



A daguerreotype from 1861 showing Rev. William S. H. Elliott, with his wife Catharine, and their infant daughter Adèle.

Rev. William S. H. Elliott, D.D.

A Descendant's Portrait

Norman E. Donoghue, II (2012)

Editor's Note: Ned Donoghue is retired from a partnership with the Dechert LLP law firm, and also from a second career as a fundraiser for The Philadelphia Orchestra. He is currently writing a book about an eighteenth century German ancestor who was a Dunker (German Baptist Brethren) and a farmer in western Maryland during the American Revolution. The article below has been adapted, and is used with Mr. Donoghue's permission.

I have been aware of my great-great grandfather, Rev. William S. H. Elliott, D.D., for maybe forty years. He was the grandfather of my grandmother Margaret Valentine Brumbaugh (1892-1993), who spurred my interest in family history. For many years I tried to find out more about Rev. Elliott's story, but was never able to do so. Like all "brick walls" in genealogy, this one finally cracked and my understanding of Rev. Elliott evolved a little at first, then a lot, then suddenly cracked wide open. This essay is an attempt to recount the arc of his life and career, and expose the issues with which he may have struggled.

EARLY YEARS

William S. H. Elliott was born on a Tuesday, October 17, 1815, and raised on Kent Island, the largest island in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay. Today the island lies directly below the Bay Bridge, leading from Annapolis across the bay, at its midpoint to the eastern shore and Ocean City, Maryland. Back in 1815, however, there was but a ferry across the bay. His full name was William Sherwood Hambleton Elliott, proudly named after various ancestors whose virtues we have yet

to discover. William's parents were Captain John Elliott and Elizabeth Hambleton Elliott. His mother's mother was a Ringgold, as was his father's mother. These were plantation families, but I cannot at this point tell what that meant in practical terms. The Elliotts, Hambletons, and Ringgolds are said to have owned significant agricultural estates on Kent Island, having arrived from England in the late 17th century. In a description of William's family by his daughter, Adèle, she made a point of the fact that both his grandmothers were Ringgolds and sisters. This would make his parents, John and Elizabeth, first cousins to one another. In many places today, marriage between persons of such close consanguinity is frowned upon, even illegal in some states.

Kent Island, or the Isle of Kent, as it was first called, was settled very early (1631), the second English settlement in the Maryland colony. It was, and still is, closer to the bay's lightly-settled eastern shore than to its more prosperous western shore, connected to Washington and Baltimore. Somewhat removed geographically, the eastern shore was quite distant to reach, until a bridge was built over the bay only in the mid-20th century. The island itself is roughly thirty-two square miles, fifteen miles long and four miles wide, with many swamps and marshes, and long peninsular fingers into the Bay. While it has about 16,000 residents today, in the early 19th century when William Elliott was born, its population was about 2,000. William could easily have led an idyllic, Tom Sawyer-like existence here, knowing little of the outside world.

One of five children, and among the eldest, William had one sister, Rebecca, and three brothers, John J., Thomas, and Oliver. His parents died while he was young, his mother when he was 9 and his father when he was 14, rendering him an orphan. He was sent to live with his maternal grandmother, Rebecca Ringgold Hambleton, and occasionally spent time with Rebecca's sister, Anne Ringgold Elliott, his paternal grandmother.

We know little of his youth, but all who have written about him emphasized his large stature. His passport application in 1873 (at age 57) stated that he was six feet $\frac{3}{4}$ inches tall, with dark brown eyes, white hair, fair complexion, small mouth, a round chin, a medium nose, and a medium high and broad forehead. His face was described as "bold & round."¹ And even as a senior minister, people remarked on his ability to connect with the younger members of the congregation.

¹US Passport #27209, found in 2011 on Ancestry.com.

