

A photograph of Rev. Henry Boehm, from an original in the archives at Old St. George's Church, Philadelphia. According to information written on it, the photo was taken in Philadelphia in 1867 when Boehm was 91 or 92 years old.

# Rev. Henry Boehm: A Methodist Life

by Rev. Helen Adams (2010)

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Rev. Henry Boehm (1775-1875) may well have been an 18th- and 19th-century Forrest Gump; like the movie character, he seems to have been present at critical moments in history – in Henry's case, the history of the Methodist movement in America. In recent years, he has been esteemed mainly as a chronicler. United Methodist historians value his memoir, *Reminiscences*, for its insights into the character and work of Bishop Francis Asbury. The Boehm's Chapel Society turns to Henry for one of the few written portraits we have of his father, Rev. Martin Boehm, a co-founder of the United Brethren in Christ.

Yet Henry is more than just someone who happened to be there – more than a recorder of history, more than someone who had the good fortune to live to 100 years old and be celebrated for longevity. Henry Boehm, the records indicate, was himself a gifted preacher and evangelist. He was a bridge between the German-speaking "Methodists" and the English-speaking heirs of John Wesley. And Henry is a bridge between the earliest Methodist evangelists and the transformation of the Methodist Episcopal Church into a settled denomination by the time of his death in 1875. As Henry wrote in the preface to his memoir, a year before Methodism's 1866 centennial celebration, "[T]his volume is a

connecting link between the present and the origin of our Church.”<sup>1</sup> For clarity’s sake, in this paper I will use first names to refer to Henry and other members of his family.

## A JOURNEY TO FAITH

In some ways, Henry was an unlikely Methodist. Born June 8, 1775 – at the dawn of the American Revolution – Henry was the youngest son of Martin Boehm and Eve Steiner Boehm. His father Martin, a farmer in the Pequea settlement of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, was Mennonite, chosen by lot in 1756 to be a preacher at Byerland Church.<sup>2</sup> The Boehms were descended from a Swiss family; one of Henry’s ancestors, Jacob Boehm (Böhm), had fallen under the influence of Mennonites, converted, and subsequently escaped across the border to France while being escorted to a Swiss prison (by his brother!) after conviction on a heresy charge. From France, Jacob made his way to the Palatinate in Germany, and emigrated from there to Pennsylvania probably about 1712.<sup>3</sup>

Born after his father first encountered German Reformed minister Philip William Otterbein at Long’s Barn, and about the time Martin was excommunicated by the Mennonites for his evangelistic and ecumenical tendencies, Henry credits his parents for giving him a firm spiritual foundation, and had an early conviction of God’s call. But the preacher’s son had a tendency to fall away from faith. Henry notes that a member of his father’s family – unnamed in the memoir – had only negative things to say about the Methodists. “This had a soul-withering influence on me,” Henry writes. “I lost my tender feelings, and neglected the means of grace... Sinners enticed me to sin and I consented.”<sup>4</sup>

At age 15, Henry went to work in a grist mill, where religious influence was virtually nonexistent. It is instructive to recall that, as historian Mark Noll has noted, “well under 10 percent of the population

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<sup>1</sup>J. B. Wakeley, *The Patriarch of One Hundred Years; Being Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical, of Rev. Henry Boehm* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1875), 6. The first edition was released in 1865.

<sup>2</sup>Abram W. Sangrey, *The Temple of Limestone: A History of Boehm’s Chapel, 1791-1991* (Lancaster: Boehm’s Chapel Society, 1991), 32.

<sup>3</sup>Jacob L. Beam. “A History of the Beam Family,” in *The Daily New Era* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania), September 25, 1919; available online at [http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~boehm/data/History\\_of\\_the\\_Beam\\_Family.pdf](http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~boehm/data/History_of_the_Beam_Family.pdf); and Wakeley, 10.

<sup>4</sup>Wakeley, 16.



Boehm's Chapel, built on land owned by Henry's father in 1791.

