meal, and water with the second. The people of the world drink either coffee or cyder with the first meal, and grog or cyder with the second. Their animal food is almost entirely pig-meat, with some times shad-fish. I have hardly eat anything these ten weeks of the flesh kind, except swine's-flesh and shad-fish. Blessed be God, I have been enabled to set apart Friday as a day of fasting or abstinence ever since Christmas, except one day when I forgot, and one day when I traveled fifty-two miles. In the morning I eat a little bread, and drink some milk, and in the afternoon eat some greens, (the only garden-stuff they have got in this part of the country) and some fruit-pie. They have a great variety of fruit-pies, peach, apple, pear and cranbury, and puddings very often. I esteem it one great blessing, that I prefer the Indian corn to the wheat. Besides, they do not in general manage their wheat properly in the South, so that the wheat-bread is but very indifferent. The people in general, and more especially our own friends, go to bed very early (about nine o'clock) and rise early, about five, or day-break," p. 57.

<sup>48</sup> Coke, rain 162, lost and no congregation 54, three to a bed 55, pranks 163, persecution 55. Coke's vocal opposition to slavery often made him the intended target of mob violence in Virginia and North Carolina.

<sup>49</sup> Coke, 162-163.

<sup>50</sup> Coke, 162. Dick's Ferry was on the North Carolina-Virginia border (Asbury, 537).

Calvinist" Asbury met at the funeral of Thomas Harrison's wife in 1782. In April 1785, Coke describes a visit to Brother Kennon in Virginia, a man who had emancipated 22 slaves at great personal sacrifice.<sup>51</sup> After a love feast and preaching at Kennon's, Coke rides forty miles and stays with Kennon's brother in North Carolina, then on to the first conference of the newly-formed Methodist Episcopal Church held at Green Hill's home near Louisburg, North Carolina.<sup>52</sup>

Jesse Lee was one of two preachers assigned to the newly formed Caswell Circuit in 1783. This was the 25-year-old Lee's first real appointment as a Methodist itinerant, and it was not auspicious.<sup>53</sup> Thrift writes that Lee found the circuit to be a fragment of an older circuit, too small to support the two preachers assigned by the Conference unless it was expanded rapidly. His first preaching engagement in Caswell County was on June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1783, at the Widow Parker's.<sup>54</sup> Lee describes it as a discouraging start:

"I preached to a few people, most of whom were called out of the harvest field, (without having time to adjust either the mind or the body, as we may suppose) and the day being warm and the people much fatigued, they were in poor order for attending a place of worship."<sup>55</sup>

This was a diplomatic way of saying his congregation fell asleep! Lee had so much trouble the next day with disorderly members that Thrift says he considered giving up and going home. The young itinerant stuck it out, and experienced some success and encouragement while preaching at Parrish's Meeting House a few days later. Nonetheless, the circuit really was too

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<sup>51</sup> Coke, 55. Coke estimates the value of the slaves at 30-40 pounds sterling each.

<sup>52</sup> Coke, 56. Could the "Brother of Mr. Kennon" in North Carolina actually have been Thomas Harrison, Charles Kennon's brother-in-law? In traveling from Virginia down to the conference at Green Hill's, Coke could have passed through Caswell County. Coke notes that he can't preach against slavery in North Carolina because the state's laws prohibit emancipation. Nonetheless, Coke and Jesse Lee had a huge fight at the conference over the issue of slavery.

<sup>53</sup> Minton Thrift, *Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee, with Extracts from His Journals* (New York: N. Bangs and T. Mason, 1823), 52. Thrift, writing with Lee's original journal in front of him and just 30 years after the events, says "Caswell at this time (1783) was but a moral wilderness: it had been but recently taken under the superintendence of the Methodists, who were resolved to take in as much ground as they could conveniently cultivate." Alas that Thrift only gives us occasional excerpts of Lee's journal (p. 51), because the original was lost in the publishing house fire of 1836 (Clark, in introduction to Asbury's *Journal*, xviii). Yet another blow to historians...

<sup>54</sup> Thrift, 54.

<sup>55</sup> Lee, in Thrift, 54.

small for two preachers, and Lee as the junior one was moved to another assignment. Minton reports, "(Lee) was by no means displeased with this arrangement, and left the circuit after having traveled it only three weeks."<sup>56</sup> Lee would go on to prominence in the Methodist Church, but as a young preacher he seems to have been thwarted by apathy and disorder in Caswell.

Richard Whatcoat passed through or near Caswell County in 1798, straying from his district in eastern Virginia down into the region overseen by presiding elder James Rogers.<sup>57</sup> On Wednesday, August 15, 1798, Whatcoat says he stayed with Osborne Jeffrey in Person County. The next day, Whatcoat preached and Lewis Garrett, one of the preachers assigned to the Caswell Circuit that year, exhorted. They administered the sacrament and stayed with General Moore. Friday, Whatcoat and Garrett rode a few miles further south into Orange County, leaving only the briefest of records to suggest their passage.<sup>58</sup>

One other colorful lion of North Carolina and Caswell Methodism deserves mention. Francis Polythress was admitted on trial to the itinerancy in 1776. By 1787 he was the presiding elder over Caswell and three other circuits.<sup>59</sup> From 1788 through 1799 Polythress served as the presiding elder over frontier circuits in Kentucky and Tennessee, except for 1797 when he was listed as supernumerary.<sup>60</sup> Dr. Redford, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Kentucky historian, said Polythress "was more intimately identified with the rise and progress of Methodism in Kentucky than any other minister."<sup>61</sup> In 1800 Polythress was back in North Carolina as presiding elder over 15 circuits including Caswell,<sup>62</sup> but the strain of years of ministry finally took its toll. In 1801 Polythress

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<sup>56</sup> Thrift, 55. Lee also traveled with Asbury through Caswell in 1799 and 1800, but Thrift gives us no details.

<sup>57</sup> *Minutes*, 212.

<sup>58</sup> Whatcoat, 280-281. Whatcoat's journal is heavily edited by Rogal to make it readable; apparently the original is sparse, cryptic, and so full of misspellings as to be nearly unintelligible.

