

A 1961 Painting of Rev. John Dickins by Charles Hargens,
based on an eighteenth century engraving.

Rev. John Dickins

Outstanding Early Methodist Leader

Rev. Dr. Frederick E. Maser (1989)

Editor's Note: Frederick E. Maser (1908-2002) was a member of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference for nearly 70 years. A well-known authority on early Methodism, he authored a number of books, including The Dramatic Story of Early American Methodism (1965) and The Story of John Wesley's Sisters, or Seven Sisters in Search of Love (1988). The following paper was given as a speech on March 28, 1989 for the 200th anniversary meeting of the United Methodist Publishing House, held at St. George's. The paper has not been published previously, though Dr. Maser's findings on John Dickins' son, Asbury, were outlined in his "Discovery" column, in the April 1989 issue of Methodist History. Dr. Maser's work has been adapted for publication; additional materials have been added by the editor.

One of the best educated and finest preachers in early American Methodism, John Dickins has never received his just dues from historians or other church luminaries. Despite his tremendous importance in early Methodism, no life of Dickins has ever been written, and only passing references are made to him in Methodist histories. The most complete portrayal of the man is found in James Pilkington's 1968 *History of the Methodist Publishing House*.¹ I would like to share a few words about this outstanding early Methodist leader.

John Dickins was born in London in 1747. The exact date is unknown, and he, himself wrote in the family Bible, now in possession of the Publishing House:

John Dickins was born, (as he supposed) August 24th, 1747.

¹James Penn Pilkington, *The Methodist Publishing House: A History*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 43-116.

There is an undocumented tradition that he was educated in London and later at Eton College. He is said to have been proficient in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Mathematics and Astronomy, besides having a commanding knowledge of the English language that was reflected in his letters and in the testimony of his friends.² Dickins came to America sometime before 1774. He may have been introduced to Methodism by Robert Williams, a maverick Methodist preacher who came to the Colonies with John Wesley's permission, although not as an assigned missionary, and who was active in Virginia. Dickins was converted in Virginia, and on May 12, 1777 became an itinerant. About two years later, on April 18, 1779 he married Elizabeth Yancey, known as "Betsy," who was the daughter of "a landed if not wealthy 'gentleman' planter of Halifax County, North Carolina... among whose [family] connections were some of the staunchest American patriots."³

As a preacher Dickins had few equals. Lednum says that "he preached like a lion."⁴ And Pilkington records a letter from Dickins to Devereaux Jarratt in which he speaks of preaching to about five hundred people at one time, converting about twenty of them. In the same letter he refers to a preaching service that lasted twelve hours, and converted fifteen more people:

[On] July 7, [1776] I spoke to a large congregation. Afterward, I was going to give out a hymn, when one was so powerfully struck, that he could not hold a joint still, and roared for mercy. I immediately went to prayer; the cries of the people all the time greatly increasing... Our meeting continued from twelve at noon, till twelve at night; during which God raised up about fifteen more witnesses.⁵

By 1780, however, his voice was temporarily gone, probably from constant use and the lion-like roar which seemed to have characterized his preaching. In 1778, 1779 and 1780, however, he had been not only a powerful preacher, but also the leader of a group opposed to Francis Asbury's view on the administration of the sacraments. In short he was a leading figure in the sacramental controversy.

²Pilkington, 57; and Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 4 vols. (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1867), I:41-42.

³Pilkington, 46. Betsy's parents were Jeconias and Hannah Yancey.

⁴John Lednum, *A History of the Rise of Methodism in America* (Philadelphia: by the Author, 1859), 193.

⁵Pilkington, 44.