On May 30, 1843, at age 27, and early in his religious career, he married Sarah Elizabeth Smith, whose father was the Rev. James Smith, a leading member of the Philadelphia Conference.² William and Sarah soon had two children, James Smith Elliott and Mary Rebecca Elliott.³ In 1847, however, while living in Port Deposit (on the Susquehanna River), Cecil County, Maryland, Sarah became severely ill, and after four months of suffering, passed away, leaving William with two young children. She was remembered as a deeply devoted Christian and mother, who “in the responsible position of a preacher’s wife... was truly a helper and encourager.”⁴

William’s loss of his own mother at an early age repeated itself for these children. He might also have thought to himself: Will I die soon, too, like my father did, at age 49? Fortunately, as we will see, he did not. In 1857, at the age of 42, he married again and started a new family. This time he married in the Germantown section of Philadelphia to Mrs. Catharine Hentz Wehner, the widow of Dr. John Wehner. At this time he had lived in Philadelphia for several years working with at least three different churches, now in particular leading one in the Germantown area. His church, St. Stephen’s Methodist Episcopal (today called Advocate St. Stephen’s), was just blocks from her family’s church, of a different denomination, St. Michael’s Lutheran Church. Whereas William came from an English family, Catharine came from a German one, the Hentz family, who had been members of that church for nearly 60 years.

Theirs was to be a modern, conjoined family.

²On Rev. James Smith, see J. Rush Anderson, “‘Delaware Jimmy’: A Sketch of the Rev. James Smith,” in *Annals of Eastern Pennsylvania* 8 (2011), 84–95. Smith served back to back stints as a Presiding Elder for both the North Philadelphia and South Philadelphia Districts in the late 1830s and early 1840s.

³There is some confusion about William’s first wife. The data above (including her name) is taken from an obituary of Sarah found in the *Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York) of June 23, 1847. A family record, however, lists her name as Mary Rebecca Smith, their marriage date as sometime in 1841, and her death date as 1848; this is all contained in family tree of the Elliott/Valentine family line created in 1920 by Adèle Elliott Valentine and her husband Sterling Galt Valentine, PhD (reproduced on dark blue architectural paper and matted in a red frame in the Donoghue living room). The editor has opted for the information in the obituary, much nearer the event; it is possible that there was a transcription error, since both mother and daughter are called Mary Rebecca on the tree. The tree also lists birth dates for the children as 1841 for James Smith Elliott (evidently named for his maternal grandfather) and 1843 for Mary Rebecca.

⁴*Christian Advocate and Journal*, June 23, 1847.

In 1859, Rev. Elliott and Catharine had their first child, Katherine “Kate” Hambleton Elliott, while in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. In 1861, during the Civil War, they welcomed their second daughter, Adèle, while her father was ministering in Elkton, Maryland. We have a daguerreotype picture of the proud parents and baby Adèle. Rev. Elliott’s older children were then teenagers. Catharine also had children from her first marriage: Sue, then 19, and Jacob Hentz Wehner, who became a doctor like his late father. So, it is safe to say that, rather than die and leave his children orphans as happened to him, Rev. Elliott instead had the good fortune to bring a lot of children and activity to his church’s manse with this large, merged family.

Tragedy struck again, however, in 1870 when he lost both his son and daughter from his first marriage, James⁵ and Mary, in the same year. According to William’s later obituary: “Death deprived him of his son, a young man of great promise; and a lovely daughter in young womanhood.”⁶ In 1870-71 wife Catharine lost her mother and then her father, so this was a truly sorrowful time in his life. William’s granddaughter, Katherine Elliott Cockey Stevens, then aged 2, also lost both parents in 1870-72 and as a consequence, went to live with other relatives on Kent Island. She was later to come to live with her grandfather, Rev. Elliott, from age 9 (1877) until 19, when she graduated from State Normal School.

The burning national public issue of the day during the early portion of William’s life was slavery. Many Methodists disapproved of slavery and some emancipated their slaves. African Americans were even accepted to become Methodist preachers.

William was converted to Methodism early in his youth, and he chose in his twenties to take the route of a preacher, serving people by preaching Methodism, doing good in the world, serving God and man. In his obituary, a former presiding elder said that when he was a boy he “heard Brother Elliott preach the greatest sermon he ever heard.”⁷

By becoming a Methodist preacher William could afford to leave the farm, the island, and the ways of plantation life of his ancestors. It was his ticket to a life of service, and he chose well. Methodism by mid-century was the largest religious denomination in America claiming 2.5

⁵Our family tree proudly indicates in Adèle’s hand that James served as a “soldier, Federal Army, Civil War.”

⁶*Minutes of the Philadelphia Conference* (1894), 70-72.

