

The Asbury Journal 74/2: 347-368
© 2019 Asbury Theological Seminary
DOI: 10.7252/Journal.02.2019F.06

Philip F. Hardt

The Capital of Methodism: The New York Station: 1800-1832

Abstract:

For the first three decades of the nineteenth century, the New York Station could easily be considered the pre-eminent circuit in American Methodism. During this period, highly dedicated, extremely gifted, and deeply evangelistic preachers and laity and the newly relocated Book Concern joined forces in an unparalleled way to impact the station and, in some cases, the entire denomination. This occurred within a rapidly growing city with tremendous commercial importance, especially in shipping. As a result, the New York Station developed a uniqueness that was unmatched in the denomination. Two of the ways it differed from a more traditional circuit were its deployment of stationed and local preachers on the Lord's Day and its rapid response to benevolent, educational, evangelistic, and missional needs.

Keywords: New York Station, New York City Methodism, Methodism and Preaching, Wesleyan Seminary, Methodist Tract Society

Philip Hardt is pastor of Glendale Maspeth UMC in New York City. He has a Ph.D. in Historical Theology (American period) from Fordham University (1998). He has been an adjunct professor of Methodist Studies at New Brunswick Theological Seminary.


THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

Introduction

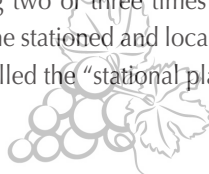
In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the New York Station in lower Manhattan can, without doubt, be considered the “capital of Methodism” in America. A number of factors contributed to this such as the incredibly fruitful ministry of Reverend Nathan Bangs who remained in New York for nearly fifty years in different capacities, the relocation of the Book Concern which placed both the book agents and their publishing at the disposal of the station, and the seemingly endless supply of highly dedicated and deeply spiritual laity. To be sure, these factors, and others, led to its singular uniqueness as a circuit. As a result, the New York Station differed from a more traditional, four week circuit in at least two distinctive ways: preaching on the Lord’s Day and the sheer number of its ministries that impacted both the station and the entire church.

Preaching on the Lord’s Day

The first way that the New York Station differed from a traditional circuit was the utilization of a high number of both stationed and local preachers on the Lord’s Day. For example, traditional circuits usually covered a large geographic area insuring that the itinerant preacher(s) would preach only infrequently and not every Sunday. According to Lester Ruth, “a circuit described the path of travel over which a traveling preacher went to preach his sermons each month including typically two dozen or more preaching sites.” Usually, two itinerant preachers, spaced two weeks apart, would be appointed to one circuit. In contrast, in a station, preaching occurred every Sunday in every congregation. This was possible since stations were usually confined to just one city. Ruth defined a station as “the assignment of responsibility for the societies of a small geographic area to an itinerant preacher or preachers, in essence collapsing a circuit to that area, even limiting it to the boundaries of one city or to one society.” Besides New York City, other stations included Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Charleston, South Carolina. Due to the smaller size of the circuit, each congregation had preaching two or three times every Sunday because of the constant rotation of all the stationed and local preachers assigned to the circuit. This rotation was called the “stational plan.”¹

The Stational Plan

The stational plan of preaching required each stationed preacher to preach three times every Sunday. In the 1790s, when only three



churches existed, this was fairly simply to execute. This is illustrated in a description of New York in 1794. “There were three sermons in each church, the effective ministers alternating, and after the evening service a general meeting of the whole society was held, conducted by the pastor.” In contrast, as the New York Station ultimately grew to six or seven churches by 1832, it became somewhat more complicated. Examples come from the various “stational plans” of the New York Station from 1815 to 1829. These plans also reveal that the circuit went from west to east and back again to the west. This progression can be clearly seen in Appendix One. For example, Reverend Ebenezer Washburn gave this description of the New York Station in 1815; at that time the station contained eight churches: John Street, Duane Street, Forsyth Street, Allen Street, Two Mile Stone (later Bowery Village and then Seventh Street), Greenwich Village (later Bedford Street) and two African churches: Zion African Church and Asbury African Church. “All the Methodist congregations in the city were then in one charge, and the preachers traveled round in the regular form of a circuit. The preacher who was at John-street in the morning was at Forsyth-street in the afternoon and Allen-street in the evening. The next Sabbath he was at Forsyth-street in the morning, Allen-street in the afternoon, and Two-mile-stone in the evening; thus preaching three times regularly in each church every time he performed his tour around his circuit.” A complete tour of the circuit took three complete rotations of the stational plan or eighteen Sundays.²

