



A walled-in cemetery in Upper Uwchlan Township marks the site of Benson's Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church, the first Methodist congregation established, and to erect a building, in Chester County.

Benson's Chapel ME Church

A Forgotten Landmark

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On Old Township Line Road, just west of Route 100 in Upper Uwchlan Township, a tiny, walled-in cemetery is all that remains of the first Methodist congregation established in Chester County. Closed since the 1830s, Benson's Chapel was described by early Methodist historian John Lednum as "the first house the Methodists of Pennsylvania built to be devoted exclusively to worship, ...a popular place, where large congregations assembled for worship [and] where the Methodists held their quarterly meetings for Philadelphia Circuit in the last [18th] century."¹

According to another historian of that era, Rev. George W. Lybrand, Joseph Pilmoor probably preached the first Methodist sermon in Uwchlan Township in 1772, marking the earliest origin of the congregation.² In December of the same year, preacher Isaac Rollins was assigned by Francis Asbury to the work then developing on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, in Kent and Cecil Counties. While traveling this circuit early the next year, Rollins ventured into Chester County by way of Marlborough Township, "penetrated the county to its center early in 1773, and established several preaching places," Uwchlan possibly among them.³ Rollins, who

¹John Lednum, *History of the Rise of Methodism in America* (Philadelphia, 1859), 390.

²George W. Lybrand, "Methodist Churches" in J. Smith Futhey and Gilbert Cope, *History of Chester County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), 281. Though a careful historian, Lybrand does not disclose his source for this claim, and there is no reference to Uwchlan in Pilmoor's journal, which Lybrand knew well. Pilmoor may have visited there in May 1772, as he left Philadelphia and moved west toward Reading to begin a preaching tour of the south, or on one of the unaccounted-for days in his journal. See Frederick E. Maser and Howard T. Maag, eds., *The Journal of Joseph Pilmore* (Philadelphia: Message Publishing Co., 1969), 134-135.

³Lednum, 141-142; and J. W. Geiger, "Reminiscences of Old Churches," in *The Philadelphia Methodist*, December 21, 1882.

therefore may be considered the father of Chester County Methodism, was joined in late March of that year by Asbury, who records traveling and preaching at several points in the county, and who remarked that Rollins “has been of some use to the people here.”⁴

According to Lednum, Uwchlan became a regular preaching appointment in 1774, the year Chester Circuit first appears in the minutes, and a class was organized soon afterward. The *class* was the basic unit of early American Methodism, consisting of a group of people under the spiritual direction of a lay class leader. A class would meet weekly for prayer, study and mutual accountability, and often became the nucleus of a new congregation, initially called a *society*, which could be comprised of any number of classes in a single community.

Lednum identifies the Uwchlan society as the place visited on a preaching tour by the fiery, eccentric Benjamin Abbott in 1780. In Abbott’s own account of the visit, he records being ill with “fainty fits” and resolving to go to bed, but “seeing such a multitude of people together, I thought I would try to exhort; accordingly I sang and prayed; the panic left me, my soul was set at perfect liberty, and the Lord attended the word with power. I met the Society and had a precious time among the dear people of God.” Abbott also mentions a woman there who shared the “strange relation” of her conversion, which came after entering a Roman Catholic Church, and the sight of a large crucifix “with blood running down the side” sent her into an anguished search for salvation. “She appeared to be a worthy member of the Society, from what I could learn.”⁵

The revival sparked by Abbot’s visit motivated the people “to provide a more commodious place of meeting than the private houses in which the services had been held.”⁶ A parcel of land was acquired for £3, the sum paid by James Benson, a leader (likely the first class leader) in the society, whose family had been landholders in the area as early as 1715. The deed records the names of the trustees as James Benson, Joseph Jones, Ellis Jones, William Ball, William Flin, James Battin, Thomas West, John Ball and Daniel Meredy, who are called “Yoemen” of Uwchlan Township. Also in the deed is a form of the trust clause, declaring as the intention of the trustees:

⁴This is part of his entry for March 21, 1773, after leading services with Rollins in Marlborough Township. On the same trip, Asbury mentions venturing as far as Goshen Township. See Elmer T. Clark, *The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury*. 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), I:73.

