



“Philip Embury’s Christmas Conversion.” *Methodist Recorder* (December 24, 1952): 7.

“On Christmas day:—being Monday the 25th of December, in the year 1752; the Lord Shone in to my Soul by a glimpse of his Redeeming love: being an Earnest of my redemption in Christ Jesus, to whom be glory for Ever and Ever.  
Amen. Phil. Embury.”

This record, penned two hundred years ago in a little notebook, could be paralleled a score of times in the diaries of early Methodism—for they were great diarists in those days. Peculiar significance attaches to this particular entry, however, a significance not fully recognised during Embury’s own short lifetime, nor for long after his death. This Christmas conversion was a landmark in the wonderful story of American Methodism. For it was Philip Embury, goaded by his cousin Barbara Heck, who was the pioneer of Methodism in New York.

I wish we could claim Embury’s first birth for Christmas Day, as well as his second—as indeed some American authorities have ventured to do. The fact seems to be, however, that he was baptised on September 29, 1728, and had presumably been born a week or so earlier. His parents were Germans living in Ballingrane, County Limerick. Ballingrane was one of the main colonies of Lutheran Protestants who in 1709 had left their homes on the banks of the Rhine, in the Palatinate, to escape the persecuting Roman Catholic zeal of Louis XIV. Many emigrated to America, but about eight hundred families went to Ireland, of whom the majority were settled as farmers in County Limerick. Although some later intermarried with the Irish Catholics, they usually kept themselves to themselves, indeed were not accepted by the native Irish. Their Lutheranism and their morals alike suffered from the lack of pastoral oversight. John Wesley claimed that, “having no minister, they were become eminent for drunkenness, cursing, swearing, and an utter neglect of religion.” Himself owing so great a spiritual debt to Germany, he had been deeply interested in the welfare of the Irish Palatines ever since he heard how, in the spring of 1749, a group of them had listened to one of his preachers in Limerick, and had exclaimed, “This is like the preaching we used to hear in Germany!”

Methodist preachers were speedily invited to Ballingrane, where they won over the teacher of the German school, Philip Guier. Guier became a local preacher, and accomplished such a reformation in the area that even a century later Methodist ministers were surprised to find his reputation transferred to themselves, for people would call after them, “There goes Philip Guier, who drove the devil out of Ballingrane.”

It was under old Philip Guier that his young namesake Philip Embury had received the rudiments of his education—in German, of course. Later he studied at an English school in the neighbourhood, probably at Rathkeale. By the time the settlement came under the influence of Methodism, however, Embury was already out of his schooling, and nearing the end of his apprenticeship as a carpenter. He proved very skilful at his trade, as well as both intelligent, honest, and obliging. He seemed destined to become a respected tradesman of somewhat reserved manners and a very sober outlook. The coming of John Wesley to the area in August, 1752, however, gave a new purpose and a new spiritual power to his life.

Wesley had been in Limerick—the third largest city in Ireland, with a population of 30,000—on three previous occasions. This visit of 1752, however, was momentous in many ways. It was the occasion of the first Irish Conference. After conferring with the preachers Wesley remained in the area for about a week, examining the infant societies, and preaching in fresh places. As a result an eighteen-year-old girl named Barbara Ruckle became a member of

the Methodist society at Ballingrane. Under her married name of Heck she later achieved fame as the “Mother of American Methodism.” During the same visit her cousin, Philip Embury, heard Wesley for the first time. The seed then sown germinated the following Christmas Day. It may have been under the influence of a sacramental service, such as that at Delvin Parish Church the previous Christmas, but it seems more likely that it was through the instrumentality of a Methodist preacher. I believe we can name that preacher. Not John Fisher, one of the first-fruits of Methodist preaching in Ireland, who was stationed in the Limerick Circuit until Christmas, 1752; for he would probably be in Limerick itself that day. It was almost certainly Philip Guier, preaching at Ballingrane.

Soon Philip Embury was appointed a class leader at Balingrane, and followed in Guier’s footsteps by serving as a local preacher in the area. When next Wesley visited Limerick, in June, 1756, he spent a night at Ballingrane. He did not enjoy lodging in one of their “little houses”—“not very warm or elegant”—but he was deeply impressed by the “plain, artless, serious people” themselves. Encouraged by the example of Guier and Embury, other classes had been formed, even among the non-Methodists.

Wesley preached again in Limerick in the summer of 1758. By this time Philip Embury had so matured spiritually that at the subsequent Conference in Bristol Wesley proposed him as a travelling preacher. Embury did not leave his carpenter’s bench after all, however, even though work was becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. He had other plans. He was now thirty, and intended to make a home for himself with Margaret Switzer, a girl little more than half his age, another Palatine, from Courtmatrix. Embury had struggled hard to secure a Methodist preaching-house for the community at Courtmatrix, and had given his own too-little-needed time to the task, though the building was too small to hold the crowd when Wesley preached there in the summer of 1758. On November 27 of that year, in Rathkeale Church, Philip Embury and Margaret Switzer were married.

