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THE REVEREND ABSALOM JONES (1746-1818)



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*Cover: The cover image is a grayscale version of an oil on paper on board portait painted by Raphaelle Peale in 1810. See article by Anna Louise Bates (p. 133) detailing the Methodist response to the yellow fever outbreaks in Philadelphia in the 1790s. Absalom Jones and Richard Allen were key Methodist figures in organizing the African-American community to assist during this crisis.*

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**“GIVE GLORY TO GOD BEFORE HE CAUSE DARKNESS:”  
METHODISTS AND YELLOW FEVER IN PHILADELPHIA,  
1793–1798**

ANNA LOUISE BATES

In 1793, an outbreak of yellow fever swept through Philadelphia, the young American Republic’s capital city and foremost urban center. Killing 5,000 of the city’s 50,000 inhabitants, this remains one of the most severe epidemics in U.S. history. In subsequent years, outbreaks of yellow fever occurred almost annually in Philadelphia until 1805, including an outbreak in 1798 that rivaled 1793’s in severity. No one alive at time knew that the cause of the dreaded deadly symptoms was an imported virus carried by mosquitoes.<sup>1</sup> This left everyone, including scientists, physicians, merchants, educators, and religious leaders to speculate about the cause of the disease and find ways to deal with its symptoms.

A significant body of scholarship exists about the 1793 epidemic. In 1997, J. Worth Estes and Billy G. Smith edited a book of articles written mostly for a 1993 conference noting the bicentennial of the 1793 outbreak. Authors, including several whose works are mentioned in this essay, evaluate contemporary writings about the fever, responses of local social and government entities, newspaper articles and medical treatments.<sup>2</sup> These

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas A. Apel, *Feverish Bodies, Enlightened Minds: Science and the Yellow Fever Controversy in the Early American Republic* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2016); Molly Caldwell Crosby, *The American Plague: The Untold Story of Yellow Fever: The Untold Story of Yellow Fever, The Epidemic that Shaped Our History* (New York: Berkley, 2006); J. M. Keating, *A History of the Yellow Fever: The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878, In Memphis, Tenn. Embracing A Complete List of the Dead, the Names of the Doctors and Nurses Employed, Names of All Who Contributed Money or Means, and the Names and History of Howards, Together with Other Data, and Lists of the Dead Elsewhere* (Memphis: Howard Association, 1879; rpt. London: Forgotten Books, 2015); S. L. Kotar, J. E. Gessler, *Yellow Fever: A Worldwide History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017); John R. Pierce and Jim Writer, *Yellow Jack: How Yellow Fever Ravaged America and Walter Reed Discovered Its Deadly Secrets* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005); J. H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793* (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 1949); Billy G. Smith, *Ship of Death: A Voyage That Changed the Atlantic World* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2013; Christopher Wills, *Yellow Fever, Black Goddess: The Coevolution of People and Plagues* (UK: HarperCollins, 1996). I might add that in the discussion about where the yellow fever virus originated, Sheldon Watts questions African genesis, and says yellow fever might have originated in South and Central America. Watts’ view has not gained traction in the academic community; “Yellow Fever Immunities in West Africa and the Americas in the Age of Slavery and Beyond: A Reappraisal,” *Journal of Social History* 34.4 (Summer 2001): 955–967.

<sup>2</sup>J. Worth Estes and Billy G. Smith, eds., *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation: The Public Response to the 1793 Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic* (Philadelphia: College of Physicians of Philadelphia, Library Company of Philadelphia, Science History Publications, 1997).

scholars use the yellow fever episode as a window through which to assess historical developments in the young republic's main urban center. Two items in particular are interesting for this work. Philip Lapansky's "'Abigail, a Negress': The Role and the Legacy of African Americans in the Yellow Fever Epidemic" evaluates the works of African Americans who worked as responders during the fever years. Lapansky writes that African-American leaders such as Absalom Jones and Richard Allen led the African American community during the epidemic and helped their community in many ways. Lapansky acknowledges that Jones and Allen were ordained by the Methodist Episcopal Church but does not take seriously the deeply religious motivations for their actions, or the special place of African Americans in the rapidly growing Methodist denomination. In fact, few of the articles discuss religion at all. Martin Pernick's dated but pertinent article from 1972, "Politics, Parties and Pestilence," evaluates political responses to the epidemic. Pernick acknowledges religious motives, noting that "the division between medicine and theology was still young." He notes that some Philadelphians thought pestilence represented the "wrath of the Deity," and that "before the debate about the epidemic had ended theology, like medicine, had become enmeshed in political developments."<sup>3</sup> His analysis, though, stops here. He does not say which tenets of Methodist theology and philosophy motivated Jones and Allen, how and whether that changed, and most importantly what this meant for the African-American Methodist community.

More recent scholars address a growing body of historical literature about epidemics and microbial history. In *Feverish Bodies, Enlightened Minds*, science historian Thomas A. Apel evaluates the debate within the eighteenth-century scientific community about the cause of yellow fever, concluding that localists, who thought the disease arose from environmental miasmas (vapors from marshes) prevailed over contagionists, who thought the disease was imported and therefore communicable from person to person. Apel shows how those conclusions carried cultural and intellectual biases. Tracing both positions to their Enlightenment roots, he connects the generally better-educated localists to Hume and other Scottish philosophers, who claimed God-given human reason could decipher the natural world and address all problems within it. Localists favored efforts to clean up dirty city streets and ventilate houses. Contagionists believed the disease was imported by undesirable migrants. They encouraged strict enforcement of quarantine laws and deportation of immigrants who might be carriers. The premier localist was Dr. Benjamin Rush, who thought the fever was contagious, but locally generated. Dr. William Currie and others thought it was contagious and imported.

Both localists and contagionists pointed to facts that supported their beliefs. Stagnant water and filthy conditions described by localists provided

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<sup>3</sup> Martin S. Pernick, "Politics, Parties, and Pestilence" in Estes and Smith, eds., *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation* (1993), 119–146.

breeding pools for *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes, the virus’s carriers. The contagionists, who blamed commerce and immigrants for the disease, pointed to the disease’s appearance in ports where ships from places such as Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) docked. It spread, they believed, by contact with infected people who came off the ships. Indeed, the virus came on the ships, but needed mosquitoes to spread it.