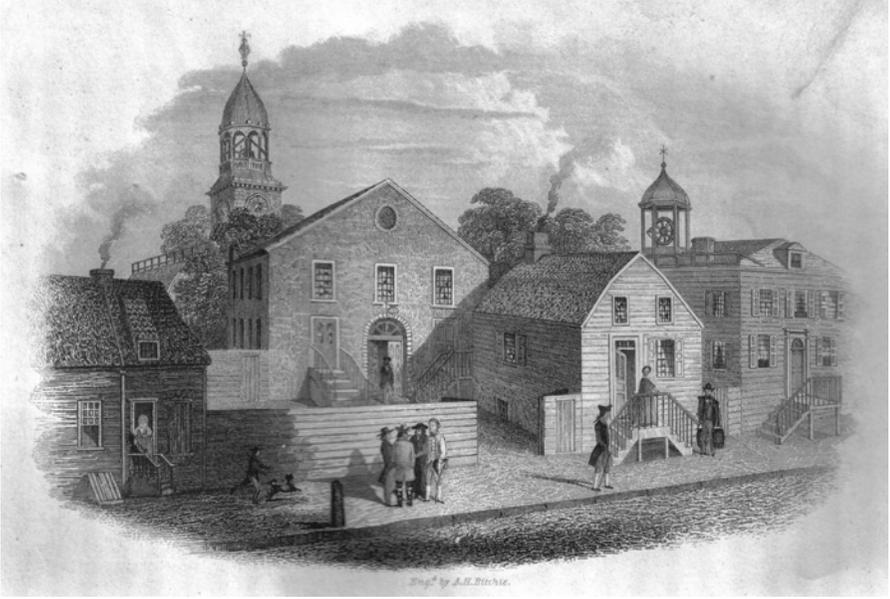
The controversy was a result of the effects of the Revolutionary War. During the war many Anglican clergymen, who were for the most part Tories, fled to Canada or returned to England, leaving their parishes without ministerial supervision. Since the Methodists up to this time generally received the sacraments in the Anglican churches, the vacancies created a desperate need. None of the Methodist preachers were ordained clergymen and Asbury, following the lead of Wesley, refused to allow them to administer the sacraments. A group of the southern Methodist preachers, however, of whom John Dickins was a leader, decided to form a Presbyterian type of organization, ordain each other and so meet the emergency. On one occasion Dickins boldly argued his position with Francis Asbury. Asbury was no match for Dickins' keen mind and solid logic, and could only throw up his hands and resort to private prayer.

Eventually a compromise was reached. The two sides agreed to withhold the sacraments for at least a year while a letter was sent to Wesley seeking his solution to the problem. Asbury was to itinerate and explain the situation to the societies. John Dickins was chosen to write this important letter to Wesley.⁶

Wesley's solution was not actually forthcoming until 1784. At that time Wesley, assisted by James Creighton, an Anglican clergyman, ordained Thomas Coke as a General Superintendent of the American work and sent him to America to ordain Francis Asbury as a General Superintendent. Accompanying Coke were two men whom he, Creighton, and Wesley had ordained first as deacons and then as elders: Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey. Together with Asbury, they were to ordain chosen preachers in America. The move resulted in the Christmas Conference of 1784 and the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

In the meantime, however, Asbury was successful in winning Dickins to his viewpoint. Dickins had located and was living in Halifax County, North Carolina, possibly because of his throat ailment or because of his marriage. Asbury persuaded Dickins once more to become an itinerant and sent him to New York City. Some of Dickins' friends looked upon him as a traitor to their cause, and one of them wrote a couplet:

⁶Pilkington, 51; and Frederick E. Maser, *The Dramatic Story of Early American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965), 79-83.



John Street Church and parsonage, in New York City. Betsy Dickins was the first Methodist minister's wife in America to live in a parsonage in the 1780s

Who would not blush, if such there be,-
Who would not weep, if John Dickins were he.⁷

Others criticized Asbury for assigning a man who had heretofore been a country preacher to such a prestigious appointment as New York. But Asbury knew his man and believed that Dickins would do well wherever he was placed. In later years the two men became close friends, Asbury often relying on Dickins' advice and counsel.

Betsy and John Dickins were thrilled and challenged by the New York assignment. They sold Betsy's share of her father's thirteen hundred acre plantation to her brother-in-law, Thomas Crawford. It was this money which later was used by Dickins to begin the book business of the Methodist Episcopal Church.⁸ The New York people had a parsonage, and on hearing of the coming of the first married man to their

⁷Edward J. Drinkhouse, *History of Methodist Reform*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Board of Publication of the Methodist Protestant Church, 1899), 1:216.

⁸Pilkington, 59.

charge, they spent five pounds on new furniture and other necessities. Betsy Dickins was the first woman to live in an American Methodist parsonage.

Dickins was well-liked by his New York parishioners, as was Betsy, his wife. In 1785, however, they returned to North Carolina to settle some matters in connection with the estate of his mother-in-law and probably to do some speculating in land and real estate. He was again assigned to New York in 1786, remaining there three years and possibly dabbling in the publishing business. In 1789, however, he was appointed to St. George's Church in Philadelphia with the express purpose of founding a publishing house for the Methodist Episcopal Church.