<sup>59</sup> *Minutes*, 11-12, 64-65.

<sup>60</sup> *Minutes*, 194.

<sup>61</sup> Dr. Redford, "History of Methodism in Kentucky," quoted in M.H. Moore, *Sketches of the Pioneers of Methodism in North Carolina and Virginia* (Nashville, TN: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1884), 86.

<sup>62</sup> *Minutes*, 244.

went west again and disappeared. M.H. Moore says the 1802 Western Conference "intimated (Polythress) was in 'a grave state of unaccountability.'"<sup>63</sup> Caswell was the first and last circuit bracketing his distinguished Kentucky ministry: Francis Polythress had gone mad!

### **Methodism Grows 1800-1840**

With the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Methodism in Caswell began to emerge from the era of mythic personalities and take shape as an institution. One sign of the growing permanence of Methodism was the securing of church property. The early itinerants had preached under trees, in homes and barns, private chapels, and (where unopposed) empty pulpits of other denominations such as the Church of England. The earliest churches were probably privately built on privately-owned land and made available for the societies and preachers.

But just as John Wesley had insisted on conference ownership of the Methodist preaching houses in England to avoid control by property owners, the Methodist Episcopal Church seems to have made a serious push in the early 1800s to claim ownership of the church buildings on the circuits. A survey of deed information for Caswell County Methodist churches shows that the oldest deed is dated 1809; most are clustered in the 1820s and 1830s.<sup>64</sup> There seems to have been "model deed" language that the churches incorporated. Camp Springs' deed is typical:

"This indenture made this 30<sup>th</sup> day of June in the year of our Lord Eighteen hundred and nine between James Simpson... and Thomas Humphreys... James Taylor, Charles Moore, Thomas Thompson... and William Matkins... trustees in trust for the uses and purposes herein after mentions. Witness that the said James Simpson for and in consideration of the sum of forty dollars to him in hand paid... hath given... a certain lot or piece of ground... including a Spring of Waters known by the name Camp Springs containing and laid out for one acre of ground... unto these the said

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<sup>63</sup> Moore, 90. Moore also quotes Rev. Henry Boehm, Asbury's traveling companion on an 1810 trip to Kentucky: "Monday 15, we went with Brother Harris to see Francis Poythress (sic), one of our old preachers. He *has been for ten years in a state of insanity, and is still in a distressed state of mind*" (emphasis original).

<sup>64</sup> Joseph W. Watson, *North Carolina Conference Historical Directory* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Conference Commission on Archives and History, 1984), 16-17. The deed dates for the older churches are: Camp Springs, 1809; Connally, 1821; Hebron, 1829; Leasburg, 1836; New Hope, 1831; Prospect (as Piney Grove), 1817; Purley (as Harrison's), 1831/1835; Union, 1820; and Yanceyville, 1834.

Thomas Humphreys, James Taylor, Charles Moore, Thomas Thompson, and William Matkins *and their successors in office forever in trust that they shall erect and build or cause to be erected and built thereon a House or Place of Worship for the use of the members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America according to the rules and discipline which from time to time may be agreed upon and adopted by the Ministers and Preachers of the said church at the General Conferences in the United States of America and in future trust and confidence that they shall at all times forever hereafter permit such ministers and preachers of said Methodist Episcopal Church or by the yearly conferences authorized by the said general conferences and none others to preach and expound God's holy word therein...*"<sup>65</sup> (emphasis added).

The deed stipulated that the trustees or their successors would build a place of worship for the use of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. Its usage would be governed by the rules and discipline approved by the General Conference, and the pulpit would be open to authorized Methodist preachers and no others. Other church deeds from the era, such as the 1835 deed for Harrison's,<sup>66</sup> use almost exactly the same language for the responsibility of the trustees, which indicates this was probably model language promoted by the denomination.

Methodism's rapid growth in its first two decades had leveled off. In 1810, local lawyer Bartlett Yancey could say of Caswell churches: "The Religion of the inhabitants may be best estimated by the number of churches and communicants: there are 4 Baptist Churches & about 300 Communicants: 4 Presbyterian Congregations and about 200 or 250 Communicants: 3 or 4 Methodist Societies and about 250 or 300 Communicants:"<sup>67</sup> Yancey's estimate was not far off the official count of 472 whites and 51 blacks, which was about the same as the numbers

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<sup>65</sup> 1809 Deed, James Simpson to Thomas Humphreys.

<sup>66</sup> 1835 Deed, Abisha & Mary Slade to Andrew Harrison et al.

<sup>67</sup> Bartlett Yancey, "A concise description of Caswell County," letter to Thomas Henderson, August 11, 1810, manuscript. To judge from Yancey's description of a primary industry, the Methodists probably had their hands full: "The Inhabitants of Caswell, are following the example of the western counties in erecting distilleries: there are I suppose upwards of fifty. the greater part of which have been erected within a few years: Some of them are useful to the owner and the Country, but most of them are nuisances to society, being the resort of idle dispirited men, who by their visits to such places, bring on ruin to themselves and their families: I know of nothing which has so great a tendency to demoralize Society, except it be the late practices of chicanery by drunkenness the people with grog, and with falsehoods."



reported in the late 1790s.<sup>68</sup>

To fill the buildings newly owned by the church, camp meetings became a popular and common aspect of North Carolina Methodism after 1802, and a natural successor to Wesleyan field preaching. Tise writes that the Moravians in Salem were not impressed by the excitement of the camp meetings. They described week-long events with shouts of praise and cries of distress, saints and sinners, free men and slaves, 20 preachers, a central square surrounded by wagons and tents, and lit by camp fires, singing, praying, and "much preaching."<sup>69</sup>

The impression of the Moravians and the scale of the camp meetings are corroborated in a letter written by Rev. Henry Hardy to *The Methodist Magazine* in 1822 describing camp meetings around Hillsborough (near Caswell County) the year before. Hardy begins his letter with an August meeting on the Granville Circuit boasting seventy tents, twenty pastors, and a Sunday congregation of 3,000!<sup>70</sup> At a slightly smaller camp meeting near Hillsborough beginning August 29<sup>th</sup>, "thirty-five souls had been, during the meeting, brought into liberty."<sup>71</sup> Another smaller meeting at Kimsborough had many "inquirers after truth," and sixty were converted.<sup>72</sup>

Hillsboro also hosted a revival. Three sermons each day were delivered at the courthouse. On Sunday morning, the Methodist clergyman preached on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and then served it – a first, Hardy thought, for the town. He reported that thirty people were prostrated on the floor under the power of the Spirit and conviction of sin, most of them "earnestly groaning under a sense of their condemnation & supplicating for mercy in the name of

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<sup>68</sup> *Minutes*, 482. The conference numbers are higher. We don't know if Yancey asked the Methodists for his numbers or was simply "guesstimating." If modern experience is a guide, the number listed on the official church roles may be noticeably higher than the actual number of "communicants."