Apel’s fourth chapter, “Let Not God Intervene,” comes as close as any recent yellow fever scholarship to addressing the religious community’s understanding of the epidemic. He presents religious views expressed in the writings of several physicians and scientists of the day. Samuel Latham Mitchill stressed that people were mutually dependent upon natural law and also “the intellectual, designing and organizing power, which gave law to the atoms of which natural beings are composed, and assigned each its sphere of action . . .”<sup>4</sup> Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush, writer Noah Webster, and Mitchill also connected the filth that allegedly caused the disease with moral decay. This view appeared to confirm their suspicions that the disease was of divine origin. In other words, God, or whatever deity they believed in, either sent or allowed pestilence to arise (from the marshes?) and thrive in places polluted by human desecration. Apel observes that localists such as Mitchill, Rush, and Webster

found an elegant compromise among the various theological and philosophical demands of their Christian-scientific perspective. As they cast it, by negligently and carelessly allowing dirt and filth to accumulate, the city-dwellers violated both scriptural and common-sense prohibitions against uncleanness, setting in motion a chain of events that, consistent with God’s design, naturally produced yellow fever.<sup>5</sup>

To this end, they encouraged sanitation and supported the local government’s efforts to clean up filth in Philadelphia.

Apel mentions the Rev. Ashbell Green, a Presbyterian minister who later served as president of Princeton University, whose *Pastoral Letter* of 1798 claimed that God sent yellow fever as punishment for sins. Green claimed the citizens’ apparent reluctance to stop sinning brought continued scourges.<sup>6</sup> Apel’s comments on religious views ends here. He does not delve into theological views of local religious leaders, except those who were also physicians or scientists. This leaves space in yellow fever scholarship for interpretations of the disease by religious leaders.

This essay identifies and addresses the views of prominent Methodist leaders and clergy about yellow fever. Did they believe God sent or allowed pestilence? If sent, was it punishment for sins? What did it mean when the best and holiest Methodist clergy fell victim to the disease? Also, how did the epidemic impact African-American Methodists, such as Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, whose religious beliefs led them to assist during the outbreak, particularly in 1793?

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<sup>4</sup> Apel, *Feverish Bodies*, 91.

<sup>5</sup> Apel, *Feverish Bodies*, 97.

<sup>6</sup> Apel, *Feverish Bodies*, 99.

This article evaluates the ways Methodist leaders in Philadelphia understood what they called the “prevailing fever,” how they accommodated and resisted it, and its impact on Methodism moving forward to the nineteenth century. Analysis of Methodists’ understanding of sickness and disease as described by John Wesley and Francis Asbury and the theological connection between disease and sanctification provide clues to how Methodist leaders understood the epidemic and explains, at least in part, their behavior during its presence. The disease had special significance for African-American Methodist leader Richard Allen, who proved his Wesleyan mettle recruiting workers from the African-American community to care for those stricken by the disease. Ezekiel Cooper, periodically assigned to Philadelphia during the fever years, left insightful reflections in his journal. Finally, John Dickins, the Superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church’s publishing business, died from the fever, stalling the production of Methodist literature until Cooper revived it a year later. Overall the impact of yellow fever upon Methodism was uneven but clearly discernable.

More than two decades after Methodists appeared in religiously diverse Philadelphia during the late 1760s they remained a minority denomination in the city, but had grown to 374 members meeting regularly at two locations: St. George’s Chapel on Fourth Street, the oldest site and the seat of Methodism in Philadelphia, and the recently (1790) opened Ebenezer Chapel on South Street in Southwark. Both locations were busy all week with class meetings and multiple Sunday services. At the services, itinerant preachers enjoyed the support of several local and located preachers, including Thomas E. Haskins, Henry Willis, John Dickins and others. Occasional visits from retired elders living nearby or active itinerants travelling to conferences, such as Ezekiel Cooper and Benjamin Abbott, graced the pulpit occasionally, as well as elders coming to the city for quarterly and annual Conferences. Joey Eastburn and Johnny Hood acted as “setters of tunes,” leading hymns during the meetings at St. George’s.<sup>7</sup> Dickins, a married former itinerant, moved his family to Philadelphia in 1789 and assumed control of the church’s publishing business, the Methodist Episcopal Book Concern.<sup>8</sup> Located preacher Haskins labored at editing Francis Asbury’s journals while assisting with preaching and other tasks at St. George’s.<sup>9</sup> Philadelphia Methodists were pioneers in religious instruction, and armed with an active printing business, founded Sunday Schools in 1791 and established a school for the religious

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<sup>7</sup> John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, in the olden time; being a collection of memoirs, anecdotes, and incidents of the city and its inhabitants, and of the earliest settlements of the inland parts of Pennsylvania . . . Enlarged, with many Revisions and Additions by Willis P. Hazard, Volume 1* (Philadelphia: Edwin S. Stuart, 1891), 456, 458.

<sup>8</sup> Lucas Endicott, “Settling the ‘Printing Business’: John Dickins and the Methodist Episcopal Book Concern from 1789 to 1798,” *Methodist History* 48.2 (January 2010): 81–91.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Haskins was received on trial in 1782, itinerated for three years then located in Philadelphia. Ancestry.com notes that his first wife, Martha Haskins, mother of two of his children, died at age 34 in the year 1797. It is not clear that she died from yellow fever, but this was the heyday of that malady in Philadelphia (MEC, *Minutes . . .*, 15, 23; and Ancestry.com, “Martha Potts, 1764–1797”).

instruction of girls, one of the first in the Early American Republic.<sup>10</sup> The presence of more free African Americans than any other city in the United States gave Philadelphia a special significance for those seeking places to worship. Overall Philadelphia, and St. George’s in particular, was a hub of Methodist activity during the years following the American Revolution.

In 1792, the year before the first occurrence of yellow fever, Philadelphia was a bustling seaport flush with worldly vices. Religious leaders from all denominations competed with taverns, theatres and loud politicians. Artisans, laborers (free and slave), merchants, and a growing class of professionals that included physicians and at least as many quacks crowded the city’s streets. French finishing schools—run by refugees from Saint-Domingue, where a large slave revolt was brewing—attracted members of a fledgling middle class who wanted to give their children respectable educations. Altogether, the area around Philadelphia’s port was busy. Immigrants of all kinds settled along Water Street, overcrowding small dwellings along the waterfront. Wharves and jetties trapped dirty waters from the river.<sup>11</sup> Public theatres and John Bill Rickett’s modern circus drew crowds. Add to this a plethora of alehouses, populated by sailors and local rowdies, and one can fully appreciate the reaction of Bishop Francis Asbury when he came to conference in Philadelphia in early September, 1792. On that visit, he preached at Ebenezer, and wrote a chillingly prophetic entry in his journal:<sup>12</sup>

At night the *mobility* came in like the roaring of the sea: Boys were around the doors, and the streets were in an uproar . . . the wicked were collected to oppose. I felt the powers of darkness were very strong . . . This is a wicked, horribly wicked city; and if the people do not reform, I think they will be let loose upon one another, or else God will send the pestilence amongst them, and slay them by hundreds and thousands: the spirit of prayer has departed, and the spiritual watchmen have ceased to cry aloud among all sects and denominations: for their unfaithfulness they will be smitten in anger: for sleepy *silence* in the house of God, which ought to resound with the voice of praise and frequent prayer, the Lord will visit their streets with the *silence of desolation*.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, Asbury had a philosophical and theological context for events that unfolded in Philadelphia the following year.