⁵John Ffirth, *The Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rev. Benjamin Abbott*. (Philadelphia: Ezekiel Cooper, 1801), 94; and Lednum, 291.

⁶Geiger.

...[the] purpose of building a preaching house or Chapel thereon and that they the said trustees and the survivors... for the time being do and shall from time to time and at all times forever thereafter permit such persons as shall be appointed at the yearly conference of the People called Methodists (held in America) to preach and expound God's word and none others to have and enjoy the said premises, provided always the said Preachers preach no other doctrine than contained in the Rev. John Wesley's notes on the New Testament and four Volumes of Sermons.⁷

In 1781, a building was erected which became known as Benson's Chapel, no doubt in honor of James Benson, and was described in a 1796 tax list as "One Log Meeting House, belonging to the Society of Methodists." Asbury mentions preaching there as early as October 7, 1781, and again on August 25, 1782, when he says, "Rode ten miles to Benson's preaching house, where there were, I suppose, nearly four hundred hearers collected."

For its entire existence, Benson's Chapel was part of a circuit, which linked together any number of societies under two or three traveling preachers. Making the rounds of all the appointments by horseback could take as long as a month, the preachers finding lodging with host families in the towns they visited. Hence the term *circuit rider* to describe the early itinerants. In its early days, the territory of the Chester Circuit encompassed the state of Delaware and all of Chester County, which until 1789 included today's Delaware County. Among the preachers who ministered among the people of Benson's was William Watters, the first native-born American itinerant, who had been recommended to travel at the very first Methodist Conference in America, in 1773. In 1774, Watters spent several months on Chester Circuit – a temporary reassignment from his original appointment on Trenton Circuit – in order to heal a division in the fledgling Valley congregation (today's Grove United Methodist Church).⁸

In 1783, Chester Circuit included Philadelphia and stretched all the way to the Susquehanna River. One of the three preachers assigned that

⁷Deed Book Z3-72-540, as quoted in Estell Cremers and Pamela Shenk, *The Upper Uwchlan, A Place Betwixt and Between* (Morgantown: Mastoff Press, 1999), 128. An inspection of the actual deed, on microfilm at the Chester County Archives in West Chester, Pennsylvania, revealed that the land was acquired from Joseph and Anna Lloyd, who owned a local farm. The deed is dated March 6, 1783, though the building was known to have been erected by early October 1781, when Asbury records preaching in it. It could be that the Lloyds were members of the society and allowed the building to be erected before formally subdividing their property, a sequence of events not unknown in early Methodism. Curiously, the deed was not actually recorded until May 14, 1827.

⁸Lednum, 120; and William Watters, *A Short Account of the Christian Experience and Ministerial Labours of William Watters* (Alexandria, Virginia: S. Snowden, [1806]), 43-44.

year was 23-year old Thomas Haskins, whose manuscript journal is now in the Library of Congress. Haskins, who candidly records his self-doubts and the hardships of itinerant travels, later left the traveling ministry and settled in Philadelphia, where in 1796 he became a founder of the first pension fund for Methodist ministers. In his journal entry for August 8, 1783, Haskins says "Half after one o'clock, I set out for Quarterly Meeting, [and] rode about 25 miles to J. Benson's; much fatigued." He then described the meeting:

Saturday, 9th. Between 12 and 1 o'clock, meeting began. Mr. Asbury preached from 1 Thess. 5:15-22. Brothers Ellis and Hagerty exhorted. A pretty solemn time today. Oh, that tomorrow may be much more abundant.