Reverend Tobias Spicer, appointed to the New York Station from 1819 to 1821, gave a similar account. “There were five stationed preachers, and we were assisted by the book agents (of the publishing house) and local preachers. We each preached but once in the same church on the same Sabbath, and once in five weeks, on a week evening, in the different churches.” Again, three years later, Reverend Daniel DeVinne gave the following description. “The whole city then was in one circuit. Six preachers and six churches have special charge in his own locality, but rotating regularly to all the churches on the Sabbath. This year Willett street church was built, receiving the congregation from the Mission House, in Broome Street.” Ten years later, when he was reappointed to New York City, it had been divided into two stations but the stational plan remained intact. In 1834, he wrote, “New York, at this time was divided into two large circuits, East and West. I was stationed in Duane Street...The ordinary routine of ministerial duties, at this time, was as laborious as it had been

ten years before. Three sermons on the Sabbath and a walk of from one to five miles." Some preachers, however, rode in a carriage due to winter conditions or simply to get to their appointment more quickly. For example, Reverend Coles noted that on a Sunday morning in March, Brother Worrall took him in a carriage to the Willett Street church (a west to east route) for his first preaching appointment. Another time, Brother Worrall took him to his afternoon preaching appointment in Rose Hill (a south to north route). At the same time, Reverend Coles would occasionally stay overnight at a member's home after preaching the evening service perhaps due to extremely cold weather or the lateness of the hour.³

In addition, this plan allowed the preacher to use the same sermon in all three services but with some variation. Regarding this, Reverend George Coles wrote that "...in the morning, when the mind is clear and calm, take care to 'feed the flock' with wisdom and knowledge; in the afternoon, when some of the hearers are apt to dose a little, we might give them a brief epitome of the morning's discourse, and wind up with a warm exhortation; and in the evening, when strangers are generally present, give them the best parts of the morning's and afternoon's efforts, and finish with a practical application."⁴

Moreover, the stationary plan allowed the members of each church to hear a variety of preachers that was not possible in a traditional circuit. According to Reverend Coles, "they had an opportunity of hearing seven different preachers and no one twice the same day, unless they chose to follow a favorite from one church to another. If there happened to be one preacher more popular than the rest he was the common property of all the churches and each one had an equal share of his labors." Conversely, "if, among the seven there was one not so gifted as the rest, no objection was made to him on that account. There was no such thing as objecting to an appointment, either on the part of the preacher or people."⁵

Yet, the stationary plan could also be quite demanding on the preachers. For example, Reverend Heman Bangs, the brother of Nathan Bangs, who was appointed to the John Street Church in 1821 and 1822, described an apparently typical Sunday in the following way: "On my feet constantly, from ten in the morning until ten at night – preaching three times, baptizing, holding society meeting... No rest during the week – meeting of some kind each day and night." Again, a month later, he wrote that Sunday had been both "a day of labor and of joy. After preaching three times, praying ten times in public, and traveling five or six miles,

was too weary to sleep much. Truly, the life of a minister is the life of a servant. What but love to souls could induce me to go and forego, as I do." Similarly, seven years later, Reverend Coles described Sunday circuit preaching in almost identical language. He wrote that besides preaching three times, he also "prayed in public and in families twelve times, met one class, sung considerable and walked about four miles." Again, ten months later, he recorded that besides preaching, he "prayed fifteen times, baptized seven children, sang about one hour, married a couple, visited the sick, and walked three miles."⁶

At the same time, the arduous day-to-day demands on the preachers of the New York Station apparently, at times, adversely affected the quality of their preaching. These demands included afternoon and evening meetings, visitation, leading several class meetings, attending church trials, which sometimes lasted for seven hours, and weeknight preaching. For example, Reverend Coles periodically lamented that he simply did not have enough time to prepare adequately for Sunday. Besides, the daily demands on his schedule, Saturdays, too, were also extremely busy. His typical Saturday included the New York Preachers' Meeting (nine a.m. to one p.m.), lunch with a church member, visitation of the "sick poor" and other families, work at the Book Room, and perhaps one other appointment, and even people visiting him in the evening. On three separate occasions, he voiced his frustration. For example, on Saturday, March 21, 1829, he "returned home very weary and received several visits in the evening and thus ended the day and the week without much preparation for the approaching Sabbath." Again, on Saturday, October 10, he "closed the day without making any preparation for the Sabbath. No wonder our sermons are thin, poor, lean, incoherent, and wanting in grammatical accuracy, logical skill, rhetorical ornaments and sound, consistent, and profitable development." Finally, on Saturday, December 12, he lamented, "owing to a great many perplexing things I had no time until seven o'clock this evening to study anything for tomorrow. The interruption of company and domestic burdens have been a sore trial to my mind this afternoon. To have to saw and split wood, carry coal, and make fires and to be taken from my study on Saturday afternoon and to have no hours of retirement grieves me exceedingly and makes me ill both in body and mind. How I shall succeed tomorrow no living mortal knows." Reverend Heman Bangs, too, felt that he needed more time to prepare but noted, with some frustration, that "my duties are so many and onerous, that my time is all occupied."⁷

Sunday preaching, however, was not limited to just the churches in the station. As the station expanded in several different ways, especially in the 1820s, the stationed preachers were often asked to preach in primarily four other settings.. First, preachers were needed for the growing ministry to children and youth, which included periodic Sunday afternoon preaching Sabbath School anniversary services, Charity Sermons (in November and December) for the Methodist Free School, and Quarterly Sermons for the Sunday school. Second, stationed preachers also preached in new outreaches such as Broadway Hall (central lower Manhattan) and Rose Hill (northern Manhattan). Third, stationed preachers often preached at the Sunday evening service at the two African churches, Old Zion Church and Asbury African Church, both of which were often in need of preachers. Finally, stationed preachers took regular turns at various institutions such as the state prison (located in Manhattan), another prison on Bedloe's Island, and the House of Refuge for delinquent boys and girls. A Methodist layman, Nathaniel C. Hart, was superintendent of the House of Refuge from 1826 to 1836 and arranged for both stationed and local preachers to preach most every Sunday morning and afternoon.⁸