On the eve of the yellow fever outbreak in 1793, the Methodist congregations in Philadelphia were divided along class lines. Members includ-

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<sup>10</sup> Fred Pierce Corson, “St. George’s Church: The Cradle of American Methodism,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 43.1 (1953): 230–236.

<sup>11</sup> Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ebenezer Methodist Episcopal Church Central Publishing Committee, *History of Ebenezer Methodist Episcopal Church of Southwark, Philadelphia Together with a List of the Official Members, the Present Members of the Church, and a Sketch of the Centennial Services* (Philadelphia: Lipincott Company, 1890).

<sup>13</sup> Francis Asbury, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury in, In Three Volumes, Volume 1, The Journal, 1771–1793*, eds. Elmer Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 729–730.

ed mostly artisans and laborers, with some notable racial divisions.<sup>14</sup> A wealthier and growing class of industrialists and shop owners occupied controlling positions in the churches. As Dee Andrews notes, “the Philadelphia Methodists were markedly divided between . . . merchant trustees and artisan class leaders.” That year, the Methodist Episcopal Church’s Conference Minutes record 364 white and 20 “colored” members in Philadelphia. The African-American classes met separately and on different days than white classes.<sup>15</sup>

Yellow fever first appeared on August 3, 1793, when residents at Denny’s boarding house became gravely ill with fever and other mysterious symptoms, including black vomit, preceding miserable deaths. Eight people at Denny’s and nearby houses died in just one week. Local physicians, including Benjamin Rush, were baffled by the illness. Rush identified it as yellow fever, and blamed filthy conditions and a load of spoiled coffee rotting on a nearby dock for causing it. Rush applied his usual remedies, which included bleeding and mercury-induced purging, but these could not control the disease. Fellow physicians were equally confused, and their remedies equally ineffective.<sup>16</sup>

Asbury learned of the fever while passing through New York on his way to a September annual conference in Philadelphia. Travel weary, recovering from a shoulder injury and sick with the flu, he wrote:

The weather is extremely warm. Great afflictions prevail here (in New York)—fluxes, fevers, and influenzas. It is very sickly also in Philadelphia. I have found by secret search, that I have not preached sanctification as I should have done: if I am restored, this shall be my theme more pointedly than ever, God being my helper.<sup>17</sup>

Here Asbury reveals much about his beliefs, and his ideas on how to deal with pestilence. His reference to sanctification requires expansion here. This will be a key element in his and other Methodists’ understanding of yellow fever.

To John Wesley, sanctification was a process by which converted Christians sought holiness, or Christian perfection. Wesley believed the primeval world was God’s perfect creation, free of sin or corruption. Humans, corrupted by sin, spoiled paradise. Because humans, like everything else in creation, were originally perfect, they could, through God’s prevenient and ever-present grace, find their way back to wholeness. Justification, in

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<sup>14</sup> See Dee E. Andrews’ sixth chapter, “Laboring Men, Artisans, and Entrepreneurs,” in *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 155–183. On race, see Jacquelyn C. Miller, “The Wages of Blackness: African-American Workers and the Meanings of Race during Philadelphia’s 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 129.2 (April 2005), 163–194.

<sup>15</sup> Andrews, *The Methodists . . .*, 167–171; Methodist Episcopal Church, *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the years 1773–1828, Volume 1* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840).

<sup>16</sup> An excellent current biography of Rush is Stephen Fried’s *Rush: Revolution, Madness, and the Visionary Doctor Who Became a Founding Father* (New York: Crown, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, 769.

Wesleyan terms, means acceptance and forgiveness of sins through God’s prevenient grace. Sanctification is the journey back to (unattainable) Christian wholeness.<sup>18</sup> Within this context, disease and suffering are caused by human disruption of God’s perfect creation. Asbury’s own illnesses, exacerbated by tales of horrible and widespread sickness in Philadelphia, reminded him that he needed to double down preaching on sanctification to his wayward flock.

When Asbury arrived in Philadelphia on September 6, he witnessed a convoy of frightened citizens fleeing the city. “Ah! How the ways mourn: how low spirited are the people whilst making their escape! I found it awful indeed. I judge the people die from fifty to one hundred in a day: some of our friends are dying, others flying.”<sup>19</sup> The scene Asbury described was a procession of mostly affluent and middle-class Philadelphians out of the city for the countryside. Government officials, including George Washington, were among their number.

Some Philadelphia Methodists also took flight. The Rev. Freeborn Garrettson, recently married, was stationed as Elder in Philadelphia that year. Although Nathan Bangs wrote that, during the fever, “his labours here were greatly blessed,”<sup>20</sup> biographer John Wigger notes that Garrettson and his bride did not remain in Philadelphia. Rather they, like others who could afford to do so, high-tailed to the Maryland countryside until the scourge abated.<sup>21</sup>

Asbury, though apprehensive, did not leave the city before the conference he led adjourned. He stayed and preached between conference sessions.<sup>22</sup> On Sunday, September 8, Asbury preached a warning:

“Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show my people their transgressions, and the house of Jacob their sins.” The people of this city are alarmed; and well they may be . . . The streets are now depopulated, and the city wears a gloomy aspect . . . Poor Philadelphia! The lofty city, He layeth it low!

Clearly, Asbury saw the city’s difficulties, its plague and its social strife, as evidence of God’s wrath. Eager to atone, he planned a “day of humiliation” the next day.

We appointed Tuesday 9th to be observed as a day of humiliation. I preached on

<sup>18</sup> Harald Lindstrom, *Wesley & Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation* (Nappanee, IN: Francis Asbury Press, 1996), 120–124.

<sup>19</sup> Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, 770.

<sup>20</sup> Nathan Bangs, D.D., *The Life of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson Compiled from His Printed and Manuscript Journals and Other Authentic Documents* (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1829), 234.

<sup>21</sup> John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (Cambridge: Oxford UP, 2006), 229.