A MAN OF MANY DISTINCTIONS

Dickins could be termed a Man for All Seasons! Certainly he was a man of many distinctions. During 1785 and 1786, he prepared the first *Discipline* into a form which became the guide for all future editions. Pilkington describes his work as follows:

...between the summer of 1785 and the fall of 1786...Dickins was engaged in another of those projects that would have a lasting effect on Methodism. He was revising the Minutes of the Christmas Conference and putting them into the pattern and form that have ever since been characteristic of that most important Methodist book, the *Discipline*... [T]he first *Discipline*... was a rambling, rather unorganized affair. John Dickins, educated and editorially inclined, took the book, 'Methodized' it, and organized it into logical sections.⁹

On June 19, 1780 Asbury wrote in his journal, "Brother Dickins drew the subscription for a Kingswood School in America: this was what came out a college (Cokesbury College)." The footnote adds, "The plan for the first Methodist school in America was prepared at John Dickins' house on Fishing Creek near Halifax and Edgecomb County line."¹⁰ Thus Dickins was the father of education among the Methodists.

⁹Pilkington, 75.

¹⁰Elmer T. Clark, ed., *The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 1:358. For the story of Cokesbury College, and Dickins' role in it, see John Abernathy Smith, "Cokesbury College: Kingswood in America," in *Methodist History* 28:4 (July 1990), 219-236.

Dickins was in New York City in 1784 when Thomas Coke and his friends came to America to unveil John Wesley's plan for American Methodism. Dickins was the first American Methodist to hear the purpose of Coke's coming to America, and he urged Coke to spread the word of Wesley's proposal far and wide. As Coke described their encounter in his journal:

I have opened Mr. Wesley's plan to Brother Dickins ...and he highly approves it, says that all the preachers most earnestly long for such a regulation, and that Mr. Asbury he is sure will agree to it. He presses me earnestly to make it public, because as he most justly argues, Mr. Wesley has determined the point, and therefore is not to be investigated, but complied with.¹¹

Coke did not preach in New York on the plan Wesley had outlined for American Methodism; but, probably with Dickins' encouragement in mind, he unfolded the design shortly thereafter when preaching in Philadelphia at St. George's.

Dickins was a member of the Christmas Conference which founded the Methodist Episcopal Church, where he was ordained a deacon and where, according to Thomas Ware, a youthful itinerant at the time, he suggested the name for the new denomination that was being organized:

...the question arose "What name or title shall we take?" I thought to myself I shall be satisfied that we be denominated, The Methodist Church, and so whispered to a brother sitting near me. But one proposed, I think it was John Dickins, that we should adopt the title of Methodist Episcopal Church. Mr. Dickins was, in the estimation of his brethren, a man of sound sense and sterling piety; and there were few men on the conference floor heard with greater deference than he... The motion on Dickins' suggestion was carried without, I think, a dissenting vote.¹²

In 1789, Dickins took part in another very significant event in the life of the Methodist Church and the country. On April 30, 1789 in New

¹¹John A. Vickers, ed., *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2005), 31.

¹²Thomas Ware, *Sketches in the Life and Travels of Rev. Thomas Ware* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 106.

The Naming of Mother Bethel

Another distinctive service rendered by John Dickins was to inspire the name of one of the most revered and historic churches of American Methodism, Mother Bethel AME Church. The following is excerpted from Richard Allen's memoir, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*



(Philadelphia: Martin & Boden, 1833), 18:

I bought an old frame that had been formerly occupied as a blacksmith shop from Mr. Sims, and hauled it on the lot in Sixth near Lombard Street, that had formerly been taken for the Church of England. I employed carpenters to repair the old frame, and fit it for a place of worship. In July 1794, Bishop Asbury being in town, I solicited him to open the church for us which he accepted. The Rev. John Dickins sung and prayed, and Bishop Asbury preached. The house was called Bethel, agreeable to the prayer that was made. Mr. Dickins prayed that it might be a bethel to the gathering in of thousands of souls. My dear Lord was with us, so that there was many hearty Amens echoed through the house. This house of worship has been favored with the awakening of many souls, and I trust they are in the kingdom both white and colored.

York City, George Washington had been inaugurated as first President of the United States. About a month later in the same city the last and final of the eleven conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the year 1789 was being held with Asbury presiding. The conference decided to present a congratulatory address to General Washington in which the church would embody its approbation of the Constitution, and profess its allegiance to the government. The message was duly written, and a copy was sent to the president by two couriers – Thomas Morrell and John Dickins. The couriers also requested a time when the bishops of the church could be received to read the statement to President Washington. At an appointed time, therefore, on June 2, Bishops Asbury and Coke, together with Thomas Morrell and John Dickins, were received by Washington. The statement of the conference was read by

Asbury, and Washington made a fitting reply. The text of both the address and the reply have been printed many times, and they both appear in volume three of *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*.¹³

In addition to these many distinctions, John Dickins has been called the first author in American Methodism, having prepared and published a *Short Scriptural Catechism* which Nathan Bangs, an early American Methodist preacher and historian, called “among the most excellent” of the catechisms produced in the church. “It contains in fact a body of divinity in a few words, selected from the Holy Scriptures, arranged in due order, in the very phraseology in ‘which the Holy Ghost teacheth.’”¹⁴

Seldom has a man who proved himself to be so important as John Dickins in the development of a religious movement received so little recognition from historians and Methodists in general. I dare say that the average Methodist knows nothing about John Dickins; the more informed Methodist probably knows he had something to do with the Publishing House; but the vast majority of Methodists, if they heard his name mentioned, would more than likely think the reference was to the English novelist Charles Dickens.

