

An engraving of Rev. William Barns (c. 1797-1865), replete with his impossible wig and “ever-offending” high collar.

The Eccentric Irish Minister: Rev. William Barns of the Philadelphia Conference

by J. R. Flanigan (1880)

Editor's Note: this sketch of Rev. William Barns appeared in J. R. Flanigan's Methodism; Old and New, with Sketches of Some of its Early Preachers (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1880), 128-135. Colorful and idiosyncratic, Barns (sometimes also spelled Barnes) was well-known in the Philadelphia region. An extensive sketch of him is also found in Robert W. Todd's Methodism of the Peninsula (Philadelphia: ME Book Room, 1886). Flanigan's work has been slightly edited for publication, with footnotes and additional materials added as noted.

Rev. William Barns was extensively and familiarly spoken of by Methodists of the olden times as "Billy Barns." He was the first regularly-stationed preacher at Salem ME Church,¹ after the severance of the "St. George's charge" in 1835. He had, however, alternated there with others when at the same charge in 1825. There were several reasons, doubtless, for the great regard in which Mr. Barns was always held by that congregation, a prominent one being his kindred nationality with a very large portion of the membership, but his preaching was of a style that would necessarily be attractive to that people.

Mr. Barns was an extraordinary man. Born in Ireland of parents in very moderate circumstances, he was without much education and was, before leaving the "seagirt isle," apprenticed to learn the trade of an

¹Organized in 1819, Salem ME Church was located on Thirteenth Street, south of Spruce, from 1822 to 1842, when it moved to Lombard and Juniper. After a merger, a new church was built at Eighteenth and Spruce in 1894 and renamed Covenant; this later closed and gave its name and funds to today's Covenant United Methodist Church of Springfield. Harold C. Koch, *The Leaven of the Kingdom* (Ephrata: Science Press [1983]), 11.

ornamental painter, to which pursuit the poetry of his mind, as developed in after-years, probably directed him. Arriving in Baltimore in 1811, he followed that business for sometime in that city, being engaged in painting a sign when the Presiding Elder called upon him, saying there was other and more important work for him to do. He was converted in August 1812, and joined the society in the following year. He began to preach on a circuit with the Presiding Elder in 1816, and was received as a member of the Baltimore Conference the following year, 1817, and continued in the work until his death, which occurred in November 1865. His ministry was prolonged through a period of forty-eight years.

A COLORFUL CHARACTER

As a pulpit orator, Mr. Barns was not only exceptional, but unique, and will be best described, perhaps, by the designation of an aggressive preacher. His style and conduct was earnest and vehement, and he was wont to attack the strongholds of the enemy – to employ one of his own tropes – with “banners flying and drums a-beating.” Like all other men of limited education who rise to distinction, he was a hard student, and thus had rendered himself particularly strong as an exponent or expounder of the “doctrines” of the Bible. His mind was of a metaphysical order, and he delighted in the elaboration of abstruse questions of theology, psychology, etc., and was a most ready controversialist.

He retained through his whole life so much of the Irish brogue, which made his preaching peculiarly characteristic; a circumstance, however, to which an affection of the throat or nasal organ, with which he was always more or less afflicted, might have in some degree contributed. He was accustomed to become not only greatly in earnest, but much excited when preaching, and his tropes and figures on such occasions would carry the hearer from world’s end to world’s end again, and to the most lofty heights of imaginative power. We have seen and heard him in such flights of rhetoric, when he would rush wildly to the “highest dome of God’s celestial temple in the skies,” and, portraying the reward that is reserved for the righteous, he would fly to the “blue vault of heaven, where we shall pluck the stars as flowers from a garden, and dressed in garments of dazzling light, we shall drink from cups of gold, circled with diamonds and rubies, from the pure and everlasting springs that circle and flow around and over Jehovah’s starry throne;” and coming down from such giddy heights he would launch the thunders of

the law against “the Pope and the devil, and all the fiends of hell,” with such terrific volume as would startle the most irrepressible man or woman in the congregation.

Mr. Barns had from some cause lost his hair, and from the time we first knew him he wore a wig, and such a wig as we always thought greatly disproportioned to his head – albeit that was ample enough to contain the large brain of which he must have been possessed – and when preaching under such excitement the top covering would shake like an aspen leaf. These flights of rhetoric must have been not only heard but seen to be appreciated. The peculiar dialect and the highly-impressive gesticulation of the speaker are wanting in every attempt at description, for which the most graphic word-painting is inadequate.