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belonged formally to local congregations, and many areas on the frontier were entirely devoid of Christianity” following the Revolutionary War.<sup>5</sup> Henry fell “into bad company” until Martin confronted his youngest son:

His quivering lip, tearful eye, and tremulous voice showed how deeply he felt for me. Shame crimsoned my cheeks. His counsel was not lost, but it terminated in deep conviction for sin... When my father left I went into the upper loft of the mill, and on my knees, in an agony of deep distress, I cried, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” ...[I]n a moment I felt my heart strangely warmed. My conscience was assured of its part in the atoning blood, and God sent forth the spirit of his Son into my heart crying, “Abba, Father” This was in February, 1793.<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding his very Wesleyan conversion experience – one that also echoed Martin’s own warmed heart while plowing a field years before – Henry continued on a convoluted path to ministry. He fell into “a sad error” of deciding he didn’t need the support of the church and did not unite with one. “I lost my spiritual enjoyment. My course

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<sup>5</sup>Mark A. Noll, 1992, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 166.

<sup>6</sup>Wakeley, 16-17.

was zig-zag... I told no one I was converted. Instead of letting my light shine before men I resolved to hide it.”<sup>7</sup> This went on for five years.

Despite his zig-zag course, Henry had imbibed Methodism from his earliest days. For years Martin had opened his home to itinerant Methodist preachers. Henry grew up hearing Robert Strawbridge, Richard Whatcoat (who supplied the plan for construction of Boehm’s Chapel), Richard Webster, Joseph Everett, William Jessop (buried in the Boehm’s cemetery) and Jesse Lee. In 1780, the noted early preacher Benjamin Abbott described his preaching there during a revival:

When I came to my application the power of the Lord came in such a manner, that the people fell all about the house, and their cries might be heard afar off. This alarmed the wicked, who sprung for the doors in such haste, that they fell one over another in heaps... Mr. Boehm, the owner of the house, and a preacher among the Germans, cried out, “I never saw God in this way before.” I replied, this is a pentecost, father. “Yes, be sure!” said he, clapping his hands, “a pentecost, be sure!” Prayer was all through the house, up stairs and down.<sup>8</sup>

Henry, who was present at the service Abbott describes, says, “I heard him, and beheld the strange scenes he relates. It was more like Pentecost than anything else I ever saw.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1798, Henry wrote that a revival broke out at Boehm’s Chapel (built in 1791) at a quarterly meeting led by Thomas Ware. As the Spirit filled the chapel, and Henry saw his niece Nancy Keaggy praying for grace, “my heart was melted, my eyes were filled with tears, and again I knelt down and there ‘gave my wanderings o’er by giving God my heart.’ There God restored to me the joy of his salvation. Then I united with the church,” and was admitted by Ware.<sup>10</sup> Reluctantly, Henry accepted leadership of a class meeting at Soudersburg – another step on the road to Methodist ministry – but only after a manifestation of Spirit power at family devotions the night before he was expected to begin. In 1799, after a health crisis, Henry attended a quarterly meeting at Barratt’s Chapel in Delaware, and made a covenant with God that if the Lord restored his health, he “would do the work of an evangelist.” He recovered, and in

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<sup>7</sup>Wakeley, 17-18.

<sup>8</sup>John Firth, *The Experiences and Gospel Labours of the Rev. Benjamin Abbott* (New York: Emory & Waugh, 1830), 73; also quoted in Wakeley, 20-21.

<sup>9</sup>Wakeley, 24.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

January 1800 began preaching on the Dorchester Circuit on Maryland's Eastern Shore, then part of the Philadelphia Conference.

Even this step was taken with much hesitation. Henry writes that he found himself deeply depressed and considered quitting and going home: "I was fearful I had mistaken my calling." He was reassured by the wife of Methodist Harry Ennalls, who warned him that such a misstep might imperil his soul. Henry returned to the harvest field.<sup>11</sup> In 1801, he was received into the Philadelphia Conference. On May 8, 1805, Asbury wrote in his journal: "We ordained elders Henry Boehm, James Aikins, James Polemus, John Wiltbank, Asa Smith, and Benjamin Iliff."<sup>12</sup>

From 1801 to 1808, Henry preached on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, in Delaware, New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania. He is best known for his years as Asbury's traveling companion, from 1808-1813. Even before that, however, he had ridden with Asbury. In 1803, Asbury asked Henry to accompany him on a trip. Henry notes – ironically or not – "so I left all, for in that day the bishop said, 'go, and he goeth; come, and he cometh.'"<sup>13</sup> They rode as far west as Berlin, Somerset County, but then Asbury decided that Henry should return and "preach to the Germans" while Asbury continued west. Henry was appointed to the Dauphin Circuit that year, where he remained through 1804. Asbury appointed him a missionary in Pennsylvania in 1807, before once again soliciting Henry as a traveling companion in 1808.

