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"ASBURY IN NEW ENGLAND"

A Paper

Read for the New England Methodist Historical Society

at the Annual Conference meeting

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By Rev. J. Rex Shepler.

ASBURY IN NEW ENGLAND

In the last year of his life Asbury spent some of his days of illness in examining and approving his Journal. The records were read to him and revised under his direction. "I have buried in shades," he writes, "all that will be proper to forget, in which I am personally concerned." More significantly, he states: "As a record of the early history of Methodism in America, my Journal will be of use; and accompanied by the Minutes of the Conference, will tell all that will be necessary to know."

It is indeed true that Asbury's Journal is the largest single contribution to the history of early American Methodism, although it is far from being our only source. But for the contacts of Asbury with New England, it is naturally the prime source of information. From it we can gather much that has large interest to those who are familiar with New England.

Asbury did not enter New England till 1791. The large success of Methodism in its earlier fields, especially the South, and the strong and antithetical hold of Calvinism in New England, delayed the entrance of the itinerants into this section of the East. Lee was appointed to "Standford circuit" in Connecticut in 1789, and was sent on to Boston in 1790, two helpers being appointed to New England with him. By 1791 a church building had been raised in Lynn, where Lee formed his first society, and in that early structure Asbury preached early in July, when making his first visit.

One cannot appreciate Asbury's first remarks about New England without reading about his other travels. Not long before coming here he had been in Kentucky, where he viewed the graves of twenty four men who had been slaughtered in a raid by the Indians; he and his companions would camp beside the road, and bread would grow short after forty and fifty mile daily stages through the wilderness. It was out of such pioneer experiences that Asbury came into Connecticut, where the thing that impresses him is that "we are never out of sight of a house; and sometimes we have a view of many churches and steeples, built very neatly of wood--either for use, ornament, piety, policy, or interest, or it may be some of all these." Coming to New Haven, he writes: "I am reminded of England in traveling here; this country more resembles my own than any I have yet seen on this side the Atlantic." While in New Haven Asbury preached at Yale College, having the President in his audience. When he had finished, so he records, "No man spoke to me....They used me like a fellow

Christian in coming to hear me preach, and like a stranger in other respects." This incident causes Asbury to remark on the words which George Whitefield had said to Boardman and Pilmoor when they first left England for America: "Ah!" said Whitefield, "if ye were Calvinists, ye would take the country before ye."

Boston gave another example of a cold New England reception. Here Asbury remarks that the professed friends of the Methodists were apparently ashamed to publish notice of the meeting, for only twenty or thirty were present to hear him in a large church. At a second service more were present, but Asbury concludes: "I have done with Boston until we can obtain a lodging, a house to preach in, and some to join us." He records at this time the variety of churches in Boston, which was a city of 18,000 (virtually the size of Westfield today): there were nine Congregational churches, two each Episcopalian and Baptist; one each of Catholic, Universalist, Sandemanians, and Friends. "The Methodists have no house, but their time may come."

Lynn offered a good Methodist welcome; and perhaps the warmth of the people had something to do with the impression the location made upon Asbury: "As a town, I think Lynn the perfection of beauty; it is seated on a plain, under a range of craggy hills, and open to the sea; there is a promising society, an exceedingly well-behaved congregation. These things, doubtless, made all pleasing to me...Here we shall make a firm stand, and from this central point, from Lynn, shall the light of Methodism and of truth radiate through the state." Asbury stayed for two weeks in Lynn, which was a settlement of 2,000 people; during the period he preached also in Salem and Marblehead, which were considerably larger places; in the latter Asbury met with a good response. From Lynn he traveled back again toward New York, preaching as he went.

From 1792 to 1815, Asbury held some twenty-five conferences in New England; until 1797 they were only district conferences held for convenience in the eastern or western sections; regular records were kept beginning only in 1800. Instead of following Asbury in chronological order during these twenty-three years in which he passed through New England, we will take impressions from the record as a whole, associated under a few headings.

First we gather a few of the physical impressions of the territory. The first visit

to Lynn covered the first two weeks of July. The fourth of July was Monday, and the record for that day is: "I took the benefit of the sea air, and began visiting." The next Monday, the 11th, we read: "I labour under deep exercises of soul. The seabath found to strengthen me." What a typical summer entry is made the next day: "We had a blessed rain after nearly a month's drought." Perhaps it was a continuing northeaster, because the day after that finds Asbury on the road once more, traveling to Worcester, as he writes, "through rain, and with pain and weariness."