Brother Barns, with all his strength of character, was eccentric, and there were, during his long ministerial career, many amusing anecdotes concerning him current. Mrs. Barns used to say that if she could catch his eye when thus intensely excited in preaching, she was able to recall and restrain him, possibly through something bordering on magnetic influence. On one occasion, as we have heard narrated, while stationed at Union Church, Wilmington, he became greatly excited with his subject, and noticing Mrs. Barns’ efforts in that regard, he exclaimed, “Oh! You may look, and you may look, Mrs. Barns, but the tri-colored flag of Methodism – the Bible, the Hymn-book and the *Discipline* – shall be carried to the front in triumph if it costs William Barns his life!”

Another instance of such fervid eccentricity is said to have occurred at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He was accustomed to urge plainness of dress and to denounce the frivolities of fashionable life and attire as indulged in by many Methodists. Some of the brethren (more likely the sisters) had discussed the subject, and in so doing retaliated on the preacher on account of his wig, which was by the critics styled an unnecessary appendage of dress. These criticisms reached Mr. Barns, and preaching one day one of his fiery sermons, he raised his hand over his head, exclaiming, “Here is William Barns with his wig,” and suiting the action to the word, and grasping the wisp of hair and holding it aloft, he continued, “And here is William Barns without his wig. How do you like him best?” The effect of such a dramatic scene was not only electric but to some extent ludicrous, the audience for a few minutes giving way to what approximated to boisterous laughter.²

²Todd, 62, relates the same incident, but says it occurred while Barns was serving Union ME Church in Wilmington, Delaware.

Another Portrait of William Barns

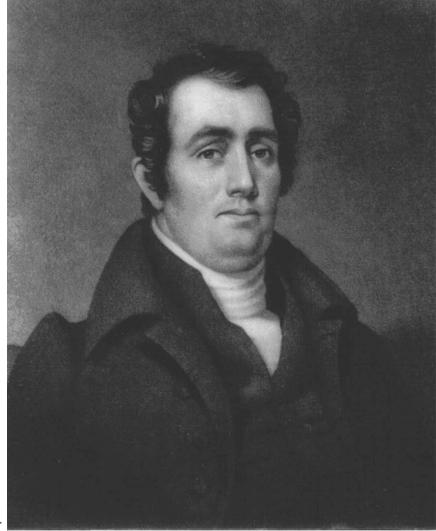
The vivid description that follows is excerpted from Robert W. Todd's Methodism of the Peninsula, 52, 60-61.

Billy Barns was... so unique in his facial angles; so comical in his natural expression; so carelessly pitched together and tumbled into his ill-fitting clothes; so heavily bewigged; so almost hid behind the screen of an immense shirt collar, and so fidgety withal – that the very sight of him, even in repose, would have evoked a smile from the most discouraged dyspeptic in the land. His voice and brogue were as remarkable as his face, and his speech was the fitting exclamation point that intensified his grotesque expression. Nevertheless, as a thinker and orator, Barns was both strong and brilliant... [and] as generous and liberal as he was witty and impulsive – always ready to respond to every appeal of philanthropy or Church progress, according to his ability. At a session of the Philadelphia Conference, where a subscription was taken in aid of Dickinson College, he arose in his usual nervous manner; tugging at his ever-offending collar; and in his irresistible brogue, thus addressed Bishop Waugh: “Mr. Präsident; you may put Billy Barns down for fafty dollars anyhow; and, Bishop, if you give him an appointment where the ecclesiastical nubbins grow long enough, he’ll give fafty dollars more at the end of the year.”

A CONTROVERSIAL PREACHER

As a loyalist to the government of his adopted country and to the Methodist Church, Mr. Barns was profound, but he urged the cultivation of charity and courteous conduct toward all other denominations. His hostility to the Romish Church, however, was boundless. Some of his poetic effusions that we have seen, some in manuscript and others in print, although not attaining to the highest standard of the muse, burn and blaze with patriotic ardor. His poetry was like the rough, unhewn rock from the mountain base, but it partook of the practically energetic strength of mind which made him a power in God’s ministerial army. Opinions have varied as to the merits of Barns as a pulpit orator, for he was more or less during life himself a subject of discussion and criticism, but his power and success as a preacher of the Gospel was universally conceded.

