



DISCOVERY

edited by
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John Wesley and Cokesbury College's First President

by Frank Baker

Much about the ill-fated but memorable Cokesbury College, opened in 1787 and burned down in 1795, is just as obscure as the story of its first President, the Rev. Levi Heath. John Wesley's affectionate concern for him and his family is once more demonstrated in the only known letter to Mrs. Heath, here made available for publication by Dr. Frederick E. Maser. It seems appropriate to place the letter within the setting of what is known about her husband.

Neither the year nor place of Heath's birth are known, nor any details about his education, except that his name does not appear among the graduates of Oxford, Cambridge, or Dublin, so that it seems highly likely that he did not attend a university. He had apparently been one of the two masters in the ancient Grammar School attached to All Saints' parish church in Kidderminster, England—where Richard Baxter ministered between 1641 and 1660.¹ In 1787 Wesley speaks of him as "a middle-aged clergyman," even though he had been ordained as deacon and as priest by the Bishop of Hereford, Lord James Beauclerk, as recently as June 29, 1783 and October 18, 1784.² From 1783 onwards he appears to have augmented his schoolmaster's salary by serving as curate of

¹ Edwin Schell, in Gordon Pratt Baker (ed.), *Those Incredible Methodists*, Baltimore: Commission on Archives and History, 1972, p. 68; cf. *The Victoria County History of Worcester*, IV, 523-24, where he is not mentioned, but the appointment of Thomas Morgan in 1787 to teach Latin grammar, writing, and arithmetic, was probably his replacement.

² John Wesley, *Journal*, Standard Ed., ed. Nehemiah Curnock, London, Epworth Press, 8 vols., 1938, VII, 252; Nelson Waite Rightmyer, *The Anglican Church in Delaware*, Philadelphia, The Church Historical Society, 1947, p. 121.

a local church—possibly that of St. Michael's, Lower Mitton, in Stourport, three miles south of Kidderminster.³

Having put new life into Asbury's long-delayed plan for a Kingswood School in America, in 1785 Dr. Thomas Coke returned to Britain determined to further the project by securing suitable leaders. He seems to have asked Wesley's advice, and then approached the Rev. Levi Heath, to whom he wrote: "The college is erected on the plan of our school at Kingswood. I believe that we shall have one hundred scholars, but we intend to begin with fifty, and three masters. The headmaster's salary will be £60 sterling and lodging in the college, board, washing, and so forth, for himself and family."⁴ On December 23, 1786, Asbury and the trustees decided to finish at least two rooms of the great building, "and to send for Mr. Heath for our president."⁵

By this time Coke was on the high seas bringing a new batch of preachers to America, but being blown off course to the West Indies. After touring the West Indies, he spent March, April, and May of 1787 in the United States before returning to England. Meantime Wesley was trying to assist poor Heath to wind up his affairs in England and to complete his arrangements for traveling to America, for Coke had been too busy running around to attend to the necessary details. (Asbury similarly found himself saddled with most of the college chores in America.) Wesley visited Heath at Stourport on Friday, March 23, 1787. Heath was away from home, but (says Wesley), "I met his wife and two daughters here, who are quite willing to bear him company; and I think their tempers and manners—so 'winning soft, so amiably mild'—will do him honour wherever they come."⁶ Wesley loved children, indeed, and Heath's children pulled at his 83-year-old heart strings so much that hardly a letter to or about Heath passes without a mention of them. The following day at Birmingham Wesley wrote to his senior preacher in Bristol, John Valton: "Mr. Heath (that is to be the President of Cokesbury College) must go by London to Bristol. His wife, with her two lovely daughters, may come directly to Bristol from hence." He went on to ask Valton to help Heath and his family to secure the much cheaper passage from Bristol (rather than that from London) to New York or Baltimore, to "make every-

³ Wesley, *Journal*, VII, 252; John Wesley, *Letters*, Standard Ed., ed. John Telford, London, Epworth Press, 8 vols., 1931, VII, 381.

⁴ John Owen Gross, *Methodist Beginnings in Higher Education*, Nashville, Board of Education, 1950, pp. 14-15. The two other masters were offered eighty and one hundred pounds, one being unmarried, the other married, but both were to be responsible for their own upkeep. Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁵ Francis Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, ed. Elmer T. Clark, etc., Nashville, Abingdon Press, 3 vols., 1958, I, 257.