THE BOOK EDITOR

Dickins’ greatest achievement was the founding of the Methodist Publishing House at Old St. George’s in 1789. He became its first Book Steward or Book Editor. Dickins was a truly great bookman. He began the publishing business, as we have noted, with some of the money he received from the sale of his wife’s property. God bless Betsy Dickins for her vision and generosity. She never once complained, although long after John was dead she suffered from poverty – a poverty that was somewhat relieved by her Methodist friends,¹⁵ but a poverty

¹³Clark, 3:70-71.

¹⁴Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 2 Vols. (New York: Mason and Lane, 1839), 2:68.

¹⁵Bishop Asbury took a special interest in caring for Betsy Dickins. Henry Boehm says that after the death of Asbury’s mother, that portion of the bishop’s income formerly forwarded to England for her support was given to Betsy. Asbury also set up an annuity for Betsy, stipulating in his will that, “should Elizabeth Dickins survive me and continue in her widowhood, it is my will she should be paid, during her natural life, Eighty Dollars annually.” See J. B. Wakeley, *The Patriarch of One Hundred Years, Being Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical, of Rev. Henry Boehm* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1875), 453; and Clark, III:473.

she might never have had to endure had her money been placed in a wise investment that would have guaranteed her a life income with a reasonably high return.

John Dickins was a successful if prolific publisher. Ezekiel Cooper in his memorial sermon on Dickins says that during the last four years of Dickins' administration he published 114,000 tracts and books.¹⁶ Part of his success lay in the fact that he knew his market. Today we have a marketing division in the book business to give the final word on whether or not a book shall be published. This sometimes is very frustrating to an author. Many years ago I spoke with my friend, Bishop McConnell, on this very point. He was in an angry mood. Looking at me as though I were the culprit he asked, "Do you know what book makes the most money for the Publishing House?" I replied that I had not the foggiest notion. Then in a tone of disgust he said, "A book called *The Encyclopedia of Fun*." Then he shook his head as if to imply that unless one wrote on this level one would have difficulty getting his best efforts published.

The bishop, of course, could have been exaggerating, and his mood soon passed. John Dickins, however, had no marketing division. By 1790, there was a committee to supervise the book business, but since Dickins, himself was a member, he probably influenced the most important decisions. Fortunately, he knew the market. He began work on *The Arminian Magazine*, the first Methodist periodical published in the New World.

The first books he published were Wesley's abridgment of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas A Kempis and Wesley's *Primitive Physic*. Thus he ministered to both the spiritual and physical needs of his people. Both books were wise choices. *The Imitation* was being printed and read throughout the country. Its popularity was so great that it allegedly was the first book ever printed in Wilmington, Ohio to meet the demands of the westward moving population. *Primitive Physic* was a sure seller in a land where there were few doctors and where the head of the house had to serve as nurse and physician to the members of his family and, in the case of a plantation, to his slaves.

¹⁶Ezekiel Cooper, *A Funeral Discourse on the Death of That Eminent Man, the Late Reverend John Dickins* (Philadelphia: Printed by H. Maxwell, for Asbury Dickins, 1799), 21.

John Wesley's Letter to John Dickins

In 1789, John Wesley wrote Dickins, encouraging him in his new role as editor and organizer of American Methodism's first publishing house.



To the Rev. John Dickins,
Market Street,
Philadelphia, Pa.

Chester, July 15, 1789.

My Dear Brother, – It was a concern to me likewise that you should have so little employment in the work of God, as it was your real desire to be of use to the world before you are called to a better. Therefore I am glad to find Providence has pointed out a way wherein you may be of general use, and the more so, as in some of the extracts from late authors, the inattention of my corrector inserted some sentences which I had blotted out, two or three of which assert Universal Restitution. The numerous errata likewise I doubt not you will carefully correct, which sometimes spoil the sense. Wishing you much of the favor and of the presence of God, I am, dear sir,

Your affectionate friend and brother.
John Wesley

In a sense Dickins was a genius; but he was more than a genius – he was a man of God. In Dickins' philosophy the purpose of the Publishing House was to do good, not to make money. We well might ask ourselves whether through the years we have slowly changed that philosophy! Have we changed our priorities? Is not our first question today "Will it sell?" "Can we make money by publishing it?" rather than, "Will it advance the cause of the Kingdom?"