When his five years with Asbury were over, Henry served as a Presiding Elder from 1814 to 1821 on the Schuylkill, Chesapeake, Delaware and Milton Districts. The subsequent 14 years found him returning to circuit riding in eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey – including the Lancaster Circuit in 1823 – before he retired to New York. Henry married Sarah Hill in 1818; they had four children. Joseph Holdich, who served the Lancaster Circuit with Henry in 1823, wrote of the Boehms: "[Henry] was always like a father to the young preachers under his care. Mrs. Boehm was an inestimable woman, gentle, intelligent, and deeply pious, a perfect model for a minister's wife."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Wakeley, 60.

<sup>12</sup>Elmer T. Clark, ed., *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, 3 Vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 2:468.

<sup>13</sup>Wakeley, 100. The quote is an allusion to Matthew 8:9.

<sup>14</sup>Joseph Holdich, "Riding Lancaster Circuit in 1822," in *Annals of Eastern Pennsylvania*, No. 3 (2006), 42.

Even in retirement, Henry “itinerated,” often visiting places where he had served or preached. Sangrey notes that Henry returned to Lancaster County in 1856, 1867, 1868 and 1871 – at age 97. On this last visit, he helped to lay the cornerstone for a Methodist Church in Lancaster city. The 1867 trip included presiding at the adult baptism of Benjamin K. Maynard on the Safe Harbor Circuit. In 1868, he married a couple at the National Camp Meeting in Manheim. Sangrey wrote that in 1943, he met 93-year-old William Bishop, who remembered seeing Henry in 1867, when Bishop was 17. “He was a tall, strong-looking old man with white hair, not one of which was missing,” Bishop told Sangrey. “He was as straight as an arrow.” Henry preached that year at the Methodist Church in Strasburg.<sup>15</sup>

Henry was a witness and participant in key moments not only of Methodist but of American history. In 1800, Henry attended the General Conference in Baltimore, at which Whatcoat was elected Bishop. Days later, he attended the Philadelphia Conference, notable for a great revival that fell; “one meeting in the church continued forty-five hours without cessation.”<sup>16</sup> In 1805, he attended the first Peninsula camp meeting at Smyrna, Delaware. He was a caregiver when Bishop Whatcoat died in 1806. Hurst writes: “Two days before [Whatcoat’s] last he burst into tears in the presence of Henry Boehm, the kind preacher of that circuit. Recovering himself, he said, ‘I have been thinking of the many pious people I have known in Europe and America, and what a glorious time we shall have when we meet in heaven.’ On July 5, 1806, he died.”<sup>17</sup> It appears that Henry and Asbury experienced the first shocks of the great New Madrid earthquake on December 16, 1811, in Missouri but were preserved from harm.<sup>18</sup> Henry attended the 1844 General Conference at which Southern Methodists withdrew from the MEC over slavery: “I wept when, in 1844, we were rent asunder.”<sup>19</sup> He visited the National Camp Meeting gathering in Manheim, Lancaster County, in 1868, at age 94.<sup>20</sup> Simpson’s *Cyclopaedia of Methodism* says of Henry:

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<sup>15</sup>Sangrey, 46, 83-84.

<sup>16</sup>Wakeley, 47.

<sup>17</sup>John Fletcher Hurst. *The History of Methodism*, 7 vols. (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1902), 5:596.

<sup>18</sup>Wakeley, 367.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 529.

<sup>20</sup>Sangrey, 60.



Left: Rev. Thomas Ware (1758-1842), under whose leadership Henry recommitted his life to Christ, joined the ME Church, and accepted appointment as a class leader. Right: Bishop Richard Whatcoat (1736-1806), whom Henry cared for during his last hours.

He was a self-trained man of twenty-five when he became an itinerant preacher of the ME Church, traveling circuits in Maryland, Virginia, and the regions beyond. Later he served in Pennsylvania, introducing Methodism into Harrisburg and Reading. Boehm was able to preach in both English and German. Before 1810, he had preached in German in fourteen different states. At Francis Asbury's request he superintended the translation of the 1805 Methodist Discipline into the German language, printed in 1808 at Lancaster, Pa. As traveling companion of Bishop Asbury for five years he visited annually not only all the states along the Atlantic coast, but all the frontier settlements and many of the isolated homes. After he ceased to travel with Bishop Asbury he was appointed to various important districts of the rapidly growing denomination needing skilled leadership, and then to pulpits of commanding influence in Pennsylvania and New Jersey until old age compelled him to ask release from regular ministerial duties. After his one hundredth birthday he preached several times, and only a few days before his death on Dec. 28, 1875, he gave a formal address.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Matthew Simpson, ed. 1878. *Cyclopædia of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1878), 289-290.