Sunday, 10th. At 9 o'clock Love Feast began; a comfortable season. About 11 o'clock publick preaching began [and] Mr. Asbury preached from 1 Samuel 12:23-24. Brothers Ellis and Hagerty exhorted, an intermission of 10 or 15 minutes, then I exhorted. Brother Lyon exhorted and meeting concluded.⁹

Asbury writes about the same meeting, though he does not mention Benson's by name, recording on August 9, 1783: "Our quarterly conference begun in Philadelphia Circuit, and was well attended; our love feast was spiritual, and many spoke feelingly of the goodness of God." Yet another traveling preacher who left behind a journal was William Colbert, who preached on Chester and Strasburg Circuit in 1797 and 1798. In an entry for July 15, 1798 he reports, "I preached with a degree of satisfaction at Ucland [sic] Methodist Meetinghouse from John 3:7, 'Marvel not that I say unto you, ye must be born again.' I found the friends lively in class meeting."¹⁰

Other early pioneers were known to the people of Benson's as presiding elders, who oversaw the assigned preachers and conducted quarterly conferences for the circuit. Thomas Vasey was the first presiding elder in Chester County after the Christmas Conference of 1784 established the Methodist Episcopal Church in America; it was Vasey who had been sent by John Wesley to explain Wesley's plan for American Methodism. Freeborn Garrettson served as presiding elder for the area, 1793-1794, as did

⁹Photocopy of manuscript journal of Thomas Haskins, in the archives at Old St. George's. Haskins met his wife on Chester Circuit, Martha Potts, granddaughter of Rebecca Grace, founder of the Coventryville Church. See Francis H. Tees, et al, *Pioneering in Penn's Woods; Philadelphia Methodist Episcopal Annual Conference Through One Hundred Fifty Years*. (Philadelphia: Conference Tract Society, 1937), 186-189. Reuben Ellis and John Hagerty were the other two preachers assigned to Chester Circuit with Haskins in 1783.

¹⁰Journal of William Colbert, typescript copy in 10 volumes in the archives at Old St. George's; Vol. 2, 207.

two future bishops: Richard Whatcoat in 1788 and 1790, and Robert R. Roberts in 1815.

No records of Benson's Chapel have survived, so little is known about the original families. Asbury mentioned a Thomas Evans when he preached in Uwchlan on July 8, 1787, which seems confirmed by a 1924 newspaper article in which locals recalled that members of a family named Evans were among those buried on the site. The same clipping relates a "legend [that] tells of an Indian who there sleeps the long sleep."¹¹

A bit more is known about Joseph Jones, a trustee named in the deed, and his wife, Lydia. In 1925, their descendants erected a bronze plaque on the site to mark the final resting place of their forebears, which reads in part:



Francis Asbury

Joseph Jones
came from England when nine years of age
Removed from Gwynedd, Pa.
to the "Back Country" in Pikeland 1745
He was buried here in 1793.
Lydia Roberts, his wife,
a granddaughter of Robert Cadwalader
who emigrated from
Marionshire, Wales, to Gwynedd in 1698
Lydia Roberts died April 4, 1787

The inscription also includes several lines of poetry, eulogizing "Dear Lydia Jones, a pattern bright was she; A loving wife adorned with charity."

¹¹*Daily Local News*, May 9, 1924, in Newspaper Clippings Files, Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Apparently also buried there is none other than Isaac Rollins, the preacher who helped establish Chester County Methodism in the 1770s. Rollins had made a promising start in ministry, but ended badly. Chafing under appointments he considered undesirable, Rollins left and re-entered the itinerant ranks several times until 1781, when Asbury appointed him back to the circuit which embraced Chester County, “where he wished to be.” Asbury takes up the story from there:

...[Rollins] presently set about making a party, enjoining secrecy upon his followers; after one quarter he left us, and set up for himself; and he and a few of his adherents took from us the Forest Chapel. He began now to be forsaken; and being too lazy to ride a circuit, took to baptizing and begging, by way of subscription. There were many reports about him, which decency forbids to mention; which, nevertheless, were probably true. From these scandalous imputations on his character, he felt, it seems, the necessity of defending himself; and being at the Yellow Springs, he was for some hours employed in having his defence written: he did at times drink freely, but whether he was in liquor while there, I know not; so it was, that setting off on a mettlesome horse, he had not ridden many yards before he was thrown to the ground, and died on the spot. I had said “I think he cannot stay long,” because he did pervert the right ways of the Lord. To the Lord I leave him, desiring that his sad example may be a warning to me and all preachers of the Gospel.¹²

Another of the leaders mentioned in the deed was James Batten or Batten, who hosted a class meeting in his home, about five miles southwest of Benson’s, across the Brandywine Creek. Members of the class included James Batten and his wife, Thomas Batten (their son) and his wife, Hannah Batten (Thomas’ sister), Rachel Kerns and Ann Maxwell. By 1782, another class of Benson’s Chapel was meeting nearby as well, hosted by Thomas Johnson. In 1783, both Batten’s and Johnson’s became regular preaching appointments in their own right (as attested by Haskins’ journal), and these two classes became the core of a new congregation. Today that daughter of Benson’s is one of our strongest congregations, the Hopewell United Methodist Church; as John Lednum put it in 1859 “the offspring lives, but

¹²Clark, I:444. Rev. George Lybrand is the source for the claim that Rollins is buried there; writing in 1881, he attributed it to “tradition” that he had received. It is noteworthy that Asbury’s extended passage about Rollins’ life and death appears in his journal immediately before the entry for August 9, 1783, which describes the opening of a quarterly meeting at Benson’s Chapel. The text begins “Having lately heard of the death of Isaac Rollins... I will here notice some of the circumstances of his life.” It is intriguing to speculate that Asbury’s musings may have been prompted by his being shown the fresh grave of Rollins outside the meetinghouse, upon his arrival for quarterly conference.

the parent is no more." According to Hopewell historical records, families from Benson's who joined those named above to establish Hopewell included the Guthries, Parkers, Reads and Powells. A first building was erected in 1800 and called "Batten's Meeting House" until the 1820s, when the name "Hopewell" was adopted.

Over the years, the Hopewell congregation gradually grew, while Benson's declined, no doubt due in part to the superior facilities of the former; in 1827, circuit preacher William Cooper reported that the Hopewell congregation "was now superceding another which was a log church [i.e., Benson's]." Benson's Chapel continued to dwindle until about 1832, when the last public services were held, and the old meeting place stood empty and silent. At some point, the building was opened up to the use of a local school, until stormy weather caused a tree to fall on the old structure, collapsing the roof, and "the wreck of the one-time noted rallying place was sold to a neighbor for whatever he chose to give."¹³

After the wreckage was removed, Benson's faded from memory, though periodically a new generation of Methodists rediscovered the site, and became interested in its story. In the 1880s, Rev. John Wesley Geiger was appointed pastor of Hopewell, and after learning about Benson's determined to resurrect a congregation there. In the early summer of 1881, he began holding services in the Eagle Schoolhouse, attended by a dozen or more local Methodists. In August, he erected a tent on the old Benson's site for special services to mark the 100th anniversary of the erection of the chapel, and to begin a movement to establish a new congregation in Uwchlan; he even expressed his hope to build a new chapel on the old property.¹⁴ Though occasional services at the Eagle Schoolhouse continued, the dream did not materialize, and the lot once again fell into obscurity.

The road which leads past the old Benson's Chapel site, once a major thoroughfare, is now a dead end street, not far from the Eagle View Corporate Center. The old wall-in cemetery, without a single surviving headstone, is all that marks the place where pioneer preachers proclaimed the Word, and the Spirit of God moved in powerful ways to establish Methodism in Chester County and beyond.

¹³Geiger.

¹⁴*Daily Local News*, June 20, August 23, August 30 and September 8, 1881, and June 8 and 14, 1882, Newspaper Clippings Files, Chester County Historical Society.