⁷*Ibid.*

million souls. There were held each year around the countryside an estimated three to four hundred Methodist “camp meetings” – week long tent revivals where they preached all day and pressed to obtain more converts for the church.⁸

HIS MINISTRY

A short biographical sketch on William Elliott written by a fellow Methodist minister at the time of his death in 1893 records:

Through the agency of the ministers of the ME Church, then the only clergymen that visited the island, he was converted in his youth and early set to work as an exhorter and a local preacher. In these positions he soon gave evidence of a call to a higher place and a wider field of influence in the Church.⁹

In the winter of 1839, at age 23, William was recommended to the Philadelphia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, by the Quarterly Meeting Conference of the Bristol (Pennsylvania) Circuit. The certificate reciting his induction declares him to be “a suitable person to be received into the traveling connection” by the conference, which was held in the Bucks County town of Bristol. As explained by Rev. Joseph DiPaolo, a contemporary historian of Methodist practice:

“Received into the traveling connection” meant he was first accepted into the Philadelphia Conference to work as a lay preacher, on recommendation of the circuit he was then serving unofficially (in this case the Bristol Circuit). The early preachers of that period typically were hired essentially as assistants and “tried out” for a year, then officially accepted into the traveling connection (that is, as one of the itinerant preachers under appointment by the Bishop) for a period, still un-ordained, and trained basically as apprentices. Then they’d be ordained deacon, and after two more years, ordained elder.¹⁰

⁸Facts on 19th century Methodism are found in *What Hath God Wrought 1815-1848*, by Daniel Walker Howe (Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁹Obituary in the *Philadelphia Methodist*, December 16, 1893.

¹⁰E-mail correspondence to the author from Rev. DiPaolo, December 15, 2009. The certificate recommending his acceptance, in the archive at St. George’s, is dated February 9, 1839, and signed by both the Presiding Elder, Rev. James Smith (Elliott’s future father-in-law), and the circuit secretary, Pearson Hambleton (perhaps a relative?).

Members of the conference at that time often traveled with other clergy to set up tent meetings for several days to convert new souls to Methodism. What follows is a cogent description of what Methodism looked like in the mid-nineteenth century:

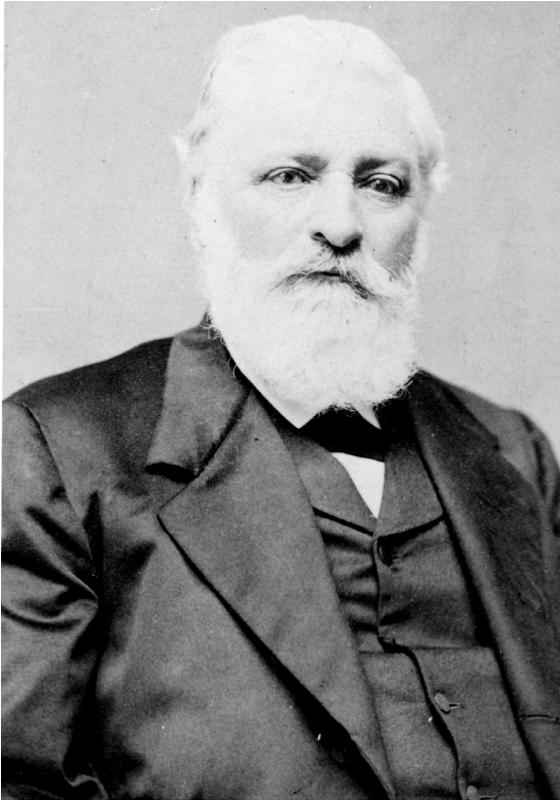
Methodism was a deeply populist religion, which held that salvation was open to any sinner who sought the open arms of Jesus. Methodists had no interest in metaphysical debates. Instead they emphasized the power of God to bestow happiness, and the dignity of individual religious feeling – the more fervent the better – even among poor people, women, and blacks. It was a theology made easy for the average man to understand, emphasizing love and free will rather than exclusionary tests of faith and logical proofs. Methodists were famous, above all, for passionate preaching, lively singing, and flamboyant emotional expressiveness... They developed an extraordinarily successful system of itinerant preachers who rode the circuit... In warm seasons they would get up camp meetings that lasted for days.¹¹

William never had the advantage of either college or theological school. Fortunately, Methodism was an anti-elitist church which did not rely heavily on book learning, but instead emphasized “love and free will” (one of their rituals was literally called a “love feast”). It was said, however, that William was a “close student... of the Bible and of everything that would help him to understand its truths and preach them to others.”¹² Given that William had suffered the tragedy of losing both his parents at an early age, he may have experienced the consolation of the church and could give others the benefit of his personal experience.

