

## CIRCUIT RIDERS OF THE METHODIST FAITH

In 1771 Francis Asbury, a minister of the Methodist Episcopal church of England, was sent to America by John Wesley, founder of the religion. Asbury's mission was to establish churches and organize congregations.

Circuit riders covered a designated region on horseback, carrying their sermons, Bibles and a change of clothes in their saddlebags. They were housed and fed by fellow Methodists along their routes which often covered hundreds of miles.

Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke were appointed bishops in 1784. Both men visited our area, Asbury more than once. He kept journals, as did most of the circuit riders. These journals provide the major source of the history of the early church.

In 1809 Henry Boehm, a circuit rider for 64 years, came into York District in late November and stayed in Yorkville with William Gassaway who would later establish the second oldest Methodist church in York County. In his journal Boehm wrote that he left Gassaway in a severe snowstorm and headed for Lancaster District.

Chilled to the bone he found the house of Robert Hancock on the old Camden to Salisbury Road close to the present-day intersection of Hwy 521 and Hwy 75 in the Osceola community of Indian Land township. Robert Hancock had built "Hancock Chapel," a church that vanished with time but the name Hancock was to be revived at the end of the century as a railroad stop for the Seaboard Airline Railroad.

On November 25, 1809, Boehm preached a sermon at Hancock's and was joined by William Capers, a young circuit rider. Capers, like Asbury, kept an extensive journal. One of Capers' accounts told of how he and Bishop Asbury happened to be at Robert Hancock's when an unexpected snow fell and the northwest wind was bitter cold.

Hancock put the men in a loft bedroom which had a fireplace but the wood was so damp that it proved impossible to start a fire. Capers wrote, "I had been at work blowing and blowing long before bed-time; till to my mortification, the aged bishop came up, and there was still no fire to warm him. "O Billy, sugar," said he as he approached the fireplace, "never mind it; give it up; we will get warm in bed."

Capers knew that Asbury always rose at 4 a.m. Capers worried that he would not only be unable to light a fire in the morning but, since he normally slept until 6, that he would not wake in time. He determined to sit up in his overcoat so that he would not be warm enough to oversleep.

Capers napped, waked, napped again. Shivering in the cold he thought it must surely be near 4 a.m. Managing to get a weak flame by blowing and blowing on the damp wood, he had just enough light to look at his watch. To his mortification he heard Asbury, in a soft voice, said, "Go to bed, sugar, it is hardly three o'clock yet."

It was worse the next night for Capers who woke at his usual 6 a.m. to find that the Bishop was dressed and at his books with a blazing fire going. Capers wrote that Asbury, who had the reputation of being austere, "a man confessedly who never shed a tear who seldom laughed . . .", was greatly amused.

Much of William Capers' assigned circuit was in the lowcountry of SC. There he became the leader of Methodists who ministered to the slave populations of the large plantations. Methodists had always believed that their church must minister to all regardless of color. Capers' ministry with the slaves elevated him to the rank of bishop in 1846.

Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, a Charleston Federalist and one of the Founding Fathers of the U. S. Constitution, was a large slaveholder who invited Rev. Dr. Capers to preach to his slaves. He was the first planter in the state to do so and soon other large planters were giving their support, financial and otherwise. Most of the planters were not Methodists but many of their slaves became members of the church.

By 1828, when the Plantation Missions were formally set up, there were 18,475 slave members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in SC.

In 1861 the South Carolina Conference reported that it had 46,600 Negro members and 37,986 white members—clear evidence that Capers' labors were highly successful.

After the Civil War most of black membership of the Methodist Episcopal Church left it to join with two churches founded by free blacks of Philadelphia and New York—the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) and A. M. E. Zion Churches. Other black Methodists joined the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church and kept close ties with the post-war white Methodist Episcopal Church.