<sup>69</sup> Tise, 46-47.

<sup>70</sup> Henry Hardy, "Account of the Work of God in North-Carolina, in 1821. Extract of a letter from Rev. Henry Hardy, dated Raleigh, (N.C.) Dec. 14, 1821," in *The Methodist Magazine*, March 1822 (New York: T. Mason and N. Bangs), 113.

<sup>71</sup> Hardy, 114.

<sup>72</sup> Hardy, 114.

Jesus."<sup>73</sup> In a town Asbury once abandoned as depraved and hopeless, the results were amazing.<sup>74</sup> Even Hardy acknowledged Hillsboro's hardscrabble reputation, but said the new topic of conversation since the revival was religion, and that a subscription had been started to build a church.<sup>75</sup>

Most likely the camp meeting fever that swept North Carolina in 1802 and burst out just south of Caswell County in 1821 had a local counterpart. The only evidence we have, though, is a notice in the Milton newspaper for July 31, 1830: "A CAMP-MEETING For Caswell Circuit, will commence at Harrison's Meeting House, on Friday the 20<sup>th</sup> of August, instead of the 13<sup>th</sup>, as heretofore published, under the superintendence of the Rev. Moses Brock, Presiding Elder for the Yadkin District, with the assistance of the Rev. John H. Watson & John J. Head. Other travelling and local Preachers are particularly invited to attend. July, 1830."<sup>76</sup>

### **Methodism at mid-century**

Two clashing trends can be discerned in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The camp meetings might be seen as a final outgrowth of Methodism's roots as a wild-and-woolly frontier religion of loosely organized societies appealing mainly to the marginal elements in society, which was in turn an extension of Wesley's field preaching, designed to convict sinners and bring them into the fold. On the other hand, the establishment of church deeds with clauses guaranteeing control by the Methodist Episcopal Church, though it had Wesleyan antecedents, was a harbinger of Methodism's encroaching institutionalism and respectability. The latter impulse continued to push the former aside as the 1800s progressed.

Donald Matthews writes of these changing times: "Although the anxious bench was to

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<sup>73</sup> Hardy, 115.

<sup>74</sup> Asbury, 510.

<sup>75</sup> Hardy, 115.

<sup>76</sup> Anonymous, "A Camp-Meeting," advertisement in *Milton Gazette and Roanoke Advertiser*, July 31, 1830. See Appendix C, illustration 3 for the actual advertisement.

persist in revivals and camp meetings, neither it nor the class meeting could survive the century."<sup>77</sup> For the dislocated and isolated pioneers in the North Carolina wilderness at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, the Wesleyan class movement had provided a social outlet and a sense of order. As the 1800s progressed, those same settlers put down roots, the population grew, transportation and communication improved, and the sense of isolation receded into memory.<sup>78</sup>

According to Matthews, "Methodists built churches on the bases of the classes and the churches in turn promoted membership in various charitable societies... which could fulfill many of the functions of the class."<sup>79</sup> These trends can be documented in mid-century Caswell Methodism. Surviving records include the quarterly meeting minutes for the Caswell Circuit 1844-1854 and the Yanceyville Circuit from 1855-1877, the journal of the circuit's pastor in charge for 1852-1853, and some miscellaneous documents.

Looking at the quarterly meeting minutes reveals that the Methodists were still grappling with their dual identity as classes or as churches. On paper, they sound more like classes. Next to the roll call of names at each meeting are abbreviations indicating roles in the church: P.E. (Presiding Elder), A.E. (Acting? Elder), EX (Exhorter), Std (Steward), and CL (Class Leader). These titles are reminiscent of the early days of Methodism. The roll from the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarterly meeting, held at New Hope in 1846, is a typical example:

"William Carter P.E.  
James L Nicholson A.E.  
Elijah Roberts, John Pinchback, John Davis EX  
William Smith, St. Wm. H(?) Childs St.  
James Ingram, Green T. Womack, Richard Taylor, Daniel T Merit?, Bluford W. Reid,  
Franklin B. Burton CL

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<sup>77</sup> Donald G. Matthews, "North Carolina Methodists in the Nineteenth Century: Church and Society," in *Methodism Alive in North Carolina*, ed. Kelly O. Ingram (Durham, NC: Duke Divinity School, 1976), 68.

<sup>78</sup> Matthews, 68-71.

<sup>79</sup> Matthews, 71.

George W. Jeffreys Local Elder  
Elijah Roberts, John Pinchback, John A Davis, Thomas W Holden, James Bradsher,  
Stephen Garret | EX  
William Smith, William H. Childs Benj. F. Stanfield Recording Steward John P.  
Harrison, Daniel Gunn, William Taylor | Std – passed their annual examinations of  
character."<sup>80</sup>

The abbreviations indicate William Carter is the presiding elder for the district and James L. Nicholson the pastor in charge of the circuit. Elijah Roberts and friends are exhorters. William Smith is a steward. James Ingram and the rest are class leaders. Notice that the members must still pass an annual examination of character, a throwback to Methodism's early days.