William’s first posting as a young minister and young husband was in 1841 to the Bethesda Mission in the rough and tumble Southwark section of Philadelphia. Southeast Philadelphia was then the location of the Navy Yard and the iron works. Many recent immigrants had settled in this neighborhood. We are fortunate to have some record of his missionary work there in the form of a *Memorial Record of Wharton Street Methodist Episcopal Church*, published in 1892. This is what they said of the men who ran this mission:

¹¹Description of Methodism from *The Most Famous Man in America, A Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* by Debby Applegate (Doubleday, New York; 2006), 149.

¹²*The Philadelphia Methodist*, December 16, 1893. While Methodist ministers in this period did not attend seminary, they were required to complete a course of study before ordination, administered by more senior ministers of the conference.



A photograph of Rev. Elliott from later in his life.

The aggressive spirit of Methodism, expounded and exemplified by the earnest men constituting the organization of this mission, and afterward associated in our Church, soon challenged the attention and spirited opposition of the patrons of the Sunday market, and the frequenters of the liquor brothels nearby who actively opposed every effort made by these earnest, devoted workers.¹³

“The Sunday market” in the eyes of some,

¹³John C. Hunterson, *Memorial Record of the Wharton Street Methodist Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia, 1892), 22.

...was a source of wholesale dissipation, fed by a nest of taverns in its immediate vicinity. Commencing in a breach of Sabbath obligations, under the guise of humanity, it existed as a rendezvous of sin, in shameless exposure, drunkenness and brawls. Indecencies of the grossest kind being constantly witnessed.¹⁴

Rev. Elliott had his work cut out for him:

During this work of grace, the Rev. John A. Boyle was sent to them, he being followed by the Rev. William H. Elliott in the year 1841. Brothers Elliott and Coombe joined effort in earnest temperance reform. The Sunday market was soon looked upon as a reproach, and gradually lost patronage. Persons of respectability desiring to settle in its vicinity made objection to its continuance, causing property owners to consider the subject, and the city assessors soon recognized the loss caused by this business, centered in the Sabbath desecration, and joined the moral citizens in their endeavors, which ultimately secured its discontinuance.¹⁵

These efforts for the community must have endeared Rev. Elliott to his seniors and his peers in the service of the Lord in Philadelphia at this time. In 1842 he became the first pastor of the Wharton Street ME Church, which was created by the merger of some smaller congregations. His obituary years later stressed that "His combats with the adherents of the Sunday market, while pastor of Wharton Street Church, are samples of moral heroism."¹⁶

It was the church procedure at the time to rotate its ministers about every two years, so that their careers consisted of two-year periods in a small town here, then there, then to a big city, then back to a different small town. And so was the rhythm of Rev. Elliott's 45-year career. We also have an October 1843 letter sent to Rev. Elliott by a Methodist colleague. Rev. David Shields was then preaching in Phoenixville, while Brother William was ministering in Mauch Chunk, a little town in the Poconos. All their talk was of the camp meetings they were both mounting for the fall.¹⁷

¹⁴Ibid., 25.

¹⁵Ibid., 27.

¹⁶*Minutes of the Philadelphia Conference* (1894).

¹⁷Manuscript letter in the collection of the author; see page 92.

After ministering in West Philadelphia for two more years, he labored in small parishes in Mauch Chunk (now called Jim Thorpe in Carbon County), Columbia (Lancaster County), Pottsville (Schuylkill County); Elkton and Port Deposit¹⁸ (Cecil County), Maryland, where in 1847 he lost his wife. He then served a church named Ebenezer in the larger town of Reading, Berks County, Pennsylvania, which must have prepared him for his first large church in Philadelphia.