What kind of weather did Boston have in Asbury's time? In the middle of summer, 1800, the record reads: "We came to Boston. It was a damp day, with an easterly wind, unfriendly to my breast." And was it ever thus? One physical factor which inevitably receives notice in New England from the Lord's horseman is the stony footing. So on the third visit to Lynn: "We rode upward of thirty miles. The last nine days we have ridden upward of two hundred miles, and, all things taken together, I think it worse than the wilderness. The country abounds with rocks, hills, and stones." Five years later, after a day's journey from Swansea to Taunton, he writes: "The day was excessively warm; and Oh! rocks, hills, and stones! I was greatly outdone: no price can pay, there is no purchase for this day's hire but souls." After holding Conference in Buxton, Maine in 1804, Asbury returned through New Hampshire and Vermont. He writes: "The morning found us under way over the Isingglass hills, which furnish the windows of the country with lights....I came to Hanover town....I have traveled by computation seven hundred and forty-six miles from Baltimore. Oh New Hampshire, thy perpetual hills and rocks! Alas, poor people! Alas, poor, suffering preachers!" Later on in this trip Asbury reached what is today the Berkshire Trail, over which we glide in our machines through the central stretch of the Berkshires. But how could Asbury dwell upon the beauties which we enjoy today? "I was glad to stop fifteen miles short of Pittsfield, after riding over dreadful hills and rocks forty-five miles: we lodged at a tavern, weary, weary enough!" Another trip over the Berkshires, in which Worthington and Chesterfield are mentioned, causes Asbury to

comment: "I wondered to see the people settled here so thickly among the rocks, where the soil can only be cultivated by the iron hand of active, laborious industry: I should prefer any part of the Alleghany where it is not too rocky, because the land is better." Was it these travel experiences that led Asbury to comment in Bennington on his first visit to Vermont: "I have felt awful for this place and people; but God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham"?

Asbury's citations are frequently full of interest. Single references should not be taken as forming a full estimate of the places and conditions which he encountered. As regards the world of nature, we may rightly conclude that Asbury was as appreciative of it as the demands of his work allowed him to be. The difficulties which nature placed in the way of his travels naturally are more often mentioned in his Journal than the beauties which a person of leisure might have noted. While at Pittsfield Asbury records, "I was pleased to enjoy the privilege of retiring alone to the cooling sylvan shades in frequent converse with my best Friend." But three days later he is writing, "I became weary of staying three days in one house." There you have the man.

Next we note a few comments upon the people of New England. One of his earliest remarks is this: "I felt enlargement in preaching, and the people were tender and attentive. It has been said, 'The Eastern people are not to be moved;' it is true, they are too much accustomed to hear systematical preaching to be moved by a systematical sermon, even from a Methodist; but they have their feelings, and touch but the right string, and they will be moved." How remarkable it is that after a century and a half midwesterners still come to New England with the same anticipations as Asbury!

While among the Connecticut Yankees Asbury made this observation: "The simplicity and frugality of New England is desirable--you see the woman a mother, mistress, maid, and wife, and in all these characters a conversable woman; she seeth to her own house, parlor, kitchen, and dairy; here are no noisy negroes running and lounging. If you wish breakfast at six or seven o'clock there is no

setting the table an hour before the provision can be produced."

Traveling in New England found Asbury sometimes eating and lodging in the homes of Methodists along the way, sometimes in taverns and inns. Generally speaking accommodations were easily obtained, in high contrast to the frontier. However, at times Asbury remarks that it costs a dollar a day to feed man and beast, and the value of a dollar in those times must have made this quite a burden. That this was not always the case is clear from such a reference as this: "The taverns in New England are good, good attention and moderate charges." It was Asbury's custom to conduct public devotions wherever he went. "In every house, tavern and private," he writes, "have I prayed and talked; this is part of my mission." "At Beverly," we read, "my host did not quite understand praying in the daytime." At Northampton he records: "I proposed prayer, but found it was not well received." There are other such references, but there are many cases where individuals were moved under his direction.

Another matter of interest is Asbury's attitude toward other religious organizations than his own. What would he say to those who said there were churches enough already? Somewhere beyond Brookfield he says "we dined at a place where 'the people are united, and do not wish to divide the parish.' Their fathers, the Puritans, divided the kingdom and the church, too, and when they could not obtain liberty of conscience in England they sought it here among wild men and beasts."