<sup>22</sup> Wigger, *American Saint*, 229. It is not clear whether Asbury had yellow fever at some time during his travels. He complained constantly about one malady or another, possibly owing to his travelling in places where infections such as flus and fevers prevailed. He visited cities with yellow fever before Philadelphia in 1793, and he would visit others in the future. That he did not contract the disease in Philadelphia suggests that he was immune, or that he inadvertently avoided the mosquitoes carrying the virus.

1 Kings viii, 37–40, and had a large and very serious, weeping congregation. The preachers left the city on Monday; I continued in order to have the minutes of the conference printed.<sup>23</sup>

He reaffirmed his beliefs a few days later in Delaware, where news of the plague in Philadelphia caused alarm: “I showed that God sent pestilence, famine, locusts, blasting, mildew and caterpillars; and that only the Church and people of God know and believe his judgments.” Clearly, yellow fever influenced Asbury’s preaching, and hence Methodism. Philadelphia was certainly not the only port impacted by yellow fever. He noted that two hundred people had died in the bounds of the Somerset circuit the last summer. When he arrived in Maryland on September 27, people feared they would contract the disease from him, “although I had been out of Philadelphia from the 9th to the 26th instant.”<sup>24</sup>

Traveling on to Baltimore, he learned that he needed a pass, a sort of health certificate, to enter the City. He got the needed pass and preached a warning to that city also: “I sounded the alarm on Jer. Xiii, 16: Give glory to God before he cause darkness.”<sup>25</sup> Here ends Asbury’s reflections on the 1793 fever. However, another important Methodist leader wrote of the epidemic, and of his role in it.

Richard Allen, popular and articulate leader of African-American Methodists in Philadelphia, was a major player in the yellow fever saga. Details of Allen’s history and significance are well documented in Richard S. Newman’s *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (2008). A few comments about Allen’s early history and conversion experience are needed to understand how the yellow fever epidemic impacted him and the future of all African-American Methodists in Philadelphia and elsewhere.

Allen claims he was born to slave parents in Philadelphia on February 14, 1760, and spent his early years in the home of his owner, Benjamin Chew. In about 1788, Chew sold Allen, three siblings, and his parents to Stokeley Sturgis, a Delaware plantation owner.<sup>26</sup> Sturgis subsequently fell upon hard times and sold Allen’s mother and two of his siblings. Apparently, Sturgis allowed Allen and his remaining siblings to attend local Methodist meetings. Eventually, Allen, his brother, and Sturgis joined the Methodists. Allen provides few details of his life as a slave but is very clear about his conversion experience. He was “awakened and brought to see myself poor, wretched

<sup>23</sup> Asbury, *Journal & Letters*, 770.

<sup>24</sup> Asbury, *Journal & Letters*, 771.

<sup>25</sup> Asbury, *Journal & Letters*, 772.

<sup>26</sup> The major references for Richard Allen’s life in this work are Richard S. Newman’s biography, *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York UP, 2008) and Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen. To Which is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Containing a Narrative of the Yellow Fever in the Year of Our Lord 1793: with an Address to the People of Colour in the United States* (Philadelphia: Martin & Boden, 1833). Newman discusses the possibility that Allen was born on one of Chew’s properties in the state of Delaware; see *Freedom’s Prophet*, 29.

and undone, and without the mercy of God must be lost . . . . My sins were a heavy burden.”<sup>27</sup>

What sins did Allen suffer under? Dee Andrews offers clues in descriptions of four Methodists, including Allen. Allen, like many other Methodists, reached an awareness of personal sinfulness as a precondition to salvation. Andrews claims that the shock of family deaths or removal of family members drove some to seek comfort in religion. In Allen’s case, the trigger experience may have been the sale of his mother and three siblings. Allen does not write about the horrors of slavery, but it is possible that his conversion experience incorporates those things, albeit obliquely. Perhaps the deep sorrow he felt being separated from his family prompted despair so deep Allen perceived indulgence in it sinful.<sup>28</sup>

Allen converted in 1777 and worked hard to purchase his freedom from Sturgis. He succeeded in that endeavor in 1783. After that, he became a travelling Methodist preacher. He attracted the attention of Methodist leaders, including Benjamin Abbott and Francis Asbury. Allen was one of two African Americans at the 1784 Christmas Conference, where Asbury qualified him as a preacher. Allen itinerated for a few years, then received an assignment to St. George’s in Philadelphia in 1785. In 1787 Jones and Allen, along with some of the African-American members at St. George’s and others from the community, formed the Free African Society, a religious but non-denominational mutual aid society that assisted African Americans, including freed slaves and slaves escaping bondage. This was the first organization of its kind.

For unspecified reasons, Allen was ejected from the Free African Society in 1791, possibly because of his insistence on Methodist rather than Quaker, Episcopalian, or other forms of worship.<sup>29</sup> Allen continued his association with Jones, though, and stayed in close contact with the Society while he continued leading classes and preaching at St. George’s.

During this time, Philadelphia was an abolitionist haven. Allen worked with the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society and was a popular leader in the growing African-American community. He was a successful entrepreneur with a chimney-sweeping business, a blacksmith shop and several other business ventures. In 1792, on the eve of the yellow fever outbreak, Allen lived with his wife, Flora, who worked with him building his African-American religious community.

Allen preached at St. George’s and at other places where groups of African Americans sought religious services. He worked closely with fellow African-American preacher Absalom Jones, also licensed by the Methodist Episcopal Church. Sometimes Allen preached in the commons near St.

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<sup>27</sup>Allen, *The Life*, 9.

<sup>28</sup>Andrews, *The Methodists*, 86–89.

<sup>29</sup>Sources also differ on this part of Allen’s story. Newman’s chapter, “We Participate in Common,” attributes Allen’s firm commitment to Methodism to needing Methodist clergy to administer sacraments (Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 131). Absalom Jones remained with the Free African Society and became the first African-American Bishop in the Episcopal Church, the affiliation chosen by the Society late in 1793.

George's, attracting large crowds. As the African-American congregation grew, white members at St. George's grew uncomfortable with their enthusiastic worship style and asked them to move to a separate section of the church. Sources differ on why this situation arose, and it is not clear whether white congregants or Allen and Jones themselves suggested building a separate church. It is clear, though, that when Allen and Jones approached the district elder, whom Allen identifies as "Mr. W\_\_\_," about a separate facility, he refused, using "very degrading and insulting language."<sup>30</sup> Convinced of his own sanctification and his firm belief that African American and white souls carried equal value, Allen nonetheless believed African Americans needed their own worship space. He redoubled his efforts to create such a space, be it a separate church or something else, for his African-American brethren.