Is not this a question the entire Church must face? Is it not shot through our entire ministry? I have been guilty of this secular spirit in my own life. Again and again I have had to remind myself that my chief purpose in life is to do good, and not to try to heap to myself honors or wealth or a more commanding appointment in the conference. I sometimes wonder if the cause for Methodism's decline in membership in recent years is to be found in that we have reversed our priorities and

centered our ministries in self rather than in Christ. Here is a living challenge for the Publishing House – by their publications to direct us once more to the basics of our Methodist faith. I assume this is why the Publishing House is producing the books in the Wesley Works Project. This is a tremendous undertaking and one for which we are all very, very grateful. And this is as it should be. For if you will take the trouble to look through the list of books published by Dickins that can be found on the advertising leaf at the end of some of his books, you will be amazed by the intellectual and spiritual level of the volumes. Dickins was primarily a man of God.

Unfortunately, the Methodist Episcopal Church never paid Dickins sufficient for him to make ends meet in his personal life. According to an article in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*:

...about 1792, (Dickins) began to trade on his own account as a stationer and bookseller. This was the business with which young Asbury (Dickins) helped his father and which he, himself, was to run for his mother when John Dickins died.¹⁷

It is no wonder that after Dickins' death, Ezekiel Cooper and others found it difficult to sort out what belonged to John Dickins and what belonged to the church. Pilkington in his masterly work already referred to was not entirely sure how the whole matter was resolved. There is, however, some previously unknown material in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania that was discovered after Pilkington had finished his first volume, in which there is a letter from Thomas Haskins that throws some light upon the matter and seems to indicate that eventually all parties were satisfied.

THE ASBURY DICKINS PAPERS

Information about John Dickins is still being discovered. I remember how excited I was when I first saw a footnote in an article on

¹⁷Peter J. Parker, "Asbury Dickins, Bookseller, 1798-1801, or, The Brief Career of a Careless Youth," in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 94:4 (October, 1970), 467. That Dickins was running a general bookstore in addition to publishing Methodist materials is attested by a 1796 letter of Asbury, in which he mentions, "Brother Dickins keepeth a stationer's shop." Dickins also ran notices in local papers advertising the sale of "Foolscap, Post, and Wrapping Paper, Blank Books, Pocket Books, and Tablets, Slate and Lead Pencils... A Variety of other Stationary and A Collection of Books, on different Subjects." See Clark III:145; and Pilkington, 105-108.

Asbury Dickins, John Dickins' son in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. The note mentioned two journals and ledgers of John Dickins, and a journal and ledger of Asbury Dickins in addition to a great number of letters. I was aware that Ezekiel Cooper had stated that John Dickins had destroyed his journal.¹⁸ Jean Hager of the Publishing House, Leland Case of the former *Together Magazine* and others all urged me to keep looking for the journal. They refused to believe as I did that it had been burned or destroyed. As I read the footnote, my heart leaped. I had found the elusive journal.

I placed the magazine under my arm, shouted to my wife that I was heading for town to uncover an important historical find and made my way to the Jenkintown train station. Three quarters of an hour later I arrived quite breathless outside the Pennsylvania Historical Society on Locust Street, only to discover the library would not open until one o'clock.

I went to the Union League and tried to read a newspaper without success. All I could think of was that I had found Dickins' journal. The elusive journal would tell us so much about publishing that Pilkington never knew or dreamed of. I walked up and down the main lounge of the League. I went into the dining room and ordered a sandwich which I hardly tasted; and then, promptly at one o'clock I walked into the library of the Historical Society.

After I pointed to the article and made my request, the librarian shook her head:

"I don't think the journal is what you expect!"

"But – but," I stammered.

"I'll get it" she replied.

She arrived a little later with all the material. Alack and alas, the journals were not a record of the day to day events in the life of an important man, but a listing of the books bought and sold during certain years that Dickins was Book Editor.

Nevertheless, the journals and especially the letters can tell us a great deal about the business and about what happened to Asbury Dickins and his mother following John Dickins' death. One Seminary to whom I relayed the news of the find is even now seeking copies of all the material.

¹⁸Cooper, 32-33, states "At one time, he kept a diary of his religious exercises and other occurrences and transactions in life; ...and I apprehend that he destroyed what he had written, as it is not yet to be found."