We have mentioned him as a controversialist, and as such he at times agitated the entire Methodist community, where he would be stationed. In 1825, he was one of the several preachers located at “St. George’s charge,” officiating alternately at that church, Ebenezer, Salem and Nazareth. One of his colleagues in the charge was Rev. Charles Pitman, who was in his time also one of the most distinguished of the Methodist ministers, and an entirely different sort of man from Barns.³ During that year there grew up what was extensively known among Methodists as the “Pitman-Barns Controversy.”



Rev. Charles Pitman

As before remarked, the latter was a close metaphysical student, and his discussions of doctrine were at times such as to rather astonish the old-time Methodists. We remember very well the excitement in the different congregations resulting from the preaching of these two gentlemen, who asserted and maintained different positions concerning doctrinal points. When it was ascertained from “the plan”⁴ that Barns would preach at either of the churches named, the house would be crowded, and so on any other occasion when Pitman was to fill the pulpit, albeit the attendance might be sparse enough at other times. The point first in controversy was sanctification, but, as is ever the case, the field of discussion took a much wider range subsequently, and eventuated in the preferment to the Conference of a charge of heterodoxy against Barns, by Mr. Pitman and a local preacher whose name has escaped us.

³Rev. Charles Pitman (1796- 1854) served St. George’s Circuit, 1825-1826, with Barns and Joseph Holdich as colleagues. He was again pastor of St. Georges, 1836-1838, and oversaw massive growth and major renovations. Pitman was enormously popular in the Philadelphia region; Pitman, New Jersey is named for him. See Caleb Malmesbury, *The Life, Labors and Sermons of Rev. Charles Pitman, D.D.* (Philadelphia: ME Book Room, 1887).

⁴“The Plan” was the published preaching schedule, a table showing the dates each preacher assigned to the circuit would be at particular churches within its bounds.

The charge was patiently heard by the Conference, Bishop George, as we recollect, presiding, and each of the parties defended his position with marked ability. The Bishop was greatly interested in the discussion of the subject. The contestants were, perhaps, two of as strong men theologically as there were at the time in the American connection, and it was manifest that the Bishop was deeply impressed by the close reasoning and the somewhat ponderous, logical presentation of Mr. Barns. The result of the hearing before the Conference was a verdict of "not proven" and the charges were dismissed.⁵ At a subsequent period, very shortly after this examination, doubtless, the three gentlemen – the Bishop, Pitman and Barns – were present at a camp-meeting in New Jersey, to which the former had been specially invited. Barns preached there one of his most logical and impressive sermons, and after the conclusion of it Bishop George, laying his hand impressively on the shoulder of Mr. Pitman, said, "Leave that man alone."

BARNS ON SANCTIFICATION

Barns taught the doctrine of entire sanctification in this life. "Surely," said he, "there is nothing in instantaneous sanctification to stagger our faith or confound our reason; for if Satan had power, through the sin of our first parents, to instantaneously efface from their souls the image of God that consisted in righteousness and true holiness, we might therefore easily believe that, according to the Gospel scheme of salvation in Christ Jesus, Omnipotence could instantaneously restore that image, and enable us to triumph over all moral evil." Said he in another sermon, "Sanctification implies to be saved from sin and to be purified... and as sanctification is a divine work, Jehovah can as effectually purify the whole soul in a moment as he could effect partial sanctification or accomplish the work by slow degrees."

⁵The author's words suggest that Barns was tried before the Philadelphia Conference, during a session superintended by Bishop George. However, the editor read through the handwritten minutes of the Philadelphia Conference in the collection at Old St. George's for 1825 and 1826 – the sessions bracketing the only year Barns and Pitman worked together, both superintended in part or whole by George. The minutes make no mention of any charges, trial or hearing of Barns, though they recount in detail other such trials. Perhaps George resolved the case off-line. Another possibility is that Flanigan refers to Barns' case being raised at a quarterly conference session of St. George' Circuit; unfortunately St. George's quarterly conference minutes for those years are lost.

Bishop Enoch George
(c.1767-1868), who
adjudicated the dispute
over doctrine between
William Barns and
Charles Pitman.