What, then, were Henry's contributions to Methodism? I suggest the following:

#### A BRIDGE TO GERMAN "METHODISTS"

Henry had a natural ability to relate to Germans because of his heritage and education. He was a bilingual preacher, and this skill made him a bridge between the English-speaking Methodists and like-minded believers who spoke German – particularly the United Brethren, of whom Martin Boehm was a co-founder and a Bishop. Henry credits his schoolmaster, Henry Rossman, a former Hessian mercenary, for teaching him proper German.<sup>22</sup> In 1800, when the United Brethren organized, Henry was actually listed as a minister, but he writes, "I did not belong to them."<sup>23</sup> Henry was drawn to the superior organization and discipline of the Methodists. His father Martin was enrolled in a Methodist class meeting in 1802 – a point of much contention with United Brethren historians, but one that Henry insisted upon. The United Brethren and "Albrights" were sometimes called "German Methodists."

Asbury's journals frequently note that "Brother Boehm" preached or exhorted, often in German, following the Bishop's sermons. One 1809 entry reads, "On Monday we took the path to Berlin [Pennsylvania], and had a cool ride... Brother Boehm preached to them in high Dutch... We gave away religious tracts, German and English. We have disposed of many thousands of these."<sup>24</sup>

Henry also was a key figure in having the Methodist *Discipline* translated into German. Asbury wrote in an 1807 letter to Jacob Gruber, a Presiding Elder in the Baltimore Conference, that "Dear Henry" was "about to print our disciplines in Dutch"<sup>25</sup> Henry notes that this translation – published in 1807 – was done at the request of Asbury and the Philadelphia Conference. Henry employed for the work a Dr. Romer, a German from Middletown, Pennsylvania, and assisted in the actual translation. This accomplishment moved forward the possibility of a union between the Methodists and Brethren, Henry wrote.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Wakeley, 13-14.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 388.

<sup>24</sup>Clark, 2:611-612.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 3:372

<sup>26</sup>Wakeley, 174.

Connections among the Methodists and their German brethren were close in the early 1800s, even after the formation of the United Brethren in Christ and the “Albrights.” Surely some of this friendly feeling resulted from the linkage to Martin Boehm via Henry. On the Dauphin Circuit in 1803-04, Henry wrote, “we held union, or what were called ‘friendly meetings,’ where the Methodists and the United Brethren in Christ met in harmony, and the ministers took turns in preaching.”<sup>27</sup> In his review of *Reminiscences*, Peck noted, “Indeed there was constant communion and interchange of pulpit labor at that day between the Methodists and the United Brethren, and there was strong talk of uniting the two bodies into one.”<sup>28</sup> In 1813, Henry and William Hunter were named delegates to the United Brethren. Although the prospects of merger faded away after 1813, the fellowship of the “warmed heart” did unite – at last – in 1968, when Evangelical United Brethren and Methodists came together to form the United Methodist Church.

#### AN INTERPRETER OF ASBURY

In 1808, Asbury recruited Henry as his traveling companion – a position he held for five years, longer than anyone else. That in itself is a testimony to Henry’s faith; Asbury was an indefatigable itinerant despite advancing age (he was 63 in 1808) and failing health. Henry writes that he and Asbury logged 40,000 miles in five years.<sup>29</sup> Both *Reminiscences* and Asbury’s journals record a litany of illnesses, accidents, travel hazards and bad weather that befell the pair as they covered Asbury’s far-flung territory – from Maine (and Canada in 1811) to Georgia, from New Jersey and Delaware to Kentucky and Tennessee. Henry’s writings expand on, and explain, Asbury’s journals of his travels and preaching.

There is no denying Asbury’s dedication, but at times a tone of martyrdom creeps into his reflections. In July 1809, Asbury wrote, “I preached in Silas Bliss’s barn, in Zanovia [New York], on Thursday; we had a profitable meeting. My bed was on the floor at night – it was cooler thus, and I accommodated my friend. Next day, I again held forth in a barn in the village of Pompey. Here brother M’Kendree left me to

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<sup>27</sup>Wakeley, 106.