Allen, Jones, and their followers continued to raise eyebrows with their passionate worship style. That discomfort erupted into rebellion in June, 1792, when Allen, Jones and several other Methodist Free Africans were forcibly ejected from their seats at St. George's.<sup>31</sup> Jones and several other members of the Free African Church resolved not to return to St. George's. Allen, however, stayed and continued to lead classes and preach at St. George's, despite censure by Presiding Elder John McClaskey.<sup>32</sup> Allen was a firmly committed Methodist. Asbury's biographer Wigger notes that he remained "confident that there was no religious sect or denomination [that] would suit the capacity of the colored people as well as the Methodists; for the plain and simple gospel suits best for any people. For Allen, this was primarily a religious, not a professional or financial, decision."<sup>33</sup>

The 1793 epidemic came at a critical moment for Allen. It would, in the end, give Allen a perfect opportunity to prove himself an exemplary Methodist. When the fever broke out, building plans for Allen's separate African-American church were put on hold. Amid the crisis, Philadelphia's mayor, Matthew Clarkson, and physician Benjamin Rush appealed to Jones and Allen, who were well known and respected in the city as well as the religious community, to assist in the crisis. Clarkson and Rush mistakenly believed African Americans were immune to the disease. Allen and Jones considered the plea for help, and true to their Methodist convictions resolved "that it was our duty to do all the good that we could to our suffering fellow mortals."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Reconstructing the history of African-American Methodism between the years 1787 and 1794 is rather difficult, as dates and events differ from one source to another. Allen's own biographical account differs from church records regarding dates and personnel changes at S. George's. The assigned Elder in Philadelphia in 1787 was John Hagerty. Allen refers several times to "L\_\_\_G\_\_\_," probably Lemuel Green. Other preachers at St. George's included Henry Willis ("Mr. W\_\_\_?"), Caleb Boyer and William Gill. It is not clear who the offending elder who used degrading language was, but Asbury biographer Wigger speculates it was Henry Willis. See Wigger, *American Saint*, 490n.

<sup>31</sup> Newman, *Freedom's Prophet*, ch. 2, "Gospel Labors," 53–77.

<sup>32</sup> Andrews, *The Methodists*, 146–147.

<sup>33</sup> Wigger, *American Saint*, 249.

<sup>34</sup> Allen, *Narrative*, 9.

Besides transporting people to Bush Hill hospital and carrying out and burying the dead, Allen and his followers performed many other duties. Allen recruited nurses from the membership of the Free African Society.<sup>35</sup> Rush taught Allen’s group some of his medical techniques, such as bleeding, so they could attend directly to fever victims. While they were compensated for much of their work, they did many tasks with no pay: “[W]e have buried several hundreds of poor persons and strangers, for which service we have never received not never asked any compensation.”<sup>36</sup> Regarding direct care of patients, “we have bled upwards of eight hundred people and do declare we have not received to the value of a dollar and a half therefor.”<sup>37</sup> Clearly, Jones and Allen saw their duty as a Christian one.

Wigger points to a letter from Rush to his wife, wherein he claims Allen himself was ill. Allen did, in fact, have yellow fever, and was confined to Bush Hill from late September until November, 1793.<sup>38</sup> Newman points out that Allen, though incapacitated for most of October and November, stayed informed on the work African Americans were doing through friends and fellow workers.<sup>39</sup> Allen’s brother, John, also a Methodist, was one of the aid workers. Allen coordinated efforts from the hospital, and after his recovery from the fever, enjoyed immunity to the disease. Allen commented disdainfully on the assumption shared by Rush and other members of the white city council: “When the people of colour had the sickness and died, we were imposed upon, and told it was not with the prevailing sickness, until it became too notorious to be denied; then we were told some few died, but not many. Thus, were our services extorted at the peril of our lives.”<sup>40</sup>

Besides members of the Free African Society, a number of black prisoners were released from jail to work at Bush Hill. Rush created a training program for them, which of course involved purging and bleeding, Rush’s favorite treatments for the fever.<sup>41</sup> When patients died from the treatment, black caregivers were blamed. To add insult to injury, the city watched the black workers struggle to perform necessary work but shunned them as infected and undesirable.<sup>42</sup> Jacqueline C. Miller’s analysis of Allen’s narrative confirms the suspicions of scholars including Gary Nash, Carol Smith-

<sup>35</sup> Available sources do not name the nurses. One, Sarah Bass, would become Allen’s second wife after Flora died in 1803. Abolitionist preacher Ezekiel Cooper presided at their wedding. Finding the identities of these African-American women nurses would be an excellent project for a scholar in the future.

<sup>36</sup> Allen, *Narrative*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Allen, *Narrative*, 51

<sup>38</sup> Wigger, *American Saint*, 249.

<sup>39</sup> Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 89.

<sup>40</sup> Allen, *Narrative*, 49.

<sup>41</sup> Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead*, 98.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew Carey’s *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever; Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject, Indifferent Parts of the United States, To Which Are Added Accounts of the Plague in London and Marseilles; and List of the Dead, from August 1 to the Middle of December 1793*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia, 1793), unfairly condemns black nurses for allegedly charging exorbitant wages, and refers to some black workers as vile. Jones and Allen’s work, referenced above, was largely a retort to Carey’s thorough and descriptive but prejudicial if laden with assumptions about race tract.

Rosenberg, and others that the process of “racialization,” promoted largely by white self-interest, was “complex and often unstable, even in the case of individual actors.”<sup>43</sup> Miller emphasizes that racialization included an assumption of biological difference as one of its main tenets. Miller goes on to say that differences, or perceived differences, between black and white Philadelphians were used to justify paying lower wages to black laborers and to give them dirtier jobs.

Rush eventually backed down from his insistence that African Americans could not contract yellow fever. He qualified his new-found wisdom with comments about the time of year when African Americans got sick, which was later in the season, and he insisted the disease was milder when they caught it.<sup>44</sup>

When the fever subsided, white Philadelphians wasted no time criticizing the contributions of Allen and the African American community. Matthew Carey published a widely read narrative of the fever, wherein he praised African Americans such as Jones and Allen for their efforts but accused African-American workers of charging exorbitant rates for their work and stealing belongings from victims.<sup>45</sup>

Mr. Carey pays William Gray and us a compliment: . . . By naming us, he leaves those others in the hazardous state of being classes with those who are call the “vil-est” . . . . We have many unprovoked enemies, who begrudge us the liberty we enjoy, and are glad to hear of any complaint against our colour, be it just or unjust . . . .<sup>46</sup>

Jones and Allen’s *Narrative* was a response to Carey and others who denigrated the work of Philadelphia’s African-American population during the height of the fever.

Allen’s narrative reveals his deeper commitment, and his true motivations for his actions. Allen acted as a Methodist, first and foremost, and a firm conviction that all souls were equal before God. If pestilence struck a community, for sin or by chance, this was an opportunity for Christians to prove their faith. “For Allen,” says Wigger, “this was primarily a religious, not a professional or financial, decision.”<sup>47</sup> Allen was motivated first and foremost by his faith, as defined by Methodism. Allen expressed this view in his *Narrative*, under the heading “Acts of Love”:

O dear Jesus . . . what shall I do to express my affection towards thee? I will relieve the necessities of my poor brethren, who are members of thy body; for he that loveth not his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Jacqueline C. Miller, “The Wages of Blackness: African American Workers and the Meanings of Race during Philadelphia’s 1793 Epidemic,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 129.2 (April 2005): 167.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin Rush, *Account of the Biliious Remitting Yellow Fever as it Appeared in Philadelphia in the Year 1793* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1794), 97.

<sup>45</sup> Matthew Carey, *A Desultory Account of the Yellow Fever* (Philadelphia, October 16, 1793).

<sup>46</sup> Allen, *Narrative*, 47.

<sup>47</sup> Wigger, *American Saint*, 249.

<sup>48</sup> Allen, *Narrative*, 37.

In the wake of the fever, Asbury reconfigured the church to keep Allen. He removed McClaskey, sending him to Baltimore, and appointed Freeborn Garrettson to Philadelphia. Allen and his followers remained Methodist and continued plans to build a separate parish that would remain connected to the Methodist Conference. He used a lot he purchased at Sixth and Lombard Streets for the location and purchased a blacksmith shop for a building. A legendary drawing shows the blacksmith shop being drawn by horses to its the location, where a new church, named Bethel (by John Dickins), opened in 1794. Asbury preached the dedication ceremony. Allen’s church remained governed by Methodists until the formation of the independent African Methodist Episcopal church in 1816.

According to tallies published in *Methodist Magazine*, 32 Methodists died in 1793 (46 would die in 1798). The *Magazine* article was a compilation of tracts previously printed elsewhere, that included multiple scenes of decimation, such as this:

... a black man entered [a] house, and found the body of a man, almost devoured by vermin. Two black men were hired for sixteen dollars to take the corpse and throw it into the river. Another was found dead in a sail-loft. A woman was found dead in Water-Street and her young child was alive upon the same bed by her. And a number of other similar instances occurred.<sup>49</sup>

The references to unnamed black men stand out in these descriptions. Multiple sources refer to black women or black nurses with no names to identify them.

Philadelphia remained vigilant in the wake of the pestilence. After the 1793 disaster, the Board of Health, formed in 1793, continued its activities, focusing on ways to prevent future plagues. Citizens who left town returned and conformed to careful regimens to decontaminate and air out their houses. Nonetheless, a few cases of yellow fever appeared annually in 1794, ‘95 and ‘96. When the fever appeared in other places, Philadelphians mobilized to keep it out of their midst by passing quarantine laws and posting guards on routes into the city. They also struggled to maintain the sanitary conditions adopted during the 1793 epidemic. Streets were swept, sewers redirected, and new curfew and quarantine laws adopted and enforced. Citizens learned that mutual aid was helpful. When the fever appeared, citizens mobilized quickly to collect and distribute resources.

Yellow fever hit other places besides Philadelphia. Coming aboard ships carrying slaves up the Atlantic coast, ports such as Charleston, Boston and New York had recurring outbreaks. Ezekiel Cooper, another prominent early Methodist clergyman, wrote an account of the fever in the year 1796, when assigned to Philadelphia. Cooper was immune to yellow fever, having contracted it in Charleston during 1792–1793.

Sunday August 13, 1797—Brother Regan preached for me in the morning and assisted me with the sacrament. He and I this afternoon attended the funeral of young

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<sup>49</sup> *Methodist Magazine* (1799), 518.

Mr. Wild, who died with the fever which is beginning to take place in this city. We both visited him while he was ill. This week the people begin to be much alarmed about the contagious fever, which appears to be threatening. The doctors are divided in opinion and are writing in opposition to each other; and the fears of the people are wrought upon amazingly.<sup>50</sup>

Not much is written about the 1797 yellow fever. It was a lesser outbreak than those in 1793 and 1798. However, it was significant enough to drive a significant portion of the population out of town:

I preached to-day, seriously, upon the subject of the sickness; warning the people to prepare. The terror through this week caused the people very much to flock out of town; by the last of the month it is believed that one third of the people had moved to the country.<sup>51</sup>

The family with whom Cooper lodged was among the crowd fleeing the city. Friends advised Cooper to follow, but he indicated that his mind

[W]as not free to go . . . [A]s I was stationed here as a preacher, I resolved to put my trust in the Lord and stand by the dear people in the days of adversity and distress. Truly things appear gloomy and melancholy, but the Lord he is God. He saved Daniel in the lion's den; he saved the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace; and he can save in the midst of a raging fever. Through mercy I am very little afraid and cannot say that I am any alarmed or terrified.<sup>52</sup>

Cooper clearly did not realize that he, having had the fever, was immune.

I concluded to stay in Colonel North's house. Miss Fanny Wolf, one of our friends, stays also to take care of the house, so that, with the assistance of a little girl of one of the neighbors, she keeps house, cooks, etc. 'Tis a solemn time for prayer and meditation. I have ventured to go among the sick and, two or three days, I felt very poorly myself; but I took medicine for three successive days and found relief.<sup>53</sup>

Cooper's journal entry for September 16 reveals another impact of the fever: "Brother Lee, Brother Dickins, and myself came to a resolution to publish in the public prints that our Conference (the Philadelphia annual) would be held at Duck Creek Cross Roads (Smyrna, Del) instead of this city." A sad entry appears later the same day:

We have accounts that Brother Regan is dead; that he took the fever while in town and died some days ago. Thus, his course is run and his work is done. We have no doubt that he rests with his Lord in heaven. When he was leaving the city, I accompanied him to the boat, where we conversed some time upon the very awful calamity, and the uncertainty of life and everything in this world. We then parted with clasped hands, commending each other to God and divine protection. We hoped to meet

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<sup>50</sup> Quote is from Cooper's diary, Sunday, August 13, 1797 (George A. Phoebus, ed., *Beams of Light on Early Methodism in America Chiefly Drawn from the Diary, Letters, Manuscripts, Documents and Original Tracts of the Rev. Ezekiel Cooper* [New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1887], 213). Thomas A. Apel, in *Feverish Bodies, Enlightened Minds: Science and the Yellow Fever Controversy in the Early American Republic* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2016), addresses the argument within the medical community that Cooper references.