In the 1840s, however, the duty to hold each other accountable had lost its original loving Wesleyan context and taken on a more bureaucratic and legalistic form. On September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1845, John Westbrook and William P. Chambers were summoned before a called meeting of official members of the Caswell Circuit and charged with "quarrelling & fiting against the rules of the Methodist Episcopal Church."<sup>81</sup> The minutes read like a court trial: charges were alleged and admitted, witnesses were introduced and deposed, statements were made, etc. In the end, the committee "after mature deliberation" unanimously decided the charges were sustained and James Nicholson, the preacher in charge, pronounced that Westbrook and Chambers were no longer part of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Besides discipline, another role of classes and class leaders in early Methodism was to raise money. Church names that remain familiar in modern Caswell County appear almost every

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<sup>80</sup> Benj. F. Stanfield, 1846 3rd quarterly minutes, in "Quarterly Conference Minutes of the Caswell Circuit, 1844-1854, and of the Yanceyville Circuit, 1855-1877," manuscript. Notice that two generations after 1800, the names of founding families like Harrison and Davis are still common in the church leadership. Stanfield's name is also common in Caswell Methodism at this time.

<sup>81</sup> Caswell Circuit *Minutes*, September 27, 1845. The charge was, "Westbrook give Chambers the lie upon the Charge that he never paid a debt only by law. Thereupon Chamber struck Westbrook two blows, they then closed for a fight with abusive language on both sides such as infernal scoundrel, rogue, Lie &etc." Other less prominent examples of cases and appeals are handled often during the regular quarterly meetings. See for example the 1846 4<sup>th</sup> Quarterly Meeting.

quarter in the minutes from the 1840s. The list from the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarterly meeting of 1844 is typical: "Harrisons \$14.75 Yaceyville \$12. Union \$4.50 Leas Chappell \$12.20 Concord \$16.00 Bethany \$8.50 Hebron \$1.00 N.Hope \$2.75 Pineygrove \$5.20 Prospect \$13.14 Shady Grove 14.97 Ser. Shouse \$5.00."<sup>82</sup> Were these names considered churches, or still thought of as societies led by the class leaders? A few, like "Ser. Shouse" (Sergent's Schoolhouse), appear sporadically, or only occur once or twice before disappearing again. It is doubtful these ephemeral groups were considered churches in our modern sense, which makes one wonder if the other, well-established names were also still thought of as classes.

Sunday schools were one of the organizations that eventually usurped the role of classes in the church. Their progress in the quarterly minutes for Caswell County is obvious. Minutes for the first quarterly meeting in 1844 state that Solomon Lea had opened a Sunday School at his house. Samuel S. Bryant, the presiding elder, laments that no other schools operate within the circuit, but says he is trying to instruct children wherever he is staying.<sup>83</sup> By the next meeting, the minutes report "the state of Sabbath Schools is in a flourishing condition among us. About nine are in operation."<sup>84</sup> The minutes for nearly every meeting track the rise and fall of the Sunday Schools on the circuit obsessively.

By 1860, a new abbreviation appeared in the roll – Supt SS, or Superintendent of Sunday Schools. At the same time, proportionally fewer names were marked CL (Class Leader).<sup>85</sup> At least in terminology, the newer title seems to have usurped the role of the more traditional title.

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<sup>82</sup> Caswell Circuit *Minutes*, June 15, 1844.

<sup>83</sup> Caswell Circuit *Minutes*, March 2, 1844.

<sup>84</sup> Caswell Circuit *Minutes*, June 15, 1844.

<sup>85</sup> Yanceyville Circuit *Minutes*, March 10, 1860. The Yanceyville Circuit superceded and absorbed the central and northern portions of the old Caswell Circuit in 1855. The minutes for the two circuits are continuous in the same book. The roll for this meeting includes the following: "A.F. Reid P.E.; Wm Burrigen(?) A.E.; Elijah Robards Ex.; Samuel S. Harrison Stw; Noel Burton CL; Joseph C Pinnix(?) CL; Thos H Hatchett Supt SS; Wm H Holdenness(?) Supt SS; John W. Gunn Supt SS; Wm S Hatchett Stwd; Dr. A Gunn Supt SS; Wm B Bowen(?) Stwd" Only two men are listed as class leaders, while four are Sunday School superintendents.

A major item of business at the 1<sup>st</sup> Quarterly Conference of 1860 for the Yanceyville Circuit was to appoint two or even three "Superintendents for the Several Congregations on the Circuit."<sup>86</sup>

The church names are not referred to as classes, but *congregations*. The terminology has changed, or at least been clarified. The change of focus from classes/ societies to congregations/ churches was beginning to resolve, and Sunday Schools were helping drive the change.

If the minutes of the quarterly meetings for the Caswell and Yanceyville Circuits give a glimpse of the changes in Methodism from the perspective of the lay leaders, the journal of William M. Jordan offers an even rarer peak at Methodism from the clergy's side in mid-century. Jordan's journal covers the years 1852 through 1857. In 1852-1853 Jordan was the pastor assigned to the Caswell Circuit.<sup>87</sup> His daily reflections are colorful and honest.

Unfortunately, Jordan does not provide more clarity about the distinction between societies and churches. Twice Jordan refers to societies, and only once to church in the same context. In 1852 he writes, "[May] 29<sup>th</sup> & 30<sup>th</sup> Held a Two Days Meeting at Salem. This is a New Church built during the last year. We have only four members in Society at the [present?]. I fear it will be a good while before we shall do much here."<sup>88</sup> Perhaps by church, Jordan means the building, and by society he means the congregation? Except that when he reflected on his work at the end of each year, he talked about the number of probationary members who joined "*the*

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<sup>86</sup> Yanceyville Circuit *Minutes*, March 10, 1860. The evolution of terms and roles after the late 1840s is difficult to trace in the *Minutes* because many of the pages are severely water stained or faded and illegible. The manuscript *Constitution of Prospect Sunday School* may help fill this gap. Though the manuscript is undated, article 4 requires the school secretary to make a written report quarterly to the preacher in charge of the Caswell Circuit. This suggests the constitution was written before the Caswell Circuit became the Yanceyville Circuit in 1855. Article 2 of the constitution calls for two superintendents, a secretary, and form(?) managers. This suggests that Sunday School was becoming a more formal and bureaucratic endeavor even before 1860.