<sup>28</sup>Luther W. Peck, “Reminiscences of Rev. Henry Boehm,” in *Methodist Quarterly Review* 88 (July 1866), 388.

<sup>29</sup>Wakeley, 459.

serve alone. The evening brought us up at Paddock's, in Manlius. I lay along the floor, in my clothes. There was a lady in the corner, and brother Boehm in bed, like a gentleman. The female could not possibly occasion reproach, so I was persuaded; but I wished I was somewhere else: my fear was not commendable."<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, Henry's memoirs fail to shed light on this singular occasion! But Henry points out that when Asbury was incapacitated, Henry had to "lift the bishop out of bed, bathe his limbs, dress his blisters, and nurse him like a child."<sup>31</sup>

So Henry had no easy road as Asbury's companion; sometimes frustration bursts into view. Asbury, for instance, wrote in his journal on April 23, 1809, "Ah! how many Marthas there are, and how few Marys!" Henry riposted, somewhat tartly, "I might inquire, What kind of a world would we have if all the women were Marys? Has not injustice often been done to Martha?"<sup>32</sup> Henry, it seems, was often a Martha.

On July 23 that year, in Walnut Bottom, Pennsylvania, Asbury recorded: "Brother Boehm upset the sulky and broke the shaft." Henry's commentary: "It was well I was in the sulky instead of the old bishop, or he might have fared hard. He might have had something worse than a 'broken shaft': a broken limb or a broken neck."<sup>33</sup> Henry was on the road with Asbury when his father Martin died in 1812; Asbury preached the funeral sermon, but the pair was back on the road three days later. Henry's salary for this life of hardship was \$100 a year.<sup>34</sup>

Yet Henry was a staunch defender of Asbury, despite a tendency in later Methodism to consider the bishop something of a tyrant. Henry backed Asbury's controversial (and unilateral) decision to create a new Genesee Conference in upstate New York, for instance. And Henry's portrait of the bishop in *Reminiscences* is warm; while acknowledging Asbury's "rough exterior," he adds, "under that roughness and sternness of manner beat a heart as feeling as ever dwelt in human bosom." He also wrote that he loved Asbury "as I loved my own dear father."<sup>35</sup> It is noteworthy that Henry did not marry until 1818, two years after Asbury's death; the Bishop often decried marriage as ruinous to the career of an itinerant Methodist preacher.

<sup>30</sup>Clark, 2:608-09.

<sup>31</sup>Wakeley, 193.

<sup>32</sup>Clark, 2:599-600; and Wakeley, 230.

<sup>33</sup>Clark, 2:610, and Wakeley, 252-53.

<sup>34</sup>Wakeley, 228.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 451, 427.

Whether Asbury returned Henry's devotion is hard to determine from the laconic and/or cryptic entries in his journal. In his funeral sermon for Martin Boehm, Asbury described Henry only as "a useful minister of the Methodist connection," because of his ability to preach in German and English.<sup>36</sup> But Asbury did reassign Henry to be Presiding Elder of the Schuylkill District in 1813, so he would be nearer to his widowed mother, and told that year's Philadelphia Conference, "[Henry] served me as a *son*; he served me as a *brother*; he served me as a *servant*; he served me as a *slave*."<sup>37</sup> Some smiled at the description; it would appear to be more accurate than humorous! Asbury's confidence in Henry is demonstrated in the Bishop's naming Henry, along with William McKendree and Daniel Hitt, as executors of his will. Asbury also commissioned those three in his will to administer a \$2,000 bequest for publication of Bibles and other religious tracts.<sup>38</sup> "Henry Boehm," Sangrey writes, "probably knew Bishop Asbury more intimately and more profoundly than any other person."<sup>39</sup>

#### OPPONENT OF SLAVERY

As did many of the early Methodists, Henry preached against slavery and preached the gospel to the "colored people." He writes, for instance, that while serving the Annapolis Circuit in 1801, "We preached against slavery, and persuaded our brethren and those who were converted to liberate their slaves, and we were often successful... Many slaves were made 'free' by 'the Son.'" On one of Asbury's tours in North Carolina, Henry preached to "the Africans:" "We never forgot these sable children."<sup>40</sup>

In 1803, he met "Black Harry" Hosier, who was traveling with Asbury and Freeborn Garrettson. Henry records with regret, however, that Hosier fell "under the influence of strong drink" later in life, until he was restored to faith before his 1810 death.<sup>41</sup> In 1864, Henry attended the General Conference at which delegates from the African Methodist Episcopal Church were welcomed fraternally in Philadelphia. In his

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<sup>36</sup>Quoted in Wakeley, 375.