<sup>51</sup> Phoebus, *Beams of Light*, 213. Quote is from Cooper's diary, Sunday, August 20, 1797.

<sup>52</sup> Phoebus, *Beams of Light*, 214–215, quote from Cooper's diary, September 14, 1797.

<sup>53</sup> Phoebus, *Beams of Light*, 232.

again in time, but death has cut him off, and we shall meet no more till we appear before the Lord. O may I be prepared to reign with him in glory, with all the saints above. By grace I may be saved, and by grace through faith only. My trust in the Lord, my Saviour.

Cooper goes on to explain why he continued to work amid the disease:

It may naturally be supposed that I feel at times apprehensions of danger; but I reason thus: if the people ever want the visits and counsel of a minister, it is in time of affliction and distress. Shall I leave them now? No; it would be like a Shepherd flying from his flock in time of danger! Although I risk my health and life, yet my duty is to feed and comfort the flock of Christ, and not flee until called by the duties of my profession to take charge elsewhere, or attend Conference, or something of a passing nature.<sup>54</sup>

Cooper describes horrifyingly un-Christian behavior among families hit by the disease:

Same day “Truly it is affecting to see the sorrows and woes of the afflicted and distressed. Sometimes the nearest friends fly from the sick and leave them in their anguish and misery. How melancholy to see parents leave their children, and children their parents! And sometimes fear preys so powerfully that a husband or wife cannot have resolution to stay with the companion of his or her life. To attempt a full description of the various scenes of distress would be in vain; imagination can scarcely figure out the miseries of many.<sup>55</sup>

Then 1798 came with a new scourge. This one challenged 1793 in severity for Philadelphia and was even more devastating for Methodists. The culprit once again was slavery and its tangled history. In 1793 the plague virus came aboard ships from Saint-Domingue. The slave revolt led by former slave Toussaint L’Ouverture and Jacques Dessalines (ultimately successful in 1804) and the occupation of Port Au Prince by the British prompted the flight of more French colonials with their slaves. Pennsylvania’s Governor Mifflin was aware of the threat when the first ships arrived. Alarmed at the prospect of the introduction into Philadelphia of a crowd inimical to the country from whence the plague originally came, Mifflin issued orders to the Board of Health to detain them at quarantine and prevent them from coming to the city. He applied to President John Adams for assistance. The French on board the ships rebelled and threatened to take possession of the vessels in which they were passengers and proceed to the city.<sup>56</sup> Rather than becoming the scene of a revolution reminiscent of Paris, they were allowed to disembark. With them came the virus, which local mosquitoes spread.

The fever was virulent during the summer and early fall of 1798. Descriptions of scenes in the city rivaled those of 1793:

Putrefying bodies were discovered in deserted houses in such a state of decomposition that they were no longer recognizable, and persons delirious from fever ran through the streets almost naked. Many were found lying in the streets stricken

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Phoebus, *Beams of Light*, 215, quote from Cooper’s diary, Saturday, September 16, 1797.

<sup>56</sup> John Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609–1884, Volume 2* (Philadelphia: L.H. Everts & Co., 1884), 494–495.

down by the disease. About forty thousand people fled from the town. At night the streets were deserted, and the thief and robber plied their trade with impunity . . . . The fever made its appearance in the Walnut Street prison on the 13th and 14th of September, and the mortality was severe. There were then three hundred persons in confinement, including debtors.<sup>57</sup>

The 1798 epidemic took a huge toll on Philadelphia. Asbury reflected in his journal: “The fever is breaking out again in Portsmouth, and it is awful in Philadelphia; it seemeth as if the Lord would humble or destroy that city, by stroke after stroke, until they acknowledge God.”<sup>58</sup>

Without a doubt, the most serious loss the Philadelphia Methodists experienced during the 1798 fever was the Rev. John Dickins, who by all appearances led a model Methodist life. He emigrated from England at an early age and became a Methodist itinerant in 1777. He was intelligent and motivated enough to acquire a largely informal education in the natural sciences, Greek, and Latin. He was a “plain, practical and pointed preacher,” and made his most valuable contributions during his years as superintendent of the Methodist Book Concern. From his office at St. George’s Church, he oversaw the publication, printing and distribution of thousands of books including hymnals, Sunday School tracts and other things.

Dickins lived with his wife and children in a rented house. His memoir says he was “peculiarly attentive to his duty as a husband and a parent;—very conscientious . . . remarkable for his tenderness and strictness in the education of his children, not suffering them to mix with the wild, wicked and dissipated, either in childhood or advanced age.” Surely, if God spared the righteous, Dickins would have survived. He remained at his station during the 1793 epidemic, and those of subsequent years until 1798. In that year, he contracted the fever and died. His final letter to Asbury, whom he had recently visited, suggests that Asbury might have recommended that he leave the city during the fever:

*My much-esteemed Friend and Brother:*—I set down to write as in the jaws of death: whether Providence may permit me to see your face again in the flesh I know not. But if not, I hope through abundant mercy, we shall meet in the presence of God. I am truly conscious that I am an unprofitable, *a very unprofitable*, servant; but I think my heart condemns me not; and, therefore, I have confidence toward God. Perhaps I might have left the city, as most of my friends and brethren have done; but when I thought of such a thing my mind recurred to that Providence which has done *so much* for me, a poor worm, that I was afraid of indulging any distrust. So, I commit myself and family into the hands of God, for life or death.<sup>59</sup>

When Dickins wrote to Asbury, his oldest daughter, Elizabeth, a promising young woman of 16, was also gravely ill, dying from the fever. Dickins accepted her death, the day before his own, with remarkable Christian resignation: “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; Blessed be the name of the Lord.”<sup>60</sup> Dickins himself died the following day, on September 27, 1798.

<sup>57</sup> Scharf & Westcott, *History*, 495.

<sup>58</sup> Asbury, *Journal & Letters*, 2.171 (September 4, 1798).

<sup>59</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Minutes*, 79.

<sup>60</sup> John Atkinson, *Centennial History of Methodism* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1884), 326.