Rev. Joseph Holdich (1804-1893) served on the St. George's Circuit with Barns and Pitman during the controversy, and recalled the following incident with Bishop George. Holdich's recollection was published in History of Ebenezer Methodist Episcopal Church of Southwark, Philadelphia (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1890), 80-81. The first anecdote mentions Rev. John Newland Maffitt, a famous preacher of the time who was a guest in Ebenezer's pulpit.

Rev. William Barns was... stationed at St. George's and had Ebenezer for this peculiar department. When Maffitt was preaching in his high-flown and stilted style, he exclaimed, "Oh, if I could take my congregation up in my arms and carry them to the throne of God!" Barns, who was sitting next to me, turned and said, "I would not like to be there; I am afraid he would let me drop."

Barns was a peculiar man, with a great deal of talent, especially of an imaginative sort. He was supposed to be not quite right in theology. Bishop George called on me at my lodgings and desired to see Brother Barns. He took him upstairs and they had a long conversation. After they had come down and Barns had gone, the Bishop said to me, "I want your opinion of Brother Barns. Is he sound in the faith?" I smiled, and said, "He is as sound as any of us, but he has a peculiar mode of expression. Let him give his own explanation, and he is as sound as you are." The Bishop smiled approvingly, and said, "I believe you are quite right." While holding this conversation, Barns had said, "Oh, Bishop, just let me alone, and I will shake this off as a lion shakes the dew off his mane." – referring to the criticism upon him.

But it was not upon this proposition alone, as we remember or understand, that Mr. Pitman's formal charges of heterodoxy were preferred. They embraced also the subjects of the Godhead and the Sonship of Christ. Barns – who, by the way, preached the same doctrine during the whole of his ministry – taught that Christ suffered as a man and not as a God, and it was upon this point that the prosecutors sought to make good the charge of heresy. But we would depart from the purpose of this work were we to follow this subject further.

Mr. Barns was greatly beloved by immense numbers of the Methodist people. He was a most laborious and unceasing worker for his Master; was proud of his high calling, and his faith was such as would, if possible, remove mountains and dam the ocean's flood. He died with the harness on his shoulders, having preached at Bristol, where he was stationed, the day before he was taken ill. He breathed his last at the home of the Hon. James W. Quiggle on Walnut Street, Philadelphia, to which he was taken when stricken with illness on the street.

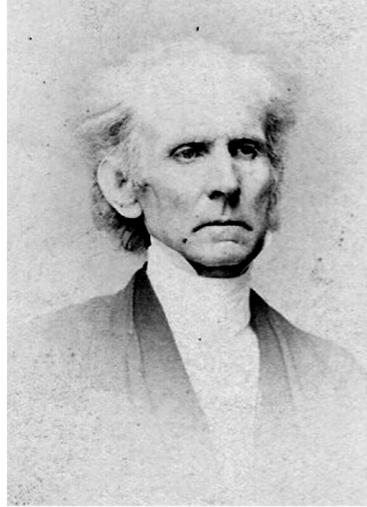
The following reminiscence was printed in the Philadelphia Methodist (the conference newspaper) of September 7, 1900, as part of a letter to the editor from Rev. William Copp of Northfield, Minnesota.

While I was a resident of the city [of Philadelphia], Rev. William Barns, an eccentric Irish Minister, was stationed at one of the Methodist Churches, and the Rev. Allen Johns⁶ at another. Barns had secured a furlough, as he called it, for two weeks. When Sunday came, he wanted to go to church, and knowing that Brother Johns was nearsighted, thought that he could go and be seated in the back part of the church and thus not be seen until the service was over.

But as Johns was passing into the church, he happened to see him, and while the first hymn was being sung went down and insisted that he should go into the pulpit with him. Barns yielded at last, but went grumbling along, saying he did not see what he had done that he should be arrested in this way. As soon as they reached the pulpit Johns urged him to preach, but he insisted on saying he had a furlough and would not preach. Just as Johns rose up to commence his sermon, he turned and said to Barns, "You must preach tonight." Now, Barns was

⁶Rev. Allen Johns (1805-1868) was a native of Chester County, and had joined the Philadelphia Conference in 1833. He was pastor of Philadelphia's Mariner's Bethel ME Church, 1852-1855. Philadelphia Conference *Minutes*, 1869, 25-26.

generally spoken of as “Billy” Barnes. Just as he closed his sermon he said, “I have the pleasure to say that Brother Billy – ” and then stopped and undertook to rectify his announcement. Barnes sprung to his feet, took him by his swallow-tailed coat and pulled him down on the settee, and then, after giving his enormous shirt collar a pull, said, “I suppose what he wanted to say was that ‘Billy’ Barnes would preach for you tonight. Well, well, I guess he will, and will preach against all the ‘isms’ the devil was ever the father of.”