William was 45 when the Civil War broke out, and had four children and a wife. There is no record of his serving in the war; to the contrary, records show him serving churches on both sides of the Mason and Dixon line, in Pennsylvania and Maryland, during the war years. In 1859-60, he was in Lancaster, Pennsylvania; in 1861-62 in Elkton, Maryland; in 1863-64 in Odessa, Delaware; and in 1865 he “took a supernumerary position,” which means that he took a sabbatical or time off. One might well wonder if, with the war over, he needed the rest, or whether there was community repair work to be done, family to re-visit, and similar chores.

It is worth noting that in 1865, William received a ticket, which a descendant of his still owns, to the funeral at the “Executive Mansion” in Washington, DC, of President Abraham Lincoln.¹⁹

HIGHLIGHTS OF HIS MINISTRY

William apparently was respected by his peers, and elected several times to important posts and missions. One of his trips for the faith was to Prince Edward Island in Canada for a Methodist conference. Twice, in 1872 and 1876, he was elected to serve as a delegate to the General Conference, the governing body of the Methodist Episcopal Church. There may have been a conference in England, too. William also was selected to serve as a Presiding Elder in Philadelphia for five years in the early 1870s. Again, we have the benefit of a Methodist historian to clarify:

¹⁸Upon his departure from this church the congregation presented him with some thirty-five squares of elegant embroidery, some dated in ink 1848 with his name and “Cecil Co.” also in ink. When assembled and sewed together by his daughter Adèle in 1900, they created a stunning Baltimore album quilt which has carried on the memory of the esteem in which Rev. Elliott was held by his congregation.

¹⁹An Elliott descendant in Tacoma, Washington, has this memento.

Bishops were not assigned to any particular geographical area, but were also itinerants, traveling all around the country each year. The Presiding Elders such as Elliott did perform the basic function of Bishops in terms of day-to-day administration and oversight of all the churches and preachers of the district under their authority. It was not until the early 20th century that Bishops were assigned to particular conferences, and the term “Presiding Elder” was changed to “District Superintendent,” a term we still use today.²⁰

In 1874, he reported to his peers as Presiding Elder of the North Philadelphia District that he had spent four and a half months “touring Europe, Egypt, and Palestine” with some of his brethren that year. This must have been a rare privilege and honor to make such a pilgrimage, for a minister on a modest salary at that time. It also seems in retrospect like a mini-sabbatical to balance the loss of two grown children shortly before. It is not clear whether his wife and children (then 14 and 12) accompanied him. One doubts it. Catharine’s parents had both passed away in 1870-71, so she may have inherited funds that enabled him to take his trip. Also, his wife’s brother, J. Henry Hentz, was one of the leading wine and liquor importers of Philadelphia (with branches in Washington and New York) at the time, and may have had a hand in the European part of that trip.²¹ We know from other sources²² that J. Henry traveled in Europe in pursuit of wine business and we believe that in the early 1880s he may have included as a guest Rev. Elliott’s daughter Kate.

In 1880 at the time of the Federal Census, we find Rev. Elliott in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, living with his daughter Kate H. (age 20) and three servants, Gertrude (23) and Anna Turner (16) and Florence Lee (15). Later in 1883-84, William served as the chaplain of the Pennsylvania legislature in Harrisburg, a singular honor for him and a reflection of the growing importance of Methodism. At some point late in his career, he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree (D.D.), probably by some nearby Methodist college or university.

²⁰E-mail from Rev. Joe DiPaolo, December 15, 2009.

²¹Although we only found a US passport application (#14290) for J. Henry in 1879 on Ancestry.com. No doubt his brother-in-law’s business was a source of ribbing from William’s abstemious Methodist brethren, who were ardent temperance advocates.

²²The author has in his collection envelopes addressed to Kate “c/o Drexel, Harjis & Co.” in Paris and Milan, postmarked 1881. Also, the author once saw an autograph book of Tante Kate’s (Kate Hambleton Elliott) which had autographs dated 1881 at the Villa d’Este, a magnificent hotel still standing on the banks of Lake Como, near Milan, Italy.