⁶ Wesley, *Journal*, VII, 252.

thing as easy for them as you can," and then to let the Assistant in Birmingham know the details.⁷ On the following morning (Sunday) Heath himself came to Birmingham—just in time to assist Wesley in reading prayers and administering communion to seven or eight hundred communicants.⁸

Time passed, but no word came from Coke. Perhaps owing in part to the unexpected opening up of a new mission field in the West Indies, Coke's undertakings to Heath seem to have been forgotten. Heath needed money both for travel and for living expenses for several months while preparing to emigrate. On May 6, 1787, Wesley wrote from Ireland to the Anglican clergyman in charge of his City Road Chapel, Rev. Peard Dickenson: "Have you seen poor Mr. Heath? He is extremely ill used. At Dr. Coke's instance he has given up both his school and curacy, and now the doctor leaves him and his wife and his lovely children either to sink or swim, having made no manner of provision for the payment of the money which he had articed to him. But he shall not sink; neither he nor his shall want anything while I have either money or credit. If he comes to London, I wish you would take acquaintance with him and speak comfortably to him. He is a man of sense, and of an excellent spirit; besides that, he has a considerable share of learning."⁹ On June 5 Wesley wrote again to Dickenson, thanking him for the help which he had rendered Heath during his visit to London.¹⁰ Wesley also wrote reassuring letters to Heath himself, some of which have survived. At length, on June 10, 1787, he passed from generalities to specifics:

I have been afraid of explaining myself for fear of grieving you, but I think I ought to delay it no longer, only premising that you need not be concerned, for the love I feel to you and your dear family is a stronger bond than any that could be wrote on parchment.

I have no more to do with Cokesbury College than with the College of Douay. And I fear Dr. Coke has not; for I doubt Francis Asbury has shaken us all off. Therefore you cannot stir till you hear from him. I never promised him or any in America to advance a shilling; but some of them *took it for granted* I would advance £50. Dr. Coke, not I, engaged for the rest. I never engaged for anything. But that makes no difference. I love you. I love your wife. *I love my dear children.* Therefore my heart is engaged to you for all that I have. . . .

He enclosed a letter to Mr. Knapp, a Methodist leader in Worcester, asking him "to give Mr. Heath whatever money he wants, be it

⁷ Wesley, *Letters*, VII, 376.

⁸ Wesley, *Journal*, VII, 253.

⁹ Wesley, *Letters*, VII, 381.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, VII, 383.

twenty or thirty pounds, or more," and stating that he had also written to John Atlay, in charge of his business affairs in London, to make money available for Heath.¹¹ On June 25 Coke arrived in Dublin from America, and informed Wesley that he had in fact given Heath £50 before leaving England, and would indeed "be accountable for what [remained] due to him." Wesley's near-panic was assuaged, but he still believed that they were in debt to Heath, and continued his financial support.¹² As an experienced traveler, he also furnished Heath with an itinerary from Birmingham via London to the ship and his waiting family in Bristol, as well as arranging for meals and lodging en route.¹³

The Heaths apparently embarked in August, 1787, and would therefore in all probability arrive in Baltimore in September. Teaching had already begun under the oversight of Truman Marsh, a young man of nineteen who had recently graduated from Yale College, and in September Asbury seems to have conducted the first public examination of the pupils.¹⁴ The official dedication of the institution had been set for December 6, by which time Heath and his two assistants should be nicely adjusted to their tasks.¹⁵ Wesley remained in touch with Heath, writing, "You are now setting up a Christian school concerning which I will give my advice, the result of long consideration and much experience, which you are at liberty to take or leave."¹⁶

Less than a year passed, and Asbury recorded in his Journal for August 10, 1788, "heavy tidings from the college": "both our teachers have left; one for incompetency, and the other to pursue riches and honours." One of these—probably the former, was Patrick McCloskey, an Irishman recruited by Coke, who had come out with Heath, but left teaching for farming.¹⁷ It has been supposed that the other was Heath himself, on the evidence of reminiscences related by one of the scholars seventy years later to a writer for the *Methodist Quarterly Review*. Summarized, his story went that young Marsh, a good Latinist in charge of the senior scholars, was absent, whereupon the president took charge of the whole school. He seems to have paid more attention to the juniors, and to have

¹¹ *Ibid.*, VII, 387-88.

¹² *Ibid.*, VII, 391, 393.

¹³ *Ibid.*, VIII, 6; Wesley, *Journal*, VII, 308.

¹⁴ *Methodist Quarterly Review*, April, 1859, p. 180; Franklin B. Dexter (ed.), *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College*, New York, Hall, 1907, Vol. IV, pp. 493-94; Asbury, *Journal*, I, 550.