<sup>87</sup> William M. Jordan, *Papers, 1852-1857*, manuscript. Jordan's journal is in the Special Collections of Duke Divinity School. Jordan writes well and in the grand tradition of Wesley, Asbury and Coke. For those unable to access the original, the author has transcribed all of 1852 and portions of 1853 into a computer text file. Jordan's stories include horseback itinerancy, washed-out bridges, problems with gambling and alcoholism among his congregations, observations on race and racism, and complaints about the parsonage (some things never change).

<sup>88</sup> Jordan, 8-9. The other unhelpful mention of society is on page 64-65, "Wednesday [October 26, 1853] at Shady Grove – two persons joined on probation. Society at this place in rather a bad condition."

church," as if the circuit or perhaps the Methodist Episcopal Church were the congregation.<sup>89</sup>

Jordan shows modest interest in the Sunday School movement within the churches. At least three times he preaches on "the instruction of children."<sup>90</sup> On those same days he comments on the lack of a Sunday School at Yanceyville, the good Sabbath School at Connaly's, and the painful lack of interest in training the next generation at Harrison's.

Jordan is more interested in the sacraments of communion, baptism, and the love feast than he is in Sunday Schools. He often celebrates communion and a love feast on the same day. Jordan is disappointed on those days when interest in taking communion is low – he obviously takes his sacramental authority seriously. At other times he is spiritually uplifted in the administration.<sup>91</sup> Baptism is a huge issue that Jordan addresses head-on: "What a pity that so much time has to be taken up in discussing this subject. If the Baptists will agitate the subject I say our preachers are in duty bound to give our views on the subject."<sup>92</sup> Jordan baptizes scores of people during his tenure, generally by aspersion but occasionally by immersion.<sup>93</sup>

Jordan is *most* interested in revival meetings – they are his overriding passion. July through October of 1852, he "commenced a meeting" at every single church on the charge. He repeated the cycle in 1853. Some of these meetings lasted only a day or two,<sup>94</sup> and some more than a week!<sup>95</sup> The primary feature of the meetings was lots and lots of preaching. In this, lay

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<sup>89</sup> Jordan, 27 and 66.

<sup>90</sup> Jordan, 3, 4, 52.

<sup>91</sup> Jordan, 5, is an example of disappointment; 2 is an example of a "good time."

<sup>92</sup> Jordan, 10.

<sup>93</sup> Jordan, 29. On October 31, 1852, Jordan baptized 20 people in one day!

<sup>94</sup> Jordan, 11: "Sat July 17<sup>th</sup> [1852] Commenced a meeting at New Hope. Bro S. Lea came to my assistance on Sunday and preached one sermon. I toiled hard 'till Sunday evening. Sinners seemed to feel much, but would not yield. Poor New Hope! It is a hard place. Great deal of gambling about here."

<sup>95</sup> Jordan, 12-14: "Sat 31 [July 1852]. At Connaly's commenced a meeting by preaching from 2 Peter 3.12. Sunday morning we held *Love-feast*; at the close of which we had two mourners. At the close of the first sermon we administered the *Sacrament of the Lord's Supper* Had a time interest. Bro S Lea preached the second sermon. We had several mourners. On monday two persons professed to find the Lord in the pardon of their sins. On Tuesday we had a goodly number of mourners, but no converts. *Baptized three persons by immersion*. Wednesday was rainy – few persons out. We had however sufficient encouragement to continue the meeting. Thursday was election day but

preachers and exhorters on Jordan's circuit aided him much, especially Solomon Lea. In the more successful revivals, communion, love feasts, baptisms, and altar calls also played important rolls.

While the impulse to hold revival meetings appears to have been left over from the camp meeting glory days of the early 1800s or the Wesleyan field preaching of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it is hard to argue with Jordan's success. At the end of his first year on the circuit he counted 70 people added to the church on probation.<sup>96</sup> At the close of 1853 Jordan praised the Lord for 230 conversions and 188 probationary members!<sup>97</sup>

However, one particular journal entry illustrates the impending collision of the old, camp meeting conversion model of the church and the new, Sunday School nurture model of the church. Remember that Solomon Lea, one of Jordan's chief lay preachers, was also conducting a Sunday School as early as 1844 according to the quarterly meeting minutes. Jordan led a meeting at Bethany in August, 1852. When he held an altar call after the second sermon, "about fifteen persons came to the altar and prayed for nearly all of whom were pupils in Br Leas' School. After laboring with them a short time two of them professed to find the Lord in the pardon of their sins."<sup>98</sup> Jordan was catching fish that were already in Lea's net, so to speak.

### **Methodism 1880-1910**

Frontier Methodism before Jordan's time still carried elements of the old Wesleyan system like the model deed. Its strength was in societies and classes, camp meetings and revivals, loose and flexible organization. In Jordan's time, the mid-1800s, a murky shift was underway to a different model, where Sunday Schools and other organizations replaced the class meeting and

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a goodly number of people attended and we had a time of interest. Friday, we had a glorious time. Some ten persons professed conversion. During the meeting fifteen persons professed to pass(?) into the liberty of God's people and fourteen joined the Church. Thank the Lord for his goodness. During the Meeting I was greatly aided by Brothers H(?)N Holden and T.J. Howard."

<sup>96</sup> Jordan, 27.

<sup>97</sup> Jordan, 66.

<sup>98</sup> Jordan, 19-20.



where Christians were nurtured, not recruited. The changes that marked the church and society, such as the 1844 split in the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Civil War, were still invisible in the documented life of local Caswell County churches mid-century.<sup>99</sup> However, by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century most vestiges of the roots of Methodism in Caswell County and in America were gone. Methodism began to look much like the institutional church we know today.

Gone was the Wesley-esque model deed language, and acknowledged was the split in the denomination. In 1886, Harrison's Church moved two miles south to be on the main road in the community of Purley. A descendant of Thomas Harrison was still involved, but the deed illustrated how much things had changed:

"This Deed made & entered into this 6<sup>th</sup> day of October in the year of Our Lord 1886 between Louisa Harrison party of the first part and John W. Slade, Dr. Geo. Gunn S.G. Woods, Geo. Daily, Jos. C. Pinnix & R.L. Smith trustees for Yanceyville Circuit, North Carolina Conference of the *Methodist Episcopal Church South* parties of the Second Part... in consideration of her *love & affection for the said Methodist E. Church South* & the further consideration of Five dollars cash in hand..."<sup>100</sup> (emphasis added).