In 1803 the Baptists of Connecticut petitioned the bishops of the Methodist Church to join with them in a petition to the Connecticut legislature to obtain toleration, that is, freedom from compulsory church taxation. Although Asbury whole-heartedly contemned the established church law in Connecticut and Massachusetts, he comments in this fashion; "What can we do, and how is it our business? We are neither popes nor politicians. Let our brethren assert their own liberties. Besides, who now may be trusted with power? The baptists are avowed enemies to episcopacy, be the form of church government as mild as it may. Now, it seems, popes, as they would otherwise term us, may be useful to

them, nor are they too proud to ask for help; but our people will not be pushed into their measures; their bishops have no coercive power of this sort. If the Baptists know not what to do we cannot tell them." Is there any connection between the Asbury temper and the current Methodist response to the interdenominational assembly at Worcester?

It was, however, the Baptists who were most congenial to Asbury's religious standpoint, and that of Methodists generally. Asbury has many good words to say about them as he met them from time to time. And when the New England Conference met in New London, Connecticut in 1808, Easter was Conference Sunday. "I preached in the Baptist meetinghouse," Asbury writes, "the Baptists occupied ours; theirs was the larger building, and we had it crowded....There were seventeen deacons, traveling and local, ordained; and nine elders ordained in the Congregational Church, before fifteen hundred or two thousand witnesses. I know not where large congregations are so orderly as in the Eastern states."

The support of the Established Congregational Church by taxation in New England brings various pungent remarks from Asbury. In 1794 he observes: "Out of fifteen United States, thirteen are free; but two are fettered with ecclesiastical chains, taxed to support ministers who are chosen by a small committee and settled for life. My simple prophecy is that this must come to an end with the present century. The Rhode Islanders began in time, and are free. Hail, sons of liberty! Who first began the war? Was it not Connecticut and Massachusetts? and priests are now saddled upon them. O what a happy people these would be if they were not thus priest-ridden!" In 1802 Asbury stopped at Needham, while his companion George Pickering stopped "to demand the church rates taken from the Methodists, amounting to one hundred dollars or upwards: this is to pay the Independent ministers, whose forefathers fled from Episcopal tyranny: yet, be it known to all men, their children's children are risen up and glory in supporting the Gospel according to law. Happy the descendants who condemn not themselves by doing that which their ancestors disallowed!"

We turn now to the distinctly Methodist characteristics emphasized by Asbury

in his New England contacts. His first trip into this section ends with his prophecy: "I am led to think that the Eastern church will find this saying hold true in the Methodists: namely, "I will provoke you to jealousy by them that are no people, and by a foolish nation will I anger you." The succeeding years brought both hope and disappointment in the train of this early prophecy; in spite of the slowness of the work in some respects, there is no question that a marvelous spread of religion took place through the Methodist movement. Asbury's goals were high: on one occasion after a meeting in New England he asked an aged man how many inhabitants were in the place, and on receiving the reply that there were four thousand, Asbury comments that not more than one fourth of the people had been present at the meetings.

Fifteen years after Asbury first entered New England, the camp meeting program was in full swing. When Conference was held at Lynn in 1805, the Sunday morning service was held in "a grove belonging to Benjamin Johnson, a beautiful and sequestered spot, though near the meeting house....There were many exhortations and much prayer; many must have felt; some were converted: from this day forth, the work of God will prosper in Lynn and its neighborhood." The next year a camp meeting took place in Buxton, Maine, which Asbury addressed before meeting the annual Conference at Canaan, N. H. He records that there were about five thousand people on the grounds, and some conversions. After mentioning the toils of the journey, he concludes: "I felt that our way was of God."

Asbury's requirements of the preachers were high and not easily fulfilled, and his expectations were sometimes disappointed, though often satisfied. James Mudge remarks that it was easy for any man who was willing or showed any promise to have a chance in the Conference to show what he could do, for there was always a scarcity of men as compared with the ever-growing demands of the work; but the testing was pretty thorough before admission to full membership was granted. Thomas Coke's marriage in 1805, with his consequent announcement that he intended to be a sojourner in America instead of a visitor, led Asbury to soliloquize: "Marriage is honorable in all, but to me it is a ceremony awful as death. Well may it be so, when I

calculate we have lost the traveling labors of two hundred of the best men in America, or the world, by marriage and consequent location." Asbury was in Marblehead when he penned these thoughts. The minutes of the New England Conference in these early years contain many frank estimates of the preachers serving on trial. In one case George Pickering is quoted as passing judgement on Daniel Webb "that he loved home rather too well." But Pickering was like Asbury, though married; during fifty years of married life it is said that he spent on an average only about one-fifth of his time at home. It is in the light of such facts that these judgments should be read. A poorly attentive audience in Rhode Island led Asbury to place the blame farther back upon the preachers: "Our preachers get wives and a home," he comments, "and run to their dears almost every night: how can they, by personal observation, know the state of the families it is part of their duty to watch over for good?"