Of course, these additional requests drew them away from their regular Sunday circuit appointments. Yet, able substitutes came from three sources within the station: the "book agents" appointed to the Methodist publishing house in Manhattan, the local preachers, and, starting in 1826, the editor and assistant editor of the *Christian Advocate and Journal* (who were both preachers). Yet, it seems likely that the local preachers did the bulk of substitute preaching since there were at least fifteen in the station.

Local Preachers

They were laymen who were employed full time in a variety of occupations. This is illustrated by the four extant lists of local preachers from 1820 to 1832. For example, the 1820 list indicated at least seven occupations that can be confirmed: machinist, whitesmith, printer, merchant, dry goods, mason, and physician. Another list from 1828 to 1829 contained the following occupations: physician, tinsmith, basket maker, grate maker, D.D. and tobacconist. Occupations from the 1831-1832 list included grocer, teacher, and cork storeowner. Finally, a list of local preachers from an 1831 preaching plan for June and July included a printer, physician, bookbinder, carpenter, bellows maker, and an editor of *The Genius of Temperance*.⁹

Besides preaching when the stationed preachers were ill or away at annual conference in May, several extant preaching plans for the station listed them as the regularly scheduled preacher at various Sunday services. These preaching plans were probably worked out in consultation with the Preacher-in-Charge and the New York Preachers' Meeting, which met every Saturday morning to handle various administrative and pastoral matters. The printed preaching plan for June and July of 1831 listed four local preachers with scheduled appointments at several of the churches on the station. For example, during June, James Collard, a printer, who had been a traveling elder and then located, preached once in the afternoon at Forsyth Street Church. Dr. Barrett preached once in the afternoon at Willett Street Church and Dr. David M. Reese preached once the afternoon at Allen Street Church. During July, Collard preached once in the evening at Allen Street, Nehemiah Tompkins preached once in the afternoon at Bowery Village, and Barrett preached in the afternoon at Duane Street Church and in the evening at Bowery Village.¹⁰

Moreover, local preachers often preached in the churches that were near their own residences making the travel easier for them. For example, Dr. Barrett resided on Walker Street near the Bowery, which put him close to both Bowery Village and Willett Street. Nehemiah Tompkins, a physician, resided at 168 Division Street at the corner of Walker Street which was also close to Bowery Village. Dr. David Reese, who resided at 51 Crosby Street, was near the Allen Street Church where he sometimes preached.¹¹

Local preachers, however, seemed to preach more extensively in the outlying areas of the station where new churches had not yet been built. Obviously, the demand for preaching would be significant since a stationed preacher had not yet been appointed to those missional places. An example comes from the 1831 preaching plan for June and July. For example, at Upper Greenwich Church (a relatively new church), local preachers preached twice on the first and third Sunday in June, and all three times on the second and fourth Sundays. The same pattern occurred in July. Another example comes from the Manhattan Island outreach on the lower east side. In June, they preached twice on the second Sunday and at all three services on the first, third, and fourth Sundays. In July, they preached once on the first Sunday, twice on the fourth Sunday, and at all three services on the second, third, and fifth Sundays. Finally, local preachers also assisted the stationed preachers at the House of Refuge.

This can be seen in the same 1831 preaching plan for June and July. For example, in June, local preachers preached every Sunday. In July, they again preached every Sunday except the fourth which Reverend Pease, a stationed preacher, conducted.¹²

Unlike Heman Bangs and George Coles who often diligently recorded their sermon texts, assessment of the sermon, and even the congregation's response, local preachers apparently did not leave such information making it difficult to determine the content and effectiveness of their sermons. One exception, however, was Dr. Thomas Barrett who preached in the circuit churches, outlying areas, and the House of Refuge where he was chaplain for twenty years. Evidence for his effectiveness comes from the journal of Reverend Coles. For example, on Sunday, October 19, 1828, he noted that Barrett preached in John Street Church on the text, "Master, what good thing must I do so that I may have eternal life?" and although "he did not rise to his usual eloquence...it was a good sermon." Again, on a Tuesday evening in October 1828, at Duane Street Church, "Dr. Barrett preached a beautiful sermon on 'Blessed are the pure in heart.'" One week later, he preached one of the several funeral sermons for Bishop George at Willett Street Church that "was not only most excellent but admirably delivered and produced a powerful effect on many present." Then, at the New Year's Eve Watchnight service at Duane Street, "Dr. Barrett preached a good sermon on 'The Barren Fig Tree.'" Furthermore, Coles noted that in April 1829, a woman joined the Duane Street Church who had been "awakened under this (i.e., New Year's Eve) sermon." Then, in February 1829, Coles "heard Dr. Barrett at Allen Street Church preach a first rate sermon on 'God so loved the world.'" He also heard him preach the following Sunday at the Bowery Village Church. Again, seven months later, he "heard Dr. Barrett preach an excellent sermon from 'Let a man examine himself and let him so eat.'" Finally, Coles recorded that on December 6, 1829, Barrett preached on Sunday afternoon at Bowery Village Church. At this service was a "converted Jew" whom Coles and Barrett both knew. Coles recorded that "Dr. Barrett preached an excellent sermon on Hebrews 4:9. His introductory remarks were very full of consolation to persons in the situation of the Jewish convert. The Jew was present and seemed to take deep interest in the discourse."¹³