The deed for the land where Harrison's new church would rise no longer contained the standard text about the trustees erecting a church for the use and control of the Methodist Episcopal Church and its ministers and preachers. There were no stipulations at all on the use of the land. However, the Methodist Episcopal Church *South* was explicitly named, not just as the legal entity behind the trustees, but as the object of Widow Harrison's sentimental affection.

Gone also were the class leaders. Entrenched were the Sunday School Superintendents. In the 1882-1884 minutes of the Hillsboro District Conference, the pastor's reports from the Yanceyville Circuit don't mention any class leaders, but they do spend a lot of time considering

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<sup>99</sup> Caswell Circuit *Minutes* and Yanceyville Circuit *Minutes*. Nowhere in the Caswell quarterly meeting minutes for 1844 or 1845 is the split between the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church South mentioned. Likewise in those portions of the Yanceyville quarterly meeting minutes for the 1860s that are legible, there is no hint that the country is at war with itself.

<sup>100</sup> 1886 Deed, Louisa Harrison to John W. Slade et al.

the condition of the Sunday Schools.<sup>101</sup> The pastors also express concern about participation in the sacrament of communion, and about low participation in infant baptism due to a feeling among the laity that it wasn't satisfying.<sup>102</sup>

And gone was the emphasis on revival, replaced by an emphasis on building. The inadequate pioneer structures began to make way for modern facilities. The Yanceyville Circuit pastor's reports for 1882 through 1884 generally complained about the poor condition of the church buildings, many dating to the rugged days of the early 1800s.<sup>103</sup> When the congregation of Harrison's Church moved in 1886 from the old camp ground to the new the plank road near the Purley post office, they were on the leading edge a movement that would see many Caswell churches rebuilt or repaired in the next twenty years.

Building projects became so important to the new, institutional Methodist church that they exuded the energy once saved for revivals, which were now more of an historical afterthought than the engine of church growth and spiritual renewal. For example, here is how the pastor of the Milton Circuit<sup>104</sup> in 1906 answered Question B, "Spiritual State of the Church:"

"1<sup>st</sup> Quarterly Conference, Feb. 17<sup>th</sup>, 1906, Dr. J.S. Gibbs, P.E.  
We have come to journey with the good people of this charge the 4<sup>th</sup> and last year. While we have not been able to accomplish what we would like to have done, yet I'm happy to say I believe we have made (permanent?) advances. The church is in some respects far better established in the affections of the people than since the circuit's organization. Our people have gradually grown in the spirit of liberality. We have begun the church at New Hope, buying material and repairing Purley. Besides the people are increasing in their interest towards the benevolences of the church. Upon the whole I think we are doing well....

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<sup>101</sup> Various, "Hillsboro District Conference Minutes, 1882-1884; Durham District Conference Minutes, 1885-1895," manuscript.

<sup>102</sup> Jordan had struggled with the issue of infant baptism 30 years before. Especially in Caswell County, where Baptists and Methodists are shoulder-to-shoulder, this theological debate has always been a live issue. On the eucharist, the Methodist church had come a long way from the 1780s, when Wesley took radical action to meet the American longing for communion, to Jordan's time when the sacrament saw uneven interest, to the apparent serious lack of interest in the 1890s.

<sup>103</sup> Hillsboro District Conference Minutes, 1882-1884.

<sup>104</sup> The Milton Circuit had been carved off of the Yanceyville Circuit and contained Milton, Connallys, New Hope, and Purley Methodist churches.

Respectfully submitted –  
J.S. Daily, P.C."

"2<sup>nd</sup> Quarterly Conference, April 14<sup>th</sup> 1906, Dr. J.S. Gibbs, P.E.

Judging from the general interest the people all over the charge have in church repairing and building alone we are doing very well. At New Hope we are building a good church but just at the beginning of work there we sustained a great loss to that church, and indeed to the whole charge in the death of our good sister Mrs. Ella B. Satterfield. We believe the indications are for good revivals on the circuit this year.

Respectfully submitted –  
J.A. Daily, P.C."<sup>105</sup>

Rev. Daily's answers about the spiritual life of the church don't mention prayer, worship, or bible study at all. Revivals are an afterthought, given a single less-than-ringing endorsement at the end of the second report. When asked about spiritual life, the pastor talks mostly about the charitable giving and interest in building and repairing instead.

## Conclusion

Reality-based crime dramas advise, "only the names have been changed – the situation remains the same." The opposite is true in Caswell County Methodism: the names have not changed (much) for 200 years, but the situation has changed. In the literal wilderness of the frontier, Wesley's and Asbury's vision for a Methodist movement built on spirituality, sacraments, conviction of the heart, small group accountability, and lay empowerment, could thrive amazingly. As the frontier receded, both Caswell Methodism and American Methodism slowly became acclimated and adapted to the new culture. But in the process, I feel we have lost the best parts of our strength. The situation has changed again from 1900, when a smug and triumphant Methodist church could spend more on bricks than bibles. We live in a cultural wilderness today, and perhaps it is time to re-examine our history and reclaim our heritage.

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<sup>105</sup> Various, "Milton Circuit, Quarterly Conference Minutes 1906-1908," manuscript. This quirky emphasis on works over spirituality was built into the fabric of the new church. Until New Hope's sanctuary was repainted two years ago, a large stone tablet directly behind the pulpit memorialized Mrs. Ella Satterfield with the phrase, "She hath done what she could."

## Appendix A – Caswell Circuit Statistics, 1773-1800

From *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences Annually Held in America; From 1773 to 1813, Inclusive, Volume the First*, ed. by Hitt and Ware (New York: John C. Totten, 1813).

Year	Station	Preachers	Membership	US Total
1773	Norfolk	Richard Wright	100 (Virginia)	1160
1774	Norfolk	John King	73	2073
1775	Norfolk	Francis Asbury	125	3148
1776	Pittsylvania	Isaac Rollins	100	4921
1777	Pittsylvania	John Sigman, Isham Tatum	150	6968
1778	Pittsylvania	William Gill, John Major, Henry Willis	n/a	6095
1779F	Pittsylvania	Lee Roy Cole, Greenberry Green, John Atkins	500	8577
1780	Pittsylvania	Richard Ivy, Carter Cole, William Partridge	634	8504
1781	Pittsylvania	Thomas Foster, James Mallory	600	10539
1782	Pittsylvania	Caleb Bowyer, Ira Ellis, Henry Jones	491 (w/ Yadkin)	11785
1783	<b>Caswell</b> Pittsylvania	Peter Moriarty, Jesse Lee James O Cromwell, Tho. Anderson	n/a 362	13740
1784	<b>Caswell</b>	Richard Swift	165	14988
1785	<b>Caswell</b>	Elijah Ellis, <i>Richard Ivy (Elder)</i>	n/a	18000
1786	<b>Caswell</b>	Sihon Smith, <i>Sihon Smith (Elder)</i>	153(w) / 0(c)	18791(w) / 1890(c)
1787	<b>Caswell</b>	Terence Burns, <i>Francis Polythress (Elder)</i>	206 / 6	21949 / 3893
1788	<b>Caswell</b>	Isaac Lowe, <i>John Tunnell (Elder)</i>	300 / 12	30809 / 6545
1789	<b>Caswell</b>	Thomas Ware, Henry Ledbetter, <i>Edward Morris (Presiding Elder)</i>	351 / 43	35019 / 8243
1790	<b>Caswell</b>	Henry Merritt, Simon Carlisle, <i>Thomas Anderson (Elder)</i>	469 / 44	45949 / 11682
1791	<b>Caswell</b>	Enoch George, Henry Hill, <i>Isaac Lowe (Elder)</i>	508 / 31	63269 / 12884
1792	<b>Caswell</b>	Jonathan Bird, John Sproul, <i>Isaac Lowe (Elder)</i>	517 / 75	52109 / 13871
1793	<b>Caswell</b>	F. Killinsworth, George McKenney, <i>Isaac Lowe (Elder)</i>	517 / 75	51416 / 16227
1794	<b>Caswell</b>	William Ormond, Leondard Dyson, <i>Isaac Lowe (Elder)</i>	477 / 58	52794 / 13814
1795	<b>Caswell</b>	Samuel S. Steward, William Wells, <i>James Meachem (Elder)</i>	500 / 58	48121 / 12170
1796	<b>Caswell</b>	John Weeks, Roger Hancock, <i>Josiah Asker (Elder)</i>	362 / 25	45384 / 11280
1797	<b>Caswell</b>	William Wilkerson, William Brittain, <i>James Hunter (Presiding Elder)</i>	430 / 50	46445 / 12218
1798	<b>Caswell</b>	Lewis Garrett, John Turner, <i>James Rogers (Presiding Elder)</i>	432 / 59	47867 / 12302
1799	<b>Caswell</b>	Banister Meador, Samuel Hooser, <i>James Rogers (Presiding Elder)</i>	465 / 67	49115 / 12236
1800	<b>Caswell</b>	John Ray, John Gamewell, <i>Francis Polythress (Presiding Elder)</i>	515 / 120	51442 / 13452

After 1786, the *Minutes* grouped circuits geographically under presiding elders as follows:

1785	<b>Caswell</b> , Halifax, Salisbury
1786	<b>Caswell</b> , New-Hope, Roan-Oak, Tar-River
1787	<b>Caswell</b> , Guilford, Halifax, New-Hope
1788	Bladen, <b>Caswell</b> , Guilford, Halifax, New-Hope, New-River, Roan-Oak, Salisbury, Tar-River, Yadkin
1789	<b>Caswell</b> , East New-River, Guilford, New-Hope, Pamlico, Roan-Oak, Salisbury, Tar-River, Yadkin
1790	<b>Caswell</b> , Guilford, Pamlico, Roan-Oak
1791	Anson, <b>Caswell</b> , Guilford, Lincoln, Salisbury, Yadkin
1792	Anson, <b>Caswell</b> , Guilford, Highco, Lincoln, Salisbury, Yadkin
1793	<b>Caswell</b> , Guilford, Haw-River, New-Hope, Swanino, Union
1794-1795	<b>Caswell</b> , Franklin, Guilford, New-Hope
1796	Anson, <b>Caswell</b> , Frankford, Guilford, New-Hope, Salisbury, Swanino, Union, Yadkin
1797	Banks, <b>Caswell</b> , Contentney, Goshen, Mattamuskeet, Newbern, Pamlico, Roan-Oak, Tar-River
1798	<b>Caswell</b> , Contentney, Goshen, Mattamuskeet, Newbern, Pamlico, Roan-Oak, Tar-River
1799	<b>Caswell</b> , Contentney, Franklin, French-Broad, Goshen, Guilford, Haw-River, Mattamuskeet, Newbern, Pamlico, Roan-Oak, Salisbury, Swanino, Tar-River, Yadkin
1800	Banks, <b>Caswell</b> , Contentney, Franklin, Goshen, Guilford, Haw-River, Mattamuskeet, Morganton, Newbern, Pamlico, Roan-Oak, Salisbury, Swanino, Tar-River, Wilmington, Yadkin

## Appendix B – Asbury in Caswell County, 1780-1791

Excerpted from Francis Asbury, *The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury In Three Volumes: Volume I, The Journal, 1771 to 1793*, ed. by Elmer T. Clark et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1958). This list also includes dates when Asbury probably passed through or near Caswell County, even if he did not explicitly record it.