Rev. Allen Johns

Brother Swain, who was with me, suggested we remain, so we stayed over for the night service. And such a crowd as went to the Mariner’s Bethel Church that evening was perhaps never seen in it before. Brother Swain and I went more than half an hour before the time for service and the church was about half full when we got there. When the preachers arrived, they had to get to the pulpit through one of the back windows. After the services were opened, Barnes rose up and gave out his text in this way, “Adam, where art thou? Adam where art thou? Adam where art thou?” – raising his voice to a higher key each time. “Now, if you do not know where these words are you ought to, and I advise you to look them up. I shall undertake, in the first place, to show that man is always somewhere; in the second place, that he is often where he ought not to be; in the third place, that he is not so often where he ought to be; and in the fourth and last place, I will prove by an ocular demonstration that if he is not careful he will get where he don’t want to be, and where water is a very scarce article.”

To give you an outline of that sermon, even what I recollect of it, would occupy a large share of the columns of your paper. But never in all my life have I seen a congregation moved at one time to laughter and then to tears as was that one. And then, at the close, he called out, “How many of you want to escape hell and go to heaven? As many of you as do rise up,” and those who were not standing rose up en masse. He pronounced the benediction and dismissed us.

The following portrait was written by Rev. Pennell Coombe, in his Fifty Years' Review of the Philadelphia Conference (1883), 13:

William Barns was one of the most remarkable men in the Philadelphia or any other Conference. He was an Irishman by birth, though for some reason he refused to be called one. He would never let his precise age be known, and it was only by sending an agent to look up his baptismal register that it was at last found out. He was full of vigor to the last, though he died over eighty years of age.⁷ His death was by apoplexy, produced by over-excitement. He fell in the street in Philadelphia, was taken into the house of a stranger where he was most tenderly cared for during the few hours he survived. In private life and in the social circle he was a perfect specimen of an Irish gentleman, but in the pulpit he was like a stormy tempest, especially under great excitement.

He sometimes became so excited while preaching, and by the preaching itself, that he was wild both in his expressions and manner, so much so as to appear almost deranged. He had a hearty hatred of the Pope and the Devil, and generally coupled them together, and treated them as one and the same. While many of his sermons were only moderately able, he often rose to the grandly majestic, in style, logic and eloquence. His descriptions of Hell and the Devil were terrible. A short time before I served Elkton, Barnes had been stationed there, and while on one occasion preaching on the horrors of the lost, he became so terrible in description that several women screamed with affright and ran out of the house. I heard him once at a camp meeting introduce the Devil to the congregation, and the picture was so vividly drawn, that it was not difficult to imagine his Satanic majesty actually before you. He was insensible to bodily fear, and while holding camp meeting on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, though often threatened with personal violence, his antagonist quailed before his dauntless eye and manner. His great forte in preaching was on the Divine character and government. Here he excelled all other men I have ever heard. His eloquence blazed with light and burned with fire, while his audience moved with the influence like a ripened field of wheat in a gale. He loved his wife and children tenderly, and stood by his friends like a hero. Peace to the memory of our Billy Barns! We shall never look upon his like again.

⁷This age does not agree with the birth year of 1797, published in the 1866 *Philadelphia Conference Minutes*, and used in this article, which would make Barns about 68 years old at the time of his death.

Editor's Post Script

Barns' family is barely mentioned in the sources, but according to Bruce H. Harrison, *The Family Forest Descendants of John Throckmorton* (Kamuela, HI: Millisecond Publishing Co., 2004), 66-67, Barns married in 1827 to Rachel Throckmorton (1811-1899); with whom he had six children: Susan Amanda; Mary Jane; Margaret Ann; William (1842-1911), a Philadelphia attorney; Rachel Abigail Throckmorton (1846-1867); and George Washington. A short memorial of Rachel Barns may be found in the Philadelphia Conference *Minutes* of 1899 on page 89.