While local preachers were essential to the station plan of preaching, tensions occasionally arose over the scheduling of their appointments. Apparently, either the preacher-in-charge of the station

or the stationed preachers themselves asked the local preachers to fill vacancies as they occurred. This arrangement, however, seems to have changed in 1829 or possibly earlier. At least by 1829, permission had been given to the local preachers to make their own appointments. Most likely, either the preacher-in-charge or the Quarterly Meeting Conference had approved this change. This policy, however, apparently caused tensions between the Board of Trustees and at least one or more of the local preachers. For many years, the trustees had not only dealt with property matters but also exercised a great amount of control over the preachers and Sunday services. For example, at a meeting in May 1829, they appointed a committee of three members to speak with the preacher-in-charge regarding this new policy. No action was taken until June probably due to the annual conference, which was held in May. Then, at the June Quarterly Meeting Conference, Dr. Thomas Pitts, a local preacher, was tried and acquitted. The charge may have been making his own appointments in the churches since the trustees passed the following resolution at a special meeting on June 23, 1829, stating “that the preacher-in-charge be required not to allow Dr. Pitts to officiate in any of our pulpits and appointed Nathaniel Jarvis, John Westfield, and James Donaldson to communicate this to Reverend Samuel Luckey (preacher-in-charge).” Then, at their next meeting, the minutes noted, “Brother Westfield from the committee to confer with the Preacher-in-charge, upon the propriety of allowing the local preachers to make their own appointments in our churches, reported that he had had an interview with Brother Luckey and had received an assurance that there would be an amendment of the process thereafter.”¹⁴

Major Initiatives

The second way in which the New York Station differed from a more traditional circuit was in its ability to initiate at least five major projects, some of which impacted the entire church. These ministries included the New York Assistance Society (1808), the Methodist Branch of the Sabbath School Union (1816), the New York Methodist Tract Society (1816), the Wesleyan Seminary (1818), and the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church (1819). Most of these outreaches were originally aimed at local needs within the city but two had unforeseen national and international effects. The combination of outstanding and gifted stationed preachers, capable book agents, and dedicated laity such as Joseph Smith, Lancaster Burling, and Mary Morgan, to name just three,

contributed to this prolific output during a time of great need in the city of New York.¹⁵

Wesleyan Seminary

One of the major ministries was the founding of an academy for the children of Methodist parents. Of course, the New York Station had already demonstrated an apostolic and benevolent interest in education. Like the other denominations in the city, it had maintained its own “Charity School” or “Free School” since the early 1790s. In addition, in 1816, under the leadership of Miss Mary Morgan, it had started its own “Sabbath Schools.” Although a few “public schools” had just started to open, at least some of the members wanted their children to be educated in a more intense religious environment. This attempt, however, to start the school took nearly two years to accomplish. The idea was first discussed at a General Leaders’ Meeting when Lancaster S. Burling, one of the key lay leaders in the station, suggested, “establishing a School, for the education of the children of Methodists.” In response, “a committee of five was appointed to draw up a plan for the school.” The committee included Burling and fellow class leaders Joseph Smith, Thomas Bakewell, John C. Totten, and John P. Morris. At the following meeting on November 18, “the committee to inquire about the expediency of establishing within the city of New York a Seminary where the children of pious parents may be educated gave a report and a short debate followed. The report went through several alterations and amendments and was brought before the ensuing Quarterly Conference, where it received sanction...” Then, at the January 20, 1817, Quarterly Conference, Reverend Soule, chairman of the School Committee, presented the committee’s proposed constitution, which was adopted without changes.¹⁶

Yet, the Quarterly Conference took no further action until its October 20, 1817, meeting when Joseph Smith made a motion concerning “the neglected business related to the organization of a school for children of Methodists in New York City.” The School Committee, however, was not prepared and the Quarterly Conference asked the committee to present a plan for the school, including its cost, at the next meeting. Finally, at its January meeting, Reverend Soule read the report for the school paragraph by paragraph. A motion to accept the report without resolutions passed. Then, four resolutions were read. Somewhat surprisingly, one resolution, which would have added candidates for ordained ministry, was defeated

forty-two to thirty-five; this apparently reflected the still strong bias against a formally educated clergy. The three remaining resolutions passed after more debate. The Quarterly Conference then directed that a committee of five to draft a memorial to the New York Annual Conference. Soule, Burling, Smith, Reverend Nathan Bangs, and Joel Ketchum formed the committee. At its April 1818, meeting, Soule read the “memorial” which was approved. The Quarterly Conference requested that the president and secretary sign it and have it printed and asked Soule to present it to the Annual Conference, which was meeting in May. On May 18, the New York Conference approved the request and adopted a constitution for the “Wesleyan Seminary” as the school was called.¹⁷