Pages	Date	Notes
370-371	8/2/1780	Hillsboro
	8/3	Set off for Pittsylvania. 25 miles to John Lee's.
	8/5	Quarterly meeting at Henley's Preaching House. Richard Ivey (Pittsylvania 1780) spoke. Staying at John Lee's.
	8/6	Sunday – preached to 500.
	8/7	Monday, 10am, preached at Lee's Chapel, Caswell Co. to 60 people on Matthew 7:21. Preachers don't have good studies. People thought highly of him. Baptists upset.
	8/8	Tuesday. 16 miles to Baxter's, preached to 80 people on 1 John 1:8-9. Difficulty crossing the Line Creek. Rode 6 miles, was hour too late. 8pm cabin with dirt floor.
	8/9	Wednesday. 16 miles to White's, arrived at 3pm. Notes on the roads, the crops, and the poor people of Caswell County.
422	3/3/1782	Sunday. Preached the funeral of Mrs. Harrison, wife of T. Harrison, on Dan River. Snow. Spoke on 1 Corinthians 15:57-58. Hopes Mr. Harrison will take care for his own soul. C. Kennon a sensible Calvinist.
438-439	4/3/1783	Rode from Guilford to Caswell Co., approx. 20 miles. Met a considerable congregation. Staying at a small cabin with little place to read; the barn is my closet for prayer.
	4/7	Hillsboro – ruined chapel, 3 men dying; thoughts on the waste of war
457	2/22/1784	Funeral in Rockingham Co. on the Dan River
	2/23	Monday. Preached twice.
	2/24	Tuesday, 40 miles. Wednesday, preached to 15 people.
	2/26	Thursday. Hillsboro. Snow and sick horse. People drinking and swearing.
	2/27	Friday. James Cromwell, Pittsylvania Circuit.
508-510	3/1/1786	Wednesday. Rockingham County – Newman's Church. Arrived in night at A. Arnett's poor cottage.
	3/2	Thursday. Preached on "This do..."
	3/4	Saturday. At Widow Dick's. Preacher Foster, Ellis, L. and Hull. (Footnote identifies this as Reuben Ellis, but it might have been Elijah Ellis assigned to the Caswell Circuit for 1785.)
	3/7	Tuesday. Stanfield's. Many hearers, more liberty in speaking.
	3/10	Friday. Hillsboro. Never visit again. Cool reception. Grieved for the sufferings, sins, follies, of people.
537	4/15/1787	Sunday. Newman's Church, Rockingham Co. Then 40 miles to Arnat's house, while Coke goes to Dick's Ferry.
573	5/22/1788	Thursday. Guilford Courthouse.
	5/23	Damp and rainy. Rode to Smith's Chapel and preached. To Brother Harrison's on Dan River, preached. With Polythress and Tunnell.
	5/25	Sunday. Preached. Love Feast and Sacrament. Rode to Widow Dick's.
	5/26	Good time at Martin's. Swam Dan River on way to Stamfield.
621-622	1/22/1790	Friday. Ordains Thomas Anderson. With Whatcoat. Footnote says Key's is in Hillsboro.
642	6/7/1790	According to footnote, Whatcoat records that he and Asbury stayed with James Rice in Caswell County after this date.
671	4/9/1791	Large congregation at Arnett's. 7 miles to banks of Dan River, could not cross. At length came to T. Harrison's. Traveling with Coke.

## Appendix C – Maps and Illustrations

Illustration 1: North Carolina circa 1800 (from Burnside, *Reasons For and Motivations Behind*)



Illustration 2: Conjectured spots Asbury visited in North Carolina (from Asbury, *Journal*)

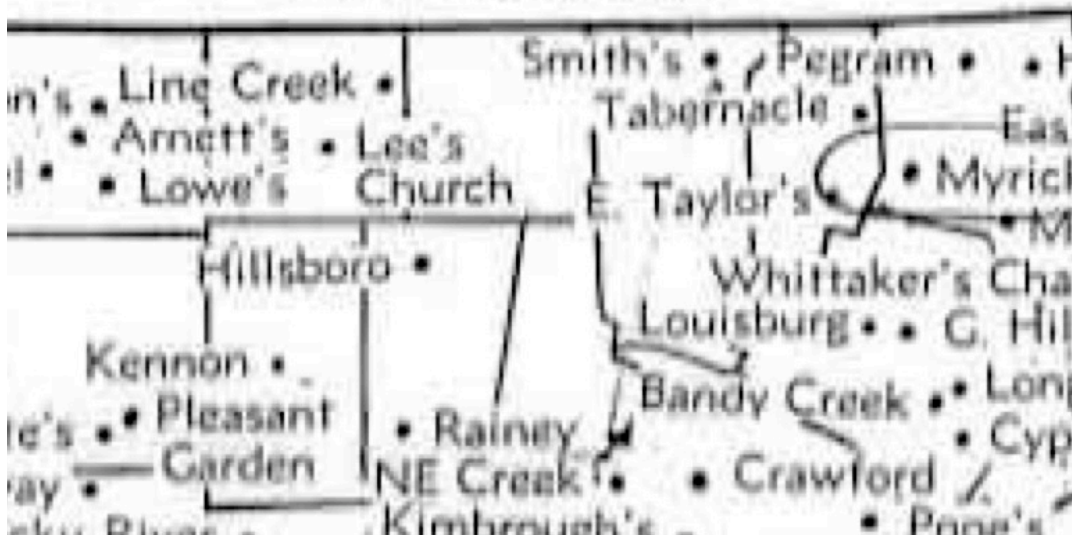
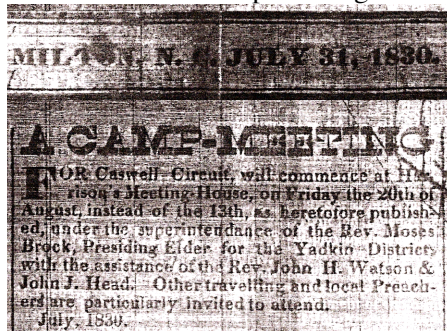


Illustration 3: Methodist camp meeting ad in the Milton Intelligencer & Roanoke Advertiser



## Appendix D – Bibliography

*To assist future research on this topic, I have added the location of all resources (as of November 19, 2008) to the bibliographic entries below.*

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# **Methodism in Microcosm:**

**Methodist History in Caswell County,  
North Carolina, 1780-1905**

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**Parish 159 – Methodism**  
**Heitzenrater / Thompson**