An image of Asbury Dickins, John Dickins' son, from Pilkington's *The Methodist Publishing house: A History* (used by permission)



Asbury Dickins, John Dickins' son, according to the letters, fled the country because of debt. Heretofore no one had known exactly why young Asbury fled to England. In England, however, he was placed in a debtors' prison, but later married what Pilkington calls "a Scotch woman of noble descent."¹⁹ The letters in *The Pennsylvania Historical Society* reveal that she was quite poor and seemed to have shared his misfortunes. Betsy Dickins, according to the letters, also suffered from poverty and finally died in the home of her daughter, Sarah, and her husband Dr. Samuel Baker.²⁰

¹⁹Pilkington, 133.

²⁰Betsy died April 23, 1835. Her obituary, penned by her son -in law, appeared in the *Christian Advocate* (New York), of May 8, 1835, which reads:

Departed this life, on Thursday, the 23d inst., Mrs. Elizabeth Dickins, relict of the late Rev. John Dickins. She was born near Halifax, N.C., and for upward of 50 years she endeavored to honor her Lord and Master by walking in obedience to his precepts.

With Lamp well-trimm'd and burning bright,
 And loins begirt around,
 In waiting posture long she stood
 To hear the welcome sound.
 Born from above, and thither bent,
 And longing fo the skies,
 How sweet the voice that charm'd her ear,
 And softly said, "Arise."

Asbury Dickins was finally released from prison and became Chancellor of the US Consulate in London. Through connections of his mother's family he became clerk in the Treasury Department in Washington and later Secretary of the United States Senate.

I have in my personal collections a letter from Asbury Dickins to a Major John M. O'Connor, in which Dickins backs William H. Crawford, Secretary of the Treasury, for the office of President of the United States. Unfortunately, Asbury backed the wrong horse.

JOHN DICKINS, THE FAMILY MAN; AND HIS LAST DAYS

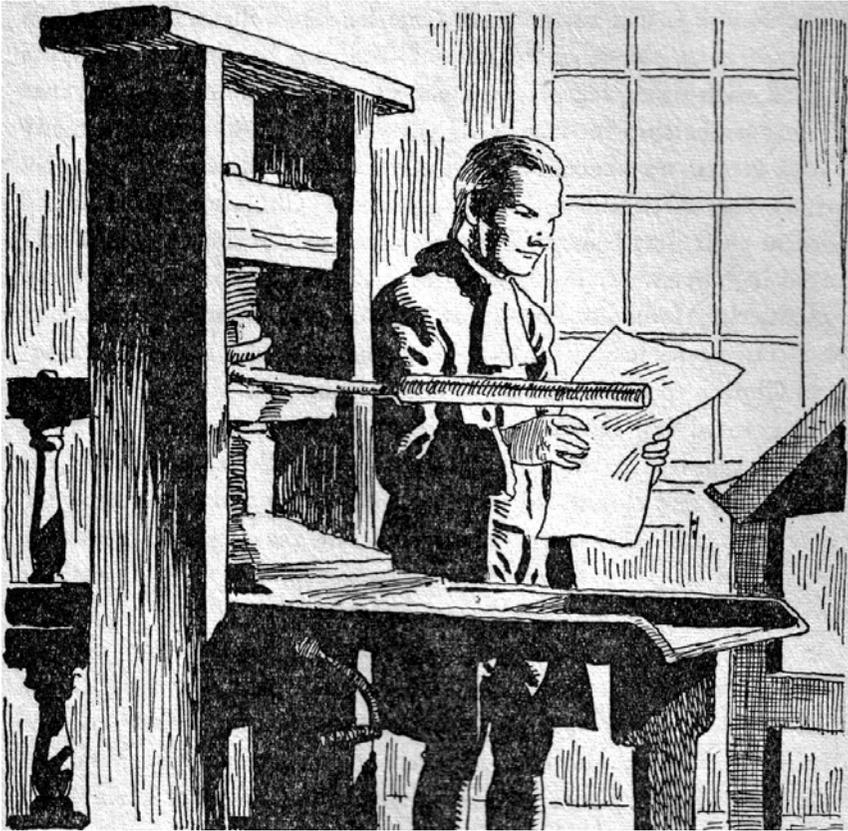
Betsy and John Dickins were devoted to each other. It is difficult to discover exactly how many children they had, although the most likely number is seven. Pilkington does not make the matter entirely clear, although a glance through the family Bible in the Publishing House might solve the riddle. On the birth of her last child, on January 16, 1797, Betsy almost lost her life. In writing of the event to his friend, Francis Asbury, Dickins reported:

About 6 o'clock this morning, my wife was delivered of a fine daughter, but owing to bad management, or some other cause, her life almost flowed out; so that by the time we procured a Physician, about 8 o'clock, she was nearly gone. In a desperate case, he had recourse to desperate measures. Hoisted the windows, threw off great part of the bed clothes & prohibited fire; together with other means. And the Lord had mercy; so that now about 6 o'clock in the evening, she can speak & show some degree of cheerfulness. Blessed be the name of the Lord! I am almost ready to say, I hope the danger is over; but must check myself and say, Father thy will be done. If Divine grace should ever bring me to heaven, I think I shall be one of the principal debtors there.²¹

Dickins believed in early rising, family prayers and religious instruction for his children. He was cheerful, yet a Christian gravity always attended him. He had no disposition to vanity, levity or trifling. He told his friends their faults in a candid but gentle manner; but such was their respect for him that they were not offended by his frankness.²²

²¹Letter of John Dickins to Francis Asbury, January 16, 1797; in the Methodist Archives, Drew University, Madison New Jersey.

²²Cooper, 16-17, 22.



An image of John Dickins at a printing press, from Fred Maser's 1965 book, *The Dramatic Story of Early American Methodism*. Despite images like this, Dickins never printed any materials himself. Though he edited and sold the books, and even purchased the paper and other materials for printing them, Dickins employed the presses of established Philadelphia printers, such as Joseph Cruikshank and Parry Hall.

He lived through two scourges of the Yellow Fever plague, but succumbed in 1798. He seemed to have a premonition of his death, having written as much to Francis Asbury:

My much esteemed friend and brother, I set down to write, as in the jaws of death; whether Providence will permit me to see your face again in the flesh, I know not. But if not, I hope through abundant mercy, we shall meet in the presence of God.²³

But he had no fear of death! Toward the end he said, "I have not been so happy for seven years." And when his friends asked him if they should *pray*, he said they should *praise*. His last words were "Glory! Glory! Come Lord Jesus!"

John Dickins lies buried today in a vine-covered grave in the charming little churchyard behind Old St. George's United Methodist Church, Philadelphia.

Where is John Dickins Buried?

Joseph F. DiPaolo

For many years, tour groups and confirmation classes have been shown the small, vine-covered spot behind Old St. George's, mentioned in Dr. Maser's article, as the final resting place of John Dickins. A weathered stone bearing his name, mounted on the wall above, was joined in 1989 by a plaque placed there by the United Methodist Publishing House, at a special bicentennial celebration, to honor the founder of Cokesbury.

But is John really there? Or anywhere on the grounds at all?

While assembling materials for Dr. Maser's article to be included in this issue of the *Annals*, your intrepid editor chanced across an obscure reference in an old local church history which, in conjunction with other clues, suggests that the mortal remains of John Dickins may not be where generations have assumed.

²³Dickins's letter, and one from Betsy Dickins to Asbury describing John's last hours, were published in the Minutes that year. *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, annually Held in America, from 1773 to 1813, Inclusive* (New York: Hitt and Ware, 1813), 206-207.

That Dickins and his daughter Elizabeth both died during the Yellow Fever epidemic in September, 1798 is beyond dispute, as is the fact that both were buried in St. George's cemetery on Crown Street. One of several burial grounds owned by the congregation, Crown Street was in use from 1795 until the mid-1830s. Early urban sprawl led to the cemetery's relocation in 1847 to make way for development, and the bodies there were moved to a vault underneath St. George's. An inscribed stone marker embedded in the wall just outside the gift shop today marks the spot where several hundred saints await the last trumpet call – among them (or so we might assume) John Dickins.

Already we have a problem with the “vine-covered grave” outside St. George's as the site of Dickins' burial. For Dickins (and his daughter) would have been reburied not in the yard outside, but in the vault beneath the floor of the church along with the others. Philadelphia Conference historian John Lednum, writing in 1859, says as much as he relates the story of Dickins' death and double burial:

[Dickins] fell in the third visitation of the yellow fever in 1798, in his fifty-second year. His daughter Elizabeth died of the same disease the day before his death. They were interred in the cemetery of St. George's, in Crown Street. But when the ground was built upon some years since, the remains of many of the dead were put in a large vault under the basement entry of St. George's Church; and whatever was found of the mortal part of this good man and his daughter, after dwelling about forty years in the narrow house, was put into this vault, while his headstone, with its inscription, is in the burying-ground of this church in Coates Street.²⁴

The Coates Street burying ground eventually also was relocated, and a number of headstones made their way to St. George's and were placed in the yard, some of which can still be seen there today. Evidently Dickins' stone was among them, as indicated by another 19th century conference historian, George W. Lybrand. In an article that appeared in the conference newspaper in 1884, Rev. Lybrand also relates that Dickins' remains were placed in the vault under the church, and says that Dickins' headstone was then “in the wall in the rear of the [St. George's] Church, and was inscribed, “In memory of the Rev. John Dickins, who departed this life September 27, 1798, in the 52d year of his

²⁴John Lednum, *History of the Rise of Methodism in America* (Philadelphia: 1859), 198.

life,” followed by eight lines of a poem in his honor written by Ezekiel Cooper.²⁵ It may be that later, people simply assumed that the stone marked his resting place, based on the fact that Ezekiel Cooper, who followed Dickins as book editor in 1798, was buried outside the church (by the front doors) in 1847, with a stone erected to mark that spot.