One article, however, of its constitution, which encouraged ministerial candidates to attend Wesleyan Seminary, was severely criticized and had to be quickly revised in the station. Article Seven stated that “Young men who shall have been approved according to the Methodist discipline as candidates for the itinerant ministry, and so commended by the New York Annual Conference, shall be admitted as Students in this seminary for any length of time to be determined by said conference.” This article probably reflected Nathan Bangs’ strong support of ministerial education, which he also tried unsuccessfully, at first, to have enacted at several General Conferences. At the same time, many preachers opposed it as being a dangerous innovation to Methodism (although Wesley himself had been an Oxford graduate who knew several languages!). Three months later, the trustees, with Bangs taking a leading role in the revision, approved the following resolution: “The Board deemed it expedient in order to quiet the fears expressed by certain individuals respecting the Seventh Article of the Constitution, that the same should be explained as to its true meaning.” Bangs and Soule were then appointed to write an explanation for the board meeting. At the next meeting, Bangs’ report was approved and two hundred copies were printed and distributed.¹⁸

The New York Annual Conference and the New York Station jointly shared in the oversight of the school. For its part, the annual conference yearly appointed the nine-member Board of Trustees, which included three preachers and six laymen, who were from the New York Station or its vicinity. The trustees nominated the candidates and the annual conference made the appointments. Moreover, the annual conference appointed a five-member Standing Committee and the principal, who also had to be a preacher. This rule, however, was changed in the mid-1820s. At the

same time, the appointed representatives from the station handled the day-to-day operations. For example, the trustees, standing committee, and principal formed a board that made the rules for the school. In addition, the trustees were responsible for purchasing land for the school, erecting a building, reporting annually to the conference, and appointing teachers. The principal had oversight of the literary, moral, and religious concerns of the school. Finally, a rotating group of preachers and laymen made a weekly visitation of the school.¹⁹

The curriculum struck an ambitious balance between academic and practical subjects. For example, the “academic” offerings included Latin and Greek, French, spelling, reading, writing, arithmetic, English grammar, and geography. At the same time, it offered practical subjects such as bookkeeping, surveying, and the measurement of places. Methodist students, however, did not seem to be attracted to the more academic courses and, in 1827, the trustees noted with some concern that “less than half (of Methodist students) were in these higher branches of male and female education.”²⁰

Despite its strong oversight and diversified curriculum, the school encountered three major difficulties that apparently led to its demise approximately ten years later. The first difficulty was its struggle to find a permanent home. Its first location was in a rented building on the corner of Pump and Eldridge Streets (on the east side of Manhattan). Then, in April 1820, two lots were leased on Crosby Street between Howard and Grand Streets which was another east side location. A forty by sixty-five foot building was erected with a chapel on the second floor. During this time, Sunday preaching was scheduled at the seminary and the annual conference even met for one of its yearly sessions. Yet, four years later, most likely due to dwindling finances, the building was sold to the Methodist Book Agents and a new building was purchased at 157 Mott Street, again on the east side. This location, however, was not a favorable one for some reason and may have also led to its eventual closing.²¹

The second difficulty was the relatively frequent change in principals. It seems probable that four different principals served over the ten-year period. The first, Reverend Nicholas Morris, served from 1818 to 1820 but in 1821, the New York Annual Conference expelled him. Yet, the next principal, Reverend John M. Smith, son of Joseph Smith, a trustee of the seminary, did an excellent job from 1820 to 1824. Smith had been educated at Columbia College and had initially considered a career in

medicine until he felt called to the traveling ministry. He left, however, to become principal of the Methodist academy in White Plains. His loss was greatly felt and Bangs even attributed his departure as the most significant reason for the school's closing. Reverend Henry Chase was the third principal for about a year before being appointed as chaplain to sailors and their families in Manhattan. The final principal was Ambrose White, a layman, who served until the school closed.²²

Most importantly, the steadily plummeting finances added to its troubles. Although its enrollment – divided into male and female departments - remained around one hundred from at least 1821 to 1828, it was increasingly clear that the school was struggling financially. For example, in February 1820, a “collector” was appointed to collect unpaid tuitions. A month later, Nathan Bangs, a longtime trustee, had appealed to the “pious and well-disposed to help with costs.” Three months later, the trustees appointed another trustee, Dr. Nehemiah Gregory, and the principal, Morris, to try and get subscriptions (i.e., yearly donations) for the school. Then, in December of that same year, the trustees needed a three thousand five hundred dollar loan for expenses. A little more than two years later, Joseph Smith, presented a “memorial” or petition to the state legislature for the school's support. Again, at the 1823 annual conference, the board asked the conference to appoint a “General Agent” to solicit donations; in July, Reverend Brown was appointed.²³