¹⁵ Baker, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-8.

¹⁶ Gross, *op. cit.*, p. 15. Wesley described "the best and shortest method which can be taken to make children critical scholars in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew." This letter is not otherwise known to me.

¹⁷ *Methodist Quarterly Review*, April, 1859, pp. 180-81; Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

brushed off a request for help from a senior, a boy from Philadelphia, who surmised that Heath was incapable of dealing with a somewhat harder Latin text on the spur of the moment. Heath resigned, then Marsh.¹⁸ There is undoubtedly a kernel of truth in this story, but some of its implications do not square with the contemporary evidence. Asbury states that "both teachers" had left by August 10; the assumption that the president himself still remained (though perhaps under fire) is partially confirmed by the fact that not until nearly three months afterwards did Wesley hear about Heath's difficulties. Although problems still remain, it seems more likely that Marsh left first, as one of the two teachers, perhaps in order further to prepare himself for a more lucrative career. Certainly after his ordination the following spring he became an Episcopalian clergyman with a record far more illustrious than that of Heath, although Heath was credited with assisting in his theological training.¹⁹ Clearly he was a bright young man, and may well have let slip some derogatory remarks about his superior, including the incident noted, which eventually undermined Levi Heath's position to the point that he felt he must resign. Heath seems to have written to Wesley, though Wesley's information about him may have come via Asbury and Coke. At any rate on October 20, 1788, Wesley wrote to him at Cokesbury (though naming also in the address one of the trustees in Baltimore, in case the letter needed redirecting): "Dr. Coke is not pleased with a letter sent to Mr. Asbury and transmitted to him, wherein you are charged with neglect of the children; but you have an opportunity of answering for yourself. Perhaps you was so unhinged and discouraged by finding things otherwise than you expected that you had not the heart to apply yourself to anything as diligently as you was used to do." Wesley said that he "was of the same mind" with Heath, namely that it would be better for him to return to England, where Wesley would offer him a warm welcome, and would surely be able to find employment for him.

The newly-discovered letter was written about the same time and on the same subject. It is on two pages, and runs as follows:

To Mrs Heath
My Dear Sister

London
Oct. 1788

I cannot say that I was very willing to part from you and my dear children when you left England—especially not an opportunity

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Dexter, *op. cit.*, pp. 493-94.

of taking a long and perhaps a last Adieu. It is true, I had only had the pleasure of a very short acquaintance with you. But in that short time I contracted a nearer union with you than I had done with others in many years. The sweet hour with you and them at Birmingham will never be effaced from my memory. And how glad should I have been of a few more such hours before our long separation.

But as it seemed to be the Providence of God that called you, I could only say, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt!" Nevertheless it would give me as heartfelt satisfaction to see you once again in England. I should be glad to contribute a little toward it myself. And I will talk with Dr. Coke upon the head, who is to set sail in a few days for the Leeward Islands.

Wishing all blessings, spiritual and temporal, both to you and my very dear children, I am.

My Dear Sister
Your ever Affectionate Friend and Brother
John Wesley

A few weeks later Wesley made a specific order of £50 to help bring Heath and his family home, and asked Henry Moore to remind Dr. Coke "that *he* and *I* took Mr. Heath from his livelihood, and (whether he has behaved well or ill) are obliged in honour and conscience to bring him home."²⁰ Again in June, 1789, Wesley wrote to Heath offering the £50 for the return passage, and again to the same effect in July, 1790, though he felt that Coke also should help.²¹ To make absolutely sure that the matter did not go by default Wesley even had a clause inserted in the will which he made on February 20, 1789: "Out of the first money which arises from the sale of books, I bequeath to my dear sister, Martha Hall (if alive) forty pounds; to Mr. Creighton aforesaid, forty pounds; and to the Rev. Mr. Heath, sixty pounds."²²

Whether by inclination or not, however, the Rev. Levi Heath continued to make the best he could of life in America. He seems to have remained for some months in a Maryland curacy which he had held along with his Cokesbury duties. From this he moved after a time to several other short term appointments as a clergyman in the Protestant Episcopal Church—another in Maryland, one in Burlington, New Jersey, two in Pennsylvania, finally becoming rector of Norborne Parish, Berkeley County, West Virginia, where he died about 1806.²³

²⁰ Wesley, *Letters*, VIII, 106.

²¹ *Ibid.*, VIII, 148, 225.

²² Wesley, *Journal*, VIII, 343.

²³ Rightmyer, *op. cit.*, p. 121.