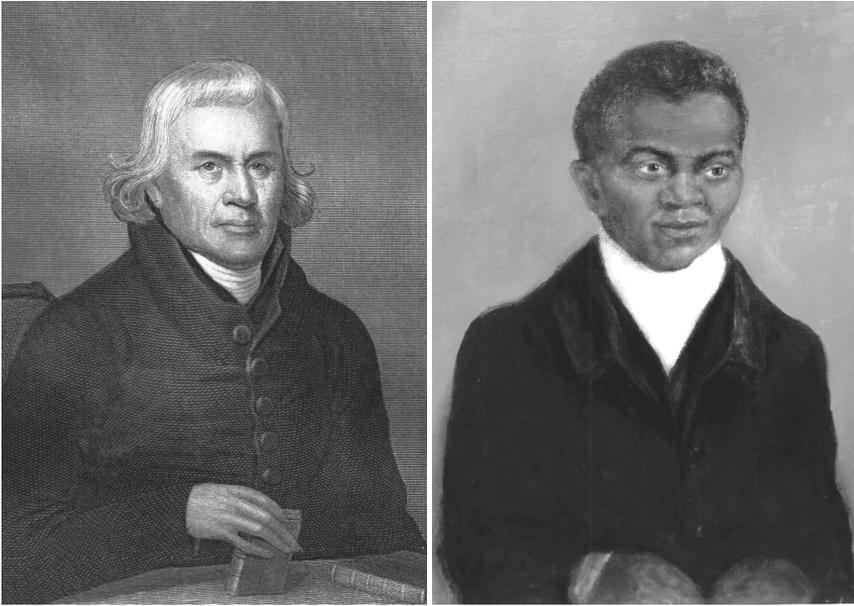
<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 414.

<sup>38</sup>Clark, 3:472-3.

<sup>39</sup>Sangrey, 57.

<sup>40</sup>Wakeley, 69, 274.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 92.



Left: Bishop Francis Asbury; Right: “Black Harry” Hosier.

remarks to the conference, Henry said that while he and other Methodists felt the AME split in 1816 was unfortunate, “I have been very much affected in hearing our colored brethren testify here... I admire the providence of God in this instance.”<sup>42</sup>

#### A SKILLFUL SHEPHERD

Henry spent 74 years in ministry – productive years. Sangrey describes Henry as “a beloved pastor and... an effective spiritual director in his circuits.”<sup>43</sup> William Capers, a younger contemporary who later became a Bishop of the ME Church, South, wrote that Henry was “one of the purest and best of Methodist ministers.”<sup>44</sup> Henry was a Presiding Elder – the equivalent of a District Superintendent – after his five years with Asbury, and by all accounts was an effective administrator.

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<sup>42</sup>Wakeley, 490.

<sup>43</sup>Sangrey, 43.

<sup>44</sup>William May Wightman, *Life of William Capers, DD, One of the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Including an Autobiography* (Nashville: Barbee & Smith, 1902), 111.

Henry also seems to have supplied the impetus behind construction of the first Methodist place of worship in Germantown, outside Philadelphia, after Methodists were forbidden to continue meeting in the local schoolhouse. He wrote in his journal in 1803, that he had begun to raise a subscription for a meeting house. In *Reminiscences*, looking back over the years, he adds with satisfaction, “The Methodists have there two churches: 483 members, and 116 probationers; in all, 509, and Church property worth \$36,000.”<sup>45</sup>

#### AN UNDERAPPRECIATED PREACHER?

Not only as a shepherd was Henry effective: his memoirs and Asbury’s journal indicate that he was also effective as a preacher. One suspects he would give the glory to the Holy Spirit rather than taking the credit himself, but he did do “the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5) that he had pledged to do in 1799. Consider this note in *Reminiscences* about street preaching in Lancaster, a notoriously difficult venue for Methodists, in the early 1800s:

Once while I was preaching, and there was some disturbance, I saw a man coming toward me from the tavern. He seemed to be full of wrath, and pressed through the crowd toward my pulpit, which was a butcher’s block. I kept on preaching, throwing out some hot shots, when suddenly he stopped, his countenance changed, and the lion became a lamb, and I was preserved from the harm he no doubt intended I should suffer.