William Barns also published several items. One which took aim at Roman Catholicism (a favorite target, evidently) was *O'Connell Refuted: Wesley, Methodism and the Protestant Bible Vindicated, and Popery Exposed* (Harrisburg: Barrett and Parke, 1840). Another was *A Sermon on the Greatness and the Government of God* (Harrisburg, 1840). In 1863, he took aim at the growing movement within the ME Church to allow laity to serve as elected delegates to General Conference with *Lay Representation in the General Government of the Church Proven to be Unscriptural, Unreasonable and Contrary to Sound Policy* (Philadelphia: C. Sherman & Co., 1863). A review in the *Methodist Quarterly Review* 46 (April 1864), 355, reads, "The pamphlet takes the high conservative ground of Dr. Bond and Dr. Bangs, that laymen are Scripturally excluded from the General Conference. The author has no capacity for reasoning, but his pages are pervaded with a rich vein of harmless dogmatism as a substitute." The year after his death a 350-page collection of sermons was published, entitled, *Sermons on the Most Important Subjects in the Book of God* (Philadelphia: J. G. Miller, 1866).

He apparently also tried his hand at poetry, occasionally publishing pieces in periodicals on contemporary and patriotic themes. One that appeared in the *Philadelphia Press* of December 20 1861, after the outbreak of the Civil War, read in part,

Still may our far-famed "Union" stand,
 To bid our eagle soar
 Above this blest and happy land,
 Till time may be no more.
 Let sovereign States, by proper laws,
 Each others' rights maintain,
 And glory in Columbia's cause
 Where freedom's sons shall reign.

Another, earlier poem, composed for the *Christian Repository*, was occasioned by the death of former President John Quincy Adams, and is here taken from the *Columbia Spy* of April 1, 1848:

On John Quincy Adams
By Rev. William Barns

While heroes deck'd with laureled fame
On victory's field are crown'd,
Great Adams claims a nobler theme
For fame's loud trumpet's sound.

In deeds of blood his mighty soul,
Would take no active part;
But lov'd mankind from pole to pole,
With an unchanging heart.

His wisdom from our highest throne,
Beam'd like the morning sun,
And greatest in our councils shone,
Till his vast work was done.

His praise shall float on every wind,
And virtue's purest page
Shall point each tow'ring statesman's mind
To Massachusetts's sage.

The stars and stripes that freeman love,
Shall freedom's honors pay;
While our bold Eagle soars above,
To watch his sleeping clay.

Columbia's daughters weep around,
Where the great statesman lies;
And look for the last trumpet's sound,
To raise him to the skies.

Then death shall bid him die no more,
While endless ages run,
But live on the eternal shore,
Where untold deeds are done.

(Columbia, Pennsylvania, March 13, 1840)

William Barns' Service Record:

- 1817 Calvert, Maryland (Baltimore Conference)
- 1818 Rockingham, Maryland
- 1819 Bedford, Pennsylvania
- 1820 Bottecourt, Virginia
- 1821 Uniontown and Brownstown, Pennsylvania
- 1822 Connelsville, Pennsylvania
- 1823 Wheeling, [West] Virginia
- 1825 St. George's ME Church (Philadelphia Conference)
- 1826 Without appointment
- 1828 Lewistown, Delaware
- 1830 Snow Hill, Maryland
- 1831 Elkton, Maryland
- 1832 Queen Anne, Maryland
- 1833 Dover, Delaware
- 1835 Salem ME Church, Philadelphia
- 1837 St. Paul's ME Church, Philadelphia
- 1839 Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
- 1841 Pottsville, Pennsylvania
- 1843 Eighth Street ME Church, Philadelphia
- 1845 Wharton Street ME Church, Philadelphia
- 1846 Western ME Church, Philadelphia
- 1847 Columbia, Pennsylvania
- 1849 Easton, Pennsylvania
- 1851 Manayunk, Philadelphia
- 1853 Sanctuary ME Church, Philadelphia
- 1855 Asbury ME Church, West Philadelphia
- 1856 Nazareth ME Church, Philadelphia
- 1857 Columbia, Pennsylvania
- 1859 Union ME Church, Wilmington, Delaware
- 1861 Salem ME Church, Philadelphia
- 1863 Emory ME Church, Philadelphia
- 1865 Bristol, Pennsylvania



William Barns, from
an 1867 composite photo
of conference ministers