Dickins’ memoir, written by an unidentified Methodist for the Conference Journal, assured its readers that Dickins died “in the Lord.” He “close[d] his setting hour of life with uncommon joy, peace, and a triumphant assurance of heavenly bliss.” The memoir’s writer also speculates that Dickins escaped some of the uglier symptoms of the fever: “he was mercifully preserved from those awful agitations of body, and distractions of mind, that have frequently appeared very dreadful in patients under the operations of that terrible disorder. ‘Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace.’” Indeed, his wife, Elizabeth, assured Asbury in her letter to him that when her husband died “[T]he Lord watered his soul with divine comfort. With what composure did he receive the stroke at the hand of his God!”<sup>61</sup> Thus, the righteous Dickins, though stricken by God’s pestilence sent upon Philadelphia, escaped the worst agonies of the sickness.

There is another possible explanation for the way Elizabeth presented Dickins’ calm demeanor at the time of his death. Jacquelyn C. Miller wrote an article based upon narratives by 1793 fever victims arguing that composure and lack of emotion was characteristic of the growing white middle class. According to Miller, the middle class emphasized emotional self-control to maintain physical health.<sup>62</sup> Dickins was certainly part of that growing class, as were other white members of St. George’s church. Dickins’ peaceful death possibly identified him not only as an exemplary Methodist, but a middle class (and therefore white) one as well.

Ezekiel Cooper preached Dickins’ funeral sermon at the cemetery of St. George’s.<sup>63</sup> His death was a blow to the church.<sup>64</sup> Renowned itinerant preacher Jesse Lee commented: “His death was more sensibly felt by the Methodist connection in general, than we had ever known or felt in the death of any other preacher that had died among us.”<sup>65</sup> The practical impact of Dickins’ death would be felt for generations. The Book Concern remained leaderless for a year before Ezekiel Cooper assumed the position. Under Cooper’s supervision, the Book Concern continued to publish, but with a difference. The *Methodist Magazine* ceased publication after 1798. It was the loss of Dickins’ skill and expertise that perhaps inspired Asbury to remark in a letter to Ezekiel Cooper upon Dickins’ death: “What I have greatly feared for years hath now taken place. Dickins, the generous, the just, the faithful, skillful Dickins is dead!”<sup>66</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Minutes*, 79. The biblical reference is to Psalm 37.

<sup>62</sup> Jacquelyn C. Miller, “An ‘Uncommon Tranquility of Mind’: Emotional Self-Control and the Construction of a Middle-Class Identity in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia” *Journal of Social History* 30.1 (1996): 129–148; [www.jstor.org/stable/3789752](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3789752).

<sup>63</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Minutes*, 79. Dickins’ remains were afterward placed in the old Methodist burial ground in Baltimore, but were some years later removed with the remains of his widow, at the expense of the Baltimore preachers, to nearby Mount Olivet Cemetery, where many prominent Methodists are buried.

<sup>64</sup> Edwin Warriner, *Old Sands Street Methodist Episcopal Church of Brooklyn, N.Y.: An Illustrated Centennial Record, Historical and Biographical* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1885), 67.

<sup>65</sup> Jesse Lee, *A Short Account of the Life of Rev. John Lee, a Methodist Minister in the United States of America* (Baltimore: John West Butler, 1805), 254.

<sup>66</sup> Asbury, *Journal & Letters*, 173.

Overall the impact of yellow fever on the growth of Methodism was profound. Besides the epidemics in Philadelphia, Methodists in other port cities along the Atlantic coast, as well as their missionaries overseas, continued dying from yellow fever until the end of the nineteenth century. The prevalence of yellow fever along the Atlantic coast also caused a change in scheduling annual conferences in 1798 from fall to spring, so that the conferences began their rotation in the South during the winter and terminated in the eastern states during the summer.<sup>67</sup>

Upon the death of Benton Riffin, who died of the fever in 1798, the church had lost eight pastors to yellow fever. Riffin's memoir closes with a plea from its writers:

It is but a small tribute we pay to the memory of those men of God, to acknowledge their services, which are recorded upon the hearts of many precious souls that have attended their ministry. To give their children in Christ an account of the consolations that marked their dying hours, especially when we have the strongest testimony of their living and dying in Jesus, may be as an application to all their sermons, sufferings, and lives.<sup>68</sup>

This essay sought to pay such tribute. Yellow fever continued to ravage the eastern ports, particularly in the South, and Methodists continued to contract the fever and die. Philadelphia, however, did not see another major outbreak.

In conclusion, we see that Methodist leaders believed God sent yellow fever as punishment for multiple sins, including intemperance, sabbath breaking, and participation in the slave trade. If stricken, Methodists used remedies prescribed by local physicians and also prayed for their souls. If they died, they tried to do so in a state of "Christian perfection." Unlike their Calvinistic peers, Methodist clergy believed that everyone, including all yellow fever victims, could opt for salvation. African Americans, innocent of the sin of slavery, might, according to some, have been spared to some extent. When they died in numbers proportionate to the white population, they could, like everyone else, use the disease to increase their holiness. If, however, God sent yellow fever to punish Philadelphia, it might be seen as a vain effort on His part. Though many sinners died and Rickett's circus burned, theatres and taverns thrived. The Methodist publishing business languished for nearly a year before Ezekiel Cooper sorted out the debts owed by Dickins in his private publishing business from those of the Methodist Book Concern. Yellow fever left an uneven but clear footprint on Methodists in Philadelphia.

The fever years possibly marked a significant turning point in the history of Methodism in the United States. John Wesley and Francis Asbury envisioned Methodism as a religion for the masses: a faith requiring no for-

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<sup>67</sup> Holland Nimmons McTyeire, *A History of Methodism: Comprising a View of the Rise of This Revival of Spiritual Religion in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century, and of the Principal Agents by Whom It Was Promoted in Europe and America* (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1884).

<sup>68</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, *Minutes 1778–1828*, 91.

mal education, but rather an emotional conversion experience followed by a life of good deeds. During the fever years, Methodism underwent the same process other citizens in the still new republic experienced, namely, the formation of a distinct middle class. This new middle class had behaviors distinguishing itself from, on one hand, haughty elite, and on the other, an uneducated and not all white lower and laboring class. In the years following the fever, African-American and white Methodists grew increasingly isolated from one another. Institutional racism and class stratification separated them. True, it was ultimately a controversy over church leadership that led Richard Allen to separate from the Methodist connection and form the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816.<sup>69</sup> However, it is also clear that all-African American congregations proliferated after the formation of Bethel Methodist Church in 1794. African Americans preferred a highly emotional style of worship that distinguished them from the increasingly middle-class Methodist Episcopal Church. This suggests that Black and white Methodists grew apart in the process of class formation as well as administrative personnel.

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<sup>69</sup> Peter C. Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race, 1930–1975* (U Missouri P, 2004), 14–15.