Henry concludes that he finally succeeded in establishing a class meeting in Lancaster in 1807.<sup>46</sup> While serving in 1801 on the Annessex Circuit, Henry wrote of his evangelistic work, “Indeed the whole circuit had a wall of fire around it and a glory in the midst.”<sup>47</sup> In Reading – most likely in 1823, since Holdich records the same incident – Henry

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<sup>45</sup>Wakeley, 95. Henry’s role in establishing the church in Germantown in 1803 is confirmed in Robert Thomas, *A Century of Methodism in Germantown* (Philadelphia: Germantown Independent, 1895), 4-5, which includes the interesting remark that previously, “Henry Boehm... had occasionally preached in Germantown, as his father had before him.” This is the origin of today’s First United Methodist Church of Germantown.

<sup>46</sup>Wakeley, 114. This is the origin of today’s First United Methodist Church of Lancaster.

<sup>47</sup>Wakeley, 70.

encountered a young man who mocked the Methodists, offering to show his companions how the Methodists behaved in their meetings by falling down on the floor and mimicking being felled by the Spirit. “[A]fter he had lain for some time, [his companions] wondered why he did not get up. They shook him in order to awake him. When they saw he did not breathe they turned pale, and sent for a physician, who examined the man and pronounced him dead.”<sup>48</sup> This Ananias-like incident had the dual effect of halting persecution in its tracks in Reading and winning the Methodists favor with the people.

Asbury also provides hints of Henry’s effectiveness. In November 1808, Asbury wrote of a tour in Cooper’s Gap, North Carolina: “On the Sabbath brother Boehm spoke in the morning at eight o’clock; I preached from Matt. viii, 5; exhortations followed, and brother Boehm ended our Sabbath labours by preaching at night, when there was a considerable move. We came away on Monday by Rutherford court house to G. Moore’s. At Moore’s Chapel on Tuesday I preached from Colossians ii, 6. Henry Boehm spoke at night; verily we had a shout!”<sup>49</sup>

At an 1806 camp meeting in Dover, Delaware, at which Henry preached, he recalled, “there were reported one thousand three hundred and twenty conversions and nine hundred and sixteen sanctifications.”<sup>50</sup> As Presiding Elder of the Schuylkill District in 1813, he held a camp meeting in Dauphin County at which many were converted, including the daughter of the eminent scientist and Unitarian Joseph Priestley, of Northumberland.<sup>51</sup>

## A BRIDGE TO THE PAST

Henry Boehm turned 100 in 1875, his faculties little diminished. Ten years earlier, the Rev. J. B. Wakeley had first overseen the publication of *Reminiscences*, recording the early history of American Methodism for a new generation – especially important considering that Methodism observed its centennial in 1866. In a review of the first edition, Peck wrote, “It is not often history calls upon the stand a more important witness than Henry Boehm... The Church has reason to rejoice that Providence has spared so interesting a representative of her early

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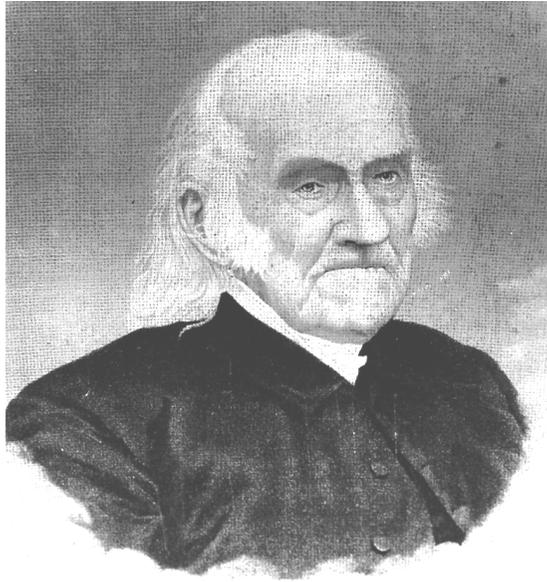
<sup>48</sup>Wakeley, 109; Holdich, 48-49.

<sup>49</sup>Clark, 2:582.

<sup>50</sup>Wakeley, 151.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 417.