Further, the headstone beside St. George’s today does not appear to be 18th century, and does not bear the inscription described by Lybrand in 1884; it may have become illegible and been removed by 1903, when Rev. Adam Wallace delivered a paper on Dickins before the Philadelphia Conference Historical Society. Wallace then wrote, “The honored dust of this really great luminary among the lights of other days sleeps in an obscure corner of the back yard of St. George’s Church, without a cenograph or stone to mark the spot. It is hoped such an omission will be looked into.”

The stone now hanging on the outer wall of the church may have been placed there in response to Wallace’s plea. Where he got the idea that Dickins was in the yard, rather than the vault, is not clear; perhaps Wallace remembered the earlier stone and, thinking it marked the gravesite, is the source of the tradition that it is the exact spot where Dickins rests.²⁶

But Dickins may not be at St. George’s at all! In an 1885 history of a Brooklyn, New York congregation that Dickins helped to found while stationed in the city in the 1780s, author Edwin Warriner included the following statement:

“[Dickins’] remains were first deposited in the cemetery of St. George’s, in Crown Street, Philadelphia. They were afterward placed in the old Methodist burial ground in Baltimore, but were some years later removed with the remains of his widow, at the expense of the Baltimore preachers, to the Mount Olivet Cemetery near that city, where many of the heroes of Methodism sleep.”²⁷

²⁵George W. Lybrand. “Rev. John Dickins, The Founder of the Methodist Book Concern” in *The Philadelphia Methodist*, November 22, 1884.

²⁶Adam Wallace, *John Dickins, A Monograph; Read Before the Historical Society, March 9th, 1903* (Handwritten document, Old St. George’s, Philadelphia), 17-18. As an aside, Dickins’ name is sometimes spelled Dickens, and the two markers beside St George’s each spell it a different way.

²⁷Edwin Warriner, *Old Sands Street Methodist Episcopal Church of Brooklyn, NY; A Centennial History*, (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1885), 66-67. Rev. Edwin Warriner (1839-1898) was remembered as a careful historian in the *Christian Advocate* of December 8, 1898.

The claim is credible for several reasons. Warriner's footnote for yet another reburial reads: "Letter of Rev. Dr. James H. Brown to the author." Rev. James H. Brown (1807-1886) was a member of the Baltimore Conference from 1829 until his death, and was in a position to know about a number of deceased Methodist luminaries (including Francis Asbury) who were disinterred and transported to Mount Olivet Cemetery for reburial in the mid-19th century.

Even more telling is the fact that Dickins' widow, Betsy, relocated to Baltimore some years after John's death, where she lived with her daughter Sarah and son-in-law, Dr. Samuel Baker. Another daughter also lived with them, and her son Asbury lived and worked in Washington DC. It does not seem a stretch to imagine that sometime after the death of Betsy in 1835, the remaining children decided to reunite their parents in death nearer their homes, especially if they learned that their father's remains were to be moved anyway, as the Crown Street cemetery was being relocated.

St. George's Trustee minutes from 1847 survive, and contain an intriguing statement in connection with the reburials from the Crown Street property that year. Workers removed 367 bodies from the cemetery, the minutes record, "two of which were taken away by friends," resulting in only 365 being re-interred at St. George's.²⁸ Unfortunately the missing persons are not named! But it could well be John and his daughter. Attempts to confirm from Baltimore Conference records that the remains of Dickins and his daughter were transported there, however, came up empty; conference burial records for Mount Olivet date only to 1849, and are not complete thereafter.

My theory is that Dickins was disinterred and moved to Baltimore either soon after the 1835 death of Betsy, or when the Crown Street cemetery remains were moved in 1847. The fact was probably not much known beyond the trustees of St. George's who were involved at the time, and local historians, relying on earlier information, assumed he was still in Philadelphia, at Old St. George's.

Wherever John Dickins sleeps, we can only say, *requiescat in pace*.

²⁸*Minute Book of Trustee Board*, Jan. 4, 1831 to Mar. 2 1863 (Bound, Handwritten volume at Old St. George's), 298-299.