LATTER YEARS

On the 2nd day of March, 1887, Rev. Elliott proudly officiated at the marriage of his youngest child, daughter Adèle, then age 26, to Sterling Galt Valentine, Ph.D. in Oak Lane, Philadelphia. Sterling, a chemist, was the son of Rev. Milton Valentine, the chair of the faculty of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, and formerly the president of Pennsylvania College (later renamed Gettysburg College). Adèle's husband was a Lutheran, not a Methodist. Often at that time the wife's affiliation determined the church the couple attended; Sterling followed suit, and got to know the Methodist Church so well that he led the choir, and served in other ways.

Adèle named her second son William Elliott (born 1890) in honor of her father and her son named his second son William Elliott (born 1917) – two generations later my brother William Elliott Donoghue (born 1941) was named for him, so Rev. Elliott left a very positive impression or legacy within the family line. Adèle became an avid family historian, tracing her own and other ancestral stories, and passing on her knowledge in a much-copied family tree. She said of her father: "My father gave me all the names of all the brothers and sisters of his grandmothers, with all the other marriages and births, down to the end of his life."²³ That attention to family detail which Rev. Elliott had, apparently a memorized oral history, seems to have provoked a true love of family ties, and must have been a powerful stimulant to his daughter to initiate her own research in family history.

Adèle wanted, for the sake of her own descendants, to gain admission to the DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution) through her mother's Hentz family. She failed in this attempt, lacking documentation on the Hentz side, and only later gained that much sought after admission through her father's Elliott line.

William Elliott spent his last retired years living with his daughter Adèle and son-in-law Sterling Valentine in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. Adèle's eldest daughter, later my grandmother, Margaret Valentine (later Mrs. Roy Brumbaugh) was born in 1892 and, only as an infant knows such things, got to interact with her grandfather Rev. Elliott in the final year of his life. From his birth in 1815, this

²³Letter from Adèle to Maryland Historical Society dated February 2, 1930, in author's possession.

grandfather/granddaughter relationship thus created a family bridge to her death in 1993, a span of almost 180 years.

Rev. Elliott died at age 78 of natural causes – one account said “of weakness and exhaustion, due to a severe attack of the grippe”²⁴ after a long illness. After a funeral service in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, attended by dozens of his fellow Methodist ministers, his body was taken by train to Philadelphia where it was laid to rest in the Mount Vernon cemetery (just across Ridge Avenue from the larger cemetery of Laurel Hill) next to the grave of his second wife Catharine, who had predeceased him by four years.

The obituary in the *Public Ledger* (December 10, 1893) said of him that “in his whole course as a minister, he was exceedingly successful. He was noted as a very benevolent man, and was always a special and beloved favorite with that portion of the congregation composed of young people.” Another encomium said that “In Stroudsburg after every Sunday evening service, a body-guard [of young people], as it was laughingly called, would accompany him to the parsonage, and sit and chat a while.”²⁵

One of his colleagues wrote of a conversation with William during his final illness near the time of his death. William told him: “I have gone too far now to come back. I am within sight of the city, and shall soon step out on the golden shore.”²⁶ As another colleague wrote of William’s passing, “He did his work... and did it well, and doubtless has been welcomed into the upper sanctuary with, ‘Well done, thou good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of the Lord.’”²⁷

Amen!

²⁴*Philadelphia Conference Minutes* (1894), 70-72.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*The Philadelphia Methodist*, December 16, 1893.

William S. H. Elliott's Service Record

1838	Bristol Circuit
1839	Pottsville and Minersville
1840	Mauch Chunk
1841	Bethesda/Wharton, Philadelphia
1843	Asbury, West Philadelphia
1845	Columbia
1846	Port Deposit, Maryland
1848	Elkton, Maryland
1850	Pottsville
1851	Ebenezer, Reading
1853	12th Street, Philadelphia
1855	St. John's, Philadelphia
1857	St. Stephens, Germantown
1859	Lancaster, First ME Church
1861	Elkton, Maryland
1863	Odessa, Delaware
1865	Supernumerary
1866	Hedding, Philadelphia
1869	Chestnut Hill
1870	Lebanon
1872	Presiding Elder, North Philadelphia District
1873	Presiding Elder, Central Philadelphia District
1876	Paul Street, Philadelphia
1879	Stroudsburg
1882	Lebanon
1885	Milestown
1887	Retired