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Henry Boehm in later  
life, from a painting  
hanging at Old  
St. George's Church,  
Philadelphia.  
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founders to see the centenary year, and afford us at least one link by which we may connect the present with the glorious past.”<sup>52</sup> Peck’s review contrasted current Methodist views of the itineracy, the episcopacy, church organization and the General Conference – usually in an unfavorable fashion – with Henry’s memories of Methodism’s early days, indicating that at the start of its second hundred years, the Methodist movement was growing increasingly aware of its disconnection from its roots. Peck referred to Henry as “Father Boehm” – the same title accorded to Henry’s father Martin in his day.

In 1864, Henry noted in *Reminiscences*, the Methodist Episcopal Church had nearly 7,000 traveling preachers and more than 900,000 members – not counting the Methodist Episcopal Church, South – yet when he was ordained, there were 266 preachers and 65,980 members. “Church edifices were scarce, and parsonages comparatively unknown. We had no colleges or seminaries; no Biblical Institutes, no periodicals, and were almost without a literature; indeed wholly so, except a Hymn Book, *Discipline*, and a few tracts and other small publications.” And yet:

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<sup>52</sup>Peck, 389-390.

In some matters I cannot but think that, as a Church, we have retrograded. The people and preachers in that day were patterns of plainness; we conform more to the world, and have lost much of the spirit of self-denial they possessed. Our fathers paid great attention to Church discipline, and their preaching was more direct; they aimed at the heart, and looked for more immediate results than we of the present day.<sup>53</sup>

That latter description, of course, was a portrait of Henry himself. But he added, “If we remain true to Methodism, ‘walking by the same rule and minding the same things’ our fathers did, then our future will be grand and glorious as the past.”

As Henry’s 100th birthday neared, the Newark and New York annual conferences staged two celebrations before the date – Sangrey suggests wryly that the conference leadership might have been concerned as to whether Henry would live to see age 100 – and an anniversary party was held on the actual date, June 8, 1875, by the Newark Conference. Henry preached or presented remarks at all the events. Celebrated hymn writer Fanny Crosby composed two hymns for the official centennial, and the mother of US President Ulysses S. Grant came to town specifically for the occasion.<sup>54</sup> On June 27, Henry preached a second centennial sermon at John Street Methodist Church – the oldest Methodist minister speaking in the nation’s oldest Methodist church.<sup>55</sup>

And while Henry labored at a time when theological education was scarce in Methodism, he bequeathed all the money raised in celebration of his centennial to fund scholarships for Methodists preparing for the ministry at Drew Theological Seminary. This living representative of the Methodist past, this “self-trained” man, in Simpson’s phrase, recognized the changes that had occurred in the movement over a century, and was looking toward the future.

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<sup>53</sup>Wakeley, 491-492.

<sup>54</sup>Accounts of all these celebrations (which had been “phonographically reported”) may be found in the 1875 edition of Wakeley, 500-577. Ironically, Rev. J. B. Wakeley, who edited and published Henry’s memoirs, and led efforts to commemorate the multiple 100th birthday celebrations, died himself on April 27, 1875, less than two months before Boehm’s actual centennial on June 8.

<sup>55</sup>Wakeley, 579.

## HIS LAST DAYS

Henry Boehm died on December 29, 1875 (contra Simpson, who placed the date at December 28). In his itinerant career, he had traveled more than 100,000 miles. One of his most poignant trips was his 1856 visit to Lancaster County:

I went to the old Boehm's Chapel and the old house where I was born. My eye lighted upon the place in the gallery where in 1798 I gave my heart to God... What sermons had I heard in that chapel! The venerable forms of Asbury, Whatcoat, M'Kendree, and others I had heard preach came up before me. It was Easter Sabbath, and I preached on the resurrection of Jesus. It was forty-four years that day since my father died. From the window I could see his grave and those of my mother and the other loved ones... My feelings well nigh overcame me. The friends of my youth were gone. There were none of my name remaining in that neighborhood. Generations had passed away, new ones had risen that knew me not. I wandered among the tombs in the old burying-ground, then bade adieu to the old grave-yard, to the old chapel, to the old homestead.<sup>56</sup>

Sadly, it would appear that even more new generations have risen in Methodism since 1856 that know him not – an oversight that the church should consider correcting. Henry Boehm was not only a friend of the giants of Methodist history. He was one of those giants himself.

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<sup>56</sup>Wakeley, 482-483.