During the next four years, even more drastic measures were taken. For example, in July 1824, the principal, John Smith, “introduced a plan of instruction at lower prices.” Five thousand copies were printed and the “preachers in the station were requested to cooperate in recommending to the people of our churches the support of the above contemplated plan and to aid in the distribution of circulars.” Six months later, a five-member committee was appointed to recruit more students. Yet, despite these measures, by 1827, the seminary's debt was two thousand dollars. Another attempt was made to get more subscriptions in late 1827 through early 1828 but was not successful. A final attempt was made in February 1828, through an advertisement placed in the (Methodist weekly) *Christian Advocate and Journal* “in relation to the seminary soliciting an increased share of public patronage.”²⁴

The financial struggle was also evident in the amount of salaries paid to the teachers. For example, the first principal's salary was eight hundred dollars; two years later it was reduced to seven hundred. Similarly,

the salary of the female teacher, Miss Thayer, was reduced from four hundred dollars to three hundred. Again, the assistant female teacher, Miss Susan Brewer, had her salary reduced from three hundred dollars in 1818 to two hundred fifty in 1820 and then to two hundred in 1823. Eventually, she had to be terminated to save money due to the “decline in scholars.”²⁵

Methodist Tract Society

Another ministry with far-reaching consequences for the entire church was the approval of a new tract society for the station in 1816. Sometime during that year, the Quarterly Conference appointed a committee to explore the possibility of forming a larger tract society than the small female-operated one that currently existed. At its January 1817, meeting, the conference approved the report of the committee and had it put on file. Ten months later, the minutes of the Methodist Tract Society recorded that an organizing meeting was held “according to a vote of a Quarterly Conference, previously held in the City.” At this meeting, it was resolved “that the Report of the Committee appointed by the Quarterly Meeting Conference to draft a Constitution to be presented to this meeting be read.” The proposed constitution was read article by article and, after some changes, it was referred to the same committee to make another report at the next meeting. It also resolved “that it is expedient to form a Tract Society in the City of New York in conformity to the principles of the Methodist Episcopal Church.” At the next meeting, on January 2, 1818, the revised constitution was read and adopted. Article One specified that its name was to be the “New York Methodist Tract Society.”²⁶

Four factors apparently contributed to its astonishing impact on both the New York Station and the entire denomination. The first factor was its superb organization. For example, a constitution and by-laws governed the society. Its officers consisted of a president, vice-president, corresponding secretary, treasurer, and clerk. A twenty-four member Board of Managers composed of stationed preachers, book agents, and laymen from the station, met bi-monthly on the last Tuesday of the month. In addition, three “standing committees” directed its day-to-day operations: the Committee on Selection, the Committee on Printing and the Committee on Distribution. Finally, an annual meeting, which included an address, elections of various officers, and new business, was held either in June or July. Moreover, almost immediately, the Society developed a constitution for “auxiliary societies” which was then mailed to every preacher-in-charge

(of a circuit) in the entire United States. Over a fourteen-year period, from 1817 to 1831, an astounding one hundred twenty-three auxiliary societies had been formed along with several tract depositories in various key cities.²⁷

The second factor that led to its success was its location. For example, for the first seven years, two local Methodist printers, John Harper and John C. Totten printed all the tracts in Manhattan. Local printing made it possible to quickly handle the various requests of the New York Station. These included its Sunday Schools, its Assistance Society (an outreach to the sick poor), its class leaders who requested the tracts, “On Dress,” and “An Address to Class Leaders,” and the “Exhorters’ Association.” Also, beginning in 1825, new members of the New York Station were given three of Wesley’s publications in tract form: “Christian Perfection,” “On Dress,” and the “General Rules of the United Societies.” Moreover, since New York was a thriving commercial seaport, it also quickly and efficiently responded to national and even international requests for tracts. Some of these requests included tracts for ships’ crews, for Methodist preachers serving in Louisiana (tracts were also translated into the French and Indian languages), for Christians traveling to France and Italy, and for the Colonization Society’s mission to Liberia on the West African coast.²⁸

The third reason its growth and impact were so explosive in just a short time was its remarkable close connection to the Methodist Book Concern, the publishing arm of the denomination, which at that time was located in Manhattan. For example, at its January 1824, meeting, a three-member committee was appointed to “see how the New York Methodist Tract Society might be connected with the Book Concern in order to make it more useful.” Three months later, the “Committee reported favorably on this venture” but decided to delay any action until its Annual Meeting in July. No action, however, was taken until May 1825, when the New York Methodist Tract Society decided to sell all their tracts to the Book Agents (of the Methodist Book Concern) at a one third discount. In addition, it was also decided, “the Tracts shall be printed, published, and distributed under the direction of the Agents for the Methodist Book Concern.” Under this arrangement, the New York Society would now purchase its tracts from the Book Concern. At the same time, the New York Station continued to supply all the officers and managers.²⁹

Finally, the New York Tract Society wisely decided to formally link up with the denomination. This is illustrated by its action at its July 1826, Annual Meeting where the Society voted to change its name to “The Tract

Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church.” Then, the following May, the President, Reverend Nathan Bangs, “suggested a change in the Constitution in order to enlist all the Annual Conferences.” One month later, at the Annual Meeting, Bangs called for major changes since both the number of tract society members was growing and the demand for tracts was increasing. In order to transfer responsibility to the denomination Bangs made a resolution, which called for the “annual election of a president and five vice-presidents.” The president and four of the vice-presidents would be chosen from most senior bishops instead of from the New York Station. In addition, each annual conference would appoint an additional vice-president. These motions apparently were approved. A final link to the denomination occurred the following March when the Society made a resolution “that an address be prepared to lay before General Conference, soliciting that body to sanction by some public act the Tract Institute, and recommend its support to the members of our church throughout the United States.”³⁰

Conclusion

During the first three decades of the nineteenth century, the New York Station conducted its preaching and various outreaches in a way that greatly differed from other traditional circuits. To be sure, other stations in cities like Philadelphia and Baltimore utilized the stationary plan of preaching but did not equal the staggering number of local church Bible societies and circuit-wide ministries of the New York Station. Due to the unofficial partnership with the Methodist Book Concern, its evangelical and missional outreaches extended internationally. Moreover, the dedicated and self-sacrificing lay and clergy members of the circuit acted heroically in both spreading the Gospel and alleviating suffering. It can justly be said that, for at least the first part of the nineteenth century, the New York Station occupied the preeminent place in American Methodism.



First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

Stational Plans

Reverend Ebenezer Washburn, 1815, New York Station

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Morning	John St.	Forsyth St.	Allen St.	Two Mile Stone	Greenwich Village	Duane St.
Afternoon	Forsyth	Allen St.	Two Mile Stone	Greenwich Village	Duane St.	John St.
Evening	Allen	Two Mile Stone	Greenwich Village	Duane St.	John St.	Forsyth St.

Source: "Narrative of Rev. Ebenezer Washburn," *Christian Advocate and Journal*, April 12, 1843

Reverend George Coles, 1828, New York Station

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7
Morning	Duane St.	John St.	Forsyth	Willett St.	Allen St.	Bowery Village	Bedford
Afternoon	John St.	Forsyth	Willett St.	Allen St.	Bowery Village	Bedford	Duane
Evening	Forsyth	Willett St.	Allen St.	Bowery Village	Bedford	Duane	John St.

Source: Reverend George Coles "Journal" (Madison, NJ: UMCA – GCAH. "Drew University Methodist Collection." Drew University), 1828.

Note: John Street, Duane Street, and Greenwich Village (later Bedford Street) were located on the west side of lower Manhattan. Forsyth Street, Willett Street, Allen, and Two Mile Stone (later Bowery Village) were on the east side.

Constitution of the New York Methodist Tract Society (approved January 2, 1818)

Article 1 – The association shall be denominated the “New York Methodist Tract Society.”

Article 2 – The business of the Society shall be conducted by a President, Vice-President, Clerk, Corresponding Secretary, Treasurer, and twenty-four Managers to be chosen at the annual meeting of the Society.

Article 3 – The board constituted according to the proceeding article shall make By-Laws for regulating their transactions shall fill up vacancies that may occur during the year, and shall lay a statement of their proceedings before the Society at their annual meeting.

Article 4 – Fifteen members present at any meeting of the Society and seven at any meeting of the Board shall be a quorum.

Article 5 – Ministers of the Methodist Episcopal Church stationed in New York, for the time being, and the Book Agents, shall be ex-officio members of the Society.

Article 6 – Auxiliary societies that may be formed in other places on the same principles, and embracing the same objectives with this Society, shall be supported with Tracts by the Board at cost.

Article 7 – The Trustees, published or purchased by the Board shall be in no wise inconsistent with the doctrines and discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Article 8 – Every annual subscription paying one dollar in advance shall be a member, and the payment of ten dollars shall constitute a person a member for life.

Article 9 – Annual subscriptions shall be entitled to Tracts to the value of one half their annual subscription, and members for life to half a dollar per annum.

Article 10 – The Annual meeting of the Society shall be the third Monday in July.

Article 11 – The Board of Managers shall have authority to make any arrangement they make think proper with the Book Agents to facilitate the distribution of the Tracts of the Society.

(Articles 12 to 14 have been omitted)

Source: “Methodist Episcopal Church of New York. Methodist Tract Society. Board of Managers. Minutes 1817-1832” (New York, NY: New York Public Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, Methodist Episcopal Church Records, vol. 105, photocopied).

End Notes

¹ Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below* (Nashville: Kingwood Books, 2000), 17, 29.

² Samuel A. Seaman, *Annals of New York Methodism* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1892), 129. “Reverend Ebenezer Washburn’s Narrative,” *Christian Advocate and Journal*, April 12, 1843.

³ Tobias Spicer, *Autobiography of Tobias Spicer* (Boston: C. H. Pierce and Company, 1851), 71. Daniel Devinne, *Recollections of Fifty Years in the Ministry* (New York: N. Tibbals and Company, 1869), 34-35, 39-40. George Coles, “Journal” (Madison, NJ: United Methodist Commission on Archives – General Commission on Archives and History, Drew University Methodist Collection), November 30, 1828; April 26, 1829; March 7, 1830.