It was not a good time to begin housekeeping. The Germans had for a time been given preferential treatment over the Irish tenant farmers. This very fact created a barrier of antagonism, and in some places the Palatines were gradually being boycotted into starvation. When Wesley visited Limerick again in July, 1760, he wrote that the German settlers in Newmarket and Ballingrane “with all their diligence and frugality could not procure even the coarsest food to eat and the meanest raiment to put on, under their *merciful* landlords, so that most of [them] have been forced to seek bread in other places, some of them in distant parts of Ireland, but the greater part in America.”

Among the faces Wesley missed were those of Philip Embury, and his cousin Barbara Ruckle, now married to Paul Heck. Embury had organised a company of twenty-five Germans, who planned to make their fortune by manufacturing linen and hemp in America, confident that a settlement would readily be available for such a purpose in that land of opportunity. In the spring of 1760 they sailed from the custom-house quay at Limerick, on board the *Perry*, Captain Hogan, and arrived in New York on August 10. Soon after their arrival they applied for land, but were disappointed. Nor was it too easy to find other jobs. Tradesmen abounded in New York, though it was a town of only some twelve thousand inhabitants, about half the size of the Limerick which they had left behind. Accordingly Embury set up as a schoolmaster.

There were no Methodists in New York, of course. Quite naturally Embury and his friends attached themselves to the Church of their fathers. When the Palatines had emigrated to New York, in 1729 they built the Trinity Lutheran Church, where the pastors preached in German, English, and Dutch. When the Ballingrane contingent arrived the pastor was Johann

Albert Weygand, with whom Embury quickly struck up a friendship. That Christmas of 1760 Embury made his first communion in a Lutheran church. The name of his young wife is missing from the Church Book on this occasion, for their first baby had just been born. The Emburys' child was baptised at the church on January 9, 1761, as Catharine Elisabeth, after her maternal aunt, who was a sponsor. Their other children were also baptised there—Johann Albert (after the pastor, who was sole sponsor) on October 10, 1762, and Samuel on September 24, 1765.

Embury soon left his first teaching post at Mr. Foster's in Carman's Street. A school was being built for the Lutherans "in Little Queen-street, next door to the Lutheran Ministers." Already in March, 1761, Embury was named as the future schoolmaster there, though the building would not be completed until May. He advertised in *Weyman's New York Gazette* for private pupils to augment his income. Meantime he also tried to keep the linen and hemp project alive. In 1763 his company obtained a grant of 10,000 acres in Albany, only to find the land unsuitable. In 1765 they were granted another 8,000 acres—land which was conveyed to them amid the stormy atmosphere of bitter American resistance to the English Stamp Tax. About the same time most of the remaining population of Ballingrane arrived in New York. Many of them were related to the Emburys and the Hecks, though only a few were Methodists. What followed some months later shook Embury out of his routine once more, out of his secure profession as a teacher, out of his business ventures, out of his quiet allegiance to the Lutheran Church.

The story has often been told, with varying details, though there is no doubting its essential truth. Barbara Heck came into her kitchen one October evening to find a group of the recent Irish-German immigrants playing cards. She lifted a corner of her apron, swept the cards into it, and flung them into the fire. After a few sharp words of rebuke she pulled on her bonnet and hurried along to her cousin Philip's, for he was the acknowledged leader of the community. "Philip," she said, "you must preach to us, or we shall all go to hell, and God will require our blood at your hands!"

"How can I preach?" he replied. "I have neither a house nor a congregation."

Came the devastating rejoinder: "Preach in your own house and to your own company first."

Embury accepted the rebuke, and formed the first Methodist class meeting in New York. There were only six of them at the first gathering—the two Emburys, the two Hecks together with their African servant Betty, and John Lawrence, one of the card players, who later married Embury's widow. The work thus commenced in October, 1766, however, was the trickling source of what was soon to become a mighty river. As the company expanded they moved to a room near the British barracks. With the advent of Captain Thomas Webb of Bristol, in February, 1767, more space was needed, and a large rigging-loft was occupied. This gave place in 1769 to the first Wesley Chapel of the world, build in John Street—built in part by the labour of Philip Embury's hands, with his old Irish clock ticking away on the wall. Embury was the unpaid pastor of this first Methodist society in New York, and he preached the first sermon in the new church, from the pulpit which he himself had constructed.

The story of Embury's labours in New York reached Ireland and England by means of Captain Webb. Stirred by the news, Robert Williams adventured forth from Ireland to join Embury, arriving in America in August, 1769. He was followed two or three months later by Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoor, official preachers sent by the Methodist Conference. Embury was content to resign the work into their hands, and in 1770 removed to the settlement of Ashgrove-Camden, obtained five years earlier. Here he founded another Methodist society, preaching and working at his old trade, a highly respected figure in the community, until over

exertion as he was mowing brought about his death at the early age of forty-five.

By Dr. Frank Baker