But this would be a one-sided view of things if taken alone. Asbury does not spare his comments when the work of the churches does not please him, but he has more space to give to those things which are pleasing and successful. It was a day of rapid expansion and growth, and the mere maintenance of the status quo boded no good for Methodism. The quick response in other parts of the country sometimes made New England compare unfavorably, as far as Methodism was concerned. The emphasis on enthusiasm and witnessing was so great, that the lack of it could easily be mistaken for a lack of it could easily be mistaken for a lack of religion. On the same occasion in Rhode Island, Asbury writes, "Oh, the death--the formality in religion! Surely, the zealous, noisy Methodists, cannot but do good here!"

Interesting views of annual Conferences recur. In 1806 the New England Conference sat for seven hours a day, going through the business with "haste and peace." Where were the chronic debaters in those days? "We did not," says Asbury, "to my grief, tell our experiences, nor make observations as to what we had known of the work of God; the members were impatient to be gone, particularly the married townsmen, so we made great haste." Evidently even the bishop did not have the final say when it came to conducting the New England Conference. The next year with Confer-

ence at Boston, Asbury writes that "it kept us busy to preach five times a day, ordain fifty-nine to office, and inquire and examine into characters, graces, and gifts, and appoint the numerous stations." With Conference at Barnard, Vermont in 1811, the session lasted from Thursday to Tuesday, and 3000 people were in the audiences on Sunday. "We disposed of eighty-seven preachers," writes Asbury, "and each man took his station at once, and without hesitancy, like a man of God.... Conference broke up at twelve o'clock. At one o'clock many of those hardy soldiers of the Lord Jesus were already to horse, and their faces set to the wilds, or wherever else their duty calls them."

Asbury was not as much at home in New England as in some other sections of the country. Newport, Rhode Island comes to the front more than once in the Journal as typifying the burden which was laid on Methodism. On his 1800 visit Asbury says of the city: "Grand house, steeple, pews; by lottery. The end is to sanctify the means. Ah! what pliability to evil!" In 1813 the same scene leads him to say: "O rare steeple-houses, bells! (organs by and by?)--these things are against me, and contrary to the simplicity of Christ. We have made a stand in the New England Conference against steeples and pews; and shall possibly give up the houses, unless the pews are taken out, and the houses made sure to us exclusively. The Conference now pursue a course which will surely lead to something decisive; we will be flattered no longer." The early Methodist chapels in the Conference, such as those at Lynn Common, Methodist Alley in Boston, Beech Hill in Grabville, and the beautiful structure in Wilbraham, were built according to the Methodist requirements.

The contrast between the way of Methodism and the way of the world comes to the front in Asbury's travels. A trip from Epping to Haverhill produces the understandable reaction: "To travel forty miles a day, and be under the necessity of going into dram and sin-infested taverns: it is such a journey that teaches us the value of hospitality in the South, and the excellency of Methodism everywhere." Another contrast between New England and the South comes up in connection with Boston Methodism.

In 1810 the new chapel in Boston was greatly in debt, and George Pickering had been in the South soliciting funds; yet when Asbury visited in 1810 and preached in the chapel, the want was so pressing that he also wrote five letters to Methodist centers in the South, and each one responded with a gift. Early in his contacts with Boston Asbury said that the great needs of Boston were good religion and good water. Later on, however, he records that he had an open time when preaching in Boston, as he always did. Later history would make it appear that the Southern cities have always remained at least one step ahead of Methodism in the city of Boston. Perhaps our resident bishop is overlooking a good opportunity for taking a collection.

Seriously, Asbury maintained high and well-justified hopes for New England, despite his inability to become wholly congenial to the environment. Both factors appear in his last considerable comment upon our territory: "Surely we shall rise in New England in the next generation," he predicts. "I believe, for one, that there has been more true Gospel preaching in the other states, than in the five New England states, after all their boasting."

Remembering that the first Methodist society in New England was formed in 1790, it is worthy of remembrance that by 1810 the membership of the New England Conference was 11,220; and ten years later in 1820, the membership was 17,739. Included in the New York Conference were perhaps half as many again who actually lived in New England. During the years of Asbury's visits here, the membership increased on an average of 500 a year, and many who were converted under Methodist preaching also joined with other denominations. It is estimated that the Methodists of the New England states at this time amounted to one-tenth of the members of the church throughout the country. Thus the harvest truly was plenteous, and although the daily work was done by the itinerant ministry, a great part of the credit for leadership and direction of the forces will always belong to the Francis Asbury who systematically followed the long trail into New England.