⁴ Coles, “Journal.”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Heman Bangs, *Autobiography and Journal of Reverend Heman Bangs* (New York: N. Tibbals and Son, 1872), 109-110. Coles, “Journal,” March 22, 1829; January 1, 1830.

⁷ Coles, “Journal,” March 21, October 10, December 12 (all 1829); Heman Bangs, *Autobiography*, M105.

⁸ “Preachers Meeting. Minutes. 1824-1831” (New York, NY: New York Public Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, *Methodist*

Episcopal Church Records [hereafter, *MECR*], vol. 116, photocopied), December 12, 1829; May 29, 1830; October 15, 1830. Coles, "Journal," various entries 1828-1830.

⁹ "Quarterly Conference. Members. 1818-1832," *MECR*, vol. 79. Thomas Longworth, Ed. *American Almanac, New York Register and City Directory* (New York: printed by the author, 1812, 1815, 1825). Seaman, *Annals*, 480-481.

¹⁰ Seaman, *Annals*, 480-481. Longworth, *City Directory*, various years.

¹¹ Longworth, *City Directory*, various years.

¹² Seaman, *Annals*, 480-481. Society for the reformation of Juvenile Delinquency in the City of New York, *Documents Relative to the House of Refuge* (New York: Printed by Mahlon Day, 1832), 284.

¹³ Coles, "Journal," October 19, 21, 28, and December 31 (all 1828); February 15, 22, April 19, September 20, December 6 (all 1829). "Quarterly Conference. Members. 1818-1832," *MECR*, vol. 79.

¹⁴ "Board of Trustees. Minutes. 1820-1834," *MECR*, vol. 93, May 6, June 23, and July 1 (all 1829). Coles, "Journal," June 10, 1829.

¹⁵ For an account of the Methodist Sabbath Schools, see "The Methodist Branch of the New York Sunday School Union," *Asbury Theological Journal*, fall, 2003, 37-56. For a brief account of the Missionary Society, see Abel Stevens, *Life and Times of Nathan Bangs* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1863), 226-229. The New York Assistance Society will be the subject of a forthcoming article.

¹⁶ "Methodist Episcopal Church of New York. Board of Leaders. Minutes. 1811-1823," *MECR*, vol. 90, October 14, 1816; November 18, 1816. "Quarterly Conference Minutes. 1804-1824," *MECR*, vol. 247, January 20, 1817.

¹⁷ "Quarterly Conference Minutes," *MECR*, vol. 247, October 20, 1817; January, 1818; April, 1818. Seaman, *Annals*, 207.

¹⁸ "Wesleyan Seminary. Board of Trustees. Minutes. 1818-1832," *MECR*, vol. 124, June 13, September 28, and October 8 (all 1828).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ "Wesleyan Seminary. Board of Trustees. Minutes," *MECR*, vol. 124. Seaman, *Annals*, 207.

²² "Wesleyan Seminary. Board of Trustees. Minutes," *MECR*, vol. 124, June 13, 1818; March 22, 1820; December 22, 1825; August 16, 1827. Seaman, *Annals*, 207-208.

²³ "Wesleyan Seminary. Board of Trustees. Minutes," *MECR*, various years.

²⁴ *Ibid.* July 16, 1824; February 7, 1828; June 17, 1828.

²⁵ *Ibid.* November 18, 1820; February 13, 1823.

²⁶ "Methodist Tract Society. Board of Managers. Minutes. 1817-1832," *MECR*, vol. 105, December 19, 1817; January 2, 1818. Nathan Bangs, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, vol. 3 (New York: Printed by Thomas Mason and G. Lane for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1840), 55-57.

²⁷ "Methodist Tract Society," *MECR*, vol. 105.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.* January 27, 1824; May 24, 1825.

³⁰ *Ibid.* July 31, 1826; June 13, 1827; March 25, 1828.

Works Cited

- Bangs, Heman
1872 *The Autobiography and Journal of Reverend Heman Bangs*. New York, NY: Tibbals and Son.
- Bangs, Nathan
1853 *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*. New York, NY: Carlton.
- Coles, George
1828-1832 "Journal." Madison, NJ: United Methodist Commission on Archives – General Commission on Archives and History. "Drew University Methodist Collection." Drew University.
- Devinne, Daniel
1851 *Recollections of Fifty Years in the Ministry*. New York, NY: Tibbals and Company.
- Longworth, Thomas, Ed.
Various years *American Almanac; New York Register and City Directory*. New York: Printed by the author.
"Methodist Episcopal Church Records" New York, NY: New York Public Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division. Vols. 79, 90, 93, 105, 116, 124, 247.

- Ruth, Lester
2000 *A Little Heaven Below*. Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books.
- Seaman, Samuel A.
1892 *Annals of New York Methodism*. New York, NY: Hunt and Eaton.
- Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquency in the City of New York.
1832 *Documents Relative to the House of Refuge*. New York, NY: Printed by Mahlon Day.
- Spicer, Tobias
1851 *Autobiography of Tobias Spicer*. Boston, MA: C. H. Pierce and Company.



First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY